So Many Stars
by transdimensional_void

Summary

After graduating with his law degree, Dan decides to move to Japan to teach English for a year. (aka, Dan and Phil are English teachers in Japan AU)

See the Masterlist on tumblr for extras, such as art and playlists: transdimensional-void.tumblr.com/smsmasterlist

WINNER of Best AU in the 2015 Phanfic Awards, 2nd Place in the Best Fic category, and 2nd Place in Best Storyline! Thank you!!!!

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter 1

It was 36 degrees outside — literally human body temperature — and the air was so thick with humidity Dan was pretty sure he could take a bite out of it. Yet here he was, sat in a full suit and tie in a room where the only relief from the sweltering heat came from the half-assed breeze that occasionally drifted through the open windows. His shirt was plastered to his back with sweat, and he was pretty sure it was going to have to be surgically removed later on. The vinyl couch he sat on felt like it was made of lava.

“Do you know *yatsuhashi*?”

Dan’s feverish thoughts were interrupted by the voice of the city supervisor, Masaki.

“Erm, what?” He turned to look at the man seated on the couch next to him, also dressed in a suit and tie but somehow managing to look cool as an ocean breeze. He was leaning slightly forward, one arm extended, palm open, to indicate a small plate resting on the low table before them. The plate held three pastel-colored triangles. Dan had no idea what they were. “Oh. No, I don’t. What is it?”

“This is *yatsuhashi*,” Masaki explained, lifting the plate from the table and holding it out to Dan. “It’s a famous sweet from Kyoto. Would you like to eat it?”

Just a few moments earlier, a young woman had brought the plate out, along with a cup of tea for each of them, and then disappeared somewhere. Now it was just him and Masaki here, sat waiting for someone — the school’s headmaster? — to show up and welcome them. Dan briefly debated turning down the sweet — he’d just eaten lunch less than an hour before — but he had a vague sense Masaki might be offended.

“Sure! It looks delicious.” He paused, wondering if he was just supposed to pick it up with his fingers. There weren’t any utensils lying around, so it must be a finger food, right? He reached out to pick up one of the little triangles — a pink one — and was pleasantly surprised to discover that it had been chilled. A little more enthusiastic now, he lifted the squishy snack to his mouth and took a tentative bite. It was chewy and powdery on the outside and just a little sweet, but the cold feel of it on his tongue was so refreshing he actually closed his eyes and let out a little sigh of contentment.

“Do you like it?”

“Mm-hmm!” He took another bite, this one bigger, and discovered it had a sweeter, grainy center. After a moment he recognized the filling as sweet red bean paste. The flavor was a little unexpected, but on the whole not bad. He polished the rest of it off in just one more bite.

Behind them a door opened, and Masaki hopped to his feet at once. Dan followed suit, just a beat too slow, and turned to see that three men had come through the door. They were all on the older side of middle age — in their fifties, Dan would’ve guessed — and dressed in breezy short-sleeved shirts and slacks. Dan resisted a strong urge to insert a finger between his shirt collar and the skin of his neck to try to let a little air under it as the three men made their way over and Masaki bowed to them. Dan bowed too — once again just a beat behind his companion — and when he came upright again the three men were all gazing at him with varying levels of curiosity.

Masaki began speaking to them in rapid-fire Japanese, and the only words Dan could pick out were “domo” and “onegaishimasu.” Then Masaki turned to him, and said, “This is Mr. Namatame, *kouchou-sensei*, Mr. Sasanuma, *kyoutou-sensei*, and Mr. Oji, *kyoumu-sensei*.” Each man
gave Dan a little nod as Masaki said his name, and Dan gave an answering nod, hoping that was the right thing to do.

He knew that one of them was the headmaster and the other two were the assistant headmaster and the head teacher, but he had somehow managed to forget which Japanese title corresponded to which English one. Masaki was giving him a little nod, though, so he turned to the one standing in the center — Mr. Sasanuma? — bowed again, and introduced himself.

“Erm, watashi wa Haueru Danieru desu. Yoroshiku onegaishimasu.” He’d been practicing the introduction for days, but he still managed to stumble a little over his yoroshiku.

“Yoroshiku onegaishimasu,” the three men replied almost in perfect unison. Then they began chatting with Masaki again, and Dan was left awkwardly stood to one side, trying to look engaged in a conversation he understood almost nothing of. His eyes wandered around the room again, taking note of the large, old-fashioned desk in one corner, the row of photos of previous headmasters that formed a border near the ceiling, the crossed flags in stands in another corner of the room. It almost looked more like an office in a military compound than one in a school.

After a while, the three men left, bowing on their way out too, and Masaki motioned for him to follow, Dan shuffling after as quickly as his several-sizes-too-small slippers would allow.

At the school entrance, it was a relief to slide the slippers off and put his own shoes back on. Outside, there wasn’t a single cloud to break up the blazing blue of the sky. As they made their way back out to Masaki’s car, they passed a group of three girls holding garden implements, all dressed in matching white jersey shirts and purple shorts. They were staring at him, wide-eyed, and one even had her mouth hanging open a little, as though she beheld a great wonder. His future students, he assumed. He grinned and gave them a friendly wave and said, “Hello!” — might as well start the charm offensive right away. One of them gave a shriek, and they all three turned and bolted away, leaving Dan staring after them in consternation.

He turned to Masaki for an explanation.

“The students are always excited to see the new ALT,” the supervisor offered before opening the passenger’s side door of his car and gesturing for Dan to get in. Dan supposed that was all the explanation he was going to get and crouched down to clamber into the low-slung car.

The car had air conditioning, for which Dan was so grateful he felt he might actually weep. It took all his self-restraint not to lean forward and stick his face right in the cold stream of air pouring from the little vent on his left-hand side.

He settled instead for leaning against the cool glass of the window and watching the scenery go by. He’d been in Japan for a week already, but that had been in Tokyo. They’d only arrived in this city — his home for the next year — this morning, and the trip here had been his first glimpse of rural Japan. Even now, he couldn’t help staring in fascination at the stalks of maturing rice waving gently in the neatly-squared paddies, the dark-blue-tiled houses with their low stone walls, the ragged line of the mountains in the distance. He still couldn’t quite believe he was actually in Japan.

“I will return to Tokyo after I take you to your apartment. Do you have any questions?”

Masaki’s voice drew his attention back to the interior of the car.

“Erm, is there a grocery store near my flat?” When they’d stopped by the flat earlier to unload his suitcases, Masaki had given him a bag full of some basic items — a cooking pot, a box of kleenex, a toilet brush — that he’d said were a gift from the city’s Board of Education, but other than that he
still needed to stock up on all the necessaries.

“Yes, there is Trial. It’s about a fifteen minute walk. I wrote it on your map.”

“Oh, right.” It just now came back to him that Masaki had printed out a map of the entire city for
him, with important sites circled in red and the names written beside in Masaki’s careful hand.

The building his flat was in was a small one, only three stories, with a tiny parking lot. On one side
of it stood a Seven Eleven, and on the other started a line of little shops that looked like they might
have stood in that same spot for a few hundred years.

At the door to his flat, Masaki said, “You have my mobile number, yes?”

“Yes, right here,” and he patted his jacket pocket that held the third copy of his supervisor’s business
card that Dan had been given, not that it would do him any good to have Masaki’s number a hundred
times until he had a mobile of his own. At least he’d been told that his flat came with internet already
set up. All he’d have to do would be to plug the ethernet cable into his laptop and he’d be good to go
(or so he hoped).

“Please call me, if you should have any trouble,” Masaki was saying. Then he bowed again and
went back to his car and drove away, and just like that Dan was all alone in a foreign country.

He’d gone to the job interview almost on a whim.

After so many months of interviews with law firms, and so many months of getting rejection letters
or, worse, hearing nothing at all back from them, he’d begun to take a somewhat haphazard
approach to his future. Maybe he wouldn’t bother following up on that law firm in Liverpool his
father had a friend in. What would be the point? Maybe studying law had been a terrible mistake.
Maybe a future as an extremely well-compensated solicitor wasn’t exactly what he wanted out of life.
Maybe he should drop out of uni right now, just months from graduation, and go on a backpacking
trip around the world. Maybe just going to the interview for the low-paying English-teaching job in
Japan couldn’t hurt, just for a change of pace, just to see what would happen.

He hadn’t expected the interviewer to actually like him, or for her to actually manage to make the job
sound intriguing, and he certainly hadn’t expected to get the call back offering him the job, starting in
August just after graduation, as long as his visa went through.

He hadn’t expected it, but when he’d gotten it, it had seemed like a sign. On the same day he’d been
offered the job in Japan, he’d received yet another rejection letter from yet another law firm that was
pleased about his interest in joining them as a trainee but that felt he wasn’t quite what they were
looking for. Clearly Japan wanted him and law didn’t. Well, fuck law. And fuck England, for that
matter. He would go to Japan.

That had been back in March. Now it was August — apparently the month during which Japan
temporarily converted to a tropical swamp — and here he was, stood in an Asda knock-off store
trying to decide whether he could afford to splurge on fresh fruits and vegetables or whether it would
be possible to survive on instant ramen alone. He’d almost had a heart attack when he’d seen that
they were selling single apples for ¥498 (which he calculated to be £2.65) and that a package
containing just six slices of bread cost ¥198 (£1.06). He couldn’t even bear to look at the prices on
meat and decided that he would just have to do without for now.

“Oh my god! A gaijin!” came an excited voice from nearby.
For just a moment, Dan didn’t react. Then it struck him that he had just heard English and that the *gaijin* was probably him. He turned his head away from the rows of ramen packages and then spotted them, at the other end of the aisle: a short, roundish girl and a tall, very dark-skinned guy. As soon as they made eye contact, the girl grinned at him, waved, and then rushed over, her companion following a few paces behind.

“Sorry, but are you Dan?” Her accent was decidedly American, though her features made him think her family might be of Indian extraction.

“Yes,” he blinked at her. “Who are you? How do you know my name?”

“Oh, I’m Madhavi, and this is James.” She gestured vaguely at the guy with her.

“Hello,” James said, holding a hand out. Dan shook it absently, a little dazed at suddenly being accosted by two strangers who knew his name in a small town in middle-of-nowhere Japan. From his conversations with Masaki, he’d gotten the impression that, in a tiny place like this, he would be the only non-Japanese person for miles around.

“There aren’t a lot of *gaijin* around here, so we always know when we’re getting someone new. Welcome!” Madhavi had to almost bend her neck at a ninety degree angle to look him in the eye, but she was still grinning like meeting him was the best thing to happen to her all week. “How long have you been here?”

“Thanks, er, I just got here this morning.”

“Ok, wow. So you’re really new. Do you need help with anything? Do you have a phone yet?”

Dan shook his head. Masaki had helpfully circled the electronics store on his map and indicated that as the place to purchase a mobile, but of course Dan hadn’t made it there yet.

“James here is new too, and I’m taking him to K’s Denki tomorrow,” Madhavi said, her eyes lighting up. “Do you wanna come too?”

“Yeah, that’d be great actually. Erm, so are you English teachers too?” He almost couldn’t believe his luck at meeting someone so eager to help him out just out of the blue like this. It almost seemed too good to be true, and he couldn’t help feeling just a bit suspicious.

“Yeah, I teach at the girls’ high school, and James will be teaching in elementary and middle school like you. You’re at Nishichu, right?”

Dan wasn’t quite sure what Nishichu was, but he guessed she meant the school he’d visited earlier in the day, Nishi Junior High School.

“Yeah, Nishichu,” he said.

“We’re just here getting James some groceries since he was worried about being able to read the labels and things, but we were going to hit up the sushi train afterward. Have you eaten dinner yet?”

“Well, no, but—“

“Great! You can come along. Now let’s see about getting you some groceries. What all do you need?”

It was a bit of a whirlwind after that, but once he’d managed to communicate his limited budget to her, Madhavi pointed out all the best things to buy for cheap-but-filling meals. She offered to teach...
him how to cook miso soup and a few other simple dishes as well, pointing out that the ingredients for Japanese food tended to be cheaper than for Western dishes. He wasn’t sure how they’d gotten to the point of her offering cooking lessons so quickly, but he wasn’t one to look a gift horse in the mouth.

It wasn’t long before he found himself seated in a sushi-go-round restaurant with his two new acquaintances, learning all the details of each of their stories. James, a native of Vancouver it turned out, had only been here for four days and was in general as clueless as Dan. He was a couple of years older and had left a dead-end office job to pursue something new and exciting. Madhavi, on the other hand, had been here for three years already, having come to Japan just out of university, like Dan. She was from New Jersey, had studied biology with a Pre-Med focus, but secretly longed to become an animator. She was one of the lucky few who’d come over as a reasonably well-paid JET, rather than joining up with a private dispatch company like Dan and James.

By the time he made it home that evening, Dan not only had plans to visit the electronics store the next day but had also been invited to a welcome dinner two evenings from then on Saturday, where Madhavi had promised to introduce him to all of the other foreign English teachers in the area. Dan still felt a little battered by the American girl’s storm of friendliness, but he wasn’t about to complain. In the space of one evening he’d gone from feeling abandoned in the wilderness to having a full social calendar.

It took a few minutes to dig up the internet login information Masaki had passed on to him from the real estate office, but when he had typed the username and password into the little box that popped up on his laptop, he was greeted by the familiar Chrome start page. He felt a tension in his shoulders ease that he hadn’t even known was there. No matter where he went in the world, as long as he had internet he could feel at home. A short while later, he had updated Twitter and tumblr and moved on to Facebook for a status update that would appease his friends and family back home. As he pulled up the page, he noticed that he had a single new message waiting for him.

**Phil Lester**

*Hi! I’m Phil. I’m an ALT at Nishichu, and I heard we’re going to be co-workers starting Monday. I hope you don’t mind that I stalked you on Facebook to send you this message, but I thought it would be a good idea to get to know each other a little. When will you be in Harata? We’re having a welcome dinner on Saturday for all the new ALTs. Would you like to come?*

The message had been sent six hours ago. Dan read it through twice before replying.

**Dan Howell**

*Hi, Phil! I didn’t realize there was another ALT at Nishichu. That’s actually really great to hear. I just arrived in Harata this morning, and I visited Nishichu. I met a girl named Madhavi (do you know her?), and she invited me to the thing this Saturday, so yeah! I’m planning to go. I guess I’ll see you there?*

He pressed enter to send the message and then closed the chat box. After a moment, he opened it up again and peered closely at the tiny image beside the name. His new co-worker’s hair was black, a sharp contrast to his pale face, and he was smiling, a big toothy grin. There was a girl with him in the picture. Dan’s curiosity overcame him, and he clicked on Phil’s name.

In the larger version of the profile picture, he could see that Phil and the girl were holding hands. She must be his girlfriend. The other thing Dan discovered in the larger image was that Phil was hot — his eyes large and clear, the fingers that grasped the girl’s hand long, and his arms slender but muscular. Shit. Dan closed the tab and then Chrome and then his computer. Nope. Nope nope nope.
He was not doing this, definitely not doing this. There was no way he was going to be attracted to someone he worked with. That was a terrible idea, so it was best to just nip it in the bud right now. They were going to be co-workers, and maybe friends — nothing more.

With this firm resolution in mind, Dan slid his chair back and headed off to his tiny bathroom to try to figure out how to make the shower work.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Dan gets to know his new home a little better and finally meets his new co-worker, Phil. (Warnings: Alcohol, drunk people, weird food, awkward social situations)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When he woke in the morning, he fixed himself a bowl of cereal and checked Facebook first thing. There was one friend request from Madhavi, which he accepted, and also a reply from Phil.

Phil Lester

Oh, yeah, Madhavi’s a good egg. I’m planning to go on Saturday. Looking forward to meeting you! Is Madhavi going to give you a ride there? Otherwise, I’d be happy to!

Dan Howell

Yep, she said she’d give me a ride, but thanks for the offer. Looking forward to meeting you too!

The urge to stalk Phil’s Facebook page a little more was strong. They were going to be working together, right? So, he needed to know a little bit more about the guy…right? Just looking at a few pictures, just the ones he had made public, couldn’t hurt…

The first few pictures had only been added about a week ago. It looked like Phil had had a pretty nice summer vacation. He felt a pang of envy seeing an album simply titled “Okinawa.” As he clicked through the photos in it, he wasn’t too surprised to discover that the girl from Phil’s profile picture featured heavily. Yep, definitely his girlfriend, and Dan did not feel disappointed about that. Not in the least.

Half an hour later, Dan realized that he was now browsing pictures of Phil from 2007. Wow. He had even less self-control than he’d thought. Here was Phil at a party during his university days, looking a little tipsy with his arm slung around some guy’s neck. Here was another one of him at Halloween, dressed as a zombie Pikachu, and another one where he seemed to have been visiting America with his family. Dan really needed to stop. Madhavi and James would be here to take him to the electronics store in a quarter of an hour and he wasn’t even dressed yet, but just a couple more pictures…

Ding Dong

Crap! They were here early. Crap! Dan leapt to his feet, grabbing for a pair of jeans lying on the floor and calling out, “Just a second!” as he yanked them on.

Ding Dong

It’d barely been a minute since the last ring. That was a little rude of them. Dan knelt in front of one of his suitcases, flung it open and started rummaging around for a t-shirt. He pulled one out at random, threw it on and then raced for the door that led out to the front hall. As he reached for the
door handle, a little flickering image on the wall beside the door caught his eye. There was a tiny screen there, with a speaker underneath that he hadn't noticed there the day before. On the screen he saw the grainy, black and white image of a middle-aged Japanese man. As he watched, the doorbell sounded again, *Ding Dong.* In the image, he saw the man push the doorbell, wait a few seconds, and then turn and walk away.

Should he go after him? He waffled back and forth for a long moment. On the one hand, it might be something important. On the other hand, why was someone ringing his doorbell when he'd moved into this flat less than 24 hours ago? After a few seconds more, Dan decided that if it was really something important the man would eventually come back.

At least now he was dressed, with time to spare for actually looking in the mirror and making sure he looked decent. He was still hunched over in the tiny bathroom, fiddling with his hair, when his doorbell rang again. This time he didn't bother checking the screen but just went straight to the front door and opened it.

“Good morning! You ready to go?” Madhavi’s cheerful voice greeted him from the doorway. James was with her, stood to one side, but Dan barely spared a glance for either of them.

“Wow,” he murmured. He stepped out onto the landing and walked over to the railing, his eyes fixed on what lay beyond.

His flat was on the second floor, and his front door faced due west, with a view out over the parking lot. However, on that side of the building, the neighboring lot was an empty field, and beyond that was a series of rice paddies. As a result, he had an almost unobstructed view of the mountain range that bordered the western edge of the town, all ablaze at the moment in the morning sun. The sky was clear again today, its blue so deep it almost hurt to look at. He glanced to his right and saw that the low peaks stretched as far as he could see toward the north. He looked left and saw the range dwindling to low hills as it extended farther south.

“Whoa! I didn’t notice that before,” James exclaimed as he came up beside him. “Damn. I’m jealous. All I can see from my front door is a stationery shop.”

“We’ll have to take you both up the mountain sometime soon,” Madhavi said as she joined them at the rail. “James told me he’s dying to check out the *onsen.* There’s a ton up there, since there are a couple of active volcanoes nearby. You guys’ve gotta try *Kita-onsen,* and *Ohmaru* too. Oh, and *Benten,* of course! You like *onsen,* right, Dan?”

Dan’s main knowledge of *onsen* came from the fan-service episodes of various anime he’d watched over the years. He had a vague impression that they were places full of naked girls getting drunk on *sake* and squeezing each others’ boobs.

“Er…” he said, but that seemed to be all the response Madhavi required.

“We’re lucky that there are a lot of mixed ones in this area. Come on! It’s already 10:30, and I wanted to take you guys to this awesome ramen shop after we get your phones.”

The other two turned and headed for the stairs while Dan locked up. He couldn’t help casting a few more glances over his shoulder at the incredible view as he hurried after the others. A little grin lifted the corner of his mouth. He was starting to really like this place.

When Dan saw just how much the contract for an iPhone 5 was going to cost, he almost cried. The newly-released Galaxy S4 was much cheaper, but… Goddamit, he could admit it: he was a slut for Apple products. Maybe this could be his one big luxury item. He wasn’t planning to get a car, after
“I think I’m gonna go with the Note II,” James was saying beside him. Dan glanced at the price on the Note and sighed. Yes, he was actually going to spend that much more money per month just to be able to own the Apple device.

The process of each of them getting their phones, choosing their plans and setting up their service took a lot longer than Dan expected, but the salespeople were polite and patient, and Madhavi was a very competent translator. By the time they left the store, it was just past noon, and Dan was glad that there was food in their near future.

After lunch — at what Madhavi claimed was the best miso ramen shop in the entire north of the prefecture, a title which Dan was inclined to agree with — Madhavi offered to take them both to buy anything else they needed. As James started listing off the items on his still-to-buy list, Dan realized that he was also pretty short on useful things like towels and hangers. He had just been planning to go home, but it seemed to make better sense to go to the shops with the others again.

“Are you going to get a car?” James asked as they headed back to Trial. He had to crane his head around from the front seat to be able to see Dan where he was scrunched up in the less-than-spacious back. “I was just planning to bike it, until I saw that one of my elementary schools is an hour’s ride away from where I live. Someone told me they could hook me up with a good long-term rental place, though.”

“Well, I checked out the bus system, and I think I can make it work—“ Dan started.

“No, no, no. You need a bike,” Madhavi cut him off without taking her eyes from the road. “The bus is okay for snowy or rainy days, but if you want to get to work on time or go grocery shopping without it taking you hours, you should get a bike.”

So the afternoon ended up being spent in picking out a bike for Dan — honestly, he wasn’t even sure he remembered how to ride one — and buying random crap that both he and James still needed. Once they’d figured out how to fit the unwieldy bicycle into Madhavi’s tiny Nissan and gotten it back to Dan’s place, he had to admit that it was probably a wise purchase. Now he wouldn’t have to rely on someone else for his transportation all the time, and hey! Maybe with all that riding around he’d actually start getting fit like he’d been meaning to these past six years and more.

“Thanks for dragging me around everywhere today,” he said once the other two had helped him carry all his bags upstairs. “I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

“Ah, no worries, no worries,” Madhavi said, waving a dismissive hand. “Gotta help you newbies out somehow. I’ll be by at 7:15 to get you tomorrow, right? Right. See you then!”

“Bye!” And he waved them both off down the stairs before walking back inside, slipping his shoes off at the door, and cracking his knuckles. It was kind of exciting having a new place to furnish, and he was actually looking forward to an evening of putting away all his new purchases, hanging up his posters on the walls, and finally unpacking his suitcases. Hopefully by the end of the night his little flat would start to actually resemble a home.

The next morning, he was half-wakened early by a distant rumbling sound that he took to be a large truck passing by on the road outside. There was already sunlight streaming through his east-facing window, but when he checked his phone he was startled to see that it was only half past 4:00. With a groan, he dropped the phone on the futon beside him and pulled his blanket back over his head. He’d forgotten that Japan didn’t do summer time.
He drifted in and out of sleep for a while before managing to regain full unconsciousness. Eventually though he fell asleep again, and then didn’t end up leaving his futon until almost lunch time. After he’d gotten dressed and grabbed a bite to eat, he wondered what he ought to do with the rest of his day. He could see his 3DS sitting there on the edge of the desk, almost beckoning him to come pick it up and lose a few hours in Animal Crossing. But then he felt a little guilty. He was in Japan of all places. What would it say about him if he just hung out playing video games all day as though he were still in his bedroom back home in Berkshire? No. He was in a whole new country now, and he was going to get out there and enjoy it.

When he stepped outside, he was struck by the view of the nearby mountains once again. This time, though, he had his new iPhone in his pocket. He pulled it out, took a quick shot, and posted it to his Instagram with the caption, “Don’t think I’ll ever get enough of this view.”

Once he was down on the street, he had to pause for a moment to decide which way to go. On the one side stood the Seven Eleven, and beyond it was an intersection and then a few houses. On the other side was the row of shops stretching up the street. After a few seconds, he decided that way looked more interesting and set off at a jaunty pace.

It only took half a block for him to regret leaving the safety of his air-conditioned room. The sun was just as mercilessly bright as it had been for the past two days, and the humidity made him want to try a breast stroke. He was pretty sure he’d already sprouted a hundred new freckles, just in those few minutes. But dammit, he was in Japan and he was going to enjoy it.

Just before he reached the end of the block, the street crossed over a little stream — well, really more of a paved ditch — and he paused to look over the edge of the short bridge. He was amazed at how clear the water below was. He could see straight down to the bottom, which was completely covered with long stalks of grass bent by the flow of the water. The massive paving stones lining the side of the stream were overgrown too, with thick moss and more grass. It was surprisingly picturesque, for a ditch. He couldn’t stop himself pulling out his phone and taking another picture, though this one he didn’t post.

By the time he had walked fifteen minutes in one direction, he’d already snapped pictures of a stone lantern perched atop a wall outside someone’s house, a bush covered over with some type of reddish-pink flower, a boarded up shop, some posters that appeared to be left over from the 80’s, two cats, and a statue of a tanuki. He was also practically swimming in his own sweat, which was what made him finally admit defeat and turn back toward home. After all, he told himself, there was no reason why he couldn’t explore the town just as well once the cooler weather arrived.

Back home, he immediately stripped down to his boxers, sprawled on the floor and soaked in the glorious feeling of artificially cooled air. His 3DS was still waiting there patiently for him, and it was only a matter of time before he was happily collecting items to sell for Bells.

It was well past 6:00 before he finally managed to pull himself away from the game, grab a shower and start getting ready for the party. When the doorbell rang promptly at 7:15, he still hadn’t quite got his hair right, but he supposed he only had himself to blame for that.

“You’re quite punctual,” he said when he had opened the door to Madhavi.

“Our two-hour nomihoudai starts exactly at 7:30. There’s no way I’m missing out on that,” she replied. “You ready?”

“Yes!” Once he’d locked up and followed her down the stairs, he added, “What’s a nomihoudai?”

She grinned in reply.
“It means ‘all-you-can-drink.’ Seiji got us a deal where we only have to pay ¥1800 apiece, and we get as many drinks as we want for two hours.”

Dan mentally reviewed his budget and grimaced. There was no way he could afford to spend ¥1800 on drinks alone, especially after dropping so much on his phone yesterday.

“Er, we don’t have to do that, if we don’t want to, right?” he asked as he folded himself into the front seat of her car.

“Oh, no, of course not. It’s just for whoever wants it,” she assured him as she started up the engine. “Not a big drinker?”

He let out an involuntary snort of laughter.

“No, no, it’s not that. Just trying to be frugal!”

“Oh, right.” She gave him a sympathetic look before turning her attention back to her driving. “You know, you could always teach private English classes on the side for extra money.”

“I thought that was against my contract?”

“Weeell,” she said, hunching up her shoulders and making an equivocal gesture with one hand. “I mean, it’s not technically legal, but…” She shrugged. “Everyone does it. As long as they pay you in cash, no one ever has to know, right?”

“Riiight.” He wondered briefly what Japanese prison was like. Probably pretty nice, based on what he’d seen of the country so far. He wouldn’t be surprised if the cells came with bidet toilets and straw mat floors. Still, he didn’t fancy the idea of finding out for sure. “Maybe if I get really desperate,” he finally conceded, but she only laughed at that.

It ended up being a short drive. Harata was a pretty small city, only about 70,000 occupants, and the restaurant they were going to wasn’t far from where Dan lived. As they pulled up outside, he discovered that his heart was beating a little faster than normal. He was just nervous about meeting all those new people, probably. But even as he had that thought, he couldn’t help thinking of Phil’s grinning face in his picture on Facebook. Nope. Not attracted. Nope nope nope.

“Irasshaimase—!” someone called out as soon as they had ducked under the door curtains and slid the front door open. There was a young woman in uniform stood behind a desk just inside the door, and Dan was interested to see that beyond that a long hallway stretched back to a bar with low stools around it. Each side of the hallway was lined with raised wooden platforms that led into private rooms, most of which were closed off with sliding paper-screen doors. The door to the room nearest the front, though, stood open, and outside it sat two neat rows of shoes. As Madhavi slid the front door shut behind them, someone leaned out of the room and waved.

“There you are!” It was a guy who had a full, dark beard and a thick Australian accent. “Hurry up. They’re taking orders for the first round of the nomihoudai already.”

“Oh, shit,” Madhavi said and rushed over to the door, pausing only to slip her shoes off before scooting into the room. Dan followed at a slower pace, feeling a little abandoned. He’d been kind of relying on her to introduce him to everyone. He realized at the door that his sneakers had been a somewhat foolish choice of footwear, as they required him to sit down on the ledge outside the room and untie them before he was able to get them off and enter the already-noisy room.

It was a long, narrow room, with a single, low table running down the center of it. The floors beneath his socks were covered in straw mats, and the walls were papered over with ancient-looking
beer advertisements and a few scribbled signs. There were eight or nine people already crowded around the table, seated on large floor cushions and poring over menus. Several people looked up when he came in, but the first thing he noticed was that Phil wasn’t among them.

“Oh, guys, this is Dan. He’s the new Karen,” Madhavi spoke up from where she sat next to the Australian guy at one end of the table. “Dan, this everyone.”

He didn’t realize that he was awkwardly hunching his shoulders, but he was fully aware of how uncomfortable all their stares were making him. The only other person he recognized there was James.

“Hi, everyone,” he managed to say with a friendly wave and a reasonable semblance of a friendly smile. They all went around the room introducing themselves — Max, Seiji, Brett, Jonathan, Lisa, Allen. He forgot who was whom almost as soon as they’d finished the introductions. His palms were sweaty in his pockets.

“Here, sit across from me!” Madhavi called, pointing to one of the few empty spaces left at the table. He hurried over to the spot, glad to no longer be the center of attention, and plopped down on the cushion there, wondering just where he was supposed to put his legs — he had a lot of leg, and there was very little space beneath the table.

“By the way, this loser here is Jake,” Madhavi added as soon as he’d sat down. She was jabbing her thumb toward the beardy guy next to her. The two of them were sitting very close together, and Dan wondered if maybe he was her boyfriend.

“Hey, nice to meet you,” Jake said, holding out a hand across the table. “So, you’re working at Nishichu with Phil?”

“Yeah, apparently,” Dan took the offered hand and gave it what he hoped was a firm and confident shake. “Though I haven’t actually met the guy yet,” he added.

“Oh, yeah, he should be here. I think he was just running late—”

“He’s always running late,” Madhavi interjected. “Did you want a drink to start off with? The girl just left, but we can call her back.” She was leaning back and reaching for a small, white button attached to the wall behind her.

“No, that’s okay. I’ll just, er, order when she gets back.” His heart rate had suddenly picked up again for some reason, but he was doing his best to ignore that. Instead, he turned to the person seated next to him, a small, dark-haired guy, and stuck out a hand.

“Hi, you’re Max, right?”

The guy turned and gave him a shy smile.

“Yes, I am,” he said. “I work at the boys’ high school. Where are you from, Dan?” His accent was very soft, but Dan thought he could detect a slight Scottish note in it.

“Near Reading. You?”

“Glasgow,” Max said, folding his arms across his chest and leaning forward over the table, “though my parents are from Hong Kong.”

It took a few minutes — during which time the waitress returned with everyone’s drinks and Dan finally managed to order one of his own, a beer, as he couldn’t read the menu, and that seemed to be
what everyone else had ordered — but he finally managed to get Max to admit to having studied law as well, and to being a graduate of Oxford. Dan had a strong curiosity about how that had led to him teaching English in Japan, but before he had a chance to probe further, a general chorus of greeting rose from the group, and he looked up to see a very tall, dark-haired man stooping down to pass through the low doorway. After a second of staring, he recognized him — Phil had finally shown up.

Dan blinked in surprise. He hadn’t been expecting him to be so tall — but no, he was definitely not going to think about that.

“Where’s Akari?” Of course Madhavi was the first to get a question in.

“She couldn’t make it,” Phil answered, shuffling around the table in his stocking feet toward the only open seat, which Dan realized just happened to be right next to him. “She wasn’t feeling very well.” Dan swallowed hard. He also hadn’t been expecting Phil’s voice to be so deep. Shit.

“Awww, that’s too bad,” Madhavi was saying, but Phil wasn’t looking at her anymore. Instead he’d turned those bright, blue eyes on Dan and was grinning at him in a way that did absolutely nothing for the calmness of Dan’s nerves. Phil, who seemed to fit the small room just as ill as Dan, had had to squeeze himself into the narrow space between the table and the wall, and his left knee was practically on top of Dan’s right one. For a moment, it seemed that all of Dan’s sense of touch had shifted to a tiny patch of skin on his right knee.

“You must be Dan. Hi, I’m Phil!” He held his hand out for Dan to shake, having to fold it across his body at kind of an awkward angle just to reach him. Dan noticed that Phil’s hand was smaller than his as he took hold of it and shook it exactly twice.

“A pleasure to meet you,” Dan said, and he wasn’t sure he’d ever meant that phrase so literally before.

The first round of food arrived right then, and there wasn’t much talking as everyone passed around plates and chopsticks and divvied up the food. Dan hadn’t a clue what half the things were that ended up on his plate, but he discovered that every one of them was delicious. When the second round came out, he resolved to try and have some of everything.

“Do you like motsu?” Madhavi asked him as she held a skewer of meat over his plate.

“Excuse me?”

“Innards,” Phil translated from beside him. “Guts, entrails, intestines—“

“I get the idea. Yeah, go on then. Might as well.” He was already well into his second beer then and feeling adventurous. When he tried a bite, though, the motsu actually tasted pretty good.

“Here, try the baka-sashi.” On his other side, Max was already placing some kind of raw meat mixture on his plate, even as he spoke. So Dan tried that too and was pleasantly surprised at the delicate but delicious flavor.

“What is this?” he asked Phil around his second mouthful, as Max had turned to serve the person on his opposite side.

“Raw deer and horse meat mixed together,” Phil answered, glancing at him out of the corner of his eye with a small smirk playing about his lips. “Do you like it?”

“It’s horse?” He stared down at the last bite, already held between his chopsticks, but he figured it was too late to be repulsed by it now. He was pretty sure Phil was laughing at him, but he just
shrugged and downed it. Here’s to new experiences, he thought.

It was only as he started his third beer that he vaguely started to worry about how much the meal was going to cost. He’d been so distracted by meeting everyone that he’d neglected to check the menu for prices.

“Crap,” he muttered under his breath. He hadn’t meant for anyone to hear, but Phil turned to him with a concerned look.

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing…” He paused, considering his much-abused budget. “Well, actually, can you help me read the menu really quickly?”

“Of course.” As he spoke, Phil reached out and grabbed one of the menus that had been shoved over to the end of the table to make room for the food. He propped it open in front of them, and Dan leaned in close to try to make sense of it. Back in March, when he’d decided to try his luck in Japan, he’d bought a Japanese practice book and downloaded an illegal copy of Rosetta Stone with every intention of becoming conversant in the language by the time he got here. That hadn’t quite happened, but he had managed to at least pick up some basic vocabulary. His reading skills, though, were still sadly lacking. If only Japanese didn’t have so many different writing systems…

“Is this the section with the drinks?” he murmured to Phil, pointing to an area of the menu where he thought he could make out the character for sake.

“No, that’s rice-based dishes. Drinks are over here,” Phil’s long, pale finger moved over the laminated surface of the menu and came to rest on a different section. In his slightly impaired state, Dan couldn’t keep from letting his eyes follow the gesture the entire way across the page. He was on the verge of letting his gaze wander from the finger to the hand and up the slender forearm— Stop, he told himself severely and forced his eyes to focus on the words under Phil’s hand. It took him several seconds to decipher the word for beer, and then he saw that beside it were the symbols “中” and “大.” He glanced at his drink and then back at the menu.

“Did I order a medium or a large beer?” He’d meant the question only for himself, but Phil answered promptly.

“That’s a medium.”

Dan looked at the price next to the “中” symbol and almost had a heart attack.

“¥800?!? For, like, a pint of beer??” He did some quick math in his head. “Shit. That’s ¥2400. Shit…” He’d just spent more than £14 on three beers. But why was the beer so fucking expensive?

“You’re doing the nomihoudai, though, right?” Phil was saying. “So no matter how many you get, it’ll just be 1800.”

“I, er… I told them I wasn’t doing it,” Dan muttered, realizing that he should definitely have checked the prices before making that decision. He tried to visualize how much money he’d brought with him. He thought he had a ¥5000 note left in his wallet, so as long as dinner didn’t end up costing more than ¥1900, he should be fine.

“Hey, don’t worry about it, okay?” Phil’s voice broke across his thoughts. “I’ll get you this time.”

Dan’s cheeks were suddenly burning. He hoped they weren’t as bright a red as they felt.
“No, it’s fine. I think I’ve got—“

“Seriously, don’t worry about it.” When he turned to look at Phil — out of his peripheral vision because he couldn’t quite meet his eye — he was giving him that grin again, the one that made his stomach feel wobbly. “Consider it my welcome gift. Welcome to Harata!”

Dan wanted to protest. He really did. But the beers cost ¥800 apiece, and he wasn’t going to get his first paycheck for another month and more. Feeling a strange mixture of elation and chagrin, he nodded and thanked his new acquaintance. Great. They’d just met, literally just met, and he was already asking the guy for favors.

“Dan, Dan, Dan!” Madhavi was leaning across the table and waving to catch his attention. It suddenly struck him that she was supposed to be his ride home, yet he’d been watching her down drink after drink for the past hour and a half. “Dan, Phil said he can take you home. Is that okay?”

He turned to Phil beside him and noticed then that he had had nothing but water all evening. That’s when he remembered reading that Japan had a zero tolerance policy for drink-driving — technically you weren’t even supposed to drive after even a single sip of alcohol. What had Madhavi been thinking?

“Is that okay?” he repeated the question to Phil, feeling all kinds of guilty for imposing on him yet again.

“Of course!” He gave him two thumbs up and then leaned in close so that Dan would be the only one to hear his next words. “Don’t worry about Madhavi. Jacob’s apartment is just a block over, so she won’t be driving anywhere tonight.”

The party was winding down by then, and Seiji — the Japanese-American ALT who seemed to have been the organizer of this little event — was calculating everyone’s portion of the bill. When he announced that they each owed ¥2200 for the food, in addition to the cost of the drinks, Dan cast a sheepish little smile at Phil beside him, who dipped his chin once in a reassuring nod. So far he wasn’t doing so hot with this being poor thing.

They were quiet on the car ride home, once Dan had explained which part of town he lived in and Phil had said he knew the way. Dan was feeling too embarrassed by the whole money fiasco to even try to speak to Phil, and for some reason of his own, his soon-to-be co-worker seemed lost in his own thoughts. When they at last pulled into the narrow parking lot of Dan’s building, he felt he should say at least a final thank you.

“Thanks again for everything. Really.” As he spoke, Phil seemed to come out of a daze. He turned and gave him a polite, listening smile.

“Oh, it’s no trouble. It was really great meeting you. I guess I’ll see you on Monday?”

“Yep! See you on Monday.”

Somehow, he felt that Phil wasn’t entirely there with him right now, and he unconsciously hunched his shoulders again after he’d climbed out of the car and waved Phil out of the parking lot. He wondered where he was going next. Back to his own place? Maybe to his girlfriend’s? Dan shook his head. It was none of his business now, was it? He shoved his hands in his pockets, trudged up the steps to his front door, and did his best not to slam it behind him as he went inside.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Dan's first day of school.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On Sunday night, he made sure to set two alarms, one for 6:45 AM and one for 7:15. There was no way he was going to be late on his first day of work. He was unbelievably proud of himself when the first alarm went off on Monday morning and he actually got out of bed. New country, New Dan! he thought to himself.

New Dan got ready in record time — suit and tie again, much as he hated it — mostly because he was actually having a good hair day for once. He’d carefully mapped out the route from his building to the school and then tested out his new bike by riding there and back. He’d been a bit wobbly on the bike at first, but whaddya know, the saying had turned out to be true.

The ride was a pleasant one, though the summer heat continued just as moist and miserable as ever. Once he got up to a fair speed, the still air turned into a brisk breeze that cooled him even as he worked up a sweat pedaling. Though the path he took never left the town, much of the scenery along the way was rice paddies, at this time of year full of rice near-ready for harvest. As he wound through the fields, he began to catch a faint aroma, a soft and delicate scent like an old-fashioned perfume. He realized, after passing through an area of housing and then out among the rice paddies again, that it was the scent of the ripening rice. He’d never known that rice plants had a scent, but for some reason it had struck him as strangely beautiful.

He left his flat twenty minutes early that morning, both to make absolutely sure he did not arrive late and also to allow himself to pedal at a more leisurely rate. He didn’t much like the idea of showing up to work in a shirt and jacket already soaked with perspiration.

When he at last pulled through the front gate of the school grounds, he was met with a disconcerting sight — dozens of little clusters of students grouped all about the school yard, who all turned to stare at him as he rode up. Crap. Where was supposed to park his bike? He cast a few surreptitious glances about and finally saw a row of bikes on the far side, right up against part of the stone wall surrounding the front courtyard. He pedaled over, through the throngs of gawking students, and was startled by a sudden series of shouts.

“Hello!” “Hallo!” “Howareyou?” “HELLO!!” “Ohayou gozaimasu!” “HOW ARE YOU?!?”

“Good morning,” he managed to call out as he pulled up next to the row of bikes, though his voice came out rather quieter than he meant it to.

“Goo’ MOANING!” someone practically screamed from less than a meter away, and he actually jumped a little. He turned to see two boys standing there, both grinning at him with all of their teeth. They were both drowning in school uniforms far too big for them, from which he deduced that they were first years.
“HOW ARE YOU?” the boy on the right yelled, and then they both cracked up, clutching their stomachs as though it was the best joke ever told.

“Er… I’m hot and a little nervous,” he answered, dismounting and holding his bike up as he tried to work the kick stand. It took a couple of tries, but he finally got it down. “How are you?” he asked, putting on his friendliest smile and turning to face the two scrawny first years.

“Uwaaa! Taka—!” one of them cried, elbowing the other in the side.

“Ehhh! Se ga takai yo! Ki mitai naaa~” the other boy replied. They had both stopped laughing and were instead staring at Dan, open-mouthed, in a way that made his palms start to feel moist.

“Hontou ni takai yo. Firu-sensei yori mo takai ka mo,” the first boy said to his friend, who nodded his agreement with a very serious expression on his face. They began to turn away from Dan, but then one of them seemed to remember himself and looked back over his shoulder to shout, “GOOD BYE!!!” Then they walked away, muttering between themselves.

“Oookaay,” Dan said under his breath as he watched the pair disappear around the side of the school building. He wasn’t entirely sure what that had been about, though he had definitely understood that they were impressed with his height. He grabbed his messenger bag from his bike basket, slung it over one shoulder and headed for the front entryway. There were no students there, just the rows of shoe lockers neatly labeled with all of the staff member’s names. It gave him a strange feeling to see that there was one in the very bottom row with a little white label and black letters spelling out “Dan.” It somehow made all of this seem more real. Yes, he actually worked here at this school in a foreign country, and here was the shoe locker to prove it.

As he slipped off his outdoor shoes and put them away in his locker, he noticed that the one right above his read “Phil.” It sort of made sense — Phil was technically his senpai, after all. He let out a little laugh under his breath and pulled his brand new indoor shoes from his bag, setting them on the raised bit of floor that marked the transition from outside to inside. He was about to step into them when a door across the hall opened, and someone came hurrying out. After a moment, he recognized her as the young woman who had brought him and Masaki snacks on their visit the other day.

“Ah, Dan-sensei ga kimashitan desu ne. Ohayou gozaimasu!” she cried as she came to a stop several meters away.

“Ohayou gozaimasu,” he replied, glad he was capable of at least that much conversation. He wasn’t sure exactly who this woman was — some kind of secretary? — but she seemed rather flustered. He wished he knew how to ask what was wrong.

“Ano—” she said, and her forehead wrinkled up as though in concentration. “This way, please,” she said slowly, as though it took an effort, and then she ducked her head in a quick bow and held out her arm to indicate a door off to one side. It was the door that led into the same office where he and Masaki had met the headmaster.

“Oh, thank you, Miss—?” He trailed off, hoping she would understand that he wanted to know her name.

“My name is Keiko Iwato. Nice to meet you,” she answered him, her words very carefully enunciated. She smiled then, and it struck him that she was actually quite beautiful.

“Nice to meet you too, Miss Iwato,” he said, and returned her smile, adding a little bow as well, just for good measure.
Then he stepped into his indoor shoes at last and followed Miss Iwato into the room with the flags and the desk and the vinyl couch. She disappeared at once, only to return a minute later with a small cup of tea, which she set on the table before him before whisking out of the room again. When after five minutes she hadn’t returned, he guessed he was on his own now. He was somewhat at a loss. Wasn’t he supposed to be working, rather than hanging out in an unused office drinking tea?

When he tried a sip of it, he was startled to taste, not tea, but something that was almost like it, except refrigerator-cold and with a sort of roasted flavor? It wasn’t bad. In fact, he found it refreshing. It just hadn’t been at all what he was expecting.

The door to the room opened again, and he looked up to see a girl in school uniform enter. He gave her an expectant smile, but she just ducked her head, her eyes fixed on her shoes. A woman came in behind her, took her by the arm, and led her to the couch on the other side of the low table from Dan. The woman bowed to Dan and then murmured a few words to the girl before leaving the room.

Dan set his tea down, feeling more awkward than ever. The girl was hunched over, perched on the edge of the couch, but as he looked, he saw her eyes glance up, fix on him for just a moment, and then dart back down toward the floor again. She had very light brown eyes that made a pleasing contrast with her tanned skin and dark hair.

“Hello,” he said, putting on his extra-friendly meeting-the-students smile again. “My name is Dan. What’s your name?”

She lifted her face then, her eyes gone wide and staring. She didn’t smile, but at least she was making eye contact.

“Touko,” she said, pointing at the name tag on the left side of her school blazer. Her name was written there, of course, but in kanji that Dan had no idea how to read. As he peered closer, though, he realized that the last character was a very simple one, “子,” which he remembered meant “child” and could be read as “ko.” That must be the second syllable of her first name then.

“Nice to meet you, Touko,” he said.

She stared at him again for a long time, but then finally she mumbled, “Nicetomichu,” in return.

They sat in silence for several minutes, Dan looking around the room and Touko staring at the floor. He wondered whether or not he should try to make conversation, and if so, what things he could say that she might understand. He had just decided to try asking her how old she was when the door to the room opened again, and a middle-aged woman dressed in a skirt-suit came in, offered Dan a polite bow, and then beckoned to Touko.

The girl stood and followed the woman out, but at the door to the room, she turned, gave a low, jerky bow, and said, “See you.”

Dan felt more confused than ever. He looked up at the clock and saw that it was already 8:10. He’d been sitting here with no clue what was going on for a full fifteen minutes now. At 8:13, at last, the door opened again, and a round man in a dark grey suit and glasses strode in, stopped near the couch where Dan sat, and said,

“Good morning. Are you Dan?”

“Yes, I am,” Dan replied, jumping to his feet and feeling a sense of relief that something was finally happening.

“I’m Shun Watanabe, and I’m one of the English teachers here,” the man said and offered Dan his
hand to shake. “So, now the staff have a meeting, and you are going to introduce yourself. Are you ready?”

“Do I need to make my introduction in Japanese, or—?” Dan could feel his pulse rising already. He definitely was not ready.

“No, no, you can give your introduction in English,” Mr. Watanabe reassured him. “Just quick, and simple. You are a new teacher, so you need to tell them your name and you are an English teacher.”

“Right. Got it,” Dan said, hoping that sounding confident would make him feel confident.

Mr. Watanabe nodded and led him out, across the hall and through another door. They passed through a small, dark room where Dan caught a glimpse of a couple of ancient computers and a fax machine, and then stepped out into a big, long room full of people. The door they entered through brought them out right next to a row of three big desks where the headmaster, assistant headmaster, and head teacher (What were their names again?) were seated. Along the two long sides of the room, at a perpendicular angle to the three main desks, stretched two rows of smaller desks, each with a teacher dressed in a suit seated behind it. At the backs of the row of teachers to Dan’s left was a wall lined with cabinets, and behind the row on his right was a wall of windows that opened onto the front courtyard of the school.

All eyes were turned on Dan and Mr. Watanabe, who was now speaking. Dan caught the phrase “atarashii eigo no kyoushi” and assumed that the English teacher was explaining to everyone who in the hell Dan was. Then Mr. Watanabe turned to him and gave him a little nod. He stopped himself on the verge of shoving his hands in his pockets, straightened his shoulders, and introduced himself.

“Good morning. My name is Dan Howell, and I will be teaching English here starting today.” He cleared his throat a little. That was all Mr. Watanabe had told him to say. What else? What else?

“Erm… Yoroshiku onegaishimasu,” and he gave a low bow that he hoped didn’t look as clumsy as it felt.

“Yoroshiku onegaishimasu,” responded the fifty or more occupants of the room in chorus. Internally, Dan felt he must look like a deer in the headlights, but he tried to appear outwardly calm. There was a silence then that felt like an eternity, as Dan looked at the teachers, and the teachers looked at Dan, and he tried to figure out what he was meant to do next. Then he realized that Mr. Watanabe was pointing toward the opposite end of the room, and when he looked down there, he saw Phil sat at one of the desks, giving him a little wave and a small smile. Then Phil pointed to an empty desk next to him, and with relief Dan understood that it was for him.

The room remained completely silent as Dan made his way down the center aisle, between the two rows of desks, feeling all the way as if he were running some sort of gauntlet of stares. When he at last reached the empty desk, the very last in the row on the cabinet side of the room, Phil pulled the chair out for him, and he gratefully sank into it. The moment he was sat down, the headmaster, up at the front of the room (Mr. Namatame, maybe?), stood and began speaking. He was so far away that Dan couldn’t really make out anything he was saying.

“This is the morning meeting,” Phil leaned over and whispered then. “It’s already about half over. In a minute, when they’re done speaking, we’ll all stand up and say Yoroshiku again.”

Dan nodded, thankful that at last someone was explaining to him just what was going on. After the headmaster was done speaking, a few more teachers stood and gave speeches of their own. Then the assistant headmaster said something, and then at last all the teachers stood at once, and they all bowed toward the front of the room — Dan along with them — and said “Yoroshiku onegaishimasu!” The moment that was done, people began dashing around, some talking to each
other, some leaving the room entirely, others taking care of other tasks.

Unsure of what he was meant to be doing, Dan glanced over at Phil and saw that he was sitting back down and pulling something from his desk drawer. So Dan sat down too and began a close inspection of his own desk. There were three drawers on the right side, the side where his desk bordered Phil’s, and one long one across the part where Dan sat. The top of the desk was covered with a large piece of clear plastic sheeting. He looked over at Phil’s desk and saw that he’d placed various papers and photographs beneath the plastic on his own. Phil himself was now busy pinning a name tag to the left side of his jacket.

“Er, do I get one of those?” Dan asked.

“Oh, yeah. Check the top drawer of your desk. The long one there,” Phil answered, pointing toward the drawer. He pulled it open and found a few pens and pencils, a ruler, an eraser, and sure enough, a name tag with his last and first name written out in katakana: ハウエル ダニエル.

“The opening ceremony starts at 9:00, so we’d probably better make our way over to the gym in a few minutes,” Phil told him as soon as he’d gotten his name tag on. Dan nodded, not really sure what the opening ceremony was but figuring it was best to just go with the flow.

The school’s opening ceremony turned out to be the longest, most boring formal ceremony that Dan thought he’d ever sat through. The staff and teachers all sat to one side of the gym, in folding chairs, while the students filed in carrying their desk chairs from their classrooms and lined them up in neat rows, eventually filling the entire gymnasium. It started out with the singing of Kimi ga yo (the national anthem) and the school song, and then what felt like an endless series of speeches. He was pretty sure he saw one or two of the older teachers actually dozing off where they sat. At one point Dan and some other new teachers were called up onto the stage and introduced. Then there were more speeches…and a couple more speeches. Then at long last, after what Dan was shocked to see had only been forty-five minutes, they all stood and Yoroshiku onegaishimasu-ed, and it was finally over.

After that, he followed Phil back to their desks in the staff room, though Phil didn’t sit down. Instead he grabbed something from his book bag, and said,

“Has anyone shown you where your locker is yet?”

“I get a locker?” Dan asked, standing up from his chair again at once.

“Yep, in the changing room. Come on. If I don’t get out of this suit ASAP I think I’m going to suffocate.”

He led the way out into the hall and to the room next door, which had a curtain hanging in the doorway.

“Shitsurei shimasu!” Phil called at the doorway before pushing the curtain aside to allow himself and Dan to pass through. There were a couple of other male teachers there, already changed out of their stuffy suits and into short-sleeved shirts or, in at least one case, a track suit.

“Over here,” Phil murmured and pointed out two tall lockers at the back of the room, once again with their names neatly labeled. “Your key should be hanging inside the door there. Did you bring a change of clothes?”

“I didn’t know that was even an option,” Dan muttered, taking the opportunity to reach up and loosen his tie.
“It definitely is. You can at least take off your jacket and tie.” He had already shrugged out of his own jacket and was starting on the buttons of his shirt. “You really only need to wear a suit on ceremony days, like today. I haven’t personally fallen so low as to buy a matching track suit, but many of the teachers here seem to love them.” He had his shirt off now, and Dan had to force himself to look away to keep from staring. Apparently Phil was just going to strip right there in front of him. He really hoped he wasn’t blushing. He let out a nervous little laugh.

“They are very 1998-cool,” he said, looking over at a couple of teachers who had come in and were now pulling out track suits of their own. “So, do you know if we have any classes today, or—?”

“Nah,” Phil’s voice was a little muffled, as though he might be pulling a shirt over his head now, though Dan didn’t look to find out. “They probably won’t invite us to any classes until next week.”

“Next week?” He couldn’t help but turn to Phil now, and thank god he was fully dressed. “So what are we supposed to be doing this week?”

The left side of Phil’s mouth lifted in a smirk.

“Well, I’m currently studying to take the N1 Japanese language test in December, so I brought all my flashcards and stuff. I have my Kindle too, if you’d like to borrow it.” When he saw the expression on Dan’s face he laughed out loud. “Yeah, basically we can do whatever we want as long as we look like we’re staying busy.”

They passed the rest of the morning with Dan quizzing Phil on his Japanese vocabulary flash cards, and occasionally taking breaks for Phil to explain more to Dan about who all the teachers were and how the school worked. Apparently there were four English teachers, including Mr. Watanabe, other than Dan and Phil, who were technically just assistant teachers. Phil explained that he secretly liked Mr. Watanabe the best of the four, because he was the one who actually talked to him and invited him to classes most often. The junior high school had three levels of students — the 12-year-old first years, 13-year-old second years, and the 14-year-old third years. Mr. Watanabe taught only first year students, Mr. Suzuki taught only second years, Mr. Kato taught the third years, and Ms. Takabayashi taught two each of the first and second year classes. All in all, there were six classes of 35-40 students in each year.

“There’s also the Special Needs students. We usually get to teach them one or two times a week as well,” Phil was explaining, leaning back in his seat with his legs crossed in a casual posture. They were the only ones in the staff room right now, so he wasn’t even bothering to keep his voice low. As he spoke, the door right next to them slid open, and Ms. Iwato and a couple of other staff members came in carrying trays, bowls, plates, and several containers from which wafted delicious food smells.

“Lunchtime!” Phil jumped up at once and rushed over to take the giant bucket Ms. Iwato held, while Dan followed at a slower pace. Masaki had told him that the school would be providing their lunch, but he hadn’t a clue what all that would entail. He figured he’d give it a shot, and if it turned out to be horrible he could always claim food allergies and start bringing his own lunch.

Phil was helping the other teachers lay out trays on an empty table at this end of the room and distribute bowls, plates, chopsticks and food among them. Dan wanted to join in, but the others were all getting everything done so quickly and efficiently he wasn’t sure there was anything left for him to do. Instead, he stood awkwardly on one side and watched as the school nurse went around and ladled out soup from the huge metal bucket and Ms. Iwato spooned some sort of cold salad out onto each plate. Phil was putting a small carton of milk on each tray, and another teacher was distributing mysterious red, plastic boxes among the trays.
They were finished in only minutes, and then everyone picked up trays and started carrying them off to various desks. Dan walked over and picked up a tray as well, preparing to carry it back to his own desk, when he noticed that Phil was taking the tray he carried up to the front of the room. Maybe they weren’t supposed to be eating at their desks? He started to follow Phil, but then he saw him put the tray on the assistant headmaster’s desk and leave it there. Oh. They were passing the trays out to other people…except Dan had no idea which desks belonged to which teachers, and even if he did, he wouldn’t know which teachers needed lunches and which didn’t. So, he just stayed stood there, trying to look like he was taking the tray he held somewhere, until the others had finished passing them out and were taking trays back to their own desks.

The food turned out to be surprisingly delicious, for a school lunch. He discovered that the red boxes contained a serving of sticky rice. Other than that, there was some kind of seaweed-heavy soup, a cold seaweed salad with a rather vinegary flavor, and a piece of baked mackerel with a sweet, miso glaze. He had a few difficult moments when he couldn’t find a spoon for the soup, but then noticed that everyone else was just picking bits out of it with their chopsticks and then drinking the broth. He’d never known before that it was possible to eat soup with chopsticks.

“Is the lunch usually this good?” he asked Phil when they were done and gathering up their dishes.

“Yeah, it’s all right. I prefer bread days, though,” he added as he stacked his and Dan’s bowls on top of a pile of dirty ones on the table. “Ugh, and don’t even get me started on natto days!”

“Oh, come on,” Dan said as they headed back to their desks, “is natto really as bad as everyone says? It’s just beans, right?”

Phil stopped dead in his tracks, and cast him a look of utter horror.

“Yes. Yes, it’s that bad.” A shudder passed through him as he spoke the words. “Just beans. Just beans. Ha!” Dan was about to ask him to elaborate, when Phil said, “Come on. It’s hiruyasumi. I’ll give you a tour of the school and maybe we can talk to some of the kids.”

The school was a lot bigger than Dan had realized. Apart from the main building, which held the staff room on the ground floor and a few classrooms on the first and second, there were two other large buildings, one for only the third years and another with classrooms for the first and second year students. To one side of those two was a small, free-standing building that housed the kitchen, where Dan could see students handing off their empty lunch containers and dirty dishes to the kitchen staff. Behind the first and second-years’ building were a couple more smaller buildings that Phil told him held the wood and metal shops. Next to these stood the gym, and beyond the kitchen and the gym was a wide, dirt-covered school yard, where Dan saw various games of football under way.

“Past the school yard are the tennis courts and swimming pool,” Phil explained as they passed it, “And I think that about sums it up.” As they walked along the pavement that led from one building to the next, they kept passing groups of students, who would stop talking and stare at them as they walked past. A few of them would boldly yell out, “Hello!” or “How are you?” and the groups of girls would often start giggling. However, as they passed one group of girls, one of them stepped away from her friends, walked right up to Phil, and said,

“Hello, Phil-sensei! How are you?” She looked a little different from the other students — her hair and eyes seemed to be a lighter brown. Dan looked over at the other two girls she had been talking to and was startled to see that one of them had two braids of bright blonde hair. The other had very dark hair and eyes, but her features didn’t look quite Japanese either.

“I’m very good, Julia. How are you?” Phil answered her with a smile.
“I’m happy today,” the girl answered. Then she turned and looked at Dan and gave him a megawatt grin. “Hello, I’m Julia. I’m from Brazil. Nice to meet you!” She held out a hand, and Dan shook it.

“Hi, I’m Dan,” he said, and then added, “I’m from England. Nice to meet you too.”

“They are my friends, Sumi and Marcella.” She waved at the two girls behind her, who were both gazing at Dan with wide eyes. “Marcella is from Brazil. Sumi is from Peru.”

“Oh, that’s cool.” He wasn’t sure exactly how to respond, but Julia didn’t seem bothered by it.

“I love English. Good-bye!” she said, and with an enthusiastic wave, turned and went back to her two friends.

“Bye,” Dan said, waving as well, even though she wasn’t looking any more.

Before they’d gotten more than a meter away from the girls, Dan heard them burst out laughing and start chattering loudly in a language that was definitely not Japanese — maybe Portuguese? Spanish?

“Julia is probably one of the best students in English class,” Phil told him once they were out of ear shot. “She won the English speech contest last year.”

“Isn’t it, like, an unfair advantage if she’s not Japanese?” Dan asked, glancing back over his shoulder at the girls again.

“Oh, she is Japanese, though.” Phil said. “Well, half. She was born in Brazil, but they moved to Japan when she was still in primary school.”

“Is that common?” Dan hadn’t even considered the possibility that some of his students might not be fully Japanese.

“More common than you’d think. There are a lot of kids from South America in this town especially,” Phil answered as he waved to a group of boys who were headed toward the school yard carrying a baseball and a few bats. “By the way, are you busy next weekend?”

The question caught Dan off-guard, and he almost laughed. What plans could he possibly have?

“Nope.” He shook his head.

“Cool. Seiji was taking a group of us down to Kitsuregawa to see the fireworks on Saturday night. They have a little matsuri there every year, and it’s usually one of the last of the summer, so it might be your last chance to go to a summer festival until next year.”

“Yeah, that sounds like fun.” They were nearing the far side of the school now, past the gym and the wood shop building. There was a chain link fence here that marked the end of the school grounds, and beyond that Dan could see a parking lot and then some kind of stadium.

“Great! We’re going to dress up in yukata and everything too. Do you have one? If not, you can borrow one of mine,” Phil gave him a quick look up and down. “I think we’re about the same size.”

“If you wouldn’t mind…” Dan definitely didn’t own a yukata, nor did he think it likely that he’d be able to afford to buy one before Saturday.

“It’s no trouble at all. Just come over to my place beforehand, and we’ll find one that fits you.” They had just reached the chain link fence and stopped walking. Phil turned back to face the school, spread his arms in an all-encompassing gesture, and declared, “And here concludes our tour of Nishi
Junior High School. We hope you have enjoyed your trip, and thank you for choosing Lester Tours, Inc. for all of your junior high school touring needs. Please collect any trash before leaving, and be sure to tip your tour guide.”

What an adorable dork, Dan couldn’t stop himself from thinking, but he told his brain to shut up.

“Do you think I could contract your services for a tour of some of the classrooms as well?”

Phil dropped his arms and grinned.

“I thought you’d never ask.”

Chapter End Notes

Originally published on tumblr
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Dan goes to a fireworks festival with his new co-worker, Phil, and friends.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Despite the utter lack of actual work, Dan wasn’t bored once that entire week. In fact, he had a far more difficult time finding ways to stay occupied once he got home in the afternoons (other than tumblr, grocery shopping, and the occasional Skype session with someone back home) than when he was at school. Every now and then he would look over and see another teacher hard at work grading papers, or someone would scurry into the staff room, grab a book and then scurry out again, and Dan would feel a momentary stab of guilt for actually being on the payroll. But then Phil would start telling him another story about some ridiculous person he met at the train station, and everything else would just stop being important.

By Thursday he felt he’d gotten the hang of the school’s daily routine. He’d arrive at 7:55, just enough time to grab a cup of coffee from the break room before the start of the morning meeting at 8:00. The meeting would last until about 8:10, and then all the teachers would disappear to their classes, leaving him and Phil with the huge, empty staff room all to themselves.

Just before noon, the office staff would show up with the day’s lunch makings, and after lunch he and Phil would wander the school, looking in on various activities the students were getting up to during their midday break. Afterthirayasumi was o-souji, cleaning time, and he and Phil would join the crew of second year students assigned to give the staff room a once over. On the first day, Dan discovered that bending over to sweep with the sixty centimeter-long brooms provided was back-breaking work, so after that he made sure to grab the watering can before anyone else could and focus on watering all of the plants in the room very slowly.

When the twenty minutes of cleaning time were up, afternoon classes would begin, so it was back to just him and Phil, killing time in the staff room until 3:00 PM when Dan’s contracted hours were up. Phil, who worked directly for the city rather than for a dispatch company like Dan, had slightly different hours — 8:00 to 4:00 — so after the first couple of days, Dan started to find excuses to stay later — because there was no point in rushing home just to be bored and alone, right?

During the Thursday morning meeting, a flier was passed out to all the teachers, even Dan who they must know couldn’t read it. Once everyone else had left, though, Phil translated it for him. It listed all of the school’s club activities for the year, along with the teachers in charge, fees to join, equipment needed, etc. After reading through his once, Phil slid it under the plastic cover on his desk and seemed ready to move on to another topic. Dan lingered over his a little longer.

“Would it be weird if I stayed after school and spied on the archery club one day?” he asked after a moment. “I’ve kind of always wanted to see kyuudo in real life.”

“Probably not,” Phil said, frowning thoughtfully, “but they bus the kids over to a gym on the other side of town for practice, so it wouldn’t be very practical to go.”
“Oh,” Dan said, and looked back down at the list: Art club, Choir, Band, Baseball, Volleyball, Football (or rather, Soccer, because for some reason the Japanese had adopted the American term), Judo, Tennis, Swimming, and something called “Cultural Activities.” “How about the judo club?”

“They practice at the Prefectural Gymnasium next door, so you might be able to swing that one.” Phil didn’t sound particularly interested in the topic of conversation, and Dan guessed that this was all old news to him.

“Do you think they’d let me join a club?” He scanned the list again, immediately ruling out all of the sports clubs — there was no way that was going to happen. Maybe choir…?

“Maybe, if you asked,” Phil shrugged, and then pulled out his Japanese study guide and notebook, opened them and began to copy down grammar terms.

Dan was surprised, and a little hurt, by Phil’s apparent disinterest. He knew this probably wasn’t the most exciting topic of conversation for Phil, but it was something Dan cared about. He wanted to get more involved with the school and maybe have a chance to get to know some of the students better, and joining a club seemed like a good opportunity to do that. Up until now, Phil had been so helpful with almost any question that he had, that his sudden coolness was a jarring change.

With his usual source of entertainment apparently lost in language study, Dan pulled out his laptop and opened up a document he had started working on the evening before. So much had happened to him over the past two and half weeks, and he had all these thoughts about it milling around in his mind, trying to coalesce into some greater idea. He’d decided that maybe he could help the process along by writing it all out, so he’d started typing up some of his thoughts and impressions with a vague idea that he might start a blog or something eventually.

He pecked away at the keyboard, typing out long, convoluted sentences that took five minutes to craft and then reading them back and deleting them because they sounded too fucking pretentious. After about half an hour, Phil stretched and closed his books and started talking to him about what he suspected really went on in the school’s “Special Documents Room,” and everything seemed to be back to normal. Dan was kind of relieved, and not just because it was an excuse to give up wrestling with his intractable writing.

After lunch, Dan managed to chase down Mr. Watanabe in one of the first-year classrooms and ask him about joining a club. The English teacher’s eyes opened wide behind his black-rimmed glasses.

“I don’t think any ALT has joined a club before. I have to ask the school principal,” was his first response. Then, “Which club do you want to join?”

“Kyuudo?” Dan suggested, raising his eyebrows in a hopeful expression. Mr. Watanabe’s own face maintained its look of surprise.

“I have to ask the principal,” he repeated. “I will tell you later.”

“All right. Thank you!” Dan gave a small bow and then left the English teacher to his paper grading and gentle teasing of the first years.

On Friday afternoon, when Dan finally bid good-bye to Phil at around 3:45, he couldn’t believe how the week had flown by. It was a little lowering to remember that he was about to spend a long Friday evening at home alone, but overall he was pretty happy with the state of affairs, and tomorrow he had the fireworks festival to look forward to.

He had just settled down in his browsing position on his futon when, for the first time ever, his new
iPhone began to ring. At first, he just stared at it, surprised by this new experience. Then he saw the name on the screen, “James,” and he picked it up, swiped right, and answered.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Dan! This is James. How you doin’ this evening?”

“I’m all right. What’s up?”

“Well, Madhavi and Jake and I were going to go down to the arcade, and I thought maybe you’d want to come. I hear they have the one game with the drums…”

“Taiko no Tatsujin?”

“Yeah, that one! Wanna come?”

A social life and arcade games? Dan didn’t hesitate for even one moment.

“Definitely! When are you going?”

“In about an hour. We might grab some food first, too. You in?”

Dan thought about his ever-shrinking bank account.

“Er…I think I’ll eat here at home, but I’ll definitely come along to the arcade.”

“Sweet!”

The “arcade” turned out to be a small side area just inside the door of the Asda-esque Trial Mart, but it was stocked with a good selection of games and an equally wide variety of purikura machines. Almost as soon as they arrived, Madhavi challenged him to the drum game, which he had really thought he’d be a natural at, with his background in drumming. He was surprised when she beat him soundly every time. After three rounds, he forfeited, and she laughed and told him,

“You have to get up pretty early in the morning to beat me at this game.”

Jake leaned over from where he was destroying wave after wave of invading aliens on the next machine over.

“Whatever. She thinks she’s some kind of taiko master after playing for a whole two years,” he muttered out of the side of his beard.

“Shut up!” Madhavi said, giving him a playful punch in the shoulder. “It’s been two and a half years now.”

That’s when Dan heard an old but familiar voice call out, “Gotta keep movin’!” Slowly, he turned to look behind him and, yes! There in the corner it stood — an ancient DDR machine. Two teenage boys were just walking away from the game, leaving it open for the next contender. Suddenly nothing else seemed to matter to Dan. Here it was. His moment had come at last.

“Madhavi, what do you say we have a re-match on a different game?”

“What?” She left off trying to distract Jake and make him lose his game, and turned to look at Dan again. “Oh, yeah sure. Which game?”

Dan just grinned an evil grin. She had no idea.
Madhavi ended up having to bow out after just one round, conceding that Dan was truly a Dance Dance Revolution prodigy. Next he challenged James, who actually gave him a little competition before Dan beat him as well. Jake refused, saying he was terrible at the game, and by that time Dan was pretty winded any way. Before he left the DDR machine behind, he gave it a soft caress and whispered, “I’ll be back for you soon.”

In Jake’s car on the way back to their respective homes, Dan asked the others if he would see them at the fireworks festival the next day. James said Seiji had invited him and he was definitely going, but Madhavi and Jake said they had other plans and wished the other two a good time. When Dan crawled into bed that evening — far later than was really healthy for someone trying to keep a regular work schedule — he felt content with how his Friday evening had turned out.

The next morning, he indulged in the glorious luxury of not waking up to an alarm, which led to him sleeping in until mid-morning. Phil had told him to come over after lunch and had texted him his address. It was about a fifteen minute bike ride away, but Dan had yet to venture to that part of the town. He was a little worried about getting lost, so as he sat down with his spaghetti bolognese for lunch, he pulled up Google Maps and carefully traced out the route from his place to Phil’s.

Where Dan lived was in the south part of town, which seemed to consist of a lot of rice and vegetable fields with the occasional neighborhood or block of flats thrown in. Phil lived farther north, more toward the center of Harata and near things like the City Hall and the hospital.

It was an easy bike ride, and Dan took it slowly, allowing himself plenty of time to check out the city all around him. It was strange how the basic building blocks of the city were all the same as any city anywhere in the world — roads, pavements, shops, houses, street lights, electrical wires — and yet no matter where you looked in Harata, there was no doubt you were in Japan. It wasn’t just the fact that the signs were in Japanese, either. Everything — from the cleanliness of the gutters, to the shabby charm of the ancient shop buildings, to the complete lack of garbage bins anywhere in sight — it was all so Japan.

Phil’s building was taller than Dan had been expecting. It towered over everything in the surrounding area. He counted eight floors total. Phil had explained that though he lived on the third floor, it would be marked as the fourth because Japan counted the ground floor as the first, like they did in America. After considering the idea of four flights of steps, Dan decided to take the lift. It turned out to be an ancient and rickety one with a flickering light that made Dan feel he was stepping into the start of a horror film. As it creaked its way up to the fourth floor, he made a mental note to take the stairs in future.

When the doors squeaked open at last and he stepped out onto Phil’s floor, Dan was amazed again at the view. Since he was one floor higher than at his own flat, he could see a little farther into the distance and make out a little more of the line of mountains. It was sunny and clear again today, and the air was so clean he thought he could make out every detail of every rock on the nearby peaks.

It was almost with reluctance that he turned away from the view and pushed the doorbell button beneath the plaque reading “フィル・レスター.” There was a long pause, and Dan was on the verge of pushing the button again, when he heard the sounds of unlocking, and then the door swung open to reveal Phil stood on the other side in a long, dark hallway.

“Hey, you! Come on in.”

There was a small tiled space right inside the door — just large enough to fit four ceramic tiles — and then a step up into the flat proper. Dan stopped to pull off his shoes, before stepping into one of the waiting pairs of slippers. He wasn’t surprised to find that, unlike the school ones, the slippers Phil owned actually fit him.
“I’ve got a couple of different yukata. You can try them on and see which one you like best,” Phil said over his shoulder as he led the way up the hallway. Dan glimpsed a closed door on the right and what looked like a laundry room on the left. At the end of the hallway, they stepped out into a kitchen/dining area with three more rooms opening off of it, and Dan was immediately envious.

“This place is massive!”

Phil looked around in faint surprise at what, back in England, would have been considered a somewhat small flat, and then turned a grin on him.

“Oh, yeah, you live in one of those itty bitty Leopalaces, don’t you?”

“I have one room,” Dan groaned. “One room, and I can see over the shower curtain rod, and my kitchen is just a hallway! The stovetop is next to the washing machine, Phil.” He peered into Phil’s living room and saw that he actually had space for a small sofa, a bookshelf, and a coffee table. Dan’s computer had to sit on the same table as his TV because it was the only one in the entire flat. Up until now, he’d just assumed that all ALTs lived in similarly cramped quarters. It almost felt like a betrayal to discover that Phil had been keeping all this space to himself.

“This apartment is owned by the city, so they let me live here for pretty cheap,” Phil explained, and Dan thought detected a faint note of gloating. “I hung up the yukata in the tatami room, by the way, if you wanna get changed in there.” He was pointing to the wall behind Dan.

Dan turned around to see that the sliding doors opening off of that side of the kitchen led into a traditional Japanese-style room, complete with straw mats on the floor, a low table in the center, and a folding screen in one corner. There were a couple of long yukata hung from the screen. Dan was on the verge of stepping into the room when Phil stopped him with a hand on his arm.

“Ah, sorry. No slippers on the tatami or Akari will kill me. Do you mind taking them off first?”

Dan obligingly slid off his slippers at the entrance to the room and then stepped inside, sliding the doors shut behind him. He walked over to where the two robes hung and picked up the first one. It was dark indigo in color, with just a few small accents of white, over the left breast and on the back. The other one was less subtle, though the colors were just as muted. The main color was a medium grey with a soft, metallic sheen, but it was decorated with a pattern of stylized dragon in a darker grey thread. After a few moments going back and forth, he decided he liked the dragon one better.

“Yes? You all right in there? Need any help?” came Phil’s voice from the kitchen.

“No, I’m fine,” he called back. He hesitated a moment, feeling strange about being stood in Phil’s apartment about to undress, so he hurried through it, ripping his shirt and jeans off and pulling the yukata on as quickly as he could. He held it closed around him as he walked back over to the door, slid it open again, and said,

“Well, how does it look?”

Phil looked him up and down, eyes narrowed in an appraising manner.

“Let’s try it with the obi and see how it looks.” He brushed past Dan, stooped to grab one of the sashes that he’d left lying on the table in the tatami room, and then stepped up to Dan again. “Do you know how to tie it, or do you want me to do it?”

“Oh, yeah, I have no idea how to tie one of those. Onegaishimasu!”

“Omakase,” Phil said, slinging the sash over his shoulder and then taking the two lapels of
Dan’s yukata in either hand. “You have to cross the left side over the right,” he explained as he did so. “If you do it the opposite way it means that you’re dead.”

“Oh,” Dan said, not quite able to focus on Phil’s words. His fingertips had brushed against the skin of Dan’s bare chest as pulled the robe closed again, and suddenly Dan’s thoughts were all muddled.

“Now hold it in place for me,” Phil instructed, and Dan reached up to hold the left lapel closed over the right. Then Phil pulled the obi from his shoulder, gave a flick of his wrist so that it unfurled in one swift motion, and leaned forward, putting his arms around Dan to wrap the sash around his waist. Holy crap. Letting Phil do this had been a terrible idea. Dan’s heart rate skyrocketed as Phil’s soft hair brushed against the side of his neck, and Dan had to suppress a shudder at the tickling sensation of it.

Mercifully, Phil leaned away from him again then and handed him one end of the sash.

“Hold this too, please,” he said. His voice sounded perfectly calm, and his expression was one of simple concentration as he began to fold the other end of the sash over on itself. The sash was meant to be worn low, just above the hips, and Dan had to take a deep breath and think about cold showers and blizzards and cool mountain streams so as not to focus too much on the feeling of Phil’s hands fiddling around in the region of his abdomen.

“All right!” Phil said at last, stepping back and regarding Dan with his lips pursed in approval. “I think it looks pretty good. There’s a mirror in my room, though, if you want to check yourself out.” He pointed toward a door on the other side of the room, and Dan walked through into what turned out to be Phil’s bedroom. He was even more envious to see that there was an actual queen-sized bed, a far cry from Dan’s narrow futon.

He found the mirror on the back of the bedroom door, and what he saw there surprised him. He’d thought he would look kind of silly wearing what was essentially a long dress, but the yukata actually suited him nicely.

As he stood there admiring his reflection, the doorbell rang and he heard Phil’s footsteps heading off to answer it. Dan passed back through the tatami room and then out into the kitchen once again, curious about who else would be coming over to Phil’s place on a Saturday afternoon. Then he heard voices, Phil’s and a higher-pitched one, and he realized who the other visitor must be — Phil’s girlfriend.

When the two of them stepped into the kitchen, Phil was grinning his head off, and Dan did his best to ignore the sinking feeling in his stomach.

“Dan, this is Akari. She’s been dying to meet you all week!”

She stepped forward then, and Dan’s heart sank even lower. She was really pretty. Her hair was dyed a soft brown and cut in a short bob with a fringe straight across her forehead, and her eyes were very dark. She had a small, shy smile on her lips. He noticed after a moment that she was dressed up in a yukata too, though hers had a pattern of lilies on it and the wider, higher women’s obi.

“Hello, I’m Akari. Nice to meet you!” She held out her hand, and Dan shook it. Her fingers were slender and cool, and he noticed that she’d done her nails to match the colors of her yukata, black and silver and pale pink. Then she dropped her eyes down to her toes, turned to Phil and asked him a question in Japanese. The two of them talked back and forth for a minute, Dan feeling more and more like a third wheel. At last, Phil turned back to him, and said,

“Okay, I need to get dressed too. Do you want to wait in the lounge? There’s probably nothing good
on TV, but I’ve got the Wii hooked up, if you want to check out my games collection.”

At any other time, Dan would have been eager to find out just what sort of games Phil owned, but now he felt like a kid who was being sent to the other room to play while the adults talked about serious business.

“Yeah, sure,” he said, trying to sound enthusiastic. In the living room, he sifted through the pile of cases next to the entertainment center for a few minutes, but really his thoughts were in the other room, wondering if Akari was helping Phil get dressed just like Phil had done for him. No. No, he shouldn’t think about that. Instead he pulled out Phil’s copy of *Skyward Sword*, popped it into the Wii and did his best to concentrate on Link’s quest.

It was only a few minutes later that the doorbell rang again, and Phil called from the other room asking him if he wouldn’t mind answering it. When he got to the front door, he opened it to find Seiji and James.

“Hey! Dan, right?” Seiji said, hurrying in and sliding off his sandals. He was dressed in a dark blue yukata, but James behind him was dressed in some kind of Japanese-style matching shirt and shorts set.

“Yes, Phil’s still getting into his yukata, so I’ve been sent as the welcoming committee.”

“Did you buy that?” James asked, pointing at the yukata Dan wore as he too stepped into the flat. “I looked for one at Trial, but all they had were these.” He pointed down at his own outfit.

“Oh, no, I’m borrowing this from Phil,” Dan explained. “What exactly is that?”

“It’s called a jinbei.” Seiji called back over his shoulder. He was already in the kitchen, with Dan and James following at a slower pace. “We need to get on the road if we want to be able to find parking. Phil! Are you almost ready?”

Phil and Akari finally emerged from the tatami room then, and Dan had to stop himself staring. Phil had put on the other yukata, the indigo-colored one, and the darkness of the cloth was a perfect complement to the paleness of Phil’s skin. He’d let the front drape in such a way that it showed just a small triangle of his chest. It suddenly struck Dan that he loved yukata.

“Let’s go!” Seiji’s voice snapped Dan out of his slightly-nsfw thoughts, and the group headed for the door. Phil had also offered to let Dan borrow a small drawstring bag to carry his wallet and things in, which Dan had hung from his obi by the strings, and a pair of sandals. When he slipped on the latter in the entryway, his ensemble was complete.

They ended up having to take two cars, as it turned out Seiji’s girlfriend Hana was joining them as well. Seiji drove one car, with James and Hana, and Phil the other. Dan went to open the door to the back seat of Phil’s car, but Akari rushed up to him and started waving her hands rapidly.

“No, no! You’re very tall. I’ll sit in the back, okay?” she cried.

Crap. She was nice too.

“Thanks,” he said, offering her a smile and a sheepish little nod before opening the door to the front seat instead.

As soon as they were on the road, Akari leaned forward from the back and started pelting him with all kinds of questions. Where was he from? Where did he go to university, and what did he study? Why had he come to Japan? Did he like it here? Did he like Japanese food? Did he miss England? It
surprised Dan how interested she actually seemed to be, and he realized that Phil wasn’t just being polite earlier when he’d said she was dying to meet Dan. Her English wasn’t the greatest, but she used it enthusiastically and seemed able to understand most things he said, if he was careful to enunciate.

Dan returned some of her questions, learning that she was a year older than Phil — twenty-seven — and worked in an insurance office. She loved Disney films, Thai food, and Korean actors, and she and Phil had met at a party thrown by Seiji. When she told Dan that they’d been together for three years now, he gave up his last shred of hope that he had any chance with Phil. Three years was practically married.

The drive down to Kitsuregawa lasted about two hours, and then it took them almost forty-five minutes to find a place to park two cars together. Kitsuregawa wasn’t a big town, but it was now overflowing with people who had come in from all over the prefecture just to see the last big fireworks show of the season. They ended up having to park almost a twenty minute walk away from where the festival was being held. By the time they made it over there, it was already after 6:00, and the sun was sinking lower in the sky.

The festival was packed. Dan saw lots of people dressed in traditional Japanese garments like their own, though a slight majority wore everyday Western-style clothes. As they drew closer to the festival grounds, Dan began to be able to make out rows of stalls lining the streets, and shortly afterward the scents of the festival foods reached his nostrils. His stomach immediately began making loud, growling noises, so he was glad when Phil turned to the group, and said,

“I think we should get food first.”

“Well, Sarah and Kevin said they’re already here saving us a spot to watch the fireworks,” Seiji said, gesturing further down the road. “I think I’d better go try to find them.”

Phil nodded and turned toward the food stalls, while Seiji headed onward with Hana and Akari, who had drifted over to Hana’s side as the group made their way to the festival.

Dan and James followed after Phil, both of them gazing up and down the row of stalls with twin expressions of wonder. James raised a finger and thrust it straight out toward a stall that had a giant picture of a squid on its sign.

“I don’t know what they’re selling there, but I think I want to eat it,” he declared. Phil looked in the direction he was pointing and raised an eyebrow.

“It’s literally just a grilled squid on a stick. Are you sure about that?”

James’ eyes grew wide.

“You mean, like, an entire squid?”

“Yep.”

“Yeeeeesss. That is exactly what I want.”

“If you say so,” Phil muttered as James strode off toward the stall. Dan and Phil continued along the line, Phil pointing out the various food options — fried chicken with mayonnaise, rainbow ice cream, okonomiyaki, takoyaki, some kind of pastry called ohbanyaki, various kinds of dango, and on and on and on. James caught up with them as Dan was purchasing a container of takoyaki, and Dan’s nose was immediately assaulted by the pungent scent of the grilled squid.
“Dear god, man, that smells vile,” he exclaimed, holding his nose with his free hand.

“If by vile you mean delicious, then yes. Yes, it does,” James said, taking a huge bite out of the thing.

“Excuse me if I stand several meters away from you until you finish that,” Dan said, stepping away as he spoke. He hoped he didn’t seem overly dramatic, but the squid literally smelled like something that had died, washed up on a beach, and sat out in the sun for a couple of weeks. It was putting him off his takoyaki. James shook his head and let out a sigh through his nose.

“You’re missing out, man.”

Phil was fumbling with the drawstring bag that hung from his own sash, and as Dan watched, he pulled out his iPhone, fiddled with it for a moment, and then started filming James as he devoured his squid-sicle.

“James, how is it?” Phil asked, making his voice loud and clear enough to be heard on the recording.

James rolled his eyes up toward the sky and let out a long groan of satisfaction.

“Heavenly,” he muttered around a mouthful. Then Phil turned the camera on Dan who, true to his word, was stood several meters away.

“Dan, can you give your opinion on the squid-on-a-stick?”

Dan let his eyes widen and his nostrils flare into what he hoped was a mask of horror.

“It smells of death,” he said in a stage whisper, and was rewarded with a small ripple of laughter from Phil, who turned the camera off and stashed his phone again.

“Saving these beautiful moments for posterity?” Dan asked, lifting one of his takoyaki balls from its plastic container and taking a tentative bite.

“Yes,” Phil answered, “and also for YouTube, assuming you don’t mind being in a video on my channel.”

Dan swallowed his bite of takoyaki and looked at Phil with interest.

“I didn’t know you made YouTube videos.”

Phil just shrugged and turned back to the food stalls, tilting his chin back and surveying the spread like a king taking stock of his kingdom.

“I think I could go for a taco,” he decided at last. Dan rather liked the look of the tacos too, so once he’d polished off the octopus dumplings, he followed Phil to the taco stand. After that, he tried some karaage (fried chicken), followed by a couple of the ohbanyaki and a rainbow ice. By the time he’d finished that, he saw that he had basically eaten his way to the end of the food stalls. Now they stood at the top of a steep slope which he guessed was usually covered with grass. For the moment, though, the grass had disappeared beneath a layer of tarps and blankets and the people sitting on them. At the foot of the slope he could make out a wide, empty space that had been cordoned off to keep people out, and then beyond that was the river for which the town had been named.

“The fireworks will be shot off on the other side of the river,” Phil explained as he came up beside Dan. “Better call Seiji and see where they are.”
It took a good ten minutes of wandering around among the sea of blankets, and more than a few awkward apologies for treading on someone’s foot or bag or jacket, before they at last located the big blue tarp which Seiji’s friends had laid down to save their spot. By now the sun had already sunk below the horizon and the light was fading quickly. It seemed early for sunset in the summer, until Dan reminded himself once again that Japan didn’t do summer time.

Seiji and Hana and Akari were already seated there, along with two new people that Dan assumed were Sarah and Kevin. The three newcomers squeezed themselves into what empty space was left on the tarp, and Dan tried to tell himself that he wasn’t happy that Phil had ended up seated next to him. Phil’s girlfriend was here for goodness’ sake.

They chatted for a while, Sarah and Kevin asking the two newbies all the usual questions: What grade do you teach? What city do you work in? Country/Degree/Why Japan? Then, just after it had grown completely dark, a woman’s voice materialized from the air around them, introducing the fireworks display — or so Phil explained to him in a whispered aside. The moment she finished speaking, the first chord of a song struck, and the first fireworks shot up in twin silver streaks on the far side of the river. An excited murmur rose from the crowd around them, along with scattered clapping, and Dan leaned back on his hands and stared up at the sky.

He had expected maybe twenty minutes of fireworks, but the show went on for the better part of an hour, with several programs of fireworks, each set to a different song and each building up to its own big finish. The others chatted and whispered to each other throughout the show, but beside him Phil stayed silent, his eyes fixed on the display of colors above, and Dan stayed silent with him. Every now and then Dan couldn’t help stealing a glance over at Phil. There was something about his amazed expression, illuminated moment by moment in the sudden bursts of colorful light, that made Dan wish he could see what Phil was seeing. Without realizing it, he ended up watching half the show in the sky and half of it reflected in Phil’s pale eyes.

It was over all too quickly, and then there was the long trek back to the cars, squeezing through the throngs of people all around them.

“Did you like it?” Akari asked him when the crowds had at last begun to thin out and they could concentrate on something other than not getting squished or stepped on. She was walking along between him and Phil, a position which made Dan realize just how tiny she was in comparison to the two of them.

“I loved it,” he countered. “It was a lot bigger than I expected! How many fireworks do you think they set off in total?”

“Ichi-man!” she answered immediately, surprising him. He had expected speculation, not an exact number. Akari had turned to Phil, though, and was asking him, “Eigo de ichi-man ha dou ieru no? Oboetenai—!”

“It’s ten thousand,” Phil answered, then looked over his girlfriend’s head at Dan. “They actually advertise it on TV and on posters and stuff: Come see the Kitsuregawa Fireworks Show! Ten Thousand Fireworks Used! That kind of thing.”

James slowed his pace then to join up with them, and he started asking Phil something about the city they were in. Akari took that opportunity to turn a bright smile on Dan and murmur to him in a confidential tone,

“Phil talks a lot about you this week. I think he likes working with Dan.”

He almost tripped over his own feet before he caught himself. He hoped she hadn’t noticed the
momentary wobble.

“Well, I like working with him too,” he replied quickly, then added, “Actually, I don’t know what I would do without him. Probably cry from boredom every day.”

She laughed at that, a deep and pleasant sound. In spite of himself, he was starting to rather like her.

“I think he is bored without you too,” she said, giving a little nod to emphasize her words.

“Yeah, it’s probably a good idea to have two ALTs at Nishichu,” he agreed. “I’m sure he was happy to have the people before me too.”

She looked up at him then and smirked, her dark eyes sparkling in the low light of the intermittent street lamps.

“He likes you more than the last people,” she said. “He never talked about other ALTs before. Not a lot.”

“Well, I’m very flattered to hear that,” Dan said, giving a mocking little laugh that in no way matched what her words had made him feel inside. He shot a sideways glance at Phil, still deep in conversation with James, and then looked back down at Akari and smiled. “But it’s only been a week. Give it a while, and I’m sure you’ll start hearing all about how much he hates being forced to sit next to an arsehole like me.”

Akari laughed out loud then, and Dan laughed along with her and hoped to god that he wasn’t right.

Chapter End Notes

Originally published on tumblr
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Dan teaches his first English class and learns some valuable lessons about interacting with his students.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

On Monday Dan was awakened early again by the rumbling that was probably a lorry, and then he remembered that it had actually happened several times over the past week. He just hadn’t ever been awake enough to properly remember it.

When he woke up with his alarm again later he decided he would ask Phil if he knew why there were always big trucks going by so goddamn early in the morning. Delivering milk to the Seven Eleven maybe? Or…a mail truck? He shook his head. Definitely too big to be a mail truck.

He got to school at the usual time, wheeling his bike up to park it next to the first years’ bikes on the northern side of the courtyard. There were a couple of late arrivals dashing away toward their classrooms, and one caught sight of him and bowed, muttering a hurried, “Ohayou gozaimasu!”

“Good morning,” Dan returned, figuring that as he was meant to be exposing the students to English it would be counterproductive to start speaking to them in Japanese, even for something as simple as a greeting.

It wasn’t until he got to the staff room and saw Phil’s empty desk that he recalled that Phil was scheduled to be at the primary school today. He slung his bag down on the floor, shoving it under his desk with his foot, and slumped into his chair. Their schedule was there on his desk where he had slipped it beneath the plastic covering, and yes, in the column beneath Phil’s name the box beside today’s date read “西小学校.” He was pretty proud of himself for being able to read all of the kanji in the school’s name. He saw the same kanji written beneath his own name for Thursday. Besides the junior high school, he and Phil had two primary schools that they also shared, and Thursday would be Dan’s first day at one of them.

“Nishi Shogakkou,” he whispered under his breath, then scooted off to the break room to grab some coffee before the assistant headmaster called the morning meeting to order.

He spent the first couple of hours of the morning banging away at his computer keyboard again, writing whatever the hell it was he was writing. After two hours though, he slapped the laptop shut and pushed it away with a noise of disgust. Could his writing be any more nonsensical?

It was still nearly two hours ‘til lunchtime, and he’d forgotten to bring any other form of entertainment. He’d asked Phil about getting the school’s wifi password and had been met with a snort of amusement. Apparently, not only did the school not have any wifi, but whatever internet they did have was only accessible to the ALTs through a single computer in the cramped, dark fax machine room next door. Full-fledged teachers were allowed to hook up their school laptops through ethernet, but Phil explained that a good half of them only had the dimmest awareness that the internet even existed. At that moment, Dan had understood that he truly had entered a foreign land.
He wished he had brought a book to read or something. If Phil had been here, he could have borrowed his Kindle, as he’d suggested the other day. It struck Dan that, though it’d only been a week, he had already come to associate work with Phil. It felt somehow strange — wrong, even — to be sat here in this huge, empty room without him.

He reached down and started opening his desk drawers at random. The large bottom drawer and the middle drawer were completely empty, and the long, thin drawer in front of him contained only stationery. However, in the top drawer on his right he had discovered a set of three books: the English textbooks for the three different school years. He hadn’t really bothered to look at them yet — fuck, he had to be the laziest teacher on the planet — but with nothing better to do for the next hour and a half, he figured he might as well. So he pulled out all three books, opened up the book for Year 1 and started slowly flipping through it.

That’s how Mr. Watanabe found him, shortly after the bell had chimed to signal the end of third period.

“Dan, are you busy now?”

Dan ripped himself away from the riveting tale of Japanese junior high school student Yuki’s study abroad trip in Finland and turned startled eyes on the rotund English teacher. He was at work. He was sitting at his desk at work, and he was reading a textbook to pass the time. And it was Mr. Watanabe’s job to create his class schedule and assign him work. Was this a trick question?

“No, I’m not busy,” Dan answered after a moment’s hesitation.

“Good. So, can you come to my class now?”

“Sure! Yeah, definitely,” Dan was on his feet at once. “Erm, what’s the lesson?”

“So, I just want you to give your self-introduction to the students,” Mr. Watanabe explained in his hoarse voice. Dan had intuited after a couple of days that Mr. Watanabe was a secret smoker (and one who illegally smoked on school grounds in the “Special Documents Room,” if Phil was to be believed.) “Then, can you read the vocabulary words?”

“Yes, I can do that,” Dan said, though in his head he was thinking, Finally.

Out in the hallway, there were crowds of students taking advantage of the passing period to use the toilets or get a drink at one of the sets of long sinks that could be found on each floor of each building. They’d gotten used enough to Dan that they no longer stared every time he passed, but most of them were still too shy to come up and speak to him unless he was with Phil. This was Phil’s fifth year teaching here, so most of the students at Nishichu had had him as a teacher since they were in primary school and didn’t find him the least bit intimidating anymore.

“Did you have a good weekend?” Mr. Watanabe asked him as they passed out of the main building and started down the pavement that led to the first and second years’ building.

“I did, thank you. I went with some friends down to see the fireworks in Kitsuregawa.”

“Oh, really?” the English teacher said, turning to Dan with an expression of such surprise that Dan wondered if he’d said or done something wrong. “How did you like the Japanese festival?”

“I enjoyed it! The fireworks were beautiful, and the food!” Dan let out a little groan at the memory, which caused Mr. Watanabe to let out a deep, raspy chuckle. “I’d never had most of that stuff before, but it was amazing.”
They reached the building, and Mr. Watanabe stood to one side to let Dan walk through the doorway first. They had a class with 1-4 (Year 1, 4th Class), whose classroom was on the 2nd Floor, so they made their way over to the staircase.

“Can you tell the students about the festival?” Mr. Watanabe asked as they started up the stairs. “After your self-introduction, I will ask you some questions. Is that okay?”

“No problem.” Dan didn’t know why Mr. Watanabe was being so polite. He was basically Dan’s superior — being a full-fledged teacher while Dan was only an assistant — so he would be well within his rights to simply tell Dan what he wanted him to do instead of asking.

They had reached the door of the classroom now, with the sign above it reading “1-4,” and Mr. Watanabe slid it open and gestured for Dan to precede him again.

There were still two minutes left before the bell would ring again to signal the start of fourth period, so while many of the students were already sat at their desks getting ready for class to begin, others were at the side of the room pulling textbooks from their bags, or stood next to their desks pulling their blazers back on after changing from their P.E. uniforms, or dashing back in from the toilets. However, as soon as Dan walked into the room, every pair of eyes turned to him for a moment, as thirty-five twelve-year-olds registered the fact that they were about to have English class with the strange new foreigner their school had acquired. As if Dan weren’t already sweaty enough in the 30-degree heat, the concentrated power of all of those eyes made hot prickles spring up all over his palms and the skin of his back.

He drew in a lungful of air, gave them his biggest smile, and walked up to stand at the front of the room beside the teacher’s desk. Mr. Watanabe breezed in behind him, dropping his books on the desk and saying something to a student who was carefully writing out a note on the chalkboard just behind the desk. As soon as the English teacher was in place at the front of the classroom, the students seemed to remember themselves, returning to their previous activities with twice the sense of urgency.

Now that no one was staring at him anymore, Dan’s heart rate began to return to normal, and he decided he probably looked more awkward just standing there than he would walking around and talking to the students. He ventured over to one of the desks in the front row, where a boy was busy laying out all of his supplies for the period: pencil case, two pencils, rubber, notebook, Sunshine English Year 1 textbook, and a shitajiki with a picture of a smiling member of AKB48 on it.

“Do you like her?” Dan asked, pointing at the girl in the picture.

The kid looked up at him with eyes filled with pure panic, shook his head vigorously, and then slid the shitajiki out of sight beneath his notebook. Okay. Clearly that had not been the right thing to ask. The boy was now bent over the notebook, writing the date at the top of the open page so agonizingly slowly that Dan wondered if he would finish it before the class started. Maybe he just wasn’t in a mood to chat right now. Dan moved to the next student in the row, a girl with a short braid who was writing in a notebook with Rilakkuma on the cover. She raised her eyes as Dan stopped by her desk, though she didn’t look directly at him. Instead, she seemed to be studying him from the corner of her eye.

“Good morning,” she said after a moment, her voice very small.

“Good morning!” Dan returned. “How are you?” Hopefully that would be a safe enough question to ask.

“I’m fine thank you and you,” the girl replied immediately. She said the words all smushed together
as though she were reciting her multiplication tables rather than responding to a question, but at least she had answered.

“Very good. Thank you!” Dan answered. Then the girl looked back down to her notebook and started writing again. Well. That was the end of that.

“So, Dan,” Mr. Watanabe called from the front of the classroom. “We will start the class soon.”

With a slight sense of relief, Dan turned and walked back over to stand next to the teacher’s desk. He thought of himself as being fairly personable. He’d never had any trouble talking to new people or making friends. The language barrier was certainly an issue here, so maybe he could chalk up the students’ reactions to that?

The bell rang then, right on time, and the moment the sound ceased, one of the students called out “Kiritsu!” and all of them rose from their seats. The same boy shouted, “Ki wo tsuke!” and the students all stood up straighter, holding their hands to their sides. Last he called, “Rei!” and all thirty-five of them bowed in unison. Mr. Watanabe bowed back, so Dan quickly bent forward, hoping that no one would notice how half-assed it looked. Then the class leader yelled, “Chak—sek—!” and all of the students sat down once again.

“Hai, mokusou,” Mr. Watanabe called, and the students all closed their eyes in silent meditation. The English teacher left them like that for nearly a full minute, while he pulled out his book and shuffled some papers. Finally, he said, “Hai! Ja, hajimemashou!” and the students’ eyes popped open again. He then launched into a brief speech, which — judging by the teacher’s silly facial expressions and the fact that the students were all in stitches by the end of it — was apparently hilarious. At last, he turned to Dan, and said,

“Please give your self-introduction to the students.”

Dan nodded and stepped forward. Now that class had started and the students were all sitting attentively in their desks, all of his nerves had disappeared. Standing at the front of the classroom, he felt calm and relaxed. It was like a switch had been flipped in his brain, putting him in teacher mode.

“Hello! My name is Dan Howell. I come from England.” He turned to the chalkboard and drew what he felt was a reasonably accurate map of Britain. He added a couple of dots, one for London and one for his hometown. “This is London,” he explained to the students, pointing to the corresponding dot on the map. “This is Wokingham. It’s my home,” he said, pointing to the other dot.

He turned back to the students, who were all watching him so quietly he could hear a teacher on the floor below reading an angry lecture to a different class. He’d never seen such an attentive group of twelve-year-olds.

“Nice to meet you!” he finished, and the students responded with a chorus of, “Nice to meet you, too!”

“Is that all?” Mr. Watanabe asked. At first his question made Dan nervous. Should he have said more? But then he saw the teacher’s smiling expression and realized that he was really just making sure that Dan was finished. Dan gave him a nod.

“Great! Now, I want to let the students ask you some questions. Is that okay?”

“Sure.”

The teacher turned to the class and explained in Japanese that they could ask Dan any questions they
wanted, as long as they used English. Dan was pleased with himself once again, for having caught all of that. His listening comprehension seemed to have already grown by leaps and bounds in the short time he’d been here.

In the second row, a boy’s hand immediately shot up, and Mr. Watanabe called on him. The boy stood next to his desk and asked,

“What food do you like?”

“I like everything!” Dan replied, and a few of the students laughed.

“What’s your favorite food?” Mr. Watanabe amended the boy’s question for him.

“Hm,” Dan said, stroking his chin in an exaggerated thinking gesture. “My favorite food is pizza,” he said at last. The boy grinned at him, and so, on a whim, Dan returned the question, “What’s your favorite food?”

“I like hamburger,” the boy replied and sat down again.

A few more students raised their hands after that, and in quick succession Dan told them his favorite color (black), season (autumn, which Mr. Watanabe had to translate to “fall” for the students), month (He said December, because of Christmas), and drink (coffee, because he was pretty sure “margarita” wasn’t an appropriate answer for a Year 7 class). One of the kids asked how tall he was in Japanese — before Mr. Watanabe scolded him and made him ask in English instead — and once again Dan patted himself on the back for catching the words “nan senchi,” and understanding they wanted to know how many centimeters tall he was. They were duly impressed when he answered with “188.”

Then all the way in the back a student’s hand rose into the air, and when Mr. Watanabe called on him, he stood, smirked and asked, “Do you have a girlfriend?” A spate of muffled squeals and giggles erupted from the students, but died down after one stern look from Mr. Watanabe. He said something sharp to the boy who had asked the question, and the kid’s smirk disappeared to be replaced by a chastised expression. Dan assumed he’d just been told off for being cheeky. The boy sat down again, and Mr. Watanabe called on another student.

After a few more questions from the students, the English teacher turned to Dan and started asking him about the fireworks festival. Where did he go? What did he see/eat/drink? When Dan said he’d gone with Phil-sensei, Mr. Watanabe turned his overly startled, “Oh, really?” on Dan again. Was that strange? Dan quickly reviewed the concept in his mind — two co-workers going out to a cultural event over the weekend with a group of friends. There was no way that could be considered odd, right? Surely Phil wouldn’t have invited him if it was, or he would at least have warned him not to mention it at school.

“Thank you, Dan,” Mr. Watanabe was saying to him, signaling the end of his questions.

The rest of the class period was spent studying Chapter 5 of the students’ textbook. Mr. Watanabe had Dan read out the dialogue for the chapter, so that the students could hear his pronunciation and repeat after him (“Hi, Yuki.” “Hello, Jim.” “Yuki, you look great in that sweater.” “Oh, no … not really!”) He wasn’t exactly sure why the textbook was teaching the students chat-up lines, but he figured it was safest not to question it.

When the bell for the end of the class rang at last, Dan’s stomach was already protesting loudly. He was glad it was lunchtime, though the prospect of eating alone at his desk in the staff room was an unappealing one. Before heading back down to the staff room, he stopped Mr. Watanabe to ask if
he’d had a chance to speak to the headmaster about Dan joining a club.

“Ahhh, right,” the English teacher responded, his expression turning regretful. “So, I talked to your company. They said you can’t join an after school sports club because it’s too dangerous. So…” He paused, his thick brows drawing together in a look of concentration. “You only work during the day. After school, it is past your contracted hours, so the school’s insurance cannot cover you if you are injured.”

“Oka-y,” Dan said, drawing the word out as he thought. He hadn’t really wanted to join a sports club anyway (Well, unless it was the kyudo club. Kyudo just seemed so badass.) “Can I join another club, like band or something?”

“Oh, yes, sure, sure,” Mr. Watanabe nodded with an enthusiastic smile before abruptly turning away and calling out to one of the students who was walking by. Dan figured that was the end of the conversation and left for the staff room then.

Later, during the midday break, he strolled around, walking up to random groups of students and attempting conversation with them. He noticed that they seemed more relaxed than the students in class had been, and he had a lot more success getting responses out of them. A few minutes before hiruyasumi was set to end, a group of second year boys actually walked up to him and starting asking him questions, though mostly in Japanese. He did his best to answer — in English — or just shook his head and smiled when he didn’t understand. The last question they asked he couldn’t quite make out, but he caught the phrase “nan-senchi” and realized they wanted to know how tall he was again.

“One hundred eighty-eight centimeters,” he answered, and the three boys all stared at him in shock for several long seconds before doubling over with laughter. They laughed so hard that two of them actually cried, and Dan started wondering if maybe he wasn’t quite in on some joke. Then the bell rang, and the boys shouted, “See you!” before scampering off to their classroom.

In the afternoon, Mr. Watanabe had him come give his introduction to two more classes of first years. By the time 3:00 o’clock rolled around, Dan was almost feeling proud of himself. He’d put in a good half-day’s work!

If Phil had been there, he would have made some self-deprecating joke about how hard-working he was. But Phil wasn’t there, and Dan thought it likely none of the other teachers would quite appreciate his humor. So instead he packed his bag and left with a bow and an “O-saki ni shitsurei shimasu!”

It was a little pathetic just how much happier Dan felt the next morning when he walked into the staff room and saw Phil already seated at his desk sipping his morning coffee. It wasn’t a romantic, butterflies-in-the-stomach kind of feeling either, as he’d half expected it to be. It was more like the mingled excitement and relief he remembered feeling when school was canceled for a snow day or something back when he was a kid — like the work day ahead had been unexpectedly converted to a holiday instead.

“Good morning,” he said, giving Phil a bright smile as he slid into his desk chair with his own coffee in hand.

“Good morning,” Phil returned. He looked like he was on the verge of saying something else, but just then the assistant headmaster stood up and the morning meeting began. When the meeting was over, Dan turned to Phil with an expectant look, but Phil just returned his smile with a faint air of questioning. Maybe Dan had just been imagining things earlier.
“Er, so how was primary school yesterday?” Dan asked after a moment, needing to break the silence.

“Oh my god!” Phil groaned, raising his hands in the air and grinding his teeth a little. “Okay, I love working with the primary school kids. Honestly, I do, but Kyoko-sensei.” He uttered the name as though it were a swear word.

“Who’s Kyoko-sensei?”

“She is like everything that is dark and evil in the world all shrunk down and smushed inside the form of one, horrible, horrible human being,” Phil said, scrunching up his nose and making a gesture as though he were doing the smushing himself. “She teaches the 4th, 5th, and 6th year English classes at Nishisho,” he added, and Dan let out an involuntary breath of laughter.

“All right, I’m prepared to accept that this woman is evil incarnate, but what exactly did she do to you?”

“All right, I’m prepared to accept that this woman is evil incarnate, but what exactly did she do to you?”

“Okay,” Phil started, and Dan could tell he was gearing up for a full-on rant. “So at Nishisho there are five classes in each year, which means we have to do the same lesson five times in one day. I came down with a little bit of a cold on Sunday, and my throat was still kind of scratchy yesterday, right?” That was when Dan noticed that Phil’s voice did sound a little more hoarse than usual. “So, I bought some cough drops to make sure I’d be able to get through the day and keep my voice. Well, in the middle of third period, I have a coughing fit, and so I have a cough drop so I can stop hacking up a lung and get on with the class. And she gives me this look—“ Phil paused to re-enact the look, leaning back and regarding Dan with dramatically widened eyes and flared nostrils. “And after class, she pulls me aside and says, ‘Please don’t eat candy in class again.’” He held up his hand in a WTF gesture. “What was I even supposed to say to that?”

He could tell that Phil was still a little pissed off about the incident, but Dan couldn’t help laughing at the way Phil was telling the story. He was really good at that.

“You should have just coughed on her and hoped you gave her your swine flu or whatever,” he offered.

“I think she just downright hates me,” Phil said, shaking his head. “Last year, there was this American girl named Karen who worked here instead of you, and Kyoko-sensei was always giving her little presents for holidays or chatting with her about her weekend plans, but me,” He shook his head again, his expression dark. “When she looks at me, it’s like she’s offended that I even exist.”

“Maybe it’s not just you,” Dan suggested. “Maybe she hates all Englishmen.”

“Well, you’ll get to test that theory very soon. You teach the fourth years with her on Thursday.”

“Gre-at,” Dan muttered.

Mr. Watanabe came over then and greeted them before handing them each a sheet of paper. When Dan looked down on it, he saw that it was a schedule for the rest of the week, with his and Phil’s names and actual classes written down for each day. They were even going to be visiting two whole classes apiece today. His work life was really ramping up.

Dan’s first class was during first period — his self-introduction and the same lesson as the day before with yet another class of first years — so he bid Phil goodbye and headed off with Mr. Watanabe. When he got back from that class, Phil was gone to a different class for second period, and he didn’t reappear again until after the bell for third period had rung.

When Phil came in, Dan was once again on his laptop, having struck a small vein of inspiration that
he was attempting to mine for all it was worth. So he didn’t notice the smirk on Phil’s face or the humorous light in his eye as his co-worker took his seat next to him. Instead he murmured a distracted greeting without even looking away from his computer screen.

Phil wasn’t the most patient of people, so he only managed to wait for about two minutes before he leaned over and said,

“Dan.”

Dan looked up, but his eyes had that faraway look that told Phil he still wasn’t entirely there.

“What’re you working on there?” Phil asked, as it had just occurred to him that he’d seen Dan typing away with the same look of desperate concentration a few times now.

“Oh, er,” Dan shut his laptop with a decisive click. “Nothing much.”

Phil raised an eyebrow but decided to let it pass. He had another, more important question to ask. As he thought of it, the muscles around his mouth quirked up and he fought to hold in a bubble of laughter.

“Did you happen to talk to a group of second year boys yesterday?” His voice was a little unsteady. Dan scrunched up his nose as he cast his thoughts back to the day before.

“Yeah, actually, I think I did, after lunch. Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know if you’re aware of this, but you’re currently the talk of the entire second year,” Phil said slowly, and Dan at last noticed the hint of humor in his tone. “Or, at least, the boys.”

“Oh, god.” A strong sense of foreboding overcame Dan as he pictured the way the second year boys had laughed at him yesterday. “Come on. Out with it. What did I say?”

“Well,” Phil managed, before having to pause to control his laughter. “Apparently you told them that your penis is one hundred eighty-eight centimeters long.”

“What,” Dan said.

Phil nodded slowly, and then seeing the look of dawning understanding on Dan’s face, at last gave in to the tide of laughter that was welling up from within him.

“Wait. No,” Dan spluttered. “I thought they were asking me how tall I was. Shit.”

Phil’s eyes were all screwed up, and there were tears actually peeking out at the corners of them, he was laughing so hard.

“Why the fuc—” Dan stopped himself as he remembered where they were, glancing around the room to make sure no one had heard him. As usual, though, it was just the two of them there in the staff room. He lowered his voice anyway. “Why would they even ask me a question like that?”

His fellow ALT controlled his laughter just enough to shoot him a look that said, “Oh, please.”

“They’re thirteen-year-olds, Dan. What do you expect?”

“I dunno,” Dan shrugged, something about Phil’s attitude striking a little spark of annoyance within him. “To respect me? Because I’m their teacher?”

Phil’s smile quickly changed from humorous to sympathetic, but he just shook his head.
“Well, you’re not wrong, necessarily. They should respect us more…” Then he gave his head another shake and shrugged. “That’s a battle I gave up fighting years ago. Just, don’t answer any questions unless you’re sure of what they’re asking. Oh!” Phil’s eyes suddenly grew wide and he leaned forward to emphasize the importance of his words, “And you’ve got to watch out for the kancho.” As he spoke, he raised his hands and clasped them together, intertwining all of his fingers except for his two index fingers. These he left standing upright and pressed together, and as Dan watched he made a thrusting gesture with them.

Dan almost choked on his own breath.

“What the fuck?” He was too startled to care about swearing in the staff room that time. “What…is a kancho?”

“They’ll come up behind you and—“ Phil finished his sentence by repeating the same thrusting gesture. Dan just stared at him, wondering if this was some sort of strange nightmare. Phil dropped his hands to his side and gave him another solemn nod. “A couple of nine-year-olds nearly got me yesterday at the primary school. You have to be constantly on alert there. Always guard your rear, Dan.”

“Are you serious?”

The corners of Phil’s mouth turned up in a smile, but his eyes stayed just as serious as ever.

“Absolutely,” he replied. “I don’t think there’s a single male ALT in all of Japan who hasn’t had at least one of his students try to shove their fingers up his arse.”

“Oh…my god,” was all Dan could manage. Phil had to be just taking the mickey, surely. Surely…

“Anyway, Akari told me you seemed like you were having a good time on Saturday.” Phil grinned, and Dan knew he was changing the subject deliberately. “She really liked you, by the way.”

“Oh?” Dan said, perking up. “I liked her too. She was very easy to talk to.”

“She’ll be happy you said so. She said you were ikemen,” Phil continued, one side of his mouth rising in a little smirk.

“Thanks, I think,” Dan said, creasing his brow. He wasn’t sure what that word meant, but he thought it sounded like a positive thing. Staying on Phil’s girlfriend’s good side seemed like the right idea if he wanted to become better friends with Phil.

He could see that Phil was laughing at him again. It was strange, but if anyone else had teased him this much he would probably be more than a little annoyed with them by now.

“It means she thinks you’re hawt,” Phil said, winking at him before standing and picking up his coffee mug. “I think I’m gonna grab a cup of tea from the break room. Want anything?”

Dan could think of one or two things that he definitely wanted, but instead he just handed Phil his own mug and asked that he get him some tea as well. It was all Dan could do not stare at his co-worker’s retreating form as he sauntered away, and it took the whole mug of chilled barley tea before Dan felt that he had entirely cooled down.

Chapter End Notes
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Dan meets the Special Needs students and visits the primary school for the first time.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On Wednesday, Dan and Phil were wandering around the school during *hiruyasumi* when Phil suggested they stop by the third years’ building for a few minutes. When Dan asked why, Phil explained that he wanted to see what the Special Needs students were up to. They had their own classrooms on the ground floor of that building.

When they stepped inside the front door, they could already hear the sounds of laughter from an open classroom door further down the hall. They made their way toward that room, and Phil poked his head in, calling out a “Hello!”

“Hello!” several voices called back, and then Dan came up behind Phil and peeked into the room. There were five students there and two teachers. He vaguely recognized the teachers from having seen them in the staff room, though he couldn’t remember their names. Two of the students had run over to Phil as soon as he walked in. The other three were stood off to one side with the teachers, playing some kind of coordination game that Dan thought he’d seen before in an anime or something.

The two boys who had run up to Phil were both stumbling over their words trying to be the first one to ask him their questions, and Phil broke into a wide grin as he shushed them and tried to get them to take turns.

“This is Dan-sensei,” he finally managed to introduce Dan, when the boys had done with whatever they were asking him. “*Eigo de jikoshoukai yatte goran.*”

The first boy, who was the taller of the two, turned to Dan with a shy smile, and said,

“Hello, Dan-sensei. My. name. is. Hiroki. Nice. to. meet. you.” He paused to take a deep breath after every word, but he managed to get them all out. Then he stuck out a hand, which Dan gladly shook.

“Nice to meet you too, Hiroki.”

“Yusuke?” Phil was whispering to the second boy, whose eyes were still fixed on the toes of his indoor shoes. The boy didn’t respond. One of the two teachers from the other group came over then and put her arms around the boy’s shoulders and murmured something to him in Japanese. The boy’s shoulders rose and fell once as he took a deep breath, then he barked something out in a hoarse voice. The only word Dan could make out was the boy’s name, so he assumed he was introducing himself.

“Nice to meet you, Yusuke,” Dan said.

“*Ganbatta ne, Yusuke-kun,*” the Japanese teacher said to him, and then looked up to give Dan a warm smile.
“Oh, Phil-sensei!” Hiroki said loudly then, grabbing Phil by the arm and pulling him over toward the other group. The teacher was still talking quietly to Yusuke, so Dan followed after Phil and Hiroki, who seemed to be trying to convince Phil to join in the game the others were playing. The other students were three girls, and as Dan walked up to the group he realized he knew one of them.

“How are you?” he asked her. Even within the short space of his question, she managed to land the ball in the cup again, and then proceeded to flip it out and land it on a wooden spike sticking out of the side of the cup. She looked up at him again, giggled, and then looked back down.

“I’m fine,” she said, keeping her eyes fixed on the ball. She looked very different from when he’d seen her on the first day of school, when she’d barely been able to look up from the floor. He watched her deftly land the ball in the cup, then flip it to the spike again and then, in a particularly impressive move, spin it up into the air and catch it on a spike on the end of the toy she held in her hand.

“Can you teach me?” he ventured, not sure if she would understand. She looked over at him, then returned to her game once more, and he decided that she must not have.

“Dan-sensei ni oshiete-agete mo ii?” Phil called over to Touko from where Hiroki was showing him something in his notebook.

Touko looked up at Dan again, her light eyes wide with surprise.

“Oshiemasu ka?” she asked, and Dan nodded. So she handed him the toy she’d been holding and grabbed a different one off a nearby table. The other two girls had stopped playing and were now watching intently as Touko unwound the string from around the cup to let the wooden ball hang free. Then she demonstrated the necessary flick of the wrist to make the ball fly up in the air and land neatly in the cup.

It looked simple enough, so Dan held out the toy she had handed him and mimicked her gesture. The red, wooden ball flew through the air and then smashed into his thumb with a loud thwack!

“Ow,” he said. The three girls all burst into laughter, and Touko gave him a look that was reminiscent of a coach disappointed in her star player. He tried again, this time managing not to injure himself but still missing getting the ball in the cup by a wide margin. The girls laughed harder.

“Dan-sensei!” Touko said and shook her head, her tone exasperated. “Mite kudasai.” Then she once again demonstrated, her ball landing perfectly in the cup, and he saw her smirk as she went on to flip it onto the spike and back into the cup and then back onto the spike a few more times. Well now she was just showing off.

“Wow, she’s really good at that,” Phil said from behind him. Dan hadn’t noticed that he had finished talking to Hiroki and walked over to watch Dan fail at his lesson. “I’m pretty crap at kendama myself.”

“Thank god I’m not the only one,” Dan muttered. As he watched Touko continue to flaunt her
mastery, the other two girls lost interest and went back to playing with their own kendama. He was relieved to see that neither of them seemed able to land the ball in the cup more than one time out of five. So maybe it wasn’t that he was bad at this — Touko really was just some sort of kendama prodigy.

Just then the bell rang, signaling the end of hiruyasumi and the beginning of cleaning time. Dan and Phil bid good-bye to all the students, though the only one who actually waved and said good-bye in return was Hiroki.

That afternoon, as he and Phil sat revising Phil’s vocabulary cards in the staff room, the Special Needs teacher came over and stopped in front of their desks.

“Hiruyasumi de tokubetsu shien no seito to issho ni asonde kurete, arigatou gozaimasu,” she said, offering them a small bow. “Seito ha hontou ni tanoshimemashita ne.”

“Douitashimashite,” Phil replied, bending forward where he sat to return her bow. “Watashitachi mo tanoshimemashita yo ne.”

Dan didn’t quite understand the conversation, but he caught enough to know that the teacher was thanking them for visiting during the midday break and that she said the students enjoyed it. She and Phil chatted back and forth for a few more minutes, before she bowed again and walked back over to her own desk on the other side of the room.

“What did she say?” Dan asked in a low voice once she was seated.

“Apparently that new girl, Touko, was really happy that you remembered her name,” Phil explained. “How did you know her? She only just started here this term.”

“I know,” Dan answered. “I met her on my first day here, when I was waiting to introduce myself to the staff.”

“Oh,” Phil said, drawing the word out. “Well, Yamanaka-sensei wants us to come teach an English class for the Special Needs students on Friday. Are you up for it?”

“Definitely,” Dan grinned.

They spent the rest of the afternoon discussing ideas for the lesson and then making the materials they would need for it. They decided to teach some different food names and then have the students practice asking each other which foods they liked and didn’t like. Phil set about creating a worksheet, and Dan volunteered to make picture cards for the different foods.

As he sat coloring in a picture of a strawberry he had just drawn, it dawned on Dan that he had a degree in law...yet here he was getting paid to spend an afternoon coloring pictures. He sat back and tried to imagine what he would be doing right now if he’d stayed in England. What if he’d kept applying to law firms, and one of them had actually taken him on? He’d be in some office now poring over contracts or case studies or — more likely — making copies for one of the partners. His bank account would be a lot happier, though.

He looked over at Phil, who had a ruler out and was carefully drawing lines on a blank sheet of paper, the tip of his tongue poking out from one corner of his mouth as he concentrated. Phil had a Master’s degree in visual effects, yet there he was right alongside Dan doing arts and crafts. Where might Phil be right now, if he’d stayed in England back in 2009, instead of coming here? Phil hadn’t talked much yet about what had made him decide to come to Japan, though Dan recalled that that had been a pretty shit time to be looking for a job in England.
He opened his mouth, on the verge of asking, but he was interrupted by a deep, rumbling sound — so deep that he almost felt it before he heard it. It was swiftly followed by a strange, unsteady feeling, not exactly like he was moving but more like he’d just lost his balance for a moment. Phil looked up from his work and became very still, his face taking on a keen, listening expression. Then the rumbling and unsteady feeling stopped, and Phil let out a loud sigh, of relief maybe?

“What was that?” Dan asked slowly, looking around the staff room as though he would find the source of the noise there. The rumbling had been very much like what he’d been hearing early in the mornings, but this couldn’t have been a lorry. The staff room where they were sat was at least a hundred meters from the closest road.

“Earthquake,” Phil said, picking up his pencil and continuing the line he had been drawing. “Just a little one though.”


Phil nodded without looking up from his work.

“No idea why, but they seem to, around here at least,” he added when he had finished the line.

“Have there been any really big ones since you’ve been here?” Earthquakes had been a slight worry of Dan’s when preparing to move to Japan. It wasn’t something he’d ever had to deal with before, having lived in England his whole life up to that point.

Phil shot him a look as though he were crazy and then just nodded.

“Yes,” he said, and his tone sounded like a door closing. Then it dawned on Dan that his question had been a really stupid one. Phil had been here in 2011, during the massive earthquake and tsunami and the nuclear disaster. Dan felt like an even bigger dolt, though now that he’d made the connection his curiosity was piqued. Instead he went back to coloring his strawberry and let Phil get on with making his worksheet.

A short while later, the bell rang signaling the end of fifth period, and Watanabe-sensei popped into the staff room and flitted over to their desks.

“So, Dan, Phil.” He waited for them to look up from their respective tasks and focus their attention on him. “I spoke to the ichinensei students about the English speech contest, and Nishida-kun from class 1-4 will participate. And also Tanaka-san from class 1-4. I think we will start practice in the beginning of September, so can you help after school?”

“Yes, of course,” Phil answered at once. He’d told Dan a little bit about speech contest practice — namely that it was one of the main things the ALTs were around for.

“Dan, can you stay too?” Mr. Watanabe asked him.

“I don’t see why not.” It was in his job description, after all.

“Yes, of course,” Phil answered right at once. He’d told Dan a little bit about speech contest practice — namely that it was one of the main things the ALTs were around for.

“Thank you very much. I will tell you more next week,” he said, and gave them a nod-bow — just a quick up and down of the chin — before breezing off to his next responsibility.

It was almost 3:00 then, and Dan could have gone home, if he’d wanted to. He glanced at Phil out of the corner of his eye. He was just finishing up the worksheet. Dan looked down at his own picture cards. He was on his last one as well. There wasn’t really any work-related reason to stay later.
“Any plans this weekend?” he asked, setting down his colored pencil and leaning back in his chair.

“Hm?” Phil looked up, stretching his long arms above his head before putting his own pencil aside. “Oh, yeah, Akari and I were going down to Tokyo to see the Beauty and the Beast musical.” One corner of his mouth lifted in a half-smile. “It’s my birthday present to her.”

“Oh, right,” Dan said, nodding and looking down at the extremely detailed drawing of a hamburger he’d just finished coloring. “Well, I guess I’d better be going,” he continued after a moment, starting to slide the colored pencils back into their cardboard container.

“Oh,” Phil said, and was that just a slight note of disappointment Dan detected in his tone? “Okay.”

He stayed completely silent as Dan finished clearing the top of his desk, packed up his bag, and rose to leave.

“See you Friday,” Dan said.

“See you then,” Phil answered, and Dan saw that he had pulled out his Kindle, and his eyes were already focused on its screen.

Nishisho, the primary school, was even larger than Nishichu, with upwards of a thousand students. It was also right next door, meaning that Dan passed Nishichu on his morning ride to work on Thursday. It felt a little odd to be passing by the entrance instead of turning in there. He couldn’t help glancing in to see if Phil’s car was there yet. It wasn’t.

Since this was his first day at the school, he had to go through the same process he’d been through at Nishichu — a cup of tea in the waiting room while the staff began their morning meeting, then someone collecting him and bringing him into the staff room, and a quick self-introduction and Yoroshiku onegaishimasu, and lastly his guide led him over to a table in the very back of the room to sit and await further instructions.

They arrived a short while later in the diminutive form of Kyoko-sensei. She was small and slender with skin like bleached paper and eyes like two deep voids. When she walked up to him, she introduced herself and smiled, but no matter how wide her smile was, her eyes stayed dark and cold as ever. Making eye contact with her almost made him want to shiver, though she barely came up to his elbow.

“Today we will teach fourth graders,” she explained, setting a lesson plan down in front of him and taking the chair beside his own. “We will teach them directions: Go, Stop, Turn right, Turn left. We have classes in first, second, third, fourth, and fifth periods. You will eat lunch with 4-3 class today. Do you have any questions?”

He looked down at the lesson plan. It was all very neatly laid out, with estimated length of time listed for each activity, but it was full of esoteric phrases such as “Dansinglish” and “Kyoto Activity.”

“Er.” He cleared his throat a few times. “What, er, what am I supposed to do during the class?”

She smiled at him, and he felt his palms begin to sweat.

“I will tell you what to do. First period begins at 8:35. The students will come to get you.”

Then she stood and walked back over to her own desk. It was a few meters away from the table he sat at, and frankly he wished it were a little farther. The students appeared at the staff room door promptly at 8:30, a boy and girl each wearing the colored caps that primary school students in Japan had to wear during school hours. When one of them had slid the door open, they exchanged a look,
took a deep breath in unison and then said together, “Shitsurei shimasu. Eigo no jikan desu.”

Kyoko-sensei stood from her desk, and called, “Hello! Please come in.”

The two kids started forward, then a moment later stopped themselves, bowed quickly, and then dashed over to Kyoko-sensei’s desk, where she started handing them her books and things to carry to the class for her. She murmured something to them, and they both turned very slowly to stare at Dan. He could see them steeling themselves mentally before they both walked over to him, exchanged a glance with each other and said, again in unison,

“Good morning. Please come to 4-1 class.” They waited until he’d said good morning back and stood from his chair before they both turned and bolted away, just pausing long enough to bow at the staff room door and say, “Shitsurei shimasu” again before disappearing into the hallway.

That left Dan to walk to the class with Kyoko-sensei. Fortunately for him, she didn’t attempt any small talk along the way.

When they got to the classroom and the bell had rung to start, she asked him to introduce himself to the students. Once again, now that he was up there in front of the class, he was suddenly in teacher mode, and all the horrifying scenarios of completely messing things up disappeared from his mind. His primary school introduction was a little more involved than the junior high school one, including writing his name on the chalkboard for the students to admire and acting out his likes and dislikes for them to guess. He allowed himself a small, smug smile as the students all laughed at him acting out how much he hated running, complete with wheezing, chest clutching and pretending to collapse on the floor. There was nothing nine-year-olds loved more than watching adults suffer.

After that, he received his introduction to the joys of Dansinglish when Kyoko-sensei held up some picture cards and had the students repeat a phrase for each (“This is for you.” “Oh, really?” “Thank you!” “You’re welcome!”) Then she put on a CD, and she and the students sang the phrases along with the recording, performing a different gesture for each phrase. The classroom teacher, who was teaching the lesson along with them, was dancing along too, and Dan realized that he was probably meant to learn the Dansinglish routine as well. Oh boy. Well, who needed dignity any way?

The lesson with Kyoko-sensei ended up going pretty smoothly. Just as she had said, they taught the students different directions and then had them complete an activity where they had to follow Dan’s directions to find different locations within the city of Kyoto on a map. At the end of the lesson, the students sat and wrote their thoughts about the lesson in folders that Kyoko-sensei collected and carried back to the staff room with them.

They had just a few minutes to grab a sip of water before the students for the next class arrived to cart them off to 4-2 and complete the same lesson all over again. By the time third period rolled around, Dan had the Dansinglish choreography down pat, complete with the big finale (“Can I have a sticker?” “Of course!”) He was so glad that no one from his university was here to see just how low his dignity had sunk.

After fourth period, it was back to the staff room for him, where he saw that some of the other teachers were already laying out the lunch trays. He quickly washed up and joined in with a smile. It felt like the first time in weeks that he’d been able to do something without someone having to explain it or show him what to do. It was a good feeling. As he was setting out the last milk carton, the staff room door opened, and two of the students from 4-3 appeared, mumbling something about being there for Dan-sensei. One of the teachers handed him the tray he had just finished making up, but the girl from 4-3 — Her name tag said Mana — rushed over and took the tray from him.

It was slow going, walking back up the stairs to the 4-3 classroom, with Mana walking at less than
half speed, doing her best not to spill any of Dan’s soup along the way. He was itching to just take the tray off her, so instead, he clasped his hands behind him and tried to engage the students in conversation. That was pretty slow going too; neither of them seemed quite courageous enough to make eye contact with him.

Mana gave a loud sigh of relief when she finally got his tray set down on the desk they’d set aside for him with most of the soup still in the bowl. The students had pushed all of their desks together into groupings of four or five, creating little lunch tables. Mana and the boy who had come to pick Dan up were both seated in the same grouping as him, so when she had pulled out Dan’s chair for him, she slunk around to the other side and sat down in her own seat across from him, still avoiding his eyes.

Dan looked down at the tiny, tiny chair she had pulled out for him, sighed, and then somehow managed to fold himself up small enough to sit in it. There was no way he could fit his knees beneath the low desk his tray had been set on, though, so he had to hold his legs out to one side.

This was his first time eating with the students, though Phil had explained that soon they would start having lunch with the junior high school classes in rotation as well. Up until now, he’d just eaten in the staff room at Nishichu, where the only person he had to wait on was Phil. Here, though, he saw that none of the students were touching their food while the students in charge were still handing out plates, milk, napkins, chopsticks, etc. to every student in the class. Dan’s stomach was feeling hollower by the minute, and his plate of food before him was sending out delicious smells to tempt him. It was like some form of torture, having the food right there, ready to be eaten, but being forced to wait until a group of unhurried nine-year-olds decided it was time for him to eat.

At last the final student had received her carton of milk, and then two students walked up to the front of the room and led the entire class in a round of “Arigatou gozaimasu! Itadakimasu!”

“Atadakimasu,” Dan repeated and then picked up his chopsticks and dug in. He’d only been eating for a minute or so when the boy seated on his right turned to him and started in on the questions. He asked in Japanese at first, until it became clear that Dan didn’t really understand what he was asking. At that point one of the other kids intervened and — he thought — told the kid to use English instead.

“Ehh,” the kid said, eyeing Dan as though he were weighing him and finding him wanting. “Firu-sensei ha nihongo ga jouzu da ze! Naze Dan-sensei ga dekinai?”

“Atarashii da mon!” Mana jumped to his defense, looking up from the bowl of soup she had been staring into previously.

Dan only sort of followed this exchange, but he gathered that the boy thought he should be as good at Japanese as Phil was. He decided the best thing to do would be to start the conversation himself.

“Atarashii da mon!” Mana jumped to his defense, looking up from the bowl of soup she had been staring into previously.

“Do you like English?” he asked Mana. She looked a little startled at the question, but she nodded once.

“Yes, I do,” she said, then bit her lip and looked back down at her soup.

“Me too!” yelled a boy from the group next to theirs, and then several kids across the class shouted out their own declarations of like for English. The classroom teacher — Izumi-sensei, he thought her name was — said something then, and they all quieted down. He thought she had told them to be quiet and eat, but then a student raised her hand, and Izumi-sensei pointed at her. The girl turned to Dan and asked him what color he liked. He answered, and then several more students’ hands rose in the air, and one by one Izumi-sensei called on them and let them ask him their questions. They were
the usual suspects, all the same questions he’d gotten at the junior high school — favorite food, drink, season, game, and the like. None of these kids asked whether or not he had a girlfriend, fortunately, and he wondered if it was because they weren’t interested or because they didn’t know how.

When lunch was over, Dan was preparing to leave, but one of the kids raced up to him and started speaking rapidly and excitedly in Japanese. He had no idea what the kid was saying, until he caught the word “dojiboru.”

“You want to play dodgeball?” he guessed.

“Hai!” the boy confirmed, nodding vigorously. By now a few other students had wandered over, and were adding their own pleading expressions to the first kid’s. “Hiruyasumi de 4 nen 3 kumi to issho ni dojiboru yatte kudasai.”

Dan had a sudden mental image of him stood out in the school yard with a group of thirty year fours all gathered around him, dodgeballs in hand and evil gleams in their eyes. He looked down at the crowd of students around him, all gazing up at him with big, hopeful eyes.

“Oh, okay,” he gave in. They were all pretty small, so hopefully they wouldn’t be able to do too much damage. Hopefully.

“Yay!” the little group around him all yelled and started jumping up and down in celebration, before they scurried off to inform their classmates of their good fortune. Why did he have to be such a sucker for cuteness?

Dodgeball turned out to be both tamer and more confusing than he had expected. Rather than the violent free-for-all he remembered from his own school days, the version these kids played had a complex set of rules that none of them ever bothered to explain to him. There was apparently some system that allowed kids who got out to be tagged back in by their remaining teammates, but only if they were stood in a certain spot at the edge of the court — he still hadn’t entirely figured it out by the time the bell rang to signal the end of the break. Nevertheless, the students from 4-3 all thanked him loudly for playing with them before dashing off to get ready for cleaning time.

He followed at a slower pace, turning his own feet toward the staff room entrance. On the way, he passed a group of children so tiny they only came up to about his knees. They all wore yellow caps, and they looked like nothing so much as a row of ducklings waddling toward a pond. These must be the first years. As he walked past them, a few of them looked up at him, craning their necks back as though they were gazing up at a majestic Redwood tree.

“Deka—!” one of them exclaimed, and then the others repeated it. “Dekai!” “Deka—!” “Waa! Hontou ni dekai wa!” “Kowai~!”

He chuckled to himself as he stepped back inside the staff room. Apparently he was so massive that he literally struck fear into the hearts of small children.

After helping out at cleaning time, he bid goodbye to the students of 4-3 and was startled when a couple of them actually ran up and flung their arms around him before he left. Back in England there were pretty strict laws against any sort of physical contact between teachers and students, so it made him nervous, but it was also kind of nice to be hugged and to hear them shouting, “Thank you!” up at him, even if it was almost loud enough to make his ears bleed.

“You’re welcome! See you next time,” he told them as he extricated himself from the tangle of arms.
“See you!!!” came a chorus of voices from behind him. He was grinning as he stepped back out into the hallway.

In the afternoon, there was one more class, and then sixth period was free. He had had vague ideas of wandering around the school to get a better sense of its layout, but as soon as he’d sat down at his table in the staff room again, Kyoko-sensei came over with a stack of the student’s folders from earlier and plunked it down in front of him.

“Can you put a sticker in the folder and write a message for the students?” she asked, though the fact that she was already holding the sheet of star stickers out to him hinted that it was more of a command than a request.

“Of course,” he said, eyeing the stacks of folders with misgiving. There were five classes of fourth years, with about thirty students each, which meant about…150 folders total for him to write in. Well, there went the rest of his day.

At first he just opened the folders, stuck on a sticker, scribbled a “Well done!” or “Hello!” at random and moved on to the next as quickly as possible. But then, as he was writing in one of them, something caught his eye — his own name. So he stopped to try to make out what the student had written there. Fortunately there weren’t many kanji, and he was able to figure out that it said, “Dan-sensei, 4-2 ni kite kurete arigatou gozaimasu!” — “Dan-sensei, thank you for coming to class 4-2!” His lips curled up in an involuntary smile, and he changed what he was writing from “Well done!” to “You’re welcome!”

After that, he paid closer attention to what the students had written. It was slower going, but it was worth it for all of the cute, little messages the kids had left for him. Kyoko-sensei came over at 3:00 and told him he could go, but he ended up staying until almost 4:00 so that he could finish writing messages in all 150 folders.

Just as he was loading his messenger bag into the basket on the front of his bike, his phone buzzed in his pocket. When he pulled it out, he saw he had a new message, from Phil.

Phil: Hey, how was Nishisho? Wanna come over later so that I can utterly destroy you at MarioKart?

He read the message at least five times before at last he smirked to himself.

“Missed me, didn’t you?” he murmured under his breath, then sent back a quick reply in the affirmative before climbing on his bike and setting off for home.

Chapter End Notes

Originally published on tumblr
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Dan makes an amazing discovery and experiences his first onsen. (Warning for mentions of death. Nothing too specific, but it gets a little heavy.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Their lesson on Friday went reasonably well, despite the fact that Dan and Phil were both running on little more than coffee and enthusiasm. After being soundly defeated by Dan in MarioKart several times, Phil had challenged him to a round of Mortal Kombat, boasting that this time his victory was assured. When, by a fluke, Dan had ended up winning that too, an unsettling gleam had entered Phil’s eye and he’d pulled out some weird Japanese PS1 game and demanded that Dan battle him in an endless series of bizarre mini-games. Eventually, Phil had beaten him so many times that Dan forfeited, but by then it was already past 3:00 in the morning, and Dan had had to ride his bike home in the eerie stillness of late night in a small town.

8:00 AM Friday morning had found them both at their desks, bleary-eyed and sucking down coffee like it was the nectar of the gods. Somewhere around 8:15 the caffeine had kicked in, and they’d both come out of the fog enough to exchange wry, rueful smiles.

“Remind me never to lose a game to you again,” Dan had yawned as they collected their materials for their respective first period classes. “You’re the worst loser I’ve met this side of the Pacific.”

Phil had narrowed his eyes to glare at him, though his angry expression had been belied by the smile that kept threatening to form on his lips.

“Yeah, well… You’re the worst winner I’ve met this side of…the staff room!” was Phil’s stunning rebuttal.

Dan held up his hands in a gesture of surrender.

“I admit defeat,” he said. “Clearly I am no match for your wit.”

Phil had narrowed his eyes even further and scrunched up his nose and shaken his head slowly.

“You’d better watch out, Daniel Howell,” he grumbled, “or one of these days you’re going to open your desk drawer and find it filled with leftover natto.”

Dan had yet to experience the supposed horror of natto, so he found Phil’s threat less than impressive. He’d seen that it was on the school lunch menu for next week, though, and he did have to admit he was curious as to what all the fuss was about.

Later on, when it was nearing 4:00, and they were that close to being set free for the weekend, Phil looked up from his Kindle and said,

“By the way, I’m posting that video this evening, so if you don’t want to be in it, now would be the time to let me know.”
Dan had already completely forgotten about the short clip Phil had shot at the festival and the fact that he’d mentioned posting it on YouTube.

“Oh, right, that.” He looked up from his own book, a mystery novel he’d borrowed from Phil’s bookshelf the day before. He’d taken several manga as well, but Phil had explained that, unfortunately, comic books were a little too obviously non-work-related to be an acceptable staff room pastime. “I don’t mind at all. What’s the video about?”

“Just stuff I’ve been doing lately,” Phil shrugged and returned to his Kindle, which Dan now recalled had been more or less his reaction when he’d tried to talk to him about his YouTube channel the last time. He guessed Phil didn’t really want him to know about it, though that seemed odd, considering the fact that he was the one who’d just brought it up.

Dan glanced up at the big analog clock hanging on the wall at this end of the staff room. It only lacked a few minutes to 4:00.

“Hey, do you want to go get sushi or something together after this?” he asked, turning back to Phil.

Phil set his Kindle down again and glanced up at the clock himself.

“I wish I could, but I promised Akari I’d come over to dinner with her family this evening.” His eyebrows drew together as he offered Dan an apologetic smile. “But I’ll take a rain check on that sushi. Maybe next week sometime?”

At the mention of Akari’s name, Dan recalled that on Wednesday Phil had said something about her birthday, and Dan felt a little stab of guilt. She’d been nothing but kind and welcoming to him when he met her, yet he’d been too caught up in his own petty jealousy the other day to even wonder when her birthday was.

“Next week would be great, and hey,” he pulled out the most sincere smile he could manage, “tell Akari happy birthday from me.”

Phil’s eyes lit up at that, his whole expression seeming to brighten, and Dan felt like even more of an immature bastard.

“Yeah, I definitely will!” Phil said. “Her birthday was actually a few days ago, but she’ll be happy to hear that any way.”

“Good,” Dan said, trying very, very hard to mean it.

A few hours later, he was sat at his computer in the one, tiny room of his flat, getting up to absolutely nothing, when his phone buzzed in his pocket. He still had few enough friends here that receiving a text was always a happy surprise. He pulled the phone out and saw that it was a message from Madhavi.

Madhavi: Hey, so a few of us are going up to this onsen called Naritaya tomorrow afternoon. Wanna come experience your first ever onsen? This one’s REALLY beautiful!

When he’d read the message through twice, Dan set his phone down and frowned. On the one hand, this was exactly the kind of only-in-Japan experience he was eager to try, but on the other, he wasn’t sure that he could actually manage the amount of nonchalance necessary to spend an afternoon hanging out with friends completely naked. It wasn’t that he was necessarily ashamed of his body, it was just… It just sounded like a level of vulnerability he was not really ready to explore with people he’d only known for two weeks.
His phone buzzed again, and a new message appeared.

**Madhavi:** *REALLY beautiful. Like, google it if you don’t believe me.*

He sighed. All right. He’d give it a shot. He opened up a new tab in Chrome and typed in “naritaya onsen.” Immediately several reviews came up, and he clicked through to the top one. The reviewer sounded pretty enthusiastic about it, going on and on about how nice it was sitting in the outdoor bath surrounded by nature. He scrolled down to try to read more of the reviews, but all the rest were written in Japanese. Still, the overall rating people had given it was pretty high.

He scrolled up to the top of the page again and clicked through some of the pictures. What he saw was a set of deep, stone baths positioned next to a small cataract in a shallow river. The river lay at the bottom of a gorge with steep sides that were completely overgrown with lush greenery. Here and there a stone cliff face peeked out from among the foliage, and there were large boulders jutting up from various points along the river bed.

Dan didn’t really consider himself much of an outdoorsman, but he had to agree that it was a beautiful location. He clicked over to the Google image search, hoping to find larger pictures that gave a better view of the area. He was disappointed to see that other than the first couple of pictures, the rest of the results seemed to be images of random *onsen* from all over Japan. Among them were lots of pictures of smiling, naked people stretched out under the sky and the trees, enjoying the outdoors in their altogether. Everyone in the pictures looked relaxed and happy…

Dan bit his lip, wavering on the point of decision. What finally decided him was the recollection that Phil would be out of town that weekend, so there was no chance of Dan having to get naked in front of him at least. He picked up his phone and unlocked it.

**Dan:** *What the hell. I already relinquished all my dignity at the primary school anyway. What time?*

The reply came through less than a minute later.

**Madhavi:** *I’ll be by to get you at 4:30!*

By midnight he was too sleepy to keep his eyes open, so he went to bed and ended up waking before 8:00 the next morning. It was one of the unfortunate side effects of having a regular work schedule — he’d actually managed to train his body to keep normal hours.

Once he’d had breakfast, it slowly dawned on him that he had a whole day stretching ahead of him and no plans to fill it with until much later. He could actually do something productive for once. It was still early enough that the cool of the morning lingered in the air. Perhaps he could go for a bike ride, explore the area a bit and see a bit of the scenery. Yeah, that was a good plan… but maybe he should map out a route first. He didn’t know how good the reception on his phone was yet, and he could just see himself getting lost out the middle of a bunch of rice paddies with no service and no idea how to get home.

He pulled up Google maps and typed in the address of his apartment building, zooming out just enough to get a feel for the layout of the surrounding area. Farther north, the town buildings grew denser, leading into the heart of Harata. To the south, nothing but fields and the occasional house. To the east, Harata stretched along a highway until it bumped up against the outskirts of another town. To the west, the same — a road stretching westward toward the mountains, and look, there was Nishichu, just a bit to the south and west of where he lived… and somehow thinking of Nishichu made him think of Phil (like that was a great shock), and thinking of Phil reminded him of talking to Phil the day before. Hadn’t Phil said he was going to post the video with Dan in it?
Almost without thinking about it, Dan popped open a new tab, typed in youtube.com and then searched “phil lester.” And there it was, just like that: Phil’s channel with an old picture of Phil making a goofy face. “AmazingPhil,” it said. He clicked on the link without even a moment’s hesitation.

The most recent video had been uploaded nine hours ago, probably right around the time that Dan had started to become so unbearably sleepy. It was titled “BACK TO SCHOOL!” and the thumbnail was a picture of Phil being terrorized by a ruler and a pencil and various other stationery. He clicked through, full-screened it, and skipped the ad.

“Hi, guys!” Phil’s voice blasted from his speakers — Dan quickly hit the down volume button — and he saw Phil, seated on his bed in his flat, with sunlight streaming through from the French doors that Dan remembered led out onto his balcony. He started trying to work out when it had been filmed, but Phil was still speaking. “So school’s started up again.” Phil scrunched up his nose in an angry face, and the image shook a little. “I can’t believe summer vacation’s over already. I miss you, Okinawa!” He held out his hands longingly toward one side of the screen, where a picture of a gorgeous, tropical beach appeared before slowly dissolving into nothing. Phil sighed and clutched his hands to his heart in a melodramatic gesture. “Someday I will return to your suffocating humidity and pristine beaches.”

That pulled a grin from Dan, and he leaned forward, drawn in further without even noticing. The rest of the video was Phil talking about some silly incidents that had happened to him recently. Dan felt a hot wave of embarrassment pass over him as Phil mentioned his “friend” who had accidentally and hilariously mixed up his height with the length of his penis. Ahem. Phil hadn’t asked his permission to share that… but at least he hadn’t said Dan’s name. The part where he talked about the festival finally appeared toward the end of the video.

“Also, last weekend I went to see a fireworks show with some friends. Here’s a clip!” And then there were a few seconds of bright lights and explosions that seemed vaguely familiar. Dan frowned. He’d been sat right next to Phil and didn’t remember him taking any video during the show. Maybe he’d gotten the footage from someone else’s camera. “We also ate some incredible festival food, and my friend James ate an entire squid.” And then there was the clip, with a shot of James munching on the vile grilled snack, followed by Dan’s repulsed expression. “Dan was not impressed,” Phil finished up with a smirk and a shake of the head. And then Phil ended the video with a few more comments and the usual request to subscribe.

When it was over, Dan sat back, more impressed than he’d expected to be. The video had been really good. The editing was top notch — unsurprising considering Phil’s degree — and the picture quality was excellent, but more than that, Phil had just been so entertaining. He was the same Phil that Dan knew from the staff room, but with his personality turned up to 11. Dan was surprised at how badly he wanted to see more.

He absentmindedly scrolled down and then did a double-take when he saw the view count on the video he’d just watched. It had only been posted last night, but it already had a couple hundred thousand views. Whoa. Had it gone viral or something? He clicked back over to Phil’s channel itself and checked his subscriber count. Nope. Not a viral video. Phil was just much more popular on YouTube than he could ever have guessed. Wow. Phil was a legit YouTuber, and he hadn’t even known.

Long ago, say 2007 or 2008, Dan had been what one might have called a YouTube addict. He could spend hours at a time binging on videos by people like Shane Dawson or Natalie Tran. It had been a distraction from his less-than-happy life at the time, and a way to feel less lonely. But then he’d gotten more serious about his future and started cutting out things that he knew were just distracting
him from his end goal of becoming a lawyer. YouTube had been one of the first things to go. Acting hadn’t been too far behind (because, honestly, who was he kidding, thinking that he could ever have made it as an actor?) And he’d done it at just the right time, too. As it was, he had just barely managed to pass all of his A-levels — he’d come that close to not getting all the marks he needed to start university on time, but luckily that hadn’t been the case.

“Yeah, and a fat lot of good that did me,” he muttered to himself as he browsed through Phil’s collection of videos. The next one was titled “Sand and Sun,” and was clearly footage from his Okinawa trip with Akari. There were other, less vloggy ones, like this one called “Why I was a weird kid,” or ones that were clearly YouTube challenges or tags. Here was one from a couple of summers ago, where it looked like he’d been home visiting England, but as he moved further back and tried guessing the contents of each video from the title and thumbnail, he saw that the majority of them seemed to be Japan-related.

When he reached videos from 2 years ago, he caught sight of a title that stopped him in his tracks: “About the Earthquake.” After hesitating for a moment, he clicked on it, and the video started at once, no ads. He scrolled down quickly to check the date. March 12, 2011 — the day after the earthquake.

The first few seconds of the video were just black screen with white text: “Yesterday, at 2:46 in the afternoon, a level 8.9 earthquake struck just off the northeastern coast of Japan. It was followed by a tsunami that devastated the coastline in that area. Tens of thousands of people are dead or missing. Please keep Japan in your thoughts.”

Then the black screen dissolved into an image of Phil, sat on his bed just as he had been in the other video. He wasn’t smiling in this one, though.

“I wasn’t sure whether I was going to make this video or not.” 2011 Phil said, “but I got so many Tweets and comments and other messages from people wanting to know if I was safe that I thought it was best to put something up right away and give you all an idea of what’s going on. The prefecture I live in is completely landlocked, so there was no tsunami here. The epicenter of the earthquake was several hundred kilometers away from me, so it was only about a 6.6 here.” Video Phil paused, took a breath, continued. “I don’t know exactly how to describe what it was like, other than to say it was the most terrified I’ve ever been in my life.”

He paused again, looking down. When he started speaking again, he kept his eyes lowered rather than looking up into the camera lens again.

“And that’s when Dan stopped the video, closing his laptop so that he didn’t have to see the still image of Phil’s crumpled face anymore.

This felt wrong. It felt all wrong, watching Phil like this, listening to him talk about his life like this. It felt almost like Dan was spying on him somehow. Setting aside the fact that that video was a public
one, that Dan was just one of hundreds of thousands of other people who had watched it over the years, the fact still remained that when he’d brought up that particular subject — the earthquake — Phil had chosen not to tell him about it.

It would have been different, Dan thought, if Phil had just been some casual acquaintance, just someone he’d met on a train or at a party and wouldn’t be seeing very often. Then he wouldn’t have felt so bad satisfying his curiosity about Phil’s past by bingeing on his YouTube back-catalogue. But Phil was about as far from a casual acquaintance as someone could get. He was, Dan was beginning to grasp, something akin to the axis upon which Dan’s entire daily life revolved. For the moment, Dan considered himself fortunate that he got to spend eight hours a day with someone like Phil, but it was a delicate balance, a very delicate balance. Knock things even slightly askew, and those eight hours a day could become a sort of torture instead. So how would Phil feel — Phil who had been very closed-lipped about his YouTube channel — how would he feel if he knew that Dan had been snooping around there?

Perhaps Dan would be better off going on that bike ride after all. He opened his laptop again and quickly closed the YouTube tab. Back to the map, then.

He decided to ride south, out among the fields of rice that had, just within the short space of time since he’d arrived, turned from mostly sharp green to mostly golden-yellow. It was another gloriously clear day, and as he rode farther from the buildings of town, more and more of the mountain range became visible in the blue and purple distance. Here in Japan, the colors of things seemed sharper and more vibrant than they were back in England. He supposed it was from all the bright sunlight that his own island was rather short on.

The cool breeze and the tranquility of the empty landscape calmed his mind, so that by the time he was parking his bike back in the bike area of his building’s car park, the sense of guilty wrongness he’d felt earlier had largely dissipated.

The afternoon passed quickly enough, with him taking care of various small necessities — a load of laundry washed and hung to dry on the drying rack he’d bought for his flat, a quick run to the supermarket for milk and a packet of spaghetti, a couple of emails he’d been putting off sending. When Dan glanced up at the clock and saw that it was already past 4:00, he almost couldn’t figure out where the day had gone.

As usual, Madhavi appeared at his door right on time.

“Da-an!” she sang out as soon as he opened the door. “Are you SO excited? It’s gonna be awesome!”

“Yep,” he said, smiling despite himself. Her enthusiasm was infectious. “Very excited. Not at all nervous to be showing my butt to a bunch of strangers.” He slid his shoes on, not bothering to tighten the laces — he could do that in the car — and locked up.

“It’s really not that bad,” she assured him. “And at this one, they let you wear a towel if you want to. That’s what I always do.” She paused and looked him over. “Did you bring a towel with you?”

He blinked at her.

“Don’t they have them there?”

“Oh, no. Well, it’s a hotel, so you only get one from them if you’re staying there. Otherwise, you have to bring your own.”
So Dan unlocked the door that he’d just locked, slid his shoes off again and dashed into his room once more to grab a couple of towels and a bag to carry them in.

“Anything else I’m forgetting to bring?” he asked Madhavi, pausing before putting his shoes back on.

“Nope. Just ¥500 to get in,” she answered. “Though I wouldn’t be surprised if they just let us in for free.”

“Why would they let us in for free?” Dan asked her when they were on the stairs heading down to the car park.

“Oh, we go there all the time, and they always recognize us. I mean,” she shrugged, “they don’t get that many gaijin up there.”

She was still talking, saying something about how she had met the owner of the hotel, but Dan had stopped listening to her entirely because they’d reached the foot of the stairs and he could see that there was a second car pulled up next to Madhavi’s, one that was very familiar because he saw it nearly every day parked out front at Nishichu.

“You’re riding with me, by the way,” Madhavi’s voice cut across his panicked thoughts. “Don’t worry. Seiji and Jake agreed that you should have shotgun, since you’re the tallest.” She had continued on towards the cars without hesitation, and he had to hurry to keep her from noticing his pause.

“Right. Thanks,” he muttered. As he climbed into the front passenger’s seat of Madhavi’s car, he dared to glance over at the other, and there was Phil, with James sat next to him, both of them smiling and waving. Oh dear. He shot a look back up toward the door of his flat. Was it too late to plead illness? He starting chewing his lower lip, thinking rapidly. Maybe he could feign a sudden bout of terrible diarrhea, dash back inside, and hide in the toilet until they left without him.

“Oh, come on,” he scolded himself. You’re twenty-two, not twelve. You can be adult about this.

Madhavi started the engine of her car, and he stared longingly back up toward his flat. What had ever possessed him to agree to this? He must have been experiencing a moment of temporarily insane levels of self-confidence. Deep breaths. He just needed to take deep breaths, and he’d be okay.

“You look nervous,” came Seiji’s voice from the back seat. “Is this your first time going to the onsen?”

“Yes. I’m a true onsen virgin,” Dan joked because, really, humor was the only refuge he had left.

“It’s really not as big a deal as it seems,” Seiji tried to reassure him.

“Yeah,” Madhavi agreed, turning to back out of her parking space. “I remember the first time I went I was freaking out a little, but then you get there, and everyone’s just relaxing and not paying any attention to you at all.”

“Okay,” Dan murmured, pressing his lips together to keep from saying more. There was no way he could explain that he wasn’t really worried about everyone.

“It’s just like going to a nude beach in Europe, or something,” Jake chimed in from the back. “No one’s there to stare at you. They’re just there to chill.”

Dan had never visited a nude beach before either, but the focal point of his anxiety had entirely
shifted from self-consciousness about being naked in front of other people to just a generalized *oh shit phil is here shit shit shit*.

It was about a forty-five minute drive up to where the hot spring was. As Seiji explained along the way, there were two big *onsen* resort towns in the nearby mountains: Nasu, which was west and a little north of Harata, and Shiobara, which lay due west. They were visiting the latter today, though according to Seiji, Nasu was the more famous of the two. Apparently even the Emperor owned a summer home there.

“We’ll definitely be making several trips up to Nasu this winter,” Madhavi assured him, showing her teeth in a cheerful grin. “Most of my favorite *onsen* are up there. Plus we have to show you the *sessho seki*.”

At any other moment, Dan would have been curious to learn exactly what a *sessho seki* was, but instead he kept his attention focused on the passing scenery — thick maple forest and a winding mountain road — and responded with nothing but polite noises of interest.

When they reached the hotel, Dan was surprised to see a rather plain-looking building wedged right up against a cliff face. They’d basically just stopped in the middle of the roadway, partway up the mountain. The area around the hotel seemed like little more than a wide space at the side of the road, and a quick look around revealed no sign of the beautiful river gorge he’d seen in the pictures.

As they all piled out of the cars, he hung back to wait for Phil, who was busy locking up, while the others continued on inside.

“Hey, I thought you said you were going to Tokyo this weekend.” He did his best to make the comment sound casual — nothing more than mild curiosity about this apparent change in Phil’s plans.

“I am,” Phil said, shoving his keys in his pocket and raising his eyebrows at Dan. “I’m going tomorrow.”

“Oh, right.” Well, as usual, Dan had been a right idiot not to consider that possibility.

They were met at the entrance to the hotel by a young woman wearing a smart skirt suit. She bowed low and welcomed them in perfect English before indicating the row of slippers waiting on the raised floor of the room. It was a subtle reminder that they should take off their shoes before entering the lobby. Dan could see the others already up at the reservation desk.

“How are you today, Phil?” the young woman asked as they stepped into their slippers. Dan shot a sideways glance at his companion. Madhavi had been right about the people here recognizing them.

“I’m pretty good,” Phil was answering. “Are there lots of people in the baths today?”

She shook her head, accompanying the gesture with her perfect-hostess smile.

“Just a few, so I think you will have it mostly to yourselves.”

Before Dan and Phil even had a chance to approach the reservation desk, the other four were shuffling back over to the entrance and sliding their own slippers off. Dan was left in confusion for a moment, until Madhavi made eye contact with him and gave him a big, overly exaggerated wink. He guessed they were getting in for free, just as she’d thought. The others were putting their shoes back on, and heading back out the door, so Dan figured he should follow suit.

“Er, where are we going?” he murmured to Phil once they were out in the car park again. Phil just
grinned and pointed across the highway, where there was nothing but sky and the side of the next mountain over. As he watched, Madhavi and Jake dashed across the highway — fortunately there were no other cars coming at the moment — and stopped next to a sign that he hadn’t noticed there before with a big arrow pointing down. That’s when he at last saw the railing and the beginning of a staircase. So that’s where the river gorge was.

Dan almost laughed when they reached the top stair, and he looked down to see a steep set of hundreds of stairs zig-zagging down the side of the cliff. It seemed ridiculous that anyone would expect him to climb that many stairs just to take a bath. Didn’t that kind of ruin the whole relaxation aspect of it? But the others were already halfway down the first flight, clearly not in the least bothered by either the height or the necessity of actually doing exercise. He took a deep breath, let it out, and followed.

He didn’t get out of breath quite as quickly as he’d expected. Maybe all of his bike riding was actually doing something for his physical fitness. Once they were about halfway down, the river came into view, running between the steep cliffs. A little bit farther down, and he could see the baths. As the hostess at the hotel had said, there really were only a couple of other people there, lounging against the side of the largest bath.

By the time Dan reached the bottom, the others in his group were already there. He caught a glimpse of Madhavi disappearing off to his left, down a trail that skirted the side of the main bath, but the rest of them — Phil, Seiji, James, and Jake — were all stood in an area just to the right of the staircase, stowing their towels and things in some cubbies built into the cliff face there. It wasn’t until he had walked up to join them that he realized they were getting undressed right there, in the open. Great! he thought. Just great.

He stashed his towels in an empty cubby and turned his back on the others. If he couldn’t see anyone else, it wouldn’t feel so weird taking off his clothes in public…probably. He did it quickly, stripping off his shirt and shorts and then grabbing a towel and wrapping it around his waist before slipping off his pants. He shoved all of his clothes into the cubby next to his other towel and then, careful not to look directly at the others in case they didn’t have their towels on yet, walked over to the edge of the bath and looked out across the river.

The largest bath, which he stood next to now, was long and rectangular and paved in dark stones. One side of it abutted the trail he had seen Madhavi walk down, and the edge of the other side dropped down the last couple of meters to the river bed. To his left, the river flowed downstream, passing over a shallow waterfall before spreading out into a wide part of the gorge. To his right, upstream, the gorge grew narrower, and the river had to wind its way through a series of massive boulders that had tumbled from the cliff face, hopefully in ancient times. In that direction, a few steps led down to a couple of smaller baths, one of which was directly beside the river. The day continued sunny and clear-skied, and at the moment the whole gorge was lit up with the deep-gold rays of the late afternoon sun.

He heard chattering and splashing behind him then and turned to see that his companions were already climbing into the bath beside him. The two people who had already been here — a man and a woman — had both stood and looked to be on the verge of leaving.

“Come on, Dan. The water feels amazing,” Phil called from the other side of the bath, where he had settled down next to Seiji, near a slender waterfall that fell into the bath from a chute running down the side of the cliff. Dan suppressed a sigh. He might as well get on with it.

The bath was deep — deep enough that when he stepped into it, the water came up to his waist. When he first stepped in, he almost jumped out again. It was a lot hotter than he’d been expecting.
But after a few more seconds, his skin became acclimated and the temperature began to feel more comfortable. He waded over to where the others were sat, careful to keep his towel closed around him, as his movement through the water threatened to tug it loose.

“Hmmm,” he heard James murmur from where he was leaning back against the river side of the bath and closing his eyes. “This is everything I hoped it would be and more.”

“I dunno,” Jake was saying, as he stretched his arms above his head and then lay them along the stone edge of the bath. He had chosen to sit on the trail side. “It’s still a little too hot for me to want to spend much time sitting in a hot spring. I’ll probably go jump in the river in a minute.”

“You can do that?” Dan asked, as he came up to sit near — but not right next to — Jake.

“Yep,” Seiji answered. When Dan looked over at him, he realized that Seiji had elected not to wear a towel into the water but had instead taken it off and laid it on ground beside the bath. Maybe being part Japanese, Seiji was more comfortable with this particular part of Japanese culture. “It’s almost a necessity if you’re going to be using the **onsen** in the summer.”

“What is?” came Madhavi’s voice from behind them. Dan hadn’t heard her walking up behind them, probably because he was too focused on not looking in certain people’s direction.

“Swimming in the river when the bath gets too hot,” Jake said, budging up to make room for her to climb in between him and Dan.

Once she’d gotten settled and pulled her towel tightly around her, she scrunched up her face as though Jake had said something unpleasant.

“There’s no way I’m getting in that gross river water,” she said.

“Stop being such a girl,” Jake retorted, elbowing her in the side.

“Shut up!” She elbowed him back, and Dan surreptitiously scooted a little ways away from them, trying to avoid being jostled. “It’s not because I’m a girl. It’s because I have standards.”

They kept up the bickering and playful fighting for several more minutes — long enough for Dan to start wondering if he wouldn’t be better off moving away from them and over to the other side of the bath. James was still lying there with his eyes closed and an expression of utter bliss on his face, and Seiji and Phil were engaged in a murmured conversation that Dan couldn’t make out over Jake and Madhavi’s loud voices. After another minute or so he realized that he also couldn’t make it out because they were speaking in Japanese.

It was then that he realized that he was staring at Phil, and he had to force himself to look away because **oh god** shirtless Phil in a towel had to be just about one of the hottest sights he’d ever been fortunate enough to see in his short life.

Leaving Madhavi and Jake to their argument about who was more likely to die first in a post-apocalyptic wilderness survival scenario, Dan stood and waded over to take the empty spot next to James. With James blocking his view of Phil, it was much easier to focus his gaze somewhere else. The other newbie opened his eyes and sat up when he heard Dan approaching, making a welcoming gesture toward the space next to him.

“How’re you liking your school so far?” he asked, as Dan settled himself so that he could see both James and the view out over the river at the same time.

“A lot, actually,” Dan answered, taking a deep breath. The heat of the bath was starting to get to him.
a little, and the idea of jumping into the cool river water below was sounding more and more appealing. “Not that there’s much to do so far. I mostly just sit in the staff room and talk to Phil,” he made a helpless gesture with his hand.

“Really?” James’ dark eyes opened wide enough for Dan to see all of their white. “I have three or four classes almost every day, and some of the other teachers have even invited me to their classes. Like, the other day the home ec. teacher asked me to come to a cooking class.”

“That must be nice,” Dan muttered, surprised that he didn’t feel more envious than he did. “According to Phil, the headmaster at our school isn’t a big fan of English education. Apparently he actively discourages the teachers from using the ALTs.”

“What a waste,” James said with a frown, “especially with two of you there.”

Dan shrugged. James was right, of course. It really was a waste. But for some reason he couldn’t get too worked up about it.

“At least with two of us there we don’t get too bored.”

“Yeah, I’m a little jealous of you there,” James said with a chuckle.

Dan couldn’t help glancing over at Phil then, because they were talking about him. He and Seiji had finished their conversation, and they were both gazing over the side of the bath and out across the gorge now. As he studied their two faces, Dan began to wonder what the topic of their conversation had been. Seiji’s dark brows were drawn together in a serious expression, and Phil’s eyes seemed almost sad. Seeing the look in Phil’s eyes, he couldn’t help but think of Phil as he’d seen him in the video he’d watched that morning — not the enthusiastic Phil from the festival video, with the outsized personality and exaggerated expressions, but the other one — Phil who couldn’t look up from his bedspread as he talked about the earthquake…Phil whose voice had caught on a sob.

It struck Dan then, all at once: that person, the one whom Dan had watched cry in the video, he was the same person sat just a few meters from Dan right now. Even if two years had passed, and two years’ worth of emotions and experiences had been layered over him, the Phil who had lived through the most terrifying moment of his life was still there somewhere inside the current Phil. Deep down, a part of him was still the him from 2011, the one who had cried because sometimes terrible things happen to completely ordinary people.

As Dan watched him now, he wondered how much of the Phil he knew was still that Phil. It wasn’t so difficult to look at him now, he realized. Somehow it didn’t feel so wrong to stare. Because right now, as he sat in the hot water and breathed the clear, golden air of afternoon on the mountain, and looked at Phil looking at the view, all he felt was an odd sort of warmth spreading out from the center of his chest.

Chapter End Notes

Originally published on tumblr
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

English speech contest practice and a very fun house party. (Warnings for mentions of death, alcohol, drunkenness)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Dan returned to the staff room after his third period class on Monday morning, he found Phil sat at his desk with his nose stuck in a colorful brochure. As Dan set his books down and slid into his chair, he bent his neck a little to one side so that he could get a closer look at the cover.

The first thing he noticed was the photograph of a young woman dressed in the type of formal skirt suit you might expect to see a royal princess wear while visiting a hospital. She had a cheerful smile on her face and one hand held out next to her as though presenting the title of the brochure, but Dan couldn’t make himself read what it said. His eyes had become fixated on the space beside the woman’s head where there was a speech bubble containing nothing but the mysterious phrase, “Knt!”

He would have been able to hold in his laughter if it hadn’t been for the exclamation mark. As it was he let out a bark of laughter so loud that an elderly Social Studies teacher who had been dozing at his desk on the far side of the room sat up, startled, and glared at him. Dan immediately lowered his gaze and cleared his throat a few times, trying to disguise the sound as some sort of sneeze or cough.

“Are you okay?” Phil closed the brochure and set it aside, looking Dan over with a solicitous expression.

“I’m fine, but,” he waved a hand at the front of the brochure and bit his lip to stop himself laughing again, “erm, what on earth is she meant to be saying?”

Phil lifted the brochure again, angling it so that they could both see the cover. There was a smile playing about the corners of his mouth.

“What, the K-N-T lady? Isn’t it obvious she’s saying the name of her travel agency, K-N-T?”

“Ooooh,” Dan said. “K-N-T.” He shook his head and pursed his lips. “They really should have capitalized the ’N’ and the ’T.’”

Phil cast him a sidewise glance and then looked back at the brochure with a smirk.

“They really should have,” he agreed. He paused before adding, “It’s even better when you know what the letters K-N-T stand for.”

“Oh god. Do I even want to know?”

Phil chuckled at Dan’s expression of exaggerated horror.

“The travel agency is named Kinki Nippon Tourist.”
The Social Studies teacher still had his eye on them, so Dan took several deep breaths and tried to achieve a sense of inner calm before responding to that.

“You’re kidding,” he said.

But then Phil flipped the brochure over and pointed at something printed at the bottom of the back cover, and when Dan peered closer at it, there it was, written in neat black letters, “Kinki Nippon Tourist.”

“‘Kinki’ is another name for the Kansai Region of Japan,” Phil explained.

“So, you’re saying that there is an entire area of Japan known as the Kinki Region?” Dan’s cheeks were aching from holding in his laughter. Phil nodded. “Have you ever visited the Kinki Region, Phil?”

Phil bit his lips, and Dan could tell he was struggling not to laugh as well.

“I have, as a matter of fact. Several times.”

Dan just shook his head. They were going to get kicked out the staff room if they kept on like this.

“Why are you looking through a travel brochure anyway?” he asked then. “Planning an exotic getaway to…” He glanced at the cover and frowned. “Igirisu? You’re looking at a travel brochure for the UK?”

Phil’s response to that was a sigh and a roll of his eyes.

“You can blame Akari for that,” he said, holding the brochure out at arms length and making a face at it. “She’s convinced that if you even attempt to plan an international trip without the aid of a travel professional, you’re risking death or worse.”

Something in the pit of Dan’s stomach suddenly felt queasy and cold.

“Oh, she’s planning a trip to the UK then?” he asked, and his voice didn’t sound nearly as off-handed as he’d hoped.

“Yeah, she’s coming home with me over Christmas,” Phil nodded and tossed the brochure to one side. “It’ll be her first time visiting.”

“Ah,” Dan said. His throat felt strangely dry. “Guess she wants to meet the parents and all that.”

“Oh, she’s met my family before,” Phil said, leaning back in his chair and pushing it away from his desk a little so he could stretch his beautifully long legs. “They came here to visit last year. But Akari’s never been over there, and she really wants to see where I’m from.” Phil paused and folded his arms over his chest, looking down at his desk top as though he were considering something. Then he went on, “And, you know, she wants to see what it’s like for herself before she decides to move there.”

Dan was on the verge of asking why she was thinking of moving to England when it dawned on him what Phil meant.

“So, you’re planning to move back?” he asked, before adding, in an attempt at a teasing tone, “I had just assumed you were a lifer at this point.”

Phil grimaced and shook his head violently from side to side.
“No, I definitely do not want to end up spending the rest of my life in Harata.”

Dan was taken aback at the vehemence with which Phil said this. Harata was certainly no major cultural hub, but it seemed a pleasant enough place to settle down, and from what he knew of Phil so far he wasn’t aware that he aspired to anything more than that — a comfortable place to settle down.

“I’m thinking I’ll stay for another two years or so,” Phil was continuing. One side of his mouth twisted up in a sort of smile. “Hopefully by then I’ll have convinced Akari that England is a planet capable of supporting human life.”

“Do you want some tea?” Dan asked, standing up quickly and making a clumsy grab for his coffee mug. “I could really use some tea.”

Phil looked at him askance for a moment before nodding and handing him his own mug.

“Yeah, sure. Thanks.”

That afternoon, they had their first practice with the English speech contest students. Dan had really been hoping to start trying out some of the club activities after school this week, but Mr. Watanabe explained that, as the speech contest would be taking place in early October, the students would need to practice all throughout the month of September in order to be ready. Dan wanted to ask if it was really absolutely necessary to have the students practice every day, but considering how little work he did otherwise, he didn’t feel he had a right to complain about this rather minor addition to the workload.

There were four students from Nishichu participating this year. Phil had explained to him that they were allowed to send one student in each year to the competition, so there was one first year, one second year, and one third year student. When Dan had inquired about the fourth, Phil had said that she was competing in the “native speakers” category, meant for students who had previously lived abroad or been taught in an English-medium school.

“You mean that one of our students is a native English speaker?” he’d demanded when Phil told him this. “And I never even noticed?”

“She’s pretty good at hiding it,” Phil had said with a shrug.

“Why would she want to hide it?” Dan had asked, but Phil had just shrugged again. When Dan thought about it, he supposed it wasn’t that surprising. He himself knew a thing or two about being bullied for standing out at school. Things probably weren’t any different here. In fact, wasn’t it Japan that had invented that lovely metaphor about the nail that sticks up being hammered down?

Dan hadn’t been invited to any of the third year classes yet, and he’d only been to a couple of the second year ones, so when they walked into the library for practice and saw the students sat at a table waiting for them, he didn’t really recognize the second and third year girls. The first year boy, Nishida, he remembered at once from Mr. Watanabe’s classes. He was loud in class but always seemed to do well on quizzes and assignments. The first year girl, on the other hand, didn’t seem familiar at all, though Dan knew she was in the very same class as Nishida. She must be one of those students who sat quietly in the back and made sure to never do anything that would draw attention to herself.

Mr. Watanabe entered the library right behind him, with his usual bustling air, and immediately started talking to the students. All four of them jumped to their feet, and then the third year and
second year girls introduced themselves to Dan.

“My name is Airi,” said the third year girl with a bright smile. Dan had learned that you could tell which year the students were in by the color of their name tags. This girl’s was green. The second year girl wore a yellow one, and the two first year students wore blue ones.

“My name is Natsumi,” the second year girl said, keeping her eyes fixed somewhere around the region of Dan’s collar.

“Hello, Phil-sensei and Dan-sensei!” Nishida called then, waving his hand at them wildly despite the fact that he was right there in front of them.

“Hi, I’m Kurumi,” the first year girl said, and gave him a polite smile. She pronounced her own name with an American accent (Koo-ROO-me), so Dan guessed she must be the native English speaker.

“So, I asked them to try to memorize the speech over summer vacation.” Mr. Watanabe addressed his comments to Dan, presumably because Phil was already aware of this. “Mr. Kato will come later to help with individual practice, but now I want each of them to give a speech in front of all of us.”

So they all sat at the table while the students took it in turn to stand a few meters away and recite their speech. None of them had completely memorized the words yet, so it was Phil’s job to hold a paper print-out of each student’s speech and prompt them when they forgot a word or lost their place.

Three of the speeches were pretty standard fare. Nishida talked about a trip he took to Italy with his family, Kurumi’s speech was about her experiences on the track team, and the second year girl, Natsumi, talked about how important her family was to her. But then the third year girl, Airi, stood up and started reciting her speech.

“Good-bye, Yurika! Good-bye, Asami!” She pretended to wave to two people. “I said good-bye to my friends from the volleyball team. We had practiced hard for the championship. We were going to win that year.

“But I didn’t know that was the last time I would see them. That day was March 11, 2011, the day of the big earthquake and tsunami. My home was in Fukushima Prefecture, and my city was next to the ocean.

“My friends Yurika and Asami lost their lives on that day.”

She stopped, and Dan guessed that she had forgotten the next sentence. He glanced over at Phil, who was looking down at Airi’s speech, his forehead wrinkled up in a frown.

“Phil?” he whispered, and Phil looked up with a start.

“Oh, right,” he muttered. “A few days later…” he prompted her, and Airi nodded and took a deep breath.

“A few days later, there was an explosion at the nuclear power station. Because of the radiation, I had to leave my home. I can never go back there.”

She didn’t have very much of the rest of the speech memorized, so after she had stumbled through the next few sentences, Mr. Watanabe told her she could stop. She walked back over to the table and took her seat, and Dan couldn’t help giving her a quick, assessing glance. He couldn’t believe that she was able to talk about these things so calmly. Just hearing the first couple of paragraphs of the speech, even in her halting, poorly-pronounced English, he felt a lump forming in the back of his
throat. He did some quick calculations in his head. As a third year student, she must be fourteen or fifteen. Two years ago she would have only been thirteen at the most.

He looked over at Phil, worried about his reaction, but Phil had turned to Kurumi beside him and was going over something in her speech with her.

It wasn’t until early the next week that Airi managed to finish memorizing her speech, and when Dan finally heard the end of it, he actually ended up crying right there in the library. He’d been expecting something sad, about how much tragedy this girl had had to endure at such a young age. And it was very sad, with her descriptions of having to move seven different times in six months, of trying to fit in at every new school but being forced to leave before she could make friends there. But eventually she talked about moving here, to Harata, and about finally settling down in a new city and school. She talked about joining Nishichu’s volleyball team and how she hoped that she would finally get a chance to play in the championship game. It was her last sentence that brought Dan to tears.

“I’m so happy that I finally have a new home, Harata,” she said.

Dan swiped at the tears on his cheeks, wishing he had thought to bring a box of tissues. Then beside him, Phil nudged him and held out his own packet, and Dan thankfully pulled out a few.

Airi walked over to them then. Mr. Watanabe was off practicing somewhere else with the two first years, so it was just the two ALTs, Airi, and Natsumi in the library today.

“Dou deshita ka?” Airi asked Phil when she’d stopped in front of them. “Eigo no hatsuon daijoubu deshita ka?” She’d been working hard to try to pronounce certain of the words in her speech, and she’d especially had trouble with the words “nuclear” and “prefecture.”

“Un, daitai daijoubu datta,” Phil told her, and she smiled in relief.

“It was very good,” Dan chimed in, hoping he didn’t look a mess. He’d managed to dry his cheeks, but he was pretty sure his nose was still all red.

“Thank you,” she beamed at him before taking her seat to listen to Natsumi give her speech next.

Dan was still thinking about her speech in the staff room a couple of days later. He’d been hesitant to discuss it with Phil, afraid of sounding like he was prying. But there wasn’t really anyone else he could ask about it, so he finally turned to Phil, who was working on a lesson plan for the Special Needs class the next day, and cleared his throat to get his attention.

“Phil,” he said, when after several seconds his co-worker hadn’t looked up from his work.

“Hm?” Phil turned a distracted gaze on him. It was still early in the morning, and the whole staff room was awash with sunlight from the east-facing windows. The light caught Phil’s eyes in a certain way, and they were sat close enough together that Dan noticed for the first time that Phil’s eyes weren’t quite as blue as he’d thought. Or rather, they were a pale blue, but with a dash of green thrown in and a little splotch of golden-yellow right there next to his pupil —

“What’s up?” Phil prompted him, and Dan cleared his throat again in attempt to focus his attention.

“How did a student like Airi end up in Harata of all places?”

Phil raised an eyebrow and frowned at him.

“What do you mean?”
“I mean… I was under the impression that this area was pretty far away from the areas affected by the tsunami. Since it’s landlocked and everything,” Dan rushed to explain. There was no need to mention that he’d gotten that impression by watching Phil’s video on the subject.

“It’s not,” Phil said, his frown smoothing out into a look that was much harder to read. He glanced out the window for a moment before turning back to Dan. “Airi’s hometown is only about 80 or 90 kilometers from here. The Fukushima Daiichi Power Plant — the one that had the meltdown — is only about 110 kilometers away.” One side of his mouth twisted up, but it wasn’t really a smile. “We got a pretty healthy dose of radiation here.”

“Oh,” Dan said. Phil didn’t look particularly thrilled to be discussing this topic, but at least he was talking about it. And he hadn’t turned back to his work. Instead he still sat there, body turned toward Dan, almost as though he were waiting for Dan to ask him more. “Are you— er…okay?”

Dan regretted the question the moment it was out of his mouth. What an absolutely moronic question to ask. Then Phil let out a little ripple of laughter and gave Dan a humorous look.

“If you’re trying to trick me into admitting that I now have superhero powers, then think again!” he said, holding an admonishing finger under Dan’s nose. Then he dropped his hand and shook his head. Dan was so relieved to see he was still smiling. “Yeah, I’m fine. We couldn’t eat the persimmons off the trees that year, and they had to scrape the top layer of dirt off the ground in a lot of places, but in this area at least, the radiation lasted for too short a period of time to cause health problems or anything.”

“Good to know,” Dan said. He only had the vaguest ideas of what the lasting effects of radiation exposure might be — cancer, probably. Infertility maybe? Nope, he definitely was not going to ask Phil about that.

“By the way, I saw you accepted Seiji’s invitation to the party this Saturday.” Dan wasn’t sure if Phil was intentionally changing the subject or not, but he was glad that the dark look had passed from his eyes. “Do you need a ride down to Eric’s house?”

“If you don’t mind,” Dan gave him a sheepish smile. Most of the time it was nice not having to worry about taking care of a car or what the price of petrol was, but he still felt awkward asking Phil to drive him places. He never felt that way when it was Madhavi or Seiji, so he chalked it up to lingering shame about that first night, when Phil had had to buy his dinner and his drinks and be his designated driver.

“Not at all,” Phil said. “You haven’t met Eric yet, have you?”

“No.”

Dan had actually felt kind of strange accepting an invitation to someone’s party when he’d never even met them before, but Seiji had assured him that it was perfectly normal. Apparently this Eric guy was an ALT in the south who was lucky enough to live in, not a flat, but an entire house, which he had all to himself. Seiji had said he held parties there a lot, and invited ALTs and their friends from all over the prefecture.

Phil smirked at him.

“He throws good parties,” was all he said, before at last turning back to his lesson plan.

A cold front blew in late Friday evening, bringing heavy rain and causing the temperature to drop a
good ten degrees. It was only September 13 — Friday, the 13th, now that Dan thought of it — but he figured the change in weather was a signal that summer was over and that autumn temperatures would soon settle in. At least, that’s what he hoped. He wasn’t sure if he could stand many more weeks of near 100% humidity and over-thirty-degree high temperatures.

On Saturday evening, he actually pulled a jacket on over his jumper before walking down to the car park to wait for Phil, who was, unsurprisingly, running a few minutes behind schedule. It was almost twenty past their agreed-upon hour by the time Phil’s Element was pulling into the car park and Phil was waving him over to the passenger’s side door.

“Did you bring drinks?” James asked him from the back seat when he’d gotten in and they were pulling back out onto the road.

“Oh, no,” Dan said. All he had with him was a bag with his toothbrush and a change of clothes. Phil had warned him that nobody from Harata would be driving home that night. “Was I supposed to?”

“Eric will have snacks and drinks and stuff there, but I thought we could pre-game on the way down,” James explained, holding up a can and then taking a sip from it to illustrate his point.

“Wait, is that alcohol?” Dan demanded, and James nodded. He glanced at Phil in the driver’s seat, but he looked completely calm about it. “Is that legal?” Dan asked, uncertain.

“Yep!” James answered him with a cheerful grin and took another swig of his drink.

“I was gonna stop by a combini to get some snacks and stuff anyway,” Phil said, and Dan could hear the laughter in his voice. Apparently it had become his role in life to serve as an endless source of amusement for Phil. “You can grab some drinks there if you want.”

So it was that twenty minutes later Dan found himself watching the sunset from the passenger’s seat of Phil’s car while munching on a packet of crisps and taking sips from a One Cup Ozeki. James, in the backseat, had already gone a bit silly and was giggling at almost everything any of them said. It felt so very wrong to be getting drunk in a moving car, but Dan supposed it was all part of the cultural experience.

By the time they pulled up to the house, Dan himself was feeling rather warm. Still, he had enough of his wits about him to be impressed by Eric’s house. It was a sprawling, single-story building, and it looked very old. A hundred years ago, it had probably housed several generations of a single family. It stood on its own plot of land, with nothing but fallow vegetable fields stretching for several hundred meters in every direction. Every light in the house was blazing, and even from out here where Phil was parking at the edge of one of the empty fields, Dan could hear the buzz of laughter and music and conversation from inside.

James, who hadn’t held himself together quite as well as Dan, stumbled out of the car and into the house the moment Phil had parked, but Dan hung back and waited for Phil, who had gone to the boot of the car and was pulling out an armful of futon.

“Do you mind helping me with this?” he called to Dan from around a bulky futon mattress.

Dan hurried over and took hold of the duvet and a couple of pillows.

“Er, was I supposed to bring my own bedding?” he murmured to Phil from the side of his mouth as they made their way up a short dirt path to the front door.

“Don’t worry about it. Seiji and a few other people will have brought extras, and I think Eric has a few futon for guests too,” Phil reassured him.
Then the door to the house was flung open, and Dan was hit with the full blast of noise from inside.

“Phiiiiil!” someone was shouting. The person was silhouetted against the bright light from inside the house, so Dan couldn’t quite make him out, but he got a vague impression of thinning hair, a slouchy jacket, and outstretched arms. Whoever the guy was, he seemed intent on throwing his arms around Phil, and he wasn’t about to let the giant futon Phil held stop him.

“Phil, you made it!” he cried, his accent aggressively American, and he clutched Phil and the futon all together.

“This is Dan,” Phil managed to get out, when the squeezing had let up a little.

The guy let go of Phil, backed away, and then moved in on Dan. To Dan’s relief, he only held out his hand and then gave Dan’s a hearty shake.

“Nice to meet you! I’m Eric. Are you drunk yet?” he asked, squinting up at Dan. “You aren’t!” He looked over at Phil. “Neither of you are. You need to come inside immediately and have a drink.” And there was really nothing to respond to that because they were already being propelled inside by one of Eric’s arms around each of their shoulders.

The entryway of the house alone had to be almost as large as Dan’s entire room, and when they’d stepped out of their shoes and up into the house proper, he saw that there were several more huge rooms opening off the wide hallway.

“This way to drinks!” Eric was saying, his arms pushing them toward a sliding door that opened off to their right.

“Gotta drop the futon off first,” Phil corrected him, ducking around Eric’s arm, and motioning toward a room on the left with his chin. “This way, Dan.”

Dan was only too glad to escape Eric’s clutches, as he had a strong foreboding that if left in his host’s tender care he would end up passed out in some corner well before midnight.

“Ah, right. That way, that way,” Eric was agreeing with Phil, and trailing after them as they stepped into a tatami-covered room. They passed through that room and into yet another one, this one only slightly smaller and also tatami-lined. Here there was already a pile of bedding and people’s overnight bags and jackets. They dumped their stuff on the pile, and then Eric had hold of them again and was leading them back out to the other room. Dan caught Phil’s eye over Eric’s head, and Phil shrugged and smiled. Apparently they were going to just accept their fate.

The other room seemed to be where all the noise was coming from. It was the largest room yet, with a low table out in the center, and window seats on the far side, and an alcove off to the right where a group of people were producing the music Dan had heard before. There was a man playing an acoustic guitar, accompanied by a woman with a set of bongos and another guy playing, of all things, a didgeridoo.

People were crammed in everywhere, and through a door off to his left Dan could see more people stood about in what appeared to be a kitchen.

“Da-an!” someone cried, and then Madhavi was rushing over and dragging him off by the arm. “You have to meet everyone!”

And then he was being introduced to yet another flurry of new people, and at some point someone pressed a new drink into his hand — something lemon-flavored and kind of awful, but he drank it anyway — and Madhavi was leaning over and muttering things like, “This is Stephen. I can only
understand about a third of what he says,” or “This is Yukari ohmygod she’s so hot.” It was clear the party had been underway for quite a while already, as everyone he met smiled at him in a blurry sort of way, or giggled when he shook their hand, or asked him rather rude questions.

After a while — twenty minutes? an hour? — he found himself squeezed in at the table next to Seiji, who had brought a massive bottle of makgeolli, which he was explaining to Dan was kind of like a Korean version of unfiltered sake.

“Here, have some,” Seiji said and produced a styrofoam cup from somewhere and poured out a generous helping of the sweet, cloudy drink for Dan.

After the makgeolli, things got even hazier. At one point he remembered someone — was it that Stephen guy? — started daring Seiji to kiss Dan, who was just intoxicated enough for it to seem like a hilarious idea. He was pretty sure someone captured the moment on their cell phone, but it was just a harmless peck on the lips after all, and immediately afterward Seiji went on to kiss some girl sitting on his other side, and everyone was cheering him on.

“Dan, why don’t you kiss Phil next?” Stephen was saying in his slight Hampshire burr, and Dan turned to see that without him realizing it, Phil had come to sit down beside him. He expected Phil to object — he was practically engaged after all — but he was grinning at Dan in a vague sort of way that made Dan realize that he was completely game.

“No way,” Dan said, forcing out a laugh along with the words. “Don’t you realize I have to sit next to this fucker every day at work?”

“Aww, come on,” Seiji was saying beside him. “How do you think Phil feels knowing that you’ll kiss my ugly face but not him?”

_Honestly_, Dan thought to himself. Drunk twenty-somethings were as bad as twelve-year-olds. Worse, even, because they were less inhibited.

“I think I’m gonna grab a snack. Does anyone want anything?” he said quickly, pushing himself away from the table and standing, not daring to make eye contact with Phil. A loud chorus of disapproval rose up behind him as he made his escape to the kitchen, where he stumbled through the door to find Eric stood in the opposite doorway, feeling up not one, but two girls simultaneously.

He grabbed a packet of something from the side at random and slipped back into the other room, hoping that the group at the table had moved on to some other game by now. Off in one corner of the room, he caught sight of Jake making out with some girl who was definitely not Madhavi, which maybe wasn’t so bad considering that over in the window seats Madhavi was making out with a Japanese girl who was most certainly not Jake.

_Dear god_, he thought, _am I at a party or an orgy?_

He decided this would be a good moment to retreat to the toilet, so he slid out into the front hallway again, and then wandered through the other rooms, which were blessedly empty at this point, until he eventually found the small room with the toilet in it. He reckoned it must be the only small room in the entire house.

When he came out, he heard giggling and glanced down the hallway to see James and a girl slipping into one of the empty bedrooms. Yep. Definitely an orgy.

“There you are!” Someone said behind him, and he turned to see Phil walking up the hallway toward him from the opposite direction. “Where’d you run off to?”
He jerked a thumb toward the door behind him, hoping the gesture made him look nonchalant.

“Bathroom,” he said and started to push past Phil.

“Hey, are you all right?” Phil’s voice was soft and blurred by the effects of alcohol. When Dan looked up at him, his eyes were hazy like a hot summer sky. “You seem a little…tense.”

Dan almost laughed in his face.

“It’s a little noisy in there,” was all he said. “I think I’m going to step outside for a breath of air.”

“I’ll come with you,” Phil said at once, and proceeded to follow Dan over to the front door, wrestle his shoes on, and trail after him as he stepped out into the refreshing chill of the night air. There wasn’t really any way for Dan to explain that it was Phil himself who was making him so tense, so he just let him come along.

It was so quiet out there.

Eric’s house wasn’t just in the middle of a bunch of fields; it was practically in the middle of nowhere. There were one or two houses over on the other side of the street, but the nearest town was just a glow on the horizon, many kilometers away. When Dan tilted back his head, he was awed by just how many stars glittered in the velvety dark sky above.

It was so quiet out here that beside him he could hear every breath as it entered and exited Phil’s lungs.

“Why don’t you want to stay in Japan?” he asked, because it was dark and they were alone, and Phil’s eyes looked so much clearer out here in the reflected starlight.

Phil stayed silent for a long time, breathing in and out, and in and out, his eyes fixed on the sky while Dan’s eyes stayed fixed on him.

“It’s all just temporary here, isn’t it?” he said at last, his voice low, but loud in the utter stillness around them. “All of them in there,” he gestured back toward the house with one hand, “they’re all just here for a year or two or three, and then they go back home, to wherever they came from, and someone new comes to fill their place. And the longer you stay here, the more you start to feel left behind. The more you start to feel like it ought to be you going back to where you came from, so someone else can come and fill your place.”

Phil’s voice wasn’t sad. Not really. Dan tried to come up with the right word to describe the mood settling around them. Reflective, maybe. Contemplative? Or maybe wistful.

“Aren’t you planning to leave too?” Phil went on, turning his eyes from the sky at last, to focus them on Dan. “When your contract is up, you’re going to go back and apply for more positions at more law firms, aren’t you?”

It didn’t sound like an accusation, but it was. Dan couldn’t deny that had always been his plan, and that it still was. What did he have to stay for, after all? Certainly not Phil.

“Gu-uys,” Madhavi called from the doorway behind them. “What are you doing out here? Come back inside. We’re going to play A and B.”

“Fine, fine. We’re coming.” Phil called back to her, and then turned toward the door, not waiting to hear Dan’s reply. There was nothing for it but for Dan to follow him back inside and submit to what turned out to be an extremely inappropriate round of the drinking game. Between them, Seiji and
Dan managed to finish off the entire bottle of makgeolli, a decision Dan was vaguely aware he would probably regret in the morning.

He had no idea what time they all finally went to bed. It was still dark outside. He was aware enough to notice that. As everyone started to lay out their respective futons in the tatami rooms, the dim thought entered his brain that he ought to have asked to borrow one from someone back when everyone was still reasonably sober. Now it seemed that, even back in the lounge, every available futon, bed, couch, or window seat had already been claimed, and he was left stood awkwardly in a corner, wondering if he should just lie down on the tatami and hope to pass out.

“Oh, are there not enough futons for everyone?” Seiji was the one who at last noticed Dan alone in the corner. “Sorry, Dan. I should’ve brought more, I guess.”

“Did you not get a futon?” Madhavi was just about to climb into her own over on the other side of the room. “I’d say you could join me,” she said with a wink, “but Jake already takes up enough space for two people.”

“You can share mine,” said Phil from where he had just finished laying out his own futon by one wall. “There’s plenty of room, if you don’t mind me spooning you all night.” He was laughing again, whatever mood he’d been in earlier outside having completely vanished.

Mind? No, Dan didn’t mind. He didn’t mind at all. He cast a quick, panicked glance around the room, hoping someone else — anyone else — would offer, but they were all already bunked down and drifting off, their sleep hastened by all the alcohol.

“Okay, thanks,” Dan mumbled. He could only look on in a sort of dazed horror as Phil slid beneath his duvet and then lifted up the edge of it and turned his face up to Dan with a welcoming smile.

Dan had no choice (Right? he told himself This is happening because I have no choice. Of course. No choice) but to step onto the squishy futon mattress and wriggle under the duvet, which Phil then let fall over them both. If it had only been a few degrees warmer, Dan could have pleaded fear of heat stroke, and gotten out of it that way. Instead, the cooler temperature made the heat from Phil’s body feel all the more inviting, and Dan wasn’t entirely aware (No, no. Definitely too drunk to be aware of what I’m doing) of snuggling up against Phil, or of the feeling of Phil’s arms folded against his back or of Phil’s warm breath tickling the back of his neck. And he certainly wasn’t the least bit aware of the way that Phil’s hips curved around his own, or the way his knees grazed the backs of Dan’s knees, and as Dan drifted off to sleep that night, his last thoughts were most certainly not about the way that the rise and fall of Phil’s breathing caused his stomach to press lightly against Dan’s back in an ever-slowing rhythm.

Chapter End Notes

Originally published on tumblr
When Dan woke in the morning, he was warm. The air in the unheated room around him was cool, but his body was wrapped in a perfect cocoon of lovely warmth. It was such a pleasant feeling that he couldn’t help but snuggle deeper beneath the duvet, and that’s when he was suddenly reminded that he was not alone in the futon.

There was a hand resting on his hip. He hadn’t felt it there when he first woke, because the hand lay so still, but his movement had jostled it, and now he felt it, just the lightest pressure of Phil’s hand resting on his hipbone. He heard a sound — a small sigh from Phil. Was he awake? Was he aware he was touching Dan?

Then Phil’s hand disappeared, and Phil sat up and started stretching and yawning and making loud morning noises. Dan lacked the self-control not to turn and peek at him. Phil looked even sexier than he’d expected, with his hair ruffled and his eyes bleary and…glasses? Dan blinked in surprise. He’d never known that Phil wore glasses.

“Good morning,” Phil murmured through his final yawn. He must’ve noticed Dan looking at him. “Looks like we might be the first ones awake.” He was keeping his voice low because, as Dan saw with a quick glance around, everyone else in the room still lay snuggled down in their own futon, fast asleep.

“I really need to go for a wee, but it’s so nice and warm under the covers,” Phil said, as he pulled the duvet back up to his chin.

“I really need water and paracetamol,” Dan muttered, lying completely still, afraid to even breathe too deeply, lest he somehow give away exactly how giddy he was feeling at the moment.

“Aw, poor Dan.” Phil gave him a sympathetic smile. Then his eyebrows lowered in an expression of determination and he sat up. “Right, I’ll go see what Eric’s got in his medicine cabinet.”

Before Dan could even protest that he was a grown man who could bloody well get his own paracetamol, Phil had shoved the duvet over and hopped to his feet and was traipsing off to the bathroom to dig through someone else’s private belongings on Dan’s behalf. If Dan’s head hadn’t been throbbing so much, he probably would have mustered the energy to go after Phil, but instead he lay an arm across his eyes to block out the increasingly painful sunlight and simply waited.
It was several minutes before Phil returned, glass of water in one hand and a pair of capsules in the other. He sat cross-legged on the futon beside Dan and offered up his findings. With a long groan, Dan sat up at last and took the water and the pills and did his best to swallow them down without gagging. He’d never been very good at swallowing tablets.

“Thanks,” he managed, when he’d got them both safely down.

“Any ideas what you’d like for breakfast?” Phil looked bright and fresh as though he’d turned in early and gotten a full night’s sleep rather than staying up as late and drinking just as much as Dan.

“A giant plate of something greasy and unhealthy,” Dan replied. His stomach didn’t feel particularly receptive to food at the moment, but he knew that it would feel better once it had something in it.

“MacDonald’s?” Phil suggested, wrapping his arms around his knees and pulling them up to his chest. Like Dan, he was still dressed in his clothes from last night, but even in his jumper he still looked cold.

Dan gave a snort of laughter that made his head ache worse.

“Really? MacDonald’s?” It seemed a little ludicrous to be going to the fast food restaurant when they were in the land of sushi, ramen, and green tea.

“Are you trying to argue that MacDonald’s breakfast menu isn’t god’s gift to the severely hung-over?”

“Uuuugggghhh,” groaned Seiji from the next futon over, “Hash browns.”

“MacDonald’s it is then.” Phil chuckled.

It took awhile to get everyone up and awake enough to start packing up their bedding and things. They found James cuddled up between two strangers on the floor of the lounge, and it took some extra effort to get him conscious for long enough to stumble back out to Phil’s car and curl up in the back seat. Dan wasn’t even sure he wanted to know about the night that James had had.

It ended up being a gorgeous Sunday, which Dan was able to appreciate a little more once he had some food to settle his stomach and the painkiller had set in. James was also improved by their MacDonald’s breakfast and talked almost non-stop the entire way back to Harata. Apparently he’d pulled some ALT from New Zealand, yet had somehow woken up between two guys both named Joe. He seemed enthusiastic about the experience, but Dan wished he would just be quiet and let Dan think. He couldn’t stop his thoughts returning again and again to the feel of Phil’s hand on his hip that morning. It had probably meant nothing. It served no purpose to dwell on it. He should just let it go…is what he told himself for the entire hour and a half drive back to his flat.

Phil was acting as though nothing unusual at all had happened, and Dan supposed he should take his cue from that. After all, nothing really had happened, outside of Dan’s vivid imagination, at least.

At school on Monday, everything was just as it had always been, and that’s what finally settled Dan’s mind on the matter. They each only had one class for the entire day, so they ended up spending several hours in the staff room, talking about nothing and trying not disturb the teachers who were actually doing work.

They’d invented several little staff room games to pass the time on days like these. For example, there was one Phil had named “The Amazing Phone Race” that had been inspired by the fact that the staff room phone sat on the empty desk opposite Dan’s. Though they were the two who had the easiest access to it out of all the teachers, no one expected the foreigners to answer, so every time the
The phone rang, the other nearby teachers would jump up and race each other to be the first to answer it. The first time he’d witnessed this, Dan had almost had to hide under his desk, he was laughing so hard, but Phil had explained it was just part of Japanese work culture. You were supposed to appear overeager and overcommitted — being a hard worker was as much a matter of appearances as of productivity.

Dan was so amused by the concept that he’d started keeping a running tally of which teachers won the phone race most often, and Phil had joined in, helping him award extra points for style, distance traveled, and politeness of phone voice. So far the youngest of the P.E. teachers was in the lead. Dan figured it was because she had the added advantages of being sat fairly close by and being more physically fit than most. Phil said it was just because she was a first-year teacher — the lower down on the totem pole you were, the more extra work you were expected to take on.

That afternoon, Dan worked with Kurumi on her speech, while Phil and the other English teachers each worked with one of the other students. The first year girl had vastly improved in both her expression and projection, and he was impressed by just how good she had gotten.

“Have you been practicing on your own?” he asked her as they were finishing up.

“A little bit. My juku English teacher has helped me a lot too,” she answered as she slid her written copy of her speech into a file folder and bent to shove the folder into her book bag. It was still a little surprising to him every time she switched into speaking English in her perfect, California accent.

“What’s juku?” Dan thought the word sounded familiar, but he had no idea what it meant.

“Um,” she bit her lip, and her forehead wrinkled. “It’s like…a school that I go to after school? I don’t go every day, but I go there sometimes, and I have an English teacher who helps me practice conversation so I don’t forget everything.”

“That’s useful,” Dan said, refraining from pointing out that he in fact was also her English teacher and could very easily help her practice her conversation skills. He’d learned only too well that the junior high school English classes were not only lightyears below Kurumi’s level, but not really designed to teach useful skills like conversation anyway. It was one of the reasons why he and Phil ended up abandoned in the staff room so often. English class time was focused on teaching the students grammar and vocabulary, and you didn’t really need a native speaker to practice those.

When he got back to his desk, he pulled out his iPhone and opened up the imiwa? dictionary app he’d downloaded and looked up the word “juku.”

“Oh, it’s cram school!” he muttered.

“What’s that?” Phil had just gotten back too, from helping Nishida practice his speech, and was checking his own phone for messages.

“Nothing. I just learned a new word,” Dan said, stowing his phone in his trouser pocket and starting to pack up his things.

“Hey, do you have any plans this evening?” Phil said, looking up. Before Dan could really answer, he added, “Akari was saying she’d really like to see you again, so she’s offered to cook us Thai green curry, if you want to come over.”

Akari. Right.

“Sure, that sounds great,” Dan said, wondering if he was agreeing out of guilt or simply because he enjoyed torture.
Akari’s green curry, though, was far from torturous. Dan hadn’t had any particular expectations about Akari’s cooking, but he certainly hadn’t been expecting her to be a gourmet chef. When he complimented her cooking, she blushed and said,

“I want to go to school for… Firu, eiyoushi ha eigo de nanto iu nano?”

“Nutritionist,” Phil translated for her.

“Nu-tri-tion-ist,” she repeated slowly before turning back to Dan. “I want to go to school for a nutritionist.”

“To become a nutritionist,” Phil corrected, and she nodded.

“I want to go to school to become a nutritionist,” she told Dan, and then gave him a shy smile. “I’m sorry for my bad English. I have to practice it.”

“Your English is just fine,” Dan assured her. “Certainly a lot better than my Japanese.”

“No, no. Dan’s Japanese is so good. I’m so surprised!” Akari rushed to say, her eyes opening wide. The tension in her tone sounded almost as though she were upset, but Dan had started to learn that it just meant she was being earnest. He had tried out a few of his newly-learned Japanese phrases on her earlier, as he and Phil sat and chatted with her and she stood at the stove and worked her magic. He thought she seemed far more impressed than was warranted by his limping attempts at conversation, but he accepted the compliment anyway.

After dinner, Akari surprised him again by owning him and Phil both in Super Smash Brothers Brawl. At one point, when Phil paused the game to go use the toilet, Akari leaned over to him and thanked him for coming over.

“Thanks for cooking for us,” he answered, feeling a pang at the realization that she was treating Phil’s home as her own, while he was just a guest here.

“Don’t tell Phil,” she said with a grin, “but I can understand you better than him.”

He raised an eyebrow at her.

“What do you mean?”

“Sometimes I can’t understand his English,” she murmured, glancing toward the doorway. “His accent is very difficult for me. I think it’s easy to practice English with you.”

Dan knew, of course, that Phil’s northern accent sounded different to his southern one, but he’d never considered the fact that that might make him easier for some people to understand.

“We can practice English any time you like,” he offered, regretting the words almost as soon as he said them. Why would he want to spend more time with Phil’s girlfriend? Just how much did he hate himself?

Phil came back then, and got right back to the business of trying to knock Akari’s Zero Suit Samus off the screen. Watching the competitive gleam in Phil’s eye, and then seeing them both dissolve into laughter when Akari won the level yet again, made Dan’s heart twinge painfully. Akari seemed to really make Phil happy. It didn’t matter how many hours he and Phil spent together every day at work, or what he thought Phil’s hand on his hip the other night might have meant, sitting here looking at the two of them together made it absolutely clear to Dan that Phil didn’t have any of those types of feelings for him. How could he when he was so clearly in love with his girlfriend? Dan
made a mental note not to accept invitations to be Phil and Akari’s third wheel again in future.

That Wednesday was his second day teaching at their other primary school, Shiratsuka Shogakkou, and it was his first time ever teaching the really little kids. This school was much smaller than Nishisho, with only three or four classes in each year, and he was assigned to teach the second years that day. The teacher he was working with here, Ayaka-sensei, had turned out to be not only less-frightening than Kyoko-sensei, but actually really fun and easy to get along with.

When they walked into the first class full of seven and eight-year-olds that morning, he got the open-mouthed stares and cries of sheer awe that he had come to expect from Japanese children. He supposed that, to kids who had barely been alive long enough to grasp the concept of other countries and ethnicities, he must seem like some sort of gigantic, mythical beast. After the usual, minimally-degrading round of Dansinglish, Ayaka-sensei had him give his self-introduction and then taught the students how to introduce themselves in English (“Hello! My name is___. Nice to meet you!”). Then each of the kids got to come up to the front of the class, recite the introduction to Dan, and shake his hand as he replied with “Nice to meet you too.”

Several of them actually cheered and cried, “Yatta!” afterward, and he thought his heart might melt at how proud of themselves they looked. At the end of class, each of them brought their folder to the front of the class and asked for a sticker, most of them with shy giggles and sideways glances, and he handed them each one of the shiny bits of foil with a “Here you go!” Half of them forgot to say “Thank you” in return and were scolded by Ayaka-sensei or their classroom teacher, but Dan didn’t care. The fact that, within the space of one forty-minute class period, they had progressed from shock and fear to smiles and handshakes was reward enough for him.

Lunch with the second years was an even more painfully slow process than lunch with the fourth years had been. That didn’t bother him either, though. The group of students he’d been sat with prattled at him like he was an old friend, apparently unaware that he barely understood them. When he did try a few fumbling Japanese phrases on them, they acted like it was the most natural thing in the world that he would speak Japanese. He realized after a while that their own level of conversation was barely higher than his own. He wondered if he ought to feel guilty for not making the students speak English with him, but as he listened to their happy chatter, he didn’t feel guilty in the least.

They asked him to come play with them during hiruyasumi, and the game ended up being freeze tag. It was shameful, really, how quickly he was winded. After the first ten minutes, the kids were all running circles around him, and he had to beg a break. He wasn’t allowed to sit out for long, though. Within a minute of him sitting down on a bench at the side of the school yard, he felt a pair of small hands take hold of each of his own and looked down to see two of the second year girls trying to drag him away with them.

“What are you doing?” he asked, trying to give them a stern teacher look and failing.

“Dan-sensei! Dan-sensei! Kite mite!!” one of the girls cried, her eyes shining up at him.

“Mite kudasai!” the other girl chimed in, her own eyes pleading with him.

“All right, all right. I’ll come see,” he muttered with an air of having been worn down — not that he’d ever had any intention of saying no.

He allowed himself to be pulled across the school yard to a pair of parallel bars, where the two girls proceeded to demonstrate just how good they were at hanging upside down. After he’d congratulated them on their skill, they dragged him over to a small shed, where they each grabbed a unicycle from the school’s collection. They then showed off their unicycle-riding skills — one of
them was significantly better than the other, but he neglected to mention it — looking back over their shoulders as they cycled up and down the edge of the yard to make sure that he was still watching.

“Yes, very good job! You’re both very talented,” he told them when they had cycled back over to him, and half-fallen off their respective unicycles. He gave them a big, double thumbs up.

“Yay!!” they both screamed, hugging each other and jumping up and down. That was when Dan started to seriously wonder whether it would be feasible to smuggle a small Japanese child home with him in his suitcase when he eventually went back to England.

He’d finished all of his classes in the morning, so the afternoon was free. He could have spent it just hanging out in the staff room with Ayaka-sensei, but the teacher from 2-2 had invited him to join in the students’ Japanese lesson that afternoon, as they were practicing calligraphy.

Perhaps he should have been more embarrassed at being bested at something by a bunch of seven and eight-year-olds, but they were just so cute as they demonstrated the right way for him to hold his brush, and scolded him when he set the tip to the paper at the wrong angle, or praised him when he managed to draw a line that wasn’t too wonky, that it just didn’t matter how silly he probably looked.

“Dan-sensei jouzu!” several of the kids cried when he at last held up his finished work. They’d been writing the kanji 友人, which the boy next to him had explained was meant to be read “Yuujin.” Though Dan had never heard the word before, he assumed from the combination of the characters that it must mean “friend.” He was pretty proud of how it looked until he glanced over and saw what the eight-year-old girl across from him had managed to create. How did her lines all look so perfect? He sighed and looked back at his own piece of rice paper, seeing now that the characters weren’t quite in proportion.

“Jouzu desu ne,” came a gentle voice from over his shoulder. He looked up to see the classroom teacher, Kumiko-sensei, standing above him, holding a brush with red ink on the tip. “Dan-sensei ha hajimete shoudou yatteimasu ka?”

“Hai. Hajimete desu,” Dan replied. He would hope that he would have been able to do better than this if he’d had prior experience with calligraphy.

“Sugoi desu ne! Yoku dekimashita yo ne,” Kumiko-sensei said. Then she leaned over his shoulder and used her brush to draw a swirly red flower shape on his page.

“Eeeeh!” the students around him cried, staring at the flower with open mouths. “Hana maru da! Dan-sensei ha hana maru moratta wa!”

He wasn’t sure what the red flower marking meant, but judging by the kids’ reaction he guessed it was a good thing. He looked on as Kumiko-sensei went around the table, correcting students’ work or drawing a big, red circle if she thought they’d done well. The girl across from him also got the flower circle, and he couldn’t help grinning at the way her face lit up. It was so adorable watching the way Kumiko-sensei interacted with the students, and Dan couldn’t stop imagining what it would be like to watch Phil teaching a primary school class. It really was a shame that they were never scheduled to work at primary school on the same day.

Dan wasn’t too surprised when he checked his phone at the end of the school day and saw a message from Phil waiting there.

Phil

*Can I cash in that rain check for some sushi this evening?*
Of course the answer was yes. It had gotten to the point where Dan almost preferred work days to
weekends, because his days didn’t feel quite complete if he didn’t get to talk to Phil at least once, and
that was never guaranteed on the weekends. On days like this, where they worked at different
schools, the day somehow felt even more wrong, even empty, if they didn’t meet up afterward.
Messages from Phil like this one hinted that maybe, just maybe, Phil had started to feel the same
way. And, really, that was enough for Dan.

That Friday, he finally got his first paycheck. When he picked up his bank book from the slot at the
cashpoint and saw the newly-printed line indicating the updated balance of his account, he actually
did a small, celebratory dance right then and there in the front lobby of the bank. Who cared how
many elderly Japanese ladies were stood staring at him on the pavement outside? He was no longer
(quite as) poor! He could afford things like meat and beer and — dared he even dream it? —
weekend trips!

The first thing he did was text Phil to tell him the good news. His friend responded with several rows
of the dancing lady emoji and a random boar thrown in at the end for good measure. The next thing
Dan did was to post on all of his social media in order to give his friends and family the chance to
celebrate along with him.

As he cycled home from the bank, he tried to decide just what he would spend his money on first.
New music maybe? Was there a Steam sale on? Maybe he should offer to take Phil out for dinner to
repay his earlier generosity, maybe somewhere nice with white tablecloths and candles and a wine
menu (did Harata even have anywhere like that?), or better yet, he could take him on a trip, up the
mountain maybe? They could stay at a ryokan for the weekend, maybe one with an onsen like
Naritaya, and they could sit in the onsen together under the autumn moon — He had to screech to a
halt to avoid riding his bike directly into the side of a building that had suddenly appeared in front of
him. Ahem. Perhaps it was best not to let his imagination run wild when he was meant to be
operating a vehicle.

After the brief cold snap on the weekend of the party, the temperature had warmed back up pretty
quickly, and the rest of the month the weather continued relatively warm and mild. When October 1
rolled around, the students at Nishichu were required to switch to their winter uniforms, and Dan felt
a little sorry for them all, dressed in the thick, woolen skirts or trousers in the 25 degree heat.

The first weekend in October ended up being a pretty crappy one, as all of Dan’s friends had left on
trip to Nagano that they’d planned months previously. He’d been invited along, of course, but that
had been back when he had no money and the trip had sounded like an extravagant luxury. Now that
he realized he could very easily afford it, it was too late. The accommodations had been booked, and
there was no extra space. Even James, the other newbie, had had the foresight to sign up back in
August. So now it was just Dan and his laptop alone together all weekend.

He managed to pass Saturday all right, with a leisurely bike ride in the morning and a sudden bout of
inspiration for the blog-post-or-whatever-it-was thing that he was writing in the afternoon.
Eventually, though, the inspiration ran dry, and after a couple of hours of mindless browsing even
tumblr had started to bore him. That’s when the thought floated to the surface of his mind that there
was a YouTube channel full of nearly a hundred videos of Phil that he had never seen before. Surely
it couldn’t hurt to watch just one…a recent one… That wouldn’t be quite so invasive as digging up
one of the ones from Phil’s past, right?

There were a couple of new ones up that hadn’t been there several weeks ago. Dan was about to
click on one of those when, on a whim, he decided to watch the one about the festival again. Maybe
it was just because he had that tiny cameo in it, but he felt a particular fondness for that video. He
watched it through again, and was yet again surprised at just how fun an experience it was. He
scrolled down to check the view count and wasn’t too shocked to see that it had added another fifty-thousand or so views since he’d seen it before. He was about to scroll up again when something in the comments caught his eye: his name.

“That Dan guy is hot. Will he be in any future videos?” the comment read. He scrolled down a little more, and his eyes grew wide. The comment had over 150 likes, and a string of replies seconding the original commenter’s question. He scrolled down the page a little more and saw several similar comments: “Who is Dan? He’s smokin’!” “Are you going to make more videos with Dan and James in them?” “Please make another video with the brown-haired guy!!!”

As he scrolled through the comments looking for more that mentioned him, he tried to imagine what it would be like, making videos with Phil. Judging by what they got up to in the staff room, probably pretty fun. Back when he was, say, seventeen or eighteen he had fantasized all the time about making YouTube videos of his own, of becoming a popular YouTuber with a million or more subscribers. But he’d put that dream in its proper place ages ago, on the discard pile along with his childhood dream of becoming a racecar driver and his adolescent one of starring in a West End production.

Now he attempted to dredge up those ancient feelings again, tried to imagine himself on the screen, featured in a video with thousands of views and comments. It was strange how he could remember the longing he’d felt for that scenario back when he was a teenager, yet he seemed unable to feel it again now all these years later. Perhaps, he mused, when he’d stopped nourishing that dream, the part of him that had dreamed it had shriveled up and died.

His phone buzzed then, and he looked down to see that he had a message from Max.

**Max**

*Hey, you’re like the only person still in town this weekend. Wanna hang out?*

So half an hour later, he found himself seated in a small cafe on the north side of town, enjoying a Vienna coffee and the laid-back Bossa Nova beat of the background music.

“Why didn’t you go to Nagano with everyone else?” he asked Max, after setting down his coffee and wiping a smudge of whipped cream from beside his mouth. The table between them was low, and made of dark wood, and the chairs they sat on were more like small couches, plush and comfortable.

“Oh,” Max shrugged and took a sip of his mango lassi, “soccer isn’t really my thing.”

“Right. Soccer.” Dan repeated the word.

“Sorry,” Max laughed a little. “Everyone here speaks American English, so it’s just easier to call it soccer like everyone else. Why didn’t you go?”

“I didn’t have the money,” Dan shrugged. He remembered, now, Phil mentioning that the reason they were going to Nagano was for some kind of ALT football tournament. Football wasn’t really his thing either, so maybe he should be happy he hadn’t gone along.

“Oh, right,” Max nodded sagely. “I’d forgotten that you company types didn’t get paid for a long time to start out with.”

Dan let the conversation wander here and there a bit before he finally felt it was safe to ask what he was really curious about.
“So, how did you end up here anyway, if you don’t mind my asking? I mean, I would have thought that with a degree from Oxford, the law firms would have been banging on your door. Did you just completely bomb all of your interviews, or…?”

Max set his drink down and looked out the diamond-paned window beside them. It was an overcast day today, though still much warmer than Dan thought October should be.

“I didn’t do any interviews,” he said when he looked back at Dan at last. He hitched his shoulders up and down in an uncomfortable shrug. “I didn’t really like the idea of going straight from being a university student to being chained to a desk in some law office. I dunno,” he gave Dan a half-hearted smile. “If I’d gone to my interviews feeling like that, I probably would have completely bombed them.”

Now it was Dan’s turn to feel uncomfortable. He reached for his coffee glass and quickly brought it to his lips, trying to give himself time to think. He thought of his collection of rejection letters, a score or more of them filed away in his trash bin back home — *We regret to inform you that at this time we do not anticipate taking you on at our firm.*

“What about you?” Max was asking from across the table. “What brings you to Japan?”

“The same thing, I guess,” he answered when he’d set his glass down again. “I guess I wasn’t really ready to sacrifice my youth on the altar of office labor.”

Max let out a chuckle and then raised his glass.

“I’ll drink to that,” he said, and ridiculous as it seemed to drink a toast with coffee and mango lassi, Dan joined in.

When Dan arrived at work on Monday morning, Phil was already there, sat at his desk, frowning down into his coffee mug. He didn’t look up when Dan slid into his own chair and stowed his bag beneath his desk. Dan glanced over and was startled to see that Phil’s mug didn’t even have anything in it.

“Hey, are you all right?” he murmured beneath the morning buzz of the teachers getting ready for the day.

“Huh?” Phil gave a little jump and looked up at last. “Oh, yeah, I’m fine.” Dan saw that his eyes were red-rimmed, and his skin was even paler than normal, and splotchy. He offered Dan a weak smile. “Didn’t get nearly enough sleep this weekend.”

“I’ll get you some coffee,” Dan said, scooping up both their mugs before Phil even had a chance to respond.

Phil perked up a little after the caffeine had a chance to work itself into his system, and he willingly answered all of Dan’s questions. Yes, he’d enjoyed himself in Nagano. No, their prefecture’s team hadn’t won. In fact, their women’s team had placed dead last. Yes, everyone else seemed to have enjoyed themselves too. It didn’t take long for Dan to notice that Phil wasn’t volunteering much information on his own, so he decided to take the hint and drop the topic, no matter how much he was dying to know what had happened to make Phil so reticent.

At some point during the morning meeting, Phil’s usual carefree grin returned, and when the meeting was over he seemed back to normal. He explained to Dan that the Nishichu teachers had just engaged in a horrified discussion of the fact that students had been discovered using the school’s toilet tissue for things other than intended use. Apparently, some students had been caught actually
using it to blow their noses. He had Dan in stitches at his impression of one of the particularly strict third-year teacher’s disgusted tone of voice as she described the severity of this breach of school etiquette.

Dan spent more time at school that week than ever before. The English speech contest was scheduled to take place that Friday, so this week’s practices ended up going twice as long as normal. Somehow, though, Dan didn’t mind all of the extra hours of work. And besides, Mr. Watanabe assured them he and the other English teachers would take them out for a meal as thanks once the contest was over.

The contest venue was actually in the town to the west of Harata, and, as Phil explained to Dan on Thursday afternoon, it made more sense for some of the Harata ALTs to carpool than to each take their own cars.

“Seiji is going to drive us, if you don’t mind,” Phil said as they stood at their desks packing up to go. They’d stayed so late today that it had already been dark out for an hour. “It’s easier for him to pick us both up at once, so I was wondering if you wanted to stay at mine tonight.”

Dan almost dropped the file folder he had been sliding into his messenger bag.

“Er, yeah, that would be fine,” he said, shoving the slippery folder down between two books. “I’ll just need to stop by my place and grab a few things.”

“Of course,” Phil said, slinging his own bag over his shoulder. “I was thinking, if you want, you can just leave your bike here tonight. I can drop you back at Nishichu after the contest tomorrow so you can get it.”


Phil cooked them both a stir-fry for dinner, before challenging Dan to a re-match at MarioKart, claiming that he’d been practicing and there was no way Dan would be able to beat him again.

Dan beat him again, several times. After the fourth or fifth time Dan came in first, Phil looked at him with this certain gleam in his eye, and Dan was absolutely positive for a moment that Phil was about to tackle him. But then Phil just threw his controller down on the sofa in mock-anger and said he was going to bed.

Dan hadn’t dared to ask about sleeping arrangements, but he wasn’t too surprised when he came back from brushing his teeth and saw Phil lugging a futon out of the closet in the tatami room. He supposed it had been too much to hope that they would be forced to share again.

He helped Phil lay out the futon on the tatami and place the duvet and pillows on top, but when Dan was about to climb in, Phil stopped him.

“No, I’ll sleep here. You’re the guest, so you take the bed.”

Dan’s heart rate rose just a smidgeon, and he gave Phil an odd look.

“I’m not going to kick you out of your own bed,” he said after a moment. “I sleep on a futon every night. It’s really no big deal for me.”

Phil just shook his head and smiled a stubborn smile.

“No, no. I insist.”
Dan paused, wondering if it would be okay to just—

“I feel bad, though. There’s plenty of room there, you know. We could just share.” His heart was beating so fast that he could barely keep his breathing even.

“No, I’ll sleep in here,” Phil said and then pointedly pulled back the duvet and stepped into the futon.

There was nothing for it but for Dan to take himself off to the bedroom, where he changed into his pajamas and climbed into the Queen-sized bed all by himself. The sheets were cold, and he shivered as he waited for his body heat to warm them up. When he rolled over onto his side, he realized that the pillow smelled faintly of Phil’s shampoo.

He lay awake in Phil’s bed for a very long time that night, thoughts chasing each other’s tails around and around in his head until they almost made him dizzy. It was close to dawn before he finally managed to drift off to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Originally published on tumblr
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Poor, poor sleepy Dan goes to the English Speech Contest

Chapter Notes

When Dan’s iPhone alarm went off the next morning, he’d barely gotten three hours of sleep. His eyes felt glued shut, and his stomach was queasy. Today was going to be a great day.

Maybe he could just lie there for a minute longer; just one minute (or two…or three) wouldn’t make much difference…

He woke again some time later to the glorious scent of sausages and scrambled eggs and coffee. He let out a whimpering sigh and then pushed himself up off the bed. Phil’s bed was far too comfortable for reason.

He stumbled a little when he stepped into the kitchen, his head still spinning.

“Morning, glory!” Phil called from where he stood over by the stovetop, stirring the sausages around in a skillet. “I was wondering if you were going to put in an appearance this morning.”

“Nnnnggg,” Dan grumbled in reply and continued on down the hall to the toilet. Clearly Phil hadn’t had any trouble getting a full night’s sleep last night. Somehow the thought made Dan feel even more cross.

But when he returned to the kitchen and saw the two plates of food set out neatly with a cup of fresh-brewed coffee next to each, he couldn’t muster enough energy to stay cross at Phil. Instead he sank into one of the chairs, mumbled an Itadakimasu and then began inhaling the breakfast food.

“Sleep all right?” Phil asked, shoveling a forkful of egg into his own mouth.

“No.” When Dan hadn’t slept enough, he had a hard time turning on his filter. “You?”

“Oh, I slept fine.” Phil frowned and took a sip of coffee. “Is something wrong?” he asked then, eyes wide and inquisitive. Dan wanted to sigh. How did Phil manage to be so completely clueless?

“I’m okay. I just…er, have a hard time sleeping in new places.” It wasn’t entirely a lie. He often did have trouble falling asleep when he wasn’t in his own bed. In fact, if he hadn’t been absolutely positive about the true cause of last night’s insomnia, he may have even assumed that’s all it had been.

“Oh. Sorry about that.” Phil was looking a little guilty.

“No.” When Dan hadn’t slept enough, he had a hard time turning on his filter. “You?”

“Not your fault,” Dan mumbled, and took a big bite of toast before he could say anything more.

Somehow Dan managed to be fully dressed, with his hair decent-looking and his teeth brushed by the time Seiji showed up at 8:00. He had that sick-awake feeling that you get when the only thing
keeping you from passing out is a serious dose of caffeine. Seiji didn’t look particularly awake himself, so it ended up being a quiet ride to the contest venue.

Dan had visited the town to the west, Kokki, a few times before. It had a lot of cool cafes and restaurants that Madhavi and Seiji loved to frequent, and one or two of the ALTs who lived here had invited him over for parties and game nights and things. The building they pulled up in front of this morning, though, stood in a completely unfamiliar part of the town.

“What’s this place anyway?” Dan asked as they made their way from the car park up to the front door.

“It’s the Iki-iki Fureai Center,” Seiji answered. “It’s kind of like a community center,” he explained when he saw Dan’s raised eyebrow.

There were already several groups of teachers and students stood around out front, the teachers dressed in suits like Dan and Phil and Seiji were, the students all in their respective school uniforms. It was easy to pick out the Nishichu group from the crowd just by their uniforms.

“See you later,” Seiji muttered as he split off toward his own school’s students and Phil and Dan headed to where Watanabe-sensei stood with the four Nishichu kids. When they walked up, they were greeted with a chorus of *Ohayou gozaimasu-*es and then Watanabe-sensei handed them each a thick packet of papers.

“These are all the students’ speeches, and the schedule for the day,” he explained. “Dan, you will judge the first and third year students, and Phil, you will judge the second year and bilingual students.”

“We’re judging the speeches?” Dan asked Phil out of the side of his mouth when Watanabe-sensei had turned away to give Nishida a few final admonishments.

“Oh, yeah. Did I forget to mention that to you?” Phil gave an apologetic grin. “Not our own students’, of course.”

“Yes, you forgot to mention that.” All of Dan’s cross feelings from earlier in the morning had come rushing back, and the words came out a little sharper than he’d meant them to.

“Sorry,” Phil said, casting him a look from the corner of his eye. “It’s nothing to get too worried about, really. The criteria are all laid out pretty clearly there on your judging sheet.”

“Right,” Dan said, flipping the packet open and pretending to look at the sheet. Why was he so angry about this? Like Phil said, it was really not a big deal. And it’s not like it was Phil’s job to take care of him all the time anyway. He was just irritable because he was tired. That’s all it was.

Inside, they took the stairs up to the second floor, where there was a huge auditorium with several rows of stadium seating. All of the other Harata and Kokki ALTs had already gathered in a group down at the front of the room, so Dan and Phil drifted over to join them.

“All right,” one of the Kokki ALTs — Dan thought his name was Luke — was saying, “anyone want to volunteer to give a speech.”

Everyone in the group was suddenly looking everywhere around the room except at Luke.

“Come on. Two of us have to do it.”

“I’ll do one,” another of the Kokki ALTs raised her hand and stepped forward.
“Thanks, Beth. Anyone else?” Luke looked around the group, and then his eyes settled on Dan. “Newbie? You wanna volunteer?”

“What?” Dan had been in a daze, his brain half asleep. “Oh, me? What kind of speech?”

“Just say a few encouraging words at the beginning,” Phil said beside him. “Tell the students good luck, that sort of thing.”

Dan wondered why literally any of the other twenty people stood there couldn’t have volunteered to do it instead, but he nodded and mumbled some sort of agreement.

“Marvelous,” Luke said. Dan thought he could detect traces of Yorkshire in the way Luke spoke, though like most of the ALTs who had been here for a long time, the edges of his accent had been smoothed away.

By then the other teachers and the students were starting to take their seats, and the opening ceremony was about to start, so the ALTs took their seats all together in the front two rows of the auditorium.

The speech ended up being pretty easy. The other ALT, Beth, went first, speaking slowly and cheerfully and telling the students that she thought they were all winners already for working so hard on their speeches. Dan copied her bright tone and managed to wing a speech about how impressed he was with the students’ positive attitude, or something like that. As deliriously sleepy as he was, he didn’t feel entirely in control of the words that were coming out of his mouth, and he could only be thankful that none of them ended up being four-letter ones.

Then half the ALTs and teachers disappeared along with the second-year students, and Dan and the other remaining ALTs and teachers pulled out their judging sheets and speech packets, and the speeches began. The first years kicked it off, and after just the first few speeches, Dan knew that Nishida didn’t have a chance. Some of the other kids were really good.

As the day wore on, Dan had a more and more difficult time keeping his eyes open. He wished he hadn’t sat in the very front row, where the students would easily notice if he dozed off in the middle of their speech. Imagining how discouraging that would be to one of these nervous twelve-year-olds was the only thing that gave him the strength to fight the waves of drowsiness that threatened to carry him off.

At last the first-year speeches were over, and they moved on to the third-year ones. It was startling how much higher their level of English was, despite being only two years older than the first-years. Still, as he listened to speech after speech, he began to realize that — in practice at least — Airi was better than most of them, and he started to get a little excited. What if one of his students actually won?

At last Airi got up to give her speech. As soon as she mentioned the earthquake and the fact that she was from Fukushima, a silence fell over the room so complete that when someone behind Dan shifted in their seat, the creaking sound made him jump. By the time Airi’s speech was finished, there were sounds of sniffling and crinkling tissue packets throughout the room. Dan wasn’t the least bit embarrassed that he too was teary-eyed, despite having heard the speech a good fifty times already.

He did feel sorry for the girl who got up and gave her speech next, all about how much she loved Disney Land and wished the real world could be more like the Magical Kingdom. There was nothing wrong with her speech, but Airi was a hard act to follow.

Shortly after that, they paused the speeches so that the other group of teachers and students could file
back into the auditorium, having finished earlier than the first and third-year group. Dan perked up just a bit when Phil came and took the empty seat on his other side. When the last of the third years had finished his speech, Dan leaned over and whispered,

“I think Airi might actually win.”

Phil raised his eyebrows and gave him an impressed nod.

“Natsumi and Kurumi did good too, but we’ll just have to wait and see,” he replied.

It was lunchtime then, and they would break for the meal before the afternoon awards ceremony. Dan had a nervous moment wondering if he was supposed to have brought food with him, but Phil explained that bento lunches would be provided, and offered to go get Dan’s for him.

They took their lunches out front, where there was a seating area with landscaped bushes and a few benches. All the ALTs had split up to eat lunch with their respective school groups, so it was just Watanabe-sensei, the students, and Phil out here with Dan in the midday sunshine. That was all right, though. He didn’t really care about eating with any of the other ALTs.

“Dan-sensei, spiichi ha daijoubu deshita ka?” Nishida asked Dan as he took a seat on the bench beside the first-year boy.

“Hontou ni kinchou shiteimashita yo!”

“Yes, you did a very good job,” Dan told him, and it was true. Nishida had remembered all of the advice that Dan and Phil had given him during practice and had delivered the speech as well as he ever had.

“Watashi no ha?” Airi asked from the bench across from them. She looked even more nervous than Nishida, and Dan wanted to tell her just how great he thought her speech had been. However, he didn’t want Nishida to feel bad, so he just told her that she’d done a good job too.

After lunch, there was free time while the speech organizers were still busy tallying up the scores, so the ALTs were charged with keeping the students entertained. Fortunately, Luke, who Dan had come to realize was sort of the head of the Kokki ALTs, had planned some games for them all to play together and had even brought sweets to hand out to the students who won the games.

By the time the English teachers had all filed back into the room and the awards ceremony was starting, the combination of the energetic games and his full stomach from lunch had almost put Dan into a coma. He was glad that Watanabe-sensei wanted them to all sit in a group off to one side of the auditorium. At least that way if he did finally give in to sleep, not too many people would be able to see him.

They started with the announcement of the first-year winners, and Dan wasn’t too surprised that Nishida didn’t place. The first-year boy seemed to take it in stride, but Dan made a mental note to tell him again later how proud he was of his hard work. The second-year girl, Natsumi, ended up placing third, so she got to go up to the front of the auditorium and collect a certificate and a plaque. Last of all, they announced the third year prizes, and once again, Dan wasn’t too surprised when they called out Airi’s name for first place. However, when she heard her name, Airi’s eyes went round, and she turned a shocked expression on her teachers. Watanabe-sensei had to remind her with a little encouraging gesture to go up and accept her prize, which she did, her expression still one of wonder.

It was only after the ceremony that Dan realized there hadn’t been any awards for the bilingual students like Kurumi. When he asked Phil about it, Phil explained that this competition had just been practice for her. Her real contest would be at the prefectural level, next month.
“There aren’t enough bilingual students in this area to make it worth it to choose winners,” he said, as they stood from their seats and began to make their way down the stairs to the front of the room. Just then, Airi came running up to them, pulling a small, middle-aged woman behind her.

“Dan-sensei, Firu-sensei, watashi no haha desu,” she introduced the woman. Dan had noticed that there were a few people seated in the very back row of the auditorium, but he hadn’t realized some of them were the students’ parents.

The woman stepped forward, and that’s when Dan noticed that there were tears running down her cheeks.

“Kono ko wo testudatte kudasatte, makoto ni arigatou gozaimashita,” she murmured, the words wavering as her voice shook with her tears. Then she put her hands up to cover her mouth and bowed deeply to them several times.

Phil bowed back, just as deeply, and Dan followed suit.

“Iie,” Phil said, shaking his head. “Airi-san jishin ha ganbattan dakara, goukaku dekimashita.”

“Arigatou gozaimasu,” Airi’s mother repeated then, bowing several more times and reaching over to bend Airi’s back along with her own. “Taihen o-sewa ni narimashita.”

When Airi and her mother had left, Dan had tears in his eyes yet again. Up until that moment, he had been under the impression that, as much fun as the kids had during the classes they taught, he and Phil weren’t exactly an important part of their students’ education. After all, if they were important, why didn’t the other teachers actually invite them to class more often? But seeing his student’s mother cry like that, and thank them so honestly, and thinking about how difficult the past two years of Airi’s life had been, he understood all at once just how meaningful this small victory must be for her and for her family. Just as Phil had told her mother, Airi had won through her own hard work, but he knew that he and Phil had helped. All those extra hours they’d put in over the past month hadn’t been for nothing.

He looked over and saw that Phil was wiping tears from his own cheeks. Phil looked up, and their eyes met, and then Phil gave him a wavery sort of smile.

“Should’ve brought my tissues with me,” he said, breathing out a laugh.

Dan returned his smile and pulled his own packet of tissues from his pocket, holding them out without a word.

Watanabe-sensei came over to them then and thanked them once again for their hard work. Then he told them that they were free to go home early, as long as they didn’t mention it to the other Nishichu teachers. Dan could have almost sobbed, he was so relieved. He could almost hear his futon calling his name from all the way over in Harata.

They stood around talking to friends for a few moments longer before Dan decided to go track down Seiji and see if he was ready to leave yet. He spotted him talking to Luke over on the other side of the room and began making his way over. As he walked up, he heard Seiji saying,

“Yeah, we have to renew our contracts by the end of November. I’ll probably stay another year. When do the Kokki city ALTs have to renew by?”


“Wait, the Harata city ALTs are renewing their contracts next month?” Dan asked, stopping beside
Seiji and hoping he didn’t seem rude interrupting them.

don’t think Phil is going anywhere any time soon.” If Dan had been any less exhausted, he might’ve
blushed at the gleam in Seiji’s eye.

“Oof, not bloody likely,” Luke agreed, leaning nearer the others in a confiding manner. “Have you
seen his girl?”

Seiji laughed at that, and Dan pretended to. Yeah. Akari was great. Awesome.

“Ready to go?” he said to Seiji.

“Sure. Wanna stop by the Seven Eleven for ice cream on the way back?”

A while later the three of them — Dan, Phil, and Seiji — were on their way back to Harata, Phil in
the back seat happily munching a blue-colored ice lolly and Dan and Seiji up front each enjoying
their “Black Thunder” ice cream bars. Seiji had assured him that, name not withstanding, it was
hands-down the best ice cream available in the country. It was chocolate-y and crunchy, and Dan
had to agree that he certainly hadn’t had any better in his short time in Japan.

“Any ideas for your Halloween costumes yet?” Seiji asked, turning slightly to show that the question
was directed at Phil too.

“I have a few ideas,” Phil said around a mouthful of blue stuff. “Need to make a trip over to Donki,
though.”

“Oh, so you’re going to be all mysterious about it again?” Seiji laughed. “I guess we’ll just have to
be surprised. You, Dan?”

Dan knew they were supposed to wear costumes for Halloween lessons at the primary school this
month, and he’d stopped by a shop that Madhavi had recommended to pick up some vampire fangs,
white make-up and a cape.

“Yeah, I think I’m going as a vampire.”

“What? That’s too boring, though,” Phil said, leaning forward so Dan could hear him properly. “You
can do better than that.”

“I don’t think the primary school kids are going to give a fuck how creative my costume idea is,
Phil,” Dan said before crunching down on the last bit of his ice cream cone.

“No, no, not your costume for school,” Seiji said. “For the Halloween party.”

“What Halloween party?” Dan said.

“You haven’t told him about the Halloween party yet?” Seiji cast Phil an accusing glance over his
shoulder. “Dan. You don’t even know, man. Our Halloween parties are epic.”

“This is the first I’ve heard of it.” Dan gave Phil his own accusing glare.

“Sorry, sorry! It must’ve slipped my mind. So, yeah, we’re planning an epic Halloween party. Seiji
rents out this cafe up in Kokki for the night, and they clear out all the tables to make a dance floor,
and we get a professional DJ and everything. Wanna come?”

“Of course,” Dan said, though partying was the furthest thing from his mind at the moment. Now
that the prospect of home, and more importantly bed, was so close, his body was practically begging him to let it stop being awake.

“Should I just drop you back at your place?” Seiji was asking him. Dan was on the verge of saying yes, when Phil interrupted from the back seat.

“Your bike’s still at Nishichu, though, isn’t it?”

Dan groaned, and the sound felt like it was being dragged from the depths of his soul. Phil was right. A fifteen-minute bike ride still stood between him and the comfort of his futon. He turned toward Phil, a snarky comment about being tricked into this situation on the tip of his tongue, but he saw that Phil was frowning down at his phone. As Dan watched, Phil locked the screen, raised his head and looked Dan straight in the eye.

“You want to just come back to my place instead? I can drive you over to Nishichu to get your bike later.”

No, that wasn’t what Dan wanted at all. That meant an even longer time before he would be reunited with his pillow, except there was something in the way that Phil was looking at him right now, the way his eyes were locked onto Dan’s, almost as though there were some secret message lurking behind them that he was trying to beam directly into Dan’s brain.

“All right,” Dan said, though he could already feel a tension headache settling in behind his eyes.

When Seiji dropped them off in the car park of Phil’s building and drove away, Dan expected some sort of explanation would be forthcoming. Instead, Phil simply turned and led the way into the lobby, and they rode the lift up to the fourth floor in silence. They made it all the way to the entryway of Phil’s flat before Dan simply couldn’t stand it anymore.

“So…what’s up?” he asked, as the front door swung shut behind them and left them in the dark of the hallway. It had been bright outside, and Dan’s un-adjusted eyes couldn’t make out the expression Phil turned on him.

“Hm?” was all Phil said as they made their way up the corridor and into the kitchen.

Dan followed but paused before stepping into the room. He was trying to make sense of Phil’s silence — trying to hear whatever it was that Phil wasn’t saying.

“Is everything okay?” he finally asked, which made Phil stop halfway across the kitchen and turn a smile on him.

“Sure,” he said. “Do you want to watch a movie or something?”

Dan was so confused, and his head was fairly pounding now, and he felt like he would be able to figure this all out so much more easily if his head didn’t ache quite so much and he weren’t just so exhausted.

“Yeah, all right,” he said and turned toward the lounge, but Phil pointed to his left.

“I know you’re kind of tired. I thought we could watch it on my laptop in the tatami room instead.”

So Dan followed Phil into the tatami room and sat down on the futon that was still laid out there, leaning his back against the wall, while Phil went and got some movie options from the other room. Dan had to admit that it was probably more comfortable to watch the movie here, where he could stretch his legs off the side of the futon, than on Phil’s tiny sofa in the somewhat cramped lounge.
Phil came back and sat down on the futon next to Dan and slid a DVD into his laptop, which sat before them on the low table, without even asking Dan’s opinion on the choice of title, and then he leaned back against the wall next to Dan, bent his knees up, hugged them to himself, and rested his cheek against his right knee. After a minute, Dan saw that the movie was *Wall-E*.

Within the first couple of minutes of the movie starting, Dan could feel himself sliding further and further down the wall. He tried his best to stay awake, fought off sleep for as long as he could, but they hadn’t even gotten to the first spoken lines in the movie before Dan had slid all the way down the wall and rolled over on his side and given in entirely to sleep.

When Dan floated back to consciousness a while later, it was quiet, which he supposed meant the movie was over….except it wasn’t entirely quiet because he could hear Phil’s voice, just a few centimeters from his ear it seemed.

“I’m sorry,” Phil was saying. “Please don’t hate me.”

“Why would I hate you?” Dan murmured, trying to open his eyes but finding that his eyelids still felt monumentally heavy.

There was a long silence, long enough that Dan started to drift back to sleep. At last Phil said,

“I didn’t know you were awake.”

“I’m not,” Dan said, and snuggled closer to Phil’s side, because he could feel now that Phil was no longer sitting up against the wall but was lying on the floor beside him, head pillowed on the futon and legs stretched out across the tatami just as his were.

There was another long silence, and this time Dan did fall completely back to sleep.

He remembered waking again some time later when Phil got up and told him to lie on the futon properly, and he did so because it seemed like it would be much more comfortable than his current position, and then Phil pulled the duvet over him, and Dan thought Phil was going to join him there. But he didn’t, and Dan fell asleep again feeling vaguely disappointed.

When he finally woke again, the whole flat was filled with bright, pale light and a morning chill. He lay there for a long time, staring at the ceiling, studying the way the sunlight pouring through the open door of Phil’s bedroom lit half of it in blinding white while leaving the other half in murky grey. It was Saturday morning, and he hadn’t slept in his own bed since Wednesday.

He remembered yesterday, and Phil speaking softly near his ear while he slept, but he couldn’t remember any of the things he’d said.

He checked his watch. It was just past 6:00 in the morning. He doubted Phil would be up for another couple of hours yet. It almost frightened him how strong of an urge he felt to get up and walk into the other room and slide into bed beside Phil. He doubted Phil would stop him either, but he also knew he wouldn’t do it. It would be wrong. It would be a violation of Phil’s trust — and he sensed that Phil did trust him, or was starting to, and he didn’t dare do anything that would make him change his mind about that.

If he’d had his bike here, he would have just ridden home, but he didn’t, so instead he pulled his phone from his pocket and occupied himself that way for the next hour and a half, at which point he finally heard some stirring from the room next door.

He took that as his cue to climb out of the futon and head into the kitchen, where he managed to find the right ingredients to cook Phil more or less the same breakfast they’d had the morning before.
He’d wanted to make pancakes, but he couldn’t read the labels on the things in Phil’s cabinets very well yet, and the stuff he thought might be flour didn’t look quite right.

“Mmm, that smells wonderful,” Phil yawned from the doorway of his bedroom a few minutes later, and Dan turned to see him stood there, arms stretched above his head and eyes screwed up behind his glasses. His hair, which usually fell in a fringe over the side of his face, had been pushed back so that his whole forehead was visible for once. Dan thought that he’d never looked more beautiful.

He stayed the whole day with Phil again, playing video games, watching random movies, or just lying on the tatami and talking about nothing. A couple of times he saw Phil sneaking a glance at his phone and frowning the same disturbing frown Dan had seen in Seiji’s car the afternoon before. But for the most part, he seemed his usual self, smiling and silly and occasionally so hilarious that Dan ended up with sides sore from how hard he had laughed.

When evening rolled around again, Dan almost thought he might end up spending the third night in a row at Phil’s place, but after they’d gone out for a sukiyaki dinner at a nearby restaurant, Phil finally said he ought to get Dan home again. He asked if Dan wanted to be dropped at Nishichu to get his bike, but Dan just shook his head. He didn’t feel like riding in the dark on the narrow roads that lay between the school and his building. He could walk over and get his bike on Sunday.

They were quiet on the short drive over to Dan’s place. Out of all the questions that Dan was aching to ask, he only managed to find the courage to bring up one.

“So, er…Seiji said that you have to decide if you’re going to renew your contract next month.” They were waiting at a stoplight, just a couple of streets over from Dan’s place.

“Yeah, our contracts run from April to March,” Phil said, putting the car in motion again as the light turned green, “They like us to let them know if we’re leaving by November. Gives them plenty of time to hire someone else.”

Dan waited, giving Phil time to answer the unasked question on his own. Instead, Phil continued driving, past the coin laundry, and the ramen shop, and the pachinko parlor, and at last Dan cleared his throat and just asked.

“So, you’re planning to stay, right?”

Phil turned a startled look on him, then gave him a puzzled grin.

“Yeah, of course I’m staying.”

It was selfish of Dan to be happy about that, when he himself wouldn’t be staying past August. Still, he was happy. That gave them nine more months together. Nine more months of Nishichu and Phil and hopefully more days like today.

Dan was smiling to himself as he made his way over to the stairs of his building, and he didn’t look back in time to see Phil checking his phone again and frowning. Instead, when he turned, Phil was looking up and giving him a wave good-bye. Dan waved back, cupped his hands around his mouth, and called “See you on Monday!” before turning toward the stairs again and making his way up to his front door at last.

Chapter End Notes
Originally published on tumblr
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Dan visits the sesshoseki and things get…complicated. (Warnings for alcohol, drunkenness, mentions of death)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was a strange week.

Now that the intense speech contest practice sessions were over, Dan had plenty of time after school to check out some of the club activities. On Monday, when they’d finished their sixth-period class with the special needs students, he mentioned to Phil that he was going to drop in on the chorus club and asked if Phil wanted to join him. Phil had been in some sort of daze all day, taking seconds too long to respond to Dan’s questions and spending up to half an hour at a time just staring at nothing, arms crossed over his chest, one lip folded beneath his front teeth as they nibbled slowly at the pink flesh.

Dan wasn’t too surprised when Phil declined his offer, but he was disappointed nonetheless. Over the past weekend, he’d started to believe there was a possibility Phil enjoyed being with him as much as he enjoyed being with Phil. But clearly that wasn’t the case. If their roles had been reversed just now — if Phil had suggested Dan tag along to an activity he knew Dan wasn’t particularly interested in — Dan would have jumped at the chance to spend even a few extra minutes with him. Instead, here was Phil packing up his bag promptly at four and waving good-bye to Dan without a single look back.

Suzuki-sensei, the teacher in charge of the chorus club, seemed a little startled when Dan appeared in the practice room shortly after the bell had rung to signal the beginning of bukatsu time. She welcomed him, though, and one of the third-year girls offered to share her music with him. Dan felt he did a reasonable job of singing the alto line along with her, and Suzuki-sensei even praised his efforts at the end of the hour-long practice. Several of the students added compliments of their own. Dan left with a slightly-inflated ego and the impression that joining the chorus club was a definite possibility.

On Tuesday, he decided to take a look in at the orchestra club. Phil had seemed even more distracted today, barely giving monosyllable responses to anything that Dan said, and Dan had begun to worry that he’d done or said something wrong. He didn’t even bother asking Phil if he wanted to stay after with him this time, and Phil actually ended up sneaking out fifteen minutes early.

Ignoring the heavy feeling in his chest, Dan decided he needed to get out of the empty staff room and climbed the stairs up to the orchestra room, which was on the second floor of the same building.

He arrived before any of the students or even Kato-sensei, the club sponsor, so he used the time to take a look around. It was a long room, with a set of risers on one side where the students would set up their chairs and instruments. At the far end of the room, Dan caught sight of an ancient grand piano, and he felt his spirits rise, just a little.
He hadn’t played since he had come to Japan, and just seeing the instrument stood there across the room made his fingers itch to be on its keys. He glanced back out into the hall. No one was there. They were all still in their classrooms for the final homeroom of the day. He hurried over to the piano, lifted the lid and sat down at the bench.

He ran his fingers lightly over the keys and then played a few chords, just to warm his fingers up — C Major, B Flat Major, A minor, A Flat Major — before shifting into an actual melody. It wasn’t a sunny day today, and the light filtering down through the clouds and into the room around him had a sort of dreamy quality to it. The muted strikes of the hammers against the strings became strands of sound that rose into the air a round him and seemed to blend themselves into the diffuse, grey light. For a while Dan’s entire world was nothing but melody and the faint clacking of the old piano keys and the grey October afternoon.

“Uwaaaan! Dan-sensei jouzu!!” A squeal from across the room jarred him from his trance. His fingers paused above the keys, and he looked up to see two ichinensei girls stood at the door of the room, staring at him with wide eyes. “Ah! Yamechatta,” one of them said.

Dan reached up and slid the piano lid closed before standing and scooting away from the piano. Inwardly he was mortified that his students had overheard his less-than-mediocre playing, but he managed to give them a smile and a greeting that hid just how hard he was cringing on the inside.

Orchestra club was fun but a little more difficult to participate in than chorus club had been, seeing as how the only extra instrument they had for him to play was a triangle. It wasn’t exactly the best instrument to showcase his rhythmic prowess. When the hour of practice was over, Kato-sensei and the students thanked him for showing up, but he mentally crossed orchestra off his list of possible clubs to join.

On Wednesday, Phil had gone from distracted to downright withdrawn. Dan had finally had enough, so sometime around mid-morning, he made Phil leave the staff room with him and walk out to the chain-link fence behind the metal shop building where they could see a line of gingko trees outside of the stadium across the way, their autumn leaves a blaze of gold against the crisp, blue sky.

They leaned against the fence and looked out at the trees together for several minutes before Dan finally mustered the courage to ask his question.

“Did I do something wrong?”

It took a few long seconds for Phil to look away from the view and focus his eyes on Dan, and even when he did, Dan thought he still looked so far away.

“No. Why would you think that?”

“You’ve barely spoken to me since Saturday. I was worried that…” He paused. What he was really worried about was that somehow, over all the time they’d spent together the past weekend, Phil had finally become aware of Dan’s feelings (Because, it was so obvious. Literally, how had he avoided knowing for so long?) and now felt awkward being around him. But he couldn’t explain that because, what if Phil hadn’t noticed?

“You were worried that…?” Phil prompted him.

“I just thought I’d pissed you off or something.” It wasn’t exactly the truth, but it wasn’t exactly a lie either.

“Well, you didn’t,” Phil said, his tone flat, matter-of-fact. Something Dan was beginning to learn
about Phil was that, when he didn’t want you to know what he was thinking, he could become as a blank as an empty sheet of paper. Dan thought he might explode from frustration.

“Are you going to tell me what is wrong then?”

Phil looked away again at that, back over towards the gingko trees across the car park. A slight breeze was rolling down from the mountains, causing the bright yellow leaves to rustle and glow in the late morning sun.

“Maybe,” he said at last. “Eventually… When I know more myself.”

Dan wondered if he could press further, or if that really would make Phil angry at him. He had no patience for all this secrecy. But he worried that pushing Phil to tell him more would only push him farther away, and that was the last thing he wanted.

The bell to end fourth period rang then, and Phil turned to head back to the staff room for lunch.

“You can trust me, you know,” Dan blurted out, desperate to keep the conversation from ending.

Phil turned back around again, his eyes a little widened, his mouth slightly open as though he were on the verge of speaking. Then he closed his lips in a smile, a quick one accompanied by an equally quick breath of laughter through his nose.

“I know,” he said, and then headed toward the staff room, leaving Dan to follow at his own pace.

That afternoon, Dan wheedled the kyuudo sponsor into letting him ride the bus over to practice with the students. He’d noticed a few of the students carrying their bows and quivers around before or after school, but seeing so many of them up close like this, he realized at last just how huge they were. Even the tiniest students had bows longer than Dan was tall. Their practice was incredible to watch, but also intimidating. He’d never seen a bunch of pre-teens so quiet and concentrated before. Everyone waited in line to use the targets in perfect silence so as not to disturb the concentration of the person at the front while they lined up their shot.

Dan didn’t have a bow, of course, and when Goibuchi-sensei, the sponsor, offered to let him try a shot, he shook his head vigorously no. He could just imagine his arrow going awry and accidentally skewering one of his students. Kyuudo was interesting to watch, but he was sure now that it was definitely not the club for him.

Thursday they ended up having speech contest practice again, for Airi and Kurumi, who were both preparing to compete at the prefectural competition in early November. Phil had seemed a little more normal today (Maybe their conversation the day before had clued him in to how strange he’d been acting?) During practice, he almost seemed his usual self as he acted out the gestures and expressions that he thought Airi should use to accompany her speech. When they’d got back to the staff room, though, he packed up and left at once, just as he had every other day this week.

Dan tried not to be overcome with dejection as he rode home in the gathering dark, but his legs felt almost too sluggish to turn the pedals of his bike. Why wouldn’t Phil just talk to him? He’d seemed eager enough to pour his heart out when he’d thought Dan was asleep the other day. What did he have to say that he couldn’t let Dan hear in his waking hours?

Just as Dan was pulling into the car park at his building, he felt his phone buzz in his pocket. It was pathetic how quickly he pulled up and yanked the phone out, convinced it would be Phil finally willing to talk. It wasn’t.

Seiji
Hey, do you have plans this weekend?

_Dan_

Nope. Are you offering?

_Seiji_

Ha ha. Yeah. Want to go up to Nasu and see the sesshoseki?

_Dan_

I have no idea what that is, but I’m in.

_Seiji_

Great! And you’ll find out. You’ve seen Naruto, right?

_Dan_

Yes?? Is that relevant???

_Seiji_

Ha ha. You’ll see.

On Friday, Phil seemed almost cheerful, and as soon as the morning meeting was over, he spun his chair around to face Dan and asked if he was going on the Nasu trip.

“Yeah, are you?” Dan’s mood lifted a little. He hadn’t even considered the fact that Phil might be there too.

“Yes, me and Akari are both going,” he said, and Dan’s heart sank back down again. He didn’t mind Akari going. He definitely didn’t. He liked Akari. She was sweet and funny and interesting to talk to, and he liked her goddammit.

“Cool,” Dan said.

There were no _bukatsu_ after school that day, so Dan stayed after with Phil until 4:00, chatting and playing another of their stupid staff room games (thank god at least that seemed to be getting back to normal.) Then he went home for an evening of illegally-streamed tv shows. Considering how impossible it was to get the newest episodes of _American Horror Story: Coven_ legally in Japan, he didn’t feel the least bit ashamed to watch the pirated versions.

He allowed himself to stay in bed as late as 9:00 the next morning, though actually he’d woken up promptly at 8:15 and been unable to fall back to sleep. This whole working adult thing was still taking some getting used to.

Seiji was there to pick him up at 11:00, and Dan was a surprised to see Phil and Akari in the back seat of Seiji’s car. For once Phil had decided not to drive. Instead, the second car that pulled into Dan’s car park was driven by Madhavi, and held Jake and James as well.

“Good morning,” Phil said when Dan slid into the front seat of Seiji’s car.

“Good morning,” came a subdued echo from Akari beside him.
Dan cast a glance toward her out of the corner of his eye and noticed with a painful squeeze of his heart that their two hands resting on the seat between them were clasped tightly together. Akari looked up at Dan and gave him a faint smile. He returned it before turning around and facing forward again, his heart pounding. Was there something wrong with Akari? Was that why Phil had been acting so strangely all week? A thousand different scenarios passed through his imagination, but he discarded them all. It did no good to speculate. As maddening as it was, he would have to let Phil tell him in his own time.

The ride up the mountain was a quiet one, with Dan and Seiji carrying most of the conversation. Even when they switched into Japanese, to let Akari join in, she barely said three words together. The road wound round and round the mountain, growing steeper and steeper the higher they went, until at last they arrived among a little cluster of buildings built up around a section of the road that was almost at a perfect 45 degree angle. A few of the buildings appeared newer, but the farther up they went, the older the buildings looked. At last Seiji pulled the car into a lot next to a tiny, wooden building with a banner out front that read “Udon.” They’d decided the first order of business would be lunch, and Seiji had said Dan simply had to try this restaurant’s yama-udon and tempura.

When they stepped out of the car, Dan’s nose was immediately assaulted by the strong scent of sulfur. He wrinkled his nose, and Seiji laughed at his disgusted expression.

“I see you’ve discovered the delicious scent of Nasu,” he said.

Lunch ended up being much noisier, with the addition of Madhavi and her crew. Dan took Seiji’s food suggestion and was not in the least disappointed. He couldn’t help but notice that Phil and Akari sat at the end of the table together and barely spoke, other than in whispers to each other. Dan glanced over at them toward the end of the meal, and Akari seemed almost to be leaning into Phil, propping herself up against his solid shoulder. Suddenly, Dan found that he had absolutely zero interest in staying here any longer — all of the excitement he had felt in visiting a new place had been sucked out and replaced by an intense desire to curl up in his futon with his laptop and a mountain of junk food. God how he wished he had his own car and could just leave.

When they’d paid the bill and said their gochisou-sama deshita, Dan started to head back toward the car, but Seiji stopped him and pointed across the street to where he could see a torii gate opening onto a concrete staircase that led up to a wooded area. They checked for traffic and then dashed across to begin the climb up the long series of stairs.

“There’s a shrine up there that we’ll visit first,” Seiji explained as they made their way up, “and then the path leads on up to the sesshoseki.”

“Okay, but what does sesshoseki actually mean?” Dan asked, his words coming out a little breathy as the stair-climbing had already winded him a bit.

“Killing stone,” Seiji answered with a grin.

Madhavi came up on Dan’s other side then.

“Hasn’t anyone told you the story of the sesshoseki yet?” she asked, falling into step beside him, though she was taking almost two steps for his every one.

“Nope. Not yet.”

They’d reached the top of the stairs now, which opened out onto a path that passed through a line of stone lanterns before leading under yet another torii.
“You should get Phil to tell you. He’s the best at it,” she said, looking behind them to where Phil and Akari were bringing up the rear of the group. Dan turned too and received a jolt when he saw that the two of them were holding hands again. He’d never, since meeting them, seen them this affectionate with each other, and certainly not out in public. His stomachful of udon was suddenly feeling less satisfying and more nauseating. He wondered if there was a toilet nearby.

“Phil!” Madhavi had cupped her hands around her mouth and was calling back down the stairs to Phil. He looked up, his expression startled. “Come here and tell Dan the story.”

“Erm, that’s okay,” Dan tried to whisper to her under his breath, but she paid no attention to him. Instead she raised her hand and waved Phil and Akari closer. They picked up their pace, though Akari stayed glued to Phil’s side.

“I’ll tell him later, when we get closer,” Phil said when he’d gotten within speaking range of them.

Dan had to bite his bottom lip to keep from telling Phil in an acid tone that he was doing just fine without any explanations from him. Running his mouth certainly wasn’t going to make matters any better.

Further up the path, they reached an area with a few stone statues, including one of a horse that had clearly been broken and patched back together. There was one particularly huge seam around the horse’s neck, and he could see that a few splinters of the stone there were missing.

“What happened to this guy?” he asked Seiji, who took a look and turned solemn.

“It fell over and broke during the earthquake,” he said, his voice low and toneless. “A lot of shrines and stuff were badly damaged in the earthquake. Harata Jinja in particular was quite a mess.”

“Oh,” Dan said.

Eventually they came to the shrine itself, a modest-looking wooden structure framed by two large stone lanterns, with a thick hemp rope slung across the entrance. They all stopped at a well that was off to one side of the path, and Seiji demonstrated the proper way to wash one’s hands using the long, bamboo ladle lying there. He explained to Dan that you were really supposed to cleanse your mouth as well, but that the water in this particular well wasn’t safe for drinking.

Then they continued on to the shrine — along the sides of the path, as Seiji explained the center was reserved for the passage of the gods — and Seiji showed them the proper ritual for praying. First, he stepped up and pulled the long, thick rope to ring the bell once. Then he bowed deeply, twice, placed his hands together and closed his eyes. When he was finished praying, he clapped twice, bowed, and backed away.

Dan wasn’t exactly religious, so he felt a little awkward saying a prayer. He hoped that, if there was such a thing as a god living here, it wouldn’t be offended by his lack of faith. Still, he followed the steps that Seiji had demonstrated, ringing the bell and bowing twice. Then he closed his eyes and held his hands up and prayed with all of his heart that Phil would just tell him what the hell was going on already. Then he opened his eyes, clapped twice, bowed, and took a few steps back before moving away so that James could say a prayer.

Phil and Akari each took their turns then, and as Dan watched Phil stand there with hands pressed together and eyes closed, he felt a burning curiosity to know what it was that Phil had to say to a god.

Farther on, the path moved on into the woods, which consisted of a thick growth of red pine. The
scent of the needles and the damp earth beneath the tree roots was almost strong enough to mask the stench of sulfur that hung in the air here. Dan was so lost in thought, staring up through the pine needles at the white sky above that he jumped when Phil cleared his throat beside him.

“A long time ago,” Phil began, his voice pitched loud enough so that James on his other side could hear as well, “there was a nine-tailed fox demon. Do you know how fox demons gain extra tails?”

Dan shook his head, and he saw James do the same on the other side.

“Every time a fox demon manages to destroy an entire town, it gets a new tail. This particular one had destroyed nine towns, so it had nine long tails. That’s how you know it was an especially evil one. This demon was actually a Chinese fox demon, but it had grown bored with destroying Chinese towns, so it decided to come over to Japan to cause a little mischief here. Instead of slaughtering peasants, though, it decided it would aim for a bigger target — the emperor.”

As the path wound on, the forest around them grew deeper, blotting out the sky and the milky, cloud-filtered light, until they were walking in a sort of twilit gloom.

“Fox demons are very good at disguises,” Phil continued. “They’re especially good at tricking people into thinking they are actually beautiful women. That’s exactly what this fox demon did. It disguised itself as a woman, the most beautiful woman at court, and the emperor was so captivated by her that he forgot about all of his other concubines and only spent time with her.”

“Rude,” Dan muttered under his breath and was rewarded with a snort of laughter from Phil.

“Don’t be too hard on the emperor,” Phil said, raising a finger that glowed pale against the dark trees. “The fox demon was using magic, so the emperor didn’t really have a chance. The emperor began to grow ill, and he became weaker and weaker, until his court feared he would die. They called in every doctor and wise man they could find, but no one seemed able to cure him. Then, at last, one particularly wise old man came to visit, and he managed to see through the fox demon’s disguise to its true form.”

They had come to a fork in the path where there was a wooden sign indicating what lay in each direction. The others, up ahead of them, were taking the right fork, and Phil led them in that direction as well. Dan could see that Akari was up ahead talking with Madhavi now. The trees were beginning to thin out once again, and the path had taken a downhill turn.

“The wise man tricked the fox demon into revealing itself,” Phil said. “Enraged at having been deceived, the emperor called up his army to destroy the demon, but it fled. The army chased it all throughout Japan, following the trail of destruction it left in its wake. At last they caught up with it here, in Nasu, and many soldiers lost their lives in the ensuing battle.”

The forest opened out around them all at once, and they found themselves on a sort of wooden platform. To their left were some large signs with a couple of illustrations and several paragraphs of Japanese text. Phil led Dan and James over to one of the signs and pointed at the picture.

It was a photograph of an old painting, showing the fox demon lying down with an arrow stuck in its side, surrounded by soldiers and archers.

“One particularly talented archer at last mortally wounded the fox demon. However, instead of dying, with the last of its magic the demon transformed itself into a stone. For many years, that stone stood here in Nasu, emitting a poison so powerful that small animals that walked too near it would die instantly. Then a priest came along and decided to exorcise the stone, to hopefully destroy the evil that was blighting the area.”
Phil turned around to point at the landscape behind them, and what Dan saw when he looked startled him. Up to their left, the mountain continued up to its rocky peak. To their right, it sloped away steeply toward the town and, beyond that, in the far, hazy distance, the wide plain where Kokki and Harata lay. At their backs was lush pine forest, and even this open area was covered in grass and bushes and small trees. However, beginning just a little up the slope from where they stood and continuing for at least a hundred meters downhill to their right, there was a huge scar in the land, a rock-strewn space where not a single blade of grass grew. A wooden path snaked its way through the area, and he glimpsed hundreds of stone statues wearing bright red caps, before Phil called his attention back by picking up his story again.

“The priest did break some of the stone’s evil power, but he couldn’t destroy it entirely. Instead, his spell caused the stone to explode, splitting into four pieces, which flew off to different parts of Japan. However, one piece of the stone still remains here in Nasu.”

Phil pointed in front of them, up the hill a little ways. Right at the point where the rocky scar began there stood a single jagged boulder with a sacred rope tied around it that had little lightning-bolt-shaped pieces of paper dangling down at regular intervals.

“As you can guess by the fact that we’re all standing here, the stone is no longer poisonous enough to kill anyone, but if you stay here too long you will get sick. That path down there marks the only safe path through this area.” He pointed downhill, toward the wooden path Dan had seen a minute before. “If you wander off that path, you’re in danger of breathing in poisonous volcanic fumes.”

“Oh, so I guess that’s the real, scientific explanation behind all of this,” Dan said, gesturing toward the barren land below them.

“What? No!” Phil dropped his jaw open in a mock-offended expression. “It was the nine-tailed fox demon’s evil magic.”

“Sure it was, Phil.” Dan rolled his eyes but couldn’t help the small smirk that lifted one side of his mouth.

“Well, at least the part about the poisonous gases killing small animals is true,” Phil said, returning Dan’s smile. “I think it just grew weaker naturally, though.”

“What are all those little men down there?” James asked, pointing at the red-capped statues Dan had glimpsed earlier.

“Those are jizo statues,” Phil said. “There’s another story about this area. You see that little stone hut thing over there?” He pointed toward a tiny stone structure off to the right of the scarred area. “There was a holy man who lived there, a priest. After he died, they made the area around his hut into a sort of shrine. Those statues represent prayers or offerings. A lot of them are from families who have lost children.”

“Why are they wearing hats and scarves?” James asked as the three of them began to follow the others down the wooden path into the rocky area.

“Those are put there by the families who placed the statues,” Phil explained. “They’re supposed to represent the children’s clothes. So, putting them there lets the children’s spirits have them in the afterlife.”

They fell silent as they passed by the forest of little statues. There were hundreds of them there, and it wrenched Dan’s heart to think how many lost lives they represented. They caught up with the others shortly after that. Phil stepped away from him then and went immediately to Akari’s side. She
reached out and clutched his arm with both hands, leaning into his side once more.

Dan didn’t realize he was staring at them until Seiji fell into pace beside him and murmured,

“Hey, are you okay?”

“What?” he looked down at Seiji and blinked. “Oh, yeah, I’m fine.”

Seiji pursed his lips, glanced up ahead at Phil, and then looked back at Dan.

“Are you sure?”

Dan nodded, but he didn’t meet Seiji’s eye. He probably needed to talk to someone about all of it, if only for clarity’s sake. He often found that he didn’t know his own feelings about something until he’d talked it out with someone, and he guessed Seiji would be a good sounding board. Still, this wasn’t really the time or place.

“Well, if you ever need to talk, just give me a call,” Seiji said in a low voice. “I’m kind of the vault for everyone’s secrets around here.”

Dan nodded and murmured his thanks. After a moment, he frowned.

“Are there really that many secrets to keep?” he asked. The thought of it made him wonder if he hadn’t become too self-absorbed, so lost in his own little Phil-centric world that he’d been blind to the drama of all his friends’ lives.

Seiji shot him a small smile and raised one eyebrow. Then his expression turned thoughtful. He took a deep breath that turned into a sigh and said,

“It’s like…everyone is here because they’re running away from something back home.”

There was a silence as they both let the idea settle in the air around them. Dan couldn’t deny that, at least in his own case, Seiji’s assessment was so true it was painful. He thought about the others he’d met here — Madhavi, who’d only done Pre-Med to make her parents happy, James who had finally gotten fed up with being a mindless office drone, Jake who wanted nothing more from life than the courage to chase his dream of becoming a games journalist. He glanced up at Phil again and wondered if he was escaping from something too.

“How about you, then?” Dan asked at last. “What are you running away from?”

Seiji’s black brows drew together.

“I might be the only exception to that rule,” he said slowly.

“Oh? How so?”

“I think I came here running toward something,” he said, then paused. “With my dad being Japanese, I think I was always planning to come here.”

They were nearing the end of the wooden path now, and Dan glanced behind for another view of the sesshoseki and the strange scar in the earth. It almost looked like an alien landscape. Perhaps this was what it felt like to stand on the moon, all pale dirt and barren rock and no good air to breathe.

“Maybe I’m kidding myself with that, though,” Seiji was saying, and Dan wrenched his eyes back to him. “I never really liked living in America.”
Dan was about to ask what he meant by that when James spun around from the group a little ahead of them and called back,

“Hey, you guys want to stop at the foot onsen?”

“What’s a foot onsen?” Dan muttered to Seiji beside him, not caring how unenthusiastic he sounded. Now that they’d seen the thing they’d come here to see, he was only too ready to just get home and away from…everything.

“Um, an onsen for your feet?” Seiji answered, casting him an amused sidewise glance. “It’s really shallow, so you just put your feet in and soak them. It’s actually really nice.”

James was raising his arms and eyebrows in a questioning gesture, so Seiji called back their agreement. Dan just shrugged. Sometimes it really sucked not being in control of your own transportation.

They followed the pavement that curved around the side of the highway and led back down to the torii back at the beginning. Dan and Seiji walked side-by-side in silence, the others up ahead. In an effort to keep from glaring at Phil’s back, Dan turned to the left and gazed out over the rooftops of the town spreading down the side of the mountain below them. There was a gap in the mountains there, just wide enough to allow a view of the plains below. From this distance, it looked like little more than hazy patches of yellow and greyish green, though he could make out the rough outlines of a city. He wondered if it was Harata or part of Kokki. Seiji would probably know, but he was afraid if he opened his mouth to ask only bitter sarcasm would come out.

The foot onsen turned out to be a tiny wooden structure inside of which was a shallow square of bath surrounded by a few benches. By the time Dan stepped inside the darkened interior, the others were already pulling off their socks and shoes, so he did the same, tucking his socks neatly inside his trainers and setting them to one side.

“Holy shit that’s hot,” Jake yelled when he stepped into the bath, and he immediately jumped out again. Madhavi laughed at him and then plunged her own feet into the bath, crossing her arms and staring at Jake as she stood perfectly still in the scalding hot water.

“Show-off,” Jake said, and she stuck her tongue out at him.

Dan had to physically look away from them to keep from rolling his eyes. God, did they ever stop?

The others all stepped into the water more cautiously. Dan was the last to put his feet in, and he almost yelped in surprise at the heat, despite the warning he’d had from Jake’s reaction. He held it in, though, not wanting to draw any unnecessary attention to himself, and took a seat on one of the rough-hewn benches between James and Seiji. Phil and Akari were sat on the bench across from him, and in a hut this size there was nowhere else to look. They were holding hands again. He sighed and folded his arms over his chest.

“We should go to karaoke after this!” Madhavi suddenly exclaimed.

“What, in the middle of the afternoon?” Jake shook his head.

“No, later. I mean, by the time we leave Nasu and get back to Harata, it’ll already be almost dinner time. We could grab some food and then hit up Ban Ban.”

“What’s Ban Ban?” James asked, lifting one brown foot and swirling it around in the hot water, probably in an attempt to cool it down somewhat.
“It’s this karaoke place next to Jake’s,” Madhavi explained, leaning forward with an eager light in her eyes, “and they never care if we sneak our own drinks in, and they usually let us stay as long as we want.”

“That sounds like fun,” James said. “I haven’t done any karaoke since coming to Japan.”

“Yeah, I could go for some karaoke too,” Phil chimed in then. “Akari?”

She turned a slight smile up at him and nodded her agreement. Dan kept his lips firmly clamped shut as the others all started discussing where they’d go for dinner and whether they should try to make a reservation at the karaoke place or just show up and hope to get a room. Once most of the others were engaged in the conversation, he turned to Seiji beside him and murmured,

“Would you mind dropping me off at home before you go to dinner?”

Seiji cast him a sympathetic smile and nodded. Dan had thought all of the others were listening to James and Madhavi’s argument about which sushi go-round to visit, but apparently he’d been wrong.

“Wait, you aren’t coming to karaoke, Dan?”

He looked up to see Phil gazing at him from across the way, eyes wide with concern.

“Er, I’m a little tired,” Dan muttered, hunching up one shoulder in a shrug.

“No, Dan, you have to come! Our karaoke sessions are the stuff of legend,” Madhavi pleaded, giving him an exaggerated look of anguish. “You need to experience this.”

“Seriously, you haven’t lived until you’ve heard me mangling all the classics,” Jake added.

Dan laughed a little despite himself.

“I don’t know,” he said, feeling himself relenting and resenting them for being able to sway him. “How much will it cost?”

“It’s only ¥1500 for free time,” Madhavi said. “That’s, like, 1500 for as long as we want to stay.”

He squinted his eyes, trying to conjure up another excuse.

“Aw, come on, Dan,” Phil joined in. “I’ve been waiting for forever to get you to karaoke so we could sing this one duet.”

And just like that, Dan wanted to go. He couldn’t believe he was going to agree to this. He knew it was just going to prolong the torture of watching Phil and his girlfriend all over each other. Why was he letting himself be convinced?

“Okay, okay, I guess I’ll give it a try.”

“Yessssss,” Madhavi said in her best Napoleon Dynamite impression.

Dan regretted it almost immediately, as he looked up and saw Akari settle her head on Phil’s shoulder. He continued to regret it during the ride back down the mountain, and all throughout their dinner at the sushi restaurant, where they continued to hold hands. He regretted it so much that when they stopped at the combini for drinks and snacks to take with them to Ban Ban, he ended up buying three 250 mL cans of grapefruit-flavored chu-hi strong (the kind that was 8% alcohol rather then merely 6) and had managed to polish a full can off before they’d even gotten to the karaoke place.
They were given a small room on the ground floor, and the seven of them just managed to all squeeze onto the two couches. Everyone seemed to already know which songs they wanted to sing first, and Dan had barely had time to flip the guide book open before someone handed the controller to him to make his own selection. He glanced down at the page he was on — artists beginning with “C” — and just punched in the number for the first song he recognized. It was only after he’d passed the controller on to James that he wondered if maybe it was the alcohol that had prompted him to choose a Christina Aguilera song.

“Who just fucking chose *Genie in a Bottle*?” Madhavi suddenly screeched. She’d parked her car across the street at Jake’s so she wouldn’t have to worry about driving it anywhere once they were done, and she was already well into her own first drink.

“That would be Dan,” James called from across the room.

“That’s one of my songs,” she said, glaring at Dan with mock anger. “I will *fight* you.”

“Excuse me? You honestly think you can do late nineties pop better than me?” After the frustrating day he’d just passed, Dan was in a combative mood.

Madhavi narrowed her eyes and then held out her hand to James.

“Pass me the controller,” was all she said.

The first song started then, and it was Jake singing *Sultans of Swing*. He sang terribly off-key, and if Dan had been any drunker he probably would have stuck his fingers in his ears to save them the torture. As it was, he spent the song downing his second can of *chu-hi*.

Someone turned the lights off halfway through the next song, so now the room was lit only by the flickering light of the video playing behind the lyrics on the tv screen. It was Seiji’s song, and he was utterly slaying Queen’s *Don’t Stop Me Now*.

Phil sang *Nine in the Afternoon* after that, and Dan discovered that it was actually possible to become even more attracted to his completely-off-limits co-worker. Dan wasn’t sure he’d bought enough alcohol to get him through this experience after all.

By the time it came around to *Genie in a Bottle*, Dan was floating in a bubbly sea of *chu-hi*, and without even thinking about it, he grabbed the mic, jumped up on the couch and not only belted the song at the top of his lungs but actually accompanied it with the sexiest dance moves he thought he could get away with. When the last chords of the song faded away, his friends were all cheering and wolf-whistling, and he stepped down, took a deep bow and passed the mic to James with a pointed look at Madhavi.

“Just wait,” she said. “Just you wait,” and she took a huge swig of her melon soda and vodka.

Her song selection ended up being Madonna’s *Ray of Light*, and he had to admit that she had some pretty serious singing chops. Dan wasn’t about to concede defeat, though. When it was his turn again, he brought down the house with his sensual performance of *Toxic*.

When the others had finished their standing ovation and he’d taken his seat again, he was startled to find Phil squeezing onto the couch beside him.

“Hey, so I queued up our duet.” He had to turn his head and lean in close to Dan’s ear to be heard over what was turning out to be a stirring performance of *Speed of Sound* from James.

“What is it?” Dan asked, reaching up to rub the tickling sensation of Phil’s breath out of his ear.
Phil chuckled and shook his head.

“You’ll just have to wait and see,” he said, taking a sip from his own rum and coke. The room fee had included endless refills on soft drinks, so some of the others, including Phil, had sneaked in flasks of liquor to spike them with.

Dan stuck his lip out and pretended to pout, which made Phil’s smile turn into a grin. He leaned in closer, his face just centimeters from Dan’s. His eyes were black in the dim light of the darkened room.

“Hey, how do you do that thing?” he asked, his words clear but a little too slow. Dan wondered all of a sudden if Phil was already as tipsy as he was.

“What thing?” he asked, barely finding the breath to get the words out.

“You know, the thing you do when you’re singing *Toxic*. The Britney Spears thing where your voice goes all deep when you sing ‘Baby, can’t you see?’”

“Oh, that thing,” Dan breathed. “Er, you just…have to kind of make a sound like…” He blinked. How had Phil suddenly gotten so close to him? “Kind of like a sex sound.”

Phil let out another chuckle.

“Baby, can’t you see,” he sang, his voice turning the words into a rough croak.


Phil’s eyebrow shot up, and his lips drew up into a little smirk. He hadn’t moved a millimeter further away, and his face was still so close Dan could feel the heat from his skin.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” he murmured.

Maybe the alcohol had loosened Dan’s tongue, or maybe he was just feeling reckless because he’d spent so much of the day angry, but the words somehow slipped out before he’d even had time to consider what they meant.

“Yeah, I kind of would,” Dan said.

Phil’s expression froze, his eyes wide and fixed on Dan’s, his lips slightly parted, whether in surprise or because he had been about to say something, Dan would never know.

“Phil, isn’t this your song?” Jake’s voice cut in then.

Dan was the one who looked away, his heart beating so violently he could hear the thudding of it in his ears. He glanced up at the tv screen. The opening lines of “A Whole New World” were scrolling across it, and it dawned on him that this was the duet Phil had wanted to sing with him.

“I have to go to the toilet,” Dan mumbled, jumping to his feet and stumbling toward the door.

He could hear Phil behind him telling Jake to skip the song as he shoved the door open and fell out into the corridor. It was quiet out here, though he could make out the faint sounds of tracks playing in other rooms up and down the hallway.

He didn’t know where the toilets were, but that didn’t matter. He turned back toward the reception area and dashed through the entryway of the building and out the front door into the chill night air. It was freezing and he’d left his jacket inside, but that didn’t matter either. The night had turned
achingly clear after a day of solid clouds. There was a moon up, a blinding, white full one, and looking up at it he wondered if he might not just be better off up there, slowly asphyxiating among all the white dust. It couldn’t be any worse than the suffocating weight that seemed to be crushing his chest at the moment, down here on the surface of the earth.

Well, he’d really done it now. He really had. *Fuck.*

Chapter End Notes

Originaly published on tumblr. (Also, this is the chapter I partially wrote while I was at Playlist Live :D)
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Dan has a difficult Sunday.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For about three seconds after he woke on Sunday morning, Dan was blissfully unaware of just how fucked he was. Then his brain achieved full consciousness, and every agonizing moment of the previous day came rushing back into his memory.

He let out a long, loud groan.

Phil knew. Phil knew about his feelings for him, and it was because Dan — his own idiotic self — had said it right to his face.

He pulled the duvet up over his head and shoved his face deeper into his pillow. There was absolutely no reason to get out of bed today…or any day from now on, really. Nope. Starting today, the little wedge of space between his duvet and his futon mattress would be his entire world. It was fine. Who needed food or work or a social life?

A loud buzz sounded just centimeters from his ear, making him jump. He turned his face just enough to see the bright light of his phone’s screen reflecting off the underside of the duvet. It was probably just someone on Facebook inviting him to play Candy Crush. Or a Tweet (Who did he have notifications turned on for again?) Either way, it definitely wasn’t a text message from anyone. Couldn’t be that. No need to check it —

His hand slid up the sheet, seemingly of its own accord, hovered for a moment over the cold block of glass and metal, and then — he sighed — took hold of it and held it up in front of his face.

It was a notification from Facebook. Madhavi had tagged him in a photo. He frowned.

He slid right on the notification, tapped in his passcode, and then waited while the Facebook app loaded. And then he groaned again.

She’d uploaded pictures from last night, including an extremely flattering series of drunk Dan stood on the vinyl couch in the karaoke room, head thrown back, microphone shoved up to his open mouth, and his free hand snaking down one hip in one of his stripper dance moves. Well, now that was on the internet for everyone to see. He supposed he could untag them, but honestly he just couldn’t be arsed. Not today. Today it just didn’t seem to matter enough to bother with.

The pictures had set his memory off again, and suddenly he was back in the room last night, hunched up in a corner after he’d slunk back in from outside. He should’ve just stayed out in the lobby. He’d wanted to, in fact, but he knew that eventually someone would notice and possibly come looking for him and then it would be a whole thing. No, it had been safer to just return to the group and try to act like everything was normal.

He grimaced into his pillow again, rolled over onto his back, frowned, rolled back to his stomach,
frowned again, and then finally shoved the duvet off entirely and sat up. Hiding in bed all day was no good because, lacking other stimulation, his mind would do nothing but think…and remember…and brood.

All right, then. He would go for a bike ride.

Half an hour later found him out on his street, glancing first left and then right and eventually deciding right was the better direction. That way the road led east toward a part of the town he hadn’t much explored yet. New sights and sounds were exactly what his brain needed right now.

He passed through some houses and a few small shops before crossing over a side road that continued in a southerly direction. He turned to peer down it and saw empty fields — over the past couple of weeks most of the rice had been harvested — and beyond that pine forest. It looked promising, so he stopped on the far side of the intersection and changed directions, following the side road now instead.

In a few moments he was surrounded on all sides by the fields, bare of all but leftover rice straw. Far out in the middle of one of them he could see the morning sunlight glinting off the polished stone faces of a small, square cemetery. It was a common sight in the area, but in the summer it had struck him as odd to look out across a field full of growing things and see such a stark symbol of death sprouting up amongst them. Now, with the fields full of nothing but dirt and dead plant matter, it somehow seemed just right.

He passed through the fields and came to the forest, which he could now see extended east from the left side of the road. He rode along beside it for a minute until he came across a tiny dirt path that led off beneath the trees. On a whim he turned onto it. Just a little ways down the path the trees seemed to close behind him. The road, the cars on it, the bright sunlight, all disappeared almost as though they’d never existed. It was like entering another world. For a moment he imagined himself as Chihiro in Spirited Away, having unintentionally stumbled across the entrance to the realm of the gods.

After two minutes of pedaling, though, the trees parted up ahead and he could see fields and sunlight again. When he’d left the forest behind, he found that the path wound through a series of farm buildings, and he wondered if he hadn’t accidentally ended up on someone’s private property. There wasn’t anyone about, though, so hopefully if he hurried past they’d never notice.

He could hear running water somewhere nearby now, so he wasn’t too surprised when, after passing the buildings by, he reached a narrow bridge. He knew there was a river that started somewhere up in the mountains and ran through Kokki and Harata both before continuing on its way to the Pacific. He stopped his bike and parked it along the pavement, stepping up to the low wall along the side of the bridge.

About ten meters below was the river. It was shallow here and the water so clear he could easily make out every smooth, brown pebble in the river bed. He wondered, if he jumped over the side, how badly would it actually injure him?

No. Stop. He shook his head. He wasn’t actually that dramatic. It was just that thing — what did they call it? The thing that makes you imagine doing something horrible even when you don’t really want to: l’apel du vide.

Further up the river there were a couple of men fishing from a small island, and beyond that he could see the shining ribbon of water snaking its way back west toward the blue line of the mountains.

Honestly, why was he so upset about Phil knowing? Of course Phil didn’t return his feelings. He had
Akari, and nothing was going to happen. And besides, it was just a little crush. Just an infatuation. It wasn’t even Phil, really. It was just that they’d been thrown together by circumstance; spending hour after hour together day after day, of course he had grown attached. It could have happened with anyone…

It didn’t help that Phil was literally his closest friend in the entire country. And he wasn’t just being clever with words — it was the rawest truth about his life at the moment. No matter how wonderful his friends here were, there wasn’t a single friendship among them that wasn’t brand new and unsteady. It wasn’t like when he’d left for uni and exchanged an old place for a new one knowing that home was just a few hours’ train ride away. He was an entire continent and nine time zones away from anyone who really knew him. Yet something about Phil had felt familiar from the first day they’d met.

Something moved in the water below, and he leaned further over the rail to get a closer look. A group of lazy grey fish took their time passing beneath the bridge. He wondered if they were laughing at the fishermen further upstream, waiting so patiently in the wrong place.

He should just call Phil.

Last night, hunkered down in the corner of the room, as far away from Phil and Akari’s PDA as he could possibly get, he’d watched as Phil quite meticulously ignored him. There had been that constrained smile cast his way when he’d first wandered back into the room. And then just eyes that were studiously trained anywhere and everywhere but Dan.

Even so, he knew that if he called him now, Phil would answer. There was something unspoken among the expats here, he’d realized, a rule that if someone needed you, you would be available, because none of them had family or roots or lifelong friends to fall back on. Without anyone telling him so, he’d learned that they were all each other’s safety net. If he called Phil, then Phil would answer — because Dan might really need him.

As he pulled his phone from his pocket, a biting breeze swept down from the direction of the mountains and lifted his fringe from his forehead with icy fingers. October hadn’t been too cold so far, but it seemed like that was changing quickly. His fingers shook a little as he pulled up Phil’s number in his contacts list, and he told himself it was just a chill.

The glass of the iPhone’s screen was painfully cold as he pressed it against his ear, but all he could focus on was the distant sound of ringing.

“Hi!”

Suddenly Phil’s voice was there, right on the other end of the line, and he had no choice but to respond.

“Hey, erm… What’s up?” Lame. Lame. So so very lame.

“Nothing much. I’m just hanging out at Akari’s. Did you need something?” His tone was polite, but the question stung nevertheless. ‘I’m busy and I’d like to hurry this along, please,’ was what Dan heard.

“Yeah, er. I mean. Not exactly. Can I, er…talk to you? Later…?” Why hadn’t he planned out what he was going to say in advance? Stupid, stupid, stupid.

There was a pause on the other end. Phil was so quiet that Dan could make out the faint murmur of other voices carrying on a muted conversation in the background.
“Yeah, of course,” Phil said at last. His voice was so smooth, not the slightest tremor of emotion to reveal his thoughts. “I should be home around 7. Wanna come over?”

“Erm, yeah, if that’s okay with you?”

“Sure,” Phil said. “Say, 7:30?”

“Sounds good. See you then.”

“See you. Bye!”

Click.

Crap.

Well, at least he had the entire rest of the day to plan out what he was going to say now. Another gust of wind sliced across his face, and he glanced up to see shreds of grey cloud flying in from the west. Whatever thinking he was going to do was probably best done back inside.

On his bike again, his first thought was to turn back the way he’d come and retrace the same road home, but looking on ahead, he saw that the bridge carried on to a path that followed the river a little further before rejoining the main road farther on. It would only add another minute or two to his ride, so it couldn’t hurt to explore a little more.

The path along the river turned out to be a precarious one. On his left, the edge of the path bordered the steep drop of the river bank, and on his right, there was an almost equally steep slope down to a series of fallow rice fields. If he didn’t concentrate carefully on holding his bike upright, he could take a nasty spill in either direction.

When he reached the main road at last, he paused to look left and right. He didn’t recognize this stretch of it, but the convenient thing about having a mountain range due west — okay, technically north and west, but who was counting — was that you never got confused about which direction was which. Turning right would lead him out of town, while left led back in, so he turned left and followed the road until eventually he saw the okonomiyaki restaurant and knew he was close to home.

He only just managed to get inside before the first raindrops began to fall. He slammed the door of his flat behind him and hurried down the hallway to his room, grabbing the remote to click on the heater the moment he was inside. The sunlight had failed, and the room was now plunged in a greyish gloom that did nothing to improve his dismal mood. It was too quiet here. Unbidden, his imagination drew up an image of Phil sat in Akari’s family’s living room, Akari at his side, the two of them laughing and chatting companionably with her family. Dan’s imagination was a dick.

He piddled around on the internet for a while after that, trying to distract himself by reading through the longest, most ridiculous Reddit threads he could find. When that wasn’t enough, he tried getting on Skype to see if he could catch any of his family or friends online. It was afternoon here in Japan now, which meant that people in England would be awake — or at least those people who had their lives together enough to be out of bed by 8:00 AM on a Sunday morning. Admittedly, that description did not fit most of his friends back home, but it was still a let-down to check his Skype contacts and see zero people online. Maybe he could just go back to bed until 7:30. He shook his head at his computer screen. There was no way he was getting his brain to shut up for long enough to fall asleep right now.

That really struck to the heart of the issue, didn’t it? Too many thoughts, and no one to listen to them.
Only half-conscious he was doing so, Dan clicked the Pages icon down at the bottom of his screen and opened up The Thing, as he’d taken to calling it. It was nearly thirty thousand words long now, of pointless rambling that he was too embarrassed to even attempt to re-read. He hit enter until he had nothing but blank white page in front of him and then started typing.

As he wrote, he let himself remember yesterday, really remember it with every disgusting detail — the way Akari’s hand had looked so tiny inside of Phil’s, the softness in Phil’s eyes as they had looked down at her, and the kiss he’d pressed to the top of her head when he thought no one was looking. And then the night, and how Phil’s words had felt rough and hot in Dan’s ear, the way his pupils had edged out the blue of his eyes to turn them into two black holes, and how Dan had gotten sucked right in.

He didn’t look up from his computer screen until his stomach startled him with a noisy complaint. He glanced at the clock and saw that it was after 4:00. Had he really been writing that long?

The rain outside had slowed to a sullen drizzle, and Dan thought he might brave the outdoors again. God knew he needed to get away from his own company for a while.

There was a tiny cafe Seiji had shown him several weeks back, just a couple of blocks over from Phil’s, so Dan packed up his laptop and bundled up in a water-resistant jacket, and went out into the dismal afternoon once more.

It was easier to focus on other things in the cafe, where he could sit and drink his coffee and eat his croque monsieur and try not to get caught people-watching. He had actually managed to think about something other than his impending conversation with Phil for a solid five minutes when Seiji suddenly materialized before him and plopped down on the bench across the table.

“Mind if I sit here?” he asked, pulling out his own laptop and setting it in front of him.

“Be my guest,” Dan said.

A waitress came over then and took Seiji’s order. When she had gone, Seiji turned to Dan, gave him a narrow look and said,

“Do you wanna talk about it?”

Dan looked over at the couple seated at the next table. Then he looked out the window behind them, and up at the ceiling and down at the table before him. He sighed.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Seiji nodded and leaned forward over the table a little, but he didn’t say anything else. He just waited.

“So…” Dan said, grimacing down at his hands where they were tearing a napkin to shreds on the tabletop. “…I kind of stupidly have feelings for Phil.”

Seiji raised an eyebrow and pursed his lips in a silent whistle, but still he didn’t say anything.

“It’s ridiculous. It’s just a dumb little crush, really, but…” But if it was really such an insignificant thing why did he feel so devastated every time he saw Phil and Akari together? Why did it hurt so much to know that Phil didn’t return his feelings? “Anyway, Phil didn’t know about it until last night, when I had to open my idiot mouth and tell him.” There was no reason Seiji needed to know that what he’d actually told Phil was that he wanted to…er, have sex with him.
“I see,” Seiji said, drawing out the second word. The waitress appeared with Seiji’s hot tea then, and Dan returned his gaze to the napkin carnage beneath his fingers. “What did Phil say?” Seiji asked when they were alone at the table again.

“He didn’t say anything,” Dan sighed, picking up a bit of napkin and rolling it between his fingers until he’d made a tiny paper ball of it. “I left before he could, and then when I came back after, he ignored me.”

“Ouch,” Seiji said.

Dan shrugged.

“The environment wasn’t exactly conducive to heartfelt conversation,” he muttered. “Besides, Akari was there.”

“Yeah,” Seiji said and sipped his tea. “So what are you going to do?”

Dan had made a nice, neat little row of paper balls now, and he started pushing them about with his fingertip, arranging them into various patterns. It helped him think, to have something to do with his hands.

“I’m going over to his place in a little bit, and we’re going to talk about it.” He kept his voice as dead as he could, but he wasn’t nearly as accomplished at concealing his emotions as Phil. He could hear the tremor rumbling through his words, and he knew Seiji must too.

He heard the sounds of Seiji slurping his tea again. Then,

“Do you think he has feelings for you too?”

That pulled a laugh from Dan, a sharp, harsh sound. Could anything be more ridiculous?

“No, of course not,” he snorted. “Which was why he was supposed to never know a thing about it.”

“Phil’s a really nice guy,” Seiji said then. Dan wanted to roll his eyes, but he didn’t. “I’m sure he won’t be cruel to you about it.”

“No, I don’t think he’ll be cruel,” Dan muttered, squishing all the napkin balls together into one big, crinkly sphere of paper. “But I still have to sit next to him for eight hours every day at work. There’s no way that’s not going to be awkward.”

Seiji drew his breath in through his teeth, making a hissing sound.

“Sucks, man,” he said.

Seiji wasn’t very good at comfort, but Dan was feeling better nonetheless. It helped that Seiji hadn’t freaked out or told him he was evil for falling for someone who was taken. And actually hearing himself explain the situation out loud to someone — it didn’t sound so bad after all. He and Phil were both adults, and they could be mature about this. Work was work, and they wouldn’t let personal matters get in the way.

“What are you doing here anyway?” Dan asked Seiji, reaching for his own drink before remembering that he’d finished it ages ago.

“Working on a lesson plan. When are you going over to Phil’s?”

Dan checked the time on his phone.
“In, like, two hours,” he said, flagging the waitress down and ordering another round of coffee.

They sat on their respective laptops for the next two hours, and though there wasn’t much in the way of further conversation, it turned out to be exactly what Dan needed. He didn’t know how he would have gotten through those last couple of hours if he’d been all alone. Probably, he would have shown up at Phil’s front door a nervous wreck.

At 7:15, he folded up his laptop, stowed it in his messenger bag, and called the waitress over one last time, to get the bill.

“Good luck,” Seiji told him, as he pushed back his chair and slung his bag over his shoulder. “I’m sure it will all be fine, though.”

“Thanks,” Dan replied. “I hope you’re right.”

Phil’s building was so close he didn’t even bother getting on his bike. He just wheeled it down a couple of blocks and then there he was in the car park. He stashed his bike underneath the bike shelter, locking the built-in metal ring around the back tire, and then headed into the entryway. The lift was just as eerie as always. As it creaked up to the fourth (third) floor, he tried not to look too closely at the warning sign illustrating the dangers of attempting to ride it during an earthquake.

Up on the fourth floor, the moist darkness of the evening was broken only by the dull yellow lights that hung at intervals along the side of the building. He trudged down the long veranda with shoulders hunched against the cold until he reached Phil’s door and, not giving himself any time to think about it, rang the bell.

It seemed like Phil was there at once, swinging the door open and beckoning him in from the cold. Had he been waiting at the door? His expression was calm…disturbingly normal. Just the sight of Phil was enough to twist Dan’s stomach into knots, but it was probably only because Dan had spent all day thinking about him.

“I’ve got the kotatsu on in the tatami room, if you want to warm up in there,” Phil said, leading the way down the hall. “I’m just putting the kettle on for tea. Would you like some?”

“Yes, please,” Dan said, despite the fact that he’d drunk so much coffee he felt sloshy inside. Peeking into the tatami room, he saw that the low table there had been fitted out with a cushiony blanket. He slid his slippers off at the door and then slipped his legs under the table, almost groaning with pleasure at the toasty warmth radiating from the heater underneath. He’d seen kotatsu in anime plenty of times, but he’d never realized what a heavenly invention they were until now.

It was quiet for a while, the only sounds the running of water into the kettle and the gentle clink of metal on metal as Phil set the kettle on the burner. Dan could feel a knot forming between his shoulder blades, and his heart seemed about ready to explode from his chest. He was very carefully staring down at his phone, not daring to look up, in case Phil was watching. Best to appear as nonchalant as possible, he figured.

A few short minutes later, Phil was stepping carefully into the room with two brimming mugs, and Dan allowed himself to look up at last. Phil was busy concentrating on not spilling their tea, a tiny crease between his pale eyebrows.

Dan had thought hard about what he was going to say all day. He’d considered lying — “What? No! I was just joking?” He’d considered getting down on his knees and begging Phil to leave Akari for him (and maybe daydreamed just a little about what might happen if Phil agreed). Watching Phil set the mugs down and then slide beneath the kotatsu across from him, he wished so badly that Phil had
given him even the slightest clue what had been on his mind lately.

Phil looked up from his mug of tea and smiled — not the tight, cautious smile of yesterday evening, but not exactly an open, warm and welcoming one either. Dan couldn’t meet his eyes and stared down at his own tea instead.

“I’m sorry.” The words rushed out all at once.

“Why are you sorry?” Phil was as calm and beneficent as a fucking bodhisattva. It was almost irritating.

“Because,” Dan said, and then lifted his mug of tea and took a long swig. He still didn’t dare look up at Phil. “I think I made things awkward. And I don’t want things to be awkward.”

“Dan—“ His eyes glanced up then, an involuntary reaction to hearing his name called. Phil had fixed him with a steady gaze, that saintly smile still curving his lips. “It’s okay. I don’t feel the same way about you, but I don’t feel awkward. In fact, I’m kind of flattered.”

But I didn’t even tell you how I feel about you, Dan wanted to say but didn’t. He felt relieved, sure, that Phil seemed to be taking this so well, but that thing was calling to him again. That frighteningly powerful urge to do the exact things he knew he shouldn’t — tell Phil he was in love with him, reach across the small tabletop and force Phil’s lips onto his, anything he could think of to wipe that damn cold smile off his face.

Dan smiled back at Phil and said,

“Okay.”

Phil stood from the table then and held out his arms toward Dan, who blinked up at him in astonishment.

“Do you want a hug?” Phil asked. Something about his smile seemed warmer now, or was that just Dan’s hopeful imagination?

“Okay,” Dan said again, standing up himself and shuffling across the tatami to where Phil stood. He took it slow, knowing this would probably be his one and only chance to ever hold Phil in his arms. Phil’s body was so slender, but his arms around Dan’s back squeezed tightly. Dan closed his eyes and took in the warmth of Phil’s chest against his. He hadn’t been prepared for it to feel so perfect. Then Phil’s arms loosened, and Dan stepped quickly back, forcing a grin onto his face.

“Bet I can still slaughter you at MarioKart.”

Phil’s eyes narrowed.

“Prove it,” he said before turning and striding off toward the lounge. Dan took one second more to catch his breath — the side of Phil’s neck had smelled like his pillow, like skin and laundry detergent and Phil’s shampoo — and then followed after.

Dan won every round, and Phil claimed he’d gone easy on him, though they both knew it was a lie.

Chapter End Notes
Originally published on tumblr
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Things get Halloween-y! (Warnings for alcohol and drunkenness)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next Thursday was their first time working at primary school on the same day. They were deep into Halloween lesson time at both primary schools, so Dan supposed it was almost inevitable that they would end up scheduled together at least one day this month. Last week, he’d been almost giddy with excitement about it, losing himself in ridiculous daydreams about him and Phil playing tag together with all the kids during the midday break. Now the only thing he was looking forward to was the fact that, with a full day of classes each, they would hardly see each other.

No, he didn’t mean that. Or did he? Shit, Dan didn’t even know what he wanted anymore. On Monday, sitting next to Phil at their desks, things had felt normal enough. They’d snickered together after the morning meeting over the teachers’ horrified discussion of a mysterious something that had been discovered in the third-year girls’ toilets the day before. Neither of them had a clue what it was, as none of the teachers had been brave enough to actually say.

They’d spent the next hour competing with each other to propose the most ridiculous theory as to what the dread object might have been. Phil maintained that it was a portal to an alternate dimension, and that one of their students had been carried off to become the magical girl savior of the world on the other side. Dan said it was probably just cigarettes.

In the afternoon, having finished their classes for the day, they’d engaged in one of their favorite staff room activities — re-casting famous movies with their ALT friends and other acquaintances. Monday’s selection had been Star Wars, with Seiji as Luke Skywalker and Madhavi and Jake as R2-D2 and C3PO, respectively. They’d passed an agreeable hour bickering about which of the two of them, Dan or Phil, made more sense as Boba Fett, a point which had yet to be decided by the time 4:00 rolled around. They had bid each other good-bye with laughs and parting shots, and it had all been fine.

But on Tuesday there had been less to talk about, and Phil had seemed distracted half the time anyway. Dan had even started in on a funny story about a party at uni last Halloween but had broken off halfway through when Phil had turned to him with a blank stare and just said, “What?”

Last week, Dan would have scolded him for it without hesitation, but now, with Phil’s expressionless eyes fixed on him, he felt cowed by his friend’s apparent lack of interest. It raised all sorts of doubts in him. Why should Phil want to pay him any attention in the first place? Was his story really even worth listening to?

“Nothing,” Dan had said and turned back to the novel he was reading.

“No, Dan. You were saying something. I’m sorry,” Phil protested, leaning in a little more closely, but that just irritated Dan. He didn’t want Phil that close to him if there was nothing he could do about it.
“It really wasn’t important,” Dan said, his voice calm and even, and he snapped his book shut and stood. “I think I’m going to go for walk. I’ll be back in a bit.”

“Oh, okay.”

Dan had spent a good half hour just standing on the second floor balcony. The science classrooms up there were empty at this hour, and on a clear, sunny day like today it was nice to stand up there and look out over the school grounds and see the city framed by the mountains. It was just a shade too chilly to be up there at this time of year, especially with the brisk breeze whipping round the side of the building, but Dan just pulled his blazer closer and withstood it. Better here than back downstairs.

Phil made more of an effort on Wednesday. Dan could tell, by the way Phil trained his eyes so carefully onto Dan’s and the way he kept his hands so still on his lap. This was even worse, Dan decided, than Phil ignoring him. If being friends with Dan was so much work, he wondered that Phil even bothered.

Now here they were on Thursday, seated in neighboring chairs at the table in the back of Nishisho’s staff room. Phil had lucked out and ended up scheduled to teach the third years with Hikari-sensei, while Dan was stuck teaching the fourth years with Kyoko-sensei again. At least the Halloween lesson plans were fun to do. Dan would get to change into his vampire costume in a minute, and the whole lesson would just be teaching the kids Halloween-related vocabulary and then playing Halloween games with them. Kyoko-sensei even had a bag of mini-costumes for the students to wear, including things like witch’s hats, cat ears, and devil horns.

“What costume did you bring?” he asked Phil as they both stood up to head to the changing room after the morning meeting.

“Oh, I didn’t actually,” Phil answered, hefting a plastic bag. “Hikari-sensei brought this one for me, to match hers.”

Dan glanced over at the English teacher, who had already changed into her own costume. She was dressed in a floofy blue dress with a frilly white apron over it, white stockings, and a blonde wig with a black bow on top. Dan raised an eyebrow and looked back at Phil.

“So that makes you…Johnny Depp?”

“Yes!” Phil said with a chuckle.

In the changing room, Phil pulled out a long coat, which he shrugged on over his work shirt, and a top hat with a little card stuck in that read “10/6.” Dan caught himself just standing there watching Phil get dressed and quickly turned away to tie on his own black cape before hurrying over to a small mirror that hung on the opposite side of the room. It took him several minutes to get his pale make-up and fangs just right, but when he stepped back and looked over the finished product he was pretty pleased with it.

“Dan,” Phil called, and he turned to see him struggling with a multi-colored piece of cloth that he had hung around his neck. “Can you help me tie this in a bow? I can’t do it without a mirror.”

Dan was on the verge of saying yes, but then he imagined it: standing in front of Phil, leaning in close to his face, carefully tugging at the fabric around his neck and feeling the way it gently brushed against the skin there—

“Here, I’m done with the mirror. Go nuts,” he muttered, before pushing past Phil and out of the room.
The next several hours ended up being some of the most fun he’d had since coming to Japan. They
started off teaching the kids words like “ghost,” “witch,” “skeleton,” “jack-o-lantern,” and “candy.”
Dan really got into it, having them repeat the word normally once before repeating it again in a silly
way, saying, “Ghoooooost!” in a scary ghost voice or adding a high-pitched cackle after “witch.”
The kids were almost bouncing off the walls with excitement by the end of it, a few of them even
doubling over with laughter at Dan’s ridiculous Dracula impression. Even Kyoko-sensei didn’t seem
to mind the slightly chaotic atmosphere. Maybe somewhere deep in her icy heart there remained
some spark of human warmth.

After vocabulary practice, they played a game to give the students a chance to use the new words.
The students divided up into their lunch groups, and each group was given a set of picture cards and
a pair of oversized dice. They laid out the vocabulary cards in rows, like a game board, and each
student used their rubber as a game marker. They took turns rolling the dice and moving that number
of spaces, repeating the name of the picture card they landed on. If they couldn’t remember the
English word, they had to move back a space. Dan was allowed to join in with one of the groups in
each class, and he couldn’t believe how much fun the simple game turned out to be. He especially
enjoyed helping the students cheat by whispering the words out of the side of his mouth when they
couldn’t remember them.

At the end of each lesson, he and Kyoko-sensei handed out tiny candy-filled jack-o-lanterns to the
students, and then they all posed for a group photo in their costumes. Kyoko-sensei hurried back to
the staff room each time, but Dan kept getting mobbed by students who wanted him to reprise his
Dracula impression and pretend to bite them.

He was very tired by the time lunch rolled around, but he was in such a giddy mood that he didn’t
think twice about sneaking up behind Phil in the corridor outside the staff room and scaring him with
a shrill, “Boo!”

He was rewarded with a strong start from Phil, who turned and gave him an exasperated smile and
shake of the head.

“I hate you,” he said, narrowing his eyes at Dan, though he was still smiling.

“You can’t blame me. I’m a vampire. It’s in my nature,” Dan replied, widening his eyes and
waggling his fingers at Phil in a spooky gesture.

“You’re a Danpire,” Phil corrected him, grinning at his own joke.

“Oh my god. That was terrible,” Dan groaned, shaking his head before moving past Phil and into the
staff room. The truth was that he’d thought it was kind of adorable, but there was no way in hell he
was going to tell Phil that.

Lunch turned out to be natto, the sight of which cast a faint pall over Dan’s bright mood. He’d had
his first natto several weeks ago, and despite every warning, he still hadn’t been prepared. It was the
second bite that did it. The first bite of the sticky, slippery beans that he’d managed to grab between
the ends of his chopsticks had been odd and new and not particularly nice. He’d gone for a second
bite, wondering why people got so upset about this dish, but once the second cluster of beans had
joined the first in his mouth, it struck him that what was resting on his tongue was a combination of
every vile flavor he’d ever tasted — bitter, metallic, acidic, sickly — no matter what horrible
adjective he thought of, they all seemed to describe the sticky blob in the center of his mouth. He had
almost gagged on it, and Phil had just laughed.

Dan had been careful to avoid it when it had cropped up in lunches again after that. However, the
unfortunate truth about natto was that it wasn’t just the flavor that was so offensive — it was the
smell. And on natto days, the whole school would grow redolent with the scent of it from lunchtime onward.

He managed to grin and bear it throughout his lunchtime with the fourth years. Then he was able to escape outside for the forty-five minutes of hiruyasumi. Out here, as long as he didn’t get too close to any of the kids, he wouldn’t have to smell their natto breath.

As soon as he stepped outside, he was accosted by a group of second years who wanted to show off their stilt skills to him. After he’d congratulated them all on their surprising adeptness at walking around on the giant metal stilts, he wandered over to where some boys were playing a game of baseball. The game didn’t make for very interesting spectating, but it did have the advantage of allowing him to keep an eye on Phil where he was playing dodgeball with the third years just on the opposite side of the baseball diamond.

Like Dan, he’d temporarily switched back to his normal clothes in order to avoid messing up his costume. Dan thought he could have easily stood there for the rest of the day watching Phil run back and forth in his white shirt and work trousers, grinning and sticking his tongue out at the kids when their shots missed him, and cheering on his teammates with “gambare”s and “naiso shotto”s.

Eventually the bell rang, though, and Phil ruffled a couple of kids’ hair before herding them all back inside. Dan followed after at a slower pace.

By the time they were back in the staff room after fifth period, Dan was wiped. The fourth years’ seemingly boundless energy had exhausted him, but he didn’t mind too much. They’d been a lot of fun.

He and Phil sat side by side in silence for a while, Dan busy adding stickers and comments to the fourth years’ folders and Phil busy studying for his Japanese language test in December. Dan really needed to start studying too. Phil had actually talked him into signing up for the N4, the second-lowest level of the exam, so he would be testing in December as well.

“That’s cute,” Phil said, and Dan looked up from the little cartoon he’d been doodling next to a note in one of the students’ folders to see Phil leaning over to get a closer look at it. “Is that you?”

“Yes,” he replied, turning back to his drawing and adding a final touch. “It’s a Danpire.”

Phil chuckled at that, and Dan expected teasing. Instead, Phil asked him,

“Hey, have you got your costume ready for the Halloween party?”

Oh, right. That.

“Er, no,” Dan said, keeping his eyes fixed on the folder he was working on.

“Dan!” Phil scolded him. “It’s this Saturday.”

“Yeah, well, I was thinking I might not go,” Dan mumbled, his shoulders hunching just a little farther forward over the table.

There was a pause before Phil continued, his tone light and conversational.

“It’s a really big party, you know. There will be loads of people there from all over the prefecture. Plus, random people from the local community often show up too. Last year we had more than eighty people in total. There will lots of people there,” he reiterated.

Dan knew what he was really saying — that Dan needn’t worry about feeling awkward around Phil
(and Akari) because he didn’t even have to see him there if he didn’t want to, and that maybe Dan would have a chance to meet someone else...

“We always have a ton of fun,” Phil was saying. “I really think you should go.”

“Okay,” Dan gave in, and it was partly because Phil had convinced him and partly because he knew he would regret skipping it if he didn’t go. He shouldn’t let stupid boy drama stop him from enjoying his life, after all.

“Good! We need to get you a costume then,” Phil said.

Dan couldn’t help looking up then and gazing at Phil with slightly widened eyes.

*We?*

“The best place to get costumes is Donki,” Phil had hurried on, apparently oblivious to the strange look Dan was giving him. “Don Quijote, that is. It’s this big supermarket department store kind of thing up in Kokki. Do you wanna go when we get done here?”

Phil was offering to drive him all the way to Kokki just to buy a costume? He cast his mind back over the last few hours, trying to figure out what in the world had brought this on.

“Yeah, I guess. That would be…helpful,” he said slowly.

“Great!” Phil’s tone was bright and cheerful, and Dan could only stare at him in confusion. Was he faking it, just pretending to be so gung-ho for this spontaneous shopping trip while having some ulterior motive? But Dan couldn’t conceive of what possible secret motive could be behind something so inane. Unless it was bribery. Maybe Phil was just feeling guilty for making Dan feel so shit these past several days. Dan snorted quietly to himself as he finished up the last of the folders. There was no need for Phil to feel guilty about it. It wasn’t his fault that the target-finder on Dan’s love-missile was faulty.

“Love-missile,” Dan snickered softly under his breath.

“Hm?” Phil asked, glancing up from his own work again.

“Nothing.”

They decided it would be best for Dan to ride his bike home first and then for Phil to follow after to pick him up. They didn’t want to repeat the whole bike debacle of two weekends ago. Dan couldn’t help thinking back to that weekend on his ride home and how Phil had lain on the futon beside him and whispered secrets to him while slept. He’d thought Phil trusted him then, but that had all changed now. Not that he’d given Phil any reason to distrust him per se, but he knew Phil would be more guarded around him now. Whatever it was that had been bothering him, he wasn’t likely to open up to Dan about it anymore.

Don Quijote turned out to be a massive and strangely eclectic place. While the ground floor was more or less a normal supermarket, when they took the escalator up to the first floor they found a department store with everything from clothes to stationery to an adults-only section. Dan couldn’t resist popping his head behind the curtain to see what was in there and was not disappointed by the, er, interesting collection of items on offer.

Eventually Phil dragged him over to the costume section (though they both got distracted for a while looking through all of the anime merch), and Dan wandered through aisle after aisle of costume options. There were the usual suspects — school girl, police officer, pirate — along with some truly
bizarre ones — boxer shorts with a faucet attached to the front, pile of poo, or the one that was simply a head-to-toe spandex suit available in any color of the rainbow.

“Erm,” Dan said, picking up a curly, purple wig and eyeing it with misgiving. “I have no idea. What are you going to be?”

“It’s a surprise,” Phil said, shaking his head and miming zipping up his lips.

“I could just go as a vampire, you know,” Dan said, setting the wig back down and gazing up and down the aisle again. Nothing was really catching his eye.

“No, come on,” Phil shook his head more firmly this time. “You’ve got to try a little harder than that! There’s a costume contest, you know. First prize is ¥5,000.”

“What? Really?” He hadn’t realized this party was such a big thing.

“Seiji’s really good at organizing parties,” Phil just answered with a shrug.

Dan glanced up and down the aisle again. Could he pull off the school girl look? Maybe buy a long, black wig and get Madhavi or someone to put make-up on him? It could work… He walked back over to the girl’s uniform costume, saw the price tag and decided it definitely could not work. His company had started paying him now, but he still couldn’t afford to blow an entire ¥万 on a Halloween costume.

He walked down to the end of the aisle and gazed around the costume department once more. That’s when he spotted it, over near the toy section — the perfect costume for him. He hurried over and picked it up, glancing at the price tag. ¥3,500 wasn’t cheap, but it wasn’t terrible either.

“Is that really the one you’re getting?” Phil asked with a laugh, coming up behind him and looking over his shoulder.

“Yeah, won’t I be adorable?”

“The adorablest,” Phil agreed, another laugh escaping through his nose, and Dan almost blushed. He knew Phil was just joking. He did. So why had his whole body grown warm at Phil’s words?

“Come on. Let’s go check out,” he said, spinning on his heel and hurrying off to the nearest cash register, leaving Phil to follow at his own pace.

On the drive back home, Dan couldn’t help asking,

“Does Akari have her costume ready for Saturday?”

“Yep,” Phil said, one side of his mouth rising in a smirk. “I think she had it picked out months ago. She loves Halloween.”

Akari often had to work on Saturdays, and Dan had been holding onto this faint, mean hope that she wasn’t going to be able to make it to the party. Clearly his hope had been in vain.

“Can you at least give a hint about your costume? Maybe just a little one?” Dan wheedled.

“Fine.” Phil rolled his eyes, though he quickly turned them back to the road. “It’s a character from One Piece.”

Dan made a dissatisfied clucking noise with his tongue.
“That’s no help. There are like fifty million characters in that show,” he muttered. “Wait. Unless you’re dressing up as Nami.”

Phil laughed out loud at that.

“Geez, I think that would actually make people go blind.”

Dan had never really gotten into One Piece — he found it cliched and boring — but here in Japan it was inescapably popular, especially among his students, so he’d made himself learn more about it. It gave him something to chat with the students about over lunch.

It was already completely dark out by the time Phil dropped him back home. Dan had been hoping that Phil would suggest they get dinner together, but he didn’t, and Dan certainly wasn’t going to suggest it himself. He wasn’t sure how he’d ended up being invited out by Phil today, but he wasn’t going to push his luck.

“See you tomorrow!” Phil called after him as he clambered out of the cramped passenger seat.

“See you then,” Dan replied and waved Phil off with a smile.

On Friday afternoon when they were finished with classes, Phil explained his plans for getting them all to the party and back. It would be starting on Saturday evening, at 7:00, but Phil explained that a bunch of them would be meeting up at someone’s flat in Kokki ahead of time to pre-game and get their costumes on. The cafe where the party would be held was in Kokki, fairly close to their friend’s place, so Phil would leave his car there and they would walk to the party all together (Dan hoped that being in a group would diminish the humiliation he would probably feel at walking around in his costume in public).

“Then after the party we can get a daikou back to Harata, if you don’t mind pitching in,” Phil finished up.

“What’s a daikou?” Dan said, glancing up at the clock and seeing that they still had nearly half an hour until they could go home. Well, actually Dan could have left half an hour ago already, but there were still thirty minutes until Phil could go too.

“Oh, right,” Phil said with an apologetic grin, “Sometimes I forget that you haven’t been here forever and still don’t know a lot of things. A daikou is a kind of taxi service where you can get someone to come out and drive you home in your own car, if you’ve been drinking and can’t drive.”

“That’s pretty useful. Er, is it expensive?”

“Nah, it’s actually cheaper than taking a regular taxi. If we split the cost among you, me, James, and Akari it should only be about ¥1,000 each.”

“Okay. Yeah, I think I can manage that,” Dan said.

“Good! We can get them to drop you back home, or you can just crash on the futon at mine again, if you want.”

“I think I’d rather just go home,” Dan said quickly, looking down at his notebook where he’d been writing out Japanese vocabulary words as practice.

“Sure,” Phil answered.

There was a pause then, which stretched out into a silence that, after a full minute had passed, started
to become awkward.

“I think everyone’s going to love your costume,” Phil said at last, and Dan let out a laugh that was louder for being partially motivated by relief.

“I’d say the same about yours if I knew what it was.”

“Oh, they’ll love mine too,” Phil assured him. “That’s why I went with One Piece. The key to winning the costume contest is picking something that everyone will recognize.”

“Wow, Phil. Why so mercenary?”

Phil turned to him then with a narrow-eyed, pursed-lipped look and gave Dan a single nod.

“Halloween costumes are serious business,” he said, his voice slow and deep.

Dan let out a snort of laughter, but inwardly he was melting a little bit at the sound of Phil’s voice. No one had the right to sound that sexy while saying something so silly.

Saturday turned out to be a cold, blustery day, and Dan spent it entirely indoors, heater on full blast and duvet wrapped around his shoulders. Luckily, he’d just borrowed a new stack of manga from Phil and had no trouble filling the day.

Phil rang his doorbell promptly at 5:00, and he grabbed his bag with his costume inside and then, on a whim, stuck in a change of clothes and his toothbrush. He was still planning to come home, but it never hurt to be prepared.

“Ready?” Phil asked as soon as he’d opened the door. The wind was whipping his hair all over the place, and he was hunched up into his coat, his hands rubbing up and down the sides of his arms.

“Yep!” Dan said, quickly locking up.

When they got down to Phil’s car, Dan was surprised to see only James inside.

“Where’s Akari?” he asked as they climbed in.

“Oh, yeah, her work called her in last minute,” Phil muttered and then started the car.

Dan didn’t want to admit that he was happy, especially as he knew how disappointed Akari must be to be missing the party. He really wasn’t that much of an asshole. Really. It was just that now he would get Phil all to himself all evening… But he was very sad Akari had to work, and Phil was probably upset about it too. In fact, Phil would probably need cheering up…

Dan shook his head and scowled out the window at the passing buildings.

“What’s your costume, James?” he asked after a minute, turning in his seat so that he could see James in the back seat.

James held up a hat and a pair of boots that had been lying on the seat next to him.

“I’m a cowboy,” he said with a grin. “Or I will be once we get to Nathan’s. How about you?”

Dan opened his bag and pulled out his costume, still wrapped in its package with a picture of it on the front. James cracked up almost immediately.

“You are a braver man than I,” he said, wiping a tear of laughter from his eye.
Nathan’s tiny flat was packed with way too many people, and Dan would probably have felt
uncomfortable being there if they hadn’t mostly been people he knew. As it was, he stuck close to
Phil’s side as they made their way into the tatami-lined lounge and squeezed onto a couch next to
Max. Someone pressed a drink into Dan’s hand almost as soon as he’d sat down, and he was grateful
that it gave him something to do other than sitting there staring awkwardly around at everyone.

“Sorry I’m not being much of a host,” Nathan, an American ALT from Iowa, leaned in from his
bedroom next door and announced. “I’m still putting the final touches on my costume. Oh, hey,
Phil!” And then he disappeared back around the door frame.

Several other people were also hurriedly attaching last-minute pieces to their costumes, and over in
one corner Dan saw an ALT from down south putting elaborate make-up on another ALT he didn’t
know. Dan’s own costume required very little preparation time, so he figured he would just slip it on
a couple of minutes before they left.

He managed to get through two lemon *chu-hi* before it was time to start getting dressed, so he was
feeling much calmer and more sociable. That was a good thing, he thought to himself as he stood in
Nathan’s bathroom pulling on his costume over his regular clothes. When he checked himself in the
mirror, he couldn’t suppress a grin. He’d never looked less dignified, but this costume had definitely
been the right choice.

He stepped out into the lounge once again, and all eyes turned to him. There was a pause in the
conversation and then the entire room erupted in laughter.

“Oh my god, that’s so cute!” Madhavi exclaimed, rushing over to him and reaching up to squeeze
one of the ears on his costume’s hood.

“Wow, man. I have so much respect for you right now,” Jake said from where he sat on a couch on
the far side of the room. “That takes balls.”

“Thanks,” Dan said, deadpan. He looked around for Phil, wanting to get his reaction to Dan in his
bright pink Hello Kitty onesie, but he was nowhere to be seen. He must still be in the other room
getting his own costume ready. Dan had to admit he was dying to see what it was.

That was when Phil stepped out of Nathan’s bedroom, and Dan’s eyes went wide. He was dressed
in a black suit with a bright orange shirt underneath, a frilly blue cravat, a huge afro wig on his head,
and a tiny black top hat in his hand. In his other hand he held a cane, but it was his face that really
made the outfit. Someone had painted it completely white, with black around his eyes and skeleton-
like teeth around his mouth, so that if he closed his eyes, his face looked exactly like a skull.

“Wait, what are you supposed to be, Phil?” Madhavi asked, relinquishing Dan’s squishy cat ear and
stepping toward Phil with a frown. She herself was dressed up like a pirate, with a bandana on her
head and a fake sword at her waist. She lifted up her eye-patch to get a better look.

“I’m Brook,” he said, doing a slow spin to show off the costume.

“Oh, from *One Piece*, right?” Jake said, comprehension dawning on his face.

“Yep!”

“We’d better get going,” Nathan said then, appearing behind Phil in his giant Pop-Tart costume.

The walk down to the cafe wasn’t half so embarrassing as Dan had thought it would be, probably
because he was far from the weirdest-dressed person in their group. Also, probably because he was
now halfway into a third *chu-hi*. He wasn’t sure why he kept drinking them, when he liked the flavor
so little. Most likely because they were cheap but had a high alcohol content.

The temperature had dropped even further, and the wind blowing down from the mountains was unforgiving, but Dan was surprisingly snug in his thick onesie. He might actually just start wearing it to sleep in at night, it was so comfortable.

“Wishing you’d just sprung for a onesie too?” he murmured in Phil’s ear as he walked up and fell into step beside him. “It didn’t seem like your strategy worked out so well.”

Phil cast him a sidewise glance and a smirk.

“Just wait,” he said.

They could hear the party about a block before they actually reached it. Dan had been to this cafe once before, and it had been a normal, laid-back kind of place, with the usual soft jazz and bossa nova songs playing in the background. Now it was blasting something with a heavy bass line. The tiny car park out front was already full, and Dan understood now why everyone had wanted to walk. As they made their way up to the door, he saw through the window that the cafe’s one room was already packed with people.

They had to pay at the door, and get their hands stamped to show that they were allowed in and out throughout the evening. Once they were in, Dan made a beeline straight for the food table, stacking a plate full with tiny sandwiches, chips, and even some mini-tacos. As he stood off to one side chowing down on what was essentially his dinner, he watched Phil make his way through the room — or rather, try to make his way through the room. He kept getting stopped every few minutes so that people could exclaim over his costume or ask to get a picture with him. Dan just slowly shook his head.

“He’s going to be so full of himself on Monday,” he murmured under his breath, unable to keep from smiling as he polished off the last of his sandwiches.

“Dan!” Seiji suddenly appeared at his side, grinning but also looking a little harried. “I love your costume.”

“Thanks!” Dan had to raise his voice a bit to be heard over the music.

“I’m gonna start the dance music soon. We need to get people out on the floor. Do you think you can help?”

“Er, sure,” he said. “But, why me?”

Seiji let out a shout of laughter at that and clapped him on the shoulder.

“I have faith in you,” he said before disappearing into the crowd again.

What was that supposed to mean? Dan shrugged and then headed over to the cafe’s tiny bar to buy a cocktail. It was only ¥500, a discounted price they’d gotten the place to give them because Seiji was good friends with the owner. By the time Dan had finished it, the music had shifted from pop to dance, and Seiji was standing over at the DJ booth trying to wave him down. Dan set his drink on the bar and signaled to Seiji that he’d seen him. Then he pushed his way through the crowd of people all stood around talking and out into the center of the room.

He scanned the crowd, looking for a victim — there was no way he was doing this alone. His eyes lit on Phil, leaning against a wall over near the windows, and the impulse was just too strong. He hurried over, took hold of Phil’s arm, and dragged him protesting into the center of the darkened
“What are you doing?” Phil laughed, trying to shake out of Dan’s grip.

“Dancing with you,” he answered, letting go of Phil’s arm in order to sidle up and give him a playful hip bump. “Come on, Seiji asked us to get the dancing started.” That wasn’t exactly what Seiji had asked, but Phil didn’t need to know that.

“Er,” Phil said, darting a glance toward Seiji, who just grinned and waved at him from behind the DJ’s table.

“Come on,” Dan said, shimmying his shoulders. “Look, other people are joining in too.”

He watched as Phil scanned the room, seeing that one or two people were also moving out onto the dance floor. Dan could see the moment when Phil gave in, the tension in his posture easing and his smile growing less rigid.

“Okay, okay,” he relented, raising his hands in the air a little and copying Dan’s hip movements.

“There you go,” Dan said, bumping hips with him again and tossing him a teasing grin. All the people standing around had started to notice the dancing, and more and more of them were moving into the middle of the room to join in. Several of their friends came over and started dancing next to Dan and Phil, and Dan, taking his role of dance-floor-starter very seriously, made sure to dance with each of them until they were all fully into it.

Whoever the DJ was, they were really good at their job. It seemed like every song that came on was exactly what Dan was in the mood to dance to right then, and it only took about three songs for most of the people in attendance to end up out on the dance floor. Dan had gotten separated from Phil pretty quickly, but that was okay. He was having too much fun weaving in and out of the crowd, getting into ridiculous dance-offs with random strangers, and fake-grinding on his friends.

Once he was sure that the dance floor had become self-sustaining, he gave himself a little pat on the back and headed back over to the bar for another cocktail. ¥500 was just too good a deal to pass up. As he stood waiting for the bartender to fix it for him, Blurred Lines came on, and Dan blinked in surprise. It was the first time he’d heard the song in months, since he’d come to Japan in fact. It was odd to think about, as he remembered that before he’d left England, the song had been everywhere — on every radio station, in supermarkets, clubs. It was so popular as to have been practically unavoidable. But here in Japan it was like the song hadn’t even existed.

It struck him then that he must have grown rather disconnected from popular music back home. He had no way of knowing if Blurred Lines was still just as ubiquitous back in England, or if it had now been replaced by some other inescapably catchy ear-worm. It made him sad, almost, to realize that. Life back home was continuing without him. If he went back right now, he could pick up more or less where he’d left off, but the longer he stayed away, the more little things like that he would miss out on — the latest love-to-hate pop song, the next big reality show sensation, the “Can you believe what happened on that show last night?”

He wondered what it was like for people like Phil and Seiji, who’d been living apart from their home cultures for years now. When they went home did they feel out of place? Did it seem like life there had begun to pass them by?

“Da-an!” Madhavi’s voice interrupted his thoughts. “Come dance with me!” She was standing next to him and tugging on his hand, trying to pull him back out onto the dance floor.
“Just let me finish my drink,” he laughed, downing the last of his mojito before allowing himself to be dragged away.

A few minutes later, the music quieted down for a moment, and Seiji announced that voting for the costume contest had now opened and to make sure that they all put in their votes for the top three. Dan wandered over to the table where they were taking the ballots, and he voted for Jake (who had come dressed as a shockingly-accurate Ash Ketchum), Nathan (because who didn’t love a giant Pop-Tart?), and Phil (just because).

“I love your outfit,” someone said as he left the voting table, and he turned to see a girl he didn’t know who was dressed in a maid costume. She had long, dark hair and was smiling up at him through thick, black lashes.

“Thanks. I like yours too,” he said.

“I’m Caroline. Hi.” She accompanied the words with an outstretched hand, and he took it and gave it a shake. Her hand was very warm.

“Hi. I’m Dan.”

“Do you want to dance?” she asked, not letting go of his hand.

“Yes, I do,” he grinned down at her and let her lead him out among the dancers again. They danced for a while and then went outside to cool off and chat for a bit. There were a few chairs and benches set up out front of the cafe, and several other people had also come to sit out here where it was quieter. Caroline was Taiwanese-American, she told him, and she taught at a school in a town just to the south of Harata. She had a soft voice and a warm smile, and she definitely knew how to flirt.

“Hey, I think the costume contest winners are being announced,” someone leaned out the front door of the cafe and called.

“Do you want to go back in?” Dan asked, as all of the other people sat out there got up and started heading inside.

“Why, do you think you might win?” she said with a soft chuckle.

“No,” he laughed. “You?”

She gestured at her black dress and white apron.

“Not exactly the most original costume idea, is it?” she said and shook her head.

“It suits you, though,” Dan said. “I’d hire you to clean my house.”

“Ha. Thanks,” she laughed, and then leaned over and kissed him. He had kind of been expecting her to for a while now, though he still hadn’t decided whether he wanted it to happen or not. Now that her lips were pressed against his, and moving gently, though, he kind of liked it. She deepened the kiss, and he went along with it, bringing one hand up to take hold of her arm and draw her closer.

From inside came the sound of cheering, and Dan and Caroline broke apart, leaning back and grinning at each other.

“That was nice,” she whispered to him.

“Yeah, it was,” he agreed.
“I don’t suppose your apartment is anywhere nearby?” she asked and raised her eyebrow.

He shook his head.

“Nope. It’s a twenty-minute drive away, and I don’t even have a car.”

She sighed and leaned back against the bench they were sharing.

“Too bad,” she said.

“Too bad,” he agreed.

There was more cheering from inside, and Dan glanced over at the window just in time to see Phil bowing, his wig bouncing with the movement, and accepting the first-prize envelope. He looked back at Caroline quickly and found her leaning in for another kiss. He let their mouths meet again, and let her put her arm around his waist, and let her tongue slip between his lips, and tried not to think about anything else for as long as he could.

Chapter End Notes

Originally published on tumblr
Chapter 14

Phil was lying beside him, backlit by the sunshine pouring through the French doors that led onto his balcony. His face was in shadow, but his eyes were strangely clear. Phil stretched an arm out toward him and pulled him close, pressing Dan’s face into his bare shoulder. Dan closed his eyes and breathed deeply of the warm scent of Phil’s skin—

“Da-an,” someone was murmuring nearby. He felt his lips twitch into a smile. He thought he could feel Phil’s warm breath against his ear again, tickling and moist. “Don’t you want your breakfast?”

“No,” he mumbled. He didn’t want to get out of bed because he knew — even if he didn’t want to let himself know — that when he opened his eyes Phil wouldn’t be lying beside him or holding him or whispering into his ear.

“Aw, come on. James has already eaten and gone, and it’ll get cold soon if you don’t get up and eat it,” Phil said.

Dan blinked his eyes open then immediately wished he hadn’t. The room was bright with sunlight that stabbed into his sore eyes. Wincing, he squeezed his eyes shut tight again.

“NNnnngnngrnnrn,” Dan groaned into the pillow. The golden glow of his dream had sharpened into the cold light of morning, and the mere mention of food was making him want to— Crap! Dan’s eyes sprang open, his hand went to his mouth, and he stumbled out of bed, pushing Phil out of the way as he made a mad scramble down the hall to the bathroom. He barely had time to register the fact that he was still dressed in his bright pink onesie before he was crouched on the floor in front of Phil’s toilet, violently expelling the contents of his stomach into the porcelain bowl.

He was shivering and shaking, with tears leaking from his eyes, when Phil appeared at the open door of the bathroom and eyed him with concern.

“Are you okay?”

Dan could only stare up at him and shake his head faintly from side to side. Even that slight movement brought the queasy feeling back, and a moment later, though his whole body ached with the effort of it, he was retching into the toilet again.

“Aww, Dan,” Phil murmured, before kneeling beside him and rubbing a gentle hand up and down his back while Dan gripped the sides of the toilet just to keep from falling over. His body felt almost too weak to support its own weight. Even just breathing seemed an effort. Fuck. How had he gotten so drunk?

“Do you think you can stand up?” Phil was asking him. He shook his head. In a minute maybe, when he’d had the time to gather his strength again. “Okay. Wait here a minute.”
Phil got up and left him, and it felt terrible. He wanted to call after him, order him to come back at once and put his soothing hand on Dan’s back again, but he didn’t have the strength even to open his mouth. It hurt so bad he started to cry, weak tears dripping down his face, and he wasn’t even sure what it was that was hurting so much — his stomach, his head, or just Phil being gone.

Phil reappeared at the door then, a full glass of water in one hand and a pill bottle in the other.

“Here, come out of there,” he ordered Dan. “You’ll feel better out here.”

Dan couldn’t think why that might be true, but he was willing to let Phil do his thinking for him at the moment. He let go of the toilet and put his hands on the floor and crawled out of the bathroom and onto the tiled floor of the laundry room it opened onto. His arms and legs shook with the effort, and he crumpled against the floor for a moment to catch his breath before sitting up and leaning against the wall.

Phil sank down beside him, holding out the glass of water first. Dan reached out and took it, but there was no strength in his wrist to hold it up, so Phil kept hold of the glass and helped Dan guide it up to his lips and take a long sip. The water was lukewarm and tasted of the tap, but it felt so good swirling across his tongue and down his throat that he started crying again.

“Dan,” Phil said quietly. “Do you want to go to the doctor?”

He mustered the strength to shake his head, back and forth once. No. No doctor. He needed to lie down and sleep for a few years, and then he’d be back to normal.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” he croaked, and he barely recognized his voice it was so hoarse.

Phil sat and stared at him for what felt like an eternity. Dan had no idea why he was staring at him like that, but eventually Phil raised the glass to his lips once more and helped him finish drinking the water. Then he left again, taking the glass with him, and came back with it full again. This time he shook two tablets out into his hand from the bottle he’d been holding and showed them to Dan.

“Do you need painkillers?”

Dan stared at the pills, his thoughts seeming to move so slowly. Yes, he was in pain. He hurt. His head hurt, his stomach hurt, his heart hurt. He nodded.

“Okay,” Phil said. “Open up.”

Dan opened his mouth, and Phil placed one of the pills on his tongue and helped him drink from the glass. Then Dan opened his mouth again, and Phil put in the second pill and helped him drink again. The water seemed to be doing Dan some good. His mind was feeling a little clearer, though that only made him all the more aware of just how much his head and body ached.

“I need to lie down,” he managed to say, and Phil nodded and held out a hand. Dan hadn’t the energy to feel embarrassed by how heavily he needed to lean against Phil as he rose from the floor on legs that wobbled like gelatin. Phil half-supported, half-dragged him back down the hallway to his bedroom, where he helped Dan climb back into his bed, and Dan slid beneath the duvet once again with a grateful whimper. As soon as his head hit the pillow, he felt himself drifting off into unconsciousness, and he let out a long sigh of relief.

“Dan, don’t go to sleep.” Phil’s voice jolted him awake again, and he scowled. Why would Phil do a
thing like that? “You need to eat something, and… You can sleep after you’ve had something to eat.”

No, no no no no no, he wanted to scream like a petulant toddler. Instead he just glared up at Phil and shook his head. How had Phil not grasped that the very idea of food going near his lips at the moment made him feel like his stomach was about to flip itself inside out?

“Yes, you’re going to eat something. It doesn’t have to be a lot, but you need to get something into your stomach. I promise it’ll help you feel better.”

Dan started to protest again, but Phil just walked out of the room, presumably to go get Dan’s food. Well, stupid Phil because Dan was going to go to sleep whether he liked it or not. He let his eyelids slide down again, and took a deep breath that made him nauseous, and tried to forget about the pounding in his head for long enough to lose consciousness.

He was roughly jostled back to awareness some time later — he didn’t know how long — by Phil’s hand on his shoulder, and the sickening motion of it almost made him vomit again.

“Dan,” Phil’s voice was quiet but urgent. “Dan!” It had risen in pitch, and Dan opened his eyes enough to see Phil’s face hovering above him, eyes bright with some emotion Dan was too foggy to read. “Oh, you’re awake.”

“Nnnn,” Dan whined. Of course he was awake. Phil had just fucking woken him.

“Here, I made you some scrambled eggs and bacon, and there’s toast too if you think you can manage it.”

Phil was setting a plate down on the bedside table beside the glass of water and the bottle of ibuprofen. That was funny, that the bottle said “ibuprofen” on it in English. Why wasn’t it in Japanese? If he’d had the energy to, he would have asked Phil why his pill bottle’s label was in Eng —

“Dan, are you listening to me?”

He looked up at Phil with a start. Right, food. Phil wanted him to eat the food. He turned his eyes toward the plate, one lip lifting in slight disgust. Nothing had ever looked more unappetizing in his entire life… But Phil had made it for him, and Phil wanted him to eat it, and Phil had settled on the bed next to him and was raising a forkful of egg to his mouth.

He opened his mouth and let Phil spill the contents of the fork onto his tongue, and though every cell of his body revolted against the sensation of it, he chewed and swallowed and willed the food to stay down.

The next forkful was easier, and the one after that even easier. Soon they’d built up a steady rhythm of spill, chew, swallow, repeat, and after an eternity of this Dan had finished the eggs. He was exhausted.

“Well done,” Phil said and offered him a smile, and why did Dan feel like a first year primary school student who had just tied his shoes on his own for the first time? “Want to try some bacon?”

Dan nodded, and Phil lifted a slice of bacon to his lips and let him bite and chew it. When Dan had finished the bacon, Phil tried to get him to eat the toast too, but Dan simply couldn’t. He hadn’t the energy left even to open his mouth for it. He just shook his head and sank back on the pillow, his eyelids dropping down over his eyes and his mind slipping into darkness.
When he came awake again sometime later, the light in the room and changed. He realized it was afternoon now. He scooted up the pillows until he was in a sitting position. His head still pounded and his throat still ached, but his thoughts were a little sharper now. He frowned. What was he doing in Phil’s bed? Of course he remembered this morning — he shuddered a little at the thought of it — and falling back to sleep after eating, but what about before then? Why was he here and not back home? Hadn’t that been what they’d agreed to?

He cast his mind back to last night. He could recall the dark interior of a car, leaning his forehead against the cold glass of the window because it felt so nice against his feverish skin. There was a girl. He’d kissed her. He definitely remembered that. Dancing? It was all coming back to him in snippets, just little clippings from the reel of his memories. Phil had won the costume contest, and Dan had thrown his arms around him and hugged him, laughing and congratulating him, and they’d danced together. He remembered holding Phil’s hand.

For just a moment his heart stopped, and he cast a panicked look around the room, searching for signs that they had— But no. That wasn’t it. He let out a long, tired breath and lay back down again. Oh god. How had he managed to get so very drunk last night?

“Dan?” Phil’s voice drifted in from the tatami room next door. “Are you awake again?”

“Yeah,” he called back, glad that at least enough of his strength had returned to be able to do that.

He heard sounds from the next room — Phil clambering up from the floor and shuffling over the tatami in his stocking feet. Then he appeared at the doorway, his eyes raking over Dan in a careful, studying manner.

“How are you feeling?”

“Better,” Dan rasped and reached for the glass on the bedside table. After a long swig, he set it down and looked at Phil again. “A lot better. Thank you.”

Phil smiled, and Dan could read the relief in his eyes now.

“Good,” was all he said. Then, “Do you want some lunch? I was going to make a stir-fry.”

Dan’s brow wrinkled as he took careful stock of his body. His stomach still felt fragile, and his headache still nauseated him, but the idea of food didn’t repulse him entirely as it had a few hours earlier.

“If you don’t mind,” he said, pulling together a sheepish smile for Phil.

“Oh course I don’t mind.” Phil gave him a swift nod, then disappeared from the doorway.

While Phil made busy noises in the kitchen, Dan lay on his back in bed and gazed up at the ceiling, watching bright splashes of sunlight play across the smooth white paint. He could almost piece together the events of last night, if he did a little guess work. He’d gone outside with Caroline and kissed her and watched Phil win his award. He and Caroline had sat out there for a while, talking and kissing occasionally. But then she’d gotten too cold — she’d left her coat inside — so they’d gone back in and danced a while longer, and he’d gotten her phone number, and they’d promised to meet up some other time.

Then she’d gone to the bathroom, and he’d gotten another cocktail, and after that he’d spotted Phil out in the middle of the dance floor, and that’s when things started to get kind of fuzzy. He’d rushed over to him, and squeezed him in a hug and told him how proud he was of him for winning first prize. And if Phil had thought his behavior strange, he certainly hadn’t shown it. Or, Dan frowned,
Dan hadn’t been able to see it. It had been Phil who had taken hold of Dan’s hand and started
dancing with him, and Dan hadn’t needed any more invitation than that to show Phil exactly what
his body was capable of on the dance floor.

Dan let out a low groan. He was pretty sure he could remember full-on grinding his hips against
Phil’s ass while singing along to Flashing Lights (Kanye, not that other one. Of course).

Oh, dear.

“Food’s almost ready,” Phil called in from the other room. “Are you going to eat in bed?”

Dan tried to imagine getting out of bed at the moment. Nope. Not happening.

“Yeah,” he called back. “Is that okay?”

“Yep! Just gimme a minute.”

But here was Phil, letting Dan sleep off his hangover in his bed for most of the day, and cooking him
meals and bringing him water and pain reliever, as though Dan weren’t some creepy perv who had a
knack for taking things too far when he’d been drinking.

Honestly, Phil was too good for him.

“Here we are,” Phil was saying as he stepped carefully through the bedroom doorway, balancing a
plate of stir-fry in each hand. He shuffled over to the far side of the bed and climbed on, handing one
of the plates to Dan before he settled himself against the headboard.

“Itadakimasu!” Phil said and dug in. Dan mumbled the phrase as well and started picking at his own
food. After the first few bites, though, he realized he was ravenous and began shoveling the stir-fry
into his mouth as fast as he could.

“Hey, Dan, can I ask you a favor?” Phil asked around a mouthful of food a few minutes later.

Dan’s whole body went tense, and the bite of food in his mouth seemed to suddenly lose its flavor.
Shit. This was it. This was where Phil told him how uncomfortable Dan had made him and asked
him to please back the fuck off. He braced himself, knowing it would hurt but knowing he deserved
every word of it.

“Yeah, of course. What’s up?” He managed to keep his voice sounding more or less normal. Having
his words muffled by a mouthful of chicken helped.

“Er, I’ve been wanting to ask you for a while. I just wasn’t sure exactly how, erm, to word it…”

Dan’s heart gave a painful squeeze. He wished Phil would just get on with it. Phil was looking up
into his eyes now, so he gave him a little nod to tell him to go on.

“Erm, do you wanna be in one of my videos again?”

If Dan hadn’t had such good manners, he probably would have let his mouth hang open, half-
chewed food and all. Instead, he swallowed the food in his mouth to give himself time to think.

“Maybe,” he answered at last. “Like, how do you mean? You mean, just filming me when we’re out
doing something like you did last time?”

Phil shook his head.
“No, like a proper cameo. Or, like, it could be called a collab if you actually had your own channel.”
Phil paused and cast him an uncertain look. “Do you have a YouTube channel?”

Dan shook his head.

“I have an account, but I’ve never posted anything.” He grinned a little around another mouthful of food. “Always lurking, never posting.”

“Right,” Phil nodded. “So, you would just be, like, a guest star. Or something.”

A guest star. That sounded pretty cool. But…why?

“So…” Phil was saying, setting down his now empty plate. “Do you think you’d want to film a video with me today? I mean later,” he rushed to add, “when you’re feeling better.”

“Er, yeah,” Dan said, one side of his mouth rising in an involuntary smile. “Yeah, I’d love to.”

“Awesome.” Phil stood then, picking up his plate and holding out a hand for Dan’s, since he’d just polished off the last bite of his own food before heading back into the kitchen.

He could hear Phil doing the washing up in the other room, so he leaned his head back against the headboard and stared up at the ceiling again, feeling blindsided in a happy sort of way. He still felt pretty crap, but the food had done a lot for his energy level. While he waited for Phil to finish in the kitchen, he took the opportunity to swallow down another couple of the ibuprofen tablets. His head was better but still not very good.

Now that he was feeling a little healthier, he was also beginning to realize how uncomfortable his onesie had become. He’d been wearing it for a good eighteen hours now, and a significant portion of that time had been spent on a sweaty dance floor. He could really do with a shower and a change of clothes.

Something in his memory was jogged loose, and he suddenly recalled that he had had the foresight to pack clothes and his toothbrush yesterday. Well done, past Dan! Gold star for you. Now he just needed another zillion or so of them to make up for the huge black marks on his record labeled “Coming onto your taken co-worker whilst under the influence of alcohol.”

“Do you mind if I just take a quick shower?” he called to Phil as he pushed back the duvet and gingerly placed his feet on the floor. Brrr. It was cold here outside of the covers.

“Go for it,” came Phil’s reply. “I think your bag’s in the tatami room, by the way.”

Dan saw whorls and swirls before his eyes when stood from the bed, so he waited there for a moment until the world had settled back into its usual patterns. When he dared to move at last, he plodded over to the room next door, where he saw his bag waiting patiently for him in a corner next to one of Phil’s bookcases. As he made his way over to it, he caught sight of the futon still spread out on the floor, with the blanket from the kotatsu crumpled up at one end of it. He realized with a pang that that’s where Phil must have slept last night. After perving on him at the party, he’d proceeded to kick him out of his own bed yet again. Great. What a wonderful friend Dan had turned out to be.

He slung his bag over his shoulder and continued on out into the hallway and down to the shower room, which was another small room opening off Phil’s laundry room. It was one of the differences to Japanese housing design that he really appreciated — the insistence on separating bathing spaces from, er, toilet spaces. He could certainly understand how taking a bath next to a toilet could ruin the aesthetic of the experience.
Peeling off the dirty onesie and stepping under the hot stream of water had to be one of the most heavenly things he’d ever felt. He thought he could’ve stayed in that shower forever, if the hot water hadn’t run out eventually. When it turned lukewarm, he sighed and switched it off and stepped out smelling of vanilla and sugar, which for some reason was the scent of Phil’s body wash.

He found Phil in the tatami room, curled up under the kotatsu, which now had its blanket back, and doing something on his laptop. Dan slid beneath the kotatsu blanket on the opposite side and asked, “So what video are we making?”

Phil looked up from his laptop screen but didn’t move from his position on the floor.

“Since Halloween is on Thursday, I wanted to put up a Halloween video — actually, a few videos. Well, you’ll see. Anyway, I thought we could wear our costumes for it.”

Dan looked over at his grungy onesie, which he’d dumped in the corner next to his bag and made a face.

“I’d really rather not put mine back on until it’s had a thorough washing,” he said slowly.

“Oh, right,” Phil glanced up again. “You could wear your vampire one instead.”

“I don’t have it with me.”

“That’s okay!” Phil clicked his laptop shut and placed it on the tabletop, sitting up from the floor at last. “We’ll go grab it. It’s not like your place is all that far away.”

So a few minutes later they were in Phil’s car on the way over to Dan’s. It was mid-afternoon now, though the day had turned cloudy and there wasn’t much sunlight left.

“I hope this doesn’t come off wrong,” Dan said, staring straight ahead through the windscreen, “but why exactly do you want me to be in your video?”

He dared to peek at Phil out of the corner of his eye then and saw him chuckle.

“You remember that I put that clip of you in a video back in August?”

Dan nodded. Duh. Of course he remembered. Then he realized Phil was looking at the road and couldn’t see him moving his head.

“Yeah, I remember.”

“Well, I got a lot of comments on that video asking about you and whether or not you would be putting in any more appearances.” Phil let out another small laugh, a deep, throaty sound that made Dan’s heart rate rise. “I figured I should just give the audience what they want, assuming you were okay with it, that is.”

“Well, I definitely am,” Dan reassured him.

There was a pause, and Dan peeked at Phil again to see him frowning slightly.

“Are you sure, though? The thing is…” He stopped, cleared his throat. “I may have kind of, er, undersold my YouTube channel.”

“Oh?” Dan feigned surprise.
“It’s quite a lot bigger than, er, than you probably think. So, if you’re in my video, a lot of people from all around the world are going to see you. Are you sure you’re okay with that?”

Dan could hear the nervous tremor running through Phil’s voice and realized that he’d been hyping himself up to have this conversation for a while. From Phil’s point of view, it must seem rather like he’d sprung this information on Dan all at once. Dan, of course, had had plenty of time to adjust to the idea of Phil being a fairly well-known YouTuber.

“It’s really fine, Phil. Just out of curiosity, though, are a lot of your viewers in Japan, or are they mostly in other countries?”

“Most of them are in America, actually,” Phil answered, just as he was pulling into the car park of Dan’s building. “A lot in the UK too, and other English-speaking countries. Of course, the number in Japan grew larger after I moved here…also Germany, for some reason.”

“Huh,” Dan said before he clambered out of the car. “I’ll be just a minute.”

It was a quick dash up to the second floor, where he grabbed the bag that still held his black cape, fangs, and make-up. He also pulled a white shirt and black trousers from his wardrobe to complete the ensemble, folded them neatly into the bag, and then headed back downstairs. When he climbed back into the car, Phil was looking down at the screen of his phone and frowning.

“Is something wrong?” Dan asked as he clicked his seatbelt on.

“Oh.” Phil gave a start, almost as though he hadn’t noticed Dan there until just then. “No.” He paused and sighed. “I don’t know. I’ll tell you later. Let’s just go.”

Phil was pulling out of his parking space and turning onto the street, while Dan still sat there slightly dazed. I’ll tell you later. Did that mean that Phil actually did still trust him? Was he going to confide in Dan after all?

Back at Phil’s flat, Dan became a vampire while Phil set up the lighting and camera in his bedroom. Then Dan helped him make the bed so that it wouldn’t look like a hungover person had spent most of the day rolling around in it.

Phil changed into his own costume then, not the one from last night, but a giraffe onesie that he for some reason had tucked away in the back of a closet. Dan couldn’t help staring at the way his little giraffe tail swung back and forth as he walked.

“I think I want to be a zombie giraffe,” Phil said, snapping Dan out of his thoughts. “Would you help me with my make-up?”

“Oh. Sure,” Dan said, still kind of in a daze. It wasn’t that he wasn’t happy. No, no, he was ecstatic about all of this. But he was puzzled by it too. None of this seemed like it should be happening right now — Phil taking care of him, and asking him to guest star in a video, and trusting him, and now letting Dan sit on the bed cross-legged in front of him and lean in and smooth white paint all across his face. Dan had done nothing to deserve any of this. In fact, he’d done exactly the opposite of deserve it. As he carefully dabbed black face paint around Phil’s closed eyes, he couldn’t help peering into that face and wondering just what was going on in the brain behind it. He could just ask, of course. There was always that.

“All right. You are as fearsome a zombie giraffe as ever I’ve seen,” Dan said, leaning back and admiring his handiwork.

“Excellent!” Phil said, his eyes popping open. He was still sat on the bed right in front of Dan, their
faces just inches apart. When Phil broke into a grin, Dan could feel the expression in every cell of his body. “Okay. Scooch off. I don’t need you for this first part.”

Dan stood off to one side, watching fascinated as Phil cranked up his personality to high power and began describing the spooky game he wanted to play with his audience. After a few takes, he finally seemed to have gotten the footage he wanted, and he crawled over to the camera and turned it off for a minute. Then he turned to Dan.

“You have to go in the other room for a while. The next part is a surprise.” He actually winked at Dan as he said it, and all Dan could do was nod mutely and then wander off into the lounge. He could still hear the muffled sounds of Phil speaking in the bedroom, but he did his best not to listen.

“Dan?” Phil called at last, and Dan hurried back into the bedroom where he found Phil leaning off the side of the bed to dig around in his book bag. He came up with a notepad and a pen a moment later and held them out to Dan.

“What you ready?” he grinned.

“I was born ready,” Dan answered, mirroring Phil’s smile back to him.

The game turned out to be a sort of Mad Lib where Dan had to come up with a list of words that would later be added to a story Phil had written. He actually had him do three different lists of words for three different stories, which Phil explained would each be uploaded in a different video. Then came the actual filming part. Phil pretended to call Dan into the room once more, and Dan swooped in, playing up his role as a scary vampire just as he had for the students at primary school.

He’d been worried about messing up or saying the wrong thing and annoying Phil by forcing him to film it again. But somehow once the camera was recording and Phil had started talking to him, everything just felt natural and easy, like they were teaching a lesson together at school. Maybe he should’ve felt more nervous, but he didn’t. It was just him and Phil here, after all. No one could hear them making total fools of themselves for the camera (Well, maybe Phil’s neighbors, but they didn’t count).

The whole process only took about an hour from start to finish, and when it was over Dan suddenly found himself feeling sad…disappointed almost. It had ended too quickly.

“That was really fun,” Phil said as he detached the camera from the tripod and carried it into the tatami room. “We should do it again sometime.”

“Really?” Dan had figured that Phil would at least want to see how successful the video ended up being before offering to let Dan guest star again.

“Yeah! Maybe we could do a Christmas one together or something. I’ll try to think of some ideas.”

Dan sat at the kotatsu and watched as Phil downloaded the footage from his camera and then backed it up on an external hard drive.

“Are you hungry?” he asked Dan as he unhooked the camera from the laptop and started putting it away in its case.

“I could eat,” Dan said. The stir-fry had been several hours ago already, and Dan’s recovering system was still begging for more calories. “Hey, erm, Phil?”

“Mmm?” Phil was still busy stowing the camera away.
“Do you remember how I got so drunk last night?”

Phil turned to him and cocked an eyebrow.

“You don’t?”

Dan shook his head.

“I’m not entirely sure myself,” Phil shrugged, standing and walking the camera over to the closet. When he came back, he settled himself beneath the kotatsu across from Dan and gave him a knowing look. “After you made out with that girl, you came back in and danced with me for a while. You seemed pretty far gone by then anyway, but then you seemed to get really upset about something. You refused to dance anymore, and I think you went to get another drink then. I’m not sure, but it wasn’t too long after that that James and I decided we should probably get you home. Except when we tried to drop you off at your place, you wouldn’t get out.” Phil’s eyebrow shot up again, and Dan could tell he was being laughed at. “So we brought you back here. It was probably a good thing too. I don’t know how you would have managed this morning all by yourself.”

Dan could feel his entire face burning red. He didn’t know what was worse, the fact that Phil had seen him making out with Caroline or the fact that Phil had seen him acting like a contrary toddler while drunk.

“Er, I, er…” He cleared his throat a few times. “I’m sorry—“

“It’s fine, Dan, really. Let’s have some dinner!” Phil stood as he said this, emphasizing that they weren’t going to discuss it any further. Dan didn’t know whether to feel worried or relieved.

They cooked some pasta together after that and ate it sitting on Phil’s bed just like they had with their lunch. It had grown completely dark out now, and Phil had turned on his electric blanket to keep them warm. If he hadn’t spent so much of it feeling so ill, Dan might have thought that today was the most perfect day he’d ever lived.

“Phil,” he said after they were done eating and were just lolling under the cozy blanket letting their food digest. “What was wrong earlier, that you didn’t want to talk about?”

“Oh,” Phil said, his face falling, and Dan wanted to kick himself for bringing it up. He just had to go and ruin the moment, didn’t he? He watched as Phil’s forehead crumpled up, and then to Dan’s utter shock, he tipped over and rested his head against Dan’s knee. From this angle, Dan could only see the back of Phil’s head, and the side of his face curtained by a dark fall of hair. He heard Phil let out a little whimpering groan, and his fingers ached to reach out and smooth his hair aside.

“It was just Akari, being mad at me again,” he mumbled. “And me being mad at her. But it’s okay. We’re figuring it out.”

Dan’s heart was thudding in his chest, and his thoughts were all tangled.

“Do you wanna talk about it?”

Phil shook his head, his cheek rubbing against Dan’s knee through the thick fabric of the blanket.

“Okay,” Dan said. He lifted one hand, knowing he shouldn’t give in to the impulse but giving in all the same. He stretched his fingers out and brushed Phil’s fringe aside. He heard Phil let out a tiny sigh, and Dan felt a melting warmth pooling in the pit of his stomach.

The moment was interrupted by his phone buzzing in his pocket. His hand reached toward it
automatically, but stopped. No. He didn’t care who was trying to speak to him right now. He wanted this moment all to himself, just him and Phil here on Phil’s bed forgetting that anyone else in the world existed, for as long as he could.

Chapter End Notes

Originally published on tumblr
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

The dawn is filled with dreams…

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“We ought to get you home,” Phil said, sitting up suddenly.

He had lain with his head on Dan’s knee, for how long Dan didn’t know, and let Dan trail his fingertips through his hair as the silence in the room grew thicker and thicker. Then he had stilled under Dan’s hand — a split second of flux — and then a moment later he was sitting up and telling Dan it was time for him to go home.

Phil was still sat very close to him on the bed, and he was half-turned toward Dan, half-turned away.

Something about the moment was making Dan feel brave, so he met Phil’s eye and offered him his gentlest smile.

“Do I have to go?”

Phil laughed, but the sound was too sharp.

“Sorry, but yeah.” He moved across the bed then and swung his legs over the side and stood. He wasn’t looking at Dan at all now.

“Yeah.” Dan’s own laugh came out too soft. “I guess I should let you have your bed back. Not that the futon isn’t comfy and all.”

Dan crawled out from under the covers himself, his movements slowed by reluctance. Phil was already halfway out the bedroom door when he answered.

“Ha, oh, well I made James take the futon last night. But really, I kind of need to talk to Akari.”

“Oh,” Dan said.

It wasn’t as cold outside as he’d been expecting. The cloud cover had helped to trap a little heat over the city, and the cool night air was moist against Dan’s face as he trudged along the veranda toward the lift, a few steps behind Phil. He’d changed out of his giraffe onesie now, so there was no tail to excuse Dan staring as he walked.

They didn’t talk all the way to Dan’s place, and Dan wondered if Phil’s head was filling up with things he wished he was saying the same way Dan’s was.

It was only about 8:00 in the evening when Dan walked back through the door of his flat and closed it just a little too loudly behind him. Less than an hour ago he had been looking back over the day with a sense of rosy contentment, yet now here he was standing in his chilly, dark bedroom with his thoughts a hopeless mess.
Phil had sent him off like a master dismissing a servant. Or like a dog being put out of the bedroom at night. Like he was Phil’s fucking toy that he could put back in its box when he was tired of playing with it.

When he checked his phone he had two text messages, one from Seiji and one from Caroline. He didn’t read either of them. Instead, he took another shower, for no particular reason, and tried to get into a book but couldn’t. He ended up spending the rest of the night watching very bad Japanese television — the variety shows with a box up in the corner of the screen to show some D-list talent’s reaction to the show’s host being dropped through a trap door in a stage, the travel shows that consisted of endless close-ups of food being held between chopsticks, the news programs that were just a talking head framed by a wall of kanji. He finally got bored enough of it to shut it off around 2:00 in the morning, at which time he climbed into his futon and lay wide awake for what felt like hours more.

He overslept and was almost late to work the next morning.

There Phil was at his desk in the full morning sunlight, sipping his morning coffee with a smile playing about his lips, and Dan loved him. He must be fucking in love with him because somehow, despite the fact that he’d spent all night fantasizing telling Phil off in the most epically mic drop-worthy manner possible, now that he saw him all he could imagine was putting his arms around his neck and whispering in his ear that he would be happy as long as Phil was happy. Why did love have to make you want to be so goddamn noble?

“Hey,” Dan said.

“Hey!” Phil’s voice was the very definition of chipper. Dan wanted to put his face on his desk and put his arms over his head and then maybe just sink into the floor and disappear from existence.

They both had classes during the morning, so it was easy to find excuses to be too busy to chat. During second period when they were both free, Dan concentrated diligently on a worksheet he needed for one of his afternoon classes. And then Phil was gone during third period, and they were both gone during fourth. Then they each ate lunch with separate classes, and Dan found some third years to hang out with during hiruyasumi, and in fifth period he had a class.

He came that close to getting off scot-free.

As he sat at his desk during the first half of sixth period, fiddling with vocabulary revision cards without actually studying them, Dan debated whether or not he could just head home at his usual time without Phil thinking anything of it. And whether or not he actually cared if Phil thought something of it.

“Akari came over last night,” Phil’s voice interrupted his inner turmoil. Dan’s eyes suddenly stopped seeing the cards on the desk in front of him, and his ears filled up with the sound of his own rushing blood.

“Oh yeah?” he said, prodding at a revision card with one finger to try to keep up the charade of being busy.

“Yeah. We made up.” Phil’s voice was low, and he was leaning in toward Dan in a confiding manner. Dan couldn’t stop himself looking over at him, and when he did Phil raised his eyebrows and quirked one side of his mouth up in a suggestive expression.

Dan’s whole body felt like it had been doused in ice water. A moment later, his skin felt hot like a sunburn. He didn’t know what emotion this might be, other than pure rage.
“Don’t tell me things like that.” The words came tumbling out before he had a chance to bite them back.

Phil backed away from him a little, his expression one of shock, though it quickly changed to mirror Dan’s anger.

“Why not?” Phil’s voice came out as a quiet hiss.

Dan could only stare at him.

“You know why not.”

Phil’s eyes, which Dan had often thought were like a warm, spring sky, had turned wintry all of a sudden.

“Don’t you think it’s time you got over that?” His voice was still so calm, and he was keeping it low so as not to disturb the other teachers in the staff room, and Dan could still only stare at him. All of the eloquent speeches he had prepared last night had devolved into one phrase ringing in his brain: Fuck you — which he couldn’t even get out around the aching tightness in the back of his throat. Fuck you, Phil, for bringing me water when I was sick, and sleeping in the bed beside me, and asking me to film a cute video with you and telling me it’s time to just get over it.

Dan’s eyes were burning, and he couldn’t see Phil very well anymore, and fuck he was fucking crying in the staff room.

“You’re right,” he managed to get out at last, and it was so fucking annoying just how much his voice shook, “I should just get over it.” He didn’t dare look to see if any of the other teachers in the staff room were watching, if any of them were seeing his face turn red and crumple up and the tears start to spill down his cheeks. He needed to leave. Immediately. He pushed back his chair and stood.

“Dan—“

He just shook his head. He couldn’t look at Phil right now. He somehow found his way out of the staff room and out into the corridor without really seeing where he was going. It wasn’t until he’d shut the staff room door behind him that he realized he’d left his jacket inside. There was no way he was going back for it now, despite the fact that the temperature in the unheated corridor was probably less than 10 C. He couldn’t go up to his usual spot outside the second floor science classrooms, so instead he turned toward the staircase at the opposite end of the building and wandered up to the art room, which he knew would be empty and unlocked, and he found a stool in a vacant corner and sat down and let the tears come.

He couldn’t believe he’d actually just cried in the staff room. Great. Worse, he couldn’t believe that Phil could be so cruel. This wasn’t like him. Or was it? Sat there on the cold, metal stool in the corner of the empty art room, Dan wondered why he had thought that he knew Phil so well. He’d met him only two months ago for christ’s sake. It was just, when they were alone together in the staff room talking about which of the other teachers was most likely to secretly be a government agent, or when they were at Phil’s place arguing over who got to play as Luigi in MarioKart, or when they went to the sushi train and dared each other to eat the tuna with natto, Dan felt that he was more himself than he’d ever been in his whole life.

But Phil thought he should just get over it.

His hand was shaking ever so slightly as he pulled his phone from his pocket. The two missed messages were still there, and they’d now been joined by three new ones — one from Madhavi, one
from James, and a second one from Seiji. He tapped on the first one from Seiji. It had been sent at 1:30 AM on Sunday and simply read, “Are you OK?”

Dan tried to remember whether or not he had been okay at 1:30 on Sunday morning. He must have still been at the party then. Was that before or after he’d started trying to drown his attraction to Phil with alcohol again?

He scrolled up to the second message from Seiji. It was from this morning. “Hey, James said you got back to Phil’s all right. Just wanted to thank you for coming to the party! Great job on the dance floor.”

“Thanks for organizing it,” Dan typed back, adding a heart emoji.

The message from James was also from this morning, and it read, “You seemed pretty out of it yesterday. Hope you’re feeling better today!”

No, I’m not. I feel like a flaming pile of shit today, thank you very much, was what Dan wished he could type back. Instead, he wrote, “I do. Thanks for helping get me home safe!”

The one from Madhavi had been sent only a few minutes ago, and it was an invitation. “Hey! Kitsune Matsuri in Nasu this weekend. Wanna come? There’ll be face paint!”

Will Phil be there, with Akari glued to his side? “Sounds like fun. I’ll let you know!”

Last of all, he opened the message from Caroline. It had been sent yesterday evening, when he was still at Phil’s. He vaguely remembered his phone buzzing in his pocket. “Hi! It was really cool meeting you last night. Hang out again sometime soon?”

Dan sat and stared at the screen for a long time, his eyes and throat burning. At last he typed out his response.

“Yeah, some of us are going to this thing up in Nasu at the weekend. Interested in joining?” His thumb hovered over the send button for a long time before he finally gave it a decisive punch. What would he do if she said yes? He stood and pushed back the stool, slipping his phone back into his trouser pocket. He was shivering with cold in the unheated classroom (The school never bothered heating rooms when no one was in them), and he knew he should get back to the warmth of the staff room. He felt calmer now. He thought he would be able to face Phil again. It would be time to leave in a little while, so he would have to go back soon anyway.

When he slid open the staff room door at their end of the room, his eyes went at once to Phil’s desk. He was there, bent forward over his notebook, copying out vocabulary words as usual. He looked up as soon as Dan came in, and his eyes were wary. They followed Dan as he made his way over to his own desk, pulled out his chair and sat down.

“Look, Dan, I’m sorry.” The sound of his voice was low and urgent. Dan looked over at him and saw that he had turned in his chair to face Dan and was leaning slightly toward him again. “I didn’t realize that you—“ He paused, and Dan could feel his eyes running over every inch of Dan’s face. “I thought you meant that you just had a little crush on me.”

Dan stared back at him, not knowing anymore what he was supposed to feel.

“Well, I don’t.” His voice was blank like an empty wall.

“I know that now,” Phil continued. “And I’m sorry I said that to you. I— I won’t talk about Akari anymore if you don’t want me to.”
“Phil.” He sighed. Phil was apologizing, but somehow Dan was still the one giving up ground. “You can talk about her, okay? She’s an important part of your life, so you can talk about her all you want. Just… There’s a line, okay?”

“Oh, okay,” Phil agreed, his voice small.

Yes, there was a line. There was definitely a line, that both of them had made a trip to and back this past weekend. There was a line that ran down the center of Phil’s bed, and a line that divided their two desks in the staff room, and a line circumscribed around Phil’s thoughts, bisecting them so that when he opened his mouth to speak to Dan, only half-truths came out. And now, despite the fact that it was the last thing in the world he wanted, Dan was requesting that Phil stay firmly on his own side of that stupid line. Genius, that’s what Dan was. A fucking genius.

Dan was sitting at his computer watching an illegally-streamed episode of American Horror Story and eating a bowl of rice with sesame furikake when his phone vibrated loudly against the wood of the desk.

Caroline

*That sounds awesome! Just give me the deets when you’ve got em.*

Oh, right. He’d invited her up this weekend. In that case, he’d probably better tell Madhavi that he was going.

Dan

*Hey! I checked my schedule, and I should be able to make it to the matsuri thing. When are we going?*

Madhavi

*Sunday morning. Do you need a ride, or do you think Phil will take you?*

So Phil was going. Since it was a Sunday, that probably meant Akari would be going too.

Dan

*Do you think you could pick me up?*

He sent the reply off to Madhavi and then opened up the conversation with Caroline again.

Dan

*We’re going on Sunday. Wanna come up Saturday as well?*

He sat and stared at the response for a long time without pressing the send button. If she came to Harata on Saturday, it would mean spending the night at his. That wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, he told himself. Then again, she was just someone he’d met and talked to at a party when he was drunk. He knew next to nothing about her, even if he had accepted her friend invitation on Facebook. He realized he’d barely even glanced at her profile before accepting the invitation.

He erased the second sentence and typed out a new one before sending the message.

Dan
We’re going on Sunday. Pick you up from Kokki station around 11?

By 10:30 that evening, he was exhausted, so he turned in early without even waiting for Madhavi and Caroline’s responses. When he woke in the morning, he saw that they’d both replied in the affirmative. Good, he guessed. Now he’d be able to enjoy his weekend with as little contact with Phil as possible.

At school, they went about their everyday tasks with the ease of habit, and they played their staff room games, and Phil smiled and sparkled his eyes at Dan, and it was so hard not to stare. But Dan did his best.

After lunch, as they were busy working up a lesson plan for the special needs class, Phil paused in the middle of writing, and said,

“I’m posting our video this evening when I get home.”

“Oh, okay,” Dan said, not looking up from the textbook he was flipping through.

“Would you want to watch it?” Phil’s tone was the auditory equivalent of a nervous glance.

“Yeah, of course. Send me the link.” He should probably have told Phil already that he’d found his channel. Now it just felt too awkward to explain.

“Will do.”

As soon as he was back home that afternoon, Dan pulled up Phil’s channel and kept refreshing it for the next forty-five minutes until at last the new video appeared. When he clicked the link he saw that there were only 2 views, and he let out a sardonic laugh. It was like he’d gone back in time to high school when he’d been a massive YouTube fanboy, stalking his favorites’ channels to try to get first comment on every new video.

Phil appeared on his screen in his onesie, explaining the game just as Dan had heard him do on Sunday. Next came the part he’d made Dan leave the room for, where he read out the story, leaving pauses for the viewers to fill in. Then all at once Dan appeared, swooping in with his cape held out and taking his place on the bed beside Phil. Dan blinked in surprise. It was surreal enough seeing his own face recorded in 720p, but that wasn’t what had taken him aback. It was the way he was smiling, the grin on his face wide enough to split it in half, and the way he was laughing, mouth open showing all of his teeth, with tiny tears of mirth at the crinkled corners of his eyes. He’d never seen himself looking so happy. He turned his eyes to Phil, watching with close attention every slight lift of his lips, every glance at Dan, every chuckle and sigh. Did he look as happy as Dan did? Dan didn’t think so, but maybe he was biased.

At the end of the video, Phil announced that he’d be posting the other two stories they’d recorded on Wednesday and Thursday. Dan wondered if he could bear to watch those videos as well (but he knew he would).

The next morning at school, Dan turned to Phil and was on the verge of congratulating him on a good video when he remembered that Phil still hadn’t sent him the link. He must have forgotten.

“Hey, did you post the video yesterday?”

“Oh, yeah I did,” Phil answered from where he was rummaging around in his book bag.

“Were you still going to send me the link?”
“Of course,” Phil cast him a quick smile before turning back to his bag.

When Dan got home that evening, he made himself wait a full hour before he checked Phil’s channel. However, he was not disappointed to find that the next video had been linked from the first. He watched it, mesmerized by the way Phil laughed at nearly everything he said. He watched it through three times and then scrolled down to see the comments. The view count was showing “301+,” and there were already a couple hundred comments. Most of them were people copying out their own abduction stories. He read a few and chuckled at the absurdity of them.

Then he clicked back to the video from yesterday, curious to see what kinds of comments that one had accumulated. Here too, most of the comments were people copying out their own version of the scary story or exclaiming about the fact that they’d picked some of the same words as Dan. He was pleasantly surprised to see a few comments like “Yay! You brought Dan back!” or “It’s that Dan guy again.” Then he saw one that wiped the smile right off his face: “Are you two dating?” Within the twenty-four hours since Phil had posted the video, the comment had gotten 143 likes and had fifty-six replies. The very last reply — the only one that was shown — simply read “I ship it!!!!” He wondered if he dared read the other ones…but the curiosity was killing him. He clicked to see more.

“No, Phil has a girlfriend?” “Um, no, Phil is taken!!!!” “Don’t you watch Phil’s videos? He has a girlfriend!!” “Omfg, that would be so cute, though!” “I can totally see them together…” “Guys, PHIL HAS A GIRLFRIEND.” “Okay but Dan is hot. That would be so hot. (°_3°)” “I know I’m terrible for saying this because Phil has a girlfriend, but do you see the way that guy Dan is looking at Phil? He’s obviously in love.”

That was about all Dan managed to read before he had to close his laptop and take a deep, shaky breath. Phil had probably read these comments too, or he would very soon. Dan had a sudden, sneaking suspicion that Phil was not going to send him the link to the video after all.

By the next morning, he still hadn’t, and Dan didn’t bother asking him for it. There was no point in forcing that awkward conversation. Dan couldn’t stop himself checking the comments sections of Wednesday’s and Thursday’s videos too, and he took a demented sort of pleasure in seeing similar comments on each of those. He tried to imagine Phil reading them. What would that make him feel? Guilty, maybe.

On Friday, Phil was gone to primary school again, and Dan was back to feeling relieved that he was gone. Whatever roller coaster his relationship with Phil had inadvertently ended up on, it was exhausting him. When Phil was away, he thought about him constantly, but that didn’t take nearly as much energy as being beside Phil and holding back all the words he wished he could say to him.

Seiji texted him after school to let him know that there was a sale on at Mr. Donuts and to ask if he wanted to grab a doughnut together. Harata’s branch of Mr. Donuts was only about a three minute bike ride from Nishichu, so Dan shrugged and sent back a “Yeah, sounds good.”

The line at the doughnut shop was almost out the door by the time Dan got there, but he stood outside while the cold wind played with his hair and waited for Seiji to show up. He pulled into the car park a good ten minutes after their agreed-upon time, and Dan just rolled his eyes and smiled. Seiji always seemed to be on a different time schedule to everyone else.

“Hey, sorry I’m late,” Seiji called as soon as he was out of his car and making his way over to Dan. “The vice principal wanted to talk about some stuff after school.”

“That’s fine,” Dan said, opening the door so that he and Seiji could add themselves to the end of the doughnut line. “I don’t know if I’ve ever said more than two words to Nishichu’s vice principal.”
“Well, I’ve been at my school for forever,” Seiji pointed out.

“True.”

They shuffled forward in the line and each picked up a tray and a pair of tongs. Dan was already craning his neck to see over the people in front of him, trying to decide which doughnuts he wanted to get. He eventually decided on a strawberry ring and a matcha pon de ring. Once they’d bought their doughnuts and coffee — and managed to snag the last open table in the shop — Seiji took a huge bite of his kuma choco doughnut, washed it down with some coffee and then said,

“So, are you doing okay?”

Ahhh. So that was the real reason for this little excursion.

“Yeah, I am,” Dan said, sipping his own coffee and doing his best not to appear as though he were lying. He didn’t feel okay just at the moment, but he figured he would survive.

“Good.” Seiji chewed for a while, glancing up at Dan and then down at his coffee several times, before he finally said, “I just thought I should give you some warning, so you can prepare yourself.”

Dan swallowed his mouthful of green tea-flavored doughnut, and his stomach suddenly felt cold.

“Okay,” he said.

“It’s just, I think Phil and Akari might be about to get married.”

Dan almost choked on the coffee he had been taking a sip of. He had to clear his throat several times before he could respond.

“Er, why… ahem Why do you think that? Did Phil tell you something?”

Seiji shook his head.

“No, but you know Akari and Hana are close, yeah? It’s just based on some things Akari has said to Hana lately.”

“Like what?” Dan asked, then wished he hadn’t. No, he really, really did not want to know what Akari told her friends about her relationship with Phil. (But what if Seiji was wrong? What if he’d misunderstood? There was that small possibility). “No, never mind, don’t tell me. Erm, yeah, thanks for the warning.”

“Sure,” Seiji said, his eyes meeting Dan’s over the rim of his coffee cup and then looking back down again.

“But…” Why was he asking this? Why was he torturing himself just to satisfy his curiosity? “I mean, isn’t that a little fast? They aren’t even engaged… Wait, are they engaged?”

Seiji shook his head quickly.

“No, but it’s not that unusual for foreigners who get married here to just sort of skip the engagement stage. Getting married in a foreign country is mostly paperwork anyway.” His lips twisted up into a smirk. “I have multiple friends who have called their new spouses from the embassy in Tokyo to inform them that they were now married. It’s more convenient for most people to go ahead and get all the legal stuff out of the way as quickly as possible and then save up to have a big party or something later on.”
“I see.” Dan bit into his next doughnut and chewed it without really tasting it. As little as Phil had bothered to tell him about what was going on with him and Akari, he supposed he shouldn’t be surprised to learn something as big as this second hand. It still hurt like hell, though.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’ll be fine,” Dan said, finishing his doughnut and swallowing down the rest of his coffee. “Ready to go?”

When he was back in the safety of his own flat, Dan pulled his phone from his pocket, opened up the conversation with Caroline and typed out a message.

Daniel

Hey, do you think you might want to come up here a little earlier? Maybe tomorrow?

He pressed send quickly, before he had a chance to second-guess himself, and then went off to cook himself some dinner. He was just draining a pot of pasta into the sink when his phone went off in his pocket. He set the colander down and pulled out the phone.

Caroline

Maybe. What did you have in mind?

He frowned at the words on the screen.

“That is a very good question,” he muttered to himself before locking the screen and slipping the phone back in his pocket. What exactly was he thinking? Because if he was just inviting her up here for meaningless sex that would hopefully make him hurt less and make Phil jealous— but why would he think that Phil would even be jealous of him? — either way, it was a pretty shitty thing to do to Caroline. She seemed nice, and she seemed to actually like him.

It doesn’t have to be meaningless, whispered a little voice in the back of his head. Maybe you’ll fall in love with her instead.

As he sat down at his desk and started shoveling pasta into his mouth, he considered the possibility of falling out of love with Phil and into love with someone else instead. It sounded wonderful. Then he and Phil could just be good friends, who snickered quietly together in the corner of the staff room, and explored Japan together, and occasionally made videos together in Phil’s bedroom, and spent their free time trying to destroy each other in video games. Except it struck him that what he was imagining was him and Phil spending nearly every hour of every day in each other’s company for the rest of their lives, and where exactly were their girlfriends supposed to fit into that equation?

How had he managed to get so tangled up in Phil in just the two months that he’d known him?

Daniel

Just hanging out. I could see if Madhavi or someone wants to take us around, and we can show you Harata a little bit. I can borrow an extra futon from Phil, if you want to stay the night at mine.

There, that should be clear enough. He hit the send button and sighed. Meaningless sex had sounded kind of nice.

Caroline
She’d gotten the message then. Cool. He polished off the rest of the pasta, dumped the dishes in the sink and then decided to turn in early again.

Saturday ended up being kind of okay. He woke up around 8:00 so that he could make an 8:30 Skype call to his parents. It was 11:30 on Friday evening back in England, pretty late for them to be up, so he appreciated the effort they were making. He hadn’t talked to them for a couple of weeks, and it was comforting to hear their voices and see their faces and be reassured that home still existed somewhere out there.

Just as he was finishing up his conversation with them, one of his friends from uni saw that he was on and sent him a message asking if he wanted to talk. So he ended up spending another hour or so catching up with Adam and hearing all the news about everyone back home. Adam was on a gap year too, and had been traveling around Europe and Northern Africa since graduation. He was in between trips now, back at home with his parents saving up money for the next round.

It was interesting sharing their very different experiences as expats. Even though Adam had stayed for several weeks at a time in each location, he had still been basically a tourist, something that Dan certainly was not. Adam didn’t have to worry about paying an electricity bill or signing up for the national health insurance scheme in the countries he visited. He also didn’t get to call any of the new places he stayed in “home.” Dan didn’t quite think of Harata as his home yet, but every time he visited a different city, like Kokki or Nasu, it was striking how relieved he felt to get back to the familiar streets and shops of Harata.

He thought of messaging Phil a few times throughout the day — “Hey, were you going to send me that video link?” or “Wanna get rekt at MarioKart again?” But he didn’t. Instead he spent the early afternoon writing and then went out for ramen and arcade games with Madhavi, Jake, and James in the evening.

Madhavi was back at his flat the next morning at 10:30, once more with Jake and James in tow.

“You said your friend’s train is getting in at 10:53?” she asked as she pulled out of his car park and onto the street.

“Yeah, I think that’s what she said.” He pulled out his iPhone and checked the Hyperdia app for the next train arriving in Kokki. “Yep, 10:53.” There was a train station that was technically in Harata, though it was so far west as to nearly be over the line and in Kokki instead. However, the Kokki train station was nearer to Nasu anyway, so it made the most sense to meet up there.

He had to admit he was pretty nervous about seeing Caroline again. He wasn’t sure what she was expecting from this. Did she think they were dating? Were they dating? Now that he thought of it, Dan wasn’t really sure what he was expecting of this either.

“Is she that girl you were making out with at the Halloween party?”

Leave it to Jake to leap right to the heart of the matter.

“Yes,” Dan said.

“Oh ho!” said James, and Dan could feel the smirk on his face without needing to turn around and look at him. “So, are you two like a thing now?”

“Erm,” Dan said, his fingers twisting together in his lap. “Not sure. I’ll let you know, if I find out.”
They arrived at the station at 10:55, and Caroline was already standing out front waiting. You had to love how insanely punctual the Japanese train system was. Her expression perked up when she caught sight of their car pulling up at the curb, and then Jake got out and let her squeeze into the middle seat between him and James. Oops. Dan realized he probably should’ve sat in the back next to her. Well, it was too late now.

“Hey!” she called from the back seat. He turned around and smiled at her. Wow, this was awkward.

“Hi!” he said.

Fortunately, James saved him by starting in on the usual interrogation — Which city? Which country? What did you study at university? Dan could barely remember the same information about her himself, so he was relieved that James was asking for him.

Phil, Akari, Seiji, and Hana were meeting them there. It was a quick drive from Kokki station up the mountain and into Nasu. They didn’t head all the way up to the yumoto this time, but instead turned off the highway pretty quickly and ended up at some kind of open field next to the river. He was glad they weren’t going any higher than this, as he’d seen in the paper earlier in the week that Nasu had already gotten its first snowfall of the winter. As it was, it was cold enough here that he was very glad of his thick coat and gloves.

Caroline drifted over to his side as they made their way from the designated parking area up to the event space itself.

“So, is this a date?” she asked him, keeping her voice low since the others were only a few steps ahead of them.

“I don’t know.” He may as well be honest. “Do you want it to be?”

She was eyeing him from beneath her lashes, just as she had when she’d first come up to him at the Halloween party the other night.

“Kind of,” she admitted, “But is it?”

So, it was all up to him to decide then. He suppressed a sigh.

“Let’s say it is, but just a really low-key, no-pressure one?” he said at last.

“Okay,” she grinned and looped her right arm through his left. He had to admit that, as chilly as it was out here, he was glad for her warmth at his side.

“Oh, hey, Dan, before I forget,” Madhavi was turning to look at him, and when she saw the two of them with arms linked, her eyes widened a little and a smile appeared at the corners of her mouth. “Um, do you have any plans for Christmas? I’m asking because Jake and James and I were thinking of taking a trip, and I thought you might want to come too.”

“Erm, yeah, that might be good. Tell me more about it later,” he answered, wishing that she wasn’t smirking at him in that particular manner.

The others found them then, and Dan wasn’t surprised to see Akari clinging onto Phil’s side in just the same way she had the last time they were in Nasu. He had absolutely no right to be upset about that either. None at all.

“I heard there’s face painting,” he said to Caroline beside him. “Want to go see if we can find it?”
“Sure!” And she grinned up at him. “Lead the way!”

It didn’t take them long to find the face-painting booth, and despite the fact that everyone else waiting in line was under the age of twelve, they each sat down and let one of the ladies there make them up to look like the kyuubi kitsune, the nine-tailed fox demon. They each received a white stripe down the center of their noses, a dab of red in the center of their lips, and three black whiskers on each cheek.

“Let’s get a picture with our make-up on,” Caroline suggested when they’d finished. So he leant down, and they each threw up a peace sign and smiled big. “Very cute,” she said when she showed him the picture a moment later.

They wandered around for a while after that, trying out various foods and stopping at different booths to see presentations on things like water conservation efforts in the town of Nasu or the English-for-primary-school-students initiative the town had recently implemented. It wasn’t the most exciting stuff, but the day was clear and sunny and Caroline was easy to talk to. They caught up with the others a bit later waiting in line for pizza, and Madhavi suggested that they take their food down to the river to eat.

The river was wide and shallow here, wider even than the section he’d visited in Harata. The banks had been walled in with neat concrete steps, which were perfect for sitting and eating their pizza while watching the water make its unhurried way down toward the plain. Caroline sat and ate beside him for a while before moving over and striking up a conversation with Madhavi. He hoped it wasn’t because she’d noticed how often he was glancing down to where Phil and Akari were cuddled up together a couple of steps below them.

Caroline had only been gone a minute when Dan saw Phil detach himself from Akari, walk up to where Dan was sitting, and plop down in the space Caroline had vacated.

“Hey,” he said, nudging Dan in the side with his elbow. “How’s it going?”

“It’s all right,” Dan answered, concentrating very hard on wiping pizza grease off his fingers with his napkin.

“Caroline seems nice,” Phil ventured.

Dan nodded. He looked up and saw that Phil had gotten his face painted like a kitsune too. It was so adorable it was almost unfair.

“She is.”

“So, are you two—“

“I don’t know yet.” He kicked himself for answering too quickly and too sharply.

“Oh, okay.”

“Dan! Phil!” Madhavi called, and they both whipped their heads around to look at her, off to their right. “Turn this way so I can get a picture of you!”

So they both turned to give her a better angle for the picture, and Phil put his arm around Dan’s shoulder, and Dan put his arm around Phil’s waist and couldn’t stop himself leaning into his side to feel the softness of his coat-clad body pressed against Dan’s.

“Say cheese!” she called, and snapped a picture on her phone. Phil’s arm dropped as soon as the
shutter noise went off, and Dan let go a moment later. “Aw, you guys, this is so cute!”

“Ha ha, thanks,” Dan mumbled.

“Cute? I think you mean very, very manly and tough,” Phil said, but Madhavi just stuck her tongue out at him.

When they dropped her off at the train station a few hours later, Caroline leaned over and kissed Dan on the cheek before sliding out of the car and waving good-bye. He guessed that meant she was still interested.

Dan, on the other hand, kept checking Facebook all evening until he at last saw that Madhavi had posted her pictures from the day. Caroline had posted their selfie with their face paint an hour earlier, and he had of course liked it. But when Madhavi uploaded her pictures, he clicked through the album until he got to the one of him and Phil, arms around each other, leaning in close, grinning like they couldn’t be happier. The picture was such a lie, but Dan didn’t care. He dragged it onto his desktop and then in to his pictures folder and knew he would keep it saved there for a long time to come.

Chapter End Notes

Originally published on tumblr
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

The endless nights that I have searched… (Warning for alcohol)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The following Friday was Dan’s last Halloween lesson of the year. He felt a little odd dressing up in his costume and acting all Halloweeny when it was already November 8th, but the kids didn’t know any different and seemed to have just as much fun as any of the other students had. It also happened to be the day of the Prefectural English Speech Contest, a fact that he was kind of upset about.

They’d spent every afternoon this week practicing with Kurumi and Airi, and Dan felt they were as perfect as they were ever going to get. Phil and Watanabe-sensei had gone down to the prefectoral capital to watch the girls give their speeches and to cheer them on, but Dan couldn’t take the day off primary school and so was stuck waiting for one of them to let him know the results.

He was working at Shiratsuka with Ayaka-sensei today, so their classes were done at lunchtime. After midday break, he went back to the staff room and worked on putting stickers in folders and helping Ayaka-sensei make materials for their next class in a few weeks. His phone started vibrating in his pocket at around 2:45, and he quickly pulled it out and stepped out onto the pavement just outside the staff room. He saw it was Phil, so he slid right and put it up to his ear while biting his lip.

“Hey! What’s the news?”

“Hey!” came Phil’s voice from the other end. “There’s someone here who would like to speak to you.”

There were rustling and clicking noises that he assumed meant the phone was being passed over. Then a new voice came on, quiet with shyness.

“Hello.” It was Kurumi.

“Hi, Kurumi. What’s the news?”

“Um, well, I won?” she squeaked.

“You won?!” Dan practically shouted into the phone.

“Um, yeah.” He could hear the restraint in her voice and knew that she must be smiling. “I got first place in the bilingual category.”

“Congratulations! That’s amazing! You mean you got first place in the entire prefecture?”

“Yes,” she said, and Dan did a little celebratory dance because he knew no one from the staff room would be looking.

“Well done! I’m very proud of you and all of your hard work.”
“Thank you, Dan-sensei,” she said, her voice quieter than ever, but he could tell she was happy. Then there was rustling and clicking again, and he knew she’d passed the phone back to Phil.

“Oh my fucking god. She actually won first prize?” he yelled as soon as he was sure it was Phil on the other end.

“I know.” The words came out half-laugh. “I actually almost jumped up and started yelling during the awards ceremony, except everyone was being all dignified and solemn, so I had to just hold it in and scream internally. Oh, by the way, Airi wanted me to tell you thank you very much for all of your help.”

“I guess she didn’t place,” Dan was a little disappointed about that, but he supposed that whoever had won had probably deserved it.

“No, but she’s not too upset about it. She told me she’s just happy she made it this far.”

“She’s such a good kid.” Dan was still a little giddy about Kurumi winning, but he realized he was just as proud of Airi, who had worked no less hard than the other girl and seemed to be accepting the results with grace.

“She really is,” Phil agreed. “Yeah, and Watanabe-sensei asked if the 16th would be good to take us out for a celebratory dinner. It’s a Saturday,” he added.

“Er, yeah, that’ll probably be fine. I don't think I have anything then.”

“Cool. I’ll pass that along.”

“Good,” Dan said. There was a pause, and then, “Well, tell Kurumi congratulations again for me!”

“Will do. Talk to you later!”

Click.

The following Monday, there was a handout lying on Dan’s desk when he came in, which Phil translated for him after the morning meeting. Dan was actually pretty impressed when, zoning out during the meeting, he managed to pick out a lot of words and phrases on his own. The one he was most proud of reading was 飲み会, which he knew meant “Drinking Party.”

“Yeah, so this is telling us that there will be a school bonenkai on December 14 and if you’d like to sign up you should see Takabayashi-sensei,” Phil explained. “The fee is ¥18,000, which is actually pretty cheap considering that it’s meant to cover the stay at the hotel and all the food and drink.”

“Wait, what’s a bonenkai? I thought it was just a normal nomikai.” And why were they staying at a hotel?

“A bonenkai is a year-end party,” Phil said. “Lots of companies and schools and other organizations like that have them in December. The words actually translate to ‘year-forgetting party.’ Basically, you’re supposed to get really drunk and have a lot of fun to forget all the bad stuff that happened in 2013 and get ready to start fresh in 2014.”

“Sounds like my kind of party,” Dan said, keeping his eyes fixed on the sheet in front of him. He probably shouldn’t have said that, but he couldn’t exactly take it back now.

“So, you think you’ll go then?” Phil seemed to have chosen to ignore the subtext of Dan’s comment.
“Probably. You?”

“Yeah, I think so. We’re not meant to fly out until the next weekend, so it should be fine.”

Oh, right. Phil’s trip to England with Akari. As if Dan wanted to be reminded of that. Instead of trying to find a response, Dan pulled out his wallet and made his way over to Takabayashi-sensei’s desk to put his name down for the party and fork over his ¥18,000.

Caroline came up to see him again the next Sunday, and he got Madhavi to drive them around Harata just like he’d offered before. It was fun, showing off his town to someone new, but he was fast realizing that as enjoyable as she was to be around, he really wasn’t that attracted to Caroline. That afternoon, while Jake and Madhavi were busy arguing over who got to edit their purikura photos, he pulled her aside and told her he thought they should just be friends.

“Yeah, I kind of guessed that,” she said, shaking her head and grinning at him. “That’s okay. You’re fun to hang out with. You should come down and let me show you around Yaita sometime.”

“Deal,” he agreed, relieved she didn’t think he was an asshole who had led her on.

She came up again the following Saturday, this time just as his friend, because the Americans in Harata had organized a big Thanksgiving meal, which Phil had ended up hosting, as his flat could hold more people than anyone else’s. It was a potluck, so rather than the traditional turkey and cranberry and whatever else people usually had at Thanksgiving, they each just brought a dish they knew how to cook. Madhavi had made them the spiciest chili he thought he’d ever eaten, while Jake had simply brought vast quantities of mashed potatoes. Dan himself had made a stew from a recipe his mother had given him, and he was pretty damn proud of it too.

“I think I put too much cumin in this,” Madhavi muttered over her bowl of chili as they all sat around Phil’s dining table enjoying their feast. “Does it taste too cumin-y to you?”

“The only flavor I can taste in it is fire,” Dan said, stuffing a dinner roll in his mouth to try to ease the burning on his tongue.

“I think the seasoning is just right,” Caroline assured Madhavi before turning to Dan. “And this stew is amazing!”

“Thanks,” he said, attempting a smug smile around his mouthful of bread.

After dinner, he sat in the tatami room and chatted with Madhavi about their Christmas plans a bit. She, Jake, James, and Dan were all going to buy the seishun juuhachi kippu, a discount-rate ticket that Japan Rail sold during school holidays. One ticket cost ¥11,000 and came with five uses — five days during which you could use the entire Japan Rail train system for free for the entire day. As long as you didn’t mind the occasional twelve-hour train journey, it was a really cheap way to travel long distances in Japan. Dan was dying to see Kyoto and Nara, while Madhavi was campaigning hard for a trip to the Sea of Japan coast and Japan’s famed Snow Country. Eventually they decided they could just do both.

He saw Phil sitting nearby, deep in conversation with Seiji, and felt a twinge in his chest. As fun as the trip sounded, his heart kept sinking every time he remembered that he wouldn’t be seeing Phil at all for a full two and half weeks (not to mention the fact that during that time Phil would be off showing Akari around England.)

The rest of November passed easily enough, and Dan started visiting the chorus club again, partly because he had more free time now that they were completely done with English speech contest, and
partly because it felt good having something better to do than sit in the staff room and sneak glances at Phil.

Then all at once it was December 1, and they were traveling down to Utsunomiya, the prefectural capital, for their JLPT exams. There were a bunch of them all taking different levels of the exam this time, though Phil was the only one of Dan’s friends attempting the highest level, N1. Madhavi and Jake were each trying for N3, and Caroline was taking the N5, while Max was going for N2. James had declined to try the exam, claiming that his Japanese was still practically non-existent. Dan was pretty nervous about his N4, despite the hours and hours of study he’d put in over the past few months. In addition to the revision he did during his down time at work, he’d started attending free weekly classes at the local Kokusai Kouryuu Kai, the International Cultural Exchange Society.

The volunteers there were mostly retirement-age, and speaking to them made him realize that he’d gotten a pretty one-sided view of Japan up to that point. It was fascinating hearing stories about how back in their day, Harata had been cold enough in winter for natural skating rinks to form, or how amazed they were that kids nowadays got school lunch because they could remember the days right after the war when they and many of their classmates simply went hungry at midday.

The exam started just before midday, and nobody talked much on the train ride down. They were all too busy cramming in some last-minute revision. It was being given at a university in Utsunomiya, which was about a fifteen minute walk from the main Utsunomiya train station. It was very cold out, and a brisk wind had blown away all the clouds, leaving behind only a remote blue sky.

Once they reached the university, they each split up into different rooms, according to the level of the exam they were taking. There were two other ALTs that Dan was slightly acquainted with taking the N4, so he bid good-bye to his friends and headed off to the classroom with them.

The exam lasted for more than two hours, with two multiple-choice sections and a listening portion. Within the first few minutes of starting the test, Dan realized he was going to ace it. Why had he been so worried about this? The two hours seemed to breeze by, and before he knew it the proctor was calling time and collecting their packets and answer sheets.

The higher levels of the exam lasted longer, so Dan wandered out to a picnic table in front of the classroom building where he found Caroline and a few others waiting.

“How do you think you did?” he asked her, brushing a few dead leaves off the cold metal seat before sliding in beside her. She scrunched up her nose and shrugged.

“Eh,” she said, “Could’ve been better. How about you?”

“The listening portion was a lot easier than I was expecting,” he said, not wanting to add that he’d thought the whole test pretty easy. He didn’t want to toot his own horn too loudly.

“Yeah, I guess that’s because we actually hear native-level Japanese every day,” one of the other ALTs, a guy from Kokki named Hassan, mused. “You know the test is offered all over the world, so we kind of have an advantage over people who don’t live in Japan.”

Madhavi and Jake and the other N3 people showed up shortly after that, followed a while later by the group taking the N2. Phil, whose N1 exam had lasted almost three hours, was the last to show up. He walked up to the table, sank down next to Dan and put his forehead right down on the cold metal tabletop.

“That good, huh?” Dan quipped, hesitating a moment before giving him a soothing pat on the shoulder.
“I feel like I just battled a dragon,” Phil muttered, his words muffled by the table.

“Did you slay it at least?” Dan asked.

“No. I think it toasted me like a marshmallow.”

“Awww, there there,” Dan said, patting him again and letting out a little breath of laughter. He didn’t really believe Phil, knowing as he did how good his Japanese was. He figured he was just tired after what was admittedly an extremely difficult exam.

“I think we’ve all earned a beer and some gyoza,” Max declared then, standing up. “There’s that one place next to the station?”

“Mmmmm,” Phil moaned, but he got up too and started stretching out his arms, which Dan assumed meant he was interested.

The place Max had mentioned was actually a little grouping of gyoza restaurants that was off to one side of Utsunomiya Station. They had their pick of them all, so they went with the largest, since they were a pretty big group. Over a round of beer and endless orders of gyoza, they each took a turn explaining exactly what they thought they had screwed up on the exam.

“I couldn’t remember what kamawanai meant,” Madhavi lamented, dousing her yakigyoza in ponzu and downing it in one bite. “I think I put down that it was the negative form of ‘bite.’”

“That’s kamanai,” Max corrected her.

“Crap,” she said, picking up another yakigyoza.

“Yeah, kamawanai means ‘doesn’t matter,’” Jake said, finishing off his beer and signaling the waitress to bring another. “I thought you knew that.”

“I do know that!” Madhavi huffed in return, sticking a sharp elbow in his side.

“I had to choose the correct meanings for yojijukugo,” Phil said, staring into the bottom of his own beer mug with a dazed look. They had all come here by train, so nobody was worrying too much about drinking.

“What’s that?” Dan asked.

“They’re four-kanji idioms,” Phil answered. “So, there are four kanji, and when you say them all together, they have a new meaning. It’s kind of like an aphorism? Or a common saying?”

“Like 一期一会,” Max said, drawing out the kanji in the air with his finger.

“*Ichigo ichie*?” Dan repeated. “What does that one mean?”

“It means ‘a once-in-a-lifetime encounter,’” Max explained. “The kanji literally mean ‘one season, one meeting.’”

“The deeper meaning,” Phil added on, “is that you should treasure every moment you spend with people because that moment will never come again.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Caroline said from across the table, and they all raised their glasses and toasted. They were all a little tipsy on the train ride home, and Caroline fell asleep on Dan’s shoulder. When
the train pulled up at Yaita Station and she still didn’t wake up, he had to shake her awake and practically push her out the door with the other Yaita ALTs. There were only two more stops until the station where all the Harata residents would get off. Once Caroline had gone, Phil stood up from where he’d been sat across the aisle from Dan and took the now-empty seat beside him. To Dan’s surprise, Phil put his head on Dan’s shoulder just as Caroline had. In the train window across the way, Dan watched Phil’s reflection, saw him close his eyes and snuggle closer against Dan’s shoulder, and he wondered just how drunk Phil was.

“I think I completely and utterly failed that test,” Phil murmured after a moment, his voice so quiet that Dan was probably the only one who could hear him.

“Don’t say that,” Dan tried to comfort him. “I bet you did better than you think.”

“That was my third time taking it,” Phil sighed but didn’t say anything else. He kept his head pressed into Dan’s shoulder for the remainder of the ride home, his hair tickling Dan’s jaw, his left hand laid close to Dan’s thigh on the train seat. It was all Dan could do not to reach over and intertwine his fingers in that hand.

Eventually they reached the station, and Dan raised his shoulder just a bit to wake Phil up.

“We’re here,” he whispered. Phil sighed again and sat up, and then they all piled out onto the platform. It wasn’t until they had walked through the gates out into the station lobby that it occurred to Dan that Madhavi had driven them here this morning…and was in no state to drive them back home again. He looked at Phil, eyes still droopy from his nap on the train, and realized that he wasn’t going to be able to drive them either. It was a good fifteen minutes by car from the station to Dan’s flat, and he really didn’t want to have to walk all that way.

“Er,” Dan said, gazing around at their little group.

“It’s okay,” Jake piped up then. “I can drive Madhavi’s car.”

“Are you sure?” Dan asked, raising skeptical eyebrows at him. He’d definitely seen Jake put back three beers just a couple of hours ago.

“No, you’re not driving my car,” Madhavi interjected, glaring up at Jake. “We’ll take the bus.”

So they walked around to the other side of the station where the big, green city bus was waiting, and once they were in and settled, Phil leant his head against Dan’s shoulder again and seemed to drift back to sleep.

“Hey,” Dan muttered to him a few minutes after the bus had lurched into motion. “Hey, I’ve never ridden the bus here before. Are you going to wake up and tell me which stop to get off at?”

“No,” Phil said, rubbing his cheek against the scratchy wool of Dan’s winter coat. “Just come over and stay at mine. I’ll drive you home to change clothes before school in the morning.”

Dan blinked down at him in astonishment. This had to be the alcohol talking, right? There was absolutely no logical reason why Dan shouldn’t get off at the stop nearest his own flat and just go home. Phil didn’t seem to be in the mood for games or movies or even just hanging out, even. In fact, all he seemed to want to do was sleep, so why…would he invite Dan over just to sleep? Dan’s heart began to pound in his ears, and his own two beers were making it difficult for him to pull his thoughts together.

“Dan, I think the next stop is yours,” Max suddenly called back from where he was sat two seats in front of them. Dan peered out the window into the darkening evening. It did look familiar out there.
He had a pretty good idea of where they were in relation to his flat. It would probably only be about a five minute walk from the bus stop to his front door.

“That’s okay,” Dan called back. “I’m going over to Phil’s for a little while.”

He couldn’t really see Phil’s face from the angle he was at, but when he glanced over at the window of the bus, he could see Phil’s reflection smile for just a moment before his expression smoothed into sleepiness again.

It was another ten minutes or so before they reached the stop nearest Phil’s place. When the bus squeaked to a stop, Phil startled Dan by suddenly sitting up and saying in a gravelly voice,

“Here we are.”

They waved good-bye to Max — Madhavi and Jake had gotten off one stop earlier, near Jake’s flat — and stepped out into the cold evening. Dan could see the sign for the hospital just off to their left, lit up in neon lights. Phil led the way off to their right, following the road for a short way before crossing over to the opposite side at the next intersection. That’s when Dan spotted Phil’s building, just a block off the main road, and was finally able to get his bearings.

“Did you want to cook dinner together or something?” he asked, speeding up just enough to match pace with Phil, who was walking quite briskly for someone who’d seemed so sleepy just moments ago.

“I’m not really hungry yet, but yeah, we could,” Phil shrugged.

Dan had to admit that he wasn’t particularly hungry yet either. They’d eaten a lot of gyoza. Still, it was already after 5:00, so it would be dinner time soon.

“We could watch a movie,” Dan suggested next. They’d reached the edge of Phil’s car park now and were making their way up to the front steps of the building.

“That sounds good,” Phil said. “Let’s do that.”

He didn’t sound particularly enthusiastic about the idea, but then again, his voice did still have a somewhat drowsy quality to it. They fell silent in the lift, and the silence continued all the way down the veranda to Phil’s front door and down the corridor and into the tatami room.

“Help me set up?” Phil broke the silence at last as he made his way over to the cupboard and pulled out the futon.

“Sure,” Dan replied.

Phil laid out the futon against one wall, propping up a few pillows and cushions for them to lean against, and then together they dragged the kotatsu over so that they could lean against the wall with their feet underneath it and Phil’s laptop set up on top of it.

“What should we watch?” Dan asked next, wriggling down into the narrow space between the wall and the kotatsu.

“Erm, I’m feeling in an anime mood,” Phil said, “Just a second.” He stepped out of the room, and Dan could hear him rummaging around in the lounge for a minute. Then he came back carrying a DVD, which he popped into the side of the laptop before squeezing himself under the kotatsu beside Dan.
“It’s Princess Mononoke. Is that okay?” Phil asked as the movie player app started up.

“Yeah, sounds good,” Dan said, trying not to stare at Phil from the corner of his eye. He had no clue what was going on (“You know,” his inner voice was scolding him, “you’re probably reading too much into all of this. He’s your friend. He just wants to hang out.”), and he had even less of a clue when, once the movie had started and the volume was set just right, Phil slid down into a recumbent position and rested his head against Dan’s side.

Reflexively, Dan lifted his arm and placed it around Phil’s midsection, his hand draped just over Phil’s stomach, and he had to admit that whatever this was, he didn’t mind it so much.

Phil was asleep in less than five minutes. The more deeply he drifted into sleep, the further down Dan’s side he slipped, until about twenty minutes into the movie, his head was pillowed on Dan’s upper thigh and he was snoring loudly. Dan was very much not watching the movie anymore at this point. Instead, his fast-sobering brain was running a mile a minute trying to work out how he’d managed to end up in this position. Step one: Phil did poorly on his exam. Step two: Phil drank beer. Step three: Phil became sleepy. Step four: Phil decided to invite Dan over so that he could fall asleep on him? There was a missing step somewhere in there…

Phil woke when the movie was over, sitting up and looking at Dan with clear eyes, as though there was absolutely nothing strange about the situation.

“I’m starving,” he croaked as he raised his arms in a stretch. “I think I’ve got makings for pancakes. Wanna have breakfast for dinner?”

“That sounds delicious,” Dan said. So Phil set up his laptop in the kitchen and put on Blackholes and Revelations, and they made pancakes together while singing along just loud enough that hopefully the neighbors wouldn’t report them to the building manager.

After dinner, Phil wanted to show Dan this ancient PS1 game that he used to play called Um Jammer Lammy, which turned out to be both very strange and very full of crappy music. Dan didn’t care, though. He had fun bashing the buttons and peeking at Phil’s grinning face every so often from under his lashes. They had both failed Level 6, which for some reason took place in hell, several times when Phil tossed his controller on the floor, yawned, and said,

“I’m tired. You ready to turn in?”

“Erm, yeah.” While Phil was looking away, Dan checked his phone and saw that it wasn’t even 11:00 yet. “Guess I’ll take the futon?”

Phil glanced at him and shook his head.

“Nah, it’s too cold. I don’t have a heater for that room, and I’m not giving you my electric blanket because I don’t have a heater for the bedroom either.”

“Okay,” Dan said, and went to the bathroom, where he borrowed some of Phil’s toothpaste and cleaned his teeth with his finger. He felt like he had entered some kind of Bizarro universe where everything Phil said or did was the exact opposite of Dan’s expectations. And maybe that meant… But, no. He was probably just projecting his own feelings onto Phil, right? That had to be it…right?

Phil lent him an old t-shirt and some pajama bottoms, and then they slid beneath the electric blanket together, each hugging a separate edge of the queen-sized mattress. Dan’s blood was pounding so loudly through his brain that he couldn’t form a coherent thought. He was pretty sure he’d never felt less sleepy in his life. He rolled over on his side, toward the center of the bed, and he saw that Phil
had done the same. Phil’s eyes were closed, though; he couldn’t see Dan staring at him like a freezing man might stare at fire.

What if Dan just slid a little closer? And then what if he just put his arm around Phil? And after that, what would happen if he brought their faces close together? And then if he pressed his lips against Phil’s lips…?

“Phil?” He hadn’t made a conscious decision to speak, and he realized a moment later that he didn’t actually have anything to say.

“Yeah?” Phil mumbled, not opening his eyes. His voice sounded soft and a little breathless. Dan just kept staring, willing Phil to open his eyes and look at him. If he could just look into his eyes, then he would know if it was okay to move closer.

“What is it?” Phil said, and his eyelids fluttered open. His gaze locked onto Dan’s, and they lay there like that for what could have been years or seconds, stuck in a stalemate, seeming to dare each other to make the next move. It was Dan who finally moved. Not taking his eyes from Phil’s, he rolled a few inches closer to him. Phil responded by inching closer to Dan. Then Dan reached out a tentative hand, placing it lightly on Phil’s side, and when Phil didn’t flinch away, he slid his hand around to Phil’s back and drew his body in closer. Their faces were now just a breath’s space apart. Dan closed his eyes, feeling Phil’s breath tickling against his upper lip for just a moment before he pressed his lips into Phil’s, and he heard Phil let out a sound that was halfway between a squeak and a sigh. A moment later Phil’s lips were moving against his, and Dan realized with wonder that he was kissing him back. Half of Dan’s brain was asking What the fuck? and the other half was lost in the sensation of Phil and the smell of Phil and the sound of the duvet rustling around them.

Then Phil made that sound again, almost like a whimper, and Dan drew back to look into his face again. Phil’s eyes were open, and they were full of tears, and as Dan watched, the tears began to spill over and run down his cheeks.

And that’s when Dan suddenly thought of Akari.

Phil’s face crumpled up like a piece of paper crushed inside a fist, and the tears were falling thick and fast, and he was making choking, sobbing sounds in the back of his throat.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. Okay? Shhh,” Dan said, pulling Phil in against his chest and wrapping his arms around him more tightly. “It’s okay. It’s okay,” he said, hoping that that wasn’t a lie.

Phil didn’t say anything, just pushed his face deeper into Dan’s chest and sobbed even harder, and Dan had no idea what the right thing to do was. He shouldn’t be kissing Phil. He was sure of that, except that Phil had definitely kissed him back, and even before that, it had been Phil’s idea to invite him over, and ask him to spend the night, and suggest they sleep in his bed together. But now Phil was shaking and crying and not speaking, and Dan thought it might be up to him to fix this.

“Do you want me to just go home?” he whispered, rubbing his hand up and down Phil’s back and hoping he would find that soothing.

At first Phil shook his head, but a moment later, he leant back and looked up at Dan, his face all red and splotchy and his eyelashes dark with wetness.

“Yeah,” he mumbled. “Yeah, I think so. I’m sorry, Dan. I’m really sorry. I just need some time to think. I’m sorry—”
“That’s fine,” Dan said, and pulled his arms from around Phil’s body, drawing them up against his own chest, where he could feel the patch of moisture Phil’s tears had left behind. “It’s fine.”

“It’s not,” Phil said, his voice breaking on the second word, and his eyes scrunching up again.

“Okay, it’s not,” Dan agreed, his voice low and gentle. “I’m going to get up and go change clothes now.”

Phil nodded to show he understood, his eyes still screwed shut, and Dan slipped out from under the blanket into the cold, cold air of the bedroom, slid open the tatami room door, stepped through, and then slid it shut behind him.

His heart was still pounding so hard that he could only manage quick, shallow breaths. He squeezed his fists closed at his sides and forced himself to draw big, full gasps of air into his lungs. Shit. Shit shit shit.

He changed quickly, shuddering and shivering in the chill of the dark room. How was he going to get home, though? Was Phil going to drive him? That didn’t sound likely at the moment. Was he going to just walk? In the middle of the night, in winter? He tried to calculate how long it would take. Maybe an hour. His coat was pretty warm, at least.

He could hear Phil back in the bedroom, getting up, opening a drawer and digging around inside it. Then the tatami room door slid open again, light from Phil’s bedside lamp spilling through and making Dan wince against the sudden brightness.

“Erm, here’s my bike key for my old bike, if you want to borrow it.” Phil was holding a closed fist out toward him. Dan took a step closer, holding his palm open, and Phil dropped something cold and metallic into it. “It’s a bright blue one. Should be the only blue one down there.” His voice was hoarse and shaky.

“Thanks,” Dan said, though why was he thanking Phil for making him bike home in the dark and the cold?

“I’m sorry,” Phil said again.

“It’s okay,” Dan repeated. “I’m gonna go now.”

“Okay.”

It took so much willpower to make his body turn away from Phil and to make his legs step out of the room and into the kitchen, and to make himself continue down the hallway to the front door, and to shove his shoes on and push the door open and to just walk away. And there was no Phil behind him, calling out to him to stop, telling him to just come back.

The temperature was below 0 C out tonight, and Dan cursed himself for not wearing a hat. He hadn’t expected to be outdoors much today. He found the bike easily enough, though his chilled fingers had a hard time working the key in the lock. Eventually he got it open and climbed on and slowly pedaled off down the street. At least at this time of night there weren’t many cars out to make his ride that much more dangerous.

By the time he reached his own place, his teeth were chattering with the cold, but he hardly noticed.

Once inside, he stripped off his coat and then his clothes and ran himself a hot bath to warm up, but it was like his body was on autopilot while the gears of his mind whirred with the effort of trying to formulate a proper thought. It wasn’t until he slid into the warm embrace of the hot bath water that
something finally clicked into place in his brain — Phil’s hand on his hip, Phil’s head on his knee, Phil asleep on his thigh, Phil’s lips against his — Phil wanted him just as much as he wanted Phil.

Well, crap.

Chapter End Notes

Originally published on tumblr
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

So many eyes, so many hearts, so many smiles

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Scenario #1: Phil is in love with me.

Scenario #2: Phil just wants me for my sexy body.

Scenario #3: I was hit by a car while riding my bike on one of these narrow-ass Japanese roads and am now in a coma experiencing disturbingly vivid dreams.

Dan exhaled a laugh through his nose and lifted his pencil from the page in his notebook. He’d been planning to do some grammar practice — Hey, no time like the present to get ready for the N3! — but somehow, when he’d set graphite to paper something entirely different had spilled from the tip of his pencil.

He nibbled on his lower lip for a moment without realizing he was doing so and then lowered his pencil to the paper once more.

Scenario #4: Phil is having difficulties in his relationship with his girlfriend and simply turned to the nearest available warm body for relief and comfort.

Dan’s pencil paused at the end of the sentence. He re-read what he had just written, a deep line carving itself between his eyebrows. Of all the scenarios, number four was the one that rang the most true. That sucked. He set his pencil down and flipped the notebook closed over it.

"Dan-sensei samishisou naa," a voice suddenly interrupted his thoughts, and he looked up to see one of the P.E. teachers — a tall, mustachioed man named Mr. Kato (no relation to the English teacher) — stood at the edge of the phone desk gazing down at Dan with a sympathetic twinkle in his eye.

"Er, sumimasen. Kikoemasen deshita," Dan said, holding a hand up to his ear to emphasize his point.

"Firu-sensei ga inakute Dan-sensei samishisou da to itta," Mr. Kato elaborated.

"Oh," Dan said, feeling his cheeks growing warm and hating himself for it. "Er, chotto samishii desu yo."

"Ne," Mr. Kato said, pursing his lips and giving a strong nod.

"Ne," Dan agreed, and Mr. Kato nodded once more and then wandered off back to his own desk.

Oh, goody. Dan apparently looked so dejected that even the other teachers had started to pick up on how forlorn an air he exuded. He glanced to his right, at Phil’s empty desk that never looked so neat and tidy when Phil was actually there. When he’d come in this morning and been greeted with the
absence of Phil, Dan had experienced a moment of panic, imagining that Phil had been so broken up inside about the events of the previous evening that he’d actually had to take a day off work. But then Dan had checked the schedule and realized that Phil was just working over at Nishisho today. He wasn’t supposed to be here. Right.

It had made Dan feel such a dolt for working himself up all morning as he got ready for school, steeling himself to try to look Phil in the eye in the full light of day. He needn’t have bothered. That glorious moment would be reserved for the following day.

Now here Dan was, sat twiddling his thumbs all alone in the staff room on a day when he’d only been given one measly second-year class to teach.

A sudden thought stole into his brain, and he slid a finger between the pages of the notebook to flick it open once again. He picked up his pencil, licked his lips, and wrote.

Scenario #5: Akari is an international drug kingpin and Phil is an agent of Interpol working deep undercover to try to bring her down. He doesn’t love her, and he never did. It was just business, sweetheart. *tips trilby over eyes and disappears into the damp, black evening* Will Phil’s attraction to Dan prove fatal? Will Dan ever wake from his coma? Tune in next week for the answer to these and other mysteries, in the thrilling conclusion of “The Yakuza Who Loved Me.”

Dan chuckled quietly to himself, wishing Phil were here to share the joke. Except — his laughter twisted into a scowl — there was no way he could share that particular joke with Phil. And maybe that was the worst part of this whole, stupid thing. The best remedy for his present melancholy was probably just to sit and laugh at ridiculous things with Phil.

He shut the notebook again and leaned back in his chair, sticking his fingers in his hair and ruffling it around in an agitated manner. If only there were something for him to do. He needed a distraction, and he needed it badly. But it was only 10:30 in the morning, and he was at work, and the closest thing to a distraction he had was an increasingly absurd list of explanations for Phil’s behavior yesterday.

He’d already pulled his phone from his pocket and gone to text Phil so many times this morning. He’d even gotten so far as to spend forty-five minutes typing out a long, meticulously worded email, only to re-read it, decide there was nothing in it he wouldn’t rather say directly to Phil’s face, and delete it, draft and all.

He would just have to wait. That’s all there was to it. Wait and see if Phil broke the silence first. Wait and see how Phil seemed tomorrow. Wait and see if he could convince Phil that they needed to just fucking talk it all out. finally. for. the. love. of. god.

Scenario #6: Phil fell for me just as hard as I fell for him but hasn’t a clue how to reconcile that to the fact that he has a wonderful girlfriend he is planning to marry.

Dan gazed down at the words on the page, letting the idea of it fill his mind like the breath of air filling his chest, and he held it there, not daring to move, for as long as he could stand it, and then quickly and sharply he let it go. Scenario #6 was probably more absurd than any other he’d written so far.

“Dan-sensei, isogashii desu ka?”

He glanced up to see Yamanaka-sensei, the special needs teacher, leaning over the desk in front of him and peering at his notebook. He snapped it shut and pushed his chair back from the desk a little.
“Iie, isogashikunai desu,” he answered her, hoping it was okay to admit to a fellow teacher that he had literally nothing to do.

“Ja, Dan-sensei ha tokubetsu shien no seito to issho ni karenda wo tsukaretara mo yoroshii desu ka?” She was speaking very slowly, enunciating every word to make sure he caught it. It still took him several seconds to work out her meaning. The special needs students were making calendars?

“Tanoshisou desu,” he said with a nod, and stood from his chair to indicate his willingness to join in.

“Yokatta desu!” she exclaimed, offering him a warm smile.

As they made their way over to the third-year building where the special needs classrooms were located, Yamanaka-sensei explained further that the students teamed up with the special needs class from Higashichu, Seiji’s junior high school, to make a calendar every year. Dan wasn’t really sure what she meant by “make” and was half-imagining he would be walking in on some kind of fashion photo shoot of his students.

Instead, when she slid open the classroom door and motioned Dan inside, he saw the students leaning over big tables that had replaced their desks. There were large sheets of paper laid out across every available surface in the room. He walked over to where Hiroki was working alongside a third-year girl named Arisa. An ink-stained block of carved wood was laid on the table before them, and as Dan watched, Arisa was dipping a roller into a tray of ink and rolling it out onto the wood, covering the carved symbols in a sheen of black ink.

Then Hiroki lifted a fresh sheet of paper and, carefully lining up the corners with the corners of the wooden block, lowered it onto the block and weighted down each edge with a small, black iron bar. Next, Arisa picked up two paddles made of woven bamboo that were lying on the table nearby and used them to smooth the paper out over the wood block until all of the ink had been transferred to the paper. Then Hiroki removed the weights and peeled back the paper to reveal that it had just been printed with the calendar for the month of April.

“Jouzu ni dekita yo ne,” Yamanaka-sensei said to the students, giving them a nod of approval, and Hiroki grinned at her before setting the freshly-inked page down in an empty space on a nearby table.

“Dan-sensei, chotto mite kudasai,” Yamanaka-sensei said, turning to him again and gesturing him over to the other side of the room. He followed her until they reached the row of shelves lining the back of the classroom. She picked up one of the sheets laid out there, and he saw it was for the month of January. The bottom half of the page was printed with the calendar grid in black ink, just as he’d just seen Hiroki and Arisa making. However, the top half was printed in full color, showing a wintry mountain scene.

“Kono e ha Touko-chan ni kakareta mono desu yo. Kirei desu yo ne?” she said, leaning back to admire the image. Dan frowned at her, trying to understand.

“Kaita,” she explained, dropping one side of the page to mime holding a pencil and drawing with it. “Zenbu no e ha tokubetsu shien no seito ni kakareta mono desu.”

Dan chewed his lip. He thought he understood. All of the pictures for the calendar were drawn by the special needs students, and the January one she was showing him right now had been drawn by Touko. Dan looked at it more closely, seeing that its carved lines depicted a village on a mountainside, half-buried in snow, with brown houses and colorfully-dressed little people wandering
the streets. The lines were thick and simple, giving it a sort of rough charm, and he smiled, impressed that one of his students had actually made that. Touko didn’t seem to be here for the calendar-making session, so he made a mental note to congratulate her on her artwork later.

Yamanaka-sensei set down the sheet again and beckoned him over to a table where Yusuke and two girls were printing pages for October.

“Yusuke-kun,” she said, and the boy looked up and gave Dan a little wave. After several months of having Dan as his teacher, he wasn’t the least bit shy around him anymore. “Dan-sensei ni oshiete-kurete mo ii?”

“Hai!” Yusuke barked, promptly picking up two bamboo paddles and demonstrating the proper way to smooth them over the paper. Then he thrust them toward Dan and gave him an encouraging nod. Dan took hold of them by the woven handles and then proceeded to do as Yusuke had shown him, rubbing the straw pads against the paper until all of the ink had been picked up. Then he stepped back, and one of the girls peeled back the page to reveal their handiwork.

“Yatta!” Yusuke congratulated him, and Dan smiled. He’d never realized when he took this teaching job that he would end up spending so much of his time honing his arts and crafts skills.

He worked alongside the special needs students for the remainder of the morning, helping them complete the printing for October and get started on November. There was a dicey moment in there where he realized they were making calendars for November 2014, nearly a full year from now, and he’d started trying to imagine what he would be doing with his life in November of next year. He would back in England, and if all went according to plan, he would have a position as a trainee in a law firm. But stood there in the freezing cold classroom, working alongside the special needs students to create hand-made calendars, the entire idea of him as a lawyer seemed laughably absurd. He could almost more easily seem himself spending the rest of his life as a printmaker, or a teacher.

And that’s when things had gotten particularly dicey, for he’d tried to imagine what if (Just, what if? Just for the sake of argument, I mean I’m just playing devil’s advocate here), but just supposing he decided to stay on here for another year? An extra year to ponder his future and figure out his life… an extra year of sitting beside Phil every day at work… An extra year of frustrated feelings too, unless…

Scenario #7: Phil breaks up with Akari and asks me to marry him instead. We make headlines across the world as the first same-sex couple to marry at the British Embassy in Tokyo. We spend the rest of our lives bickering in the staff room and helping students win the speech contest together, living happily ever after.

He should not find that scenario nearly as appealing as he did.

After lunch and hiruyasumi, he taught his one class of the day — “I would like to become a Pokémon Master. How about you?” with the second-years — and then waited in the staff room for fifteen minutes until he was free to go.

When he walked through his front door and saw his lonely bedroom, he knew at once that he could not spend the rest of the day cooped up in there with his thoughts. So he grabbed his laptop, slipped it into his bag, and headed over to the cafe he’d visited with Max a while back. It had good dessert and a cool, laid-back vibe, and hopefully hanging out there would keep his mind off other things.

Of course it didn’t. He hadn’t been there for twenty minutes when he finally gave in and pulled his phone out of his pocket. It took him at least six minutes of typing and deleting and re-typing and re-
deleting before he finally felt up to pushing the send button.

Dan

I’m at Chara. Wanna come have a cup of coffee and talk about things?

As soon as the message was sent, he set his phone down on the table beside his coffee cup, face down so that he wouldn’t keep glancing at the screen to see if there was a reply yet. A cafe was neutral territory, unlike school or either of their flats. And it wasn’t likely anyone around them would be able to understand enough English to properly eavesdrop on their conversation. Hopefully Phil would understand that, and understand just how badly Dan needed to hear what was going on in his head.

Two minutes later his phone buzzed against the table, and his hand darted out for it at once.

Phil

I’m sorry. I need more time. I’ll see you tomorrow.

Scenario #8: Even Phil doesn’t know what the fuck he wants.

The next morning Dan woke from a half-sleep, stomach churning with anxiety. He’d watched the videos of him and Phil again, twice…okay, maybe three times. Why, he couldn’t say. Maybe he’d been looking for something in Phil’s face, some clue in his eyes, in the way they watched Dan. Whatever it was he hadn’t found it. He’d fallen asleep well after 2:00 and even then his sleep had been light and fitful.

It was a gorgeous, sunny day, the sky overhead bluer than any December sky had the right to be. As he headed west toward school, he got an eyeful of the mountains, pure white in their recently-acquired shrouds of snow. He wished he could focus on things like the beauty of nature right now, instead of playing out possible conversations with Phil in his head over and over.

He was early to school today, and he saw as he pulled into the courtyard that he’d beat Phil here for once. That made him frown, if only because it meant delaying this confrontation even more.

He’d fixed himself a morning cup of coffee and was attempting to register the information on his class schedule for the day by the time Phil appeared at the staff room door and shambled over to his own desk.

“Hi,” Dan said, looking up from his schedule, gaze drawn at once to Phil’s pale face. Phil’s expression was neutral, and his own eyes were trained on the bag he was stowing beneath his desk.

“Hi,” Phil said back, casting him a quick glance and a half smile. Then he slid behind Dan’s chair and made his way over to get his own cup of coffee. By the time he sank into his chair, the assistant headmaster was calling the morning meeting to order, and they both had to make a show of paying attention to the long discussions about which third-year students had been caught biking around town without their helmets on.

When the meeting was over and the room had mostly cleared out, Phil at last turned to Dan and said,

“So, I’ve been thinking about our lesson for the special needs class on Thursday, and I think we need to change the game to a different one.”

Dan blinked at him, not quite processing the words he was saying.
“What?”

“It’s just, I think they’re going to find the rock-scissors-paper aspect of it too distracting. Maybe we could do something a little calmer, like Chinese Whispers?”

Phil’s voice and expression were entirely serious, and Dan couldn’t for the life of him understand why.

“Is…that what you want to talk about right now?”

Phil’s eyebrows shot up for a moment, but then his gaze lowered.

“Yes, it is. I…” He paused, took a deep breath, “I promise we’ll talk about other things another time…soon! Just, I need to figure some things out first.” He looked back up at Dan, his eyes pleading. “Is that okay?”

Dan wanted to be angry. No, scratch that, he was angry, that Phil was drawing out this state of unbearable limbo even further. But anger wasn’t a very productive emotion to have in this situation. Dan would be lying if he tried to suggest that there was an obvious best choice for Phil to make. No matter what he ended up deciding, the reality was that they were all screwed. But fuck it Dan felt entitled to some straight answers from Phil for once.

“Can I ask you a question, at least?” He kept his voice quiet and well-modulated.

Phil stared at him for the space of two breaths before giving him a cautious nod.

“Do you have feelings for me?” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Dan wanted to cringe at how silly they sounded, like he was an eleven-year-old on the playground asking someone if they liked him. Still, it was something he needed to know. On Sunday, when he’d let Dan draw him in and press their lips together, had that decision been predicated on lust alone, or was there something more to it?

Phil’s eyes drifted down toward the floor again, and Dan could see the rapid rise and fall of his chest beneath his work shirt.

“I don’t know,” Phil said after a moment, the words quick and indistinct. “Maybe. I think so. It’s all really confusing right now. I’m sorry I can’t give you a better answer than that.”

“You think so?” Dan repeated, his own breath dizzyingly shallow.

Phil shifted his eyes back to Dan’s face, and that pleading look was in them again. Okay. Okay, he shouldn’t force him. He’d said he needed time.

“All right,” Dan said. “I can wait.”

“Thank you,” Phil’s voice was smaller than Dan had ever heard it, and how could Dan be mad at him when he sounded so utterly lost?

“So, Chinese Whispers. I think you’re right. Let’s change the lesson plan.”

The rest of the week passed in a delicate sort of dance, as Dan watched Phil and Phil tried not to meet Dan’s eyes, and every word either of them said could be taken as a hint or just a passing comment, and Phil definitely did not once even slightly allude to Akari’s existence.

And then on Friday afternoon, Phil turned to him and looked him dead in the eye and asked,
“Do you want to go to Ohmaru Onsen with me tomorrow? Just the two of us,” he added.

“Yes,” Dan said at once, not even knowing where Ohmaru Onsen was or why Phil might want to go there with him.

“Great,” Phil grinned, and god that grin was brilliant, like the light at the end of a long tunnel. “It’s supposed to snow on the mountain tomorrow, and I don’t know if your life would be complete if you’d never had a chance to sit in the onsen in the snow.”

“I would go to my grave unsatisfied,” Dan agreed. “What time?”

“Pick you up at 10:30? They don’t open until 11 anyway.”

“Yes, sounds good.”

Phil arrived at his place at 10:47 the following morning, but Dan didn’t mind. He’d slept late after another restless night (Thanks, Phil!), and the extra few minutes gave him time to sort his hair out before Phil showed up.

They were quiet at first as Phil steered the car through western Harata and then into Kokki. It was a fair enough day down here on the plain, but when Dan had stepped out his front door that morning, he’d seen thick white clouds rolling down from the north to swallow the tops of the mountains.

It wasn’t until they’d passed over the river bridge that marked the boundary between Kokki and Nasu that Dan at last worked up the nerve to turn to Phil and ask,

“Does this mean you came up with a better answer for my question?”

Phil kept his eyes trained ahead as he made the turn onto the road that would lead them further up the mountain.

“Yes,” he said. “But before we get to that there’s something I need to tell you, er, about me and Akari.” It didn’t escape Dan that Phil rushed the end of the sentence there, barely mumbling Akari’s name. “I should have told you ages ago. I really meant to tell you, too. I promise I wasn’t trying to hide it from you. I just…didn’t know how to tell you. Do you believe me?”

He tossed a sidewise glance toward Dan before wrenching his eyes back onto the road. Dan took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“I want to believe you. Maybe you’d better just tell me what it is.”

“It’s just, Akari and I, we…we broke up,” Phil said, his voice cracking on the final word. Dan’s head whipped around toward him, knowing the tears would be sitting there at the corners of his eyes before he even saw them. Holy shit. For a moment Dan’s body tingled like he was being stabbed with millions of tiny needles. He shivered. Holy shit, Dan was a legitimate home wrecker.

“I’m sorry,” Dan finally managed to say. “I’m really sorry.”

Phil reached up a hand and rubbed the tears out from under his eyes.

“Don’t be. It’s not your fault,” Phil said.

Erm, it isn’t? was on the tip of Dan’s tongue before he bit it back. He gathered his thoughts for a moment and took a deep breath.

“Do you mind telling me how it happened?”
Phil shook his head, but he didn’t say anything for a while.

“Maybe you should start with when,” Dan prompted at last, and Phil nodded.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “It was a few weeks ago. Erm, the weekend that we went out with the English teachers. Do you remember?”

A few weeks ago? Dan wanted to scream. A few weeks ago. Holy shit.

“I remember,” was all that Dan said.

“It had been coming on for a while. I don’t know if you remember, that one night, after we made the video, when we were fighting—“

“I remember,” Dan repeated.

“She just…” Phil stopped and shook his head. “I thought I’d talked her into England, and she was even going to come visit with me, but then when she thought she was pregnant back in October — I guess I never told you about that — But it just really made me realize some things, and her too I guess.” Phil stopped, and Dan thought his head was going to explode from the sudden flood of information, like whatever dam had been holding back all of Phil’s secrets had not merely sprung a leak but had experienced a complete structural failure.

“So, if I’m following,” Dan said slowly, when it became apparent that Phil wasn’t going to continue, “you broke up because she didn’t want to move back to England with you?”

“I guess that’s the short answer,” Phil mumbled. Dan glanced out the window and was startled to see that the world outside had turned completely white without him noticing. They were a little ways up the mountain now, and already everything around them was covered in a thick blanket of snow. Phil cleared his throat and added, “But it’s just as fair to say that we broke up because I didn’t want to stay in Japan with her.”

Okay, okay, okay, Dan’s brain was saying. Okay, so Phil is single. Holy shit Phil is single, and he might have feelings for you. Holy shit.

“Staying in Japan was that big of a deal-breaker for you?” Dan asked, trying his hardest to keep his tone neutral.

Phil sighed and shook his head.

“It didn’t used to be,” he muttered. And then, “You know, for that one week in October, I actually let myself imagine it — marriage, a baby, a house in Harata where her parents could visit us every weekend, everything. It didn’t sound so bad.”

“So…what made you change your mind, then?”

A breath of cool laughter fell from Phil’s lips.

“Did you know,” he said, “those videos we made together, have gotten more views than any video I’ve ever made?”

Dan shook his head. Somehow, despite having watched them too many times to count already, he hadn’t noticed that. He would not be surprised to discover that he was singlehandedly responsible for every single one of those extra views.
“My subscriber count went way up after posting them too,” Phil continued. “And people keep commenting, asking when I’m bringing you back.”

“Oh,” Dan said. So, it was his fault after all? This was massively confusing. “So, you’re saying that you want to make more videos together?”

“Yeah, I’d love to, but I guess that’s not really what I’m getting at.”

“What then?”

“You can’t get a visa in Japan for being a YouTuber,” Phil said slowly.

“You can get one for being married to a Japanese citizen,” Dan pointed out.

“Yeah,” Phil said, his voice quiet. “It’s just… It suddenly struck me, how much I love YouTube and how I really want to just quit teaching, quit doing other work entirely and put everything into my YouTube channel. I never thought before… That is, lately it’s started to seem like a real possibility.”

Dan could see the way the yarn of Phil’s gloves strained across his knuckles as he clenched the steering wheel tightly. “But Akari wants stability. Akari wants a house and a family, and she wants it all right now. Or, at least, she thinks that’s what she wants.”

They had long since passed the sesshoseki and the stinging scent of sulfur that lingered near it, and they had pulled out of the endless curve of the road leading up the mountain and into a clear, flat space. Dan could see some shops across the way. Along the roadside, the snow was piled up nearly sixty centimeters deep, and fresh, fat flakes were drifting down from the white sky overhead. Phil continued across the open space that Dan realized after a moment was a car park, and he passed the row of shops before turning onto a narrow road that ascended at a perfect 45 degree angle.

“That’s it, just up there,” Phil said, nodding further up the road, and Dan peered through the windscreen to try to make out what was in the distance. With the snow, though, visibility was crap, and all he could see was a fence along the road side and then a wall of white. Phil turned the car into another car park, pulled into a driving space, and turned off the engine. “We’re here!”

When Dan stepped out of the car, his shoes immediately sank down into snow up to his mid-calves. He was glad he’d decided to wear a couple of extra layers today in addition to his wool coat, scarf, hat and gloves.

It was a short walk up the road and then across a bridge that spanned a wide stream of steaming onsen water. On the opposite side of the bridge loomed the entrance of the onsen hotel. Once inside the double set of sliding doors, they stamped the snow off their shoes in the entryway and then Phil led him over to a tiny side room where they slid their outdoor shoes into a row of cubbies and grabbed a pair of the wooden slippers ranged neatly on the shelves above.

The girl at the front desk took their money — ¥1,200, which Dan thought was a bit steep — and gave them each a large towel for drying off, and a small one to take into the bath with them. Then she pointed to the men’s baths, through a door and off down a hallway to their left.

“This place is pretty nice,” Dan commented, looking around at the wood-paneled walls and old black and white photographs, as they made their way down the hallway.

“Yeah, it’s probably one of the swankiest onsen hotels we visit regularly,” Phil tossed back over his shoulder.

Up a set of stairs, past a few hotel rooms, and they at last reached a set of sliding doors that had two dark blue hangings in front of them, printed with the words 男湯 in huge, white brush strokes. Phil
flicked the hangings aside and slid the doors open for them to pass through.

The changing room was small and thankfully empty. Dan felt weird enough stripping down in front of Phil without a bunch of strangers to watch as well. There were shelves against the walls, with baskets to hold their towels and clothes, so Dan stood as close to the shelf as he could manage and swiftly peeled off his clothes and strung the small towel around his hips. It was really small. Like, so small he was pretty sure it wasn’t covering anything. He glanced up to see that Phil was already making his way down a step and through a steam-covered glass door that he assumed led into the bath. Phil had elected to wear his towel draped over his arm, and Dan could only stare for several breathless seconds at the unexpected sight of Phil’s glorious posterior walking away from him.

Calm your tits, Howell, he chided himself. You’re about to see a whole lot more than that.

They passed through a room with a set of sinks, and then through yet another door into the steamy bath room itself. Along the wall to their right was a row of shower heads, built low into the wall so that you could set a stool down in front of one and have a thorough wash. To their left was another door, through which he could see the blank white of the snowy outdoors, and straight ahead was a huge, deep bath full of clear hot water. Dan followed Phil over to the showers and pulled up a stool beside him.

There were a few people already in here, so they chatted about inconsequential things as they lathered and rinsed. The others finished long before they did, and disappeared outdoors. Alone for now, the two of them decided to try out the indoor bath first.

“Ouch, ouch, ouch!” Dan moaned when he first set foot in the scalding water. He glanced over at the sign beside it and saw that this bath’s temperature was set at 41 C. Ouch.

“Oh, come on. This one’s not even that hot,” Phil teased him, sliding down onto the built-in stone seat along the edge of bath. Dan was blushing furiously as he made his best efforts not to stare. Phil was smirking at him, but he couldn’t tell if that was because he’d noticed Dan’s flush or because he was still teasing him about his inability to withstand the heat. Dan took the plunge, sinking entirely beneath the surface of the water and then quickly turning around to place his arms along the edge of the bath so that his front was facing the wall and his eyes could easily focus on the showers across the way…and nowhere else.

“What’s the hottest bath you’ve ever been in?” Dan asked once he’d acclimated to the temperature enough to not want to leap out of the water immediately.

“There’s this one place I went to in Gunma where the baths get progressively hotter, and the hottest is set at 48 degrees. I stood in that one for about three seconds before I jumped out again,” Phil laughed.

“That sounds like it could literally melt your flesh off,” Dan muttered.

They sat in silence for a while, each simply enjoying the soothing warmth of the bath. At last Dan leaned back from the side a little so that he could more easily see Phil’s face.

“What did you mean when you said that that’s only what Akari thinks she wants?”

Dan still hadn’t mustered the courage to ask the question he really wanted the answer to. Phil sighed and sank down in the water until his chin rested just at the surface.

“What I mean is, Akari is twenty-eight and has an older sister who’s made it clear she doesn’t intend to get married and a pair of fast-aging parents who have made it their final mission to see their
grandchildren before they die.”

“Oh,” Dan said, sinking down a little too, to be on the same level with Phil.

“But here she is signing up for a two-year course in nutrition so that she can make a complete career change,” Phil went on. “She says she’s ready to settle down, but I think she’s deluding herself.”

“Oh,” Dan said again and sat up. “Do you want to try the outdoor bath now?”

“Yeah,” Phil said, breaking into a wide smile. “It’s through that door.”

Dan quickly got out of the water and headed straight for the door, attempting to hold his dripping towel in place. He heard Phil’s wet feet on the tiles behind him and gave up on the towel, instead yanking the door open. There were plastic sandals lined up just outside, and Dan was grateful not to have to step on the cold pavement in his bare feet.

“You know,” Phil said, sliding into a pair of sandals just behind him. “You’re not actually supposed to wear towels in the baths here. These little ones they gave us are just for modesty when you’re getting in and out of the water.”

“Oh,” Dan said, not looking back at Phil but instead starting down the stone steps that led to the outdoor bath.

“Wait! Here,” Phil called after him. Dan turned to see that Phil was holding out a pointy straw hat to him. Dan had somehow missed the shelf holding the hats, which he could now see was just beside the door. “To keep the snow out of your hair,” Phil explained. Dan took the hat and settled it on his head before continuing on down the stairs.

Dan had been worried about stepping out into the frigid air with nothing on, but he found that the lingering heat from the bath made the cold easy to tolerate. As long as he got into the next bath pretty quickly, he would be fine.

The big outdoor bath was a mixed one, and as Dan turned the corner around a protective screen that separated the entrance to the men’s baths from the mixed area, he saw that in addition to the people he’d seen inside, there were some women seated in the water as well. The bath itself was huge, more like a pond than a mere bath, with the side of the hotel enclosing it on one side and a slope thick with vegetation forming a sort of natural wall on the other. The slope and the trees were all buried under mounds of fresh, white snow, and more flakes were falling fast, disappearing upon impact into the steamy surface of the water.

“The women get to wear towels,” he muttered to Phil as the two of them slid off their sandals at the water’s edge and stepped down into the bath.

“It’s not exactly fair, is it,” Phil agreed with a sympathetic grin.

They waded out into the center of the bath, where there was a thatched roof rising from the water on wooden columns. Dan was glad to get under it because as soon as they had moved away from the sheltered area near the hotel wall, he’d felt the sting of the sharp snowflakes biting into the bare skin of his back and shoulders.

Once they were settled, though, with the hot water lapping their shoulders and the roof of the hut keeping the snow from their skin, Dan had to admit that he agreed with Phil. His life would not have been complete without this experience. Though the snow was falling thickly now, there was no wind, and their fellow bathers were refraining from conversation. The scene laid out before them they viewed in complete silence. As Dan gazed around him, the contrast of dark water with bright
snow seemed mirrored by the stark contrast between the heat of the bath he sat in and the chill of the air on his bare face. He turned to Phil beside him, and when their eyes met they smiled in unison.

Dan didn’t know exactly why, but it felt like the right moment to ask.

“So, what about us?”

Phil didn’t drop his smile, but something subtle in his eyes shifted away from simple contentment.

“I like you a lot,” he said after a moment.

“But…?” Dan prompted, knowing from Phil’s tone that there was a “but.”

“I just don’t think I’m ready to be more than a friend to you…or anyone really.” The corners of his mouth lifted further, but he wasn’t exactly smiling anymore. “I’m kind of a mess right now.”

Dan wanted to say that it didn’t matter to him if Phil was a mess, that he wanted him any way he could have him. And maybe it would even be true. Maybe he could be happy with a boyfriend who was still heartbroken over someone else, but he knew it wasn’t what Phil wanted or needed right now.

“I like being your friend,” Dan said, his tone tentative.

Phil nodded and flashed a smile at him before turning away to gaze out over the water again.

“It’s like…like if you’re playing a game, and you spend hours getting past every level and you get to the final boss, and you think you’re about to win, but then the game crashes, and just like that all your hard work is gone, and you have to start all over again at the beginning.” He shook his head slowly from side to side. “And it’s just so disappointing that you’re not even sure it’s worth trying again anyway.”

It’s worth it, Dan wanted to yell. He watched Phil’s profile for a while, silhouetted against the snowy hillside behind him.

“You’re the first person I’ve told,” Phil said, suddenly turning back. Dan was glad Phil pretended he hadn’t just caught Dan staring at him. “About me and Akari, I mean. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner, but I just couldn’t. I really couldn’t.”

Dan nodded.

“I understand,” he said. His shoulders were getting cold, so he slid down into the water until it lapped at his chin. They should probably go back inside soon.

“Thanks for understanding,” Phil said. “Do you want to go?”

“Yeah.”

They warmed up in the inside bath again and then rinsed off (Phil said it was always a good idea to rinse off after using the outdoor bath). There were a thousand more questions crowding Dan’s mind, but he wasn’t sure if he was allowed to ask any of them. How had he managed to be so completely blindsided by Scenario #9: Phil is single and has feelings for me but wants to stay just friends anyway?

His mind was still trying to reassemble all of the pieces of the puzzle into the correct image — So, when Phil kissed him a week ago, he had already been single. So, he wasn’t crying about Akari…or
no, he probably was. Because even if he wasn’t technically cheating on her, he must still have felt like he was, in a way. And maybe he didn’t have feelings for Dan after all. Maybe he was just on the rebound, and Dan had happened to be in the right place at the right time. Dan supposed he should be grateful to Phil for not acting on feelings that may not even be real. He glanced over to where Phil was zipping up his jeans on the other side of the changing room. He didn’t feel particularly grateful.

“There’s a really nice coffee shop about halfway down the mountain. Wanna stop on the way?” Phil asked when they’d both completed the lengthy process of pulling on all their layers of winter clothes.

“Sounds perfect.” Dan replied.

It really was kind of perfect — sitting by the cafe’s big front window and watching the snow fill up the car park while he sipped his Brazilian coffee and listened to Phil imagine out loud a planet where snow was hot and you could swim around in it in swimming trunks.

Later, Phil dropped him off at his own place, and Dan was only mildly sad to watch him drive away.

Perhaps it was because he could still picture Phil’s exact expression as he told him, “I like you a lot,” or perhaps it was because Phil had felt the need to share with him one of the most quietly beautiful things he thought he’d ever experienced, but despite everything that Phil had told him, despite the fact that he was almost certainly still in love with Akari, the single strongest emotion that Dan felt as he walked through his front door that evening was hope.

Chapter End Notes

Originally published on tumblr
On Sunday, Dan came over, and they marathoned all of Season 2 of Buffy: The Vampire Slayer. Dan had never really seen the series, and Phil felt this was a wrong that it was his moral duty to right. Also, Phil had explained that, while Season 1 did have some good episodes, the series didn’t really come into its own until the second season.

On Monday, Dan came over after school, and they cooked a stir fry together. After that, Phil made him play *Um Jammer Lammy* again, this time in Parappa mode, in which all of the crappy songs had now become crappy *rap* songs. Phil ended up beating him in Vs. mode because Dan couldn’t stop laughing at the ridiculous lyrics.

On Tuesday, they started Season 1 of Buffy because Dan had been annoyed at not being able to understand any of the references to past events in Season 2. After the opening scenes of episode three, he turned to Phil and shook his head slowly.

“Spontaneously combusting cheerleaders? Really?”

“That’s why I made you start with Season 2,” Phil huffed. “The show was still finding its footing in the first season.”

On Wednesday, Seiji invited the two of them to come along with him to Kokki, to the cafe where the Halloween party had been. It was back to its normal, low-key self now, with saxophone-y jazz and mouthwatering pasta. The three of them sat and chatted and browsed their computers — it was one of the few places around with complimentary wifi — and enjoyed the free gelato the owner brought them.

On Thursday, Madhavi wheedled them into coming out to her taiko practice, which was a twenty-minute drive away in the next town to the east. Phil said he had been before and decided it wasn’t really for him, but when Dan said he was interested, Phil agreed to come along for the ride.

Madhavi drove, with Dan up front and Phil in the back.

“Oh, hey,” Phil spoke up suddenly, a few minutes out from Dan’s place. “I guess I should mention this since you’re both here now. Er, my Christmas plans have changed, so would it be okay if I came along on you guys’ trip?”

If they hadn’t been in a car, Dan would have spun completely around to stare at him. This was the first he’d heard of this.

“What? I thought you were visiting England,” Madhavi said, echoing Dan’s confusion.
“Yeah, but it ended up not working out,” Phil explained. “I’ll probably go early next year instead. So, yeah, I’m free over winter break. Can I come?”

“I mean, of course you can,” Madhavi said. “We’ll have to change around some of our hostel bookings and stuff, but it’s still early enough that it probably won’t be a problem.”

“Thanks. Sorry for the late notice,” Phil said.

“No big,” Madhavi replied with a dismissive wave of her hand.

Taiko practice ended up being way cooler than Dan had even expected. He had a vague notion of what taiko drumming was like, from anime and games and general research into all things Japanese. He’d been imagining huge drums and showy hand motions. Instead, when he walked into the room on the first floor of the little community center, he found a series of only three small drums set up in the middle of the room. There were also a bunch of kids, ranging from barely older than toddlers to high school age, sat on the floor around tires, practicing their drumming against the hard rubber.

Seiji was there next to one of the tires, along with an ALT from this town whom Dan knew slightly — Brendan? Was that his name? He didn’t hang out with the other ALTs much, but he still tilted his chin back and grinned a greeting at them when they walked in.

A moment later, an older Japanese man came in behind them, and Seiji stood and motioned for Dan to follow him over.

“Saikin Nihon ni kita ALT no Dan desu,” Seiji introduced him.

“Nice to meet you! I’m Masuda,” the man said, grinning and holding out a hand for Dan to shake.

“Nice to meet you too. I’m Dan,” he replied.

Then Mr. Masuda went and got him a pair of slender sticks to practice with, and Dan sat next to Madhavi at their tire, and she demonstrated the first and most basic rhythm the group played: teken teken teken teken teken teken teken teken. She explained that singing the words along as you hit the drum was essential for beginners. Dan picked it up right away and was able to play along as various group members went up to the drums to practice the song. As they all played it through the first time, he realized that the other two drums were keeping different rhythms that interlocked with the main rhythm played on the center drum. There was also a young man playing a bamboo flute, and as he listened in more closely, he started to understand that, while the center drum set the pace of the song, the flute was really the force driving the song forward.

After a few minutes, Mr. Masuda looked over at Dan and beckoned him up to the drum. He experienced a slight deer-in-the-headlights moment, but Madhavi made encouraging motions, and Phil grinned at him and gave him a little push.

He stood and walked over to the chair in front of the center drum. With one last nervous glance at the drummers on either side of him, he plopped down in it.


“Right,” Dan nodded. Then he held his sticks out to the thick cowhide head of the drum, lifted his hands and started playing. He was only a few beats in when the other two drummers joined in, and a moment later the flautist jumped in too. And just like that he was playing the song. At first, it took a lot of concentration to tune out all of the other parts and play his own correctly and steadily. Slowly, he got used to it, though, and he looked up at Mr. Masuda where he was stood in front of his drum, hoping for some indication of how he was doing.
Mr. Masuda smiled and then held up his own hands, giving them a loose-wristed shake.

“Relax,” he called over the noise of the song. Dan concentrated on his arms, feeling the way his forearms were tensed up, and he tried to imagine them relaxing and his wrists being as floppy as Mr. Masuda had just shown him. It was almost exactly the opposite of the grip he’d had to learn for Western-style drumming.

“Good!” Mr. Masuda called again, and Dan felt a warm swell of pride in his chest.

When the flautist played the long, high-pitched note signaling the end of the song and Dan returned to his friends and their tire, Madhavi was looking at him with raised eyebrows.

“That was really good for your first time. I’m kind of jealous,” she said. “It took me three weeks to be able to play the first song that smoothly.”

“Ha. Thanks,” Dan said, keeping his eyes locked on his knees as he settled back down on his floor cushion.

“That was amazing,” Phil agreed, gazing at him with shining eyes. “How’d you pick that up so fast? I’m still trying to memorize the stupid words.”

Dan felt his cheeks warming, and he let out a nervous laugh.

“I’ve played drums before,” he mumbled.

“Still, that was really cool,” Phil said. Dan nodded and ducked his head, hoping that no one else was noticing how red his face had turned.

On the car ride home Madhavi outright demanded that Dan keep coming to taiko practice with her, and Dan assured her he would.

“If you keep coming regularly, they might even let you perform at the matsuri in April,” she added as an extra incentive. “You get to dress up in a cool outfit, and we get lots of free food and beer.”

“Well, when you put it like that…” Dan said.

The next morning at work, though, there was something else entirely on his mind.

“Erm, so you’re coming on our trip with us?” he asked Phil halfway through third period. He wasn’t sure if Phil would be comfortable with a more direct question than that. Since Phil had spilled everything over the weekend, they hadn’t discussed his break-up or anything related to it any further. Dan hadn’t worked out yet whether that was because it just hadn’t come up or whether it was actually a taboo topic.

“Yeah, it sounds like fun,” Phil answered, looking up from his Kindle. “I’ve never been to Todaiji on New Year’s, but I’ve heard Seiji gushing about it before.”

“Pretty sure Seiji is the entire reason we’re going to Nara at all,” Dan said with a snort of laughter. Somehow, despite the fact that the Japanese-American ALT wasn’t even going on their trip with them, he had managed to get his say in about their plans. He had family in Nara and always made it a point to champion the somewhat less well-known neighbor of Kyoto. “Have you been to Kanazawa before?”

Phil shook his head, pushing his Kindle away a little and leaning back in his chair.
“I’ve been farther north on the Japan Sea Coast, like Niigata or Akita, but I’ve never been down in that area. I hear it’s lovely in winter though.”

“Yeah, that’s why Madhavi wanted to go,” Dan nodded. Then he cleared his throat. “So, you aren’t going back to England at all over winter break?” He peered closely at Phil as he spoke, looking for his reaction to the question. His expression remained calm and relaxed, Dan was relieved to see.

“No. My parents were a bit disappointed, but they understood. Plus, I promised to visit sometime in the spring instead.”

Dan waited for a moment, allowing Phil time to elaborate on his reasons, but when no elaboration was forthcoming, he simply nodded.

“Okay,” he said. Phil may have opened up to him in part, but it seemed he still wasn’t at the point where he was willing to tell Dan everything. That was all right, though. Maybe boundaries were exactly what they needed at the moment.

After school, they went out for sushi, and then Phil drove them up to the cinema in Kokki (the only one in the area) to see Gravity, which had just opened in Japan that day. The theater was packed — not surprising considering it was opening day, which meant tickets were only ¥1,000 rather than their usual ¥1,800 — and they barely managed to find two seats together. It was even more intense than Dan had been expecting, and he actually groped for Phil’s hand in the dark on a few occasions before he caught himself and gripped the arm of the seat instead. On the ride home, the two of them couldn’t stop talking about what an incredible film it had been.

“If that isn’t at least nominated for like ten Oscars, there is no justice in the world,” was Dan’s final conclusion.

“My heart is still beating really fast,” Phil said as he pulled into Dan’s car park, and he put one hand up to his chest to confirm it.

“Ha. I’m so keyed up I probably won’t get to sleep until like 4,” Dan agreed.

“That’s just because you’ll stay up too late on tumblr,” Phil said, casting him a teasing glance out of the corner of his eye.

“Maybe…” Dan returned Phil’s sidewise glance. They both sat for a moment, the car filling up with silence. Then at last Dan reached for the door handle. “Er, see you tomorrow, I guess.”

“Yes. I’ll pick you up for the party at 6:00,” Phil said. “Good night.”

“Good night.”

In the morning, Dan Skyped with his parents and went for a bike ride. After lunch, he met up with Max and his Peruvian friend for an early afternoon coffee, but he headed back home after only a couple of hours. He wanted to make sure he had plenty of time to pack and get ready for the evening. It was only a one night stay at the hotel. They’d be heading back here to Harata the very next morning, but he had never been to a bonenkai before and something about the idea of getting drunk and spending the night in an onsen hotel with literally all of your bosses and co-workers unnerved him. At least he would have Phil there for moral support.

As expected, Phil showed up at his place at around 6:15, and Dan was already pacing up and down in the car park outside, trying to walk off his nerves.

“You all right?” Phil asked when he slid into the passenger’s seat.
“Yeah, just, please don’t let me get too drunk. *Please.*”

Phil chuckled at that, but Dan was only half-joking. He kept imagining these horrible scenarios where he got wasted and challenged one of the English teachers to a rap battle or tried to give *kouchou-sensei* a lap dance. Or, what was much more likely to happen, got a little too frisky and attempted to lure Phil off alone into some secluded corner of the hotel.

_None of that sort of thing, now,* he firmly admonished himself as they made their way up into Nasu again. It was still snowy as ever up there, though the sky was clear this evening, with a smattering of cold, bright stars.

“So, like, what are we supposed to do all evening?” Dan asked, craning his head back so he could see the sky through the car window.

“There’ll be a big banquet where we’ll all eat together,” Phil said, “and they’ll have some games for all of us to play as well. There’ll be some speeches, of course.” He snorted a laugh. “It wouldn’t be a Japanese event without a couple of long-winded speeches. Then after that a bunch of the younger teachers will probably want to drink more and sing karaoke, while all of the older teachers will go back to their rooms and drink more and bitch a lot.”

“Just tell me one thing,” Dan said, turning his head to look at Phil again. “Will I have to get in the *onsen* with *kouchou-sensei*?”

Phil’s eyes widened in horror at the suggestion.

“If I had to choose one person in the universe I would never, ever in a all of time and space, wish to be wet and naked and vulnerable in front of, it would be Namatame-sensei,” Phil said, his voice soft and solemn.

“Same,” Dan muttered, returning to his window-gazing.

It was only a moment later when Phil pulled into a wide car park, and slid into a parking space. “Slid” was the correct term for the car’s movement because, as Dan noticed the moment he stepped out of the car, the pavement was almost entirely covered over with a sheet of ice a couple of inches thick.

“Dear god, we’ll never make into the hotel alive,” he moaned, gripping the side of the car and gazing with extreme trepidation at the wide space that separated them from the lobby doors. “Haven’t these people ever heard of salt?”

“Come on. It’s not that far,” Phil called from the other side of the car in a bracing tone.

“It’s not that far,” Dan muttered, “was probably what Magellan told his crew before they set sail.”

“Do you wanna hold hands?” Phil offered, scooting around the front of the car and holding out a gloved hand to him.

“No,” Dan said, but grabbed Phil’s hand anyway.

It took a lot of cursing and slip-sliding and one spectacular spill just in front of the door that left them both rubbing their bums, but they at last made it into the hotel. Dan was so out of breath he couldn’t focus on anything but the stabbing pains in his lungs, not to mention the ache in his rear end.

“Oh, Dan, Phil, you made it!” Watanabe-sensei’s voice drew his attention, and he looked up to find the portly teacher ambling toward them, dressed in a suit as always. “We’re starting the dinner soon,
so I need to take you to your room first.”

The two of them exchanged a nervous glance before following him over to a row of lifts. He had definitely said your room, singular. Surely the school hadn’t shelled out the money to get them their own room? Surely.

They both let out little sighs of relief when Watanabe-sensei led them to a door on the third floor and opened it to reveal two other teachers already inside, rolling out their futon. Right. So it wasn’t their room exclusively. Once they were through the door, Watanabe-sensei disappeared, and Dan assumed that meant his ALT-chaperoning duties only extended as far as getting them to the right bedroom.

Then stepped out of their shoes, leaving them in the entry-way by the door, and shuffled inside, setting their bags against the wall and greeting the other teachers before they each pulled their own futon from the cupboard at one side of the room and rolled them out onto the tatami. Dan guessed this must be a precautionary measure, in case they came back from the party too drunk to do anything more than simply collapse into bed. Unfortunately, the other two, Takeshita-sensei and Mori-sensei, if Dan remembered correctly, had laid their futon out side by side near the window, so Dan and Phil had no choice but to lay out their own futon side by side in the remaining space closer to the door. Dan was careful not to make eye contact with Phil as he pulled the sheet over his futon and spread out the duvet, and he was pretty sure Phil was doing the same.

“Ja, Firu-sensei,” Mori-sensei said with a cough to get Phil’s attention. Dan looked up too, having just finished his own futon set up. “Shokuji ha shichiji kara de, ikkai no shokudo de okonawaru dakara, hayaku ikanakereba…”

“Hai, wakatta. Ja, ikou ka?” Phil replied. “You ready, Dan? Apparently dinner starts at 7 and it’s back on the ground floor, so we ought to get going.”

“Oh, right,” Dan answered and followed the other three back out into the corridor once more.

The dining hall was huge, with four long, low tables set up, each seating about fifteen people. At the front of the room was a small dais upon which a microphone and a few chairs had been placed. The tables were already laid with an incredible variety of foods, and all of Dan’s worries slipped right out of his mind as he took his assigned seat and got an eyeful of the appetizers. Some of the waitstaff were still there, distributing trays of what looked to be extremely high-quality sushi. One of the second-year teachers — it had been the second-year teachers’ job to plan the entire event — had directed Phil to a different table, and Dan found himself seated next to a couple of teachers he barely knew.

While he was still gazing about and taking it all in, Ms. Iwato appeared on the other side of the table, knelt down and asked, “Dan-sensei, what do you want to drink?” in her slow, careful English. He glanced along the table and saw that there were several bottles of drinks already set out.

“I’ll have some orange juice,” he said, pointing to a nearby bottle. Ms. Iwato’s eyes went wide and she blinked at him several times.

“Won’t you drink some beer?” she suggested, reaching for the nearest bottle of Asahi Super Dry.

“Er, thank you, but not right now,” he said, his nerves returning.

“I see,” Ms. Iwato said and poured some orange juice into his waiting glass. After that, kyouto-sensei stood and gave a little speech to “open” the event, and then it was all a haze of melt-in-your-mouth flavors and delicious food scents, and the teachers next to him doing their best to hold a conversation across the language barrier. To his chagrin, the moment he drained the last of his orange
juice, the P.E. teacher on his left grabbed a bottle of beer and filled his glass again. Oh well. At least he could say he had tried.

About ten minutes into the meal, some of the hotel waitstaff filed into the room and started going around to each place setting. Dan didn’t pay much attention to what they were doing until one of them knelt in front of him and lit something on fire. He blinked, mesmerized by the little blue flame. He hadn’t realized until that moment that the covered ceramic dish in front of him had a small burner beneath it.

“Kore ha nan desu ka?” he asked the P.E. teacher when the hotel staff had moved on.

“Ah, sukiyaki mo shittemasu ka?” she asked him. “Oishii desu yo!”

“Oh, hai, sukiyaki shitteimasu,” he replied. After the little blue flame had burned down completely, she waved her hand to get his attention and then showed him that it was okay to take the lid off and start eating the contents now. Inside were a variety of vegetables, mushrooms, noodles and several thin-sliced cuts of beef, all sizzling in a tantalizing brown broth.

“Yum,” he said before digging in. He’d only gotten a few bites in when Phil appeared in front of him, and he looked up in surprise.

“Hey,” Phil said, his cheeks glowing faintly pink. The room was rather warm. That must explain it. “I forgot to tell you, but you aren’t supposed to finish your entire drink. You always leave a little in the bottom. If you finish it all, though, someone will definitely fill your glass up again.”

“Yes,” Dan said, wishing he’d known that a few minutes earlier.

“If you don’t want them to keep filling it, leave your glass full,” Phil recommended with a smirk. “Oh, and you’re also supposed to pour drinks for other people, and never pour your own drink. That’s really rude. So, keep an eye on your neighbors’ glasses and make sure you offer to refill them if they’re getting low.”

“Right. Got it,” Dan nodded. It would have been great if Phil had given him this crash course in Japanese banquet etiquette a little sooner, but he supposed it was better late than never. Phil started to stand again but then sank back down and added,

“One more thing. Banquets like this are a chance to build relationships and curry favor with people of higher rank than you, so you’ll probably see all of the teachers get up and move around to talk to other people a lot. Someone may even come over to chat you up. If there’s anyone here you want to get to know better or would like to ask a favor from, now’s your chance.”

Dan glanced around the room and noticed that indeed, several of the teachers were already out of their seats, kneeling next to others and chatting or pouring their drinks for them. The higher-level staff, like kouchou-sensei and kyouto-sensei, each had a small entourage of three or four teachers already gathered around them.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Dan said with a quick nod. Phil smiled at him again before jumping up and moving back over to his own seat. It wasn’t two minutes later that Dan saw one of the science teachers sidle up to Phil and offer to pour his beer for him. Dan wondered if she was trying to get on Phil’s good side for some reason or if she was just being friendly. Now that he understood what was going on, Dan found it kind of fascinating to watch who was talking to whom and try to figure out why.

His speculations were interrupted soon after, though, when the entertainments began. First, some of
the second-year teachers got up on stage wearing black and red tartan school girl outfits and performed AKB48’s grating hit single *Heavy Rotation*, to much laughter and applause from the Nishichu staff. He supposed he should be thankful they hadn’t chosen to perform it in the style of the music video.

After that, there was some kind of big countdown thing (he guessed it was a countdown of the top most interesting moments of the school year so far?) that he didn’t really understand, but which made all the staff roar with laughter. Next they played a couple of games, including one where Dan’s team chose him to go up on stage and eat a cream puff filled with spicy mustard without letting his face show the burning agony he was experiencing. He didn’t quite understand what the purpose of that was, but apparently his team won, so he supposed he should be happy.

Then came the speeches, which were fortunately offset by the arrival of dessert. Dan focused in on his chocolate mousse and tuned out kouchou-sensei’s droning voice, feeling a warm glow of alcohol and contented feelings settle over him. Before he knew it, the banquet was over, and one of the maths teachers was kneeling down beside him asking him if he wanted to join them for karaoke. He had a sudden flashback to a night in October when he’d been less than sober and gotten a little carried away with the karaoke.

“Er, sumimasen. Onsen ni hairitai dakara…” he said, accompanying his words with an apologetic bow.

“Ah, onsen desu ka? Hai, naru hodo. Ja, kondo issho ni karaoke wo yarimashou ne.” The maths teacher — was it Mr. Saito? — was looking genuinely disappointed, and Dan felt a little sorry for turning him down.

“Hai, kondo yarimashou,” he agreed, though he wasn’t sure when this “next time” that they would have a chance to sing karaoke together was supposed to be. Maybe Mr. Saito was inviting him out sometime? He let out a nervous little laugh as Mr. Saito bid him goodbye. Sometimes he thought he was finally starting to understand everyday interactions in Japan, but this was not one of those times.

He saw that many of the older teachers had already disappeared from the banquet hall, so he didn’t feel too bad slipping out of the room as soon as no one was looking at him. Hopefully no one else would have had the idea to try out the onsen just yet, busy as they all still seemed to be with their socializing.

When he slid open the door to the bedroom, though, he found Phil there, shrugging on a yukata.

“Oh, Dan,” — he turned, pulling the yukata shut and beginning to wind the obi around — “I was just about to try out the baths. Wanna come along?”

Somehow, in the intervening months, Dan had forgotten just how exquisite Phil looked in a yukata. It was a good thing he’d had this opportunity to refresh his memory.

“Sure. Where’d you get that?” He gestured vaguely at Phil’s outfit.

“They’re in the closet there, if you want to grab one.” Phil waved a hand toward the cupboard on the other side of the room. “They give them to you so you don’t have to carry clothes to or from the bath.”

“Convenient,” Dan said with an approving nod and walked over to the closet to grab a yukata and obi of his own. Once he’d changed into it — Phil said it was okay to just tie the obi into a simple knot, so he didn’t require any help this time — Phil pointed at the closet again and suggested they each grab a haori as well. Dan saw that the haori was a thick, jacket-like garment that
you could pull over the thin yukata to keep warm. Dan hadn’t thought it possible, but the haori made Phil look even sexier than before.

“They don’t have a rotemburo here, unfortunately,” Phil told him as they made their way back out into the hallway again.

“What’s a rotemburo?” Dan asked.

“Outdoor bath,” Phil translated. “I read online that the indoor one is pretty nice, though.”

It was pretty nice, being large and built right next to a wide window with a view out over a snow-filled yard. The moon was just past full tonight, which meant the snow was lit in wide swathes of pale blue light, broken up by the jagged black shadows of trees and the hotel’s outbuildings. One or two of the other Nishichu teachers had made their way down here as well, but fortunately kouchou-sensei was not among them.

They soaked in the bath for a long time, mostly just staring out at the scenery and only exchanging the most cursory of conversation. Eventually, though, Dan was starting to worry he really would turn into a prune, so he said he was getting out, to which Phil responded that he would too.

They headed back up to the room together, but when they pushed open the door and stepped into the tatami-covered sleeping area, neither Takeshita-sensei nor Mori-sensei were anywhere to be found. Dan probably would have guessed that they were still downstairs karaoke-ing the night away, if he’d been thinking about them at all. He wasn’t, though. Instead, he was standing there looking at Phil, and thinking about the way the moonlight had shone through the window of the bath to illuminate one side of Phil’s face in a sort of silvery glow, and Phil was looking back at Dan, perhaps thinking something similar about him.

Phil took a step toward him, and Dan knew right then that this whole “just friends” thing was not going to work out at all. Two heartbeats later, Phil had one arm circled about his waist and the other hand cupped around his cheek, and Dan had both arms folded tight across Phil’s back, and then their lips and their chests and their thighs were pressed together all at once. Then Phil’s fingers were in his hair, mussing it all up (as if he even cared) and his own fingers were straining against Phil’s back, as though they thought there were some way to pull him in even closer to Dan’s body.

“What if the others come back?” Dan muttered, breathless, when they at last pulled apart.

“It’s only 10:30. They won’t be back earlier than midnight.” Phil returned before drawing him back in for another kiss. Dan didn’t care whether or not he should believe Phil. He wanted to believe him, and that was enough.

A moment later, Dan was lying on his back on his own futon with Phil on top of him and Phil’s hand at his hip, working the knot on his obi loose. He’d imagined this happening so many times before that the moment almost felt unreal, as though he might still only be daydreaming. Phil’s palm was smoothing across the skin of his stomach, and he had goosebumps over every inch of his skin, and Phil’s eyes were taking him in, slowly and carefully. Dan sighed.

“What. Wait a moment,” he whispered, taking hold of Phil’s wrist to still his hand’s delicious progress.

“What’s wrong?” Phil’s chest was heaving up and down, and his words came out all breathy. He sat back and looked down at Dan with his eyebrows drawn together. “Do you not want to do this?”

knew—I wanted to make sure you understand, this isn’t just sex for me.”

Phil’s brow smoothed out, and his eyes drifted across Dan’s face. He nodded.

“I know,” he said.

“I love you, Phil,” Dan went on, the words light on his lips but heavy in the air around them. “I’m in love with you.”

He didn’t know if it was a good idea to say it now, knowing as he did that Phil wouldn’t be able to say it back. But he was so full of the word at the moment, that he was pretty sure it would have burst out of him no matter how much he tried not to say it.

Phil’s eyes came to rest on his, and he leaned forward and dropped a quick kiss on Dan’s lips before flopping down on the futon beside him and letting out a gusty sigh.

“It shouldn’t happen like this anyway,” Phil said after a moment, directing his words at the wood-paneled ceiling above them. “We shouldn’t be drunk, or worrying that someone’s about to come in and catch us.”

Dan nodded into his pillow, though he knew Phil couldn’t see the movement. Phil rolled over to face him then, and Dan adjusted his position so that he could meet Phil’s gaze more easily.

“I think this means we fail the ‘just friends’ test,” Dan said with a rueful half-smile.

“Yeah,” Phil agreed, biting his lip for a moment. “We can still be friends, though, right?”

“Oh, course,” Dan said. “Friends, but not just friends?”

Phil breathed out a laugh and lifted a hand to brush Dan’s fringe out of his eyes.

“You have really beautiful eyes,” he murmured. At any other moment, Dan would probably have blushed, but right now he felt as though he were already blushing on the inside instead, his entire body flooded with rosy warmth.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

“It’s like your eyes are always talking to me,” Phil continued. “I can’t always tell what they’re saying, though.”

“Mostly that I love you,” Dan said, then bit his lips between his teeth. He’d said it out loud twice now, and Phil hadn’t run away screaming yet. Maybe it was okay. Maybe Phil was okay with the fact that Dan was in love with him.

“I might need you to keep giving me lessons in Dan language,” Phil murmured, one side of his mouth lifting slightly in a smile.

“I’ll do my best, but I’m not exactly fluent myself.”

“So, do you want to come over to my place when we leave here tomorrow?” Phil asked all in a rush, and Dan could see the shiver of nervousness in his gaze. He reached over and ruffled Phil’s hair back, making him laugh and shy away for a moment before he moved back in, even closer to Dan than before.

“Yes, I do,” Dan said.
When Takeshita-sensei and Mori-sensei at last stumbled into the room sometime between midnight and 1:00 AM, they found the lights dimmed and their two foreign co-workers already snuggled up asleep in their respective futon. Maybe if they hadn’t had so much to drink, they would have noticed the way that each of the ALTs had scooted all the way to the edge of his own futon that was closest to the other’s, or the way they were both rolled on their sides so that they were practically face to face. However, Takeshita-sensei and Mori-sensei were both pretty far gone and couldn’t manage any thought deeper than that they should be as quiet as possible so as not to wake the sleeping ALTs.

Chapter End Notes

Originally published on tumblr
Sitting next to Phil at work on Monday was a completely new experience.

He’d thought it was difficult not to stare at Phil back when he’d spent every other moment fantasizing about making Phil his. But now when he looked at Phil, he knew that he was allowed to reach out and intertwine their fingers together or stroke his cheek or press a kiss against his wrist. He was allowed to look straight into Phil’s eyes and pour into them every ounce of feeling he had for him. He was allowed to tell him he loved him. Of course he wasn’t going to do any of these things in the staff room in front of all their co-workers, but knowing he could made the urge to do so all the stronger.

And then there was that warm tightness he felt in his abdomen every time he remembered the day before, when, after breakfast at the hotel and the long drive down the mountain, they’d finally reached the privacy of Phil’s flat, and Phil’s hands had been on him at once, pulling up the hem of his jumper, fumbling at the button of his jeans, and his own hands had gone straight for Phil’s ass, which they had been itching to get around almost from the moment he’d first laid eyes on it.

Sitting here at their desks, he could glance at Phil and immediately remember the sound of Phil whispering in his ear just how badly he wanted to fuck him. It made it very difficult to concentrate on his lesson plan.

They hadn’t actually had sex, though. Or, not exactly. Dan tried not to frown now as he stopped himself from looking over at Phil for what had to be the millionth time that morning.

It’s not that they hadn’t wanted to. On the contrary, they’d been in such a rush that they’d both been completely naked by the time they reached Phil’s bedroom. An involuntary smile parted his lips as he bent more closely over the page he was writing on. He’d seen Phil naked before, of course, but yesterday he’d at last been allowed to look his fill, and to touch. He bit his lip, feeling that strange hot shiver roll over him again. He’d never known before that it was possible to get so excited just remembering the feel of someone’s skin beneath his fingertips.

And then Phil had pushed him down on top of the duvet and leaned back and stared at him for a while, and when Dan asked what he was doing he’d told Dan he was memorizing how he looked lying on his bed right then. Phil’s eyes had at last come to rest on Dan’s, and the intensity behind that gaze had made Dan dizzy.

It had been near midday, and the room had been flooded with bright sunlight from the glass doors leading onto Phil’s balcony, and somehow in Dan’s memory now the outline of Phil’s body had melted with the sunlight so that he couldn’t remember if he had felt hot all over because of the one or the other or both.
Without meaning to, he looked over at Phil now, who glanced up from his book and looked at him with an expression that made his stomach drop. Phil’s eyes were slightly narrowed, his lips slightly parted, and *fuck* he didn’t even have to say anything for Dan to know exactly what he was thinking. Dan knew he was staring at Phil’s lips, but how could he not stare at them when he could remember the exact way they felt, against his own lips, against his jaw, in the hollow of his neck, on his nipple, near his belly button, around his dick, on the ticklish skin of his inner thigh.

Phil looked away and back down at his book again, and Dan saw him catch his lower lip between his teeth in an effort to hold in a smile.

He turned his eyes back to his own work, but he wasn’t really seeing the words on the page. Instead, his memory was playing back the feel of Phil against his tongue, the softness in Phil’s eyes as they had looked down into his, the teasing gentleness of his fingers as they had traced the skin at the back of Dan’s neck.

And how he’d pulled off and told Phil he couldn’t wait any longer to have him inside him.

Thank god Phil had had lube and condoms on hand because Dan certainly hadn’t packed any. Never in a million years had he imagined his weekend would end up that way. Except — and now he had to suppress a frown again — when he’d ripped open the condom packet and gone to put it on Phil, he’d discovered that he couldn’t get it on because Phil wasn’t hard anymore. He’d looked up at Phil and seen the frozen expression on his face and the panic in his eyes, and he knew that he pretty much had one chance to react in the right way.

“I’m sorry,” Phil was whispering. “I— I don’t know what’s wrong. I’m sorry—“

So he’d smiled at Phil, tossed the condom on the floor, pushed Phil back down on the bed, and done his best to prove to Phil that nothing was wrong at all. And a few minutes later he’d been rewarded for his efforts with the exquisite sight of Phil throwing back his head and screwing up his face and coming with a long, shuddering groan.

Phil hadn’t made any more apologies after that, even later when they’d just been lying together under the electric blanket, holding each other and conversing. But Dan knew that didn’t mean he wasn’t still worrying about it. What Dan was afraid of was that the more Phil worried about it, the more likely it was to happen again.

He had a pretty good idea of why it had happened in the first place. How many times over the past three years had Akari been in that same room, in that same bed, doing those same things with Phil? They’d only broken up a month or so ago. Dan couldn’t stop himself wondering when the last time Akari had been in Phil’s bed was. Recently enough, Dan guessed, that the memory must still be quite vivid in Phil’s mind. Just the thought of it made Dan want to rip his hair out.

But that wasn’t what he wanted to think about right now. He’d much rather remember afterward, when they’d gotten tired of lying around, and Phil had said,

“It’s December 15, and I still haven’t put up my Christmas decorations. Wanna help me do that?”

“Are you kidding?” Dan had said, sitting straight up in bed. “Just the thought of hanging tinsel makes me inappropriately excited.”

“Excellent,” Phil had chuckled.

So they’d pulled their clothes back on, and while Phil had dug his box of decorations from the back of the closet in the study, Dan had scoured Spotify to put together the absolute ideal Christmas
playlist to get them in the festive mood.

They’d hung sparkly gold and silver garlands all around the kitchen, *tatami* room, and lounge and then set up the miniature tree, only as high as Dan’s hip, in a corner of the *tatami* room. While they wound the string of multi-colored lights around it and hung it with baubles and ceramic reindeer and glittery plastic snowflakes, they’d talked about Christmas back home and their favorite Christmas memories. It was Dan’s first time spending the holiday away from his family, and the more they’d talked, the more homesick he’d begun to feel.

“What does everyone here usually do for Christmas?” he’d asked when they were finished with the tree and taking a well-deserved break beneath the *kotatsu*.

“A lot of people go on trips,” Phil said, staring up for a moment as he considered. “We often have to work on Christmas Eve, and sometimes even on Christmas day, since it’s not actually a holiday here. That makes it hard to do anything really big.”

“Oh,” Dan said. “Well, we are off on Christmas Day, and we aren’t leaving on our trip until the 27th. What are we doing this year?”

“Did you guys not make a plan for that?” Phil asked, eyebrows rising. “I’d assumed that was part of your plans.”

Dan shook his head. He didn’t know why exactly it hadn’t come up before, though now that he considered it, he realized that this was the first day he’d felt properly Christmassy all month. It wasn’t that there weren’t decorations up in stores, or Christmas songs playing over their speakers (actually, it was mostly just various versions of “Last Christmas” playing in every store all the time), or the occasional Christmas-themed adverts on tv.

It was just that it seemed to only be stores that were doing anything for Christmas. None of the houses were decorated, nor were there decorations at any of his schools. No one was dressed in ugly Christmas jumpers or wearing earrings made of annoying jingle bells. The kids weren’t slowly losing their minds the closer it got to the big day. In general, no one seemed to particularly care that Christmas was coming, and that made it difficult to get too excited for it. He shouldn’t have been surprised, of course. Christmas wasn’t a part of Japanese culture, after all. He just hadn’t been prepared for how big of a letdown it would feel.

“Let’s have a party here for it, then,” Phil’s voice broke across his thoughts. “Like we did for Thanksgiving.”

“You don’t mind hosting a party on such short notice?” Dan wanted to be cautious, even though the idea sounded achingly appealing.

“It shouldn’t be too much work. We’ve already finished the decorating.” He gestured at the tree and all the garlands. “We can make it a potluck again and do a white elephant exchange and then just watch a bunch of Christmas movies. Easy.”

Dan’s face cracked into a grin.

“Sounds perfect.”

They’d spent the next hour or so making a Facebook event and fielding all their friends’ questions about what to bring. And just like that they had Christmas plans.

Remembering it now, Dan pulled out his phone and set a reminder for himself for later in the week so he wouldn’t forget to go shopping for a white elephant gift. He needed to get a gift for Phil too,
now that he thought of it. On Facebook, they’d written that the point of the gift exchange was so that everyone wouldn’t feel obliged to buy gifts for everyone else, but he could give Phil his gift before all the others got there. This was something he’d been wracking his brains about for weeks already — just what was the right gift to give Phil to express his admiration of him without it being too much. But things were different now, of course. Now he didn’t have to worry about making Phil feel awkward by giving him too nice of a gift— not that his budget would actually allow anything very extravagant.

He slipped his phone back into his pocket and leaned back in his chair. It was a good thing he only had one class on his schedule today. He was getting through this lesson plan at a pace of about one sentence per hour. It was a Christmas-themed lesson for the special needs class, with whom they’d have their last class of the term on Friday. So far, he’d only gotten as far as “Morning Greetings — ‘Merry Christmas!’”

“You said you had a Santa costume we could use, right?” he asked Phil all of a sudden. Phil looked up from his book again, blinking like someone who’d just walked out into bright sunlight.

“What? Oh, yeah, somewhere in the back of a closet I should have one.”

“Do you think one of us should dress up and hand out gifts to the kids? Like…pencils or something?” Dan rubbed the end of his pen against his lower lip, trying to imagine what the students might like to get as a Christmas gift.

“How about Christmas stickers?” Phil suggested. “I think I saw some cute ones at the stationery shop.”

“Yeah, that’d be good,” Dan nodded. He wrote “Final Activity — Hand out Christmas stickers” near the bottom of the page.

As he wrote, he was suddenly overtaken by a huge yawn.

“Tired?” Phil asked him with raised eyebrows. “I thought you slept pretty good last night, the way you were snoring.”

“Shut up!” Dan muttered. “I wasn’t snoring.”

Phil stuck his tongue out a little and grinned.

“Fine, you weren’t snoring,” he conceded, but then added, “much.”

Dan turned to him, one finger raised and his eyes narrowed in mock anger.

“At least I wasn’t hogging all of the covers,” he said.

“You didn’t have any trouble staying warm, as I recall,” Phil murmured, a glint in his eyes. Dan caught his lip between his teeth to suppress a laugh and felt his neck flush with warmth.

“No, I didn’t,” he agreed.

They’d gone for ramen yesterday evening after all the Christmas decorations were up and the party was all planned out. When Phil had offered to drive him home after, Dan had cast a shy glance at him and asked,

“Erm, can I sleep with you instead?”
Phil’s face had broken into a slow grin.

“Yes, please,” he’d said, reaching across the car’s small cabin and taking hold of Dan’s right hand in his left one.

So what if it was technically their third time sleeping in the same bed? As far as Dan was concerned, this was the first time it really counted because this time he was allowed to pull Phil’s body against his own and snuggle right up to his back and bury his face in Phil’s neck and drift off to sleep with the scent of Phil in his only thought. When he’d woken in the morning, he was lying on his back, with Phil curled into his side, face pillowed on Dan’s chest. He’d been so amazed by the sight that he hadn’t woken Phil but had simply lain there and stared down at the top of Phil’s head and listened to his deep, steady breathing until he’d woken on his own several minutes later.

By then they were already way behind schedule, and the rest of the morning had been them scrambling to grab a bite of food and get Dan back to his own place to change into his work clothes in time for both of them to not be late.

And now here they were, sitting side by side in the staff room when only hours before they had woken up beside each other in Phil’s bed, and Dan still couldn’t quite believe any of it.

Dan stayed at his own place that night, and on Tuesday too. On Wednesday, when Phil suggested Dan come over for more Buffy and to spend the night, though, Dan made a counteroffer.

“Why don’t you come over to my place instead?”

Dan’s flat was way too small a space for even one person, and Phil had barely set foot inside it before, but Dan was still determined to try it.

“Oh, yeah, I guess that would be fine,” Phil said after a moment. “I’ll just swing by my place after school and grab my laptop and things.”

“Cool,” Dan said.

“Er, any reason why?” Phil asked after another pause.

Dan shrugged, aiming for nonchalance.

“I just thought it might be a nice change of pace.”

“Oh, okay,” Phil said.

After Dan cooked them a quick dinner, they squeezed onto his tiny futon together and managed to get through the entire fifth episode of Buffy Season 1 before Phil found Dan’s hand on his upper thigh too distracting to ignore any longer. The laptop was unceremoniously closed and shoved over on Dan’s desk, and then Dan was shoved over too, onto the futon, and he was pretty sure that his plan had worked. Phil had both their clothes off in record time, and since they were at Dan’s place now, he happily produced the necessary supplies.

If he’d been worried it wouldn’t happen again, he needn’t have been. A short while later, Phil was leaning over him and asking him if he was ready, and he was so very ready oh my god, but he just nodded, and then Phil was inside him and it was so good he couldn’t even breathe for a few seconds. All he could do was close his eyes and savor the moment.

“Are you okay?” Phil murmured.
“God, Phil,” he breathed at last, opening his eyes to see Phil watching him, red-faced and panting. “That is literally the best feeling in the world.”

Phil grinned, and Dan inwardly breathed a sigh of relief, but then Phil started moving, and he didn’t have many more coherent thoughts after that.

Later, when they were both lying there, slowly coming down, Dan looked at Phil beside him and wondered if it was possible to become addicted to this kind of euphoria. He couldn’t imagine ever wanting anyone else as much as he wanted Phil right then.

Phil stretched an arm out for him, and he rolled into Phil’s side and let him link his arms around his back. They fell asleep like that, huddled together in Dan’s narrow futon, which they both somewhat regretted in the morning when they were both rushing to get in and out of Dan’s tiny shower (which was too small for them to share) in time for work.

A few hours later, when they were both free during third period, Phil turned to him with a frown wrinkling his forehead.

“What’s up?” Dan asked, setting aside his revision cards.

“I think we need to talk about, erm, whatever this is,” he murmured. They were alone in the staff room at the moment, but Dan understood why Phil would still wish to keep his voice down.

“Okay,” Dan said, drawing the word out. “What, specifically, do you think we need to talk about?”

“Just…” Phil paused and took a deep breath. “I don’t think we should tell any of our friends about us.”

Dan raised his eyebrows. He hadn’t been planning to tell anyone, at least not unless they decided on some more official status for their relationship, but he was curious to hear what Phil’s reasoning was.

“Do you mind explaining why you feel that way?” Dan asked slowly.

“I, er,” — Phil was staring down at his hands, which were clenched together tightly in his lap. “I just haven’t really even told most people about the break-up yet, and I think I still need some more time before I… before I can really talk to people about it.”

“That’s perfectly fine, Phil,” Dan interjected, “I mean, we’re still figuring out what this is anyway. There’s no need to feel any pressure to explain it to other people yet.”

Phil nodded and let out a deep sigh, his hands in his lap relaxing a little. Had he been worried about this conversation? Perhaps he’d been afraid that Dan would be offended.

“Can I ask a question too?” Dan continued after a pause. Phil looked up at last and nodded.

“Are we, erm, exclusive?”

Phil leaned back a little, his eyes widening.

“Oh, yeah. Of course.” He frowned a little. “I mean, unless…do you want to sleep with other people?”

“No, no, not at all,” Dan rushed to assure him. “It’s just, er, since we aren’t actually, er, technically together—”

“Yeah, no, I get what you mean,” Phil said. “I definitely want to be, er, exclusive.”
“Good,” Dan said. “Me too.”

They both turned back to their own desks then, and Dan felt both relieved and kind of awkward. It was strange trying to define a relationship that theoretically had no definition. So far — he ticked off the list in his head — they had decided to be friends, but not just friends, who exclusively had sex with one another…in secret. To be honest, it sounded kind of shady when he actually put it all into words like that, but it didn’t feel shady. It felt amazing.

“Hey, wanna come over on Friday?” Phil asked all of a sudden. “Madhavi was saying her family sent her Settlers of Catan for Christmas, and I was thinking of seeing if she might want to come over and invite a few people to play.”

“Well,” Dan said, pursing his lips, “I mean, that’s okay, as long as you’re fine with losing to me at yet another game…”

“Shut up,” Phil grinned and punched him lightly in the shoulder. “I’ll put you down for a ‘yes’ then.”

Settlers with Madhavi, Phil, Jake, and Max turned out to be a brutally cutthroat game. Phil ended up losing, but so did Dan, when Madhavi suddenly whipped out a road-building card and took his Longest Road title, thereby reaching ten points and ending the game.

“You cheated!” Jake cried, knocking over all of her little orange cities, one by one.

“No, you just chose shitty hexes to build on,” she countered, sticking out her tongue at him and knocking over one his blue settlements.

“I feel like I should separate you two and put you in time out in opposite corners,” Dan said.

“He started it,” Madhavi whined and stuck out her lower lip, while Jake reached over and pretended to pull a strand of her hair.

“Oh my god,” Dan said, rolling his eyes but laughing at the same time.

When Dan had managed to get his revenge in the second round and all the others started to get ready to go, he was kind of nervous that they would notice he wasn’t leaving along with them. So, while Jake and Madhavi and Max gathered up in the genkan and started getting their shoes on, he pretended he needed the toilet and hid in the bathroom until he’d heard the door close behind the last of them.

“Dan?” he heard Phil’s voice from out in the corridor. “Everything all right in there?”

“Er, yeah,” Dan called back, pushing the door open and walking out to the hallway with a sheepish grin on his face. “Is everyone gone?”

“Yep!” Phil smiled back at him.

“Cool. Wanna watch a movie or something?” Dan asked, feeling suddenly shy.

“Nope,” Phil laughed and grabbed his hand and pulled him off toward his bedroom. They started out with hurried, tongue-heavy kisses and roaming hands, but after a while, they slowed into soft pecks and Phil’s nose nuzzling his neck, and Dan pulled away to get a closer look at Phil’s face.

“Hey,” he said. “Something on your mind?”

Phil lowered his eyes and then pressed his face against Dan’s neck again and sighed, making Dan
squirm a little as he tried not to laugh at the ticklish sensation.

“Yes, but I don’t want there to be,” he mumbled against Dan’s collarbone. “I just want to think about you right now…”

Dan waited a few moments to see if Phil would add anything else. When he didn’t, he put his arms around him and squeezed him close.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Phil shook his head from side to side. No.

“Will you tell me something, then?” Maybe an oblique approach would produce better results.

“Okay.” Phil’s voice was little more than a vibration against his skin.

“When did you first start to realize you might have feelings for me?”

Phil lay quiet for a long time, and Dan started to wonder if he’d asked the wrong question. He was about to tell him to forget about it when Phil at last spoke up.

“Do you remember that afternoon after the speech contest when you came over here and fell asleep during Wall-Eand ended up spending the night?” His voice was still very low, and his words were muffled by Dan’s shirt, so it was difficult to make them out.

“Yeah,” Dan said. He remembered.

“And do you remember how we were in Seiji’s car driving back from Kokki, and you were really sleepy, but when I asked you to come over, you still said yes?”

“I do.”

“I was really surprised that you said yes, but I was so relieved. Because I just…” He paused, and Dan felt his breath leave him in a drawn out sigh. “I mean, Akari was freaking out because she was late, but she just kept saying she didn’t want to talk to me or see me at all. Because we’d had this huge fight in Nagano, and she still hadn’t really forgiven me for it. And I just didn’t know what to do, if I should just go out to her house anyway or leave her alone and wait for her to calm down. I just… I didn’t want to be alone right then, and it was like you understood that somehow.” He pulled a little away from Dan then and turned a searching look on him. “How did you know that?”

Dan could only shrug.

“You were staring at me like you’d just heard your dog had died or something,” he said.

“I was kind of losing my mind, just a little,” Phil agreed. “But you came over, and even though you fell asleep right away, I dunno, just you being here somehow made me feel calmer. Also,” he breathed out a laugh, “you looked so cute when you were sleeping. So yeah, I think that’s when I started to realize.”

Dan couldn’t help leaning down and giving Phil a kiss then. There was something about the way his eyes seemed to be glowing as they gazed up at Dan that made the urge to kiss him irresistible.

“Wait,” Dan suddenly said, pulling back to look Phil in the eye again. “You were lying!”

“What?” Phil blinked.
“You lied to me, when I came over here that one day, and you told me you didn’t feel the same way about me.” He wasn’t really angry about it. Okay, maybe he was a little indignant, but he was mostly relieved to at last be starting to piece together the puzzle that was Phil’s behavior over the past couple of months.

“Oh. That.” Phil’s eyes dropped down to focus on the front of Dan’s shirt. “Yes. I… I thought that if I made you believe it that I would be able to believe it too.”

“I did believe it,” Dan muttered.

“I didn’t,” Phil returned.

Dan’s first thought was that he wished Phil had just been honest with him about his feelings. It would have saved him so much hurt, and maybe they could have been together even sooner—Except that Phil had still been with his girlfriend then, and if he’d told Dan about his feelings, what would Dan have said? You have to choose her or me? I’ll let you keep me as your side piece? He let his face twist into a sardonic smirk, knowing Phil wasn’t looking at him right then. Things were messy enough as it was. Perhaps if Phil had said something back then, they would be even messier now.

“I want you, Dan,” Phil was saying, and Dan’s eyes were drawn back down toward him again. “I want to be with you. I just… I need more time.”

“I know,” Dan said, squeezing Phil gently and then releasing him. “Do you wanna watch a movie or something?”

Phil’s lips rose almost imperceptibly, and he nodded.

They spent a lazy Saturday together, playing games and going for a walk down to the river and back, and cooking curry for lunch. Dan stayed over again on Saturday night, but on Sunday he told Phil he had to take care of some things back home. Really, he very badly needed to get his Christmas shopping done, and since one of the main things he needed to get was a gift for Phil, he couldn’t very well have him along.

It took him all day and a bus trip into Kokki, but at last he found something he was happy with.

_Dan_
_Did you have a good Sunday?

_Phil_
_Send help. I think I overdosed on pancakes._

_Dan_
_I leave you alone for one day…_

They had to work on the 24th, which felt very strange to Dan. Even when he’d worked in a store back when he was still in school, they always at least got off at midday on Christmas Eve. But here in Japan it was just another normal work day. He and Phil both left at 4:00, and Dan rushed home to grab a quick shower, change his clothes, and pack up for the evening. He was pretty pleased with himself when he arrived at Phil’s at just a quarter past 5:00. The others wouldn’t start arriving until 6:30 or so, which meant they had more than an hour all to themselves.

When Phil answered the door, his hair was still damp from his own shower.

“That was quick,” he laughed as he ushered Dan inside.
“I wanted to give you your present before the others got here,” Dan explained, following Phil to his bedroom. Phil sat down on the bed and picked up his hair dryer, gesturing for Dan to take the spot beside him.

“Good thinking,” Phil said. “Because I want to give you your Christmas gift too.”

“You got me something?” Dan hadn’t even considered the fact that Phil would give him a gift.

“Yeah, of course.” Phil shook his head, but he was smiling. “Just a minute.”

While Phil finished drying his hair, Dan stepped into the tatami room and pulled his own gift for Phil out of his backpack and hurriedly slipped it into the gift bag he’d bought. The gift was kind of bulky and stuck out of the top of the bag, so he’d had to hide it in his backpack to keep from spoiling the surprise.

Eventually, the noise of Phil’s hair dryer came to an end, and a minute later, Phil walked in and slid under the kotatsu next to him with an envelope in his hand.

“This is for you, Dan,” he said, sliding the envelope toward him and leaning in to place a soft kiss on his cheek. “Merry Christmas.”

“Can I open it?” Dan asked, fingers already poised at the envelope’s flap.

“Yeah, go on then.”

He slid his fingers beneath the flap and carefully tore the envelope open, savoring the excitement he felt knowing that it contained a gift that Phil had picked out for him. Inside was a card with a glittery Santa on the cover. When he opened the card, two pieces of paper fell out. He picked them up and saw that they were tickets to the Ghibli Museum in Tokyo with a date in late March stamped on them.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t get any earlier than that,” Phil said as Dan stared down at the two tickets in his hands. “They were almost entirely booked up until then!”

“This is a really nice gift,” Dan said slowly. “Thank you.”

“It’s kind of a selfish gift, though,” Phil said with a slight grin. “I’ve been dying to go there forever. But now I get to go with you.”

Dan didn’t know what to say, so he just leaned over and kissed Phil and hoped that got the point across. It wasn’t just that it was a really nice gift, or that it was basically a date (and a really adorable one at that), but that he’d bought the tickets for that far into the future. When he’d seen they didn’t have any earlier dates, he could have just chosen a different gift instead, but despite the fact that they’d barely gotten started and still had no clue where this thing was headed, Phil had gone ahead and planned a date for them three months from now. Dan could feel a lump forming at the back of his throat, so he quickly reached over and grabbed his own gift bag and thrust it out toward Phil.

“Here, this is for you. Merry Christmas.”

Phil took the bag, his face already cracking into a smile as he could see the gift poking out of the top of it. He reached in and pulled out a big, grey Totoro plushie.

“It’s like we were sharing a brain when we went shopping or something,” he said. “Thank you, Dan. It’s really cute,” and tucking Totoro under one arm, he pulled Dan close in a tight hug.
When the first guests arrived a little while later, Phil had set Totoro in the place of honor in the very center of his bed. While everyone milled about in the kitchen preparing their dishes and setting the table, Dan couldn’t stop himself from peeking into the bedroom every now and then, just to see it sitting there.

It was the usual crowd for dinner, with a few additions and subtractions — Seiji had gone off to Thailand to visit his mum’s family, and a few of the Kokki ALTs who hadn’t already had plans had shown up too. In fact, there were too many of them to all fit around Phil’s kitchen table, so a few people ended up eating in the lounge or tatami room. After dinner, they had their white elephant exchange, and Dan ended up with a copy of a romance novel that had a painting of a bare-chested Fabio look-alike on the front cover. Nobody would admit to having brought it, but at least it was in English. He definitely was not going to be reading it in the staff room, though.

A few people went home after that, but a bunch of them were spending the night, so they cleared the furniture from the tatami room and laid out a bunch of futons to create a single mega-futon. Then they all sprawled out together on the futon-floor to watch such Christmas classics as Elf and Die Hard.

It wasn’t exactly a traditional Christmas with the family, but when they all decided to turn in just after 1:00 AM, Dan decided that this might end up being one of the most memorable Christmases of his life.

No one seemed to think much of the fact that Dan was planning to sleep in Phil’s bed. Even with the mega-futon, it was a squeeze to get everyone into the tatami room, so it only made sense for Phil to offer to share with at least one of them, and everyone knew that he and Dan had become good friends. As Dan slid Phil’s bedroom door shut behind him, he thought it was a good thing Seiji wasn’t around. He could only imagine the side eye he would be getting. But then Phil was tiptoeing over to him with one finger pressed against his smiling lips, and he stopped thinking about Seiji or anyone else.

With Phil’s (admittedly unnecessary) help, he got changed into his pajamas, and then they slid beneath the electric blanket together and Phil’s lips went straight for his neck, and he had to use every ounce of self control he had not to make a sound as Phil’s lips trailed their way along the skin there and down to his chest and then lower and lower, and he actually had to put a hand over his mouth and muffle his face in the pillow to keep from making any noise that might reveal to the people next door just what Phil was doing to him beneath the duvet.

Yes, he was pretty sure this was a Christmas he was going to remember for a long, long time.

Chapter End Notes

Originally published on tumblr
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

So many songs – which one is mine?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The snow-coated train platform was the last place Dan wanted to be at 5:29 AM. It was more than an hour yet until the sun would be up, he’d barely managed four hours of sleep, and the frozen wind was sneaking tendrils of icy air into the gap between his gloves and his coat sleeves and around the edges of his scarf. Phil had given up entirely on consciousness and was standing with his chin on Dan’s shoulder and the full weight of his body resting against Dan’s back.

“You’re going to topple us both over,” Dan mumbled, his voice croaky from fatigue. “And I lack both the energy and will to live to get us off the train tracks once we’re down there.”

“Shh, I’m sleeping,” Phil pushed out between half-open lips, and Dan gave up. He probably would’ve protested harder if Phil’s body hadn’t been providing so much pleasant warmth.

On a bench nearby, Jake and Madhavi were leaning into each other, with James draped across Jake’s shoulder, and Dan was pretty sure they had all fallen asleep for real. The train was due to arrive at 5:33 exactly, so he hoped they would be able to wake up for long enough to stumble on and find seats. They were setting out from Harata Station, having caught the first bus of the morning so that they could now catch the first train of the morning. Once they were on, they wouldn’t be changing trains for a full two hours, so they should all be fine to pass out, but until then at least one of them needed to stay awake to make sure they actually got on in the first place. Somehow Dan seemed to have been elected for this job.

A gentle chime sounded somewhere above them, and then a man’s soothing voice came on.

“Mamonaku, ichibansen ni densha ga mairimasu. Abunai desu kara kiiroi sen made o sagari kudasai.”

“Rise and shine, everyone,” Dan called, relishing the way the others suddenly jerked awake at the sound his voice. “The train is arriving mamonaku.”

There was grumbling and stretching and the rustling of coats and bags as the other three dragged themselves up from the hard plastic chairs. Phil just nestled his chin closer to Dan’s neck and breathed out a loud sigh.

A few seconds later, the breeze picked up, and Dan instinctively leant forward to watch the train as it pulled in from the north. Phil looked up too and finally stepped back from Dan so he could pick up his bag. At last the train groaned to a halt in front of them, and the doors slid open, and Harata Station’s syncopated melody started playing. One of the things Dan had learned to love about Japan’s train system was the fact that each train line — and sometimes individual train stations — had its own distinctive song that played when the train doors opened.
“Getting on a train, getting on a train, getting on a train, ri-ght now,” Phil sang along to the song as they all shuffled through the open doors. The car they’d gotten on had long benches down the sides of the train and a wide aisle in the center for standing. Dan and Phil shoved their bags into the racks above the seats on one side of the train, while the other three did the same on the opposite side. Then they all collapsed onto the seats while the doors shut behind them and the station music came to an abrupt halt. Dan snuggled into Phil’s shoulder, and Phil rested his head against Dan’s, and they were both falling asleep by the time the train was pulling out of the station.

They slept in stops and starts, jerked awake suddenly by a station with particularly loud music or someone brushing past with a large bag. The sun at last began to rise at around 6:50, when they were already south of Ustunomiya, and once it was fully up Dan finally properly woke. Phil, who wasn’t about to let a few sunbeams interrupt his beauty sleep, stayed firmly asleep on Dan’s shoulder, making it difficult for Dan to do much but sit and stare out the window at the fresh snow sparkling in the sunrise. He wondered if it would be snowy all the way down to Kyoto. Not likely, considering they’d really only gotten a light dusting even this far north. His mouth cracked open in a yawn then and he leaned his head back against the top of Phil’s head and closed his eyes.

He opened them again when they reached Oyama because he simply couldn’t get back to sleep, and on top of that he was starving. Across the way, Jake, Madhavi and James were all still passed out on top of each other — Dan couldn’t help noticing an elderly man a little way down the carriage eyeing them with a scandalized expression — but he guessed by Phil’s shallow breathing that he was awake.

“You ready for some breakfast?” he said, keeping his voice low so as not to disturb their sleeping fellow passengers.

“Hmmm,” Phil murmured. He lay still against Dan’s shoulder for a moment longer before he at last sat up and started stretching his back and neck. “I guess so. I can’t seem to stay asleep any longer.”

“Good, cuz I think I’m about to start gnawing on my own arm,” Dan said and stood to grab his backpack from up above. They’d stocked up on snacks and drinks at the Seven Eleven the night before, and Dan now produced a couple of onigiri and juice boxes, which he divided between him and Phil.

“Ugh, you gave me the umeboshi one,” Phil frowned, inspecting the onigiri Dan had handed him. “Trade me for one of the tuna ones.”

“What? But the umeboshi ones are the best!” Dan grumbled, taking back the offending food item and pulling out a different one for Phil.

“You’re welcome to it, then,” Phil said, ripping the plastic wrapping off his onigiri carefully so as not to tear the nori and taking a huge bite. “Mmmmmm. Foooooood.”

They changed trains for the first time in Omiya; they only had three minutes to dash from one side of the station to the other, but Dan still managed to stop in front of a vending machine on the platform, pop in a few coins, and grab a can of hot coffee just before the doors slid closed on him. He and Phil shared the coffee between them as the train continued on its way south into Tokyo. Now that the train was getting fuller, none of them could sleep anymore, and James came over to sit on Phil’s other side and chat with them a while.

“This is my first time in Tokyo since I first got here back in August,” Dan observed as they pulled into Ikebukuro Station and watched a huge crowd of people pile off, only to be replaced by another huge crowd of people.
“Really?” James leaned around Phil to give Dan a wide-eyed stare. “I’ve been down a bunch of times. There’s this awesome American pizza place in Roppongi, kinda near the station, and the guy who runs it is actually American, and the pizzas are all normal size and none of them have corn or mayo, and it’s amazing.”

“You come to Tokyo just to eat pizza?” Phil laughed.

“And burritos, man. I do not think I could live without burritos.” James cast his eyes up toward the ceiling of the carriage and shook his head slowly. “Not to mention Tokyo is the closest place I can buy ethnic hair care products.” He reached up and prodded one of the little twists of hair on his head to emphasize his point.

“How do you afford it?” Dan asked.

James turned a funny look on Dan and then pointed at Dan’s hair.

“Come on. You can’t tell me that hair cut cost anything less than ¥5,000.”

“What? No, I didn’t mean the hair stuff. I meant all the trips to Tokyo.”

“Oh, right,” James said, making a sheepish face, and Phil burst out laughing. “Shut up. I only slept five hours last night.”

“Take a seat, dude. Phil and I only slept four,” Dan countered. “Plus you’ve been asleep for most of the morning as well.”

James’ mouth suddenly opened wide, and his hand flew up to his mouth to stifle a loud yawn.

“Well, unless you want me back asleep again, maybe we should stop talking about it,” he said, as a couple of people nearby shot him dirty looks. Loud noises were generally frowned upon in crowded Tokyo trains.

The train stayed full all the way through Tokyo and Yokohama and on to their next change, at Atami. Somewhere well past Yokohama the train tracks had turned seaward, hugging the coast closely enough that Dan could look out the opposite window and see the winter sun sparkling across a thin line of dark blue ocean. Despite last night’s snow, today had turned out to be a day of clear skies and bright sunshine.

They had four minutes to change at Atami, and as they clambered onto the new train, Madhavi pointed out the sign indicating that they were on the Tokaido Line now — the train line that followed along the stretch of coast between Tokyo and Kyoto, tracing the famed ancient pathway between the two capitals.

A short while beyond Atami, Phil tapped his shoulder hard.

“Quick! Look out the window behind us.”

When Dan turned, his eyes opened wide. Framed by the wide blue sky, without a single cloud obscuring its magnificence, stood Mt. Fuji. The mountain dominated the horizon, its dark sides faintly reflecting the blue of the sky and its nearly perfect peak pure white in its cap of snow. Dan had seen pictures before, of course, but he hadn’t been prepared for how beautiful the mountain would be in person. He could only stare as it slid past outside the train window.

“Wow, we’re really lucky,” Jake was saying beside him. “It’s really rare to see it without at least a few clouds.”
The mountain was gone quickly, and it was only then that Dan wished he’d thought to take a picture. He said as much to Phil, who just shrugged.

“But then you would have been distracted taking the picture instead of just experiencing it with your eyes,” he pointed out.

Their next change was at Shizuoka, and since it was already after 11:00 in the morning, they used their luxurious seven minutes of transfer time to stop by a station kiosk and buy some sandwiches and crisps. Dan was very glad of this when his stomach started rumbling a short while later. It was about noon, and he groaned quietly to himself when he realized they still had almost another five hours on the train.

“Let’s play M.A.S.H.!” Madhavi said all of a sudden, pulling a notebook and pen from her backpack.

“What’s M.A.S.H.?” James asked, peering over her shoulder as she wrote the letters at the top of a fresh page.

“You never played M.A.S.H. as a kid?” she asked, starting to write out categories like “Number of Kids,” “Spouse’s name,” and “Manner of Death.”

“Isn’t that that game girls always play where it’s supposed to figure out who you’re going to marry and stuff?” Jake asked.

“I dunno how you did things in Oz, but at my middle school it wasn’t just girls who played,” Madhavi replied, finishing her writing and looking up. “Okay, who’s first?”

She ended up gently bullying Phil into going first, and after it had been decided that he would someday marry President Obama and live in a shack with their fifty-four children before dying by being sucked through the airlock of his spaceship, she picked Dan as her next victim. However, when she’d finished narrowing down each of his categories to the final option, she made a disappointed clucking noise with her tongue.

“Yours is so boring, Dan,” she complained. “You’re going to live in a house and have two kids and marry Phil and die of old age.”

“You forgot the part where his job is going to be secret agent,” Jake pointed out. “But he’s only going to earn ¥10 a year doing it.”

“Yeah, and he’s also going to have a whale shark as a pet,” James added.

“Still, I was kind of hoping he would end up marrying Kanye West,” Madhavi said, then rushed to add, “Um, not that you aren’t a real catch too, Phil.”

“Thanks, but I know I’ll never be able to replace Kanye in Dan’s heart,” Phil said, placing a hand on his chest and casting Dan a look out of the corner of his eye.

“I’m pretty sure it’s your turn now, Madhavi,” Dan said loudly, yanking the notebook from her hands.

They had three more train changes after that — in Hamamatsu, Toyohashi and Maibara — and each time they boarded a new train, Dan felt that he’d left a little of his sanity on the previous one. Somewhere between Maibara and their final destination, Kyoto, Madhavi and James both fell asleep on Jake again. He seemed to accept his fate with equanimity, as he simply pulled out a book and started reading, careful not to jostle either of the sleepers as he turned the pages.
“Would you divorce me if you found out I was risking my life as a secret agent for the government while only getting paid ¥10 a year for it?” Dan murmured to Phil, pitching his voice so that the others couldn’t hear.

“I’d try to salvage our marriage, for the sake of the kids and the whale shark,” Phil whispered back. “But I would seriously question your judgment.”

“I’m seriously questioning where we keep the whale shark in our house,” Dan replied. “And how we’re supporting it on that salary.”

“You’re forgetting that I earn 1 billion space dollars a year,” Phil reminded him.

“Oh, right. Thank you, god, for Sugar Daddy Phil,” Dan said, folding his hands and casting his eyes heavenward, and Phil choked on a laugh.

The sun was just setting when their final train at long last pulled into Kyoto Station, and the five of them stumbled out onto the chilly platform. When they stepped off the escalator into the main atrium of the station, Dan blinked up at the graceful arch of steel latticework framing the night sky overhead. He followed the curve with his eyes and was even further startled to see a tower lit up in red and white lights looming above the glass ceiling. After all the research he’d done on Kyoto’s ancient temples and storied history, he’d forgotten to consider the fact that it was, in fact, a modern Japanese city.

“I think I read somewhere that this is supposed to be one of the most beautiful train stations in the world,” Phil said, falling into step beside Dan as they made their way toward the exit.

“Well, it’s no Grand Central Station,” Madhavi said from Dan’s other side, “but I guess it’ll do.”

Outside, they passed a fountain shooting streams of rainbow-lit water up into the air before they stopped at an intersection so huge it had zebra crossings not only connecting the sides of each street to one another but even criss-crossing diagonally through the center to connect the opposite corners. After they’d waited a few minutes, all of the lights turned red, and the little crossing noises started playing, alerting pedestrians that it was safe to cross in all directions.

Their hostel was only about a five minute walk from the station, which Dan was very glad of. When they reached the front door, there was a sign indicating that they should take off their shoes and put them in the shoe lockers in the genkan. It surprised Dan when he realized how relaxed he felt having taken his shoes off. After living here for several months, it seemed his brain had learned to associate the action with being safe at home.

There were enough of them in their group that they’d been able to reserve an entire dorm room to themselves, and once they’d gotten the key and dragged their suitcases down a long hallway, they discovered that it had three sets of bunk beds.

“I call bottom bunk!” James yelled, immediately dashing forward and throwing himself across one of the beds.

“Me too!” Madhavi said, doing the same. “Jake, you can share with me,” she added, in the manner of someone making a magnanimous offer.

“Wow, thanks,” he said, walking over and plopping down beside her.

Dan and Phil stepped in behind the others, and Phil pulled the door shut.

“Top bunk or bottom?” Dan asked, exchanging a look with Phil.
“We could share,” Phil suggested, raising an eyebrow, and Dan almost blushed. Geez, did Phil have to look at him like that with everyone else there?

“Why did we even bother getting the room with six beds, if we only needed three of them?” Madhavi complained. “We could’ve saved so much money.”

They only grabbed a quick dinner at a gyoza place that evening. It was still only 6:00 when they left the hostel, but after eleven and a half hours on the train, none of them felt up to much exploring. They discussed their plans for the next day over dinner. Today was the 27th. They would be spending the 28th and the 29th in Kyoto before heading on to Nara on the 30th. There was a long list of sites that they all wanted to see in Kyoto, and Dan privately thought that there was no way in hell they were going to be able to squeeze them all into just two days. However, Phil, Madhavi, and Jake had all been here before and had voted for spending more time at their other destinations. Dan figured he’d just have to come back to Kyoto another time to get a less rushed experience.

Dan ended up taking the top bunk, mostly because he knew the others had thought Phil was joking about them sharing, and he was pretty sure they’d start to get suspicious if the two of them actually did share when there was no reason to.

Even though they’d gone to bed before 9:00, Dan was out almost as soon as his head hit the pillow. He was wakened at about 7:00 by his phone alarm going off. For once in his life, as soon as his eyes opened, he actually felt fully awake and ready to face the day. Maybe he should try sleeping ten hours every night. When Dan climbed down from his bunk, he saw that the others were already up or starting to get up as well, except for Phil, who was still just a lump curled up beneath the duvet with only a few tufts of dark hair sticking out to confirm that there was indeed a person under there.

“Phiiil,” Dan called, reaching over and giving his shoulder a gentle shake. “Phi-il, time to get up.”

“Mmmmmffffffff,” said the lump, wiggling a little but otherwise showing no signs of movement.

“Come on, little Philly. You’ve been asleep for more than ten hours now. Don’t you want your breakfast?” Dan teased him.

“No.” Dan couldn’t help laughing at the contrast between the petulant response and Phil’s gruff voice, deepened even further by sleep.

“All right. Well, we’re all going to go eat and enjoy Kyoto without you. Have a nice day in bed!”

When Dan got back from his shower a short while later, he was pleased to see Phil sitting up on the edge of his bed. He was still in his pajamas, but at least it was progress. Madhavi was already fully dressed and talking about heading down to find some breakfast, and Jake and James were almost ready as well.

“If you guys want to go ahead, I’ll wait here with Phil,” Dan offered, seeing how antsy Madhavi was getting. “Just text me when you find somewhere to eat.”

“Are you sure?” Madhavi asked, though he could tell she was relieved.

“Yeah, it’s fine. We’ll be right behind you,” Dan assured her.

As soon as the others were gone, Phil held out his arms like a child asking to be picked up, and looked up at Dan with puppy dog eyes.

“Come snuggle with me,” he said.
“Phi-il,” Dan groaned, but sat down next to him and put his arms around him nevertheless. It was nice to be alone for a few minutes. He wasn’t sure how he’d managed to go more than twenty-four hours without getting to kiss Phil. He made sure to remedy that now. After a couple minutes, though, he pulled back and said, “Now, come on. We’ve got a lot to do today.”

“Fine,” Phil said, his tone still petulant, though he was grinning now.

After breakfast, their first order of business was to head back down to the train station and buy the ¥500 day pass that would let them use the city’s buses throughout the day. Their first stop was Kiyomizudera, the temple famous for its iconic red pagoda and viewing platform. They were lucky to have another clear, blue-skied day. It wasn’t even that cold today, with the high temperature projected to reach 12 C in the afternoon. Dan wondered if Japan knew that it was supposed to be winter.

They admired the view out over the city, and Dan took about a million pictures of the temple’s pagoda with the city spread out behind. Then they went downstairs and washed their hands in the sacred water the temple was named for.

The street leading up to Kiyomizu had been lined with little shops of all kinds, so they walked back down it slowly, stopping here to buy a vanilla cream puff or there to check out souvenirs decorated with horses, representing the upcoming year. Dan bought a few things that he was planning to mail home as belated Christmas presents. He’d sent several packages already, but he figured his family and friends would be especially impressed to get a gift from Kyoto.

Next up was Nijojo, the castle which had been the home of Tokugawa Ieyasu and every Tokugawa Shogun afterward. As they made their way up to the moat, Phil explained to Dan that the name of the castle — Nijo — came from the way Kyoto was laid out in ancient times, in a grid that broke the city up into separate sections, called jo. The main streets in the heart of Kyoto were still named after this system, with Kyoto Station lying between the eighth jo to the south and the seventh jo to the north. Nijo Castle was, of course, within the second jo.

The castle itself was surrounded by a wide moat and massive walls painted stark white. Despite its age, it still somehow managed to look like the intimidating fortress it was built to be. They crossed over the bridge and then through the towering main gates. The palace buildings across the wide courtyard weren’t quite as impressive, though as they drew closer, Dan could make out all the lovely carved and painted details in the woodwork.

The inside of Ninomaru Palace, on the other hand, was stunning, with gold leaf on the ceilings and intricate paintings on the sliding doors. The wooden floors creaked constantly underfoot, and Phil told him that this was intentional, to make it impossible for anyone to sneak up on the people inside. Dan tried to imagine himself as a ninja sent to assassinate the shogun, and tiptoed as softly as he could, but no matter how lightly he stepped the ancient wood still whined and sighed with his every slightest movement.

By the time they had wandered throughout all of the palace buildings and the extensive gardens, it was lunchtime, so Jake pulled out his phone and looked for restaurants in the area.

After eating, they made their way east, to where the vast imperial palace complex stood, surrounded by its own park. The park was nice, though Dan sensed that it would probably be a much prettier place to visit in any season other than midwinter. The palace was closed to visitors, so they had to make do with walking around its high, thick walls and admiring the rooftops of the buildings they could see rising above it. Madhavi explained that the imperial family mostly lived at the palace in Tokyo, so this one was closed for most of the year.
Their final stop of the day was **Ginkakuji**, the Silver Pavilion Temple. It ended up being Dan’s favorite destination of the day, not because any one part of it was particularly impressive but because all together the buildings, grounds and views made it a place of calm and understated beauty. The pavilion itself was not silver but wooden, with a reflecting pond beside it and a coterie of carefully-tended evergreens. As they moved through the gardens, Dan was pleasantly surprised when he noticed that the smooth green space spreading beneath the trees was not grass or ground cover but rather thick, dark moss. Long after the others had gone to sit on the benches near the entrance, Dan was still wandering around taking pictures of the sunlight through the tree branches or the pleasant monochrome of the wide area of raked silver sand that gave the temple its name.

The sun had already set by the time they returned to the hostel to regroup. Dan was hungry, but after a full day of sightseeing what he most wanted was to lie down for a while. As soon as James unlocked the door to their room, Dan trudged in and slumped down onto Phil’s bed.

“Hey!” Phil protested, stopping at the side of the bed and crossing his arms.

“I can’t be bothered to climb the ladder up to the top bunk,” Dan mumbled into Phil’s pillow. “Look, there’s room for you too,” and he scooted over to show there was plenty of extra space. James had collapsed onto his own bed, and Madhavi and Jake were sitting on their bed and rubbing their tired feet, so Phil shrugged and climbed in beside Dan.

They lay there for so long that Dan actually fell into a light sleep, and he was surprised when Phil shook him awake what seemed like a few minutes later and told him he’d actually been out for an hour.

After another simple dinner — sushi, this time — they decided to stop by a grocery store and buy stuff to cook their own breakfast in the hostel’s kitchen the next morning. Madhavi suggested checking out the hostel’s bar downstairs, so they went down and had a few drinks with some of the other travelers. They didn’t stay long, though. Tomorrow would be another full day.

The next day, it was harder to wake up, and this time it was Phil prodding Dan to try to get him out of bed and dressed in time for breakfast. The others were already downstairs in the kitchen, cooking their bacon, eggs, and toast, by the time Dan got out of the shower, but Phil had waited for him, and they managed to sneak a few kisses before any of the others came up to look for them.

The first stop on today’s schedule was **Kinkakuji**, the Golden Pavilion Temple. This temple really was golden, a two-story building whose walls were covered over entirely in brilliant gold leaf. It was a startling sight, contrasting as it did with the dark of the pine trees surrounding it. The pavilion stood at the edge of a wide pond, and as today was another clear, mild day, the glittering gold of its walls was reflected in a perfect reverse image in the water below. A path ran along the perimeter of the entire pond, and the five of them took their time walking all the way around it, stopping every few steps to admire the temple from a new angle.

Eventually the path led away from the pond and into the wooded area behind the pavilion, until it brought them out into a clearing on a slight rise above the building. From here, Dan could clearly see the golden phoenix that sat at the pinnacle of the pavilion’s roof, bright against the dark trees and water beyond it.

“You know, the Shogun who built this pavilion and **Ginkakuji** too was technically from our prefecture,” Phil pointed out as they made their way down the path and back toward the pond. “Except Japan didn’t actually have prefectures back then.”

Next they visited **Ryoanji**, a plain and unassuming temple just a little to the south of the flashy golden pavilion. It was famous not for its building but for its garden, considered one of the finest examples
of a zen rock garden in existence. They wandered up and down the viewing porch for a while, trying to find the secret vantage point from which one could see all fifteen of the rocks in the garden. After that, they simply sat on the wooden deck in the warm morning sunlight, contemplating the stones and their bed of sand and the way that they weren’t just stones and sand but also mountains and earth.

After lunch, they paid a visit to Arashiyama and its famed bamboo forest. Dan had never known before that bamboo forests were so noisy, but as they walked the paths amongst the impossibly tall green stalks, even the slightest breath of wind would start the bamboo rubbing and shushing against one another, and a stronger wind would get the stalks clacking as they crashed together.

Phil insisted on visiting the monkey park as well, which involved a wheezing climb up a steep hill in order to see a bunch of red-faced macaques lazing about and picking bugs off each other. Phil was happy when they got to go into the little hut at the top, though, and feed the monkeys apple and banana slices, and Madhavi was cooing at them and taking a zillion pictures, so Dan couldn’t complain too much.

They headed back to the hostel earlier today because they had real plans for dinner this evening. Seiji had a friend who worked at a hotel here in Kyoto, and she had managed to get them a full, private banquet for a very reasonable price. The hotel was in the Gion District, where all of the geisha worked, and after possibly the swankiest meal of Dan’s life, they stepped out into the street to be greeted by the sight of two geisha in full make-up and kimono making their unhurried way down the narrow street. Dan was embarrassed to find himself staring at them. It may have been all of the sake he’d just drunk or simply the rarefied air of Kyoto, but he was pretty sure they were two of the most beautiful women he’d ever seen.

The next morning, they were on the train again and waving good-bye to Kyoto. In order to make the most of their full day of free train riding, they had planned to take the quick trip over to Nara, drop their bags in lockers at the station, and then head on to Horyuji. The temple there was mainly impressive for its five-level pagoda and its age. Madhavi told them, as they walked around the grounds, that the original temple had been built in 607 and that the wooden column at the center of the pagoda was estimated to be more than 1,400 years old. It was colder and overcast today, which made it a little more difficult to appreciate the beautiful surroundings, but Dan did his best.

As they boarded the train to head back up to Nara in the early afternoon, a light snow began to fall so that by the time they reached the city, its buildings were coated with a dusting of white. Once they’d checked into their hostel, they made their way over to the park, which held most of the city’s attractions. Nara was small compared to Kyoto, and it was actually pretty easy to get everywhere they wanted to go just by walking. A large hill dominated the city’s horizon to the north, and as they made their way up the main street, Dan was fascinated by the way the misty, low-slung clouds crept down through the dark trees on the hilltop to fill the city below.

Once they entered the park proper, the deer were everywhere. Of course Dan had heard of the Nara deer, but he’d expected to just see a couple of the creatures wandering about amongst the trees in the distance. Instead, their little group was mobbed by deer looking for food before they’d taken more than ten steps into the park.

“Oh god, I think one just bit my butt,” James yelped, and Dan turned to see a shaggy deer nuzzling at James’ backside.

“Let’s buy deer senbei to feed them!” Phil said, his eyes shining with excitement. Dan just stared at him.

“Are you kidding? If they’re this aggressive when we’re just standing here, what do you think they’re going to do once we actually have food?”
“But, Dan,” Phil said, jutting his lower lip out and making puppy dog eyes.

“If you want to feed them, you can. I’d like to keep all my fingers, thank you very much.”

They wandered around amongst some of the temples, even stopping for a moment to see Todaiji, though they didn’t go in just yet. They were saving that for New Year’s Eve. Soon, though, it was too dark and cold to make walking around in the park very enjoyable, so they headed back to the hostel to warm up and talk food.

Over dinner, they discussed their plans for the next day, on which subject they were divided. James was going down to Osaka for the day to meet a friend, and Madhavi and Jake were bent on visiting Himeji to see the castle there. However, Dan had read online that the castle was undergoing restoration and wouldn’t be properly open for viewing again until 2015. Instead, he’d found this nearby place called Koyasan which was the headquarters of an ancient Japanese sect of Buddhism and had lots of interesting-looking sites to visit.

“Why don’t we just split up?” Phil suggested finally. “Madhavi and Jake can go to Himeji, and Dan and I’ll visit Koyasan.”

No one could come up with any objections to that plan, so that’s what they finally managed to agree on. Dan was secretly pleased that he would get to spend an entire day just him and Phil, and he wondered if maybe that’s why Phil had suggested it. They’d gotten their own room at the hostel again, and this time Phil volunteered to switch with Dan so that he could have the bottom bunk.

In the morning, they were up very early. They wanted to be sure to be back in Nara well before the evening since it was December 31st, and they had big plans for celebrating the New Year.

Since Koyasan was actually a valley high up in the mountains, they couldn’t take a train directly there. Instead, they had to stop at a station at the base of the mountains and then take a cable car straight up the side. It was reasonably warm at the base of the mountain — around 10 C — but as the tiny carriage climbed up the mountain, they could feel the temperature dropping. About halfway up, snow began falling, and by the time they reached the top, they realized they were in a full-on blizzard.

When they stepped off the cable car, their shoes sank down into a good twenty-five centimeters of snow.

“Erm, this may not have been the best day to visit,” Dan muttered, staring down at where the lower half of his legs had disappeared from view.

“Are you kidding?” Phil said. “Look at this place. This is incredible.” He had taken a few steps further and was slowly spinning in place, head tilted back to take in the trees heavy with clumps of snow, the thick snow covering the roads that no cars were daring to drive on, and the continuous flurries of flakes pouring down from the white sky.

“Well, I guess we can try it, but once my socks start to get wet, I’m going back to Nara,” Dan said.

From the cable car station, they caught a bus further into the town, getting off at the stop next to Okunoin, the largest cemetery in Japan. Dan wondered, as they made their way through the arched gate, if it was somewhat morbid to go sightseeing in a cemetery. However, as they entered, he forgot all about that and instead marveled at the beauty of polished stone softened by piled snow and the contrast of the white marble and even whiter snow with the rich red and green of the pine forest growing all throughout the area.
They didn’t talk much. They were the only ones in the entire cemetery, and it didn’t seem quite right to disturb such a solemn place with the sounds of their voices. According to what Dan had read, to be buried here at one of the most sacred Buddhist sites in Japan was a very great honor, and the mausoleums belonged not only to families or religious groups, but even to companies and corporations. It seemed a strange concept to him, to be buried alongside other people, not because you shared a name or a set of beliefs, but because you had worked together.

They crossed over a small, frozen stream on a bridge painted a shocking bright red. On the other side, they found a cluster of plain wooden buildings, including one where you could light incense. The sticks there were all burned down and cold — no one could be bothered to come out and pray on a day like this.

When they passed by a little hut with a wooden grate on the front, Phil stopped and read the sign and then laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Dan asked, slightly unnerved by the jarring sound.

“Apparently you’re supposed to reach through this grate and grab that stone in there and try to lift it up onto the shelf. It’s supposed to be heavier and harder to lift the more you’ve sinned.”

They both tried it, but neither of them could lift the stone more than a centimeter or two.

“I guess we both have some penance to do,” Phil observed.

Eventually they made their way out of the cemetery, trudging through the ever-deepening snow. Along the road stood a seemingly endless series of temples, pagodas and other religious buildings. They stopped and visited a few, though Dan grumbled a little when he realized that most of them required them to take their shoes off and put on slippers to go inside. None of the temples were heated, and he got snow on his socks every time.

He was so distracted by how cold and wet his feet were getting, that he didn’t notice how subdued Phil had become. It wasn’t until after they’d stopped to have a marvelously hot bowl of udon for lunch that it at last dawned on him that Phil had hardly said anything for the past hour.

“Is something wrong?” he asked as they slurped their noodles.

Phil looked up from his bowl, met Dan’s eyes, and then looked down again.

“I need to tell you something,” he said into his food.

Something in Phil’s expression was setting alarm bells ringing in Dan’s head. His heart suddenly clenched, and he began to feel dizzy.

“What’s wrong?” he said, his voice coming out strangled.

“I fucked up. I fucked up really bad, Dan,” Phil said, his eyes still fixed on the bowl in front of him. “I don’t think you’re going to be able to forgive me.”

“Just tell me,” Dan begged. His heart had jumped up into his throat, making it difficult to breathe.

“Back in November, when Akari and I broke up, I wasn’t really thinking straight,” Phil whispered. “Or maybe I was. I don’t know. I just made the decision really quickly, and now I wish I’d thought harder about it.” He looked up at Dan at last, his eyes pale and cold as the snow outside. “I didn’t renew my contract for next year. I’m going back home for good in April.”
Dan looked at him, at the regret pooling at the corners of his eyes and the sadness weighing down the corners of his mouth, and of course he wasn’t angry with him. Of course not. He wasn’t angry — his heart was just breaking.

“Why are telling me this now?” Dan managed to whisper at last. “Why didn’t you tell me back in November? Or…or a few weeks ago when we started this whole…thing?” Why can’t you ever just be honest with me?

“I didn’t tell you because I thought maybe I could fix it.” Phil’s voice was so, so quiet. “Or, I mean, at first I just wasn’t ready to tell you, about Akari, or me leaving or anything. And then when I was ready to tell you, I realized I didn’t really want to leave yet, so I tried to fix it. I told the Board of Education I changed my mind and wanted to stay after all, and they said they’d consider it. But they emailed me yesterday and said they’d decided I couldn’t renew again.”

Dan turned the idea over in his mind, again and again. Phil going home. Phil gone, leaving Dan behind. Hadn’t Phil already said, though, that he wanted to quit teaching, that he wanted to just focus on YouTube? Why would that change just because of Dan?

“Why aren’t you ready to leave yet?” he asked slowly. His udon was going cold, but he didn’t notice.

Phil’s eyes went wide and he blinked a few times in confusion.

“I mean…because of us. Because we’re just starting to figure this thing out, and it’s a really crappy time to just up and leave.”

“Oh, Yeah, I think you’re right about that, but… It’s what you want, ultimately, right? To quit your job and just do YouTube?” Dan shook his head. That was more important than any relationship, right? Figuring out your life? Deciding your future? That should be Phil’s priority, right?

“Sure it’s what I want, but it’s not the only thing I want,” Phil returned, watching Dan with his forehead wrinkled. “I thought…that you would be upset.”

Dan was upset. Dan felt like his insides were being squeezed in a giant fist. He felt like his head had become detached from his body and was just sort of floating in the air, unable to connect any longer to any part of reality.

“There’s no point in being upset about something that can’t be changed,” Dan’s mouth said, and Phil stared at him a moment longer before slowly nodding.

“I guess you’re right,” he said at last. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. I’m really sorry, Dan.”

“It’s okay,” Dan said, but it really, really wasn’t.

Chapter End Notes

Originally published on tumblr
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Which dream of all the dreams? (Warnings for alcohol and drunkenness)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On the train ride back to Nara, Phil put his head on Dan’s shoulder and slid his hand into Dan’s, and Dan gripped it hard, as though it were a lifeline thrown to him over the edge of a cliff.

“I’m really angry with you,” Dan heard himself saying. Outside it was dark, a heavy ceiling of clouds having blotted out the last of the afternoon sunlight. Down here in the valley, though, there wasn’t a single flake of snow to hint at the blizzard they’d just been through.

Phil sat up and looked at him, but when he would have pulled his hand from Dan’s, Dan just gripped it even tighter. Phil looked down at their hands, ran a nervous tongue over his lower lip, and then returned his eyes to Dan’s face.

“You should be angry,” Phil said.

“You should have told me sooner,” Dan murmured. He wanted to stop looking at Phil because everything about Phil’s face hurt right now, but he couldn’t seem to get his eyes to look anywhere else.

“I should have,” Phil said.

He searched Phil’s face, trying to feel some spark of anger rather than this gnawing hollowness in the pit of his stomach that was like hunger but worse. But he couldn’t. His brain knew he was angry, and it knew that Phil was to blame, but the rest of him just couldn’t muster the energy to feel anger. He sighed and let his forehead drop down onto Phil’s sharp shoulder.

“Don’t just agree with me,” he said.

“Okay,” Phil said, and Dan groaned in frustration. The stupid thing was that even though it was Phil who had made him feel like such crap, Phil was the only person he could imagine being able to make him feel better right now.

“So what’s gonna happen when you leave?” Dan asked because it was the most pressing question in his mind at the moment. He tilted his head so that his cheek was resting against Phil’s shoulder now. “What are we going to do?”

Phil’s shoulder rose slightly as he drew in a deep breath.

“We can make long distance work,” Dan heard him say. He couldn’t see him from his current position. Instead, Dan’s eyes were fixed on the grey of the seat back in front of them.

“Long distance what?” Dan’s voice was flat, with just a hint of sarcasm.
Phil’s breath ruffled Dan’s fringe as he let it out in a long sigh.

“I don’t know. Long distance…people who mean a lot to each other and like to have sex sometimes?”

“Kinda hard to do the sex part long-distance,” Dan pointed out.

“There’s always sexy Skype sessions,” Phil suggested, then hurried on. “Besides, it’d only be for a few months, right?”

That was right. If Phil went home in April, and Dan’s contract was up in August, theoretically they could be back together again in just three months. Except…except that meant that Dan would be staking his entire future on the possibility of a relationship with Phil — Just to be with Phil, he would quit teaching and leave Japan and move to wherever Phil was living. And whether he was ready or not, he would pick a career and get another job. But what? He wasn’t exactly qualified to do anything other than law, yet every day he was more sure that life as a lawyer would make him miserable. Was he ready to be miserable just to be with Phil?

The problem was, he’d started to get used to the idea of being able to stay in Japan indefinitely — with a paycheck and a life and a Phil — while he figured out the rest of his future.

“Right?” Phil was repeating, his tone less certain now.

“What if I don’t want to leave Japan in August?”

Phil was quiet for a full minute before Dan felt him squeeze his hand.

“Do whatever will make you happy, Dan,” he murmured.

But I don’t know what will make me happy, Dan wanted to protest. Because he was certain being with Phil would make him happy and that being away from him would make him miserable. But how long would he be able to stay happy when Phil was the only thing in his life that wasn’t utter crap?

“Where will you go, when you move back to England?”

“Probably Manchester,” Phil answered quickly. “I’ll be near my family, but I’ve got enough saved up to get my own place.”

Manchester. Dan considered it. His dad did have that lawyer friend in Liverpool…

“I don’t want to be a lawyer,” Dan blurted.

“Okay, then don’t be a lawyer,” Phil said, and Dan could tell by the lightness of his tone that he had not yet grasped the depth of Dan’s crisis.

“Then what should I be instead?”

“Well, what do you like to do?” Phil asked.

“Eat, play games, take the piss out of you when I’m better than you at things,” Dan listed off.

“Ha ha,” Phil said. “Well, based on my very scientific calculations then, your ideal job is Quality Assurance Specialist at a ballpoint pen factory.”

“Great. Where do I apply?”
“Actually, I think you’d probably be pretty good at that job,” Phil mused, wiggling the fingers that were intertwined with Dan’s. “You’re very detail-oriented, and you’re always really picky about how things look—“

“Oh my god, Phil,” Dan groaned. “I’d literally rather do law.”

“Why are you so against law anyway? You did a whole degree in it, after all…”

Dan shifted around in his seat, uncomfortable all of a sudden. How could he explain how soul-crushingly boring a law office was? Reading case law and writing analysis of it and getting into arguments with his classmates about the finer points of it had actually been kind of fun, but actual office work? Sitting around at a desk reading pages and pages of contracts — because he was even more sure that criminal law was not his destined vocation — or researching changes in tax law, or sitting in on some business meeting and trying not to let his mind wander — oh god. How had he ever thought he was suited to that kind of work?

“Okay, how about this,” Dan said, ignoring Phil’s question and raising his hands to frame the scene he was setting. “I make use of my law degree by becoming the next John Grisham and writing tense and extremely accurate legal thrillers. Sound plausible?”

“Do you like writing?” Phil asked, sounding genuinely curious.

“Yeah, well, kind of,” Dan made an uncertain gesture with one hand, while he took hold of Phil’s hand again with the other. “If I feel like I have something worthwhile to say, I do.”

“You could be a travel writer?” Phil suggested.

“That sounds kind of fun…”

Phil didn’t say anything in response to that, at least not for a while, and it was long enough that Dan started to drift off, lulled to sleep by the swaying movement and warm interior of the train.

“Dan” — Phil was jostling him awake — “Dan, we have to change trains here.”

He sat up abruptly and saw that the train was pulling to a stop. The sign outside said “Shin-Imamiya.”

When they’d boarded the next train and settled themselves in a new pair of seats, Phil turned to him and said,

“I know this is all my fault. I want to fix it.” He paused before adding, “I wish I knew a way to fix it.”

Phil’s expression was calm, but his eyes were full of pleading.

“Don’t go?” Dan said, because it was the only thing he could think of.

Phil’s gaze searched his face for a moment before he turned away, his lips squeezing together in a line.

“I could get another job,” he said after a moment. “I think they might even be hiring in Kokki for next year, or maybe one of the new primary school positions in Nasu.”

Dan shook his head.

“Wouldn’t that be like a step backward for you?”
“More like a step sideways,” Phil shrugged.

“You’ll resent me for it,” Dan said. “You’ll start wishing you were getting on with your life instead of stuck in a job you didn’t really want just for my sake.”

“I won’t resent you.”

Dan just shook his head again. It was easy to say that now.

“I could look for a different job,” Phil suggested, turning toward Dan once more. “I think I saw that Google’s Tokyo offices were hiring…”

“Do you want to work for Google?” Dan cocked an eyebrow at him.

Phil shrugged again, a sharp, jerky gesture. Dan could tell he was getting frustrated.

“It’s only temporary, right?” Phil said. Meaning that it was all down to Dan, that Phil was offering to put his entire life on hold while he waited for Dan to figure out his. It was too much. Dan couldn’t be responsible for that.

“No, I think you have to go back to England,” Dan said slowly. “You decided to go back for a reason, and I think if you don’t just go for it now, you’re always going to regret it. I don’t want to be the cause of that.”

Phil’s eyes dropped from Dan’s face, focusing on the narrow strip of seat between them.

“I think I can understand that,” he muttered at last. With a loud gust of air through his nose, he collapsed onto Dan’s shoulder and groaned. “I just want to be with you.”

“I want to be with you too,” Dan answered, his voice soft.

The sun had gone down now, and it was growing darker and darker outside the train window. It was New Year’s Eve. In just a few hours it would be 2014. Dan had a difficult time grasping the fact that this morning he had woken up full of hope and excitement for the new year. He’d been relieved to leave 2013 behind — the year he’d graduated university and realized he’d spent four years getting a degree he didn’t even want, the year he’d fallen in love with a man who was in love with someone else. But now he knew that 2014 was going to be the year Phil left him behind and moved on to bigger and better things, and he half wished he could just stay here in 2013 instead.

When they reached Nara Station, they found James already sitting in the station’s waiting room, scrolling through pictures in his phone. They’d all checked out of the hostel that morning, figuring that since they were planning to stay out well past midnight and leave Nara the next day, there was no point in spending money on a room for the night. Their bags were safely stowed in coin lockers here at the station. It would be a six hour train ride to Kanazawa, so they were planning to stay out all night and pass out on the first train of the morning.

James was too busy gushing about his day in Osaka and showing them pictures of all the things he and his friend did there to notice the gloomy air hanging about Dan and Phil. Madhavi and Jake showed up a short while later, arguing about whose fault it was that they’d gotten off at the wrong stop originally, so they didn’t have much attention to spare for the others either.

Once they were all present, the five of them headed down to Nara’s main street where they found a place for dinner. It was a little crowded — there were lots of people out tonight — but they managed to find a table, and Phil splurged on the extra fancy honey toast for dessert, complete with scoops of vanilla ice cream and chocolate syrup drizzled on top.
They took their time over dinner, Madhavi and Jake going on and on about how cool Himeji Castle had been despite the giant, white scaffolding obscuring the outside completely from view. Eventually they got around to asking Dan and Phil how Koyasan had been, so they made sure to go into extra detail about how deep the snow was and how beautiful the temples.

When they finished dinner, it was still well before 8:00, so they wandered down the street until they came to a small standing bar and James convinced them they might as well go ahead and get started on the evening’s festivities. The bar was tiny, just a single narrow room with a short counter where patrons could stand and drink a beer while watching the evening news. The five of them took up nearly all of the available space.

After two beers, Dan was feeling much more sanguine about the evening. No point in worrying about the future while he was on vacation, after all. Everything could wait, at least until morning.

“Let’s go down to the park now,” Phil suggested, polishing off his own second drink. “Maybe we still have time to feed the deer.”

The main street fed directly into the huge park, which was home to both Nara’s sacred deer and its temples. Phil was doomed to be disappointed once they arrived, however, for it seemed that while the park was teeming with people, the deer had all disappeared elsewhere.

“They’re probably sleeping,” Madhavi observed as they wandered among the trees looking for black noses and shaggy tails. “The deer don’t care that it’s New Year’s.”

Normally the temples and shrines of the park would be closed this late in the evening, but many of them were open late in recognition of the holiday. Dan had learned that New Year’s was one of, if not the most important holiday in Japanese culture, and the bustling atmosphere of the park reflected that. There were even a few food stalls set up here and there, though they were all still too full from dinner to be tempted. At one point they passed a banner with a cartoonish picture of a fat baby wearing a sash and a pair of antlers sprouting from his head.

“What the hell is that?” Dan demanded, stopping before the offending picture.

“That’s Sento-kun,” Phil said. “He’s Nara City’s mascot.”

“He’s creepy,” James said, and Dan vigorously nodded his agreement.

“I wanna ring the bell,” Madhavi said all of a sudden. “I think it’s supposed to be good luck or something.”

They looked around until they found a map to show them the way to the belfry. When they reached it at last, though, there was a huge line of other people waiting to ring the sacred bell in hopes that it would help their prayers for the new year be heard.

“If we wait in line, we aren’t going to have time to do anything else,” Jake complained.

“Fine, I’ll wait, and you can go do other things,” Madhavi said, shooing him off. “Anyone else want to wait to ring the bell?”

The others stood there, awkwardly trying not to make eye contact with each other. At last, Phil stepped up next to her in line and said,

“I’ll give it a go.”

So Dan ended up wandering the rest of the park for the next hour with Jake and James. The temples
were beautiful, and it was interesting to read the history behind each one, but after two days in Kyoto and today’s visit to Koyasan, Dan had to admit he was getting a little bored of temples. After a while, they all started to look kind of the same.

Phil and Madhavi caught them up shortly before 11:00, and they all decided they’d probably better go ahead and get in line for Todaiji, which would be the night’s main attraction. In honor of the new year holiday, at midnight tonight the temple would open its doors and allow free entry to anyone. When they reached the doors of the temple’s outer gate, there was already quite a crowd of people waiting, and they were glad they hadn’t put it off any longer.

“Did you get to ring the bell?” Dan asked Phil as they added themselves to the end of the queue.

“Yes! I prayed for better Mario Kart skills in the new year,” Phil replied with a grin.

“Good because I’m pretty sure only the gods can help you at this point,” Dan retorted, though secretly he was wondering if Phil had actually asked for something else.

“I read that Todaiji is the biggest wooden structure in the world,” James was saying.

“I think it used to be,” Phil corrected him. “But I think they’ve built some bigger ones in recent years.”

“It’s still massive,” Jake said. “With a really big statue of Buddha.”

“You know, this is technically our hatsumode,” Phil said, raising one finger with an instructive air.

“What’s that?” James asked.

“Well, it’s supposed to be your first shrine visit of the year, but I think visiting a temple can count too,” Phil explained. “I know, at least, that we can still buy amulets and get our fortunes for the year and everything else you’re supposed to do.”

“And pray for a good year,” Madhavi added.

“That too,” Phil agreed.

The crowd of people behind them continued to grow, and by 11:45 there were so many people that Dan could no longer see the end of the queue.

At about 11:55, Jake pulled out his phone and turned on the second counter so that they would be able to count down to the new year. All around them, other people were doing the same. Up by the gate doors, Dan could see the temple employees checking their watches. The air around them was filling with a sense of expectation, and despite all his misgivings, Dan couldn’t help getting caught up in the mood. Yes, 2013 had been a pretty crappy year on the whole, but then again, it had been the year that he had come to Japan and met Phil, and it had been the year that Phil had first kissed him, and told him he wanted to be with him. And even if 2014 would take Phil away from him, it was still a brand new year, full of possibility, and that made Dan feel full of possibility too. Who cared if he didn’t know what he wanted to do with his life? He would figure it out eventually.

There were golden lanterns hanging from the gates up ahead, and a brazier on either side of the doors, each bright with yellow flames from a wood fire. The moon up above was a tiny silver sliver, its light too faint to compete with the warm glow around the gate.

“Twenty seconds,” Jake called, and they all crowded around to watch the numbers count down on his phone screen. “Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one— Happy New Year!”
“Akemashite omedetou! Akemashite omedetou gozaimasu! Happi— nyuu iya—!” people were shouting all around them. Then the temple employees were pushing open the massive doors, and the crowd was surging forward, and they were all swept along into the temple precincts.

Once inside, they found themselves on a sort of wooden walkway that ran along the inner part of the temple’s outer wall. Across a wide yard, Dan could see the temple itself, and it was massive. It looked more or less like every other temple he’d seen the past few days, except two or three times as large. Down the center of the yard was a stone-paved path leading straight up to the doors of the temple itself, and the sides of the path were lined with more burning braziers.

“You know, that entire thing is made of wood,” Phil leaned over to whisper in his ear, “like, really old wood, and they won’t even let anyone smoke near it. But they thought it was okay to set dozens of little fires right outside?”

“It wouldn’t be New Year’s without the thrill of knowing you could be about to watch a thousand-year-old temple go up in flames,” Dan replied.

They passed a huge iron bowl full of sand, where several people had stopped to light sticks of incense and say a prayer. The aroma of the incense rose to combine with the scent of wood smoke to create the unique aroma Dan had come to associate with Japanese religious places. Beyond the incense bowl was a set of shallow stairs, and as they walked down them and out onto the pavement, Dan looked up at the temple again and stopped, stunned.

Straight ahead, just under the temple’s eaves a huge window stood open, and through the window he could see an enormous golden face gazing down at him.

“Is that Buddha?” he whispered to Phil, who had stopped beside him, and nodded toward the window.

“Yeah,” Phil said, giving him a little push to get him to start moving again. There were still a ton of people trying to get down the stairs behind them. “They only open that window on New Year’s and Obon, so that Buddha can look out at the world on the two holiest days of the year.”

Dan found it strange to think that every New Year’s Day for centuries, the statue of Buddha had been looking out at the world, watching it change one year at a time, and that this year he happened to be looking down and seeing Dan staring back up. But next year when he looked again, Dan would probably be all the way on the other side of the world.

They stopped for a picture then, getting a friendly passerby to take a shot of the five of them crouched down with the temple as their backdrop. Then they made their way up the path to the temple doors, filing in behind the line of people that had already formed there.

Up close the statue was even huger, but less golden. In the dim light of the temple’s interior, it had the dull sheen of bronze, and Dan realized that the color he had seen from outside had only been a reflection of the firelight. They stood and just stared at it for a while, and Phil pointed out that if you looked really closely you could see that Buddha had a little mustache with curly ends. There were two golden Bodhisattvas flanking the Buddha on either side, and Dan read the placards explaining who they were while the others stopped and prayed.

On the far right side of the main temple hall they found a column with a hole cut into its base, and Madhavi read the sign out loud to them, explaining that if you could fit through the hole you would achieve enlightenment in your next life. As they stood and watched, a small Japanese woman was barely managing to squeeze through. Dan supposed he would just have to take his chances in the next life like most people because there was no way he was small enough to fit through there.
They walked around the back of the statue of Buddha and came out on the opposite side of the
temple, where there were stalls set up to sell amulets and picture books of the temple and Nara.
Madhavi and Jake stopped to look at some of the amulets — she wanted one for safe driving, and he
wanted one for financial success — but Phil was dragging him over to where they could get *omikuji*.

They each paid their ¥100, and the priest behind the counter held out a container filled with dozens
of long, thin wooden sticks. They each pulled out a stick and read off the number on it to the priest,
who then turned to the wall of slots behind him and pulled a slip of paper from the slot corresponding
to each of their numbers.

Dan carefully unfolded his, one eye squinched up and his face turned slightly away from it. It was
supposed to tell him his fortune for the entire year, and he had a terrible feeling it was going to be
bad.

But no, when he pulled it open, it read “小吉 Small Fortune.” He breathed a sigh of relief.

“What’d you get?” he asked, turning to Phil beside him. Phil held up his own paper with a grin, and
Dan saw that it read “大吉 Biggest Fortune.”

“What? That’s so not fair!” Dan cried, grabbing Phil’s fortune and looking at it more closely. Other
than the words at the top, none of the rest of it was translated into English, and the Japanese was too
difficult for him to make out.

“Why? What did you get?” Phil was asking, and Dan held out his own fortune, which Phil took and
read closely. “*Shokichi* isn’t bad. And look, it says you’re going to do well in your studies.”

“I guess that means I definitely should take N3 then,” Dan said a little dryly. “What’s the rest of it
say?”

“Erm,” Phil hummed, glancing through it. “You will receive news about something you’ve lost.
Your business dealings will continue at the same level of success. Oh, apparently if you plan to give
birth next year, you can expect a safe delivery.”

“Good to know.”

“Be cautious in travel and in…” Phil stopped, glanced at him, pursed his lips, “and in love. A minor
dispute will be resolved in your favor, and a loved one’s illness will improve.” He had rushed
through the last few before shoving the small fold of paper back into Dan’s hand.

“Crap!” They both jumped a little at Madhavi’s exclamation from nearby. When they turned to look,
she was staring down at her own fortune with a stricken look on her face. Dan peered over her
shoulder and read the words “凶 Curse.”

“You can get cursed by one of these things too?” Dan muttered.

“We need to take it outside and tie it on a branch,” Phil said, nodding sagely. “That’s supposed to get
rid of the bad fortune.”

“Wait. I think I can tie it over there,” Madhavi said, pointing to a nearby wall against which there
stood a rack with long metal bars. It already held several twists of paper that had been folded around
the bars. They walked over, and Madhavi tied her bad fortune on to a bar before heading back over
to Buddha to say a couple more prayers.

When they caught up with Jake and James, they had each gotten good luck as well, and Madhavi
started grumbling about being the only one to get cursed with bad luck for the year.
They wandered outside again, stopping by a statue of a monk that a bunch of people were crowded around. Phil read the sign and then told them that the monk had had occult powers, so rubbing a part of the statue’s body and rubbing the corresponding part of your body was supposed to heal an illness there.

“Hey, Madhavi, maybe you should rub his brain,” Jake teased her, and she glared at him before poking him in the side.

“You think anyone ever rubs his…you know?” James asked, raising his eyebrows suggestively, but nobody dignified the question with a response.

After a few more pictures, they decided that they were finished with the temple, so they headed to the exit. It was already past 1:00 in the morning, and the first train would be leaving at 5:25, so they headed back down to the main street, still teeming with people celebrating the new year, and made their way down to a bar Seiji had suggested that was only a few blocks away from the JR Nara Station.

The bar was rather small, and a few steps down from street level, and once they were inside they found it packed full with a blend of Japanese people and foreigners. Eventually they found a tiny standing table that they all managed to squeeze around, and then Jake and James slipped off to the bar to order everyone’s drinks.

They’d only been standing there for about two minutes when a very drunk Japanese girl stumbled over, set down her beer on their table, and looked up at Dan with wide eyes.

“Doko no shuushin desu ka?” she asked, her words cheerful but indistinct.

“Igirisu-jin desu yo. Anata ha?” he replied, startled but willing to go along, at least for the moment.

“Igirisu na no? Demo kirei da wa! Sungoku kirei!” Her forehead had wrinkled up, and she seemed almost upset by just how pretty Dan was. He hadn’t missed her sudden switch into casual Japanese either. She set a hand on his arm, and he raised an eyebrow, making eye contact with Phil over her head for a moment before looking back down at her. “Naze nondenai no? Biru katte kureru!”

“Ah, iie,” he waved his hands quickly. “Kekkou desu.” He was trying to think how to explain to her that he already had a drink on the way when his thoughts were interrupted by a loud wail from her.

“Nazeeeee?” She frowned up at him, and he couldn’t help laughing at her overreaction. “Atashi kawaikunain dakara?” She stuck out her lower lip, and he actually saw tears starting to form at the corners of her eyes. She hadn’t even told him her name yet.

“Erm…” he said, not quite sure how to respond.

“Sou de mo nai yo,” Phil said all of a sudden, and she turned hazy eyes on him. “Riyuu ha, kono kirei na hito ha ore no mono dakara. Shoganai, ne.” And as he spoke, he slid a hand across the table top in front of the girl and took hold of Dan’s hand, giving it a visible squeeze.

The girl stared down at their clasped hands, her eyes going round. She glanced up at Phil, then slowly turned her head to take in Dan, and then turned back to Phil again. Dan was almost shaking with all the laughter he was holding in. Across the table, Madhavi was actually doubled over, with tears streaming down her face. Fortunately, the girl hadn’t noticed her.

“Gei?” the girl said at last, staring at Dan again and drawing the word out to emphasize her disbelief. “Hontou ni gei na no?”
Instead of answering her, he just lifted his eyebrow even higher, stepped around her, slid his arm around Phil’s waist and planted a firm kiss on his lips. When he pulled away, Phil was blushing furiously, and the girl had picked up her drink and walked away. Across the table, Madhavi had stopped laughing and was looking back and forth between the two of them with her eyebrows raised.

Just then, James and Jake showed up and started passing drinks around, and Jake lifted his Guinness high in the air and proclaimed,

“To 2014!”

They all raised their own glasses and drank the toast to the new year. When Dan lowered his drink, he was met with Madhavi’s sharp gaze, so he just grinned and winked at her. He probably shouldn’t have kissed Phil like that in front of all these people, but as long as he kept his cool, no one had to know it wasn’t just a joke.

It wasn’t two minutes later that someone new stumbled up to their table, a short guy with blonde hair who turned out to be a Dutch backpacker. While he chatted up Jake, James and Madhavi, Dan was distracted by a young Japanese man in a three piece suit at the next table over, who was frantically waving him over. Dan looked left and right, then pointed at himself, as if to ask, “Are you really waving at me?” The guy smiled wide and nodded, and Dan muttered an “Excuse me” to Phil before walking over.

“Hello,” he said, and was greeted with a loud cheer from the table’s three occupants, all young men in business suits.

“Hi! Will you drink with us?” the guy who had called him over asked. “We will drink tequila. Will you drink tequila with us?”

Dan glanced back over at his own table and found that Phil was watching him with an amused glint in his eye. It was probably okay, right? Phil was keeping an eye on him, so he was probably safe.

“All right,” Dan said, turning back to the group of businessmen and receiving another cheer. The first guy disappeared off towards the bar while the other two guys, who had considerably less English ability, did their best to interrogate Dan about his life.

A short while later, the guy came back, accompanied by one of the bartenders, and between the two of them they were carrying four shots of tequila, four lime wedges, and salt. The bartender divvied out the shots and limes among each of them before returning to the bar. As soon as she was gone, Dan’s three new friends lifted their limes, studied them with a puzzled expression, and then proceeded to squeeze them into their shot glasses.

“No, no, no! Wait!” Dan cried as soon as he realized what they were doing. All three of them turned startled expressions on him, but they paused in the middle of their squeezing. “Like this,” Dan said, then demonstrated the proper way to take a tequila shot: a sprinkle of salt on the back of the hand, lick the salt, take the shot, bite the lime. When he pulled the lime out of his mouth, he found the other three regarding him with what a cockier person might have described as awe. He gave them an encouraging thumbs up, and they each did their best to mimic his actions. He wasn’t too surprised at the horrible faces they all made when the tequila first hit their tongues. Why in the world had they wanted to do tequila shots when they had clearly never even tried the liquor before?

“Thank you!” the first guy said to Dan when they had all finished their shots. He wasn’t sure what he was being thanked for — the drinking lesson, maybe? — but he nodded anyway. “Another one?”

He ended up having three tequila shots with the businessmen before he at last managed to excuse
himself and head back to his own friends. By the time he returned, James had been dragged off by
the Dutch guy — Dan could see the two of them over at another table with the same girl who had
been hitting on him earlier — and Madhavi and Jake were over against a wall next to a juke box,
making out.

Phil was stood at the table, sipping a cocktail and gazing about him with what Dan thought was a
somewhat lost look.

“Hey, you okay?” Dan asked, trying not to sound as drunk as he was starting to feel.

“Yeah, just feeling a bit abandoned,” Phil said, one side of his lips rising in a half smile. “How were
your tequila shots?”

“It was a cultural experience,” Dan pronounced, leaning against the table beside Phil and making a
grab for his own barely-drunk cocktail. “For me or for them, I’m not sure, but someone at least got to
experience some culture.”

Phil let out a soft laugh through his nose.

“You’re drunk,” he said.

“Kind of,” Dan agreed. He gestured toward Madhavi and Jake with his chin. “That could be us right
now,” he said and tossed Phil a glance out of the corner of his eye. They watched for a moment as
Jake smashed his face against Madhavi’s.

“Erm, I’m fine, thanks,” Phil murmured, and Dan spluttered a laugh into his drink. It wasn’t really
that funny, but Phil was right about him being drunk.

“Look, Phil,” Dan began, placing a hand against the tabletop both to give emphasis to his words and
to steady himself, “I may be a little tipsy right now, but I think I have something to say.”

“You probably shouldn’t,” Phil muttered but fell silent as Dan continued.

“I fucking love you, okay?” Dan said, turning his head just enough so that he could look Phil straight
in the eye. “I don’t know what that means, and I don’t know what I want to do with my life, but I am
in love with you, and like fuck am I going to let anything stop me from enjoying just being with you
while I still have you.”

Phil gazed down at him for a long time, and Dan was afraid he still didn’t believe him, but at last Phil’s
eyes returned to his face, and there was just the smallest smile playing around his lips.

“一期一会, huh?” he murmured, and Dan felt his face split open in an involuntary smile.

“Ichigo ichie,” he agreed.
Later, in the deep dark before dawn, the five drunk friends wove their way down to the train station, gathered their belongings from the lockers, and crawled onto the train where it stood waiting patiently for its first passengers of the day. When they’d found a group of seats together and situated their bags, Dan collapsed onto the seat next to Phil’s. Phil put his arm around Dan’s waist, and Dan laid his head against Phil’s shoulder. Dan fell asleep almost at once, but Phil stayed awake even after the train doors had closed and the train had lurched into motion, his eyes fixed on Dan’s sleeping face, and his teeth worrying at his lower lip.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

When there are oh so many stars... (Warnings for alcohol, implied sex, mentions of death and blood)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

January

They are walking through Kyoto Station, where they will grab a quick breakfast before changing trains, and Phil stops him and directs his attention out the window just in time for him to see the first sun of 2014 breach the horizon just above the train tracks.

“Seeing the first sunrise of the new year is supposed to be really lucky,” Phil says, giving him a sleepy grin before they head on their way.

*

A snowstorm last night has left central Japan buried beneath sixty centimeters of snow, and though Dan is meant to be sleeping to make up for staying out all night last night, he can’t help staring out the window at the fields of sparkling white that stretch out toward high white peaks set against a pure blue sky.

*

Their hostel in Kanazawa has an indoor bath that can be reserved for private use for thirty minutes at a time. It takes some careful planning, but on their last night there he and Phil manage to reserve it at a time when the other three are all busy with other things. Phil lets him wash his hair, and he lets Phil take far too long scrubbing his back, and Phil puts his arms around him while he leans back against his chest in the deliciously hot water.

*

They arrive home in Harata late on January 4th, exhausted after a fourteen hour train journey. They both get off the bus at Phil’s because they’ve slept in separate beds for the past eight days straight. Dan doesn’t sleep in his own futon again until the night of January 8th.

*

It’s January 9th and school is back in session. Mr. Watanabe comes over to ask Phil if he’s really leaving. Dan can hardly stand to look at Phil for the rest of the day because all he wants to do is cry.

When he gets home in the evening, he sits down in front of his laptop and writes everything, about Christmas and their trip and how life is never, ever fair.
One afternoon, Seiji asks him out for coffee after school, and when Dan settles into the seat across from him, the other ALT is frowning up at him with a laser-sharp stare.

“Is something wrong?” Dan asks cautiously.

“Hana told me that Phil and Akari broke up,” Seiji says, and Dan nods slowly. “She said Phil canceled his trip to England and went on the trip with you instead.”

“That’s true,” Dan answers.

“And Phil quit his job,” Seiji adds. Dan’s eyes drift down to his hands, clasped around a hot cup of coffee.

“Yeah,” Dan says. “Yeah, he’s going back home.”

“Are you okay?” Seiji asks, and Dan’s eyes dart back up to the other’s face. Seiji’s dark eyes are trained on him, carefully taking in his expression.

“It really sucks,” Dan says. “I’m not happy, but there’s not really anything I can do about it.”

“Isn’t there?” Seiji returns quickly.

Dan’s eyebrows shoot up.

“What are you implying?”

“Aren’t you and Phil…you know…together?” Seiji asks at last, and Dan thinks he understands why Seiji wanted to talk to him today.

“I didn’t break up Phil and his girlfriend, if that’s what you think.” He raises his coffee to his lips and takes a long sip, never breaking eye contact with his friend.

Seiji’s gaze drops down to his own coffee.

“I didn’t mean…” He pauses for a moment then shakes his head. “No, I know they had other problems. It’s just… I felt kind of blindsided by the whole thing. I can’t believe Phil is actually leaving.”

“Have you talked to him about it?” Dan says.

“Yeah.” Seiji frowns. “Yeah, I have. He seems…okay.” His eyes lock on Dan’s again, before narrowing, like Dan is a riddle he is trying to solve. “Surprisingly okay. I wasn’t expecting him to seem so calm and accepting of everything so quickly.”

Dan nods but doesn’t say anything. He knows Seiji knows, or at least that he is fairly certain. He just isn’t sure he’s actually ready to talk to anybody about him and Phil, not when everything is still all up in the air.

“It’s hard for me to imagine Phil without Akari,” Seiji says at last, and Dan bites his own lips so hard they hurt. Seiji grimaces. “I’m sorry. That came out wrong. I guess all I want to say is that I think you’re good for him.”

Dan smiles and sips his coffee again. He thinks he agrees with Seiji.
On January 30th, Phil turns twenty-seven, and they have a party at his flat with all their ALT friends. They make Mexican food, and Dan makes a playlist of mariachi music to set the tone for the evening. They play board games after dinner, but only for a little while because it’s a Thursday night and they all have school the next day. Seiji casts him a knowing look as he helps Phil usher all the guests out the door, but Dan keeps his expression neutral.

When everyone is gone, Dan gives Phil his birthday present. They both show up very sleepy to work the next day.

On Saturday, Dan gives Phil his other present — a night for two at Naritaya, in a Japanese-style room on the sixth floor. The balcony has its own private hinoki bath and a view out over the entire river gorge. In the evening, they enjoy a banquet served in their own room along with chilled daiginjo sake.

After the meal, they have a long soak in the fragrant bath. The night is clear and cold with no moon to speak of, and this far from any cities Dan is sure he can see every star in the sky.

“What if,” Phil murmurs as they rest their arms side by side on the edge of the bath, “there is a planet around each of those stars, but instead of each planet being full of aliens, each one is just a different version of Earth? And everyone who ever exists just has an infinite number of doppelgängers living on other planets around other stars.”

“I think they’d still technically be aliens,” Dan replies, his voice full of his smile.

“What do you think all the other Dans and Phils are doing right now?” Phil asks, ignoring Dan’s comment.

“Probably sorting their lives out,” Dan mutters. He wonders if out there somewhere there’s a version of himself that is a successful lawyer, or maybe just a version who’s successful at something.

“Do you think the other Dans and Phils know each other?” Phil says.

“I hope so,” Dan responds, turning to gaze at Phil’s starlit profile for a moment before leaning in to place a kiss against his lips.

February

On the 3rd, they are served a special lunch at school, each receiving a packet of dried beans with a picture of a little demon face printed on the front. The students explain to Dan over lunch that today is Setsubun, and that you are meant to eat as many beans as you are years old. He asks about the demon on the package, and after several minutes of confusion, the students finally communicate to him that the beans are also supposed to be used to drive away evil.

Back in the staff room, he asks Phil for further explanation and learns that Setsubun is considered the day when winter changes into spring. In ancient times, this was the start of the new year, a good time to think about driving away any evil influences or bad luck.

“At the primary school, they’ll get one of the teachers to put on an ogre mask, and then all the students throw beans at him to chase him away,” Phil tells him, miming a scary ogre face.

Dan sneaks a few leftover packets of beans into his pockets, and as soon as they get home from school, he pelts Phil with handful after handful of dried beans, shouting, “Begone, evil demon!”

“I hope you know you’re cleaning all of those up by yourself,” Phil calls from where he has taken refuge behind the couch in his lounge.
“I dunno,” Dan shrugs, wiping bean dust on his trousers, “this isn’t my flat, after all. I could just go home and leave you to wallow in the mess.”

“What do you mean this isn’t your flat?” Phil retorts, just peeking his nose up over the arm of the couch. “You haven’t even been home in two days, and half your clothes are on my bedroom floor.”

Dan tries to think of a good comeback for this but can’t.

* 

The third years are all walking around hunched over and bleary-eyed. Dan realizes he and Phil haven’t been invited to any third year classes since before winter break, and when Dan asks why, Phil sticks out his tongue and says it’s because they’re busy studying for their high school entrance exams. The exams cover English, but only grammar and vocabulary — not topics ALTs are expected to teach.

Dan visits the special needs class during hiruyasumi one day while Phil is at primary school, and he asks Arisa and some of the other third years which high schools they are taking exams for. They all have the same answer — the special needs high school in Kokki. He wonders, when he leaves, if they were offered any other option.

* 

There is a huge storm late in the month that covers Harata and Kokki both in a good twenty centimeters of snow. The temperature stays below freezing for three days straight, and the snow quickly compacts into ice.

Dan has never been more thankful for Phil’s warm body snuggled up beside him in bed.

Phil is afraid of driving on the unmelted ice, so they end up making the thirty minute walk to and from school each day until the sun comes out again and the ice at last recedes. Dan has to borrow a pair of boots from Phil because it’s too much trouble to walk home and get his own. He’s glad then for the collection of clothes he’s built up at Phil’s place.

* 

Madhavi gets together a group of them to head up the mountain to Kita Onsen, a four hundred-year old onsen hotel. Though the snow has gone completely from Harata, Nasu is still buried. As they sit in a tiny stone-lined bath beneath two huge, long-nosed tengu masks, Seiji tells them that this onsen was featured in a movie a couple of years ago, and has been insanely popular ever since. They’ve lucked out today — because of the recent bad weather, they have the place almost to themselves.

While Madhavi sits in the indoor bath and rolls her eyes, Dan and Phil end up getting into a naked snow ball fight against Jake and Seiji just outside. The two English ALTs win, but only after Dan experiences sharp snow crystals smashing into parts of his body that he had hoped would never experience that particular sensation.

March

By the first weekend in March, it’s been sunny and mild for a week and a half straight, and Dan is finally starting to believe that spring is just around the corner. Seiji suggests they drive over to Mito, the capital city of the prefecture to the east, to see the plum blossoms blooming at Kairakuen.

“You know,” Phil says to him in the back of Seiji’s car as they are driving to the city, “Kairakuen is
considered one of the three most beautiful parks in all of Japan.”

“What are the other two?” Dan asks, slipping his hand into Phil’s because Seiji is too busy driving and James is too busy talking to notice.

“We’ve actually already been to one of them,” Phil says, his eyes glowing as he glances down at their hands. “Kenrokuen, in Kanazawa. You remember — we visited there right after we arrived on New Year’s Day.”

“Oh, huh,” Dan says, remembering the park blanketed all in white and trees all wrapped up with ropes to support the branches and prevent them breaking under the weight of the snow. “What’s the third?”

“It’s called Korakuen, and it’s in Okayama Prefecture, down near Shikoku. I’ve never been there,” Phil says, and his eyes darken for a moment. Dan knows he is thinking that he probably never will go now.

“I’ll have to go visit it then,” Dan says, giving Phil’s hand a squeeze. “Gotta catch ‘em all.”

He is rewarded with an eye roll from Phil and a sound that is half-laugh, half-groan.

The park is packed with people who have come out to enjoy the beautiful weather and even more beautiful ume blossoms. Before they even get into the park itself, they must wander through a maze of food stalls and shops, and Phil makes him stop and try some of the ume-flavored ice cream.

“I thought you didn’t even like ume,” Dan says, eyeing the bright pink ice cream he’s holding with interest.

“I don’t like umeboshi,” Phil corrects him. “This has a lighter, sweeter flavor.”

The ice cream turns out to be pretty good, sweet as Phil says with just a hint of ume tanginess. Seiji also buys them a bottle of the park’s own special brand of umeshu. They pop it open after settling down on the dead grass beneath the colorful trees. Though the sky is blue, the air is still crisp with a wintry chill, and they’ve all bundled up in scarves, gloves and coats.

“To spring,” Seiji says, holding his paper cup of umeshu aloft, and they all toast to the coming season, though the only sign of its approach are the bright and hardy ume blossoms sprouting from the bare tree branches.

* 

On the morning of Friday, March 7th, Nischichu holds the graduation ceremony for all of the third years. The proud third year teachers dress up in their fanciest clothes — the men in coats with tails and the women in full kimono and geta.

One of the third year girls who is particularly talented at violin stands up on stage and plays a selection from the “Spring” portion of Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* while all of the third years slowly file in. There are endless speeches, as usual, but then each of the third year students walks up to the front, and one by one they receive their diplomas.

When Dan glances over at Phil, he sees him furiously rubbing tears from his cheeks.

* 

On March 11th, at 2:46 PM the entire school stands for a minute in silence, in remembrance of the
events on that day three years ago. Dan hadn’t been able to help sneaking glances at Phil throughout the day, wondering if it would be all right to ask him more about it. In the end, he doesn’t have to ask.

“That morning,” Phil says, when they have taken their seats again, “the third years came through the staff room to announce that they’d gotten accepted at their high schools. Everyone was really happy, and some of the students and teachers were crying. I remember my favorite student stopping here to tell me he’d gotten into a high school in Utsunomiya — one of the top ones in the prefecture.”

Dan waits, watching Phil’s eyes narrow as he takes himself three years back in time.

“It was a Friday afternoon, and fifth period was almost over. I was actually in a class then, with Mr. Watanabe. It was 1-4, up on the second floor of the *ichinensei* building, and I was standing in the back of the class trying not to be too obvious about watching the clock.

“When the earthquake started, no one paid it much attention. I’m sure you’ve noticed — there are lots of little quakes all the time, and if we stopped class for every one we’d get really behind. But then it got a bit bigger, and Mr. Watanabe stopped teaching, and all of the students immediately got under their desks. I opened all the windows and doors while Mr. Watanabe turned off the heater. And then it got bigger.”

It has been three years, but Phil’s voice still comes out soft and breathless, and his eyes are too bright. Dan can’t quite grasp what that moment must have felt like for Phil, but he can read the fear clear on his face.

“I could barely stand anymore, the building was shaking so much. I had to grab onto a desk. I actually cut my hand on it, but I didn’t even notice the blood on it until hours later. I looked out the window, and the trees down in the courtyard were trembling from the roots all the way up to the branches. You know how old that building is. I really thought, for a good twenty seconds, that the building was going to fall and I was going to die. You know how they say your life flashes before your eyes? Well, it wasn’t exactly like that, but more like I took stock of my life and thought about everything I’d done up until then, and then I accepted the idea that that was everything I was ever going to do with my life.”

“But it wasn’t,” Dan can’t help saying.

“No,” Phil says, a weak smile barely lifting the corners of his lips. “That was difficult to take in afterwards — the fact that I was still alive and whole. There was this moment, where the earthquake was at its strongest, and I just knew, deep in my gut, that it was about to get worse, but then it didn’t. The shaking became lighter and lighter and the noise got quieter and quieter, and then it stopped.

“Mr. Watanabe started yelling at the students, and they all jumped up and dashed outside. They were all terrified, I could tell, but they’d been trained about how to act during an earthquake, and even though they were running, they all formed a single, orderly line. The first aftershocks started almost immediately, and we almost didn’t make it down the stairs, the building was still shaking so hard.

“But we got all the students out to the school yard and made them line up by class so the teachers could make sure everyone had made it out. The ground was shaking continuously with aftershocks. You could look over at the school gym and see all the windows vibrating. It started snowing while we were out there, but no one had had time to get their coats, and it was too dangerous to go back inside, so we all just huddled together to try to stay warm.

“We waited for all the students’ parents to come and get them. The last students finally left at about 6:00 PM, and fortunately it was still light out. They finally let me run into the staff room for a
moment to grab my bag and coat.”

He pauses for a moment and leans back in his chair, pointing at the ceiling above them. Dan looks up at the white tiles along with him.

“The entire ceiling up there had caved in, and our two desks were covered with broken tiles. If I’d been sitting here instead of in class for once, I really might have died,” Phil says quietly.

It’s funny how things happen like that sometimes. Phil’s eyes drop back down to his desktop again, and he lets out a long sigh.

“I didn’t know about the tsunami, or how bad the earthquake had really been until after I got home,” Phil is saying. “I’d left my cell phone in the staff room while I was in class, so I hadn’t had a chance to check it for more than three hours. The few teachers who had their phones on them out in the school yard had been too preoccupied coordinating the parents picking up the students to share the news.

“When I got to my place, everything was a mess. Bookcases fallen over, everything fallen off the walls, microwave smashed on the floor. The glass in one of my balcony doors had shattered. The electricity was completely out, but the worst thing was that up there on the fourth floor, the aftershocks were making the entire building sway back and forth. It was terrifying.

“I called Richard — he was the guy who had your job back then — and he told me to come over to his place. It was only on the first floor, and he still had water and electricity. It was just a tiny, one-room place, like yours, but five of us ended up spending the night there. No one wanted to be alone.”

Phil stops speaking, and it takes a moment for Dan to realize he is finished.

“Thank you,” he says at last.

Phil looks up and gives him a single nod.

“Thanks for listening,” Phil replies. “I hardly ever talk about it anymore, but sometimes I just need to remember.”

*

The third years haven’t been taking classes for a couple of weeks now, ever since they finished their exams, but on Friday, they all show up, wearing their junior high school uniforms one last time. They form a line and file through the staff room, stopping to announce to their homeroom teachers that they have been accepted into their high school of choice.

After hugging Yamanaka-sensei, Arisa steps out of the line and hurries over to Dan and Phil’s desks.

“Firu-sensei, Dan-sensei, ichinenkan arigatou gozaimashita,” she says, giving them a deep bow.

They bow in return. When they stand back up, there’s a grin plastered across her round face.

“Tokubetsu shien koukou ni hairemashita!” she exclaims.

“Omedetou!” Phil says, and Dan echoes his congratulations.

A few minutes after she leaves, Airi comes over to them and offers them her own bow. There are tears streaming down her cheeks, and just the sight of them puts a knot in the back of Dan’s throat.

“Ichinenkan, arigatou gozaimashita,” she says. “Kokki Minami Koukou no juuken ha goukaku
“Omedetou!” Dan and Phil say in unison, and Dan can hear the matching tremors running through both of their voices.

When all the third year students have gone, it is still the middle of third period. Phil asks Dan if he wants to go for a walk, so they amble out to the back fence, where the gingko trees across the way are just putting on new leaves. They stop and stare out, and Dan is startled by a sob from Phil; he looks over to see him with his face in his hands. He glances around, makes sure no one can see them, then puts a comforting arm around his shoulder.

“They were just nine-year olds when I first met them,” Phil manages to choke out after a moment. “And now they’re all going to high school. I can’t believe I’m not going to get to watch them grow up any more.”

“You can always come back to visit,” Dan murmurs, gently running his hand up and down Phil’s back.

“It won’t be the same,” Phil says, “I won’t be their teacher anymore.”

“True,” Dan answers, “but that would have been true either way since they’re going to high school now.”

“I know,” Phil says, but he keeps crying anyway.

*  

Phil is building up an impressive collection of floral arrangements. He receives one from Nishisho and one from Shiratsukasho on his last day at each, and another few from former students at the Kokusai Kouryuu Kai, where he had taught a few private English classes. There are other gifts too, from friends, neighbors, and acquaintances. Individual classes at the primary schools and even at Nishichu put together collections of pictures and letters for him. The Nishichu teachers pool their money to buy him a beautiful — and from the looks of it, extremely expensive — traditional Japanese-style tea set.

“I don’t know where I’m supposed to fit all of this in my luggage,” he grumbles, frowning down at the tea set where it sits on his dining room table. “I’m afraid to ship something this fragile, but I don’t see how it’ll be much better off in my personal bags.”

He’d already been shipping boxes home for a couple of weeks now, and his flat is looking emptier and emptier. Dan is trying not to panic at the sight of it. The whole place smells like a garden.

“Maybe it could be your carry-on item?” Dan suggests, and Phil grumbles some more.

He receives one final floral arrangement from the junior high school on March 21st, during the end of year ceremony. All of the teachers who are leaving are called up on stage, thanked for their time at Nishichu, and given a lovely potted plant. Each of them gives a speech, and Phil only barely manages to get through his without breaking down crying again. Out in the audience, Dan gives in and lets the tears flow freely.

He had been surprised at first to see how many teachers were leaving, until Phil had explained that the Board of Education intentionally moved teachers around from school to school each year. Supposedly it is meant to help even out the quality of teaching available at each school, but Phil had told him that in his opinion it was all very political.
When the ceremony is over, the rest of the day is spent in a massive, school-wide spring cleaning, involving all of the staff and students. Dan finds himself assigned to help a group of first years plant pansies in the school’s front flower beds. It’s dirty work, but the kids know how to make it fun, with teasing jokes and questions and pleasant chatter.

Theoretically, like all of the other teachers Dan and Phil are supposed to continue to show up to school throughout the rest of spring vacation, but at the end of the day, Mr. Watanabe pulls them aside and tells them they needn’t bother. Dan, of course, will return again in early April when the new school year begins. Mr. Watanabe asks him to please take care of Phil’s replacement, his new kouhai, whenever they show up.

Phil moves so slowly as he packs up his desk. There isn’t very much to take, really — the photographs from the desktop, a few novels, his stationery, his coffee mug. It still takes him a good twenty minutes to clear it all out and pack it away in his backpack. Dan can hardly watch.

They wait until 4:00, though Mr. Watanabe had made it clear that they could leave whenever they wanted.

At the staff room door, Phil bows one last time and calls out,

“O-saki ni shitsurei shimasu!”

The few teachers in the staff room all stand and bow back.

“Otsukare-sama deshita” they call, and then kyoutou-sensei and a few others show him out the door.

At the entrance to the school, Phil changes into his outdoor shoes and then, instead of sliding his indoor shoes back into their little cubby, slips them into his backpack. He turns and waves to the teachers standing there one more time, and then he and Dan walk out to his car.

In the car, Phil is crying again, and Dan thinks that he needs to make him drink some water when they get home so he won’t get dehydrated. Actually, they should probably both have some water, Dan realizes, because he’s started leaking tears again as well.

*  

It’s the last week of March, and Phil films one final video on his bed in his flat. His replacement is scheduled to arrive on April 1st, so Phil has to be completely moved out several days before then. He’d bought his plane tickets all the way back at the beginning of January, and when Dan asks him why he’s bought them for April 23rd, he explains that he wants to make sure he sees the sakura bloom one last time before he goes. He’ll stay at Dan’s for the last few weeks, and they’ll somehow find a way to make do with two grown men in one tiny flat.

“I’ve never shown you my channel, have I?” Phil says as Dan helps him set up the camera and a couple of lights. It’s a sunny day out, so they need to make sure the room is well-lit to prevent there being too many shadows.

“Heh, well about that,” Dan says, scratching the side of his neck in embarrassment. “I kind of discovered your channel on my own, erm, back in August.”

Phil’s eyes open wide.

“You what?” he demands. “You mean you’ve been watching my videos all this time without telling me?”
Dan bites both his lips and nods.

“You sneaky little shit!” Phil cries and then, without warning, tackles him, pushing him onto the bed and attacking him with tickles.

“Wait, wait, stop! No, not my neck! Ahhhh!” Dan says, trying to protect his vulnerable areas with his hands, but somehow failing miserably at it.

It only takes about a minute for the tickling and wrestling to turn into a full-on makeout session, which in turn leads to both of their clothes on the floor and Phil’s fingers clinging to him with a desperation almost verging on terror.

It’s a good hour and a half before Phil’s video filming gets back on track.

“Hey, guys,” he says, and Dan wonders if he’s the only one who will notice that Phil’s fringe is just slightly out of place. “So, I have a big announcement to make — I’m leaving Japan.”

Phil has to do five takes before he gets all the footage he needs. He keeps getting choked up in the middle of sentences and having to start over again.

Dan is lying on the tatami with his head propped on Phil’s knee playing Flappy Bird on his phone, while Phil works on editing the video he’s just filmed, when Phil’s doorbell rings, and they both jump a little.

“I’ll get it,” Dan says after a moment, knowing how Phil hates to be disturbed in the middle of editing.

“Thanks,” Phil mutters, not taking his eyes off his computer screen.

When Dan leans across the genkan and swings the door open, his heart seems to stop for a moment. Stood there outside with the sunset-colored mountains spread out behind her is Akari.

“Hi,” he says.

“Hello,” she replies, and he can see her swallow hard. “Can I speak to Phil?”

No, no, no, no, no, Dan’s mind is yelling.

“I’ll ask,” he says. “Erm, please wait here.” He feels guilty closing the door in her face, but he’s not sure how Phil would feel about him inviting his ex-girlfriend into his flat.

He walks into the tatami room and waits for Phil to look up at him.

“Who is it?” His eyes are blank, and Dan can tell his attention is really still focused on his editing.

“Akari,” Dan says, and Phil’s eyes sharpen right up. It’s one of those times Dan really hates the fact that Phil is so good at hiding his thoughts. He thinks he might kill to know what’s going through Phil’s mind just now. “I can go out for a little while, if you two need to talk.”

Phil chews his bottom lip and then gives a slow nod.

“Is that okay? I promise I had no idea she was coming over. I’ll see what she wants, but come right back in thirty minutes, okay?”

Dan lets out a breath slowly, trying to calm his racing heart. It's okay, he tells himself. Phil wants to be with me, not her.
“I’ll just head down to bsp cafe,” Dan says, naming the cafe that’s just a couple of blocks over.

Phil follows him back out to the front door, and Dan slides on his shoes before they open it to find Akari still stood there, hands running up and down the strap of her purse. He can’t stop himself glancing back to see Phil’s face as he looks at her. Phil’s gone pale, and he isn’t smiling, and he’s motioning Akari inside with a jerk of his chin.

It’s so, so difficult for Dan to wait patiently at the cafe for thirty whole minutes. He guesses it must be feeling like no time at all to Phil and Akari. They haven’t seen each other since November, he knows. Why is Akari here today? He can’t stop asking himself the question and coming up with all of the most disagreeable answers as he downs one cup of coffee and orders a second.

When he’s been gone for twenty-five minutes, he pays his bill and rushes out the door. The sun has set entirely now, and the outdoors has been plunged into a chill, grey twilight.

Akari’s car is still in the car park at Phil’s building, but it has only been twenty-nine minutes. The lift creaks slowly up to the third/fourth floor. The walk from the lift down the veranda to Phil’s flat is longer than he remembers. He can just make out the mountains to the west, reflecting the last of the sun’s fading light.

He runs into her just outside Phil’s front door. Her eyes are red and puffy, and she’s still crying. She looks up at him and tries to smile, but doesn’t really manage it. She offers him a quick bow before brushing past on her way to the lift.

Phil’s door is unlocked, so instead of knocking, Dan just walks in. He finds Phil sat on the tatami room floor, sobbing into the knees of his jeans, so he sits down next to him and puts both arms around his shoulders. Phil leans into his side and proceeds to soak the right side of his jacket with his tears, but Dan doesn’t mind.

It takes a while for Phil to be calm enough to speak, but when he does, he looks up at Dan and explains,

“She just wanted to come and say a proper good-bye, before I left.”

“Are you sure that’s all she wanted?” The question is out before Dan has a chance to think what he’s saying, and Phil pulls back and just stares at him, stunned.

“I’m sorry—” “Dan begins, but Phil cuts him off.

“Even if that wasn’t all she wanted, that’s certainly all she got.” Phil’s voice is quiet, and somehow despite its raspy quality it manages to sound cool and controlled.

“I know, Phil. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said it.” He puts both hands up and rubs them over his face. “I can be a right insecure bastard sometimes.”

“I know,” Phil says, but he’s smiling, and he leans over and drops a gentle kiss on Dan’s cheek.

“I don’t know why you put up with me.” Dan shakes his head, not daring to look at Phil.

“Don’t you?” Phil asks, his voice a whisper. Dan turns to look at him, and the softness in Phil’s gaze makes his breath catch in his throat.


“Because I love you,” Phil replies, his eyes keeping their steady fix on Dan’s.
He wants to kiss Phil, but he also wants to keep looking into his eyes and seeing the way they’re looking at him right now, possibly forever. He finds that he is smiling, and he’s not sure when that happened. Eventually, Phil is the one who leans in for a kiss.

They end up naked in Phil’s bed again for the second time that day, and somehow Phil doesn’t manage to get his video edited until the following evening.

*

It’s Saturday, March 29th, and all of Phil’s possessions have either been shipped off to England or moved into Dan’s place. Dan watches as he walks through every room of his former flat, checking closets and shelves for any forgotten items, running his hand over the walls or the stovetop or the back of the couch. Dan knows he is saying good-bye. It’s so odd to think that in a few days, someone new will be here, calling this place home.

They step into the *genkan* and slide on their shoes, and then Phil closes the door and locks it for the last time.

They stop on the veranda, to look out over the mountains, and Dan is pretty sure this is the last time he will ever see this particular view. He can’t imagine ever wanting to come back up here to the fourth floor when this isn’t Phil’s place anymore.

On the way to Dan’s, they stop by the Board of Education to drop off Phil’s key, and he can see the loss in Phil’s eyes as he walks away from it. One by one, Phil is relinquishing the pieces of his life here.

Phil sleeps squeezed in next to him in his futon that night, and though Dan had been worried it would be uncomfortable, he finds that the extreme closeness is exactly what is wanted at this particular moment.

*April*

Chapter End Notes

Originally published on tumblr
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Along the countless days…

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Dan Howell**

Hello! I’m Dan, and I currently work at Nishichu. The Board of Education told me you’ll be working at Nishichu too this year, so I just wanted to introduce myself and let you know if you have any questions I’m happy to answer them. Welcome to Harata!

**Aalia Usman**

Nice to meet you, Dan! I’ve just arrived here, and I’m really looking forward to the year. I think I have about a million questions, but I’ll save most of them for next week. I did want to ask, are there any other English teachers here, or is it just us two?

Dan couldn’t help smiling to himself as he read through Aalia’s message. He remembered when he’d arrived — was it really only seven months ago? — and been shocked to discover that he wasn’t the only foreigner around.

“Phil?” he called toward the bathroom next door, where he could hear Phil rustling around after finishing his shower.

“Yeah?” Phil’s voice sounded muffled, like maybe he had a towel over his head at the moment.

“Do you want to try to meet up with this Aalia girl and show her around town a bit or something?”

There was no answer for a minute or two, and he wondered if Phil had actually heard him, but then there came the sound of wet feet on hardwood floors, and then Phil walked in, with damp skin and a towel around his waist, and Dan said a silent prayer of thanks for having been born.

“That could be fun,” Phil said in a neutral tone, stepping up and leaning over Dan’s shoulder to look at the girl’s profile on Facebook that Dan had pulled up on his laptop. There was something in his voice that caused Dan to turn and study his face closely.

“We don’t have to,” Dan said after a moment. “I can just pass her info on to Madhavi and let her do the honors. She’d probably nearly faint from excitement.”

“Yeah, I bet Madhavi would really love that,” Phil agreed, even more quickly than Dan had expected him to. He’d read Phil’s reaction correctly then.

“Cool,” Dan said, and Phil returned to the bathroom to finish getting dressed for bed while Dan sent Madhavi a text to let her know the new girl was here. A short while later they were snuggled down in Dan’s futon, with Dan’s arm draped across Phil’s side, and Dan decided he should offer Phil the chance to talk about it if he wanted.
“Do you not want to meet her at all?” he murmured, keeping his voice low since his lips were just inches from Phil’s ear. For a while the only sound he heard was Phil’s steady breathing.

“I don’t know,” Phil answered finally. “It just seems like a weird time to be meeting new people.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Dan said.

It was April 1st, and they’d spent the day going down to the immigration office in Utsunomiya so Phil could surrender his gaijin card and switch over to a tourist visa for his remaining few weeks in Japan. Fortunately, as it was a Tuesday, the office hadn’t been too busy. They’d been in and out in only about twenty minutes and had spent the rest of the day shopping at Parco and LaLa Square. They’d even stopped at Starbucks to grab two caramel macchiatos. It was a rare treat considering that the Starbucks in Utsunomiya Station was the closest one to where they lived.

“We should drive over to Nikko and see Toshogu tomorrow,” Phil said all of a sudden. He’d made arrangements to sell his car to James as soon as he had finished out the month on his rental contract, but for the moment Phil still had his own mode of transportation.

“Yeah, sure,” Dan said, lifting one shoulder slightly in a shrug. “Everyone keeps talking about it, so I guess I should finally go see what the fuss is all about.”

“We can see the three monkeys, and the sleeping cat, and you can see Tokugawa Ieyasu’s tomb,” Phil explained, and Dan couldn’t help smiling at the enthusiasm in his sleepy voice.

“Sounds amazing,” Dan yawned, tightening his arm around Phil’s stomach to pull him closer and snuggling his face more deeply into the dip between his neck and shoulder.

“Good night,” Phil whispered.

“Night,” Dan mumbled against his neck.

Nikko, though it was in the same prefecture, was on the other side of the mountains, which meant they had a choice between driving twenty or thirty minutes south to go around the mountains or taking the winding road up through the peaks. Phil insisted on taking the mountain road, telling Dan there was something he wanted to show him. So up they drove, the road passing through Yaita before beginning to steadily rise in elevation. Eventually, the road passed near the highest point of one of the mountains, and Phil pulled over at a wider place where there was a small parking area and a scenic outlook.

It was just before noon, and with the sun high in the sky, the lower peaks and hills below them looked like a series of gigantic steps leading down to the valleys of the western part of the prefecture.

“That was beautiful,” Dan said when they’d returned to the car. “Thanks for showing me.”

“You’re welcome, but that wasn’t actually it,” Phil said with a smirk. “Are you ready to experience the Iroha-zaka?”

“I guess I have to be,” Dan said. “What’s that?”

“One of the most beautiful and dangerous roads in all of Japan, possibly in the entire world,” Phil answered, raising his eyebrows in an impressive manner.

“Cool. Didn’t know death was on the schedule for today, but all right,” Dan said, mostly joking but also feeling his heart rate rise just a bit.
“Don’t worry. We’ll take it slow. Anyway, it’s called Iroha Slope because the ancient Japanese syllabary had 48 sounds, and the first three were I-ro-ha. The road has 48 hairpin turns in it, so if you look carefully you’ll see the sign with the name of each turn as we head down.”

“Forty-eight?” Dan asked, feeling the hammering in his chest quicken. Phil was a safe driver, right? They would be okay…

Phil just chuckled and nodded, and Dan supposed he was glad that his attention was on driving instead of talking.

“Iro ha nioedo chirinuru wo, Wa ga yo tare zo tsune naramu? Ui no oku yama kefu koete, asaki yume mishi, ehi mo sezu,” Phil chanted as they started down the first of the sharp turns, and DEAR GOD these weren’t graceful curves — they were sections of road bent back on themselves in curves literally as tight as the bend in a hairpin.

“Was that even Japanese?” Dan asked, gazing out at the “い” sign marking the first curve. “I didn’t understand a single word of it.”

“It’s really ancient Japanese,” Phil explained, slowly taking them around the second curve. It was a good thing there weren’t really any other cars up here today, Dan thought. “Like from the ninth or tenth century. It’s all of the syllables of the ancient Japanese syllabary arranged into a little poem that uses each syllable only once.”

“It’s a poem?” Dan asked, gripping the handle on the side of the car as they moved into the fourth curve.

“Colorful flowers are fragrant, but they will eventually scatter,” Phil recited. “Who in our world is unchanging? Today we are crossing the deep mountains of impermanence. We will not have superficial dreams, nor will we become deluded.”

Dan gazed out the window and caught a glimpse of the lower parts of the road zig-zagging back and forth over and over again down the side of the mountain. The sight was at once exhilarating and terrifying.

By the time they reached flat land again, Dan’s head was pounding with blood and adrenaline, but he had to admit it had been one of the most beautiful drives of his life.

“We’re here,” Phil grinned. He was steering them into a car park and pulling into a space. When they got out, he led Dan over to a set of stairs that took them down to a viewing platform. From the edge of it, Dan saw that they were perched above a vast chasm. At the bottom of it flowed a river, but just in front of them the water of the river was pouring over the edge of tall cliff in a massive waterfall. A sign nearby named it as Kegon Falls.

“It’s nearly a hundred meters from top to bottom,” Phil noted. In the shady areas to either side of the falls, Dan could make out tiny patches of old snow. It was only about 4 degrees out right now. Up here in the mountains, spring had yet to make much headway.

“Let’s walk down to the lake,” Phil said after they’d taken in the waterfall for a few minutes. It was only a few blocks’ walk down to the wide, blue lake walled in on all sides with high hills. A paved path led along its edge, so they followed this for a ways before stopping next to a dock where a bunch of multi-colored swan boats were tied up. As lovely a day as it was, it was still far too cold for anyone to be interested in taking a boat out on the water.

They grabbed some lunch at a restaurant near the lake, before Phil took them back up the other side
of the Iroha-zaka and into Nikko City proper, where they could visit the famous shrine. When they parked the car, Dan couldn’t see anything resembling a shrine nearby, but Phil explained there was no parking near and they would have to walk.

The approach to the shrine was a wide avenue lined with high trees on either side. They made their way up this and a set of stone steps, and through a massive stone torii before reaching the entrance, where they paid their ¥1,300 entrance fee. They passed a tall, red pagoda on the way, and Dan made Phil stop so he could get a few pictures. Then it was up a steeper set of stairs and through a wooden gate with protective demon statues on either side, and when they reached the top Dan had to stop and stare for a moment.

“Are you sure this is a shrine?” he muttered, taking in the bright colors, the ornate carvings, and the gold leaf everywhere. “I thought shrines were supposed to look plain and natural and blend in with their surroundings.”

Phil smiled and gave him a slow nod of approval.

“You’re learning, my young Padawan,” he said, and Dan rolled his eyes. “Yeah, that’s one of the things that makes Nikko Toshogu unusual. It’s theoretically a Shinto shrine, but it’s decorated as ornately as a Buddhist temple. Come over here and look at this.” Phil motioned him off to the left with his hand, and Dan followed.

They were standing on the pavement before a small, wooden building. Phil pointed up near the building’s roof, at a series of carved and painted panels there.

“It shows the life of a monkey, from birth to death,” Phil explained. “Notice anything familiar?”

Dan’s eyes followed the panels, showing the baby monkey with its family, and then as it grew a little older and bigger, leaving its family behind. At last he came to a panel showing three monkeys, one with its hands over its ears, a second with its hands over its mouth, and a third with its hands over its eyes.

“Hear no evil, Speak no evil, See no evil?” Dan asked.

“Yep. That tiny little carving up there is where that saying comes from,” Phil said.

They continued on, with Phil pointing out all the little details on each building — the golden dragon carvings hanging down from a set of eaves, or the strangely hairy elephants decorating one wall.

“Whoever carved that had probably never even seen a real elephant before,” Phil explained.

The shrine wasn’t too crowded, but there were plenty of other visitors here, many of them foreigners. Dan thought it was the most foreigners he had seen all in one place in the entire prefecture. Further in, they passed a priest in full regalia escorted by a couple shrine maidens in their wide, red hakama, and Dan imagined for just a moment that none of the tourists were here, and he was watching a scene from several centuries in the past.

At the top of another set of steps, they had to show their tickets again to continue. Once they’d stepped through, Phil pointed out a carving of a cat that hung over the entrance to the steepest set of stairs yet. The cat was curled up asleep, and Phil said that this was meant to indicate that this place was safe. The cat was a guardian that would supposedly only wake if some danger threatened the sacred area beyond.

The stairs continued for what seemed like forever. Every time they reached the top of a set, it would turn out to only be a landing, a resting place to pause before continuing up the next flight. Dan was
wheezing within a few minutes, and Phil was looking pretty red in the face, but they continued on. There was a thick growth of red pine all around them, and the stone walls that closed in the staircase were overgrown with downy moss and ruddy lichens. As far as historical sites in Japan went, this one was fairly new — only about four hundred years old — but it still managed to give off an air of having existed for an aeon.

At long last, they reached the top of the final set of stairs, and they both plunked down on a bench they found there. Dan had to do a double take when he saw a vending machine selling cans of cold green tea. He supposed he shouldn’t have been surprised, though. He’d heard there were even vending machines at the top of Mt. Fuji.

When they’d caught their breath, they walked on, passing by a small, red building before reaching a locked bronze gate guarded by two lions. There was a narrow path that led around one side of the gate, and Phil led him down this. They passed through into a walled-in area. The path skirted its perimeter, but out in the center, across an expanse of rough grey and white pebbles, stood a single iron structure sporting a sloping temple-like roof with the Buddhist flame symbol at its pinnacle. A couple of meters in front of the structure was a small bronze statue of a crane stood atop a tortoise’s back.

“That’s supposed to be Tokugawa Ieyasu’s tomb,” Phil murmured. Dan wasn’t sure if he was keeping his voice so low because some rule required it or simply because it felt appropriate to the solemn atmosphere of the place. “But he’s actually buried some place else. This is just his main shrine.”

“What do you mean by that? Is it his shrine because he built it?” Dan asked as they followed the path around the back of the iron structure.

“No, I think his son and grandson actually built it,” Phil said. “It’s his shrine because he was made a god after his death.”

Once they’d passed out of the sacred area surrounding the “tomb” once more, they stopped at a small structure where some of the shrine’s employees were selling amulets and little trinkets. Dan bought a keychain with cartoon versions of the three monkeys stacked on top of one another, but Phil didn’t buy anything. He had enough stuff to worry about taking home with him without adding anything new.

By the time they were on the road back to Harata again, the sun was sinking beneath the mountains. Though the sky was still blue directly overhead, the hills and peaks cast deep shadows over the valley Nikko lay in. Phil had fallen quiet, and when Dan looked over at him, he saw that his brows were drawn together in a frown.

“Something on your mind?” Dan asked, reaching a hand over and placing it on Phil’s knee.

Phil shot a glance at him out of the corner of his eye and flashed him a quick smile.

“Oh, just thinking about all the useless knowledge about Japan I’ve built up over the last five years of my life,” he said.

“Seems pretty useful to me,” Dan commented, giving Phil’s knee a comforting pat.

“That’s only because we’re actually in Japan.” Phil’s expression drew up in a frown again. “Once I go back to England, nobody’s going to care that I can recite the entire Iroha poem or explain the history behind Nikko Toshogu. It’ll just be, ‘Oh, you lived in Japan? I bet the sushi was good!’ or ‘Oh, do you speak Japanese? Say something in Japanese!’”
“If they ask you to say something in Japanese, you can always say the Iroha thing then,” Dan suggested.

“Ha,” Phil scoffed, “and then when they ask me what it means and I explain, I’ll get to see their eyes glaze over in utter boredom. Or they’ll just think I’m really pretentious.”

“You’re, like, the least pretentious person I’ve ever met.”

“Even when I’m reciting tenth century Japanese esoteric poetry?” Phil shot him another look, but there was a smile playing around the corners of his lips.

“Even then,” Dan affirmed and gave his knee another pat.

The following weekend was the last weekend before the school year would start back up, and Seiji had organized a group of them to go down to Utsunomiya to do hanami at the big park in the middle of the city. The sakura were barely starting to open up here in Harata, but just an hour south in the capital they were already near their peak.

Sunday was a lovely, mild spring day with just a hint of a chill in the air. They’d spent Saturday figuring out how to use Phil’s old rice cooker to bake a cake. It had taken a full day of looking up directions online, shopping for ingredients, and one failed attempt at measuring the amount of water correctly before they’d finally managed to create a decent-looking cake with whipped cream and strawberry slices on top. Dan had held the plastic cake container on his lap during the entire train ride down, and he was now carrying it in both hands as they made their way from the train station down to the park.

“Did you guys really bake that yourselves?” Caroline asked, appearing at his side and pointing at the container he was holding so carefully.

“Yes. In a rice cooker no less,” Dan grinned. It had taken enough work to make the damn thing that he didn’t feel the least bit embarrassed of how proud he was of it.

“Wow. You can do that?” She had pursed her lips and was nodding her head in a very impressed manner. “Can you teach me?”

“Sure,” he said. After a pause, he added, “I guess I still haven’t made it down to Yaita, have I?”

“No, you haven’t,” she agreed. “You should come down next weekend, and bring Phil.” She accompanied this with a wink and a smirk, and Dan could feel the heat rising up the back of his neck. So, had like everyone figured it out by now?

“I’ll see if he’s free then,” was all Dan said in reply.

The park was huge, covering an entire side of a low hill. As they wound their way up toward the top of the hill, they passed through row upon row of food stalls selling all of the usual matsuri food items, and Dan was reminded of his very first festival last August when James had eaten that awful squid thing and Phil had filmed Dan’s reaction. It seemed an age ago already.

They at last reached a grassy area surrounded by dark-branched sakura heavy with pale pink blossoms. There were already tons of people set up here, with full banquets of food spread out beneath the flowers. Seiji and Madhavi had brought tarps and blankets, and they spread these out beneath a tree before sitting down and beginning to set up their own banquet.

Seiji had brought a massive bottle of a local brand of sake, and once everyone had filled their plates with food, he pulled out tiny paper cups and passed them around so that everyone could try a little.
Once every person had some sake in their cup, they raised them in the air and shouted, “Kanpai!”

Dan had just set down his drink and picked up his plate to dig in when a warm breeze rose, rustling the branches overhead and bringing a shower of papery pink petals pouring down on top of them. Though the wind died down just a few seconds later, there were already sakura petals everywhere, all over Dan’s food, in his sake. He looked over and saw that several of them had gotten stuck in Phil’s hair, the matte petals pale against the shining black. Dan started to laugh and reached up to try to brush the petals out of his own hair.

“I thought sakura petals were supposed to float down gently and poetically, not assault you in the face,” he said.

“They look much more poetic from a distance,” Phil chuckled, rubbing at his fringe to try to dislodge a particularly stubborn bit of flower.

Still, the delicately pink flowers bright against the blue sky overhead were achingly beautiful, and Dan couldn’t help staring up and all around as he nibbled at his food. Having survived a winter with plenty of snow and ice and no insulation or central heating, he could very much appreciate the Japanese celebration of spring. He too was very thankful that the warmer weather had come at last and that he no longer had chilblains on his toes like some Dickensian street urchin.

When they lifted the lid from their cake, everyone oohed and aahed and complimented them on their baking prowess. Dan finally got to try a bite and was pleasantly surprised by how delicious it had turned out to be.

They stayed in the park until the sun sank low and its warm beams were slanting through the sakura blossoms so they seemed to glow from within. On the train ride home, Phil held his hand, and Dan figured it didn’t really matter anymore at this point whether or not people here knew about them.

Monday was Dan’s last free day before classes would start again, and when they woke late in the morning, Phil insisted that they spend the entire day doing absolutely nothing productive. Dan didn’t much feel like arguing. Instead, he happily spent the rest of the morning lying next to Phil in the futon arguing about which Final Fantasy game was the best of all time. (Phil said Seven, but Dan thought that Nine was a strong contender.)

For lunch, they walked down to a nearby ramen shop that was so tiny it consisted of a mere two tables and a bar. Dan was in the mood to try something new, so he ordered the shoyu ramen with ohba leaves in, and he had to pause for a moment to close his eyes and appreciate just how incredible the flavor was.

In the afternoon, they marathoned Season 5 of Buffy, and Dan actually started crying during Episode 16.

“I think that has to be one of the most perfect pieces of television ever created,” he said when the episode was over.

“Now you know why I love this series so much,” Phil agreed, then added, “Or at least one of the reasons.”

It was evening now, and Dan realized he wanted the day back. Starting tomorrow, he would have to go to Nishichu for eight hours every day without Phil there. He would be forced to leave Phil behind in the morning and pass a whole day without him. They’d barely spent more than a few hours apart over the past four months, and even those had mostly been when they were asleep.
He couldn’t imagine what Nishichu was going to feel like without Phil to get him through the day.

“I don’t think I’m going to renew my contract,” he said all of a sudden. He hadn’t been thinking about it at all, but somehow the words were coming out of his mouth, and he knew they were true. “I don’t think I can stay at Nishichu without you.”

Phil shut the laptop and pushed it off his lap before rolling over onto his side so that he could get a better look at Dan.

“Yeah?” he said, his eyes slowly moving across Dan’s face, taking in his expression.

Dan just shook his head because his throat was closing up and making it hard to speak.

“Leaving Nishichu doesn’t mean you have to leave Japan,” Phil offered, still watching Dan.

“No,” Dan said. He couldn’t really imagine working at any other school or living in any town other than Harata, but it was always a possibility. The more he saw of Japan the more he longed to see the rest of it.

He couldn’t think of anything else to say, so instead, he reached over and took hold of the front of Phil’s shirt and pulled himself in close against Phil’s chest. Phil’s arms came up around him at once, and an involuntary sigh escaped Dan’s lungs. It just felt so right to be here lying in Phil’s embrace. Never before had he felt so completely that he belonged in a place. But there was more to life than that, wasn’t there? They could spend a lazy day hiding away from reality, but at some point they had to get up and go outside and make all the hard decisions about the future.

It was just — now that he had Phil, and now that he knew what it was like to come home to a flat with Phil in it at the end of the day and to fall asleep every night next to Phil’s comforting presence, he couldn’t figure out exactly how he’d managed to get through life without him before.

In the morning, Phil woke up early with him and cooked them a big breakfast of bacon, eggs, and toast while he showered and put on his suit. After they ate, he walked him out to the front door.

“Have a nice day at work, darling,” Phil said with a grin, adjusting his tie for him before planting a kiss on his cheek as he slid his shoes on.

“Shouldn’t you be wearing high heels and pearls, if you’re going to act like a fifties housewife?”

“The cheek,” Dan said, shaking his head but not quite managing to suppress a smile. He quickly returned Phil’s kiss before rushing out the door with a hurried good-bye.

Phil could have easily driven him to school, but they’d gotten used to going to school separately to hide the fact that they spent most nights together from their co-workers, and they figured there was no point making it obvious now. So Dan rode his bike to work like always. When he pulled up to his usual spot next to the first years’ bikes, he saw there was another bike parked there already, a new one he’d never seen before.

It felt so wrong, sitting down in his seat in the staff room next to an empty desk. It wasn’t like the days when Phil had been gone to primary school because then he had still been able to look over and see Phil’s photographs beneath the clear plastic top and the worksheets he’d shoved in under it too, and the coffee stains he’d forgotten to clean up from the day before. Now the desktop was completely bare and neater than he’d ever seen it.
The new girl came in with Watanabe-sensei about halfway during the morning meeting, and she gave a nervous bow and a stumbling self-introduction before Dan waved her over to her desk. He wondered if he’d looked so nervous on his first day.

“Hello there,” he whispered when she’d sat down.

“Hi. You’re Dan?” she whispered back. “Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too,” he answered before turning his eyes back up to where one of the third year teachers was giving a speech. The girl had short, wavy black hair and a soft Irish accent. He’d seen on her Facebook profile that she was from somewhere in County Galway.

He prompted her to stand at the end of the meeting, just as Phil had done for him, and then explained that the Opening Ceremony would be happening after this and led her to the gym. The whole thing was giving him déjà vu.

After the ceremony was over — and he managed not to nod off even once during the entire torturous forty-five minutes — they basically had the entire day free, so after chatting with Aalia for long enough that she started to relax, he offered to show her around the school.

It was easier than he’d thought, falling back into the pattern of daily school life — lunch, hiruyasumi, cleaning time, a long afternoon of nothing, and then time to go home. He texted Phil around midday to tell him that the new girl seemed nice enough but it was really boring without him here. Phil responded by asking if he was being a good senpai, and Dan assured him he was. Since it was Aalia’s first day and she hadn’t known to bring something to entertain herself, he stayed until 4:00 to keep her company until she was free to go home. They waved good-bye at the school gate, and she headed off north toward Phil’s old place while Dan continued east towards his own.

When he got home, he found Phil lying on his back on the carpet with Dan’s 3DS held in the air above his face. He’d left the window open to let a breeze in — and probably a million bugs too, Dan grumbled inside his head — and the room had a light and airy feel.

Dan dropped his bag on the floor and then collapsed next to Phil.

“Tadaima,” he muttered.

“Okaeri,” Phil said, setting the 3DS aside and turning toward Dan with a smile. “How was your day?”

“Long,” Dan groaned. “Yours?”

“It was all right. I went for a walk and sent some emails and did some laundry. Nothing too earth-shattering.”

“What should we have for dinner?” Dan asked.

“Wanna splurge on some Pizza-la?” Phil said, his eyebrows rising in excitement.

“Yes. Very yes,” Dan replied.

The pizzas were way too expensive — more than ¥3,000 apiece — but they tasted so, so good.

The rest of the week continued more or less the same. School felt weird, but it wasn’t as bad as he had expected, mostly because he was too distracted explaining everything to Aalia. Once she’d gotten over her initial nervousness, she turned out to be a fairly chatty, bubbly person, and it was
easy enough to pass the hours talking to her. Still, it wasn’t the same. By Friday he was positive that leaving Nishichu at the end of the term was the right decision.

In the afternoons, he would come home to Phil, and Phil would ask him about his day and sometimes even cook him his dinner, and Dan found himself beginning to fantasize that they were married and Phil was his cute house husband who went out and did the grocery shopping during the day and kissed him good-bye in the mornings when he left for work.

“We still need to make another video together,” Phil said on Friday as they sat on the floor in front of the tv and watched some cooking show. “The viewers are still asking for it.”

Dan nodded and pursed his lips, trying to come up with a good idea. Then his eyes fixed on the tv screen, where a middle-aged woman was stirring some kind of sauce, and he had a thought.

“What if we made one where we taught them how to bake a cake in a rice cooker like we did?” he said.

“Hmmm… I’ve never done any cooking videos before,” Phil said, tapping his fingers against his chin as he considered it. “It could work, though.”

On Saturday morning they took the train two stops south to Yaita, where Caroline showed them around her town, and they taught her how to make the cake. By the time they finished, Dan was pretty sure they could consider themselves experts in it. At the very least, he was certain they were good enough at it to make a decent video.

Filming and editing it ended up taking all day Sunday, but once Phil uploaded it, it quickly became one of his most popular videos yet.

“Omg. I ship you guys SO FUCKING HARD.” “please tell me your taking dan back to england with you please” “please” “Dan’s going to be in more of your videos, right? RIGHT??” “I need more Dan in my life, like honestly.” “Okay, I really want to make this cake, but I don’t have a rice cooker HOW DO I GET A RICE COOKER??”

Dan alternately laughed and teared up as he scrolled through the comments. He wasn’t really sure why Phil’s viewers liked him so much, but it was clear they did. He wondered if maybe, possibly… Nah, it would never work.

On Monday, as soon as he walked in the door from work, Phil pointed over to the table at a small cardboard box laid on top of it.

“You got a package in the post,” he said, getting up from where he’d been sat on the futon and walking over to watch Dan open it.

It ended up being an Easter care package from Dan’s mum. She’d jotted down a note and stuck it in with the Cadbury eggs and chocolate bunnies: “Don’t eat it all yourself. Make sure you share some with Phil.” He blushed as he read over the note. He hadn’t told his parents about him and Phil, but they’d probably figured it out from how frequently Phil seemed to feature in their Skype conversations.

“Apparently I’m meant to share some with you,” Dan said, rolling his eyes toward Phil. “I guess you can have one of these little bags of mini eggs…”

“What?” Phil said, crossing his arms and sticking out his lower lip. “No, I should at least get one of the creme eggs too!”
“No, no,” Dan said, shaking his head and ripping open the bag of mini eggs. He shook one out and held it out to Phil. “That’s all you’re getting, so you’d better make it last.”

“Like hell it is,” Phil muttered and then launched himself at Dan, making a grab for the bag of chocolates but accidentally knocking them both over onto the floor instead, with Phil on top of Dan and both of them laughing so hard it hurt. The little pastel-colored eggs had spilled out onto the floor all around them, but the two of them ended up getting so distracted that it was at least an hour before they bothered to clean them up.

The rest of the week passed by in a blink, and then it was Friday evening, and it struck Dan like a brick to the face that their last full week together was almost over.

Chapter End Notes

Originally published on tumblr
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Pero ahora frente a frente aquí sentados, festejemos que la vida nos cruzó. (Warnings for alcohol and sex)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Dan got off work on Tuesday, he rode his bike straight to the train station. He’d packed his overnight things in his backpack and taken a full day of nenkyuu for Wednesday. He’d considered taking Thursday as well, but he’d been pushing his luck to even get one day off.

He probably could’ve done with a shower after the long school day, but a quick change of clothes in the Nishichu locker room would have to do. He couldn’t bear the thought of walking into his flat and finding it empty of Phil.

He’d left that morning at the same time Dan had left for work. When they’d locked Dan’s front door and dragged Phil’s luggage down to the car park, there was a pale green taxi waiting there for him. The taxi driver had jumped out to grab Phil’s bags for him, and Dan had only gotten one quick hug before he’d had to dash off to school. That was all right, though. He would see him again that night in Tokyo.

After the thirty minute bike ride to the train station, Dan definitely needed a shower. He was glad then that Phil had gone on ahead to get checked in to the hotel. Phil had said he wanted to do some last minute sightseeing around the city as well — one last chance to buy obscure merch in Akihabara or try to see all the way to Mt. Fuji from the top of Tokyo Tower. Dan glanced up at the clear spring sky overhead. If it was this clear in Tokyo, he may have actually managed it.

The train station was empty on a Tuesday afternoon in late April. Sakura season was already past for anywhere south of Yamagata-ken, and the Golden Week traveling frenzy wouldn’t start until the following week. The only other people around were high school students heading home early from school.

It was the first time Dan had ever ridden the train alone in Japan. He supposed he could have asked one of his friends to come down with him, but if he was honest, he wanted this last night to be just him and Phil.

As he made his way down the stairs to the platform, his fingers itched to pull his phone out and text Phil about how much he wished they were riding down together. But Phil had turned off his cell phone service yesterday. His familiar phone number was still saved in Dan’s contacts list, but Dan guessed that if he tried to dial it nothing would happen.

He felt fine waiting on the platform until the train pulled up and the station melody started to play and he suddenly remembered Phil’s voice singing along to it that early December morning when they were leaving for Kyoto. Dan’s heart clenched so hard in his chest that he couldn’t even breathe for a second or two. The music stopped, and he realized the doors were about to close without him on the train, and at the very last second he stumbled forward into the mostly-empty carriage.
The train set off, gathering speed to leave Harata behind, and for just a moment he could imagine himself leaving Harata behind too, waving good-bye to its already-familiar paddies and shops. *Good-bye, little town. Phil and I have to go now.*

Except that wasn’t true. Dan would be coming back.

After a moment of just standing in the aisle, he finally slid down onto the long bench seat, eyes fixed out the eastward window, mind fixed elsewhere. He hardly noticed when the train had left Harata for good and moved into Yaita.

His thoughts had wandered back to Saturday, when Harata’s Yatai Festival had started.

He’d been practicing weekly with the taiko group since January, and Mr. Masuda had told him in early March that he had gotten good enough to play in the festival. He’d managed to learn the center drum — *nakatsuke* — part for two of the songs now and had almost mastered a third. The festival would last all day both Saturday and Sunday, and the taiko players’ part in it involved showing up very early in the morning and walking around behind their group’s *yatai* all day waiting for a turn to play. He’d almost said “no” to the offer to join in, seeing as it was Phil’s last weekend and he didn’t want to spend a moment of it without him, but Phil had convinced him he couldn’t miss this opportunity. So Dan had compromised and gotten Mr. Masuda to let him agree to only play on Saturday.

Phil would hand his car off to James on Monday, so he was able to drive Dan down to the little building near Harata’s old town center where they were all supposed to meet. They found Seiji and Madhavi already there, dressed in their *matsuri* uniforms. Mr. Masuda had had to order one especially for Dan — he was too tall to fit in the normal-sized ones.

The moment Dan set foot inside the *genkan* of the rickety, old building, Seiji pounced on him and dragged him off to a side room to help him get dressed. He almost protested that he could very well dress himself until Seiji pulled the *matsuri* trousers — *momohiki* was what he called them — out of the bag and started explaining how to put them on. Dan had never seen a more complicated item of clothing in his life. When he’d finally gotten each leg in the right hole and looped all the strings through the right openings, he realized that the back of them sagged worse than his skinny jeans.

“This is an attractive look,” he had muttered, but Seiji just grinned.

“That’s how you know you’ve got them on right,” he said.

Next, Dan had to put on the shirt — easy enough since it just buttoned — and tuck it into his *momohiki*. On top of that, he pulled on the apron-like *donburi*, which had pockets in the front where he could put his sticks when he wasn’t using them. Over that, he added a *hanten* and *obi*, and then Seiji helped him accessorize with a *hachimaki* around his forehead, *kifuda* hung around his neck, and *tabi* and sandals on his feet. It was a complicated outfit to put on, but once they were outside in the chilly April air, he was glad of all the layers.

Phil was stood out there in the cold, wrapped up in his jacket and with a knitted hat pulled over his ears. Even though it was barely past 8:00 in the morning and the festival hadn’t even started yet, Phil was there, and he would stay there throughout the entire day, cheering Dan on when he got to play, bringing him snacks from the stalls, and walking beside him to keep him company during the long hours between his turns to play.

“*Utsunomiya. Utsunomiya desu,*” came a woman’s voice from overhead, jarring Dan back to the inside of the train. They had stopped on the platform at Utsunomiya Station, and Dan was familiar enough with the train schedule now to know that the train wouldn’t get underway again for a good
ten minutes. So he slung his bag over his shoulder and stepped out onto the platform. There was a vending machine just outside the open train doors, and he stuck in a couple of ¥100 coins for a can of hot coffee. The caffeine was probably a bad idea this late in the day, but he wasn’t planning to sleep much tonight anyway.

Back on the train, an elderly woman had taken his spot, so he moved along the carriage until he found an empty seat and then he sat idly sipping his coffee and staring at people walking past on the platform until the doors slid shut and the train started off again.

By Saturday evening, his feet had been aching from walking around all day and he was mildly inebriated — all throughout the day they’d been stopping at shops or homes where people had set up tables out front with gifts of snacks and beer for the *taiko* players. There was a team of men who were pulling the *yatai* around by two thick ropes, and they were all completely wasted by midday, but Dan and the other performers had to stay at least somewhat sober.

Shortly after 5:00 PM, they’d begun to make their way down to the huge intersection that had, perhaps a hundred years ago, once formed the heart of Harata. It had been shut off to traffic for the *matsuri*, and the nearby streets were all lined with festival booths. There were nine *yatai* total, each representing a different area of the town, and it was a laborious process, getting all nine of the huge, wooden carts set up in a circle around the intersection. Each them had players inside, who kept up their drumming throughout the process, as they had done all day, and the cacophony of nine different sets of drummers all playing nine different songs at nine different speeds was dizzying.

“So, what exactly is supposed to happen now?” Phil had leaned over and whispered to him once their group had finally gotten their *yatai* into position on the western side of the intersection.

“Seiji said there’s supposed to be some kind of giant drum battle between all the different groups,” he’d answered. They could have asked Seiji himself, if he hadn’t been one of the drummers playing at the moment, or Madhavi if she hadn’t slipped off somewhere with Jake — probably to buy food.

As the sunlight faded and darkness fell, the streets all around began to fill up with people. By 6:00, Dan was pretty sure that every citizen of Harata and their dog had turned out for this. Then a hush fell — for the first time today all of the drummers had stopped playing — and some man walked out into the empty center of the intersection and started speaking.

“That’s the mayor of Harata,” Phil had informed him as the man droned on about how he hoped this year would be a happy and prosperous one for the town. “You know, that’s actually one of the main purposes of festivals like this,” Phil had murmured, leaning across his shoulder to reach his ear, “not only to provide entertainment for the townspeople but to entertain the gods as well, keep them happy so that they’ll continue to bless the town.”

The mayor had stopped talking and was retreating now, and all at once two of the *yatais*’ players had started up their rhythms again. As Dan and Phil stood and watched, the two competing *yatai* were pulled out to the center of the circle and then halted, head to head, the drummers inside playing harder, louder and faster than Dan had ever heard any of them play before, while all the group members who weren’t playing jumped up and down outside the *yatai* and cheered the players on with a chant of “Hai! Hai! Hai! Hai!”

After a straight three minutes of playing, the drummers slowed at last, and the two groups retreated. A moment later, two different *yatais*’ players started up, and the process started over again. When they were finished, Dan’s group was up next, so he followed them out to the center of the circle and cheered his group mates on, grinning all the while.

Once each *yatai* had competed once, it was time for the big finale. All nine of the massive carts were
pulled out into the center, closing up into the tightest possible circle. The drummers inside were playing at full power again, and the sound was deafening, but Dan hardly had time to notice because Madhavi was dragging him into the tiny space in the center of all the *yatai*, and he in turn was dragging Phil along with him, and then they were squeezed in there with all of the various groups’ members and as many townspeople as could fit. Everyone was jumping and yelling “*Hai! Hai! Hai! Hai!*” and waving their hands in the air, and Dan thought it was kind of like the politest and most subdued mosh pit he’d ever seen.

They stayed out there for a solid five minutes, cheering the players on as their arms began to tire and the sweat rolled down their cheeks—

Someone jostled Dan’s knee as they made their way up the aisle to the next car, and he was once again pulled from his thoughts. He’d been on this train for nearly an hour and a half now, and they still hadn’t quite left the prefecture.

He wondered what Phil was doing right now. Had he checked into their hotel already or was he still out and about getting his final fill of Tokyo?

Dan pulled his phone from his pocket, even though he knew there was no way he would be able to get in touch with Phil. He clicked the button to view the screen and saw there was a message from Madhavi.

*Madhavi*

*Give Phil a huge hug good-bye for me! I wish I could have come out to Narita with you to see him off, but call me when you get back, okay?*

His lips lifted in a slight smile. Madhavi was a good egg, just as Phil had said. He slid right and typed out a quick response — “Thanks! Will do.” — before pulling up his saved pictures. There was Phil, on Sunday, chowing down on a massive helping of rainbow ice. And here were the two of them were on Saturday, posing next to the *yatai*. And here was Phil with Madhavi in her *matsuri* outfit, gurning for Dan’s camera. It was so weird to look at these pictures, only a couple of days old, and realize they already belonged to a different era of his life — back when Phil still lived in Harata with him.

Sunday had been a nice, lazy day — sleeping in before wandering down the festival. Since Dan hadn’t been playing that day, he was free to just walk around with Phil and try out all the food, play the kiddy games, and stop and talk to the Nishichu students who kept running up to chat with them. In the evening, there had been one final *butsuke*, the big drumming battle, so he’d dragged Phil back out into the center again to cheer everyone on, and when Phil wasn’t looking, he’d snapped a photo of him, head tilted back to stare up at the brightly-lit *yatai* and mouth slightly open as he shouted out a “*Hai!*”

Here on his phone now was Phil, at the *butsuke*, moments before he’d realized Dan was taking a picture and had tried to snatch his phone away to see it. Dan smiled to himself at the memory now before he slid his phone back into his pocket.

The train was just stopping at Nogi, the last station in the prefecture, and Dan was growing impatient. He still had another hour and a half before he would see Phil again. He had to work hard to keep his brain from adding the words “for the last time.” No, of course this wasn’t the last time. Whether it was in Japan or England, there was no doubt in his mind they would see each other again someday.

On Monday they’d tried to pretend everything was normal. Phil woke up early to make their
breakfast and see Dan off to work. Dan had only had two classes the whole day, so he’d ended up spending most of the day texting back and forth to Phil, right up until Phil got to the Docomo store and had his mobile service cut off.

When Dan had got home, Phil had been there, knelt in front of a suitcase and finishing up the last of his packing. The sight had made his thoughts go blank with sudden fear. Phil was leaving. He was actually leaving.

“Tadaima,” he’d said, and Phil had looked up and smiled.

“Okaeri.”

Dan had found that there were tears slipping down his cheeks. He wasn’t sure how that had happened, but Phil was on his feet at once with his arms around Dan, patting his back and making soothing noises like a parent comforting a child.

Their friends had had a good-bye party for Phil that evening, at the same izakaya where Dan had first met him at his own welcome party. There had been drinks and speeches, and Max had surprised Phil with a photo album that they’d all put together for him, with pictures and notes about their favorite memories with Phil in Japan. Phil, for his part, had brought a bag full of random crap that he couldn’t take back with him and had been unable to sell at the second-hand store and had distributed the spoils amongst his friends.

And then they’d come home and climbed into Dan’s futon, and Dan hadn’t been able to sleep because he didn’t know if he’d ever spend another night in a home he shared with Phil.

As the train entered the built-up area around the outskirts of Tokyo, Dan pulled out his phone and checked the address of the hotel one more time. It was on Omotesando, and Phil had insisted on paying the full price on his own, no matter how many times Dan offered to pitch in. He had the feeling it was a lot more expensive than Phil was letting on.

At long last the train pulled into Shibuya Station, and Dan rushed out and quickly made the transfer to the metro. The hotel was only about a fifteen minute walk from here, but he’d found a metro station that would get him within five minutes’ walking distance. Dan was nothing if not economical with his exercise.

It was nearly 8:00 PM by the time he stepped out of the narrow stairwell that led down to the metro station and onto the busy Omotesando. He’d been here ages ago, back in August when he’d first arrived in Japan and had spent a week in Tokyo for training. Nothing looked the same, and he wasn’t sure whether that was simply because he was on a different part of the famous street or because he was seeing it in a way fresh-off-the-plane Dan never could have.

At this time of the evening, there were enough people off work and out on the town for the street to be packed. Dan wondered, if this was what it was like on a Tuesday night, how busy must it get here on the weekends?

The hotel was tall but unassuming. He almost walked past it and its understated sign, distracted as he was by all of the bright lights and crowds.

Inside, he walked up to the desk and gave the woman behind it Phil’s name, careful to give it a katakana pronunciation.

“Yes, I see he has already checked in. Would you like to call the room?” she replied, her English startling him. Right, this was a tourist-y part of Tokyo where they were used to getting non-Japanese-
speaking foreigners. Of course she spoke perfect English.

“Yes, please,” he answered. She gave him a polite smile then dialed a number and handed him the receiver.

It rang twice before picking up.

“Moshi moshi,” came Phil’s voice from the other end, and Dan felt most of the tension in his shoulders disappear.

“Hello there, Mr. Lester. I’m in the lobby. Would you like to come down and collect me?”

“Would I,” Phil laughed, and then added. “I’ll be down in just a minute.”

Dan couldn’t stop himself pacing up and down in front of the lift until finally it dinged and opened and there was Phil, reaching for his bag.

“Hey!” Phil said as he took Dan’s bag from his limp grasp.

“How was your day in Tokyo?” Dan asked, and they stepped back into the lift. Phil leaned forward and pressed the button for the eighth floor.

“Pretty good. I had to stop myself buying so many things though. Ugh,” Phil groaned.

“Did you go up Tokyo Tower like you wanted?” Dan asked, eyes glued to the changing numbers on the little screen just inside the lift doors. 4…5…6…

“I actually got in to the Sky Tree,” Phil said with an impressive lift of the eyebrows. 7…

“You must have been so proud.”

Ding.

The doors opened and they both hurried out, Phil leading the way down the corridor to their left. He never responded to Dan’s last comment. He was too busy fumbling with the card key, trying to slide it into the little slot. And then he had the door open and was dumping Dan’s bag on the floor, and Dan didn’t even have a moment to register what the room looked like before Phil had his arms around him and was kissing him with utter abandon.

He had him pressed into the bed with both their shirts off before Dan caught his breath and pointed out that he really wanted a shower.

“Can I join you?” Phil’s voice was breathless, and his chest was heaving in and out like he’d just been running a race.

“Of course.”

A good hour and a half had passed before they were dressed again and looking for a nearby place to grab some dinner. They finally found a katsu restaurant that looked decent, and when Phil slid into the booth, Dan didn’t hesitate to slide in on the bench right beside him. They ate dinner thigh-to-thigh and went out for a quick postprandial drink before they were back in the hotel room, and he was unzipping Phil’s jeans again for another round.

They lay on the bed staring up at the ceiling and talking for a while after that, as they both caught their breath. It was the first time Dan had a proper chance to look around the room. It was small, as most Tokyo hotel rooms were, but everything in it looked expensive. The blinds were drawn just
now, but he bet there was a pretty nice view of the late night lights of Omotesando. At the moment, though, he couldn’t be bothered looking anywhere other than the person lying beside him.

Phil wanted another shower then, considering that he was going to be traveling for a full twenty-four hours before he had a chance for another one. The only problem was that somehow the shower ended up being more than just a shower, and by the time they got out they were both completely spent. Dan just managed to remember to set his alarm for the morning — Phil’s flight left at 12:15, and they wanted to get to the airport a couple of hours early — before they both passed out.

Dan woke sometime later, while it was still dark, and he reached out an arm for Phil and could have cried with happiness when he actually found him there. He pulled Phil in close, accidentally waking him with his sleepy clumsiness, but Phil didn’t seem to mind. Instead, half-conscious though he was, he smiled in the dim light seeping through the curtains and placed a hand beneath Dan’s chin and set his lips against Dan’s lips. A moment later, Dan’s hands were under Phil’s shirt, and Phil’s hands were tugging at Dan’s pajama bottoms, and in a dreamy state of half-wakefulness, they managed to have sex for the fourth time that night.

The morning was cloudy, and despite the fact that he’d slept a maximum of five hours the night before, Dan came awake the moment his alarm went off.

The same couldn’t be said for Phil, who was curled up in a ball around a pillow with the curve of his spine pressed against Dan’s side. When Dan reached over and gave his shoulder a little shake, he whimpered and shook his head.

“Phi-il,” he sang in the quietest voice he could manage. “You have to get up now.”

“No I don’t,” Phil muttered and buried his face deeper into his pillow.

“It’s nearly 8:00 and we still need to have breakfast and check out,” Dan reasoned, biting his lower lip to stop the laugh that threatened to slip out.

“We can eat at the airport,” Phil said. “Just come cuddle some more first and then I’ll get up.”

It was a tempting offer. Dan found he was unable to resist it. So he quickly set another alarm just in case, tossed his phone aside, and curled one arm over Phil’s side. Phil immediately scooted back against his chest and let out a long sigh.

For fifteen minutes they managed to lay there and forget, Dan’s chin resting against Phil’s shoulder and his chest slowly expanding and contracting against Phil’s back. Then his iPhone began to trill its alarm song again, and both of them tensed at the sound.

Dan pressed a kiss into Phil’s temple and said, “Come on.”

This time Phil didn’t protest.

They caught the metro up to Nishi-Nippori and then the Yamanote Line to Nippori Station, where they changed to the Keisei Skyliner, the express train that traveled to and from Narita Airport’s terminals. The seats on the Skyliner were much nicer than the regular trains Dan was used to taking. He and Phil sat in a pair of seats together and held hands because honestly Dan didn’t give a fuck anymore if anyone noticed.

It took both of them to get Phil’s two massive suitcases over to the check-in counter, but once they’d checked them, they had a good two hours left before Phil needed to worry about boarding.
They found a small cafe up on a balcony overlooking the departures lobby, and Dan held a table for them while Phil went up and ordered them some breakfast.

“Did I tell you I actually have a lay-over in Moscow?” Phil said after he’d set down their coffees and plopped into the seat across from Dan. “Like, I’m just going to be hanging out in the Moscow airport for three hours.”

“Couldn’t you find a direct flight?” Dan asked, lifting his coffee and taking a long sip. He was starting to feel the effects of his sleepless night, though he was so wired with adrenaline he didn’t think the coffee would make much difference. Phil shook his head and grimaced.

“The BOE paid for my plane ticket, so they wanted me to get the cheapest flight I could find,” he explained.

“They paid for your ticket?” Dan spluttered, setting his coffee down so hard that a little splashed over the mug’s rim and onto the table. “Fucking city ALTs.”

That drew a laugh from Phil, even if it was just a ghost of his usual chuckle.

“You could be a city ALT too, you know,” he pointed out. “With a year of experience on your résumé, you’d probably be able to get hired at any number of places.”

“Probably,” Dan agreed, but he didn’t elaborate. This wasn’t a conversation he wanted to have right now. He knew Phil was just trying to make sure he didn’t feel pressured to decide his future a certain way, but he had found that Phil’s attempts to keep an open mind just irritated him. He wanted Phil to beg him. He wanted him to say he couldn’t imagine his life without him, that he needed him by his side. He wanted Phil to want him with as much reckless abandon as he was discovering he wanted Phil.

“If you did come back to England,” Phil began, pausing to take a small bite of his blueberry muffin, “and you didn’t have a job lined up already, you could stay with me in Manchester while you looked for one. You know, if you didn’t want to have to go back and live with your parents.”

Dan watched him over the rim of his coffee mug for a moment before looking down at the brown liquid and taking another sip.

“In fact,” Phil went on when Dan didn’t say anything, “you could stay with me as long as you liked. Indefinitely, even.”

“Probably,” Dan agreed. He knew Phil was just trying to make sure he didn’t feel pressured to decide his future a certain way, but he had found that Phil’s attempts to keep an open mind just irritated him. He wanted Phil to beg him. He wanted him to say he couldn’t imagine his life without him, that he needed him by his side. He wanted Phil to want him with as much reckless abandon as he was discovering he wanted Phil.

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“What, and you’ll pay for everything, just like you always have?” Dan snapped and then immediately regretted it. Why was he being so contrary? Of course he wanted to live with Phil. It was just… Phil was looking at him with a crease between his brows, and Dan knew he’d hurt his feelings. “I’m sorry. I just…don’t like owing people things, especially when I have know idea how I’ll ever pay them back.”

“You wouldn’t owe me for anything,” Phil said, nibbling at his muffin again, his eyes darting toward Dan and then away again. “I mean, I’d expect you to help with rent and utilities and groceries and stuff. You’d probably have to get some random job to make ends meet at first.”

How did Phil always manage to sound so calm and reasonable when they were arguing?

“I’m just so worried about getting stuck in some bullshit job while life and opportunity slowly pass me by,” Dan said, staring down at his still-untouched bagel. “You know?”

“I know,” Phil said. “Why else do you think I’m at this airport right now?”
“Oh,” Dan said, looking up into Phil’s eyes. He was relieved to see little more than amusement in them. “Right.”

There were so many things he wished he could reply to that, if there were time, if the circumstances were different.

“Hold on a second,” Dan said after a moment, reaching into the front pocket of his backpack and pulling out a small, white envelope. “Here.” He held it out toward Phil, following the proper Japanese etiquette of holding it in both hands because holding things any other way had started to feel uncomfortably rude.

Phil followed the same protocol, taking hold of the envelope’s corners between the fingertips of both hands.

“Don’t open it yet,” Dan instructed. “Wait until you’re on the plane.”

“Okay.” And Phil slipped the envelope into his carry-on bag.

The departures lobby around them was an open, airy place, with one wall made entirely of windows and a series of skylights in the ceiling overhead. Despite the overcast weather, the whole room was full of bright morning light, and Dan thought there couldn’t be a better way to memorize every detail of Phil’s face than to see him lit up in that particular light.

The two hours were gone too quickly. Dan found that all at once Phil was pulling Dan’s phone across the tabletop to check the time and frowning.

“We’d better go,” he said, and Dan’s heart began to thud heavily in his chest.

They took the short flight of stairs down to the lobby’s polished stone floor, and then they were there, stood right next to the counter where Phil would have to check in before passing through security.

“I’m going to miss you so much,” Phil was saying, his hand reaching out to cup Dan’s cheek.

“Me too,” Dan replied. They were both crying, and when he pushed his lips into Phil’s, the kiss tasted salty. He knew people were probably staring at two tall gaijin kissing and sobbing in the middle of Narita Airport, but nothing mattered more than Phil in this moment.

“Skype me as soon as you get there?” Dan mumbled against Phil’s mouth.

“Of course,” Phil whispered back, stealing another kiss or three before dragging himself away at last. “I love you.”

“I love you,” Dan choked out, and Phil stepped back and back again and then turned and walked over to the check-in counter, bag in hand.

Dan just stood there, staring at him as he showed the lady at the counter his passport and got his boarding pass. When he had it, he turned to give Dan another teary smile and a wave before walking toward the cordoned-off security area, and still Dan stood there and watched him, even though he was blocking people’s way and they were giving him dirty looks.

Phil turned once more at the door that led into the secure area, and Dan could see that his cheeks were shining with tears, even from all the way across the room. And Phil waved once more, his hand moving frantically back and forth, and he blew him a kiss, and then he was gone.
Dan was standing in the departures lobby all alone, crying hard enough that he was actually letting out gasping little noises, and people were giving him a wide berth, and the room was far too bright.

He turned on his heel and walked toward the escalator that would lead down to the train tracks, his vision so blurry that he could barely see where he was going.

It was five levels down to the underground train platform. Somewhere else in the airport, Phil must be finding his gate, Dan thought. He sobbed down all five escalators. As he stood on the platform and waited, he imagined Phil standing in line waiting to board.

The Keisei Skyliner pulled up at 12:07, and Dan guessed that Phil must be in his seat on the plane already, gazing out the window for one last glimpse of Japan. The seats on the train looked just the same as they had several hours ago, but now it was just him with an empty seat beside.

He stared at his phone until the numbers read 12:15, and he told himself Phil was in the air now, looking down at Japan from thousands of meters above. Maybe he could even see the train from where he was, just a thin grey line that barely stood out from the dark green vegetation around it.

Three hours later, Dan was getting out of the train at Harata Station and climbing on his bike and thinking that he was already home while Phil’s trip had still only just begun.

When he at last pushed open the door of his flat, he expected to break down into tears again, but instead he found he had neither tears nor energy left. Instead, all he felt was a crushing weight in his chest as he dropped his bag on the floor and climbed into his futon and pulled the duvet up over his head.

Chapter End Notes

Originally published on tumblr
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

There, but for the grace of you, go I... (Warning for implied sex)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He woke up some time later to the buzzing of his phone by his ear.

For a while he lay there and just let it vibrate, not really thinking anything. Eventually it stopped and then buzzed once to let him know he had a new voicemail.

His mind still studiedly blank, he pulled the phone over to him to check the time. It was nearly 5:00 in the afternoon. He’d only been asleep for a couple of hours. It’ll still be another five hours before Phil reaches Moscow.

He’d been trying so hard to avoid thinking it, but then there it was. Right now Dan was lying in his futon here in his flat, but Phil was on a plane somewhere over the continent of Asia.

Quickly, he dialed his voicemail to listen to the message, not even pausing to check who had called. He needed a distraction, and fast.

“Hey, Dan! It’s me,” came Madhavi’s voice from the other end. “Just got home from school, and I hadn’t heard from you. I’m going to futsal and Brazilian tonight, and I was gonna see if you wanted to come too? Anyway, I’ll probably head out about 5:30, so just let me know!”

A lot of the ALTs from Harata and Kokki got together regularly on Wednesday evenings to play futsal, and then they would go out to eat at this Brazilian restaurant afterward. They’d invited Dan loads of times, but despite that fact that he more or less knew how to play the game — he’d been forced to play football in P.E. like anyone else — considering his complete lack of natural sporting ability and the number of times he’d skipped P.E. class growing up, his skills couldn’t even be described as passable. Besides, Phil never went.

Tonight, though, the alternative seemed to be sitting alone in his empty flat, and he’d even take physical activity over that at the moment.

He dialed Madhavi’s number.

“Hey, did you get my message?” Her voice was cheerful, but he thought he detected a note of caution in it.

“Yes. You don’t mind if I tag along this evening?” He was still lying in his futon, with the duvet pulled up to his chin.

“Not at all. You can sit on the sidelines and keep time with me, if you don’t feel like playing,” she offered.

“Okay,” he said.
“Pick you up in thirty?”

“Sounds good.”

When the line went dead, he dropped his phone on the futon beside him and just lay there staring up at the ceiling for awhile. It was still bright outside. The sun wouldn’t be setting for a couple more hours yet. Phil’s plane was moving with the sun, though, so it would be a while before Phil saw nighttime again.

He finally rolled out of the futon sometime later when he checked his phone and saw that Madhavi was supposed to be there within the next four minutes.

He was still pretty disheveled, his hair ruffled and his clothes wrinkled from sleeping in them, when his doorbell rang. Madhavi raised one eyebrow a bit when he opened the door and stepped out, but she kept her comments to herself.

“I guess you aren’t planning to play,” she said after they’d been riding in the car in absolute silence for a minute or two. She’d lifted one hand off the steering wheel to gesture at his clothes.

“Oh,” he said, looking down at his rumpled t-shirt and jeans. “No. I’m not much of an athlete.”

“I like playing, but they won’t let me because I’m a girl,” Madhavi muttered.

“What? Really?” He knew some of the other guys could be rather laddish, but he hadn’t realized they were that bad.

“Yeah, they claim that if they let a girl play with them they would be too worried about hurting her to be able to play their best.” She rolled her eyes toward the ceiling for a moment before looking back at the road.

“So basically, they’re saying that they’re sexist and unwilling to change.”

“Basically.”

The sun was quite low in the sky already by the time they made it to the futsal courts that their friends had rented out for the next couple of hours. The courts were closed in with high chain-link fences around all sides to keep the ball from flying off and getting lost in the surrounding woods. There were about ten players there, some ALTs, some not, warming up by kicking a ball around. He and Madhavi took a seat on the benches that had been wedged into the space between the fence and some vending machines.

The temperature had been mild during the day, with a high of 16 or 17 degrees, but the lower the sun dropped the cooler it became. Dan was glad he’d pulled on a jacket before stepping outside, but now he was kind of wishing he’d changed into a jumper as well.

“Hey, Dan! Never thought I’d see you here.” He turned to find Seiji standing at the fence, beanie pulled down over his ears and leggings on beneath his football shorts. “Aren’t you going to play? It’s good practice for Nagano in June.” He raised his eyebrows as though this were meant to be an enticing offer.

“Probably not going to go to Nagano, tbqfh,” he replied, smiling wide to soften the words a bit.

“Aww, why not? I know you couldn’t afford it in October, but that shouldn’t be a problem now,” Seiji said. “You can always come and just cheer on the sidelines like Phil used to.”
Dan’s eyes dropped down to his hands folded in his lap. Seiji must have realized he’d said the wrong thing because a moment later he started talking about the weather and how nice a day it had been for April. Dan nodded along but let Madhavi keep up the rest of the conversation. He wondered if the airport in Moscow had wi-fi. If so, maybe Phil would be able to send him a message or something during his lay-over.

He was busy googling this when the futsal game got under way, and he ended up missing the first couple of five-minute matches. (It turned out that, yes, Sheremetyevo International Airport did have free wi-fi throughout most of the terminals).

“Any word from Phil yet?” Madhavi asked him when he looked up from his phone at last.

“No, he’s still in the air, probably over eastern Russia by now,” Dan said. “He has to stop in Moscow for a few hours, so I’m hoping he’ll send a message from there or something.”

She nodded, and they watched the match in silence for a while.

“Thanks for coming out tonight. I know you probably didn’t really want to,” she said after one match had ended and the next one had started.

He let out a breath of laughter through his nose. It wasn’t exactly a happy sound.

“Thanks for inviting me. This is much better than moping around my place all evening.”

About half an hour in, he was starting to shiver from the cold, so he bought a can of hot cocoa from one of the vending machines and tried to make the heat from it last as long as he could. He was very thankful when at last they wrapped up the game and everyone piled into their cars to head to the restaurant.

“Mmm, I think I’m going to have the milanesa this time,” Madhavi said as they pulled into the restaurant’s car park. “And a can of Guaraná. This is your first time here, right?”

Dan nodded, peering out the car window at the tiny restaurant with its wide windows. It looked pretty empty inside.

“The food here is amazing, and the hamburgers are massive,” Madhavi said as they walked up to the door and joined the others heading inside. “They actually have a challenge where, if you can eat four of their hamburgers in an hour you get a free meal.”

“Has anyone ever done it?”

“Nope!” Seiji said from just a few steps ahead of him. “Many of have tried, and just as many have failed.”

They all grabbed a big table together in the back, and then the waitress came over and took their orders. Dan had barely had time to glance over the menu, so he just copied Madhavi’s order of milanesa and Guaraná. He wasn’t really sure what either of those things was, but he’d learned that, apart from level of spiciness, he could trust Madhavi’s taste in food. The waitress was clearly an immigrant from Brazil, and she barely spoke any Japanese or English. It took a lot of pointing and careful pronunciation of the food names, but eventually she got everyone’s orders taken down.

Most of the others were in an energetic mood after their hour of exercise, and even Madhavi quickly got pulled into the lively conversation. Dan knew he ought to be making more of an effort to enjoy himself, but it was like there was some sort of barrier between him and all of his friends, like he was cocooned in a thick, invisible blanket that insulated him from all the fun everyone else was having.
When the food came, it was just as delicious as Madhavi had said, but he couldn’t really pay attention to it. All he could think was that Phil would be in Moscow in another two hours.

When Madhavi dropped him back home, he pulled up the flight tracker on the airline’s website and watched as the little plane icon slowly crept across the continent of Asia.

At 10:00, he told himself Phil must be in Moscow now, so he checked the weather (overcast and chilly) and the time (4:00 PM, six hours behind Japan time) and did his best not to stare at his phone.

He waited until after 1:00 in the morning, watching a movie, taking a shower, and even going for a walk around the block to keep himself from checking his phone every five minutes. There were no messages from Phil. At 1:45, the flight tracker showed that Phil’s next flight had taken off and was due in London in four hours. He could wait up until 5:45, keep himself awake with the internet or crappy tv programs or food, but there was work tomorrow, and he figured the time would pass more quickly if he was asleep anyway.

He fell asleep again more quickly than he had expected. It helped knowing that Phil was in the air and wouldn’t be messaging him any time soon.

At 6:38, two minutes before the time his alarm was set for, he came fully awake and reached immediately for his phone. And there it was, a single message from Phil.

*Phil*

*Made it to London in one piece. Omg I forgot how long of a trip that is. Also, the pilot was really kind and landed my side of the plane first. :/ Skype me before you head to school?*

It was the first time in a long time he was actually out of bed before his alarm even went off. He took just a few minutes to use the toilet and fix a cup of coffee before he flipped open his laptop and signed on to Skype.

There was Phil’s name and profile picture, with the green symbol beside it showing he was online. A little thrill went through him as he clicked the call button.

Phil picked up almost immediately. In the grainy picture on his laptop, Dan could see his face, pale in the artificial light of a small hotel room. He was seated at a chair in front of a desk with a brown wall and an ugly painting just behind him. Since he had known his flight would be arriving fairly late at night, Phil had decided it was better to get a hotel room and take the train in the morning.

“Hey,” Phil croaked, his voice rough with exhaustion. Even as he spoke, his mouth cracked open in a huge yawn.

“You survived,” Dan said. “Just barely it seems.”

“Yeah, I survived. No thanks to the pilot,” Phil scowled, running a hand over his face. Dan opened his mouth to respond, but then Phil leaned in a little closer to the camera and said, “I’m in England, Dan. Everyone is speaking English and there are, like, no Japanese people anywhere. It’s so weird.”

“How many people have you accidentally bowed to so far?” Dan asked, leaning forward a little too. He, of course, hadn’t yet had the experience of going back home after living in Japan, but he could imagine it would take some adjusting.

“I think I’ve bowed to almost every person I’ve seen,” Phil groaned. “And said *shitsurei shimasu* or *sumimasen* to at least a dozen.”
“Just don’t try to pay for things in yen, and you’ll be all right,” Dan said, as Phil stifled another massive yawn. He must be dying to go to bed right now. Dan couldn’t help smiling to himself a little to think that he’d made time to Skype him first. “I went to futsal and Brazilian last night for the first time.”

“Oh, really? Did you like it?”

“It was okay. The food was surprisingly good. Have you ever been there?”

“Yeah, a long time ago. I don’t remember much about it.”

It felt wrong, somehow, to know that he’d had a new experience in Japan without Phil to share it with. This was only going to happen more and more frequently from now on, he realized. He’d see and try new things, and Phil would only learn about them second hand. And it would be the same for Phil. He would start a new life in Manchester that Dan would only hear about over Skype. It was a lowering thought.

Phil was yawning again, his arms stretched high over his head, and even over the webcam Dan could see the sleepy tears forming at the corners of his eyes.

“I should probably go get ready for school,” Dan said. “And you look like you’re about to pass out.”

“Yeah, sorry. It was a really long trip.” Phil had placed one elbow on the desktop in front of him and was leaning his cheek against his palm. “When do you want to talk again?”

“I guess I should give you time to get home and settled. Erm, your Friday morning/my Friday evening? Maybe…11 AM and 7 PM?”

“That sounds good,” Phil murmured, his eyes closed.

“I’ll send you a Facebook message to remind you later,” Dan said, smiling and shaking his head. “Good night.”

“G’night,” Phil said, giving a little wave with his free hand. It took all of Dan’s willpower to reach out and click the end call button. He wished so badly that he didn’t have to leave for work and that he could instead sit here and watch Phil fall asleep. He did click the button, though, and Phil’s sleepy face and waving hand disappeared, and it was like the sun had somehow gone back down.

He got dressed and went to work and taught lessons, but all throughout the day his thoughts were really miles and miles away.

On Friday evening, when it was time to Skype Phil again, and Phil asked him what he’d been doing the past couple of days, he couldn’t really remember. It was all a blur, and his clearest impression of it was a constant longing for Friday night to hurry up and come. Phil was at his parents’ house, where he would be staying while he looked for a place of his own, so the first order of business was giving Dan a tour. Dan couldn’t quite muster the courage to tell Phil that he’d already seen most of it — he’d broken down back in February and started secretly watching all of Phil’s videos, right from the beginning.

They ended up talking for almost three hours, despite the fact that it hadn’t even been a full three days since they’d last seen each other. They talked about ideas for Phil’s first video back in England, and what kind of flat he was looking for, and all the ways that England was so weird and not at all like Japan. It was even harder this time to end the call. Dan started wondering how feasible it would be to just start a Skype call with Phil on his phone and keep it open permanently.
“Are you going anywhere for Golden Week?” Phil asked him toward the end of the conversation. Dan had barely thought about the holiday, though Seiji and Madhavi had both invited him along on their respective trips.

“Trying to choose between Izu with Seiji or Tohoku with Madhavi,” he said, though neither particularly appealed to him.

“Where in Tohoku?” Phil asked around a mouthful of cereal. Their Skype session had spilled over into his lunchtime, so he’d grabbed a bowl of cereal to stave off the hunger pangs.

“Yamadera? And some onsen town I can’t remember the name of,” Dan shrugged.

“Oh, Yamadera is really beautiful, but then again so is Izu. Hm, that’s a tough choice.” Phil took another bite of his Shreddies and then added, “Izu will probably be warmer.”

“I could just stay home, too.”

Phil stopped mid-chew, his forehead wrinkling.

“I mean, you could, but… I mean, is that what you really want to do?” he said, his words slow and cautious.

“I don’t know,” Dan said, pushing his laptop to the end of his futon and flopping forward onto his stomach. “Just, nothing really sounds very interesting…at the moment.” He had been about to say “if you’re not there,” but thought better of it.

“We could watch Season 6 of Buffy together over Skype,” Phil said after a moment, and Dan couldn’t tell whether or not he was joking. It didn’t matter, though. Dan sat up at once and opened a new window in his browser.

“Illegally downloading it…now,” he said, clicking the mousepad on his laptop.

“Are you really?” Phil laughed. “I mean, I wasn’t really serious, but if you actually want to—”

“Tuesday is a holiday, so let’s start then,” Dan said, one corner of his lips lifting in a smirk.

Phil just shook his head and took another bite of cereal, but he was grinning.

Over the weekend, Dan caught up on the latest episode of *Game of Thrones*, which he had been too busy to watch over the past week. It kind of sucked that due to the time difference between Japan and the U.S., he wouldn’t actually be able to watch this week’s episode until Monday, but then he got the idea to text Phil and see if he wanted to watch it together.

So they ended up spending five hours together on Skype on Monday night, watching the episode and speculating about what would happen in the next one before moving on to the first few episodes of Season 6 of Buffy. Just after 2:00 in the morning, Phil said he needed some dinner, and Dan decided he should probably try to get some sleep.

He woke up again shortly before 11:00, so while he waited for it to be a reasonable time in England again, he had a late breakfast and tried some writing. He wrote about his last few weeks with Phil, and saying good-bye in Tokyo and what it felt like to still be here when Phil wasn’t anymore. And then he realized he was finished. There was nothing more to say about Phil or Japan or his feelings about it all. So instead of writing more, he scrolled back up to the very top of the document (dear god was it really more than 100,000 words long now?) and started to re-read what he’d written.
He read the first few sentences and then started laughing so hard that tears sprang to his eyes. Apparently all he’d been able to think about back then was how disgustingly hot it was all the time. He supposed it wouldn’t be too much longer now before the temperature and humidity started ramping up again.

He read on, about how he had met Madhavi and James for the first time at the supermarket and how he’d been suspicious of Madhavi’s easy kindness, and then he read about the welcome party and blushed as he remembered just how nervous he’d felt meeting Phil and how mortified he’d been when Phil had had to pay for him. He read as the sun moved past midday and his stomach started to demand lunch, but he ignored all of that because he’d been completely sucked into this world of his own creating.

Had he really been that scared of going to the onsen the first time? It had become such a normal part of his life in Japan by now that he’d half-forgotten how weird it had seemed at first. And poor Akari, he thought, as he read just how jealous he had been of her for all those months. She had really tried so hard to be his friend, but he was having none of it, was he? From his vantage point several months in the future, he felt more sympathy for her than envy.

He had reached his first entry from December and still hadn’t eaten lunch when his reading was interrupted by the sound of a Skype call coming through. He looked up and was startled to find that the room was growing dark around him. It was already almost 5:00.

“You’re up early,” he told Phil as soon as he’d answered. On his screen, he saw Phil lying on his bed, still in his pajamas with his hair all ruffled and god he was beautiful.

“Went to bed pretty early last night, since I knew you were asleep already anyway,” Phil answered, his voice gravelly with sleep. “How was your holiday?”

“Pretty uneventful,” Dan said with a sheepish grin. He couldn’t believe he’d spent nearly the whole day in one spot. “Hey, do you mind if I take you into the kitchen so I can cook some food? I kind of accidentally skipped lunch.”

“What’cha making?” Phil asked, rolling over onto his side and pulling the laptop up the bed so that it was next to his face once more.

“I don’t know yet. Help me decide.”

So Phil and the laptop perched on the edge of the sink (because Dan’s hallway-kitchen had literally zero counter space) while Dan cooked some rice with tuna and furikake on top.

They ended up talking until nearly 1:00 AM this time, with a few breaks here and there for Phil to eat some breakfast or lunch or talk to his mum, who came in and waved to Dan before saying she needed to discuss a few things with Phil.

When Phil came back on, he told Dan that his parents were going away on a trip next weekend, which meant he would be home alone for a few days. He accompanied this news with a few wiggles of his eyebrows, and all thoughts of Golden Week trips flew out the window as Dan very quickly agreed that the weekend would be the perfect time for a couple of extra-long Skype sessions.

Phil was too busy to Skype over the next few days, so instead they made do with texting and tweeting each other as much as they could whenever they both happened to be awake. Fortunately for the quality of Dan’s work, his hours at school mostly overlapped with nighttime in England. He would stay at work until 4:00 or 5:00, chatting with Aalia or dropping in on the chorus club for a little while, and by the time he got home, Phil would have woken and texted him about whatever
weird dream he’d had or about the flats he was going to go see that day.

Dan finished reading what he’d written on Friday afternoon and sat back with a frown. The story was almost unbelievable — how likely is it that any person would through random coincidence be assigned to work side-by-side with the love of their life in a junior high school in Japan? If he hadn’t lived it, he would probably dismiss the idea as pure fantasy. On the other hand, sad ending notwithstanding, he couldn’t deny that it was actually a really good story. If only it weren’t so full of private details about his life, he could almost see himself trying to publish it…

He sat and stared at the screen for a long time, chewing the inside of his lip as he thought. Then all at once, he leaned forward, opened a new Pages document, copied and pasted all 100,000+ words he’d written, and began editing.

Their Skype session on Saturday was comparatively short — only about three hours long — but Dan found it extremely satisfying. Sunday’s lasted longer, and was, if possible, even more satisfactory than the previous one, though at one point Phil did complain that it sucked not being able to see all of Dan at once.

“I never had to choose before,” he grumbled.

“Sorry. I’m still trying to figure out this whole webcam girl thing,” Dan said, his apologetic expression someone spoiled by the smirk on his lips. “It’s a skill set they didn’t really teach in law school.”

“I wonder if they do have schools for that kind of thing,” Phil began, but Dan made sure to draw his attention back to the task at hand before he could get too far down that rabbit trail.

He had Monday and Tuesday off work, thanks to the holiday, so he decided to take a quick overnight trip down to Hakone, just so he’d have something to tell people when they asked how he’d spent his holiday. He ended up regretting it, as it rained the entire time he was there and he couldn’t see Mt. Fuji at all from the lake. At least the hotel he’d picked had good wi-fi, and he and Phil managed to get in one more special Skype session before Phil’s parents came back from their trip.

Once the holiday was past, they fell into a regular rhythm of two or three Skype sessions a week and endless texts and tweets in between. In fact, Dan was tweeting Phil so often that Phil’s numerous followers had taken notice, and his own follower count had shot through the roof.

Phil decided on a place to live the second week in May, and he moved in a couple of weeks later, making sure to give Dan the grand tour over Skype.

“And check out my view,” he said, carrying his laptop out to the balcony and slowly turning it so that Dan could take in the Manchester skyline. “No mountains, but I don’t think it’s too bad.”

“Not bad at all,” Dan agreed.

“So what do you think?” Phil asked, as he turned the laptop back around and carried it inside again. “About the flat, I mean.”

Dan knew what he was really asking — Do you think you could see yourself living here with me?

“It’s pretty snazzy,” Dan said. “I think I like it.”

“Good,” Phil answered, his lips on the screen lifting up into a small smile.

“Hey, Phil,” Dan said after a moment. He saw Phil tense a little and rushed to reassure him. “I kind
of wrote something, and, erm, I was wondering if you would read it for me and tell me your opinion.”

“You wrote something?” Phil’s eyes went wide, and he crossed his legs where he was sat on his couch so that he could lean closer to the camera. “Wait, is this that thing you were always working on in the staff room?”

“Yeah, well, kind of,” Dan said. “I changed it a little, but… Can I email it to you now? And you can tell me what you think next time we talk?”

“Of course!” Phil said.

Dan’s hands shook a bit as he opened his gmail account and attached the file to an email. He paused for a few seconds before he clicked Send. The story he’d written had everything in it — everything he’d thought and felt since the moment he’d met Phil. He was laying it all out there for Phil to see, and he’d never been more nervous to share something he’d created. He had vague ideas of sending it out to an agent or a publisher, but the truth was that Phil’s approval was what he cared about most.

“All right. It’s sent,” he said at last.

“Cool. I just got it,” Phil replied, his eyes focused just below the webcam, probably on a tab with his email account open in it.

“Don’t read it yet!”

“Okay, I won’t.” Phil said, his eyes moving back up to the camera. “Hey, before I go I wanted to show you something.”

“Oh?” Dan raised an eyebrow and cocked his head to one side.

“Not like that. Perv,” Phil grinned. Then he lifted the laptop and carried it down a corridor and into his bedroom. He’d already shown Dan around here, but this time he set the laptop down on the edge of the bed and then turned it so that Dan could see his bedside table. “Recognize this?”

He was pointing at something square and shiny sitting on the tabletop — a picture frame.

“It’s too far away. Bring it closer.”

So Phil lifted the picture frame and held it in front of the camera on his laptop, and now Dan could see that it was a picture of the two of them, with fox whiskers, white fox noses, and red fox lips painted on. Their arms were around each other, and they were both grinning like they couldn’t be happier to be together. At the time Dan had thought the picture was a lie, but looking back at it sometime later he’d realized that nothing about those smiles was fake.

“I read your note on the back so many times that I have it memorized,” Phil murmured. “I don’t think I told you this, but the moment I sat down in my seat on the plane, I ripped that envelope open, and I read your words over and over again the entire way home.”

“I meant every word of it,” Dan said, his voice so quiet that he worried for a moment that Phil hadn’t heard it.

“I know you did,” Phil said, and he set the picture back on his bedside table.

That was a Tuesday evening (Tuesday morning in England), and they weren’t due to Skype again until Saturday. However, on Friday morning Dan woke to see a text from Phil on his phone.
Phil

I just finished reading it. It’s brilliant. You’re brilliant. We need to talk about this immediately.

He slid out of bed and went straight to his laptop. Sure enough, when he checked Skype he found Phil online. His cursor was hovering over the call button when a call from Phil came through.

“It was so good,” Phil said at once, and Dan just laughed, the sound coming out sort of squeaky as it was the first sound he’d made all day.

“Thanks.”

“I have like a zillion questions, though,” Phil went on. A knot appeared in between Dan’s shoulder blades. He imagined that there were a lot of things in there that Phil would have questions about. “Why did you make yourself an American girl?”

“What?” That was certainly not the question he’d been expecting Phil to lead with. “Oh, because I didn’t want anyone to know it was about me.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Phil nodded. It was nighttime in England, and he was sitting cross-legged on his bed, bent forward just enough so that Dan would be able to see his entire face. “But the ending was so sad. Why did you have the cute co-worker from Manchester end up with someone else?”

Dan glanced away for a moment and shrugged.

“I was just trying to be realistic.”

Phil stayed quiet for a long time after that, and Dan looked back at the screen to see what expression he was making. His face was as impossible to read as ever.

“Is that what you think is realistic?” Phil asked at last.

“Isn’t it?” Dan returned. “I mean, it’s what seems to happen more often than not. And, you know, it’s nice to have some sort of closure…in the story, I mean.”

“Right,” Phil nodded, his eyes fixed somewhere in the region of his toes. “I liked that one part a lot,” he said in a soft voice after a moment, “where they’re in the outdoor bath at Tanakaya at night, and she says that it’s like every star in the sky is a different possibility for the future and she can’t choose the right one. I felt like… Kind of like I understood you better after reading that.”

“Only because I’m the most indecisive human ever to exist,” Dan muttered.

“No,” Phil shook his head, “because I think you really are that full of possibilities.”

Dan just stared at the screen, at the collection of pixels that represented Phil. When Dan didn’t answer, Phil continued.

“You wrote the story all about how meeting this guy in Japan changed your character’s life, like you think meeting me changed everything for you. And maybe it did, but I don’t know if you realize that you changed everything for me too.

“I mean, back when you first started working at Nishichu, I used to get irritated with you sometimes because you were just so excited — wanting to join all the after school clubs and try to get the students to respect us more, and at first I thought it was just because you were overeager. But
eventually I realized it was because I had stopped caring enough. The BOE were right, you know, not to let me renew my contract. I needed to leave, both for my sake and the students’.”

“Phil—” Dan began, but Phil cut him off with a shake of his head.

“No, I’m not finished yet. I just wanted to say, thank you. Thank you for helping me break free from my inertia. Thank you for being the catalyst that shook me loose from the rut I’d gotten stuck in. I think my whole life is already infinitely better simply because I met you.”

There were tears running down Dan’s face, and he didn’t know what to say, where to even begin.

“Me too,” he said at last.

“So are you going to publish it?” Phil asked, wiping a couple of tears from the corners of his own eyes. “Because I think you should.”

“Do you? I… I mean, I’m not really sure how, like, how you even start to try to get something published—”

“We can figure it out,” Phil jumped in, his face cracking open in a grin.

“Yeah,” Dan said, a smile slowly dawning on his own face. “Yeah, I think we can.”

Chapter End Notes

Originally published on tumblr
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

One year later...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

April 2015

Dan liked to think that his months of applying to positions at law firms had just been training for the process of trying to get his novel published. After all, writing a cover letter for a job application wasn’t so very different from writing an inquiry letter to submit to prospective agents or publishers along with his novel. And when the rejection letters had started pouring in, he knew to accept them with grace and carefully update his novel submission spreadsheet before chucking each letter in the bin.

Just this morning he’d had two brand new letters to file in the circular file, and two more red “R”s to add to the “Response” column on his spreadsheet.

“You only need one,” Phil had reminded him on his way out the door just after breakfast. He was meeting up with someone for a collab today— Louise. That was her name. Dan had been out of the YouTube loop for a pretty long time, and there were all these new names and faces to learn. When Phil had first come back to England from Japan, he’d made a point of reconnecting with some of his friends from YouTube days of yore and had managed to slowly reintroduce himself to the British YouTube scene.

“I know, I know. You’re going to be late if you don’t hurry,” Dan had smiled, giving Phil a quick kiss on the cheek before practically pushing him out the door. Phil rolled his eyes but returned Dan’s kiss before running off down the hall to the lift.

Dan had his own plans for the day. He had an article to finish writing that was due to his editor later today. He’d started applying for freelance writing jobs during his last couple of months in Japan, and after moving in with Phil had managed to build up enough of a client base to keep the bills paid. The magazine he was writing for right now had paid for him to go to some indie band’s concert last night so he could write a review of it today. The music had been mediocre, but he’d dragged Phil along anyway, and they’d had a decent time.

They’d been living together for nine months now, but it still felt a little unreal every morning when he woke up and saw Phil there next to him. He could still recall every detail of that moment in Heathrow when, after frantically texting back and forth for several minutes, he and Phil had finally found each other next to the baggage claim. And then a few hours later, when they’d gotten out of a taxi in front of Phil’s building and taken the lift up and walked in the doors, and Dan had realized he was home.

He sat down at the table in the lounge and opened up his laptop, but he’d only gotten a few more sentences down when his mind began to wander again. Was he even doing the right thing, trying to publish his novel? Maybe it wasn’t any good after all. Even if Phil loved it, and Madhavi and Seiji
and Caroline had told him it was good, and even if he himself loved it, if all these publishing professionals kept rejecting it, it couldn’t be that good, right?

He’d agonized over the manuscript for months before Phil had finally told him it was time to stop worrying about it and just take the plunge. It was late October, and he’d already been living with Phil in Manchester for nearly three months, before he’d finally worked up the courage to email that first agent, only to be rejected almost at once. It was disheartening, but he tried to ignore that little voice in his head and just keep pushing forward. He only needed one positive response, as Phil had said.

And then there was always the worry of, what if he did manage to publish it and people figured out it was really about him and Phil?

He was planning to publish it under a pseudonym, but someone might still figure it out. It’s not like he was famous or anything, though he supposed Phil sort of was. His channel had hit a million subscribers a couple of months ago, and he’d made it no secret that Dan lived with him. He actually featured in a lot of his videos, though they’d never so much as hinted that they were anything more than friends. That didn’t stop people from speculating, of course. He worried that if Phil’s subscribers discovered his novel, the speculation would turn into an all-out shipping frenzy.

His eyes focused on the computer screen in front of him and he shook his head.

“Writing,” he muttered and forced himself to concentrate on the article again. What was something nice he could say about the band? Hmm. He didn’t want to completely bash them — They’d put on a fairly entertaining show at least.

It took another hour of forcing his thoughts back to the task at hand for him to finally finish the first draft of his article. It took another hour to read back over it and fix all the typos and re-write the awkward parts, but by lunchtime he was satisfied enough with it to attach it to an email and send it on to his editor.

Dan fixed himself a quick lunch, ate, and washed up before heading down the hall to Phil’s room and pulling out the recording equipment.

This was his other big plan for the day.

It had felt surreal watching his follower count on Twitter rising every day for about a year now. It had been even weirder when someone had noticed a comment of his on one of Phil’s videos and people had started subscribing to him on YouTube — despite the fact that he hadn’t posted a single video yet. He had over a thousand subscribers now, and Phil kept gently suggesting that maybe he might want to think about making a video for them.

He’d finally caved to the idea, but he’d decided he would make it a surprise, for both Phil and his subscribers. So he’d been working on a script in secret and waiting patiently for a day when Phil would be out of the house for a while. It was a pretty long train ride down to where Louise lived, so Phil wouldn’t be back until quite late. By then Dan hoped to have his video edited and ready for posting.

It took him no time at all to set up the camera and lights in his own room. He’d helped Phil set up countless times before, and he could almost do it in his sleep. What he hadn’t expected was the sudden jolt of nerves that hit him as he sat down in front of the camera. He’d been in a dozen of Phil’s videos already without feeling the least bit anxious about it. Why should this be any different?

But for some reason it was. His hands were shaking slightly as he shuffled through the pages where he’d typed out his talking points for the video. He set the papers aside and made himself take several
slow, deep breaths. He could do this.

He stood up and leaned forward to hit the record button.

He was about thirty minutes and four takes in when his phone buzzed loudly in his pocket and ruined the take.

“What kind of idiot leaves his phone in his pocket while filming?” he demanded of the camera as he fished the offending device out. It wasn’t the same iPhone 5 he’d bought in Japan — he’d sold that one after figuring out that he wouldn’t be able to use it on a British cellular network without some shady modifications.

He saw that there was a notification for a new email, and he was about to ignore it but, on a whim, decided to at least see who it was from.

He didn’t recognize the name, but he clicked on it anyway, and as he started reading, his scowl turned into a dropped jaw.

“Dear Mr. Howell:

Thank you for your submission of your novel, ‘So Many Stars.’ I very much enjoyed reading the first chapters and would be interested in seeing the rest. Please read below for the guidelines for sending further chapters of your novel…”

The rest of the email was just the submission guidelines, and then it was signed with the person’s name, which he now recognized as the name of an agent in London he had submitted to. She actually liked it. She actually wanted to read more of it! Okay, so it wasn’t the same as someone saying they wanted to publish his novel, but it was a start at least.

He allowed himself an excited shout and a little dance of celebration before he remembered that the camera was still recording.

“Oops.” He chuckled as he hit the button to turn it off.

His video forgotten for the moment, he rushed back into the lounge, flung open his laptop and then spent the next couple of hours painstakingly putting together the rest of his manuscript according to the guidelines listed in the agent’s email. Would replying so quickly make him seem pathetically overeager? Well, who cared if it did? There was no point in pretending he wasn’t thrilled.

He agonized for a full half hour before he finally managed to hit the send button on the email. What if he’d messed up the formatting on one of the chapters? What if there had been a typo in his cover letter? He’d gone over everything three times just to be sure, but what if he’d still missed something? At last he told himself that he had to send it some time. Better to just get it over with.

Once he’d sent it, he texted Phil, knowing he was probably busy recording and wouldn’t get back to him for a while. So he texted Madhavi, then Seiji, and then Caroline. Madhavi answered first, probably because she was back in New Jersey now and it was actually a reasonable time of day for her.

Madhavi
Daaaaaaaaaaaaaan!!!! That’s amazing!!! Your novel is so good, of course someone loved it. CONGRATULATIONS!!!!

He got a reply back from Seiji a few minutes later. It was nearly midnight in Japan now, but Seiji had always been a night owl.
Congratulations! You’ll autograph my copy once it gets published, right? ;)

He wasn’t too surprised when he didn’t hear back from Caroline. She was probably asleep by now. He figured she’d text him back in (her) morning.

When Phil still hadn’t replied forty-five minutes later, Dan decided he’d better finish his filming. There was only another hour or two of daylight left.

Somehow, when he sat down in front of the camera once more, all of his nerves had disappeared. Maybe he should just start the video all over again, from the top. He hit the record button, sat back, grinned, and started off. It was mostly just a self-introduction video, telling a little bit about himself (recovered YouTube fanboy, failed lawyer, Japanophile) and the types of videos he wanted to make (good ones?).

Amazingly, he got through all of it in just two takes. While the video was uploading to the computer, he decided he would tease it with a tweet.

@danisnotonfire I’ve got something exciting to share with you guys this evening. Try not to die from the antici—

It was with a grin that he sat down at the computer, pulled up Final Cut and began the painstaking editing process. His grin didn’t last for long. He’d watched Phil edit videos before, and had even gotten him to teach him the basics, claiming he wanted to make himself more useful. However, it was still slow going, doing it all on his own now. Still, this was what he had wanted — to prove to himself that he could do it by himself, that he wasn’t just riding Phil’s coattails to success.

It was past 9:00 PM when he finally sat back and smiled faintly at his finished video. Okay, so it probably wasn’t the best YouTube video ever made, but it was his. And the idea of that kind of blew his mind. It took until nearly 10:00 to get it uploaded — still set to private — with the thumbnail he wanted and the correct tags. He was worried Phil was going to get home before he actually had a chance to tweet it.

That’s when he realized Phil still hadn’t replied to his text from earlier. Was he really that busy? Or maybe his phone had died… Dan reached into his pocket for his phone but found it empty. Oh, right. He’d left it in the lounge.

When he’d located his phone again, he wasn’t too surprised to see three missed messages and two missed phone calls from Phil. Oops.

Phil
I’m so proud of you!!!! That’s amazing. Okay, I’ll be home just before 11:00, and we are going to celebrate with chocolate cake or something.

Phil
Or maybe pancakes with chocolate chips in them? Or whatever you want!

Phil
Dan? You didn’t answer my call. Are you okay?

He tapped out a quick reply.

Dan
I’m fine! See you soon! (And, yes, I think chocolate of some sort is in order)
He checked the time. It was 10:03. He’d better hurry if he wanted to share the video before Phil got home.

It was almost more nerve-wracking un-privating his video than it had been sending his manuscript to the agent. He knew he wouldn’t hear back from her for several days at the least, but the video was going to get an instant response, or so he hoped.

The moment the video was public, he copied the link and pasted it into a tweet.

@danisnotonfire —pation. Here you go: youtube.com/xxxxxxx

He’d been too busy getting his editing done to notice the hundred or so replies his earlier tweet had gotten. He smiled a satisfied smile to himself now, reading through them and seeing how excited people had been.

Then he switched over to the replies from the new tweet.

“OH. MY. GOD. DAN MADE A VIDEO I’M DEAD.” “this is so funny!!! subscribed!!!” “Wow. I can’t believe Dan just Beyonce’d us with a video.” “this is so good???” “Thank you! You’re great!!!” “um, you stole that joke from rocky horror picture show. unsubscribed! (jk ily).” “dan’s video just killed me.”

Despite the fact that apparently his video had the power to cause death, on the whole he was quite pleased with the response.

His phone buzzed, and he looked down to see a notification lighting up his screen.

@AmazingPhil My friend Dan just Beyonce’d us with a video. Check it out! youtube.com/xxxxxxx

He was smiling so wide his cheeks hurt, and there were tears in his eyes. On his laptop, he opened up the video again and was a little dazed to see the view count sitting at 301+. He’d expected to see a few dozen views on it at the most, but here it was, a video of his that was getting so many views right now YouTube hadn’t been able to calculate them yet.

His phone buzzed again.

Phil
How dare you??? Why didn’t you tell me you were making a video? I would’ve helped you. But it’s so good!

Phil
You’re amazing

Phil
I’m almost home. When I get there, we’re going out to celebrate.

Phil
Did I mention that you’re amazing?

Phil
Oh, and I love you.

Dan was definitely crying now, but that was okay. They were a happy sort of tears.
Chapter End Notes

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