In Between the Lines

by I_Will_Think>About It_Later

Summary

"Eijun, looking up at him and the slant of his mouth, his thick-rimmed glasses catching the glare of the fluorescent lights overhead and shielding his eyes, wonders with something of a gut-punch if he’s being judged."

Notes

when i can't write, i spend DAYS not writing a word. when i can, i write three fics consecutively (/^\)

I SHOULD BE UPDATING CORRELATE I'M SO SORRY TO PPL WAITING FOR THAT! I will, I promise. Soon! Just that I've been wanting to do this fic for sooooo long (like months) and I finally, finally had the urge to start, and I wanted to get it down before I lost the feel of it T^T I'll finish Correlate ASAP! Promise!

also yayyy my first AU!

See the end of the work for more notes
Chapter 1

He’s wriggled his way out of the shudder-swishing train doors even before they’re fully done opening, diving headlong into the throngs queueing to get in and not really sparing any time to dwell on the trail of enraged shouts and mutters he leaves in his wake.

There’s a stitch at his side by the time he’s reached the stairs, and it’s sharp and smarting, but he still takes the steps two at a time, muscles protesting this uncalled-for upsurge in activity, brain morbidly speculating how badly out of shape he is, lungs just struggling to keep drawing in enough air as he ends up panting out, and all the while, even as he emerges into the street, misty-white clouds puffing out of his mouth as he tries to catch his breath, he knows that it’s probably already futile.

But he isn’t sure, and that’s almost as unbearable as knowing, so he keeps going, staggering a little as he tries to pick up momentum, soles of his sneakers smacking into the pavement as he navigates his way around infuriatingly slow-moving pedestrians, picking out a path so familiar he could probably tread this in his sleep.

By the time he reaches the bookstore, he’s struggling so hard for air he can feel his ribs shuddering to hold up.

With his heart in his throat, skin growing taut as the sweat he’s by now drenched in cools with the sudden hit of the air-conditioners indoors, Eijun sweeps his eyes toward where he knows what he’s looking for would be kept –

And lets out a long, low muffled curse that winds up sounding like a whimper.

“Shit, shit, shit,” he mutters under his breath, in tandem with each step he takes toward the low table, where, in an ideal world, the glossy, colour-printed covers of his manga would still be stacked underneath the huge “New Volume Releases Today!” sign now left standing like some lonesome sentinel.

But there’s nothing there, and Eijun had known there would be nothing from the moment he’d stepped out of that godforsaken meeting that had droned on and on forty-five minutes past its scheduled time, and known it when his supervisor had called him in for extra “words of advice”, and if Eijun’s versed in the tendencies of rabid fangirls, he deduces that the entire stock had probably pretty much sold out even before he’d managed to step out of the office building.

This doesn’t, however, stop the tenacious bubble of hope pushing him along from imploding.

With nothing better to do, and with all that physical – and mental – exertion he’d just been put through catching up to him, Eijun doesn’t realise he’s all but staring, crushed, at the “New Releases” placard when he hears, “They sold out like wild-fire.”

Eijun groans. “I expected as much,” he mumbles, unable to keep the disappointment out of his voice, “Do you know if you’re going to get new stock sometime soon?”

The shop assistant gives him a wry smile. “Apparently, the publishers didn’t print enough copies,” he says – Eijun absently thinks this is probably the most words he has ever exchanged with this guy, and then absently thinks that he is apparently not weirded out by a grown guy having a meltdown because his shoujo manga’d sold out, “so…it’ll be a while before we get any new stock.”
“Darmit.” Still huffing, Eijun feels the exhaustion of the day crash over him, a lead weight. No one had told him a mere internship would involve the inhumane truckload of work that keeps getting dumped on his head daily – add to that the stress of counting every single second till he could escape, only to stand willing a freaking electric-train to move faster and counting more seconds, and he’s completely and utterly wiped out. Gravity pulls him down, and he lets it dump him on the emptied podium mocking him with its stupid sign-board. “Oh. Wait. Can I sit here?”

“It’s a bit too late to ask,” is the response he gets, and Eijun frowns a bit – that’s not exactly the appropriate “guaranteed customer satisfaction” kind answer he’s used to at this place. He zooms in on the guy, and recalls seeing him around before – manning the counter, or answering inquiries, or helping reach books stacked too high for people to reach.

This is the first time they’ve actually had what could count as a conversation, though.

“Miyuki…san,” he reads off the plaque pinned to the guy’s neatly pressed blue apron, embroidered with the shop name – he thinks the suffix is appropriate, because despite the shaggy nest of mussed hair on his head, his features speak of a certain maturity that makes Eijun think he is definitely older than him, if only by a little, “Do you know if the publishers have any date set for the second release?”

Miyuki smiles down at him. It’s an odd smile – it sets off tiny little alarm bells in Eijun’s head, because he can’t tell what it means.

“I’m not exactly authorised to disclose that information.”

And his distress must show on his face, because he continues, “Isn’t there someone you know that has bought a copy?”

Wakana probably has. Problem being, Wakana is in a freaking different city. Rather than divulging all this, though, Eijun says, “I want a copy of my own.”

“Apparently everyone does,” the smile grows into something of a lopsided smirk, and Eijun, looking up at him and the slant of his mouth, his thick-rimmed glasses catching the glare of the fluorescent lights overhead and shielding his eyes, wonders with something of a gut-punch if he’s being judged.

Whatever. It’s not like I’ve not been judged before for this. He should just get out of here – it’s still the middle of the week, and he has work tomorrow, and just the prospect of having to sit through another merciless drilling session by Takigawa-san makes him want to do nothing more than run a warm bath and hope he drowns in it.

“The last issue was one of the best in the series,” is what he says, and his head’s in a quandary because This isn’t what we just discussed! “It’s not surprising more people wanted to get their hands on it this time.”

Not to mention the interlude between the last release and this one, which’d given non-readers more than ample time to catch up to all the chapters and solidified the fan-base, built up even more by the anime adaptation that’d started airing recently, and plenty more time to generate at least a few book’s worth of content in theories and discussions on all those internet forums Eijun browses through whenever he gets the time, not to mention all the publicity the mangaka had raked in teasing concept art and first drafts and half-pictures of storyboards on her Twitter…

But, defensive as Eijun is, he’s not exactly keen to get into all of that with this human-Sphinx of a stranger. He gets up, throat scratchy and dry and dying for a Pocari Sweat, and he’s mentally
calculating how early he can catch a train back if he leaves now when Miyuki cuts into his thoughts.

“You realise that at least ten people would have already scanned and uploaded the chapters on the net by now, right? You can just read it online.”

The complexities of commuter-train timetables promptly fly out of Eijun’s head.

“I can’t do that!” he gasps, in genuine, quivering shock – the vehemence of his response actually makes the guy blink a little, and a small part of him is glad to have elicited some reaction apart from those maddeningly unreadable smiles, “The writer and beta-workers and everyone works so hard for each release – every panel! Hand-drawn! And the art is so good and the narration is so smooth! I can’t just not support that dedication and rip it free off the internet!”

He finishes on a high octave, having steadily rolled down the spectrum from being defensive to being actually affronted – like, what kind of bookstore assistant tells you to read stuff free online? – and he’s priming up to flounce his way out of the door when –

“Huh. Then maybe I have something that might interest you.”

Eijun turns, his hands still poised in the act of adjusting his bag-strap.

This Miyuki person shifts in a little closer to him, and now that they’re at relatively eye-level – the other is still a couple of inches taller – Eijun can see through the gleaming lenses of his glasses. He’s got brown eyes.

Brown eyes which are currently glimmering with interest.

Eijun doesn’t even fully get to grasp the meaning of his pulse stuttering before he’s told, “Why don’t you come round to the counter?”

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Even though he’s basically holding it, in both his hands, and his eyes have not budged from the pristine, embossed letters doing this duochrome shiny thing under the counter lights, he can’t quite believe it.

“How…I thought they were sold out?” he demands in an undertone, still too riveted by the surreal fact that he is actually, really, holding this thing in his hands, fervently taking in the details of the cover-art, featuring his favourite protagonist in shoujo manga by far silhouetted against a full, chipped moon, and even though he’s seen the cover released online ages ago, it’s still so much more strikingly beautiful when it’s tangible and real and right in front of him and he gets to run his fingertips over the matte textures laid out in between the lines, and –

“Sometimes we keep one or two,” he glances up to look at Miyuki, finds him shrugging, and experiences a pang of self-consciousness upon realising that he was probably watching him drooling over the book, “For display and stuff.”

This triggers a flutter of panic. “So. Wait. You can’t sell me this?”

Apparently there’s something funny about his worries, because Miyuki chortles, low. “I am selling you this,” he waves a hand at the counter he’s been leaning over, a paper bag ready on its surface, the screen of the cash register facing him, digital green lettering spelling out “Item” and “Price”. 
“But…” the dilemma makes him flounder. On the one hand, he’s literally here with the book he’s been waiting for, for so long it had physically hurt, basically handed to him on a silver platter, and this would be one of those times Kuramochi-senpai’s advice of *Take the ball and roll with it* would be appropriate – but on the other hand…

“Isn’t this against the rules?”

And if he’d only experienced misgivings before, the emotion evolves into full-fledged suspicion when Miyuki’s smile parts around pearly-white teeth.

“Well ~,” he coos, and it just gets Eijun’s hackles up further; he eyes him, wary, his grip around the book tightening, “You’ll probably have to make it worth my while.”

*Oh.*

*Shit.*

Eijun tries not to gawk, realises he’s already gawking, and quickly clenches his mouth shut – Miyuki, evidently, notices, and that stupid Cheshire cat grin of his broadens, and Eijun can *swear*, despite the multitudes of stereotypical, diabolical antagonists he’s come across and unequivocally hated in his illustrious manga reading career, he’s never come across a smile that manages to look so untrustworthy.

*Oh no.*

*He’s probably a criminal.*

*Ohhhhh no. Is he a drug dealer?*

*Is he using this bookstore to run a racket??*

*IS THERE WEED INSIDE THIS BOOK??*

Pre-emptively, without really thinking about it, he spastically shakes the book open, and is greeted with a flurry of –

*Pages.*

*Oh.*

“But,” he blurs, at the quizzical eyebrow he has raised in his direction. Acutely aware that his ears are probably glowing red by now, he hastily tries to divert attention, “Um. So, err…what were you saying?”

The grin he gets is so completely impish Eijun *instantly* regrets asking.

“Why don’t you ask me out for coffee?”
Chapter Notes

YOU GUUUUYS :D It's been just, like, a day, but the response to this fic has been so overwhelmingly kind and encouraging and sweet y'all actually made me cry as I read all the comments on the bus back home. I DON'T DESERVE Y'ALL ;A;

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR EVERYTHING I LOVE YOU SO MUCH

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I,” Eijun begins, disconnected telephone receiver in one hand, a staple-gun in the other, “am going to kill him.”

Impassioned and deadly serious as his promise is, it only gets a meekly apologetic response out of Harucchi.

“I’m sure he didn’t mean to,” he says, tone placating – he’s pulled a revolving chair over from the neighbouring cubicle, belonging to the prospective victim of Eijun’s first homicide. Just the fact that the guy had had the nerve to prance off to lunch after his announcement has Eijun all but seething.

“This is the fourth time, Harucchi,” Eijun stresses the syllables with louder than necessary taps on his keyboard – Harucchi eyes the screen of his desktop in mild disconcertion, “The fourth time. In just this week! I don’t care if he doesn’t know how to keep within his freaking word limits, I just finished the layout of that page. Like, literally two minutes ago. And now I have to move EVERYTHING!”

Harucchi grimaces at the way his volume crescendos near the end, holding up both hands and motioning that he keep it down. Eijun, breathing so hard he can all but feel his nostrils distending with steam, is tempted to scream even louder.

But considering that that’ll just end in the two them probably getting fired, he grapples with himself to get it under control.

It’s hard, though.

“I’m sorry, Eijun-kun,” Harucchi really does sound upset on his behalf, and Eijun laps up the sympathy like a salve – the heavens know he doesn’t get much of it around here, “It’s only because we’re so shorthanded with people for layout that Takigawa-san keeps assigning – “

“Ohhh don’t even get me started on him,” half his attention scrambling to figure out how he’s going to space out the other pieces on his eight-by-ten virtual page with the extra two hundred words Kanemaru’s cheerily informed he’d added to his article of the week, he devotes the other half to keeping his rapid-fire, incensed ranting below an audible sound range, “Not only does he keep approving these inane last minute changes, he also clearly doesn’t know how to read because I specifically applied to write. Not spend every second in this hellhole drawing freaking boxes – which,” he pauses with a shuddering draw of breath, holding up an enraged finger, “is harder than you’ll imagine.”
Harucchi’s wheeled his chair a little bit closer, and at some point during his diatribe started to pat his shoulder. “I know, I know,” he says, and his soft-spoken, calming voice sedates him, if only a little, “It’s just that…you’re so good at it! You have a knack for this, I mean, you used to do the entire school newsletter’s layout by yourself before!”

Eijun snorts. “We were only five people,” he reminds Harucchi dryly, “not like I had much choice.”

Not like he has much choice here, either. It’s been three weeks since they’d started here, and Eijun, to his horror, feels all the motivation he might have possessed has been wrung straight out of his brain the way his mother vigorously wrings the laundry before hanging it out to dry.

Oh, his mother. How he misses her. If he hadn’t decided to “make it big” in Tokyo, maybe he’d be with her right now, hanging out laundry under the crisp Nagano sun, where the only things getting the crap busted out of them would be their mattresses as his mum attacked them with a large stick. The image is therapeutic.

“You know…,” he’s brought out of his nostalgic daydream, out of the vibrant, open expanses of his hometown to this sterile, monotonous shoebox of an office cubicle, and he turns to find Harucchi dithering, “You could. Just. You know. Pitch to him.”

Eijun’s mouth clamps shut on reflex.

“I…could,” he acquiesces, eventually — the hand he’s probably had glued to his mouse since that morning slides off his desk and flops on his chair’s armrest, “but I…don’t know if I should.”

That, he thinks, is the most ambiguous, half-assed answer he could give, but he can’t think of a better way to explain it. Maybe it makes sense that they didn’t pick me to write.

Harucchi isn’t deterred, though. “Kanemaru-kun got it because he actually went up to Takigawa-san with a pitch, and he liked it,” he argues, earnest, “And I really think Takigawa-san is always on the lookout for talented people — he’s just not had a chance to see your work yet! If you’d go talk to him — “

“Yeah,” Eijun says — but he’s hedging, and Harucchi can tell.

“Why not, then?” he demands, and it almost stuns Eijun into silence, because the sudden switch from considerate empathy to steely no-nonsense scrutiny reminds him of Onii-san so much it’s uncanny, “You wanted to work here so badly…what’s the use if you’re going to be miserable?”

“It’s…”

Shit. He actually feels bad for grousing so much now. He’s well aware that both Kominatos are truly worried about him — it had only been on the faith that they would be here that his parents had agreed to send him to Tokyo in the first place. Harucchi and he had attended the same high-school, were currently enrolled at the same university — and it’s entirely on Eijun that he and Harucchi had chosen the same workplace for their compulsory penultimate semester internship program too.

“This isn’t like you,” Harucchi comments, a bit severely, his frown visible even under the too-long bangs his brother keep threatening to cut off in his sleep.

Eijun agrees. It isn’t. He’d always been the one to plunge headfirst into situations, uncaring of consequences until after the fact, taking risks big and small with such blithe carefreeness Kuramochi-senpai regularly predicts he would him give a heart attack one of these days.
But this isn’t something he can afford to botch up. Takigawa Chris Yuu might be young to the industry, but he’s a perfectionist. It’s the only reason he’d even managed to bring up a three-year young media start-up to the point where it could compete with longer-established, more-experience-under-their-belts magazines. The papers praised him for his shrewd business sense, and the man himself chalked it up to sheer unwillingness to compromise when he’d showed up as part of an entrepreneurs’ panel session Eijun had attended back in university.

No matter how much he complains, Eijun has an inordinate amount of plain respect for Takigawa-san, bordering on awe, and somehow that’s caused an imbalance between what the standards he thinks befit this magazine, and the standard of his own writing.

He doesn’t know how to put that to Harucchi, though.

“I’ll pitch to him if I can think of something I’d actually like to write about,” he says, finally – Harucchi doesn’t appear appeased, but Eijun’s not about to tell him that the reason he’s stuck in this self-inflicted vicious cycle is because of a bout of insecurity literally no one that knows him could have foretold. “Seriously. I mean, lately my brain’s just full of lines and boxes and pixels to centimetre conversion – if he wants an article on that…” he trails off.

Harucchi’s still frowning.

Abort, abort, abort. Harucchi’s got a sweet deal going with the sales department, and a couple of senpais there he speaks really highly off, and it’s bad enough that Eijun spends so much time griping to him – as his best friend he’d probably feel obligated to be depressed on his behalf too.

“Look, screw layouts and articles,” he says, hastily, and grabs his mouse to minimise the window he’d been working on, “There’s more important things to think of. Like what the hell am I going to get Onii-san for his birthday?!”

This catches Harucchi off-guard – Eijun holds his breath, counting blinks, and only exhales when he spies a small smile twitching against the pink-head’s mouth.

“Last minute yet again?” he asks, teasing, and Eijun’s chagrin is at least fifty percent authentic.

“You got him something already?!”

Harucchi nods, the tilt of the smile kind of self-satisfied. “The complete Wes Craven collection on BluRay.”

The noise Eijun makes can be interpreted as both envious and awed. “That’s so clever,” he groans, and spastically opens up an internet tab, even though he has no idea what to search for. “What should I get him? Maybe a bo – “

Book.

Oh shit.

Book.

“He’s been complaining about not having anything new to read for a while,” Harucchi volunteers, oblivious to the veritable typhoon of panic Eijun’s unleashed in his own head.

It’s by no means an unfamiliar typhoon. It’d been raging pretty much continuously in Eijun’s head ever since he’d used the excuse of another customer queueing up behind him at the counter that day to dole out his cash and make a getaway, holding on to his shoujo manga like some kind of
talisman to ward off demons.

It hadn’t warded off the slew of conflict that’d hounded him throughout the train-ride home though. Because, y’know, what was the big deal? People ask people out for coffee all the time. *Coffee* was basically code for, let’s sit and chat.

Except he’d been a stranger.

A suspicious stranger.

Maybe a suspicious *drug dealing* stranger…?

No, no, no, he’d been too paranoid.

Or was he?

It wasn’t normal for people who can’t even be called acquaintances without a bit a stretch to suddenly invite you – or invite themselves? – for coffee. Because… well. Why? Eijun might have made a fool of himself flapping his book around expecting to find cocaine flying out of it, but of course drug traffickers wouldn’t be so obvious – they’d probably want to meet in neutral ground, away from their hub of operations, to throw suspicion away from their perfectly respectable cover identities. He’s watched *Breaking Bad*, he knows what’s up.

Or maybe he was just a guy looking to make friends.

Maybe he liked the manga too and wasn’t as unapologetic as Eijun about it and just wanted to talk to someone who could relate.

OR maybe he’s yakuza.

Eijun’d frenzied himself into such a migraine by the time he’d gone home that he’d straight up asked his flatmate what it meant when a stranger asks, *Why don’t you ask me out for coffee?*

Kuramochi-senpai’d given him one, extremely caustic evil eye and all but twisted him into a human ball of yarn.

That was two days ago. He still hasn’t gone back to the store.

And he’d left without replying.

*Oh, for the love of all that is holy,* he screams at himself internally, scrolling through the “New Arrivals” section of the very same bookstore plaguing him, *he probably didn’t even mean it! He was probably just joking! He looks like that kinda guy!*

But what if he isn’t? What if he’d just genuinely wanted to go out for a cup of coffee for no other reason than for a break, maybe, and he’d just *left* him there in a fit of ingratitude and unfounded distrust?

As much as he’s terrified of the yakuza, it’s this latter possibility that makes his gut churn uneasily.

“What was that book he likes again?” he asks Harucchi, having scrolled all the way to the bottom of the screen and not finding anything that’d caught his eye, “The one with the creepy little boy? *The Sparkling*?”

*The Shining,* Harucchi corrects, and his voice lilts with suppressed laughter. Eijun hardly notices. He types in the name, and expands the rest of the store’s options by the same author, drawing up
an impromptu battle plan as he goes, because he’s pretty sure he’s not going to be able to rest until he resolves this. He can’t just boycott the bookstore because he’d run out on an overly friendly employee.

He has a *platinum* membership card.

*And 15% off on Tuesdays.*

In the interests of his mental well-being and future book splurges, he’s going to have to see this through.

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When he actually reaches the bookstore, though, he almost completely loses his nerve.

The guy – Miyuki, his name was – is near the manga section, surrounded by a swarm of probably middle-school girls. From this distance, Eijun can spot the best incarnation of service-with-a-smile he’s seen of late – it’s not hard to tell that the manga isn’t what the girls are here for, and as much as Eijun adores Wakana as, basically, a sister, he’s fervently glad she didn’t go through that phase in adolescence where some girls decide to turn into pocket-sized harpies.

Not envying Miyuki at all for having to deal with that, and in a way actually *glad* that for once he doesn’t have business in the manga section, he quietly slithers into the *Horror* aisle of the bookstore.

Fifteen minutes later finds him crouching until he’s almost seated on the carpet, phone to his ear and a growing pile of books by his side.

“*Christine?*” he asks, and there’s a tinge of desperation to his voice at this point.

“He has it,” comes Harucchi’s quiet, cautious voice. Onii-san’s not home, but given the guy’s ability to evidently teleport right behind you, neither of them are willing to take chances.

“Er…*Cujo?*”

“Has it.”

Eijun huffs. They’ve gone through Poe and Lovecraft already, and Eijun’s beginning to grow conscious of the trepid conviction that Onii-san, in an unprecedented feat of exercising his proclivity for nightmarish fantasy, has *actually* managed to read every horror book out there.

“*Salem’s Lot?* No, wait I know he has that one…um,” Eijun skims his finger along the rest of the tomes in front of him, “What about…?”

“*Doctor Sleep?*”

If Eijun hadn’t already been taking exquisite care to keep his voice down, he might have screamed. Instead he jumps, so violently the stack of potentials he’d piled up spills in a mini book avalanche.

Miyuki, unperturbed by the irony of the fact that he’d basically just jumpscared him in the “Horror” section of the bookstore, kneels beside him and calmly pulls out a book further along the row Eijun’d just been covering.

Eijun reads off the title after a couple of false attempts. “*Doctor Sleep?*”
A few seconds trickle by, and Eijun uses the time to remind himself that you need to breathe out after you breathe in. “He doesn’t have this one!”

Eijun all but crumples to the floor, “Oh, thank God.”

And then he remembers where he is, and with whom, and thinks he might need God to stick around for a little longer.

Chapter End Notes

so what if Eijun ain't pitching baseballs - he's still gonna be pitchin' XD

I was going to continue, but then I thought I'll save it for a more Miyuki-heavy third chapter (but I hope you guys still liked it!!! I really hope you did). Also more actual interactions with the rest of the charas coming up soon too :D ~

References to
-Wes Craven : you may know him as the man behind A Nightmare on Elm Street, Scream and other classic 80s horror films. they might seem campy today, but back then what this guy pulled off without CGI and special effects was revolutionary and a helluva lot more impressive than some of the horror movies out today
-Edgar Allan Poe & H.P. Lovecraft : both extremely renowned in their own rights in the horror genre - I'm a bit more partial to Lovecraft than Poe though, but they both did oodles for horror in literature (/^\)
-Christine, Cujo, The Shining, Salem's Lot, and Doctor Sleep - all novels by Stephen King, whom I love as much as I hate, because his prose is remarkable and he's really the best at creating pure and abject terror, but at the same time his books have given me more nightmares than anything else in the world. and yet I go back for them so idk what that says about me
-The Shining was also a Stanley Kubrick film, and if you've seen it I'd still recommend reading the book, because it's almost entirely different from the movie, and Doctor Sleep happens to be a kind of sequel to it

Er...I think that's it for now. Thank you all sooo much for reading and I'd love to hear your thoughts if you'd like to share!
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

i’m sorry if this sucks i rushed it so much and nothing came out the way it was supposed to ;A;

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Do you want this gift wrapped?”

Eijun is bewildered for all of two seconds, before recalling that the guy currently scanning his membership card and tallying up his total had caught him in the middle of a pretty telling phone conversation.

“Um, yes please,” he says, after quick debate of the pros and cons in his head – he’s never been particularly good with wrapping paper, and it’d be nice if there’s at least an element of surprise to the present when he hands it over to Onii-san; maybe he’d actually get a reaction this time. “Can I write a quick message inside?”

“Sure.” A pen is produced, and Eijun shuffles closer to the counter, letting his bag drop with a soft thump to the floor beside him. Smoothing the first blank page he comes across, he deliberates a little, chewing on his lip – the added knowledge that the slightly taller store assistant who may or may not be trying to embroil him in underground mafia activity is standing barely a foot away does not ease his mind enough to let him think clearly.

In the end, he scribbles, Dear Onii-san – I hope this book spooks you as much as you spooked me with that manga about humanoid cockroaches. Happy birthday!

He dithers a moment, self-conscious, and hurriedly adds Love, Eijun, before he can change his mind.

He’s taken his pick of wrapping paper – going with a plain pale gold one with a light sheen, because Onii-san isn’t a fan of loud colours – and Miyuki’s in the process of neatly folding in the corners around the volume, movements fluid and practised, when he says, conversationally, “I was surprised to find you in that section, to be honest.”

Eijun, who’d been slowly tormenting himself by repeatedly wondering if he’d overreacted in a big way and misconstrued the whole situation the last time he’d been back here, is caught off-guard.

“Why?” he blurts, unthinking.

Judging by the short, quick blinks with which this is received, he’s surprised Miyuki as much as he’s surprised himself.

“Oh,” Miyuki laughs, after a moment, shaking his head, “it’s just that you usually only go for very specific genres...but then again that’s only based on what I’ve seen you buy. But maybe I’m quick to judge,” he trails off, and the look on his face is a little apologetic, and Eijun wonders, for the umpteenth time since he’d awkwardly tried to help Miyuki put all the books he’d taken out back in their places in the book racks, how grossly he’d misinterpreted whatever the hell had happened last
time. Miyuki’d been nothing but helpful, if not a tad chatty, and maybe that isn’t such a weird thing considering he’s something of a regular at this store and they’re likely to cross paths often at any rate, and Eijun’s rapidly working himself into a state of abject contrition for maybe completely misunderstanding him. “Did I offend you?”

Eijun rushes to correct him. “Oh, no, no, no,” he says, shaking his head a bit too enthusiastically, “I don’t read horror at all. This is for Onii- I mean, my best friend’s brother.”

Miyuki’s answering smile looks slightly relieved, and it makes Eijun feel like a heel. This is legitimately worse than the time he’d freaked out thinking Mochi-senpai was some kind of street-gang delinquent when they’d first met a couple of years ago.

“Must be a big fan of King if you had this much trouble finding something for him,” Miyuki comments, idly, sealing off the corners with clear, clean-edged strips of tape. “…are you sure he didn’t buy this one online?”

“Yeah,” Eijun’s response is confident, “he’s not into reading stuff on a screen.”

In fact, it’d been Onii-san who had bred in him an appreciation for hardcovers and collectibles, and what Mochi-senpai referred to as his OCD when it came to keeping all his books as pristine as he possibly could. Getting a proper, original copy, Onii-san’d stressed, back when he’d gifted Eijun his own copy of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* despite owning the full collection himself, is one of the best ways to thank authors and creators for the work that they do – they put a little bit of their souls into everything they create, and if you freeload off of it, it amounts to no more than the highest form of ingratitude. And while that’s as far as his and Eijun’s literary preferences converge, it’s advice Eijun had taken to heart and never deviated from.

All this is too much to explain to a guy he doesn’t even know the first name of, though, so he keeps mum.

It’s Miyuki, however, who speaks up. “So you get that from him.”

It leaves Eijun blinking again, mystified. He wonders if he ought to feel offended by the familiarity with which Miyuki keeps making assumptions about him.

He wonders if he can feel offended if all these assumptions are correct.

“All done.”

Eijun digs in his pocket for his wallet, picks out a few bills, his mind racing as he reaches to take the package being handed over to him.

*So had that whole thing been a joke?*

As much as that’d been the most attractive – and least compromising – option out of all the others Eijun’d listed out…

It didn’t quite sit right.

*“You’ll probably have to make it worth my while”*

On the brink of discovering a fresh quandary to torture himself with over the next couple of days, Eijun decides to throw caution to the winds.

“I owe you,” he says, slipping his fingers around the twisted rope strap of the paper-bag, knotting
his fingers into them and clenching, “…again.”

He waits out a heartbeat, and another, holding his breath without meaning to.

He’s not entirely sure what to feel when the faint surprise that’d registered against Miyuki’s features slip and melt off around –

A smile. The smile that’d been there the last time but not today, not until now – something shrewd and knowing, and almost a little bit wicked.

“And here I was thinking you’d forgotten,” he hums, and no. Eijun had not been mistaken. The mystifying smile in front of him is definitive proof that their previous encounter hadn’t just been some kind of weird, half-hallucinated anomaly.

Eijun’s unsure if he’s relieved or regretful.

But he’d come prepared, and he’d had his guard up, and he chooses to follow through, and if this is a bluff, he calls it.

“So…two coffees?”

It makes Miyuki chortle. Eijun absently notes that it’s not the kind of sinister chortle you’d expect from a villain whose plans are falling into place. If anything it actually sounds quite (wait) pleasant –

–

What?

Eijun’s still in the process of absorbing just what his mind had hiccupped just then when Miyuki quips, “I was thinking more along the lines of dessert.”

It’s with something of a shock that Eijun realises he’s twinkling down at him.

He looks pleased, is the mental, somewhat startled observation the voice in his head supplies, and it looks…genuine, and innocuous, and it jostles his intentions to play this cool, delays his ability to react –

And gives Miyuki enough time to interject again.

“To be honest, I thought I’d put you off.”

It’s so blunt it’s disarming.

“I…was a little taken aback,” Eijun confesses, choosing not to elaborate on how that could probably contend for the biggest understatement of the century.

Miyuki smirks – the corner of his mouth hefts up one cheek, and behind his glasses, Eijun can see his eyes sparkling with humour.

“Sorry about that,” the effect of the apology is ruined when he sniggers, but it doesn’t trigger any of the sirens Eijun’d been expecting – if anything, he just sounds supremely amused, “I guess it kind of went about in the wrong order.”

And next thing he knows, Miyuki’s straightening himself up, schooling his features to a picture of solemnity.
His eyes are still laughing, though.

“Miyuki Kazuya,” he says, as he holds out his hand – Eijun, not exactly having very many options, finds himself tentatively shaking it, “Current Master’s student of hospitality, part-time bookstore assistant.”

So he’s a part timer, is what Eijun repeats to himself, before noticing that Miyuki is looking at him expectantly.

He might be yakuza! a plaintive, paranoid little voice pipes up in the back of his head. Eijun ignores it.

“So you’re a writer,” he comments, then nods, “Yeah. I can see that.”

And there it is again. Miyuki (Miyuki Kazuya) drawing assumptions about him – assumptions so eerily accurate he doesn’t know if he can fault him for pegging him down so neatly. Just to prove him wrong, Eijun’s half-tempted to tell him he’s actually the unofficial layout editor.

He doesn’t.

What he does say is, “Hospitality? As in…like, training to be concierges and stuff?”

Miyuki’s smile broadens. “Why don’t we save that discussion for coffee?”

It’s cheeky, and playful, and a part of Eijun’s convinced that he’s being teased – but he also can’t deny that Miyuki isn’t the only one intrigued.

He deliberates for only a moment, his brain skimming down his comprehensive breakdown of worst case scenarios before playing along.

“So when do you wanna go?”

***

If he’s completely honest, a reasonable, sensible part of him, underneath the significantly louder, significantly more frantic half of his psyche, hadn’t expected this to amount to anything. At the very least, it would be jokey banter, and at most, a guy who’d probably been bored at his not-exactly-exciting job looking to make small-talk.

Which is possibly why, as they settle down at the dainty little table giving on to a white-paned window, single lightbulbs dangling overhead to cast pools of light punctuated by seemingly deliberately placed shadow –

It feels rather surreal.

“Wait…isn’t that against the rules?” Eijun’d asked, alarmed, when Miyuki’d called over a grouchy, half-asleep guy who looked roughly about Eijun’s age and instructed him to cover for him, pulling off his apron and patting down the casual button-down underneath.
The sly edge to Miyuki’s smile’d confirmed that Eijun’s not the only one conscious of the déjà vu attached to this question.

“They can afford to do without me for a little while,” is the answer he’d been given, and Eijun’d thought that, for a part-timer, this guy possessed a remarkable sense of autonomy.

Now, though, as he watches Miyuki Kazuya flag down a waiter for two menu-cards, he thinks that might just be who he is. Even here, in this unfamiliar space, he carries himself with a level of self-assurance Eijun wishes he possessed.

As it were, he’s already anxious about whether he’d bitten off more than he could chew in this gamble to notice the card laying on the table in front of him until Miyuki taps it.

“I hear their caramel macchiato is amazing,” he says, leaning a little toward him – the café’s understandably crowded, given the hour. Eijun spots enough crisp shirts and darkly coloured slacks to conclude this must be a popular hang-out spot for young, working adults.

It’s a bit disconcerting when he remembers that he counts as a young working adult now.

Pushing these thoughts aside, he amps up his volume a bit to get himself heard, “I don’t really like coffee.”

He immediately questions the wisdom of this, because now Miyuki actually looks let down.

“Aw, no. You should have said earlier – we could have gone somewhere else.”

He’s frowning, and he looks legitimately dismayed, and Eijun can’t help but be thrown off by it.

“But I owed you coffee,” he mumbles, sheepish, feeling, not for the first time this evening, the unorthodox strangeness of these events – he’s sitting opposite a person about whom he knows enough personal facts to count on one hand, in a cozy little café he’s never been to, and as much as Harucchi advocates he go out, meet new people, he’s also never completely outgrown Onii-san and his dad’s sombre advice of Trust no one.

At the very least, the chances of Miyuki pulling something in such a public setting is statistically low, he tells himself, trying to ward off the on-again-off-again washes of panic shoring up at the edges of his consciousness.

Miyuki’s short laugh snaps him back to the present. “Don’t make it sound like an obligation,” he jokes, and Eijun doesn’t know what to say to that, because as far as he’s concerned, that’s probably the primary reason he’s here – Miyuki Kazuya’d pretty much gone out of his way to help him in more ways than one, and while treating him to coffee isn’t quite the natural progression of events he could’ve expected, this does kind of give Eijun the chance to repay him.

Except…

“Did anyone find out about the book you sold me?” he inquires, timid, once they’ve placed their orders – Miyuki got his caramel macchiato, and Eijun opted for honey-lemon tea. We’ll take our time with dessert, is what Miyuki’d told the waiter when he’d inquired if they’d like anything else, and you’d have thought they’re the chummiest of buddies, hanging out after work one evening, rather than two individuals who probably knew so little about one another that everything felt awkward and foreign.

“Nome,” Miyuki smiles easily, emptying two sachets of white sugar into his tankard-sized coffee mug – Eijun eyes it warily, his blood sugar rising just imagining the potent combination of that
much glucose and caffeine.

Eijun stirs his straw around, sticking it through the holes in the clear-as-glass ice-cubes cluttering half the tumbler of his drink. “No one suspected anything?” he presses, trying not to sound too prying.

He’s not entirely sure if he succeeds, because the smile Miyuki flashes him at that is so sly it instantly puts Eijun on red alert.

“I've got a pretty spotless record at work,” Miyuki says finally, shrugging and pausing for a slurp of his coffee, “and besides, if the sale is accounted for no one would mind.”

Using his own drink to stall, Eijun processes this information. *Spotless record at work means...*

“So you don’t usually give off reserved copies of books to customers.”

If he’s doing this asinine thing, he thinks, pulse beating wildly against his ribs, he might as well get his answers.

To his credit, Miyuki doesn’t look at all troubled by this question.

“I don’t,” he admits, easy and casual, and then there’s silence, and Eijun is left flummoxed, because in getting answers, he’s managed to come up with more questions.

He’s not entirely sure how to ask them.

Once again, Miyuki takes advantage of his hesitation.

“Speaking of the manga,” he stops again for a sip, licking his lips as he retreats to snuggle back in his seat, and Eijun absently wonders if the frothy, chocolatey-looking concoction is really that good, “How are you liking it so far?”

*So far?*

“I’m done reading it.”

“Woah. Already?”

“I’m halfway through my second reading.”

Miyuki looks suitably impressed, and for the moment, Eijun allows himself to preen a little – he’s never been quite immune to the amazed looks he gets over the speed of his reading ability. He’s not one to brag, but he’d finished the entire *Hunger Games* trilogy in just four days.

*With* full-time classes going on.

“Either you’re an absurdly fast reader,” Miyuki observes, studying him with an elbow propped at the table’s edge, his hand cupping his chin, and Eijun experiences, not for the first time, the slightly jarring sensation that accompanies every time Miyuki somehow cleanly picks a thought out of his mind – which is way too many at this point for him to grow completely comfortable, “or that manga is incredibly good.”

Well.

“It is,” he insists, and he can’t really help himself when he starts to subconsciously lean forward in his eagerness to emphasise the point, “this volume was so good, it’s easily my favourite after the
previous one and I was pretty much sure the previous one couldn’t be topped, but this totally lived up to the hype – ”

He notices a split second too late that he’s rambling, and goes flailing halfway down his sentence.

If Miyuki notices, he doesn’t let on. “Explains the rampage that happened because of that release,” he reflects, “I don’t think I’ve seen that kind of response for any other title – “

“It’s just that good,” Eijun makes a conscious effort to tone down his enthusiasm, but he still can’t quite resist the needling urge pushing him to make his case, “the plot avoids all the normal clichés you’d expect in shoujo manga, it completely subverts what you’d expect would happen and always keeps you guessing. Not to mention,” he pauses for dramatic effect, flourishing his straw and ignoring the spray of iced tea this causes because that’d just be embarrassing, “the characters have substance.”

It’s around this point in Eijun’s long experience of embarking on unasked-for-but-passionate analytical breakdowns of his favourite fictional properties that he grows belatedly aware that his audience is either visibly disinterested, or uncomprehendingly overwhelmed.

Miyuki, who looks to be neither, actually raises an eyebrow and exhales a low whistle. “That good, huh?”

Enthused, if not pleasantly surprised by the positive reaction, Eijun gushes, “You should read it.”

“Isn’t it already at its sixtieth volume?”

“Fifty seventh,” Eijun amends without thinking, and frowns a little, “yeah, okay, maybe it’s a little long but – “ he ignores the way Miyuki arches a sceptical eyebrow at him at a little, “but it’s completely worth it. There’s not a moment in it that feels unnecessary or gratuitous and it all comes together so amazingly it’s like – wait. Have you ever read or watched anything by Narita Ryogo?”

He catches the spark of recognition even before Miyuki affirms that he does.

“Okay, so, you know how some of his works start off with something seemingly random, and then like, ten chapters later it fits in somewhere in a way you totally wouldn’t expect?” Eijun’s breathless by the end of this extremely long rhetorical question, but he ploughs on ahead without giving Miyuki the chance to agree or disagree with him, “This manga is just like that – plot points are set up and you barely notice them and later on they just fit in and everything makes sense and you never see it coming. I mean, of course it’s not set in some kind of super corrupt, shady underworld – “ ridiculous as it is, some forever delusional part of him sits up and scrutinises Miyuki intently to catch anything telling at the mention of the underworld, “but it’s still got its fair share of mystery”

He winds to a stop, realises he’s actually breathing hard, and makes a grab for the now slippery-with-condensation glass of his at least half-melted-ice-water tea.

Miyuki, by some miracle, still doesn’t look put off by his unequivocal-at-times-intimidating zest.

“I’ve never heard this one being described as a mystery before,” is what he says, and Eijun’s started on an entirely new tangent before he can think to stop himself.

By the time he’s done, describing at length his full admiration for the writer’s skill, gushing half-coherently about everything from the narrative tone of voice to the way every panel is set up, they’re both digging into plates of strawberry cheesecake.
“It’s a popular item here,” Miyuki’d told him when they’d placed the order, and Eijun, his reservations having evidently been kicked to the backseat with the level of receptiveness he’s getting from Miyuki, probably the first real life person to actually entertain him as he waxes poetic about how much he respects a work of fiction they don’t know anything about, asks him how he knows.

The smile Miyuki’d given him had been secretive, and oddly coy.

“Since we came in,” he lowers his voice to a whisper, theatrically cupping a hand around his mouth as though he’s about to impart the most covertly classified of information, and Eijun has to shift forward a little to be able to hear him, “I’ve seen exactly seventeen people order this.”

This isn’t at all what Eijun’d been expecting to hear – he lets out a giggle.

“Seriously,” Miyuki swears, although he appears to be having difficulty keeping his own grin at bay, “Life hack in the hospitality business – whenever you’re at a new eatery, get what most people seem to be getting. It’ll probably be the best thing on the menu.”

And Eijun dutifully files this away, because it’s legit sound advice, but speaking of “hospitality business” …

“What did you say you were doing in hospitality again?”

Miyuki smirks, probably seeing through Eijun’s pretence of not recollecting that he’d never gotten around to revealing that detail, but doesn’t comment on it. “Culinary arts.”

Now it’s Eijun’s turn to be impressed. “So you want to be a chef?”

Miyuki, mouth full of cheesecake, nods once.

“Wow,” Eijun breathes out, letting that sink in. He and Mochi-senpai have binged enough episodes of *MasterChef and Hell’s Kitchen* to know that being a chef is, quite possibly, the most stressful if not straight-up unenviable job in the universe. Cooking is one thing, but the mere standards for perfection were sometimes set so unbelievably high Eijun’d often have to walk out of the living room during the elimination rounds because he couldn’t stand the tension.

And this little embellishment to what he knows about Miyuki instantly cranks up his respect for the guy to a new high.

“Then…wait,” he starts, after a few moments of consideration, “Then how come you’re working at a bookstore? Shouldn’t you be working at a place like this?”

The suggestion makes Miyuki grimace. “I’d rather not,” he confides, adds in a wry shrug, “we have enough of all this in classes. If I had to do it full-time I probably wouldn’t be able to enjoy just coming out to a café and chilling over cake and coffee.”

Eijun absorbs all this, munching on the juicy little strawberry his slice of cake had come garnished with. All this – getting to know this brand new person from scratch, getting to learn their completely different outlooks in life – it’s unexpectedly intriguing.

It occurs to Eijun that he may, in a weird kind of way, have lived a very sheltered life. It’s not that he’s introverted – Harucchi is fond of pointing out that he’s the kind of person who knows everyone and who everyone knows. But for the longest time, the people immediately around him had been people who’d been around him for a long time, be it his family, his friends from back home, the Kominatos, and even Kuramochi-senpai, whom he’d known since his first year in
college, and that had already been almost three years ago.

And yeah, sure, he’s met and learned plenty of other people – his classmates, his colleagues at work, even a couple of people online he clicked with on similar interests. But never to the extent that he’d found himself sitting opposite them, vis-à-vis, intentionally picking away at them to glean as much as he can – for the simple reason that he is curious.

It’s been a long time since he’s had to be curious about a person, and maybe it’s this – or maybe it’s the near two-hour mark they’ve whiled away at this café, or the mild sugar high he’s having with all that tea and cake in his system, or simply the improbability of this entire situation – that makes him reckless.

“So you don’t normally ask out random customers for coffee?”

There’s a buzz of apprehension – anticipation? – at the back of his throat as he asks this, and it might not be the most tactful thing he’s ever said in his life, but he thinks he’s entitled to know.

And Miyuki, clearly, doesn’t have any qualms cooperating and it’s almost as though –

He’d been waiting for this.

“As a matter of fact,” he murmurs, and Eijun only realises how much more natural and candid his expressions had been until just recently as he watches, part-fascinated, part-wary, that same enigmatic smile that’d relentlessly thrown him off during their previous run-in, “I don’t.”

He leaves it at that, and once again, Eijun feels his questions are only being rewarded with more questions.

Except…are they?

Miyuki’d technically answered all of them.

Now it’s a question of reading in between the lines.

And Eijun suddenly finds that the prospect of doing that is…daunting.

He can’t explain his reaction, this weird but overpowering reluctance to look closer when only a couple of hours ago he’d been determined to dispel all his confusion surrounding this guy and this –

Inordinate interest he has in him.

So Eijun does the only thing he can think to do, obeying the spring-lock snap of instinct.

He ignores the subtext.

“I wouldn’t mind eating this stuff everyday though,” he chimes, and prays the hum of surrounding conversation is enough to drown out the almost-but-not-quite way his voice had pitched as he said that. He spoons the last of his cake into his mouth, fighting the urge to be even more obvious and checking his phone for the time.

Miyuki’s still smiling at him, and it’s still cryptic. “There’s a place a few blocks down,” he tells him, glib and unaffected, and it almost tricks Eijun into wondering, yet again, if he’d been imagining things. “They have this amazing chocolate crepe cake,” he pauses for a beat, and somehow it lends weight to what he’s about to say.
“We could go there next time, if you like.”

Next time.

“Are you offering to smuggle more contraband books to me?”

Miyuki chuckles. It’s a breathy, guttural sound.

“It’ll be my treat.”

“Miyuki,” Eijun tries to breathe in, tries to steady himself, tries to rationalise the completely ludicrous, madcap suggestion stringing itself together, crawling out of his mouth almost against his will, “Are you…are you flirting with me?”

This actually makes that undecipherable stare he’s been getting falter.

“Wait.” Miyuki pushes himself upright from where he’d been leaning himself on his folded arms against the table, eyeing him almost dubiously, “you’re asking me this now?”

When Eijun doesn’t answer – can’t – Miyuki laughs again, and this time it’s of a sharper, startled variety.

“And here I was thinking I was being so obvious.”

Why don’t you ask me out for coffee

Why don’t you ask me OUT for coffee

Why don’t you

Oh

As Eijun smoothly transitions into a meltdown, Miyuki regards him with visibly more uncertainty than he’d displayed at any point since he’d approached him by the empty dais of his sold-out manga.

“Does that…weird you out?”

Eijun, mind far too crowded with fresh new questions and much-too-late realisations, is only capable of blurting an unintelligent, “Huh?”

Miyuki, the edge taken out of the self-assurance Eijun’d been admiring mere hours ago, repeats, a little urgently, “Does it weird you out?” he hesitates, and adds, “A guy flirting with you?”

Oh, Eijun thinks, getting the gist of what he’s saying, and the honest answer, the one he ends up giving, is No. That’d not even factored among the many, many concerns demanding his attention, going berserk in his head, and heck, it’s never been an issue, not when he’d spent as much time fighting people shipping Steve Rogers with Natasha Romanoff because clearly Steve has a thing for Bucky, and the only deterrent stopping him from trying to matchmake Onii-san and Mochi-senpai’s the fact that their first date would probably involve killing him for interfering in the first place.

No, that’s not it, is what he says, because what weirds him out, completely stumps him, is that the revelation that he’d been flirted with is more difficult to swallow than believing Miyuki Kazuya is a drug-lord.
Miyuki Kazuya, who, for all the suaveness he’d unleashed on Eijun’s painfully oblivious self, is actually sitting there looking relieved.

He’s a little tempted to pinch himself.

“I…understand if this sudden for you,” is what he says, and if that isn’t a euphemism, Eijun doesn’t know what is, “and I’m not asking you to rush into anything. We can…take our time. You can take your time.”

Miyuki Kazuya, bookstore assistant, aspiring chef, probably-not-yakuza, reaches out a hand that very, very diffidently brushes against the back of his as he finishes, in a breathless, nervous hush, “I’d like you to think about it, though.”

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They part ways some time after that, saying their goodbyes in stilted, awkward undertones, Eijun carrying the novel he’d almost forgotten at the café –

And a new number in his phone.

Chapter End Notes

References to:
-Manga with humanoid cockroaches: Terra Formars. Simultaneously the best written, scientifically informative, poignant, heartbreaking and legit TERRIFYING manga I've ever read (I recommend manga over anime here). If you haven't read it or are thinking to try it, lemme tell you what I wish someone had told me before I started - be prepared to lose everyone you love. The story's ruthless - and also brilliant, but VERY VERY ruthless and unforgiving. It's worse than Game of Thrones and that's saying something.
-Narita Ryogo: the GENIUS behind Durarara!!! and Baccano light novels and anime. if you haven't already, please watch/read both, and prepare to have your mind BLOWN
-The Hunger Games trilogy: I'm of the books-over-movies camp and I'm sure Eijun is too
-The manga Eijun's totally losing it over is, unfortunately, fictional, but the closest I've come to a shoujo manga that inspired this kinda reaction from me would be Dengeki Daisy. Guys, even if shoujo manga isn't your thing, please try this one. I literally read it for over 14 hrs straight, not sleeping the whole night, because that's how freaking compelling the story is.
-Steve Rogers: Captain America; Natasha Romanoff: Black Widow; Bucky: aka Bucky Barnes/Winter Soldier

Okay I think that's it...I shall show myself out now orz I'm sorry for mistakes and general weirdness and I'm really hoping whatever questions you guys have will gradually be answered in the course of the story...thank you for reading! ~
“You’re early.”

Eijun doesn’t say anything – not when anything he says might trigger a violent takedown before he’s even managed to get his shoes off. Instead he calls out, “I’m home” like he hasn’t heard Mochi-senpai’s overtly sarcastic greeting – Eijun’s well aware that this is his personal way of compromising on the interrogation he likely wants to conduct, but has refused to ever since Oniisan’d casually pointed out that he acts like an overbearingly protective mother-hen.

That’s not to say Eijun doesn’t appreciate it. Normally he’s very mindful of texting Mochi-senpai ahead of time if he thinks he’s going to be late, or if he’s going to stop over somewhere on the way and wants to ask if there’s anything he wants him to grab coming back.

Today, all that forethought had slipped his mind.

Distracted, a little dazed, Eijun’s making a mechanical path for the couch to drop his bag when Mochi-senpai says, “Wait…did you actually get a pitch across today?”

“Huh?”

His flatmate, weaving his way round the kitchen counter and into the adjoining living space, eyes him critically.

Eijun’s skin prickles with self-awareness.

The brunt of Mochi-senpai’s stare is weighty, and the effect isn’t as damaged as it should be by the flowery apron he has thrown over the faded college baseball jersey he’s too attached to throw away.

After an indefinite interlude, during which Eijun has no choice but to shuffle awkwardly on the spot because clearly, Mochi-senpai is already not pleased with him for a) not telling him he was going to be late, and b) not volunteering information about what exactly he’d been late doing, before Senpai says, “…you look like you’re in a good mood, is all.”

It takes Eijun aback, because that’s honestly not what he’d been expecting.

“Which is not a bad thing, considering the mopey-ass face you bring back home most times,” Mochi-senpai follows up tactfully, drying his hands on a dishcloth and tossing it back on to the counter – he’d been doing dishes, Eijun deduces, his mind deciding to snag on that currently irrelevant factor than what Mochi-senpai’s words imply, “So I thought you’d finally found the balls to pitch a story.”

“Oh,” Eijun says, and is aware that he has mere milliseconds in which to decide what to do, “It’s because…I uh…”
“Found Onii-san a present!”

He’s not blind to the way this elicits a shift – slight though it may be – in his flatmate.

“Oh,” he says, light and breezy; his eyes do a quick sweep of the things Eijun’s carrying, but since he’s tucked the paper-bag containing the book inside his workbag, he doesn’t find what he’s looking for.

And Eijun’s perfectly aware that he wants to know.

But even on pain of death, he won’t ask.

“Yeah, I hope he likes it,” he breezes, hitching his bag more securely to his shoulder – Mochi-senpai’s proven he’s not above ransacking through Eijun’s things to get his answers (even though he always vehemently denies his accusations, before inevitably shutting him up by pulling some unfair *Street Fighter* move on him), and shuffles toward his room instead.

“What is it then,” he hears from behind him, voice nonchalant, and bites back a smile – for someone as tough and naturally menacing as Mochi-senpai, he’s surprisingly tsundere.

Not that he’s ever going to say that out loud. He’d learnt his lesson the first time.

Eijun devises a swift calculation in his head – there’s just a couple of feet to his bedroom door, and if he takes it at a sprint he thinks he can make it there before Mochi-senpai can tackle him. Weighing his chances, he decides to wing it.

“It’s a surprise!” he croons, in that intentionally tongue-in-cheek way he knows the guy hates, one foot already poised to give him that extra bit of momentum to make his escape.

But all he gets, when he risks a quick glance over his shoulder, is Senpai rolling his eyes at him.

“Good luck with that,” he drawls, uncrossing his arms and retreating back round the kitchen counter, presumably to resume washing dishes, “I don’t think Ryou-san knows how to feel surprise.”

Now, Eijun can’t exactly deny that – his eerie lack of reaction during even the most jarring of horror movie jumpscarels would have convinced him to suspect the guy’s a robot if he hadn’t known him so closely growing up.

But still…

“What are you getting him then?”

Mochi-senpai tips his head back from where he’s stood at the sink, just enough for Eijun to see the edge of a smirk. “It’s a surprise,” he calls, throwing his words back at him with no small measure of smugness, and the splash of water jetting against china drown out any protests Eijun could’ve made.

Still, though, he thinks, once he’s back in his room, snatching up the first pair of clothes on top of the clean laundry pile he’d left on his bed and forgotten to stick inside his closet, trying to remember if he’d left a dry towel in the bathroom – whether or not Mochi-senpai’d intended to, he’d confirmed a couple of suspicions Eijun had already been harbouring.
For starters – he had remembered Onii-san’s birthday.

And he’d got something in mind for him already.

Now he wishes he hadn’t played so coy – maybe if he’d come clean with what he’d bought, Mochi-senpai would have indulged him too. But then again…he did tend to be very close-lipped when it came to Onii-san, and as much as Mochi-senpai fusses over him, he’s not exactly one to play fair.

But Eijun still can’t help the immodest degree of curiosity with which he mentally nitpicks possibilities. It’s not as though Mochi-senpai’s stellar at gift-giving – for his birthday, he’d bought Eijun *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate*, and wound up playing the whole campaign by himself.

Eijun’d returned the favour and bought him a copy of some sordid shoujo manga too trashy for even Eijun’s tastes, and in the process put his spine in imminent danger.

But he’s convinced that won’t be the case with Onii-san. They’ve been tiptoeing around each other for a long time now, and the blustery, foul-mouthed shortstop had gone from forgetting how to construct sentences around Onii-san to holding long, deep, engaging conversations with him that no one else was usually invited – or welcome – to, and Harucchi’d agreed with him when he’d opined, just a couple of weeks ago, that it was only a matter of time before one of them made a move.

*I should know*, he’d said.

*No one understands romance better than me*, he’d said.

And tonight, he thinks, testing the temperature of the shower spray as he adjusts the knobs, pretending he doesn’t notice the way his heartbeat escalates underneath the hiss of water splattering against tile, he’s proven himself wrong.

He bites his lip, a nervous habit, and can still taste some of the residual sweetness of his cake.

***

“Wait…so, what?”

Eijun, lights turned down low, headphones clamped over shower-wet hair because he doesn’t want Mochi-senpai to hear anything and decide to exercise his apparent right to invade his flatmate’s privacy, shoots his laptop’s webcam a withering look.

“Wow,” he sees Wakana mouth, the moving pixels of her mouth oddly jerky – of all the days the internet had to be shitty, of course it would be today, “*I mean. Wow. I know you’re delusional* – “

“Oi – “

“But he was being SO obvious.”

Distressed, unhappy with the truth he’s tussling with getting shoved into his face, Eijun snaps, “Yes. Yes, I know. Can we get past that already?”

“You ACTUALLY thought he was a druglord? Like, for real?”

Eijun hopes the full effect of his thoroughly displeased glare is reaching Wakana, miles and miles away in Nagano and yet tempting him to kind of want to strangle her for so heartlessly laughing at
his…predicament. “I’m glad you’re finding this so droll.”

“Oh, don’t be so uppity, Ei-chan,” the image quality sucks, but Eijun can still make out the impressive eye-roll he’s getting, “It’s kind of hilarious.”

Before Eijun can retaliate though, momentarily forgetting about the importance of keeping his voice down, Wakana continues, “Poor guy, though…I almost feel bad for him.”

“You don’t even know him!”

“Yeah, but,” Wakana shrugs – Eijun can just barely make out the teddy-bear print of her jammies, and it sobers him up a little, the knowledge that the only reason they’re even doing this right now, at 1 a.m., when both of them should ideally be conked out, is because he’d emerged from his shower in a state of abject panic and sent a decidedly worrying yet cryptic message to his childhood friend, and she’d cared enough to immediately check up on him, “Poor fella was there putting all his cards on the table, and you were writing him off as a criminal.”

She has a point. She has a point that Eijun’d wrestled with all the way home, and having it spelled out to him only amplifies the bubble of guilt swelling inside his gut.

Not to mention the struggle to comprehend that he actually might be some kind of idiot.

“Never mind that,” he says, hurried; he’s well aware that his door is creaky enough to be heard even over his headphones, but he throws a cursory glance at it before drawing the microphone wire closer to his mouth just in case, “What should I do?”

Wakana takes her time answering. Eijun can’t really tell, because his screen is blurry and there are multi-coloured splotches swimming round everywhere, but he largely suspects that she’s enjoying herself.

“About what, exactly?” she says, finally, with so much nonchalance one wouldn’t think that their best friend was unburdening the biggest crisis to hit their life since learning about the casualties during the Battle of Hogwarts.

Eijun hisses. “I just spent an hour telling you “about what”!” Spittle flies from his mouth, and he only manages to catch himself from swiping at it at the last minute. His dignity’s taken enough of a battering already.

“What do you WANT to do?”

“What do you mean?” tense, stressed out, fatigued but with too much sugar in his bloodstream to let him have restless sleep, Eijun thinks he might be close to the end of his tether. He wonders, in hindsight, whether this’d even been a good decision – since Wakana is the only person he knows in an actual, committed relationship, he’d thought she would have some good advice about the motions surrounding that concept, but –

“I mean,” even though the sound is choppy, it’s obvious that Wakana’s tone is patronising, like she’s talking to a kid, and if Eijun didn’t so badly need her advice right now he swears he wouldn’t have tolerated it, “He asked you out, yeah? So, basically, it’s a question of figuring out if you want to go out with him, or not.”

He feels lightheaded. “Why do you sound so blasé about this?” he demands, unable to think.

“What’s there to be worked up over? Do you not like him?”
This brings Eijun to a stuttering stop. Over hordes of terabytes being transmitted wirelessly across Japan, he can sense Wakana studying him.

“I…don’t even know him,” is what he ultimately offers; his voice is weak.

“Yes, but that’s not the question. Do you like him? Is he nice? Is he easy to talk to? Can you see yourself wanting to maybe consider a relationship with him?”

The word “relationship” accosts him with a fresh bout of panic. Despite the poor connection, Wakana evidently somehow tunes in to it.

“Okay, let’s back up and take this a step at a time. First of all, why are you freaking out?”

Aware that he’s no longer being teased, and soothed by the sober patience he can hear in a familiar voice he’s trusted with some of his darkest secrets – Wakana is the only person in the world who knows that he’d kind of liked *The Phantom Menace* – Eijun wills himself to take a deep breath and sort out his thoughts.

“I…wasn’t expecting it. It came out of the – hey!” He cuts himself off, indignant, because although the video is glitching he’s pretty sure that was a snort.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry…it’s just that…oh my gosh, he was being SO obvious!” Eijun, pained, waits for her giggling fit to subside, “Anyway, alright. So you weren’t expecting it and it came as a shock. Yes?”

“Yes.”

Virtual Wakana leans forward. “But was it a bad shock?”

Again, this was probing on uncharted territory. Eijun hesitates. Wakana catches on.

“Let’s rephrase that,” she contends, tapping her chin thoughtfully for a few moments. “Did you feel…weirded out by it?”

*That’s the same question he’d asked,* is what that tiny little voice inside his head, subdued and meek now, reminds him. Aloud, he gives the same answer he’d given then. “…no.”

“Okay…did you maybe find it…unwelcome?”

Unexpected? Yes.

Unwelcome?

“I guess…not?” he says, haltingly, uncertain.

He’d spent the entire train ride obsessively going over every scrap of what he could remember from their time in the café – which, he’d discovered in retrospect, had clocked in at slightly over three hours – and at this point he’s pretty sure most of the details are scored into his memory.

And once he’d gotten over the initial shock of it, and tried to think it over coolly, tried to dissect how it’d made him *feel* –

He can’t really deny that it did feel kind of…nice.

To be…sought after.
To be liked.

But that’s a horrible premise to make decisions off of, and he tells Wakana as much. Eijun’s been a vocal critic of those air-headed, vapid characters in some of the lesser impressive manga he’s come across, where one of the protagonists – unfortunately, usually the girl – completely loses their head over the first individual of the opposite sex who shows the slightest amount of kindness to them. He supposes, darkly, that it’s better than the alternative of stories where characters are besotted with people with borderline abusive tendencies, but still –

“Ei-chan, you’re spacing out.”

“Sorry,” he shakes his head, running a hand through his hair before bunching some of it and giving it a tug – the self-inflicted twinge of pain helps clear his mind up some, though it inspires a very unamused look from Wakana.

“So, you weren’t weirded out by it, and you didn’t find it unwelcome. And from what you’ve told me, he didn’t try to force you or get an answer out of you either, yeah?”

“No,” Eijun murmurs – the patch of skin at the back of his hand, where Miyuki had run the very tips of his fingers in a touch that was barely even a touch, had tingled all the way home. “He said…” I’d like you to think about it “I could take my time.”

“Good,” she sounds pleased, although Eijun can’t make out her expression as she nods, “good.”

But therein lies the conundrum. Even though he’d said that, somewhere in the maybe-not-so-distant future, Eijun would have to give him an answer. Eijun doesn’t know what that answer is.

“You’re overthinking again.”

Defensive, he retorts, “What else am I supposed to do? I mean…we exchanged phone numbers. I go to that store at least twice every month. Sooner or later, he’s going to expect an answer from me.”

“Ei-chan, I swear…” Wakana’s shaking her head at him again, but this time he thinks he can hear a smile underneath the disbelief, “It doesn’t have to be so complicated, okay? He hasn’t proposed marriage!”

Eijun swears she’d timed this intentionally to the moment he’d reached over for the bottle he keeps by his bed to chug some water.

Ignoring his spluttering, she continues, “Look. It’s very simple. I mean…the fact that you didn’t turn him down there and then is a sign that there might be something to this, right?”

“I - !” He’s blushing. He knows he is, and the paranoia that hounds him around the clock convinces him that in spite of crappy video quality and dim lighting, Wakana can see. “I was too shocked to do anything!”

“But you took his number,” Wakana calmly counters, “and gave him yours.”

“He probably already knows my number, or can get it,” Eijun argues back, “the database – “

“But in giving it to him yourself, you gave him permission to contact you.”
His mouth snaps shut.

He hears a heavy, exasperated exhale of air on the other end, and something that sounds like *Boys*, before she humours him again, “Alright, then let’s just get one last thing into perspective. Okay?”

Dubious, tired, emotionally frayed out, Eijun croaks, “Okay.”

“Did you enjoy yourself with him?”

The question doesn’t surprise him. It’s been inside his skull, prowling at the edges, this entire time, but as it stalks into the limelight, Eijun’s breath still hitches a little, because this thought hadn’t been meant to surface. He’d gone into that situation partly to repay a bookstore assistant for his arduous efforts at what is, technically, his job, and partly to find some kind of closure so he didn’t sacrifice more brain-cells than he had to trying to figure out where he stood with that guy.

But he’d stayed. For much longer than obligatory coffee-meetings are intended to last.

He’d *stayed*, and maybe even for the tiniest fraction of time, forgotten all about leaving.

“I did,” he admits, and he’s not sure why his voice drops down into a hush.

As though he’s imparting a secret.

“And – excluding everything about dates and favours and the like – would you want to hang out with him again?”

That’s the question isn’t it?

Because as conflicted as Eijun’s felt, as thrown off as he’d been by someone showing romantic interest in him, as pressured as he suddenly feels to give an answer, torn between the absurdity of going along because someone’d gone out of their way to try and court him, and this innate unwillingness to disappoint that’s just a part of who Eijun is, there’s one thing that he’d come to terms with, even before Miyuki’d admitted to flirting with him, even before the oddities in his behaviour’d started to make sense to Eijun –

And that’d been that he had been having fun.

“Yes.”

“Now if that isn’t reason enough to give this thing a shot,” Wakana tells him, warm and comforting, channelling all the assurance he so desperately needs when his mind is a mess and his thoughts are fragmented nothings, “then I don’t know what is.”

Chapter End Notes

No Miyuki in this chapter - at least physically. I did say this was slow-build, and since they've just met, minus the pre-established relationship we have in the anime/manga, it'd realistically take some time for the two of them to get together...I hope you guys are okay with that and willing to bear with me though /eep

Just because I didn't wanna leave y'all off without at least a LITTLE Misawa interaction, though, I wrote TWO chapters and am posting the next one now, so...I
hope you won't be mad at me (/u/)

References to:
-The Phantom Menace: first of the weird Star Wars prequels, which came after the original trilogy beginning with Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope
-Battle of Hogwarts: yeah, idc how many heartbreaking shows/stories I've gone through in this lifetime, I will never forgive Rowling for the people she knocked off in Deathly Hallows
-Assassin's Creed Syndicate: most recent Assassin's Creed game, set in Industrial Revolution England AND YOU GET TO PLAY AS A GIRL. YAS. aside from botched up and wildly inaccurate historical depictions, the only complaint I have is "why no steampunk"
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

eyyy idk what's going on anymore

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He’s sleep-deprived, he’s cranky, he has a splitting headache, and he ends up pulling off another sheet of paper off his note-pad, crumpling it up more viciously than absolutely necessary.

Inspiration is an elusive bastard.

With eyelids itching and heavy, Eijun glances at the time – he has roughly two hours until the weekly roundtable Takigawa-san’s such a huge propagator of, that one day every week where he’d come in, in person, and pick the brains of the newbies and undergraduates, giving everyone a chance to air their thoughts and opinions and ideas –

Giving them a chance to make them reality.

So far, Kanemaru, the guy who sits beside him, has had three articles published in their magazine. Three.

And Eijun doesn’t want to compare, and he understands this isn’t a competition, but…

It’s not easy.

He reaches for his mouse, scouts through his emails for the articles of the issue they’d just sent to the printers – with the next batch of articles currently in the works, there isn’t anything to do for layout except just wait for the finalised details of each piece, dimensions for pictures and length of columns et cetera. Right now, he has nothing to do.

Right now, he has nothing to do, and when he has nothing to do, he thinks too much, and that’s always been his downfall.

He’s found himself scouring through Kanemaru’s pieces again without thinking.

7 Smartphones You Can Get Instead of the New iPhone

Are the Xbox One’s Days Numbered?

Ddos Scare – How Likely are Mr. Robot’s FSociety?

Tech. So much tech. That’s all this guy writes about, and what with the self-driving cars and automated trains and the world’s worth of data in clouds, Eijun gets the appeal – it’s timely, it’s relevant, it’s newsworthy, and it’s almost a given to get picked up, especially when it requires at least a degree of in-depth expertise and knowledge not everyone possesses or specialises in. It’s not a fair frame of reference for him to try and draw inspiration from – Harucchi’s pointed this out whenever he’s caught him at it –

But it’s not just here that Eijun feels out of his depth.
He flits through the articles. Fashion. Food. Travel. Politics. Lifestyle. They slot their way into neat little categories the way Eijun slots these texts into the columns he’s stuck laying out, week after week after week. It’s a mind-numbing activity, mechanical, like he’s some kind of pre-programmed robot churning out its daily script of algorithms – nothing more, nothing less. Yeah, sure, placement is key – he has his moments of brilliance, and it’s nice when Takigawa-san notices those and commends him for it – but they are few and far between. It’s…insipid. It’s tedious. It’s not what he wants to be doing.

The blank sheet of paper, with the nib of his pen bleeding into the spot where he’d landed it and discovered he had nothing to write down, mocks him.

**Come on. Something. There must be something.**

Book reviews? No. Who needed an article about that when you could just Google reviews on Amazon Books or Goodreads?

Then what?

*Then what?*

Then walking into another roundtable, probably, and listening to people expertly pitch stories about back-packing, about fusion cuisine, about Pokemon Go, about things he doesn’t get or understand and can’t bring himself to be interested in, and getting stuck with layout again.

It’s a vicious cycle. He doesn’t know how to break out of it.

The fear, looming in the distance, that he might never be able to, is so close.

One hour, thirty-five minutes.

An excruciatingly blank piece of paper with an inkblot.

One hour, thirty-four minutes.

He checks his phone, and –

There’s a message.

*So*

*I started*

There’s a picture file.

There’s a picture file and Eijun, brain filled with static, thumbs at it.

It’s a book cover.

*A manga cover,* specifically.

It gets an unexpectedly powerful reaction out of him, and maybe if he were slightly more awake, he’d have been more prudent in how he’d proceeded.

Instead all that does happen is he forgets to turn off the capslock in his excitement.

“Ohm”
“HOW DO YOU LIKE IT SO FAR???”

In retrospect, perhaps this is too spirited a response – his thumb had basically smashed the “question mark” button and muscle-memory’d made him hit send before he could think this through. He’d not even checked the time-stamps to see when those messages had arrived, and –

That’s okay, because he gets a text back in mere seconds and doesn’t have to spend too long overanalysing it.

*It doesn’t read like I would expect it to at all*

*That curveball at the end of the first chapter*

Eijun’s typing even before the three fade-in bubbles portending whatever message is being written on the other side can pop back in on his screen.

*“IKR!”*

*“I WAS TOTALLY NOT EXPECTING IT!!!!”*

*“HOW FAR INTO IT ARE YOU”*

*“sorry about the capslock >_<”*

Bubble. Bubble.

*I finished volume 1 like five minutes ago*

*Lol*

*No worries*

*I can sense your excitement from here*

And Eijun *is* excited. If Kanemaru were to cease drafting out his own pitch in the neighbouring cubicle and peek into his, he might have gotten an eyeful – a raccoon-eyed, haggard looking intern grinning toothily away at his phone screen.

Perhaps blissfully, capable at the moment of just barely functioning as an average human, this doesn’t occur to Eijun’s generally over-anxious mind.

It’s hard to believe that half the reason he’d had so much trouble falling asleep in the first place had been because of his inability to do the math of when, exactly, would be the appropriate time to initiate a conversation.

*Do I message him?* he’d demanded of Wakana, after categorically refusing to tell her the full name of his…suitor, so she could stalk him online. *Do I wait for him to message me?! What do I say?!

*Give it a day or so,* had been her advice – *see if he contacts you. Or...if you feel naturally inclined to contact him yourself.*

It’s been less than a day.

Eijun hasn’t yet noticed.

Eijun’s busy typing out a giddy reply.
“I can’t believe you actually started reading it omg”

Bubbles. He watches them swish in their little boxes, waiting.

You did such a good job selling it

How could I not

There’s a tiny square at the top left corner of the chat window, and it’s his face.

Eijun falters. He can’t think. His nerves, overworked from the night before, are hardly in working order.

“Do you” he types, chews on his lip, trying to fumble through the fog and unearth something coherent, “mean that”

He’s got just enough judgement left not to press send.

Instead, he messages, “Are you going to continue?”

The bubbles take longer this time.

What, are you serious

Of course I will

That cliffhanger at the end was the cruelest thing since Game of Thrones Season 5

Relief. That’s what he feels. Somehow, Miyuki actually liking the story he loves so very much makes him feel a lot better than if he were just reading it to impress him or something – which would, technically, still be very flattering. But still. This makes him…

Happy.

“I don’t actually watch Game of Thrones”

“It’s too”

“Tense”

“For me:( “

Bubbles.

They give him time to think, It’s surprising easy talking to him.

They give him time to think, It’s ironic.

His phone trembles under the onslaught of consecutive back-to-back messages.

Whaaat

Okay

I agree that it’s

Unforgiving to say the least
But if you enjoy plot twists and crazy storytelling

I mean you like Narita Ryogo

You’d probably love Game of Thrones

Now Eijun wants to say, I can sense your excitement from here. Smiling a little – his eyes flicker to the chat icon, Miyuki’s profile picture, as he does – he replies with, “My flatmate’s tried to get me into it – I lost it within the first couple of minutes”

He doesn’t add that Mochi-senpai’d given up trying after he’d spent that first hardly completed episode bawling over a dead animal.

The bubbles pop on his screen at almost ferocious speed.

The beginning of Baccano was brutal too, remember?

Eijun blinks. “Good point” He’d almost given up on it after the first five minutes – but waiting it out was probably one of the best decisions he had ever made. It’d still been bloody and messy and at parts almost traumatising but still –

Have I convinced you to give it another shot?

Game of Thrones is everywhere, if he’s honest, and it’s cropped up more than a few times in their roundtable sessions as well, and it’s got all those aspects of newsworthiness he’s been taught repetitively in class to uphold, and as much as Eijun’s always zoned out, pretty much as he always does when Mochi-senpai has a self-destructive rampage after a particularly emotionally destructive episode, he clearly needs to broaden his horizons, and try new things, if he’s hoping to pitch anything at all during what’s left of his internship…

“Maybe” he sends back.

His phone buzzes in less than a second.

Sigh

I wish I were as persuasive as you

It makes his eyes widen in surprise. Persistent, he’s been called before. Borderline annoying? Plenty of times. Stubborn and incorrigible and obstinate are on the list too.

But persuasive?

“I was fanboying”

“Shamelessly”

A laugh emoji pops up. It doesn’t look mocking.

That was very eloquent fanboying, if you ask me

Huh. Eijun wonders again whether Miyuki’s just buttering him up at this point – but somehow, it doesn’t feel like it. Somehow, it doesn’t feel like Miyuki would do that.

You don’t even know him, the tiny, overly cautious voice in his head reminds him – the same argument he’d used to try and rationalise with Wakana. His gut refuses to listen.
It makes sense, probably. He’d been talking about something he adores, has invested more time in than is probably healthy, read and re-read, theorised and broken down and rebuilt and theorised again, and that combination of knowledge and passion would probably come off as compelling. After all, he’d been pretty much floored by the extent of Miyuki’s knowledge of things like the different brews of coffee, the short little breakdown he’d been given when he’d asked what exactly a macchiato is clearing up a lifetime of confusion regarding just how espressos and cappuccinos and Americanos are different from one another, and it’d so obviously been something he was heavily interested in, from the composed enthusiasm with which he’d explained it all to him, and Eijun’d learnt so much in just a couple of hours, that he –

Thinks –

“Sorry, I have to go now”

“I have a meeting”

He just has enough time to glance at the clock after he’s scribbling feverishly on a piece of paper before the words flee him.

Sixteen minutes.

***

It’s not that he’s too dogged to learn about new things – to write about new things. It’s not that at all. But when you put yourself with other people who look like, who sound like, they know exactly what they’re saying, like they’re connoisseurs in their fields while you barely even qualify as a noob…it makes you feel inadequate. It makes you afraid, to try new things, to be a little daring, to take chances. It makes you feel as though you can try and it won’t be good enough, and that prospect of finality is so daunting sometimes you’re not brave enough to try.

Eijun’s thinking all these things, tussling with it, his nerves, his insecurities, even as he stretches his hand into the air when Takigawa-san completes the review of how well they’d met their weekly milestones, and asks if there’s anyone with a story to pitch him.

His eyes fall on Eijun immediately. So do a couple of others, including Harucchi, who, he can see from the corner of his eye, is actually gaping at him.

This is to be expected, Eijun tells himself. He’s not one of the usual faces volunteering for this kind of thing. This would in fact be the first (the last? No shut up don’t think that) time he’s doing this.

Attempting.

Trying.

It’s terrifying.

“Eijun,” Takigawa-san calls in his pleasant, deep tenor – he doesn’t appear fazed, but Eijun supposes you’d have to have a pretty decent poker-face to weather the kind of obstacles this guy had on the way up. He’d spoken, back at that seminar at his university, of how for the longest time, people just refused to take him seriously. He was too young. Too inexperienced. Too ambitious. Perhaps that’s why he preferred this kind of arrangement – this flat, open door policy where he interacted on the same level with all his employees, be they top management or mere interns. “You have a pitch for us?”

Eijun’s mouth is uncomfortably dry. “Yes,” he croaks, and in a state of blind panic almost stands
up, reverting to the automatic reflex drilled into him when he’d been in school and would be called on by one of the teachers.

But he’s not in school – he’s at work, amongst colleagues, future editors and journalists and media professionals, and he understands, in a startling flash of clarity, that it’s now or never.

“Go on,” Takigawa-san invites him, cordial – they’re sitting in a circle, the big conference table dutifully moved to the side, and Takigawa-san, with his ruffled hair, bright eyes, loose tie and sleeves rolled almost up to his elbows, could easily pass for one of them.

It’s both impressive and anxiety-inducing.

“Right,” Eijun mutters, more to himself than anyone else, “So. Café-culture…is a thing.”

_Ect Miyuki wouldn’t think you so eloquent now, would he._

“And it’s not a thing someone like me knows much about,” he continues, willing his heart not to explode out of his chest – he can feel the embarrassed heat singeing him from the inside out, concentrated in his face, but he bulls forth, “in fact, I didn’t know all these types of coffees are different because of the ratio of brewed coffee to milk and cream, until yesterday.”

It’s as he’s explaining this that he recalls, in a spectacular lack of foresight, that he hasn’t told Harucchi about Miyuki yet.

Oh, he has so much explaining to do.

Partly distracted by this, maybe thankfully so, he goes on, “And then there are so many cafes popping up these days, everywhere – French, Japanese, Franco-Japanese…the choices are kind of overwhelming. Especially, again…for someone who doesn’t really go to cafes often.”

Rambling. He knows he’s rambling. He’s basically outlining all that he doesn’t know about what he’s chosen to talk about. Takigawa-san might be smiling at him, brisk and encouraging, but that might be because Eijun is doing all his work for him, neatly sabotaging himself so Takigawa-san won’t even have to turn him down.

“So I was thinking of doing an article,” he pushes on, ignores the heated flush of his skin, ignores the slight way his voice shakes – what’s the worst that could happen, after all? He’d get turned down. He’d get turned down and he’d be stuck doing layouts for the rest of his life. “About a couple of…rules of thumb, let’s say, for people to enjoy their experience, when they go to a new café.”

He finishes, stammers off lamely, and is at this point pretty much ready to casually throw himself out of one of the windows here when Takigawa-san levels one, decisive nod in his direction, and asks, “Do you have anything specific in mind? Regarding the content?”

Wait

Wait

Wait –

Harucchi’s hand is clutched into the edge of his sweater, surreptitious.

Supportive.
“Well, for instance, I was thinking one of the points – this would be a listicle – would be about how you should watch for what most people seem to be ordering,” Eijun’s jittery, and he’s probably talking too fast, but there’s something about the way Takigawa-san is hanging on to his fractured diction with rapt attention spurring him on, “What people most commonly tend to order would probably be the best item in the house, and… I was thinking the subtitle would be… *I’ll have what she’s having.*"

The unexpected happens.

Takigawa-san *laughs.*

He throws back his head, with a short, merry bark, and when he looks at Eijun again, clapping a hand on his knee, his eyes are twinkling.

“Good one,” he says, appreciative, and Eijun, beyond relieved that he’d gotten the reference, manages to breathe again.

“Thank you,” he mumbles, and now he’s embarrassed for different reasons, “the advice, I actually got from a – friend. Who’s doing his Master’s in hospitality and – ” is he improvising? Is he bullshitting? Is this some on-the-fly stroke of genius, or subconscious wish fulfilment? “I could interview him, for soundbites for this piece.”

Takigawa-san nods, and he’s still *smiling,* and he looks *intrigued,* and everything is ethereal and it’s probably all a dream. “Tell me more.”

By the time Eijun gets down to the “*Of Mousse and Men*” bullet point on his notes, he’s scored his first article.

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**Chapter End Notes**

**References:**

- *Mr. Robot/Fsociety:* from the series Mr. Robot, which has incidentally broken my mind. [SEASON 3 PLS HURRY.](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3305704/)
- *Game of Thrones:* I don’t imagine Eijun would be into the kind of ruthless, merciless, heartbreaking world that is Game of Thrones. But I do imagine both Mochi and Miyuki would love it. Like, I know the show has been overhyped endlessly by so many people but I personally love the *A Song of Ice and Fire* book series and the GoT show because they are SO intricate - thousands of years of lore, dozens of different locations, hundreds of characters, umpteen interlocking plotlines, historical references and a narrative so surprising it just catches you off guard at every turn - it’s an entire alternate universe with years and years of documented history, all from the mind of one man, and. gah. it’s everything I could ask for in fantasy… apart from the fact that y’know. everyone dies ;A; (sorry for the spaz i slipped)
- *Baccano:* again. I must stress. Pleeease try this. The anime hops between different storylines, time periods and characters and yet somehow ties everything together so seamlessly by the time you reach the end you kind of have to go looking for your jaw coz it fell off your face in awe
- "I’ll have what she's having" - a line considered one of the most memorable and iconic in film history, from the rom-com, *When Harry Met Sally*
- *Of Mousse and Men:* play on the title of the book "*Of Mice of Men*", coincidentally
also the novel that destroyed me at age twelve.

//breathe's out. OKAY. Thank you all SO MUCH for sticking to this fic and for being so encouraging and sweet and amazing. It means so much to me and honestly, given how messy life gets sometimes, you guys are absolute godsend, always brightening up my day. I say it so so much, but please know that I appreciate everything y'all have done for me, from the bottom of my heart.
this was supposed to go up way earlier but I had to kinda work over the weekend and am pulling a lotta overtime so I just managed to work on it now...so i'm really really really REALLY REALLYYYYY sorry if this chapter isn't up to par and for any grammar mistakes or typos this might have - I'll try to fix everything ASAP!

THANK YOU ALL SO MUCH for your overwhelming love for this fic - y'all absolute angels, that's what you are. Work's still kinda hectic, since we're in the final stages of a big project, and I might be a bit late getting back to you lovelies BUT I WILL DEFINITELY GET BACK TO YOU COME HELL OR HIGH WATER. Did I mention I love y'all?

writing their second "date" was more terrifying than the first one and i am seriously hoping i didn't screw up here orz

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eijun’s not the type to really dwell on what he’s wearing.

Sometimes he wears graphic T-shirts. Sometimes it’s flannel. Sometimes it’s both, if he’s feeling like expending a little effort. Or if it’s on the chilly side of a pleasant day.

Today, he nervously pats down the front of a pastel knitted sweater, angling himself in front of the bathroom mirror critically to gauge if the shirt collar peeking out the woolly neckline is too obtrusively wrinkled.

He’d not been this antsy over picking an outfit since going for his internship interview.

And even then, he’d had Onii-san to mow through his wardrobe before grimly announcing they’re going shopping.

Eijun doesn’t have Onii-san right now though. Eijun doesn’t even know how he’d go about enlisting Onii-san’s help.

He feels Mochi-senpai’s eyes snag on him and narrow suspiciously the moment he steps out of his room.

“…Ryou-san’s dinner thing is in the evening, you know,” is what he says. Eijun doesn’t need to think much to translate what that’s meant to say.

Where the hell are you going so early on a Sunday?

He wishes he really had gone through with his plan of leaving before Mochi-senpai’d come back from his morning run. At least then he’d not have to explain what he’s doing wide awake before noon on a weekend.

“I’m – uh, going out for a little while,” he says it as glibly as he can, “I’ll be back before you leave for Onii-san’s.”
Mochi-senpai considers him for a while, eyes slanted to slits, and one would think Eijun were some ill-disciplined child with a propensity to fib – but Eijun’s lived with this guy long enough to understand that he’s probably trying to figure out the best way to find out where Eijun’s going without having to outright ask.

*You fuss over him so, Youichi. Like some kind of mother hen.*

Eijun doesn’t know whether Onii-san’d improved or debilitated their situation. As much as Mochi-senpai resents being called out for possessing something remotely resembling concern for the wellbeing of others, the tacit understanding that Onii-san would skin Mochi-senpai alive if something were to happen to Eijun under the shortstop’s care’d made the guy incredibly vigilant about his duties as a flatmate.

“Are you going for a date?”

Nope.

He takes that back.

Mochi-senpai’s definitely trying to kill him.

“Wh-what?”

The shortstop leans back into the couch he’d been reclined in, dangling his can of Pocari over its arm, seemingly impervious to how badly he’s just upped Eijun’s blood pressure.

“You mentioned the other time that someone asked you out for coffee,” and Eijun ought to question, really, why that sounds accusatory, like he’s just perpetuated the world’s greatest slight, but at this moment, frazzled as he is from the minutes he’d spent in front of the mirror trying to get his bangs to cooperate with him, he doesn’t have that presence of mind. “And now you’re going out – on a *Sunday morning* – all dolled up. So…did you finally get yourself a girlfriend?”

Tsundere or not, there’s a reason they call this guy the Cheetah.

“I’m…going to do an interview,” he says, and wills himself not to fidget, “for the article I pitched on Friday.”

“Oh,” it takes less than a half-second for Mochi-senpai’s brow to clear up, all the suspicion melting off his face. The change is so abrupt it’d almost be unsettling, if Eijun weren’t so relieved, “Right. Okay then – good luck.”

He says this last bit offhandedly, digging an arm in between the couch cushions in evident pursuit of the TV remote, but Eijun knows he’d meant it, and he’d meant it sincerely – he’d not been able to wait until he got home to share the news with Senpai after his pitch, calling from his cubicle and whispering in fervent undertones, and he knows that the genuinely pleased inflection he’d detected over that call hadn’t been his imagination.

*Well, FINALLY. At least you’re not gonna be coming home looking like some kinda depressed zombie.*

*Can zombies be depre-*

*Shut up.*

*Sorry.*
And...congrats.

He’d meant it, Eijun knows this, just like Harucchi had meant it, tackling him into a hug no sooner than they’d left the conference room and gushing over how great his pitch’d been, bright-eyed and enthused and more than a little biased, but it’d only inflated the exhilarated joy ballooning inside of Eijun’s ribs, threatening to combust by the time he’s called Onii-san and lapped up his warm, lilting words of praise, because Onii-san is sparing with praise and Eijun doesn’t often find himself at the receiving end of it, and he’d called his mum, had an obscenely loud shouting match with his granddad rendered mostly incoherent because he’d been in a lift with poor connection, and of course Wakana, who squealed so loud she almost pierced his eardrum before rambling how she’d known all along that he could do it –

But they weren’t the only people he’d contacted.

Conscious of the anxious tremors in his gut, a little motion-sick even though he can barely tell they’re moving, sitting as he is for once as his train speeds off, Eijun pulls his phone out of his jeans’ pocket and thumbs through to the messages he’s read so many times since Friday that he has them memorised.

The butterflies in his tummy still swoop, though, when he spots the little icon of a profile picture.

He’d messaged first this time.

_I owe you_

_Now time_

The timestamp shows the response’d come within the same minute.

??

Eijun can clearly remember it. Can clearly remember lying in his bed, forgoing his shower, forgoing changing out of his clothes, so exhausted he can feel his bones melding into his mattress and yet unable to relax, adrenaline still not entirely flushed out of his system, phone gripped in his hand, warm, because he’d been abusing it almost nonstop as he made his way down all the contacts on his speed-dial list, and the entire time, there’s been another name, another contact, at the back of his mind, patiently waiting to be acknowledged.

And Eijun, on the brink of sleep, teetering in an unhealthy place between fatigue and hysteria, high off the belated rush that comes from a risk that pays off, had decided to take yet another one.

_I got to pitch my first story today_

_Use that tip you gave me_

_About knowing what to order_

Bubbles.

Bubbles.

Eijun had stared at them, hard, ignoring that lurching feeling of free-falling that comes from transcending the time-limit the human body’s allowed to go without rest.

His heart’d done a little ping of its own when his phone next buzzed with an incoming message.
Wow!

Congratulations!!!

So...I guess you can say I was your inspiration? ;)

It might have been because he’s not functioning at maximum capacity, it might have been because he’d still been riding the high of feeling a story buzz like static in his fingertips, the words he’d wanted, needed, hunted for so desperately now ready and waiting, the confidence that if he were to open up his laptop then and there and closed his eyes, he’d see them scored in behind his eyelids, new phrases popping up at random that he thinks he’d want to use – “But first, let me take a selfie” would make a nice subheading for the bit where he talks about atmosphere, a part of him had been disjointedly thinking –

Or maybe it’d just been the security of knowing where he stands with him. Or the sheer weight of his gratitude because whether he’d intended to or not, he’d been the key to unlocking Eijun’s writer’s bloc -

Whatever it is, Eijun doesn’t hesitate to reply.

Thank you!!

I seriously owe you

Big time

Bubbles.

Bubbles.

And then –

About that chocolate crepe cake, then...

It’s this line that he keeps catching on.

It’s this line that his sleep-addled brain singing *Everything is Awesome* on loop had responded to with a Sunday?

It’s this line that his wakeful self’d later realised had been a question.

*It means he didn’t presume*, had been Wakana’s interpretation, when Eijun’d totally freaked out when he woke up in crumpled slacks and sent screenshots of their entire conversation to her for analysis, *he didn’t take your ‘yes’ for granted*

Eijun has no idea what that means, but from the way it makes this snug, cosy heat tickle behind his ribs, he doesn’t think it’s a *bad* thing.

The tickling gets a bit *intense*, though, when he finds himself manoeuvring down an unfamiliar block, sneakers crunching on the grit of concrete as he sweeps his eye over the storefronts, searching for the name he’d Googled and studied the map of because even now, with his GPS telling him he’s close, there’s a panicky uncertainty niggling at the back of his head telling him that he’ll have as much luck finding it as Muggles have finding the Leaky Cauldron because Eijun in general is *horrible* with directions and –

*This is real*, is one of the many thoughts crisscrossing inside of his head, as hard to keep track of as
a single firefly in a swarm of fireflies.

One other thought, belonging to his psyche’s resident coward, suggests, *It’s not too late to turn back*

Another squeaks, *Maybe he forgot. Maybe he –*

“Eijun!”

Many things happen at once – he almost drops his phone, his conditioned response to jumpscare from all those days he’d been forced to endure Mochi-senpai binge playing *Five Nights at Freddy’s* making him stiffen up so he doesn’t end up shrieking, his heart leapfrogs and almost ruptures his lungs in the process, and one of the umpteen voices in his head echo *Eijun* back, because this is the first time he’s addressed him by name, *any* name –

But the most telling reaction of all is the way he can feel the ends of his mouth curl up, automatic, even as he turns in the direction the call had come from, and

*Ah*

“Hi,” he hears himself say, and he can feel the smile firmly against his face, and that tickling’s back again, rampant and anxious, but not unpleasant.

The smile’s returned to him, and Eijun thinks this is the first time he’s seen Miyuki dressed casually – red-and-white flannel, faded blue jeans.

It drills in the contrast between their first outing and this one more acutely than any amount of stressing out up to this point had.

“Hi,” Miyuki grins back, and Eijun’s brain scrambles to reacquaint himself with the voice a part of him had probably been trying to recreate, enunciating the words that up to a couple of minutes ago he’d been seeing against a screen.

*It’s only been two days*, that disbelieving voice in his head chides, and another part of him says, just as stunned, *I know.*

Reeling as he is from the paradigm shift that’s apparently happened inside of him without his knowledge in the space of a little over forty-eight hours, a little distracted trying to adapt to the change in the context underscoring the last time they’d met, Eijun’s a bit startled when Miyuki suggests, “Shall we?”

***

“Do you know how to make this?”

Miyuki probably detects the note of awe to Eijun’s question – he catches a smile out of the corner of his eye as he examines the slice of cake on his plate, fascinated by the papery thin layers of crepe stacked neatly with chocolate custard oozing out from the sides, drizzled with a ruby-red sauce that’s making Eijun’s mouth water.

“It’s not really all that difficult if you know how to make crepes,” Miyuki says, his cheek resting against his palm, elbow resting at the edge of the table, “then it’s just a question of layering. Try it?”

Eijun doesn’t require any more encouragement.
The first mouthful was him muffling a delighted squeal, “*Thisshogood!*”

Rich, decadent chocolate caresses his taste-buds, creamy custard melting, and the literal icing on the cake, a tangy, sour-sweet kick to even out the sugariness –

“This strawberry sauce is amazing,” he hushes, his tongue automatically feeling around his teeth to catch the little seeds he’s so used to getting stuck there whenever he’s pigging out on the fruit.

In the light of day, the bright, snowy-gold of midday streaming in through the window they got a booth at, Eijun can see more of Miyuki’s expressions than he remembers seeing the last time they’d found themselves in a similar situation.

Or maybe this time, he’s really looking.

“Well, that’s a relief,” Miyuki twinkles at him, smile relaxed, “this was my best guess.”

Eijun doesn’t get it. He tips his head, quizzical, mouth too occupied with cake to speak.

“I mean,” there’s a laugh colouring Miyuki’s elaboration, “this place has the best strawberry sauce I know. And…you like strawberry, don’t you?”

If the way Eijun’s jaw pauses mid-chew weren’t any indication, the way he fumbles with his fork definitely is.

“Ah,” leaning away from the table, Miyuki holds out the hand he’d been cupping his chin in, and there’s a little pink against his nose that Eijun would probably not have noticed in more muted lighting, “I’m assuming again. Sorry. It’s because last time, I noticed you left the strawberry til the end with your cheesecake and…” He trails off.

And Eijun uses the time he has between chewing and swallowing his mouthful of cake to decide how this makes him feel.

“You’re very observant,” he mumbles, finally – he’s pretty sure the tingling at the back of his throat is not just because of the strawberry.

It’s small talk, it’s an almost half-assed pass to keep the conversation going because he doesn’t know what else to say back, but Eijun rethinks that opinion the moment he notices the slight smirk tugging at Miyuki’s lips.

“Wouldn’t want another situation where you don’t actually like the thing we came out to have.”

There it is again. The tickling.

“So,” Eijun smacks his lips together, wishes his smoothie would hurry up already because he suddenly finds his mouth is unbearably dry, “How far are you with the manga?”

***

It’s surprisingly easy, Eijun thinks. He’s not sure what he’d been expecting, keeping himself from playing out their meeting before it happened because he knows that would be the path to second-guessing and self-destruction, but this can’t be coincidence – the way time just slips by when he’s not paying attention, the way he forgets about half-finished food and a sundae glass full of something aptly named Mango Blast.

What’s different between the last time they’d been hashing out opinions on the merits of
storytelling in manga versus books and right now is the quintessential factor that Eijun isn’t lost wondering what he’s doing there.

He knows, and he understands, and while what he makes of it all isn’t yet evident to him, he’s…

Okay with it.

“If not the show, then at least try the books,” Miyuki’s saying, after they’ve made their way through their cakes, and Miyuki’s ordered another cup of coffee, Eijun opting for a refill for his smoothie, “the lore is even more dense in the books and lets you sort of work your way around some of the – er…more visceral aspects of the show.”

Eijun pulls a face. “You talking about the Red Wedding, or the Purple Wedding?”

It makes Miyuki snigger. “I thought you had a strict “no spoiler” policy?” he teases.

Rolling his eyes, Eijun quips back, “It’s very hard to avoid spoilers when your flatmate has a meltdown every week because of that show.”

“I’m still amazed that you live with someone who loves Game of Thrones but haven’t tried it out yet.”

Eijun thinks about this awhile. “I think maybe it’s because I live with a Game of Thrones fan,” he ruminates, aloud, “I mean, I’ve seen the books around a lot, and I might even have picked one of them up – if I didn’t know it was going to involve that much death and destruction.”

“That’s not all it is,” Miyuki protests, blunt and immediate and adamant, and Eijun suppresses his smile around his straw – it’s a little funny, but he’s somehow never imagined Miyuki to be the type to get worked up over a piece of literature.

But then again, Eijun relates all too well.

“In my defence, I’d probably not have tried a lot of things if I knew what they would involve,” Eijun reasons, playfully placating, and Miyuki quirs a questioning eyebrow. “like Baccano. Or…Fullmetal Alchemist.”

“Hold up,” Miyuki actually matches the action with a hand held into the air, palm outward, “if you’ve watched Fullmetal Alchemist there’s no reason you wouldn’t like Game of Thrones! Unless…” Miyuki narrows his eyes at him, “you didn’t like it?”

This suggestion is so implausible Eijun bursts out laughing. “Of course I loved it, what do you take me for?” he demands, good-humoured, “I mean, sure, I was emotionally handicapped for a week after I was done but gah. It was so good! How do writers balance so many characters with all their different arcs and storylines and make us care for each and every one of them?!”

“And this,” Miyuki says, and he taps a finger on the table-top for emphasis, “is exactly why you should at least give the books a shot. I wouldn’t be suggesting it if I didn’t know you’d appreciate it.”

There’s something about the way he phrases that that warms Eijun from the inside. It’s a bit like… when Onii-san’d given him an impressed side-eye when he’d recognised the Hamlet references in Zetsuen no Tempest.

It’s just…nice, sometimes, to have someone acknowledge – appreciate – the quirks that comes with being an unrepentant fanboy, rather than being put-off by his zeal, and it makes him feel all
happy and glow-y inside, the way his favourite shoujo manga couple getting together would.

“I…might…try the books,” Eijun ventures, a little doubtful still, and he knows Miyuki can tell, from the sceptical deadpan he’s getting. “Will I be needing therapy afterwards?”

“I know a few places,” Miyuki’s rejoinder is instant and glib, and Eijun giggles.

There’s a lapse in conversation. Eijun idly thinks it’s odd, that it doesn’t make him fret – he’s not immediately rifling through his head for things to plug the silence with.

It’s…comfortable, and Eijun ought to worry about how at ease he feels.

He doesn’t.

It’s Miyuki who punctures the silence.

“I…am glad though.”

“Hmm?”

“When you agreed to come,” Miyuki explains, and he’s not looking at him, and it makes Eijun sit up, suddenly alert. “I thought… it was because of the article. And that you probably wanted me to help answer some questions or something.”

He says the last bit in a hurry, like he wants to get it out and over with, and he’s still not looking at Eijun, and oh, Eijun thinks, brain missing a step, catching itself, getting its bearings, this –

“That’s…partly true,” Eijun admits, and it’s a little hard admitting it, a reluctant little secret which’d have been happy to be overlooked; it’d been the convenient answer, both to Harucchi’s inquisitive probing about who exactly this culinary arts student friend of his is and to Mochi-senpai’s bad-cop routine back home, but as much as Eijun has yet to completely understand Miyuki and completely grasp what’s going on here and where it’s all leading, he’s been a bit amazed at how seamlessly they tune into each other’s wavelengths – and right now, sensing the uncertainty, the nerves just barely hidden in Miyuki’s body language, his tone, is one of those times.

Eijun resonates with it, knows exactly how it feels, and is compelled to dispel it.

“But… that’s not the only reason.”

Miyuki’s eyes flick up at him.

There’s something that looks like hope in them, and for a second Eijun forgets to breathe.

“So,” Miyuki says, slow and deliberate and a little cautious, almost as hesitant as he had been when Eijun’d finally cottoned on to the fact that he was being flirted with, and he’d carefully laid out his proposition, “if, say, I answer any questions you have, right now…and then I ask you out to lunch. Would you come?”

Eijun thinks about the time they’ve spent here. Eijun thinks about all the things they’ve said, all the thoughts they’ve swapped. Eijun thinks about how it doesn’t feel like it’s dragged on too long. How it feels like they only just stepped through those quaint glass-fronted doors with the ornate little bell hanging over it. How it feels like there’s so much more time between now and some point in the evening he has to be back home so he and Mochi-senpai can go over to Onii-san’s together. How there’s so much more about him he doesn’t know yet, and about how much he’d like to.
He remembers the last question Wakana had asked him, and his answer, in all its bare honesty.

He repeats that answer.

If he’d needed any more definitive proof of what he’d long started to suspect, the way he can feel his pulse completely stop – the way his lungs seize, the way his brain’s too jumbled for coherent thought – the way he feels himself smile again, mirroring the lopsided grin growing on Miyuki’s face…it’s irrefutable.

He’s crushing on Miyuki Kazuya.

Chapter End Notes

References to:
- "Everything is Awesome": an UNFAIRLY catchy song from The Lego Movie, which I am ashamed to say I know all the lyrics to
- "But first, let me take a selfie": is an actual line from the actual song #SELFIE by The Chainsmokers, which made me laugh and cringe at the same time
- Five Night's at Freddy's: AMAZING HORROR GAME SERIES. Recently played the newest addition, "Sister Location", and had the bejeezers spooped outta me
- Leaky Cauldron/Muggles: Y'all know where that's from #potterheadsunite
- Red Wedding/Purple Wedding: Game of Thrones/ A Song of Ice and Fire
- Full Metal Alchemist (Brotherhood): IF YOU HAVEN'T YOU NEED TO WATCH THIS IMMEDIATELY. LIKE. IMMEDIATELY. 11/10 would recommend
- Zetsuen no Tempest: an anime that honestly snagged my attention because it opened with a quote from Hamlet, and proceeded with a ton of references to it
- Hamlet: arguably Shakespeare's most famous play. I love the rich language and imagery used in it but Hamlet as a chara is someone I would like to beat the ever-loving crap out of AND HE'S FICTIONAL so you see what I'm getting at here

//EXHALES// PHEW. So I hope you guys enjoyed this! I apologise again for any weirdness, I'll defo look over it again when life is a little less overwhelming. Thank you soooo much for reading and I'd love to hear your thoughts if you feel like sharing!

Also, KuraRyou next chappie! Ryou-san finally appears XD
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

This chappie's coming out a lot faster than intended, because given how things stand I probably won't be able to update until after next week ;A; so please consider this compensation and I hope you'll bear with me! I'm so sorry if progress is slow - I really wanna pace this right orz

Also thank you all you lovelies for your kudos and comments!!! You guys make me smile like a goofball in public so often I'm losing count. Nothing makes me happier than knowing these fics make YOU guys happy, and I can't thank you enough for sticking with me - you guys are the best. I promise I'm reading all the comments and I'll be replying back as soon as I can! I promise! Pinky-swear! Onegai, bear with me just a little bit longer

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's something of a feat to impress Onii-san.

It's something of a feat to impress Onii-san to a point where you can get a real, visible reaction out of him.

It turns the subject of birthday and Christmas presents into something of a competition every year.

Eijun has the grace to admit, at some point late into the evening, that the bar's been irrevocably raised this year.

Heck, the bar may even have been broken.

"Eijun-kun, you've grown so much!" the flurry of burgundy that'd accosted him at the door almost a beat after he'd rung the doorbell is gushing, holding him at arm's length – Harucchi's mother is petite, but she's got a helluva grip, and with her hands on Eijun's shoulders she can manoeuvre him around easily, "Are you eating well? Are the boys looking after you?"

"I - ," overwhelmed, a little dazed and a lot muddled, Eijun spastically looks from Harucchi, who's in the corner wearing the shadow of what looks like an amused grin, to his dad, who's openly laughing.

"Let the boy breathe, dear," he says, but doesn't do anything to pry Eijun out of his wife's hold – instead, he strolls closer, pats a hand on top of Eijun's head, and ruffles his hair, fond, "How've you been, kiddo?"

It takes him a few seconds, but he's finally able to boot his vocal chords back up. "Oh my God," he hears himself hush, "oh my God. You guys are actually here."

Harucchi's mum laughs, and pulls him in for another hug, not deterred by how much he really has actually grown since the last time they'd seen each other – he towers over her, at least taller by a head, but she's still as affectionate as he remembers. As affectionate as she'd always been, whether she'd been cooing over his cute little clothes as a kid, or tearing up on his first day of school, or
pulling him into another hug, as fierce and packed with pathos as she’d been seeing her own sons off with the morning he’d left for Tokyo.

He’s not been hugged like this in the longest time, and baffled as he is, Eijun’s lulled by it.

“Don’t break him.”

“Hush, now,” Harucchi’s mum snaps, without bite, and Eijun looks over her head toward where Onii-san is sauntering into the living-room of his and Harucchi’s shared flat, and he has just enough time to catch the way his eyes flicker behind Eijun before he drawls,

“This is quite the scheme you pulled off.”

He hears a nervous hem in the background, and realisation sparks inside Eijun’s head. He whips around.

“Mochi-senpai?!”

“He arranged everything! The tickets, and picking us up at the station, and he brought us over to your flat,” Harucchi’s mother is enthusiastically explaining to Eijun, once he’d actually recovered from the shock enough to thrust his wrapped-up present in Onii-san’s hands and wished him a very garbled “Happy Birthday” – they’re settled in the living room, too many people for the four-seater dining table. “I was hoping you’d be there too, but you had to go out for work?”

Eijun valiantly pushes off the self-conscious buzz of guilt this sets off for the time being, rounding on Mochi-senpai from his spot on the floor.

“You could have told me!”

Mochi-senpai rolls his eyes. “It would have ruined the surprise, idiot,” Eijun doesn’t miss how his eye slides a little warily to Mr. and Mrs. Kominato after he lets that insult slip.

“It wasn’t a surprise for me,” Eijun insists.

“You didn’t tell me about your present.”

“My present wasn’t two fully grown human beings!”

“I’m still young at heart, boys.”

“Sure thing, Dad,” Onii-san drawls, and his mother giggles.

“You could have told me when I came home,” Eijun’s still contending, stubborn – he’d actually set his plate down on the floor in favour of pursuing this. The most covert of conspiracies had unravelled right under his roof, and he’d not had a single inkling, and it’s grating on his nerves.

“Harucchi! You could have told me at least!”

“It wouldn’t have been as much of a surprise to you, if I had,” is Harucchi’s response, “it’s only fair you get as stumped as we did.”

“But – “ Eijun’s not done grousing. By the point they’d reached here everyone had been in on the secret – except for him. It might be dumb and childish, but he feels left out. “if I’d stayed at home, I’d have met them anyway.”

“Actually,” Onii-san leans forward – the dim, gold glow of the lamps he’s strategically placed everywhere – for ambience, he insists, whenever Harucchi gets into a tizzy over electricity bills –
enhance his cryptic features, “I think the original plan was to bring them straight over here. Right, Youichi?”

Eijun almost gets whiplash, darting his eye to where his flatmate’s been hogging the settee.

Even in the sparse lighting, and under the bronzed tan of his skin, Eijun thinks he can see tell-tale signs of red.

“What do you mean?”

Again, it’s Onii-san who answers. “I mean, Youichi probably took our parents over to your place first because you weren’t home – to let them rest up and wait for me to get back home…that’s why you called, isn’t it? To check if we were around?”

“Stop drilling the poor guy,” Harucchi’s dad interjects, affable, and claps a hand on Mochi-senpai’s arm – somehow this simple act causes the shortstop to acquire a curious case of indoor-sunburn, “he went through all this trouble to make sure all three of you were in the dark in this whole process, that mustn’t have been easy.”

All three of you

“What’re you staring at punk?” Mochi-senpai mutters, in a belligerent undertone, when Eijun’s possibly gaped at him a little longer than can be called discreet.

“Nothing,” he mumbles back, and he dips his head down, stares at his plate, unseeing, more to hide the smile bubbling in his face than anything else; he knows if Mochi-senpai caught whiff of it, he’d find himself in a chokehold on the way back home. It doesn’t stop the goofy grin from spreading, though, and while he’s aware Mochi-senpai won’t really appreciate any further acknowledgment of his ability to actually be, y’know, thoughtful, and really surprisingly sweet, he still makes up his mind to do all the laundry and the groceries and the dishes way into the foreseeable future.

By the time they’re done with dinner, and the dishes have been cleared, and Mrs. Kominato has chased you boys out of the kitchen, the evening’s ticking closer to midnight and a distant part of Eijun’s brain is trying to remind him he has work tomorrow – getting up in the morning is going to be hell – when the sofa he’s half passed-out on dips.

“So,” Onii-san lilts, in that maddeningly unreadable tenor of his, “I read the message in the book.”

Eijun freezes.

A hand comes up behind his head, and he feels it pat his mop of hair.

“Thank you,” Onii-san tells him, in an undertone, and the softened edge to his default cynical smile tempers Eijun’s anxiety; the smile he lets out is a bit on the giddy side.

“I hope you’ll like it,” he hums, a pretty standard response, but this is a custom with them – don’t judge a book by its cover, don’t judge a book until it’s done.

Onii-san hums. “How is your article coming along?”

“Ah,” Eijun sits up a little straighter, willing himself not to transition into a food coma – he’s aware of each groove the waistband of his pants are digging into his skin, and dismally wonders how much weight he’s managed to put on in just a day, “I’m mostly done. I only need to add in some stuff tonight before I pass it up.”
Onii-san nods. “The interview, right?”

There it is again. That sharp-static shock to his conscience. It feels so weird, hiding something that feels so crucial from the people he’s shared the most invaluable moments of his life with. It’d been Onii-san he’d come to when he’d decided he wanted to attend a college in Tokyo. It’d been Onii-san who’d encouraged his ambition to write. It’d been Onii-san who’d walked him through the whole “getting a job” process, gone so far as to hold mock-interviews with him and background check his boss extensively.

It’s Onii-san he feels he owes a confession to the most, but Eijun hesitates.

A couple of feet away, Harucchi and his dad are cross-legged on the floor, trying to hook up the home theatre system so they can cap off the night with one of Harucchi’s Wes Craven movies. Over in the kitchen, a sliver of the warm-gold lighting visible through the open dining-room door and over the island, Mochi-senpai and Harucchi’s mum are side by side, chatting as they work through the dishes even though she’d insisted she wanted to do them all on her own.

Beside him, Eijun can tell Onii-san’s looking in the same direction, and in a rare moment of transparency, Eijun can see how happy he is. It’s there, in the slant of his eyes, the mellow waver of his smile. Sharp lines a little smudged, a little smoothed out. Maybe the changes are indiscernible to a stranger, but Eijun’s known Onii-san since they were both kids, and he knows.

He can tell how much this means to him.

“You know,” Onii-san says, conversational – he’s watching the travesty his brother and dad are making out of the stereo-system wires, not showing any inclination of having some mercy and taking over, “I think he’s going to ask me out soon.”

Now, Onii-san’s always been blunt. But the blasé way he lets this on still surprises Eijun a little – jolts him into actually sitting all the way up.

This is the first time one of them has actually verbally acknowledged what every person in this flat has long cottoned on to.

“Well, finally,” Eijun retorts, once he’s got his bearings straight again, and gets a snort from Onii-san, “it’s only been…what? Two years?”

“Some things take time,” Onii-san concedes, lets out a sigh; it feels so normal to be talking to him about this that it feels weird, “with him, especially. It’s better to let him take his own pace.”

“You’re just saying that because you want him to do all the work.”

Onii-san’s smile turns devious. “Perhaps.”

It’s so complicated, yet so simple. It’s so personal, yet so easy to talk about.

“Isn’t it…scary?”

Onii-san raises an eyebrow at him, glancing away from the mini-celebration Harucchi’s dad is having at finally getting the menu screen to show up on the TV – they’re going for *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, Eijun notes absently, a part of him already gearing up for a sleepless night.

“The movie? Not really,” and though he’s so inscrutable, Eijun thinks he catches a knowing glint even before Onii-san speaks. “But that’s not what you’re asking me, is it?”
On his phone, stamped from two hours ago, is a message reading *Having fun?* and another reading *Did he like the book?*

There are long interludes between his replies, and the last one was an hour ago, and logic argues that he has better things to do on a Sunday night, and that he’s probably being courteous trying not to keep Eijun on his phone during a social event, or that he’s asleep, maybe, or he’s reading the *manga* again, and any or all of these possibilities are valid, can be true, but Eijun doesn’t know, and there’s a corner of his brain, a newly appointed department in his cognitive functions, niggling him with the need to find out.

“I mean,” he says, slow, trying to remove all inflection from his voice, trying to come off as unassuming as he can, “isn’t it…at least a *little* scary, when you…get together. With another person?”

That’s a generic question, that’s a question people are going to be asking for generations and into eternity, but the answer isn’t in one of Eijun’s *manga*. There are embellishments, there’s a subconscious promise of a “happily ever after” – there’s a pre-determined destination, this ideal scenario where the couple are together and they’re happy, and no matter what bumps come in the road en-route to that scenario, and how much they’re designed to shred his emotional health to pieces, it’s this promise of “everything’s going to be okay” that keeps him going.

Like jumping off a springboard into seconds of nothingness, knowing there’s water underneath to catch you.

But real life isn’t like that. And as much as Eijun’d think he knows this, it still catches him off-guard. He’s not the world’s most self-aware person, but he’s dabbled enough in all the tropes of romance to draw some conclusions for himself.

He understands he has a crush on Miyuki Kazuya.

He also understands he knows next to nothing about him.

They’d moved, earlier that afternoon, from the café to a ramen shop, because, as Miyuki put it, when you spend as much time memorising foreign and exotic recipes as he’s forced to in class, you learn to appreciate the simpler things in life.

And they’d talked.

They’d talked and talked and talked, about books, about *manga*, about adapting videogames into films and why that was always a bad idea, about the mockery they’d made out of *Silent Hill* until even Eijun’d not been scared of it and Mochi-senpai’d had a raging fit, what a shame it was that they’d cancelled the reboot.

They’d talked and talked and talked, and it had been with a pang of disappointment that Eijun’d glanced at his watch and pondered aloud that he should probably get going.

Miyuki’d told him, “*Text me when you get home.*”

Miyuki’d told him, “*Have fun*”

Miyuki’d told him, “*Thank you for coming out today.*”

Eijun had responded in kind. Eijun’d returned with a rabid swarm of butterflies incubating in his stomach, mind consumed with a play-by-play of their entire meeting, and he’d not even noticed Mochi-senpai’s curious apathy when he’d shown up late – which, really, ought to have tipped him
off there and then –

Miyuki’s made a place at the back of Eijun’s mind, burrowing himself into it and digging his heels in with increasing tenacity, but…that’s what crushes are like. Consuming and distracting and intense. And yet it still feels…

It still feels too…flimsy.

Uncertain.

There are still so many things he doesn’t know.

*When are we going to meet next?*

*Where do we go from here?*

*Where do we stand with each other?*

Onii-san’s staring into the distance, and he looks a little preoccupied. Eijun follows his line of sight, toward the dining-room, where Mochi-senpai and Onii-san’s mum have shifted, engrossed in conversation.

“Of course it’s scary,” he says, finally, and the butterfly swarm in Eijun’s tummy weave a loop-de-loop, “It’s a risk, right? People rush in…people let themselves get carried away by their feelings. And as strongly as you can feel sometimes, feelings aren’t permanent. Some of them come and go, even if you don’t believe they will.” Onii-san gives him a twisted smile, a little dark, a little morbid. “No one can tell how it’s going to go – if it’s going to end.”

*End* is an ugly word, a frightening word, and Eijun’s throat seizes up at it, and –

“But…if you find someone that’s worth it, you stick around,” Onii-san’s volume drops, into something that’s almost imperceptibly gentler. He’s still looking at the dining-room door. “Until it isn’t scary anymore.”

***

Two days later, Mochi-senpai curtly informs Eijun, via an uncharacteristically abbreviation-free text message, that he’s not going to be at home that evening for dinner, and Eijun doesn’t have to order for him if he gets delivery.

Eijun wastes no time scurrying over to Harucchi’s station at work.

“I think they’re going on a date tonight!”

It’s later, after he’s gone over the edits to his article and dragged Harucchi over to *ooh* and *ahh* over the layout and design template for it, and he’s sitting at his desk with nothing much to do, really, that it occurs to him he doesn’t exactly have to be home early today.

***

If he’d been nervous before, he’s all but on the verge of a panic-attack now.

The route he’d taken to the bookstore so many times he thinks he could probably do it blindfolded feels foreign – new and a little intimidating.

Swallowing down his nerves, he hastens.
He doesn’t see Miyuki when he enters the store.

*Maybe he’s in the back room.*

*Maybe he’s behind one of the shelves.*

*Maybe…it’s not his shift today…*

Eijun determinedly ignores the disappointment colouring this thought.

He actually *has* come here with a specific purpose.

It’s not hard to locate what he wants.

Front and centre, almost in the middle of the store, stacked alongside *The Hunger Games* and the *Percy Jackson* series – honestly, who’s in charge of this arrangement? – is probably the most lethal novel Eijun’s ever going to read.

He pulls it out of its place, and frowns at the cover. With a franchise as popular as this, it’s hard not to have at least a little bit of it spoiled, and Eijun’s well aware the jagged, misshapen throne on the cover, with Sean Bean managing to look more depressed sitting in it than he looks in most of his movies and that’s saying something, is the *Iron Throne*, and all things considered, the dark, gritty broodiness of the cover-art is pretty epic. But a quick scan of the remaining titles confirms that it doesn’t follow the standard patterns of the rest of the series – a single motif taking centre stage, a single colour framing it.

And it might be a minor thing, really, and Eijun doesn’t actually know if he’ll be able to get through the first book enough to continue, anyway, but it nags at him nonetheless – it’s a bit like… getting one *Harry Potter* book from Bloombury, and getting the Scholastic editions for the rest. How would that even *look* on his shelf? It’s –

“Looks like I can be pretty persuasive.”

Eijun almost jumps out of his skin.

“You…you. Need to stop doing that.” Eijun presses a hand flat against his chest, as if trying to force his heart to still.

Miyuki, pressed apron pristine, name tag shiny under the display lights, isn’t the least bit contrite. “Doing what?” he asks, all innocence, and Eijun narrows his eyes.

“Sneaking up on me!”

Now Miyuki flattens his palm against his heart, “Sneak up on you? Me? Never.”

Heart jack-rabbiting for a different reason now, Eijun gives him a half-hearted glower.

Miyuki doesn’t hesitate to take his cue.

“I thought it’d be a long, long time before I could get you into this,” he says, arms crossed, tipping his chin toward the book – he’s smug, but not in an infuriating kind of way, “I mean. If you didn’t get into it while having it play out on your TV every week – “

“Yeah, well,” Eijun turns back toward the shelves, more to try and gather his composure than anything else, and occupies himself with skimming down the spines of the books again, “Moch – my flatmate didn’t exactly reference *Fullmetal*, Ryogo, *Narnia* and Tolkien in one sitting to get me
to try it."

“What a shame,” Eijun can hear the flippant humour in his voice, and he bites down on his lip – he’s *freer* today, somehow a little less reserved and a little more forward with his banter than last time…like he’s a bit more…

*Sure* of things.

*You stick around, until you’re not scared anymore*

“Um,” Eijun clears his throat, dabbing his tongue at chapped lips, “do you…do you have a copy that’s…kinda…more consistent with the others? The cover-art, I mean?”

A part of him cows, because he’s always scared he’s inconveniencing people whenever he gets this finicky, and there’ll come a day someone straight up resents him for it.

Today is not the day. Miyuki actually looks pleased, his answering grin white and cheeky.

“Come here.”

It’s only after they’ve reached the counter, Eijun busily wondering if the guy’d actually been lying about not expecting him sooner and is going to miraculously conjure up a copy with the cover-art he’s looking for from under it like he had the last time, that it occurs him to ask, “Where are we going?”

Miyuki glances over his shoulder, presses his forefinger to his lips, and winks.

Eijun absolutely *does not* have a mini-heart-attack because of it.

“Wait, you – “ he whispers, panic setting in as he dithers uncertainly at the edge of the counter, watches Miyuki unlock the back-room, “That’s not – that’s against the rules right?!?”

He eyes the “Employees Only” signboard, and almost ruptures a lung when a firm, warm hand closes around his wrist and tugs him.

“*Come on.*"

*This is stupid and crazy and bad and my membership card is definitely getting revoked and –*

A light flickers on, and there are boxes everywhere. Metallic shelves almost reaching the ceiling, retractable ladders propped against the wall, and some variation of the Dewey decimal system labelling the rows and rows of cartons and –

He inhales, deep. It tickles his nose a bit, a little dusty, a little coppery, and a lot like…

“*Books,*” he sighs, with rapture, and Miyuki sniggers.

Barely glancing at the labels, Miyuki strides left, purposeful, and briskly grabs a box, deftly lowering it to the ground and pulling out the cardboard flips on the side.

“I really, really don’t think I should be in here,” Eijun jitters, staring around wide-eyed, part apprehensive, part trying to gulp down as many details as he can before he has to leave.

“But you’ve never seen the back-room of a bookstore before, have you?” Miyuki chimes, and as he expertly peels off the re-sealable tape holding the carton closed, he glances up once to flash Eijun a rakish grin, “This is where we keep all the good stuff.”
It’s hard to tell if Eijun’s in imminent peril of cardiac arrest because of the fear of getting caught here – will I get arrested? Do I have to go to court?! – or the completely, absolutely, totally unfair way that grin affects him.

*Oh boy.*

“And here we go,” Miyuki straightens, fluid, and there’s an azure blue tome in his hand, the hilt of a sword embossed in the cover, and Eijun’s a bit distracted by how nicely *this* would fit in with the rest of the display outside, and how he doesn’t understand why people insist on having those *As seen on television or As seen in the blockbuster hit* type book covers anyway, and he reaches for the volume, all but ready to open it and stick his nose inside –

But Miyuki pulls it back –

And Eijun stumbles a little forward trying to get it.

It occurs to him, with a hazy kind of hindsight, that they’re completely alone right now.

And standing closer than they’ve ever been.

“Why…?”

Miyuki’s smiling a weird smile. It’s a bit…secretive.

It’s a bit…tantalising.

Eijun bites his lip.

“I’m going to buy this for you.”

“What?” A blink. Two. “Oh. Oh, no, I can’t let you – ”

“I insist,” Miyuki lowers the hand he’d been holding the book in, and now suddenly there’s nothing between them – nothing but air and a titillating, electric tension that leaves Eijun a bit lightheaded, leaves him wondering if Miyuki feels it too and – “Since you’re reading this at my behest.”

“But I’m – !”

He accidentally bites his tongue when Miyuki leans in a little, and though the bluish, industrial lighting of this place isn’t the most flattering, Eijun can’t keep his eyes from straying, a bit, taking in the way his messy bangs reach just short of his glasses, and frame eyes which are really more honey-gold than brown, and –

“I wouldn’t want you thinking I’m only doing this to up the store’s sales.”

It’s a joke, it’s *obviously* a joke, and Eijun knows it’s a joke, and he kind of feels like an idiot for not suspecting *this* but jumping straight to the underworld when he’d first asked him out, but that’s not all this is – it’s a reaffirmation of what they’re even doing here, why he’s in a restricted area of a bookstore he’s not supposed to be in, standing with bare inches between himself and Miyuki, and it’s scary, but it’s also *exhilarating*, and as much as Eijun’s head is in overdrive, a part of him wants to see where this is going.

“I’m…I don’t think that,” he’s not proud of the way he stammers, or the way he can tell he’s blushing really hard.
Miyuki chuckles. It’s somehow a more…personal sound, than the ones he’d heard outside, or in those cafés.

“I really hope you don’t mind me saying this,” he hums, and he sounds oddly...happy, is the only word Eijun’s brain manages to supply, “but you’re adorable.”

He thinks he should be offended. He knows he would have been if someone else had told him that.

All he’s capable of right now, though, is trying not to hyperventilate.

Miyuki keeps his word. He tugs out his wallet and teases a few bills into the register, not displaying the price on the counter as he’d do for a normal transaction, and when he hands over the book, in a fresh paper bag, Eijun takes it with both hands and ends up holding it, tentative, in front of him.

It apparently amuses Miyuki even more. “It’s not going to break, you know,” he quips.

“I know, it’s just, I – “ Eijun bites his lip again, confused, conflicted, dazed, “Th-thank you!”

The eyebrow Miyuki arches at him is playful. “Should you be thanking me for pushing you into a series I like to the point I bought the book for you so you’re basically forced to read it?”

Eijun’s done that too. Eijun’s bought copies of his favourite manga, several volumes at a time, and dumped them on Wakana. Eijun’s snuck in renegade one-shots and magazines in with presents for Harucchi.

But they’re his friends. Miyuki is –

What, exactly?

He flashes back to Sunday evening. To the way Mochi-senpai and Onii-san’d shared this private little smile when they’d said goodbye.

To the way Eijun knows that, at some point during A Nightmare on Elm Street when he’d been busy using Harucchi as a pillow-shield, Mochi-senpai and Onii-san’d left the room.

To the way that, after what feels like a long time and no time at all, Onii-san’d reached a point where he was no longer uncertain. Where he could sit beside him on a couch and simply say, without fear, that he’s found someone worth sticking around for.

Eijun thinks he wants to know how that feels.

“I – “ his voice croaks, breaks, and he’s pretty sure there must be steam coming off his face at this point, and oh boy, this is more petrifying than pitching and You don’t have to do this, you can leave and What if – What if...? “was thinking o-of...catching a movie. Tomorrow. A-are you free?”

He can’t make himself look at Miyuki, and yet he really wants to, and he compromises by stealing a swift glance, and it’s just long enough for him to catch surprise morphing into something else.

“As a matter-of-fact...I am.”

“Okay.” Eijun says, throat dry, mind blank, heart way too overworked to be good for his health, “Um. Do you...wanna come? With. Me?”

He hears another chuckle and almost chews his own lip off.
“It’s a date.”

Chapter End Notes

finally, an official date that's an actual date and nothing else ;u;
also yay for KuraRyou-Misawa relationship foils...?

References to:
-Percy Jackson series: surprising fun way of brushing up your Greek mythology. Applies for all of Rick Riordan's books tbh. but idk why bookstores put em side by side with ASOIAF
-Silent Hill: OMG. if ever a game was a work of art and literature, Silent Hill 2 is it for me. The way the gaming medium was used to create this...metaphysical world with a damning storyline still haunts me today (and then ofc they had to make a movie and ruin it). Silent Hill 4 and PT are amazing as well - but then since we can't have nice things PT got cancelled too and sometimes I wonder if humanity wants to screw itself over for the laughs
-Sean Bean: notorious for dying in his films, to the point that if he doesn't die in a film, you're actually surprised (coincidentally, he was in both Silent Hill films)

I HOPE Y'ALL LIKE THIS AND I ALSO HOPE THIS READS OK AND ISNT TOO MESSY AND FULL OF MISTAKES AHHH
thank you so very much for your super kind responses on chapters 6 and 7! I cannot begin to EXPLAIN how much they've meant to me - and how much they've helped me, too, because this was the shittiest week I've had in a while and you guys and your awesomeness helped make my day and I can't thank you enough :') I just hope that I'm able to bring you guys as much joy through this fic as you guys bring me by just being here <3 If I haven't replied to you yet, I will soon! Promise!!! Am kinda shuttling between home and work rn so please bear with me!

also, to anyone waiting on "Correlate" - I'm SO SORRY. I'm generally never 100% okay with anything I write but I really REALLY disliked the way the second half of that came out, so I. err. kinda ditched it. And started again Dx I'm sorry for the wait I'll try to update soon OTL OTL

You said: OMG

You said: DID HE DIE

You said: NONONONONO

You said: HE'S JUST A LITTLE BOY??!

Miyuki Kazuya said: ah

Miyuki Kazuya said: Um. Spoilers?

You said: HE’S ALIVE THANK GOD OH MY GOD I WAS GOING TO SHRED THIS BOOK

You said: I HATE THE LANNISTERS

You said: I HOPE THEY DIE HORRIBLE DEATHS

You said: EXCEPT TYRION

You said: I like Tyrion

Miyuki Kazuya said: I like him too

You said: Wait

You said: DOES THAT MEAN HE DIES??!

Miyuki Kazuya: Well ~

You said: What??

Miyuki Kazuya: You have to read on to find out ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes
You said: >:(

Miyuki Kazuya: Are you not going to?

You said: OFC IM GOING TO

You said: ARGHHH

Miyuki Kazuya: Hahahaha

Miyuki Kazuya: Welcome to my world

You said: >:(  >:(  >:(

You said: I’m sorry for spamming you

You said: I’ll stop now

Miyuki Kazuya said: No don’t

Miyuki Kazuya said: It’s cute

Bubble.

Bubble.

You said: I don’t wanna bother you

Miyuki Kazuya said: You aren’t

Miyuki Kazuya said: I promise

***

You said: OMG JOFFREY YOU LITTLE BRAT

You said: DON’T MAKE ME COMMIT CHILD ABUSE

Miyuki Kazuya: XD XD XD

***

“Is this okay?”

“I can’t even see you, stop moving so much – “

“I can’t,” Eijun slouches lower in his seat, ducking behind the partitions of his cubicle as he draws the microphone of his earbuds closer to his mouth, “I’m at work!”

The miniature Wakana on his screen rolls her eyes at him.

“We could have done this…oh, I don’t know. Yesterday? When Kuramochi-san wasn’t even home? And both of us were free?”

Eijun overlooks the withering sarcasm – once again, Wakana’s doing him a huge favour just by entertaining his last minute requests. With the decidedly faster internet-connection he’s freeloding off of at work, he can fairly easily make out the rows of booths and bookshelves behind Wakana –
she’s in her college library, and taking a pretty big risk herself being online.

“I’m… I was busy,” Eijun waffles instead; he hopes his phone’s camera quality isn’t as sharp as Wakana’s laptop, because he’s pretty sure his red ears are an obvious giveaway.

“Right,” Wakana drawls, raising a sceptical eyebrow, and Eijun swallows self-consciously, half-paranoid that she can, basically, read his mind and tell that he’d spent the whole of the previous evening shuttling between devouring a book the size of his standard Oxford dictionary and figuring what movie to watch, “Anyway. Just… pretend you need to go to the bathroom or something. I can just see your head.”

Eijun obeys, and scoots out of his cubicle as unobtrusively as he can manage. There’s a small stretch of hallway leading toward the lifts, and Eijun, having watched his fair share of Sherlock, sidles into a blind spot under the CCTV camera before hoisting his phone up, angling it until he can see himself top-to-toe on his screen.

He hears Wakana let out a speculative hum, and agitatedly asks, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Wakana’s demure. “Well…it definitely looks like you put in the effort.”

Eijun’s hand conveniently fumbles, covering the camera with his thumb.

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?” he grouses.

There’s a laugh rippling through Wakana’s answer. “Good thing,” she croons, and Eijun keeps his thumb obstinately over the tiny camera lens because as much as he’s sure she knows how embarrassed he is, he’s not about to give her anymore fodder to make him squirm, “You look good, Ei-chan.”

It’s hard to decide whether she sounds fond, or like she’s laughing at him, but Eijun’s dallied here long enough; eyeing the pixelated numbers slipping past beside the lift, he backtracks, slightly less keyed up about getting caught now that that mortifying predicament is dealt with.

“So… when are you going to tell Ryou-Nii and Haruichi?”

His steps stutter over the new predicament she throws his way.

“I’m… I don’t know.”

Wakana makes an uncertain noise. “Ryou-Nii’s not going to be pleased, you know.”

Eijun knows. It’s partly the reason he’s been putting this off in the first place. But there are other reasons, and they’re slightly more compelling.

“I don’t… know what to say,” he catches Wakana’s dubious stare again and adds, “I mean, I’m not even sure if anything’s going to come of this and – “

“Ei-chan,” Wakana cuts him off, evenly; Eijun finds himself hovering, hesitant, at the edge of the corridor, peering through the semi-frosted glass-doors leading to the broad space neatly margined off into workstations, “You asked him out. You went through the effort of dressing up for it. You probably spent all of last night looking for a good movie – “ Eijun starts, almost drops his phone in alarm, one of the earbuds falling out in the process, but Wakana continues, unfazed, “And here you are, AT WORK, the one place where you’re hell bent on not breaking the rules, having a Skype call with me. I think this is PRETTY definitive.”
And it is – it really is, and Wakana, as usual, is right, but the bare-faced truth is still a startling,
intimidating thing, and it makes Eijun’s pulse flicker like a dying lightbulb.

“I’m…” he begins, a little weak, “I know, but, I mean…”

Wakana is firm. “They’ll want to know, Ei-chan.”

Dry-mouthed, guilty as a kid hiding cookies in his pocket, Eijun lets out a little helpless whimper.
He’d been steadfastly picking his way around this, trying to delay it, put off the inevitable – but the
inevitable follows him around, an elephant in the room sitting just on the outskirts of his sight, and
sooner or later he’s going to have to see.

Sooner or later he’s going to have to stop making up excuses of why he’s going to be late coming
home to Mochi-senpai, or hurry away before Harucchi can ask where he’s going when he leaves
work.

“I…will,” he says, repeats it again so he can believe it too, “I will. I just. I need to make sure if
this…” will work. Is real. Is possible. “…is what I want.”

He can tell Wakana’s mulling over his words, the furrow against her brow deepening, before she
sighs. “Fine. But when you’re sure, you’re telling them. Okay?”

Eijun hiccups a hysterical little giggle. “You said when.”

Portable-mini-Wakana tilts her head at him, and there’s a small smile gracing her mouth, but not
the kind she wears when she’s particularly pleased with herself for a good joke at his expense.
“I…” she says, and there’s something gentle about her tone – gentle and a little dream-like, a little
girlish, “have a good feeling about this.”

The electronic ping of the elevator signalling someone getting off saves Eijun from admitting that
he does too.

He’s through the doors in seconds, half-certain that he’s made it before whoever’d been coming to
this floor could see him, deftly unplugging his earbuds and stuffing them into a pocket along with
his phone as he goes, and he’s thinking about the timing of it, thinking that’d probably saved him
from delving deeper into things than he is comfortable delving right now, and how he’s going to
have to apologise profusely when he reaches his desk for cutting Wakana off, and how he can
segue as nonchalantly as he can into asking her advice about this – his brain neatly side-steps the
word date, for now, because it might short-circuit – and he’s going to have to do something
spectacular to thank her because she’s his saviour, and –

“Ah, Eijun. Good afternoon.”

Eijun prides himself for not jumping in shock.

It still comes off a little breathless when he manages to say, turning around and not quite knowing
what to do with his hands, “Good afternoon, Takigawa-san.”

Takigawa-san motions before him, indicating that Eijun walk along, and he obliges – he’s headed
somewhere, probably the conference-rooms on this floor, judging by the brisk purpose in his
stride. Two of his board of directors trail a couple of steps behind them, and Eijun’s not entirely
sure whether he’s supposed to turn around and greet them too or if that’d just be presumptuous.
Besides, the only reason they’re walking abreast of each other is because they’re going in the same
direction, and Eijun’s rehearsing how he’s going to take his leave and wish Takigawa-san a good
day without embarrassing himself when Takigawa-san does it for him.
“Right, I’m going this way,” he says, warm smile and twinkling eyes and everything except the demeanour of the highest ranking individual in the building – they’ve reached the row of cubicles branching left toward the double doors of the conference halls, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

And before Eijun can respond in kind, he adds,

“I’m eager to see what you’ll pitch next.”

***

By virtue of being horrible with directions, time management, and anything else that involves mental math, Eijun turns up at the theatres early, which, all things considered, is a good thing. The lines are still meagre, a few people straggling in the queues roped off along the different counters, and after a moment’s consideration and one last perusal of the movie schedules he’s got memorised from how often he’s checked – just in case – Eijun goes to get their tickets.

He likes it when the theatres are like this – half-empty, sans the hyperactive throngs buzzing with anticipation and noise. It’s not that he dislikes that – that kind of atmosphere has its own charm, especially when it’s a big premiere everyone has been waiting for and there’s a feeling of community, togetherness in their shared enthusiasm…but on days like this, when few people are free enough to drop in for a movie and the halls are likely to be about half-full, and Eijun can stroll back and forth along the huge promotional posters and examine them for as long as he likes without being jostled or getting in someone’s way, it’s a bit more…liberating.

It gives Eijun space to think, to let his mind wander without continuously being on the lookout for “those pesky troublemakers” Mochi-senpai complains off every time they come on crowded days and he squints suspiciously at anyone within a metre’s radius.

And it’s like this, spacing off as he is in front of a huge cardboard cut-out of the Ghostbusters logo, that Miyuki finds him.

“Boo.”

Eijun has to work a little not to full-out smile. His lips still twitch, though, when he teases, “Very clever.”

Miyuki’s answering grin is playful. “I try,” he says, and buffs his collar theatrically. “Were you waiting long?”

Eijun shakes his head, and a little sheepishly pulls out their tickets. “Um. You are okay with this, right?”

“I quite enjoy Tim Burton-esque movies so…yes,” Miyuki shifts, making way for him, and Eijun falls into pace beside him, “Though I haven’t seen Alice in Wonderland, so…”

“It was kinda weird,” is what Eijun blurts immediately, and has to hasten to correct himself when Miyuki regards him with a raised eyebrow, “I mean, it was still…fun? But weird. Not like the book, really…which was also. Weird.”

Eijun cuts himself off, frowning, and notes that there’s a reason he’d never tried his hand at movie reviews.

Miyuki chuckles, though, and comments, “Tim Burton does weird well, though. But I heard he’s not directing this one – he’s doing Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children instead?”
“Oh, Onii-san was talking about that one,” Eijun recalls, gets a little jazzed up, “I haven’t read it yet, is it good?”

“Hmm. Well…if you like stuff like A Wrinkle in Time, or Dahl, or Coraline and…,” Miyuki gestures at the huge, topsy-turvy cut-out for Alice Through the Looking Glass propped up by the ticket booth, “I think you might like it.”

Eijun exhales, nodding to himself as he adds the title to his near inexhaustible list of things to read, when Miyuki asks, “You…were looking a bit preoccupied. Is everything okay?”

Yeah, everything’s fine, is the programmed response Eijun’d have given without even thinking – it’s the response poised and ready to go at the tip of his tongue.

But he’d asked for Wakana’s advice, and rule number one from the veritable essay she’d written had been simple.

“If you want to know about him, you have to let him know about you”

And Eijun does want to know about him. That’s why they’re here. That’s why he’s doing any of this.

Equivalent exchange.

“I’m…well. The place I’m interning at has these pitching sessions at the end of the week and. My boss. Kind of,” Eijun flails, trying to vocalise, because this has been picking him apart ever since it happened and he can’t deny that he’s been stressing over it, and somehow the words he manages to come up with are disproportionate to the level of anxiety they’re causing, “he kind of told me he’s looking forward to what I might pitch next.”

They queue up for snacks, the buttery-warmth of salted popcorn invading the air and Eijun, conditioned from way too many trips to the cinema, finds his mouth automatically start to water.

“That’s a good thing right?”

Eijun grimaces, “Ideally…yes. But I don’t have anything.”

Miyuki frowns, “You don’t have anything on the backburner?”

Eijun shakes his head. “I kind of…didn’t think to pitch again. At least, not so soon.”

They draw up to the counter and place their orders, Eijun fumbling round in his pockets for coupons he’d spent more time than he should have looking for last night, and it’s only after they’ve carefully picked up the paper cups of soda and popcorn bags that Miyuki resumes their conversation.

“You came up with your last pitch kinda last minute the first time too, didn’t you?”

The temperature of the place abruptly leaps a couple of degrees. Of course Miyuki’d know this, of course he’d remember – Eijun’d gone out of his way to basically tell him that article existed only because he’d spent the evening before pitching it with Miyuki.

Eijun still has the weirdest of urges to slosh some of his chilled soda on his burning face.

Instead, he tries to play it cool. “That…might have been a fluke.”

Miyuki’s frowning again, and Eijun can tell his inquisitiveness isn’t just out of politeness. He
genuinely looks perplexed as he asks, “Why?”

“Because… I don’t fancy I can write anything that people would want to read…” his argument grows meek as he realises how pathetic of an excuse it is, and Miyuki’s increasingly incredulous stare has him backpedalling, “What I mean is… I don’t think the things I’m interested in or want to write about are the things people would be interested in reading. You know. Like, *Shoujo manga.*”

“You know a lot of things other than *shoujo manga,*” Miyuki disputes, immediate, and Eijun feels a smile pull at his mouth at how absolute he sounds, a tiny warm glow blooming to life inside his ribcage, “and I mean, you got me to catch up to, like Volume 34 of one of those in just a week.”

“Yeah, well…” Eijun hems, directing them toward the podium where they’ll have to get their tickets checked before they can head to the halls – a quick glance at one of the screens mounted around shows that their theatre has opened, and Eijun loves watching the previews of movies as much as movies themselves, his pace unconsciously picking up, “Not everyone finds that kind of thing interesting.”

When Miyuki stops them, taking a half-step forward so he’s in Eijun’s way to say, pointedly, “I do,” that glow in Eijun’s chest burns a bit brighter.

“… thanks,” he mumbles – has to duck his head, because as much as this makes him preen a little, it also brings on an untimely wave of shyness, and the warmth is spreading, reaching light slivers in between his ribs, and he thinks he might be smiling a little stupidly.

They hand over their tickets, get their stubs, and climb up the short flight of stairs into the darkened corridor, and Eijun’s in the process of pocketing both before he has the sense to ask, “Do you want yours?”

Miyuki smirks, knowing. “Yes, please.”

He hands the stub over, tucking his popcorn bag into the crook of his elbow and maintaining as light a grip as he can on his soda-cup without actually letting go, having learnt his lessons from previous experiences – as Miyuki slips the ticket stub into his pocket, Eijun asks, “So you collect them too?”

*Equivalent exchange…*

“Not really,” Miyuki’s smirk broadens, and there’s something almost secretive about it in the muted light of the long corridor, lined with more electronic movie posters, as they approach the pitch black double doors labelled Hall 2 and pull it open into the equally pitch black darkness of the cinema hall, “But this… would be something of a keepsake, right?”

The absolute darkness of cinema halls, with their steep steps and general playground of potential disaster for a person as uncoordinated as Eijun, is usually disorienting. Right now, though, as he bunny-hops toward the double-seats at the back, Eijun’s just glad it’s dark enough for Miyuki *not* to see him blushing like a moonstruck middle-schooler.

“The previews haven’t started yet,” Miyuki murmurs as they settle – Eijun’s cautiously pulling up the armrests, testing their stability before he deposits his baggage.

*Equivalent exchange.*

“Do you like watching the previews?”

In the bluish-blackness of the faint grey coming off the huge screen ahead of them, he sees Miyuki
nod.

“Watching them like this is a lot more…intense, I guess. I get hyped for things I normally wouldn’t get hyped for.”

Eijun nods, enthused. “Me too! Like, the only reason I watched that Huntsman movie was because I saw the preview in cinema.”

Miyuki lets out a low chuckle. “You watch a lot of movies, huh?”

“Not a lot,” Eijun answers, and this is technically true – compared to his other…consumption, of narrative media, films probably rank third. Or maybe fourth.

Miyuki clearly doesn’t buy it.

“How many ticket stubs have you collected so far then?” he quips. Eijun catches the sly glint of his grin, and rolls his eyes, but not without an answering grin of his own.

When the previews do actually roll around, Eijun learns that Miyuki likes Queen – and with a little probing, Bowie, and Prince, and The Beatles, and some band called The Police.

Also during the previews, Miyuki learns of Eijun’s embarrassingly low tolerance level for horror movies – in his defence, as he points out, after having almost ducked down behind the seats into foetal position, it’s not fair for them to have two in one sitting. It’s not even Halloween yet.

Miyuki laughs, but not at him.

Which is a relief, because Eijun fancies himself quite the insufferable person to watch movies with. He’s had threats made upon his life by Mochi-senpai when he’d refused to shut up throughout the entirety of Avengers: Age of Ultron – seriously, the Hulk had commitment issues and no one was talking about it – and Oni-san has abandoned him at enough ticket counters because of his propensity to try engaging the screen in a conversation, and although he can’t exactly resist, especially now, watching a film that’s probably only loosely borrowed the veneer of a book he’d adored growing up –

He’s glad Miyuki doesn’t seem put off by it.

“There’s too much CGI,” is what he’s saying, heatedly, allowing his volume to peak a little as the lights flicker on and people begin to file out, credits rolling largely ignored against the screen, “I mean, CGI can work, look at The Jungle Book, or any of the superhero movies, but it’s like – “ he waves his hands around like he’s trying to find elusive words and pluck them out of the air.

“Like they’re being lazy?” Miyuki supplies – he’s leaning back in his seat, slurping down the last of his soda, and Eijun taps his hand against the armrest.

“Yes,” he says, “exactly. Like, thirty to forty years ago people achieved all of that and more with practical effects and animatronics and, like – Star Wars was shot with scale models! Imagine! And yeah, the new prequels went overboard – “ Eijun brushes the topic aside as swiftly as he can because he doesn’t know how to explain his sympathy for Jar Jar Binks, “but the most recent movies also pay homage to the old ones – like, the chess-board scene? That was totally stop-motion.”

Miyuki’s eyebrows hitch up with interest. “I didn’t know that.”

“Cool, right?” Eijun chirps, eager, a tiny part of him conscious that he’s getting hyper-excited – his
ability to handle sugar is at an all-time low and he’d mindlessly picked the jumbo soda – but he’s bursting with too much enthusiasm to let that stop him, “That sort of thing is okay, because it still involves thought and creativity and a little bit of respect for the source material and – “

He peters off again, ransacking his vocabulary for the appropriate expressions to put meaning to what he wants to say, and coming up short.

“You know what I think?” Miyuki says, thoughtfully – ushers have started to work their way from the bottom up, clearing out litter and righting the seats, and they both take it as a tacit cue to leave; Eijun grabs the used-up packages on the way out, because Onii-san has taught him the importance of good cinema-going etiquette.

The belated self-conscious twinge of prattling too much creeping up on him, Eijun only manages a “Hmm?”

“I think that would make a really good article.”

“What?” Eijun blinks – he almost drops his popcorn wrapper outside the trashcan, but Miyuki swoops in, deft, and scoops it inside.

“I mean it, you know,” Miyuki continues, and as casual as he’s being, there’s an intensity to the way he’s looking at Eijun that makes it difficult for him to look away, “I wasn’t just saying it to…I don’t know. Get you to like me.” His lip twitches a little. “You’re really good at persuading people to try new things – especially things you’re passionate about.”

There it is again. That warm glow, burning just inside of his chest cavity. That feathery tickling that makes all his nerves tingle.

“I’m…I don’t…” Eijun stammers, not quite sure what he’s trying to say – the stark brightness of the lobby disconcerts him a little, all the bright light and movement from the film having already left him a little light-headed, “I don’t know if people would be interested…”

“I’m interested,” Miyuki says, again, emphatic, and it thrums through him, this warmth, “And I’ve never even been that big on movies. You know all of these things that a lot of people might not know about, and you clearly have an appreciation for story-telling…and I think, a lot of people would be eager to learn from it. Share that appreciation. I mean…isn’t that why you insist on buying books hardcover and original? To show appreciation for the creators?”

“Well…yeah, I mean…” Eijun hems, slow, and it’s getting to his head, it is, and there’s only so long he can deny that being praised by Miyuki like this feels…

Kinda

Really

nice.

His ego’s going to explode at this rate.

Miyuki smiles at him, and it’s a small, somewhat familiar smile. “You’re a really passionate person about the things you love, Eijun. It’s one of the things I like about you.”

He can’t really help that his breath hitches.

*Equivalent exchange.*
He thinks about Onii-san, and about Mochi-senpai, and how the shortstop’d somehow pinned with uncanny accuracy the exact restaurant Onii-san’d wanted to sample when he’d taken him out to dinner last night. He thinks about Onii-san pre-booking *Suicide Squad* tickets for Mochi-senpai on the sly.

He thinks about what it means to *know* another person so well that questions become superfluous. He wants to know how it feels.

*Equivalent exchange.*

“Um, Miyuki…” he breathes in, but it’s too shallow, and he breathes in again – they’re at the exit already, and it’s a bit unsettling to see that night’s already shrouded the neighbourhood, when it’d still been bright and pleasant when Eijun had arrived, and somehow it makes him a little sad, because endings always do, even if it’s not really an end – even if it’s a book that’ll pick up somewhere else, and he just has to wait and be patient, “c-can I ask you something?”

The way Miyuki’s lips quirk, that mellow glint to his eye, Eijun has this thoroughly implausible notion that he might already know what he’s about to say. “Ask.”

“You…that day. Why did you…ask me out?”

If Miyuki’s surprised by the question, he doesn’t let on. If anything…he looks like he might have been expecting it.

With a smile as unreadable as one of Onii-san’s, Miyuki hums a note under his breath, let’s out a small sigh. “Let me answer by asking you a question then.”

Dumbfounded, Eijun blinks. “Me?”

“Yeah. When you go into a bookstore, and you pick up a book…what makes you buy it?”

Eijun can see where this is going. Eijun can see what Miyuki’s trying to do. He reads in between the lines.

“If I think…it’ll be interesting.”

“Right,” Miyuki breathes out again, and as they step out on to the pavement, standing a little to the side so they don’t block the people coming out, and Eijun’s heart is poised, suspended, a long-drawn out moment of anticipation that just stretches, “but…I guess it’s not fair to compare with a book, is it?”

“It’s not,” Eijun says, blunt. He’s a little startled himself at this outright honesty, but…he needs to know.

Miyuki chortles. “*Hah.* How do I explain this? I won’t say I fell for you at first sight, because I don’t believe that happens,” Miyuki tips his head down at Eijun, and behind his glasses Eijun sees his eyes keenly fixed on him, studying him, like he’s trying to gauge whether Eijun’s put off by this, “But…I *did* notice you, though. For a long time.”

Eijun has a little trouble finding his voice. “*How?*”

There’s the smile again – a little roughish, a little amused, but not as perplexing as he’d once found it. Not as…nerve-wracking.
“I told you – you’re a passionate guy. Your love for your manga…it stands out.”

This takes Eijun on a brief, almost nauseating reverse-trip down memory lane – he’s pretty sure he’s fastidious enough to not have done anything overtly embarrassing in public no matter how hard he’d been revelling a new manga development or a full-colour double spread he can hang in his room, and he’s trying to figure out if he’s made a slip somewhere even as he disputes, almost indiscernibly shaky, “There. Are a lot of people. Like that. The people who queue up from the night before…and all the girls who bought out the last volume of – “

“I know,” Miyuki interrupts, and it’s not rude – it’s…gentle, and patient, and somehow Eijun thinks it’s a good testimony of how Miyuki’s handled him and his nervously volatile self so far, and it makes that warmth pulse inside of him, reminding him why he needs to hear this out, “but…you’re the one that caught my attention.”

He pauses, watches him, watches these words sink in, and let’s Eijun take his time to absorb them – like he has from the beginning.

Forward, but not overwhelming. Candid, but not coering.

Eijun inhales, gathers his nerves, and accepts.

“I got used to seeing you around the store,” Miyuki resumes, and it’s almost conversational – almost like they’re talking about the weather, or commenting on the horde of fangirls who’d swept the new issues of his manga clean off the shelves, “And…I don’t know. I guess after a while…I got curious. It’s like…there were specific manga you’d pick up – specific manga for which you were always there ahead of time to get copies, and you always looked so happy picking them up, and I mean…as someone selling books, which is a bit of a dwindling trade? – it’s refreshing, to see someone that passionate about it. And…” Miyuki trails off, and for the first time that evening, he breaks eye contact, a hand pulling out of his pocket to ruffle the back of his head, and oh, he’s blushing, and that makes two of us, and – “I suppose I started wondering. What it would feel like if…”

When he shifts his gaze back to Eijun, it’s like he’s been zapped.

“If…you felt that strongly towards a person,” Miyuki hums, and there’s no smile on his face now, no humour – there’s a grave sincerity, bordering on sombre, and a tiny, thoroughly incompetent part of his subconscious is noting that this is, possibly, the closest Eijun’s come to fainting in his life, “If you felt that strongly towards…me.”

His next exhale feels like he’s breathing out needles.

“Oh,” he hushes, vocal chords a tangle, brain a bunch of fried-up wires, feebly sparking. He gulps, licks his lips. “So…that day when you. Talked to me – “

“I thought I was just making conversation,” Miyuki confesses, and the smile’s coming back – there’s colour, rich and crimson, high on his cheeks, but Miyuki smiles anyway, and smiles as though to himself, “but…it’s like a book, isn’t it? You pick it up and then before you know it…you can’t put it down.”

Eijun knows what he means. Eijun knows better than anyone what he means.

Eijun…relates.

It’s like a fish-hook snagging in his gut when Miyuki exhalas, and then asks, quietly, “And you?”
And you.

If you want to know about him, you have to let him know about you

That’s right. Equivalent exchange. That’s how it works. Give and take. Give –

“I…” quavering. Nervous. Scared (eager) –

And take.

“…want to know more about you,” he tries to keep eye-contact, he really tries, but it’s hard when his whole face is burning, scalding, misting him away until he can almost feel his eyes water. “I want…to see. Where this is going.”

***

When they’re parting ways, after a quick stop at a deli for a mini-dinner, because they’d both scarfed down too much popcorn to leave room for much else, Miyuki shifts into Eijun’s personal space.

Eijun goes stock still.

And Miyuki, he –

Hesitates,

And waits –

And when Eijun lets the tension melt, leave his shoulders and his rigid frame, he moves in.

Eijun can still feel the place where his lips had touched his cheek, like he’d been burned there, even when he’s reached home.

Even when he’s unlocked the door and vaguely noted an extra pair of shoes too small to be either his or Mochi-senpai’s.

“Eijun,” he hears the near-melodic tenor of Onii-san drift to him, even before he’s had a chance to reach the living-room, “Where exactly have you been?”

Chapter End Notes

References to:
-“Equivalent exchange” - from Fullmetal Alchemist. Basically the concept that to "create" something with alchemy, you have to offer up something of equal value/worth in exchange, i.e. something can't be made from nothing
-A Wrinkle in Time, by Madeleine L'Engle
-Roald Dahl's books
-Coraline, by Neil Gaiman (straight up the stuff of nightmares, this)
-Alice in Wonderland & Through the Looking Glass, by Lewis Carroll (and the film adaptation, Alice Through the Looking Glass, which I didn't watch because TTLG is my favourite Alice novel and I'm scared the film would ruin it - friends tell me it was wayyy too cluttered and OTT even for that universe)
-Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children, by Ransom Riggs
-Queen: their song, Bohemian Rhapsody, totally made the Suicide Squad trailer a thousand times better
-The respective music of David Bowie, Prince, The Beatles and The Police
-Ghostbusters (the new one was not as bad as everyone was saying but it wasn't Oscar-worthy either)
-Lights Out and Ouija: Origin of Evil, both movies doing the promotional rounds around the time this fic begins (horror enthusiasts, please watch! I liked them both! They were properly spooky ;P)
-Lannisters/Tyrion/Joffrey etc.: Game of Thrones/A Song of Ice and Fire
-Star Wars (all the films)
(Probably forgetting some at this point, sorry ;A;)

Um. So. I hope you guys...er. liked it. And it answered some of your questions. And it isn't terrible.

...I'm gonna go now
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

behold, the crappiest update I've ever updated orz

I'm really really sorry if this is meh Dx I've not had the time to proof-read, so please please excuse mistakes and shabby grammar and I'll try to come back and fix it ASAP! thank you! T^T

again, I'm really sorry in advance if this chapter feels off...I had really little time to work with it and I just. argh. I hope it's not unpalatable :( 

thank you guys SO MUCH for your support and kindness, you are the peeps that keep me going!!! I love you! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Shoot.”

“No!”

“He’s gonna recognise you, just shoot!”

“I won’t! He’s not a target!”

“Oh, my lord, how long do you plan on hiding until you can get him alone?”

“As long as it takes,” Eijun harrumphs, adamant, he squints at the screen, willing the silhouette of an NPC a couple of crates over to stroll off so he can get to the other guy and grab his uniform.

Mochi-senpai lets out an impatient groan. “I think you’re missing the point of gaming being fun.”

Eijun won’t budge. He continues nibbling on the corner of his lip, weighing his options – he could set off a distraction at the other end of the room but he’s not sure if he can get to the waiter, subdue him and filch his uniform as a disguise in time before the other fella gets back, and he’s not willing to take the risk of getting caught.

“Bakamura,” Mochi-senpai deadpans, in his Be Reasonable, You Idiot voice, “There is literally no one else around, just use the silenced gun and get them both and be on your way!”

“I’m supposed to be a hitman, not a trigger-happy mass murderer,” Eijun objects, obstinate – this is so stressful, why’d he even signed up for it at all? At this rate his actual target might even have left the hotel and he’d still be crouching behind a few crates of vegetables waiting for an opening.

“You do realise this is a game, yeah?” Mochi-senpai sounds almost at the end of his tether – if Eijun doesn’t find a way to get out of this situation soon, he’s pretty sure it’s going to be him getting tackled instead of a faceless character whose name he’ll never know.

This doesn’t deter Eijun at all. “I know, but it’s the principle of the thing!”
He decides he’s going to try and hustle – he flips through the menu searching for the soda can he’d picked up earlier to toss in the other direction to draw the second guy away, and is trying to pinpoint the right trajectory when he hears Mochi-senpai mutter,

“This is why we worry about you.”

Eijun forgets all about the pressing need for optimum stealth.

“We?” he repeats, immediate; he whips his head to the side, controller idle in his lap, “Who?”

“Ryou-san, obviously,” Mochi-senpai rolls his eyes, but Eijun doesn’t miss the dull red flush against his cheek – he’s pretty sure he’d not misheard Senpai’s choice of pronoun earlier, and Senpai probably knows this too, given how there’s a vein twitching against his temple –

All symptoms Eijun’s come to associate with times Mochi-senpai is severely reluctant to go through with something, but has decided that he needs to.

But when he’s this blustery and volatile, anything can set him off, so Eijun picks his words carefully.

“You’re worried because I’m not homicidal?”

Mochi-senpai tsks. “No, you idiot,” he mumbles, and the way he steeples his fingers together around his knees almost makes Eijun think that he’s decided to pursue this any further when he says, “You’re too...I don’t know. You’re too nice.”

He says the last word with all the vitriol of a curse word and Eijun’s conflicted, because “Is…is that a compliment or an insult?”

Senpai’s not turned round to look him in the eye still, but Eijun can see resignation in the set of his jaw. “It’s neither,” he gruffs, “it’s a fact.”

Eijun stalls – he makes Agent 47 toss the soda can and does a quick tackle to get the waiter, dragging his body around behind the crates before he steals his clothes as a disguise.

“There’s a freezer, you can hide him in there.”

“He’ll die!”

Mochi-senpai snaps. “See?” he points, jabbing his forefinger in Eijun’s direction almost violently, “This is what I mean! You can’t even leave people hanging in a game, and real life is…” he gesticulates, apparently at a loss of words, “a whole new ball game.”

Eijun’s found an empty wardrobe in a corridor he decides to stuff his knocked-out victim in, and uses the time it takes him to get Agent 47 to jog back upstairs so he can locate his target again to think this through. Mochi-senpai’s stance in this whole affair hadn’t exactly been a secret – in fact, it’d been Onii-san who’d taken it mildly, all things considered.

Onii-san’d not even expected he’d come clean in the first place.

“I thought you’d need a little more…persuasion,” is what he’d said, when Eijun’d decided to hedge his bets and confess that he’d been on a date.

“Wait…wh- you knew?”

“I had an inkling, yes,” Onii-san’s expression is as impenetrable as a Guy Fawkes mask –
perpetually smiling, but unreadable, “And then I had a little help from Wakana, as well.”

“Waka – “

“And before you decide that she’s irrevocably broken your trust and destroyed your friendship,” Onii-san manages to temper the rousing tempest of bristling shock with a wave of his hand, “she absolutely refused to tell me at first – I – uh, had to persuade her too.”

Eijun’d later found out that by “persuasion”, Onii-san meant he’d scared Wakana by pointing out that Eijun’s too “trusting”, “naïve” and “impressionable” and none of them know this person he’d started taking to and all he wants, really, is to know that Eijun won’t get hurt.

Eijun’d not even had the capacity to be mad after Wakana’d filled him in, in between chagrined apologies.

“But why’d you even bring it up with her?!“

“Well…“ there’s a twinkle to Onii-san’s eye, and Eijun, cowering in the armchair in front of him and panicked enough to hallucinate that he’s in an interrogation room rather than his own living-room, almost thinks he’s enjoying himself, “it’s not every day you ask me about love advice.”

Eijun splutters, clenches his teeth round his tongue. “I didn’t ask –“

“Perhaps,” Onii-san agrees, cutting off his heated counterargument without even raising his voice, “but you’ve never expressed any interest in relationships before. And then, a few days ago Youichi’d mentioned someone had asked you out for coffee…“

Eijun cuts his eyes over to where Mochi-senpai’s been hulking, just behind Onii-san’s armchair, and if they’re playing Good Cop, Bad Cop, Mochi-senpai’s doing a terrible job because even though he’s been steadily glowering at Eijun since he’d come out with the admission that he’d been on a date, Eijun’s pretty sure he’d been just as gobsmacked by the knowledge that Onii-san’d already known this little detail and he…hadn’t.

“So when Wakana was kind enough to call wishing me on my birthday, I decided to ask her.”

Temporarily putting on hold the sting he feels at this betrayal – he’d spoken to her JUST that afternoon and she’d not even warned him! – Eijun tries to harness his bravado, and inquires, terse, “Are you angry?”

This actually makes Onii-san raise his eyebrows. “Angry that you’re dating someone?” Eijun curses the physiological programming of his body, conscious of the way his ears are overheating at the mention of the word “dating” – “Of course not.”

“Really?!“

Eijun exchanges a stunned glance with Mochi-senpai, who’d blurted out that question at the same time as him. The older Kominato sweeps a mildly amused look between the two of them, before shaking his head.

“I’m not mad that you found someone you want to go out with, Eijun,“ Onii-san trills, in that deceptively pleasant voice of his, “I am, however…curious. As to why you didn’t tell us.”

And it boils back to this again. Eijun’s so bad at this, so bad at putting the wealth of abstract concepts crowding inside of his head ever since Miyuki’d gone from being just a bookstore assistant to something…more into words, and it’d been so simple to keep relegating it to the
backseat, sweeping it under the rug, pushing back the inevitable, because whether it’d been at the Kominatos’ flat during Onii-san’s birthday dinner or earlier that afternoon when Wakana’d been trying to get him to speak to them, it’s still no easier, simplifying the chain of events that’d led from Eijun running in late for a manga release to coming back for a date he’d gone out of his way to arrange.

“I don’t know where to begin,” is the lame, thoroughly unconvincing excuse he mumbles, and he feels like a heel, because he never hides anything from Onii-san and he’d just been caught hiding something important, something big and significant and pivotal, and even though he knows he owes him an explanation, that he’s probably hurt him at least a little bit by not coming out with this sooner no matter how well Onii-san disguises it under the poker-face that makes him one of the best crisis management professionals in his field, even the clarity of what he wants with Miyuki doesn’t make things any easier.

“Begin at the beginning,” Onii-san hums, “go on to the end; then stop.”

If anything, the near-sinister irony of Onii-san quoting “Alice in Wonderland” at a time like this makes Eijun visibly tense up even more.

Onii-san sighs. “Eijun,” he says, and Eijun recognises the tone instantly – it’s the same tone Onii-san’d used when he’d been in the throes of a panic-attack the night before his interview, or when they’d first arrived in Tokyo and it’d sunk in, with the belated lurch repressed emotions sometimes come spilling out with, that he’s going to have to fend for himself without his parents and granddad to pick up after his mistakes, “I’m not asking you to justify your decisions – you’re an adult now. You get to make your choices. We – “ he deliberately glances over his shoulder, where Mochi-senpai’s contorting expressions suggest he doesn’t altogether agree with Onii-san’s verdict, “just want to know about these choices.”

There’s nothing in Onii-san’s body language or even the pitch of his voice to suggest he’s trying to be placating, cajoling – but Onii-san’s very good at persuasion, after all. There’s a tight knot loosening in Eijun’s chest, the guilt he’d been trampling down for keeping him in the dark easing, even as Onii-san continues, “And since you decided to tell us you were on a date without any pushing – I assume you’re ready to talk about it now.”

And it’d been surprisingly painless, the whole process – Onii-san’d taken it pretty well, inquired after Miyuki and what he did, who he was, the only evidence that he’s going out of his way not to alarm Eijun being the lack of passive aggressive bullying that’s Onii-san’s way of showing affection, and when he’d meekly followed Onii-san to the door when he had been leaving, and he’d stuttered out a timid but sincere, “I’m sorry,” Onii-san’d just shaken his head.

“It’s okay,” he’d lifted a hand to ruffle Eijun’s hair just a tad too roughly, and his smile’d twitched, “It’s not like I don’t understand.”

He had peeked over Eijun’s shoulder back into the living-room then, and Eijun’d known that Mochi-senpai was there, and he remembers that it’d not been all that long ago that he and Onii-san’d been basking in the glow of good food and the company of loved ones, and Onii-san had finally been confident enough to tell him that he and Mochi-senpai are getting together.

Some things take time, and it’s okay, and Eijun thinks he has Onii-san’s tacit approval to take it step by step, so long as he doesn’t hide it anymore.

Mochi-senpai, on the other hand, isn’t on the same page.

Agent 47 scales a drainpipe, and Eijun mumbles, fingers absently toying with the controller button,
“I didn’t just go along with him because he asked me to.”

“A random dude asked you out for coffee,” Mochi-senpai points out, tartly, “and you went.”

“I told you, I owed him!” the bald assassin almost falls off the ledge onto the back of his bar-coded head as Eijun fumbles with the controls in his bid to defend himself, “He seriously helped me out and – and at that point I didn’t even know he was asking me out at all!”

“This is what I mean,” Mochi-senpai hisses, spacing out the syllables emphatically, “This is exactly what I mean! He’s not even someone you know and – “

“I thought he might be a druglord.”

“…what?”

“I said,” Eijun plants his controller down on the ground, swivels around so he is face to face with Mochi-senpai, because mortifying as this is, and offended as he really should be considering the low estimation everyone appears to have about his ability to judge character, he understands that Mochi-senpai’s worried for him, and is trying to act on that worry in his own, if completely tactless, way, “I thought he was a druglord at first.”

Senpai’s eyes are almost bugging out of his face. “Why?”

Eijun hesitates, tries to be defiant as he admits, “No reason.”

“No reason,” Mochi-senpai echoes back, disbelieving.

“No reason,” Eijun repeats again, and tries to quell the agony of reacquainting himself with his own idiocy, “except that he was nice to me, and he wanted me to go for coffee with him, and I thought maybe he was a shady person, because I didn’t even know him.”

Mochi-senpai does a goldfish impression for a while, mouth opening and closing, face stuck, as though not sure which emotion ought to take precedence.

Eijun decides he’s going to use this to his advantage.

“So it’s not like I trusted him too easily,” he insists, and rushes on, before he can lose momentum, “and the second time it genuinely was because I needed to interview him…and the third time w-was… the third time was a date. That I asked him out on.”

It takes Mochi-senpai a few moments to compose himself – Eijun can almost see the cogs turn as he sieves through all the different things he’s working himself into a fit over with what Eijun’s just said, before growling, “And you still didn’t tell me.”

“To be fair,” Eijun says, and he’s aware that he’s treading very dangerous waters with his next argument, but it’s the most compelling one he’s got, “you didn’t tell me either. About you and Onii-san.”

It’d be funny, the way Mochi-senpai’s expression morphs from incensed to complete shellshock at these words, if Eijun weren’t afraid that he’d recover and attempt a real-life assassination instead.

What he does, though, is turn back to the TV, although it does nothing to hide the way he’s gone red almost to the roots of his dyed-green hair.

“But you still knew about it, didn’t you,” he manages to say, though it’s a bit strangled, “But this
guy…we don’t even know him – “

“You didn’t know Onii-san either when you first met him,” Eijun counters, and the only reason he’s bold enough is because he’s learnt name-dropping Onii-san is a pretty failsafe way of diverting Mochi-senpai’s wrath, “you…took your time, getting to know him. You decided that you wanted to, right?”

For the person who’d decided to confront him, Mochi-senpai’s suddenly turned incredibly reticent.

But Eijun pushes on, because this isn’t the first time he’s having to explain himself like this, and it’s only now that he’s beginning to realise that perhaps he’s been approaching it the wrong way.

“I decided to want to know him too,” Eijun says, and it sounds out oddly in his ears, reverberating with embarrassment but with an assurance that makes Mochi-senpai look up at him, “it’s not because he asked me out, or he helped me, or because I owe him anything. I…want to get to know him. I want this. And maybe…maybe I don’t know yet how things are going to go, and I don’t want to rush into it, but…I want to, right?”

When Senpai finally speaks, he says, “It’s been an hour and your target’s probably died waiting around for you.”

And that’s that, Eijun thinks, an ambiguous full-stop he thinks he can be cautiously optimistic about, but when he’s finally located his target, having swapped disguises three more times and run moral circles around the issue of whether or not to throw a billiard ball at an NPC’s face, Mochi-senpai says, out of the blue, “Next time you’re going on a date, tell me.”

Eijun bites down a smile. “Yes,” he okays.

“And if he does something to you,” Mochi-senpai continues, with deadly intent, “You’re going to let me whoop his ass.”

The image almost makes Eijun giggle, for some reason.

And while he has no idea how it’ll go, and if it’ll ever come to Miyuki meeting Mochi-senpai or any of the people he’s spent the weekend telling about him, Eijun’s conscious of the fluttering behind his ribs, and he knows he’s hopeful.

***

They meet over cake to celebrate Eijun’s second approved article about how faithful cinema is to its roots, and he tells Miyuki about Mochi-senpai, and Onii-san and Harucchi, and Wakana, and his parents and the Kominatos, and Nagano, and he talks until his mouth feels dry and the back of his throat smarts, and he winds up downing three strawberry lemonades.

Miyuki tells him about how he’d attended boarding school, and he’d picked up an interest for cooking because he’d hated the food there and decided to do something about it, and sold his bike to get a portable induction cooker for his dorm, and Eijun’s almost in stitches by the time Miyuki finishes telling him how he’d accidentally activated the smoke alarm when he’d left the rice on too long and wound up bribing security with home-made food, because, turns out, the staff hated the food there too.

***

“If you think he’s up to something,” Mochi-senpai warns him gravely one day, when he’s just reached home and is vegetating on the couch, “or if he’s doing something you don’t like…punch
him in the throat.”

Eijun stares at Mochi-senpai as though he’s grown an extra head. Mochi-senpai doesn’t get the message.

“Show me how you’d do it,” he instructs, and Eijun realises with a sinking feeling that he isn’t kidding, “come on.”

***

You said: I HATE SANSA

You said: WHY IS SHE LIKE THIS

You said: JOFFREYS A JERK BECAUSE OF HIS GENES BUT WHAT’S HER EXCUSE

Miyuki Kazuya said: Which part are you at now

You said: the part where everything is her fault and I hate her

Miyuki Kazuya said: hahahahaha

Eijun takes a break from fostering his intense dislike for a fictional character to wonder if that’d really made Miyuki laugh.

He hopes it had.

***

Aotsuki Wakana said: Ei-chan

Aotsuki Wakana said: Are you still mad

Aotsuki Wakana said: I said I was sorry

Aotsuki Wakana said: I really really mean it

Aotsuki Wakana: I promise he made meee :

Aotsuki Wakana: you know how it isssss

Aotsuki Wakana: and he promised he wouldn’t tell anyone

Aotsuki Wakana: and I was worried about youuu

You said: because you thought was “impressionable” and “naïve”?

Aotsuki Wakana: I freaked out okay, you didn’t even tell me his full name and I mean

Aotsuki Wakana: it seems stupid now but I remembered how you thought he was mafia

You said: Miyuki Kazuya

Aotsuki Wakana: ???

You said: his full name is Miyuki Kazuya
“‘Mochi-senpai’ is a cute name,” Miyuki observes – it’s a Friday, and they’re walking down the street – they don’t have any specific plans, and both of them are still dressed in their work-clothes, but Eijun thinks he can understand what people mean by a “holiday mood”; he’s oddly energised, even though it’s the end of the week and he thinks he can probably sleep through the whole weekend.

“He’d definitely not be happy to hear that,” Eijun chortles, “it took him almost a year to give up getting mad at me for calling him that.”

Miyuki flashes an answering grin. “Well, it’d be a wasted opportunity if you didn’t.”

“Exactly. He doesn’t see it that way though.”

“From what I’ve heard about him so far,” Miyuki drawls, and they make a mindless turn at the bend of the road, without any clear destination in mind, “I don’t think he exactly minds.”

By the time Eijun goes home, Miyuki’s taken to calling Mochi-senpai Tsundere Senpai and Eijun almost ends up blurting it out in said person’s face when he catches him coming in at the door.

“What are you gonna pitch next?”

Eijun grins, cocks sure and broad, and prompts Harucchi to actually blink twice in surprise.

“Gaming as a story-telling medium,” he says, and pushes his list of notes toward Harucchi to take a look, and preens when he lets out a low, impressed whistle.

And while Eijun’s in the middle of doing a little extra layout work, because he’s free until the next pitch and he’s bored, Harucchi says, “Hey, Eijun-kun?”

“Hmm?”

“I’m glad you got over your bloc.”

---

You said: DROGO NOOOOOOOO

Miyuki Kazuya said: I thought you didn’t like him

You said: HE LOVED HER

You said: HE LOVED HER

You said: SHE LOVED HIM

You said: NOOOOO

You said: WHY DID SHE TRUST THAT WOMAN

Miyuki Kazuya said: Um

Miyuki Kazuya said: The things we do for love?
And it might be no more than the text version of a smile, but Eijun can’t help grinning so hard he has to hide his face in his pillow.

***

“Sorry about that,” Onii-san slides back into place at the dinner table, placing his phone face down on the table-top, “it was a bit urgent.”

He graces Mochi-senpai with a smile when he brings back the plate he’d gone to warm up in the microwave while Onii-san’d been away on his call, and Eijun and Harucchi exchange covert little smiles.

***

It doesn’t take Eijun long to confirm something he’d suspected for a while – he likes making Miyuki laugh.

That is quite possibly why he confesses, randomly, one Sunday when they’re hunting for a place to eat, that he’d initially pegged him for a criminal.

Miyuki ends up wheezing so hard Eijun actually has to hold him up so his knees don’t buckle.

“So you took me as a member of the underworld, huh?” Miyuki’s grin is huge and shark-like, and there’s a glint to his eye that’s a few notches more mischievous than Eijun is used to, “Are bad boys your type, Eijun?”

His laughter goes from breathless cackling to a warm rumble when Eijun’s response to this is literally choking on a mouthful of air.

Maybe it helps him cover up for how much he likes making Miyuki laugh like this too.

***

Miyuki Kazuya said: Morning ~

Miyuki Kazuya said: At work already?

You said: My body is

You said: I think I lost my soul somewhere on the train though

Miyuki Kazuya said: hahahahaha

Miyuki Kazuya said: I get you

Miyuki Kazuya said: I probably COULD pass for an underworld lord if I didn’t have coffee first

You said: so basically

You said: you’re Hades

Miyuki Kazuya: Does that make you Persephone? ;}
When Eijun mentions that he needs to make a quick stop at the bookstore to grab a copy of *A Clash of Kings*, Harucchi pipes up, “Can I come with you?”

Even though his hair’s falling all over his face, Eijun can make out the determined glint out from underneath his fringe, and knows he’s not going to take “no” for an answer.

And that’s fine, he thinks, that’s *okay*, because this is Harucchi and he’d handled the news about Miyuki with the most composure out of everyone, and besides it’s been a while already, now, this they’d been going out, and it’s not like he’d been going there specifically to meet him anyway, though there’s that too, and maybe, maybe going there like this, on an actual errand, sans the preparation and formality, would help him gauge if Miyuki’s okay with meeting his friends-slash-family, if they’ve reached that stage where he’d be okay letting these people in too, and it’s not like they’re going to stay there for long, either –

Or so he tries to rationalise, the entire time he tries to control his bubbling anxiety on the way there.

“Relax,” Harucchi murmurs, with a soft touch at his elbow as they get off at the station, “I’m not gonna attack him. I’m not Mochi-senpai.”

“Hahaha,” Eijun quavers, and it sounds so ridiculously nervous he wonders what he’d do if it really was Mochi-senpai with him instead.

But before he knows it they’re inside the store again, and Eijun’s already spotted Miyuki, and his hand’s automatically plunged up into the air in a wave even as he manoeuvres Harucchi to the *A Song of Ice and Fire* display and reaches out for the green tomes.

“You must be Harucchi.”

Eijun’s been tracking him out of the corner of his eye but his heart still performs an elaborate leapfrog hearing him speak – he turns a bit haltingly round to find Miyuki holding his hand out for Harucchi to take, and it occurs to him that he’d remembered to use his proper name, rather than the nickname Eijun always uses for him.

“And you must be the Miyuki Kazuya I’ve heard so much about,” Harucchi responds in kind, giving his hand a firm shake – he’s amicable and smiling, but there’re still fireworks exploding in the pit of Eijun’s tummy, and he finds himself looking at Miyuki –

Who’s grinning at him.

“Is that so?” he lilts, and there’s humour in the way his eyes crinkle, and a laugh in his tone when he says, “Has you told you about my secret identiy as *yakuza* yet?”

Harucchi chortles, and Eijun groans. “Are you ever going to let me live that down?”

“Nope,” Miyuki chips in immediately, and drops his eyes to the book Eijun’s holding, “Found a spotless copy yet?”

Eijun wants to retaliate that he isn’t, in fact, *that* fussy, but he still hasn’t checked the corners of the pages and the spine for creases yet so he settles for a belligerent grunt instead, shuffling back to the books to resume his search, anxiety a little more appeased seeing Miyuki and Harucchi hit it off pretty well.
By the time he’s found a book in as close to mint condition as he can, the two of them are already engaged in easy conversation. Eijun waddles up to them, holding his book like a prize.

“Still can’t believe you started reading this,” Harucchi comments as he approaches, “I didn’t even see you with the first one – “

“Ah, that’s because I didn’t want to carry it on my commute,” Eijun explains.

“They are too big to carry around,” Miyuki hums, motioning to take the book from him. Eijun hesitates, and Miyuki grins at him, “Don’t worry, I’ll let you pay for this one.”

Relenting, Eijun hands over the book, and is about to follow Miyuki over to the counter when Harucchi says, “Oh, that’s why you weren’t carrying it around.”

Miyuki looks back at Harucchi in question. Eijun looks at him in a cross between pleading and horror.

With a smirk, Harucchi elaborates, “Eijun-kun’s a bit OCD about books he gets as gifts. He takes extra special care of them, so they don’t get creased or anything – right, Eijun-kun?”

The smile he gets is so convincingly innocent it puts Onii-san’s to shame.

***

“Why did you do that?” Eijun nags, long after they’re on the train and Eijun’s clasping his new book in one hand and his phone with other, trying to angle it so Harucchi can’t see the messages he’s trying to reply to, because

“So you took special care of the book I gave you, huh”

“That is so adorable”

And he’s in the process of typing out something that’s more of a convincing argument and less of cringeworthy sentimental drivel, when Harucchi smugly says, “Consider it payback for not telling me about him earlier.”

Eijun takes back everything he’d mentally assured himself about Harucchi being the cool-headed Kominato. Clearly, Eijun’s crush-addled brain’d forgotten he can hold grudges even better than his older brother.

“But…I’ve gotta say,” he muses aloud, ignoring Eijun’s wounded sulking completely, “I see why you fell for him.”

“Fell for…”

“He gets you,” Harucchi declares simply, and this time his smile is an authentic one, “and he’s clearly making the effort for you, and I suppose that’s all the reassurance I can ask for, really.” Harucchi bumps their shoulders together, playful, “I’m happy for you, Eijun-kun.”

***

You said: So Harucchi likes you

Miyuki Kazuya said: Of course he does ~

You said: Wait til you meet his older brother
Miyuki Kazuya said: I’m sure he’ll love me too <3

You said: You are SO full of yourself

Miyuki Kazuya said: You love it

Bubble.

Bubble.

[You are typing…]

Miyuki Kazuya said: Are you free this Saturday

[You are typing…]

Bubble.

You said: Yeah

Bubble.

Bubble.

Bubble.

[Miyuki Kazuya is typing…]

Miyuki Kazuya said: Do you wanna maybe come over

Miyuki Kazuya said: To my place?

Miyuki Kazuya said: To hang out?

Bubble.

You said: Okay

Chapter End Notes

References to:
-Agent 47/the game Eijun and Mochi are playing: Hitman (2016). There are 2 ways to play - ninja stealth, which comes with a great sense of accomplishment if you pull off a mission, and explode everything, which is oddly therapeutic and possibly what I need right now
-Guy Fawkes mask - you might recognise it as the mask V wears in V for Vendetta (both the movie and the comics are INCREDIBLE, and especially relevant to the state of the world today)
-"Begin at the beginning [...]" - quote out of Alice in Wonderland
-"The things we do for love" - Jaime Lannister's infamous quote from the first ASOIAF book
-A Clash of Kings - sequel to Game of Thrones
-Hades/Persephone - Greek mythology; Hades was the lord of the underworld, and he
fell so in love with Persephone that he...er...kinda kidnapped her (courtship techniques back then were less refined OTL but at least he's not as bad as Zeus. There's actually more to Hades-Persephone's story but I'll leave that theme for exploration in a later chapter)

Thank you for reading and MAJOR APOLOGIES IF YOU WERE DISAPPOINTED I AM SO SORRY
I can't believe this is already 10 chapters long? this is officially the longest fic I've ever written :A;

I think this is as good an opportunity as any to say what I say a lot but I REALLY need to say again - THANK YOU. I am forever scared of multi-chaps and of AUs and this fic is BOTH and without the amazing amount of support and love you guys have shown me and this fic, I promise you we wouldn't have come this far. Thank you so very much to all the lovely people who have stuck with this - it's by far one of the more ambitious things I've attempted, what with the number of charas and subplots that keep muscling in (a couple of them in this chapter actually orz) and I sincerely hope you're enjoying this journey as much as I am

Thank you all SO SO SO much for being, just, the absolute BEST <33 ILYSM!

Also I'm trying my best to reply to everyone and if I haven't replied to you yet I shall do so soon! Promise!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You added “Kominato Haruichi (Harucchi)”, “Aotsuki Wakana” to this conversation
You named this conversation “Nagano Support Group”

Aotsuki Wakana said: lol
Aotsuki Wakana said: I’m assuming this has something to do with Miyuki-kun doesn’t it ~
Harucchi said: If it’s “Nagano” Support Group you should add Aniki as well
Harucchi said: Should I add him
You said: NO
You said: OMG
You said: PLS NO
You said: In fact I kinda need you guys’ advice FOR Onii-san and Mochi-senpai
Aotsuki Wakana said: ooooooh
Aotsuki Wakana said: introing the boyfriend to the parents eh??
You said: WAKANAAAA
You said: Are you gonna listen or should I not tell you what’s going on
Harucchi said: What IS going on?
You said: I’m
You said: Kinda
You said: Going to Miyuki’s for dinner tomorrow
Aotsuki Wakana: OOOOOH
Aotsuki Wakana: I SEEEEE WINK WINK
You said: STOP THAT
You said: IT’S JUST DINNER
You said: It’s just that
You said: Onii-san’s okay but
You said: I haven’t told Mochi-senpai yet
Harucchi: Ah
Aotsuki Wakana renamed this conversation “Nagano Prayer Circle”

***

He’d checked and double-checked and triple-checked the directions Miyuki’d texted him, and he’d allotted plenty of room for the amount of time he’d spent wandering around lost, which, despite his penchant for pessimism and general streak of self-fulfilling prophesising, hadn’t actually happened.

Which in turn meant he’d shown up early yet again, and is currently hesitating in front of Miyuki’s door, uncertainly thumbing at his phone, because while Miyuki’d told him to text when he arrived, the notion of showing up before the appointed time is putting him on tenterhooks.

And he’s probably dawdled long enough for it to strike as unusual, because as he spasmodically opens and closes his chat with Miyuki for the umpteenth time, a female voice sounds out right next to him.

“Excuse me? Are you looking for Miyuki Kazuya?”

Hearing his name makes Eijun start a little guiltily – which, all things considered, probably doesn’t help his case.

“Um, yes,” Eijun stammers, cheeks hot, trying not to shrink away from the lady (and reinforce the impression that he’s scoping out the place for a burglary or something) – she’s crisply dressed in granite grey slacks and blazer, brown hair pulled back into a bun, exuding an air of professionalism so sharp it intimidates Eijun.

The lady tips her head down at him, looking intrigued.

“A classmate?” she inquires – her tone’s friendly, if not a little inquisitive, and it suddenly jolts a couple of things into perspective for Eijun.

For starters, this woman is… pretty.
And she evidently knows Miyuki.

“No,” Eijun says, a bit more guarded – he wracks his brain for a clue of who this could be, tries to remember if Miyuki’d ever mentioned someone who fits the bill, and keeps coming up short, “I’m – “

His phone buzzes. A message preview pops up on his screen as he glances down instinctively.

“Close?”

I’m here, he texts, thumbs rapid and practised.

The stranger, the lady, is still there. When Eijun looks up again, she asks, “Are you a friend of Miyuki-kun’s?”

Why do you want to know? is what the little voice in his head snaps, and Eijun’s startled by how caustic it sounds.

It’s not like she’s being rude or anything – her demeanour is amenable, and she doesn’t sound like she’s prying, exactly –

But Eijun recognises that his response is almost wary, and that throws him off. Maybe it’s because it’s the first time he’s meeting someone else who already knows Miyuki, or –

Maybe it’s because of the question she’s asked.

He’s still trying to work it around his head when the creak of hinges makes him click his mouth shut.

“Hi,” Miyuki hums at him, twinkling eyes, easy smile – and then his gaze flicks to the woman, and his eyebrow arches, “Oh. Hi Rei-chan. Working through the weekend again, I see.”

The woman lets out a weary laugh, but Eijun doesn’t notice.

Eijun’s aghast, because he’s pretty sure he just felt his heart sink, and he should be concerned about that, he should be trying to rationalise this reaction, but all his brain is currently interested in nit-picking is the fact that Miyuki’d just called this woman Rei-chan.

An endearment.

An endearment using her first name, probably.

The first name of a woman who looks the type of person who’s forever giving Eijun an inferiority complex because of how put together they come off – mature and self-assured and…and…good-looking, and –

“Aren’t you going to introduce us?”

“Right,” Miyuki turns to Eijun – he’s in tracksuit bottoms and a plain brick-red T-shirt, his hair a couple of tones darker than normal because he’d probably recently gotten out of the shower and – “This is Takashima Rei, Eijun. Scout for Seido High’s baseball team, and my neighbour of two years.”

“Nice to meet you,” Eijun finds himself garbling, automatic. His head is echoing the last two syllables Miyuki’s uttered in varying degrees of panic.
“And this,” Miyuki gestures to Eijun, and Eijun notes the spark of interest behind Takashima-san’s glasses again, “is Sawamura Eijun.” Miyuki grins at him, wolfish, “My boyfriend.”

***

“Please pardon the intrusion,” Eijun mumbles, trying to wrangle off his shoes without dropping any of the things he’s holding – it’s only now, part-curious and part-nervous as he takes in the neatly stacked shoe-racks of unfamiliar pairs of sneakers and loafers, that the enormity of it all dawns on him, the weight like a book he’d not expected to be so heavy when he’d pulled it out of its shelf.

This is Miyuki’s home. They’re not on neutral ground anymore.

It scares him.

It excites him.

A part of that, though, might be the aftershock of what Miyuki’d declared, so simply, right outside that door.

My boyfriend.

They’ve been together for a while now, and he’s started to adapt to thinking of them in that way, and yet the word “boyfriend” had almost dissolved him into a giddy puddle of nothing right there and then.

But –

“She seemed surprised,” Eijun ventures, cautious – a part of him writhes in humiliation at how petty he’s being, getting this worked up, getting almost latently hostile; another part is niggling him, aggravated, for answers, “to see me here.”

Miyuki lets out a bark of laughter. “I don’t usually have people over,” he admits, and there’s something slightly ironic about his smile, “And Rei-chan tends to be kinda nosy too.”

Somehow, having it said out loud compels him to dispute it. “She’s nice, though.”

It’s a poor attempt to justify the fact that he’d almost…disliked her. Despite not knowing her. Despite her not doing anything to wrong him.

She’d simply known Miyuki. Simply shown a degree of familiarity with him that’d reminded Eijun that there’s an entire other side of him that he hasn’t seen yet, parts of his life that hadn’t involved Eijun, and somehow it’d…upset him.

Made him…

Jealous.

Possessive.

It’s a sobering realisation, and Eijun, dazed, thinks it’s going to take some getting used to.

Miyuki shrugs – he’s standing at the threshold of the hall, waiting for Eijun, who ambles over in his socks, trying his damnedest not to be awkward as his inherent self-consciousness kicks in.

“She’s spent years working with students all the time, so I guess she can’t help looking out for
"em."

“Oh,” the more his completely unfounded, completely baseless feelings are appeased, the guiltier he feels, “she looks really young though.”

“You should see her without her make-up.”

Despite himself, Eijun snorts. “Oh my God!” he swats Miyuki’s arm, half-scandalised, half trying to appear serious, “You’re horrible!”

“Well, I am supposed to be the Lord of the Underworld,” Miyuki smirks, welcoming him into his warmly lit living-slash-dining area with a grand flourish, “Gotta live up to the expectations.”

Letting out a playful groan, Eijun teases, “I knew you were getting too into this.”

“And yet you’ve washed up on the shores of the Styx into my domain,” Miyuki declares, flowery and grandiose and theatrical, and Eijun, in spite of the fresh aftermath of an unwarranted emotional upheaval he’s going to have to overanalyse at some point, ends up giggling hard.

They’re seated side by side on a beige-upholstered settee when Eijun remembers.

“Uh…this is for you,” he says, holding out the plain white paper bag he’d made a pit-stop on the way to pick up, “it’s…that coffee you like.”

And it’s really no big deal, it really isn’t – Onii-san’d sedately observed that it’s considered etiquette to take a gift when visiting someone’s home for the first time and pretty much limited his response to Eijun coming over here to that morsel of advice, and Eijun’d been brought up as a good, well-mannered child and he’s versed in the art of courtesy and this is nothing, really, it’s a formality, except Eijun isn’t delusional and he knows how much he’d deliberated trying to pick between a Caramel Macchiato and the “Monthly Special”, some kind of lovechild between a latte and a chocolate sundae that Eijun’d reflexively felt Miyuki would have liked, given his sweet tooth –

And it basically culminates in Eijun blushing furiously as he hands the package over and watches realisation glint in Miyuki’s eye as he peeks in the bag, realisation that’s quickly replaced by –

Miyuki leaning in, pressing warm lips to his cheek and setting off a dozen volts of electricity down his nerves, before shifting back a little to look him in the eye and hush, “Thank you.”

“I- it’s nothing,” Eijun squeaks, and hopes it didn’t actually sound as much like a mouse as he thinks it did, “You should drink it while it’s still cold.”

“Oh, but that’d be so rude of me,” Miyuki intones, eyes sparkling with that mingling amusement and warmth Eijun’s starting to get accustomed to seeing – it still makes his pulse flutter, though, and he bites his lip when Miyuki brushes a hand against the back of his, saying, “Make yourself at home while I go grab something, okay?”

Which is easier said than done, Eijun thinks – the alien feel of being in someone else’s home for the first time comes packaged with an innate doubt of where the boundaries are; how much you can do without being impolite or taking excessive liberties.

But Eijun’s more curious than he is apprehensive, and Miyuki slipping into the kitchen gives him the opportunity to explore, and having seen his fair share of domestic spaces to know they tend to reflect personality, he leaves his seat and heads toward the most ostensible part of the room – namely, a ceiling-to-floor shelf packed with CD cases.
It comes as a surprise to him – he knows that Miyuki’s something of a music lover, and he’s got something of a weakness for the 80s, but the number of albums in their cardboard sleeves or plastic cases lined into the racks stun him for a moment. It doesn’t take him long to realise that they’re sorted by genre, and possibly time period too – craning his neck, he catches names like Tchaikovsky and Schubert and Handel stacked way at the top, some names he doesn’t even recognise, some evidently scrawled in different languages, likely French or German. About a quarter of the way down the shelf, he runs into more familiar names – Nirvana, Bee Gees, Eric Clapton – and it’s as he’s staring, hypnotised, working his way down this assiduously chronological arrangement, that Miyuki returns with a chilled tumbler in hand.

“Wow,” is the first articulate thing he manages to say.

Miyuki laughs, and it sounds a bit abashed. “It’s not that bad.”

“There must be hundreds,” Eijun takes the glass he’s being offered, absent-minded, eyes big and awed as he takes in the shelf in its entirety, “maybe over a thousand?”

Miyuki makes a noncommittal noise, and Eijun peeks at him, dubious. If he’d gone through the trouble of organising his music so meticulously, Eijun really doubts Miyuki doesn’t know just how many records he actually possesses.

“You’re basically a collector,” Eijun tells him – he’s pretty sure he’s never seen these many discs at the same place anywhere outside of an actual music store, “Do you still buy them?”

Miyuki dips his head a little, to indicate the glass Eijun’s been neglecting, and as he takes a sip – it’s lychee and…mint? Eijun thinks, throat tingling as the liquid makes its way down – he says, “Yeah, I do. Partly because...habit. I guess. And…to borrow the sentiments of someone I know…” he gives him an impish smirk before sauntering off to get the coffee he’d left on the side-table, “I can’t rip off of the hard work of an artist and disrespect the craft.”

It’s a bit funny, to be reminded of that.

It’d been among the first things he’d ever told Miyuki, and it’s a little hard to believe that’d been no more than maybe a month, maybe two ago, when they used to be little more than strangers, and Eijun’d known nothing except the name printed on an employee card.

He’s learnt a lot since then, in the times they’ve spent, talking, texting, getting into half-serious arguments and losing themselves in discourse.

It’s only now, though, here – as he stares around and drinks in the details of this room, this place Miyuki’s spent time furnishing with little bits of himself, all that music that Eijun’s never even heard before, a smaller bookcase in the corner where he can see the complete collection of published A Song of Ice and Fire books and a couple of other titles he’s itching to go over and examine, and what looks, at this distance, to be a few volumes of the manga that’d been their conversation opener all those weeks ago –

It’s only like this that it fully sinks in to Eijun that he’d been naïve, to assume that you could learn everything there is to learn about a person just by spending time with them.

Some things you have to see. To find out, yourself.

His brain is still working around this concept as he shuffles toward the bookcase, eyes drawn to the spines of the titles, but before he can kneel down and take a closer look, his eyes catch on what’s on top of the bookcase.
“Your dad?” Eijun asks – he glances over his shoulder as he hears muffled footsteps abound behind him, before refocusing on the photo-frame.

“Yeah.”

Eijun thinks he can see the resemblance. Shrewd, brown-gold eyes, defined, sharp features, brown-black hair but peppered, a little, with grey, but –

There’s another photo-frame, a more ornate one, with fine silvery vines twining round a photograph of two people, a woman and a man, and over here, Miyuki-san is smiling. Over here, he’s happy, and there’s a light to his eye that even the mosaic of coloured dots struggling to capture moments of reality couldn’t miss, and there are still creases around his mouth, but they’re not like the ones in his solo picture –

Not like they’re just left over, a permanently scarred scowl.

It’s not like Eijun can’t infer what that means. Miyuki’d told him, during one of their many after-work escapades, that his mother had passed when he’d still been relatively young, and Eijun’d had enough insight to gauge, from the fact that Miyuki’d appeared to have completed secondary education in a boarding school and tended to avoid talking about his father, that the two probably didn’t have the best relationship –

But looking at the difference between the man so clearly jubilant to be where he is in one picture, and so…humourless, on his own…it’s so stark and obvious, it brings out a more visceral reaction in Eijun.

It makes him sad.

“Have you seen him lately?”

He looks askance, just in time to see the corners of Miyuki’s mouth turn down.

It’s just for a moment, just an infinitesimal second Eijun’d have missed if he’d just blinked before Miyuki’s got the ghost of one of his mysterious smiles back on, and it’d been so uncannily similar to his dad’s expression that it makes Eijun’s heart twinge, a little.

“We’re not on the best of terms,” Miyuki murmurs, light.

But you have a framed picture of him in your home

Eijun can’t say that aloud. Eijun can’t force Miyuki to talk about something he’s clearly so reserved about, and he can’t begrudge him for not wanting to talk about it. He’s been nothing but forthright and frank with Eijun, about himself, about his life, about them – but this isn’t about just Miyuki.

This is a lot more complicated, something that he’s probably had to contend with for a long, long time, something he’s had to accept and tuck away and ignore, and Eijun understands, and yet –

A part of him wants to understand more.

It’s too soon for that, though. It’s still too soon for that.

“I’m sorry,” is what he mumbles instead – it’s sincere, because he feels he’s dampened the whole mood of the evening with his untimely curiosity…and because, even though it’d been for the most
fleeting of moments, he’d put that look on Miyuki’s face.

Miyuki exhales, audibly, and the next thing he knows, he’s shifted right into Eijun’s space, and he’s waggled his eyebrows, and leered, “Aww…are you going to help me feel better, then?”

And just like that, they reset – Eijun spluttering, Miyuki sniggering away smugly, and they make their slow way back to the couch with their drinks, and leave the pictures with their untapped narratives behind.

For now.

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Eijun squeals. He can’t help it.

“This,” he says, pausing to relish his second mouthful, “is straight up. The best Curry I’ve ever had. Ever.”

Across from him, where they’ve folded themselves on to the floor on either side of the low coffee-table doubling as Miyuki’s dining area, Miyuki openly basks in Eijun’s enthused reaction.

“Why, thank you very much.”

“You made the base from scratch, didn’t you.” It’s not even a question. Eijun’s had enough microwaveable curry and three-ingredient, one-pot curry to know that this – this harmony of flavour, this blend of spices teasing his tongue with degrees of heat and aroma, is a testament to good old-fashioned home-cooking sans any commercial shortcuts.

Miyuki confirms this when he fixes Eijun with a faux offended look. “Well, of course I made it from scratch, what do you take me for?”

“Sorry, sorry,” Eijun mimes bowing in apology, too enraptured with his food to really bother teasing him anymore, “this is amazing. Can you teach me the recipe?”

Miyuki peers over his glasses at him. “Are you asking a chef to divulge his secrets?”

Rolling his eyes, Eijun deadpans, “Yes, please.”

“No can do.”

“Stingy! Why not?!”

“How’m I going to get you to keep coming back without my amazing curry skills?”

Startled, Eijun chortles. Miyuki’s flirting – while never really that discreet – had grown plenty bold since they’d officially started dating. Or, perhaps, Eijun’d just gotten better at noticing it. Either way, his little riposte makes a buzzing kind of warm swarm in Eijun’s stomach that has nothing to do with a sumptuous home-cooked meal.

And since he’s gotten better at playing along, too, Eijun banters back, “Yeah, well. I don’t know if you have to worry. You know what they say about eating food from the Underworld.”

Miyuki’s smile is Cheshire-like. “Have a bite and you’ll keep coming back again and again,” he croons, motioning to the spread in front of them – steaming fluffy white rice in one big pot, and a casserole dish of thick, creamy gravy swimming with chunks of meat, carrots and potatoes.
“You make Hades sound like a Michelin five-star restaurant rather than a mythical version of hell,” Eijun giggles.

Miyuki takes this in his stride. “You gotta see who’s in charge, here.”

Eijun gets the mental image of the sassy blue fiend from that *Hercules* movie in a chef get-up and stereotypical twirl-able mustache and almost chokes on his rice.

They segue into easy conversation, like they tend to, skipping tracks and switching subjects so one minute they’re talking about how the Red Woman is literally the worst but also maybe not but Eijun won’t know about that yet until farther down the series, and how neither of them understand the concept of audiobooks, because how do you *read* a book when you’re not reading it at all and does that even count, and about how, as hectic as studying culinary arts can be, it literally leaves you with plenty of free time when you’re not actually *in* the kitchen since there’s not really anything like homework or extra study, and it winds up with Miyuki coming as close to rambling as Eijun’s ever seen him as he tries to find an equilibrium between his immense respect for their head-chef, some guy called Kataoka Tesshin, and his affinity to confuse teaching with slave-driving.

“I don’t think the guy understands the concept of a break,” Miyuki’s almost fuming, worked up and in the zone, “I mean, I don’t know how he manages to stay completely awake and upright for eight hours of service in a steaming humid kitchen without rest, but he can’t expect the rest of us to –“, he interrupts himself so suddenly it’s like the rest of the words collides with the back of his teeth and are cut off. “Okay, wow. I’m ranting.”

Eijun hurries to assure him. “It’s okay,” he says, earnest, “I don’t mind.”

“Yeah, but I’m pretty sure dinner dates aren’t supposed to include long monologues about perfectionist lecturers,” Miyuki drawls, a little wry.

Eijun’s proud of how he doesn’t lose it at the words “dinner date”. “It’s okay,” he insists, emphatic, “I…like hearing about it. I wanna know.”

It’s a clumsy way of translating his feelings into words, but he wills Miyuki to understand the meaning behind them. The cycle’s taken some time to come full-circle, but in the time since they’d gone on their first proper date and now, there’s been a change in perspective in Eijun – a shift in his thinking, a shift that probably puts his unwarranted reaction to Takashima-san earlier into context.

Takashima Rei’s a part of Miyuki’s life. Kataoka Tesshin is a part of his life. His mother, whom he barely remembers, and his dad, whom he tries not to remember, are part of his life.

And not because they’d spent time with him over dessert or store-bought ramen and swapped recommendations for good books, not because they clicked with him over similar interests.

Eijun’d been naïve. Getting to know someone and getting to be a part of them are different things. Like telling Miyuki to read a manga, and finding Miyuki’s dedicated a row in his bookshelf to it.

He accepts, with a giddy sort of exhilaration, that he wants *more* of this.

This is what he’s thinking about, when Miyuki crawls over to his music system and puts on a mellow playlist before deflecting all his offers to help and retreating to the kitchen.

This is what he’s thinking about when he pulls his phone out and unlocks it.
You added “Kominato Haruichi (Harucchi)”, “Kominato Ryousuke (Onii-san), “Kuramochi Youichi (Mochi-senpai)” to this conversation

You said: Guys

You said: When we have our next dinner thing

You said: Can I invite Miyuki

Mochi-senpai is typing…

Mochi-senpai is typing…

Mochi-senpai is typing…

Onii-san said: Yes of course

Onii-san said: We’d be happy to finally meet him

Harucchi said: What he said^

Harucchi said: Except I already met him :P

Mochi-senpai said: WHAT WHEN

You received a private message from “Kuramochi Youichi (Mochi-senpai)”

Mochi-senpai said: So you’re really serious about him

The answer is so obvious.

The answer has been so obvious, for so long. Eijun realises it’s one of the biggest decisions he’s made in his life, one that’s going to have ramifications beyond what he can even imagine – it’s going to touch parts of his life just barely represented by the chat he’s scrolling through, sitting here with the future a mere ambiguous concept vaguely outlined in a couple of text messages.

But Eijun isn’t afraid to admit it.

Because he knows he’s not alone.

Because he can tell that Miyuki doesn’t casually invite people over to his home.

Because he can tell that Miyuki keeps his distance – from his neighbours, his co-workers, his classmates.

Because he can tell, now, that while Miyuki’d been trying to get through to Eijun, he’d been making space for Eijun.

He’d let Eijun in.

And Eijun wants to do the same.

“Yes” he types, locks his phone and slides it back into his pocket, and musters up all his courage before he picks up the stew-pot cooling on the table and heads for the kitchen.

Miyuki glances in his direction from where he’s working at something at the counter facing the far wall. “Oops, did I take too long? You getting bored?”
“No,” Eijun denies, heart pulsating, mouth dry, as he places the stew-pot on the island and moves to go over to Miyuki, “What’re you doing?”

“Dessert,” Miyuki flashes a quick smile, which morphs into a frown of concentration. “…except I kinda appear to have over-frozen it.”

Eijun scoots in to take a peek. Miyuki’s holding one of those electric stove lighter things in one hand, the other wearing an oven mitt and holding up a metal scoop he’s heating with the bluish flame. In front of him are two clear glass bowls, and a Tupperware box of something frosty and purplish-red, a rich berry tint.

“Ice-cream?”

“Sorbet,” Miyuki says, dipping his heated scoop into the frozen dessert while Eijun ooohs with interest; it still takes a bit of elbow-grease, but Miyuki manages to dig out enough to dump in one of the bowls. “Here.”

Deftly spooning up the slightly melting bits off the helping into a spoon, he holds it up to Eijun’s mouth.

His eyes widen with surprise as his brain recognises the taste.

“Pomegranate,” he breathes, with a delayed little laugh.

Miyuki’s peering at him closely. “You like it?”

“Yes,” Eijun hisses with rapture – there’s a tangy sour-sweetness to the taste that he can completely warm up to, almost akin to berries, and he loves berries, “but…you’re really taking this Hades thing all the way, aren’t you?”

“Well,” Miyuki shrugs, flicking on his lighter again to renew his efforts at warming up the scoop enough to thaw his frozen dessert, “it worked for him, didn’t it?”

“It worked for him,” Eijun admits, considering the absurdity of this – the absurdity of them doing some weird Greek Gods edition of role-play, enacting one of the myths that’d always fascinated Eijun, as a child, as an adult – the tale of the birth of seasons.

The tale of how Hades took Persephone, daughter of the goddess of nature, as his bride, against their wills. The tale of how that the goddess of nature, Demeter, fell into such despair that the world started to die – trees and flowers and animals, withering, lifeless, empty husks covered in desolation and snow. The tale of how Hades was compelled to let Persephone go, because the earth was dying – but not before tempting her with some pomegranate.

Not before making her partake of the food of the Underworld, binding her, so at the end of spring, after every summer, she’d have to come back to him.

What the books often don’t say, though, is that Persephone might have known about that rule.

That Persephone had loved him enough to return, again and again, from lively, vibrant earth down to cold, dank hell to be by his side.

And here, in this compact kitchen, in a laughably mundane situation where the biggest predicament is overly frozen sorbet and Miyuki commenting that even gods have their off-days, Eijun thinks he can relate.
Eijun reaches out and pinches his fingers into the material of Miyuki’s sleeve.

Eijun takes in a deep breath and says, “Miyuki, I…I like you. I really like you.”

He watches the shock melt into surprise melt into a warm effervescent glow. Watches happiness dance in twos behind Miyuki’s glasses before he jerks his head away, presses his oven mitt to his mouth, trying to compose himself.

He’s still holding on to Miyuki’s sleeve when he’s lowered the mitt, and he’s looking at him, a little red, a little nervous, and so palpably happy, and he says, “That’s really fortunate…since I really like you too.”

When they kiss – Eijun raising himself on the balls of his feet, Miyuki leaning down to meet him halfway – it tastes of pomegranate.

Chapter End Notes

I don't even know, guys. I don't even know.

References to:
The Hades-Persephone tale that came up last chapter. Different accounts have it differently - the book I have flat out has Hades kidnap Persephone, others have Zeus agreeing to give Persephone to Hades as a bride. Either way, Demeter throws a huge apocalyptic tantrum, the world gets consumed by perpetual winter, and Hades (who's actually not as much of a jerk as people make him out to be [see: Disney's Hercules & Percy Jackson]) sends Persephone back, but with a catch. And this was the Greeks' explanation for the seasonal cycle - Spring for when Persephone came back to Earth, and Autumn when she left.

Somehow, the idea of our precious lil sunshine child being "Persephone" really made me want to draw this comparison in this fic. Except ofc Miyuki doesn't have to kidnap him to get his attention :P

Alright super wordy end-notes aside, I REALLY hope you guys liked this. I guess this chapter's brought up a lot of themes I hope to be able to build on in the upcoming chapters so...I hope you enjoyed them! Thank you so much for reading, and if you'd like to share your thoughts I'd love to hear them! ILY guys <3
Blinking so rapidly his vision’s a blur, Eijun scoots back reflexively, hand shooting to his mouth.

Miyuki, his arm still loosely draped round his shoulder, is out of breath and flushed and quizzical.

“Did I hurt you?” he husks, and it’s so gravelly Eijun has to force down a shiver – the past couple of seconds are already catching up with the cognitive side of his head and all the coyness he’d temporarily put on hold is coming flooding back.

His mouth tingles.

“Um,” Eijun’s own voice is subdued, a hush, like it’s been forced so deep down his throat it’s having trouble coming back out – trying to ward off the shyness, he shakes his head, and tries to string his words together, “no. It just…uh. Kind of surprised. Me.”

A ghost of a smirk flits across Miyuki’s mouth – Miyuki’s slightly red, slightly swollen mouth. Eijun has to force himself to look away.

“Sorry,” he whispers, and Eijun half-wishes he wouldn’t, because the intimacy of that lowered voice is wreaking havoc in him, “I’ve kind of wanted to do that for a long time.”

That gets Eijun to overcome his fluster.

“You…you wanted to bite me?” The place where Miyuki’s teeth had closed over his upper lip and sunk, sudden, into the flesh still stings.

Miyuki snorts. Eijun’s gobsmacked.

And Miyuki can probably tell, because he inches in close again, not giving Eijun time to think or duck or whatever retaliatory move he’d have pulled out of impulse, and taps a finger against his lip.

“You’ve got this,” he begins, still gutturally low, several notches lower than what Onii-san calls an “indoor voice”; the tip of his forefinger’s begun tracing the outline of Eijun’s upper lip, “really…defined Cupid’s bow. It’s very…” Miyuki’s smile morphs from demure to devilish like lightning, “sexy.”

A circuit blows in Eijun’s head with the violence of a transformer catching fire.

“T-time out!”

“Are you getting embarrassed now?” is what Miyuki’s demanding, laughter peppering his words as
he tries to pry Eijun out of the self-made cocoon he’d clammed himself up into, “after we spent the whole afternoon mak-“

“Stoooop,” Eijun pleads, muffled by the arms he’s looped around his head, because his face is a glowing beacon of red and he’s going to die of embarrassment if he’s seen, “It’s…just that…” he mumbles, indistinct, hoping Miyuki’s going to let it slide.

But of course Miyuki’s not going to let it slide. Miyuki is nothing if not persistent, and with a series of well-coordinated tugs and strategic pulls he’s managed to get Eijun out of his cloister.

Eijun still refuses to look at him though.

“Just that what?” Miyuki murmurs, and Eijun’s gut almost rockets into his ribcage when the tip of his nose skims across his burning hot cheek.

“Just…that,” his breath skates out of him, a whistle-wavering exhale, and it’s ridiculous, really, that he’d managed to hold his own when they’d been doing much more than this in the couple of days since he’d first visited Miyuki’s apartment, but a single peck, and another, and Miyuki’s nuzzling the side of his face is still enough to completely unravel him, “N-no one’s ever…um. Called me. That. B-before.”

Miyuki’s petting ceases for less than a second, and Eijun’s stricken, because he can’t even pretend he’s not disappointed.

“I should hope not.”

Eijun tries not to squirm when a gust of hot breath feathers just under his ear – it tickles, but not enough to distract him from what Miyuki’d just said.

And it should be a little off-putting, really, because while Eijun’s not in the habit of thinking of himself in terms of how attractive he’d be considered conventionally, he can’t really lie that being thought of like that and seen by other people like that wouldn’t boost his ego, a little bit…human beings crave validation, and he’d probably not have been averse to it.

And yet…maybe he’s reading too much into this, and maybe Miyuki’d known it’d disarm him as he appears to have a knack of always knowing…

But the plain possessiveness of that statement leaves Eijun incapable of thinking of much else.

When questing lips seek his, he doesn’t resist.

He can’t.

On his way out, many moments later, Miyuki follows him down like he has every other time he’s come here. The guy at the security desk, who’s busy playing some kind of game clamouring about sugar rushes on his phone, glances up at the sound of them approaching and spares a small wave at Eijun.

“They’ve gotten used to you already,” Miyuki marvels, looking amused.

“Yeah, well,” Eijun grins, “I have that effect on people.”

It’s banter, really, and the only reason he’s so chummy with the security guard is because he’d spent so much time freaking out about how early is considered too early in the lobby of this apartment complex during his previous trips, and the guy’d been sympathetic to his plight. He’d
even given him candy once - not that he’s about to tell Miyuki any of this.

So he’s a little surprised when Miyuki quickly acquiesces, “So you do.”

Now, Eijun’s immediate instinct is to deny this. As much as he’d like to believe it, his entire experience with Miyuki’s demonstrated he has miles to go before he’s overcome his social ineptitude. But there’s a queer look to Miyuki’s face that derails his thoughts, diverts them to a different track, and what he ends up saying instead is,

“So. Um, you’re really okay with coming over to my place this weekend, right?”

“That’s the third time you’ve asked,” Miyuki chortles, “Are you hoping I’m going to say no?”

It’s a joke, but Eijun throws a scandalised half-punch at him anyway. “Of course not!” he whines, much less peeved than he’s letting on, “I just want to make sure you’re not going just because I asked you too.”

“That is one reason, yes,” he’s grinning that roguish grin of his and Eijun can’t help but roll his eyes, “but…that’s not the only reason. I do want to meet your Onii-san and Tsundere Senpai.”

Eijun yelps. “Please don’t call him that to his face,” he begs, half-laughing, half deadly serious. They’ve gone out through the double doors of the complex building, out down the short flight of steps ending in a cobblestoned path toward the front gate.

“I can’t promise anything.”

“Hey!”

All he gets in the face of his at least eighty percent genuine chagrin is an unapologetically wide grin.

“You’re horrible,” Eijun bristles, reproachful, and Miyuki just playfully shrugs – it’s not like this is the first time Eijun’s called him that. If anything, Eijun’s come to the somewhat bewildering conclusion that Miyuki gets some kind of perverse amusement out of teasing him.

What’s even more bewildering is that at the end of the day Eijun doesn’t really mind.

“All right, whatever,” he grouses, faux sulking – an only child and the adopted little brother of almost all his friends, he’s perfected the art fairly early, “I’ll see you on Sunday.”

And he’s about to flounce away, pseudo-grumpy, when Miyuki snags him back by the elbow, and pillows their lips together in a touch so light it can’t even count as a kiss.

It still sets off a chorus of fire-alarms in Eijun’s head, though.

“I’m looking forward to it,” Miyuki hums, while still hovering close to his mouth, close enough that the syllables slipping out feel like actual physical touches, and Eijun can only dazedly nod as he takes his leave.

But as his bodily mechanisms reset and are restored to proper working order and Eijun goes through the motions of scanning his card and queueing for his train home, his motives for replaying that scene again and again are a little different.

Miyuki’d seemed alright with it. Miyuki’d seemed to really mean what he’d said.

Eijun’s relieved.
The longer he’s spent around him, the more Eijun’s come to realise that in spite of the poise with which he carries himself and the easy way he can communicate with others, including all those complete strangers at the bookstore every day which gives Eijun anxious palpitations just thinking about, Miyuki’s a remarkably sheltered person. He’s on good terms with everyone, but Eijun doesn’t think he’s close to them, whether it’s the people he talks about from class or work or anyone else in his general sphere.

And Eijun thinks he maybe prefers it that way.

As someone who’s always been surrounded by people – by a doting family who sometimes actually lack a sense of boundary with all their boundless affection, and by friends who’ve been by his side through all the major milestones of his life – Eijun doesn’t really get it. His circle is his life support, they’re what keeps him going, and he loves them all fiercely, clinging to their presence until they’re indelible parts of who he is, and a person who belongs at the other end of the spectrum – who chooses isolation even though he’s so much better at getting along with new people than Eijun is, still puzzles him some even after the time they’ve spent together. Eijun’s not sure if this is a consequence of his strained relationship with his father, the particulars of which he’s still been unable to broach with Miyuki, or just who he is as a person, an ambivert he thinks they’re called, but he’d been a little apprehensive about how willing Miyuki would be for this weekend.

Which is why, Eijun thinks, that it’s a relief – Miyuki wanting to meet the people important to him. Miyuki wanting to take that step for him.

It’s a relief.

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It’s a nightmare.

“You can’t do that,” Eijun’s trying to sound peremptory.

Key word trying.

“I’d like to see you stop me,” Mochi-senpai claps back. Eijun can’t really tell if he’s joking or serious – the disturbingly graphic demon mask he’s wearing kind of makes it hard to infer. Eijun supposes this is marginally better than having Mochi-senpai stare menacingly at Miyuki all through dinner, which is the possibility he’d been dreading when Mochi-senpai’d come home in a black, unyielding mood from his grocery trip with Onii-san.

“He’s a guest,” Eijun tries to reason, edging tentatively closer. He wonders what his chances are if he tries to lunge for the thing and make a run for it, but it’s taking all his willpower to even think about touching it – it’d scarred itself into his nightmares after Mochi-senpai’d pounced out at him wearing it on the very first day he’d moved into this flat, and somehow, with the age and the cobwebs and all the dust it’s amassed in storage, it looks ten times more macabrely grotesque than he remembers it.

“He’s your boyfriend,” the effect is a bit ruined, his voice muffled by the contraption of plastic and matted synthetic fur, but Eijun still detects the sing-song inflection Mochi-senpai’s been attaching to that word ever since that talk they’d had while playing Hitman, “He should be honoured I’m initiating him.”

Giving up, Eijun appeals to Onii-san. “Do something!”
Onii-san Mona Lisas him. “I think it’s rather sweet that Youichi’s going out of his way to welcome him,” he says evenly, and a stranger would’ve thought he’d actually meant it.

Eijun, though, having been in similar situations in the past, knows very well that Onii-san’s content letting himself be entertained, at Eijun’s expense, and he doesn’t much appreciate it. Frowning impressively, about to verbalise his disappointment in the complete lack of maturity of people he’s supposed to look up to in excruciating detail, the wind’s knocked out of his sails by the doorbell.

In a feat of bordering pure animal instinct, Eijun reacts before his brain’s even done processing what’s happening.

But Mochi-senpai, with all the natural advantages of being an athlete, is already speeding halfway to the door while Eijun snatches at the thin air where his back had been, and he’s only just reached the end of the hall when he hears the door opening, his fight-or-flight reflexes overpowering his ability to stop and accept that it’s a lost cause, and now either momentum or the adrenaline keeps him going and the door’s fully open and Mochi-senpai’s let out a blood-chilling yowl, and –

Miyuki’s just blandly staring at him, one eyebrow raised.

Two seconds of awkward silence filter into the hall, the panic in Eijun’s system trickling out like the plug’s been pulled in a tub, to leave –

Second-hand embarrassment.

It’s almost worse than first-hand embarrassment, and Eijun’s pretty familiar with that kind.

Fumbling with how to salvage this situation – and persuade Miyuki that he’s not, in fact, living with a lunatic – he’s approaching the two people at the door while Mochi-senpai’s pulling off his mask and –

“Gah!” Miyuki exclaims as Mochi-senpai’s dyed green, bedraggled hair comes into view, his free hand flying up to his chest, eyes comically wide, expression exaggeratedly terrified, and Mochi-senpai, face flushed and sweaty from the prolonged period he’d willingly spent inside a silicone face trap, scowls so hard and so murderously Eijun actually thinks he’s going to hit him but settles for grumbling Well played, and Eijun can only literally stand there, shellshocked, teetering on the edge of just giving up on his will to live because clearly Miyuki has a death-wish and clearly Mochi-senpai’s only too happy to oblige, and he can hear Harucchi laughing somewhere in the background, and Onii-san’s at his elbow, and he hums, Looks like they’ll get along just fine, and Eijun thinks some people just want to watch the world burn.

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“All I’m saying is,” Harucchi’s saying, tucking into his potluck, “crisis management is a pretty depressing field to work in. I mean, you’re banking on other people’s misery for business.”

Onii-san, at whom this mild diatribe is levelled, merely smiles, unperturbed. “Where some people see loss, others see opportunity,” he deadpans.

“And if it’s big corporations, some of them are getting what’s coming to them,” Miyuki tacks on. Onii-san nods once at him, approving.

Harucchi tips his head at him, intrigued. “Are you anti-capitalist, Miyuki-san?”

Miyuki chuckles a little, shakes his head. “Nothing as drastic as that,” he jests; Eijun notes his posture, body language relaxed and easy but just courteous enough to not come off as impudent.
Either he’s at ease, or very good at pretending to be, “But we can’t let the rich have all the fun, can we?”

“I like the way you think, Miyuki-kun,” Onii-san smirks, appreciative, and Harucchi lets out a disbelieving laugh and turns to Eijun.

“I think you’ve found Aniki another anarchist, Eijun-kun,” he tells him, but there’s humour in it, “if we’re not careful they might end up planning a revolution.”

Eijun gesticulates, helpless. “What’s that meme again? Chaotic good?”

“Just plain chaotic, I think,” Harucchi rejoinders, and he reaches out for another helping of the peach cobbler Miyuki’s brought as a token, “This is really good, Miyuki-san.”

“Thank you,” Miyuki intones, across from Eijun at the table – Eijun can’t help but envy him a little at how skilfully he handles compliments; he’s not exactly modest, but he doesn’t come off as an overconfident, ungrateful asshole, and it’s a balance Eijun knows from personal experience is pretty hard to strike.

In fact, Eijun’s kind of surprised at how well Miyuki’s fit in here – he’s assimilated amongst them in no time, chatting over dinner about each other’s professions, about Tokyo’s morning traffic jams, about how to nail the perfect butter-to-flour ratio for the best crumbly crust in a cobbler. It’s like he completely belongs, and Eijun’s a little bit jealous, because this isn’t something he can pull off - he’d been so rattled just meeting Miyuki’s neighbour.

But that takes a backseat to this overwhelming, cheesy kind of elation he’s feeling, the sort that kind of makes him want to sing at the top of his lungs and maybe do a little jig in the dramatic sepia-filtered slow-mo of K-dramas and smile like the hopeless sap he is, because these are two parts of his life that he has cherished, and now they’re overlapping and they’re sitting in the centre of that Venn diagram and everyone’s cheery and content –

Except Mochi-senpai, who’s handling having his troll attempt backfiring with all the maturity of a pouty six year old.

Miyuki evidently notices the spell of silence, and decides to break it. “I’ve seen you in the papers, Kuramochi-kun,” he says, amenable, “Is it off-season now?”

Called out like this, under the anxious eye of Eijun and the expectant eye of Onii-san, Mochi-senpai doesn’t have a choice except to oblige.

“We’re in training,” he answers, a tad less gruff than Eijun had expected him to be, “there’s gonna be a camp during fall before the winter tournaments, so…”

“How long’s it going to be for?”

“How long’s it going to be for?”

“Three months, roughly.”

Eijun’s ears perk, and he feels a little idiotic for how late this realisation is coming – the training camps have been a regular feature of the time he’s shared a flat with Mochi-senpai, and even though it gets a bit lonely and he can begrudgingly admit that he misses having him around when he’s living on his own, this’ll be the first time Mochi-senpai’s not going to be around for such a prolonged period of time after getting together with Onii-san. Sneaking a peek at the older Kominato, Eijun wonders how the both of them feel about that.

Miyuki’s nodding, impressed. “Wow, that sounds hardcore. But I guess it pays off, huh? It’s pretty
cool to have a nickname like *the Cheetah*.”

Mochi-senpai does a shrug, going for nonchalant.

Eijun, sitting right beside him, can tell he’s pleased though – he’s loosening up some, the cobbler having tempted him into breaking what might otherwise have been a complete oath of silence when he’d grudgingly admitted it tasted great, and heartened, Eijun decides to help.

“He’s super, *dupe*r fast,” Eijun says earnestly, “He’s like…one superhero lightning beam incident away from being the Flash!”

That gets a response out of Mochi-senpai. “I don’t want to be struck by lightning, *idiot*.” A pause. “And he wasn’t struck by lightning.”

“Yes, yes,” Eijun hastens, trying to reroute what might be an impending lecture of Barry Allen’s origin story, “but Senpai was probably *born* fast, ne? Like Quicksilver. Or Sonic.”

“The hedgehog?”

Eijun throws Onii-san a positively scathing look before hurriedly correcting, “*No*, Speed of Sound Sonic.”

Mochi-senpai grimaces – Eijun’s not fooled though. He can see the amusement he’s struggling to hide. “Please don’t compare me to that guy.”

“But he’s a ninja and he’s so cool!”

*How is he…you remember how Saitama beat him the first time right?”*

“Oh, um…yeah. Yeah, I forgot about that.”

“Bet you did, punk.”

“But his name’s cool! Speed of *Sound* Sonic, that’s kind of epic.”

“He’s not epic if he can’t back it up.”

“Okay, then what do you want to be?” Eijun asks, animated, “Zoom?”

“He’s a bad guy, so no,” Mochi-senpai pops the last of his cobbler into his mouth, and Eijun takes that as a sign that he’s okay now.

And he’s just breathing a sigh of relief when Miyuki inputs, innocuous, “Oh, so you’ve watched the Flash series with Kuramochi-kun, Eijun? How come you’d not started Game of Thrones, though?”

Eijun’s eyes widen.

Foreboding ripples through him like a burgeoning lightning-charged thundercloud.

“Because he’s a wuss, that’s why,” Mochi-senpai grumps, dismissive but not exactly rude.

And Eijun’d have been happy about that, that he’s actually *talking* to Miyuki instead of limiting himself to periodic death glares, were it not for the glint of complete and utter mischief glinting in Miyuki’s eye.
“But he’s read the books.”

“He has WHAT?”

“He’s read the books,” Miyuki repeats blithely, like he’s not just been half-yelled at – it’s diminutive, but Eijun realises, to his horror, that he’s **enjoying this** and his expression is eerily similar to Onii-san’s when he’s deliberately shit-stirring and **dear Merlin**, Haruichi’d been right. “I recommended them to him.”

And Eijun doesn’t even have the **time** to channel how very despicably **little** he appreciates this across the table because Mochi-senpai’s turning on him with a frown so deep even the wrinkles on his forehead have wrinkles.

“Is this true?” he’s trying to downplay it, but Eijun hears the note of betrayal, and he now he feels guilty on **top** of the shock of realising that his charming-sometimes-sadistic boyfriend is actually Onii-san’s cosmic twin.

“I-it’s true,” Eijun says, and the contrition probably shows on his face, which is likely the only reason he’s not getting tackled to the ground in retribution, “b-but! I’ve been reading them at home, I thought you noticed!”

Mochi-senpai still looks mutinous. “You’re reading freaking **all the time**, I don’t keep track of your literature.”

“They’re literally the biggest books I’ve read in a while,” Eijun counters, defensive.

Clearly sensing they’re edging into a deadend with this line of argument, Mochi-senpai changes tracks. “You refused to watch the show no matter how many times I told you to but you picked up the stuff it’s adapted from?”

Eijun flinches – the accusation is kind of unfair, considering Mochi-senpai’s persuasions had mostly consisted of disbelieving one-line monologues wondering how someone could **not** like **Game of Thrones** and veiled threats that he’s missing one of the best shows to ever grace television, but he’s not about to point out how much better Miyuki is at pitching an interesting TV show.

“I was warming up to it,” he argues back lamely, and Mochi-senpai snorts.

“You’re doing that ‘books are better than movies’ thing again,” he grumbles, glowering, “you ruined **The Maze Runner** for me – “

“**Hey, you do that too!**” maybe it’s unwise to fight back, because as much as Mochi-senpai’s probably not resorted to violence yet because Onii-san’s here, he’s likely going to pay for this later – but he doesn’t see any other way out of this except fighting his way out so he perseveres and makes a mental note to kill Miyuki a little bit when he gets the chance, “You’re **always** complaining about how they’re destroying comic book characters on screen and you totally lost it at Lex Luthor and – “

“That doesn’t count – “

“How doesn’t it count – “

“Don’t mind them, Miyuki-kun,” Onii-san’s saying pleasantly in the background, sounding like nothing more out of the ordinary is happening than a rogue fly invading the room, “they’re always like this.”
“We are not,” Eijun and Mochi-senpai both screech in unison, and Miyuki bursts out laughing.

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“Your coffee,” Eijun mouths, walking on tiptoes into the balcony, precariously balancing the saucer on the ledge. Noticing Onii-san’s no longer on the call he’d retreated to attend, he ventures, “everything okay?”

“You tell me,” Onii-san lilts; he jerks his head toward the balcony doors, “Are you sure you should leave those two together?”

Considering the unnecessary degrees of stress they’d both caused him recently, Eijun isn’t in the mood to be compassionate. “They can look after themselves.”

Onii-san laughs, light. “They’ll be fine,” he says, taking a sip of his coffee – strong and black. Mochi-senpai’d all but thrust the cup in his hands and wordlessly sent him to deliver it, and watching Onii-san gulp it down he wonders how the guy sleeps at night.

“Hmm,” Eijun’s a bit more doubtful, but he’d not sensed any *malice* – apart from that tomfoolery at the doorway, they’d not outright antagonised each other. Even the veritable bombshell Miyuki’d dropped hadn’t exactly been a direct attack on Mochi-senpai – considering the lengths Miyuki sometimes went to, to watch him squirm, it was probably just an elaborate ploy to prank Eijun.

Which isn’t acceptable in *any* way, as Eijun plans on letting Miyuki know as soon as he has a moment alone with him, but right now there’s another pressing matter on his mind.

“Um…so Mochi-senpai’s camp is coming up,” Eijun starts – it’s not the most subtle conversation-opener, but it’ll have to do.

Onii-san smacks his lip a little, lowering his coffee-cup. “Yeah.”

“Is…is it going to be okay? With you two?”

It’s a private question, and it’s a sensitive subject, but Eijun knows Onii-san will understand – it’s not just inquisitiveness making him ask.

He’s concerned, too.

“Well…we waited two years,” Onii-san says finally – simply, “what’s three months more?”

The answer’s kind of mindboggling.

“Aren’t you going to miss him?” he blurts out. He’s never stood on ceremony with Onii-san.

It actually gets Onii-san to laugh aloud. “Of course I’m going to miss him. But it’s a part of life. We’ll get through it.”

“Huh.”

It’s humbling, to think of it like that. To think of the future as a certainty with the both of them in it rather than an undefined list of possibilities you have no control over.

It makes him a little…

Wistful.
“What about you?”

“Hmm?”

Onii-san shakes his head a little at Eijun’s spacing out. “Your semester’s starting up soon,” he reminds Eijun, “you’re not going to have the freedom to spend as much time as you do with Miyuki-kun in…oh, roughly a fortnight.”

It’s not like Eijun hasn’t thought of this. He has. It’s his second-to-last week at work, and in an unprecedented twist of irony, he’d realised how much he’d grown to enjoy working for that magazine. How much being able to actually achieve something through his writing, that whole hectic process of copy-clearing and running his drafts through two layers of editors and the last minute rush before publication’s ingrained into his system so deeply he just knows that this is what he wants to be doing the rest of his life.

It’s going to be difficult, to adjust back. To return to lecture halls and assignment deadlines and endless cups of tea to tide him through the blur of weeks when he doesn’t even know what day it is and measures time with the hours he has left until the next submission.

“We’re still just a few train stops away,” he says lightly, but it’s starkly lacking in the kind of conviction with which Onii-san’d spoken about Mochi-senpai’s camp, “besides, college is still kinda flexible.”

Onii-san makes a noncommittal noise, and Eijun, who’d spent so long pushing off these thoughts, lets his guard down for a second too long and the misgivings pounce.

Even if he’s graced with a timetable with reasonably spaced breaks, Eijun’s literally on the last leg of the race to finishing his degree, and he knows how strenuous the workload can get. He’s no stranger to all-nighters and trying to cram a couple of months’ worth of education into a few days – he’s done it all before and while he’s not particularly fond of it, it’s something he’d accepted with grim resignation as inevitable.

That’d been before he had a boyfriend, though.

And while it’s not like he’s about to leave the city and Eijun’s gonna spend three months without physically being in his presence like Mochi-senpai and Onii-san, but it makes an anxious flutter ignite in the pit of his stomach, because he’s not brought this up yet with Miyuki, and he doesn’t know how either of them are going to handle it.

“You’ve just got to trust him,” Onii-san’s voice pierces through the cacophony of apprehension in Eijun’s head, and he jerks back a little, because either he’s incredibly easy to read, or Onii-san really is a telepath.

“I do,” Eijun says – he means it, too.

And yet there’s a feeling that where they are, he and Miyuki and Onii-san and Mochi-senpai, trust is defined in different ways. If this were a voyage, Onii-san’s already halfway across, and Eijun’s still at the starting point. Eijun’s still too bashful to even say Miyuki’s first name.

Onii-san inhales, exhales, takes a final sip of his cup. “Trusting is what it’s all about, in the end,” he says, and it’s a bit more voluntarily forthcoming than Onii-san usually is, and it makes Eijun think that he’s deliberately deciding that it’s important for Eijun to hear this, “not getting into fights or always keeping the peace or not getting to always be together. That stuff is superficial. Trusting, trying to put yourself in the other person’s shoes, learning how to compromise…that’s
the stuff that makes relationships last.”

He sounds so sure – so certain. Eijun wonders how. Eijun thinks he knows.

“Do you and Mochi-senpai fight?” he asks, dubious – he’s so used to seeing any and all arguments get one-sidedly settled when it comes to the two of them, but it occurs to him that much of what they’re like as a couple is not something he’s been privy to, and rightly so.

His question makes Onii-san snort.

“Why do you think he was so pissed when we came back from shopping?”

Eijun’s eyes widen. “I thought that was because he’s still mad at the whole me and Miyuki thing.”

Onii-san shakes his head, amused. “He’s not mad at that. He’s just…worried. In his own weird way.”

“So why did you fight?”

Onii-san’s mouth quirks a little. “He thinks I’m not…ah. Taking enough initiative in your relationship.”

This thoroughly stumps Eijun. “What?”

“Basically, he doesn’t understand why I’ve not been more…proactive, in trying to meet Miyuki-kun and, essentially, checking if he’s the right one for you.”

“Right one for…this isn’t a marriage alliance!”

Onii-san throws his head back, a short swift bark of laughter.

“I don’t know if he wanted me to arrange a marriage meeting or hook Miyuki-kun up to a lie detector or what, specifically,” he continues, and he’s smiling a definitively more amused smile than usual – a fond smile, like he’s agreed to disagree with Mochi-senpai and is totally okay with it, “but the crux of the matter is more or less what we were talking about. He wants…to be sure. Because couples are going to disagree at some point, Eijun. At some point, you’re not going to see eye to eye, and you’re going to outgrow this…this honeymoon phase, let’s call it – and Youichi pretty much considers you family. He wants to make sure that when those things happen, you’re with someone who’ll work through it with you.”

***

“So…what do you think?”

Onii-san’s still on the balcony, another phone call being Eijun’s cue to go back inside – in the interim Harucchi’s decided to play a few rounds of Street Fighter for cathartic purposes, and Miyuki’s gone to the washroom.

Mochi-senpai’s reclining on the couch, staring at the ceiling.

“You asking for my approval now?”

“I’m not,” Eijun denies, immediate; with Onii-san’s revelations fresh in his mind though, he adds, tentatively, “it’d be nice though.”

Mochi-senpai steals a side-eye at him that’s not as furtive as he probably thinks it is, and after a
few seconds of noncommittal silence, heaves a deep sigh.

“He likes getting on people’s nerves, doesn’t he?”

Eijun lets out a nervous laugh. Before he’d escaped with Onii-san’s coffee, he’d left to Miyuki blithely insisting that Jaime’s a great parent, Dany is probably going to turn out a mass murderer given her ancestry and the best person to sit the Iron Throne is Sansa while Mochi-senpai spluttered with incomprehensible bafflement and rage.

“But I guess that’s not something I can complain about,” Mochi-senpai continues, absently – he exhales again, sitting up a bit, and his eyes almost mindlessly flick toward the balcony, at Onii-san’s purposefully pacing silhouette.

“He’s not a bad guy,” Eijun assures, for what it’s worth. *He just likes to mess with people for fun.*

Mochi-senpai looks like he’s waging some kind of war inside of him before he admits, unwilling, “No…I don’t think he is.”

Eijun tries not to get ahead of himself – tries to tamp down his smile. “So…is that an “okay”?"

The shortstop hesitates, visibly struggling with himself. When he speaks, he sounds like it’s costing him every bit of willpower he has.

“He treats you right, yeah?”

“He does,” Eijun says, trying to keep his composure – Mochi-senpai’s red-faced and Eijun can relate; talking about this with Onii-san, who’s got this knack for putting you at your ease, and talking to Mochi-senpai, who’s probably as emotionally handicapped as Eijun is socially, are two completely different things.

“He respects you?”

“Yes.”

“He’s been helping you with your writing?”

“Yes.”

“He hasn’t…” Mochi-senpai chokes on this own sentence, goes a little green, “tried to be…frisky with you?”

“Oh my lord,” Eijun groans, “Senpai!”

“Well, has he?”

“He’s not…forced himself on me,” is the diplomatic phrasing Eijun chooses to use. If Mochi-senpai notes any implications, he doesn’t address them. Eijun thanks the heavens for small favours.

“Then I guess…it’s okay,” his volume drops on that last word, and his unwillingness is written into every crevice of his face, but Eijun doesn’t mind. He’s beaming, and ecstatic, and *relieved,* and it’s probably unwise but he lurches at him with a bear-hug.

“Oi get off me!”

“Ow, ow ow ow ow Senpai, Senpai I’m sorry let go – “
“That’ll teach you to accost me — “
“I wasn’t accosting, it was a hug!”
“Men don’t hug!”
“What kind of stupid rule is that – ow! I give up, I give up, I — “
“What’re you doing?”
Mochi-senpai and Eijun look up at the same time to find Miyuki standing behind the couch, looking down at them, the light bouncing off his glasses.

***

They’re heading out the corridor, Eijun having announced he’s going to accompany Miyuki down, when Eijun hears the door click shut behind them.

He wastes no time batting Miyuki across the arm.

“Ow!” with a wounded look that doesn’t fool Eijun at all, Miyuki pouts, “What was that for?”

“That was for getting me into trouble,” Eijun scolds – he’s not as livid as he had been when it’d first happened, but he plods on regardless, “You knew why I’d not watched *Thrones* with Senpai and yet!”

“Ah, that,” Miyuki hums, airy, and Eijun sets his jaw, swatting at him again, “Hey, why’re you manhandling me?”

“Don’t Ah, that me,” Eijun overtakes Miyuki, pivots until he’s in front of him, walking backwards while Miyuki shifts forward, “Why’d you do that?”

Miyuki’s silent, for a moment, and his face is so completely unreadable it pings uncomfortably in Eijun.

They’re in the lift now, and Eijun, suddenly anxious, hooks a finger into Miyuki’s sleeve.

“No, no,” he shakes his head for emphasis, and Eijun peers into his face, a little rattled, a little unconvinced.

“Then what’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, really. I enjoyed myself, they’re a really interesting bunch of people.”

It rings with candour, but Eijun’s radar is picking up something odd from Miyuki – something reserved, something reluctant, and it makes him panic.

Not knowing how to coax Miyuki, not possessing the natural suave with which Miyuki burrows through his inhibitions and gets through to him, Eijun only manages to grab one of Miyuki’s hands in both of his, and implore, “Tell me? *Please*?”

He’s trying to put on the best puppy eyes he can, and evidently it works, because after glancing at him, Miyuki lets out a heavy, belaboured sigh.
The elevator doors ping, signalling they’ve reached the ground floor, and Miyuki steps out, his fingers closed around Eijun’s.

“It’s…just that,” he says, as he moves…he’s skirted on a little ahead, and Eijun finds he’s inclining his head to the other side, like he’s trying not to let Eijun look at him, “You get along really well with him, don’t you? With…your Mochi-senpai.”

Eijun slow-blinks. “We were literally fighting all evening,” he points out, slowly.

Miyuki lets out a short bark of laughter. “That’s not called fighting, I think,” he says, and glances over his shoulder at Eijun with a half-smile, “It’s obvious you guys know a lot about each other – “Eijun’s pulse picks up, as though his nerves have tuned into something that’s yet to reach his brain “- care about each other a lot.”

“We’ve lived in the same flat for more than two years,” Eijun reminds him, even with the blood rushing in his ears, because he thinks he’s beginning to understand and it’s otherworldly but so familiar, because –

“I know…but I guess, seeing you so close to someone,” Miyuki smiles, flippant, but it doesn’t quite ring true, "Let's say I got a little jealous?”

Halfway down the lobby, Eijun plants his feet into the ground, refuses to move. His hands shackle Miyuki in place.

“He’s my roommate,” he says, earnestly, a mini-tornado of mixed feelings shredding through his gut, “he’s dating my Onii-san. He’s kind of like…a bullying but cool older brother.”

Miyuki, forced into turning around, forced into facing him, lets out a chuckle. It’s sheepish and a little ashamed. “I know that. I do, really. But…I guess…” he runs a hand through his hair, and Eijun absently thinks the last time he’d seen Miyuki so uncertain, so unsure, had been that time outside the cinema, “Seeing it…how close you guys were and all…it just sort of reminded me that there’s so much to you I don’t know yet. So I…got a little possessive?”

Eijun doesn’t say anything. He can’t. The amount of effort Miyuki’d expended pissing Mochi-senpai off on just their first meeting’s starting to take on a whole new light and frankly, it’s blowing Eijun’s mind.

Miyuki misconstrues his silence.

“That’s really dumb, isn’t it,” he garbles, and if Eijun’d not got his hand in a vice-grip he’d probably have turned away –

But Eijun doesn’t let him. Eijun cuts him off before he can say anything more, and confesses, “It’s not. I…kind of feel the same way.”

He thinks about his first visit to Miyuki’s place and how upset he’d grown just because Miyuki’d called Takashima-san Rei-chan, and about how he’d been obsessively puzzling over the question of Miyuki’s dad, too afraid to ask, too afraid to be intrusive. He thinks about how he’d felt equal measures horrible and helpless, selfish and insufferable, for not just being content with what he’s getting.

“We’re on the same page,” he hears himself say, and he sounds oddly euphoric about it, and Onii-san’s advice is ringing through his head, and he thinks how stupid he’s been, comparing them, when their relationships are their own prerogative and not some pre-charted adventure with a beginning and an end, “So…can we…figure it out together?”
Miyuki breathes out, and he laughs a little, as though to himself, as though he can’t quite believe the kind of discussion they’re having, smack in the centre of an apartment building’s reception area, before he murmurs, “Yeah”, and leans in for a kiss, and all Eijun can think is the unsettled queasiness that’d infiltrated his system when Onii-san’d talked about disagreements and not seeing eye to eye and compromises, and he thinks that feeling’d been pointless, because Miyuki’d been honest with him, and he’d been honest with Miyuki, and he thinks Mochi-senpai doesn’t have to worry, because he’s found someone who’ll work through it all with him.

Chapter End Notes

( ᅡ´Д´‹ ) this didn't come out how I planned at all OTL

I'm...Idk. Okay for starters, I hope you guys liked them all meeting - it wasn't too explosive because Miyuki's only meeting Ryou and Mochi for the first time and I don't think he'd go totally smartass on them immediately but expect more douchebaggery and squabbling and general chaos in future chapters? idk I don't think he'd risk having Eijun put under house-arrest after hearing how protective these guys tend to be of him.

I JUST HOPE THE BALANCE WAS RIGHT THO. I FEEL LIKE I DISAPPOINTED YOU GUYS OTL

Um, references to:
-Saitama/Speed o Sound Sonic: One Punch Man. Equal parts hilarious and thought-provoking. Like I actually caught feels for this ridiculousness. Also see: Mob Psycho 100
-the Flash/Barry Allen/Zoom: Properties of DC comics, specifically the CW TV series which I feel Eijun would be more up for watching than the much darker Netflix comicbook shows like Daredevil etc.
-Quicksilver: Pietro/Peter Paximoff, Marvel comics. Great guy in the movies, the mutants’ equivalent of Draco Malfoy in the comics
-All that anarchy talk: I have this idea that Harucchi would love Mr. Robot but it's mind-eff-ness wouldn't appeal to Mochi or Eijun much

Thank you for reading!! I hope you guys were okay with this installment, and I'd love to hear your thoughts if you'd like to share (/^\)
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

GUYS I AM SO SORRY THIS IS SO SO SO LATE AJSGAJKLFHIOUEUDSI

I was supposed to update like...last week? work was really hectic before Christmas break and then my cat kind of decided to jump out a window and broke his leg so I've been rushing back and forth between the vet's in a different town and - it's been crazy OTL

so, here's the update? It's a...erm. Transition chapter, let's call it. To build up to the next one. Or something like that. Idek.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The plan – albeit too insubstantial to really be called a plan – had been to spend as much time as possible with Miyuki before the last semester kicked off.

And that plan works itself out – but not at Eijun’s behest.

“He told me to invite him over for the weekend again – ,” Eijun’s saying, a bit agitated – he’s sneaking glances at his locked door again, his volume cranked down to somewhere between a whisper and a hiss, “ – even though Onii-san won’t be able to make it. And then when I mentioned I was gonna go with Harucchi on Sunday to grab stuff for the new semester, he said he’ll come too, and he’s like , Oh, your boyfriend – “ he makes frantic little air quotes around the word, mimicking the way Mochi-senpai uses it at every possible opportunity, “works around here right? Call him along, and – stop laughing!”

The déjà vu feels like that moment you load up an entire episode, only to be reminded by the first few seconds that you’ve seen this one already.

“I’m sorry,” Wakana titters, hand pressed to her mouth – Eijun’s less troubled about disturbing her today, since he’d thoughtfully planned ahead and timed his call this time so she’d neither be in class or in the middle of dozing off for the night, so he doesn’t hold back with the glaring, remembering to stare straight into the mini circular lens of his laptop’s webcam so she gets the full effect, “It’s just that…it’s adorable?”

“How?!?” Eijun almost screeches, incredulous – has to remind himself not to, because Mochi-senpai’s at home, right outside in the living-room, playing Grand Theft Auto Online. He’s already not too pleased with Eijun for having declined his offer to co-op, and Eijun doesn’t want to aggravate him any further than he’s managed to aggravate himself.

“Aw, come on, Ei-chan, you know he always gets a little antsy before he goes away for camp,” Wakana reminds him – she’s got her brown bangs out of her face with a thin black hairband, and Eijun supposes she’d been about to take off her makeup or hop into the shower when he’d called.

“This isn’t a little bit,” Eijun retorts, instantly, and it’s really hard to be emphatic when you’re also working double-time to keep your voice down, “And it’s not antsy! It’s not like he gives me a choice, you know, when he tells me to call Miyuki – it’s not a suggestion, it’s a literal order! What
if he’s not free? Or what if he has other plans? Or – “what if we wanted to spend some time by ourselves?”

Eijun can’t say that. Wakana still puts on a cat-who-got-the-cream smile on as she watches him, elbow resting on her desk, chin resting on the backs of her knuckles.

“I don’t think he’s trying to cockblock you.”

“I - !”

“Come on, Ei-chan, give me a little more credit than that,” Wakana rolls her eyes, slow and deliberate, making sure Eijun catches every millisecond, “I know what you’re thinking. And I don’t think that’s why he’s suddenly so interested in having Miyuki-san join the family, so to speak.”

“Then what do you think it is?” it’s a bit belligerent, but at least he’s managed not to splutter.

“I think,” Wakana chirrups, the first syllable a little heavy with pompous emphasis, and Eijun knows she’s doing this to irk him and tries his best not to let her win, “he’s just trying to get a better handle on what kind of person Miyuki-san is. He can’t really do that without actually having him around, so – “

“There are probably…less intrusive. Ways. Of doing that.”

“Probably,” Wakana shrugs, “But he’s going away for camp in a few weeks and he’s going to be gone for three whole months. He’s gonna need to put a lot of trust on Miyuki-san to do right by you while he’s gone, you know.”

“That’s…he,” it’s not like Eijun hadn’t considered this possibility, “I can look after myself, you know. I’m twenty-one, a few months away from graduating, getting a job, and – “

“Yeah, but he’s always been like that, hasn’t he? Protective. He just worries about you, Ei-chan. Especially the fact that for three months he won’t be around to beat the stuffing out of Miyuki-san for whatever transgression that might occur – “

“It won’t,” and he knows it sounds petulant and defensive, but he doesn’t like people pointing fingers at Miyuki’s character without even knowing him that well, and Wakana holds up both hands, palms out, in supplication.

“I said might,” she points out to him, all traces of teasing gone, “Remember, he’s only met Miyuki-san once. That’s not enough time to…to know if you can sort of leave someone you care for under their wing. I…kinda relate.”

Eijun lifts an eyebrow at her, and she says, “Hey, I haven’t even met the guy ONCE. Of course I worry.”

“You guys baby me too much,” Eijun grumbles.

“Only because we care about you,” Wakana says immediately, because this is a conversation they’ve had before, and Eijun knows he can’t resent them, not for keeping his best interests at heart, “and you know you’d do the same for us. You made me force Kaito to do an actual Skype interview with you, remember?”

“Oh, yeah,” the muscles around Eijun’s jaw catch, as if to make him smile – he’d already known Kaito a little bit in middle school, but by the time he’d got together with Wakana, Eijun’d already moved to Tokyo and he recalls the boundless – and thoroughly unfounded – misgivings consuming
him when Wakana’d first told him. “Good times.”

Wakana scoffs. “You’re lucky I didn’t make you do the same with Miyuki-san.”

Now it’s Eijun’s turn to hold up his hands, placating, “Okay, okay. Point taken.”

A beat or two later, Wakana asks, “So…since the parent isn’t going to be home for three months…”

Eijun purses his lips, unamused, but lets Wakana continue.

“Are you guys gonna…,” is it just him or does Wakana look a little pink? Her smile’s still shark-like though, as she goes on, sing-song, “You know ~”

When she steeples her fingers together, deliberate and sly, Eijun does know, and he pretty much combusts.

“I can’t believe,” he wheezes, when the first wave of unintelligible mortified noises has passed and his blood pressure’s marginally stable again, “you actually said that – “

“I didn’t say anything, Ei-chan ~”

“Oh my lord – “

“Why, what did you think I was saying?”

“Stop right there,” Eijun points at the webcam lens, trying to be imposing, probably failing, because his insides have knotted up in embarrassment and other, less easy to define things and he’d almost be mad at Wakana for instigating this, if he weren’t so otherwise occupied, “you and Mochi-senpai and everyone just needs to calm down – we’re…we aren’t…”

“Ei-chan,” Wakana’s still smiling, and it’s a gentler, empathetic smile, not the puckish kind, “It’s okay, I was just playing. If anything, I’m…glad. That you’re taking your time.”

Taking your time.

It’s been an hour, maybe more, since he’d ended his call with Wakana, but the contents of the conversation swirl inside of his head, a kaleidoscope, as he lays spread-eagled on the mattress.

Taking your time. That’d been what Miyuki’d told him during that first time they’d met outside the bookstore, isn’t it? That he – that they both – could take their time. Somehow it’d set the precedent for their whole relationship – slow, careful approaches, unhurried and prudent and a little wary, a little at a time, baby steps…

The newness of it all has settled, like sediment washed ashore, building and building, compact and solid, like groundwork, like a foundation for other things – it’s turned into familiarity, to make way for newer things yet, and there are many of those yet to come, Eijun knows this, and the difference between him after his first meeting with Miyuki and the frantic call he’d made to Wakana then, and him now, is that he’s not afraid. He’s not jangled up, like an un-tuned guitar, not reeling from something unexpected and heavy with change pouncing at him out of nowhere. He’s still terrible at dealing with things he hasn’t planned for, unforeseen things…but when he thinks of Miyuki, it’s like he’s waiting for the next book in a series, or sloughing through a week for a new episode of an anime, except magnified – far more intense, far more exhilarating. When he thinks of Miyuki, he remembers their kiss in the lobby of this building, and the unknown excites him.
“Ka – zu – ya,” he says, murmurs, spacing out the syllables as he stares at the ceiling and staves off the self-conscious burn making his face heat up. “Miyuki Kazuya.”

***

“What the…”

“I think,” Eijun tells Wakana, drably, with the air of one resigned to their less than spiffy fate, “it’s a modern day equivalent of a duel.”

Behind him, sprawled on the floor in front of the TV, Mochi-senpai’s dedicatedly kicking Miyuki’s butt at Mario Kart.

***

“Ka – zu – ya. Miyuki Kazuya.”

It’s dumb, but he sneaks a peek at the door anyway, even though it’s firmly shut – even though Mochi-senpai’d left much earlier in the morning, his season training prep beginning in earnest even though the camp’s still a couple of weeks away.

But it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter that he’s holed himself up in his bedroom and he’s got the door closed and he’s using the quietest monotone he can muster, but trying to rearrange those syllables of that name on his tongue still sets off a self-conscious fever in his tummy, and he’s at least thankful for his foresight to actually try and practise, no matter how ludicrous even the prospect had sounded in his head, because he’s pretty sure he’d just have bitten his tongue or stumbled over it and royally embarrassed himself if he’d attempted to wing it instead.

It’s still dumb though, and he knows it, and he understands this shouldn’t be a big deal but it feels like it is, and he clears his throat, tries not to dwell too closely on the flushed pink face in the mirror, and attempts to raise his voice to at least a normal speaking volume.

“Ka – zu – ya. Kazuya. Kazuya,” he’s getting into the swing of it, the fragments not coming as halting or stilted as they’d initially been, and he gets jazzed up a bit, trying out, “Do you wanna hang out this weekend, Kazuya,” and shit, no, he can’t. Not yet.

The bright red face in the mirror agrees.

***

They get along surprisingly well, if “getting along” was open to interpretation.

“We’re starting season one tomorrow.”

“We are?” Eijun doesn’t quite know how to balance the shock and the building apprehension this announcement sets off in him – he’s already on the fourth book, but given how much they still make him squirm, he’s not so sure he’ll be able to handle the ambiguity he gets to brush off in his mind painted out in vivid pictures in front of him.

“Am I invited?”

Mochi-senpai flicks disinterested eyes toward Miyuki, who’d sped up a bit to stroll on Eijun’s other side.

“I thought you had a full-day thing tomorrow,” he comments, and Eijun bites down a groan,
because of course. This isn’t even about him starting the show, is it.

“That’s not fair, Kuramochi-kun,” Miyuki trills, amicable as can be, “I was the one who introduced him to the series after all.”

“So I’ll introduce him to the show,” Mochi-senpai shrugs, and Eijun wants to kind of disappear from in between them, because he’s pretty much done trying to referee these weird matches they get into with the explicit purpose of out-riling the other, “Besides, I was planning on rewatching it anyway.”

“Hmm,” Miyuki doesn’t look the slightest bit put-off, and Eijun wishes Onii-san’d been here – although, given the guy is an unapologetic sadist, he probably wouldn’t even have tried to help. His brother, the closet sadist, certainly isn’t – Harucchi’s trailing a couple of steps behind them, and a backward glance confirms that he’s sniggering away, “I hope Eijun’s going to be okay with it though. There are some…excessive scenes.”

“I’m used to the violence,” Eijun pipes up from the middle, his determination to keep out of it shot to smithereens by his annoyance at being referred to in the third person even though he’s right there, “I’ve played Mortal Kombat, I watch David Fincher movies, I’ll be fine.”

It’s only as Mochi-senpai bites into the pretzel sample they’d been accosted with on the way into the mall, grinning victory, that Eijun realises he may have inadvertently taken a side. He quickly sneaks a peek at Miyuki, trying to catch if he’d minded, when Miyuki says, “Those…aren’t the scenes I was referring to.”

Eijun and Mochi-senpai get it at the same time.

“How about,” Eijun manages, tactfully not looking at Mochi-senpai, who’s gone a bit red, “I watch it by myself.”

Mochi-senpai shifts, radiating an intense urge to protest – Miyuki gives him a small smile. “It’s up to you.”

Except it’s not as simple as that.

“Can you please stop picking fights?” Eijun pleads, in an undertone – he’s jogged down the block to the equipment store Mochi-senpai’d left them to go browse through, plucking at his sleeve.

Having recovered from the casual reminder that Game of Thrones isn’t notorious just for violence, Mochi-senpai dismisses him. “What are you talking about? No one’s fighting.”

“It doesn’t look like that, from where I’m standing.” When they’d filed into the food-court, where Miyuki and Harucchi are waiting, Miyuki’d made a show of grabbing Eijun by the hand and leading him away to find seats, calling out his order to a very livid looking Mochi-senpai and quietly entertained Harucchi, and at this point he doesn’t even know which one of them to chastise first so he just picks the one who’d started it.

“That an accusation, brat?” Mochi-senpai’s grip on the baseball he’d been testing the weight of is slightly menacing, but Eijun stands his ground – he’s pretty sure Mochi-senpai’s not about to Lucille him in public.

Mochi-senpai evidently catches on too, because he shakes his head, scowl dissipating.
“If you’re scared I’m trying to drive him off, you don’t have to worry.”

“That’s – !”

“He pisses me off,” Mochi-senpai continues, gripping the bat handle with both his hands, getting into position as though he’s squaring off against an oncoming fastball, “and he’s too smarmy. But…he’s…he doesn’t go all-out. He’s still always very…careful with you.”

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It’s up to you.

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“Are you mad?”

Eijun glances up – Miyuki’s followed him down the aisle at the stationary store he’d beeline-d for, and, hands in his pockets, is leaning against a rack of notebooks. Eijun absently flicks through the one he’d picked up, and says, “No…are you?”

Miyuki looks at him questioningly.

“Mochi-senpai,” Eijun says by way of explanation.

“Ah,” Miyuki grins, and Eijun eyes it closely, hunting for some sign of annoyance, indignation, “nope. It’s kind of funny, actually.”

It brings him a lot of respite, but Eijun hides it, instead raising a sceptical eyebrow. He turns back to the notebook display in front of him, resumes his search for one with those in-built separators so he can catalogue his notes in one place.

“But…”

Eijun peeks askance.

“It’d have been nice. If we got to watch it together.”

This is what he means, the familiarity that still manages to be new. This is what he means, because Miyuki has moments like this, honest and sweet, in between the time he spends being intentionally infuriating, and it still knocks the breath out of Eijun.

“You were the one who said…I might not. Be okay with. Excessive scenes.”

Miyuki grins. Neither of them have to spell it out, especially not after he’d witnessed Eijun almost having a seizure when they’d tried to watch *Kill la Kill*, because, as Miyuki’d promised him with a straight face, *It’s inspired by Orwell.*

He’d neglected to mention that nearly everyone in the anime had a propensity to get naked for no reason.

“I’d imagine it would be more awkward to watch it with your flatmate – and Onii-san’s boyfriend – than with, you know,” he tugs at his collar, feigning nonchalance, “*your* boyfriend.”

Eijun’s response is to smack him with his choice of notebook.

If only to disguise the way his skin’s flushed, the way his heart’s hammering so loud Miyuki might
be able to hear it, because there it is again, the Idea, with a capital “I”, that Wakana’d let him infer, and that Miyuki’s letting him infer, testing it, showing it to him and leaving it there for him to examine and pick apart, and he thinks he gets what Mochi-senpai means, as Miyuki guffaws and playfully calls after him as he strides off to pay for his stash of stationary.

He’s always so careful with him.

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It bothers him sometimes.

When he’s careful, he feels further away.

***

“Um, can we…” he bites the inside of his cheek, and avoids looking Miyuki in the eye, “c-can we take a picture? Together?” And before Miyuki can express surprise, he adds, “My mum. Wants to see.”

His eyes flicker up toward Miyuki as he finishes, raw apprehension glutting his throat and swelling, because it’s an embarrassing request to make, and if it already strikes him as a bit intrusive, he wonders how Miyuki’d think of it, and Miyuki –

Laughs, and says “Okay” and when Eijun’s trying to snap the picture, just before his thumb finds the button, he turns into Eijun’s face and presses a kiss into his cheek and the image is a mess, and so, probably, is Eijun’s face.

They attempt a couple more times, until they both agree on an appropriate picture, and Eijun scoots over to the chair he’d pulled into Miyuki’s kitchen and starts composing a text to his mum, and hums a quiet, “Thank you” – adds a little internal Kazuya to the end that he can’t make himself say yet.

“What’re you thanking me for,” Miyuki reaches over the kitchen island and ruffles his hair a bit, and Eijun gets butterflies, “I’m just…glad. That they’re okay with us.”

Eijun laughs a little. “Yeah,” he says, and decides not to divulge the amount of enthusiasm with which his mother’s probably waiting for this picture, having pestered him for two days straight until he couldn’t handle the frequent emotionally blackmailing calls, and the fact that his dad keeps calling Onii-san for Miyuki’s number for, presumably, the obligatory “parental guidance advised” talk, “They’re…happy for us.”

He sends the picture, and looks up in time to see Miyuki leaning against the counter, staring into the distance. He’s smiling, a little, to himself.

It makes something pull at his heartstrings – a sharp, quick tug.

“What about…” he blurts it out, before he can stop himself, before he can think about it, and Miyuki’s reverie is broken – Miyuki’s looking at him now, expectant, waiting, and Eijun’s already started, doesn’t possess the presence of mind to improvise something else, “what about your dad?”

The question had been unanticipated – Eijun can see that, in the way Miyuki’s eyes widen a fraction before he smiles a mirthless little smile.

“My dad probably doesn’t even know what course I’m studying, or where,” he says, and even though it’s…soft, and light, there’s no levity to it; there’s a tightness which makes Eijun regret, all
over again, bringing it up in the first place, “I told you…we don’t get along.”

*Why? That’s what he wants to ask. That’s the question blaring, flashing in bright neon colours in the centre of his mind’s eye, Why?*

He says, “I’m sorry.”

Miyuki shakes his head, and Eijun finds himself winding around the counter and wrapping his arms around Miyuki and tucking his head into his neck, unfairly glad when he hugs him back—unfairly, because the gnawing need to understand what causes Miyuki to grow so distant is still there, needling, at the back of his head, even though it’s overpowered by a much stronger need to dispel that look from his face forever.

Miyuki’s not the only one who’s careful.

***

At the door, when he’s about to leave, texting Mochi-senpai with one hand telling him he’s on the way and wryly explaining to Miyuki that this is one of many grocery store trips Mochi-senpai is going to force him to go along with in his quest to ensure Eijun doesn’t starve while he’s gone (*even though I’m perfectly capable of looking after myself, thank you very much*), Miyuki says, “Hey…you know you could…”

Miyuki says, with a small smile. “No, nothing.”

Eijun gets it. The new becomes familiar, like their goodbye kisses and repeated requests to *text when you get home*, and other things scoot in to take their place.

Other things you don’t want to mess up, don’t want to make a mistake with—

And so, you tell yourself to be careful.

***

“I don’t know if I’m…I don’t know. Too clingy,” he cringes. “Too annoying.”

*“Has he ever said you’re annoying?”*

“He’d never say that.”

*“Indicated it?”*

“No,” Eijun shakes his head a little—he feels idiotic, as he so often does after the fact, after he’s said the thing he probably shouldn’t have said, after he’s made a mountain out of a molehill because he’d been spinning terrified circles around it rather than actually looking at it, thoroughly, with his wits around him—he expounds, lamely, “he’s always…kind.”

Wakana’s frowning at him. Eijun thinks he’s a fool for going through with this, worrying her over what most probably is a whole lot of nothing.

*“What do you mean by ‘always kind’?”*

“Like…” Eijun struggles to put it into words, this vague sense of unease he’s been getting lately, once in a while, “like, he never says no.”

*“He never says ‘no’?”* Wakana echoes, like she’s trying to process why that’s a bad thing.
Eijun doesn’t know how to explain it. “He never says no…even when I’m saying – or doing – something…I don’t know. Dumb? Unnecessary? Like…the other day, he wanted to watch The Girl on the Train in cinema, and I didn’t want to at all because, well…it’s based on a book, and I haven’t read it yet and – see?” he points at his screen, like it’ll freeze-frame that moment Wakana’d shot him a look of pure exasperation, “It’s annoying, right? It’s…fussy and…and just. Dumb. But he never gets annoyed.”

“And you’re bugged by this…why?”

“Because,” there’s a plaintive note to it, a desperate lilt, “because it’s like…it’s like. He messes around with me and he teases me and everything but when it comes to these kinds of things he’s always…accommodating. Always patient. Too patient.”

There’s a look of comprehension in Wakana’s eye. “You mean…are you like, worried, that at some point he’s going to get tired of being patient?”

“Maybe,” Eijun says, uncertain – she’s partly correct, because he does worry, sometimes, he does wonder if maybe he’s testing Miyuki’s patience…they’ve gone past the stage where it counts as…as courtship, as trying to put on the best versions of themselves for the other, and the more relaxed he gets around Miyuki, the more involuntary his tantrums or his obsessive-compulsiveness with things he really cares about or his panic-attacks over nothing get, and the more he feels that the ease with which Miyuki takes it in his stride, without argument, without reproof, is like…he’s hassling him. Saddling him down. “Maybe it’s that. It’s just that sometimes…it feels like he holds back on me.”

“Holds back how?”

“Like he…doesn’t tell me exactly what’s on his mind,” Eijun heaves it out, with a heavy sigh, “like he’s doesn’t know how I might take it.”

He flashes back to the moment in Miyuki’s doorway, when he’d clearly wanted to tell him something, ask him something – something which would have shifted them into new territory, turned the page, started a new chapter, Eijun can tell, he just can – and he hadn’t.

And Eijun can’t stop obsessing over why. Was it because he’d thought he’s not ready? Was it because he thought Eijun isn’t ready? It’s the latter that troubles him the most, because Eijun feels…culpable. For making him so doubtful.

And it’s not like it’s an isolated thing. At some point during that week – his last week at work – he’d been on the phone with Miyuki, talking about the feature pieces he’d done layout for that week, gushing, because he’d got to work first hand with the raw, unedited drafts of Sanada Shunpei – the Sanada Shunpei, the freelance journalist who’s around Miyuki’s age probably but has already bagged an Editors’ Choice Magazine Journalism Award and has written editorials for international newspapers and is quite possibly Eijun’s icon, and Miyuki’d said something like, Wow, you really like this guy huh, and Eijun’d unthinkingly replied, I freaking LOVE him and there’d been…there’d been silence. Silence for just a second, maybe, but it’d been disquieting and fractured, and Eijun’d realised what he’d just said and amended, I mean, I really, really look up to him, I want to BE like him and Miyuki’d just laughed, and teased him a little about worrying about competition and said encouraging things, but Eijun’d been left with the horribly disconcerting notion that he’d maybe upset him, and it’d felt silly because of course he didn’t mean it that way, and he thinks Miyuki knows it too, but…

He’d still been too afraid to ask.
And maybe, Miyuki’d felt that way too.

So he’d said nothing, and Eijun can’t tell if he’d meant to, and it’s…unbearable.

“I feel like he’s always so…” Eijun recognises the irony, feels the tingle of déjà vu again, this time with Mochi-senpai’s words, “so careful with me.”

Wakana sighs.

“Ei-chan,” she says, measured, calming, “Why haven’t you brought this up with him?”

“Because I don’t know how he’d take it,” Eijun knows Wakana already gets this – she’s walking him through it, making him admit it to himself, “because I don’t want to push it.”

“Exactly. I’m sure he feels the same. He doesn’t want to…impose.”

Hearing it from Wakana gives him a little faith in his own assessment. “He’s always been so…so sure of himself. Even when he asked me out, and…you know. It feels like…”

“It’s not like him?”

Eijun nods. Wakana looks thoughtful for a moment, spacing out.

“I guess I do get it,” she says, eventually; Eijun eyes her, hopeful, “it’s like…when he approached you, he – neither of you, really – had anything to lose. It was a risk but not really a risk that’d have cost you. Now – ” she peers at him, a slight dimple showing on her left cheek, and her gaze is a bit too maternal, like she’s giving love advice to a teenager rather someone her own age, “you do have something to lose, right? Neither of you wants to screw up.”

***

Eijun’s at work, and he’s distracted, which is not a good thing, because in a couple of minutes he’s going to be going in for his final evaluation – with Takigawa-san himself. The email’d almost given him a heart attack, until Kanemaru poked his head around his cubicle’s screen to ask if he’d got one too, and while it’s still daunting, because it’s going to be a one-on-one thing, with his supervisor and the big boss, and it’s the tail end of proceedings to wrap up his internship and Eijun should really get a move on and start packing away his personal belongings…

Eijun can’t focus.

You need to communicate, is what Wakana’d told him; stressed to him, again and again, the night before, I know it sounds cliché, but otherwise, it’s a standstill. You need to grow with him – you need to figure it out with him.

And that’s what the point had been, right? They’d promised to work it out together, and having some of his concerns validated by Wakana’d given him at least the assurance that he’s thinking about this the right way, but going through with it…

Going through with it is a lot more daunting than thinking he wants to, that they want to, and Eijun’s mind is full of this as he shaky-walks towards his final meeting with Takigawa-san, his brain skipping ahead of it in favour of agonising over how he’s going to bring this up with Miyuki when he drops by the bookstore later.
PLEASE DON'T HATE IT I PROMISE THERE'S PAYOFF ;A; I'm hoping to update really, really soon and I promise to reply to everyone I've not replied to ASAP! I'm super sorry for the delays!

Apologies for mistakes! I'll edit when I get the chance!

References to:
- David Fincher movies: like Se7en, Panic Room, The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, Fight Club. All mind-bending, often times scarily dark and violent stuff.
- GTA online and Mortal Kombat: co-op on GTA online is actually fun to play with friends when the thing lets you actually log on (which is almost never for me)
- Lucille: the name of a baseball bat in The Walking Dead which isn't used for baseball at all orz. I'm not gonna say any more because spoilers but...yeah. It's brutal.
- Kill la Kill/Orwell: the anime has plenty of underlying themes from George Orwell's "1984", which is what got me curious about the anime...and then it was just an acute sense of 'WTF am I watching' until the end
- The Girl on the Train: read the book, yet to watch the movie. Idk exactly how I felt about it but I was literally not able to put it down until I got to the end so I guess that says something? (edit: read it again. There are two things that bothered me with this book a) the unlikeability of practically all the characters b) how 'helpless' or dependent on men the main female charas come off as :/ idk if it's just me but. yeah. just adding this in just in case ppl were thinking to give it a shot)
- the Editor's Choice award mentioned in the fic is a real thing, though I don't really know all the specifics of it
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

First of all thank you lovelies for all your sweet wishes to my cat! Poncho's recovering well and he sends lots of kitty kisses <3

Thank you so so so much for reading and for your amazing feedback and I'm really sorry if I don't manage to reply to everyone immediately - I'm gonna be staying with the parents tomorrow onward for the holiday and I've not packed welp - but I AM reading all your lovely lovely messages and they make me SO happy I'm literally having Christmas every day thanks to you guys <3 I'll reply to everyone as soon as I can! Promise!

I'm also probably not going to be able to update again until New Year's since it won't be nice if I'm on laptop with all the family about but I'll try to squeeze one more in if I can...thank you all for your patience and for being super lovely! <3 MWAH! Happy holidays!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He’s out of breath by the time he reaches.

Outside, it’s already dark – the sun’d started to bid the day adieu by the time Eijun, a little dazed, had left his interview, gone to collect his personal effects to find a text from Harucchi saying he’s leaving early because Onii-san’s going to be waiting for him for dinner and he’s really sorry he couldn’t wait up, and he’d thought that’s okay, since he’d not been heading home either.

He’d not been heading home, and night had been encroaching on evening, pulling a screen across the sky while streetlamps and store fronts lit up like meagre, artificial replicas of stars, when Eijun’d run out of the bookstore.

Now he’s outside Miyuki’s flat, breathing hard, a stitch rending at his side as he struggles to hear himself think over his jack-rabbiting pulse.

For once, he doesn’t hesitate.

He rings the bell.

***

He’s quaking a little bit, by the time he reaches the office – he’d never been inside, had never needed to, even though Takigawa-san always leaves the door open. A polished, shiny gold plaque beside it reads “Takigawa Chris Yuu” in crisp, serif fonts, but it’s not garish – like everything about him, this too oozes quiet, tasteful sophistication.

Like everything about him, it makes Eijun cow a little, and he’s quaking as he reaches the door, hesitates a little outside, not sure how he’s supposed to announce his presence, not sure if he’s supposed to call out or knock on the glass door ominously ajar in front of him and risk smudging its spotless surface.
Tanba-san, the supervisor for the interns, catches sight of him and calls him in, and Eijun keenly regrets not dedicating more time to mentally preparing himself, because his vocal chords have apparently gotten themselves tangled with his windpipe and his greeting comes out embarrassingly strangled.

Takigawa-san doesn’t react to it. “Sit down,” he welcomes, genially, getting to his feet and waiting as Eijun scrambles for the seat opposite him, grateful it’s not the revolving kind because he might possibly have missed it and landed on the floor in his haste, “And how are we today, Eijun?”

“Good,” he croaks, and thinks this is sorely inadequate; he wills himself to do better, “I’m doing very well, Sir.”

Takigawa-san nods, and Tanba-san, who’d hung round by the door, shifts forward, pushes a manila folder in front of him, the type of non-descript, cardboard-brown types you see in filing cabinets in all those crime shows when the detectives are doing research, and he pulls up a chair.

The first thing Eijun sees when Takigawa-san flips the folder open is a plain white envelope with his name stamped across the middle, and it screams OFFICIAL.

***

He doesn’t exactly know how long it takes the door to open – maybe he imagines the stretchy interlude, maybe the adrenaline’s spurring his thoughts on at jet-speed, overtaking the seconds, but it feels like an eternity before he hears the familiar creak of the hinges Miyuki keeps saying he has to oil but always forgets, and he can’t help but try to imagine what Miyuki’d been doing before he’d been interrupted by the doorbell.

This is the first time he’s shown up hear without announcement

Without appointment.

Belated anxiety makes his heart judder like a punching-bag after impact.

“Eijun?”

There’s surprise – wide eyes and slack jaw, a frown beginning to form between those brows, and Eijun can see him trying to figure out what’d happened, can see him taking in Eijun’s state, hair probably dishevelled, clothes probably askew, face flushed as he tries to catch his breath, and he’s starting to get worried, but Eijun beats him to it.

***

It’s not the first time he’s walked into this store looking for Miyuki and not immediately spotted him, but this is the first time it’s his sole agenda. There aren’t any books he’s here to buy, no new releases to browse through, no gifts he needs help with and certainly no rendezvous point they’d decided on beforehand – he’s here, and he wants to see Miyuki.

But he’s not there.

Jittery, nerves still tangled and raw from the half an hour or more he’d spent in Takigawa-san’s office and patience fragmenting with the need to talk to Miyuki, Eijun scans the place, once, twice – he doesn’t spot that brown thatch of hair he’d probably recognise anywhere, now, knows the feel of it against his palms, tickling against the edge of his jaw…

But he’s not there.
Eijun waits. Maybe he’d needed to go fetch something from the back-room. Miyuki’s confided he’s one of the few employees entrusted with that place.

His feet clack against the floor, thin industrial carpeting muffling the rhythm over tile, and then he can’t anymore so he strides over to the counter.

“Um, excuse me,” he asks the guy manning it – he’s about Eijun’s age, probably, a part-timer Eijun remembers seeing around now and then who always looks bored out of his mind – he’s pretty sure he’d caught him sleeping on his feet at some point, “do you know where Miyuki Kazuya is?”

The sleepy guy slow-blinks at him, uninterested. “Is there something I can help you with?” It’s robotic and monotonous and Eijun would probably be a bit peeved if he didn’t have other things on his mind.

“I had some business with Miyuki, I –”

“Oh,” the guy’s eyes – icy and blue – open a tad bit wider. Eijun manages to read his name-tag in the interim, “you’re him. The boyfriend.”

It resounds in Eijun’s head, with more shock than embarrassment, really, because yeah, Mochi-senpai tends to use that word excessively around him, but Mochi-senpai is someone he’s used to – this guy, this Furuya Satoru, isn’t, and the comfort he usually gleans from having mastered how to speak to bookstore assistants evaporates in an instant. Mouthing a bit dumbly, Eijun pipes a flustered, “Y-yes,” and tries not to lose his focus wondering whether Miyuki talks about him with his co-workers.

It’s difficult.

And then it isn’t, it isn’t at all, because Furuya tips his head a bit to the side, his default stony face showing a little confusion. “Didn’t he tell you? He’s taken a sick leave.”

“Two days,” Eijun’s saying, trying to keep his tone even, trying not to let any one of the many emotions he hasn’t quite verified or grasped or rationalised yet try to trickle into his voice, “you were sick for two days, why didn’t you tell me?”

Dismay. He can hear it in his own voice and something just wilts inside of him, making way for shame and embarrassment because he’d woken up this morning with the intention of talking to Miyuki about where their boundaries are and he already feels like he’s pushing them.

“It was just a headache,” Miyuki says – assures, and he looks a little bit sheepish, and Eijun knows his composure is crumbling, the distress he’d been bottling down leaking through the cracks and Miyuki’s just trying to calm him down and that’s not even how it’s supposed to be at all because –

“Two days,” Eijun says, again, and he takes a step toward Miyuki, takes both his hands, “it was bad enough that you couldn’t go to work for two days.”

He knows that Miyuki gets migraines from time to time, that he has to wear corrective glasses because if there’s anything a little wonky with his vision or how much pressure he puts on his eyes he gets massive headaches, and he only knows this because one time, Miyuki’d had to tell him that he’d be pushing a date a little late because his doctor’s appointment is running over and that’d been the last time they’d discussed that and Eijun wonders how many other times Miyuki’s been sick and just not told him.
Eijun wonders how many of the things he feels right now are justified.

“It’s normal, Eijun,” Miyuki tells him, earnest, placating; he squeezes Eijun’s hands back and gives him a tiny smile. This close to him, Eijun can see deep welts under his eyes, haggard features of a person who’s barely had enough sleep.

“Does it still hurt? Is it gone?”

“It’s better,” Miyuki tells him, and Eijun’s grateful that at least he doesn’t dismiss it altogether, “You went to the store?”

“Yeah,” Eijun says. They’re in the living-room, Miyuki having guided him in, but it’s dark in here – Miyuki’s switched one of the lamps on, but the rest of place – the hall, the door leading into his bedroom – is dim. There’s a minty, medicinal scent in the air, the kind you associate with sluggish days spent in bed with your nose blocked and throat dry. “You…you should go back to resting. I just came to check on you, I’ll go now.”

“I’m much better,” Miyuki insists; he sounds like himself, and his eyes rake over Eijun’s face, concerned, “Is everything okay? I don’t think I got any calls from you – “

“I didn’t call,” Eijun interrupts – he’d been in such a rush to get here, spending every second of the train ride anticipating the next, but now that he’s standing where he wanted to be, he wishes he could go back. He wishes he’d just messaged Miyuki after not finding him at the store, just left a text he’d have been able to answer when he was up to it, rather than…than impose on him like this. Because this, Eijun thinks, definitely counts as imposing. Miyuki’s sick, and he’s showed up announced, and now Miyuki feels obligated to hear what he came all this way to say, and he’s screwed it up even before he’d tried to resolve it, hadn’t he? “It’s…nothing. I just wanted to see you and then when they told me you were sick I…I just wanted to check up on you.”

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“You know, I was quite surprised when you didn’t pitch, during our first couple of roundtables.”

Eijun can feel his features morph into surprise, can see Takigawa-san registering it. He smiles a knowing smile.

“I remember reading the sample you’d sent in with your application,” he explains, in answer to Eijun’s obvious astonishment, “Tanba usually runs through applications for interns but he tends to send me promising ones for every batch. I being quite impressed with yours – Why Kaomoji needs to be accepted in formal communication…or something to that effect, correct?”

“Yes, sir,” Eijun doesn’t know what else to say. At the time, he’d thought the piece had been among the best he’d ever written – it’d been on his mind a lot around that phase, especially in that time an average college student spends sending emails to his professors and course-mates and even more terrifyingly, potential workplaces to request employment consideration, and Eijun’d always struggled with the tone, concise sentences feeling too curt, full-stops feeling too stiff and business-like…maybe it was a millennial problem, a handicap of the generation growing up learning to transmit their emotions through screens using hundreds and hundreds of emoticons or abbreviations, but in Eijun’s opinion, they let him express himself better – they let him emulate actual, face to face interaction, give context to words which might otherwise wind up too impersonal and clinical.

It’s not something he’d ever dared to try experiment with on one of his lecturers, but evidently it’d been something he’d felt strongly enough about, because when it came to a sample for his
internship application, the article’d almost written itself.

And then had come that daunting dry spell, weeks and weeks of layout taking the edge out of his enthusiasm, leaving inspiration blunt and stunted, and Eijun had been starting to forget what that rush had even felt like.

It feels hard to imagine, now, with an entire portfolio of his published pieces neatly archived in the manila folder he, Takigawa-san and Tanba-san’d been evaluating together the past roughly fifteen minutes, that it’d even happened.

Takigawa-san knits his fingers together, elbows on the table. Eijun thinks, even though he’s so tuned-up he’s almost vibrating in his seat, that those intelligent eyes can see right through the whirl of Eijun’s thoughts right to the core of him.

“I don’t want to sound intrusive,” he begins, light and feathery and casual, like an old friend catching up over coffee, “but why did you not pitch sooner?”

Eijun would not have known how to answer that question, if Takigawa-san’d asked him it two months ago.

“I was…nervous,” he admits; he’s sheepish, but it’s surprisingly easier than he’d have expected to be open about it, to be open at all – both these men, despite being clear professionals in esteemed positions in this establishment, had this easy-going, almost hospitable aura about them that went a little beyond the type of subtly inclusive behaviours they teach in his classes, about how to approach clients, interviewees, how to make them feel at ease and evoke participation rather than make them feel like they’re being interrogated. Like there are right and wrong answers. It’s actually easier than speaking in front of room full of a dozen other people as he’s been doing during their Friday roundtables, and Eijun’s pleasantly surprised by how calm he is, considering how nervous he’d been leading up to it. “I felt…I had a little trouble, coming up with something that I…thought would be appropriate.”

Tanba-san murmurs “Writer’s bloc” and Takigawa-san nods, understanding.

“You may have wondered,” the latter says, folding his arms across the table-top, “why I didn’t simply assign you to writing even though that’s what you applied for.”

This hits a little too close to the truth – Eijun’d done more than “wonder”. He remembers how he’d spent weeks on end ranting about Takigawa-san and his dumb internship team for clearly not bothering to read submissions enough to care where to place whom, and yes, he’d been projecting, he’d been shifting his frustration at himself to an easily available scapegoat, but the last thing he needs is Takigawa-san figuring out how much remembering all this is making him squirm on the inside, so he tries his best to maintain the “diplomatic poker-face” Onii-san’d taught him for difficult interview questions.

“I did…wonder.”

“And why do you think we didn’t start you all off writing at once?”

Eijun gulps and hopes it doesn’t show. “To let us start from an equal footing?” it’s a bullshit answer, but when you have an older brother figure whose entire career depends on bullshitting convincingly enough to sway entire corporations and the ever-dubious public, you pick up a few tricks – he sees the slight shift down of Takigawa-san’s eyebrows, and Tanba-san out of the corner of his eye, appearing to mull over this answer, and he moves to be more specific, “To let us…prove ourselves.”
It’s not as brilliantly astute as Onii-san’s intuitive guesses are, but Eijun thinks, seeing Takigawa-san smile approvingly, that it’s good enough.

“Something like that,” he acquiesces, inclining his head – his smile is pleased, and Eijun’s blood pressure settles to a less debilitating degree, “we stressed, during all our recruitment drives, that we’re looking for young talent who show two things: promise and – ?”

“Initiative,” Eijun recites; he’d never been to one of their recruitment drives, but he remembers this well, from the seminar Takigawa-san’d come to speak at in his college, the session during which Eijun’d decided this is where he wanted to work, this is where he wanted to learn and grow as a writer.

“Correct.” Takigawa-san beams, and Eijun feels himself instinctively grinning back – the guy has a knack for making people feel great about themselves, feel…appreciated for their good work, make them strive to do better. Eijun thinks, absently, that Takigawa-san’d have made a great teacher. “People may have the ability, the talent, that spark – but if you don’t have the drive to put it to use, it amounts to nothing. Or so is my philosophy.”

This Eijun already knows. Takigawa-san’s just barely over his mid-twenties, and yet he’s one of the most formidable players in the field, and not because he’d played by the rules – he’d changed the rules, and Eijun’d been awed by how someone could possess that level of intrepid ambition, this faith in their own ability.

And he’s started to see that this isn’t just Takigawa-san’s personal motto.

“Tanba used to think these roundtable sessions were…shall we say, superfluous,” Takigawa-san says, with a grin that makes him look young and really, boyishly handsome; Tanba-san frowns, almost reproachful, “But I couldn’t think of a more…effective, shall we say, means of letting everyone – each one of you – get a chance to speak up about what you came here to do. To try and put that intent to reality. Of course, in every batch we have people who’re content getting away with the bare minimum, or just following the rulebook and playing it safe –” there’s a glint in Takigawa-san’s eye as he looks at Eijun here, a knowing twinkle, “I’m glad you chose not to be one of them.”

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“Aw,” Miyuki coos, and if it weren’t for all this evidence clamouring that this isn’t like any of the other times Eijun’s been here, that fiendish grin of his would have bought Eijun over just like it always does, “you came to nurse me back to health?”

Eijun could deny it.

Eijun could scoff and tease him back and leave, allay Miyuki’s concerns, tell him it was nothing, tell him he ought to rest and it’s nothing important and he’s going to go back, get well soon, take care, maybe chide him for not letting him know in the first place and save the rest – all of it, the entire bagful of things he’d come with to share with Miyuki – for later.

But he can’t deny himself.

He can’t deny that that is why he’d not messaged Miyuki from the store itself, that is why he had to come here and see for himself, because he knows Miyuki’d not want to alarm him, knows Miyuki would fluff the truth a little bit, if only to be considerate.

And he knows that he could leave, and that worry would stay put, and it wouldn’t budge, and he’d
have to put up with it and give himself time to lose his nerve all over again, and in a split instance he decides that isn’t something he can let happen. It’s now or never.

“Yes,” he says, summoning all his bravado, all the impulsiveness he’d used when he’d gambled with his very first article, “I would have, if you’d told me.”

Maybe he is clingy. Maybe he is annoying. Right now, gut twisted up because his brain is telling him to leave and everything else knows he doesn’t want to, he can’t – he doesn’t even care.

Miyuki looks pleased by what he’d said, that mixture of amusement and affection that makes Eijun melt filling in some of the gauntness, and he lifts a hand to brush his knuckles against Eijun’s cheek.

“I’m okay,” he says, “it’s no big deal and I didn’t want to bug you with it, and besides, I can handle – “

“I know you can,” Eijun interrupts, and he does know. He knows Miyuki’s self-sufficient, he knows Miyuki is more than qualified to look after himself, he knows he's not like Eijun, who constantly needs to be bolstered up by his loved ones – his heart’s clattering around in his rib cage like a rogue spinning-top ricocheting off corners, but he sets his jaw, takes Miyuki’s hand and shifts so he’s pulling him toward his bedroom, “but you don’t have to. You…you have me.”

He doesn’t look back, because his face is so overheated he can feel the air around it steaming up, and he tugs, adamant, stomping toward the bedroom door.

“Eijun, wait – “ he sounds a little flustered; Eijun doesn’t turn around to confirm it.

“No waiting, you’re getting into bed now – “

“I told you, I’m okay, and you still haven’t told me why – “

“It doesn’t matter, rest – “

“Eijun – “

“Kazuya.”

He’d not meant to. He honestly hadn’t, especially not like that – like a sharp, whip-crack of admonishment, the smack of palm on tabletop, impatient and exasperated. But he doesn’t let himself stop.

“You’re going to get into bed, and I’m going to give you a head massage, and if you resist, so help me lord,” it’s a bare-faced threat, and Eijun means every bit of it – bar the fact that he’s two seconds from passing out at his own temerity – and he bodily yanks Miyuki into the room – who, surprisingly, follows him pretty docilely.

That is, until they’ve reached the bed and Eijun’s nudging him to get on, and he wraps a hand around Eijun’s wrist to pull him down until he’s plopped on the mattress.

“Does this count as our first fight?” he asks, cheeky and low – they’d not turned the lights on, but from the greyish-blue glow, diluted down to a faint glimmer through the window blinds, Eijun can make out his smile.

He has to suppress one of his own as he tries to commandeer the guy into a reclining position. Miyuki – Kazuya – obliges for the most part, except he knocks a pillow out of the way, and rests
his head in Eijun’s lap instead, and Eijun can see him grinning, pleased with himself, up at him and can’t help but roll his eyes.

As Eijun starts massaging his fingertips into Miyuki – Kazuya’s – scalp, in firm, thorough circles, he hums, “I could get used to this.”

“Bet you could,” Eijun says, “Sleep.”

“Mmhmm.” His shoulders are relaxing, tension ebbing out of his body as he melds into the mattress – melds against Eijun, and it’s a small thing but it’s ridiculously gratifying, “You’re good at this.”

“Practice,” Eijun snorts – his granddad had entered this particular talent into his skillset at an early age, specially reserved for bad fishing days when the catch was so poorly Gramps would come home resembling a human thundercloud, “Sleep.”

“You’ve not told me why you were – “

“Kazuya.”

“Okay, okay. Got it. Sleeping.”

As his breathing evens, and he drifts off, even as Eijun continues his ministrations, Eijun finds himself relaxing – more tranquil than he’s been in a while, certainly more tranquil than he’d been waking up that morning, and it’s funny, how perspectives can shift – how you can change an angle and everything looks different, how you can be so terrified of something but once you’re through it, you look back and can’t understand what you were so worried about in the first place.

Eijun lets Miyuki’s hair slip in between his fingers – a little shaggy, since he’d probably not managed to wash it in the last twenty-four hours, a little knotted up, and completely different from the thoroughly groomed version of him Eijun’s seen up till now – and he thinks he can tell him about the white envelope in his bag, and the job offer it contains, when he’s up.

There’s no rush.

Chapter End Notes

I’ve been wanting to do this Chris-senpai scene since, like, chapter two, so I hope it worked out /\ Also yay Furuya! He had a teeny tiny cameo in one of the chapters but I forget which lol

Many apologies for grammar mistakes and inconsistencies, I’m gonna fix it when I can!

Thank you all so much for reading and I hope you enjoyed the update(s)!! I’d love to hear your thoughts if you feel like sharing them!
See the end of the chapter for more notes

Miyuki’s voice is thick with sleep, raspy, when he laboriously lifts his head, squints short-sightedly.

“I thought you’d left.”

He sounds glad. It makes Eijun feel warm inside.

“My legs fell asleep,” he admits, wry, “…and I went to get water. Want some?” He holds up the half-emptied tumbler he’d filled from the bottle he’s seen Miyuki refill and stock in his fridge on his previous visits – it’d felt a little weird, going through the motions himself. A little weird and a little…liberating.

Miyuki nods, and Eijun pads over, soft-footed, sitting down when Miyuki clumsily shifts, making way for him.

“How are you feeling now?” he asks, scrutinising him carefully – Miyuki’d switched the bedside lamp on, and as he drains the glass Eijun’d taken a few sips from, Eijun can see his pallor at least looks a bit better, though his eyes are puffy and a little bloodshot.

“Thanks to you,” Miyuki croons, and dips in, rubbing his nose against Eijun’s cheek – he does that a lot, Eijun thinks, like a kitten showing affection – “All better.”

Eijun eyes him, sceptical, and Miyuki holds up his hands, expression ironic. “I seriously mean it. Headache’s totally gone – your hands are magic.” He picks one of them up, cradling it, and Eijun does think he sounds better rested, that fatigued weight missing, when he adds, “I wonder what else they can do?”

Eijun snatches his hand back, punches him hard enough to actually have him rock backward a bit. “Pervert.”

“That’s not exactly what I was hoping you’d be calling me,” Miyuki ripostes, smooth, and the slant
of his smile clears any confusion Eijun might’ve had – he can feel himself blush, the self-consciousness kicking in again, and the name Miyuki’d been looking for is there, jammed halfway down his throat, and it’s having a harder time coming out now that he’s actually trying to summon it.

He clears his throat. “You ought to eat.”

This wipes off the levity from Miyuki’s face. “Shit, I don’t think I cooked – “

“I ordered.”

His face a little bare without his glasses – a little more frank, almost a little vulnerable – Miyuki blinks, owlish, at him. “What?”

Eijun’s conscious of the fact that he’s probably growing tellingly red, but he bull’s on, holding on to the remnants of the brashness which’d brought him so far. “I…checked your fridge. And there weren’t any leftovers so I…um. I ordered take-out.” And then quickly, without looking at Miyuki’s face, he tacks on, “Is…is that okay?”

His pulse is fluttering inside of his throat, like there’s something alive and desperately squirming for escape in there, and his ears are so hot he thinks they might scorch to the touch, and it’s so, so tempting to look away but he doesn’t.

He forces himself to keep looking at Miyuki, watch his features shift, grow confounded and then comprehending and then…

It’s Miyuki who looks away, and even if it’s only for a second, Eijun fancies the red against his cheek isn’t because it’d been pressed into the creases of his pillow.

“That’s okay,” he breathes, and he’s smiling, and it’s a nervous kind of smile, a touch on the giddy side, and the tension knotted up inside Eijun loosens.

“You’re okay with it?”

“Okay with what?”

Eijun shuffles his feet. A part of him thinks he can just say Pizza and get away with it.

The bigger part’s spent all the time Miyuki’d been asleep thinking about how…right, it feels, the warm weight of Miyuki deeply snoozing away on his lap, until the pins and needles had gotten too unbearable and he had to carefully slide his leg out from under his head and push a pillow in instead.

How futile it would be if he wagers this away because he can’t be honest.

“Okay with…me barging into your house,” he murmurs; he has to keep reminding himself not to look away, “and going through your things. And bossing you around.”

Miyuki gapes at him for less than a second before snorting with laughter.

“Sorry,” Miyuki chortles, at Eijun’s almost affronted face, “it’s just that…you sound like the most aggressive caregiver when you put it like that – “

Petulant, more because he doesn’t know how else to react to Miyuki’s clear amusement than anything else, Eijun sulks, “I wouldn’t have to be aggressive if you’d just told me – “
“It’s nothing – “

“Maybe to you,” Eijun protests, dogged – he’s going through the works, all the little tricks he’s learnt – his techniques of “persuasion” may lack Onii-san’s finesse, but, complete with sullen pouting and downcast eyes, he feels less like of an idiot than if he were to just blurt out the unembellished truth, “It’s not nothing to me.”

And clearly, it works, because Miyuki falters, and maybe it’s because he’s not wearing his glasses, or because he’s got his guard down, wits slow to catch on as his brain and body reset after deep slumber, but Eijun can see a moved gleam to his eye. His fingers squeeze Eijun’s hand, and Eijun squeezes back.

“I’m sorry I worried you.”

Eijun shakes his head. “Be sorry you didn’t tell me,” he glares, baleful, “and make sure you don’t do it again.” He catches the flicker of indecision in Miyuki’s face and quickly tacks on, “Even if it’s nothing serious. Even if you can look after yourself.”

It echoes what he’d said, in a fit of exasperated, overwrought pique, and Miyuki must realise this too, because he asks with a lopsided, almost wicked little smile, “Because I have you?”

“B-because you have me,” Eijun repeats, even though this is still a bit too daring for him, a bit too outside of his comfort zone, “So you have to tell me okay? When you’re not feeling well or when you’re…sad, or tired, or upset…”

“I’d be bugging you all day,” Miyuki says, soft – it’s that voice he uses when they’re both alone, together like this, a voice meant for only Eijun to hear – except usually, they’re outside in the living-room, because although Miyuki’d given Eijun a tour of his flat, he’d been careful about being presumptuous, coming on too strong, even though he’d been so forward when he’d first made a move, and Eijun remembers what Wakana’d told him the night before, about having something to lose now, and he says,

“I’ll bug you back,” he vows, solemn, “so we’ll be even.” And then, because he needs reciprocation, he needs Miyuki to do this with him, he asks, “Okay?”

Miyuki just looks at him for a while, like he’s struggling to understand if Eijun’s being serious – Eijun stares back, mouth determined and set, projecting all the sincerity he’s capable of, and when Miyuki finally breaks the impasse, it’s with an almost stunned Heh, a startled little laugh, before he grins his wide-toothed, wicked grin and chirrups an almost devious, Okay.

***

Miyuki washes up while Eijun sets out the pizza, and they end up eating on the couch, straight out of the box because Miyuki wouldn’t let Eijun fetch plates, insisting We don’t have to wash up after, even though this ends with him dropping pepperoni on his shirt and having Eijun laugh at him for karma’s instant comeuppance.

He gets his payback by grabbing Eijun by the back of the neck and pulling him in for a tomato-sauce smeared kiss that leaves him extremely and vocally disgruntled.

“It’s pretty late, though,” he notes, at one point – Eijun catches the cautiously neutral way he broaches the topic, “is Tsundere Senapi okay with you staying out so late?”

“I, uh…called him, when you were asleep,” Eijun confesses, “I told him you weren’t well and I came to check up on you…and I guess he’s actually worried, because he hasn’t already called me
ten thousand times?"

Miyuki looks like he’s not sure whether he’s more amused or peeved. “You’re making me sound like an invalid.”

“That’s what you get for not telling me things,” Eijun counters stubbornly, and Miyuki shakes his head, defeated – his hair, sticking up a little at odd angles because of all the time Eijun’d spent running his fingers through it when he’d been napping, working out the knots, flaps kind of hilariously as he does. Eijun forgoes giggling when Miyuki lapses into silence, looking a little spaced out. “What are you thinking about?”

Shaking his head again, Miyuki considers the half-eaten pizza slice he’s holding before dropping it back into the box. He deliberates a moment more before he turns a self-conscious smile at Eijun.

“I’m thinking…that the trains are going to shut down soon.”

“Ah.” At the back of his head, Eijun’d been fretting over the same.

“I’m thinking it’ll be really late by the time you reach home.”

Eijun focuses on chewing his pizza. It feels a lot like trying mash leather, suddenly.

“I’m thinking…” Miyuki peeks at him, and Eijun’s struck, pinned in place, by the weight of his gaze, “I’d really like you to stay the night.”

It’s probably not the best or most appropriate reaction, but Eijun giggles – breathless. Almost delirious.

Embarrassed and…eager.

Miyuki scrubs loose crumbs off his fingertips with a napkin, crumpling and tossing it into the paper-bag their dinner had come in – it might be the exhaustion of the day catching up with him, or the emotional whirlpool sucking his ability to think straight right out of him, but Eijun doesn’t see his hand coming before he links their fingers together again, much like he had, back in his bedroom.

“I’m thinking Tsundere Senpai would probably kill me if I kept you without passing all his trust tests first.”

***

And Miyuki’s possibly very right, because Mochi-senpai looks legitimately surprised to see him coming through the door when he’s back home later, and when he offhandedly asks how Miyuki’s doing now, Eijun makes a point to let him know that he’d hustled him to go back home before the trains stopped for the day.

***

You said: Miyuki I forgot to tell you something!

Miyuki Kazuya said: :( :( :

You said: What

You said: What happened??
Miyuki Kazuya said: What happened to just ‘Kazuya’

Miyuki Kazuya said: Are you only going to use that when you’re mad

Miyuki Kazuya said: I guess that’s pretty hot too

You said: >:(

You said: I’m

[You are typing]

You said: I’m trying

[You are typing]

You said: Kazuya

Miyuki Kazuya said: ( ˘ ³˘)♥

Miyuki Kazuya said: Now I regret letting you go

[You are typing]

You said: Mochi-senpai seemed impressed though

You said: Actually

You said: He looked pissed you did something he can’t get pissed at

Miyuki Kazuya said: hahahahaha

Miyuki Kazuya said: Well I suppose that makes it a LITTLE worth it

Miyuki Kazuya said: Okay I’m digressing what did you say you wanted to tell me

You said: Okay so today I had my final evaluation at work

You said: And

You said: I got a job offer /u/

Eijun has a split second before his phone’s buzzing in earnest in his hands, and he’s barely picked up the call when he hears Miyuki going, “Why didn’t you tell me earlier?!?” and chokes a little laughing.

***

“Isn’t there some kind of rule against not upping the workload during the first couple of weeks?”

Harucchi, glasses perched atop his nose – Onii-san’d cleared his schedule the Sunday before their first day of class with the explicit intention of getting him a haircut and hauling him to the optician’s – smiles wryly at him. Eijun considers telling him he’s a lot less adorable like this, but decides he’s mentioned it one too many times already. “I think you imagined that rule.”

Groaning in consternation, Eijun flops on the table, arms stretched out but strategically avoiding the printouts he’d just gone to retrieve – just skimming through the assignments he’s got scheduled
in a mere matter of *days* is making him seriously cross-examine himself on how badly, really, he wants this degree.

“Maybe I could run off,” Eijun mumbles, dreamily, “Live in the mountains. You don’t have to earn a living in the mountains, do you?”

“I’m not sure Miyuki-san’s going to appreciate you going Heidi on him,” Harucchi casually reminds him. They’ve all taken to doing this lately – name-dropping as though it’d get them leeway.

It usually does.

“Maybe he can come with me,” Eijun prattles off, stretching out his arms over his head – it feels harder to adjust back into the campus life he’d been so accustomed to for the best part of three years after just three months working. There’d been a regularity to that life – work was confined to work hours, and the leftovers were his own for the taking, to do what he wanted with them. Back here, with the prospect of back-to-back deadlines already looming over the horizon, he’s a bit crestfallen at how little time this leaves him for himself – and for Miyuki. For Kazuya. “He can cook, and I can – “

“Write poetry about the snow?” Harucchi suggests innocently, and gets pelted with the hard candy Eijun’d gotten from Mochi-senpai as some kind of brusque congratulations for scoring a job.

“I’m not that useless,” he scowls. As though to prove his point, he neatens up his pile of papers, searching in his bag for a folder to tuck them all into, “I fend for myself just fine when Mochi-senpai isn’t around, don’t I?”

Harucchi makes a noncommittal sound, intentionally baiting him, and Eijun knows this and winds up trying to kick him in the shins under the cafeteria table anyway.

“Is he packed?”

Eijun shrugs. “More or less,” he says, sipping at his green tea carton, “but he’s going to keep at it until he actually leaves.” For someone so deliberately cavalier about things, Mochi-senpai tends to get surprisingly nit-picky. “Speaking of Mochi-senpai though…”

“Yeah?” Harucchi’s unwrapping the candy he’d had chucked at him, popping it into his mouth. Eijun reaches for the paper, smoothing out the crinkles absentmindedly. “What is it?”

“Well…I was wondering. You know. About him and Onii-san.” Eijun sneaks a peek at Harucchi – it’s always awkward, bringing up his older brother’s relationship, especially when it happens to also be with Eijun’s flatmate, “About…I mean I know they’ve only been together a while,” A *little over four months* the voice in his head swiftly supplies, because they’d gotten together not long before Eijun and Miyuki, but this isn’t the sort of detail he can just blurt out, “But…I mean, Mochi-senpai’s not mentioned anything about leaving the flat…” he sees comprehension dawning on Harucchi’s face, somewhat glad in retrospect that his bangs have been trimmed because at least his expressions are easier to make out now, “and…I mean, I don’t really know if I ought to…offer to…?”

Harucchi peers thoughtfully at his juice bottle, turning it in his hands. “I don’t know if they have any plans for moving in together any time soon,” he says, blunt as ever – Eijun winces a bit at the straightforwardness, but he’s more grateful Harucchi’s not beating about the bush. It’s already a precarious topic to be discussing, considering… “but I don’t think Onii-san intends on leaving the flat.”
This doesn’t surprise Eijun at all. Onii-san’d fitted the place out, altering and renovating and redoing over the years since he’d moved in, and now the roomy little apartment he and Harucchi share bears all the personality of a long-time home. He doesn’t imagine Onii-san’d want to part with the place soon. But then –

“Maybe they’ll want to get a separate place, when they do,” Eijun muses out loud, “Mochi-senpai’d not really cared when he took our flat because he wasn’t going to be staying much there anyway, but – “

“But,” Harucchi continues, simply, “things have changed.”

Things have changed. The closer Mochi-senpai’s camp gets, the more Eijun tries to imagine himself in his shoes – he and Onii-san don’t get to spend all that much time together as it were, both with busy, hectic careers, and being away for that many weeks on end fills Eijun with a deep, morbid sorrow just trying to imagine it. Yeah, he understands this is part of the package deal professional athletes sign up for when they pick this route, and he gets that crisis consultancy is a round-the-clock job, but he understands better than all of that how deeply the two of them care about each other.

And yeah, maybe he’s projecting his desires on them, like he would with all the fictional couples he ships and likes to imagine in cloyingly sweet romantic scenarios, but he thinks the most painless way for them to actually be together is if they move in. At least they’d call the same place home.

Harucchi must catch on to how this troubles him, though, because he pokes Eijun’s arm with the cold, condensing end of his juice bottle. “I wouldn’t worry for the two of them,” he says, not unkindly, “they care enough about each other to work it out, and when the time comes, they will.”

***

Miyuki Kazuya said: wyd

You said: Getting ready for bed ^^

Miyuki Kazuya said: ohh actually

Miyuki Kazuya said: about that

Miyuki Kazuya said: can I ask you something

You said: ??

Miyuki Kazuya said: do you sleep in the nude

[You are typing]

[You are typing]

[You are typing]

You said: WHAT

Miyuki Kazuya said: is that a no

You said: YES

Miyuki Kazuya said: it's a yes? ‘;:D
You said: NO IT’S A NO

Miyuki Kazuya said: shame :

***

You said: Hey

You said: How do you order a drink if your bartender’s a bird

Miyuki Kazuya said: …what?

You said: Tequila, Mockingbird

You said: XD XD XD

Miyuki Kazuya said: that was AWFUL

You said: Aw really

You said: I thought it was pretty Wilde

Miyuki Kazuya said: X_X

You said: Don’t get Lear-y on me now

Miyuki Kazuya said: aren’t you supposed to be in class

Miyuki Kazuya said: concentrate

You said: Hey I’ll have you know

You said: My lecturers have Great Expectations of me

You said: You’re making Much Ado About Nothing

Miyuki Kazuya said: -_- 

You said: XD XD

***

It’s a summery sort of day even though it’s the middle of October, not the kind where it feels like the higher-ups of the universe have clapped a gigantic transparent lid over the world and everyone’s slowly stewing in the heat. There’s a hint of a breeze, just enough to pass for decent ventilation, and Eijun supposes it’s to be expected that leaving windows ajar for any prolonged period of time in this kind of weather’s like an open invitation to the bugs either preparing a mass exodus as the winds shift toward winter, or die out before the snow.

What isn’t expected is Miyuki’s reaction to them.

“You know you’re gonna end up suffocating yourself at this rate?” Eijun inquires, somewhere between stunned and amused – he’s speaking a little nasally, since he’s got his nose pinched between thumb and forefinger. The fumes of the insecticide Miyuki’s been liberally spraying since the sighting of a cockroach scurrying in under the couch still makes his eyes water though.

Miyuki, on all fours with the neckline of his sweater hefted up above his nose, looks up at him with
something close to actual helpless desperation behind his glasses. There’s a sheen of sweat shining on his forehead, even though it really isn’t all that warm today, and given the careful distance he’s placed between himself and the crime scene, crouching with spray can at the ready, it’s all Eijun can do to not laugh at him.

Or, like, take pictures.

Neither of those possibilities come to fruition, though, because their elusive little target, belonging as it does to the universe’s most resilient and unbelievably infuriating species, scuttles out from under the armchair closest to Miyuki, who springs away with the tightly coiled agility of a panicking cat, and apparently he’s forgotten about his spray can and its intended purpose in his haste to get away, because he all but lunges to the other side with a yell while Eijun grabs an old newspaper from the stack under the coffee table and rolls it up.

A few sharp whacks later, there’s a corpse on the floor, and Eijun calmly requesting a dust-pan.

“You didn’t have to...squish...it,” Miyuki tells him – he’s actually a bit ashen, avoiding looking at the remains of the tiny little thing which’d completely undone all the composure Eijun knows him to possess in seconds.

“He walked into my newspaper,” Eijun says innocently; on the inside, he’s waging a colossal battle of self-control to not just burst out laughing, struggles not to sing the line when he says “he had it coming.”

He does let out an inaudible wheeze when Miyuki warily crosses over to the windows to air out the room with all the reluctance of a warden unlocking the high-security prison cells of notorious mass murderers. “I don’t know how creatures with self-preservation instincts that horrible are supposed to survive the nuclear fallout. Why do they go toward the thing trying to kill them?!”

“They’re built to adapt,” Eijun says; he’s tactfully body-bagged his kill in a makeshift paper coffin, and makes his way toward the bathroom – he doesn’t think Miyuki’d much appreciate a dead cockroach disposed of in his kitchen, even though it’d technically be inside a trashcan.

“I don’t know why,” Miyuki grumbles, following him – he’s actually scowling and Eijun bites the inside of his cheek, since it’s usually him getting in unreasonable sulky fits, and the irony of the situation is kind of adorable, “they would even need to exist. Why any bug needs to exist.”

“They’re part of the ecosystem and the animal kingdom would collapse without them?”

“Well, the animal kingdom ought to just keep themselves in the jungle,” Miyuki mumbles, and then, a little sharply to Eijun, “You’re gonna wash your hands right?”

This time Eijun does laugh. “It was just one measly cockroach,” he ribs, grinning at Miyuki’s reflection against the bathroom mirror as he works up a decent amount of suds, if only to show Miyuki that he’s thoroughly disinfecting himself even though he’d avoided touching the thing, “Try living in the countryside, the place is crawling with them. And I’ll have you know, our bugs are tougher than Tokyo critters.”

“Why do you actually sound proud of that?” Miyuki’s incredulous, if not a little horrified, and Eijun can’t help giggling – he may have exaggerated a bit, but he’d also spent a huge part of his childhood catching beetles and adopting spiders he’d invariably name Charlotte or Arachne, so maybe he’s not exactly an objective source on this.

“They’re not all bad is what I’m saying,” Eijun contends, and he chortles when Miyuki just stares.
at him, arms crossed, frown unconvinced, “Honestly, how are you going to survive Nagano like this?”

He says it without thinking, really – says it without any actual intention to preamble or segue into something more pertinent, but as he’s shaking off the water from his now squeaky clean hands, Miyuki comes up behind him and his arm comes into view, looping round him with a small towel, and as Eijun takes it and dries up, Miyuki says, resting his chin on Eijun’s shoulder, “I’m just going to have to count on you to protect me.”

And it’s the stupidest thing, really, how happy this tiny little window of possibility makes Eijun.

But that’s a long way coming, Eijun thinks, considering this is still only his first ever time staying over at Miyuki’s.

Chapter End Notes

okay. phew. okay. to everyone waiting for more fleshing out and development of Miyuki, I promise it's gonna start in earnest from this point onward. and if there's anything that feels is missing in this chapter, I do plan on addressing some gaps in the next update to paint a better picture so I really really hope it's not gonna be too fragmented and confusing ;A;

if you're wondering about the timeline, the chapter spans from end of August/beginning of September to mid-October :)

References to:
- Heidi: novel by Johanna Spyri. It was also adapted into an anime a long time back and I loved watching it as a kid
- Tequila Mockingbird: To Kill a Mockingbird, by Harper Lee. This is a pun I received from my bff and was irrationally angry for 5 whole minutes
- Lear-y/Much Ado About Nothing: references to Shakespeare’s plays; Great Expectations, novel by Charles Dickers; Wilde: Oscar Wilde (FREAKING GENIUS PLAYWRIGHT). I'm guilty of using all of these horrible excuses for puns with my friends /\`
- Charlotte: from Charlotte's Web by E.B. White, feat best spider ever
- Arachne: tl;dr Greek mythology - she was a human who prided herself for her amazing embroidery skills and managed to piss off a goddess - I think it was Athena coz she's prone to getting pissed off - who, as punishment, turned her into a spider. Arachne got to keep her flair for embroidery, though, and that's how spider-webs came to be, where the word "arachnid" originates from, and also inspired the namesake villain in the manga/anime Soul Eater
- He walked into my newspaper/He had it coming: reference to Cell Block Tango. Check it out guys, it's catchy

ALRIGHT I HOPE YOU GUYS ENJOYED THIS AND THE SET-UPS WERE OKAY AND I'LL SEE YOU LOVELIES SOON! I hope you had an amazing Christmas and will have a wonderful New Year <3333
you know how movies consist of three ‘acts’? I think with this chapter, or the last one, this fic entered the third/final act or story-arc or whatever it's called. I'm estimating another few chappies but I'd like to end on either 20 or 25 coz it's all nice and rounded up but who knows, sometimes these things do whatever they want orz

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR YOUR LOVELY LOVELY FEEDBACK AND SUPPORT AND WISHES!!! I had an amazing break and part of it genuinely was because of all the love you guys sent this way - I cannot thank you enough ;A; I'm really sorry if I haven't been able to get back to anyone and I promise I'll get to it soon!! ILYSM!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You learn a lot about a person when you sleep and wake at the same place as them.

Things you don’t necessarily catch any other way. Things you might have never known – not realised you’d wanted to.

Tiny, little details, like the fact that Miyuki rinses his toothbrush after he’s squeezed toothpaste on to it, even though Eijun’s rinsed his before his whole life. Like the fact that the first thing Miyuki does when he wakes up is sleepy-stumble to the kitchen to put on a fresh pot of coffee. Like the fact that he’s terrible at waking up in the mornings and they’d both been startled awake by a series of extremely strident, suspenseful music which sounded like it’d been straight out of an 80s slasher film.

“Sorry about that,” is what Miyuki manages to croak, redder than Eijun ever recalls seeing him – they’re both sat up in bed, and Miyuki’s eyes look wide and panicked, his hair positively dishevelled, and Eijun dissolves into helpless sniggers first thing in the morning.

“How many alarms do you have on?” Eijun teasingly asks, trying not to grin, when they’ve gotten over that brief heart attack and made their way to the kitchen. Eijun’d adamantly quickmarched ahead to get to the cupboards and started setting the table before Miyuki could try to stop him. Miyuki grimaces.

“How do you like your eggs?” is what he says, dodging the question entirely – he’s got a warmed up frying pan on the stove in front of him, butter melting and scenting the air with its rich, luxurious aroma, and an egg at the ready in his hand, so Eijun deigns to let him get away with it.

“Sunny side up,” he says, then, as it occurs to him, “what about you?”

“I like mine thoroughly poached,” he glances back in time to see Eijun’s look of complete non-comprehension before asking, “What?”

“You don’t like the yolk runny?”

Miyuki pulls a face. “It’s messy.”
“But,” Eijun’s forgotten about the bread slices he’d been supposed to toast, his mind trying to wrap around this concept, “it’s yummy!”

Miyuki looks doubtful, and Eijun doesn’t understand how someone can not like sunny-side ups just because they’re a little difficult to eat. As if to prove his point, he takes particular care when Miyuki’s done with their eggs to indicate how much he’s savouring his meal, dipping his crisp toast into the gold, creamy yolk flecked with pepper and oregano, and finishing it up while it’s still piping hot so it doesn’t get all dried up and smelly.

And it must work to some extent, because Miyuki hovers in close to Eijun when he’s about to take his plates over to the sink, and he leans in, and –

Stops.

“I really wanna kiss you,” he says, “but you gotta brush your teeth first.”

***

The plan had been to start Game of Thrones – Mochi-senpai’d grumpily agreed to let him start the series with Miyuki rather than leave him waiting around, on condition that he watches the new season with him when it releases, and while Eijun suspects Miyuki’s going to contest this when the time actually comes, he grabs this temporary peace for what it’s worth.

But what they end up watching that late afternoon is The Sound of Music, because Miyuki’d retrieved the box of movie DVDs he keeps – which he’d categorically refused to make space for in his shelf of music CDs, on principle and Eijun suspects for aesthetic too, and Eijun’d lost his mind when he’d seen the twirly, slightly blurry image of Julie Andrews gracefully twirling framed by lush green and the blue-grey hills the film famously opens with in its first number. Miyuki’d tried to resist, but in the end Eijun’s pleading made him cave, and they – or at least Eijun – ended up singing along to Do Re Mi and My Favourite Things, and when Eijun’s leaving that evening, he does an improvised dance exit to So Long Farewell that leaves Miyuki in stitches.

***

Eijun considers his phone for a second before unlocking it, considers it a bit more before typing out the message he’s found himself typing almost every day since his last day at work.

“How you doing?”

Sure, it makes him sound a bit like Joey from Friends, but at least it doesn’t come with the cautious, somewhat formal cadence of a How are you. Just to spruce up the message a little bit, though, he adds a smiley.

He balances the phone on his lap, under the desk – he’s in a lecture, but at this point he feels some of the material they’re covering is repetitive. A lot of what they’re going through currently – bylines, slants, pros and cons of clickbait and the modern-day web-formats for news – is already something he’s encountered firsthand. All the copy-clearers and editors he’d worked with back during internship had found ways of teaching them these things through practical experience and Eijun finds that’d been more effective than trying to dredge through weeks of theory. At least this module’s exclusively assignment-based – he’s not going to be worse off for not paying attention.

The phone buzzes. “I’m fine” And then, “Don’t worry”.

Eijun replies, Hmm.
Phone buzzes again. “I’m hurt by your lack of trust :’(“

It’s a chore not to roll his eyes at an incorporeal Miyuki. Are you in class.

Miyuki said: I’m on campus…got a class in an hour

Miyuki said: Had one this morning

Miyuki said: At 5 a.m.

You said: WHAT??! X_X X_X X_X

Miyuki said: I know

Miyuki said: the cons of being a hospitality student

You said: What did you need to be up that early FOR

Miyuki said: We had a practice service today

Miyuki said: So had to prep the kitchen

Miyuki said: Stock-check ingredients

Miyuki said: Get briefed by Chef

Miyuki said: Get our shifts sorted

You said: You’re seriously amazing

Miyuki said: Well ~

You said: Don’t make me take it back

Miyuki said: Boooo

You said: But no wonder you need to be woken by Michael Myers’ theme music

Miyuki said: >( And here I was hoping you’d wanna spoil me to make me feel better

You said: I thought you could handle yourself?

Miyuki said: :( :( :'(

***

Despite Mochi-senpai having left for camp – after attempting to give him an extremely awkward lecture about consent which’d ended with No funky business anywhere I would have to go later! – Eijun’d only been able to spend one night at Miyuki’s, because his deadlines are already taking a toll on him and it makes no sense for him to stay over if he’s going to spend all day working. They’ve spent so much of their relationship making time for each other that the idea of just sharing time – just being in the same place while each did their own thing – feels a little bit alien to Eijun.

It’s not that the idea doesn’t appeal to him – he spends an insanely shameful amount of time daydreaming about banally mundane scenarios, just spending an afternoon in his most tattered pajamas reading in Miyuki’s living-room while he cooks, or plays one of his season-themed soundtracks, contributing little tidbits of trivia if Eijun mentions liking the tune of A Hazy Shade of
Winter or Sweater Weather or any of the other musical compositions he’d somehow overlooked in life.

Of course, he loves the time they spend doing things together – Eijun’d conked out in the middle of a conversation about how synth was definitely more sophisticated than dubstep and anachronistic anime like Samurai Champloo and Kabaneri of the Iron Fortress were just inexplicably really cool and it’d probably been the first time in ages Eijun’s fallen asleep without speed-reading one of his favourite books. But…spending an entire day at Miyuki’s had come with these brief, far-between, perhaps inconsequential pockets of vague anxiety, like he’s getting in the way, like maybe his presence there is making Miyuki want to accommodate him, do things unlike how he’d usually do them –

Like not playing music over his speakers when he goes to sleep, because way back when, in the early days of their courtship, Miyuki’d once shared he can’t sleep unless he’s got something acoustic playing in the background – and Eijun’d remembered that detail.

The part of him prone to giving himself a hernia psychoanalysing every tiny little thing’d rationalised, tenuous, that he can’t get himself worked up over an isolated incident – he and Miyuki’d laid side by side talking, after Miyuki’d graciously shuffled over to the side of the bed against the wall and held out his hand for Eijun, and it’d gone from being a nerve-wracking icebreaker to dispel the awkwardness of sharing a bed with your boyfriend for the first time to a genuinely intimate, engrossing discussion about anything, and everything, and nothing, and Eijun’d not even realised when he’d slipped under.

Still, though, when he’s managed to clear his schedule ahead in advance to squeeze in one more weekend at Miyuki’s, he breaches the thin veil of sleep where it’s like he’s just under the surface of water, not completely submerged, to find Miyuki by the bedside table, rummaging until he pulls out what are definitely thin, white wirey earphones. He waits until Miyuki’s crawled back into bed before shifting, looping over a startled Miyuki to reach for his iPod and pull out the earphone cord from its port.

“I wanna listen too,” he mumbles, and cuddles up to Miyuki, not giving him room to manoeuvre.

“Isn’t it going to disturb you, though?” Miyuki asks, after a beat.

Eijun honestly doesn’t know. He’s had a room to himself ever since his dad had decided it was time to teach him to be manly, and he’s never had to get into the habit of falling asleep to background noise.

Rather than going into any of this, he simply says, “I’ll get used to it.”

***

The next morning he wakes to Miyuki nuzzling his chin, dropping warm kisses against the underside of his jaw that feel like liquid heat, soaking into his skin and spreading like little fingers of electricity down his spine, and he lets out a sleepy, pleased hum, turning into Miyuki’s touches, who dips his head closer to his ear and whispers,

“Brush your teeth so I can kiss you.”

***

He goes home with the feel of Miyuki against him, his scent clinging to his hair and his skin and his clothes, and he’s almost loathe to wash it away when he starts thinking about a shower.
The next time he visits, just for a couple of hours, he finds one of those reading lamp-torch things which throw a focused orb of light in one direction fixed to the bedside table.

_For your bedtime reading._

“How’s training?”

“Brutal,” is Mochi-senpai’s immediate response – there used to be a time when he’d have responded to questions like this with almost heroic stoicism, whereas now, he just complains; Eijun prefers it this way. He tucks his phone between his ear and shoulder, multitasking as he unloads the laundry. Mochi-senpai’s been gone awhile, but he’s yet to get used to the halved volume of clothes he does every week. “It ain’t fun, jogging at the crack of dawn in the freezing cold.”

Mochi-senpai’s probably exaggerating – apart from the passing nippy, sharp breezes in early mornings and shimmering hints of mist before the sun comes out, there’s not much by way of cold to suggest winter is on the way. Eijun makes a sympathetic noise nonetheless.

“But I guess it helps build up endurance so the winter matches aren’t too terrible.”

“At this rate we’re gonna have to forfeit for frostbite,” Mochi-senpai grumps, and Eijun smiles a little, because –

“You’re homesick, aren’t you?”

There’s an intensely derisive scoff from the other end, almost sounding alarming in its aggression. “As if. At least I don’t have to babysit your butt all the time.”

“You don’t have to babysit me at all!”

“Sure I don’t. Have you got the futons out yet?”

“Yes,” Eijun declares, proud – Eijun’d enlisted Harucchi’s help one day after classes to get their thicker bedding down from the overhead storage cabinets; Harucchi’d held the ladder while sending terse warnings at the acrobatics Eijun’d done on the steps getting the gigantic plastic bags down, “and I aired them too!”

“Hmm.” Clearly disinclined to give Eijun some credit, he adds, “What about the curtains? Carpets?”

“Changed,” Eijun chirps – this one’s a half-truth, because the thought of those heavy, possibly dust-matted carpets had made his stomach turn a bit and he’d left that chore for another day. Mochi-senpai doesn’t have to know that though – he’s pretty sure he’ll have it all done by the time he comes home. Just to change the subject though, he cheekes, “Besides, it’s not _me_ I think you’re homesick for.”

There’s a pause, and another, gruffer, _Hmm_. Eijun doesn’t pay it much mind – of the two of them, Mochi-senpai’s the more reserved to openly broaching it. Even before he’d left, he’d kept uncharacteristically mum as Eijun’d pestered him to spill about how his dinner with Onii-san the night before had gone all the way out the door the morning he had left, partly because it’d been fun, partly to cover the swell of sadness he’d felt because he had known he would miss him a lot.
“You’re coming home before Christmas, right?”

“Yeah, I’m supposed to be back before then.”

“Yay!” Eijun sings – it’s a tad bit early, but if there’s one thing Eijun never procrastinates on it’s Christmas shopping. He’s spent a couple of his lesser engaging classes browsing online for what he’d like to get everyone, and he’s even got a slightly elaborate plan to deck their apartment up with a tree and a few stockings to surprise Mochi-senpai when he comes home, even though he wonders if this is going to surprise him at all after the consecutive times he’s pulled the same move –

But it’s not only Christmas that’s got him scavenging for presents.

Miyuki’s birthday is coming up soon.

***

It’s halfway through midterm week when Eijun receives a picture of what he instantly recognises as the carpet pattern of Miyuki’s living room.

There’s a baby cockroach on it. The caption reads, Missing you.

Eijun takes a selfie of him belligerently sticking his tongue out and sends it to Miyuki, and only realises the next time he sees him that he’d set it as his phone’s wallpaper and has to get creative with ways he can change it back without getting caught.

***

You learn a lot about a person when you sleep and wake in the same place as them.

Eijun learns that, fixation with oral hygiene aside, Miyuki’s a bit of a clean freak. Perhaps it’s a testament to how Miyuki’s grown comfortable enough with having Eijun in his living space, or maybe it’s because Eijun’d just not witnessed this before in the smaller stretches of time he’d spent in Miyuki’s apartment compared to now, but he gets into the whole cleaning business with so much single-minded determination Eijun thinks Miyuki forgets he’s even there at a point, even though he’d persuaded Miyuki to let him handle the hoovering, and it’s pretty difficult to ignore a hoover.

The only time he does glance up to look at Eijun, though, is when he’s cleaning his bookshelf – when Eijun’s hoover idles a bit, snagging on the edge of a carpet, when he’d been otherwise absorbed in trying to see how Miyuki handles the photoframes adorning the shelf’s surface.

He does glance up, then, and catches Eijun’s eye, and Eijun’s almost embarrassed enough to look away, and has to stoutly remindly himself that he’s not doing anything wrong to keep looking, watching – long enough for Miyuki to smile a wry, humourless smile, scrub the frames with his wipcloth in deft, mechanical motions and replace them, without fuss.

You learn a lot about a person when you sleep and wake in the same place as them, and Eijun’s started to adapt to these ticks, but that picture on the bookshelf, of a grizzlier, older, different person called Miyuki, is like a missing piece in a done-up puzzle, and it continues to elude him.

But he’s starting to picture what it looks like.

“It’s the first thing I ever learnt to make,” is what Miyuki’s telling Eijun, crouching in front of the fridge as he pulls out bell peppers and onions, scrutinises a bottle of teriyaki sauce to estimate how much there is inside.
Eijun, bending behind him, tries to mentally memorise the things he’s stacking on the counter, “When you were in boarding school?”

“Ah…no,” Miyuki hums, light – he straightens up, pushes the fridge door closed, “while I was still in middle-school.”

“You knew how to de-bone chicken in middle-school?!”

Miyuki laughs. “The cooking shows helped,” he supplies, as he runs a critical eye over his ingredients one last time – like everything else he does, Eijun’s realised, Miyuki is very thorough with his cooking. He never rushes, taking his time, planning ahead, turning possibilities over in his head, so when he acts, he’s sure of exactly what he’s going to do. “Plus, I kind of had to feed myself you know?”

This is somehow more information than Miyuki’s ever volunteered of his life pre-boarding-school, and Eijun’s a tad apprehensive. “Your dad…?”

“Working,” Miyuki says – not exactly shortly. Not with the same abrupt why he’d turned off every other time the topic had cropped up…likely because this time, he’d technically brought it up himself. “He was always working, those days.”

_Those days_, Eijun thinks, most likely meant that period after Miyuki’s mum had passed.

“You had to be really self-sufficient, huh,” he says, and it’s rhetorical, really, because it’s bled into everything Miyuki is, and it’s so clear to him now. He remembers how, earlier, when he’d first started getting to know him, he’d have these occasional pangs of envy at how put-together Miyuki is, compared to his perpetually anxious, bumbling self…when it only makes sense that he is, because he had to be. Circumstances had made him be.

Miyuki doesn’t say anything, but it’s not the usual way he gets withdrawn when they talk about this – or don’t talk about it. There’s no hardness to his expression, just a…a faraway look to his eyes, as he adjusts his veggies on the chopping board, like he’s not quite here anymore. It’s gone soon, though, because he grins up at Eijun in a blink and asks, “Ready?”

And Eijun nods, because this is okay – this is farther than they’ve gone before, and it’s as far as Miyuki’s prepared to go, and it’s enough. Eijun’s just grateful he’s been let in.

“You have to help me,” he warns, for the umpteenth time – the extent of his culinary capabilities covers a few basics, like measuring enough water into the rice-cooker and putting together those short-cut instant meals that come in boxes and are probably chock-full of unhealthy preservatives, and he needs Miyuki to lower his expectations as far down as possible if he’s going to make it through this, even though he’d been the one to request cooking lessons.

“That’s what I’m here for,” Miyuki trills, unleashing Max. Charm. Eijun, by now immune to it, just frowns at him.

“Right, let’s get started,” Miyuki holds out an apron, snatches it away when Eijun’s about to take it, swooping round instead with a toothy grin and helping him put it on.

“Thanks,” Eijun says drily, though he can’t help but smile a little at his antics. It still gets to him, how Miyuki can vacillate from being so earnest and sombre one moment to almost childishly playful the next.

Miyuki’s pulling something out of his own apron pocket, and as he shakes it open Eijun realises it’s a woolly beanie. Catching Eijun’s quizzical stare, Miyuki offers, “It’s to hold my hair back. It
gets annoying if it’s in the way…plus unhygienic.”

“Oh.” Eijun takes a moment to stare on, trying to be discreet – he’s never seen Miyuki with a beanie before, but it kind of suits him, “Wait, I should…” He reaches up to thumb at his own bangs, the tendrils reaching below his eyebrows. But he’d not brought any appropriate headgear, and Miyuki must see the comundrum, because he holds up a finger with a Hang on, and hurries to his bedroom. He returns a moment later with what looks like those oblong clips hairdressers use to hold locks in place as they style it, and before Eijun can say or do anything, Miyuki’s combing through Eijun’s bangs with his fingers, brushing them back before he clips them in place.

Which might still have been fine, if he doesn’t then proceed to study Eijun as though he’s just discovered something interesting.

“What,” Eijun brusques – it still makes him jittery, being watched like that.

“No, it just…” Miyuki shakes his head. “It brings out your eyes.”

Eijun, unsure what to do with this information or with the straightforward honesty with which it’d been delivered, hustles Miyuki back to the counter. “We need to get started if we’re ever going to get this done by lunch-time.”

***

There are other things Eijun learns he’d been slightly off about.

He’d assumed that Miyuki, perhaps, was a bit territorial about his life – a person who was protective of his privacy and personal domain and wasn’t willing to compromise on it.

While this is true, Eijun starts to feel his assumption that Miyuki prefers being alone might be wrong.

It’s not just the constant texting when they’re not together, the initiative he takes to set dates and check if Eijun’d be free to come over or meet somewhere – although there is that. It’s not even the moments of possessiveness, or the slight clinginess Eijun’s started to notice, whenever he’s waffling over whether he ought to leave early or whether he ought to bring his work over to Miyuki’s and just do it from there.

Watching Miyuki and Onii-san deeply immersed in a rousing debate about the ethics of representing a client clearly in the wrong, Eijun thinks Miyuki actually likes company. He’s never turned down any of the invitations extended by either himself or the rest of the crew when they try to have a get-together, and here he is again, this time in Onii-san and Harucchi’s flat, over for another potluck. Eijun wonders if he’d fancied the way Miyuki’d brightened up at the prospect, when he had first asked him about it – whether the “domestic life” as Wakana keeps calling it has just added rainbow-filters to his perspective.

He thinks he’d not been wrong. Miyuki does like company – except he’s very selective of who he lets in.

“What?” Miyuki’s raising a questioning eyebrow in his direction, and Eijun realises he’d been zoning out.

“Ah, no, I was just,” he shakes his head, “I was thinking it’s weird not having Mochi-senpai here too.”

Harucchi makes a soft concurring sound, and Miyuki hums, “Though I don’t entirely miss being
glared at all the time…” Eijun obliges by full-on glowering, and Miyuki holds his hands up in surrender.

Checking the time, Eijun brightens. “Actually… I think he might be free. Should we video-call him?”

It’s Onii-san who speaks up. “Won’t he have practice?”

It takes Eijun aback, and it probably shows on his face. “It’s the weekend and after their scheduled training hours,” he says, bemused, because it’s not like Onii-san to forget details like this, “I think he’ll be free.”

“Ah.” A spark of disquiet flickers in Eijun’s head. “I see.”

“Hasn’t he told you about his schedule?”

“Well,” it’s Onii-san’s normal sing-song, pleasantly unreadable, “the last time I spoke to him we were a bit preoccupied by other subjects.”

“Oh…”

“Perhaps we ought to let him rest,” Onii-san continues, smiling his Guy Fawkes smile, “it must have been a tough week.”

He finishes with the tone of one done with the conversation, and resumes what he’d been saying to Miyuki, and Eijun doesn’t know what it is – whether it’s anything at all, because he can’t put his finger on it – but it leaves him troubled.

Chapter End Notes

please excuse spelling and grammar errors! as always, I'm gonna go over and fix stuff as I find em (y)

References to:
- The Sound of Music: I watched the heck out of this movie as a kid and there are an embarrassing number of recordings of me pretending to be Maria OTL
- A Hazy Shade of Winter: by Simon & Garfunkel/The Bangles. Worth the listen!
- Sweater Weather: by the Neighbourhood
- Samurai Champloo: guys. Hip-hop and katana-fighting. Need I say more?
- Kabaneri of the Iron Fortress: got too busy to finish this at one point but I loved the whole steampunk-meets-feudal-Japan thing. Having watched Train to Busan though I wonder if this'll hold up to my zombie-train expectations ;A;

...also i'm sorry about the cliffhanger don't hate me...
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

chapter disclaimer: drama

This fic's always trying to go in the opposite direction to what I plan and I bet you guys are getting tired of me saying idk what I'm doing with each update orz It's just that...a lot of set-ups from previous chapters has been building up to the events of this chapter, and I've been trying to think of ways to make it better for two days now and don't know how, and I'm really not sure if the transition has been smooth so I'm just gonna pray that you guys like it and hope for the best //oshi

Also, I'm really, really, really sorry I've not been able to reply to comments the past couple of days - I'm still at my parents', with terrible internet most of the time, and I've tried to be diligent about replying but I really hope you guys will bear with me as I catch up! I'm so sorry for being so dreadful these past couple of days ;A; I've been reading all your lovely feedback and I can't tell you how much it means to me!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Are you fighting with Mochi-senpai?”

Onii-san’s eyes actually widen a fraction, and Eijun thinks he can be forgiven for his brashness. It’s not just a case of being close enough to Onii-san to not have any qualms being completely frank with him – with this guy, Eijun’s learnt that the direct approach is usually the most effective.

Onii-san being Onii-san tries to field the question regardless. “What makes you ask that?”

It gives Eijun pause, because honestly, he doesn’t know. He doesn’t have anything concrete – just a vague sense of something not quite right, and it sets his teeth on edge. He decides to be honest. “A hunch.”

“Ah,” Onii-san averts eyes – he’d been packing away the leftovers and Eijun’d left Harucchi to keep Miyuki company under the guise of going to help him.

He doesn’t plan to answer, and Eijun can tell, and he doesn’t know quite how to interpret it.

“Well…are you?”

The older Kominato says nothing for a while – he preoccupies himself with methodically sealing his Tupperware and making sure not a scrap is wasted. A lot like Miyuki, is the passing thought that crosses Eijun’s mind.

The silence is more telling than a plain denial could be.

“You don’t have to worry, Eijun,” he says, finally, possibly caving under the intense, stubborn focus of a boy who’s clearly determined to not budge until he gets answers – experience has taught them both that Eijun can be surprisingly tenacious when he wants something and Onii-san’d rather not test it, “we…disagree on things all the time.”
But you never let on, Eijun wants tell him – to accuse, to point out. Like the first time Miyuki’d come over to Eijun’s place, and Eijun’d not even have known Mochi-senpai had argued with Onii-san until Onii-san had admitted it to him. You’re the one who’s always in control.

Tonight, Onii-san is affected though – tonight he’s avoiding the topic altogether, and maybe it means Mochi-senpai’s finally levelled the playing field and gotten under his skin, or…

“Is it…serious?” Eijun asks, choosing his words carefully. Onii-san can get surprisingly defensive when he feels he’s being read easily – he clams up, his façade impenetrable, and it’s even less malleable then than he is on a regular basis.

Onii-san lets out a soft, surprised laugh, and Eijun’s a little relieved. “Don’t worry,” he says again, this time with a wider, more reassuring smile, “I told you right? Couples fight.”

And that’s that, Eijun thinks, because there’s only so far he can pry into the business of others, and he feels any farther would be rude.

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It doesn’t stop niggling at him, though.

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“As much as I would love the bragging rights of being better at the relationship thing than Tsundere Senpai,” is what Miyuki’s drawling as they take a joint train-ride on the way back – Miyuki’s staying over at his tonight, and it’s saying something that Eijun’s more absorbed balefully glaring at Miyuki’s cheek than mentally running over how he’d left the flat and if it’s presentable, “I think it’s understandable if they’re testy with each other.”

“Yeah…”

“I mean, they’ve not managed to meet for weeks and they probably don’t get to talk much.”

“Yeah…”

“And I suppose it’s natural if one of them is cranky or something because they’re busy, or tired – “

“Or because they miss each other.”

“Or because they miss each other,” Miyuki echoes, twining his and Eijun’s fingers together, “But you said it yourself right? They know each other and they respect each other and even if they fight, they’ll be able to work it out.”

“Yes,” Eijun says, and he’s aware that his agreement is brimming with palpable doubt – doubt which Miyuki evidently cottons on to, because he prompts,

“But?”

“But…” Eijun struggles. He’s not entirely certain what is worrying him – maybe it’s nothing, and maybe it’s the inability to tell making him anxious, but his sixth sense is insistent; it’s on edge, uneasy, and Eijun just wants to understand why. “It’s just that…they’re both really stubborn. Like, Mochi-senpai’s kind of closed-off, sure, and Onii-san usually knows exactly how to get through to him, it’s why they work, but…”

He trails off, unsure if this is the train of thought he ought to be following, if there’s another
passing him by that he can’t see. Miyuki says nothing – he rubs his thumb over the back of Eijun’s hand, waiting for him.

“But Onii-san can be really stubborn too,” Eijun says, finally, and a tug in his gut signals that this is at least part of the concept largely eluding him right now – part of the whole idea that’s making him fret, “and he’s…he’s unyielding when he is. Sometimes he just…shuts off.” And today had been one of those times. Eijun can just tell. Onii-san’s secretive, but he’s not exactly cagey – instead of laying the cards on the table he prefers to hide them in plain sight, and enjoys watching you blundering round trying to find them.

Today he’d picked up the cards and locked them away and maybe it had been nothing, and maybe Eijun’s overthinking again, but he can say that it’d been uncharacteristic.

“Should I message Mochi-senpai?” he ruminates, agitated – he’s asking their train compartment as much as Miyuki, as much as himself.

“Eijun,” Miyuki’s tone is softly accusatory, but without sting.

“What if – “

“Eijun.”

“Right, right, I know,” Eijun rubs the heel of his palm at his eyes, “I’m making mountains out of molehills.”

“It’s probably nothing,” Miyuki says, soothing – Eijun leans into his side as he untangles their fingers so he can wrap an arm around Eijun’s shoulders instead, “and even if it is, they can probably work it out. It might even be a good thing if Ryou-san is the one getting mad for a change.”

“Yeah,” Eijun says, with marginally more confidence than he has been so far – it’s supposed to be healthy, right? Not the fighting but the being able to resolve it. That’s what Onii-san’d said. That’s what all the TED talks about preserving long-term relationships Eijun’s taken to watching say.

And hearing Miyuki attest to it too assuages the amorphous dread that prickles at the back of his head… and not at the possibility of just Mochi-senpai and Onii-san fighting.

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You said: I just realised I accidentally brought your hairclip home

Miyuki Kazuya said: it’s okayyy

Miyuki Kazuya said: Keep it

You said: noooo I’ll give it back next time

Miyuki Kazuya said: No seriously

Miyuki Kazuya said: I mean it

Miyuki Kazuya said: you’re gonna need it when you’re cooking at home anyway

Miyuki Kazuya said: plus it suits you <3

You said: If you say so
Miyuki Kazuya said: I do say so

Miyuki Kazuya said: Just to affirm tho

Miyuki Kazuya said: maybe you can take some pictures?

Miyuki Kazuya said: so I can confirm?

Eijun, bangs clipped back with the alligator separator he’d somehow pocketed the weekend he’d spent cooking teriyaki one-pot with Miyuki, considers letting him know that he’d instinctively latched it to his hair the minute he’d found it while clearing his pockets before doing laundry. It’s pretty handy, keeping his fringe out of his eyes when he’s doing things that require both his hands and ample concentration –

Like wrapping presents.

So he Googles the How bout no bear and attaches the picture to his chat with Miyuki, before switching back to his seventh YouTube video on gift-wrapping for simpletons and fourth roll of paper.

He only remembers he has the thing on when he staggers into the washroom, sleepy-drunk, to brush his teeth and catches his reflection, and his bangs stick up every which way by the time he pulls it out.

***

It takes a lot of time-table wrangling, more greymatter burned than when he has to conduct mental math, trying to complement their schedules – especially Miyuki’s, since all his classes are practicals, and linear, and can’t be skipped – and in the end Eijun ends up on Miyuki’s doorstep the night before his birthday, because the actual date happens to be crammed full of classes starting early morning for the both of them.

“Are cabs even safe this late,” Miyuki is saying, clearly finding this more pressing a matter to discuss than the hand Eijun has clapped over his eyes as he commandeers him round his own living-room.

“Is that even what we’re supposed to be talking about right now,” Eijun scolds – he steals a glance at the wall-clock; they’re a little shy of five minutes to midnight.

“You could have just slept over tonight – “

“It’d just have been more hectic if both of us are scrambling to get out in the morning,” Eijun repeats the same counter-argument he’s been making in the two days leading up to this moment – they’ve been at a deadlock, but Eijun, being as wilful and bullheaded as his mother, who’d wheedled all the details of exactly what he’d gotten for Miyuki out of him and negotiated pictures, had gone through with the plan he thought most feasible, “We’re supposed to be celebrating.”

“We could celebrate tomorrow,” there’s no fight to it, at this point – Eijun knows he’s just going through the motions, now, because as concerned as he might be for Eijun’s ability to traverse back home in the wee hours of the morning – and maybe a little frustrated at how stubborn he’s capable of being – he can’t exactly change the fact that Eijun’s already here.

“Not enough time tomorrow,” Eijun tells him, evenly, and then, with another look at the clock, “And I want to be the first to wish you. Okay. Now.”
He moves his hand away from Miyuki’s eyes – his shoulder’s a bit stiff, because Miyuki is taller and he’d had to reach a bit to keep Miyuki’s sight blocked – and takes a step back, the nerves jamming in his bones at the same time as he whispers, “Happy birthday.”

There’s cake, because of course, and it’s a coffee tiramisu one, because coffee. And tiramisu. There’s a single candle, striped red and white, a wax candy cane because the shops are in the seasonal spirit already and it’s petite and charming and Eijun’d had to borrow Miyuki’s stovelighter for it after locking him in his bedroom. Beside it is the gift-box, meticulously wrapped, the surfaces smooth and reflecting the candle’s flickering flame, edges crisp, because Eijun’d not been content until it was perfect, and he has an absent though that it’s ironic, really, because the last time he’d been gift-shopping, that time for Onii-san, he’d needed Miyuki to wrap the present for him.

“Eijun – “

“Open it,” it comes ragged and high-pitched, and it’s stupid that he’s getting apprehensive about this now, all the cocksure poise with which he’d bulldozed all of Miyuki’s reservations earlier withered to nothing – there are butterflies in his tummy, and a part of him wants to run out of the room because he can’t stand the suspense, “The box.”

Miyuki obeys, and Eijun thinks it’s because he’s probably as overwhelmed as Eijun – he’d watched the surprise register in his face, watched the colour rise and stain his skin, seen the edges of his lip shift, like he doesn’t know if he’s supposed to gape or smile, doesn’t know which he wants to.

There’s an interlude, where Miyuki’s turning the package over in his hands trying to locate the flaps Eijun’d taped down so neatly they’re seamless, and Eijun loses his patience and yanks it out of his hands to unceremoniously rip off his handiwork, ignoring Miyuki’s protests and chiding.

And then, there’s Miyuki, eyes widening as he takes in the envelope inside first, eyes catching on the logo stamped in the corner.

“Are these – “

“Tickets,” Eijun’s throat is arid – he should have had a drink before all his orchestrations, “I… picked performances during the Christmas break because I know you’ll be free then.”

Miyuki’s examining the contents of the envelope, his expression stuck. Stunned.

“Brahms, Wagner and Stravinsky,” he breathes, reading off the tickets, and Eijun nods, jerky, even though Miyuki isn’t looking.

“I know you have their music,” he offers, lamely – he’d double-checked just to make sure during one of his previous visits, and even tried watching videos of orchestra performances of their pieces to try and get an idea of what the actual thing would involve; he’d not outright tried to ask Miyuki how they rank in his preferences of classical musicians because that would’ve been a bit too obtrusive, “Um. It’s at one of the bigger concert halls, with the…you know.” Or at least he hopes Miyuki knows, because Eijun’s out of his depth here.

Miyuki finally looks up at him. “Eijun…I – I don’t know what to say.”

Eijun lets out a giggle. A nervous, uncertain giggle. “You could tell me if you like it?”

“Like it?” Miyuki repeats, as though that’s the most absurd coinage of words to ever exist – he shakes his head, the high-points of his cheeks crimson; when he looks at Eijun, his eyes are bright, “I’ve wanted to go to an actual real-life symphony orchestra show all my life and you – “ He cuts himself off, sounding like the next couple of words have snagged his windpipe, and Eijun –
Eijun can’t help it. Eijun grins, relief bleeding into it, happy and fulfilled and almost a little giddy, and he nudges the box toward Miyuki again. “There’s more.”

Miyuki takes a second to give Eijun a questioning look before reaching for the rest of the contents in the box.

“It’s…uh,” Eijun’s a bit hot and a bit cold at the same time, and somehow this is makes him balk even more than the tickets – Miyuki’s flipping the CD case, blank and featureless, over to check the hand-written list at the back, and Eijun can see him figuring out what it is but can’t stop himself from stuttering the explanation, “I noticed you don’t have any soundtracks from like…movies or anime. So I…er. I put a few together for you.”

And by a few, he means fifty.

“There’s…um. There’s a lot of Zimmer. And Williams. I know you like them,” Eijun rambles, more to plug the silence where Miyuki’s apparently stuck skimming through the close-packed scribbles listed on a plain piece of white paper, tucked into the back of the plastic case, “I couldn’t find like…individual albums but I know you like having physical copies so…I mean if – ”

He’s cut off with a kiss.

When Miyuki pulls back, his breathing’s heavy, even though they’d merely brushed lips for a sparse handful of seconds, and his eyes are glowing, liqudy-dark. “Stay tonight? Please?”

They binge on cake and listen to the main themes of everything from Jurassic Park and Star Wars to Death Note and Durarara!!! and Miyuki absolutely refuses to let Eijun come with him when he jogs downstairs and down the street to buy him a toothbrush from the corner-store because If you do anything more I’m literally going to have to marry you right now, and Eijun doesn’t really put up that much of a fight because planning surprise birthdays is exhausting and he wonders how Mochi-senpai’d held up under the pressure. He hangs back, cleaning up, putting the leftover cake in a plastic box for the fridge and washing up their plates, gathering up the shredded wrapping paper and now empty gift-box to be dumped in the recycle bin, even though he gets a reproachful side-eye when Miyuki gets back, and they both go to bed way too keyed up with the sugar and the caffeine and the adrenaline and it’s going to be a nightmare getting up in the morning and making it in time to their respective classes, but Eijun can’t bring himself to mind.

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Miyuki Kazuya said: dinner with me tonight?

He’s got an evening class, and he’s going to have to rush home because he can’t show at Miyuki’s in the same clothes two days in a row if he agrees, and he’s tired, barely managing to string lucid sentences together because it’d taken him so long to sleep and he’d had so little of it when he had, and Harucchi’d actually recorded him out cold at their lunch-table in the cafeteria and shared it with Wakana and his phone has been incessantly pinging with coo-ey messages demanding deets Ei-chan! Deets!

He sends Miyuki an Okay

It’s still his birthday.

***

Train-rides are like intermissions in movies – you’re on pause here, moving but at the same time not really, because this is where you stretch your legs and rest your eyes and check your phone, go
grab a drink and spend a couple of minutes doing nothing, waiting for your routine to resume.

Eijun’s commute from college to his apartment is so habitual he doesn’t find himself peering out the windows to pick out landmarks, mapping them out in his head, despite the fact that if for some reason the train stopped and he’d be stranded he still wouldn’t know how to make his way home – he’s taken a seat close to the door, bag in his lap and arm clasped around it because you never know with the ambitious criminal activities of modern-day train robbers, the other hand scrolling through his phone. He’d be reading, most days – today he’s rolling his eyes at Wakana’s capacity to spam and thinking he’s not spoken to Mochi-senpai in a while.

He waits until he’s out of the station and in the streets before he makes his phone-call.

“Yo.”

“Hi, Senpai!” Eijun gushes – he sounds a little drunk. Side-effect of not sleeping enough.

“Sounds like someone had fun last night.”

“Someone had too much sugar before bed,” Eijun confesses, self-deprecating; he can picture Mochi-senpai shaking his head, exasperated at him, having witnessed firsthand Eijun’s horribly low threshold for handling sweets to the point he can identify the symptoms through a phone-call, “How are you?”

“Eh, alright. I’d say we’re more or less as prepared as we can be for the season.”

“Cool!” Eijun chirps; the wind’s definitely colder now, abrasive fingers of arctic chill scraping at his face and leaving any patch of uncovered skin numb. It’s bracing. “Is there anything you want me to stock up on before you get back?”

“Red Bull.”

Eijun laughs. “Anything else?”

“The protein bars, and Pocari. Oh, and I ordered a couple of games online, have they arrived yet?”

“Not yet. When did you order?”

“Yesterday. Should be there by tomorrow.”

“Okay! Message me the details and I’ll track it.”

“Right. And if you try to play them before you, prepare for death.”

“I won’t, what do you take me for?!?”

“And what about you?”

“What about me?”

“I hope you ain’t slacking on your studies because you’re too busy chitchatting with the boyfriend.”

“I am not,” Eijun denies, hotly – Mochi-senpai’s just teasing, but considering Eijun’s activities over the past two days, he might not actually be all that wrong; it hits too close to home, the amount of time he’d spent agonising over Miyuki’s birthday as opposed to, you know, working,
and Eijun, involuntarily, bristles, “What about you?”

“What about me?” there’s barely veiled menace in the question, Mochi-senpai all but daring Eijun to fill in the blanks, but since he’s not actually here and Eijun’s in no imminent danger of being roundhouse kicked, he says,

“I hope you’re not too busy chitchatting with Onii-san when you should be training.”

Triumphant, he thinks he’s actually rendered Mochi-senpai speechless. Touché.

Until Mochi-senpai says, “I’ve not been chitchatting with him that much.”

It takes a moment to sink in, and when it does it’s like the splash of a fist-sized rock hurled into a pool. Eijun demands, a bit shrill and panicky, “What?! Why?”

Mochi-senpai says nothing. Maybe he’d not meant to say anything at all.

But maybe…maybe he’d needed to say it – let it out.

“Mochi-senpai, why aren’t you talking to Onii-san?” Eijun persists – he’s stopped under an overhang, still a couple of blocks from their apartment complex, “Are you guys still fighting?”

This gets a response out of Mochi-senpai. “Still?” he blurts, as though it’d been punched out of him, “Did he talk to you about it?”

“He…” Eijun thinks about the weekend dinner he’d had at Onii-san’s. That’d been two days ago. “He just said that you guys disagree over things all the time and you’ll be okay.” He doesn’t add that he’d not been convinced.

There’s a pause. Then Mochi-senpai asks, “He said that?” and Eijun honestly doesn’t know if he sounds hopeful or miserable.

“Mochi-senpai…” Eijun’s head is swimming. Worry clenches his gut. “What happened? Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, everything is fine.”

Eijun can’t believe he expects to get away with such a blatant lie. “No, it obviously isn’t. What’s going on with you two? Why aren’t you talking?”

There’s shuffling on the other end, and the uneven sound of breathing. He finds himself praying, actually praying, for Mochi-senpai to have faith in him enough to confide in him.

“I think I pissed him off,” is what Mochi-senpai says, finally. He sounds resigned, defeated – and above all completely dejected. “And then…I got pissed off too. Because. Well. I don’t know WHY he got pissed.”

Eijun doesn’t breathe, doesn’t think – there’s more. “And then?”

“And then…well. I’ve not spoken to him since.”

Two days. Just the thought of it makes him feel uneasy. He tries to picture not speaking to Miyuki in two days, stewing in unresolved feelings and displaced anger. It hurts to even think of.

“Mochi-senpai…I don’t know who’s at fault here, but…please talk to him?”
He thinks Mochi-senpai doesn’t need much persuasion. He thinks Mochi-senpai’d been working himself up to it anyway. That’s just the type of person he is.

He’s startled when Mochi-senpai says, “…he could talk to me too, you know.”

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He begins without preamble. “Why are you mad at Mochi-senpai?!”

If Onii-san’d been planning to curtly dismiss him with a I’m busy right now, Eijun – it’s a weekday and Onii-san’s picky about leaving his phone free, preferring to message over taking calls – Eijun hopes this opener is enough to change his mind.

“What are you talking about?”

Eijun’s thought about this. He’s decided he’s going to go at it head-on. Maybe, with the extra buffer of a phone-call in between them negating any threat Onii-san might perceive as a vulnerability he’s compelled to defend, he’ll be willing to be more honest.

“I spoke to Mochi-senpai today, and he said he’s not been talking to you because he made you mad…and then you made him mad. What are you two doing?!”

He actually sounds angry. He doesn’t know if he’s supposed to be. He doesn’t even know if he has the right to be. He sounds like an angered fangirl frustrated at the stupid relationship-damaging antics of his unofficial OTP, except it’s worse, because Mochi-senpai and Onii-san are his real-life OTP and he’s been cheering them on for so long, he feels he has at least a little right to demand an explanation.

“Eijun, I told you – “

“Yes, I know. Couples fight. But you also told me that the fighting isn’t the important part, the communication is. You said you guys agreed to disagree. Then why aren’t you talking to each other right now?”

“…did Youichi say he wants to talk to me?”

Eijun sees what Onii-san’s trying to do. He doesn’t much appreciate it.

“Do you want to talk to him?”

Silence. It’s starting to test Eijun’s patience.

He doesn’t have much of it to begin with.

“Onii-san,” he changes track, breathes deep and tries to calm himself down – he’s funnelling all the earnestness he can into his words as he continues, “can you at least tell me why you’re fighting? What’s so serious that you guys won’t even speak to each other first?” He nibbles at his lip, torn up by dread and impatience and concern and indecision about how much right he has to be demanding these things, and says, “…I hate seeing you guys like this.”

It’s not emotional blackmail if I mean it, is how Eijun justifies this in his head, and stoutly reminds himself of all the times Onii-san’s used legitimate emotional blackmail to bend him to his will.

“He…Youichi, I mean,” he’s hesitant, unwilling – Eijun says nothing, biting at his lip as he waits.

“He asked me if we should think about moving in together.”
Oh.

“And I said no.”

Oh.

***

“I know it’s ironic for a culinary student to get take-out,” Miyuki smiles grimly, opening up cartons and dishing the contents into plates, “but…”

“It’s okay,” Eijun interrupts, “it’s been a busy day.”

Miyuki dips his head. “I’m sorry I had to rush us out so early – “ since Miyuki’s service prep classes start at ungodly hours, he’d had to leave early, and Eijun couldn’t exactly stay on so he cuts him off again.

“No, it’s okay. I needed to leave early anyway, I had just enough time to go home and grab my laptop and books and stuff.”

Miyuki still looks a bit dejected. “Maybe I shouldn’t have made you stay…”

“Kazuya,” by now Eijun’s perfected the pitch, tone and volume which, coupled with this name, can instantly disarm Miyuki – he uses it sparingly, because it’s embarrassing, but also because he doesn’t want it to outrun its effectiveness; it gets Miyuki’s attention immediately, and Eijun, preening inwardly at the power, continues, “It wasn’t the best planning, but it worked out, yeah? I got to wish you first and celebrate your birthday with you for the first time so…from my end, I’m happy.”

For someone who can be borderline shameless, Eijun thinks it’s kinda adorable that Miyuki gets flustered when it’s Eijun being unapologetically frank.

“From my end too,” is what he says, a few decibels quieter than his normal voice, and Eijun bites the inside of his cheek to hold back a smile, “I guess it’d have been easier if…”

Eijun’s already started on his food – since he’d napped his lunch-break away, and breakfast had consisted of a convenience store sandwich he’d made a pitstop for before his first class, he’s ravenous; he glances up quizzically, a noodle hanging out of his mouth. Miyuki barks a laugh.

“Eat first,” he says, almost fond, and Eijun doesn’t require any further encouragement.

It’s when they’re done with their meals, and Miyuki’s brewing some tea and digging through the fridge for the rest of his birthday cake for dessert, that Eijun wanders into Miyuki’s bedroom, not bothering to switch any lights on.

He checks his phone.

You have ONE (1) new message from “Mochi-senpai”

I TLD U NOT TO BUTTT IN

You have ONE (1) new message from “Harucchi”

I don’t know what you did but good job

You have ONE (1) new message from “Onii-san”
I spoke to him.

Eijun seats himself at the edge of the bed, careful not to mess up the duvet, and types back, *And?*

It takes a couple of seconds for Onii-san to reply. *We’re working it out.*

This is too diplomatic an answer to appease Eijun. *How?*

Onii-san’s online, he can see him online, but he’s not typing. He’s probably thinking of how to answer.

When Miyuki phone starts ringing, a tinny, default note surprising for someone with such particular tastes in music, Eijun almost jumps out of his skin.

He hears Miyuki call, “Get that for me?”

“Yeah,” Eijun yells back, hurriedly glancing at his screen as he fumbles to take Miyuki’s phone off its charger.

*Onii-san said: We’re talking it out amongst us*

*Onii-san said: And I AM thinking about it, if that makes you feel better*

It does. He pockets his phone and holds up Miyuki’s as he heads to the kitchen.

“It’s an unknown number,” he calls, bringing it over and glancing briefly at the flashing screen before he hands it to Miyuki.

Miyuki takes the phone from him.

Whatever respite Eijun’s been feeling is instantly replaced.


Miyuki stares at the number as though it’s the last thing he’d expected to see.

Shock.

“Miyuki…?” He doesn’t say anything, though his features go from stony to impassive. The ringing of the phone is shrill, grating on Eijun’s suddenly alerted nerves, and Eijun realises Miyuki’s waiting for it to stop, “Do you know who it is?”

Miyuki is toneless.

“It’s…my dad.”

There’s surprise, a lot of it and all at once, like he’s turned a corner and run straight into someone, so it takes Eijun a second to get his breath back and blurt, “Aren’t you going to answer?”

The phone stops blaring.

Miyuki doesn’t say anything.
Eijun looks at him. Studies him. His ears are ringing. “A—are you going to call him back?”

“Let’s not talk about – “

“Miyuki, he called you on your birthday. You should…you should call him back.”

“Eijun.” There’s a world of finality packed into those two syllables, and it’s so terse, so…blank, it agitates Eijun. He’s never heard Miyuki use a tone like this before.

“Miyuki, you – “

“I said no.”

He’s turned away. He’s turned his back to Eijun, facing the kitchen island, facing the unopened box of birthday cake. The knuckles of the hand clasping the phone are pale.

They’d been talking and laughing together just moments ago.

Eijun’s throat is afire and his eyes are stinging already and there’s a stupid, ridiculous, superfluous voice at the back of his head saying We’re fighting. This is a fight.

No, Eijun thinks. We’re not fighting. Not yet.

“Kazuya,” he ventures, trying not to sound timid, trying to sound authoritative, commanding – it kills him, that he can’t see Miyuki’s face, can’t tell if it’s working the way it always works, because this isn’t always, is it? This is brand new, and as much as Eijun’s thought about it, dreaded it, planned ahead for it and made himself promises, it’s terrifying. Like karma, with its sick sense of humour, has gone out of its way to show him that telling people how to handle their relationships, as he’d taken upon himself to all evening, is strikingly different from being in those same shoes. “I know that…I know this isn’t easy for you to talk about. It’s probably something you don’t want to talk about at all – “

“We shouldn’t talk about it then,” is what Miyuki says, low, and Eijun can’t place it, can’t place the emotion underscoring his words, “we can just pretend it didn’t – “

“Kazuya.” Miyuki stops speaking, and Eijun is tempted to touch him, make him move, make himself move so he can go round and stand in front of him; he wills himself to hold his ground. He can’t force Miyuki to see his point of view... but he desperately hopes he can persuade him to. This is what he’d been advocating, right? Communication. Compromise.

It scares him shitless.

“You…know his number even though it isn’t saved on your phone. You keep pictures of him in your house. You…you get upset whenever you talk about him because…because I think you’re not over whatever your relationship involves, even though…even though you think you’ve been on your own for so long.”

Miyuki says nothing. Miyuki doesn’t move. Eijun can’t see his face.

The foot or so between them feels like a chasm and Eijun feels as though he’s dredging it deeper.

It’d be easy to stop. It’d be easy to let go.

He thinks about Onii-san and Mochi-senpai. He thinks about how he’d badgered Onii-san until he’d told him why he’d said No.
"I'm…not ready."

He’d not been ready, and he had said no, and he’d not been able to answer Mochi-senpai when he’d asked the same question Eijun had – Why? He’d not been able to answer it, and he’d let Mochi-senpai come to his own conclusions because it’d been easier to just let it go.

It’d cost them two days. Two days of regretting things neither had ever meant to say, and two days of cowardice because they didn’t know how to take it back.

Eijun can’t let Miyuki do this.

“I know you…resent him. For not being there.” Eijun’s tongue, his throat, are scratchy; his mouth’s bitter, his nerves knotted up, “I can’t… pretend. I know. What that’d felt like. I don’t know what either of you went through, I don’t know why he’s calling you or what he’s thinking but…Miyuki. It’s your birthday. And you said he doesn’t bother, but he did today.”

There’s minute movement from Miyuki. His shoulders are tense, but his hands are limp.

“He…called me,” Miyuki finally says, and his voice sounds gravelly, like it’s just come unstuck after being stuck awhile, “last year. Same day.”

Eijun can’t explain it, but it makes him incredibly sad. “And you didn’t pick up?”

“I didn’t pick up.”

“Why?”

Miyuki laughs. It’s a quiet, joyless sound.

“One phone-call a year,” he says, and there’s a jaunty edge to it, a parody of his habitual flippancy that’s so forced it makes Eijun fidget, “It’s too little too late, don’t you think?”

Eijun exhales. He thinks about touching Miyuki again. Laying a hand at the small of his back. Hugging him from behind.

“Maybe,” he says, quiet, “maybe it is. But…it’s your birthday, and he’s calling you. Again. Maybe it is too little too late, but he’s still trying. It’d be…it would be easier not to, y’know? And…I don’t know. I don’t know what happened between you, I don’t know what he did and what you did but…Kazuya…” he sees Miyuki’s right hand, the one holding the phone, twitch a little, and it occurs to him, out of the blue, anachronistic and anomalous and unexpected, that maybe the only other person who probably addresses Miyuki by his first name is his father, and it’s a weird but also somehow befitting that they have this link them while Eijun tries to speak for a man he’s never met, “I’m not saying I know why he’s calling, and I’m not saying you should reciprocate because of what he wants. I’m just saying…I’m just saying you need to speak to him. Or else you’ll just…you’ll just be left wondering what might have been different if you had.”

He stops. Says nothing more.

Miyuki doesn’t either.

The silence is loud and unbearable.

Eijun realises his eyes are wet. There’s a hollow in his heart, and it aches.

He’d been foolish, to think Onii-san’s a hypocrite for not following his own advice. Theory’s never
the same as practice.

Ideals are not the same as reality.

“Do you…” he shakes his head, as though he thinks he can shake off the tremble in his voice, and starts again, “do you want me to lea – “

“What if nothing changes?”

Eijun inhales, sharp. Miyuki’s head is inclined. His shoulders are sagging.

He’s not holding a grudge.

He’s afraid.

“It doesn’t make sense…Haruichi is still living with me, and it’s not like Youichi can be around much anyway…”

“Isn’t that WHY he wants to move in with you? So when he is around, you can be together?”

“It’s…a big step, Eijun. It’s not something I can decide on lightly.”

“…you’re not the only one deciding on it, Onii-san.”

“…Exactly.”

He’d not really got it then. It’d irked him. Irritated him. But he thinks he sees. He thinks he gets it, because Onii-san’s always been relied on. Onii-san’s always been the one calling the shots, the one in control, the one who’d bought himself his own fancy apartment after just a year working and got where he is on his own merit, the one his parents, his brother, Eijun, and possibly even his boyfriend are dependent on.

A lot like Miyuki.

A lot like Miyuki, who’s had to learn how to rely on himself for so long that the blind faith of relying on someone else, and just hoping that everything will work out, is terrifying.

“Then…it’ll hurt,” Eijun says. He takes a step, then another, and they feel longer and shorter than they are, “and it’ll be disappointing and it’ll take a long time to get over it, but…” Eijun outstretches his hand, and his heart does a crazy two-step when his fingers graze the back of Miyuki’s. Miyuki doesn’t move away, “but then at least you’ll know. You can move on. It’s just…” There’s a horde of angry bees buzzing in his stomach, and he thinks he might be sick, but he makes himself take Miyuki’s hand and distantly realises it’s cold, so he holds it tighter, “whatever you decide…I’m here. I’m with you.”

Chapter End Notes

imsonervous

maybe i should just stick to fluff yeh

references to:
-Hans Zimmer: award-winning composer for films like Inception, Interstellar, Batman v Superman (my current favourite, esp The Red Capes are Coming, Is She With You, and Beautiful Lie)

-John Williams: award-winning composer for films like Star Wars, Jurassic Park, Jaws, Harry Potter, Home Alone (idk if this is just me but the music for Star Wars and Jurassic Park makes me tear up, esp in the new movies)

-Durarara!!!: I have the whole soundtrack. The themes are crazy but also totally capture the essence of the anime

-Death Note: y'all know what this is //walks off to listen to L’s theme so I can feel smart

-Johannes Brahms, Richard Wagner, Igor Stravinsky: perks of having a best friend with a classical music degree? symphony orchestra shows. If you haven’t, I highly recommend making a night of it someday, it's MAGICAL. I recently went to a college orchestra performance and they played Guren no Yumiya and Reluctant Heroes from SnK and I cried the whole time
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

( )

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s like waiting for your results after an excruciating set of exams, or medical reports when you don’t have a clue what’s wrong with you – except worse. So much worse. You don’t know what the outcome is going to be, you don’t know how to prepare for it, and all you can do is try to stay afloat over the erratic eddies of anxiety bubbling through you and chipping away at your composure.

It’s too late to wonder whether he’d done the right thing, futile to try and wonder what might be happening in the room he’d ushered Miyuki into and closed the door behind him before either of them could change their minds, what might happen after he comes out of it, and Eijun tries, he really does, because no matter what he needs his wits around him…he’d told Miyuki he’d be there, beside him, and he’s determined to keep his word, except it’s not as easy as thinking, wishing, wanting, so Eijun wobbles to the kitchen, puts away the cake neither of them probably have the appetite for, salvages the tea Miyuki’s left on the stove and tries to funnel all his concentration into letting the leaves steep enough to strike that medley of strength and flavour, hunts for the heat-resistant mugs and faux-wood coasters to sieve them into for – whenever, some indefinite moment in the future Eijun has no grasp and control over, and it’s scary, it frightens him, so he treats the tea business like it’s brain surgery, even though it’s such a simple thing Miyuki’s walked him through dozens of times –

But that’s probably good, in a way, because when Miyuki emerges from his bedroom and Eijun’s just bringing over the mugs to the coffee-table in his living-room, it dispels the illusion that it’d been hours, as opposed to minutes.

Miyuki must notice the surprise on his face, because he lets out a dry chuckle. “I did actually call him, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

There’s no humour in it, not even the flippant sarcasm with which he’s learnt Miyuki softens his words when it comes to things he thinks are too harsh or too blunt, and Eijun’s heart sinks.

“That’s not…” he begins, but then stops, confused, conflicted, because he knows it’d not meant to be an accusation, but he doesn’t know what he’s supposed to do – they’re in discord, out of sync, and it leaves Eijun scrambling because he’s not used to this, they’d never been like this and it’s messing him up. “I… I just expected it to last longer.”

Miyuki shuffles to the couch, and it’s so telling because Miyuki never shuffles, and when he sits it’s like he’s tossing his weight toward it and letting gravity do the rest.

“Well,” he says, and he picks up one of the mugs Eijun’d so carefully filled with equal portions of black tea, and drains it in one swig, “my dad’s not exactly the heart-to-heart type.”

It guts Eijun – it guts him because he realises, in bitter hindsight, that he’d been hoping. He doesn’t know what for, doesn’t know what kind of miracle he’d imagined could happen and reverse years
and years of bottled grievance and anguish and resentment, doesn’t know why the disappointment he feels is so keen when he’d told Miyuki himself that if nothing changed, at least they’d know, and they’d deal with it, and he’s already feeling so crushed he can’t begin to fathom how Miyuki is feeling and –

“But I guess…neither am I.”

Eijun blinks, the lip he’d been chewing on and all but drawing blood from popping free from his teeth. From where he’s still standing, he can’t quite see Miyuki’s expression – he’s hunched over, elbows braced against his thighs, but Eijun can see his profile, and he sees the grimace, the downturn of his mouth, and Eijun makes himself move. He shifts over, lowers himself into the couch, then holds his breath and scooches nearer more boldly than he feels.

“What…what did he say?”

Miyuki doesn’t speak immediately. When he does, it comes at the cusp of an exhausted sigh. “He wished me ‘happy birthday’. He…asked me how classes were going.”

“Okay,” Eijun’s tone is gentle, receptive – he realises, distantly, that he sounds a lot like Wakana when she’s trying to ease him through something he finds hard to talk about.

“He asked if I have classes tomorrow,” Miyuki continues, in a monotone that isn’t really a monotone – there are slivers of emotion rippling right underneath, like dim lightning flashing in dense clouds, “And because I do, he said he won’t take any more of my time.”

“…oh.”

“And he hung up.”

Eijun inhales a little more sharply than intended. “Oh,” he says, again, lamely – his head swims at it, at…at the mediocrity of it, at the handful of questions and answers that were swapped like compassionate words between strangers, and it’s so anti-climatic he’s not sure if he’s more let down or frustrated or…

Relieved.

“Maybe…” he hears himself say, and immediately there’s that naggy little voice in his head, rebuking, warning that he’s doing it again, he’s getting ahead of himself, he’s getting lured in by blind baseless hope, “maybe that’s a good thing.”

He feels a heatwave blast through him the moment Miyuki’s head whips in his direction, and he cuts his own eyes away. “I…I mean. Maybe he…it was the first time he spoke to you in so long. Maybe he…” just wanted to hear your voice “didn’t want to spoil the first time he spoke to you in so long with…anything else.”

He winds down, meek, and abhors the fragmented silence that follows. It’s never quiet here, it’s impossible when you’re in a dense high-rise budget apartment complex in metropolitan Tokyo – the chink of keys as their owner jangles them from two floors up, a car revving in the neighbouring street, a door banging down the hall – it carries through the night, through the thin plaster walls, and it fractures the quiet between them.

“I don’t know,” is what Miyuki heaves, finally, shattering that thin veil of silence, and Eijun doesn’t know if this makes him feel better because Miyuki’s tone is so…so tired, so ragged, like he’s had the spirit wrung out of him and he can’t muster much else, and Eijun’s throat is working furiously to contain the guilt and the anguish quaking through him and making his sinuses prickle,
because no matter how he looks at it, he’s responsible for making Miyuki feel like this. He’d pushed him, he’d made him poke a sleepy bee-hive knowing full well that it might turn into an angry swarm which’d swoop back at them, retribution, karma, whatever the hell it is, and now Miyuki’s hurt and angry and disappointed.

But Eijun’d also promised to be on his side no matter what Miyuki decides, and even though the mere whisper of the notion that Miyuki might…might blame him for this, might resent him for putting him through it makes his heart smart – he’s determined to go through with it.

Very, very slowly, he lifts a hand that’s a lot more uncoordinated now than it was when he’d been fiddling around in Miyuki’s kitchen, and brushes just the tip of his fingers, timid, over the back of Miyuki’s hand.

He waits, a second, another, not breathing, not blinking.

Miyuki doesn’t pull away.

Eijun lays his hand over the back of Miyuki’s and inhales, deep.

“Let’s…let’s put that aside for a moment,” he says, and he’s trying to channel the sage, reliable wisdom with which Wakana or Onii-san always assuage his misgivings, not knowing if he’s even coming anywhere close, “How do…you feel?” He sees Miyuki’s eyes flicker toward him. “How did it feel talking to him?”

His fingers twitch over Miyuki’s hand, so Eijun secures them a bit more.

Miyuki stares at him, blank.

Feeling obtuse, feeling like an idiot, Eijun ploughs on, “I…I mean…when you called him, when you were talking him did you…did you feel angry at him?”

Something shifts behind Miyuki’s expression, something Eijun can’t quite place, but it distracts him from the gnawing tight tension behind his ribs.

When Miyuki answers, finally, he looks a bit bemused. “…no.”

Eijun’d not realised he’d been holding his breath until it swooshes out of him.

“O-okay. So if you didn’t feel angry…did you feel awkward? Did you feel…” a part of Eijun’s trying to hold him back but – “happy?”

He catches the set of Miyuki’s mouth and thinks he’s done it this time – thinks he’s finally over-reached, thinks he’s doing that thing he wound up doing with Onii-san and Mochi-senpai, trying to frame them in a picture where everything is perfect and every problem has a solution, and he doesn’t know what he should do, if he should backtrack, if he should keep trying, if he should excuse himself and leave before he does anymore damage –

“I think…it was a little awkward. He sounded…surprised. To hear from me.”

The wind sails out of Eijun again, leaving him lightheaded. “Oh,” he hears himself say, like a comma, punctuating a sentence, signalling a continuation.

“He sounded like he didn’t know what to say…”

“Oh.”
“But I…” the fingers sandwiched between Miyuki’s knee and Eijun’s hand splay a little bit, and Eijun, heart in his throat, diffidently, gingerly slides his fingers in between them. He eyes Miyuki – he doesn’t appear to mind. “I think I…did feel a little happy. That he called.”

Miyuki is avoiding eye-contact with him again, staring at edge of the coffee table, but Eijun can spy the conflict on his face – it takes precedence over Eijun’s.

“Then, I think,” he breathes, slowly, carefully – he shifts himself in a smidge closer, not sure if he’s trying to reassure Miyuki or seeking reassurance from him, “that’s what matters, isn’t it?”

Miyuki releases a huff of air out of his mouth, caught between emotions, like overlapping frames of film, a scene melting into another but frozen before it can, a jumbled mess of pieces from different pictures. When he speaks next, it’s more like he’s talking to himself than to Eijun, “For all I know, he only called for his own peace of mind. Just to check if I was okay so he could not bother checking up again for the next couple of years –“

“Mi – Kazuya,” Eijun stops him, as evenly as his vocal chords will let him be, “your dad, he…you said he’s not one for heart-to-hearts. But…has he ever…has he hurt you before? On purpose, I mean?”

It comes out a lot less eloquently than it’d been supposed to and Eijun wonders for the nth time how he’d allowed himself to believe he can work with words, but there it is, raw and bare-faced, and Eijun relinquishes Miyuki’s hand just long enough to loop his arm through Miyuki’s, curling around his forearm tentatively.

Miyuki transitions from looking bewildered, to blank, to…something else. “He wasn’t the one who disciplined me,” is what he ultimately says, face impassive, “he left that to my mum. He was never really around for that. Like…he’d play with me and sometimes we’d go out and I know he’d be happy –” Eijun’s eyes stray over to the bookshelf, to the pretty silver picture frame he’s covertly stolen glances at so many times before – the one where Miyuki’s dad is with his mum and he’s…beatific, he’s radiating bliss and joy and good spirit in it, “– but I don’t remember moments with just…the two of us. He was away a lot.”

Eijun breathes out. It’s like he’s been chipping away at a wall all this time, dredging into a chink he’s made, and the first glimmers of light from the other side had started to filter through – just enough for him to peek through, just enough to see, a little bit.

“Because of work?” he asks, holding his breath – he wonders whether he ought to preface this with some kind of disclaimer, let Miyuki know that he doesn’t have to talk about it if he doesn’t want to, doesn’t want him to feel as though he’s obligated to share things that pain him to remember; but then he remembers that that would make him a hypocrite, because this is exactly what he’d been yelling at Onii-san for, isn’t it? Onii-san had had his own baggage of convoluted emotions and inhibitions to sort through, but the problem hadn’t arisen because of it – the problem had been because he’d not wanted to let Mochi-senpai share it. He’d not let Mochi-senpai help him carry it.

Whatever Miyuki is going through, has been through – Eijun isn’t naïve enough to assume he can make it better, or fix it. Heck, he might make it worse, might already have considering the events that’ve transpired over the past couple of hours.

But that doesn’t change the fact that whatever is weighing Miyuki down, he wants to help him carry it – doesn’t want him to feel…lonely and isolated, forced to be strong because he has no other choice.

He wants Miyuki to put that faith in him knowing he’ll do his best to hold his end up, and so he
keeps mum, and lets Miyuki decide if he wants to tell him.

He does.

“Because of work,” he acquiesces, inclining his head just a little bit – there’s a distant look on his face, and while it’s not nostalgia, it’s not exactly distraught either; Eijun shifts their tangled arms until his hand is grazing the back of Miyuki’s, and his heart does a little jerky leap when Miyuki flips his hand to take Eijun’s this time, “We...my dad didn’t exactly have that great of a job when he married my mum. And then I came along soon after. He...worked very hard, a lot of overtime and stuff, to keep the household running.”

“Oh,” Eijun says, again, and it’s starting to sound repetitive now, placeholders where more sensible sentences and responses ought to be inserted in, but that’s all Eijun is capable of – the chink in the wall is getter wider, and Eijun’s view of the other side is clearer than it has ever been.

“And...well. Then my mum, she...she fell sick. I wasn’t sure what was happening, I was too young – I got shuttled around neighbours’ houses and my mum’s relatives but they wouldn’t exactly tell me what was happening. Especially...especially him.” There’s a tight, hard look in Miyuki’s face as he says this, his voice gravelly and a little rough, “He never sat me down, never told me what was happening. But I picked up things here and there, because adults think if you’re a kid you wouldn’t understand but you...you do.”

Eijun’s holding Miyuki’s hand in both of his right now. He’s holding for dear life.

“So one day I just came out and asked the aunt I was staying with at the time what was wrong with Mum and she...I forced her to tell me. She...she was dying.”

“Kazuya...” it’s wavery and helpless and a little broken and there’s an ache, keen and bone-deep, blooming in between his ribs and Eijun doesn’t know what to do about it. What to do about the almost gaunt shadow that’s fallen over Miyuki’s face. He knows, without asking, that this isn’t something Miyuki speaks about, has spoken about in the longest time, and it rends through him, a sorrow that bleeds.

“It wasn’t...exactly slow, but it didn’t happen suddenly, either,” Miyuki continues, staring into the middle distance again, “at a point my mum...she was pretty bad by then and...Dad finally took me to the hospital to see her...she talked to me about it. Told me what was happening and why I shouldn’t be sad when she’s gone and how she’s so happy she got to spend time with me...and so sorry she had to l-leave...”

“Oh, Kazuya...” Eijun’s shifted closer – shifted straight into his personal space, their upper arms pressed tight, his hands white-knuckled around Miyuki’s because he’s gripping it so hard he almost doesn’t realise Miyuki is gripping his back – he hunts for what to say, what to do to make it better, thoughts flatlining, emotions a mess –

But Miyuki doesn’t wait for him to respond. Miyuki keeps going. “She...she said a lot of things that helped me get through that time. A lot of things that made it just...just a little bit easier. She told me...I have Dad. And Dad has me. And we have to look after each other now.

“But...” Miyuki has to stop here, has to clear his throat, and Eijun, almost reflexively, reaches for the mug of now cold black tea sitting neglected on the table and brings it up to him – he doesn’t notice who’s cup he’s grabbed, and doesn’t care. Miyuki takes the proferred mug, but he doesn’t drink from it, “it’s like...when she...left...it’s like he didn’t know how to...how to be with me anymore. It’s...not like I reminded him of her, or he resented me or anything but more like...he spent so little time at home, but when he did Mum was there, and...I don’t know. It was like he
didn’t know how to get along with me, talk to me, without her cueing him. So he…didn’t.”

Eijun’s breathing is a shallow, erratic thing and he barely notices. “He…stopped talking to you?”

“Not…it wasn’t like, he wasn’t shunning me, he wasn’t giving me the silent treatment,” Miyuki shakes his head and it’s a little spastic, “more like…I think, he didn’t know how to talk to me anymore. I just know that – after that I just stopped seeing him be…happy.” Miyuki inhales, then inhales, deep and shaky, and exhales again. He looks so worn out, so very tired. He reaches forward to set down the mug he’d not yet drunk from. “And then after a while he went back to work, and my neighbours or my mum’s cousins would help look after me until I could get by by myself and it just…that just became normal. Even after I went to boarding school, or when I was getting my degree, he never…” Miyuki makes an agitated little noise, his free hand flying up a little, jerky.

Eijun sits there, letting it sink in. There’s no chink in the wall anymore – there’s no wall anymore, just Miyuki, with a part of him, old and rusty and bent out of shape, laid bare.

He lets impulse move him.

Miyuki starts when he gets to his feet, releasing the hand he’d been holding – his mouth actually drops open a little when Eijun crowds him in, and next thing they know, Eijun’s clambered, clumsy, into his lap, and he’s hugging him with everything he’s got.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers, in earnest, solemn and heartfelt and remorseful, tremulous syllables quavering with each twinge of his smarting heart, “I’m so, so sorry, Kazuya, I – “ Shit. His voice is too thick. Even though Eijun’s got his face hidden in the crook of his elbow, arms clinging around Miyuki’s neck, it’s painfully obvious that Eijun’s crying, and he hates himself for it. It’s not like he can change anything like this, he knows he can’t – but where he ought to be comforting, he’s the one who’d wound up needing to be comforted, Adam’s apple painfully thumping against his windpipe, taking away his air, choking him, and he can’t be weak right now, he can’t. “I wish…I wish you didn’t have to go through that alone.”

He feels hands coming up on either side of him, and then arms winding their way around him, holding him. Pulling him in.

“Mum told me…” Miyuki mumbles, into his shoulder – Eijun can feel the moist heat of his breath through the fabric of his shirt, against his skin, “she told me it was going to be hard. Everyone said…I mean, I knew. I knew he loved her, I knew that it completely broke him. I could see it. And maybe…maybe Mum was wrong. Maybe he didn’t need me to…maybe he could handle himself,” Eijun has the weirdest sense of déjà vu at these words, even as he’s giving everything he has into holding on to Miyuki, running tender hands through his hair, at the back of his neck, rubbing at his shoulder – right now, he can’t pin it down, “Or he just…needed time to himself, to cope, to heal, to – “ Miyuki takes in a great, shuddering breath, and Eijun feels it vibrate through him, shaking loose the tears he’d been just barely holding back. “But…I needed him. I needed him, and he wasn’t there.”

And there it is. The crux of everything, the heart of it all. Years of unsaid words and suppressed emotions, fermenting and brewing into something that wiped away rationality and left behind something raw and powerful and overwhelming. All of that, whittled down into an admission Eijun’d probably known, understood, in some nebulous part of himself submerged deep inside his subconscious.

Eijun takes a moment to get himself to rights, trying to be as surreptitious as he can as he scrubs at his eyes and the tip of his nose with his sleeve before he starts shifting again, rearranging himself.
so he can see Miyuki, look him in the eye – it takes a bit wriggling around, but he finally manages to situate himself sideways on Miyuki’s lap, his socked feet against the couch seat, his back against the armrest.

Miyuki says nothing, does nothing, just adjusts his hold on Eijun as he pulls off his manoeuvres, and looks a little confused.

When Eijun speaks, it comes out a tad bit too blunt. “Maybe that’s why he was calling you.”

He can’t tell if Miyuki gets his drift. His face is blank, apart from the creases and dips exhaustion and emotion can carve into you, against his forehead, around the edges of his eyes and his mouth. Eijun perseveres.

“Maybe…may be he…understands now. Maybe he’s sorry that he’d not been there for you. Maybe he…regrets it, Kazuya.”

Miyuki – no, no, come on – Kazuya’s head is resting against the side of Eijun’s collarbone. Eijun lifts his head up a bit, to give him space to tuck it in under his chin.

“I don’t know,” he says, hollow and toneless and just so…lost. Adrift in the ocean, with no bearing to guide him, “I…really don’t know.”

And Eijun can’t help but think that’s tragic, because Miyuki – because Kazuya – knows how to read people well, is almost uncannily accurate about them, but his own dad –

“He could have just not called,” Eijun reiterates what he’d said before, because he stands by it and he needs, he has to, alleviate the turmoil Miyuki’s feeling, “It would have been so much easier if he hadn’t. He could have not called last year, and not tried this year, and eventually…eventually maybe you would have been able to let go. But maybe the fact that he tried means…he can’t.”

Miyuki snorts a little, half-hearted, and it jostles Eijun a bit. He winds an arm around Miyuki’s neck to keep himself steady. “I don’t know how much of a difference that made.”

“I…imagine he’s scared,” Eijun breathes out; he nibbles at his lip, because he knows what that feeling is like, and it makes him feel a little contrite, a lot hypocritical, because he resents Miyuki’s father for not being there when he needed him the most, and settling for not being there when Miyuki started to take over his own life, but at the same time, in a guilt-stricken corner of his heart, he knows he can relate, “It…people…even people we look up to and respect, sometimes they tend to do…really stupid things.” He doesn’t know how else to put it, can almost picture the look on Onii-san’s face if he’d heard him say this with him explicitly in mind, “And then they don’t know how to fix it. Because they might end up making it worse or…just because it’s…frightening.”

But…if you find someone that’s worth it, you stick around

That’s what Onii-san’d said, the little push which’d given Eijun the courage to charge headlong into the unfamiliar and the unknown, the advice which now swirls around his head and sounds itself differently, more abstract than absolute, because it works differently for different people, doesn’t it? It’s easier and more difficult and daunting and defeating and emboldening and terrifying.

He’d listened to that advice – the advice that maybe Onii-san himself needed to be reminded of – and now he’s here, in a cloister of limbs belonging to the person he –

Loves.
It’s not as sudden or as groundbreaking as all his books and movies would have had him believe. It’s like a dew-drop, a bit of rain, rolling and dripping and flowing, a long-winded journey that no matter what would ultimately reach the sea, and it’s just a question of when, and not if.

But it sits inside of Eijun’s ribcage, sinks into his skin and his flesh and his bone and into his soul, and the rightness of it makes him a little light-headed.

The rightness of it makes it much easier to imagine what it would feel like to lose someone you cherished, with your entire being.

“I’m not saying that…the way he went about it was right,” Eijun finds himself saying, and his voice sounds like it’s from a great distance away, like there’s static in his ears and he can only faintly make out the words underneath, “of course it wasn’t. But…people don’t always act the way they should. People aren’t…can’t be – perfect. The world would be a much easier place to live in if they were. Life would be much easier to live. I…I’m not trying to condone his actions but…I think, maybe…if he’s trying to speak to you, trying to check up on you, it means he’s…he cares about you. And after everything that’s happened, maybe he…just doesn’t know what to do with it.”

They both fall silent after that, Eijun not knowing how else to verbalise what he’s thinking. Kazuya wrapped up in his own thoughts. Eijun doesn’t want to disturb him – it, this, none of it is going to be resolved in a day, in an evening, and there’s a wealth of things to mull over now, to mull over for a while, and as someone who has a tendency to overthink the tiniest things, he’s aware there’s no reprieve to be had, not immediately, but –

“So…what now?”

The question startles Eijun, tangled in between parallel dimensions of uncertainty. “Um…well. We don’t know if…if he’s going to call you again anytime soon, or,” he has to steel himself a bit to say the next part, “if you want to call him.” He can sense Kazuya looking up sharply at him at this, but he bumbles on, “But…there’s no point thinking about that now, is it? It’s your birthday, and he called you, and it made you happy, and I think that…that’s what matters. The rest…we’ll figure it out as it comes.”

He emphasises this part, the pronoun he’d deliberately chosen to use, with another little hug, letting Kazuya’s head fit into the curve of his nape, tousling his hair as he rests his jaw on Kazuya’s crown.

Kazuya pulls at him, fitting him more snugly into the crevices of himself, and Eijun, with a sigh, settles, feeling all the close-knit tension picking him apart slowly bleed out.

Eventually, Kazuya hems a bit. “Hey…Eijun. Do you…do you think you could stay tonight?”

It’s not the first time he’s made this request.

It’s the first time he’s made the request like this though, and Eijun’s mouth is already instinctively opening when Kazuya answers himself, a flush creeping up his neck. “Ah, no, sorry. That’s…I made you do that yesterday too and you have classes and – “

“Kazuya,” Eijun interrupts, mildly, “it’s okay.”

Kazuya’s eyes flick up at him, his head still tipped down.

“But you didn’t bring your stuff…you’d have to rush back early again tomorrow and – “

“Kazuya.” Eijun knows he’s right. Eijun knows he’s gone nearly forty-eight hours with very little
rest and his body is starting to catch on to the fatigue, his brain a tuning fork that keeps getting struck, reverberating with silent, contained tension. He knows the sensible, the practical thing to do would be to say no, because he does have classes again tomorrow and he’d have to do double-time trying to make space for everything if he stays over, and he knows that Kazuya won’t begrudge him if he does.

But this is also the first time Kazuya is asking to depend on him, and Eijun values this far too much to refuse him.

So he leans over into him, presses his lips in a chaste kiss against his cheek and hums, “It’s still your birthday – so you get a free pass to ask for anything you like.”

Kazuya blinks up at him, caramel-eyes round behind his glasses, a bit shiny, and there are pink patches to his cheeks when he finally lets out a shadow of his customary smirk. “I guess I’m quite the high-maintenance boyfriend, causing you all this trouble,” he cheeks, but Eijun doesn’t miss the insecurity flitting behind it.

“I don’t mind,” it’s funny, really, how easy that is to say, how little he has to think about it, how eager three words which are supposed to sum up everything he feels for this guy and more are to just skydive off his mouth and into Kazuya’s, but he holds them back – he wants to say them when it’s unconditional to anything else, when it won’t sound like leverage, when it’s just a plain, simple fact he can present to Kazuya along with everything else of his and there won’t be anything else to hog his attention. So instead, he nuzzles into Kazuya’s cheek the way Kazuya nuzzles him all the time, and confesses, “You’re worth all of it.”

Chapter End Notes

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I...hope this worked, and came off realistically. I've drawn a bit from personal life here, and it's a weird realisation to have to come to, understanding that people older than you and 'responsible' for you don't always make the best decisions and sometimes it can fracture relationships for often maddeningly dumb reasons but you can't always help it and...I hope it came off okay.

Thank you all so much for reading /bow/ I hope you weren't let down!
Chapter 18

Eijun wakes to an almost tangible buzzing inside his head, a dull pulse throbbing and expanding and pressuring his skull, and soft, melty-warm kisses against his skin.

“I’m – sorry,” Kazuya punctuates his words with featherlight pecks, to his forehead, to the tip of his nose – the bedside lamp is on, but outside the pool of light it throws, everything is varying shades of ash-blue and grey, “I wanted – ” peck “to let you sleep in – ” peck “but…I didn’t want you to wake up and see I wasn’t here.”

It takes a long time for Eijun to re-sync his brain to his circumstances – tidbits and details queue up, one by one, as though they know his sore head and stinging eyes wouldn’t be able to handle processing everything at once. “…time issit?” is what he manages to gurgle, groggy and barely coherent.

Kazuya huffs a tiny, almost inaudible laugh. “It’s a little after 5 a.m. …I have a prep class,” his voice is very, very soft, like he’s trying to go easy on Eijun’s raw, chafed up, exhausted nerves – Eijun blinks, vision sharpening bit by bit like a camera’s viewfinder focusing in. Kazuya’s sitting at the edge of the bed, and he’s already dressed to go out. “I’ll be back before you have to leave, so you can go back to sleep, okay?”

The suggestion sounds like the next best thing to a free pass to heaven, and Eijun’s body actually starts to follow up on it, slumping back into the mattress and the cocoon of sheets toasty-warm from all that trapped body-heat – but his brain resists.

“How are you feeling?” he mumbles, marginally more awake, trying and failing to clear the mist hanging in front of his eyes and resorting to just dragging his body up and leaning over to get a good look at Kazuya’s face.

Kazuya leans in the rest of the way, and taps their foreheads together.

“Painfully sleepy,” he confesses, with another short huff of laughter, and Eijun can see the purplish-red bags beneath slightly sunken eyes, “but…I’m good.” He noses into Eijun’s fringe, his breath tousling it up, before he murmurs it again. “I’m good.”

It’d be like Kazuya to assure him, to put Eijun’s conscience at ease over opening up about himself – but right now, at this unearthly hour of the morning where no self-loving human being is voluntarily awake, and even the sounds of the city are a muted hush only there if you really, really look for it, Eijun knows that’s not the case.

In this fleeting bracket of time, skirting the edges between night and dawn, somewhere in the middle of a day beginning and another ending, the solitude after a storm – it’s like they’re all alone in the universe, and there are no secrets between them.
Eijun’s heart beats a languid tattoo in his chest, and he feels his lips hitch up of their own accord, “Good,” he mumbles back, and sleepily nudges Kazuya’s nose with his.

Kazuya sighs again. Eijun can smell coffee on his breath. He’s almost starting to doze, consciousness slithering back into the darkness, when it’s pulled back out by Kazuya unsteadily clearing his throat.

“Um…Eijun,” he sounds a bit uncertain, a bit meek, and Eijun drags almost painfully heavy eyelids open to find Kazuya’s staring intently at his own lap, “About last night, I’m s-“

“Don’t.” It’s markedly more crisp and lucid out of anything that’s come out of Eijun’s mouth since waking up, and it gets Kazuya to glance up at him, “don’t finish that sentence.”

Mild shock gives way to something closer to chagrin in Kazuya’s eyes, in the line of his mouth. “But I’m – “

“I’m serious,” Eijun warns, drawing himself up straighter and valiantly ignoring the protest of his sluggish, stiff muscles as he does, “don’t you dare apologise. I told you I was here for you, right?”

Kazuya wavers, like he’s been suspended mid-motion, mid-fall, before slowly winding down, the stress ebbing out of his shoulders, a snowflake drifting to the ground instead of a raindrop hurtling down. He lifts a hand, tentative, and brushes fingertips along Eijun’s cheekbone, staring into his face as though unsure if Eijun will resist.

It reminds himself of his own hesitation the night before, all the blame he’d allotted to himself and struggled under not knowing what to do, what was right.

He reaches his own hand up to hold Kazuya’s in place, turning his cheek into it.

It makes Kazuya release a whistling exhale. “I don’t…I’m…” Eijun just watches him, anchoring their hands against the side of his cheek as he fumbles, “thank – “

“No, you’re not allowed to do that either,” Eijun cuts him off, immediate, stern. He frowns for added measure.

Kazuya stares at him. Eijun smothers a giggle at his expression.

A scant couple of seconds float past, airy and weightless, before Kazuya sighs again, letting his eyes drift closed, and he flows back into Eijun’s space. “So what do I get to do?” he asks; there’s a hint of suggestiveness hidden in there, peeking out from the cracks, because this is Kazuya and this is what he does, it’s second-nature to him – but there’s earnestness too, a quiet sincerity Eijun can hear loud and clear.

This time, Eijun shifts forward, pressing sleep-chapped lips lightly into Kazuya’s cheek. “You can kiss me good morning,” Eijun suggests, sparkly-eyed – it’s definitely a lot more intrepid than he’s normally comfortable being, but it’s early morning, his defences are down, not yet recharged from the overtime they’d been doing lately; he’s pleasantly drugged on all of Kazuya’s affectionate barely-there touches, and the wide-eyed surprise with which Kazuya catches his breath is adequate reward for him not to think about it too much.

That is, until Kazuya actually takes his advice to heart, eyes on his lips, closing in –

And Eijun claps a hand over his mouth.

“I haven’t brushed my teeth yet!” is what he squeaks, slightly frantic, and Kazuya –
Bursts out laughing.

Open, honest laughter, uncoloured by anything apart from amusement and the soft, smudged-out warmth of glee, and it rinses through Eijun, sweeps away the aftertaste of bitter, despondent silences and pain-heavy words pressed into his skin, and the relief is so intoxicating he almost laughs along with him.

Kazuya doesn’t give him time for that though – Kazuya takes the palm covering his mouth and plants a deliberate kiss in the centre of it, and then pulls his wrist away to peck, close-mouthed, at his lips.

“I’ll be home soon,” he murmurs, in a low, rumbly undertone that’s entirely unfair. He speckles the corner of Eijun’s mouth with more kisses, smirks when he gets a squeal out of him when his teeth lightly clamp around Eijun’s Cupid’s bow.

“Hmm…h-have a nice day,” Eijun parrots, a bit mindless, because these intent-fuelled ministrations are a bit too much for his groggy self to handle so early in the morning, and because he’s been programmed to say this all his life, to his grand-dad and dad when they’d leave for work, to Mochi-senpai when he leaves for his morning jogs or practice…

But this is the first time he’s said it to Kazuya like this, in his bed and secretly looking forward to wriggling into all the free space he gets to himself, and there’s something…electrically different about it, and he knows Kazuya feels it too, feels it in the final press of his lips against Eijun’s before he has to pull away, regretful, or risk missing his train and getting grilled by Kataoka Sensei.

So Eijun settles back into the pillows, setting an alarm on his phone for two hours later just so he’s well awake before Kazuya returns, with the full intent of greeting him with a made-up bed and fresh mug of coffee and a Welcome home! just to see how he takes it.

The feel of Kazuya’s lips is still imprinted into Eijun’s palm, sealed into his fist like a promise.

The rest…we’ll figure out as it comes.

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“You,” Harucchi announces, rolling over to the table he and Eijun normally share in the cafeteria, “need to talk to Aniki.”

It’s a Friday, and Eijun has just one class left, but his side of the table’s strewn with highlighters, a couple of open notebooks, hardcopies of research papers because Eijun just cannot with the switching back and forth between tabs, and his laptop, which is nearing critical levels of battery because he’d not had the foresight to shotgun a table near a plugpoint.

The fact that Harucchi is choosing to ignore the clear-as-day symptoms of Eijun’s ritualistic procrastination says something.

“What happened?”

Harucchi shakes his head; the slightly exasperated huff of air he lets out stirs his fringe, blowing his hair out of steely, grim eyes. “He won’t tell me.”

Eijun spastically hits Ctrl + Save a few times, not trusting himself to have remembered as he worked on piecing together a shamefully improvised essay he’s supposed to have ready by tonight, and not trusting his laptop to hold off for much longer. “Is this…about him and Mochi-senpai?” he
hazards.

Harucchi’s silence is all the answer he needs. Eijun’s stomach – empty and grumbling and a little queasy from all the abuse it’d taken with the green-tea-and-nothing breakfast he’d decided to treat himself to – plummets.

“But I thought they were doing okay!” it comes out chagrined, aggrieved, “They…they said they sorted it out!”

Or at least, that’s what Eijun’d inferred they had meant. Onii-san’d said they were figuring it out, and Mochi-senpai’d gruffly sent him a Thank you and a Don’t let it get to your head or I’ll break your ankles, and since neither seemed more obliged to share any more details, Eijun’d decided not to intrude more than he already had, in the business of adults whose lives were, ultimately, their own charge. There had been dialogue, there had been communication, and they’d had the patience for all that back and forth they’d done for years before even becoming official so honestly, them talking it out was all that Eijun could have hoped for.

And then…given the situation with Kazuya, and with the truckload of work he’d had to put off partly because of lack of motivation, and partly because of all the last-minute sleepovers and meddling in other people’s business…he’d been pretty preoccupied to do much else.

Now, though, a bubble of unease is swelling in the vicinity of his lungs.

Harucchi’s lips are pressed, his hands wrapped around a warm plastic cup of chocolate. The temperature outside is stark and sharp, the wind like a papercut rending through naked skin – the forecast says it might snow, and it might snow hard. “They did talk,” he concedes, tapping his fingertips along the side of the cup, “And…I mean, I think they did come to some kinda compromise. But…”

“But?” Eijum prompts.

“Something is on his mind,” Harucchi finishes with a heavy exhale – it makes the swirls of steam rising over his hot chocolate scatter, a gust of unruly wind. “Something is…troubling him. He won’t tell me what.”

Eijun scans Harucchi’s face. “And…you think it has to do with Mochi-senpai?”

“Yeah. Have you spoken to him lately?”

Eijun had. The package of games he’d ordered had arrived yesterday, and Eijun’d opted to wait until he knew Senpai was likely to be free to call him when a text would probably have sufficed. It’d been a ruse, really – a long con, because he’d wheedled and whined and convinced Mochi-senpai to let him open the package because what if they got your order wrong, or left something out, or gave you a damaged copy? You only have this week for exchange! when in actual fact he just wanted to check what games Mochi-senpai’d gotten so he didn’t end up getting the same thing for him for Christmas –

And because he wanted to know if he was doing okay.

Apart from barefaced threats issued to his ligaments, there’d been nothing to suggest he was…upset, over anything. And Eijun’d taken it at face-value.

“How do you know if it’s because of Mochi-senpai that he’s troubled?” Eijun says, and he’s aware that he himself sounds doubtful – Onii-san might be insightful, but Harucchi is almost scarily accurate when it comes to reading people. It’s partly why Eijun sometimes finds it easier to open
up to Wakana than him – as much as he adores Harucchi and treasures his friendship, the way he can sometimes see right through you and right past your defences, rather than Wakana’s more gentler approach of easing you into it, is frankly a bit intimidating. “It could be work, or…”

“Have you ever seen him that bothered about work?” Harucchi counters, and now Eijun’s stumped, because truthfully, the answer is no. Onii-san does what he does and does it so well because he knows how to keep his cool, because he knows exactly how to separate himself from the situation he gets called in to for damage control. “It’s only…the only thing that I imagine would get this kind of a reaction out of him is if it were personal. And I know for a fact that it’s not about Mum or Dad, or us.” Harucchi points a finger back and forth between the two of them.

Eijun’s teeth find his lip, tugging, worried. Onii-san’s notorious for never letting on what’s on his mind unless he chooses to, so if his steadfast self-possession had fluctuated enough to put Harucchi on alert… “Haven’t you spoken to him about it?”

Harucchi gives him a wry half-smile. “He won’t tell me,” he says, spreading his hands with the air of one who’s resigned himself to it, “Aniki isn’t…used to being the one that has to look for answers, y’know? He usually has them.”

It’s not like Eijun can disagree with that. It’s not like Eijun can disagree with how difficult and unyielding that can be, when he’s drawn the similarities between Onii-san and Kazuya often enough to know this is a trait they share.

But Kazuya’s…growing out of it. Kazuya is being a little more selfish now, a little more demanding – not a complete one-eighty flip to the subtle reserve he’d maintain when it came to something he considers his problem, but just enough to show Eijun that he’s earned a little of the load Kazuya thinks he can let him share. Kazuya drags out goodbye hugs in the doorway and whines when he has to hang up the phone, and when his father had texted him a picture of Kazuya’s childhood home, renovated with a fresh coat of paint, with no attached message to give it any further context, the first thing he’d done had been to screenshot it and send it to Eijun with a slew of erratic question marks.

He can’t imagine Onii-san doing any of that.

“But…if he doesn’t talk to you, I don’t know if he’ll talk to me,” Eijun reasons, uncertainly – both Kominto brothers can be awfully tight-lipped when they wanted to be. Surely, Harucchi would –

“Actually, I think you’re the only person he could talk to,” Harucchi tells him. With a conviction that makes Eijun stop and stare, and something of a semi-knowing smirk. “Someone as closed-off as Aniki needs someone completely tactless – “

“Hey!”

“ – like you to get through to them. With me, he’s always extra cautious because I guess we’re a little too alike.”

Ignoring Eijun’s bristling and the fact that he’s opening his mouth wide to retort, Harucchi glibly continues, “Not to mention…” Harucchi reaches forward and cleanly snags Eijun’s phone away before Eijun, instincts dulled by stress and last-minute pseudo-scholarly bullshitting, can stop him – he presses the home button, and as the lockscreen illuminates, turns it to show Eijun the display screen, “…I think you’re the only one he’ll feel he can relate to.”

The snap he’d sent his mother so very long ago, of himself and Kazuya, beams at him.
“I…have no idea what most of this stuff even is.”

Eijun giggles. “The great Kominato Ryousuke doesn’t know about something?” he gasps for added effect. “There must be a glitch in the universe.”

Onii-san gives him an unamused side-eye before resuming his examination of the shelf Eijun’s crouching in front of. “I thought you can get games digitally these days?”

Eijun makes a humming noise at the back of his throat which metamorphoses into a grunt as he gets to his feet, a bit too abrupt. “Yeah. But you can’t gift-wrap a digital game, can you?”

From somewhere above him and slightly to the side, he hears a beat of laughter. “Touché.”

Eijun straightens, considering the cases he’s got stacked in the bend between his forearm and elbow. “How many do you think is a good number?”

“You’re asking the person who just admitted they have no idea what this is?”

“Come on, you have some idea,” Eijun cajoles; he holds out the blue, plasticicky cases for Onii-san to take, and starts flipping through them. “I’m definitely getting him the Resident Evil pre-order thingy, but that’ll only be out in January, and I know he already ordered The Last Guardian, so like, there should be a few things at least that he can use straightaway…or maybe I should get him merchandise?” Now Eijun’s just confusing himself – and Onii-san, apparently, judging by the blank impassivity he’s getting from his shopping partner.

Another half-hour spent searching through rows and rows of video game Blu-rays and DVDs later, Eijun thinks he strikes gold with the Resident Evil II remastered copy compatible for the PS2, knowing Mochi-senpai’s got his older console stowed away somewhere back home and has a weakness for dated, collectible games, and decides he’ll go drop by the bookstore later to grab a couple of physical copies of Senpai’s favourite comics that he reads online, and maybe a little Green Lantern keychain or something as a stocking filler, and –

“I’ve honestly not even heard him mention this before,” Onii-san is saying, turning over one of the box sets – it’s the Assassin’s Creed trilogy set for Ezio, and Onii-san’s got the same expression on his face that Mochi-senpai tends to have when he pulls a brand new, obscure and possibly psychologically scarring horror movie out for movie nights, “I mean I know about Assassin’s Creed and I know this Ezio guy is supposed to be a big deal, but…he has three games?”

“Yup. And Mochi-senpai’s only got a copy of Brotherhood, and this is the remastered version and – “

“He never tells me stuff like that.” It stems the flow of Eijun’s prattling, and Eijun regards Onii-san a bit more closely.

He’s got an unfathomable expression on…but it’s not the face he’s making that Eijun’s cottoned on to.

“I guess because it’s not the kind of thing you’d be interested in,” Eijun reasons, lightly, “I mean, he’s only ever played horror games with you, right?”

Onii-san doesn’t say anything, and Eijun takes that as a yes. “I guess he’d think you would be bored if he went on and on about the thousand million games he’s ever played in his life – especially when you’re not even into gaming that much.”
He says it offhandedly – he keeps his eye trained askance at Onii-san even as he’s paying for his purchases.

He’s quiet, and introspective, and yes, okay, while there isn’t a visibly huge difference in how he carries himself, Eijun thinks he gets what Harucchi means. The signs are barely there, only really prominent if you squint and wait and bide your time, but they’re still definitely there.

Like the fact that Onii-san’d agreed to spend the better part of a Sunday help choose something for Mochi-senpai! Please, please, please Onii-san! when it’s the time of year he typically boycotts all outings because Eijun and Harucchi’d have exams coming up since I don’t care if you’ve studied, no excuses.

Like the fact that he’s out of his depth here, in this video game store, when the last video game Onii-san’s probably ever played of his own volition was probably Fatal Frame or something – and he’s actually bothered by it.

It’s as they’re stepping out of the store into the brisk, snow-flecked breeze that Eijun says, conversationally, “I bet there are plenty of things you like that he doesn’t get either.”

If Onii-san is caught off-guard, he hides it well. “I suppose there are.”

“Like, you know, he once told me he doesn’t understand why you like Psycho so much?” Eijun’s chattering, but he doesn’t care – he doesn’t exactly have a gameplan, apart from keeping the topic circling around Mochi-senpai. Just swing and pray.

“As in…you spend half the movie thinking someone’s a main character and – ”

“It’s called misdirection.”

“I know that,” Eijun bristles immediately, defensive; he’d actually paid attention during Onii-san’s mid-movie lectures, thank you very much, “But Mochi-senpai wasn’t much impressed. And he’s also like…you know the lake? How come nothing ever surfaced from there, how deep was it, and – “

“Eijun,” Onii-san cuts him off, and he’s laughing a little bit – the bridge of his nose is dusted pink, a side-effect of the wind, “you realise what era that movie was made in? They pulled off quite a lot considering the limitations, and there’s so much artful misdirection and foreshadowing in the frames that was groundbreaking for its time – “

“I know,” Eijun reiterates, again; he’s peering around for a place to stop, maybe a café they can get a hot drink at – even through his gloves, his fingertips are going numb, “But Mochi-senpai wasn’t impressed. He’s not a…frills and laces kind of guy.”

This gets a louder, sharper laugh out of Onii-san. “That’s a good way of putting it,” he commends.

Eijun ignores the compliment. “But I guess…he never told you those things because he didn’t want you to think…he didn’t get you, or something. Or he didn’t want to make you upset.”

He’s aware of the penetrating stare he gets out of Onii-san at this.

They trudge along in silence, for a while, and Eijun focuses on the crunch of ice crystals under the heel of his boots. The light sprinkle of snow from earlier that afternoon catches the light off of the dozens of Christmas lights already adorning store-fronts – little gems of red and green glimmer at their feet, dotting the pavement.

“I…know that a lot of those things don’t interest him.” Eijun’s head jerks up a bit, involuntary, at
the sound of Onii-san’s voice, but he catches himself last minute. There’s an interlude, and Eijun chews on the inside of his cheek, keeping his eyes down, not sure what to say – whether he’s supposed to say anything at all.

But when Onii-san doesn’t offer anything else, Eijun clears his throat and hedges his bets again, “I think he knows that a lot of his stuff doesn’t interest you either.”

He catches the corner of Onii-san’s lip hitch up, appearing over the hem of the scarf round his neck, pulled up to his jaw.

There’s silence again, and Eijun sighs, something resembling helplessness twinging, hollow, inside his chest. Harucchi’d been right – Onii-san isn’t the type to ask for help. Whether it’s habit, or ego, or just long years spent out of the practice of having to need someone else’s advice, it’s…not in his nature.

But something is eating him up, and it might be infinitesimal, tremors under the surface you can’t feel unless you’ve got your ear planted to the ground, but it’s there, and Eijun wants to help.

He remembers what Harucchi’d said about tactlessness, and decides to wing it.

“Are you and Mochi-senpai still fighting?”

There’s an almost imperceptible twitch of Onii-san’s eyebrows. Eijun Presses his advantage. “You are, aren’t you?”

“No,” he denies, with a tad too much uncharacteristic enthusiasm, and Eijun allows himself a small smile, hidden into the folds of the muffler wound around his neck and chin; it’s the answer he’d been expecting, but at least it’s gotten Onii-san talking again. “We’re just…”

“You’re just?”

The older Kominato sighs. “I…told you. We talked about it and – “

“And?”

“Nosey little thing, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Eijun admits, unabashed, staring unblinkingly at Onii-san. He watches his companion quirk an eyebrow at him, disbelieving, before giving his head a small shake, “And?”

“And…” Onii-san complies, possibly realising he has no way out, “I told him that I’m not…against the idea. It’s just that…well, I don’t think now’s the right time.”

“And?”

The expression on Onii-san’s face is of one who has realised they were foolish to expect to get away with just that. “And,” he says, emphatically, rolling his eyes at Eijun – Eijun isn’t discouraged by it – “we agreed we’ll talk about it more when he comes back.”

Which, really, is what Eijun supposes is a realistic best-case scenario to have hoped for, and yet –

“But?”

Quizzical, Onii-san slants his head down at Eijun. “But what?”

Eijun presses his lips. “But there’s still something on your mind,” he spells out, plain and simple
and frank, “what’re you worried about?”

He has three seconds of satisfaction seeing Onii-san’s mouth hinge slightly open, speechless.

When he breathes out, a great heaving exhale, it mists out in front of his face, a silvery cloud puff.

“It’s…I told you. It’s a big decision.”

“Mmhmm.”

“Harucchi hasn’t graduated yet, and probably couldn’t afford a place of his own right after degree, and he definitely can’t afford the place we’re at now by himself – “

“Mmhmm.”

“And…we’ve only been together for – “

“Almost three years.”


“Onii-san, literally no one missed all the flirting and longing glances you guys were giving each other, okay?” Eijun rattles off, and yes, he’s being shameless, and yes, a huge part of his courage is coming from Onii-san’s less-than-usual degrees of caginess, and yes, it’s totally worth seeing Onii-san’s eyes go as huge as he’s ever seen them in his surprise. “Or, at least, Mochi-senpai was. The only real surprise is that you guys didn’t get together sooner.”

He finishes, triumphant, and revels in the point he thinks he’s definitely scored over the generally unflappable Onii-san –

Who, being Onii-san, recovers fairly quickly.

“The time involved is subjective,” he says, sage and cynical and every bit the over-practical naysayer that is the universe’s natural character foil for people like Eijun; he flicks at Eijun’s nose when he pouts at his answer, “you say almost three years, but…there’s still so much we don’t know about each other, and – what?”

Eijun’d stopped in his tracks.

“That’s not a bad thing, you know,” he says, seriously, brow pinched, like he can’t understand how Onii-san wouldn’t get that, “not knowing everything to know about each other…is not a bad thing.”

Onii-san studies him for a while, a pace behind him. Eijun’s immediately suspicious when he smirks.

“Are you speaking from experience?”

There was a time that jab would have made him burn from the roots of his hair to the tips of his toes and blunder through a nonsensical retort.

Now it just makes heat crawl into his cheeks – enough to make him glow red, but not enough to make him break eye contact. “Maybe I am,” he says, dogged and defiant, and takes a long step to bring himself apace to Onii-san again, “…and I seriously mean it. There’s…no way we can know everything, maybe not in our whole lifetimes, maybe not even for years…” his mind wanders a bit,
against his will, to Kazuya’s apartment and to his shelf full of music he’s not even heard half of, to
the first orchestra performance of his life that he’s supposed to be going for the weekend after
Christmas, to the invitation his parents have formally extended to bring Kazuya back home to
Nagano when he goes to visit after his exams, and to many more firsts tentatively poised against
the horizon, as far as the eye can see and beyond, like the way Kazuya’d draped himself around
Eijun’s waist minutes before Eijun’d taken his leave the day after his birthday, and mumbled into
his skin Maybe you should start leaving some of your stuff here, and the next time there’d been a
space, just for him, in Kazuya’s wardrobe, his space in Kazuya’s home – it almost carries him
away with it, that giddy, daunting whirl of euphoria which besieges him every time he thinks about
it, dizzying and uncertain in the best of ways, “…but isn’t that what keeps it interesting?”

He watches Onii-san consider him, doesn’t know what he’s seeing, what he’s reading off of his
expression, doesn’t know what kind of face he’s making – but he lets him.

“Maybe it is,” is what he yields, in the end, and Eijun’s brow furrows, because it’s too
noncommittal for his liking.

“What else?”

“What what else?”

“What else is bugging you about moving in with Mochi-senpai?” If Onii-san’s going to be obtuse,
Eijun’s just going to have to be the battering ram swinging headlong into him. “Don’t you think
about it? Being with him like that?”

Yeah. Harucchi has a point. He doesn’t imagine anyone else being this blunt with Onii-san without
anticipating certain doom. He supposes living with a flatmate with a tendency for violence takes
the edge off of your self-preservation instincts.

Eijun eyes Onii-san, critical, as the latter runs his tongue over his teeth. Hesitating.

“Deliberating.

“You know…,” he says, slow, a bit…resigned; he motions toward a storefront, and Eijun glances
up to see it’s full of graphic tees, “that it’s not like we’re going to get to be with each other like that,
right?”

It’s marginally warmer in the store, the thick, glass swing-door clicking shut behind them and
muffling the noise from the street. Eijun has to remind himself to lower his voice an octave, and
sounds like he’s trying to negotiate a secret. “You mean because of his training?”

Onii-san strides toward the nearest rack of T-shirts. Eijun wonders if he’d just wandered in here
because of the cold, or because he’d thought it would distract Eijun, stem the momentum of his
interrogation.

“His training, his camps,” Onii-san says, in a murmuring undertone Eijun has to strain his ears to
catch, “he’s not even going to back for long this time, you know. Just a few days over Christmas,
and then gone for the season’s games.”

“So…,” Eijun struggles – blurs it out, incredulous, because he doesn’t know how else to couch it,
“…you think it would be pointless?”

Onii-san turns so fast, it’s like he gets whiplash.

“No,” he says, immediate, firm – the intensity of that one syllable sears through the air like a dart;
stuns Eijun into freezing. “That’s…that isn’t it.”

“Then what is it?” Eijun knows he’s being obstinate – knows he’s probably testing Onii-san’s patience at this point, that they’re possibly seconds before he nudges it a bit too much and it backfires into his face.

But he also relates. He knows what it’s like to be insecure and afraid and anxious, knows what it’s like to harbour stupid, dumb, counter-intuitive fears you know are ridiculous and futile but they eat up at you anyway.

The difference is, Eijun’s always had people all around him to listen, and tell him that, reassure him, that he’s agonising over nothing – and Onii-san has been one of those people.

Now the tables are turned.

And to someone like Onii-san, perhaps that feels like…defeat. Like he’s losing.

“Onii-san,” Eijun pinches the material of his coat in between forefinger and thumb, and tugs – it’s a move reminiscent to the way he’d always be hanging on to Onii-san’s sleeve, throughout childhood, throughout teenage-hood, badgering him with questions, seeking answers and assurance and a pat on the shoulder telling him everything is going to be okay. “You can tell me. I won’t judge, I promise.”

Something shifts, something breaks, something rattles the evenness and stability Onii-san embodies. He sticks a hand through the line of shirts hung up along the metal bar in front of him, the clack of clothes-hangers against metal is discordant.

“It’s…” air whooshes out of him, hard and heavy, and Eijun peers at him, hand still at his arm, concern high, “I – anticipated that it would be hard. It would be difficult and frustrating and we’d get into fights and I thought…if I knew that, and if I was prepared, it’d still be fine.” His hand stills on a neon green shirt, the cotton slipping through his fingers. “I think I’m eating my words right now.”

Eijun feels his eyes go round – big, with surprise, with an almost unsettling clang of something falling, soundly, heavily, into place.

“You miss him,” he says, in a low hush.

Onii-san chortles. “Of course I do,” he hums, but it’s weary, not the enigmatic sing-song he comes to expect from him, “I knew I would, it’s only natural, isn’t it? But I – didn’t think it would be this…”

Eijun bites the end of his tongue, hesitates before offering, “Hard?”

Onii-san shakes his head. He shuffles over, to the next rack, almost mechanically, like his body’s on autopilot, just going through the motions for the sake of. “I didn’t think I would feel…so irrational,” he admits, quietly, and the way he leans his head to the other side clues Eijun in to it – he’s embarrassed. He feels ashamed, confessing it, talking about it. “I know it can’t be avoided and I know he’s trying his best but…if I resent it like this now…”

He trails off, the clatter of plastic on metal as more clothes-hangers scrape up and down the racks fill the space left by Onii-san’s voice.

Eijun finishes up for him. “…what would you feel like if you were actually living together?”
Onii-san tips his head back, just a little bit. Just enough for Eijun to have a view of one of his eyes, and the half-light in them.

“I think, for now…it’s safer, at a distance,” he murmurs, almost absently; he fingers the hem of a jade shirt, letting his thumb run over the stitches, “that way we can at least…there’s – a limit. To what we can expect from each other. Living together is…different. It’s not just my decision or his decision anymore. It’s our decision.”

There’s a note of agitation to Onii-san’s voice, and Eijun thinks he’s starting to see. He bites his lip, and hopes the momentum will let Onii-san continue – that he’ll go on and unburden himself, even if it’s just a little bit.

“A home together would be a shared responsibility and if it’s already so difficult like this,” Onii-san’s tongue darts out to wet his lip, a quick, rapid movement; a hand comes up and presses the base of its palm against his eyes, “What would happen if he can’t be there? What would happen if I can’t be there? Our jobs aren’t the most flexible. What would we do if we have expectations on each other and we fall short of them? What if I – “

“Have you talked to him about this?” Eijun interjects. His ears are ringing. The cogs are turning in his head, the confusion is clearing, gears shifting and heaving the curtains aside and letting him grasp what’s going on here, and it’s ironic, really, because it’s a place Eijun’s already been, and Onii-san’s just taken a roundabout route to get there, even though he’d been the one with the map.

Onii-san gives him a dry slant of a smile. It’s all the answer Eijun needs. “I know what you’re thinking. I’m not taking my own advice.”

It’s self-deprecating, and so uncharacteristic of Onii-san – but it’s also sobering, because it reminds Eijun that Onii-san is only human. He isn’t infallible, and he isn’t immune to hiccups like anxiety and the sometimes baseless fear you’re plagued with when you have something so invaluable you’re terrified you’ll screw it up.

“I’m…not going to say it’s not going to be hard and you’re just worrying too much,” Eijun busies himself with fiddling with the shirts too, “It’s…I can’t even imagine it, really. I don’t think – ” he thinks about goodbyes and how they never get easier, how it’s the opposite, how it gets more and more heartbreaking every time he has to remove himself from Kazuya and remember that there’s a different place he calls home, “I don’t want think about it. But…Onii-san, you said it yourself. When you find someone worth it…”

Onii-san takes his cue. With a slow breath out, with a sigh. “You stick around. Yeah.”

Eijun fidgets, then says, “You can’t figure this one out on your own, you know. This involves him too…he has a right to know.”

Onii-san sighs again. His hand falls away from the shirts. “I know.”

“…you can’t keep making him do all the hard work.”

There’s a snort, then another, and then sniggers that sound faintly nasal and entirely too inelegant to be coming from Onii-san. Eijun gapes.

“Okay, okay, I get it,” with a rub on his head, messing up his hair, the smirk growing on Onii-san’s lips almost close to seeming humorous, “Someone’s become quite the little expert on relationships, haven’t they?”

Eijun feels the blood shoot up into his face and start burning beneath his scarf, but he mouths back,
instant and defiant, “I learnt from the best.”

Onii-san’s still smirking when he turns back to the T-shirts. “Yeah, yeah,” he says, and tugs at the green one again, and Eijun makes out the words, In brightest day, in blackest night and tucks a smile away into his scarf.

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“Are you sure they’re even going to have that copy?”

“Yeah, I asked Kazuya to save one for me,” Eijun picks up the pace, skipping down the pavement. It’s been ages since he’s been to the bookstore, and as much as he’s trying to keep the spring in his step on the down-low, it’s probably not working.

It doesn’t help when Onii-san drawls knowingly from the side, “Ah, so it’s Kazuya now, is it?”

Eijun ignores him in favour of moving faster, because he can’t see him blushing if he’s several strides in front of him now, can he?

His stomach still flutters a bit when he pushes his way through the bookstore door, and he thinks he’s being a cheesy little idiot, and he’s totally okay with that when Kazuya sees him, and an equally cheesy, idiotic smile springs across his face.

Onii-san makes a noise from behind him, like someone choking on a cough.

There are greetings, small-talk, Eijun wandering away to check new shoujo manga releases thinking he’d brought the younger brother the last time and now the older one and the only one left out of the set is Mochi-senpai, and how glad he’s likely to be about that, and –

Fingers poke in between his ribs and he leaps almost into a bookshelf.

“Stop jumpscaring me!”

Kazuya’s right behind him, guffawing into his sleeve. “It’s a tradition, though,” he says, wide-eyed innocence Eijun’d have actually bought if he’d not been laughing at him literal seconds ago, “I have to honour it.”

Eijun pointedly rolls his eyes, and drills home the point by turning his back to him.

“Aw, don’t be mad,” Kazuya pokes at his cheek now, wriggling a finger in through the wraps of his muffler. Eijun tries to squirm away, “…I’m assuming it went well?”

He says this a few decibels lower, a bit secretly, leaning in, and Eijun doesn’t have to expend much thought to know what he’s talking about.

“Well, he just bought enough nerdy T-shirts to wear every day of the week, and I’m pretty sure they’re not for him,” Eijun chirps – his mood has been twirling round on cloud nine since they’d left the graphic tee shop, and yes, being around Kazuya helps too, but his gut says Onii-san’s at least a little more at peace with himself than he’d been before, and he can’t curb his tendency to be optimistic about these things, “So I’d say…yes?”

Kazuya hums, looking pleased. He sneaks a quick look around, then leans in, swift, to plant a kiss on the tip of Eijun’s nose.

“Hey – “
“You’re amazing, you know.”

“W-what?” his breath hitches, he squeaks, and it’s amazing how quickly Kazuya can get to him.

Kazuya, who takes advantage of the relative isolation in their aisle to feather his fingertips around Eijun’s wrist. “You are amazing,” he repeats, again, enunciating each word, slow and deliberate and with a husky undertone that is thoroughly inappropriate in a public setting, and Eijun’d scold him for it, he would, except he appears to have lost his voice, “the way you just…you know what to say.”

This breaks Eijun out of his trance. He almost laughs. “I don’t,” he says, and sees the arch of Kazuya’s eyebrow and insists again, “I don’t, I – “

“Yeah, you do,” Kazuya interrupts, booping him on the nose and isn’t he afraid of being seen?, “or rather…you tell the truth.”

Eijun just stares at him, blank.

“You tell people exactly what’s on your mind, Eijun,” Kazuya elaborates, with an amused quirk to his lips; Eijun feels the temperature in the bookstore scoot up a couple of degrees in less than a second.

“But…” Is this praise? Is that even a good thing? “Sometimes I have nonsense on my mind.”

Kazuya chortles. It makes his head bob lower, and brings his eyes level to Eijun’s. There’s warmth in them, melting and pretty.

“Yeah, well…not everyone’s brave enough to tell others about the nonsense on their minds,” Kazuya teases. He nudges Eijun’s cheek again – he’s doing that a lot, Eijun realises, “and sometimes that’s exactly what people need to hear. Honesty.”

Eijun is sceptical. “There’s another name for it,” he says, sardonic, “I believe it’s called meddling.”

Kazuya chortles again, inaudible – it’s visible though, lighting across his face, making his shoulders shake. “But you only meddle for the people you love, right?”

He’s already gearing up to make his case, expounding at length all the people he’s pestered in just the last couple of days with his inability to stick to his own business when the question really registers.

When what he’s asking really registers.

Eijun wonders if he’s reading too much into it.

Eijun thinks it doesn’t matter if he is.

He’s perfectly honest when he confesses, soft, “Only for the people I love, yeah.”

There’s a light in Kazuya’s eye that makes Eijun think he knows exactly what he’d meant by it.

Chapter End Notes
yeeeeah so this became long af because I thought there wasn't enough MiyuSawa so I added more MiyuSawa because I'm trash

and I've also not proofread this for consistency or grammar so I'm really really really sorry about anything wonky? I'll fix it over the weekend, sorryyyy ;A;

References to:
-The Last Guardian: EVERYONE NEEDS TO PLAY THIS GAME. IT'S LIKE BEING HUGGED TO DEATH BY FEELS. I'm serious, even non-gamers would love it, it's so beautiful to look at and beautiful for the soul and I just need to lie down for a while
-Resident Evil: CHAPTER 7 IS COMING OUT IN LIKE 4 DAYS AND I'M SO EXCITED I CAN'T. I kinda grew up playing RE games so this makes me soooo excited and the collectible edition comes with like a music box and all kinda creepy goodies
-Assassin's Creed Ezio Collection: this is literally a plug because this is my fave arc from AC, and after watching the movie recently...yeah. Pls let us have Ezio Auditore back.
-"in brightest day, in blackest night": part of the Lantern Oaths of the Green Lantern Corps (DC comicverse). I just...have this huuuge HC that Mochi loves Green Lantern (and would love to cosplay as a member maybe, I mean he already has green hair /u/) and Ryou knows it
-Psycho: perhaps not very scary by current standards, but after studying this film for a media course, Imma just say that Alfred Hitchcock is a genius and it's a brilliant piece of film that deserves every accolade for how it composes each scene
-"swing and pray": basically one of the many things to ever come out of Sawamura Eijun's mouth that makes me love this lil baseball dork in canon bless him <33

I think that's it? I hope pacing and everything was okay! Thank you so so so so so much for reading, I love you guys <333
Onii-san said: Anything else?
You said: he wanted red bull
You said: the 24 pack
Onii-san said: He’s only getting 6
You said: omg noooo
You said: he’s gonna be mad
You said: he loves that stuff!!!
Onii-san said: Do you know how much sugar there is in just ONE can of Red Bull?
Onii-san said: He’s an athlete, he’s lucky he’s getting any at all
You said: >___<
You said: if he gets mad it’s on you
Onii-san said: I’ll deal with it if he does
You said: aww
You said: so sweet <3
You said: who’s the mother hen now :P
Onii-san said: Did I mention I haven’t gotten to your half of the shopping list?
You said: ...
You said: you wouldn’t
Onii-san said: Is that a challenge?
You said: OMG
You said: YOU were the one to volunteer because I don’t have time
Onii-san said: A wasted endeavour, given that you are clearly NOT studying
You said: I WAS until you started texting me about what kind of protein bar Mochi-senpai likes
Onii-san said: Well, if you’re going to be ungrateful, I might as well not bother

You said: I take it all back

You said: I am deeply sorry

You said: you don’t want me to starve do you?

You said: Onii-san?

You said: my mum would kill you!

You said: ONII-SAN???

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Aotsuki Wakana said: how’s it going Ei-chan

You said: T______T

Aotsuki Wakana said: ah

Aotsuki Wakana said: that says it all

You said: I’m gonna die

Aotsuki Wakana said: you say that before EVERY exam Ei-chan

You said: but this time I really mean it!!! T_T

You said: I swear I don’t remember half this stuff from class

Aotsuki Wakana said: :s

Aotsuki Wakana said: but I thought you only had one exam this time?

You said: yeah but that’s the worst part

You said: it means if I screw up the assignment-based modules that’s it

You said: goodbye grades, goodbye graduation

You said: goodbye job

You said: hello unemployment

Aotsuki Wakana said: then you know what you gotta do right?

You said: move to the mountains?

Aotsuki Wakana said: you wouldn’t even last five minutes in the mountains

You said: hey!

Aotsuki Wakana said: just ace the assignment

Aotsuki Wakana said: and remember to book me a ticket for your graduation!
You said: you make this sound so easyyyyy Dx
Aotsuki Wakana said: I know it isn’t
Aotsuki Wakana said: but it’s you
Aotsuki Wakana said: you’ll power through it
Aotsuki Wakana said: after you’re done bitching of course
You said: I can’t tell if you’re trying to cheer me on or depress me
Aotsuki Wakan said: lollll
Aotsuki Wakana said: you can do it Ei-chan!
Aotsuki Wakana said: OSHI OSHI OSHI

***

He thinks he can handle it.

Yeah, okay, so he’s not been the best at paying attention in class this semester.

And yes, he’d halfasssed a lot of the essays and in-class quizzes they’d had to reinforce what they were learning or just gauge their grasp of the material, if he’d found out they weren’t going to be graded.

And also, yes, he’s prioritised hanging out with Kazuya with unplanned visits to the bookstore a tiny little bit too much maybe, to have been conducive for the time he gets to study.

He thinks he can handle it.

It’s not new. Wakana gets it. Onii-san, Harucchi, they all get it. Eijun’s just got this tendency to procrastinate. That’s how he ticks. It’s like he’s programmed with a kind of counter-intuitive, internal security system that clicks on, shuts everything off, when he starts getting close to something that he knows will stress him out, that’ll demand time and effort and commitment, and he’d much rather live in a delusional bubble of ignorance pretending it doesn’t exist until something snaps, and, like Wakana’d said, he’s compelled to power through it purely on the momentum of last-minute panic and an acute fear of failure.

Yes, it isn’t quite the best way of getting things done, but it’s worked. So far.

He thinks he can handle it.

There’s three days to go before the deadline for his final assignment submission – the last submission of his life, probably.

Unless he fails, in which case he’ll have to re-sit the paper.

He can handle it.

The lecturer’d called him aside and expressed mild concern at the quality of some of his written work. It’d been embarrassing, being told his standard was slipping, but Eijun knows he’d not really been trying with some of those. He knows that he’d been winging it, and he’s far more conscientious than to try and wing it for an actual, proper, graded paper that’ll determine if he
passes with a distinction and first-class honours and all those nice things because yeah, while he’s pretty much got a job nicely gift-wrapped and waiting for him, he’d not signed a contract, and he’s pretty sure the offer is conditional, and he’s definitely certain that whatever promise Takigawa-san’d seen in him would be open to second thoughts if he failed all his subjects.

He can handle it.

He can, he can, he can –

It’s in the throes of a panic attack that he gets a call from Kazuya, and when he’s asked the standard question he’s been asked a dozen times, for every day he hasn’t been able to see Kazuya with both their final semester commitments hemming in on them – How are you? – something caves.

“I can’t handle this.”

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It’d been a moment of weakness. He knows this. He’d known it the minute the call had ended, the unsteady weight of something clattering into his stomach making him queasy with all the familiar nausea of panic and the keen sense of knowing that he’d been asking for it.

He can’t deny, though, that when Kazuya shows up at his door with concern in his eyes and a Tupperware box full of hastily peeled-out pomegranate, his heart sings a little.

The embarrassment outweighs that, though.

“I’m sorry,” he starts off, immediately, as soon as he opens the door – Kazuya doesn’t manage to get a word in edge-wise, “I’m so, so, so sorry, I was just being whiney and wasting time and gah – I don’t know, I’m always like this, and I can’t believe you came all the way over when you’re having exams too, I just – ”

He’s cut off by Kazuya clapping a hand over his mouth.

“Can I come in?” is what he asks, and Eijun notes that he appears unfazed in spite of the rapidfire tirade that’d just been rained upon him – there’s a twitch at the corner of his lip, the shadow of his crooked smirk flickering there, and it dispels enough of Eijun’s currently rather explosive combination of nerves and guilt to give way and let Kazuya pass.

“I’m sorry,” he repeats, again, as Kazuya shuffles out of his shoes – he’s gone hushed and a bit nasal with shame, “I made you – ”

“You didn’t make me do anything,” Kazuya intercepts him again, firm; he turns back just long enough to grab Eijun’s hand, and pull him into the flat. “Besides, it’s not like I was doing anything – I don’t exactly have to study for my exams, remember?”

He’s not wrong, technically. Kazuya’s entire course is pretty much an exam – they’re tested on their skill and consistency of practical application, not their ability to scribble down from memory the step-by-step procedure to nail the perfect strudel.

Still, Kazuya’s supposed to be making his way through the last couple of sessions he has left this semester before he wraps up his Masters, and he’d even taken time off of work to make his routine more flexible, and here Eijun is, having him rush over multiple train-stops in the middle of the evening because he’d not done the thing he was supposed to have done, for literally no good reason. Seriously, why is he like - ?
“I can practically see smoke coming out of your head,” Kazuya jokes. He nudges Eijun’s face with the backs of his knuckles, “Spill it before you explode.”

Eijun wants to – but how does one go about apologising for being an intrinsically flawed person? “I’m so–”

“Uh-uh. You’re not allowed to do that.”

“But I –”

“You’re not allowed to refute me either,” Kazuya deflects, glib, and Eijun’s torn, not quite sure whether the rough electricity making a mess out of his lungs is because he’s touched or just incredibly regretful of all his life choices.

“Is this payback?” he asks, cautious – he doesn’t miss the irony of the fact that Kazuya is combatting him using his own words. Maybe he had been too wilful, all those times he’d shut Kazuya off and steamrolled over his concerns and –

Kazuya laughs, and it derails his anxious, frenetically speeding train of thought. “Maybe,” he says, light, a geniality at odds with the sparking, volatile tension Eijun’d been stewing in within the locked confines of the flat, “Or maybe, I’m just taking something my boyfriend happened to say to me once upon a time to heart.”

Frazzled, Eijun blurts, “What? What did I say?”

Kazuya mimes a pondering pose, thumb and forefinger at his chin. “Hmm, something about…what was it now…something along the lines of, I know you can handle yourself…but you don’t have to?”

He grins at Eijun’s hanging jaw, the eyes gone wide with surprise. Recognition. Leaning in, he nudges their noses together. “It goes both ways,” he hums.

And, crap, it’s such a tiny gesture – it’s a mundane bit of contact they’ve repeated so many times he can safely say it’s countless, but how is it that a nose-bump is enough to sedate all that angry, self-deprecating buzzing on repeat inside of his head?

But Eijun gets that this is a mere anaesthetic – this is just a temporary shortcut to numbing the pain that’ll definitely come biting back in retaliation, and he’s got to get his guard up.

“It’s not like you can help your migraines, though,” Eijun protests – he’s aware that every second he’s spending convincing Kazuya of the reasons he shouldn’t be here is a second he might as well have used on the thesis paper he’s still not managed to flesh out beyond a rough skeleton of what it’s supposed to be, but the lord help him, he doesn’t know how to get going, “I’m just…I don’t even know why, I just – I had this coming. I procrastinated, I totally had this coming.”

And he’s pretty sure Kazuya can’t disagree, but still, painting out your shortcomings to your boyfriend is pretty excruciating no matter how accustomed they get to your periodic breakdowns.

What Kazuya does do, though, is ask, “Okay, let me ask you this – you know exactly what direction you’re going, with your paper, right?”

Eijun rolls his tongue over his teeth. “Ye-es,” he concedes, a bit uncertainly – he’s done his reading, and he thinks he’s got a pretty compelling balance with this arguments, but –

“You’ve drafted it out?”
“My main speaking points, yeah.”

“And when’s the deadline?”

A pebble-sized knot of condensed panic slots into Eijun’s tongue as he answers, “Day after tomorrow.”

Kazuya, either oblivious to the impending second wave of Eijun’s panic attacks or choosing to ignore it, says, “Does that feel like enough time for you?”

Eijun’s lower lip feels raw from all the biting he’s been doing – his teeth fit into the indents he’s made over all the hours he’s spent fretting, as close to getting anything done as a cat trying to catch the red dot of a laser pointer. “I think…I think if I can just…if I get my head in the game now, I could finish, yeah.”

But Kazuya’s shaking his head. “That’s not what I’m asking,” he says, and Eijun tips his head at him, puzzled, “I know you can finish it, some of your best published articles were done, like, overnight – “ Eijun’s pretty sure the mild shock he feels at the realisation that Kazuya’d been keeping track of his literary prowess is showing, but Kazuya doesn’t react to it, “but, what I’m asking is – is it going to be the thesis you envisioned? Is it going to meet your standards?”

Oh. “…I…” Eijun halts, goes to nibble at his lips again, then stops. “Well, I mean if I’d started out earlier, maybe I – “

Kazuya cuts him off. Again. “Eijun,” he says, patient but firm, with that unmistakeable air of someone who wants you to stop, and listen, “everyone procrastinates. It’s human nature to put off things that we think are unpleasant – “

Eijun’s mouth is already open to refute this, because Wakana’d breezed through all her academic obligations just because she’d started prepping, like some kind of nerd-queen, since the beginning of her semester, and Harucchi’s got more actual exams than Eijun, sure, but he’s practised enough to know that he’s going to be able to balance any account they throw at him in the exam hall –

“ – you’re the one who taught me to see it that way, you know.”

The look to Kazuya’s eye, the thing he’s telling him, without using words, vaporises Eijun’s argument straight off his tongue.

“You…know that there are things I’ve put off, for a long time,” is what Kazuya eventually says, after a pause that’d felt…weighty, with unsaid things and half-hidden meanings, “And…I wasn’t the only one. The point is, it’s…normal, to put off things that can…freak you out.”

There’s really not much Eijun can say to that. It’s not like he disagrees.

“But…like I said…I know you can handle it. Because I know…,” Kazuya stops, looks like he’s rummaging around in his head that combination-lock sequence of words to spell out exactly what he thinks, “that you…don’t do anything halfway. You don’t do anything half-heartedly. It’s all or nothing for you, isn’t it? Isn’t that why you held off on writing for your internship in the first place? Because ‘good enough’ wasn’t going to cut it?”

It’s strange – what Kazuya’s talking about, what’s he’s asking him to remember, feels so distant. Like they’re memories belonging to someone else.

But that’s because, Eijun thinks…that may be because…he’d started to forget. That phase of his internship hadn’t exactly been fitting as his fondest memories of the place – he’d been wracked by
insecurity, self-doubt, this…overwhelming fear of not being able to offer what he thought was his best. And then, when it started to get better – that’s the stuff that was nicer to remember, right? The claps on the back, the warm approving smiles from his superiors, and bright, shiny words of congratulations he’d get from his peers, his family, his friends. His boyfriend.

That’s the stuff that was nicer to remember, and okay. Okay. Maybe Eijun’d forgotten how he’d gotten round to do what he had done, that shift he’d had to bring to his perspective, and lulled himself into some shortcut peace of mind because I mean, I’ve got a job offer for my quality of work, I must be doing something right.

Shit, shit, shit.

He’d let himself get complacent.

Shit.

A finger pokes into his cheek, shattering the suspended agony of this realisation.

“You’re doing it again,” Kazuya accuses, frowning, but not exactly in a manner that’s harsh – it’s admonishing, but not critical, “You’re beating yourself up.”

Eijun emits a wheezy laugh. “I pretty much asked for it.”

Kazuya shrugs. “You kinda did,” he says, semi-smirking when this gets Eijun to pin him with an almost wounded look, “But...I am to blame too, for taking up so much of your time, especially lately,” he preemptively shifts his hand back up to stem whatever protest’d been about to come out of Eijun’s mouth because Eijun’d done that voluntarily, dammit, he’d thought he had things under control, he’d thought he had known better and this is all his call - "and I know you won't let me apologise and we're just going round in circles if we keep harping on this. I just...I know you can make up for it. Like I said, even back then…you don’t go into anything half-heartedly. Whether it’s work, or…your relationships with people.” Kazuya moves in against Eijun, brushing their noses together again, his voice a warm, blankety hum, “It’s one of the things I love about you.”

***

Despite Eijun’s insistence, Kazuya doesn’t go home (“You have an exam literally tomorrow morning!” – “It’s no different from a regular class, no worries.”) – he promises to keep out of Eijun’s hair, overrules all his protests, and decides to attack a stack of presents Eijun’d piled up on the coffee table as a visible reminder to get them wrapped before Mochi-senpai came home.

“No, no, no, I’ll do them later!”

“I don’t mind, you know.”

“I know you don’t, but – “

“Seriously, I like wrapping things. It’s kinda – relaxing.”

“…I wish I could say that.”

“See? I’m better at it than you, so just let me.”

“But I’ll never learn if I keep avoiding it forever – “

“It’s okay, Eijun ~ I’ll wrap all your presents for you, whenever you like.”
And that’s how it comes to be – Eijun cross-legged at the coffee-table, engrossed in making sure he’s including all the appropriate in-text citations in his paper because he does not want to go back over the whole thing later not recalling which journal he’d picked up a particular fact from, occasionally pausing to munch on a handful of pomegranate, the crinkling of paper being smoothed around boxes Eijun’d not managed to request gift-wrapping for since he’d got so much of the stuff online – he still doesn’t trust e-shopping enough to do it for him – retreating to soft fuzzy white noise in the background.

“How did you finish wrapping all that in like – fifteen minutes?”

“It’s been forty-five.”

“Still!”

And then there’s more pomegranate, more squinting at a sentence phrased a bit too awkwardly for Eijun’s liking, an abrupt leap in logic that needs a something, a fact, a quote, more research to segue smoothly through, Eijun running his hand through his bangs to push them out of the way enough times for Kazuya to let himself into Eijun’s room and return with the alligator clip that used to be his and is now Eijun’s. There’s soft touches to his forehead, and quick peck to his cheek and a pulled-back fringe, and there’s a tuned down television set with cartoonish jingly noises as Kazuya decides to occupy himself with one of Mochi-senpai’s many platformers.

It’s completely dark out by the time Eijun waddles, a bit uncoordinated as the blood rushes back through pressed-down arteries and clamped muscles, toward Kazuya, tugging away the controller to plop into his lap.

“Done?”

“Almost. I just –” Yawn “I gotta reread it tomorrow and compile the references, but other than that –”

“You feel good about it?”

Eijun had been about to say, Other than that, I’m done, but this has a nicer ring to it. This…sits right.

“Yeah,” he hums, yawning into his sleeve, watching Kazuya through crinkly eyes, “Hey…Kazuya. Thank –”

There are fingers against his lips again – an expression a trifle admonishing. Eijun doesn’t know why, but it makes him giggle.

“I’m not allowed?”

“You’re not allowed,” Kazuya chimes back – he’s smiling the smile of a person who knows the other half of an inside joke, and Eijun, brain coarse and crackly, like hair that’s been brushed too much, finds himself helplessly smiling back, “So…how are you feeling?”

Eijun tries to shift, is thwarted by the leaden stiffness now setting into his joints. “Like a man acquitted from death’s row.”

Kazuya laughs. He leans in, nuzzles Eijun’s hairline – he’d forgotten he was still wearing his – Kazuya’s – hairclip.

“Hey,” Kazuya whispers, a beat later; Eijun’d started idly wondering just what time it was, exactly,
and whether or not dinner was on the cards after all the fruit he’d consumed, but these banalities fall away with the touch of Kazuya’s fingers against his lips again. This time they feel different.

This time they’re a caress.

“How?”

Kazuya smiles a bit, as if to himself. “Your lips are kinda red.”

It takes Eijun a moment to grasp that Kazuya’s…closer.

“Must be the pomegranate,” he hears himself hush, words somehow conjured up without the assistance of his brain, which has evidently gone off on holiday without notice.

He feels Kazuya’s breath against his mouth just before he makes contact. “Must be.”

***

They eat defrosted, thawed-out stew – God bless you, Onii-san – and Eijun does a final speed-run through his paper before he’s comfortable shutting his laptop off.

Just in case, he emails a copy to Kazuya, who laughs but humours him, and allows Eijun to thank him at least thrice before they kiss goodnight, and he has to go back home.

***

They both resent this part, and they both can tell.

***

If it’s possible to be motion-sick while sitting in one place, Eijun’s sure he has mastered it – the floor feels like it’s swirling up and around him, the edge of the metal seat possibly designed to create maximum discomfort to keep exam-takers alert frosty against his backside, and he’s quite sure he’s not supposed to see spots dancing in front of his eyes, but when the giant clock displayed against a projector screen strikes D-day, Eijun couldn’t care less.

He’s done. Yes, the reliable post-exam nightmares haven’t caught up to him yet, and he hasn’t put himself through the mandatory re-taking of every question from the paper he can remember until he’s convinced he screwed all of them up, and yes, there’s going to be a while to wait before the results are out and put him out of his misery, but Eijun – with roughly four hours of sleep over the last forty-eight to his name – doesn’t care.

He did it. He survived.

It’s over.

This is what he’s thinking as he texts tongue-in-cheek condolences to Harucchi, who still has one last paper to go the next day. This is what he thinks as he clocks in with his parents, letting them know he’s done. Done.

A four-letter word packing a punch of finality.

It’s crazy. It feels impossible. He can’t quite believe it.

But it’s true, and okay, yes, there’s still the possibility that he might have failed, but somehow, in the kind of high you’re in when you’re so tired you’re not tired anymore, when you feel like you
could probably go a week without sleep and arm-wrestle a bear or something equally spontaneous and stupid, Eijun is able to tell himself that he’s done his best, and in his completely realistic opinion, his best was probably not half-bad. He’d pass, at least of this he is sure, and right now, that’s enough to have him grinning to himself like he’s demented all the way through his train-ride, all the way up and out of the station, and straight through the bookstore doors.

Kazuya sees him straightaway.

“I’m done,” he tells him, giddy and mumbling and sounding like he’s on substance – he recalls that substance is exactly what he’d suspected Kazuya’s trade to be when he’d first met him and hiccups a hysterical laugh, “I’m done.”

Kazuya grins, hard, his body language of one who wants to move in, and be closer, more intimate – but they’re in the middle of the store, so he takes Eijun’s hand and wordlessly pulls him round, behind the counter, through the Employees Only door they’d gone through only once before.

Eijun still thinks of this place as the spot he’d mustered the courage to ask Kazuya out, the very first time.

It’s a mix of all of that, the past, the present, the future, everything, as Kazuya pulls him into a tight, squeezing hug. “Congratulations,” he sings into Eijun’s hair, and it’s completely different from the giddy, Oh my goodness, I can’t believe we got through this alive! – You better keep in touch, bro! – Hey, we should go out sometime, get some drinks, celebrate the freedom – GOODBYE all-nighters, woohoo – It’s different, because this is for him, this for them, just the two of them, and it means so many things – it means no more weeks plugged from morning to night and anything in between with classes and deadlines scheduled with no consideration of an average college-student’s scope for time management, it means weekends unhampered by a lingering, niggling recollection of the pile of work he’d left unattended, it means sleep, holy-blissful-full-nights with the only sounds emanating from Kazuya’s iPod and not alarms set for fifteen minutes later because he’s still trying to lie to himself about power-naps working –

It means so much, so much possibility, a huge, complete overhaul of how life has worked for these part couple of months, past couple of years, and Eijun is... Eijun is overwhelmed, because there’s so many things he’s feeling, and there’s a part of him that wants to cry, and a part of him that wants to laugh and another part that just wants to switch off and fall asleep right here, on his feet and in Kazuya’s arms in the backroom of the bookstore, and they’re somewhere in the eye of the storm – surrounded by chaos, with a passing moment of serene stillness before they go back out and face the newness of a brand new leg of the journey.

And maybe it’s because of this, all of this contained madness and total upheaval, that Eijun clings on to the one coherent thought that makes sense and stays stationary in his head, in the solid anchoring hold of Kazuya’s arms, under the sunny warmth of his smile.

It’s unremarkable and out-of-the-blue and completely, utterly graceless, but he can’t hold it back anymore and he doesn’t want to, so he says, “Kazuya, I love you,” and giggles all the way through the kiss Kazuya tries to give him when he’s overcome the surprise, and said it back.

***

A couple of minutes later there’s a knock at the door, and Eijun hears a voice he matches in his head to the blue-eyed, flat-toned kid he’d run into at the counter the other time – Furuya? – saying, “Miyuki-san.”

“Yeah?”
“The boss says the backroom isn’t for making out and he’s not paying you to mess around with your boyfriend.”

Kazuya actually sniggers, and Eijun shortcircuits because What the hell have you been telling them? and now he has to worry about finding another bookstore to quench his bookwormy needs because he obviously can’t show his face round here ever again.

***

The bell doesn’t ring, because of course Mochi-senpai has his own keys, but the fact that Eijun hears them being slotted in over the trilly noise of the menu screen music of some Legend of Zelda game Kazuya’s decided to take a gander at is still no mean feat.

He’s cut himself off in the middle of explaining how you can’t get a weapon upgrade unless you explore the dungeon and harpooned his way over to the hall before the door’s even opened, and there’s a strangled squawk as Eijun basically launches himself at the shortstop.

“MOCHI-SENPAI WELCOME HOME!”

“I can’t breathe, you idiot, what are you – “

“At least let him come in, Eijun,” Eijun, in a miracle of dexterity, manages to keep hanging off Senpai’s flailing frame – Did he get taller after camp? Can he still do that at this age?! – and peek over his shoulder. Onii-san’s smiling, sublime, behind him. “You don’t have to make a scene for the neighbours.”

“You should be worried about the fact that your otouto is choking me to death – “

“You’re talking a surprising amount for someone under threat of strangulation.”

“Some welcome this is – “

“Did you get me a present?!”

“What are you, five?” And yeah, Eijun gets that his behaviour isn’t exactly befitting to a person who, for all intents and purposes, is a fresh graduate on the cusp of taking over his own life as a young working adult, but it’s hard to care, when Mochi-senpai’s back home after weeks, and he’d missed him, and Onii-san’d evidently gone out of the way to arrange to pick him up and they seem okay, they seem good, they share tiny touches with minimal hesitation and Mochi-senpai goes stockstill and gobsmacked when paused mid-tirade after he finds a meagre six cans of Red Bull in the fridge because this is Onii-san’s decree and they squabble about it, harmless, Onii-san following Mochi-senpai into his room as he goes off to freshen up before dinner, and it’s all so wonderful and great and happy and Eijun’s already high off the holiday spirit, and it’s not dampened even when Kazuya acts pouty for a while for the way he’d completely forgotten about him in his rush to go cling to Mochi-senpai’s arm until he’d had to be physically extricated, nor when Mochi-senpai decides to sit down with the platformer Kazuya’d been playing to de-stress and discovered that Kazuya’d changed all his controller settings, just to mess with him.

It’s chaotic, a tornado, but Eijun still feels like he’s in the eye of it, and it’s strange and new for every single one of them, but it’s perfect.
ooookay so. as a person who is very well versed in the art of procrastination, I hope Eijun's sudden spaz-attack didn't feel off to you guys? there've been parts in previous chapters mentioning him sorta winging his schoolwork, and at least for me personally, the true terror only sets in a couple of days (if not THE day) before an actual deadline and then it's just vicious cycle of unhelpful panic and adrenaline rush to get things done /welp (actually tbh I procrastinated on this chapter more than any other BECAUSE I had to talk about procrastination. what even.)

plus, Eijun's just reached a MAJOR milestone in his life (which Kazuya's already been through once, so he's more chill) so I would expect him to freak out but also do his absolute best and work very very hard because that's who Sawamura Eijun is, bless his soul, and I really hope this AU Eijun lives up to our adorable southpaw as well, and that it's consistent with how he's been portrayed thus far too :)

thank you all SO much for reading and sticking to this fic, for all your support and encouragement, y'all have no idea how much I owe you all <3
Chapter Notes

i’m so sorry if this reads poorly or is haphazard T^T I didn't get to spend as much time with this chapter as I hoped and I don't wanna fall behind schedule because I know for a fact I'll get lazy and updates will just get slower OTL

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There are books that touch you, Eijun thinks. Change you. Like it’s something physical, like it reached out of the pages, a being of ink and mulch, and melded itself into your being, altered a part of you so indelibly you’ll never be able to get rid of it. There are books like that, that stun you, flip your world upside down, that you hate and love and love to hate and display in a place of honour in your bookshelf and recommend fervidly to anyone who makes the mistake of asking for suggestions, but you know, in your heart of hearts, that you’re not going to be reading again, because it’s too…too much.

And then there are books that do that same thing, but differently. They shift into your corners, fit into your edges, like they’re a blanket, like they’re giving you a hug. Books which came into your hands brand new, crisp corners, stark, unblemished pages, sharp print, and time goes on and on, and the edges become a little dog-eared, become a little uneven because of how often your fingertips have fit in the same space, over and over, flipping the page to a place you know, a time you’ve already lived and can play out in your sleep but you want to relive, again – read it, and remember, distinctly, where you were when you’d read it the first time, in the train, in your room long past bedtime, on a rainy evening you can still faintly hear, even though it’s not raining anymore – that soft shush of water sinking into grass, that earthy perfume drifting, airy, through the half-open window, the background score to a scene you lived in your head.

It’s like a moment captured in time, a book that’s timeless, that you can probably recite by heart but never tire of reading, again and again and again.

Life, Eijun thinks, should be just like that.

Precious and nostalgic, no matter how many times you’ve gone through the motions, the newness of familiarity, the familiarity of newness –

“…in thought?”

“Hmm?”

“I said,” Kazuya repeats – his voice is a slow drone, chafed and rumbly, and he’ squinting because he doesn’t have his glasses on; unthinking, Eijun’s hands shift from where they’d been rubbing tight circles into Kazuya’s scalp to his forehead, pushing his fringe out of the way, “what’s got you so lost in thought?”

“Oh,” Eijun says – he gives his head a little shake. “Just…books.” He sees Kazuya’s eyes narrow, as though he’s not entirely sure what to make of this answer, “How are you feeling now?”

Kazuya pulls his face into a grimace, like he’s just squeezed a whole lemon in his mouth. “Not so
great,” he grumbles, peeved, and Eijun lets his fingertips skim over Kazuya’s forehead again – it’s a little warm, still. “It’s this awful pounding at the back of my head – “

Eijun makes a sympathetic noise – he’s done his research on migraines. Some of the symptoms are downright terrifying. If Kazuya’s experiencing even a fraction of all the pulsing concentrated pain Eijun’s read of on WebMD, which can, apparently, feel as though your skull is fracturing from within, Eijun thinks Kazuya’s a superhero for even managing to string words together without, like. Crying.

“Is there anything I can do?” he asks, because he really doesn’t know. He knows light can be overstimulating, so the curtains are shut, and so is the bedside lamp, the only illumination in the room the greyish-white rays coming in through the living-room window, feebly reaching over through the open door, watered down and just enough for Eijun to make out Kazuya’s face. Kazuya’s had his meds, and Eijun’s rubbed that eucalyptus oil he’s had his mother procure and mail over into his head, because it’s supposed to be all cooling and remedial and stuff, but at this point he feels he’s exhausted his options.

Kazuya, the back of his neck neatly fitted over the curve of Eijun’s thigh as he substitutes his lap as a pillow, tips his head up at him, considering.

“Well…”

“What?”

“You could…kiss me better, maybe?”

There’s five seconds of disbelieving silence, and then Eijun says, voice flat and unamused, “You’re actually feeling better, aren’t you?”

Kazuya tries – fails – to hide the grin at getting called out. “I’m not feeling entirely better,” he contends – honestly, he’s getting a bit too good at the puppy-dog eyes. That’s Eijun’s thing. He’s not entirely sure how he feels about having his tricks used against him.

Still, Eijun’s not going to give way so easily. “I was worried, you know.”

Kazuya’s hand reaches up, toward his face – Eijun notes the motion is more fluid than it usually is when he’s in the clutches of a particularly bad migraine, like he’d been when they’d woken up this morning – he expects it to feather across his chin, or poke his cheek as Kazuya’s grown so weirdly fond of doing lately, so he’s a bit surprised when it slips past his line of sight, and then it’s curling around the back of his neck.

Pulling him down.

“Sorry,” Kazuya murmurs – Eijun watches as the speckles in his eyes, unimpeded by the thick lenses of his glasses, grow pronounced and visible, the closer he shifts, “But you can’t blame me for wanting to bask in my boyfriend’s attentions, can you?”

His reasoning is laced with a barely-there plea, a request, a tiny question mark seeking permission, and as their noses touch, upside down, and Eijun feels Kazuya’s breath tickle his chin, he thinks, without as much sting as he’d like, that Kazuya really doesn’t play fair a lot of the time.

It’s some minutes later – or is it many minutes? Half an hour? An hour? – and they find themselves lounging – Eijun’d been reading, giving himself a break from all the suspense and intrigue and drama of A Song of Ice and Fire because he thinks he’s suffered enough suspense and intrigue and drama in life what with his university life finishing, and he’d decided to reread A Christmas Carol
to get himself into the seasonal spirit, but he’s foregone the volume for dozing against Kazuya’s shoulder, swimming in and out of lucid thought.

A couple of months ago, he might have considered this a colossal waste of precious, scant time – now, pressed up against each other as they are, lazy and warm and with nowhere to be tomorrow or the next day or the next, it’s like Eijun’s mind has still to absorb this concept – all this time, all this freedom to do whatever he likes with it, and largely without consequence. It still feels unreal.

“Are you gonna keep working at the bookstore?” he asks, eventually, in one of those pockets where he’s aware of where he is and what date it is and what time it is, the fact that they should probably start thinking about brunch or lunch or something to settle empty stomachs.

Kazuya’s response is sleepy-slow, but cheeky. “Why? You gonna miss the special service you get with me there?”

Eijun swats at his shoulder. “Seriously,” he says, hefting himself up on his elbow and straightening up, ignoring Kazuya’s overly exaggerated yowl of pain, “are you?”

Eijun rolls to his front, propping himself up on folded arms, and Kazuya falls on to his back. “I think – I’ll stay awhile,” is what he says, ultimately, eyes drifting to the ceiling – mapping out a future out of the amorphous opportunities coalescing, shapeless, somewhere ahead. It’s so weird – this…transitional phase. This twilight zone between one absolute and the next. “At least, I mean, until graduation…I’ll need to cite my references and grades for a full-time gig anyway."

Humming at the logic, Eijun props his elbow on the mattress again, resting his chin in his palm. “What kind of job would you be looking for, then? Do you wanna work in like…those fancy restaurants?” While Eijun can’t say he’s been to that many fancy restaurants – that kind of stuff isn’t conducive on a student budget – he still gets a bit awed at all that classy finesse of some of the finer places Onii-san or Mochi-senpai’d occasionally treat them to on special occasions.

Kazuya emits a soft snort. Reaching over, he coaxes Eijun toward him, tugging at his upper arm and pulling until Eijun huffs out an amused breath and relents, letting himself get dragged half atop Kazuya, head finding home against his chest. “No way. I don’t fancy living under the thumb of some Gordon Ramsey or Kataoka Tesshin any more than I’ve had to – the standards for those places are unreal.”

“That bad, huh?”

Eijun feels Kazuya nod, his jaw touching down on the crown of Eijun’s head. “Everything has to be particular, and just so. It’s…I don’t know. I don’t think I’d enjoy cooking in those conditions, day in and out running some kind of…conveyor belt of food. And the working hours are brutal. I rather like my free time and general ability to still enjoy life.”

Laughing softly at the dry worked-up distaste in Kazuya’s tone, Eijun lifts himself a little so he can make eye-contact with him. “So then where? A small café? Or like, one of those bakeries?” Kazuya’s evidently got a knack for desserts, Eijun thinks, and somehow imagining him in a quaint little patisserie with dainty little sweets and pastries on display makes Eijun smile. It feels right.

“Maybe,” Kazuya shrugs, jostling them both. He flashes a small smile at Eijun, “the ideal job would be someplace with reasonable hours and a reasonable workload – I mean, I don’t mind working hard, culinary arts isn’t exactly easy but… I don’t wanna miss out on life because of it either, if that makes sense.” A hand touches down at the base of Eijun’s spine, smoothing over the curve of his back and nestling, soft, into his hair, “I think I would miss this too much, for starters.”
Eijun exhaled a shuddery laugh.

He thinks about books he’s read umpteen times and will read dozens of times more and never tire of, and murmurs “Yeah” as he gives in to the gentle pressure of Kazuya’s hand at the back of his head, and leans in for a kiss.

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They – Harucchi, Onii-san and Eijun – had all decided to spend Christmas in Tokyo this year. There’s a bunch of reasons, a list Eijun’s starting to get very articulate at reciting for all the number of times he’s had to repeat it to Wakana and his parents and his granddad – it’s everything from a campaign Onii-san’s company is running cutting a bit too close to the holiday period, to the fact that Mochi-senpai has to leave almost right after the break for the beginning of his match season and it’s not practical bringing him back to Nagano and unacceptable to simply leave him here – It’s his first Christmas as Onii-san’s official boyfriend! is what he’d wound up blurting at Harucchi’s mum, when she’d given up on both her sons and called him up to try and convince the whole lot of them to come back home.

It’s all of those reasons, and then some, but the one that bears the most heavily on Eijun’s mind is the one he finds himself trying to explain to his mother via the Skype call Wakana’d helped her set up.

“I mean, neither of them has said anything about it, but,” Eijun shrugs, a little, “…I think it might be our last Christmas at that flat.”

“Ahhhh, are they going to move in together?” his mother hushes, her breath an excitable whisper – her eyes, big and brown and bright, are visibly sparkling even through the sketchy video resolution. Eijun spies Wakana over her shoulder, chortling into her hand, and has to struggle not to roll his eyes.

“Like I said, they’ve not said anything about it,” Eijun reiterates, shaking his head, both at his inability to be articulate, and at how obvious it is that he’s inherited his mother’s penchant for being a hopeless romantic. “But…I mean it would make sense, right? And besides, even if they don’t want to yet, they’re probably going to eventually, and it’s going to be awkward if they have to factor me into the whole thing…I mean, what if they delay the decision because they’re like, Who’s going to look after Eijun.”

“You can look after yourself,” his mother combats, immediate and firm and with a none-too-discreet dash of maternal pride, and Eijun can’t help the grin taking over his face at that.

“Thank you.” he says, emphatic, gesturing grandly at the screen as though he’s presenting it to an invisible live audience, “That’s exactly what I keep telling them. But they’re both a bit – very – protective.”

“You should be grateful they care about you so much – “

“I do,” Eijun cuts his mother off before she tips over from asserting her faith in her son to nagging him at his perceived ungratefulness, as she’s wont to do pretty often, “I do. I’m trying to be considerate by trying to move out in the first place. It makes their lives easier when they decide to finally make the move and besides – it doesn’t make sense, me staying on. I’m gonna be working and earning my keep soon, and Mochi-senpai’s literally becoming more and more of a celebrity… how long is he gonna have to split living costs with a graduate?”

“It doesn’t count as splitting living costs with a graduate if said graduate is basically his future
brother-in-law,” Wakana chimes, a bit faint because she’s too far from the laptop’s microphone, and Eijun’s mum giggles.

“My point is,” Eijun stresses, trying to revert the two females to the topic at hand rather than marriage plans Harucchi’s mum might have accidentally alluded to in her last phone call, which’d left Eijun feeling that maybe work isn’t the only reason Onii-san’s avoiding going home this year, “between this December and December next year, I’m pretty sure either or both of us won’t be in that flat anymore. And who knows where we’ll end up by then? It might be…I don’t know. Our last chance to spend the holiday together like this.”

He’s speaking sense, he knows this, and he knows his mother knows this, judging by the pufferfish impression she’s doing. Eijun just raises an eyebrow and waits for her to get tired of holding her breath.

“Oooh, but I was so looking forward to having you kids over this year,” she finally rushes out, with the heady speed of someone with very little oxygen in their system; she actually looks miserable, and Eijun has to remind himself that this is how she wrangles her way with his dad over every little thing so he doesn’t fall for it too, “And I thought we could finally meet Miyuki-kun!”

There’s a laugh at this, but not from Eijun – Eijun glances up in the direction of the kitchen, and sure enough, Kazuya’s there, leaning against the doorjamb, and who knows how much of all this travesty he’s already heard.

Eijun covers the webcam with his palm, motions at him to shh, and puts on his best persuasive voice. “I know, Mum, we wanted to come back too, but you know how it is, right? It’s not just this – my exams finished so late that there’s a ton of stuff I need to take care of at home, like the bills and stuff, and the landlord’s going to come over for the end-of-year inspection, and Mochi-senpai’s going to be away playing in the prelims so one of us has to be around for all of that – ” He makes a pleading face at Wakana, but she helpfully ignores him, “Besides, we’ll come after New Year’s! All of us together!”

His mother, being his mother, pouts, crestfallen. “You’re not even spending New Year’s here…”

“That’d be my fault, Sawamura-san,” Eijun’s head darts up to look over his laptop screen just in time to see Kazuya meander around the coffee-table, Eijun shuffling to the side to make space for him. “I have work on the eve, so…”

“Ah, Miyuki-kun! How are you?” Wakana’s grinning in the background again, and Eijun would protest the double-standards of this thoroughly one-eighty switch in attitude if he’d not already seen the way his mother’d perked up the other two or three times Kazuya’d sat in on a Skype session.

“I’m alright,” Kazuya says, with easy charm, and Eijun, knowing he’d not possess a quarter of that composure in a similar situation, vents by surreptitiously reaching under the table and pinching him in the side. To Kazuya’s credit, he barely flinches. “I hope you’re doing well?”

They get into the swing of it, Wakana worming her way into the conversation too, and somehow all three of them opt to forget that Eijun’s literally sitting right there – especially his mother, who’s apparently forgotten all her heartbreak over not having her only child at her side for Christmas, judging by all her gusto – and Eijun just spectates, nursing his stung disbelief and only getting in one-word protests when his mother says things like, “Thank you for looking after my son, Miyuki-kun, I know he can be a bit hopeless sometimes…”

It makes Kazuya laugh, which in turn makes Eijun dourly glare into the side of his head. “I assure
you,” he says, amiable and warm; he twinkles a little at Eijun as he says the next bit, “it’s the other way around.”

This just gets his mother to go all googly-eyed and gushing at how kind and well-mannered Kazuya is and how much she’s looking forward to having him over, and by the time the call is over, Eijun’s slumped against the leg of one Kazuya’s armchairs.

“Preferential treatment,” he gasps, broken and a bit theatrical, “My own mother.”

Kazuya laughs, crawling up to where he is. He nudges Eijun’s legs apart until there’s enough space for him in between them.

“She’s sweet,” he says, after a while.

“She’s bipolar,” Eijun scowls, not meaning it.

Kazuya laughs a little again, light. “She’s…like you.”

“Are you calling me bipolar!?”

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It takes a bit of convincing and some more play-fighting for Kazuya to ‘convince’ Eijun that he’d not, in fact, called him bipolar, and then some to encourage him to heave himself into Kazuya’s lap and cuddle.

“You all are already so insufferable and you’ve not even met in person yet,” Eijun’s still grumbling, just for the sake of – he’s got the side of his cheek pressed into Kazuya’s shoulder, the ends of Kazuya’s hair brushing the tip of his nose, “I don’t know what it’s going to be like with my mother fangirling over you every twenty seconds when you’re actually there.”

Kazuya’s chuckle is deep, more felt than heard – Eijun’s eyes shutter a bit as he feels the vibrations sink through him. “Shouldn’t you be glad she likes me?”

Eijun grunts.

There’s a pause, and Kazuya says, “…I am. It’s…nice.”

And it sounds like he wants to say more, but doesn’t.

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Christmas Eve is the night of the concert.

It’s also the night that Eijun unequivocally decides that symphony orchestras are the best thing in the world and he’s been missing out on life and he needs to make up for his gross underappreciation of classical music and he’s going to add The Blue Danube to his playlist the minute he gets home.

“I could feel it,” he’s telling Kazuya, wide-eyed, the goosebumps still cold and prickly against his skin, his breathing shallow, “inside my bones?!”

Kazuya – who’d probably been as pink-faced and bright-eyed through the entire duration of the performances – chuckles at him.

“Mhmmm.”
“It was like…” Eijun lets the last of his air rush out of him, replaying in his head – the sounds, the sights, the ambience – the amphitheatre-like interior with its raised, upholstered seats and the intricate chandeliers and sconces bathing everything in muted soft gold had initially cowed Eijun a bit, because he’s always a bit fidgety in crowds and places where his clumsiness tends to naturally exacerbate, and he’d thought, in a panicky little bubble, that it’s even worse than juggling an armload of snacks in a rowdy movie theatre because look at the people here, look at them, decked up in what they’d deemed appropriate enough for the semi-formal dress-code specified in their tickets –

But then the lights had fallen, the rows of brass and percussion and string on stage lit up, and Eijun honestly couldn’t have cared less if he’d been wearing the wrong coloured tie anymore.

“Magic,” he finishes, breathless and exuberant and not, as he normally would, feeling like an idiot for getting so excited – yes, the musical scores of iconic movies still make him a little weepy when they swell in over scenes, but watching it made, in front of his eyes, like he’s getting to see the insides of some gigantic organism working together in harmony, a living, breathing beast, pieces moving and retreating like clockwork – it’s so humbling, it’s like sorcery, Eijun wants to go back and see it again, and again, and again, and he’s not ashamed of losing his shit, because he knows Kazuya understands what he means. Kazuya relates.

Kazuya, who’s been watching him with dancing lights in his eyes and a smile that’s as pretty as everything that’d wrecked Eijun’s senses in that hall.

And that – just knowing they’re on the same wavelength on this, that there’s someone else who gets all these hard to verbalise, hard to expound feelings, is even more amazing.

“I’m just…wow,” he says, very intelligently, some fifteen minutes later when he still hasn’t managed to get his vocabulary back together. They’re walking down the sidewalk, hands linked together, because the pavements are thronging with people and it’s hard to stick together when you’re constantly getting jostled – it’s the night before Christmas, and the last minute shoppers and early party-goers have evidently pooled all the way out into the streets. The roads are gridlocked, the station is probably going to be an overcrowded nightmare, and Eijun can’t bring himself to care.

He thinks Kazuya can’t either. “I’m pretty wow-ed myself,” he says, with definitely more composure than Eijun – but that light hasn’t left his eye, that smile hasn’t left his face, and Eijun can feel the way he’s buzzing, because as much as Eijun’d adored every moment of it, he’s still a noob at this music business, and Kazuya’s a lover of the craft. “It was…incredible.”

The soft awe in his voice just stokes the elation in Eijun higher. “I’m glad,” he says, unable to tamp down his own grin, and doesn’t even shirk away when Kazuya leans into him a little in public to nuzzle his hair.

“It was perfect,” he whispers, dipping his mouth down by Eijun’s ear – his breath feels a lot warmer after the cold air nipping at his lobe, and he shivers, unsure if it’s because of the sudden blast of heat or something in the quality of Kazuya’s voice. “It was…beyond anything I’d expected. Thank – ”

Eijun ducks out of Kazuya’s side, wrings his hand free. “What have we discussed about saying that?” he half-scolds, half-jokes, an arm’s length away, giddy from the lingering high and grinning off of it.

Kazuya concedes, chuckles as he draws him back, and says instead, “…I love you.”
It just makes Eijun smile harder. It just makes the buzzing in his veins grow stronger, like his blood is static, like his body is thumping with more sensation than he can contain. “I know,” he chirrups, and sniggers when Kazuya gapes, clearly not expecting the response.

***

“Need help?” Eijun ambles into the kitchen, unable to stem the smile that bites at his lips the moment he spies the hideous sweater Kazuya’s got on under his apron – it’s dirt-coloured, knitted with patterns of what Eijun imagines are meant to be reindeers and look like demon-goats instead, and were a present from Mochi-senpai, because I thought of you as soon as I saw it.

Kazuya’d thanked him so sincerely no one could have been faulted for questioning Kazuya’s tastes and/or sanity, pulling on the atrocity with disturbing enthusiasm, and had his payback by presenting the shortstop a package of handmade matcha-flavoured mochi, with little angry faces drawn in on them eerily reminiscent of Senpai’s signature scowl.

“Mm, can you check if the sprouts are boiled enough?”

“Okay ~”

“Look at you two, being all domestic,” comes a drawl from the doorway some minutes later – Mochi-senpai’d evidently contented himself enough test-running all the dated video games Eijun’d got him on his old PlayStation for the time being, making his way over to the counter and peeking in at what they were up to.

Kazuya plays right along. “Aren’t we adorable,” he coos, slinging an arm around Eijun – who’s wearing a beanie with antler-ears, because Kazuya apparently has some sort of weakness for him in headwear and got him an assortment of animal-eared knits because they’re so cute that Eijun’s never going to be able to wear in public, like ever.

Mochi-senpai makes a retching noise, and Harucchi pops out from behind him, going, “Say cheese!” and snaps a picture.

It’s when Onii-san’s finally arrived – Why are you working on CHRISTMAS DAY? No, I don’t care, if you don’t come over right now I’m calling your mum and telling on you – that things mellow down to a slightly less chaotic timbre.

It’s also when Eijun uses the relative isolation of the kitchen to bring up something that’s been bugging him since he’d woken up that morning.

“Kazuya,” he hems, waiting until he’s straightened up from bending to inspect the roast in the oven – the burnt aroma of spices has sedated even Mochi-senpai to be slightly less belligerent. Or maybe it’s the fact that Onii-san’d bought them matching cuff-links and Eijun’d almost died because omg I didn’t even know Onii-san could be so cute?! Harucchi, take a picture! “um. Did…did your dad call?”

He watches Kazuya closely, and tentatively decides he doesn’t appear put-off by the question.

“…no,” he says, and Eijun’s heart drops a little, catching against his ribs, when Kazuya continues, “but…then again I don’t remember us celebrating Christmas back then so…” Eijun eyes him as he shrugs off the rest of that sentence. He’d…not seemed surprised by Eijun bringing it up. In fact, he’d looked a bit…reflective. Introspective, even.

Like the thought’d already been there in his head.
“Do you wanna text him then?”

*Now* Kazuya looks surprised. “Eh?” he blinks. “I mean…I don’t think he expects…”

“Maybe not,” Eijun agrees, a bit too hurried – it’s still touchy territory, this, and Eijun’s instincts make him want to tiptoe and fast-forward through it at the same time, “but, I mean…if you want to…”

Kazuya lapses into silence – Kazuya fills it in by lifting the covers off of a steaming pot of peas soaking in butter and stirring the gravy even though it’s done.

So Eijun hedges his bets and prods him. “…do you?”

The noise of Mochi-senpai’s video games and the sound of Harucchi trying to Skype-call their families in Nagano feel like they belong in a different building, rather than the room next door.

Finally, Kazuya lets out a small little, “*Heh.*”

It’s self-conscious, and it tells Eijun everything he needs to know even before Kazuya spells it out – “I…did think about it for a bit, yeah.”

“Then you should do it,” Eijun says. He thinks about the patchy, awkward text messages that’d been exchanged between the two of them since Kazuya’s birthday, pictures sent without context and the kind of stiff, overly-formal snippets Eijun’d started getting when Harucchi’s dad first got Line and before Harucchi intervened with the basics of Texting 101 – he says, “if you want to, you should do it.”

Kazuya pulls off his mitts, slow, and stuffs them, absentmindedly, into the pocket of the apron he’d brought over, along with the amalgam of kitchenware they’d needed for a traditional Christmas dinner, like the set of carving knives he’d gifted Onii-san, waiting to be unwrapped and christened later in the evening.

“I could text him, yeah,” Kazuya says, slow – it’s like he’s speaking to an invisible reflection of himself, so Eijun stays quiet, hopes he can find his resolve – “It’s just that…”

“Just that?”

“I’ve been thinking,” he says, in a strange sort of tone – like the thing he’d wanted to say had come out with the wrong words, and now he’s struggling to make do with the ones he’s got, “I’ve…I mean. Okay we text once in a blue moon but and it’s just…pleasantries…”

Kazuya looks at Eijun then, and it’s not the absentminded, spaced-out look Eijun’d expected, because he knows that Kazuya’s default means of dealing with something that troubles or upsets him is to internalise it – he’s really *looking* at Eijun, intent, like he’s looking for something amiss, like he’s searching for a specific…*something*, and Eijun doesn’t know what it is and can’t do anything but helplessly stare back.

That is, until Kazuya snaps himself out of it.

And for a split second, Eijun thinks this is Kazuya retreating again. That this is Kazuya shutting the tiny gap of a window of possibility.

But then Kazuya’s moved past him, over to the counter ledge separating the kitchen from the living-room area, and he leans over it, calling out, “Haruichi? Could you please text me the picture you took of us just now?”
Harucchi looks intrigued by the request, but nods, and pulls out his phone to fiddle with it, and it probably takes barely a second for Kazuya’s phone to ping as it receives the photo, but it’s packed with the same, drawn-out suspense of dropping something breakable and knowing it’s going to smash into the ground and shatter and you won’t be able to catch it in time.

“What are you doing,” Eijun asks, and his voice is quick with panic because a part of him already knows the answer.

Kazuya’s movements are decisive, fingers deft as he types. He doesn’t answer until he’s done, and it’s probably just another handful of seconds that goes by, but Eijun’s on the verge of hyperventilating. “I’m introducing you to my father.”

“Oh,” Eijun hears himself say, a bit anticlimactically – it’s like his thoughts have transcended to a different dimension than that of his body, away from the havoc this pronouncement’s likely to have kickstarted – the voice inside his head is entirely too clear and too even to sound like it belongs to him.

It tells him that this had to happen eventually. It tells him that this was inevitable. If Kazuya and his dad were edging toward some kind of reconciliation – then this was fated from the start.

This is just…sudden, is all. It’s really – abrupt. Unexpected. Eijun’d not even had the time to go over each of the worries he has had about this eventuality; he’d dumped them in the backseat, because the priority was Kazuya’s emotional position on this, and that’s what Eijun’d focused on –

But now…but now…

Eijun’s the one that ends up spacing out, and it takes Kazuya to take the two steps between them to give him a strong, hard squeeze. “Hey. Hey. No freaking out. It’s fine.”

Eijun lets out a sound composed purely of nerves and hysteria. “It’s fine,” he parrots, echoing strangely in his own ears, “i-it…you just took me by surprise.”

Kazuya’s staring down at him, almost stern. Earnest. He cups his hand under Eijun’s chin to urge him to meet that stare head-on.

“It’s okay,” he says, soft, urgent, voice a balm, sounding like solace, “it’s okay, Eijun. It doesn’t matter what he thinks or says – it doesn’t change anything. I love you. That’s why…I need to know.”

“Hey, if you two are done canoodling in there, can we eat?”

Chapter End Notes

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okay first off please forgive me if I'm a bit late getting back to your guys - I've got a work event over the weekend and for some reason they picked this unsociable lazy potato to be part of the ground team - but I'll absolutely get back to you as soon as I can and just want to reiterate how MUCH your support's meant to me <3 :) ILY
“You’re still worrying.”

Eijun doesn’t jump – he’d sensed Kazuya getting up a couple of seconds after him from where they’d all decided to make themselves comfortable watching *A Nightmare Before Christmas*, and while a part of him had been tempted to just leg it into the bathroom and lock himself in there till he gets his nerves straight, he thinks that wouldn’t be of much help. He can make out the faint notes of Jack Skellington singing “What’s this? What’s this? There’s colour everywhere” before the rest of the lyrics are barred out by the door Kazuya gently shuts behind them.

“I’m fi – “

“You’re not,” Kazuya cuts him off. His jaw’s stern, and he’s got his arms crossed – and he’d been frowning, but the frown morphs into something else as Eijun averts his eyes at being so cleanly caught out. “Eijun. Hey.”

A warm palm, calloused from heedlessly grabbing scorching pans or scooping piping hot morsels into plates with bare hands, presses into his cheek. Eijun breathes in deep, and finds his own hand levitating off his side to go keep Kazuya’s company.

“I told you, right?” Kazuya is saying – his voice is soft-tongued, like it’s made out of the marshmallow fluff they’d dumped atop their hot chocolate; satiny and powdery sweet, “You don’t have to worry. It’s not like I need his permission or his approval…I’ve not needed either for a long time. I don’t care.”

Eijun knows he means it. Eijun also knows it’s not *strictly* true.

So he says, with a small, shuddery little laugh, “I care, though. A little bit.”

Kazuya looks bemused. Eijun supposes he’d not exactly made his meaning very clear.

“You decided to tell him because…if he’s not…okay, with us – “ his throat runs dry at the worst possible time, sunburnt sand and dry-cracked earth; he can feel the digits of Kazuya’s fingers flex just a trifle, and pushes himself to hurry, “you…you didn’t wanna take it any further with him, until you knew if he was okay with us, right?”

Kazuya’s lips are an almost-straight line, but the hardness in his eyes is like light behind frosted glass. Blurry and distorted, but there.

“It doesn’t matter if he’s okay with us or not,” is what he finally says – whispers, really, as though he’s afraid he might shout if he tries to speak any louder, “he doesn’t have any say in my life. It’s not going to change anything.”

And Eijun knows he means it. Eijun’d have known even without the intensity with which Kazuya’s
stare is boring into his, without the way he drifts into Eijun’s space and shares his air with him, lets
their breaths mix and coalesce, inseparable.

Eijun knows that whatever Kazuya’s dad thinks of this, of two guys dating, of them – it’s not going
to change what they are. It’s…humbling, really. The conviction is a real, tangible thing, in his
blood, in his bones, in every heartbeat – he knows that they’re more than just two people linked
by…by mutual feelings of affection, whatever you want to call it. They’re more than people
standing side by side, holding hands.

They overlap, they’re colours that have blended together to make something entirely new, they’re
milk chocolate instead of dark, they’re coffee with cream instead of pure black, and it’s humbling,
because a version of himself in the past wouldn’t have been able to think like this, or feel like this,
but this version of him, the present him, the one standing here in his stupid beanie with one of the
felt antlers drooping, nose-to-nose with Kazuya in his ugly sweater, can.

It’s humbling, that this isn’t what worries Eijun.

“If he…minds,” he says, picking words like he’s toeing around landmines; he winds his arms
around Kazuya, half to keep him anchored, half to anchor himself, “we’re going to…we’re going to
try convince him, right?”

Kazuya’s head tips down so fast his chin almost crashes into Eijun’s forehead – it catches the top
of his head instead, blow softened by the wool of his beanie.

“Convince him?” he asks, like Eijun’s just spoken to him in Dothraki.

The extreme absurdity of the words he’s about to say weigh self-consciously on his tongue, but he
pushes them out. “To…you know.” He chews at his lip, before blurting, in a distinctly smaller
voice, “Like me.”

Kazuya gawks at him.

It doesn’t help his frazzled-out nerves.

“I mean, I don’t know how we’d do it,” he blubbers, defensive, choosing to lean his forehead
against Kazuya’s chest instead of the more gruelling option of looking him in the eye, “I just. Don’t
want this to get in way.”

He doesn’t specify what he’s scared of getting in the way of, but he’s certain Kazuya can read in
between the lines.

Kazuya doesn’t say anything for a while – Eijun listens to him breathe, the short, quick exhales of
surprise petering out to longer, even draws of air.

Eventually, he says, the words rumbling through his chest and against the side of Eijun’s face
pressed into it, “…you’d actually be willing to do that?”

Eijun makes a disgruntled noise. “Is it wrong if I want him to?” As an accusatory afterthought, he
adds, “My mum’s besotted with you. And you said…that it’s. Nice.”

Angling his head up ever so slightly, he catches the twitch of Kazuya’s mouth as a corner of it
hikes up. “It is,” he admits, quietly. His voice is deep - the kind of sound that feels absolute, yet
depthless. “But…it’s a bit. Different. Y’know?” he braces his hands at the sides of Eijun’s face,
slanting up so they’re face to face again. “You…knew you could tell them. And they’d accept it.
But…” his lids flicker shut, and it’s like something fluctuates, like…a sudden ripple across still
water, a song faltering halfway. “I don’t know what to expect. I don’t know how he thinks, if he’s…conservative in his beliefs, if he’s more open-minded. I don’t know if I even really want him to be…more involved. If it’ll be worth it.”

There’s a bittersweet tang to the smile Kazuya gives him.

It makes Eijun ache.

“It’ll be worth it if that’s what makes you happy,” he says, quiet; he preoccupies himself with picking at some lint sticking out against the deformed-looking reindeer of Kazuya’s sweater, because this sort of thing never gets any less embarrassing to say out loud.

This time Kazuya’s laughter is a lot less surprised – it’s mellow and whispery, fine snow dissipating in the wind.

“You’re incredible, you know,” he murmurs, suddenly. It catches Eijun off-guard, and distracts him from his efforts to distinguish the sweater-reindeers’ heads from their limbs.

“Huh?”

“You. Are. Incredible.” Kazuya breathes again, warm and almost…reverent, the gold in his brown eyes twinkling. The praise sinks through Eijun’s skin and warms his bones, bright and honeyed – it makes him tighten up, because compliments from Kazuya never fail to pump a shot of euphoria straight into his bloodstream. “Things like this…things that stress you out so much. You freak out and yet you run straight toward it.”

Eijun blinks a moment. “That…makes me sound like a cockroach?”

His heart buzzes when this makes Kazuya laugh – a genuine, full-bodied chuckle he feels quiver through him. Looping his hand around Kazuya’s forearm, he brings them to sit at the edge of his bed.

“As hilarious as the imagery is, that’s not what I meant,” Kazuya clarifies, a grin still lingering as he does – he taps a forefinger against Eijun’s nose, and sniggers again when this makes him go a little cross-eyed, “I meant…it doesn’t matter if it’s difficult. If it terrifies you. You don’t run away. I’ve…I have avoided speaking to my father for…years, because I didn’t know how. I didn’t know what I would say, what he would say, what either of us wanted or expected…” he slows down, and as he looks at Eijun, he lets out an almost wondering laugh, “…and yet, here you are, saying you’re going to convince a person you’ve never met before to like you. For…me.”

Having it spelled out to him cranks up the knob of his self-consciousness – it maxes out, and Eijun, face steaming, heatedly stutters, “W-well, why else would I do it?!”

The smile Kazuya gives him then – it’s brighter than all the fairy-lights Eijun’s spent the night before stringing around their compact, foot-tall Christmas tree, until the plasticky foliage had barely even been visible.

“And that is why,” Kazuya confides – brings Eijun’s hands up to his lips and steals his breath away as he presses them between his knuckles, light nearly-nothing touches that still get his heart reeling, “I can tell him something like this in the first place. Because…if there’s one thing I think my father and I can both relate to….” Kazuya drops a final kiss into the centre of Eijun’s palm, and wraps his fingers around it like it’s a keepsake, “It would be this.”

And he doesn’t say anything more, but that’s okay – Eijun gets it.
When Kazuya’s phone vibrates near the end of the movie – the run-time had been indefinitely extended because Mochi-senpai’d insisted on pausing and closely interrogating them on what, exactly, they’d gone off to do (“That’s for us to know and you to find out, right Eijun ~?” “…Kazuya, WHY.”) – he holds it over where both their knees are brushing together so Eijun can read too.

“You look happy”

Eijun’s eye flicks up toward the picture, sees it for the first time – sees the broad grin on Kazuya’s face as he shamelessly riles up Mochi-senpai, sees himself, pink and reluctant with Kazuya’s arm slung around him but smiling anyway, and he thinks this is the first candid anyone’s ever taken of them, and thinks, further inside his head, in one of those alcoves where all the background operations keep running when something bigger and more critical is happening front and centre, that he needs to get a copy of it.

Kazuya types, Yes.
Types, Very
Bubble.
Bubble.

“That I am happy too”

***

“What are you thinking,” Kazuya murmurs close by his ear – Eijun’s got his face smothered in the curve of Kazuya’s shoulder, and he’d not even resurfaced to peek into the Sally and Jack scene he’d always loved before the credits rolled.

Eijun lets out a little groan. “I can’t believe,” he whines, “you sent him a picture of me in a stupid reindeer hat.”

Kazuya bursts out laughing and Eijun doesn’t even bother helping him explain himself to the other three.

***

“Salt and pepper.”
“Coffee and cream.”
“Mac and cheese?”
“Mnhmm…um, cheese and wine.”

Eijun scans their surroundings for inspiration – the slightly faulty wheel of their shopping cart clacks as it catches uneven edges of tile. His eyes land on the snack aisle, and he triumphantly declares, “Sour cream and onion.”

Kazuya raises his eyebrows, not missing the trajectory of his attention. “Salt and vinegar,” he smoothly ripostes, picking up on it too.

“No fair,” Eijun whines – he parks the cart to the side, parallel to the canned goods aisle Kazuya’s drawn up to; he makes a mental note of the brand of the baking soda Kazuya picks up – which,
he’s learnt, as a diligent disciple, is not the same as baking powder – and stows it away along with his recently acquired knowledge of how to tell if bananas are overripe and which cans of tomato sauce are likely to spoil faster because they don’t come in re-sealable packaging. “Um. Peanut butter and jelly, hah!”

Kazuya shoots him a semi-amused, semi-challenging smirk, and quips, “Oreos and milk.”

“Cookies and cream!”

“Sugar and spice and everything nice.”

Eijun lets out a noise of protest so loud he alarms a shop assistant as they turn the corner into the frozen produce section. “That doesn’t count!”

Kazuya drawls. “Oh? I thought we were just doing word associations?”

“We were doing word associations of pairs, not the recipe to create the perfect little girl!”

The twist of Kazuya’s lips is mischief-heavy – it equal parts annoys and excites Eijun. “Well, it’s not like there are any rules so…”

Eijun can’t argue with that. Eijun can’t even remember what had triggered this in the first place – they’d just been strolling down the supermarket, Eijun pushing the cart and wheedling with Kazuya to let him climb inside and wheel him round the store Just once, Kazuya, pleeeeeease – Thanks but I’d rather not get banned from coming to the closest supermarket to my house – and one of them had said something like, You know how you can’t think of some things without the other? Bacon and eggs, or…butter and toast, garlic-bread, ginger-biscuit… and it’d somehow transitioned into some on-the-fly game –

That Eijun’s determined not to lose.

“Fine then,” he grouses, staring around hard at the rows of freezers stocked with frosted-up veggies and fruits; he catches Kazuya reach for the berries section and blurts, “Strawberries, cherries and the angels kissing spring!”

The side-eye he gets from Kazuya is definitely surprised – and definitely impressed, too, Eijun thinks a bit smugly. It’s not a song he’s heard Kazuya play before, but at least it means Eijun’s not completely hapless when it comes to old-timey music. He knows a thing or two.

What he’d not been expecting is for Kazuya to hum, very softly, the next line.

“My summer-wine is really made from all these things…” He tips his head at Eijun a little, his eyebrows lifted, as though he were cueing him, and Eijun scrambles to recollect what comes after that –

“Take off your silver spurs, and help me pass the time…”

“And I will give to you, my summer-wine.”

“Ooooh-ooool, summer wine ~” Eijun regales, grand and with more vocal flourish than he has the talent for, and it gets Kazuya giggling so hard he gets teary-eyed.

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When Kazuya’s back at work, and Eijun’s trying to fill up his sudden abundance of free time with *Stranger Things* and that one *Dracula* inspired novel Onii-san’d given him over Christmas – *It’s a great work of literature and deserves to be appreciated for its worth*, is the note tucked inside, though Eijun takes it with a grain of salt because that’s also pretty much in the same vein of what Onii-san’d told him when he’d been tricked into reading *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and *Gone Girl* – he comes across a pair of keychains in one of the stores he’s ambling through searching for mementoes to bring home to Nagano.

He presents them to Kazuya with a broad, pleased-as-punch grin.

“This one’s for you,” he says, tossing the salt-shaker shaped thing at Kazuya – the crystal-like granules meant to imitate salt rattle at the motion. Holding up the one with the darker crumbs, resembling tiny particles of charcoal more than pepper, he finishes, “and this one’s for me!”

He waits, beaming, because he thinks it’s one of the cleverest little things – a physical token of an inside joke only the two of them get.

Kazuya looks like he’s debating calling Eijun out for not managing to curb the impulse-buying again – he’d made Eijun promise not to spend any more money *spoiling me, you’re my boyfriend not my sugar daddy* after he’d unwrapped the pricey customisable coffee-machine complete with ground beans that’d been Eijun’s Christmas treat to him (Eijun doesn’t see how Kazuya gets to complain when his present to Eijun had been a proper authentic replica of Kylo Ren’s crossguard lightsaber, *on top* of all those hats) – but he considers the soft-plastic toy in his palm awhile, and then gets to his feet.

“I think I have something that’ll go with that.” He takes the pepper-shaker from Eijun’s hand, and comes back with it attached to a key.

“So that…you know,” he hems, having handed it over to a now very quiet Eijun, “You can come over whenever you want and stay as long as you want, and not have to wait for me to be around.”

***

By the time Eijun’s recovered from the shock, he manages to jest, if only to cover how *winded* this’d left him – the tiny little scrap of metal on his palm feels infinitely heavier than he’d have imagined it to, but the weight somehow *grounds* him, even when his heart’s soaring somewhere in the clouds, “Are you sure this isn’t going to be a problem? Like, I might never leave?”

Kazuya chuckles. Eijun, leaning into his side with Kazuya’s arm languidly curved round him, his head on Kazuya’s shoulder, shakes along with him because of the contact.

“I don’t see how that’s a problem?”

Eijun thinks it’s ironic how he’s the one consuming copious amounts of shoujo manga, yet Kazuya gets away with spewing lines like *that.*

***

“I don’t see why you’re wasting time on this,” Eijun doesn’t bother turning around at this, hand lifting out of habit to push his hair out of the way and coming into contact with his bare forehead – he remembers the hairclip he’d stolen from Kazuya’d dresser when they’d been cooking earlier is probably still clinging to his hair, “You already *have* a job.”

“It’s conditional,” Eijun repeats, for maybe the twelfth time – he makes a note of a number and an email address in the notepad he’s got open beside him, “…and I might have failed my exams.”
“You didn’t fail,” Kazuya objects, and it’s a testimony to how much patience he has that it’s only now he’s starting to sound exasperated.

“We won’t know until the reports come out.”

He feels Kazuya move in behind him – hears the thump of him lowering himself heavily into the ground. Knees nudge at the backs of his thighs as Kazuya wiggles his legs in under Eijun’s.

“I wish you’d give yourself more credit than that,” is what Kazuya eventually sighs, against his ear. It’s a little weary, and it dispels enough of the panic-cloud which’d decided to infect Eijun’s mind this morning to make way for the guilt.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbles, and he really does mean it – he knows he gets on everyone’s nerves with his constant sanity-chipping paranoia, but it’s just…he hates being idle. He hates not having something to do. His brain gets restless, and with nothing to pick at and puzzle over, no concrete goal ahead of him, it floods all the empty spaces with imagined worries and exaggerated fears to keep him occupied. It’s this terrible vicious cycle, some personal time-loop – if he’s got something to do, he worries. If he doesn’t have something to do, he worries even more. “I’m just…panicking. I’m always panicking, so this is really a way to keep myself distracted so I don’t start hearing voices in my head or something.”

Eijun listens to Kazuya breathing, just by his ear, and lets himself focus on that, lets it lull him – until Kazuya decides to bite his earlobe, that is.

“Ouch – “

“If it’s a distraction you’re looking for,” he hears, and goes stock-still, because Kazuya’s breath is hot, and it blasts into the whorl of his ear like steam, and then it’s replaced by the feel of Kazuya’s lips, directly on his ear, moulding into the crevices, “then maybe I could help.”

There’s dense fog funnelling inside of his head, blotting out all thought, choking it out, and somewhere through the thick of it, Eijun grows conscious of warm hands at his sides – first through the fabric of his shirt, and then on bare skin.

He gasps.

“K. Kazuya. I’m…working.”

“But you don’t have to,” Kazuya’s lips print the words into Eijun’s skin – he’s not sure if it’s because of Kazuya’s mouth or because he can feel himself overheating, but the tender patch beneath his ear feels…moist and tingly. “You don’t have to worry.”

“I’m…ah,” The flat of Kazuya’s palm folds in on Eijun’s stomach. He can feel the coarseness of damaged skin – can feel an exorbitant amount of heat suffuse through that hand and into him. Bleeding into a different sort of heat, deep-down-low in his gut, flaring higher as Kazuya’s fingers splay and knead, light, into the flesh. “I just…I just want to be ready, j-just in case.”

“Hmmm,” and ah. Kazuya’s lips have caught on his ear again, and that noise he’d just made – that purring, buzzing, vibrating, entirely too hot noise – it shivers through him. Not a slight shudder, not a tremor – Eijun trembles, like his body’s breaking out in fever, and Kazuya’s hands are everywhere, moving, shifting, he can’t keep track of them, and when did he learn all these switches? When did he learn that the scrape of fingernails around his navel, or a flick of tongue behind the curve of his ear, or just the feeling of his hands, rough palms leaving prickling threads of electricity dancing all over his way-too-heated skin as they slide up his sides, could reduce him

He bites down into Eijun’s nape, and Eijun forgets, the viscous warmth bubbling in the pit of his stomach exploding like a match inside a barrel of gunpowder, what he’d wanted to be distracted from.

***

Sometimes, they fight.

“I swear, I’ve been sitting here for thirty minutes,” Eijun taps the rolled up newspaper he has in one hand against his palm for emphasis – the consternation is palpable. “I haven’t seen a thing.”

Kazuya has the grace to look abashed. “I swear I saw one,” he says, and then when Eijun’s dubious stare doesn’t waver, defensively adds, “and it was big!”

Eijun snorts. He’s not one for throwing temper tantrums at the slightest inconvenience – but, seriously though. He’s seen what Kazuya’s estimation of a big cockroach is, and he’s not particularly pleased at having been pulled away from where he’d been deeply engrossed inside The Historian – just when they’d encountered what was possibly the biggest threat of the book for the first time and things had started to get all kinds of intriguing and spooky, too.

“It’s probably gone now,” he says, groaning as he stretches out the muscles gone stiff from the time he’d spent locked into position, like some kind of sniper waiting to execute an elusive kill – except instead of a sniper rifle he has an old newspaper, and instead of a high-profile target, he’s waiting on an insect that has apparently terrorised his boyfriend enough for him to not mind chucking all his suaveness out the window. “It could’ve crawled down a drain or out the space between the door.”

Kazuya looks unconvinced, almost pained when Eijun shoulders his way out of the kitchen – but honestly, what more is he supposed to do? It’s not like he can comb the entire flat in search of a tiny bug which, despite his efforts, probably has the survival instincts to keep itself well-hidden until it chooses to show itself.

Which, of course, happens to be at three in the morning when Kazuya’d staggered into the kitchen to get some water and spotted something black and blurry scuttling across the floor and basically yanked Eijun out of his bed and all but convinced him there was an earthquake or an alien invasion happening with his terrified ramblings.

“It’s just…it’s because it’s in the kitchen,” is his – very weak – excuse for his actions, like it makes up for the reprehensible slight he’s just committed, waking up a soundly sleeping person just when they’d managed to breach that extra step into slumber-land. “And it was…it was like. Crawling everywhere.”

Eijun just gives him one hard stare, zombie-walks to the bedroom and is asleep even before he makes contact with the mattress.

The next morning, he wakes up to breakfast in bed with a runny poached egg dripping warm and gold all over his toast, and lots and lots of apology kisses (after he’s brushed his teeth of course, because miracles don’t happen overnight), and he can’t quite understand why he’d been angry in the first place.

***
“Can I come to your matches this time?” he zips in through the door before Mochi-senpai can close it, and climbs into the bed so he can’t be removed so easily. Mochi-senpai, wise to his attempts at being crafty, gives him a sour look.

“You can if you want to.”

“But I need tickets,” Eijun wails, “can’t you get some for me?”

Mochi-senpai pins him with a look dripping incredulity. “You want me to score freebies for you?”

Eijun hedges. “We-ell…I mean, it’d be nice? I mean if we watched from the VIP box we could see everything that you – argh!!”

Mochi-senpai, unfairly, isn’t even breaking a sweat from springing over to the bed and neatly twisting Eijun down in a headlock that leaves him flailing. Clearly the training’d done oodles for his stamina and agility.

“You’ve never managed to come to any of my matches before, and now you want to be in a VIP box,” Mochi-senpai states, almost amicable, if you take out the fact that he’s physically holding down his wildly-thrashing-round flatmate, “don’t you think that’s shooting a bit too high?”

Planting both his feet flat down on the mattress, Eijun executes a tricky little flip he’s learned from experience will compel Mochi-senpai to let go or risk breaking his elbows. The minute he’s free, he’s lunged to the opposite end of the room, as close as he can to the door in case he needs to make an emergency escape.

“But that’s not my fault,” he whinges, pouting, red-faced from the tussle but otherwise unfazed, “I had classes and stuff, but now I don’t, and I mean, isn’t it only fair we get to be in the VIP box if Onii-san’s going to be there too?!”

If Eijun’d paused somewhere in the flow of his prattling, he might have noted Mochi-senpai go stunned and still a bit earlier than he actually does.

“Oh…shit.” And then, a little panicky, “He didn’t tell you?!”

Uncharacteristically silent, bluster all gone, Mochi-senpai just shakes his head.

Eijun grabs the doorknob. “You didn’t hear anything from me,” he says, urgent – he eyes Mochi-senpai, a little frantic, “I didn’t say anything.”

He barely gets to have the door open before he’s tackled into the ground.

“What did Ryou-san say?”

“Nothing, nothing, please pretend I didn’t say anything – “

“Bakamura. What did Ryou-san tell you?”

“It was clearly meant to be a surprise – “

“I’ll pretend I’m surprised. It’ll win a goddamn Oscar. Just tell me.”

He gives Eijun enough leeway to roll over on to his back, and doesn’t even retaliate when Eijun watches him, wary and distrustful.

“He just…well, I asked him if this time we could go watch you play,” begrudging having to say
any of this now that he’s got an inkling of what Onii-san’d been up to, he just glares reproachfully at Mochi-senpai, letting him know that he totally blames him for this, “and he said he’d been looking into booking tickets and VIP was sold out or reserved or…I didn’t know he hadn’t told you, though!”

He ends on a keenly aggrieved high-note – and waits for retribution that doesn’t come.

“Mochi-senpai?…” Sitting up, Eijun inches himself a safe distance backward without alerting the shortstop, in case he decides Eijun’s getting cocky thinking he can escape – you can never know exactly what might piss off Mochi-senpai on a good day.

But today’s not one of those days, apparently – Mochi-senpai appears a bit preoccupied, his expression almost…troubled.

It does away with Eijun’s self-preservation instincts.

“Senpai, is everything okay?” he inquires, genuinely concerned now as he crawls back the short space to where Mochi-senpai is kneeling; his eyes fall on the slight red flush barely discernible under the tanned bronze of his skin, and his brain takes a quick unscheduled holiday, “Oh my gosh, you’re nervous?!”

When he gets tackled this time, he’d pretty much been asking for it.

***

It’s later, after he’s apologised profusely for his inability to keep his mouth shut and at least think before he blurts out whatever inane thing pops up in his brain – and then managed to coax tickets out of Mochi-senpai in exchange for intel – that he ambles his way into his room where his phone’s charging to ask Kazuya how interested he thinks he might be in baseball.

As the screen lights up, he realises Kazuya’d beaten him to it.

Except the message preview reads: Eijun, don’t freak out

Which naturally means ‘freaking out’ is exactly what Eijun does as he spastically thumbs the phone unlocked and hits the chat open, anxiety torn between spiking and going dormant because he doesn’t even know what he’s not supposed to be freaking out about and –

My dad asked if we’re free on New Year’s

He asked if we would visit him

Chapter End Notes

References to:
-A Nightmare Before Christmas: one of my fave Tim Burton movies of all time, which is somehow both a Halloween and a Christmas film and therefore totally awesome
-The Historian/novel inspired by Dracula: novel by Elizabeth Kostova. OMG this book is so good. So so good. It's not only a dozen times better than Dracula (yes I know scandalous right??) but it just skips back and forth through time periods and brings an entire era to life through letters and journals and damn, it's one of the best page-turners out there. 11/10 would recommend
- Gone Girl: by Gillian Flynn (one of those super rare instances I got to the movie before the book, because David Fincher is one my FAVE filmmakers and omg. I had to lie down after watching it for two hours)
- The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde: by R.L. Stevenson (my first horror novel ever. As a 9-10 y/o this thing freaked me the heck out)
Also as you can tell I have a thing for Ryou-san intro-ing Eijun to stuff he knows will have him traumatised but also knows he'll appreciate once he gets over the tears?
- STRANGER THINGS: Season 2 pls arrive before I prematurely age waiting for you. I feel like I would be best friends with the kids in that show, considering the stuff they're into ;u;
- Summer Wine: song by Nancy Sinatra and Lee Hazlewood. never fails to give me goosebumps, their voiiiiices ;A;

Please excuse any spelling/grammar errors, I'll fix them as soon as I can! And thank you all so much for your lovely lovely lovely support and feedback - I'm gonna get back to you soon if i haven't already! MWAHS <3

next chapter: feels are coming
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

i swear this fic is sentient and it never ever wants to go the way I think it will OTL so if this isn't too great let's just blame it on the lack of oxygen getting to my head okay?

okay.

also /frantic hands/ because this is over 20 chapters and it's going to end soon and what even?? my baby was born just yesterday and now he's already moving out and going to college ;A;

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eijun claps his hands together, harder than necessary, and screws his eyes shut.

He’s got a long list, and there are a lot of people queueing up, and he’s gotta hustle.

Thank you for last year, and for all the incredible things which happened – for the internships both me and Harucchi got, for Onii-san and Mochi-senpai finally getting together and working through their problems, for Wakana winning that research award for her papers, for us finishing degree in one piece, for me meeting Kazuya, for us being together, for Kazuya getting to speak to his dad again, for –

It’s hard to concentrate – there’s a cutting, arctic wind this morning and it’s taking liberties with the only parts of Eijun’s face still visible, across his nose and the high apples of his cheeks. Behind him, despite his efforts to tune them out, he can hear the scuffle of feet against chipped stone steps, the low murmur of voices rising from the crowds flooding in to visit the shrine, filing in to start off the New Year auspiciously.

If he opens his eyes, he’s going to see so much colour – vibrant crimsons and deep purples and rich indigo printed over with florals. If he’d been back home, he would probably have helped pick his mother’s kimono.

– let this year be easy on us, let Harucchi, Wakana and I not fail any of our exams, let Wakana get enrolled into the Masters course she was looking at, and help Harucchi decide if he wants to go for further education or work, please help Dad convince Gramps to stop trying to drive the tractor himself, he’ll get hurt, please let Mochi-senpai’s team play their absolute best and win this cup –

He hears laughter next to him – quite, subdued chuckles, but he hears them nonetheless. He frowns, because that’s distracting and Kazuya should know better.

– let everyone be healthy, happy and safe! Thank you for everything.

“Done?” Kazuya inquires, good-natured – Eijun doesn’t miss the amused glint in his eye, and scowls.

“Why were you laughing at me?!”

Kazuya doesn’t deny it – in fact, Kazuya laughs some more. Tosses his head back and lets out a sound that’s pure mirth and, okay, maybe hearing that on the first day of the New Year can’t be all
“You looked like you were having trouble with the connection,” Kazuya teases, teeth showing; his face is pink from the cold, beanie pulled down so low the wool rim is covering his eyebrows, and even his teeth chatter, a little bit. “Was the other end offline?”

It gets a veritable screech and a shove out of Eijun. “Show some respect!” he scolds, and glares when Kazuya just sniggers more, “Isn’t there anything you wanted to says thanks for? Or ask, for this year?”

Eijun sticks close to the banister side of the stairs – the steps are steep, and he’s already uncoordinated on normal days, without a cold wind whipping through his clothes and leaving his limbs rubbery and numb. Kazuya stays close to his side – takes his hand, though thanks to the thick wool of his gloves, Eijun can’t really feel the touch.

“I had some stuff, yeah,” Kazuya confides, and Eijun feels his thumb catch at the fabric of his glove as he drags it over the back of his hand – that, and the telling smile he gives, tells Eijun what’s on his mind, and he’s lucky he’s got his muffler wound round his jaw and neck again, because he gets to hide the totally cheesy smile it gets from him into it. “But you looked like you were making a speech.”

Scoffing, Eijun uses his elbow to nudge Kazuya, just a little. He laughs as he’s jostled, and drifts back into Eijun’s space. “I don’t want to be ungrateful! There’s a thing called karma you know! And besides, this year is going to be so busy, it doesn’t hurt to have some extra help.”

They’re at the bottom of the steps, trudging, pace tempered by that of the teeming crowds around them – Eijun does sees the kimonos, but there are not as many as they’d have seen back in Nagano. He wishes he could have shown a Nagano-style New Year’s to Kazuya…but well. There’s next year, he supposes.

Then Kazuya asks, quiet, “Did you…pray for today?”

Eijun lets out a watery giggle. “Naturally.”

Kazuya gives him a small, rueful smile. “Nervous?”

“You are too,” is Eijun’s retort; shaking his head, he laughs a laugh that gives the nerves he’d managed to hold down a bit away, “I didn’t think I’d be meeting your dad before you met mine.”

“Me neither,” Kazuya breathes. There’s an edge to it that Eijun instantly doesn’t like.

“Are you okay?” he asks – he adjusts the way they’re holding hands to let him swing out in front of Kazuya, so he’s walking backward as Kazuya shifts forward, squinting up into his face.

Kazuya smiles. “I’m fine.” And then, at the sceptical arch of Eijun’s eyebrow, “Okay, a little nervous. I have…no idea what to expect.”

He catches Eijun as he stumbles, inevitably, in his quest to master the moonwalk on a busy side-street, and smoothly pulls him back to his side.

Eijun peeks askance at his profile, and sees distant eyes, tension in the set of his jaw.

“Well…that means we’re both in the same boat,” he says – it’s a lot more carefree than he actually feels, the only reason his nerves and apocalyptic projections for the future not yet manifesting being that he can, for once, sense the same unsteady emotion in Kazuya, even though he’s
‘definitely’ better at keeping it under wraps.

He’s just glad Kazuya’s not trying to hide it from him.

The smile Kazuya gives him softens some of the tightness around his mouth. “A problem shared is a problem halved?” he quotes.

Eijun makes a considering noise. “I wouldn’t call it a problem, per se,” he tugs Kazuya in under the shelter of their bus-stop, cursorily checking the schedule and then his watch to make sure they’re at the right place at the right time, because you can never be too sure, “but yeah, that’s the gist of it.”

Kazuya watches him for a while, gaze soft, until he reaches up and tugs Eijun’s muffler down a bit, exposing his mouth and chin. “You’re calm today,” he observes, as though it’s not what he had been anticipating.

Eijun isn’t offended. Kazuya’s witnessed – and had to help abate – enough of his panic attacks in the face of uncertainty to have full right to be surprised that he isn’t having a proper meltdown by now.

“Actually, I’m dying on the inside,” he says solemnly, with a completely straight face.

It works. It startles Kazuya into laughing.

“Sorry about that,” he manages to huff, eventually – Eijun spies what he suspects to be their bus curving round the corner, creeping up the road. “I guess…well I suppose I could have come by myself if it makes you uncomfortable but – “

“Oh my gosh, shut up Kazuya,” Eijun’s actually kind of affronted. He exaggerates the wounded look, though, just to get through to Kazuya better, “I wouldn’t let you go alone if I could help it anyway.” For flavour, he sprinkles in, “Especially when you’re freaking out like this.”

“I’m not – “ Kazuya catches the smirk on Eijun’s face, and purses his lips. It’s a look of disapproval, but not a very convincing look of disapproval. “Okay, fine, maybe I freaked out a little.”

The bus draws up and slows to a stop with a great shuddering sigh. The doors swish open, and Eijun, change already in hand, because he lives in fear of the day he’s going to have to pay for something in coins and just won’t have the right amount and he’ll hold everyone up and make them go off-schedule and they’ll all be mad and okay breathe now Eijun, pulls Kazuya along.

“Like I said, now we’re both the same,” he tells Kazuya, as they side-shuffle down the aisle. Most of the seats are taken, because he lives in fear of the day he’s going to have to pay for something in coins and just won’t have the right amount and he’ll hold everyone up and make them go off-schedule and they’ll all be mad and okay breathe now Eijun, pulls Kazuya along.

“Like I said, now we’re both the same,” he tells Kazuya, as they side-shuffle down the aisle. Most of the seats are taken, because it’s bound to be a busy day for public transport given how many people are going to be out today, so Eijun and Kazuya secure a safety bar to themselves and cling to it as the bus wheezes back into motion. “That’s a refreshing change, to be honest.”

Kazuya’s expression is questioning.

“I mean, since I’m usually the one panicking,” Eijun clarifies – it’s not self-deprecating, he thinks, which is a nice change, even to himself, “And you’re all cool as a cucumber.”

Kazuya just blinks at Eijun a second before letting out a guffaw.

“What?!”
“Who told you I’m cool as a cucumber?”

“You are,” Eijun insists, a little bit chagrined, because okay yes, as much as the aim of the day is to make Kazuya laugh as much as possible to keep his mind off their impending visit and what it would entail, the idea of being laughed at still kind of makes him antsy. “You’ve always been so… I don’t know! Completely in control, from the very beginning.”

“That’s not true,” Kazuya denies, and Eijun knows he’s right, because Eijun’d seen it – moments where he’d waver, where he’d not meet his eyes or his skin would flush or his voice would dip low and uneven, falling out of crescendo. They stand out in his head, stark and distinct, like cracks on smooth porcelain, spider-webs on a mirror, because he’d thought, at first, that Kazuya’s flawless. And then he’d been proven wrong, because Kazuya’s better than flawless. “Do you know how long it took me to just get round to talking to you?”

It doesn’t matter how many times he hears about this; it still makes Eijun’s stomach flutter. He giggles – can’t help it.

“Thank God for sold-out manga,” he teases, feeling the smile inch higher up his face as Kazuya returns it.

“Thank God for Ryou-san’s birthday,” Kazuya quips back, “…I was sure I’d scared you away, you know.”

“You almost did,” Eijun admits, confidential, but with a lot less embarrassment and a lot more readiness than he’d have been capable of, that second time he’d ventured into the bookstore after Kazuya’d asked him for coffee, “but…I was curious.”

Now Kazuya’s the one wearing a teasing, puckish grin. “Even though you thought I was a criminal?”

Eijun feigns surprise. “You aren’t?” he blinks, rapid, “I thought you were a professional burglar.”

“Wh – “

“Because you stole my heart.”

It’s safe to say, Eijun thinks, that that’ll go down in history as the singularly most mortifying thing to have ever come out of his mouth, but the way it makes Kazuya double back, stare at him in abject disbelief, and then practically keel over laughing is totally worth it.

As a connoisseur in the business of anxiety at anything remotely resembling the unknown, Eijun knows that this reprieve is going to be short-lived, though. They banter, light-hearted, playful ribbing and mischief-heavy teasing, but it gets harder and harder to keep the volley going as the bus nears their destination – Eijun catches Kazuya gaze out the window a couple of times, sees his eyes linger, on a corner store, on a tiny compound peppered with snow but probably green and filled to the brim with kids battling for dominance to get to the monkey bars and the swing-set in warmer weather.

There’s…recognition, in his eyes, in his body language, a coiled silent something, like he’s a clockwork toy getting wound more and more the closer they get to a place he’d called home since he was a child. Eijun can’t read whether it’s a good kind of something or a bad kind. Probably both.

By the time they’ve reached – stepped out of the bus and walked a short distance into an unassuming, pretty much nondescript but neat neighbourhood – neither of them are talking much.
“Here,” Kazuya says, volume so light it’s feels insubstantial, like mist. They stop in front of a compact little house, making up for the narrow space it’s built on with two floors – there’s no name plaque, just the address nailed by the gate. It’s the same house Eijun’s already seen, in the picture Kazuya’s dad had sent, what seems like aeons ago – an empty house with a fresh coat of paint. Something pulls at Eijun’s heartstrings – keeps pulling, draws out the ache. “…any words for luck?”

Eijun takes in a deep breath. It makes his lungs judder, erratic, inside his ribs.

“May the force be with us.”

Kazuya chokes in the process of ringing the bell, and is shortling when the door opens – unexpectedly – soon after.

Then he’s not laughing anymore.

The man who steps out of the front door dithers a bit, then breaches the short distance between the porch and the gate. His pace is both steady and hesitant, Eijun thinks, blood rushing in his ears – Kazuya’s squeezing his hand hard, but his mind has apparently decided to give out under the weight of all the suspense he’d been in all this time and gone spiralling into outer space, and –

“Kazuya.”

It’s funny – Eijun’d thought this before, surmised that he’s probably the only person apart from Kazuya’s dad to call him by his first name.

But as he hears it now, enunciated in the voice of a man he’s meeting for the first time, and he sees the way his eyes – brown, Eijun thinks, and a little…guarded, he thinks, and…like Kazuya’s…they soften as they take in the person holding Eijun’s hand in a death grip, and he has this inexplicable, firm conviction that…it’s going to be okay.

Not yet, not immediately, maybe not today. Maybe not for days.

But it can be okay.

“Hi Dad,” Kazuya says, and it’s toneless, not because it’s devoid of emotions but because there is so much emotion that they have to fight for space, jam together and come out as nothing.

And then the man – Kazuya’s father, his dad – turns to him, and says, with a small smile that’s…stilted, a little bit, but not unwelcoming, “Sawamura-kun.”

“Eijun,” he almost lisps, tongue dry, suddenly too big for his mouth, “Please call me, Eijun…Miyuki-san.”

Miyuki-san considers him for an eighth of a second, maybe, but it feels like eighty seconds instead.

“Eijun it is, then,” is what he says, finally, and his smile broadens, and Eijun experiences that heart-stopping jolt of catching your foot on a step going up, because it climbs up one cheek, lopsided – an imitation of Kazuya’s. No – a shadow of his. “Please come in.”

***

Eijun’d not known, really, what to expect. He’d tried his best not to expect anything, which, while not a policy that’s been known to lead to lucrative outcomes, at least spared his mental health from rapidly crumbling away as he let his brain feed him the thousand and one ways everything could
go completely and utterly wrong.

Still, it feels...unreal. Like some out of body experience. Like they’re actors trying to play out a scene without a script.

It’s so awkward he has to sit on his hands so he doesn’t fidget.

“…so hopefully, something smaller and more fulfilling. Eijun suggested a patisserie.”

He jumps at his name, struggles not to do it again when Miyuki-san shifts his attention to him.

“And what about Eijun-kun?”

“O-oh,” Eijun begins, he has to remind himself of the checklist Onii-san’d prepped for him before his interviews – Maintain eye-contact. Speak clearly. Be to the point. “I’m...I just graduated, last month. Print and publication media.”

Miyuki-san’s eyes glitter with interest. It’s an uncannily familiar look. “Oh, a writer?”

It might be the hysteria, or the déjà vu, but Eijun almost laughs, because that’s the same exact conclusion Kazuya’d jumped to and these similarities are starting to feel like some Twilight Zone episode. Thankfully, a more alert part of him decides that might not be the brightest idea. “Yes, Sir.”

“That’s good, that’s good,” Miyuki-san nods. Grows quiet.

It’s back again, the awkwardness.


Keyed-up, because he wants to do something, say something to break the stalemate, but he can’t. Doesn’t know what to say.

It breaks his heart.

It breaks his heart, because here they are, Kazuya’s dad speaking to his son like he’s a stranger, an acquaintance, speaking to him with the same lack of familiarity as he does with Eijun. Here they are, Eijun with a paper-bag tucked to his side, a neatly wrapped, neutral-toned scarf folded inside that he’s trying to find an opportune moment to hand over, because the day before, Kazuya’d been having a crisis about whether or not he’s supposed to take something home with him, and Eijun’d been having a crisis trying to figure out how much Kazuya wanted to.

They’d not known what he would like, because Kazuya doesn’t trust his handle of his father’s preferences, and they’d discussed, for a while, maybe making a fresh batch of mochi – it’s New Year’s, after all. It wouldn’t have been remiss, because mochi’s kind of a staple this time of year but...Eijun’d felt uncomfortable.

Because it felt too personal.

Because he knows Kazuya would have huddled himself into the kitchen pounding the stretchy-doughy goodness by hand, and he knows he’d have put his heart into it, because no matter how aloof or how prudent he’s trying to be with this newfound reconciliation with his father, he’s having to hold himself back.
And Eijun’d thought it’s too *soon* for that.

Too soon to get so invested, too fast.

They can’t even hold a normal conversation for five minutes.

Eijun’d had no expectations, but he’s still disappointed, and he wishes – for the sake of the guy who’d attempted to profusely thank and apologise to him the day before no matter how many times he got shut down as they shop-hopped for a decent, practical scarf – that it were easier.

“Um,” he says – it’s the kind of sound you hear in an exam room and it’s so palpably silent the noise of a pen clattering to the floor can sound like a thunderclap; he can feel himself going red, but he perseveres, “d-do you mind if I take a look at those pictures?”

Déjà vu, he thinks again – wonders how many more times that phrase is going to crop up in this one visit. Miyuki-san follows the direction of Eijun’s pointing finger, and says, “Oh yes, of course. Please go ahead.”

Trying not to steeple his fingers together as he goes, Eijun gets to his feet and meanders in the small walking space between the furniture. It’s not spacious – a functional home like this isn’t meant to be, Eijun thinks. He recalls what Kazuya’d told him, the night of his birthday – how his dad had been working all the time when he’d been a kid, his job not particularly well-paying, just enough to make the ends meet.

He’s moved up from then, surely…and yet he’d never left.

He hears Kazuya ask, “So, uh…how is work going for you?”

It could be okay – they *want* it to be okay.

But it’s not going to be immediately, and it’s not going to be today.

Eijun hopes Kazuya is going to be able to make peace with that.

“Oh, work is…it’s the same old thing. I have my own office, so that’s something, I guess.”

“A promotion?”

“Something of the sort. I think some kind of policy rewarding employee loyalty than anything else…”

“Well…you *have* been working there for a while…”

More silence.

Eijun tries not to let it fill his skull – tries to focus on the frames hanging on the wall in front of him.

Some of the frames are silver and ornate, and they’re identical to the one Kazuya has at home – the one where his mum and dad are together, side by side, smiling.

Happy.

Eijun wonders if Kazuya’d filched that picture. If he’d just snatched it off the wall when he’d been packing to leave for boarding school.
He thinks about it, tries to picture himself as Kazuya, standing here, years and years ago – a kid, a teenager, emotionally muddled, angry and confused and hurt, looking at these frames…baby photos, mischievous eyes, glorious smiles, wearing a bib here, in a pram there, in the arms of his mother in another one, making Eijun’s heart swell with an affection that could rupture him from the inside out. He tries to imagine what Kazuya’d have thought, what he would have felt, looking at these – glimpses of a life already passed, moments that can never be the same anymore, a timeline cataloguing the life of a family that’d stopped somewhere, abruptly, somewhere right after Kazuya’d posed in his new school uniform, broad teeth, chunky glasses too big for his face – smiling and happy and holding his parents’ hands.

He imagines Kazuya standing here, on the brink of leaving, who knows when he’d come back – he imagines Kazuya taking one of the only two pictures that show his parents, together in the same frame at the same time.

A lost moment, gone forever, where they’d been together, and they’d been happy.

He’d always thought there was something bittersweet about that picture.

Now it cuts into him, sharper and clearer than ever before.

He hears Miyuki-san speak. He couldn’t have missed it – it’d been so quiet.

Eijun thinks about living with this quiet – a solitude born not from a lack of things to say but an ineptitude for saying them, this fear that burrows into your heart and your bones because everything feels so tenuous, so very fragile, like it’ll fall over and shatter, fine as glass, if you made a mistake.


“How don’t you show Eijun-kun your room, Kazuya?”

***

As they’re leaving the room, Eijun looks over his shoulder. He can’t help himself.

Miyuki-san is still sitting where he had been in an armchair Eijun’s sure he’s seen in one of pictures – and it’s not that he looks lonely that breaks Eijun’s heart all over again.

It’s that he looks so used to it.

***

“Thanks,” Kazuya says, a bit brusquely – he’s pushed the door shut, moving in to where Eijun’s taken a hesitant seat at the edge of a stripped down mattress on a single-bed. “For saying I shouldn’t have brought the sweets. That would have been…awkward.”

“We spoke about saying that word,” Eijun reprimands – he even frowns, for effect.

Kazuya’s mouth twitches, but he doesn’t laugh.

It’s still morning, closing in on noon, and he looks so…weary.

So dejected.

Eijun can’t take it.
“Woah,” Kazuya almost thuds into the wall from the force of Eijun’s tackle hug – he catches himself last minute, planting his feet apart to steady their joint weights, “Caref – “

“It’s okay, Kazuya,” Eijun says; he swears it, makes it a promise, wants Kazuya to believe it as much as he does, even though it feels so improbable right now, “It’ll be okay.”

It doesn’t take Kazuya long before he reciprocates – winds his arms around Eijun, his waist, his shoulders, drawing him until they fit, even as he says, traces of his trademark sense of humour wisping through it, “Are you trying to hug the bad feelings out of me?”

Eijun doesn’t let himself feel disheartened – the fact that Kazuya’s admitting there are bad feelings is a milestone for them already, when it comes to this. He gives an experimental squeeze, and asks, “Is it working?”

“Mm. Try harder.”

Eijun locks his arms around Kazuya’s middle and squeezes hard.

Kazuya yelps.

Eijun snorts.

They burst out laughing.

“Better now?” Eijun asks, after a while – he’s almost coy, the two of them sitting on what used to be Kazuya’s bed, once upon a time. Probably still is, technically – just like Eijun’s room back in Nagano, or the swings his grand-dad had set up for him for his fifth birthday, or the chipped Pokemon mug he’d cried and cried and thrown endless tantrums for before his mother’d relented and bought it for him, the one he’d used up until he had left for Tokyo and would find all rinsed out and ready to use whenever he went back.

It’s a space that’s still his, Eijun thinks – untouched, left exactly the way he’d left it, a stake of his in this house, a mark, faded out pencil scrawls on the wall, cracks in the plaster where Kazuya’d taped up drawings his older self had later taken down. Your room, his dad had said, and Eijun thinks he understands.

He thinks he understands.

Kazuya sighs into his hair. “Yeah. Yeah, it’s just…I wish it was easier.”

Eijun relates. “Me too.”

There’s a pause and then – “But I think…I understand it a bit. Better.”

It echoes Eijun’s own epiphany, but he doesn’t think they were thinking of the same thing. At his puzzled look, Kazuya elaborates, “Him. What he…went through.”

He’s staring, hard, intent, at where their hands are twined again, gloves off now that they’re warm and indoors – Eijun’s left in Kazuya’s right. Eijun can feel the weight of what he’s about to say next even before he’s opened his mouth. Like the sparks of lightning fusing through the air before warning rumbles of thunder.

“I think…I was sitting there looking at him, and…you were beside me. And I just.” Kazuya’s fingers tighten, not unobtrusive, not cautious – it’s a tiny gesture, but raw, and it makes Eijun’s throat seize up, “I just wanted to reach out and touch you. Just to…I don’t know. Make sure you
were still there.”

The wind thumps out of Eijun, like he’s been punched in the lungs. “Kazuya – “

“It’s,” Kazuya’s other hand comes up to join the first, and he holds Eijun’s in both of his, and when he looks up and meets his eye, Eijun’s ribs fill up, with an ache that’s almost bittersweet. “I… probably never saw it like that. I thought I did, I thought I understood his point of view, but I sat there, and I thought if I reached out, and you weren’t there – “

“I’m not going anywhere, Kazuya,” Eijun hushes, immediate. He yanks his free hand up, plants it firm and steady and solid to the side of Kazuya’s face, brings their foreheads together so he can drive it out of him, the bad feelings, the insecurity, the baseless anxiety, this fear of being vulnerable, and he gets it, he gets it so well, “I’m here. Right here.”

Kazuya inhales, slow and tremulous. His eyes slip shut a moment, open, and they’re a little glazed. “I know. I know but it’s just that I… I imagined it. I thought about it and I couldn’t even… talk. It wasn’t real but – maybe, I can’t blame him. Not when, maybe I…”

He comes short of words, running out of them, but not running out of what he wants to say, explain – Eijun can tell from how distraught he looks that he’s struggling to let it out.

But it’s okay.

It can be okay, they can make it okay, and it’s turbulence and torture, but they can ride it out, and it won’t be completely better now, or today, or for days to come maybe –

But they can fix it. Repair it, put it back together, maybe not the same way it had been before it’d been broken – but it could still work.

“You dad… Kazuya, he made mistakes. No matter… no matter what he went through, a mistake is a mistake, and maybe I’d have done it too, and maybe you’d have done it too, but that’s not the important part. The important part is he’s… trying. He’s trying now. So… we need to try, too, right?” He thinks about the house, how nothing inside had been touched, nothing changed, a lonely man living with probably the only things he has of his family, and he hurts for him, for Kazuya, for them. “We need to… stop being stuck in the past. We need to stop thinking about what ifs – what could happen, what didn’t happen, what could be if it did, it’s… we just… let’s just focus on what we have, right now.”

He clasps Kazuya’s hand, so tight he might be cutting off his circulation, but he holds Kazuya’s stare and is inexorable. “Right now, he needs you. And you get to be here for him, Kazuya. You get to make the choice, and it’s not about who made mistakes before. We just… have to not make them now.”

***

They say their goodbyes after lunch – it’s takeout sushi, but Eijun digs in without complaint, partly because he wants to dispel Miyuki-san’s contrition over not cooking or having something a bit homelier to offer, partly because all that emotional upheaval had worked up an appetite.

They’d talked. Eijun’d spoken about his classes, about his job, about Takigawa-san, whom Miyuki-san had recognised by name and been suitably impressed, about Nagano, about Eijun’s family, about how his parents had almost eloped before his grandparents had had to intervene and inform them they didn’t disprove of their relationship in the first place, about how his granddad still says his grandma had passed away while they’d been fighting and now he has to make sure he does
everything by the book so he can go see her in heaven and tell her, once and for all, that he’d not broken her fine china, you crazy old hag.

The story makes Miyuki-san laugh. It lights up his whole face.

Kazuya’d talked too – about how he’d met Eijun, how he’d approached him. About how they’re going to go meet Eijun’s parents in a week or so, how he’s a bit scared his granddad might be planning some kind of drinking party.

He’d offered, a bit tentatively, almost a little shy, a little apprehensive, to send pictures.

Miyuki-san accepts, and admits he hasn’t exactly figured out how Line works. Eijun takes it upon himself to teach him.

They say their goodbyes after lunch, and there’s a new number in Eijun’s phone, and as they walk out the gate, Miyuki-san bows to Eijun, and says, “Please look after my son,” and Eijun thinks it’s some New Year miracle that keeps him from just straight-up sobbing, because it doesn’t take much to make him cry, he’d started pre-emptively crying in the first couple of minutes of Rogue One when they’d gone to watch it last week and this is real life, real things, real people he cares for, needs to be happy, and he thinks they should have brought the mochi anyway and they definitely have to next time to make up for it.

Evidently, he’s not the only one overwhelmed though. They’ve barely made it round the corner, and Kazuya has him in a more affectionate version of Mochi-senpai’s headlock.

“I love you,” he says.

Eijun hiccups, giggles. He considers teasing him, decides not to. “Love you too ~”

It’s going to be okay. He can tell.

They can tell.

And it’s going to take a while but –

That’s okay too.

They’re halfway to the bus-stop when Kazuya lets out a loud, almost frustrated “Haaaaah,” making Eijun start.

“What?!”

“No, it’s just – “ his expression is sheepish, Eijun thinks – he moves to rub the back of his head, remembers he’s wearing a beanie, drops it limply to the side, “I think I get what you mean by not wanting to take any chances.”

Eijun doesn’t get it – not until Kazuya requests they make a pit-stop before they make their way over to Onii-san’s where they’re having dinner together, and they wind up back at the shrine.

Chapter End Notes

I wasn't planning to update so soon but this chapter was a) poisoning my mind because
of dem emoshuns b) I was scared I'd lose the flow if I waited - so I hope you guys liked it? //hopeful

Thank you for reading!! <3 You guys are my brain and heart and soul fuel :D
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Happy Valentine's Day!

As a way to express ALL my love to you guys for your neverending support and kindness, I hereby offer this extra long chapter /bows

(read: brace yo'selves, it's long)

(also pls forgive spelling and grammar errors im sleep deprived and i'll fix soon!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first night at Nagano, Kazuya gets challenged to a shogi match by his gramps.

Which would be innocuous enough, were it not drinking game shogi.

Because Gramps apparently wants to kill two birds with one stone – evidently his criteria to gauge Eijun’s significant other is how well he can hold his booze and boardgames –

And also because he loves his booze and boardgames.

Eijun thanks his stars that Kazuya’s actually half-decent at it – and he looks to be enjoying himself too, if the single-minded concentration he bestows on countering his grandfather and the victorious grins he gets flashed in his direction while Gramps is distracted trying to find a middle ground between grudgingly admitting he’s got skill and grumbling at how, clearly, the two beers he’d drowned beforehand were a handicap to let Kazuya play at his level are any indication.

Eijun’s less thankful for the fact that this means by the time they finish what’d started as a match and ended as a tournament, Gramps is very, very drunk, has slurred at Kazuya to Keep it PG13 in there when they try to excuse themselves politely and retire to Eijun’s room, and they can hear him yelling at his dad, oddly shrill for someone with such a gravelly voice, WHAT DO YOU MEAN I CAN’T DRIVE A TRACTOR DRUNK, I CAN DRIVE A TRACTOR ASLEEP!

“…are you ready to run for the hills yet?” Eijun whispers, part stricken, part mortally petrified – he honestly hadn’t expected things to escalate like this.

Or more precisely, escalate this quickly.

Kazuya giggles – not quite as sober as he’d started the evening – and glomps Eijun round the middle.

***

They take a ton of pictures – pictures of Kazuya bundled up against the snow, the elements having the upper hand here without tall skyscrapers and the concrete jungle to impede wayward drifts. Pictures of the two of them attempting to skate on a frozen-over pond before Eijun jumps back, reflexes cat-like, just in time for the thin ice to crack beneath his feet, Harucchi over in the background seemingly unaffected by the fact that the two of them had almost taken a nosedive in
freezing cold water and settling instead for an I told you so. Sleepy selfies taken in dewy morning light, snaps of the dinner spread, group selfies when Wakana comes over and can’t contain herself and floods all their social media with a combination of dopey half-posed pictures and candid shots because I missed you, you dummies.

At night, he and Kazuya scroll through the photos, by silent agreement, and pick the ones they send to Kazuya’s dad.

***

They’re prepping for a picnic – an indoors picnic, because it’s still freezing cold outside and none of them are particularly keen to die of frostbite – when Eijun sidles to Kazuya’s side and asks him, “You okay?”

Kazuya, who’d been skewering cocktail franks and miraculously symmetrical slices of tomato and bell pepper, raises a questioning eyebrow at him.

“I mean…” Eijun jerks his head a little over his shoulder. His and Harucchi’s mothers are at the kitchen table, de-shelling peas. “You’re not…overwhelmed? They can be…err. Kinda intense sometimes.”

Intense being a loose understatement for the general tempo of rowdiness that happens to be the staple in this household. They’d woken just that morning to his parents having what they called a discussion, which’d actually really comprised of his mother cryptically reminding his dad that Valentine’s Day was coming up and she was in need of a new handbag and his dad completely missing the point and telling her she could just use one of those giant shopping bags from the grocery stores instead, and it’d devolved into Mum mumbling about her husband not caring about her anymore and Is it because I’m not young and pretty like I used to be? and his father doing the whole ‘dad thing’ by indirectly trying to get Eijun to tell him just why his wife keeps sullenly glaring at him –

And that’s just today.

Probably cottoning on to what Eijun’s thinking of, Kazuya flashes him a crooked grin. “It is a bit intense,” he admits, though it’s frivolous, and Eijun can tell he doesn’t mean it in a bad way, “but…I don’t mind.”

Eijun believes him.

Eijun thinks that Kazuya’s actually…happy.

He’d already been helping his mother out in the kitchen by the second day, and if his mother had been singing Kazuya’s praises before even seeing him in person, she pretty much places him on a pedestal and elevates him to demi-god status after witnessing his culinary abilities. Eijun supposes she can’t be blamed, because her only reference for comparison are the three other men of the household, who have been notoriously terrible at whatever involves anything slightly elaborate – like chopping veggies without accidentally losing a digit or two. He overhears her talking to Harucchi’s mum when the Kominatos come over to visit, gushing about how Kazuya’d gutted a fish in less than five minutes, and he’s not sure how to react to the way they both oooh, impressed.

And then there are the guys, who are a bit harder to please – Gramps, because he’d not taken kindly to being soundly defeated on his home turf on the very first day, and his father, who, for some reason, reminds him of Mochi-senpai with how wary he is of Kazuya at first.
Both of their mild scruples last as long as the first sampling of Kazuya’s cooking, though.

Eijun’s starting to think he uses it as some kind of not-so-secret weapon as a failsafe way of getting people to like him.

And he does know that Kazuya wants them to like him. It’s in the way he respectfully refers to his family and the Kominatos, and doesn’t snark back as Eijun half-expects him to when his gramps calls Kazuya an upstart for agreeing to drive the tractor only if someone with a license rides with me – it’s in the way Eijun sometimes catches him, observing, spectating, like he’s memorising a particularly tricky recipe and rewinding it through his head again and again until he’s sure he won’t mess it up. It’s in the way he volunteers to go get the groceries and carries them for his mum, and the way he lets Harucchi’s dad pull out album after album from his youth when they go over to their house, thrilled that there’s someone – finally – who recognises and appreciates the music he’d grown up with.

And Eijun can’t deny how it makes him feel – his heart sings, flutters, does all those crazy little jumps at how domestic and perfect and heartwarming it is every time he sees Kazuya in one of his mum’s aprons, or with his feet tucked in underneath the koutatsu on chilly evenings when they all just huddle in the living-room with tea and the TV on in the background, swapping stories, trying to convince his dad that there aren’t, in fact, delinquents around every street corner in Tokyo.

Kazuya is happy, Eijun thinks, and it makes him so happy he thinks he could easily float away.

They talk about it, that night, after they’ve had their “indoor picnic” – which’d involved a lot of furniture pushing and using a plug-in stove to toast marshmallows because Eijun’d insisted.

“You looked like you were having fun,” Eijun says, because he’s learnt to do the whole indirect thing better than his dad. Not a lot better – but better nonetheless.

Kazuya’s on his side, glasses off. His face is mostly in shadow, the bedside lamp throwing the only light in the room – his eyes reflect them back at him, though, twin coppery orbs shining out, there and gone and there and gone every time Kazuya blinks, idle.

“I did,” he affirms – there’s something light in his tone. Almost buoyant. Eijun wonders if he’s imagining it there, because that’s how he feels.

Buoyant. Weightless.

“Even though Mum made us move all the furniture back and clean up?”

Eijun catches the glimmer of teeth, shiny and bright and broad. “Even though she made us do that, yeah.”

Sighing, Eijun shifts himself to be closer – Kazuya lifts up an arm, making space for him, tucking him in when he’s there. They’re always extra cuddly like this, at bedtime – it’s a bit weird to be openly affectionate with each other in front of his family, and Eijun thinks Kazuya in particular’s been so into winning everyone’s favour he’s not willing to toe any lines. And…as much as the absence of the little touches they’d share, never frugal, is a bit upsetting, it’s still kind of…

Really gratifying.

“I’m glad.”

“It’s…”
“What?”

“It…I don’t know. They’re so nice to me.”

Eijun muffles a snort into Kazuya’s sweater. Kazuya, in turn, pulls back, close enough for Eijun to read the mild affront across his features.

“They’re totally in love with you,” he tells Kazuya, ducks his head back into Kazuya’s chest, “at this rate you have them so impressed my mum might even swap me out for you.”

Kazuya tuts. “That’s not true.”

“You’ve not heard her exclaiming over your amazing fish-gutting skills.”

“…I have to admit, my fish-gutting skills are quite amazing.”

Eijun shoves him, Kazuya pulls him back. It’s like clockwork now.

Reassuring and synchronised and familiar and *routine*. Expected and safe and everything.

“But…seriously,” Kazuya continues, somewhat reflective – it’s something Eijun’s started hearing more frequently these days, in between all the time Kazuya spends either being so disarmingly romantic Eijun’s defences don’t stand a chance, or going out of his way to fluster Eijun up for his amusement. It’s…nice. It makes him feel like they have secrets, and he’s the only one allowed to know. “it’s…I lived with relatives and stuff before, but it…never felt like this.”

Eijun had suspected as much. He’s spent so much time watching Kazuya – part worried that his batshit crazy family are going to attempt to recruit Kazuya into their ranks, part fascinated with how he assimilates. And he *does* assimilate, to a degree. It’s just like the first night he’d come over for dinner at his and Mochi-senpai’s flat – easy smiles, amenable conversation, courteous manners that skirt the quiet side of confidence.

But then there are moments when he looks like he’s at a loss, like when his mum serves extra dessert for him or his dad ruffles his hair in passing or that one time his grandfather had switched from calling him ‘kid’ to calling him ‘son’. Like he’s caught off guard, in a place he doesn’t know, with people he doesn’t know, deep inside territory not mapped out by him – not his flat, not his bookstore, not any of the cafes he’s frequented and knows so well.

It’s…*new* to him, and Eijun can understand that, but Kazuya says *it never felt like this*, and Eijun feels the joy of it swell inside of him until he can barely breathe.

“Like I said, they’re pretty much in love with you.”

Kazuya makes a noise, a humming, purring kind of noise, like he’s pleased and hadn’t expected himself to be.

Eijun expects a smarmy response. Gets something else.

“…thanks to you.”

“Hmm?”

“I said…it’s thanks to you.”

Eijun retreats – wiggles back far enough to be able to squint into Kazuya’s face. He uses the pillow to get some height on his side too.
“They’d love you plenty even without me in the picture,” he reproaches him, not happy that he’s selling himself short, “I mean, my mum can’t stop talking about you to all the neighbours – which is seriously embarrassing for me, because they start getting all giggly whenever they see me now and keep commenting on how lucky I am – and my grandad keeps asking where you are if he sees me without you, and I promise I never see him this talkative with most other people.” He pokes at Kazuya’s shoulder, playful, masking what he’s about to say in a joke, because this is special, and important, but Kazuya’s still not completely used to it. “You’ve basically been adopted into a madhouse. Deal with it.”

Kazuya’s laughter is soft. A little breathless.

“I could do that,” he murmurs, and reaches up to pull Eijun back to him.

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Because Kazuya’s course had been structured differently to Eijun’s and Harucchi’s, his exam results come before theirs.

He passes. With distinction.

They’re in the living-room when the news arrives with a beep on Kazuya’s phone – Eijun’d been immersed in Zootopia (is it just him, or does Nick Wilde seriously resemble Kazuya? Like a lot?) when he’s nudged on the shoulder.

He takes a peek at the proffered phone screen, breathes in so quick his lungs over-fill with more excitement than he can let out, and wants to squeeze the stuffing out of Kazuya – but his parents are in the room, and he can’t, because they’re still playing it safe, and because he thinks his dad might not be able to survive watching his son pounce on his boyfriend and smother him in hugs.

He makes up for it later.

***

He also makes a point of telling his mother, and snaps a dozen pictures of the hybrid emotions Kazuya wears most of the time when his mother cooks him a huge congratulations! meal (assisted by Eijun, who’d insisted), and yeah, Kazuya’s not used to people cooking for him, celebrating for him, and it makes him slightly sentimental, mouth working almost infinitesimally to keep a more erratic emotion under control, and Eijun squeezes his hand under the table.

***

“ – and you know, there was one time when he was at work, and he Skyped – “

“Wakana.”

“ – just to check with me if he looked alright, and then like, oh my gosh, the fact that he freaked out because he thought you were a druglord or something – you don’t look anything like a druglord by the way – “

“Why, thank you.”

“Wakana – “

“But then again Ei-chan tends to be delusional a lot? I mean he was freaking out because you apparently never say no to him – “
“Did he now?” Eijun physically recoils as Kazuya cuts eyes in his direction, glittering and devious and interested and Eijun decides on the spot that he does not like that look at all. He opens his mouth to protest, to at least attempt to salvage the situation – if there’s anything left worth salvaging at this rate – but Wakana beats him to it.

“He did,” Wakana confirms, nodding animatedly, and it’d have been easier – not much easier, just a notch easier – to stomach it if he could pretend she was just being oblivious. Except he knows her, and he knows that he should have expected this, because apparently he’s associated with all the resident sadists of his hometown, or might just be some kind of sadist-magnet if you add Mochi-senpai and his fiendishly smirking boyfriend to that list. “He was so freaked out and I mean, is that even a thing to complain about? I wish Kaito’d never say no to me – “

“How is Kaito?” Eijun interrupts, the tinge of hysteria painfully palpable, “Why didn’t you bring him over too? I haven’t seen him in ages.”

And also I need backup

Where is Harucchi when you need him

Actually, no scratch that, Harucchi is just as bad

Wakana rolls his eyes at him, and Eijun’d forgotten how aggravating it is when she does that, even though he’s seen it projected across to him all the way in Tokyo multiple times in the months they’d been apart.

“I told you, he’s working,” she chirrups, and smiles the kind of sly smile a person who knows exactly what they’re doing would wear – Eijun is torn, because he can’t decide whether to designate more of his willpower to not combusting from embarrassment or hold back on actually strangling one of his best friends. “Anyway, where was I?”

Kazuya is quick to oblige. “Eijun was worried because I never said no to him.”

The look on Eijun’s face is one of keenest betrayal.

Kazuya actually has the gall to laugh at him.

“Right!” Wakana exclaims, enthused and raring to go; you’d never have guessed that the same person had gone through varying stages of devastation, petulance and finally whiney persuasion when they’d first heard Eijun didn’t plan to be home for Christmas. One may smile and smile and be a villain, indeed. “And then, oh my gosh, the first time he went to your house, he – ”

“Oh my god, Wakana SHUT UP.”

She actually has the nerve to look offended. “Is that how you speak to a lady, Ei-chan?” she asks, haughty, and Eijun’s consumed with the desire to rip his own hair out.

But he has to ward off the imminent disaster that will be his life if Wakana continues, and since plain dissuading and begging isn’t working, he resorts to bribery.

“I’m not giving you your presents if you keep this up,” he says, scolding, and crosses his arms to show he’s serious.

This gets a reaction out of Wakana. “Well…I mean it depends on what you got me.”

Why you ungrateful little… Eijun has to count backwards to rake back his composure.
“I mean, it’s nothing special,” he taunts, because if she’s going to be play dirty, so is he, because evidently being graduates and adults meant nothing when reunited with a childhood friend privy to your most shameful secrets, “Just all those gigantic jars of scented candles you’ve been spamming on your Pinterest – gah!”

“Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh, Ei-chan!? Really?” Wakana appears clueless to the fact that she is, effectively, cutting off his blood circulation – honestly, one wouldn’t expect such a vice-like grip from such a petite person, but then again, Wakana’s clearly a spawn of the actual underworld, or like, some modern-day version of Mephistopheles, and this shouldn’t be surprising.

Eijun has the upper hand now. He smiles – although it’s a bit strained, because Wakana’s doing the strangling he’d been trying not to enact a couple of minutes ago – and steals a glance at Kazuya – Who’s –

Wait.

“Wa-kana you’re choking – me –”

“Ohhh, oops! I’m sorry! But Ei-chan, did you really –“

“I’m having second thoughts now,” Eijun sneers – wheezes, actually, but the smugness of his demeanour isn’t exactly difficult to interpret.

Wakana wheedles and pleads with him until he relents and negotiates a deal – three gigantic scented candles, all themed around summer because Wakana has an obsession with the sea and sun and beaches, in exchange for her silence.

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The peace treaty lasts less than fifteen minutes, though, because Kazuya offers to trade pictures of Eijun in cat-ear hats waving a lightsaber chanting I am one with the force and the force is with me, and Wakana – who’s definitely sold her soul to a demon or something since he last saw her, or has she always been this evil? – is immediately swayed, and neither of them even try to stop him when he stages an extravagant storm-out from the room, vowing never to speak to either of them ever again, burning so red his mum yelps in concern when she runs into him on the first-floor landing and frantically tries to check his temperature.

***

He holes himself up in his room, pushing away the unwelcome and entirely ironic flashbacks of all the times he’d flounced in here in a huff because he’d had a fight with Wakana or Harucchi or his dad had told him off or something.

It’s still funny to think of this as his room now, though, when it feels smaller and the bed’s a little cramped because it’d been for school-child Eijun, not graduate-about-to-get-a-job Eijun, but it’ll do, because yes, he’s probably about to wilt from the embarrassment and no, he doesn’t need anyone witnessing that, he thinks he’s endured enough, please and thank you.

When Kazuya steps into the room some time later – probably having exhausted the entirety of Wakana’s stash of cringeworthy stories Eijun presumes, hostile and prickly – he doesn’t bother looking up.

In fact, he never wants to look up again. He wants to stay where he is, and sink into the bed, and fall asleep for fifty years. Rip Van Winkle knew what was up.
Kazuya, evidently having had his fun at Eijun’s expense, is a bit roundabout with his approach.

“Isn’t that uncomfortable?”

He’s referring to the way Eijun’s flopped down on the bed – on his tummy, a pillow under his chest, elbows planted on either side of it so he can use them for leverage to hold the comic he’s reading open.

Eijun’d explain to him that this pose is specifically designed to maximise comfort while reading something lying down – because the alternative is rolling on to his back and having his arms get tired holding up the volume and risking dropping it on his nose – but since he’s busy trying to give Kazuya the silent treatment, he settles for a gruff, “No.”

Kazuya hums, and Eijun can hear him shift closer, but he’s not going to look up. He won’t.

And he’s also not going to confide anything to Wakana, ever again. Like, ever.

“What’re you reading?”

Eijun considers not answering. Is savagely tempted by it.

Remembers that he’s been made a fool of enough today and isn’t going to help his case being childish.

“The Long Halloween,” he says, reluctance working itself into the cracks between the words anyway – just because it’s the mature thing to do doesn’t mean Eijun has to like it. He leaves it as that, curt and to the point, and thinks in regretful hindsight that he ought to have found a less accessible place to wallow in his misery.

Of course, Kazuya persists. “The thing Kuramochi gave you?”

Not ‘Tsundere Senpai’ this time, huh

It pleases him a little, that Kazuya’s trying to manoeuvre tactfully – but then he remembers he wouldn’t have to if he’d remembered that tact half an hour ago and is bitter again.

Or, rather, is trying to cover for the harrowing degrees of chagrin he’s suffering with bitterness. The particulars aren’t important.

“Yes.”

“Why’d he give you this one again?”

The long answer would have been that Mochi-senpai wants him to get caught up on the characters and themes of the comic so he’s familiar with their backstories when they start watching Gotham, and Eijun’s taken it all to heart because Mochi-senpai rarely ever gets him reading material (because you read way too much as it is already, with which Eijun vehemently disagrees because there’s no such thing as ‘reading too much’), and he’s clearly invested in this enough to want to share it with Eijun and who knows how long they’ll still have the chance to binge series together and he’d probably borrowed a leaf out of Kazuya’s book getting him to read the reference material rather than jumping straight into the show and Kazuya’s probably conjectured all this already and –

Well, the answer’s long. And Eijun’s not in the mood to expound.

So he sasses, “To read it.”
Kazuya sniggers. Eijun resents the way it tickles inside of his chest, because he’s supposed to be angry that he’s still not being taken seriously.

He channels all his concentration to the coloured panels in front of him.

It’s a bit hard, when he can feel the mattress sink close to his hip.

The bed’s small. There’s not enough space for two grown adults on it.

There’s a futon rolled up and tucked somewhere inside his closet, provided by his mother, that neither of them have used.

Eijun has half a mind to have it initiated today.

What panel’d he been on again?

“What panel’d he been on again?”

Eijun instantaneously forgets the mantra of Don’t look at him, and looks at him.

“I’m in the middle of chapter three,” he tells him, in the tone of someone who’s trying to figure out if the other person is being dense on purpose.

This is a mistake, though, because it means he has full view of Kazuya leering down at him, before he says, a little pouty, “But I’m bored.”

Clacking his teeth together, Eijun turns his head back to his neglected book. It’s a ruse, he knows it’s a ruse, and he’s starting to think he’d left himself a bit vulnerable with this pose, since he can’t exactly tell what’s going on behind him and being on his front like this considerably constricts his reaction time –

But he’s stubborn, so he’s not about to let up.

“Then go find something to amuse yourself with.” He almost adds, Why not find Wakana, I’m sure she’s got more embarrassing stories about me to tell you.

He holds back at the very last second, because as satisfying as the dig would be, it’d also give Kazuya a Very Bad Idea.

Realising he’s been on the same page for possibly the last ten minutes – or however much time has passed since Kazuya entered the room – he swipes, flipping to the next page and determinedly staring at the blank white margins of the panels because it goes against the fabric of his entire being to willingly expose himself to spoilers.

A part of him wants Kazuya to get the hint and leave him be so he can flush the annoyance out of his system.

(A part of him wants Kazuya to stay and make it up to him)

And, no, what? No he doesn’t want that, he’s angry, dammit, and he’s perfectly entitled to making sure Kazuya knows he’s mad because it’s not fair, there’s no one he can go to get embarrassing stories of Kazuya from but everyone around him seems at the ready to spill all the less-than-sensible things he’s done in his entire life – which is a lot – be it Wakana or Harucchi that one time he’d told Kazuya about the extra-special care Eijun’s taking of the book he got him and –

There’s a hand under his shirt, pressing warm into his side.
He flinches and tries not to squeak.

“What are you doing?” He’s proud of the way his tone doesn’t waver – is even. Almost menacing.

Kazuya’s answer sounds so innocent, it’s completely at odds to what he’s *doing*. “I’m finding something to amuse myself?”

There’s cool air touching bare skin, right at the small of his back – his shirt’s getting hitched up, Eijun realises, in shock, and Kazuya’s apparently not deterred by the fact that the material catches where Eijun’s front is still very much pressed into the mattress; he simply slips his hand – hands, he’s got both of them in there now – in the space left empty inside of Eijun’s baggy sweater-shirt, and runs them over suddenly hypersensitive skin.

“This isn’t – “ Eijun grits, stops, because he sounds breathless, *already*, and he’s just touching him, and *why*, *why is his self-control so shit* – “this isn’t what I meant.”

Kazuya doesn’t miss a beat. “But this is what I’d *really* like to do,” he says, and okay, Eijun takes it back, he’d been so completely wrong to not want to look at Kazuya, because like this, when he can’t *see* him, can only hear the now dark-dulcet timbre of his voice, somehow suggestive and demure at the same time how is that even possible, is really, really bad for his health. “You can continue reading though, don’t mind me.”

He times *that* completely insane suggestion a second before he dives, and Eijun feels the press of open lips *right* at the base of his spine.

The noise that leaves his mouth has his insides churning, so critically ashamed it almost hurts.

“Unless you’d rather be doing something else?” Kazuya hums, almost sounding *considerate*, like he’d not just been mouthing at the knobs of Eijun’s backbone and – was that his *tongue*?

No, no, no, *no* – Eijun squirms, has his hips pinned down to the bed by Kazuya, using his…

His knees.

Eijun pictures what that must look like, and inadvertently, against the clamour of his brain and his ego and that juvenile pride that refuses to be one-upped at all cost, smashes his face into the open book, crumpling one of the pages, and it’s an absolute *atrocity*, but Eijun can’t bring himself to care right now, and –

“Kazuya…my parents are – they’re at home. They’re *downstairs* – ”

He can feel Kazuya’s breath – hot, moist, *hot* – skating over damp skin. His shirt’s wadding up higher. He’d not even realised when the hands melding in against his ribs had coaxed him to lift himself enough to let Kazuya do that.

“It’s okay,” the words ghost over the patch Kazuya’s been lavishing attention to, in between his shoulder blades – it’s warm and cool and electric and Eijun almost bucks, holds himself back and isn’t sure if he’s more relieved or remorseful when he succeeds; goes to bury his face in the book again and realises it’s not there anymore. “I told your mum we were turning in.”

Eijun feels a growl bubble, spark inside his throat. “You,” he chokes out, and it’s a mixture of everything he’s feeling, right now – frustration, impatience, helplessness, *yearning*. “You are so – “

Kiss. “So?”
Eijun faceplants the pillow. There’s too much heat, his clothes are too tight and Kazuya’s mouth having its way with his back is unravelling what little is left of his sanity. “So mean,” he whines, into the plush of the pillow, and spasms with ire and something else when Kazuya’s laugh skitters up his spine. “You’re mean, and you’re horrible, and a tease and a bully, and the worst.”

“The worst, huh?”

“The worst,” Eijun confirms, trying and failing not to arch when Kazuya’s hands suddenly bunch up at the hem of his shirt and yank up, and it’s a stupidly, unfairly decisive move that makes his knees feel like liquid and his brain feel like mush, “you mean – perverted – tanuki.”

It’s the weirdest culmination of sensations in the world, having fingers, warm and rough, snag over the sensitive skin of his chest, at the same time as the person they belong to snorting hard into your nape.

The breath gets knocked out of Eijun as Kazuya drops his weight on him, a second, laughing so hard he rocks the both of them with it.

Before he can do anything to save himself from imminent suffocation, though, Kazuya’s already hefting his weight off of Eijun – finding his shoulders so he can flip him over, like he’s another page in an interesting book.

“Tanuki? Really?”

Eijun frowns – it’s not really out of anger as it is out of the fact that Eijun’s too muddled to see straight, but at least he looks displeased. “Yes, really,” he affirms, because it’d shattered Kazuya’s smarmy self-assurance a tad, and it somehow seemed to fit. “The world’s worst tanuki.”

Kazuya’s grinning down at him, supporting his weight on his elbows. Eijun tries not to think of how close they are.

“You wound me,” he croons, and Eijun makes a face at him, which only makes Kazuya chuckle, “If you had to give me a nickname, you could give me something…oh, I don’t know. Cuter.”

Eijun can’t believe this guy. Does he not realise how close he is to Eijun actually contemplating – contemplating being the key word here, because the idea alone is sacrilegious but no one needs to know – kicking him out over the excessive bullying? “You’d have to be cute to deserve a cute nickname.”

Kazuya is, maddeningly, unfazed by the jab. “Ah, I see. Good point. Well, since you’re plenty cute,” he grins harder when Eijun flushes, bright and unforgiving and obvious, damn physiology, “I guess you should get the cute nickname, right? So what’ll it be? Baby? Honey? My sun and stars, moon of my life?”

Eijun lets out a noise which, shamefully, sounds like a whimper. “Shut up,” he protests, weak and without heat, because honestly. He can’t keep up. He can’t keep up with this guy. He tries to bring a hand up to hide his face, but it gets captured, snared down next to his head, Kazuya’s grip gentle but unyielding.

“Why, don’t you want a cute nickname?” Kazuya keeps teasing, relentless, and Eijun’s half tempted to kick him, except he also kind of doesn’t want to hurt Kazuya, and curse these feelings.

“No.”

“But you’re so adorable,” Kazuya dips in, breaches his space, steals his air – he nuzzles into
Eijun’s cheek, and the butterflies are a giddy chaotic tornado in his stomach. “I…had no idea you got that worked up over our dates.”

That cinches it. Eijun’d like to slip into a coma now. Go into hyper-sleep. Get cryogenically frozen. Anything that’d keep him from having to have this conversation.

Since none of those options seem viable without advance space tech at his fingertips, tragically, he pleads, in something less than a whisper, “Can we not talk about this, please?”

“Why not?” Kazuya’s preoccupied, lips buzzing under his ear, against his neck. Shoulder. “It’s adorable.”

“It’s embarrassing.”

Kazuya laughs again, husky and low, and Eijun’s knotted up so tight with tension that his survival instincts kick into overdrive – he bucks up, this time to dislodge Kazuya, and ducks out from under his grip.

Kazuya grabs him, and they topple to the floor.

“Stupid, stupid tanuki, get off of me – “

“I’m happy.”

“Wh – “

“I’m happy,” Kazuya echoes, infuriatingly casual – he’s not the one that’d just landed on his back, sandwiched in between the floor and another fully grown person. As though he hears the stream of incensed rambling in Eijun’s head, he moves off of Eijun, shifts his arms round him like he’s cradling him as he helps him up, “that. You thought about it so much. That you…gave it a chance.”

Eijun’s conscious of how his throat feels like it’s shrivelling up – how the palpitations of his heart are thumping somewhere inside of his skull; he holds his breath as Kazuya meets his eyes, almost…bashful.

But so, so intent.

“That you gave us a chance.”

***

“So I see you kissed and made up!”

Eijun responds to Wakana’s grinning version of a ‘hello’ with belligerent hair ruffling.

“Hey – “

“I am never,” Eijun vows, quivering with the gravity of what he’s about to say, admiring his handiwork in the form of the messy nest of hair on Wakana’s head from behind an outwardly pointed scowl, “telling you anything. Ever again.”

Wakana doesn’t appear perturbed – even with her new pseudo punk-rock hairstyle.

“You don’t mean that,” she sings, running fingers through her bangs and setting them back in place. Eijun’s eyes clap lightning in her direction.
“Watch me,” he says, and turns his nose up at her, because yes, okay, he owes Wakana—a lot—for helping him rein in the guts to take initiative with Kazuya and had probably contributed the most to Eijun getting together with him in the first place, but still.

That didn’t mean she could just get away with telling Kazuya all about it.

Who did that?

He wouldn’t have done it.

He thinks.

“Oh, get over it Ei-chan,” Wakana lilts, throwing an arm around Eijun’s shoulder—they’re in the back veranda, legs dangling off the edge, drinking mugs of hot soup. “Let’s…um. Call it compensation, for all the time I spent listening to you spaz.”

And right, Eijun can’t exactly argue with that. He had bugged Wakana at the most inconvenient of times but—“If I’d known you would want vengeance, I wouldn’t have told you in the first place.”

Wakana giggles. “You and I both know that’s not true,” and damn her for being right, and damn her for knowing him so well.

He lets her scoop out the mushroom from his soup into hers without complaint.

When Eijun remains pointedly silent—but still sitting there—Wakana rolls her eyes.

“Fine, then if you’re not gonna talk to me,” she says, almost sweetly, like she’s speaking to a child, and really, why are all his friends like this? Does he wear a Please bully me signboard on his back that he hasn’t seen yet or something? “how about I talk to you instead?”

Eijun’s stare is sour.

“Okay then!” Wakana claps her hands. “So…let me begin by saying, ahhh, you guys are the cutest couple ever! Like, Ryou-nii and Haruichi told me about it and I saw a bit of it in our Skype calls but omg? You guys are so adorable?”

Eijun doesn’t say anything. Flattery isn’t going to get her anywhere.

Wakana senses this, and ploughs on, not the slightest bit discouraged. “I mean I get what you meant when you said he loves to tease you, now—“

Yes, exactly, but Eijun’s not going to cave just because someone agrees with him.

“—but. It’s…so obvious he’s head over heels for you too?”

“Eh?”

Wakana smirks, triumphant, and Eijun has to push his brain through a complicated regimen of acrobatics to pretend he hadn’t just forgotten his pledge to ignore Wakana for at least half the day in a single second.

“I said,” Wakana singsongs, because she has to be infuriating, apparently, “it’s so obvious he’s head over heels for you.”

Eijun has to struggle not to stutter. “And you got that from…what? Him showing you embarrassing pictures of me in knit hats?”
Wakana trills. “Those were adorable by the way.”

Eijun grunts. People seem to be using that adjective for him a lot lately. He’s not sure how he feels about it.

“But well…no. I mean, if you’d not been so busy throwing a tantrum – “

“I did not throw a – “

“Maybe you’d have realised how he was…looking at you.”

Wakana gives him what can possibly be interpreted as a significant look and Eijun – thinks – Remembers –

“How was he looking at me?” There’s wind in his ears, like he’s placed a seashell there, listening to empty hollows howling.

“Like…” Wakana shakes her a head a little – the teasing’s gone, her demeanour different. She’s smiling, as if to herself, “oh, I don’t know how to say this without it sounding like one of your manga. Like…you’re too good to be true. Like you’re the best thing that ever happened to him.”

***

The day his results come out, Eijun refuses to be in the room with anyone else.

That doesn’t stop his assortment of family and friends from creating a ruckus right outside the door, though.

It’s nerve-wracking, and he almost goes to sleep because of his brain’s disinclination to deal with stress when he’s on holiday, but he pushes himself through it, holds his breath as the site buffers, the tension smarting and –

Oh my god

“I passed!”

Hugs, hands roughing up his hair, thumping him on the back, a chorus of congrats! See I know you could do it! I’m so proud of you and Eijun grins until his face hurts and the muscles of his jaw feel like they’re going to lock into position like that and it’s not exactly spontaneous when he throws his arms around Kazuya and tugs him into a hug.

It’s not a long hug, not the lingering kind, not the type Eijun’s going to give him when they’re alone later on and nowhere near enough to channel what he’s feeling – the respite, the gratitude, the need to try to convey just how much he owes Kazuya – the internship, the pitches, all the times he’d dealt with Eijun’s panic attacks – all the times he’d looked past what Eijun is convinced he is to what he could be.

It’s overwhelming.

And Eijun gets it.

Gets what Wakana’d meant, what probably nestles in Kazuya’s mind these days, this profound disbelief because –

Kazuya jerks back a little, makes a surprised little noise, but holds him back, gingerly, and smiles
the most beautiful smile when he steps away, not too far – twines their hands and continues holding on all the while as he gets hustled around the house in celebration, calls Mochi-senpai to let him know and blubber-laughs through his feigned shock at Eijun’s ability to actually graduate, and –

His mum takes pictures, Wakana takes pictures, and it’s perfect, and happy, and Eijun gets it, because he hasn’t changed – he’s not become a different person, he’s not ivy turned flower.

He has grown. He’s learnt to cling, learnt to climb, learnt to use his own ability and determination to keep himself adrift and then scale higher, and it’s not accurate, he thinks, to say that the one you love completes you. No, because if there’s anything Eijun’s learnt, it’s that he’s never been incomplete – he’d just not known how to be better.

And Kazuya’d taught him that.

Kazuya’d seen that in him.

Thought it was worth Eijun seeing for himself.

And Eijun gets it.

Gets Kazuya’s silences, the wonder in his eyes sometimes, and quiet way he tugs and holds Eijun and kisses his hairline when he thinks Eijun’s sleeping, the way he sometimes catches him looking at Eijun out of the corner of his eye.

Eijun… reciprocates.

Because he thinks Kazuya is too good to be true.

Like he’s the best thing to ever happen to him.

He can’t stop smiling.

***

Harucchi’s results come out two days later – because they’d been in different faculties, and because Eijun’d finished his course before Harucchi – and he comes over with his laptop in tow because *We’re going to book our graduation tickets, Eijun-kun, and No, we can celebrate my grades later but we do this NOW or else you’ll forget.*

Which, of course, means Eijun pouts through the whole process, because yeah, he procrastinates, but he wouldn’t procrastinate on something this important.

At least he thinks he wouldn’t.

He can’t exactly deny that he’d not be sitting here with his laptop out and Harucchi monitoring him as he fills up the online application if he’d not been otherwise compelled to.

There’s time.

There’s a deadline – he’s not sure when, but it’s not soon. He thinks.

“Stop sulking and finish,” Harucchi urges, poking his arm.

“Yeah, yeah,” Eijun huffs – honestly, why is Harucchi not more laid back? He’d aced his exams, cleanly getting off with first-class honours, and if anything, he should be the most chilled out right
now. He idly thinks about bringing it up with Onii-san – remembers he’s a workaholic who’d shortened his stay home so he could get back to his job.

And his boyfriend.

He wonders how they’re doing.

Since Onii-san’d sent them pictures of match tickets – not VIP but they’re nice seats – Eijun surmises they must be doing pretty well.

“Are you getting a guest ticket for Mochi-senpai or should I?” Eijun asks, when he’s scrolled down to the tab requesting he specify how many people he wishes to bring to the ceremony.

“I will,” Harucchi says – he smiles a tiny, telling smile, “Onii-san’s instructions.”

Eijun shortles. Yeah. Yeah, they’re doing well.

“Then I’m booking for Mum, Dad, Gramps and Kazuya,” Eijun counts off on his hand.

The latter shifts, out of Eijun’s sight, somewhere behind him. Eijun’d not specifically mentioned wanting Kazuya at his graduation before this, sure, but honestly? It pretty much went without saying.

“And I booked my parents, Aniki and Kuramochi-senpai.”

“Done!”

“See? Now don’t you feel better, having that out of the way?”

“…don’t preach at me now, Harucchi, I’m relaxing.”

He prods Kazuya later, when they’re watching one of his mother’s Korean dramas – she glued to the screen, rapt, but Eijun doesn’t think she’d mind him leaning into Kazuya’s side either way.

“Did your dad message back?”

Kazuya turns his head. Nuzzles his hair. It’s kitten-like and cute and Eijun’s going to tell him that when he wants to tease him.

“Yeah.”

“What did he say?”

“He said…he’ll come.”

Eijun smiles. Delighted. Pleased. Spins plans and ideas in his head, because Kazuya’s graduation is before his, and while his parents aren’t going to be in town in time for it –

“Let’s take lots of pictures with him.”

Chapter End Notes
-The Long Halloween: a Batman comic where every chapter takes place around a holiday, spanning October to October. Kind of makes sense since in this fic there have been back to back celebrations as well :) Please read, if you haven't and if you're into detective, film-noiry Batman stories featuring the Rogues Gallery!
-Gotham: I recently started watching this, and it's what reminded me of The Long Halloween, because some very familiar names crop up here. Basically, if you love all the supporting characters of the Bat-verse and adore the Rogues Gallery, you'll love this. Tone is kinda like the Netflix Marvel shows, first season a little slow BUT IT PAYS OFF
-'smile and smile and be a villain' - quote from Shakespeare's Hamlet
-Mephistopheles - demon granted to fulfill the whims of Faust after he sold his soul to the devil in Goethe's 'Faust'
-Rip Van Winkle - read this story as a kid, couldn't understand how someone could sleep for 50 years, now I do and the man is #goals (anyone else sleep when they get stressed out?)
-Zootopia - I SWEAR NICK SMILES THE SAME WAY AS KAZUYA. IT'S CALLED A HUSTLE SWEETHEART
-'my sun and stars' & 'moon of my life' - obligatory A Song of Ice and Fire/GoT reference

um I think that's it? thank you so so much for reading! please forgive me if I haven't been able to get back to you yet, but I will as soon as I can! I just wanna let you guys know, again, how MUCH all your support and feedback means to me <3

alsoomg2chapterslefthowwhatwhy
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

i have the worst butterflies in my tummy, posting this orz

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“OSHI OSHI OSHI! OSHI OSHI OSHI!”

“Eijun-kun, they’ve not even started yet – “

“That’s why we gotta cheer now, while they can still hear – omg look it’s Mochi-senpai! MOCHI-SENPAI!”

He catches Harucchi face-palming out of the corner of his eye, feels Kazuya judder with silent laughter on his other side, but his eyes are fixed down and forward and, judging by the way the lithe figure sprinting out on to the diamond with that unmistakeable green hair peeking out from under his cap goes rigid, Eijun knows he’s been heard.

“If you keep this up, he’s going to boycott you from the next match,” comes the almost musical threat – Onii-san hasn’t deigned to get on to his feet to watch as the team jogs out, warming up.

“He should be happy I’m cheering for him,” Eijun retorts, nowhere near disheartened.

And Eijun does cheer. Forgets himself. Shouts himself hoarse, gets more than a few side-eyes from Kazuya, who’d probably never had occasion to realise the capacity of lung-power he has – his music teacher in middle-school’d once told him he would have done great in theatre, if he had any idea how to sustain a note.

“Cheetah-senpai! OSHI!”

“THUNDER THUNDER THUNDER CAT!”

“OMG DID YOU SEE THAT? ONII-SAN DID YOU SEE THAT? HE DISAPPEARED!”

“AHHHH THIS IS SO MUCH COOLER LIVE!”

“HE’S LIKE A BUMBLEBEE! OMG HE’S THE GREEN HORNET”

“If you keep giving him so many nicknames he’s going to have an identity crisis,” Kazuya tells him, during one of the interludes between innings – he’s pressing a gigantic plastic cup into Eijun’s hand, and Eijun dives for the straw, the bubbly cool of the soda soothing to chafed-up vocal chords almost screamed raw. At this rate, he thinks, he’s going to lose his voice before its sundown.

It would totally be worth it.

“But you see what I mean though?” he asks, in a whisper, which technically isn’t a whisper because he’s still low-key shouting to get himself heard over the steady undulating crescendo of the crowd. This is totally different to the baseball matches Eijun’d sometimes attended in school – even in a prelim match, the turnout for powerhouse teams beloved on a national level is insane. He
sweeps his eye over the stadium, a little disjointed, a little disoriented trying to grasp the sheer numbers of people they’re sharing this experience with. That whole sense of community magnifies the exhilaration of the match a dozen times more than all the times he’s watched Mochi-senpai on TV. “He’s so fast. Like lightning.” His eye takes on an inspired light. “Green Lightning.”

The corner of Kazuya’s mouth is puckered up, like he’s trying really hard not to smile. The sparkle in his eyes give it away.

“Eh, he’s alright,” he shrugs, and gets a shove from Eijun.

“You’re just jealous.”

Kazuya’s smirk deepens. “Oh? Of his ability or your enthusiastic fanboying?”

Eijun isn’t going to fall for it. “You tell me.”

The siren blares, the announcer’s voice – monotonous and clipped and sounding exactly as Eijun imagines those artificial intelligence systems in video games would sound like in real life – heralds in the next inning.

Just before Eijun’s about to spring back out of his seat and scour the diamond for Number 6, Kazuya swoops in and kisses Eijun’s ear.

“I guess I wouldn’t mind playing baseball if I’d have such a devoted cheerleader.”

***

Mochi-senpai’s team wins, and as much as he tries to hero it up when they have a group Skype call later – because of the whole press conference deal, another match the day after, post-match strategy sessions and the works, he couldn’t exactly come out and see them, to Eijun’s dismay – Eijun can tell he’s happy.

Even if he complains about Eijun being loud and embarrassing ninety percent of the time.

***

Eijun wakes up the next morning with his voice ostensibly missing, and has to tolerate an entire day of Kazuya intentionally misinterpreting the one-sided charades game they end up playing.

“What?”

Eijun glares. That should be easy enough to read, right?

Kazuya, being positively impossible, feigns innocent confusion. “I thought you said you wanted a kiss?”

Pursing his lips for a few seconds, Eijun opens his mouth, defeated. Croaks, sounding a bit like a pubescent teen doing a Christian-Bale-as-Batman impression, “Hungry. I’m hungry.”

“Ohh,” Kazuya draws it out, over-exaggerated with mock realisation. Eijun can’t even smack him, since Kazuya’s got his arms clamped around him so tight, Eijun’s hands are trapped in between them. “I thought you were pointing at your mouth because you wanted me to kiss you.”

Eijun rolls his eyes. Pouts. Talk about selective –

Kazuya bites his lip.
Eijun squeaks.

Or at least, that’s what it would have been, if he’d not spent several hours on end the previous day bellowing his lungs out.

When he leans back – as far back as Kazuya’s stranglehold of a hug will let him – and eyes Kazuya, bewildered, Kazuya merely tips his head to the side.

“I thought you were puckering up.”

Eijun sighs, and gives up on the likelihood of getting lunch without fulfilling Kazuya’s highly fickle quota for affection.

***

Going back to the office where he’d interned is a surreal experience.

It’s nerve-wracking, if he’s going to be more specific.

The first time, there’d been a kind of emergency door in the back of his mind, always in place over the horizon – it was just a temporary thing, he could tell himself, sitting in his shoebox and doing layout after layout. He could hate it or screw up or regret all his life choices but ultimately, in three months, he’d be able to leave. There’d been a sort of freedom to being a student he’s only starting to be conscious of now, reading through a contract Tanba-san is nice enough to walk him through the particulars of, signing on the dotted line, new and entirely alien thoughts he’d somehow not considered wriggling in and burrowing, making space for themselves in his brain. Words like health insurance and leave negotiation and income tax. Words like confidentiality and privacy disclaimers and contractual obligations.

Copies and copies of paperwork Eijun gets passed for reference, even more copies that get filed away.

By the time he goes home, he has a headache.

“I think I don’t like adulting,” he mumble-whines into Kazuya’s collar – they’re snuggling on the couch, closing credits of *Game of Thrones* slipping by on the TV screen.

There’s no one at home, Mochi-senpai at the hotel where the rest of his team are set up. They’d qualified for the semi-finals that weekend, and the pressure must be harrowing, but he’d still called that morning to check if Eijun’d remembered to wake himself up for his own first day of work.

And yeah, he doesn’t have work clothes over at Kazuya’s place, and he’s going to have to leave at some point before the trains shut down, and it’s going to be hell trying to get up in the morning, but right now, Eijun is drained and jetlagged and unsettled, and he needs something familiar.

He needs Kazuya, running fingers through his hair, laughing softly as he nuzzles his cheek.

“I thought you said couldn’t wait to leave student-life behind.”

“I did,” Eijun flails, the jumbled emotions making him spasm when they don’t find an outlet in words, “but…all this…responsibility.”

“There, there,” Kazuya coos, and it’s more teasing than placatory, so Eijun gives him a harmless punch to the side. “It’ll get better.”
Eijun makes a noise, faintly complaining but largely meaningless. The TV screen has gone blank – Kazuya, always so eager to binge-watch with Eijun, hasn’t selected the next episode yet.

“Did you feel like this, at first?” Eijun murmurs – he hauls himself up a little from where he’d been drooping, becoming one with the couch’s upholstery. Planting his chin at Kazuya’s shoulder, he blinks up at him, inquisitive.

“About the bookstore?” Eijun nods, and Kazuya breathes out his nose, expression reflective. “I… guess so? It’s obviously not as serious or as official as getting a full-time job but…at times I did wonder if it was worth it. Any kind of job in the service industry’s a lot of…responsibility.” He smirks down at Eijun as he says the last bit, and Eijun finds himself smiling back, a little.

“But you got used to it?”

“I got used to it,” Kazuya affirms; he shifts, straightening his posture, resting his weight against the back of their seat as he secures an arm around Eijun, “I even started enjoying it after a while. And I mean…it’s hard to regret it, considering all the things that happened there.”

He doesn’t have to elaborate. Eijun blushes, hides it and the giddy grin it gets out of him into the sleeve of Kazuya’s sweater.

“It’s so weird, to suddenly have so many things to think about,” Eijun confides, eventually. He’s got both his hands wound round Kazuya’s, fingers of the left absently picking at the lint on Kazuya’s sleeve. “I mean, I always thought work life would be easier than uni, because studying is a full-time occupation, you know? It doesn’t end when you come home. But at least…at least all I had to worry about was doing well in class and getting my assignments in on time.”

And even then I managed to goof up, he thinks, but doesn’t say aloud.

Kazuya hums, understanding. “Well, it’s still very new,” he tells Eijun – his voice is a low hum, and Eijun, eyes shuttering of their own volition, likens it to the feeling of hearing distant thunder when he’s deep inside the covers, not planning nor inclined to get out of bed for hours yet. It’s comforting, and a little magical. “And new things tend to be a bit jarring, right? You’ll get used to it, especially when you get round to pitching stories again.”

Eijun groans. “I’ve not even started worrying about that yet.”

Kazuya sniggers. “Probably shouldn’t have said that.”

Eijun glares, dour, but Kazuya’s smile is playful.

“You’ll be fine,” he says, and it’s not dismissive – it’s a quiet vote of confidence, and Eijun knows it in the way he holds his eye a little longer than necessary, before he leans in the extra inch or so to touch their noses together. “If you want, you can always practice pitching with me.”

In spite of himself, Eijun giggles. “Are you sure you know what you’re signing up for?” he asks – he’s captured by the weirdest temptation to pull his phone out, and scan through the millions of texts he and Kazuya have exchanged since Eijun’d first saved his number, to the very first day Kazuya’d texted Eijun.

The very first day Eijun’d pitched a story.

They keep coming round, again and again, like it’s a clock, like the hands are passing by the same pit-stops along the way…but the days are different. Their significance is different.
Kazuya’s wearing a crafty little smile of his own as he leans in, again, and pecks Eijun on the lips.

“Hmm. You’ll have to make it worth my while.”

***

It’s while he’s at work, still during the first week – he’s been handed into the care of a Kawakami Norifumi, fondly referred to company-wide as Nori-san, and Eijun’s jittery nerves are sedated somewhat to find that he’s actually a really nice guy, despite being one of the senior members of the editorial team – that he gets a text from another new number for the first time.

***

They go for the semi-finals match.

Mochi-senpai’s team loses.

Eijun doesn’t understand the technicalities of the game or that match well enough to understand why – all he knows is he’s never seen Mochi-senpai play better in his life.

That night, when he comes homes – or rather, the next morning, pushing two by the time all the press meets and interviews had been wrapped up – they throw him a party.

If a gigantic makeshift banner made with card paper bought off the stationary joint down the street spelling “Congratulations Ashi Obake!!!” in the only available Sharpie colours Eijun has left over from his note-making days and the sandwiches Kazuya manages to assemble at short notice can qualify as ‘party’.

“You were great,” Eijun gushes – nay, rambles, because he has a tendency to lose reign of his tongue when he’s trying to articulate his appreciation for something that has, basically, blown his mind, and the words try to come out faster than his brain has time to conceive them, “like, so, so cool. Like, amazing. Do you know, the people we were next to were totally fangirling at you? They said you’re the best switch-hitter they’ve seen in the current gen. Nationally. And that’s putting to the side the fact that you are the fastest man alive and – “

“Okay, okay, I get it Sawamura. You can play Dishonoured without supervision.”

“That’s not why I – I’m being honest! You were so cool!” Eijun’s lower lip juts out, offended that his heartfelt admiration is being dismissed like this and about to make his grievances known – but Onii-san gets there before him.

“You deserve the accolades, Youichi,” is what he says, and Mochi-senpai goes a little loose-jawed, his eyes go round, because Onii-san isn’t exactly generous with compliments, especially not when everyone is listening, “you were in top form, today.”

“T-thanks,” is what Mochi-senpai – now looking fairly more sunburnt than he had when he’d come back after a gruelling season of training and back-to-back matches – ultimately says. Gruffs, really. “But…I mean we still lost so…”

“That’s no reflection on you,” Onii-san corrects immediately. His tone’s lightly scolding. “You didn’t miss a single catch. That’s got to be some kind of record.”
Eijun and Harucchi exchange a long, meaningful look – Eijun’s having trouble not giggling, and Harucchi smirks, because okay. This is by far the greatest display of…what is this called? Caring? No, that has always been there, in the way they’d wait for each other to start eating, in the way they’d enter and leave rooms together.

But there’s something different, something a little less – private, a little less inhibited, a frankness with which Onii-san addresses how he thinks and feels regarding Mochi-senpai that, by Onii-san’s reserved standards, is a lot more carefree than usual.

Is a lot more openly affectionate.

It makes Eijun’s brain cotton candy and puts stupid ideas like chiming Now kiss! into his head.

Instead, he settles for grabbing Kazuya’s hand and lacing their fingers together, and totally failing not to grin when Kazuya squeezes back.

***

The next day – or, truthfully, the same day, but at a more humane hour – Mochi-senpai comes back from a meeting with his team and managers and announces, slightly stunned, that he’s been appointed vice-captain.

Eijun kicks a huge fuss, demanding his autograph, demanding selfies, demanding autographs on selfies, and only adjourns to his room when Onii-san comes over, and asks him out for a celebratory dinner, not batting an eyelid or looking the slightest bit perturbed as he says, “Just the two of us” and short-circuits Mochi-senpai while he stands at the door in his rattiest pajamas.

***

Eijun sits with Miyuki-san at Kazuya’s graduation ceremony.

It’s awkward – very awkward, because Eijun has no idea what to say, and when he has no idea what to say, he ends up spitting out whatever comes to mind.

Which is not always sensible.

“ – and so then, this Chef Kataoka, he turns up behind the student, and the guy gets so scared seeing him turn up like a phantom behind him that he screams and deflates the soufflé,” and you’d have thought Eijun had been there, rather than recounting, with a couple of embellishments thrown in here and there for narrative purposes, one of Kazuya’s many ‘kitchen nightmare’ anecdotes, “ – it was apparently so loud they heard him out in the main dining section too. I didn’t even know sound waves could be that strong, it’s crazy! – ”

A part of Eijun is winding up to that state of borderline combustive stress of knowing he’s probably talking too much, but helpless to stop himself. At this point, fuelled by an odd but compelling concoction of adrenaline, nerves and a desperate need for Miyuki-san to like him, he has a better chance trying to stem a raging waterfall using just his hands.

Luckily, though, Miyuki-san doesn’t appear averse to his incessant chattering.

He’d seemed a tiny bit nervous, when Eijun’d gone to find him at the entrance, because Kazuya had to be at the hall with the other graduates and post-graduates, and Eijun’d been more than nervous – it had been gruelling enough working up to meeting him for the first time with Kazuya by his side, and the prospect of keeping him company all by himself had stressed him out so much he’d almost felt nauseated.
But then he’d found him, looking a bit lost himself, dressed up from the casual wear they’d seen him in the last time – he’s wearing a tastefully cut suit that’s a size too big for him, and.

The scarf they’d given him.

And Eijun’d smiled – warm and genuine and a bit spontaneously sentimental – and found himself unable to shut up since.

“Though, I think the soufflé tasted fine, so he passed,” Eijun finishes, in a fervid undertone – the ceremony’s started, but since the dean is making his way down the list of degree graduates first, it’ll be a while before it’s Kazuya’s turn. Eijun cranes his neck over the sea of mortarboards teeming in the first couple of rows from the front, as though he expects to see him. “I didn’t know food could be that stressful.”

Miyuki-san actually laughs at this. It’s incredibly gratifying.

“Well, I suppose to each their own,” Miyuki-san murmurs, a tad introspective – when he smiles, the harsh creases left drooping and etched round his mouth lift into something softer. Rounder. “I think Kazuya may have always been fond of cooking.”

“Really?”

Miyuki-san nods. “When his mother would be in the kitchen, he’d be there, on a tiny stool standing beside her watching.”

Eijun absorbs this information – it’s new and shiny and fascinating, like a new mineral the world has never known before, an artefact no one had expected to find. “He said he started considering it as a career when he was in highschool.”

There’s a smattering of applause, black robes and square caps parading across the stage, pinpricks of light flashing now and again as a camera goes off near the stage. Maybe it’s a little rude, to so openly not pay attention or participate in moments clearly monumental in the lives of the people up there, filing down in alphabetical order, stepping toward the culmination of one part of life and on the crux of beginning another.

But this is...the same, isn’t it? In a room where history is being made inside the heads and hearts of individuals, multiple versions and interpretations and renditions of the same event, the same moments, minuscule and meaningless unless you zoomed in, one by one...everyone is going to leave with memories of their own, and it only feels apt that Eijun’s memory be adorned by the person he’s here for – memories of Kazuya, but, for once, through the eyes of someone else.

“When he told me he was going to do a degree in hospitality...I was surprised. I suppose I shouldn’t have been, considering Kazuya’d gotten really good at taking care of himself after...after his mother passed away.” The levity slips out of Miyuki-san’s countenance a lot more seamlessly than it’d found its way there – Eijun’s conscious of a keen ache blooming open inside his ribs as he watches the corners of his mouth pull down...fits back into the lines there.

How many times had he thought about this? How many times had he lived through it, belated regrets, burgeoning and unkempt and relentless, played over and over until they’d become a part of him?

It’s just a reminder, Eijun thinks, that just because they’ve started bridging this gap – left by time and hurt and remorse and guilt and resentment, dredged down and deep by so many things – doesn’t mean it’s going to be simple. Doesn’t mean they can make it to the other side in a single
But they have to start somewhere.

“He…told me that he started really taking an interest in cooking because the food at the school cafeteria was terrible,” Eijun recalls, a little bit nostalgic, a little amazed at how far back into his memory he has to reach to find this snippet. Like there are leagues and leagues of other things that’ve happened since, other things jotted down in incorporeal reels of film and tucked away in the fathomless bank of his subconscious.

It’s reassuring, because he’d started from nothing, and now he has so much, and craves so much more.

It gives him the perspective to deal with this situation.

Miyuki-san’s response feels weighted. Like the words are burdened down by a dense, unmalleable emotion.

“I didn’t know that.”

“They weren’t allowed to cook in the dorms…but turned out the security guards let him keep his stove and things – in return for food.”

The laugh this gets him sounds both amused and startled.

“God,” he shakes his head, and Eijun sees the conflict – it’s the kind of look he’s seen Mochi-senpai wear, when he knows he should be disapproving of whatever Eijun’s just done, like that one time he’d poured Red Bull into the ice tray and they’d had to contend with Red Bull flavoured ice-cubes in their water when his manager had come to see him about something, but kind of actually found a little funny. “I didn’t know about that.”

Eijun hesitates only a moment before saying, “…you could…ask him to tell you about it?”

It gets Miyuki-san to stop laughing.

And Eijun senses rather than sees it.

The uncertainty. The anxiety. That kneejerk feeling, baseless but real, that a false move could send everything careening off the edge.

He senses it because it’s a part of him, too, redundant little fuses that burn out before he’s about to do anything that doesn’t have an outcome laid out in plain view ahead of him.

But Eijun is growing. Eijun is learning to work around it and persevere and try his best –

And he gets to do that, because he has people helping him up along the way.

Because Kazuya helps him up along the way.

Because Kazuya is patient.

And so he says, “You should ask him. I think…it’ll make him happy.”

***

“Congratulations!” Eijun keeps the hug short, just a simple touch, really, a one-armed gesture
catching Kazuya as he walks toward them. Kazuya looks like he has a problem with this, but his gaze flicks up and he sees his dad, so he doesn’t go for anything more substantial.

There’s that awkwardness again, creeping in, ill-synced audio to a movie, off-beat music to vocals – but Eijun doesn’t let it get to him this time.

It’s a lot different from the last time they’d been together like this, in each other’s presence, both sides feeling around for footing, bogged down by mistakes that needed to be acknowledged before they could be forgotten. Forgiven.

And so, Eijun doesn’t hesitate as he shifts to the side, makes way for Kazuya’s dad, a silent cue to ask him forward –

And he obliges. Takes that step. His hand drifts up, and it snags, a second, in mid-air, like it’d wanted to keep rising, move over Kazuya’s head to touch down there, as Eijun imagines he’d imparted praise on his son before, a long time ago – but that’s still okay, because it pauses but doesn’t stop, and moves to rest on Kazuya’s shoulder, instead, and he says, the spaces between the words packed and dense and heavy, “I’m proud of you, Son.”

It’s not natural, it’s not instinctive and seamless, but this is still a beginning, it’s a start, and they’re building this bridge together, so when Kazuya glances up at Eijun, seeking him out, Eijun smiles wide.

Later – quite a bit later, actually, after multiple photo sessions, catch-ups with classmates and introductions, debating about where to go and what to eat – they’re seated at a crowded little diner and Eijun digs in his bag, pulls out envelopes.

“The polaroids from earlier,” he explains, handing them out, “I asked the photographer for three copies.”

Inside, there are sheaves of photo paper – of Kazuya with his cert and a cynical eyebrow raised at the camera, as though he can’t believe he’s being made to do this, of Kazuya and his dad, a little stiff, a little formal.

Another shot of Kazuya and his dad, with Eijun photobombing the picture from the side with two peace signs and his tongue stuck out.

The identical looks of surprise on their faces easily makes it Eijun’s favourite picture, and totally worth the fearless spontaneity.

“Thank you,” Miyuki-san murmurs, accepting the package with both hands, “Actually…there’s something…”

Eijun watches Kazuya’s eyes getting bigger, watches realisation queue up behind surprise and incomprehension, and then –

“You – oh,” Kazuya’s movements are a little jerky, like he’s suddenly inherited Eijun’s motor skills, or lack thereof. The way his hands waver as he reaches for the square-shaped gift-wrapped package he’s being given makes it look like he’s second-guessing taking it. “You…didn’t have to.”

“You just finished your Masters,” Miyuki-san reminds him, and presses the present into Kazuya’s hand when he dithers a moment too long, “Of course I had to get you something.” Then, as though correcting himself, “I wanted to get you something.”
Kazuya’s looking at the neatly wrapped square in his hands like it’s some kind of foreign object he doesn’t know what to do with.

It makes his dad cough a little, clear his throat. Nervous. “It’s…not much. But I hope you’ll like it.” And then, as though afraid to let the silence stretch too long, “Eijun-kun helped me decide on it.”

This gets Kazuya to react – his head whips up, so fast his glasses bounce a little on his nose.

“What? When?”

Eijun rubs the back of his neck. “Um…he messaged me about it a couple of days ago,” he admits, and finds it difficult to keep looking Kazuya in the eye when he’s staring at him like that, “I just. Made suggestions.”

Kazuya looks faintly shellshocked. Eijun supposes it makes sense, considering he would have been too, if he’d discovered Kazuya had been conferring with his parents on the sly after just meeting them once.

“I had no idea,” Kazuya breathes, slowly, studying the gift with the uncertainty of one not sure whether they’re supposed to open it up now, or later.

The mood is starting to grow discordant, show strain, so Eijun jokes, “That’s because I’m the king of stealth.”

He’s actually a little affronted when Kazuya snorts.

“I am,” he insists, and is genuinely aggrieved when Kazuya has to cover his mouth to hide the grin forming there, because yeah sure he isn’t the best at being stealthy, but still. He’s not that bad.

“Have you seen me playing Hitman?! I have the highest scores! I’m better than Mochi-senpai!”


Eijun doesn’t miss the way the frown around his mouth isn’t really all that discernible as he does.

“My flatmate,” he explains, “Kuramochi Youichi, he’s actually – “

“The baseball player, right?” Eijun nods, and Miyuki-san regards him a moment, his eyes a little wide. Surprised. “You know a lot of famous people, Eijun-kun.”

Eijun stares at him, nonplussed.

“You work for Takigawa Yuu,” Miyuki-san points out, “and you live with a professional national league baseball player.”

Oh.

Eijun’s never really thought of it like that.

He cuts eyes to Kazuya, searching for a hint of what to say – when Miyuki-san adds, without any inflection whatsoever, “You didn’t tell me you were dating a celebrity, Kazuya.”

The way his head snaps to the side to look at Miyuki Sr. is probably comical.

In fact, it definitely is, because Kazuya sniggers.
“He likes to keep a low profile,” is what he says, straight-faced. His eyes are twinkling, though. In an uncanny resemblance to his dad. “He’s a very down-to-earth celebrity.”

And honestly, yes, they’re joking, and yes, they’re actually bonding – if this can be counted as bonding – but the concentrated teasing of two Miyukis is more than Eijun is programmed to handle at any given time.

He blushes and splutters, “Stop that.”

“See?” Kazuya says, grinning – he makes eye contact with his dad, and…and…smiles. “So down-to-earth.”

Eijun kicks Kazuya under the table, and Kazuya laughs, and after a while, Miyuki-san asks Kazuya about the incident of illegal cookers in his highschool dorm.

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“There. What do you think?”

He can’t make out Kazuya’s expression, because he’d chosen to stand behind Eijun, arms around his middle, jaw slotted into the crook of his nape.

But he hears the sentiment, poignant and packed, when he murmurs, “I love it.”

They’re stood in front of Kazuya’s bookcase, and it’s starting to get a bit cluttered; Eijun adjusts the group photo they had clicked back in Nagano, a chaotic image snapped with a selfie stick by Harucchi on a chair to get them all in one frame – Eijun’s of the opinion that, if painted, it would make a very convincing Renaissance piece. There’s enough of a confusing variety of expressions going on in there for it to be one. The photo of Kazuya with his eyebrow permanently arched and in his graduation robes sits beside it, and beside that, the absolute masterpiece that is Eijun nailing a combo attack by bamboozling two Miyukis at once.

And right in the centre is the picture of baby Kazuya, holding his parents’ hands, and smiling with all the milk teeth he’s managed to grow – a copy of the photo Eijun’d seen at his childhood home, in a brand new frame.

“Thank you.” Kazuya exhales, and Eijun feels the way it trembles, struggling to hold up with the emotion it carries.

Eijun makes a noise. “I mean, I thought…you didn’t have a picture of you here. With your family.”

The sound Kazuya lets out makes Eijun’s heart twinge. Painful-pleasant.

“My family, huh” he repeats, as though trying it on for size for the first time, and when he lets Eijun turn around, after a while, Eijun raises himself on his tippy toes to give him a kiss.

Chapter End Notes

OKAY. UM.

I know this isn't the last chapter, but, I feel like I need to say this before I explode, because the closer we get to it, the more emotional (read: hysterical) I'm getting, so
here we go.

THANK YOU. THANK YOU SO SO MUCH. You guys have no idea how MUCH you've done for me and this fic. I mean, the fact that this exists, is 24 chapters long (THAT'S AS BIG AS A BOOK. HOW EVEN. HOW) and is an AU (/disbelief intensifies) does not cease to blow my mind. Even though it's been three months or so since I started it. It's just...incredible. And I honestly mean it when I say this wouldn't exist without you guys. I really mean it. Idk if it shows or not, but I'm a habitually nervous person prone to second-guessing EVERYTHING, so getting involved in something of this calibre and seeing it through is...one of the biggest achievements of my life? And I owe it all the love you've shown this fic since it was just one chapter in, all the love you've repeatedly showed along the way, all the lovely lovely words of encouragement which've kept me going and honestly instilled enough confidence in my writing and myself to even think about future fics or AUs, stuff I'd just have shrugged off before or been too wimpy to commit to. I just. I can't. I love each and everyone of you, so so much.

(this became real sappy, real fast. I'm sorry about that)

Thank you, so so much, for reading. I hope you enjoyed it, I hope you'll enjoy the next chapter, and I hope I'll be able to share other journeys with you guys just like this one :) you da real MVPs
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU WERE EXPECTING BUT I HOPE YOU AREN'T GONNA BE DISAPPOINTED I REALLY REALLY HOPE //FINGERS CROSSED//

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s still feels odd, even though he’s done the motions a fair few times already.

Whether it’s habit or just the undue amount of time his brain is taking to commit this to muscle memory, his hand still instinctively wants to reach for the doorbell, and his mind catches on a millisecond later to remind him that he does, in fact, have a key.

So Eijun rummages, breath bated because this doesn’t get any less new, and snags out the squishy plastic of the pepper-pot keychain, flicking through until he finds the spare to Kazuya’s flat, and lets himself in.

Yeah, this still feels odd. Odd to step over the threshold knowing Kazuya’s not going to be there to greet him – that the rooms are going to be empty and silent, captured in that moment when Kazuya’d left. Coffee cup rinsed out and drying in the rack, beads of water clinging to the sides of the metal sink because it’s not been that long since this place had been vacated. Bed made up and pillows fluffed, laundry in the dryer, because Kazuya’s nothing if not meticulous.

Eijun wanders – drops his bag onto the couch, pocketing the keys before he dithers. The self-consciousness is there, palpable, suffusing through his bones, because it feels like he’s in those off-limits sections of stores or inside the office of one of his superiors, and he’s not sure if he’s supposed to be there.

Except he is supposed to be here, and Kazuya’s expecting him to be here, so Eijun swallows around the nerves, and is happy because it’s a lot easier now than it’d been before – it’s easier to wade through the turmoil because he knows it’s benign, and let the other emotion take over.

Rapture. Glee. A bizarre, electric thrill at getting to be here, having that right, with or without Kazuya’s presence. Getting to do things like stroll into his kitchen and switch up the coffee-maker he’d got him last Christmas, because he thinks Kazuya deserves an extra special cup of coffee to spruce up the end of the day. Letting the dark, rich liquid filter and bubble as he ambles round, turns on the TV, flicks through a couple of channels.

Getting to hurry over to the door when he hears a key being turned in it, and knocking the air out of Kazuya before he’s even managed to get in.

“Okairi! How did it go? Did it go well?”

Kazuya’s chuckling, a little bit breathless because Eijun’d pretty much lunged at him with the grace of an excitable Chihuahua, but he winds his arms round Eijun anyway, walking him backward and kicking the door to behind him with a light flick of his ankle.

“Tadaima,” he hums, and rubs their noses together. He doesn’t hesitate to say it anymore. If
anything, from the way he intones it, Eijun thinks he’s not overshooting in believing Kazuya actually *likes* saying it. “Did you wait long?”

“No,” Eijun answers promptly, and then demands, again, “How did it go?”

Kazuya lets go of him, shifting round to take off his socks and shoes. Eijun waits, almost on tenterhooks.

“I think it went quite well? The manager went into an awful lot of detail about my ‘hypothetical’ working hours and shifts, and I mean…it sounds like it’s going to be a bit packed, but I like that I don’t have to be *constantly* on call? I’ll definitely need to be there in the morning and just after noon, and turning out the batches in a small time frame is gonna be killer, but I think – ” Kazuya drops his bag beside Eijun’s and gives his head a little self-conscious shake, “Ah, but maybe I should worry about that *after* I get the job.”

Eijun, who’d been getting rather enthused by Kazuya’s exposition, juts out his lower lip. “You will, though.”

Kazuya lip twists, as if to smirk. “Oh? And how do you know?”

Eijun scrunches his nose. “I just do.”

And he’s not kidding. He’s got a…a *feeling* about it. In his bones. Maybe it’s his sixth sense, maybe it’s intuition. Maybe it’s the secure knowledge that no one with an ounce of common sense would let someone as talented and skilled as Kazuya slip through their fingers – especially the fairly new Franco-Japanese boulangerie trying to make a name for itself downtown, and would *definitely* need someone who knew what they were doing backstage.

He says as much to Kazuya, who laughs, but looks pleased nonetheless. Untangling his scarf from round his neck – *It’s still kind of cold*, he insists, even though Eijun’s ditched all his winter-wear as they slough through spring – he sniffs at the air. “Is that coffee?”

“Youp,” Eijun sings, pleased with himself for his foresight, “I’ll go get some while you freshen up?”

Kazuya’s smile is more pronounced as he draws Eijun in, eyes alight. “Now what would I do without you?” he mumbles, into Eijun’s hair, inhaling deeply before he makes his way toward the bathroom, and leaves behind a widely grinning, albeit blushing, Eijun, who remembers, all over again, that it doesn’t matter how many times he has to use his own key for this place to get used to it –

It’s completely worth it.

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“Kazuyaaa,” Eijun appears at the doorjamb, and if the plaintive ring in his voice isn’t enough, the protruding lower lip and the wide eyes left wider by the hair pinned back from his forehead get Kazuya, who’d been chilling in his bed with *The Long Halloween* Eijun’d graciously lent him after finishing it, to regard him with both eyebrows high. “…help.”

“What’s wrong?” Kazuya probes, and Eijun wants to smack himself in the face because yes, he ought to have mentioned that part first – he shuffles over to where Kazuya’s made space for him, shifting to the side.

“I’m working on this story,” Eijun begins without preamble – he’s got his laptop in hand, and it’s
something of a chore to balance it while clambering on to the mattress and wriggling back against
the pillows, but he manages. “…or rather. I want to work on this story, that kinda fits the theme of
the week after next’s editorial –”

Coppery eyes widen behind their glasses, and Eijun knows Kazuya’s cottoned on.

“You want to pitch for an editorial?” he asks, voice quick, eyes intent, and Eijun, throat tight, nods.

Kazuya breaks out into a grin.

It doesn’t matter how long they’ve been dating, the sight still gets Eijun’s stomach to erupt into
titillating flutters that run all the way up to pinch at his heart.

“Oh. So what are you pitching?”

“That’s the thing,” Eijun fiddles with the screen of his laptop, grateful that Kazuya’s choosing not
to dwell on his decision – he’d questioned, now and then, whether Eijun ever intended to try for an
editorial now that he’s part of the official writing staff, but by and large let Eijun work up to it by
himself, taking his time with it. “I’m…not exactly sure. I mean I have the idea but um. I was
wondering if you could help me fine-tune it?”

He’s barely done speaking when Kazuya’s already putting the comic away on the nightstand,
tucking in the cute Batman-sigil shaped bookmark Eijun’d given him with it.

“Need you ask?” he quips, settling back with his legs crossed, shoulders straight, stance as
prepared as one can be when they’re still in bed, knackered out after a day spent rolling out pastry
and piping jam into over a hundred eclairs. He grins at Eijun, and Eijun grins back, and kind of
wants to smother him with kisses, but decides he’ll save that for later.

After he’s done practising the pitch.

“Oh, so… I wanted to sort of do a…thought piece, on whether or not it’s true that the film
industry’s running out of original ideas. Because, like, everyone is trying to create an expanded,
cinematic universe or they’re trying to reboot every classic Disney film in existence, and it’s like…
are all the big budget movies going to be a sequel or a remake? Or are there actually really good
original films going under the radar?”

“But you like some of them, right?” Kazuya quizzes, “Some of the sequels and universes I mean.”
He waves a hand at the superhero comic he’d been reading.

“I do,” Eijun agrees, nodding, and he makes a mental note to insert this question into his mindmap,
because this is pretty much as good a point as any to start before making his case, right? Pro and
con. Both sides for objectivity. “But…some of them also feel like shortcuts to make money? Like,
I feel a lot of studios are getting into franchise-building more than actual, proper story-telling. For
instance, I really thought the Jungle Book improved on the original – but then there was
Cinderella. All these other live-action adaptations Disney keeps announcing, instead of working to
churn out more classics.”

Kazuya hums, considering. “Some of those classics were also adapted from other material,” he
points out, “The Grimms’ fairy-tales and Arabian Nights and so on.”

“True. But they were adapted well. With thought and depth and I’d go so far as to say, a genuine
love for the craft,” Eijun’s aware he’s starting to sound a bit too impassioned, but hey. He’s
defending the classic Disney films of his childhood, he’s allowed to be. “But look at films like
Miss Peregrine’s, or Alice Through the Looking Glass. Every Narnia movie after the first one. The
fact that they broke *The Hobbit – one* book – into three movies.”

“Good point.”

“So I think there’s this…line. Between adapting source material and making money off of it,” Eijun’s started to get into the groove of it, the back and forth a surprisingly effective way to get his thoughts in order than the random outpouring of thoughts he’d spouted on to his notes with no sense of rhyme or meter, “How far can making reboots of *existing* films like *Akira* or *Ghost in the Shell* be justified, when they were special *because* of the medium through which they were created? Like, the smooth animation of *Akira* with all the hand-drawn frames, for *such* an old movie…how would that translate into a real movie? How far can making sequels of movies like *Prometheus* or expanding a franchise like…I don’t know, the *Resident Evil* movies be justified if we take the money out of the equation? Wouldn’t those resources be better devoted to sourcing out other, maybe *new* writers, with original ideas and screenplay?”

Kazuya lets out a low whistle.

Eijun bites his lip, tummy flip-flopping as he waits for the verdict.

“You know what I think?” Kazuya asks, and Eijun wonders if he remembers that he’d asked this exact same question once before. The thought makes him want to giggle. “I think…that sounds like more than one article.”

“Eh?” Eijun blinks. “How so?”

“I think you’ve got two…arguments, or angles going on here,” Kazuya rubs at his chin, then holds up a finger, “There’s the argument that the film industry isn’t making enough original content or that the original content it *is* making isn’t being appreciated enough.” He looks at Eijun to see him if agrees, and Eijun concedes. “I think that can be argued for as a separate, standalone issue, and you can argue for and against a studio’s justifications to build franchises or secure profits and so on. And then, a separate argument altogether would be about reboots and whether or not they’re a good or bad thing. What justifies making a well-loved film again, or expanding on it, etc.”

Eijun mulls this over.

And the more he does, the more he thinks Kazuya is actually making a whole lot of sense.

“I think…you’re on to something.” *Two* separate articles? Takigawa-san *does* allow for multiple pitches and if the writer’s willing to prove their mettle, he’d let them have it, as long as they can handle it…and if not, he can surely put one on the backburner, and go one at a time? He needs to write his thoughts down before they escape him and his brain’s buzzing, trying to work two different tracks and once and –

“*Thank you,*” the back of Kazuya’s head thuds, not hard enough to hurt but hard enough to make a flinch-worthy sound, into the headboard under Eijun’s assault-slash-hug – he wraps his arms round his shoulders and holds, *tight,* trying to convey all the gratitude he’s feeling through touch. “oh my gosh, *thank you,* I was seriously *stuck* and –”

“I thought we had a rule against that?” Kazuya breathes, sounding rather choked – Eijun eases his grip a little bit, but nudges his laptop a safe distance away so he can scramble in Kazuya’s lap.

“Sorry,” he says, framing Kazuya’s face in both his hands – he can see Kazuya’s surprise shine clear through his glasses, because Eijun usually needs to work up to this kind of boldness and here he is, basically straddling Kazuya, his face inches away, “But I just –” The words don’t come, so
he forgoes them entirely, dipping in and pressing his mouth to Kazuya’s to make his point.

It’s crackly and fleeting, chapped lips smashed together with more friction than tenderness, but Kazuya still chases after his mouth when Eijun pulls back a moment too soon.

“There’s no rule for that, right?” he grins, leaning back to touch the tips of their noses.

Kazuya huffs, almost disbelieving. “Never for that. In fact, since I helped you out for two pitches –” he tips his head up, eyes full of mischief and expectation.

Eijun laughs as he moves back in, this time curbing his enthusiasm enough to take his time with it.

It’s slow and warm, languid and lazy – lips opening and closing and folding around each other, soft puffs of air inhaled and shared. Eijun braces his hands on Kazuya’s shoulder, rubbing up, then down, then around, fingertips scrabbling at the back of his neck, behind his ears – Kazuya’s hands find home at his hips, and begin moulding into his sides, climbing.

“Oh, wait, wait,” Eijun pulls back, this time with a lot less readiness than he’d managed before – he’s panting, eyes unfocused, thoughts scattered.

It doesn’t help when Kazuya just settles for mouthing at his jaw.

“Kazuya…I. I still have to finish work.”

It’s not immediately apparent if Kazuya’d heard him, or simply chosen to ignore him – a couple of seconds pass before Kazuya responds. Shifts back with a groan.

“That’s hardly fair,” he gripes, petulant, though Eijun can tell it’s mostly affected. What isn’t affected are the blown-out pupils – the flushed skin. Moist red lips. Eijun gulps, and fights himself not to squirm. “I help you out with your probably award-winning, promotion-enabling, fame-creating articles, and I don’t even get my due for it?”

He pouts, and yeah, it’s playful, and yeah, it’s this insanely, ridiculously sweet ploy to tune down the sparks which apparently don’t take much encouragement to blaze into a full-fledged furore when they’re like this, close and intimate and overlapping…but Eijun takes his words to heart.

He inches in, biting his lip, and watches Kazuya’s pupils dilate until they’re almost black as he breaks into his space.

“Sorry,” he whispers – watches his reflection disappear from Kazuya’s lenses until he’s looking straight into his eyes, noses touching, “I guess I owe you one?”

Kazuya swallows. Eijun can feel each breath he takes against his skin – shallow and quick.

I’m doing this to him, he thinks, and almost forgets about the laptop he’s left neglected somewhere on the bed.

Almost wants to forget –

No, no, no. Focus. You are a responsible journalist, Sawamura Eijun.

He jumps a little when Kazuya’s hand finds the small of his back – anchors him, there.

“I’m going to hold you to that.”
“I seriously can’t believe this is happening,” Eijun says, for the nth time.

His fingertips feel weird, like the prints there have been smoothed out, sandpapered, by all the tape he’s been plucking at with bare hands, folding away cardboard and paper, following the marker-labelled script on each box to deposit his spoils in the room they’re supposed to go to. It’s exhausting and tedious – but still, heaps better than the packing, which’d almost made him have three separate breakdowns in one day.

A few feet over, he hears a snort. “We’ve been at this for the best part of a day. Or are you prone to daydreaming that long on a normal basis?”

Eijun glares. “You could be nice to me you know,” he grumbles, hefting himself up from where he’d decided to catch a breather with a grunt, “I’m sacrificing my weekend for this!”

To his mild but unsurprised dismay, Onii-san does not look in the least perturbed. “You volunteered, if I remember correctly,” he lilts; Eijun can’t understand how the guy doesn’t look more fatigued – Eijun’s already flushed in the face, hair knotted back from his forehead with one of the hairclips he’s developed a habit of nicking from Kazuya’s stash and had had the foresight to bring with him. The shirt he’d had on over his plain white tee’s been discarded on one of the chairs the movers had unloaded just that morning, the plastic protective covering on it still intact.

Still, it’s not like Onii-san’s in perfectly pristine condition – he has his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, switching out from slacks into sweatpants, and while it’s not so completely outlandish for Eijun to see him in a more domestic environment –

This is still definitely a first.

It’s got Eijun excited and eager and a little bit too enthusiastic to let his zeal be dampened by Onii-san’s complete lack of gratitude.

“So when are you telling him?”

“…didn’t I already answer that?”

“Yes, but ‘not yet’ isn’t exactly an answer,” Eijun snags a box, yanks it toward him, grabbing the pair of scissors he’s been using in lieu of a paper-cutter, “…I mean, it’s easy now coz he’s not in the country but how are we going to hide it when he comes back? And wants to maybe give you a surprise visit at your place?”

Onii-san’s eyes glitter as they land on him.

“I was hoping,” he says, and its nuanced – it gets Eijun to forget about the bizarre Cthulhu miniature he’s just unearthed from a box labelled Living Room Display Case, and pay attention, “that you’d be able to help me with that.”

There’s an interlude – silence that spreads, because Eijun lets it spread. Lets it trickle into the corners of what is, currently, a condo living room in absolute disarray, and settle, because he needs a moment to grasp the fact that Onii-san is, in fact, in actuality, asking for help.

Well, maybe not really asking.

But that’s the gist of it, and Eijun is more than happy to oblige.

So much so that he waddles over to where Onii-san is standing, aloof to anyone who doesn’t know him better – but Eijun does know him better, and he can tell that the light pink dusting over his
Don’t worry Onii-san,” Eijun says, clapping him on the shoulders with both his hands and a little too much force, “I’ll be your wingman.”

Onii-san is all wry sardonicism when he drawls, “Why, thank you,” but Eijun doesn’t mind. He knows he actually means it.

They’ve more or less sorted out the living-room and are moving into the kitchen when Eijun comments, sneaking a look at the older Kominato, “As surprises go, this is still kinda elaborate, I’m gonna have to say. I’d never imagined you to be the type for grand gestures.”

Onii-san scoffs. “He brought my parents over from Nagano to celebrate my birthday. I’d say the bar for what counts as grand is a bit askew already.”

Eijun can’t exactly disagree with that but – “Bringing your parents over for the weekend and finding, purchasing and furnishing a flat is a bit of an unfair comparison, don’t you think? The bar’s pretty much broken at this point.”

He’s got his back turned to Eijun, but Eijun can make out the light pink tingeing the backs of his ears.

It’s weirdly endearing, weirder yet because endearing isn’t something anyone would associate with Onii-san in their wildest delusions.

“Well, it’s not like I got this place for us,” Onii-san tells him, evenly – he doesn’t turn round, Eijun notes, occupying himself with carefully unloading crockery and arranging them to his liking in the overhead kitchen cabinets. “It’s closer to work, it’s got an extra room I can use as a study or home-office, and I don’t have to worry about how far Haruichi is from campus anymore either.”

His points are all valid – especially the last, since Harucchi’d decided to go all the way with chartered accountancy after they’d gone through the graduation milestone, and enrolled himself into one of the top universities for business and finance in the district.

What none of them had been anticipating, at least right then, had been his decision to move in into the campus dorms.

I got a scholarship, it’ll cover my housing, it’s easier if I’m close to where I’m studying, had been his justifications, when he’d broached the topic with them over dinner a few weeks back, and besides, it’s not like I can keep living with Aniki forever.

Onii-san’d disputed this, of course, because his policy from the very beginning had been that as long as Harucchi is a student, he stays under his roof.

But Harucchi had been adamant, and Harucchi’d won, whether out of sheer stubbornness or some behind-the-scenes convincing Eijun’s not had the chance to be privy to given work and the added inconvenience of not getting to see Harucchi every day as he would back in college, and now here they are. In the large-ish, minimalistic kitchen with its polished veined marble countertops glinting, sharp and clear, in the orange-gold light of a May afternoon.

And Eijun isn’t ready to let Onii-san off the hook just yet.

“If it were just those reasons, why didn’t you tell Mochi-senpai you were moving?” he inquires, innocently; he keeps his hands busy, unpacking a brand-new toaster, coffee-machine, a range of hitherto unopened appliances Onii-san’d bought because he had insisted Harucchi take the things
they’d had at home to make his stay on campus comfortable. “I mean, he’s your boyfriend.” Eijun takes an inordinate amount of pleasure in drawing the word out, enunciating it with the same sort of emphasis Mochi-senpai used to use with him in the early days of his relationship with Kazuya, “I think he’d appreciate at least knowing.”

It’s pointed and critical and all but irrefutable, but Eijun knows he has Onii-san cornered when he straightens up, sighs, and slowly pivots, dusting off his hands.

“You never give up, do you.”

“Never!” Eijun affirms, proud.

Onii-san exhales a short, quick laugh. The red to his face isn’t entirely the effect of the early-evening sunlight staining his skin.

Eijun takes his cue to move in toward the kitchen island when Onii-san slides on to one of the seats there.

“It’s…going to be hard, this next year,” is what Onii-san says, gradually – he reaches for one of the bottles of water they’d picked up on a quick grocery run to stock up the fridge and pantry while they worked on setting the apartment up, and chugs straight from the bottle. He offers it to Eijun, who gratefully accepts. “…since he’s vice-captain, and since the team is in the favourites to win the next cup.”

Eijun makes an assenting noise. With the new post had come new responsibilities for Mochi-senpai and he barely got to spend any time home any more, even off-season – if it wasn’t training, it was scouting new team picks, it was attending conferences and seminars under broad banners of sportsmanship, it was making appearances at high-profile events and galas to keep the sponsors happy and the press engaged. He’d barely managed to rest two days the last time he’d been at their flat, flying off immediately on the heels of a series of charity events to the States, to negotiate the possibility of his team training there early next year in preparation for the spring season.

It’s like his life has just been getting more and more cluttered, hurtling speedy and elusive through time, and Eijun’d have been lying if he had said he hadn’t worried about how this would affect his and Onii-san’s relationship, considering the trouble that’d gone down the last time they’d been apart this long.

So he dumps the coyness, and asks, without pretext, “Are you…okay with that?”

He startles when Onii-san actually laughs. Not his typical, marginally amused huffs of air, or the almost-disparaging snorts he’s used to – it’s just plain, unadulterated laughter, like Eijun’s unintentionally made the world’s funniest joke.

“Of course I’m not,” he says, still laughing, and it’s strange, because the last time he’d admitted this, his disposition had been totally different. There’d been bitterness, and strain, an underlying thread of anxiety and uncertainty which’d made Eijun resonate a lot easier with Onii-san, which’d driven in a crack into that façade of untroubled calm he’s so good at putting on in the face of a crisis. Now, it’s different. Now he’s…owning it. Accepting it. “Of course, I’m not okay with it. We barely had the time to really address the things that we did wrong the last time and already…” Onii-san motions, absently, and Eijun fancies it’s a bit like he’s gesturing toward the space where, ideally, Mochi-senpai should be.

His heart aches for them.
“Mochi-senpai isn’t happy about it either,” he inputs, quietly – having been a first-hand witness of how haggard he looks on those rare occasions he does see him home, Eijun can attest to the fact that he doesn’t think Mochi-senpai’s enjoying this. Not the baseball part, because he loves the baseball part and Eijun’s seen him make more than enough sacrifices over the years he’s known him to accommodate that passion – but all the frills and finery which’d come with it. His black moods get worse on the eve of some event or party he has to go to and be on his best behaviour for when all he probably wants to do is kick back in his pajamas and binge *Gotham*, but it’s not as…as one-dimensional as that, either.

Because beneath the roiling shifting turbulence of his now-constant displeasure, Eijun catches the glimpses of strain.

When he has to sit out one of their group dinners, or opt out of going shopping with them.

Or realise, months ahead as he does his scheduling for the year, that he won’t be around for his own birthday.

It’s stressing him out, it’s stressing Eijun out, and as much as Onii-san is better at hiding it than the two of them put together, it’s stressing him out too.

But Onii-san still manages to snigger, the weariness Eijun’s been openly exhibiting finally showing in the sag of his shoulders. “Yeah. He’s always complaining about it.”

*Which means you’re talking about it. Which is good. Thank goodness.*

But…

“Is…is that why you haven’t told Mochi-senpai?” Eijun ventures, siphoning out all the willpower he has – it brings him unpleasant flashbacks to the time when they’d not been speaking to each other, misunderstandings and insecurities making their hold on their own relationship brittle and unsure. Making them second-guess themselves. “Because he…he’s not going to be around?”

It’s not particularly eloquent, but Onii-san gets his meaning immediately. Shakes his head, emphatic.

“No, that’s not it,” he says, and it’s clear that he’s also remembering the same things as Eijun – recalling what he’d confessed when he’d relented and opened up to him. “I’m not…the reason I haven’t told him isn’t because I’m…not confident. In this. In – ” He hesitates, but just a little. “ – us.”

Eijun pushes his advantage immediately, “Then why?”

Is it just him, or does Onii-san actually look…sheepish?

It’s like seeing Mochi-senpai openly lovestruck, or Harucchi hysterical, and it leaves Eijun a little stunned.

Onii-san breathes in, slow. Steadying. He squares his shoulders. There’s nothing flavouring his voice when he speaks, but Eijun’s conscious of the eddies underneath when he does, “Because…I want to show him. That I’m…ready now.”

Eijun takes the words, rolls them around his head. “So you…so this *is* meant to be a surprise? Specifically for him?”

Onii-san gives him a wry smile, because Eijun’s not giving him any loopholes to evade him
through. “Sort of?”

“So you are going to ask him to move in with you?”

The characteristic bluntness Eijun clearly favours with Onii-san makes him snort again. “I’m going to…make him that offer, yes. If he likes.”

Eijun rolls his eyes at the disclaimer, because obviously he’d trip over his own feet to move in with him – he’d been the one to bring it up in the first place.

And as much as this really makes Eijun happy – reinstates all the bubbly eagerness with which he’d involved himself in helping Onii-san move, buzzing with the childish glee of being entrusted with a secret and breathlessly anticipating the moment where it’d be revealed – he has to voice the concern keeping him from going totally berserk with excitement.

“So you are going to ask him to move in with you?”

The way Onii-san’s eye twitches, it’s almost like he’s been caught out.

“Ideally…yes,” is what he says, the quirk of his lips reads dry humour, a tad self-deprecating, almost, “But…as we were saying. He’s not around much. He’s not going to be around much for a while, and he’s definitely not going to have the time for things like…house-hunting, or moving. And I…” Onii-san runs a hand through his hair, messing up his perfectly neat, combed bangs, and it’s so outlandish Eijun catches himself gaping a little, “I didn’t want to wait.”

And that’s what it really boils down to, isn’t it? That’s why this is so monumental. Because as much as Eijun’s been not-so-covertly fanboying the evolving frequency with which Onii-san’s displayed initiative or affection with Mochi-senpai after his season ended, markedly less concerned about keeping it private, markedly caring less, it culminates in this.

Because as much as he’s still nervous, as much as this is still new and daunting, as much as this is difficult and will continue to be difficult into the foreseen future –

Onii-san is ready to take this step.

And he wants to show Mochi-senpai that.

Onii-san is still speaking, a bit too agitated for it to be his normal, even cadence, the closest Eijun’s heard him to rambling, “ – of course, when – if – he agrees we’ll renovate if he wants to, and I’m going to leave space for his things, and we’ll probably end up needing to shop more for other things and –”

He cuts himself off when Eijun slips out of the bar-seat, landing a little gracelessly but padding over to him with purpose.

Eijun almost yanks him out of his own seat with the force of his hug. “It’s going to be okay, Onii-san.” He squeezes, making his grip rib-cracking on purpose, because why bother with decorum when Onii-san could count on him enough to confide things he’d probably never wanted to admit aloud? “It’ll get better, and he’ll be so happy. I know he will.”

It takes a few seconds, but Onii-san relaxes in his grip. Lays a light hand on his back, another ruffling his hair, a little awkward, because Onii-san doesn’t do hugs. “Don’t tell him anything yet.”

Eijun pulls back, immediately frowning with affront. “Of course I won’t, what do you take me
for?” he complains, lower lip protruding.

Onii-san laughs again, shaking his head, and Eijun thinks he truly, genuinely looks happy.

“But…can I be there?”

“Be where?”

“When you ask him to move in with you, obviously!”

The arched eyebrow he gets speaks volumes, but Eijun feigns ignorance. “Don’t you think that would be intrusive?”

Gasping dramatically, Eijun puts on his best wounded face. “Intrusive? After all the time I spent slaving to have your love-nest ready in time? You’re cruel Onii-san!”

If he’s affected by the ribbing, he doesn’t show it. Instead, he slides off his seat, making a U-turn to switch on the lights before returning to the unpacking.

“Funny…for someone who claims to have slaved so much, I remember you taking way more breaks than I did – “

“I’m just pacing myself, okay! I’m rationing my stamina! I – “

“Yes, yes. Why don’t you put that stamina to use for actual work than mouthing off at me?”

Eijun huffs, rants, sulks, makes a show of his grouchiness and grumbles about his benevolence not being appreciated – but stays until midnight, only leaving after he’s certain Onii-san’s got everything he needs to comfortably to keep himself going as he takes his time with the rest of the unpacking.

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The call of his name, couched in hushed, shivery-soft syllables, touch down and wisp at the very edges of consciousness.

“Eijun.”

Louder now. More insistent. Groggy and not in full control of his mind, Eijun considers rolling over and ignoring the persistent call. But he’s so comfy right now. This position is literally the best, and he’s in just the right place between warm and cool, mattress and comforter, light and dark and –

“Hey.”

“No lemme alone kill it yourself – ”

“…what?”

“Isjusacockroach,” Eijun mumbles, belligerently, and manages to harness the astounding strength and willpower he needs to flop over to his side.

There’s merciful silence, and Eijun’s sinking, a pebble swallowed by deep, deep water, when he hears Kazuya chuckle.
He frowns in his sleep. Or is he actually awake? It doesn’t feel like he’s awake – there are many leagues of misty-grey ahead of him and – oh wait. His eyes are closed. That’d explain it.

“That’s not it,” there’s definite laughter laced through his voice, and Eijun doesn’t think he much appreciates it. He’s got half a mind to actually get up and give Kazuya a proper talking to, if he weren’t currently trying to fuse with the mattress. “It’s just – Eijun.”

This last’s closer – and by closer he means right up against his ear.

And by right up against his ear, he means moulding into it.

Warm lips, warm breath, gusting words that curve and settle and sweep through him.

“It’s midnight and I really didn’t want to wake you but… happy birthday.”

Five minutes later, Eijun’s upright in bed, more wakeful than he’s been in quite possibly his entire life, and he may or not be crying, and he can’t help it, even though he knows that he’s probably not making the most flattering picture right now, red-eyed and snot-faced and totally probably thoroughly spooking out Kazuya –

Except he actually kind of looks like he’s finding it rather funny.

“It’s not funny,” Eijun wails, just so they were on the same page, and Kazuya chortles, depositing the tray he’d left on a chair by the door to the bedside table – the tray bearing a cake, a homemade cake, a cake that definitely had not been anywhere on the premises during the weekend Eijun’s spent at Kazuya’s because by virtue of physically being there, Eijun thinks he’d have known. Which means Kazuya made it while he was sleeping. Which means Kazuya’d literally stayed up while Eijun conked himself out watching re-runs of Big Bang Theory on his phone, and baked him a birthday cake. And it had strawberries on it.

Eijun’s about to have a meltdown.

The best kind of sweet, midnight-surprise-birthday-celebration-induced meltdown.

Oh lord, he needs some tissue.

Kazuya, thankfully, delivers, and doesn’t flinch or appear grossed out when Eijun blows his nose into a wad of paper napkins so hard, he kind of sounds like a foghorn blaring.

Instead he slinks into Eijun’s side on the bed, and wiggles them around until he can get his arm looped around Eijun. Eijun complies with his motions, sniffling, and it just gets Kazuya to laugh more.

Eijun finds it doesn’t bug him as much as he’d originally thought.

He snuggles up to him more.

“I’m really sorry I had to wake you up,” Kazuya begins again, and when Eijun tips his flushed-out face up to peek at him, he gives him a tiny contrite smile, “but…I kinda really wanted to be the first one to wish you.”

And Eijun, he just.

Glares.

Growls.
“Dummy,” he grumbles, hoisting himself up so he doesn’t slip down Kazuya’s sideways embrace, “don’t apologise. I… I love this.” He gestures at the cake, mind swimming because honestly, he should have guessed it, should have suspected something was up when Kazuya didn’t seem to mind him wandering off and tucking himself into bed and getting caught up in videos by himself when the whole point of him spending the weekend this time round, even though his birthday falls on a Monday, had been to spend as much time with him as possible, “I love you.”

He sees the delight bleeding into Kazuya’s smile almost in slow motion, before he masks it with a self-conscious smirk. “You’ve not even tasted the cake yet.”

“Shut up, I know it’ll be amazing,” Eijun smooshes his face into Kazuya’s collarbone, throwing his arms around his neck, and shakes along with him when Kazuya starts laughing again. Eijun loves it when Kazuya laughs. Eijun loves being the one who makes Kazuya laugh.

Eijun just loves Kazuya.

A lot.

The rest of his thoughts are fuzzy, partly because of sleep, partly because he’s experiencing some kind of sentimental overdose, but this one thing is clear, and Eijun marvels at it – at how this feeling hasn’t subsided, no matter how long it has been. It’s changed and morphed and amplified, grown and grown and grown, and it doesn’t matter if it’s almost been a year, and it doesn’t matter if they’ve started making tentative plans for a more permanent solution to their perpetual sleepover-scheduling dilemma, setting funds aside, picking up housing pamphlets half-seriously and keeping an eye on the ‘to-let’ sections of newspapers –

It still gets his blood rushing, his palms sweating, his heart carelessly skipping beats.

It’s… so much, and not enough, and the best feeling in the world, and it never falters.

Kazuya, warm and cosy and sometimes teasing, sometimes heartbreakingly sweet, never falters.

“I wanna kiss you,” Eijun blurts out, and decides to blame his imminent lack of sleep for the forwardness.

Kazuya’s expression flickers, with surprise – and then with intrigue.

And then there are lips on his, before Eijun has the chance to so much as blink – pliant, soft. Probing.

“Heyyyyy,” it’s a long sustained note, almost musical if it wasn’t pitched high with panic – Kazuya’s shock is warranted, given that the same person who’d been trying to crawl into his skin is now holding him back at arm’s length, “I didn’t brush my teeth before falling asleep!”

And then it’s Eijun’s turn to be shocked, because Kazuya doesn’t even blink as he shifts back in. “Doesn’t matter.”

“Doesn’t m- aren’t you supposed to be a germaphobe?!”

Kazuya fields Eijun’s flailing limbs – catches him round the wrist of the hand he’d been trying to press into Kazuya’s mouth, and pulls it over his shoulder. Around his neck.

“I don’t mind your germs.”
Eijun goes still.
Blinks.
Grimaces.

“That,” he says, “is the least romantic thing you could have said. Ever.”

Kazuya peers at him, a couple of seconds passing before he appears to catch on to what he’s saying. When he starts giggling, Eijun has to bite down on his lip to not mirror the action.

“Well, I guess I’ll have to fix that, don’t I?”

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They don’t get to cut the cake for a while, and they’re both late for work the next day, and when they meet with the gang minus Mochi-senpai that night for dinner, they’re so loopy with sleep deprivation they fall asleep on Onii-san’s new apartment couch while Harucchi is trying to get pictures of the two-in-one celebratory cake, since Eijun and Mochi-senpai’s birthdays are just a day apart and they’d unofficially started lumping the two occasions into one.

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Two nights later, Onii-san texts Eijun, saying he’s safely landed, and he’s in the taxi on the way to the hotel Mochi-senpai’s staying at, and Eijun thinks, belatedly, that maybe he ought to have included another set of paired keychains with the birthday present he’d tasked Onii-san to deliver, because he doesn’t need to guess to figure out what Onii-san’s planning on giving him.

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“Mochi-senpai!!”

“Bakamura, no –!”

The scuffle that ensues at the doorway barely gets a reaction out of anyone – except Kazuya’s dad, who looks as though he’s not quite sure what he’s doing here, crammed into a couch alongside Onii-san, who’d been the most adult of the adults around to keep him company.

“Congratulations, Senpai!”

“You can congratulate me without smothering me pipsqueak –”

“It’s a hug. A hug!”

Mochi-senpai, travel bag abandoned on the floor, scans the room for people who might maybe want to help him out a little bit, meets nothing but blank stares, gives up and let’s Eijun excitably shake him as he wrings out answers about how the matches’d felt, how heavy the trophy was, Was it real gold, Senpai? Can you like…smelt it into something else? Where are they going to keep it? Do they polish it before they give it to you? Did you take pictures with it?

It’s a true testament to how tired he is that he doesn’t immediately unleash some unforgiving wrestling moves upon Eijun’s head as retribution.

Later, though, when Eijun’s in the kitchen and definitely not spying on the way Onii-san and Mochi-senpai are sitting knee-to-knee, having the kind of conversation where they probably forget – even in the presence of company, Harucchi explaining the particulars of CA and auditing to
Miyuki-san just a foot away – about the world around them, Eijun finds himself fending off a different sort of wrestling move.

“Your dad is literally right there,” Eijun scolds in an undertone, trying to buck out of Kazuya’s hold – he’d gotten better at sensing Kazuya sneaking up on him, but clearly, he’d been distracted by the recently reunited couple and his inner cheerleading to have paid it much mind.

“It’s okay, Haruichi’s got him occupied,” Kazuya murmurs, undeterred by Eijun’s swatting hands – he snaps his arms around Eijun’s waist and yanks, pulling him further into the kitchen, into a more secluded corner.

“Seriously, you,” Eijun reproaches – it’s a bit hard to be fully reprimanding when he can’t even turn around to face Kazuya, but he tries. “Manners, please.”

Kazuya makes a whiney noise of complaint. Eijun knows he’s messing around, but it still tugs at his heartstrings. Still.

How?

“It’s not fair,” he wheedles, as Eijun extricates himself from Kazuya with as little fuss as he can manage, warily eyeing the living room area, where, mercifully, no one appears to have noticed their antics, “You were fine hugging Tsundere Senpai.”

Eijun purses his lips. This is becoming something of a gimmick, at this point, a running gag where Kazuya feels impelled to be extra clingy if he shows a tad extra attention to Mochi-senpai.

Mochi-senpai, of course, probably hadn’t helped by sticking his tongue out at Kazuya when Eijun’d taken him by the hand and hauled him off to check his new personal best on Dishonoured.

“I’ve literally not seen him in ages? I missed him?” Eijun spells out, like he’s speaking to a child. Kazuya pouts. “Still. I’m your boyfriend.”

He actually looks so peeved Eijun can’t help the giggle he lets out. “I hug you every day, almost,” he reminds him, with a pointed look.

“Yeah, but not that enthusiastically.”

“Yeah, but he was away for months. And we – ” he waves a finger back and forth between them, “actually live together.”

He says this calmly enough, manages to keep his face impassive enough – but it still makes his heart jitter, clatter round his ribs like some malfunctioning clockwork toy, because it’s been a while, and they’ve been working up to it, getting used to this new place, getting over their attachments with the previous ones, and they’d both been typical idiots, had somehow managed to stock up Kazuya’s shelf of music and all of Eijun’s books but not the boxes upon boxes of tableware and crockery and there’s an entire carton of bedsheets somewhere Eijun’s not been able to locate what with work and his and Kazuya’s often-times conflicting schedules, and he’s starting to get tired of ramming his toes into the barricade of unopened packages they’ve got lying around that they really need to double down on one of these weekends but still.

But still.

This still technically counts as their house-warming party, because although they’d moved in about a month back, they’d held off on celebrating until Mochi-senpai came back from his fall
tournament and winter training camp.

In time for Christmas –

And Eijun and Kazuya’s anniversary.

Their anniversary.

The word makes Eijun want to pass out and faceplant the ground and waltz through a field of flowers under a starry night sky and other, equally improbable things. They’d not been able to decide on a date where they’d officially gotten together, because they can’t agree on which coffee outing or dessert splurge they’d definitively, mutually reached that juncture in their relationship, so Kazuya’d suggested the date when Eijun had stumbled into the bookstore sleepy-high and no longer a student, and told him in between fits of giggles that he loved him.

It was embarrassing, but also really, really sweet and Kazuya’d said it back and why not? Why not?

Kazuya, probably unaware of the absurdity reigning supreme inside his head, and blissfully so, grouches. “Then maybe you should miss me more.”

It gets Eijun to do his best Kazuya-impersion, raising one dubious eyebrow. “Oh? Then maybe I’ll go and stay over at Onii-san’s place. I’m sure Mochi-senpai won’t mind.”

Kazuya’s eyes narrow. “As long as they have space for two.”

“I thought the point was going separately?”

“That’s not the point. That’s the opposite of the point.”

Eijun, at this point, can’t help the laughter. “Then how are we supposed to miss each other?”

“I miss you even when you’re here,” Kazuya tells him, very seriously.

Eijun snorts, hard. The aftershocks leave his windpipe feeling raw.

“That was a terrible line.”

“It works in all these contemporary songs.”

“It clearly doesn’t work outside of those songs.”

They’re still bickering when Mochi-senpai, evidently unable to resist third-wheeling even though they’re no longer flatmates and he’s no longer ‘officially’ obligated to be responsible for Eijun, rolls up to the kitchen and asks if they’re going to get something eat, or if he’s going to have to settle for chewing on all their unpacked boxes.

It’s much, much later, after Onii-san and Mochi-senpai double-team Harucchi to drop him back to his dorms in spite of all his protests that he can manage himself, and Kazuya’d come back upstairs after helping his dad find a taxi, that Eijun passes Kazuya his ringing phone from where it’d managed to fall in between the couch pillows.

“Our dad,” he announces, before returning to the arduous but necessary task of righting the room, because he knows full well he’s not going to want to do it tomorrow, and he’s got a story to chase about summertime reads of the year before it loses all its timeliness.

He manages to note, though, that Kazuya doesn’t hesitate in hitting the green button.
“Hi Dad.” Eijun smiles, busying himself with stacking up the used dishes – they’d gotten takeaway, because at this point Kazuya’s too busy and tired when he gets home to cook and Eijun, while getting better, is nowhere near good enough to feed an entire dinner party.

“Yeah, he’s here.”

Eijun peeks at him, questioning.

Kazuya’s looking at him. Suddenly, he smiles.

A strange kind of smile.

Secretive and –

“Yeah, he does.”

Eijun puts the recyclable aluminium boxes down for a second, curious. He tips his head at Kazuya, who shakes his.

“I won’t. Yeah. Thanks Dad. Text me when you get home.”

“What did he say?” Eijun asks, as soon as Kazuya hangs up.

Kazuya winks at him. “It’s a secret.”

Eijun isn’t amused. “It was about me, wasn’t it?” he demands, padding over to where Kazuya’s standing. He makes a grab for his wrists, tugging, insistent. “What did he say?”

Kazuya looks like he’s considering making Eijun work for it. Like he’s considering baiting him.

Eijun pre-emptively lets go of his arms and takes a step back. “You sleep on the couch if you don’t tell me,” he threatens. And he means it too. If he makes a run for the bedroom right now, given his extended period of training in random bursts of speed he’s needed to flee Mochi-senpai, he can get inside and lock the door in a heartbeat. Kazuya wouldn’t stand a chance.

Kazuya evidently senses the gravity of the situation.

Sighing, he shifts closer, smiling in spite of himself when Eijun obstinately stumbles back.

“He said he can see you make me really happy.”

It makes Eijun go stock-still – long enough for Kazuya to move in and catch him.

“He said to never let you go.”

There’s wool in Eijun’s throat. Fuzzy and dense and hard to swallow. Eijun licks his lips, and takes advantage of how close Kazuya is to lean his forehead against his chest, just so he can’t see his face till he manages to compose himself.

Kazuya seems perfectly content with this state of affairs, pulling him in against him.

“Well…I guess that means you have to listen to him, right,” Eijun mumbles, pushing the side of his face into where he can feel Kazuya’s heart thumping, slow and steady and real, reassuring. He dips his head low, but pushes on anyway, “he’s your dad after all.”

He feels lips press into the top of his head, and hears a smile in the voice that says, “I guess I do.”
I honestly never expected to get this attached to a fic. Now that it's over, I think I'm gonna have an existential crisis ;u; I'm literally thinking about a Kazuya POV oneshot to stash in all the stuff I wanted to include in this fic but which I couldn't get to fit and jghsdjkjhfgshgfs I don't know, I have nuuu idea anymore, it's like it took over my life and doesn't wanna let go welp

Since I majorly spazzed out at the end of last chapter, I'm going to try to keep this lighter and less sappy - starting, of course, with thanking ALL you lovely people for sticking to this fic, through all these weeks, reading the journey of these dumb AU dorks and sticking by me as you did. It means so much to me. So so much to me. You have brought me so much joy and smiles if it was possible to die of happiness I would have died a 100 times over by now, not kidding

Thank you, for everything! I'm sorry if I'm not immediately able to get back to you, because work is a bit busy and I literally skipped sleep to get this chapter up before I lost the feel of it (so I hope I didn't up half-assing it in the process OTL OTL) but I WILL get back to you, I promise. I love you all!

Thank you so so much for everything, and if you feel like sharing your thoughts on this fic, this chapter, anything at all, I'd love to hear from you <333 Until next time

/*sits down*/

/*cries*/

End Notes

um. I hope you liked it? and err...I hope you'll stick around for the continuation? ;A;

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