Even as you ask for more, don't forget what we already have

by anonymonypony

Summary

(Still here I carry my old delicious burdens,
I carry them, men and women, I carry them with me wherever I go,
I swear it is impossible for me to get rid of them,
I am fill’ed with them, and I will fill them in return.)

The 2016 Olympics. One for all the broken people, two for the times we had, three for us, the number of us, and a hundred thousand words to say fuck you.

Notes

Many thanks to the user potionwine for her invaluable beta.

Content warning: history of sexual abuse mentioned

Also contains major spoilers for High Speed! but if you don't know what they are you might miss them.

Poem in summary notes from Song of the Open Road by Walt Whitman

Rin's Australianisms are explained in footnotes. Also, I placed him in Melbourne because
Melbourne is the sporting capital of Australia. That end card of him in Sydney? Yeah let's just say he was just there for a swim meet.

Thank you for reading.
"So which is home to you, Australia or Japan?"

Rin would have cringed if cringing wasn't such a defeatist response to an insipid question. Rin would have simply tch-ed, if he were in a kindlier mood. Rin would have offered a one-word reply if it would just shut Nitori up, but it's been a whole term and that boy hasn't shut his fucking trap.

"Nitori, you know how I endeavour not to disappoint you but I regret to say I do not possess supernatural powers. Not blessed with any ability to bend the space-time fabric to my will or to split my bodily matter to occupy two places at once, the idea that home is a choice between Australia and Japan is a falsehood. It may surpass belief, but I could only have lived in each place in distinct and separate periods of time, thus the only conclusion we can draw is that both Australia and Japan were home. Home now, dear Nitori, is—fuck off."

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In all the stories Makoto has grown up with the Prince always gets the girl. He gets to make her his Princess and he does so by letting her know how much he cherishes her.

_I'd climb a mountain for you. I'd sail the seas for you. I'd die and die again if that's what it takes to keep you alive. Even though I'll never stop being scared of the murky ocean if there was something on the floor you asked for I'd go all the way down and pick it up for you._

But even when the fairy tales have become too far-fetched and fanciful, there are still other stories Makoto believes in—the ones that are human and real, like the old lady that climbs into bed with her sickly husband and they breathe for the last time together that night, arms wrapped around each other, like the old man who reads a love story to his old wife every day, a love story from a notebook of their younger days.

_I want to grow old with you, I want to be there when you're ninety and still make dried squid for you. I want to be the person who opens the cans of mackerel when your arms fail you, I want to check on you in the bathroom always, to see that you're still alive in the dead stale pool of water._

Every night Makoto thinks this, crawling into bed with Haruka, reaching across to that warm and curled body to pull Haruka close, to press a soft kiss on his cheek. There is the familiar rustling of sheets, and by now Haruka's learned to respond to him, to sigh a little, when he's not in such a good mood, or to nestle into Makoto, when he's in a better mood, and fold Makoto's calloused yet gentle hands into his, his quiet way of saying that there are times he does need somebody.

But Makoto needs him always, and each night Haruka still sleeps turned away from him.

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The autumn leaves crunch underfoot as Makoto bounds up the steps to Haruka's house. He has in his hands a bowl-shaped Tupperware of onigiri he helped his mother to make, and perhaps he was a little too heavy handed with the rice spoon, and perhaps he wasn't all that sorry about that because there was too much left over after dinner and of course he has to bring the rest to Haruka.

As evening sets the house fades further into the mountainside, swallowed by the shadows of the
overhanging trees. No light emanates from within, and the light from the surrounding houses seem wary of it, peeking furtively through the cracks in the fence. By this time of the year Makoto is well-prepared with a small LED torch that hangs from his key ring, which he turns on to light his path.

As always he skips the front entrance and climbs in from the back. The wind has stopped and it is unsettlingly quiet. Makoto wonders if he should begin a whistle to cut through his fear of the creeping silence. Although he has not articulated it within himself until this time, the reason why he visits Haruka so often is because it scares him that Haruka lives his days rattling around the minimally-furnished house with nothing to hold him down to earth. Makoto fears that if he does not check on Haruka often enough he will lose him to the dark, that the universe will rip a chasm into the walls and swallow Haruka out of existence. As Makoto’s socked feet pad across the tatami floor he turns off his torchlight. Even knowing how to navigate the house without need for sight Makoto is the sort to have every single light on whenever possible, but he’s also grown used to the fact that Haruka finds excessive light distressing and often chides him for wasting energy.

Makoto pauses in the hallway outside the bathroom, trying to listen for signs of life. If it seems like no one is at home Haruka is usually stuck in the bath, but there is typically a sliver of light peeking through the doorway and the sound of water sloshing. This time, not even the bathroom light is on, and on entering Makoto could barely make out Haruka’s slumped figure in the bath.

"Haru..." he pleads, voice cracking. There it is, his fear that Haruka will be lost to the water, lost to the dark. Please, please, please let him not have drowned. Makoto is about to go into total meltdown. He is aching to turn on the light, to throw into sharp relief what is happening to his friend but dreads the outcome. There comes a rasping sob that shatters the silence, and Makoto heaves a sigh of relief before tensing up again. Something—one—broke his friend.

In the dying light he takes one step forward. Haruka, he sees, is hunched over in the bath, jammers bunched up around his thigh and another hand tightly fist around his cock and, above all, he is crying. A gasping, ragged sort of crying—desperate and anguished—with racking sobs and convulsions like a fish out of water. Makoto clenches his fists, ready to fight the monsters that seek to destroy his friend. He breathes in, steadying his breath to speak in a clear voice through the murky twilight. Then he lets his breath out, almost in a sigh, and nearly loses it altogether.

"Haru, please, let me turn on the light. I can help you if you let me. Please, Haru." Makoto falls to the floor on his knees. He is shaking but he cannot let Haruka sense it. Through his own fears he has to be strong when Haruka is not and he has to be the comfort Haruka seeks. Steadying himself with his hands on the floor, Makoto begins to crawl forward, feeling like a ghost character in a horror movie. He shakes his head and bites his lip, reaches out and finds his hand on Haruka’s quivering shoulder.

"Haru, I’m so sorry. I’m sorry that someone broke your heart. I’m sorry that there are people on this earth so heartless and cruel not to treasure you as you are."

There is a face that looks up at him that Makoto never wants to see again. It is the face of a friend who has lost all hope, who can no longer see anything of worth. It lasts for no more than a second, and in a blink Haruka wipes the expression off his face, drawing a blank thereafter. Tilting his face away, he leans his head back into Makoto’s forearm.

"Haru, if you will let me, I promise I will always take care of you," Makoto says.

"You always have," Haruka whispers, voice dripping with resentment.

This is the night Makoto gets Haruka, but it is nothing like a dream.
When Rin leaves for Australia this time he brings his pillow with him. He would have brought his pillow the first time around, but his mother specifically banned it. He has been in and out of the country several times now, for exams and interviews and it's the school they least expected to get back that calls them up and says, *hey, we have a place for your boy.* Of all the schools, it is the one that does not take international students that takes him in. But with a piece of paper in his passport he isn't exactly *international,* is he? They're not going to treat him any different. *I learn fast, I'll do what they do and I won't let them make fun of me. They've got my favourite colours on the crest—red and black. I'll fit in.*

He'll be staying with his mother's brother and his family—Uncle Ken and Auntie Lisa and his older cousins Yoshi and Darren, who aren’t likely to play with him much because they’re too old to put up with him. Rin has a little room all to himself and while his mum and Gou are still here he lets Gou have the bed. In another two years he’ll be able to board at school but this is a choice he’ll leave to his mum—as long as he can bring his pillow with him he doesn’t care how the rest of the room is like.

When he's out at school Gou pastes some decals on the wall—a dolphin, an orca, a penguin, a starfish, a clownfish and some tendrils of seaweed. He has a rotten first day and comes back wishing to tear the silly decals with their smug grins off, but Gou is so pleased about her handiwork he can’t bear to do anything except tell her he likes it.

On the weekend before they part, they go to the aquarium and Rin buys a large shark plushie, a fairly ugly monster with a gaping pink mouth and jagged felt triangles for teeth.

"Gou," he declares imperiously at the airport, pushing the shark plushie into her arms. "I thus bequeath this glorious creature into your care. If you ever feel threatened just remember that at your word he'll come and bite the head off all your enemies and leave them in a bloodied heap, and then he and his brethren shall feast on their oozing guts."

He is fairly sure that Auntie Lisa is whispering something about him to his mum, hopefully in a scandalised tone, but his mother just smiles and hugs him.

"Rinrin," she says. "Swim for me, and your father."

The constellations are familiar but this is nothing like anywhere Rin has ever been. It's the Olympics—the 2016 Olympics, for real, in Rio de Janeiro, and he's at the aquatic centre and he can only hear the dull roar of the crowd. Others in the lineup for the heats have their headphones on, blaring Lil Wayne or Rimsky-Korsakov or whatever floats their boat, but he's been soaking in the atmosphere, getting used to the flat tone of the starting buzzer, the blue of this swimming pool, the smell of chlorine, all proper, proper stuff. This is what a proper crowd is like, and this is what proper swimming is like.

He zips up his jacket, shakes his muscles to loosen them, and bounces on his toes. *Dad, dad, if only you could see me. I'm here and I'll make you prouder than proud. Did you ever think that you'd someday have a son who could make it to the Olympics? Did you ever think that even after your death your wife would find so much strength in her to carry on? That she would work double shifts and study at night and learn a whole new trade so she could apply for a permanent residency in a totally different country just so her son could learn swimming with the best?*

Well, he's one of the best now, and he's here to show it.
"Rin!"

He spins around, turning to face the group that is filing in after their round. It's Tachibana Makoto.

"Knew I'd find you here!" Makoto calls out. "Well, I've had my turn, so best of luck to you!"

If Makoto's here, then Haruka has got to be here. The shock nearly throws Rin off balance when he steps backwards into a small puddle of water that threatens to derail his Olympic dreams in an all too final manner. What is Makoto doing here anyway? Of the lot, he's the last Rin expected to be an Olympian. Team physio, maybe.

After his race, when Rin scans through the athlete bios online, searching for the name of "NANASE, Haruka", it is nowhere to be found.

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When Rin finally gets to taste the metal, he thinks to himself, *finally*, that it's all been worth it.

Moving from place to place, never staying for too long, without the bother of friends who can only bog him down. Settling into a whole new country, always in terror of being identified as a FOB. The four a.m. starts and not always having Uncle Ken to drive him and riding the first bus into town with the sun chasing behind, walking past dirty gum-filled streets with peeling concert posters and the nagging fear of being hounded by a racist drunk. Boarding the creaky trams trundling down the heart of a city yet to wake. Meeting up with his coach and changing and splashing into the water, the artificial blue and chlorine that always wakes his sleep-drowned brain up.

Who's going to claim him now that he's got this piece of gold? The Japanese newspapers have allotted him some space—Matsuoka Rin, grew up in Iwatobi, started out swimming at Iwatobi, won the regionals with his friends, but when he reads about himself he gets the distinct sense he's been tainted by going abroad. He's not really one of them anymore.

And the Australian newspapers have other things to care about. For all the Asian faces you see on Swanston Street no tourist has ever thought to stop him to ask for directions and in the national team he's just a token story of how migrants work hard and assimilate and the real stars still have names like Cameron.

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The athletes' village is no place for a person like Makoto. Everywhere he looks he sees people engaged in some form of copulation or the other. Yes, he is painfully aware of the effects of tapering because hey, he is having first-hand experience right now but it really is no excuse to let all morals slide.

Makoto's here because he's wanted to swim ever since that night, ever since he saw Haruka break down. From that point on Haruka refused to swim anymore and it pained Makoto to see Haruka deny himself the thing he loved most in the world. From then he swore that he would swim for Haruka, and he would work as hard as he can to defeat that dark monster that lurks in his thoughts and at the bottom of pools. He will triumph over evil and swim all the way to the Olympics if only to prove a point, to prove that the water can still be good to those who approach it with a noble heart.

As is usual, the swimming events are drawing to a close even as the rest of the Olympics goes into full swing, a strangely convenient timeline seemingly designed to ensure that the swimmers are the most sexually available group of athletes. As he strolls through the athletes' village, he catches sight of the multitude of condoms piled into glass bowls like candy, constantly and earnestly replenished.
"You," someone says to him, and he spins around. "You anything like Rin Matsuoka?"

No, Makoto thinks darkly, but admonishes himself for harbouring so much resentment in a single thought.

"Ah, pity."

Pity? Makoto frowns. "Why would I be anything like Rin?"

"Didn't you guys swim together as kids? Gosh you're cute, yeah, but you're also so...innocent. Not really my thing, I must say."

Makoto decides to accept the comment as a compliment. He smiles amiably and makes excuses to leave. But he leaves scratching his head as to which country on earth is reporting his childhood as headline news. A country that has light blue in its flag, presumably, judging from that person's jacket. Light blue isn't a very common colour in flags...is it?

Winding his way to the catering hall, past the entanglements of orgiastic clusters, Makoto thinks of calling Haruka up to chat for a bit. They haven't talked in nearly a day.

The McDonald's here never closes and the whole menu is free. It never ceases to amaze Makoto and he grabs several large servings of French fries. He draws out his phone to take a photo of his mid-afternoon snack for Haruka. In the background, he hears more chattering that distracts him.

"Rin," someone mutters, like the name was dangerous. "Did you hear what that Rin guy's been doing in the showers?"

"Thing is, do you mean 'who', though?"

Someone sniggers. "Two rowers, a cyclist, a fencer...."

"Dude, are you talking about the Australian swimmer?"

"Yeah, duh?"

Something twists in Makoto's gut. It feels like someone has grabbed both ends of his digestive system and flung it around before wringing it like a piece of laundry to dry.

Rin, the Australian swimmer.

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The summer sun is reluctant to set, leaving the ocean still warm and like a buoyant fireball it sets the water nearly ablaze, the crashing waves like tongues of flame licking the shore. To the left of Rin, Haruka sinks his palms into the wet sand, propping himself backwards after a hard day of swimming.

Makoto has run off to chase after Nagisa, who had stolen all his clothes while he was rinsing off, leaving him nearly nude except for a flimsy towel.

To Rin's other side, Rei is perched on a rock outcropping reading a book, hovering atop an inflatable floatation device meant to look like a giraffe with its neck uncomfortably twisted into the shape of a ring. His lips are pursed and his face wrinkled in a frown.

Rin throws himself back to lie on the soft, white sand, still quaking with leftover laughter from Nagisa's elaborately intricate “surgical procedure” to extract sea urchin spines from Rei's butt after he'd accidentally sat on one.
"Isn't this great? I miss being like this." Rin nods towards the two figures tearing across the beach. "I miss running around without a care."

"You mean free," Haruka says.

"Yes, free," Rin beams back at Haruka.

After a pause, Rin tries to start up a conversation again.

"Hey Haru, you know I actually quit swimming in Australia to come back here?"

Haruka lifts his palms from the sand, draws his legs up and folds his hands across his knees. Turning his head to look away from Rin, he mumbles, "Why? Did you miss us or something?"

"No, but yeah, but no." Inwardly Rin curses himself. He sounds like a bogan.¹

"But what about Samezuka? You're with them."

"Just to keep my form, just in case, you know?"

There is another pause. In the distance, by the float rental kiosk, Nagisa finally gives up from the exhaustion of being chased around by the infinitely longer-legged Makoto.

"I'll race you," Haruka says, as Makoto and Nagisa audibly draw nearer with ragged breaths and spurts of laughter.

"Sure," Rin replies. "For you. For us. For the team."

"Tomorrow, then."

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That same night, Rin, with flecks of ocean salt still dotting his hair, receives a call from Coach McDonnell. "Hey, sorry about what happened, but you know I've got friends and they'll give you a chance. Tryouts tomorrow."

Rin doesn't say anything in reply. The smile has been wiped off his face, replaced with hard-set determination. *This is it. It's time to move on.* It is at this point where his life comes into focus and nothing else matters any more, not even Haruka.

It doesn't matter that when Rin was fourteen Coach McDonnell came on to him after swim practice and he gave his first blowjob ever to a man old enough to be his dad. Then there was "do you like fishing?" and then it was weekends in the Dandenong² with a man who's trying to be a surrogate dad but also wanted to have sex with him. At the time it felt like Coach McDonnell was the only one who understood how lonely he felt. So maybe it was dumb and stupid, but it wasn't like Rin didn't know what he was getting himself into each step of the way. right? Coach McDonnell was nice and looked out for him in a squad where everyone was inches away from clawing each other's eyes out. It was not at all like those times he ran into those leering men at the swim centre, hairy and barrel-chested, men who didn't ask nicely.

So Rin didn't say anything when some other boy had complained, an Andrej Krkic or someone, and filed a report about Coach McDonnell. They suspended Coach McDonnell's license and instead of swim practice Rin got pulled aside into a room with child psychologists. With their years of practice in the art of professional concern, they bombarded him with personal questions designed to get him talking, wearing sympathetic faces and those clinically-furrowed brows.
He didn't say anything because that other boy had already said it and he didn't say anything because he wanted Coach McDonnell to feel like he owes him something in return.

And that night, it pays off. Nothing else matters.

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"Please have some self-respect, will you, Rin?"

Makoto bursts into Rin's room while Rin is midway through chatting with Gou on Line, slouched on his bed. The laptop is angled away from the door so Gou can't see who it is but recognition registers on her face. Rin slams the laptop into sleep mode.

"What the fuck are you doing in my room, Tachibana?" Rin snaps his posture straight and glares at Makoto, almost petulantly. He hopes that the use of the last name will piss Makoto off.

"Rin. You want to know what I've been hearing about you? Everywhere? Everywhere in this village somehow I keep hearing about you, that you're doing some disgraceful act or the other and it's like you really have no respect for yourself?" Makoto's voice is even but he has one arm folded across nervously, clutching the elbow on the other side.

"I'm not here to be lectured by you, Tachibana." Rin waves a hand dismissively. "I don't see why it's something you'd get worked up about. Aren't you supposed to never get angry."

"Stop it!" Makoto grabs the offending hand but lets it go as soon as he feels Rin pulling back. "I mean it, do you know how selfish you've been? To Haru? To us? To me?"

"Look. Some of us have to fight for ourselves. Not all of us have a Tachibana Makoto to rely on, and if you think you've got what it takes to fight for two then I'll leave that to you."

Determination sets into Makoto's face. He pushes on with his point: "Do you know what you've done to Haru? He won't swim anymore. He can't. And it's all because of you. It's all because you left us again for Australia again. We're not your playthings, you know! Don't just throw us away when you're bored of us!"

"Just because Haru can't stop being obsessed with me doesn't mean you have to follow suit," Rin deadpanned.

On the tiny desk nearby Rin's phone begins to ring, rattling noisily on the table. It's Gou. At this interruption, Makoto startles and straightens up and, smoothing out his clothes, apologises for causing a mess.

Disgruntled, Rin tells him it's fine, the lie slipping transparently through his teeth. He tells Makoto he'll resume chatting with Gou and that Makoto should say hi to her. He rejects the phone call but opens up his laptop.

Makoto leans over Rin until he is captured in the camera frame and tries to muster a cheery wave as best he can, the smile pushing his cheeks up until his eyes are nearly closed.

"It's so nice," Gou says in return, "to see both of you being friendly to each other. To think I was so worried all this time."

Rin smiles, toothy and unwholesome like a shark. He winds an arm behind Makoto and pulls him down by his waist onto the bed. Makoto obliges, but shifts and rearranges his legs until he's seated primly and no part of his body is touching Rin except for where Rin still has his hand rested on his
"Well, since it seems like we're all on good terms once more," Gou continues, "we'd all like to say that we've been having a great time on the outside!" She turns her iPad to show them her immediate surroundings.

Gou's at a cafe by Ipanema beach, and in the distance Nagisa and Rei are waving. Gou turns the iPad on their mother, who's sipping a mug of hot tea across the table. Rin is surprised to find that the rest of the Iwatobi gang is here, although, with a glance at Makoto it seems obvious in hindsight.

"We're staying together in the same apartment!" Rin's mother tells him, with a kindly face and excitable tone. "I thought it was overpriced at first but the amazing view is worth it."

Oh, Rin thinks to himself. Did mum pay for all that? He can't help but feel slightly betrayed by the fact that his mum is footing the bill for this group of people who aren't really his friends anymore.

But then it occurs to him that they're Gou's friends now, and that's probably why their mother is doing this. The thought stings with barely repressed jealousy.

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When the conversation is over, Makoto turns to Rin with a sad face like a kicked puppy dog, and asks if he's seen how Haruka looks in that video.

"I couldn't bloody see him, he was far as!"  

The comment seems to fly right past Makoto's head. Makoto's face gets even more downcast—now a kicked puppy dog who has just lost his mummy. The sight of it annoys Rin and like a shark that has smelled prey he wants to take a bite.

"What was the point of you bursting angrily into my room? Are you trying to blame your relationship problems on me? I can't help that you've been inadequate."

Makoto's face contorts into a stunned expression. He sits on his hands to stop them from clenching, but his tensed knuckles knead into his thigh. "Rin! Don't go around saying irresponsible things like that. You've hurt Haru so much and you won't even admit it?"

"Why? Does it hurt you too? Your psychological co-dependency is showing, Makoto. That's not healthy for you."

The criticism of his personality seems to slide right off Makoto. Tears brim in his eyes and yet he does not look away out of shame. "He won't love me. He likes me and puts up with me and yes, he practically depends on me now but he'll never fully love me until you're out of the way."

"I wouldn't get so hung up on me, Makoto. I'm not that important."

"You don't understand, Rin. All that I've ever done for him is to help him survive, but he only ever truly comes alive when you're around."

"Are you asking me to be part of a threesome, Makoto? That's a bit too naughty coming from you, don't you think?"

At this, Makoto falls into Rin's shoulder in sobs. "I can't...I can't do the work of two. I can't do it alone."
It occurs to Rin that Makoto's uncomfortably close and soaking his t-shirt wet with his tears. If he cries any more he'll soon flood the village. Maybe then they'll hold the swimming events here instead. They still have the team relays to go. He places an arm around Makoto's shoulder.

Makoto's sobs are increasingly violent and racking and the sight of it is triggering thoughts in Rin, thoughts from a time he doesn't want to revisit. Haruka is metaphorically at brink of death. Makoto has done all he can, in the face of all his worst fears coming true. And Rin? Rin's just standing uselessly by the side, frozen, always frozen, blood running cold and looking on from a distance.

"Alright, alright," Rin says stiffly, wondering if he should put his hand comfortingly in Makoto's chlorine-tinged hair. "I'll go speak to him, or something." It's not like he knows what to say—he's not Makoto.

In truth he doesn't believe Haruka's that hung up about anything, ever, and he'll probably just tell him to be nicer to Makoto and stuff so he doesn't have to boyfriend his boyfriend for him. That bastard.

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Makoto lets Rin know that he'll be out shopping with the rest, leaving him to turn up at the doorstep of the apartment with only Haruka around. Wisely he hands Rin a set of keys because Haruka will never answer the door.

The apartment is a short walk away from Ipanema beach and from the balcony a person can catch a glimpse of the ocean above the canopy of palm trees and glittering party lights below. A couple of mountains overlook the western end of the beach. The shape of the mountains bounded by the gently waning bay almost reminds Rin of home, though perhaps on a much larger scale.

Through the door, Rei's playlist of ceaseless bossa nova tootles away despite his absence. Gou tells him that Rei formed this playlist after researching the most appropriate songs to listen to while in Brazil, particularly lazing by Ipanema beach, and that Nagisa has been trying furiously to get his very own samba playlist in between somewhere. In all seriousness, Rin wouldn't bat an eyelash if the two of them have signed up for next year's Carnival and are now seeking costume fittings.

Rin catches sight of Haruka turning around on hearing the door unlock, but also sees Haruka hurriedly turn back on spotting him. The apartment is stunningly well-appointed, not that it should surprise Rin but his mum can be so indulgent sometimes. The living room opens into the breezy balcony, where Haruka is sitting.

"So you beat Japan in the team medley relay." Haruka looks like he's talking to a ghost outside the balcony, such is his lack of eye contact.

Fuck, Rin thinks, when he realises the damn medal is still in his pocket. He can't blame himself for wanting to take it everywhere, no?

"I hope you've finally achieved everything you wanted."

Haruka's tone is pissing him off. Rin folds his arms and goes on the defensive.

"Well, yes, in fact I have. I finally figured out that my dad swam freestyle for the team and I've done the exact same thing, only in the Olympics. I also have a medal to show for all the hard work. Nice, huh?"

Haruka doesn't bother to reply. He turns his head and lets it fall slightly to the side, eyes fixed blankly on the horizon.
Rin shoves his hand into his pocket, and feels the hard cool edge of the medal. Swiping a thumb over the flat surface he can feel the ridges of the embossed design. "Congratulations to me," he says, because he'll never squeeze any celebration out of Haruka.

"In the end, doesn't matter who you do it with as long as you do it, right?"

_Fucking asshole_, Rin thinks. _Go ahead and make all the cryptic statements you want, I'll just twist the knife in deeper._

"Nope, in the end it wasn't about anyone, or any team. Just finding myself, and my dad." The conversation feels like they're trading blows.

"You selfish bastard," Haruka mutters, face still turned away.

There is a stab of joy through Rin's heart. God, finally, god, he's cracking. Is this what it's like? _To finally feel like you have all the power._

They don't say anything else for a long time. The music in the background whinnies on, weak and weaselly, the saxophone stretches thin and deflating. At last, Rin decides it's time to get up and leave, so, as his parting words, he says to Haruka—

"You should tell Makoto you love him every now and then, you know? He's really suffered for you."

He gets up and pats Haruka on the shoulder, partly to be patronising and partly to put an end to things but when his hand is on Haruka's shoulder he realises that Haruka has been crying. Fucking hell, this is the second time in two days he's had someone burst into tears on him.

He lets his hand stay on Haruka's shoulder and he gently squeezes it. He wants to be angry at Haruka but he can't, not anymore, now that he's won. All winners are expected to be gracious, and only winners can afford the privilege.

"You're right. I was such a selfish fucking asshole. I was a heartless bastard and you didn't deserve any of the shit you took from me."

Haruka's still sniffling under his curtain of hair, hunched over and everything. _So that's how he cries_, Rin thinks to himself, all satisfaction evaporating.

It is only yesterday that he saw Makoto cry, with unending tears and unyielding desperation, shaken to the core and rasping like his heart was a furball he had to cough out. Today, he sees Haruka cry, in a quiet sob under quiet night with quiet stars. Makoto is right. There is nothing Haruka has ever done to deserve this hurt. Guilt seeps like water into the crevices of his jagged-stone heart. How does Rin cry? Rin cannot cry, not when he has paid all his dues, in the saltwater of tears and sweat that left him cracked and bone dry like a parched desert floor, hoping for the alchemy that would transform all that pain into gold.

At this moment, thinking of how they're bounded by the sea before them and Corcovado behind them, Rin understands that Haruka's is a story of horribly squandered talent, and he knows now, beyond a doubt, that if they were to swim tomorrow Haruka will still beat him. Haruka will always beat him, but as time wears on it's borne less and less meaning for him and more and more meaning for Haruka because Rin is always so hungry he has more to look for beyond a race, and Haruka has nothing but that—beating him in a race when they were not yet thirteen.

"I'm sorry," Rin says, relenting at last, swinging another arm around Haruka to enfold him, leaning forward into him, resting his chin on the crown of Haruka's head. "I'm sorry you wasted your life on
The realisation drops like a weight to his chest. His breath catches and the air seems to have left his lungs.

**It feels like he's going under.** Rin wonders if the lights ever go off at the foot of the Redeemer. He wonders if there'll ever be redemption for someone like him, the boy who turned the lights off on Nanase Haruka. Alchemy's a bullshit science anyway and the gold medal hangs heavy in his pocket. It starts to feel like a burden he wants to hurl into the sea. He sees now that nothing good lies beyond the medal, which took from him his home and his friends and his innocence. He wonders if there is any chance of them starting over, when the first race the first time he was back from Australia ruined him and the race that did not happen because he ran off to Australia ruined Haruka. He realise, a bit too late now, that he’s clinging on to Haruka a bit too tightly, and Haruka's clinging weakly back at him, clawing pitifully at his sleeve, and you know, if they were underwater, people clinging onto other people like that, they’d be sinking right now. At this point it looks as though the underwater thing that Makoto feared has swallowed them all.

"You should leave," Haruka says abruptly, shaking his head as if to shake off what went on before. "It's getting late."

Rin lets go of Haruka. He slips his hands into his pockets, only to have his right palm press into that cursed medal.

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Stepping out of the apartment block, Rin walks along the Avenida Vieira Souto. The beachfront is much quieter at this time of the night but still brightly lit. Small pockets of activity dot the beach in the distance. The air is cool, almost chilly—it's actually winter in the Southern Hemisphere. Looking up in the sky Rin can spot the familiar Southern Cross, and looking out into the rocky bay, bounded by tree-covered mountains, there's a sense of the childhood he lost.

He decides now that he should head to the beach and fling his medal into the sea. It's by no means the only medal he's got but it's the one for the medley relay, his last event of the Games. And it's the medley relay medal he wants out of his sight most of all—the rest he can give to his mum for all her hard work funding his ridiculously expensive dream.

He trudges towards the shore, sneakers filling up with sand. The wind is stronger out at sea and he zips his jacket all the way up. When the waves begin to nip at his toes he takes it out of his pocket.

"Rin!" There is the sound of someone jogging up to him from behind.

Even without turning around, Rin knows it's Makoto. It doesn't sound like his mum and sister are close by.

"Where are my mum and Gou?"

"Buying ice cream at the convenience store," Makoto huffs, hauling a large number of shopping bags bulging with souvenirs, a little out of breath. "Chilly night, isn't it? But they insist on their regular dose."

Rin turns around to look at Makoto. On seeing him, Makoto flashes a silly smile in response to the idea of having ice-cream in the cold, eyes shimmering with gentle humour.

"Why are you holding your medal?" Makoto asks.

"I'm throwing it into the sea," Rin states plainly. No need to hide the fact if he's going to see the plan through to completion. He half-expects Makoto to put on that worried, concerned face and pester
him about why, and then try in all his good-naturedness to talk him out of it. It is not the response he
gets.

"For your dad?" Makoto says, and it strikes Rin that Makoto just gave him the perfect answer. Yes,
he could do it for his dad. It's a much better option than throwing it away out of despair.

"That's sweet," Makoto says.

With all his strength Rin hurls the medal into the sea. There is a faint plop in the distance, and he
hopes that the current brings it out before the early morning beach scavengers pick it up and literally
strike gold.

"Say," Makoto begins, shifting his weight from side to side. "How did it go?"

"What?" Rin says, feigning ignorance, although he knows plain well Makoto means his meeting
with Haruka. He doesn't know what response Makoto wants from him. Did he clear the house in the
hopes Rin would resolve that sexual tension with Haruka so that everyone else can move on with
their lives? The whole idea was preposterous to begin with.

"He's not going to change," Rin says, to put an end to the speculation in Makoto's mind. What kind
of idiot boyfriend willingly sets his partner up for sex with another man with the aim of improving an
already imbalanced relationship? What unholy levels of self-sacrifice does a person like Makoto put
himself through each day?

Rin punches a fist lightly into Makoto's arm. "Have you no self-respect?" He meant for it to be an
accusation but the words leave his mouth garbled and soft. He needs to get going now, before his
mother and sister realise he's on the beach with Makoto and thwart his escape. He opens his fist into
an affectionate grab. "I'll see you then," he says gruffly.

He turns to walk away, but Makoto has held on to his hand, strong fingers curling into his palm.
Under his wind-swept fringe his shining green eyes are brimming with innocence and hope. It seems
grossly unfair to Rin that the Harukas of the world get to end up with the Makotos of the world.
What's left for people like himself? Haruka doesn't deserve a guy like this, damn him.

"Stay the night," Makoto says.

Chapter End Notes

A brief explanation of some of the Australia-specific references Rin makes:

1. Bogan: derogatory Australian slang for someone from a lower social class, roughly
similar to the British chav or the American redneck. In terms of social hierarchy,
Australia is relatively flat: you have Australians, and then there are bogans.
2. Dandenong [Ranges]: A mountain range in the outskirts of Melbourne, popular for
weekend retreats and recreational outdoor activity
3. Rin is using a peculiar Australian type of expression that goes “[adjective] as”. It’s
like a half-assed simile. For example, you want to say something is “as beached as a
whale in New Zealand” but as you can’t be bothered with the second half, you say
“beached as”.
Chapter Summary

In response to Makoto's request, Rin chooses to stay the night with the group at the Ipanema apartment.

_Hush, now, quell the surging storm in your quavering heart. Let not your anger fall like inky blankets upon the shore. Do not strike with lashings of undertow the harbours and boats that took their faltering lives a lifetime to build. Do not let their hopes and dreams wash away beneath your churning ocean froth. You never meant to hurt anyone, though they did not understand you. Blame not the simple fishing folk, even as your skin is rough from the scars of their harpoons. Though they carry from you bloated bags of stolen life with gasping gills and thrashing fins you know that they sometimes carry in themselves payment for this offering, the bloated bruise-blue bodies that crumble to bits of flesh and bone, food for your own._

_You are made of the sea and you will outlive them all. Put aside your saltwater fury, you creature of the deep. Slip unnoticed into the trenches of the earth that have opened up for you, there is where your home is, there, they will not find you._

***

"Haru—"

Ahead of the rest Makoto has bounded up the stairs to the apartment. It is his job to let Haruka know to expect a crowd, and this crowd—if things go bad Makoto isn't sure if anyone can control the situation. He's not sure why he made it happen, either. Back then, on the beach with Rin, he thought he could be like one of those people who trusted their instincts, but now he's not so sure. He usually counts on Haruka to remind him of his track record in the follow-your-instincts thing, but as Haruka was absent, it obviously could not happen.

Pushing open the door, Makoto stands at the threshold with a smile made earnest by the faintest hint of exhaustion. Haruka is on the balcony, back to the door, staring out at the sea beyond. _Has he been sitting there all night?_

On hearing the door click Haruka tilts his head around but he isn't looking at Makoto. That look on his face—it is as if Makoto is transparent, as if there is something beyond him. And that hurried snap of the head to pretend he hadn't been looking when voices emerge from the elevator—that isn't meant for Makoto, not at all.

_Haru was looking for someone else._

_Something happened._

_I shouldn't have asked Rin over._

_It is my fault. It was bound to happen._

_Why did I give Rin the apartment keys?_
"Why did I leave them alone?"

"Welcome home, Rin-chan!" Nagisa exclaims, cheery voice cutting across the hallway, more laser beam than sunbeam of happiness.

Haruka doesn't budge but Makoto can nearly feel his inward cringe at the noisy interruption.

"Where do I put these?" Rin asks, voice on the intrusive side of loud.

Makoto's heart is shrivelling up in fear until he realises that Rin is staring expectantly at him, grocery bags slightly raised in question.

"Why is Rin asking me for directions? It's not like I own the place. And Rin's the one who's holding the keys."

"Rinrin," Mrs Matsuoka says. "The kitchen is over there."

"Ohhh," Nagisa cuts in mischievously. "I didn't know Rin-chan was such a mummy's boy."

"He always was!" Gou rebuffs.

"Oh? Are you jealous? I sense jealousy...."

"Nagisa, shut the fuck up." Rin swings a grocery bag strained at the handles with the weight of several boxes of ice-cream in Nagisa's direction, broadly missing his target.

"Onii-chan, you swore in front of mum!"

"Sorry, mummy."

At this, Nagisa bursts into a high-pitched cackle like a troll on helium, vindicated in his observation. Makoto has to laugh too, a good-natured laughalong chortle, even though he doesn't really know why.

"Shall we celebrate?" Mrs Matsuoka asks, lifting a bottle of sparkling wine from a paper bag. "I believe we have good reason to."

"No, mum, we don't! Do you know what onii-chan just did? Makoto-senpai just told me he threw away his gold medal from the relay. Is this how he repays his mother for all her unconditional support?"

"It's for dad," Rin says softly, shoulders hunched in a defensive posture. "I threw it into the sea as an offering."

"Onii-chan..."

"Rinrin..."

It's a heady mix of emotions, the way the Matsuokas jump from laughing and teasing to quiet confessions and concerned cooing. Somehow it makes Makoto feel like the rest of them are being left out, not deliberately, but enough to cause some social awkwardness and he looks to Haruka to confirm his feelings.

When Makoto glances at the balcony Haruka isn't even pretending not to care like Makoto expected. Haruka's body is angled to face the interior of the apartment, one arm across the back of the chair for support, and he is looking, with those faraway eyes, straight at Rin.
"Mum, dad, do you think I can enrol at a juku?"

Makoto's mother breaks into a smile. "Mako-chan, of course you may. I am so glad to see you take your studies so seriously."

"Ran, Ren, I want you to take note. See what a perfect role model your big brother is? He doesn't need anyone to tell him what to do, he just automatically does it." His father beams at him.

Makoto smiles, embarrassed but also flattered. It's something he's been thinking about for ages—now that they're in senior year, and the swim club membership has expanded to a point where he knows it will go on without him, Makoto should move on to his next important life goal—to be with Haruka no matter where Haruka goes, and at this point in their lives it's all about college.

He's not sure exactly where Haruka wants to go, but Haruka's dining table is scattered with prospectuses from universities in places like Kyoto and Tokyo. What Makoto already knows is that they will not be studying the same thing. Haruka has an artistic streak that cuts a path through fields Makoto cannot follow, so the only option he has left is to attend university in the same city, whichever city Haruka chooses. And this is why he has to work so hard—if he does well enough to make it anywhere he will not have to face the pain of being separated from Haruka for large chunks of the academic year.

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Faster than Makoto can notice, Rei has moved into the chair next to Haruka on the balcony to hand him a glass of bubbly.

Makoto is caught in the bustle of unpacking the groceries in the kitchen, in the unsealing of potato chips and the unbotting of wine and the pouring of trail mix into serving bowls. All around him, people are chattering over the rustling of grocery bags.

Why wasn't I the first to bring Haruka a glass of wine? How did I let Rei beat me to it?

Perhaps Makoto thought Haruka just needed space, and Rei wasn't clued in enough on such things. Or perhaps he was afraid to face a Haruka that he knew was slowly slipping away from him.

"Gather round, gather round, everybody please gather round!" Nagisa chirps. "We have potato chips and trail mix and gummy sweets for all, and ice-cream in the fridge for later. Please help yourself to the wine—take your pick from red, white or sparkling—there's plenty for all!"

Makoto catches sight of Rei asking Haruka to join the rest at the dining table, and Haruka nods and gets up like everything is normal and together they head in.

Makoto knows Haruka plainly doesn't like being among so many people, but he also knows that Haruka can't turn down a polite request from a friend. It is a strange truth that if Makoto had been the one to do the asking Haruka would have flat out refused and they would have remained out on the balcony the whole night.

"So what's this about Rin-chan throwing his medal away?" Nagisa says.

There is a silence as everyone around the table—everyone except Haruka—turns to look at Rin.

Realising that an answer is expected of him, Rin shifts uncomfortably in his seat, looks questioningly at Makoto, and then begins. "Ah, well, I was on the beach and decided it was appropriate."
"Why Ipanema beach?" Rei asks, prying into the gaps in the story. "Why not Copacabana?"

"Uhh..." Rin stutters.

"It's because we're here, isn't it? Onii-chan was thinking of us and that's what brought him here."

A guilty look flashes across Rin's face. He looks like he's hoping Gou's answer will be taken as conclusive.

To Makoto's left Haruka swallows an awkward gulp of wine, like he was having difficulty with the simplest physical things. *What happened between the two? Rin is looking guilty for some reason and Haru-chan's wandered off into that distant mode.*

"Do you really miss us that much, Rin-chan?"

"Uhh..." Rin stutters again, and Makoto can see Haruka's fingers tighten around the stem of the wineglass. Makoto has to push back the questions that are forming in his mind, of what lies beneath the discomfort in the way Rin and Haruka are acting around the table. Was it because everyone else was in their way? Makoto tries as hard as he can to suppress the thoughts that rise like wispy ghouls from the shadowy dark, conjuring scenario after scenario of what happened before he found Rin on the beach. *Did they touch? Did they kiss? Did they hug and did Haru come alive around Rin?*

"I miss my mum and Gou," Rin finishes, leaning back into his chair to tip some wine down his throat.

"You don't miss the rest of us then? You're such a meanie."

"Nope."

*Rin is full of shit as always.* Makoto can practically hear Haruka's thoughts in his mind.

"There, there," Mrs Matsuoka interferes lightly, trying to take the heat off Rin. "Let's cut Rin some slack. After all, what was it you won again?" She turns to face Rin with a proud smile.

"Three golds and two silvers," Rin says, kicking back into a relaxed position, arms behind his head.

Rin is back to his old showy self, all posturing and bravado. *What does Haru think of all this?* Makoto can't tell, because he hasn't yet found out what exactly went on between the two when he threw them alone in the same room. Maybe he can't tell because his heart already knows the answer but his mind won't admit to it.

"Pfft, that's nothing," Nagisa says facetiously, but his eyes widen with amazement just recalling the fact.

"Makoto-senpai got one silver and one bronze," Gou interjects. "I think that's fantastic too."

All eyes turn on him and Makoto has no choice but to smile in reply.

"I propose a toast!" Rei exclaims. "A toast to our Iwatobi Olympians."

"To Mako-chan and Rin-chan!" Nagisa says.

They toast and clink glasses. Somehow everyone has the good sense to leave Haruka alone and not force him to participate, which is a great relief for Makoto.

"Say something, Makoto-senpai!" Gou urges.
Makoto winces a little. He doesn't want to appear to Haruka like he's having too much fun, but there's a part of him that truly appreciates how everyone is gathered together in relative happiness at this moment.

"A special thank you to everyone here. If it wasn't for your support, I don't think I would have made it this far. And thank you, Mrs Matsuoka, for this lovely apartment and the delicious food and drinks."

"Thank you for your compliment, Makoto-kun. We're glad to have your company."

"My turn, my turn! I propose a toast to all penguins! After all, we are in the Southern Hemisphere and this is their home."

"Nagisa..." Rei sighs, adjusting his glasses.

"To penguins!" Gou cheers.

"To penguins," the rest of them halfheartedly try to humour Nagisa.

"I propose...a toast to this beautiful country," Rei says. "To the stunning coastline and the equally stunning people. To the ethereal strains of bossa nova and the infectious joy of the samba beat..."

"Rei-chan, you listened to my samba playlist after all..."

"To Brasil! To Rio!" Mrs Matsuoka raises her glass.

"To friends," Makoto adds, an honest smile taking over his face.

"To the people we love," Gou adds.

"To the people we love who love us as we are," Mrs Matsuoka says.

"To the Olympics!" Rei finishes triumphantly.

There is another frenzied round of clinking glasses.

"Oh, Rin-chan, you haven't said anything at all," Nagisa points out abruptly.

"Speech!" Gou exclaims.

"Speech, speech, speech," a chorus rises from around the table. Reaching for a teaspoon, Mrs Matsuoka clinks it against Rin's wine glass.

The smile that crosses Rin's face can almost be labelled bashful. Except for that bout of bravado he's actually been quite reserved tonight, perhaps even imbued with a sense of humility. The expression on his face is soft, he appears to have made peace with something and there is almost a radiance that threatens to break through. Makoto wonders if it has anything to do with Haruka.

Rin peers into his wineglass, swirls the pale greenish-yellow liquid with uncertainty, and, lifting it, says with all seriousness—

"To Haru."

***

*Why does he have to say something so stupid? Now the whole table is expecting me to say*
something.

To his right Haruka notices Makoto's head tilt downwards. His arms have sagged too, elbows falling downwards onto his knees and the wine glass he is holding hangs at a precarious angle. The pale, transparent red in the polished glass is at the brink of spilling.

*I have nothing to say,* Haruka thinks. Anger is seeping into his veins like magma from the volcanic cracks at the ocean's floor. Expectation hangs in the air like a dense fog.

"Oh, Rin-chan," Nagisa replies almost immediately, in a mock-stern tone. "Don't think for one moment that we've forgiven you."

"What?" Rin says, like he was completely clueless.

"For what you did to Haru-chan." Nagisa nods solemnly.

*How does Nagisa even know about anything?* Haruka doesn't know whether to feel annoyed at Nagisa's inexplicable prescience or to be grateful someone else has done the talking for him.

"What did Rin do to Haruka-kun?" Mrs Matsuoka asks with genuine concern, leaning forward into the table imploringly.

"All those times he ditched us to go to Australia..." Nagisa offers.

Irritation swells within Haruka because Nagisa has no need to tell Mrs Matsuoka such things—as the parent who agreed to send her son overseas now she is going to think she is to blame for ruining friendships when she has done no such thing. All of this is so unnecessary. The problem is between Rin and him alone. What needs to be done is for them to apologise to Mrs Matsuoka, for undermining her decision to send her son abroad. But as long as Rin is close enough to hear Haruka will not bring himself to do it, and so he has to let this guilt hang over the table like a millstone.

"I'm—I'm sorry," Rin interrupts hastily.

*What is Rin trying to do? Does he think he can gloss over everything with mere words? Or is he doing this to save face in front of his mother?*

Just over an hour ago Rin said those same words to him, softly, past his ear. Just over an hour ago Rin had his arms around him, tight, like a beggar, desperate to be forgiven. He can still recall the feel of Rin's breath on him, hot, and searching. With those arms he had won in the water, with that breath he fought to victory. *I will not forgive you. You will not be absolved, I refuse it. I refuse to let you go, I cannot let you go. I think I want your face buried in the nape of my neck all of the time, to feel your wet breath and dry tears, I think I want those arms, which have fought ceaselessly in the water, to surrender around me, I think want you back, I think I miss you, I think I want you, I think I hate you, I don't want to think. I don't want to think.*  

***

"Oh, Mako-chan, why were you feeding Haru-chan mackerel during lunch?"

"I did no such thing!" Makoto blushes hotly, fingers curling around the lid of Haruka's empty bento box, knuckles tense with flushed veins.

"It's okay, Nagisa. My hands were covered in paint. I couldn't touch my food."

"Oh, Haru-chan, but it's not just the feeding. Yesterday, when school was over, it was raining
heavily and Mako-chan ran after you with an umbrella and I saw him lightly brush aside your soaked hair."

Makoto looks like he's about to keel over with embarrassment. "Ah, Nagisa, perhaps you were mistaken..."

"I was not!" Nagisa insists.

"So what if Makoto did that?"

"Oh, nothing. I just thought—say, this is a wild guess and I may be completely wrong, but are the two of you dating?"

"What?" Makoto blurts, in a tone of distinct alarm.

"Yes, we are," Haruka says coolly.

"Oh," Nagisa says, brows knitting into a frown. He looks like he is running a thousand words through his head, trying to pick out the right ones. "Since when?"

Both Makoto and Haruka know exactly when. It is the night Rin abandoned all of them to swim for Australia. It is a date neither will care to commemorate.

"It just happened, I guess," Haruka shrugs.

"Oh," Nagisa says again, slightly dumbfounded by what he perceives to be Haruka's honesty.

Nagisa must still be mulling over the news as after a while, he continues, "Wow. Has it been going on for a long time?"

"I suppose you can say it has," Haruka replies, and it's not untrue.

"So...do you even celebrate an anniversary or something? Is there a special date of particular significance?"

*If there is one it's probably the first day of kindergarten.*

"I'm afraid we don't have one specific date," Makoto says, scratching his head awkwardly. "It's not like—how do I say this?—it's not typical."

"Well then," Nagisa says. "Mako-chan, Haru-chan. How about today! I promise the both of you to always remember this day, the day you admit in public your relationship. I am very honoured you let me be the first to know."

***

"Haru—" Makoto says, when the night has wrapped up and they have retreated into their rooms. The lights are off but the room glows softly in silvery moonlight filtered through the translucent curtains.

After Rin made his out-of-left-field toast to Haruka and after Nagisa squarely put the blame on Rin for all of Haruka's unfulfilled potential, Rin actually apologised to Haruka in front of everyone.

What happened next had surprised Makoto, although he wasn't sure if the rest of the room felt the same.
Makoto thought Haruka wasn't going to react. He feared Haruka would be paralysed by everyone's expectation to say something in return, and it would become all too clear how deep the wound is and how raw the pain. Makoto was going to dive in and say that it has been a tiring day and they should all head to bed for a good night's rest before anything else can happen. He wanted to jump out of his seat and throttle Rin and plead, "Leave Haru alone, leave Haru alone," if it would help things any.

Instead of drawing his chin further down, receding further behind the wall of his fringe, instead of turning his face away from the table and instead of wishing he didn't have to be there in the inescapable corporeality of the present moment, Haruka looked up.

Haruka looked up from his half-drained flute of sparkling wine and, for a second, caught Rin's eye. Then, staring straight ahead, he said—

"That's fine."

In that moment Makoto failed to read Haruka correctly. It is moments like these that reminds Makoto that when it comes to Rin, he can never read Haruka's thoughts. He only knows that it is isolating and it leaves him flailing in the wake of their high-speed collision course.

Talk to me, Haru, Makoto pleads silently, as he watches Haruka change into his sleepwear and climb under the covers. He looks so calm, like the deceptive sky with hidden clouds poised to wreck the harbour.

Tell me what happened, tell me what happened with Rin.

"Are you coming to bed, Makoto?" Haruka asks plainly.

"Yes, yes," Makoto sputters, and strips down to his underwear. His belongings are still in the Olympic Village although he'll be moving out tomorrow. He'll take a couple of days to see the sights of the city before heading home with the bunch and resuming normal life.

He crawls into bed next to Haruka. What now? What's between us? Am I allowed to reach across the gap and hold Haru close?

Makoto coughs, and then begins a strangled laugh meant to mask his discomfort, but aborts the laugh as soon as he realises it simply sounds like he's dying. Finally, he manages to emit: "What did you think of Rin today? He's quite some guy, talking about his medals without shame." It feels like such an empty statement because he knows full well Rin was just putting on a show. He was merely trying to squeeze some comment from Haruka, so that he could see for himself how things stood between Haruka and Rin.

Makoto stretches an arm across to rest a hand on Haruka's waist. Haruka lightly brushes it away.

"Rin's alright," Haruka says, still turned away. "He can do whatever he wants."

Is Haru okay with Rin now? Haru isn't revealing anything. It feels like there is something more, something I'll never find out. Why does this hurt? Why does this hurt so much? Makoto uncontrollably contracts his body, curling up into a ball.

At the sudden movement, Haruka starts and turns around to face him. He places a hand under Makoto's chin and lifts it upwards. If Haruka has genuinely accepted Rin's apology then this is the start of something new and the unarticulated fear within Makoto is that Haruka is closing the chapter on him. Haruka's eyes are gleaming like the dappled sea with the forward-looking secret path only revealed by moonlight. Haru-chan is moving on. Haru-chan is so brave, nothing ever gets him down for long. Haru-chan can face anything and not be scared.
Like a frightened child, Makoto reaches out with both hands to cling to Haruka. He buries his head in Haruka's chest and draws his legs up in between Haruka's legs. He wants a kiss, but the kiss will not come. The way Haruka is combing through his hair is like a parent comforting a child, not like a lover's wistful touch. Haruka withdraws his legs slightly so that they're embracing but not intertwined. Deep in his heart a thought stirs in Makoto. Haru doesn't want sex tonight. I think they fucked, I think they fucked.

***

Everyone has pottered off to their rooms except Rin, who has no bed here and has to take the couch. There are three bedrooms in this apartment—Gou and his mum are sharing the master bedroom, Nagisa and Rei share another room, and Haruka has the smallest room, joined by Makoto tonight. He doesn't feel like sleeping yet and so he paces about the living room. He doesn't want to turn on the television because he'll only get inundated with recaps on the Olympic events of the day.

In the kitchen the dishwasher is whirring.

Suddenly, he hears a door crack open, and he pops his head around the corner to see his mum emerge from her room, wrapped in a fluffy bathrobe, shuffling out in fluffy home slippers. She breaks into a smile on seeing him.

"Can't get to sleep?" she whispers.

"Nope," Rin says.

"Me neither."

Rin smiles at her. She's worked so hard her entire life she's probably forgot what sleep is.

"Say, it's a bit naughty, but there's some Pinot noir leftover from this evening." His mum waggles her eyebrows at him. "Wanna share?"

Rin nods, still smiling. He follows her to the kitchen to help her. All the glasses are in the dishwasher so he grabs two coffee mugs. His mum grabs the bottle, which is still half-full, and they walk out into the living room to plop themselves on the couch. They pour themselves a mugful of wine each, and then, in identical poses, both stick out their legs to rest their feet on the coffee table.

"How do you feel?" his mum asks, looking at him.

"All right. I'm happy to be here."

"I love you," his mum says.

"I love you too, mum."

Rin has his mug held to his lips like it is full of wholesome hot chocolate. It's a bit like the old times in Sano with his mother on the nights she found him waiting for her when she got home late, silently doing his homework on the coffee table. She would gently admonish him for not being in bed but her eyes would always shine with a gladness to see him there and they would make hot chocolate together before going to sleep.

"So...you gave away your medley relay gold to your dad, huh?"

"Yeah, yeah, don't be jealous mum, you're getting the rest you know."
His mum breaks into laughter, like a tinkling peal of bells. She doesn't cover her mouth when laughing. He likes that about her.

"Oh, Rin," she says, and then reaches across to muss his hair.

Rin ducks a little and leans into her. "It wasn't really my idea, actually. Makoto suggested it."

"Oh? That Makoto-kun is such a lovely boy."

"He is."

"What were you going to do with it then? Before you decided to give it to your dad."

"Oh...I guess I was just going to throw it away."

"Are you serious?" His mum sits up straight and looks at him, noticeably alarmed. "Rin, I am going to ask you a very serious question and I want you to answer me truthfully. Was it worth it? All your Olympic medals. Was it worth it?"

"Of course it was, mummy. It's worth it if you're happy about it."

"No, Rin, you don't understand. I think I may have an apology to make. Do you think I've pushed you too hard?"

"No, mum. It's what dad would have wanted, right?"

"Oh, Rin," his mum says softly.

"What? What is it, mum?"

"You don't understand. I'm so sorry."

"You're not the one who should be apologising."

"Your dad...sure, he had his Olympic dream, but it was just one of his many, many dreams. Do you understand, Rin? Do you understand that at the end, it didn't matter to him that he couldn't make it to the Olympics? Your dad...he's such a different person from you. He was happy to have a family and he was happy to be out at sea fishing all day. He was happy to remain in a small town if it meant being around the friends he loved. He was always the fanciful type, if you get what I mean. I first asked him out because he was talking such shit at the school gates and the Olympics was another one of those things he liked to talk about, but as he grew older and wiser there were all these other things that mattered so much more to him. You, for example. And Gou. And me too. I think he would have been immensely proud of your achievements, but I don't think he would have wanted it for you if it meant losing sight of everything else. That is why I want you to tell me now—is all this worth it to you?"

Rin doesn't know how to answer. There is something inside of him that is crumbling down at this moment.

"Did I push you too hard, Rin, every time I told you about your father? Did I do a terrible thing to you?"

***

In the morning the sun shines fiercely through the windows into their room, forming trapezoid pools of light on the bedspread. It is very toasty under the covers—any more of this hot sun and they'll go
Makoto wakes with a start but doesn't move. He is curled up against Haruka, who is still asleep. Haruka's face bears no expression when he sleeps, but as Haruka's face is tilted to the side there is a small trickle of crusty drool down the corner of his mouth.

Makoto wants to wipe it away for him, to run his thumb gently along the corner of Haruka's slightly gaping mouth, but he is afraid of waking Haruka up. The way their bodies are touching now, Makoto wants to stay like this forever, in the slow, sweet burning under the very warm blanket, looking up at Haruka's peaceful sleeping face, hearing his occasionally trilling breath, counting his short, dense eyelashes.

Haruka seems to have noticed his staring on some subliminal level and his eyes flutter open.

"Good morning, Makoto," he says, morning voice raspy and untested.

"Morning, Haru-chan!" Makoto replies, in a sprightly voice.

With nothing more to add, Haruka throws open the covers and they are hit by a blast of cool air.

"Ugh," Makoto thinks. Why can't it be nice and warm all the time?

Changing into his outside clothes, Haruka throws his sleepwear haphazardly on the bed and ambles out of the room. Makoto hurriedly scrambles after him, pulling on last night's clothes and rushing out of the door.

He is greeted by a flurry of activity. The dining table is buried under numerous plates piled high with assorted ingredients—onions, bell peppers, spinach, mushrooms, grated cheese.

"Good morn-ning Mako-chan, Haru-chan! We are having omelettes this morning, please choose your ingredients, put them in this bowl over here, and pass it to the kitchen. On this side of the table—" Nagisa pulls a disgusted grimace, "—we have the 'healthy' ingredients, which I won't bother to talk about, and on this side, we have delicious toppings such as KitKat, corn, sausage and pepperoni."

"KitKat?" Makoto asks. He considers himself a fan of chocolate but this? This is just too weird even for him. Who puts KitKat in an omelette?

"Rin-san's doing the cooking," Rei states plainly, adjusting his glasses. "He put some strawberry with the KitKat and mixed everything into the omelette for Nagisa. It's not as bad as it sounds."

"You actually tried it?" Makoto asks.

Rei frowns with concentration, and rustles his newspaper to fill the space. "Yes, I did," he admitted in a stilted tone. "At Nagisa's behest."

"Just admit you liked it, Rei-chan. It's a lost cause."

Makoto is still trying to wrap his head around the incomprehensible mixture of ingredients and forgets to respond with good humour to Nagisa's teasing.

"There's no mackerel," Haruka interrupts, having inspected each plate of toppings carefully.

"Ah! Haru-chan! I knew that would happen. Here, I have a plate specially prepared for you. I even cooked it myself!"

Nagisa ducks into the kitchen for a while. There is the distinct tone of a microwave ping and he
emerges with a steaming plate of a flat yellow omelette dotted with flaky scraps of mackerel, which he hands proudly to Haruka.

"Do you want some pineapple on top of that?"

"Yes."

Makoto’s stomach is churning at the mere thought. It's nice to have friends, but sometimes his friends are so damn weird. He takes an empty bowl and tosses in generous heaps of mushroom, cheese and bell peppers.

He takes his bowl to the kitchen, where he finds Rin standing over the stove in a black men's racerback tank and charcoal grey track pants. He has an apron over his clothes, and his hair is tied into a short stub of a ponytail. For no reason at all, the thought occurs to Makoto that Rin’s arms are looking really good today.

With her elbows propped on the island counter, Gou has evidently been chatting to her brother's muscular back, talking about Gross Domestic Products and consumption expenditures. Makoto knows that she wants to major in Economics because they go to the same university, but Rin? What does he do besides swimming?

"Morning all," Makoto greets, and Rin looks over from the stove.

"Morning," Gou replies, while Rin takes the bowl from him and sets it on the counter, expressionless. Has the moulted shell hardened again? So soon after last night, Makoto thinks, with a twinge of sadness in his heart.

"Mum tells me you’re headed back to the village today," Rin begins, expertly cracking three eggs with only one hand into an empty bowl. The cracks on the eggs are so neat, a horizontal split round where the equator should be. It takes a while before Makoto registers that Rin is talking to him.

"Yes, I'm packing up and moving here."

"I'll go back with you," Rin says. He pours a dash of milk into the bowl and begins to whisk the eggs at rapid speed. Bubbles begin to form in the mixture, a perfect frothy yellow. He switches on the flame in the cooker hob, a high heat that engulfs the heavy anodised steel frying pan in tongues of blue flames. Grabbing a dark green glass bottle, he pours in some olive oil in one smooth, circular action.

He takes Makoto's bowl of toppings and peers inside. "You shouldn't have mixed the ingredients," he admonishes. With his fingers he pushes all the cheese as best he can into a separate empty bowl. The oil is shimmering in the high heat, and Rin does a quick check of temperature with a swirl of the heavy pan. The oil breaks into a wavy pattern. This done, Rin tips the mushrooms and peppers into the pan, and a loud, sizzling noise erupts.

"Don't you usually cook it with the egg?" Makoto asks.

"Not unless you want a watery mess. I'm sweating your mushrooms and capsicums first—you'll thank me for this later."

"Onii-chan, will you be following Makoto-senpai back here too?"

"No," Rin says flatly. With his spatula he lifts the corners of a few mushrooms, and on seeing that they're golden brown on the underside he begins tossing them over swiftly. Makoto is admittedly transfixed by the way Rin cooks—the way the strong grip on the pan comes from his muscular
forearms, the confidence in how he throws in ingredients, the sheer style and coordination in the entire act. Makoto can't cook to save a life and since they started university Haruka has been too busy to cook at home anymore, or even if he does it's just simple food so he can carry on working.

"It'll be nice if you could move in with us," Makoto says.

Rin looks up at him with an unreadable expression. He lifts the pan from the stove, drains the excess oil and tips the lightly-browned toppings into a bowl. He puts the pan back on the stove, turns down the heat, and after another quick whisk of the egg mixture, pours it in and spreads it evenly around the pan. The mixture starts to fluff, and he sprinkles the mushrooms and peppers back in, with the cheese this time. As it cooks the omelette grows to resemble a puffy blanket. To finish off, Rin folds the half the omelette over on itself and shakes it out onto a serving plate.

"My flight's tonight," Rin says, handing over the plate to Makoto.

"It's tomorrow morning," Gou retorts.

"Two in the morning."

Makoto sees Gou slump over a little on the island counter. He feels bad that Gou hardly ever gets the opportunity to see her brother. Makoto thinks of his family, whom he texts at least once a day in the family group chat.

He takes his dish out to the dining table and plops down on a chair next to Haruka. On digging in, it is the best omelette he's ever had in recent memory. It's light and fluffy, like a perfect sunny yellow pillow and within it the bits of mushroom and peppers are crisp and flavourful, the melted bits of cheese are chewy, and they stretch into long strings as he pulls the omelette apart. He has the sudden idea to share it with Haruka, but next to him Haruka's already finished his meal and is sipping pineapple juice, unwilling to make eye contact.

After breakfast, Makoto helps with the cleaning up, and when the kitchen is neat and tidy again, he takes a quick glance at Rin to check if he's ready to leave. Rin nods at him.

Bringing his hands together in a clap, Makoto announces that he'll be heading off to the athletes' village to pack his things. "I'll be back soon," he adds.

"I'm going too," Rin says, scurrying towards the door with Makoto.

"But you won't be back, will you? Onii-chan, you're always flitting in and out of people's lives, leaving them behind like you don't care."

"Gou..." Rin says, softening. He stops struggling to put on his left shoe, lets it fall to the floor, and pads over to Gou in his dirty socks, which are still freckled with sand from last night. He pulls her into a tight hug, squeezing her around the shoulders.

"Have a safe flight, Rin," his mum says, and he turns to hug her. It's starting to get a little schmaltzy and there are shades of elementary school graduation. Just as long as Rin doesn't burst into tears again, they'll be fine. This is how life is, people come and go all the time. You have to let them make their own journeys.

After some time, Rin finally lets go of his mum and sister. With a small wave to the others, he turns once more towards the door.

"Rin-chan! Rin-chan!" Nagisa says, running up him. "Don't I get a hug too?" He crashes into Rin with an exaggerated throw of arms, and grips him tightly around the waist, rubbing his face
repeatedly into Rin's chest.

Makoto retreats behind the shadow of the doorframe to allow Rin space for his farewells, not wishing to appear like he was impatiently waiting to go. Suddenly, he feels a hand press into his.

Haru.

"Don't forget your keys," Haruka says, having slipped up behind him unnoticed. Makoto lets Haruka's fingers dally for longer than necessary on his open palm.

There is a chorus of goodbyes and Rin slips through the door again, half-hopping half-pulling on his shoes. The murky shadows of the entryway prove no cover, and as soon as Rin is through the door he spots them, spots their furtive handholding. Rin's mouth falls slightly open, like he wants to say something to them, but then he clenches his jaw, hesitating. Makoto feels Haruka's hand fall away from his.

With a little jolt to throw off whatever it was he felt watching them, Rin says, several decibels over what Makoto knows is Haruka's comfort level, "Makoto. Shall we go?"

Rin looks from Makoto to Haruka and Makoto and Haruka again.

"Bye," Haruka says, almost flippantly, like the kind of note escaping from a flute that gets lost in the wind. His face is angled towards Rin but his eyes are gazing beyond to some distant point.

"Haru," Rin says, and Haruka's eyes focus onto him. Rin steps up, and without warning, puts his arms around Haruka. Haruka lifts his palms as if to push him away, but then lets his arms circle Rin's upper body.

Why are their bodies pressed up so close? Makoto can't tell if it's him, or them. His fevered imagination, or their unspoken desires. They look like they're melding into each other.

It feels like an eternity before Rin lets go of Haruka. Looking completely unfazed, Haruka turns to him and says, "I'll see you later, Makoto." The tone is so platonic, so matter-of-fact that the idea that he can get a hug out of Haruka by the doorway seems hopelessly naive. Is it foolish of him to hope that this was a passing thing? But he's seen enough of Haruka to know nothing about Rin slips him by, and whatever he did with Rin last night is the start of something new.

He lets Rin lead the way downstairs into the taxi that will take them back to the athletes' village. Rin orders the taxi driver to take them down the coastal route, down the Avenida Niemeyer, with verdant mountain greenery to the right and the glimmering turquoise ocean to the left, churning up a frothy cauldron of swirling sea foam as the waves beat relentlessly upon the tired rock.

It is a breathtaking sight, under the bright sun of the late morning, but Makoto feels exhausted from all this stimulation and closes his eyes to the world outside and falls asleep against the hazy windowpane of the car.

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At the end of the journey Makoto is woken softly by Rin, who opens the door for him and helps him out. The sunlight is far too bright and his eyes have trouble adjusting. Stumbling into the building compound, Makoto realises Rin has been holding onto him by his arm and abruptly shakes it off in the impulsive belief that they shouldn't be so close. Rin lets go of him instantly but flashes a good-natured smile as they part ways. On second thought, Makoto regrets brushing Rin aside like that, because it may have come across as rude when he was just startled. Why is Rin being so nice to him? Is it because of Haruka?
As soon as he reaches his room Makoto keels over on the bed. He feels like something is being drained from him, and with a few deep breaths he begins to face the thoughts that have been lacing his brain with abstract fear, pulling them into a coherent train.

_Fear is attachment, and attachment leads to suffering. It is selfish to think that you can hold on to Haru-chan forever. Haru-chan was never yours and you should be grateful for the time he shared with you. Everyone has their own journeys to make and you’re just the bridge that will reconcile Haru to Rin, leading him into a new life where he will grow beyond anything you ever imagined. It's all you’ve ever asked for anyway, to see Haru at his best, and in the end the final hurdle was always going to be his first. So get up and out of bed, stop being silly and start packing so you can go back to your friends._

Makoto pushes himself off the bed, and tries to pump some motivation into himself by hopping on the spot. Surveying the things around him, he realises that he's surrounded himself with such a dismal mess, with piles upon piles of lifeless junk he cannot let go of. He picks up the empty box of green tea-flavoured Pocky and tosses it into the bin with a heavy heart. He had been reluctant to get rid of it because it reminded him of home while he lived in this distant room. He pulls his national jacket off a chair and reels the slinky quick-dry material into a ball. The jacket was left inside-out, and Makoto picks at a loose thread by the seam of the sleeve. There is a wry smile on his face as he realises the thread is red, like the sun in their flag. _The red thread of cosmic fate. I need a sign, Makoto thinks. A sign to let me know that everything will be okay from now on no matter what._

There is a sharp rap on his door. _Surprise drugs testing? Cleaning lady?_ Makoto jolts up, buries the jacket in his open suitcase, and with a few hurried gestures smoothes out his clothes so that he'll look less like he's just rolled out of bed.

When he opens the door it's only Rin.

"Need help packing?" Rin leans on the frame of the open doorway with his arms crossed.

"Don't you have to pack too?"

"I'm already done."

_How?_ Makoto wonders. How is it that there are people who can live so light on their feet? Is Rin one of those who carry nothing with them, ever? Makoto always packs nearly half the house with him whenever he has to go away.

"The trick is to live out of your suitcase," Rin says, as if sensing his thoughts. "As long as you don't smell of it."

Makoto can't do that. How does he tell Rin that at fifteen he read something about someone saying how they always had to put something in every drawer of every place they had to spend the night in, because that's how you make a place home and it's how you let the spirits know not to disturb you? Sometimes Makoto feels like he goes through life dragging everything he knows alongside him and the longer he lives the more he has to take along and the steeper the route but he'll often wonder if, in the darkest part of his heart, he'd rather get trapped for eternity in the cycle of reincarnation, doomed to live the same life over and over again, forming the same silly attachments each time. Maybe, in an earlier life, that Pocky box was a tree he found shade under.

"I'll start with that bundle." Rin crosses the room to the pile of clothes heaped on the bed, which Makoto has pulled from every drawer in the room, and begins folding the t-shirts with the trick Makoto's own mother uses. It's something he never quite got the hang of, and at home where he stays in Greater Tokyo he simply rolls up his clothes and squeezes them into the closet under the loft
Makoto goes over to close the door, removing the towels and lanyard straps he has hung on the back of it. His medals are there, too, and Rin is watching him. "Four by hundred medley relay, and hundred metre backstroke," Rin begins to narrate.

Silver for the team event, bronze for the individual.

"Who would've thought that it'd be the two of us who made it in the end?" Rin says, with a small smile.

"It's really not Haru's kind of thing, to be honest," Makoto says, slightly tired of all the insinuations about Haruka's unfulfilled potential. It doesn't take two years of living together in the western region of Tokyo with Haruka to be able to figure out that top-level competition isn't Haruka's thing. It only took him his first unscheduled visit after school to Haruka's house to realise that Haruka's swimming trophies were displayed on the shelf only because of his grandmother.

And after she died, Haruka's trophies were dumped in a forgotten box in a nondescript corner of the house.

"I'm sure you know," Makoto continues, "Haru wouldn't put up with all the extraneous stuff that comes with trying to be an Olympic athlete. The endless sports clinic sessions, having every fibre of your being measured and tested within an inch of its life, performance-optimisation strategies, the pain of having to fulfil all those dietary requirements, the countless anti-doping tests. All the training sessions out of the pool, all those weights, appointments with sports psychologists and relentless fine-tuning of form and sponsorship meetings and agents and managers and coaches. It's not pure swimming."

"Why did you do it, then?"

"I did it for Haru. I did it to prove to myself that I will no longer fear the underwater creature that lurks at the bottom of the water."

"And you killed it." Rin smiles at him like they've been off to war together and just got home.

Makoto tries to smile in return but something feels off. "I wouldn't say I killed it. Put it to rest, more likely."

"I remember when you used to be so afraid of the water," Rin says, and he says it with a sincerity that pierces through Makoto. "It's so amazing how far you've come."

"Let's not talk about that," Makoto says. "Isn't it more amazing that you've managed to achieve your lifetime dream?"

Rin laughs—a harsh, forced bark. "I was just talking about this with my mum last night. Turns out I've been swimming for nothing."

"Surely not?"

Rin buries his face in his hands, a gesture of frustration. "Whatever it was I was swimming for, I'm not sure it was worth it now."

"How so?"

Running his hands through his hair, smoothing his fringe back, Rin slumps over to fall heavily onto bed.
It then occurs to Makoto that perhaps, last night, on the beach, Rin was trying to get rid of his medals, unable to stand the weight of them any longer. How do people get so hurt from one silly sport? Makoto wonders. All the times Haruka got broken by this sport will always haunt the edges of his memory. Maybe all this while Rin was hurting too, in his own way, through vicious circles he didn't know how to break free. Even as Makoto has just proclaimed to have put his fears to rest he knows it to be untrue and regrets having voiced it out in the first place.

Doubt begins seeping back into his veins, like the relentless sea with its ebb and flow. It's almost like it'll never leave him, carrying the viscous fear that will always rise again in a wave that swallows everything whole—the deep, dark, murky water swelling with soured dreams and the exhaustion of the broken, drowning heart. It was why Makoto always wanted to be there at the end of the lane whenever Haruka swam, to extend the hand that will lift him from the impossible pull of the deep into the light, the light of the real world rooted in solid ground and sweet air.

Haruka goes through life okay now. He's grown so much. It wasn't easy, fighting the underwater demons that wanted Haruka for their own, who would drag him under and crown him their king. It wasn't easy holding onto Haruka at the threshold until Haruka learned to take a step back and fall into the arms of his waiting friends, always ready to catch him. Haru's okay now. It's not the triumphant okay of a cheering crowd but the barely audible okay of the mended heart, like kintsugi with powdered gold filling over what were once cracks.

On good days Haruka would sometimes give Makoto all the credit for fixing him back together, but that's patently not an accurate picture of the truth. It is precious to Makoto to hear Haruka speak of him like this but it's not because of anything Makoto has done. It is more about the fact that Haruka can say something like that—it lets him know Haruka's on his way along the difficult road of accepting the notion that all life is interdependent upon each other.

You with the big heart, Haruka had said to him once, heart big enough to fit a village and heart strong enough to beat against the current like a boat that carries all within it safe to shore. You with the trembling and fearful heart, like the small blinking lights that dot the harbour, the lights that spell you'll be safe soon. You with the open heart, heart like a lighthouse, beacon over the jagged rocks, heart like a home.

And maybe now it is time for the boat to push forward onto new shores. Makoto looks at Rin, who has an aura of softness around him now, like the hard edges have been worn away. He thinks of how Haruka will find a new peace and make a new happiness from being reconciled to Rin.

Is there room for someone like me? Makoto realises now that he doesn't want another life after all. He wants a sign to tell him that maybe they all fell from the same pieces of stardust, that it wasn't just Haruka and Rin looking for the moment they would be put back together again, that he too was bound to them by past and future.

"Rin," Makoto says. "I'm really glad to have met you here. Even if you don't believe it, I think what you did was incredible. I'm glad to have swum with you." As he says this, somewhere at the back of his mind he can hear a different voice admonishing himself: Tachibana Makoto, you're being selfish when you say these things, you can't let Rin go knowing Haru will go with him. You're telling Rin this because you want him to remember you.

On hearing his spoken words, Rin gives him a warm smile. "Thank you, Makoto," he says. It sounds like he means it.

Makoto scoops up a bundle of clothing from the bed, neatly folded by Rin, and stuffs them into his
suitcase. With some space cleared, he scoots down next to Rin, who is perched on the edge and habitually jiggling a leg as he looks around for something to do next.

"I'm truly glad you're here with me," Rin says. "Did you know you were the only one who tried to contact me when I was in Australia? I still have that first email from you."

"Oh," Makoto says, unsure of what to say. It wasn't like he was the only one who wanted to. He remembers that one time he bumped into Nagisa at a mall in the first year of middle school and Nagisa asked him if he'd ever heard from Rin. Thinking about it now, he wonders if Nagisa was asking him to find out if there was any point to contacting Rin at all.

"Yeah, I know," Rin begins, cringing apologetically. "I never replied." As he cringes his knees fall wider to each side and Makoto can feel their legs touch. All of a sudden, Makoto is hit with the sudden memory of a bus ride, a memory that hooks him by the gut.

How much does Rin still remember? A bus ride, shaken to the bone, unspoken words, a left turn, your leg falling onto mine, and I was okay with that. I was so scared, I would have held on to anything. Your leg never left mine until you had to get off the bus. We care about the same things.

Does that make things any better? Or does it make it worse.

"I'm such a shithead," Rin says, with a rasping laugh, but then he looks down at the floor, avoiding Makoto's gaze.

Rin looks so sad Makoto's heart wrenches. He moves closer to Rin, ready to put a friendly, comforting arm around his drooping shoulders, but suddenly finds himself reaching out to take Rin's closed hands into his. He wants to uncurl that clenched fist and open Rin to all the good things in the world, the good things that make it all worthwhile, not to lay more weight on those tired shoulders. Rin's hands unfurl slowly in between his palms and Makoto rubs them reassuringly, running a thumb over the ridges of bone under thin flesh—the metacarpals and the phalanges. Makoto once opened a fracture in his metacarpals hitting the wall the wrong way at the end of a swim, and then got told off for always swimming with too much power. It was nothing big, Makoto thinks, but Rin's hands are so different from mine.

Rin's hands are soft, and the palms are squarish. The tips of his fingers end in nails that are painted a shiny jet black—a minor point of sensation during the Olympics. The female swimmers have long been painting their nails to show some personality during competition, but the trend hasn't caught on at the men's side. Makoto idly rubs the curved edge of Rin's flattish fingernails, where the black polish has started to chip in parts.

"Gou painted them for me," Rin explains.

Makoto smiles at him. He's let Ran play with styling his hair for fun, and there was that one time she and Ren wrote on him with lipstick and eyeliner when he was asleep, and, most galling of all, sent photos of the finished product to Haruka. With each other they laugh with fatalistic pride at their family shame, that when the gods first doled out gifts to humanity they must have forgot to sprinkle any artistic sense into the first Tachibana ancestors. Makoto fears the day Ran comes home from school thinking cosmetics are necessary when the three of them siblings have only ever used it for fun and not in the conventional way, he fears the day she blames her unsteady hand and rough stroke for making her less than the sum of her personality.

"I like it," Makoto says to Rin. He'll never understand why people made such a huge fuss over it. The black fingernails look sleek and threatening, totally in line with the image a top sportsperson would want to project. He greatly admired Rin for acting like he didn't care about the hullabaloo over his nails, instead pushing on towards what he was here for. Three gold medals, two silver, one world record, and all before the age of twenty.
"You're the best, Makoto."

"Why?" Makoto can't help asking. Mentally, he's running through the list of Rin's podium finishes. Here are the golds: 100m fly, 200m fly, 4x100m medley relay, followed by the silvers: 100m free, 200m individual medley. The world record is in the 100m fly. Compared to him, Makoto feels like a fluke.

"You're the one I feel the most comfortable around. I feel like even after all that I've done, you don't hate me. I don't know what that says about you but it really is a comforting thought."

The words fall on Makoto like rain in the summer, surprising yet light, and there is something growing in his heart like late blooms nourished by the fecund summer soil. He can't let Rin down with his answer. "I'm glad to be that person for you," he says, and it feels like an affirmation of his duty in life.

"Oh, Makoto," Rin says, and the expression on his face is so soft and tender it feels like something inside of Makoto has been ripped apart. He feels guilty for that stab of jealousy he felt for Rin and Haruka last night. If Haruka is okay with Rin now then he will be, too. He has to open up a space for Rin in both their lives.

Without thinking, he lifts a hand to tuck Rin's falling fringe behind his ear.

"Makoto?" A slightly confused look crosses Rin's face.

Makoto instantly recoils. "I'm sorry," he blurts.

"It's okay," Rin says. He lets out a breath of air, a small sigh, relaxing the muscles in his body. "I don't mind, but...does Haru mind?"

Makoto looks away, and his gaze falls upon his bursting suitcase gaping half-open by the small table in the room, stuffed to the brim with things that were, on hindsight, not necessary for his stay at the Olympics village. Why did I bring a kettle? A small rice cooker? Three pairs of sneakers when all I wore was the same old pair?

"I don't know about Haru," Makoto replies, trying not to think of last night, trying not to think of the way Rin and Haruka looked at each other, trying not to think of the way they hugged this morning.

"Never mind Haru, what about you?"

"Um," Makoto says. I...kind of want this, a tiny traitorous voice in his head says. Where the hell did that voice come from?

Rin extends a hand to brush his fingers lightly on Makoto's cheeks. He tilts his head to the side and presses his lips to Makoto's lips. Rin's lips are not like Haru's lips. They're fuller, and pillowy, and moist, and his breath is so hot. They have both forgotten to close their eyes. For a moment, they are staring into each other, looking directly into each other, and it feels like the scariest moment in Makoto's entire life. His heart is hammering against his chest and it's dizzying, like he's on the edge of a precipice with no turning back. He closes his eyes and kisses back at Rin along the mouth, kisses with such terrible aim because he's so unbelievably nervous—on the corner of the bottom lip, in the dent on the upper lip, crashing into Rin's sharp teeth, noses bumping and squashed. It feels like falling. It feels like they're falling into each other.

Makoto feels Rin's fingers move away from his jawline to wrap around the back of his neck, thumb gently tracing down to just under his Adam's apple. Makoto feels like he's running out of breath with gasping, hungry kisses. Rin begins to plant kisses at the space under his ear and he hears Rin whisper
"I want you to fuck me hard, as hard as you like."

Something lurches viscerally within Makoto. Why would Rin say something like that? He suddenly recalls all the things he's heard around the athletes' village, about how easy and pliant Rin is and there is an anger that swells within him, anger towards all the people who thought Rin could be used in that way. He'll never want to fuck a person like that, senseless and ignorant and exploitative. Makoto thinks of all the times Rin asked someone to fuck him as hard as he hated himself. He can't tell what exactly it is that is coursing through his veins at the moment, fury at all these nameless people or an unbearable hurt on behalf of Rin. The way Rin is kissing him all over is so wet and messy and hot and desperate it hurts so fucking much, it hurts to think of him doing this to people who don't give a damn about him when he's so fucking good at everything he does because he tries so fucking hard.

"R-Rin," Makoto says, breath hitching as he feels Rin straddle him, his slim but muscular thighs wrapped around Makoto's torso, feeling the pressure of Rin's weight against his crotch as Rin presses down slowly, feeling him grind against the fabric of their sweatpants. "I don't want to fuck you hard, not if it means hurting you."

Makoto feels Rin stop for a moment, lips paused against his collarbone, hips pressed upwards against his belly. "Anything you do is fine, Makoto," Rin replies, and his brows are knit so tightly and his eyes are so glossy with unshed tears Makoto has to plant a couple of kisses there—one on each side where the pain is visible and stark, and as he does so Rin closes his eyes and his brows unfurrow and has anyone ever told him how pretty he is with his long, thick eyelashes and fine cheekbones, how cute his nose is with the slight upturn at the tip, how lovely his full lips are with their rosy tinge?

Has anyone ever said this to him in a way he wanted to hear?

Makoto places a hand on the small of Rin's back, along the area where the strong lats of a butterfly swimmer curve into the spine, extending below to meet the firm glutes of Rin's well-trained body. He plunges a hand beneath the waistband of Rin's pants, pulling it downwards to reveal the expanse of flesh that burns hot against his touch. Deftly, Rin climbs out of his clothes and clambers atop Makoto and the sight of it is as glorious as it is heart-wrenching. Makoto eagerly slips out of his clothes to reach some level of parity with Rin, bare skin against bare skin, stripped of hair from the customary shave down for competitive swimming. Rin is kissing Makoto down the broad expanse of his chest, from the pectorals to the sternum and Makoto wonders if Rin can feel how fast his heart is beating, if Rin can feel the churn in his stomach.

"Do you want a blowjob?" Rin asks him, sliding smoothly off his thighs, hands slipping down the waist to caress the sides: the abdominal obliques, and farther downwards to lightly brush his quad muscles. Rin falls on his knees to the floor, and presses his face into the groove on Makoto’s body where the torso meets the legs: the iliac crest, the inguinal ligament, and a moan escapes from Makoto's mouth.

"Yes, yes if you want to," Makoto replies breathlessly. At this moment he realises that he's only ever been with one person his entire life up till now and there is a sudden exhilaration at how differently this will play out, away from the familiarity and practised habits of all those times with Haruka. Was this what Haru felt like last night as well? To feel Rin's hot breath against his groin and to feel himself swell up against those soft rosy lips. Makoto uncontrollably runs forward as he feels Rin take him into his mouth, as he feels himself slip past those moistened lips, wrapped over teeth, into the soft, wet insides of Rin's mouth. Rin takes him slowly at first, by the head, in and out, tongue curling over, tongue curling under, and Makoto lets out a tiny, pathetic whimper in reply. How is Rin doing
all this? How is his mouth so hot and how is it so electrifying? Makoto lets out another whimper, even more pathetic-sounding than the first. Haruka's told him before that he sometimes sounds like an injured puppy when he's fucking but it's not like Makoto really knows how to make any other noises or anything. Makoto doesn't understand how the people in adult videos can make all that noise—it would sound so fake coming from him and it's not how he feels, he can't slap someone on the ass and go, "yeah, you like that, baby?" or grunt "that is so fucking good, baby". When the sex is this good, and Makoto has a fairly rich bank of memories in this regard, all he feels like is that he's being reduced to a powerless, helpless creature, begging and whimpering for relief.

He feels himself slip deeper into Rin's mouth, towards the back of his throat, feels Rin's hand gently curve around his balls for a light squeeze. He lifts a hand to bury it in Rin's soft hair, again tucking Rin's forward-falling fringe behind his ear. He thinks about how he wants to reciprocate, not just to have Rin doing all the work to him. He puts a hand under Rin's hard jawline, and lifts him by the chin so they are looking at each other. As he does so his cock falls out of Rin's mouth, slick with saliva, thick and heavy with desire.

"Come up here," he says to Rin. "Come up here and be with me." He runs a hand down the back of Rin's arm, past firm triceps to his elbow, gently pulling Rin up until he can kiss him on the mouth. He pulls Rin closer, closer until he can trace a line down to Rin's cock, which he gently nudges, wrapping his fingers around to tug at it. He feels Rin thrusting forward into his grip, feels Rin moving in close enough until their cocks are brushing up against each other.

"I want you to fuck me now," Rin whispers into his ear, breath heavy on the imperative, body pushing onto him with urgency.

"Okay, okay," Makoto says, breaking into a small smile at Rin's neck where he can't see. *Always in such a hurry*, Makoto thinks, as he reaches out to open the drawer where the condoms and lube are tucked away. It's faintly ludicrous, he thinks to himself, that there should be official sponsors for condoms and personal lubricant at an event like this, an event he always watched with wide-eyed innocence as a child, believing it to be about the value of sportsmanship, of teamwork, and of trying your best. It was almost absurd to realise that at the end of the day there was a big sex party going on behind the scenes and that prophylactics should be so readily available at any moment. By some strange twist of fate, he actually has cause to use these items, something he didn't think he would end up doing.

With a firm grip he lifts Rin away from him and flips him over on the bed. Rin makes a vaguely appreciative noise to indicate that he likes this sort of thing from Makoto, and Makoto has to press several tender kisses into his back in return, from the deltoids to the trapezius at the shoulders, smiling as he does, and he can feel Rin pushing into him, asking for more, more.

He flutters some fingers down Rin's spine, ending in a gentle part of Rin's butt cheeks until he sees the puckered asshole winking at him, ripe with anticipation. *This part of Rin is stripped of hair too*, Makoto notes with interest, although it's not the sort of thing he can tell other people about. Who on earth was he hoping to tell anyway? Haru? He leans forward to delve into Rin's asshole with his tongue, licking the thin folds of wrinkles at the rim, pushing into the smooth muscle within. Rin lets out a huge gasp and begs Makoto to go deeper, to open him up wider.

Placing a hand on Rin's defined calves, Makoto rearranges his legs so that he's propped up at a comfortable height. "Let me know if it hurts," he says to Rin, as he rolls on the condom. Rin nods, head pressed against the pillow, looking at him with half-closed eyes, hair streaking across his flushed face, mouth slightly parted.

Makoto squelches a dollop of lube onto his palms and rubs his hands together to warm it up. He
slicks it over his cock and then smears some around Rin's waiting asshole, pushing a finger in slightly. Rin makes an impatient little moan and Makoto reaches around to spread the rest of the lube on Rin's cock, pumping a tight fist around Rin's cock. Makoto leans over to plant another kiss on his shoulder blade, and does another quick check to ask Rin if he's ready.

"Dude, I was ready five minutes ago," Rin huffs, and Makoto can't stop himself from worrying that the moment is over because of those damn nerves and how he's just so anxious all the time, and under him he can feel Rin's body tremble a little. Makoto looks up, fearful and ready to put an end to things, but he sees that the trembling is because Rin is laughing at him, a small, tender laughter at his silliness.

"O-kay," Makoto replies, laughing in reply. With a hand around his cock he begins to push in slowly, and he sees Rin bite at his lower lip through his smile. He pushes in deeper but finds himself still laughing softly along Rin's neck, into the taut skin on Rin's back.

"You should come first," Rin says, even as Makoto has just begun thrusting. Why? Makoto thinks. Why is he always so many steps ahead?

"I just think you should," Rin adds, when he sees the hesitation in Makoto's face. Why? Makoto wants to ask, but unsure if it is rude to press.

Makoto folds himself over Rin's still-trembling body, wrapping his arms around Rin like he wants to protect him from something. His shoulders are broader than Rin's, and he can feel Rin's back arching into his chest. Rin has his face buried completely in the pillow now and Makoto can't read any expression off it.

Makoto's breath is turning ragged as he feels Rin tighten around him. He wants, desperately, to make Rin happy, to make him smile like he just did, the Makoto-is-being-silly smile. He can hear Rin's breath hitch under him, and he finds himself fucking Rin a little harder, a little faster, and Rin is telling him yes, yes, to do it like that, and so Makoto does, pushing, pushing, until he reaches the brink and lets himself come into Rin, just like Rin asked.

"Now you can flip me over and finish me off," Rin says, with a faint smile on his face. Makoto nods, finally feeling at ease, and as he guides Rin over with a steady grip on his hips, Rin reaches out with a thumb to push away a few beads of sweat at Makoto's temple. Leaning into Rin's touch, Makoto kisses his open palm, fleshy on the underside. He does as he's told and with his hands he helps Rin get off. Rin is gorgeous when he comes, all flushed skin and loose limbs, voice a growl.

They lie in bed for a bit and Rin sniffs into him, sniffs into the pillow Makoto has been sleeping on all these nights in the village. Makoto nuzzles into him in return and kisses him lightly, off-centre from the mouth.

A sense of the outside world slowly makes its way back to the room, and Makoto can hear music and chatter from outside the room. It sounds like there's a noisy game of foosball somewhere. Even the music from the ground floor becomes discernible and it sounds like someone's playing Shakira. Amidst all this noise Makoto hears Rin mumble into the curve of his shoulder, "I like the way you smell."

"What?" Makoto blurts, suddenly embarrassed. He thinks about the way Rin buried his head into the pillow just now, during sex. It's taking Makoto all he has not to blush but he's probably some shade of beet anyway. Modulating his tone out of curiosity, he asks Rin, "What do I smell like?"

"A smelly boy. A stinky, smelly athlete boy who just had sex."
Makoto looks at Rin, who has a grin on him like he doesn't have a care in the world. Makoto breaks into a laugh, light and gentle, and it makes Rin laugh too. It makes Rin laugh into him, into his skin, like a giddy schoolkid with their first love, and Makoto wonders if this is how it's like to be first, someone's first. It is a dangerous thing. It is a dangerous thing he shouldn't get used to. The laughter drops off his face and he stares at the ceiling, wondering how much of a wrong he just did and how much of a right.

After some more time Rin is the first to get up and he hands Makoto some tissues to clean up. As they try to get themselves looking decent again, Makoto wonders if he can venture a personal question.

"Will you tell me why you wanted me to come first?" Makoto doesn't know why this bothers him so much. Was this also how it happened with Haru last night? Or was it out of some kind of lingering guilt?

Rin shrugs, gathering the soiled tissues and throwing them into the bin. "I just don't like it when people continue to fuck into me when I'm kind of done, I guess."

The answer drops like a weight, shattering the fragile illusion that all is okay. It is the saddest thing Makoto has ever heard. He feels guilty now, for thinking the whole thing was about Haruka and maybe him. Would it be silly if he started to cry for Rin now? Yes, it would be preposterously silly. Too silly for anyone to laugh at.

Biting his lip, heart awash with sadness, Makoto reaches out to hold Rin's hand before he leaves the room, but only manages it by the little finger.

"Please stay in touch," he says to Rin, voice cracking.

Rin nods, drawing his hand away.
Aki's Liminal Spaces

Chapter Summary

The Olympics are over and normal life beckons.

Chapter Notes

Friendly note: this chapter is very long, around 42,000 words, so it is recommended that you download it into an e-reader, so that it's easier to read and you can easily go back to where you left off.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"The seas were full of life, from huge, complex animals like the sea scorpion creeping on the bottom to simple creatures like jellyfish, floating on the surface waters. But the land was barren, and without animals of any kind.

But there was food up there, simple plants, and that tempted some animals to venture out of the water. Surviving on land, however, was a problem for them—coming from the sea, they had to evolve ways of protecting their bodies from drying out. And even more difficult—they had to develop a method of breathing air."

—David Attenborough's First Life: Conquest

I

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"Headphones please," the flight attendant says to him, and Haruka slips them off his ears, crackly airplane static carrying his hair forth to an unruly mess. He has spent the last thirty-odd hours up in the air, broken in half by a transit at Dubai. Some part of it he spent perusing the inflight entertainment system—he started off with the movies he failed to catch in the cinemas, then as the plane ride got more gruelling he downgraded to TV sitcoms in bite-sized half-hour chunks, and finally, when he could no longer muster any energy to become emotionally invested in fictional storylines he switched to documentaries, which floated over his brain like a soothing balm. They were informative and had an ease of clarity that meant he did not have to pay attention to soak up the content, and they had the effect of making one feel enriched and smarter with the bare minimum of effort.

Next to him, Makoto is huddled up against the window, having drifted off to sleep listening to music. Haruka gently uninges the earphones from Makoto's head and passes them over to the flight attendant. She indicates for Haruka to lift the window shutter, which he does, and then he tries to rearrange Makoto with as little fuss as possible to prepare for the landing, checking that Makoto's belt is fastened securely as he does.

Poor Makoto, Haruka thinks to himself, he must be suffering from having his long limbs all squashed
up like that in economy class for thirty hours. You'd think that having brought some Olympic glory to the nation they'd give Makoto a free seat upgrade but no, they're not even on the national airline because Makoto wants to go back with the rest of them, and the rest of them are not in the national contingent and don't have the luxury of sponsored tickets and bought their tickets from the airline that offered the cheapest price.

They were only in Rio for as long as Makoto was swimming and couldn't stay for longer as classes beckoned. Haruka has skipped university for an entire week. It's not that bad because he emailed all his profs to ask for lecture slides and makeup lessons, and he was able to send his work over for consultation.

As the plane descends, the lay of the land grows in form, the mountains and greenery taking shape in the glare of the late afternoon sun. The plane banks left in a languid roll, and through the window Haruka can see the shadows of the clouds on the ground, and impatience spikes within him. He cannot wait to get back into the muggy summer heat, away from the dryness of the recycled cabin air, to feel moisture again on his skin, sweat prickling through pores, and then to wash all that off in a vigorous shower, water sluicing in transparent sheets over his skin, clinging like a lover. *Makoto isn't stirring. Those sleeping pills must have really knocked him out.*

Makoto has to take sleeping pills on a plane because the experience is so terrifying for him, and arduous, and there is no conceivable way he'll ever be comfortable in the kind of seats they can afford, large frame bent cruelly into the small crooks in between rows. Every time they board a plane the apologies come tumbling out of Makoto, apologies to the people in front for accidentally kneeing the back of their chair, and when he takes the aisle seat, which happens on short haul flights where he doesn't take any sleeping pills, he spends the entire journey apologising to fellow passengers who blearily trip on his extended foot as they get up to go to the bathroom.

On long haul flights Makoto takes the window seat because he can lean on the side as he falls into deep slumber, like a delicate princess under a jealous sorcerer's curse. They're fortunate because they have three seats to the two of them this time around, and Makoto is able to stretch out more.

Haruka glances at Makoto from the side of his eyes. He knows that whenever they land Makoto likes having a hand to hold onto, because the statistics say that most accidents occur at takeoff or landing. Haruka shifts to the middle seat and brings down the armrest between them, placing Makoto's hand on it, and then he lays his hand over Makoto's, curling his fingers into the gaps between Makoto's splayed fingers. Makoto is still sleeping, so Haruka can allow himself to caress the veins on the back of his hand, timeworn grooves of spent greenish blood. Makoto's hands are like his mother's, rough from all the times he snatched the soiled dinner plates from her and blocked her access to the sink, insisting he wash the dishes instead. Makoto's hands are like his mother's, rough with dryness from laundry detergent, from the times he spent in the bathroom, knees on the floor, trying to scrub the grass and dirt stains from the twins’ soccer kits before his mother can get to them.

"What do you do with a boy like Makoto?" Mrs Tachibana had asked Haruka once, when Makoto was washing the dishes by hand at the kitchen sink. "He refuses to let me be a proper mother!"

"He wants you to be able to sit back and relax, Obasan," Haruka replied. "He loves you enough to want to pay something back."

"Such a sweet boy, but it's not right for him to have old hands like mine."

"It's right for him because he loves you. That's how he thinks."

Even though they are miles away in Tokyo for university, Makoto's hands are the family he brings with him, skin whittled thin with generations of sacrifice, the years of love from his parents becoming
his own. These are hands Haruka wants close to him, and he squeezes them as the plane jolts onto the runway.

When the seatbelt sign goes off, Makoto wakes up as if on cue, and Haruka realises that there is a chance Makoto wasn't fully asleep as the plane landed. Was he aware of all the caressing I did thinking he wouldn't notice? I am going to pretend nothing happened so I don't have to explain why I was doing something like that. Please don't ask me anything about it, please don't even make that secret smile.

"Earth to Haru?" Makoto says, waving a hand in front of his eyes. Makoto's face is pulled into businesslike concentration, as if getting off the plane now is all that matters to him. Makoto's not going to make a fuss about the handtouching. Either that or he's just really oblivious.

"Unless you intend to stay on for the next flight we need to get our bags, but I don't think they'll let us stay on anyway," Makoto continues.

Slowly, Haruka turns around to face Makoto. Makoto has that accommodating, after-you smile on his face and so Haruka gets up to pull their bags down from the overhead compartment. As they make their way out, Makoto helps practically everyone, especially families, with their baggage, using his height for their convenience.

Moments like these fill Haruka with a sense of inexplicable shame. His own lack of social skills means that going out on a limb for complete strangers doesn't come automatically to him, but it also fills him with a sense of pride that he has a boyfriend who lives all this to him, every single moment of his life. I learn from Makoto.

And so comes the day when the sea monster, drawn by food and unchartered land, finds that its fins have broken into webbed feet, that its gills have closed into bags of air, and it breaks the surface and pads to shore, leaving the water for the final time.

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"Isn't it nice to be finally home?" Makoto breaks into a huge grin and rolls all his baggage into a corner, next to where the cat stand is. He intends to deal with unpacking at a later time—for now, he'll flop over on the secondhand sleeper couch with the dark blue fabric cover that came with the apartment.

Makoto lets out a happy sigh as he lies back onto the throw, an old blanket he wraps himself in when he needs to study on colder nights. His absence means it has accumulated some dust so he'll have to wash that too, alongside his current jetlagged outfit—but heavy laundry load be damned—and he lets his legs dangle over the sides. In this position, he can even rest his bare feet on their closet door. That's how small their 1DK apartment is: one bedroom and a dining/kitchen space, barely enough for two. In the bedroom they have managed to squeeze in everything they need for living and sleeping, with a double loft bed to one side, using the space under the loft bed for storage, leaving space for living on the other side of the bedroom, bounded by the sleeper couch. There is some empty space in front of the sleeper couch if they ever need to extend it, which they have done that time the rest of his family came to visit, an incident which really tested Haruka's boundaries of personal space. And facing the sleeper couch is the TV shelf up against the wall, with a small LED TV on the TV shelf, both purchased together, also secondhand, at a super discount. Next to the TV lies a Playstation console that has not been used since they moved here, their days taken up by the demands of university life and part-time work. Makoto has swimming to contend with too, and from the couch he can see the stack of physical training instruction manuals piled on his study desk at the foot of the loft bed.
Behind the couch there is space for only one bookcase next to the cat stand, the shelves of which are sagging from the weight of accumulated textbooks, lecture notes, art materials and an inexplicable array of accumulated junk.

Their old school friend, Yazaki Aki, will come around later in the evening to return the cats. Saba is a striped grey tabby and Hamachi is a regular shorthair with some ginger patches. Aki had moved away sometime during middle school, and they weren't in close contact, so it was a surprise when they found out that she had enrolled into the same university as Haruka. As they are one of the rare few students who own a washing machine, Aki is in the habit of swinging by regularly to use it.

"Makoto," Haruka says, dropping his bags onto the floor of their apartment. "I am very proud of you."

Do I sit up from the couch? Does Haru want me looking at him? It has been over three hours but Makoto's hand is still tingling from when Haruka held it as the plane landed. He had woken up sometime during the landing, of course, but soon as he realised Haruka was holding his hand he didn't dare to stir or even move lest Haruka let go of it. He felt bad, in a way, bad enough to be scared of holding Haruka's hand in return.

"Haru, I have something to tell you..."

"What is it, Makoto?" Haruka's head suddenly pops into the field of vision as he leans over the back of the couch to look at Makoto.

"I...I...It's about Rin," Makoto says.

Haruka's brows jump into a frown. "Really, Makoto? I don't think there's a need to bring up that name anymore."

"Why?" Makoto puts a hand on the back of the couch to prop himself up, pushing into the armrest behind him.

"I'm done with him."

"What?"

"I'm serious, Makoto! When I said bye to him that was supposed to be final."

"But...when the two of you were left alone in the apartment, together?"

Puzzlement sketches across Haruka's face like he can't even remember. "Oh, that," Haruka says, with an embarrassed cringe, the sort of cringe Makoto knows to be an honest, instinctual reaction. "He just said some really stupid things, that's all."

Why are we both dancing around names here? Makoto cannot bring himself to acknowledge the name in his mind, to hold onto the sound of it, to hold on until the strokes of the character solidify into a person.

"Bye is bye, for real," Haruka adds, with an air of finality.

You said it in such a flippant manner it was impossible to tell what you meant. And you were floating on a cloud of such bliss during our final days in Brazil I assumed it was because of him. Now you're telling me it was his absence that made you happy? This means—oh shit, oh shit oh shit this means —
"I, er, Haru, I—something—tell you—I—"

"Shh, shh," Haruka says, pressing a finger to his lips. "Say no more, Makoto. I know you're surprised but I think this really is it." Haruka is smiling away to himself, in that oddly distant way he smiles.

"Um, Haru..." Makoto starts, unconsciously bringing a hand to his head to scratch his scalp. "I think I um, I think I did something really wrong."

"What?" Haruka asks with a light voice. He looks completely unperturbed, like he isn't absorbing what Makoto is trying to tell him. "You?" Haruka questions again, disbelieving Makoto's confession, mirthful laughter escaping his throat. What is he so happy about?

Haruka's focus snaps back to the room as he rests his hands on Makoto's shoulders. "Listen up, Makoto. I don't care about what you did that you think is wrong. Nothing you do is wrong to me, so don't worry about it. Don't. I forgive you. Let it go."

"Haru..." Makoto says. *He looks so happy I can't bring myself to ruin it. Why is this happening to me? Why did I—oh hell, oh the lowest realm of hell. I should've known, I should've asked, I shouldn't have.*

Haruka places a palm on Makoto's cheek, tilting his head towards him. "Now, how about you show me your medals? I'm so proud of you, Makoto." Haruka is smiling at him, and Haruka closes his eyes and presses a kiss squarely on Makoto's lips.

Makoto opens his mouth to say something but Haruka takes it as a cue to kiss deeper, and Makoto is looking at Haruka's closed eyes; he wraps a hand over Haruka's hand to pull it away from his cheek, but as he does so Haruka takes it as a cue to slip his hand around his waist, dangerously close to the crotch. *How could I have done such a bad thing?* Makoto has to gasp for air, turning away from Haruka as he does, and Haruka kisses him on the chin, then on the throat, and Haruka is saying into him, pressing into him, demanding into his collarbone, "Your medals, Makoto, I want to see your medals."

"Um, okay," Makoto says. *Sheesh, is Haru really so turned on by them? Of all the things...* He climbs over the couch and crouches down to dig the medals out of his suitcase. The medals are tucked one each into a pair of clean socks and rolled up into a ball inside a jacket for extra cushioning. Behind him, Haruka prods at his back with an outstretched toe, teasing the hem of his t-shirt halfway up the back.

"Haru..." Makoto says with a small hint of exasperation, but he turns around to temper it with a smile. Haruka is practically beaming at him, radiant as a summer's day.

Makoto sighs, and with an uncertain shake of the head, gets up to pass the medals to Haruka – arm outstretched, straps tangled in his fingers.

Haruka doesn't extend a hand to collect them. "I want to see them on you," he says, with a curt nod.

Makoto obligingly slips the green bands of thick grosgrain ribbon past his head. Haruka reaches out to fondle the metal discs, fingers brushing Makoto's chest as he does. "Why is Haru so happy about this? It's a bit embarrassing, and I don't feel like I deserve this, especially not after um, that thing that happened."

"Makoto," Haruka snaps, cutting into his thoughts. "You're not with me. Listen, you deserve every bit of this, okay? You deserve this. I love you."
Haruka draws Makoto in. Makoto's caught, caught in-between a wavering heart and horrific misjudgment and he's caught in between Haruka's hands, which have locked around his head in a tender but firm grip. Their foreheads are touching, and Haruka's deep blue eyes are piercing right through him. Every time Haruka does this to him it feels like he's being laid bare, heart like an open book for Haruka to read. Can Haruka see the regret filling his craggy heart? Can Haruka see the fear seizing him?

"We'll be okay," Haruka whispers, and Makoto has to trust him.

"Now, how would you like your reward?" Haruka asks with a playful glint in his eye, smile snagging at the corners of his lips.

"Anything that makes you happy, Haru."

Laughter escapes Haruka's mouth like a welcome breeze, taking the heat off the situation. He chews on his bottom lip as he pauses to consider his next action, then, looking directly into Makoto's eyes, proceeds to attempt to peel off Makoto's shirt. The endeavour proves more cumbersome than normal with the medals still around Makoto's neck, and Makoto begins to make some noises out of sheer embarrassment and awkwardness as he tries in vain to slip off the medals, but Haruka is so insistent on keeping them on.

Haruka slips his arms around Makoto's naked torso, pressing up close until Makoto nearly loses his balance, toppling backwards into the wall with one hand on the top shelf of the cat stand for support. Makoto can hear the sound of his belt being unbuckled by Haruka, followed by the undoing of his fly.

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Curling his fingers over the elastic band of Makoto's underwear, Haruka pulls down Makoto's boxers, the blue pair with a faded geometric print, as he slides to the ground on his knees. Chewing on his lower lip, he looks up at Makoto, knowing full well how much this sort of thing turns Makoto on. From his touch he can feel Makoto's cock twitch into life, with blood rushing in, as Haruka runs his hands along the inside of Makoto's thighs, as he flashes another smile at Makoto, as he holds eye contact without breaking, as he runs his tongue over his lips to moisten them.

"H-Haru..." he can hear Makoto gasp.

"Do you want me to suck you off?" Haruka says, lowering his voice. Makoto taught him to always ask.

"Y-yes," comes the reply, choked with hesitation.

"You have to be sure, Makoto. You taught me to always be sure."

"Yes."

Haruka can feel Makoto swelling to full length between his hands. God, he's so big, he thinks. He's always so big.

Haruka leans in to press a kiss to the base of Makoto's cock, moving his hands upwards to push Makoto's hips into the wall behind. He can feel the hard edges of Makoto's hipbones jut against his palms, fighting against the primal urge to thrust forward. Haruka pushes his hands harder against Makoto's hips and flicks out his tongue to lick the protruding vein on the underside of Makoto's
cock. There is the familiar taste of salt and sweetness and Haruka opens his mouth wider to take more of Makoto in, dragging his mouth sideways along the shaft until he reaches the tip, sliding one hand to cover where his mouth left off, followed by the other hand, until he is pumping Makoto with two fists. With the swipe of a thumb he shifts Makoto's foreskin away from the swollen tip so it doesn't hurt, and then Haruka wraps his lips around the smooth, purplish head and works at it, filling his mouth as far as he can with the thick, fleshy length of Makoto, hands taking care of the rest.

Makoto lets out a little squeak of a moan, a sound that fills Haruka's heart with satisfaction. Sucking, blowing and pumping at Makoto, Haruka wonders if Makoto wants to fuck him up the ass today. It's not Haruka's favourite thing in the world, but what the hell, the times they've managed it were special and they haven't had any special sex to celebrate his Olympic achievements.

Looking up to catch Makoto's eye again, Haruka stares into Makoto's half-closed eyes. Makoto's breaths are short and shallow, and his knuckles are worn white as he grips the cat stand for balance. He loves when Makoto looks like this. He loves this private face that only he gets to see, when sheer pleasure threatens to tear down the barriers Makoto's built to prevent himself from enjoying anything selfishly. Haruka loves taking Makoto to that brink, where the joy that is written into Makoto's face is unbridled and so pure.

"Do you want to fuck me today?"

Makoto's eyebrows thread into a little frown. "Um, it might take a bit too much time."

"That's fine with me."

"What if Zaki-chan shows up halfway?"

Haruka doesn't want to reply. It seems such a trivial thing to be concerned about.

"How about this instead, Haru?" Makoto says, wrapping a hand around the back of Haruka's head, massaging his neck, hoping to appease him. "How about we move to the couch?"

"Okay," Haruka says with a kiss to Makoto's still-swollen cock, wet with a coat of Haruka's saliva. As he pushes himself off the ground to stand up, it occurs to him, the way it always does whenever he sees it, that the sight of Makoto's glistening wet cock is such a huge turn on for him. Haruka loves the way the wetness gleams with reflected light...

"Quit staring at my cock, Haru-chan," Makoto says to him with a nervous, teasing laugh, and reaches out to squeeze his ass. Makoto rips the medals off and flings them carelessly atop his soft-cover suitcases where they land with a dull, zipping skid before kicking off his jeans and boxers and leaping onto the couch with an excited jump. He is so adorable when he does that.

Haruka strips himself of all his clothes and follows suit.

"I think it's my turn to treat you, don't you think?" Makoto asks with that puppylike eagerness, nearly panting with anticipation.

"If you want," Haruka replies, a little too nonchalantly for his own good.

"Not enough for you, Haru-chan? What else can I do for you?"

With a sigh, Haruka replies, "I wasn't done sucking you off."

"If that is what Haru-chan wants, Haru-chan may go ahead." Makoto's eyes are pulled shut as he flashes a teasing, joking smile.
Deciding to ignore that last remark, Haruka presses down on Makoto's chest as he gets up to turn himself around. He can feel Makoto grabbing his thighs in that old, familiar grip, always comforting and never wavering. He can feel Makoto's spit-slicked hands wrap around his cock, and Haruka nestsles into the position he's become so comfortable in, cock slipping into Makoto's mouth, mouth slipping over Makoto's cock.

Everything about Makoto is like the home he wants to return to and it's hard not to thrust downwards into Makoto's mouth, a mouth that is always waiting for him. Haruka knows that no one likes having a cock thrust impolitely down their throat and he takes special care not to do it to Makoto but Makoto's mouth is so patient and warm and so yielding Haruka is constantly afraid he'll lose track of where to draw the line.

With his hands forming a tight squeeze around the base of Makoto's cock, Haruka sucks noisily at its tapered head, knowing that his enjoyment is Makoto's biggest turn-on. Rocking gently in and out of Makoto's mouth as he kisses and sucks at Makoto's cock, Haruka picks up the pace as time passes and settles into the rhythm that works for them. He knows that Makoto always wants him to come first and he's always subtly trying to challenge that, but this time he obliges. As he comes he accidentally pushes himself a little too far into Makoto's throat and there is an involuntary choking noise so he hurriedly lifts himself away but as he does so his cock sort of bobs out of Makoto's mouth and unintentionally he finds himself spurting everywhere, come dribbling down Makoto's chin and chest.

Haruka's mouth is still hanging open from where he left Makoto's cock. *It was bad of me to make such a mess. I should apologise to Makoto later.*

"Don't worry," Makoto says reassuringly, noticing the subtle shift in Haruka's expression. "I like it when you forget yourself a little like that."

Turning his attention back to Makoto, Haruka deliberately masks his frown with a veneer of concentration. *Doesn't Makoto know how maddening it is when he says stuff like that?* The mild stab of irritation only drives him to work harder at Makoto's cock, and soon Makoto is coming into his mouth. Haruka swallows him whole, neatly, like an oyster to the back of the throat. He loves the way Makoto tastes, both earthy and briny, like an estuary creature, not entirely of the sea and not entirely redolent of the grassy, muddy taste freshwater fish sometimes have.

"Haru..." Makoto calls out softly, fingers lightly brushing the outsides of Haruka's legs. Haruka turns around and catches a glimpse of Makoto's face, still glistening with pearlescent droplets of his come and he has to admit to himself that the sight is possibly worth the embarrassment of a messy ejaculation. For a moment, Haruka wonders if he should let Makoto know his feelings about this. Makoto has always reminded him to communicate his preferences during sex, but this seems a little too one-sided for Haruka to think about even mentioning it.

Haruka turns around to kiss Makoto face to face, licking up some of his own come as he does. *I'm really salty,* he realises, and not in a pleasant way. There is the small flicker of a shadowy thought as he wonders how Makoto ever puts up with him.

"Let's go for a shower," Makoto says, with that sweet, caring face, kissing him with a shy smile. Haruka nods in reply, and gets up to gather the scattered pile of clothes. Makoto dashes to the bathroom to jab at the digital panel to turn the heater on in time for Haruka.

With a sigh, partly out of resignation and partly out of fondness, Haruka takes their clothes into the bathroom and sets them on the washing machine in the adjacent laundry area. He climbs into the bathing area with Makoto, who washes him down with a splash of perfectly warm water, just a few degrees north of normal body temperature.
Flicking the water from his sopping wet hair, Haruka lifts his head to grin at Makoto. There is, truthfully speaking, not enough space for two in this tiny bathroom, but it's so fucking sexy when water is splashing down his back like that. He wonders if Makoto is ready for round two when the doorbell rings.

The doorbell is followed up by several sharp raps on the door. *Does Aki have to be so impatient?*

Before he can catch himself, Haruka mutters a few curses under his breath, and Makoto is smiling at him in that fond, *Haru-chan's-adorably-annoyed* way, which only irritates Haruka further.

"Go get the door," he snaps at Makoto, and Makoto obeys, jumping out of the bath to hurriedly towel himself dry, pulling on his clothes as fast as he can.

When Makoto is out of the bathroom Haruka turns on the shower again, luxuriating beneath the glittering streams of water as he hears the sounds of the door being opened and Aki being welcomed in.

"Sorry I'm late! I was wondering if I should've called to say I'll come by with the cats tomorrow so I could let you boys rest tonight, but then I thought to myself, what the hell, I need to see my friends as soon as I can, so here I am!"

"Not a problem, Zaki-chan. We're always happy to see you."

"Where's Haruka?"

"Ah, he's in the bath—"

Haruka can see the snap of Makoto and Aki's heads as they turn around only to find they can look through the open door straight at the showering Haruka.

"Hi Aki," Haruka says, lifting a palm to greet her, completely unruffled.

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry!" Aki exclaims in a fluster, turning her body away from the bathroom with the nude Haruka. "Um, um, here are the cats!"

Without looking, she thrusts the cat carriers into Makoto's arms.

Makoto takes the cat carriers from Aki, and with an apologetic smile at Haruka, leans into the bathroom to close the door. Haruka can still hear everything they are saying.

"So, Makoto, how was it? How was Rio?" At this point, Aki's voice distorts into a sustained squeal. She takes a moment to regain composure and then continues, "I can't believe I know an Olympic medallist! It's so exciting! How did it feel standing on the podium? My heart nearly leapt out of my chest when I watched you in the medley relay, such a shame we had to come in second when you got us off to such a good start. But never mind about that, silver is still pretty fucking awesome and I can't believe I know an Olympic medallist!"

"Zaki-chan, you've already said that..."

"I know, but it's so exciting!"

Aki starts squealing all over again. In the privacy of the bathroom, unseen by anyone, Haruka starts smiling to himself. Makoto deserves every bit of this. Makoto deserves every bit of everyone squealing over everything he's accomplished.
The conversation flows on as Haruka completes his shower, and when he is done he steps out into the bed and living area with the towel still draped over his head, poking his fingers through the fabric to dry the crevices in his ears. He is met with eager smiles from Aki and Makoto, who are chatting away merrily. They are sitting on the floor in front of the couch with a cat on each of their laps, and when Haruka approaches, the patchy ginger Hamachi starts to wriggle her way out of Aki's grip.

"Aww, look how they miss you," Aki says, releasing Hamachi with one last scratch on the belly.

"Thanks for taking care of them," Haruka says.

"Not a problem at all! I'm going to miss having them around."

Hamachi is winding her way around Haruka's legs, and Haruka crouches down to pet her.

"So, did you get to see much of Rio? Or were you trapped in the Olympic Village most of the time? Was there a curfew? Could you even go out? I heard there's a free flow of McDonald's."

"It's not a prison, Zaki-chan. Athletes are free to enter and leave at any time. You just need the photo ID pass to get around. And yes, there is a twenty-four hour McDonald's and everything is free. I tried not to eat too much but Haru can show you photographic evidence of the damage."

"Were there a lot of freebies? What else did you get for free?"

"Well," Makoto says. "Everything was sponsored. It's a really weird environment. It's not just that everything is sponsored, but that there's this unwritten rule where you are forced to use only the sponsored products."

"Damn the grubby reach of commercialism! Prying its tentacles into such a great and life-affirming event with crass advertising and blatant consumerism! Is this what humanity is about?"

"It kinda is," Haruka offers in reply.

"Damn you Haruka and your cynic realism," Aki retorts.

"Now now," Makoto begins, stepping in for Haruka, as Saba wriggles out of his grip.

Haruka takes the chance to drop out of the conversation by chasing after the cats, going to the kitchen next door to dig out some kibbles, which he then hand feeds to the cats.

Makoto and Aki's conversation has moved on to all the trivial things about being in Brazil—How is it like there? Is it sunny all the time? Are the people as good-looking as I've heard? There is a significant community of Japanese Brazilians, did you get to meet them? Are they anything like us? How are they different?

Haruka lets their voices wash over him as he heads back to the room to relax on the couch, lying across lengthwise. It is nice to be home, he thinks, and Saba is nestling on his chest in a ball. It is nice to be home, to have Makoto and Aki chattering away in their gentle, pleasant voices in the background, and to have his cats near him, to watch them leap and jump about the apartment, so wholly independent yet indisputably part of the household. He rests his hands on Saba's striped back, sinking his hands into the short, fuzzy fur and smiles to himself. This lazy contentment prompts the sudden realisation that he’s hungry—the last meal he had was on the plane. Haruka thinks of all his favourite things in the world, and it occurs to him that the only thing that will make this present moment better is if they adjourn to the izakaya around the corner, where he can have his fill of grilled mackerel while the other two keep up their conversation like a joyful burbling creek.
"Let's go to the izakaya," Haruka says, abruptly jumping up. Saba falls off him with alacrity and a threatening hiss.

For a second, Makoto and Aki fall silent and they gape at him with completely puzzled looks on their faces. Haruka quickly realises that he must have seemed like he was interrupting their conversation when he only wanted to suggest an even more perfect setting for them to have their chat. He doesn't know how to continue.

"Well, what do you know, it turns out that I am hungry too!" Makoto says, coming to his rescue. Turning to Aki, Makoto says, "I hope you don't mind as we haven't eaten all day. All drinks are on me so please join us!"

"Please dispense with all formality," Aki jokingly replies in a pompous tone. "I can buy my own drinks."

"But Zaki-chan, can you really refuse a treat from an Olympic medallist?"

"All the more I should be treating you, Makoto," Aki replies, bursting into laughter.

The question of who pays is resolved the moment they show up at the izakaya and the owner, Fujimoto, tells them that everything is on the house because one of her regulars is now an Olympic medallist for Japan. Some of the other regulars begin to recognise Makoto and they are showered with offers of free beer and endless sticks of yakitori.

***

Happy New Year!

Can't believe it's already 2017. So, I'm here, as promised. You asked me to stay in touch. Didn't expect that, did you? I would have replied to that first email from all those years ago but I'm not sure I want to see that embarrassing email address ever again. Should've taken a leaf from you and given myself a sensible email handle from the start.

I know, I know, you must be thinking to yourself—Rin's not a nice person, he doesn't contact people unless he wants something out of them and you're absolutely right! Out of the blue, I am here to ask a favour. (Cutting straight to the chase, huh?)

So you may know that Gou came down to spend the New Year with me, and I took her to Sydney, and as we were waiting for the countdown by the Harbour I happened to notice this necklace that she was wearing. How do I describe it? It's one of those necklaces with a broken heart pendant, if you know what I mean? It's like one half of a heart, and it's one of those cheesy couple things, like the other person would have the other heart, so that both necklaces combine to form one heart. Ugh, it's so cheesy I can hardly type on.

Anyway!!! So she pretended not to hear, and I was complaining about how overpriced the ice cream is (I swear the prices went up by five dollars per scoop every hour because it was New Year's Eve)
and so I decided to be direct and I said, “Gou, did someone buy that necklace for you?” After which she became very quiet and said things like, "oh, fireworks, aren't the fireworks pretty" for the rest of the night, and I didn't really want to push things further but when we were walking back to the hotel I swear she was touching the necklace in that lovelorn, smitten way, like she was remembering some romantic memory.

So, Makoto, I need to know who that person is. I'm sure you can sympathise, as a fellow elder sibling. It’s your duty to perform due diligence on all the people your sibling so much as glances at. I need to know, Makoto. I need to know who that guy is and why Gou doesn't want to tell me about him. As the both of you attend the same university it is unfortunate but you will have to do the dirty work for me.

I'm counting on you to do your best, Makoto.

-Rin

p.s. I think I said guy, but then just before I clicked send I realised it might not be a guy. If it's a girl you still have to tell me okay. Although...I don't have any girls on my list of suspects. In fact, I have a list of...only one suspect. And it's a guy. But I won't let it taint your independent research for now.

Thanks. x

***

Left turn, and the sign here says go left to Harajuku, and to the right it says the National Gymnasium. Okay, I think the sakura trees are this way. There are so many tourists, I'm sure some wouldn't mind if I bothered them for a little while to ask for directions, right?

"Haru, I'm lost," Makoto says into his phone, defeated after half an hour of pottering around the park without finding the cherry blossom trees. The task had seemed easy enough since this park is famous for them, but somehow everything had conspired to lead him away from it, and all he can see in front of him is a large body of water.

He has already stopped three people to ask for directions in his search for the cherry blossom trees, and short of getting them to walk him all the way there each time he has only become even more lost. And bringing up a map on the phone doesn't seem to work too well, it just keeps telling him he is exactly where he is looking to go.

He isn't supposed to meet Haru for another fifteen minutes.

"Describe your surroundings," Haru says. "I'm almost there."

"Er...I see a pond. There are water lilies in the pond. I see...oh shit I'm back where I started. But I feel like I've walked around this park at least five times! I should have just stayed in my uni compound."

"Stay there, I'll look for you."

Makoto finds an empty park bench and plops down on it, staring into the distance. Man, I can't believe I have to get used to this area. Everything here looks so complicated and on a totally different scale. I can't believe I'm going to start classes here in another two weeks. I'm so glad I'm staying with Haru in a much quieter city. I don't mind that the commute is over an hour long, I'll just have to use the time to revise my notes. I can’t imagine what it'll be like to stay right here, in the heart of the metropolis. Man, I still can't believe I got into Todai.
"Makoto," Haru says.

"Wow, you're here! That's fast." How did you realise I was in this exact spot? Makoto thinks but doesn't ask.

"It wasn't hard. I simply headed straight for the pond."

_How is it that Haru-chan has this supernatural ability to navigate this place?_

Haru looks away from him. "Let's go. How was your day?"

"Nothing much, just the usual freshman orientation stuff. Made a few friends, they're from all over Japan! It's so interesting how different we are. How was your day?"

"Do you remember Yazaki Aki from elementary school? Her nickname was Zaki-chan."

"Of course I remember."

"Met her today. She's at MAU too," Haru says, spelling out the acronym.

"Oh wow! What a coincidence! We should meet up and do something together before school starts then! Can't believe we'd see her again in Tokyo of all places."

Haru doesn't offer a reply, so Makoto has to prod the conversation along.

"What's she doing?" Makoto asks.

"Imaging arts and science."

"Wow, is that like photography or video?"

"Could be both. Doesn't do to limit oneself."

"That's so exciting!" Makoto says, although he doesn't feel any excitement from Haru. Haru has led them to the crowded pathway where the cherry blossom trees are. There are only small green buds on the trees, so the full blossom is likely to occur after school starts. That said, he can find some early blooms dotting the branches, in groups of pure white florets.

"Wow," Makoto says in response to the trees, wondering how it'll be like when he starts uni proper, even though he's seen plenty of photos of this exact area. He's starting to feel a little self-conscious about how easily impressed he is. Haru simply stands there in silent contemplation, like a scholarly master of old.

Haru doesn't look like he'll be moving for a while, so Makoto whips out his phone and snaps a few pictures to send to his family. They were here with him in January for the exam, and that was the first time any of them had been to Tokyo. In the grips of winter the days were short and cold, and they were preoccupied with ensuring he was in tiptop exam-sitting condition, always feeding him and letting him have uninterrupted rest and revision time. Short of sounding like a country bumpkin, up to that point Makoto had only ever been to Osaka on a middle school trip, and Kyoto in high school for that swimming competition. Tokyo is a whole new level of big city, and he wonders if it will always be this way. Haru looks so perfectly natural here, exuding the same sort of sophistication seasoned Tokyoites have.

Haru is looking up at a tree, and, satisfied with his photos, Makoto goes over to ask if Haru is ready to leave.
As he nears, a thought suddenly occurs to him as if triggered by some proximity radar from Haru. I wonder how Rin's doing.

***

"How did your grading go?" Haruka hears Aki ask. He turns around to find her rushing up to him along the corridor outside the lecture rooms, a stack of mounting boards tucked under her arm.

"Okay," Haruka replies, slowing his pace but not stopping to wait for her. "How was yours?"

"Hmm," Aki says, pausing to think. Haruka lets himself fall back in step a little so Aki isn't looking at him as she walks. "Hiyamizu-sensei says I wasn't close enough to the subject and it showed that I was shy. But nothing more I can do for this shoot, I'll just have to try harder next time."

"Oh," Haruka says. Without really meaning to, his grip on his folder loosens. It feels a relief to hear Aki's work needs improvement as well. Haruka doesn't mean to be a bad friend, but the comments he just heard from his prof about his work are hanging like a cloud over his mind.

Nanase-kun, I think you've lost sight of the brief here, because you've chosen to interpret it in such a deliberately obscure way. We don't ask for your work to be simplistic, but we don't want a convoluted process either. You're in the business of visual communication, and communication must always have clarity or it fails its purpose. You have astounding technical skill, and I love the detail in this section, but it really isn't telling the audience anything about the event the poster is for, which is a marathon. I cannot tell if your illustration is about the pain or joy of running, because not enough emotion is coming through. You may think that this assignment is over after today, but if you really want to improve your process, I'd like for you to talk to at least three different people who run. Ask them out for a coffee and dig deep into what motivates them, what it is they feel when they complete a marathon, and then think about how to carry their version of things through your work. I'll be happy to discuss it with you. It's not going to be graded but it will really help you get better to get comfortable with the process of seeing from different perspectives.

Haruka's first instinct on hearing his prof's comments was one of rebellion. He doesn't know why he immediately bristled with discomfort at the idea that he was being deliberately obscure. He was just drawing his interpretation of things, and he didn't want to use anything stereotypical about running. No feet, no legs, no people, no roads, no scenery. He was trying to defy the genre but he ended up getting called obscure.

Sometimes, he wonders why his profs are so insistent that his work needs to show commercial value. If his art is good enough, won't it get attention anyway?

"Can I see your work?" Aki asks.

It is a bit too late for Haruka to escape so he grudgingly hands her the folder containing his prints. Aki flips through the clear pockets holding the original line art, the detail prints of the digital colouring, and the accompanying process booklet. The poster itself is rolled up into a cylindrical holder and slung across Haru's shoulder.

"It's amazing," she gushes, and Haruka resents her for being unable to spot the flaws.

"Can I see yours?" Haruka says, hoping he sounds friendly enough.

"Sure." Aki hands him her boards, and Haruka can see that Aki's prof is right about her photos—her shyness put her at too much of a distance when she could have gone in for a great angle.

***
Bad news, Makoto. I have just been informed by an unnamed source that someone is studying medicine at Keio. Do you know what this means, Makoto? Do you know where the campus is? It's not that far from where my sister stays! And there are so many parks in between I'm starting to picture these...leafy outdoor dates studying on the lawn. I SHUDDER.

Why, Makoto why? Actually, on this topic of certain people from a former school, did you know Nitori's going to be in Australia for a semester? Apparently he went and applied for some...marine conservation research thing or something, cos the other day I got this message from him. Yeah, apparently he decided to do marine biology because of me. I don't even recall anything like that, but he claims I told him to do what his heart told him to do when he was angusting about becoming "salaryman Nitori" and studying accounting and going into the family business or something.

So yeah, apparently he's going to Australia in a couple of months, not just for his marine biology degree but because he wants to specialise in shark studies. I started getting all these messages from him with stuff like "did you know one third of all shark species in the world can be found in Australia, over half of which are endemic" and "the sexual behaviour of sharks is not yet well understood by humans" and "I want to study the migratory patterns of sharks" and it got a bit creepy after a while, although I can't put my finger on why exactly. I mean, yeah he's just a really enthusiastic kid and all but...it's just...too much, you know?

Anyway, it's all a bit strange to realise that your former schoolmates seem to have their lives sorted. You too, Makoto. I really admire how certain you are about becoming a teacher. You said that in elementary school, and look where you are—you're well on your way!

And what am I? Sorry to pour out all this angst on you all of a sudden but me? I'm an economics student because my mum told me to, and half my classmates are these private boys' school douchebags I want to punch the faces of and the other half are like, weirdly religious international students. I mean, believe in what you want but why are they so...churchy and Jesussy it's kind of disturbing. I mean, okay, I'm like a private boys' school douchebag too but ugh.

Looks like instead of Nitori I am the one on my way to becoming Soulless Salaryman Matsuoka. You and I both know that swimming isn't forever and I've only got two Olympics left in me, max, and after that it's sink or swim in the real world and that's why mum keeps telling me to stick to my studies. But I can't imagine doing anything out there, like, what is adult life even. Throwing on a business suit and having a sandwich and coffee for lunch everyday (I don't even get ramen!) rinse, wash, repeat. Help me, Makoto. I can't think of the future because it's all a blank and that scares me.

***

A few days into the start of the new year, something goes wrong. Something goes wrong that has Gou calling them in a frenzy.

"Makoto-senpai! Haruka-senpai! Intervention! I need you to drop by my apartment this Saturday afternoon! I know it's Thursday night and it's very short notice but please please please try to make it! Makoto-senpai, if I see you in school tomorrow I'll brief you on what happened."

"What happened," Haruka asks plainly, speaking into Makoto's phone, which is on loudspeaker.

"Um," Gou says, pausing to collect herself, the distress evident in her voice. "It's about Nagisa-kun! He doesn't want to take his entrance exams!"

"So what? We shouldn't force him if he doesn't want to," Haruka says before Makoto can stop him from saying such things.
"Rei-kun's really upset by it, Haruka-senpai! It's quite serious. Serious enough for Nagisa-kun not to have come home the past few nights."

"We'll be there Saturday," Makoto hurriedly says before Haruka decides to proffer more blunt advice.

As soon as they put down the phone Haruka pipes up.

"I don't see why this is so upsetting. What needs to happen is that Rei just needs to realise it's in Nagisa's best interests that he isn't pressured to take exams he doesn't want to take."

"Yes, but is that in the interests of his long-term future?"

"Why are you saying that."

"It's good to have career options, Haru. Nagisa needs our support to make it through the exams."


"You can't argue that exams don't matter! It's always better to have tried than not to try at all."

"Really? Do you hear yourself? They've brainwashed you, Makoto. You and Gou and Rei."

"What do you mean, Haru? Why are you saying this?"

"You know why I'm even here? I'm here because in the last year of high school you started getting so serious about your studies I thought, oh, you're really not joking about Todai because of Amakata-sensei. I thought that I might never see you again in my life when you move away. That's how I ended up here, Makoto. I could have gone to art school anywhere else but I cut nearly everything from my shortlist. I didn't want to lose you."

I didn't want to lose you. Haruka glares at Makoto.

"Haru! I didn't even think about getting into Todai at first! You were so serious with all your piles of university prospectuses and course guides I ended up thinking, Haru's going to move away for sure, and I was the one who didn't want to be left behind! It was for this reason I studied so hard, so that I could get into university wherever you choose to go."

What was the point of all that? I'm losing you anyway, to the mania of brand names and prestige and reputation in a sleepless, unforgiving, commercial city.

Thoughts churn in Haruka's mind but he cannot find a voice for them. Instead, he utters the words Makoto taught him to use if he wanted a break. "Time out."

Swiftly spinning on his heels, Haruka marches towards the door, slips his feet into the worn canvas shoes with the squashed backs, grabs his keys off the small cloud-shaped keyholder by the door and goes for a walk.

Makoto can't quite wrap his head around the whole thing and his eyes are burning hot, prickling with tears. He moved to Tokyo for Haruka! Now Haruka says he moved to Tokyo for him? Was Haruka inwardly regretting the decision? But he always looked so natural and confident in the city. How? What?

Breathe.

Remember when Haru used to walk out on you without saying anything? All those times you cried—
thinking he would never come back but he always did.

At least he tells you now when he needs to go out for a walk, so you know to let him have time to himself. And when he comes back, just remember to kiss and hug him.

We haven't lost ourselves, have we? People always say everything gets lost in big cities.

Or is it because there is something else that's missing?

***

Makoto! I took your advice, which is wonderful as always, and tried to make a friend today. There are far fewer people in the summer classes, which brings everyone a little closer, I guess. The lecture hall is smaller, so I took this opportunity to strike a conversation with the girl sitting next to me at Econometrics class. I wasn't expecting the conversation to continue but she said, oh, you're that swimming guy from the Olympics.

Yeah, I said.

Aw, sweet, she said. Did you have lots of sex?

At this point it was really embarrassing for me but then she laughed and said that the only thing she remembered about the Olympics was that article about condom demand and supply.

Anyway, I found out that she's actually an accounting and finance student, and she's really cool for an accounting student. I mean, she's a bit of a Marxist-feminist and everything so I was like, what are you even doing in accounting and finance? And she said—guess what she said. To destroy capitalism, one must do it from the inside. And then she said, well, my mother took a boat all the way to Australia just so that her daughter could be an accountant.

So yeah, it's kinda like a good day because it felt so great to talk to a real person about random things and not have it be a chore! I am making an effort to be nice to people and you're right, it's like isolating specific muscle groups in training. Just train the brain to get used to it and then you wonder why you even found it hard at all.

Also! Here's my address, since you asked. Please send me yours too!

3508/141 City Road
Southbank VIC 3006
Australia

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Saturday—two p.m sharp, and Haruka is at the door of Gou's apartment in Sendagaya. Makoto is with him, clutching a paper bag with a gift Haruka picked out from a shop near the station. Gou shares the apartment with her mother, but Mrs Matsuoka isn't in half the time.

"Welcome in, Haruka-senpai, Makoto-senpai."

"Sorry for the intrusion," Makoto says, presenting the gift bag two-handed, leaning slightly forward, chin tucked downwards. "We brought some rice crackers for you."

"Thank you," Gou says, returning with a small bow. "Rei-kun and Nagisa-kun will be here soon."

"I'll help you with the drinks," Makoto offers, with an unfailingly warm smile.
With that, Gou and Makoto abandon him.

Looking around, Haruka lowers himself into the bright purple microsuede couch in the living room. There is a long strip of a mirror above the cubist TV closet, to give the illusion of a wider space. Haruka can see himself in the mirror so he sinks lower until his reflection is out of sight. The mid-sized canvas of abstract art above the couch moves into the mirror's frame. "You may think this looks a bit like a Cy Twombly scribbled over Mark Rothko," Gou had told him of the piece, "but it was actually painted by my cousins who are about six and eight."

He's been to Gou's place several times, and if there is one feature Haruka loves, it's the minimalist coffee table with the hidden compartment. With clean lines of dark wood, it looks like a simple, low-lying piece of furniture until it is demonstrated that sections of it can be raised for a more interesting configuration. The cover to the hidden compartment swivels upwards to extend into a shelf that is the perfect height for dining from the floor or couch. It's the sort of thing Haruka wants for his own apartment if he ever gets one with the space. A person could easily set a bowl of instant noodles on the table, with a side of grilled fish and some vegetables, turn on the television, and eat alone in peace.

Lifting the cover to the hidden compartment for the novelty of it, Haruka sees a book sitting inside he hasn't seen before. He takes the book out gingerly, by the worn and well-thumbed cover. It looks like an old book, a secondhand book, like it might have been in print before Gou learned to read. The book is in English. *Feminism is for Everybody*, the title reads. The author does not spell her name with capitals.

His English is rudimentary at best but with nothing else to do, Haruka leafs through the book. A thick card falls out of it, a card of high quality stock and fine-grained white like pure winter snow, with just a few flecks of grey to keep it interesting. It is letterpress-printed on one side, Haruka realises, running the pads of his fingers against the embossed grooves of the print. At this point, his inner graphic designer senses are a-tingling. The typography is simple but beautiful too, a classic serif typeface in several different weights and sizes, all in black.

*Happy Birthday*, the card reads in English, on the letterpress-printed side, surrounded by a clean border in a thin weight that accents the typeface. Haruka flips the card over, and he realises that the card is from Rin.

*Gou—*

*Because feminism is your best defence against douchebags.*

—*Your big brother*

Haruka frowns at the handwritten Japanese words. He hears Makoto and Gou making their way to the living room, and they come into sight with a tray of hot green tea in a steaming teapot plus an array of vintage bone china teacups from British and Japanese manufacturers, collected by Mrs Matsuoka. Before they approach, Haruka quickly stuffs the card stock back in the book and returns it to where he found it, closing the lid on the compartment.

The doorbell rings.

Setting the teacups on the table, Gou runs to the door.

"Rei-kun! Nagisa-kun!"

"We brought bread!" Nagisa announces.
Haruka can feel Makoto shooting him a secretly amused look. Whenever Nagisa brings food as a gift he is usually going to eat nearly all of it by the end of the day.

"So, Gou-san, pray tell, why are we gathered here today?" Rei asks.

Gou closes the door behind her. She double latches it, which seems a bit too ominous to Haruka.

"Oh, we're just here to catch up with one another. Seems like we get too busy these days so it's nice to do this once in a while."

"What beautiful teacups you have," Rei comments to Gou as he accepts the offer of tea from Makoto. "Is this new to the collection?"

Rei has picked out a cornflower blue cup dotted with tiny red florals. A little behind him, Nagisa looks slightly worn out, as if some of the spark he once had was burned out of him.

Having filled everyone's cups, Makoto sets the teapot down and sits on the floor. No one else has decided to share the couch with Haruka, preferring to sit traditionally on the floor. As the rest sip at their tea, Makoto seizes upon the lull to pry open the hidden compartment in the table.

"May I have a look?" Makoto asks Gou, hand on the book Haruka was just browsing through.

"Yes, of course," Gou returns, turning her attention back to her tea.

Makoto pores through the book with interest, leafing from page to page until the birthday card falls out. Tired as he seems, Nagisa springs to life and snatches the card from Makoto's lap. "A birthday card, Gou-chan? Is this from anyone special?"

Nagisa flips the card over, perverse enthusiasm building only to fall like a crashing wave. "Oh, it's from Rin-chan," he says in a disappointed tone.

"What does it say?" Rei asks, leaning over into Nagisa.

"Just some wisdom from the *Analects of Matsuoka Rin,*" Gou declares.

Everyone laughs, except Haruka. Nagisa's laugh turns into a yawn.

"Have you been sleeping well?" Makoto asks, peering closely at Nagisa. Haruka can't decide if Makoto's avoiding his gaze or not, for whatever reason.

"No rest for the wicked, Mako-chan!" Nagisa tries to perk up with a grin.

"Not more wicked than usual, I hope? Is work still the same?" Makoto continues to probe amiably.

Nagisa's job is, well, Nagisa is a host. In a host club. Haruka doesn't understand why Gou, Rei or Makoto seem unable to mention it directly. There is nothing wrong with being a host. Haruka has utmost respect for anyone in the F&B or entertainment industry. When he first moved to Tokyo, Haruka tried taking on a job as a waiter at a pasta restaurant but was politely "let go" on his first day for not smiling at the customers and eating someone's leftover marinara.

Since then Haruka has gotten a bit wiser about the jobs he applies for, and on-and-off he works as a bicycle courier, cycling through the city to deliver documents and parcels. It has far less human interaction, although he still has to pretend to be excited for the people who receive his deliveries like it is their newborn baby, but he loves the cycling aspect of it and how it lets him discover the city.

"Ah, the job is fine. Busy, but busy is good. In fact it has been very busy..." Nagisa is close to
"But you mentioned you were going to quit!" Rei exclaims.

"Ah, yes, actually, there's this other thing..."

"But what about your exams?" Gou prods, cutting in.

Nagisa looks taken aback, like the exams have completely fallen off his radar. "Oh, yes, those....no worries I've got it sorted."

"You don't want to be a ronin for too long, Nagisa," Makoto says in an all-too-motherly voice before Haruka can stop him, using the term to describe students who fail to get into university right after high school. "You know we're here if you need help."

"Oh, I'm fine, I'm fine. I have Rei with me all the time. No problem at all."

He dropped the -chan, Haruka realises. Do Makoto and Gou not hear this?

"So you're not going to quit your job?" Rei asks, adjusting his glasses.

"Lots of uni students do this part-time too, you know. So it's not like I can't continue with this." Nagisa isn’t making eye contact, and he shifts his legs from his position on the floor, drawing them up to his chest.

Rei is adjusting his glasses again, agitation plain as day in the fitful movement of his fingers.

"Look," Haruka interrupts before Rei can say anything. An unexpected torrent of words spill from his mouth, all the leftover unspoken words to Makoto from their argument the other night. "Just what exactly is the problem? Nagisa's right, lots of uni students do this part-time. Nothing to tiptoe around or be ashamed about. It's not scandalous. If I had the personality, I don't see why not! And your concern, which you may think comes out of your responsibility as a friend, seems to me more like you've bought blindly into the system. It's that whole damn Todai thing again. Face and reputation, name and prestige..."

Makoto is suddenly smiling at him through pursed lips, his mind probably running through all the ways to smooth this out. Looking at all the shocked faces of his friends, Haruka realises that he might have accidentally gone too far and said too much.

"I'm not Todai," Rei mumbles, with what sounds like a tinge of shame.

"So what?" Haruka demands. "As if Tokyo Tech is anything to cry about."

Nagisa claps his hands to his ears and slumps over on the table.

"Don't sit for those exams, Nagisa," Haruka barks, like an order.

Don’t give in to the system. Don’t lose yourself.

Haruka can sense Makoto’s searching eyes trying to meet his. Why does this matter to you so much? Makoto’s expression is imploring.

Why did he suddenly decide to rally around Nagisa? Haruka isn't so sure why, though. It seems to him a question of authenticity, and maybe it has less to do with his friends than it has to do with himself. Because Haruka cannot presume to know what is going on in their lives, but he knows
what's going on in his. He knows that he's getting criticism from his profs for his work, for being deliberately obscure. He's been getting criticism for not actively trying to promote his work. And there is a part of his brain that's crying out in protest—but isn't anything good supposed to be challenging for the audience? But doesn't good work promote itself? Why is everyone obsessed with creating a brand image?

Criticism has been a bitter pill for him to swallow. Back in Iwatobi, everything seemed to come easy. His grades came easy and compliments came easy. Always such a beautiful swimmer, always such beautiful art. Reality seemed unnecessary.

***

The fuck is going on, Makoto?!?!!

Okay, sorry for swearing. But still! What on earth? Why is Rei suddenly emailing me about emotional turmoil and how he feels like the shittiest boyfriend on earth but it is too late now or whatever. WHAT IS IT TOO LATE FOR. It was not a coherent email, Makoto. I am deeply concerned. I look to you as my beacon of clarity so please tell me what's going on.

What's this about Nagisa running away? Did Nagisa really run away? Fuck I feel like a useless friend being so many millions of metres away. (Heh heh look I'm using the SI unit—Rei should be proud) WHERE THE HELL IS NAGISA. I called his phone like five times. Is he still on the same number?

p.s. any update on the Gou situation? As you may know, she just celebrated her nineteenth birthday so I'm wondering if she has any gifts from this mysterious suitor.

***

It is three in the morning when Nagisa rings him.

"Haru-chan! I knew you'd still be awake at this hour, thank goodness. What happened? Why do I have so many missed calls? I even have some weird number calling me." Nagisa's voice sounds strained, and hoarse.

"Nagisa, where are you right now?" Haruka enunciates emphatically, phone wedged in between his ear and his shoulder. It bothers him slightly that Nagisa knows about his sleeping patterns but he decides not to dwell on it. He has a habit of doing his work in the dining area outside the bedroom because he works so late into the night, so much so that the whole kitchen looks more like a workshop than anything else.

"Oh, at a hotel? Don't tell the others."

"I won't. What are you doing there?" Haruka puts his stylus down and takes his hand off the drawing tablet, shaking it to relax the tensed muscles. Next to his laptop and tablet is a vast array of Copic markers, ink pots, brushes, pencils, erasers, all laid atop a cutting mat with his trusty X-Acto blade shining by the side. The cutting mat is still peppered with residual woodblock shavings, left over from a printmaking assignment.

Makoto is sleeping in the bedroom. With an early schedule and a full day of work, it's actually possible for them to go days with barely a few sentences exchanged even though they share the same one-room apartment. Despite training and university Makoto still finds the capacity to tutor part-time at a fairly sought-after juku, which is neat enough as competitive swimming is ridiculously expensive.
Sure, there are occasional grants from the government or some sporting body, and Makoto does have some sponsorship deals but that doesn't quite cover day-to-day living costs. When they first started out it was incredibly tough, but with some reward money under the belt their living conditions have improved. When they first came to Tokyo they rented this unbelievably dingy room, just a single, tiny room with a tatami floor and terrible ventilation, with no bathroom, no cooking, and a toilet shared by the entire building.

Haruka is extremely fond of the current apartment. It suits their needs at the moment, having a main room for living and sleeping, a bathroom with a designated area for laundry, a separate WC, and a kitchen/dining area that is Haruka's main workspace. It's a little roomier than similar apartments of this type, so they allowed themselves the luxury of two cats.

"Ah, Haru-chan, I'm not really supposed to tell you what I'm doing either. I signed these non-disclosure contract-y clauses that say I'm not allowed to."

"I need to check if you're okay," Haruka says, feeling responsible for making Nagisa skip his exams.

"Eh, if you call having my hands covered in blood and having screamed my voice raw okay, then yes. But shh! I wasn't supposed to say anything. Oh, I need to go. Bye."

"Hold up, Nagisa--meet me for coffee when you're back in Tokyo, okay?"

"Yes, of course, Haru-chan!"

Haruka puts down the phone, slightly bemused. Saba is sleeping atop the scanner under his desk, so he rests his feet on the cat and massages his toes into the fur.

***

"Rei, thank you for agreeing to run with me," Haruka says.

"Not a problem at all," Rei replies. "Now, about the Tokyo Marathon, in the year of Heisei twenty-five it became the first of the six annual World Marathon Masters. The others, which Haruka-senpai may have heard of, take place in major cities such as Boston, London, Berlin, Chicago and New York, in that order. The race is run every February, or later this month. An entry spot to the Tokyo Marathon is decided by a lottery system, as the ratio of applications to the allowed number of participants is over ten to one. The marathon starts at the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building. Today, I have planned for Haruka-senpai to attempt the ten-kilometre course, ending in Hibiya Park, as a relaxed introduction to running. As we set off, please pay attention to your foot strike. Avoid landing on the heel, as it is optimal to run with the least musculoskeletal stress to your system with the least metabolic cost possible. To achieve this ideal form, the stride should be shortened and the foot brought closer in order to ensure that footfalls strike mid-foot—as close as possible to the body's natural landing when shoes are not worn."

They set off on the pavement, dodging pedestrians where they can. The actual marathon is run on the roads, specially closed for the event, but it's not something they should try to replicate now in the buzzy weekend city traffic.

"My shoes may be ugly," Rei apologises, pushing his prescription sunglasses up the bridge of his nose out of habit even though his sunglasses are already snug, "but they make my running technique beautiful." Rei has on his feet these five-toed shoes designed to be as close to barefoot running as possible. They are indeed visually appalling monstrosities of footwear, Haruka silently notes.

At around the two kilometre mark, Haruka starts to feel out of breath and completely parched, and
having already drained the one-litre water bottle he brought, he leaves Rei to go into a convenience store to purchase a drink.

"What are you doing?" Rei exclaims, jogging into the store after him as Haruka is surveying the shelves for the largest bottle of water. The bottle he'd brought was completely insufficient. If milk can come in two-litre jugs, why not water? Haruka ponders.

"You mustn't stop, Haruka-senpai! You'll lose rhythm!" Rei continues, sounding vaguely frantic. As he reprimands Haruka, he is jogging diligently on the spot, left and right leg alternating in backward kicks. There is so much bounce in the way Rei does it that Haruka doesn't know how to tell him in a polite manner that he looks way too prissy for his own good, although he has a feeling it will only incite Rei to pontificate about how his running style is the correct application of technique to reduce the chance of injury and so on.

"I'm tired, I give up," Haruka states, hoping it will chase Rei away. "I need water."

"You can have water, sure, but don't stop! Come on, Haruka-senpai!" Rei is practically dragging him out of the store.

"I'm sorry I'm not fit anymore," Haruka complains, adding a bottle of Pocket Sweat to the one-litre bottle of water he settled on purchasing at the checkout. "As a design student I'm holed up in front of my computer all the time and I've lost the stamina for this, okay? Makoto does all the exercise for me now." When he thinks about it, it actually is quite frightening how little exercise he's managed over the last couple of years.

"What happened to your cycling job? I thought that kept you in shape?"

Haruka bristles indignantly. *That is not the same. A job is a job. "Cycling doesn't feel as exhausting as this."*

Rei brings out his phone, checking it with a few flicks of the fingers. He is jogging ahead of Haruka because Haruka is struggling to keep up the pace. Haruka's been getting so many disapproving glances from passers-by for the way he's been downing his bottle of water on the move that he has no choice but to stop and drink in the little alleyways between buildings. After some time, sensing the widening gap, Rei turns around to face him and backtracks, legs still kicking in that odd cheerleader-aerobics style.

"Haruka-senpai!" he beseeches. "Stop drinking so much water or you'll puke! Look, if we turn down this way we can get to Jingu Gaien. Let's end our run there. Just another two kilometres. You can do it! Ganbatte!"

Rei snatches the bottle of water from him and begins to tear away, so Haruka has no choice but to run after him in pursuit. They take a right turn down a smaller road, with Rei occasionally bringing out his phone to check for location.

Haruka settles into single file behind Rei, trying to keep a reasonable distance but also trying not to let the distance between them get too large. At first, Rei persists in stopping to wait for him but then Haruka insists that Rei keep a safe distance away if he doesn't want Haruka to get disagreeable with him.

It makes Haruka uncomfortable to think about how he must be inconveniencing Rei by being difficult, but he also wishes that he was slow enough for Rei to let him abandon the run entirely. Regret sets in like the burn of lactic acid in the muscle soreness that will surely follow by next morning.
Plodding on, they run past several crummy old buildings. "Oh," Rei remarks suddenly, with a gasp. This must be Keio's School of Medicine!"

"So?"

"Nothing much. Just surprised the buildings look a bit old given how they're supposed to be one of the top schools for medicine in Japan."

"Maybe the inside is a whole different world," Haruka states like it’s obvious fact even though he has never seen the inside of these buildings.

"Of course, of course." Rei taps his chin in consideration.

Eventually they get to Jingu Gaien through an underpass. The floodlights of the national stadium rise above the tall spires of the trees to greet them. There are several sporting arenas in the area, and they sit like giant saucers on the winter-brown ground, solid monuments so proudly the work of humans, artificial sweeping curves of grey overlapping half the sky, against and above the wispy, ephemeral nature it was built on.

"Doesn't this fill one with a sense of the epic?" Rei asks, eyes cast towards the national stadium. The stadium was where the first Tokyo Olympics were held and will play host to the next iteration in three years. Outside the stadium, there is already a countdown clock blinking in large orange numbers. There is an odd lurching in Haruka's belly at the thought of the Olympics, but he tries to pretend to himself that it's just stitches from the running.

They jog around the Meiji Memorial Picture Gallery to reach the ginkgo avenue, where the trees are bare-branched with nothing but nubs that will spring with green in a few months.

"Look there! Isn't that—isn't that Gou-san? And whatshisname," Rei starts out with an exclamation but his voice trails off as he tries to recall the name he forgot.

"Mikoshiba," Haruka supplies. He squints at them from a distance. Their figures are bright against the background, Mikoshiba's shock of hair like a high-visibility helmet. They do not appear to be touching, but they are smiling at each other. They are standing at what seems like a normal friendly distance—making it impossible to infer anything.

"Do you think we should go up and say hi? Oh no, they're turning around, quick, hide before they see us!" Rei drags him behind the skeletal trunk of a winter-stripped tree.

"Hey!" Mikoshiba calls out, jogging over. The tree trunk is entirely inadequate cover for subterfuge. "How are you doing? We haven't seen each other in years. Fancy bumping into you here!" he continues in a perky voice. It is precisely because they haven't seen each other in years that Haruka feels irritated that Mikoshiba is acting so friendly.

Gou strolls over at her own leisurely pace, and greets them as she nears. "Rei-kun, not sure if I should be telling you this, but Nagisa-kun's back and he's crashing at my place."

The expression on Rei's face falls, and he doesn't say anything in reply.

"What happened?" Mikoshiba asks blithely. Haruka feels a stab of annoyance at his intrusion. Mikoshiba isn't part of their circle and doesn't really need to know about their private affairs. And doesn't he know it is poor manners to pry about such things?

"Nagisa-kun ran away when he was supposed to take his uni entrance exams. He disappeared for about two weeks, and no one heard from him except his family," Gou explains.
"I know about that," Rei huffs, to no one in particular. Ranting to himself, he continues, "I don't see how any good can come from that. What can he tell his family that he can't tell us?"

"Not sure. He just dropped by my apartment this morning and keeled over in exhaustion!"

"What! And you left him alone like that? I must see him!"

"My mum's at home with him. He looked happy. I don't think anything bad happened to him."

"Is he still angry with me?" Rei asks.

Gou shrugs apologetically. "I didn't ask him about that."

Haruka's tired legs are aching for a break, with all that standing around waiting for the conversation to finish. "I know," he suggests to Rei, piping up. "Why don't we go with Gou to her place and you wait downstairs, and I'll go up with her to check with Nagisa if he wants to see you, and if he does we'll call you up?"

"Sounds like a good plan. I'll wait with Rei-kun downstairs," Mikoshiba says. Haruka has to resist the urge to glare at him. No. No one asked you.

"Let's do that," Gou agrees.

***

When they reach Gou's apartment Nagisa is fully awake and chomping his way through a packet of chocolate-coated rectangular biscuits. He appears to be happily chatting away with Mrs Matsuoka, who is half-listening to him as she leafs through a stack of important-looking documents on her lap.

"We got some strawberry shortcake for you," Gou offers, producing a neatly-packaged box from her bag. Haruka wasn't there when this happened. Did she buy the cake with Mikoshiba? "Hope you're feeling better."

"Were you out for a run, Haru-chan?" Nagisa asks, surveying his outfit.

"Yes I was."

"Hmm, by yourself?" Nagisa's expression looks like he believes otherwise.

"I was with Rei, actually."

"Oh, where is Rei-chan then?" Nagisa unceremoniously pops open the pastry box, removes the cake with his bare hands and takes a large bite of it, whipped cream smearing across his face.

"He's actually downstairs," Haruka answers.

"Rei-kun wasn't sure if you wanted to see him. He thinks you're still angry with him," Gou explains.

Nagisa begins to laugh. "So what if I was? I don't stay angry for long! Did you say Rei-chan was downstairs?"

"Yes—" but before Gou can finish Nagisa has dashed up to the balcony to peek below.

"Rei-chan! Rei-chan!" Nagisa yells, waving his hands wildly. Haruka briefly wonders if the neighbours consider them a nuisance. "Come on up! I have something to tell you."
Gou proceeds to open the door, and they can hear Rei bounding up the stairs two at a time. There is another pair of footsteps behind him. *Is Mikoshiba coming up too?*

When Rei emerges, he pauses to collect himself at the door, adjusting his sunglasses before greeting everyone politely.

"Rei-chan! Come have a bit of cake!" Nagisa exhorts.

Rei looks like he is about to launch into a spiel but then decides to simply accept the offer of cake. Mikoshiba pops up and waves to everyone before inviting himself in.

Mrs Matsuoka greets Mikoshiba like he's a frequent visitor to this apartment. Now that is something to take note of, Haruka decides. *Am I the only one who didn't get the memo on Gou's… relationship status?*

"What do you have to tell us?" Gou asks, kneeling on the floor opposite Nagisa, resting her elbows on the table. Mikoshiba has wandered off to the kitchen to pour himself a cup of water. It is an open concept kitchen and Haruka can see Mikoshiba drinking by the sink. Mikoshiba then emerges from the kitchen with cups of water for everyone.

"I know I ran away without warning, but I couldn’t let myself regret not taking the opportunity of a lifetime. And let’s face it, I was going to fail the exams anyway."

"What is this opportunity?" There is a note of apprehension in Rei’s voice.

"I've been cast in a movie!" Nagisa announces brightly. "Okay, it's not a lead role, and I'm only a supporting character but this summer, you'll get to see me on the big screen!"

"How did this happen?" Rei asks, slightly affronted at being kept in the dark.

"Ah, well, at the host club I work at, one of my regulars is a set designer and she thought I was perfect for the role and recommended me to the casting director."

"What kind of role is this?" Rei asks with increasing suspicion. "It's not like the time you accidentally signed up to be the props guy in an adult video, is it?"

"No, this is a legit role! The movie is called er, 'The Devil's Onsen', and it's about a group of high school kids who go to an onsen for fun, but there’s something in the water that slowly turns them into zombies and then they go about terrorising the town."

"A horror film?" Rei cries. "But how will Makoto-senpai watch it?"

"Ah, er, this is why I have bought a pair of Hello Kitty earmuffs. Mako-chan can wear that in the cinema."

"Nagisa-kun, I don't think that's enough!" Rei huffs, inspecting the earmuffs that Nagisa has produced. Nagisa resumes stuffing his face with food.

"Who's the director? Is it a pure horror film, horror-exploitation, or erotic horror?" Mikoshiba asks.

Haruka has to restrain from shooting his disapproval at Mikoshiba. This sort of interest in horror films is not *proper*.

Too busy munching, Nagisa whips out a business card with the director's name and shows it to Mikoshiba, who looks suitably impressed. Nagisa gobbles up the remainder of his strawberry
shortcake, tapping the crumbs from the box into his open mouth.

"Anyway, Haru-chan, why are you suddenly going running with Rei-chan?" There is a smattering of cream on Nagisa’s face but Haruka decides it would be futile to tell him, as Nagisa reaches for the chocolate biscuits again.

"It's for an assignment. I have to research why people run marathons and what it is they feel when running."

"Oh," Nagisa says. "For a moment there I was worried Haru-chan had turned into a land animal. How does it compare to what you feel about swimming?"

"It's totally different," Rei answers for him. "Running a marathon is inherently masochistic. It's not a sensual experience. The farther you run the more you approach this threshold of nothingness, where the mind becomes a blank and you are pushing the brink of consciousness itself. Pain is an inherent part of the run, until you transcend it. It's the transcendence that draws people back to long-distance running, the feeling of nothingness. In running, everything comes from the self—the motivation, the propelling force. Swimming, on the other hand, has entirely different connotations. The water has long been associated with sensuality, and the interplay of the body with the density of water is what drives movement. Pure force isn't effective and may slow you down. It's about knowing how to position oneself in the best way to minimise resistance. The water will always win in the end, but you can learn to work with it."

Haruka listens intently, recording the words into his memory. Rei got it just about right with swimming. Now he just has to parse what Rei said about running back to his prof. Given what Rei said, Haruka is admittedly puzzled as to where the beauty in running is. Maybe that's why Rei preferred the field part of track and field.

"I guess I have to agree." Mikoshiba says. "I'm actually doing the Tokyo Marathon in a few weeks."

"How did you get in?" Rei asks, reaching across the table to grab the packet of chocolate biscuits Nagisa has abandoned for cake. Haruka sees that they're Tim Tams.

"Finally got lucky I guess. I've applied every year I was here," Mikoshiba replies.

"Didn't know you did marathons too, besides swimming," Rei responds.

"It's a newish thing. I'm hoping to move on to triathlons at some point!"

Haruka wonders if might have to corner Mikoshiba into an interview too.

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"Why didn't you just tell us exactly what you were doing?" Rei asks Nagisa as they leave Gou’s apartment. Haruka asked to borrow Gou's shower so Rei chose to make a move first because Haruka will take at least an hour to get out, and Nagisa decided to leave with him. "It would have made things so much easier."

"I didn't want all of you to stop me."

"Why? I don't think we would have."

Nagisa shakes his head. "Maybe I would have been too afraid to go myself, if I saw all of my friends sending me off."
"Why did you tell your family though? Were they okay with it?" All of Nagisa's sisters have been to university and Nagisa's parents were fully expecting him to do the same, having put aside family funds for this very purpose, as is typical of middle-class families.

Nagisa laughs, a big, rounded laugh. "Which part of my family would ever be okay with it? Maybe my second sister, but you know how the rest are like."

"I can't see how it makes sense for them to know."

"But I had to tell them, didn't I, Rei-chan. They said they would cut off all financial support if I didn't get into university. So that was my notice to them. They can save the money."

"Is that wise, Nagisa-kun? What if you need to go back to them someday? When they first let you move to Tokyo with us I think it was because they were persuaded that our influence over you would make you prepare for the exams."

"Why do you think I've been working so hard, Rei-chan? I've got enough savings in my bank to last for a while. And if that runs out, I just hope circumstances will have changed."

"...If your savings run out there's always me," Rei says, lifting a hand to adjust his glasses.

"Bullshit, Rei-chan, you're here on your parents' money and it won't be years till you get a job."

"I work during the holidays!" Rei protests.

"To put it bluntly, right now, I make more money than you, Rei-chan. Much more money. Let's give this a few more years before we see how you compare." Nagisa swerves into Rei's path, effectively bringing the both of them to a halt. He grins, head tilted to a side. "So, how about I treat you to dinner tonight, and you be the family I need?"

"Nagisa-kun," Rei mutters, unable to look directly into his eyes. What is family? Scientifically speaking, it is a bunch of shared genetic traits passed down from a common ancestor. Psychologically speaking, family is a mutual emotional bond, of closeness and reliance upon each other, built on trust. Biological determinism is a dangerous thing in science, dependent on assumptions that limit the scope of exploration. The true scientific mind is always prepared to question the assumptions underlying the fundamentals. The idea that we owe a primordial debt to family may have some evolutionary basis, useful in creating a sense of obligation that preserves the survival of the species as a whole, but the idea that survival is the ultimate goal of evolution stands on shaky ground. Survival is a byproduct of evolution, as is death and extinction. Evolution is simply the exploration of every possibility, of ceaseless trial and error in the chaos of the universe, of taking your chances. So this is the chance Nagisa-kun takes.

"I'd like sushi please, if you don't mind. And afterwards, let's go to that place with the amazing strawberry parfait," Rei concludes, wrapping an arm around Nagisa's shoulders, pulling him close.

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Haruka is bored.

He has been staring at the same cluster of trigonometry questions on his textbook for the past hour or so. He started out drawing diagrams on the margins, graphs of sine and cosine waves, but, losing focus, he started to add foamy splashes to the graphs, turning them into seascape sketches. Out of fun he draws little boats being destroyed by the waves, Hokusai-style.

"Makoto."
Makoto looks up from his homework.

"Do you want to have sex?"

Makoto actually drops his pen in shock. It rolls off the table and he bends down to retrieve it but doesn't surface even after a while. Haruka can see that Makoto has his back curved over, head planted into the cushion on the tatami floor, face buried into his hands. Makoto may actually also be hyperventilating, given the spasms of his back.

"I don't see why not," Haruka continues in a plain voice, as if in the midst of a class presentation with PowerPoint slides in the background, as if class presentations are the only times he’s practised persuasion. "We’re in my house, my parents are never around, we’re in the third year of high school and we can technically be considered a couple. Plus I haven’t been able to concentrate for the past half an hour because I was getting horny."

Makoto literally emits a squeak.

"If you're not interested I'll go to the bathroom to jack myself off."

Makoto squeaks again. He pushes himself off the floor, face burning hot, hair a dishevelled mess. "But Haru...it will be our first time."

"So?"

"This isn’t how I imagined it will go."

*What did Makoto want? Music and flowers and a candlelit atmosphere?*

"This is really unromantic," Makoto comments with an awkward laugh. "Homework and tatami room and broad daylight, half-eaten fruit on the table and smell of incense in the air."

"Think of this as a trial run, Makoto," Haruka says. "You can set up your perfect atmosphere another time and I'll go with that."

"… Okay. How do you want to do this?"

Haruka shifts closer to Makoto, close enough to lean in for a kiss. It has always felt good, kissing Makoto, and it always surprises Haruka how well he fits into Makoto's body. The closest they came to sex before this was that one morning at Makoto's place after he had spent the night, when Makoto woke up with a hard on and Haruka rolled over to him like it was the most natural thing in the world, straddling him and kissing him, and the feel of Makoto's hard on pressing into his belly was the sexiest thing in the world until they heard the twins bounding down the corridor, almost certain to interrupt.

Haruka tries to recall that moment up until before the twins burst in. Kissing Makoto is always like a kind of forgetting, a forgetting of the rest of the world. Everything else, every care, every pain, every other person just slips off into the unknown, the sting of reality left outside the bubble of Makoto, Makoto, Makoto, big and strong and all-encompassing like a shield, like a fortress.

Haruka loves the way Makoto yields to his touch, skin soft under his fingers. Haruka likes the way he can tell Makoto wants this, that he's been aching for this, that he's been hoping and wishing foolishly for a day like this. Haruka is pressing into Makoto and Makoto leans backwards, propped up only by strong arms. Makoto's mouth is sweet with the taste of the half-eaten melon, like a burst of bright honey.
"So...what do we do from here?" Makoto asks, posture straightening, cupping Haruka's face with a hand.

Haruka freezes to a stop. Somehow he assumed everything would go automatically, but decisions have to be made. This sex thing is starting to be a bit more laborious than he wants it to be.

"Which way do you want to do it?" Makoto asks him. *I don't know*, Haruka wants to reply. *I've never done this before so how would I know? Nothing in the textbooks have prepared us for this.*

"You need to tell me, Haru. Sex is not a guessing game. We have to be clear on what we're doing."

"You can try fucking me, I guess."

"'I guess' is not okay, Haru. Do you know how it's supposed to go? If we try that we will need condoms, lube, and prep time."

"Why do we need condoms? I'm not going to get pregnant."

"Er," Makoto hesitates. "Well, everything I've read says you should always use a condom."

"Yeah, but that's if you have sex with multiple partners. So that sexually transmitted diseases don't spread around. Unless you've been having sex with other people I don't see how we're at any risk."

"Well," Makoto says with a smile, mild exasperation tugging at the corners of his eyes. "I don't think we should try that so soon anyway. I think we should stick to simpler things like a handjob, or..."

"Yeah let's do that," Haruka says impatiently. All this negotiation is such a bother. Why is Makoto so prepared for this? How much reading has he done beforehand, and *why?*

"Which one?" Makoto asks, puzzled. "The handjob or...the other one?"

"The other one."

"Who on who?" Makoto asks.

"You decide," Haruka nearly snaps at him. *This is so technical.* Why do they have to delve so deeply into the mechanics of the thing?

"Okay," Makoto says, a small smile creeping back onto his face. "Lie back," he continues, rearranging the cushions on the floor with an indicative pat to say Haruka should lie on them.

Haruka does as suggested and leans backwards onto the cushions, staring at the ceiling. A gentle breeze enters the room, and the lamp overhead sways in the swirling autumnal air. Makoto's face looms into his line of vision again.

"Don't be angry with me, Haru," Makoto says with an obliging smile, proving he can still read Haruka's mind. "I just want to be absolutely certain you're okay with every bit of this. Communication is very important, you know."

Haruka feels like this is a thinly-veiled criticism of himself. He pushes it out of his mind, and lifts his hips off the ground so that Makoto can remove his trousers. Having gone straight to Haruka's house after school, they both still have their school uniforms on.

He can hear Makoto warming up his hands, spitting into them and rubbing them together, and he can hear Makoto tell him that he's about to go down on him.
When he feels Makoto on him, hands around his cock, mouth gingerly sucking at his tip, Haruka accidentally lets out a gasp and bucks his hips. Out of embarrassment he throws an arm across his face so that he can hide behind it. Maybe, maybe, Makoto is right because this is so different from all the solitary bathroom jerkoffs. It feels like—it feels like Haruka cannot tell where things are coming from. He cannot tell what the next move will be, and the thought is seriously terrifying.

"Makoto," Haruka calls out, in between heavy breaths.

"Yes?" Makoto replies, and it feels such a relief to hear his voice.

"Um, keep going," Haruka states, because he doesn't actually have anything he means to say. He just wants to hear Makoto's voice.

Haruka lets Makoto do his job, and lets himself wince so that Makoto knows when he's accidentally putting a bit too much teeth in it. He lets Makoto breathe when it sounds like he's getting a bit too choked up on things. And then he tells Makoto that he wants to give it a go himself, when Makoto's done with him.

This is so different, Haruka realises, and I'm actually having fun, and in his mind he is bidding good riddance to the lonely days where he only had his imagination with him. Good riddance to the lonely days, thinking, yearning, hoping for someone to be for him what Makoto is to him now.

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"Haru-chan, I didn't get the chance to say this the other time but thanks for believing in me," Nagisa tells him as they settle down at a table at a cafe, clutching their drinks.

Haruka has a long black like he usually does, while Nagisa has a strawberry cream ice-blended.

"Glad you took my advice," Haruka says.

"I'm a little worried about your lack of concern when I told you my hands were covered in blood, Haru-chan," Nagisa laughs. "But I'm a simple person. I just want to do what makes me happy. And if something stops making me happy then I don't want to do it anymore."

After absorbing this silently, Haruka finally responds with, "You're not a simple person by any means, Nagisa, but that sounds like a reasonable philosophy."

"So the blood on the hands thing really doesn't bother you? Now I know who to turn to when I'm in trouble with the yakuza."

"You can explain exactly what happened if that's what you're looking for."

"Oh, Haru-chan, after my regular introduced me to the movie producers, I went for a few auditions. I skipped juku, you know? Then after some time I got a callback, and they said the studio didn't want to risk putting a no-name in the main role, so they gave me a side character! They called me down for filming for a couple of weeks, and now the whole thing is in post-production."

Haruka nods. "How was filming?" Asking these prodding questions still feel strange and new to him, but he is learning how to move a conversation along.

"Exhausting! I barely slept over an hour each day! I was napping everywhere, under tables, behind rocks, even in the graveyard we were filming at." Nagisa follows this up with a cheerful laugh.

Offer an encouraging statement. People like encouragement. "That's good. It means you're working."
"How about you, Haru-chan? Are you happy where you are?"

Haruka is loathe to reply, but there is something about Nagisa that begets honesty. "I'm not doing so well, Nagisa. I'm starting to wonder if I made the wrong choice coming here." The confession feels foreign on Haruka's tongue and he has an immediate urge to distance himself from it.

"Why? What happened, Haru-chan?" Nagisa is peering into him with such large eyes it's like a dam has broken within Haruka. The words spill over like a gush of water, like a river bursting forth with everything within it, everything ugly and everything alive, the fish, the stones, the broken twigs and the fallen bones.

"I'm not sure I'm cut out for design," Haruka pours out. "I'm not getting good feedback in my work and there are so many group assignments and you know my feelings about groupwork. It's such an inefficient way of working. I figured out that the time we spend waiting around for someone else to get stuff done is more than the time we spend getting things done."

"Oh Haru-chan, and we used to be a team," Nagisa tuts. "Are people saying nasty things about your work?"

"No, not really. I just." Haruka looks to the side, away from the table. "I suck at taking criticism."

Nagisa bursts into laughter. "Glad you know that, Haru-chan!"

Haruka is a little taken aback. He knows Nagisa means this as a joke but is it possible that all his life, he has been emotionally coddled and his friends have withheld criticism from him? What do they truly think about me that they don't let me know?

Nagisa is staring right through him, bulging eyes almost like a tunnel bore.

"Don't be so shocked, Haru-chan," Nagisa reassures, with an exaggerated pat to his shoulder. Haruka instantly recoils. He resents the insinuation that he is visibly shocked when he's always thought himself able to keep his composure. "No one is ever good at taking criticism. No one. It always feels like a betrayal of yourself, because it's your own work that's up for criticism. The trick is to realise all work is a two-way conversation and you just have to get used to it. The idea that you can produce a finished work is rubbish. Nothing's ever finished, you just let deadlines dictate how much you get to do with it."

Haruka does not manage to form a reply, feeling so much like he wants to crawl back into the hole where he came from. Sensing his silence, Nagisa takes the opportunity to continue.

"The important thing you must be able to do is to realise it's about the work," he says in earnest. "I hope Haru-chan did not suffer from personal attacks? When someone levels a personal attack, the only thing to do is shut them out. Haru-chan does not need mean people in his life, ever. This is the first rule. You just deal with the people who are there to improve your work. Because, you know, Haru-chan... no matter how good a person is, there's always one thing everyone lacks—distance from themselves. We always need someone to provide that outside view of things so we don't get caught up or lost in ourselves. This is the second rule, Haru-chan."

As he speaks Nagisa's grin light up his eyes—always so clear, always so free from self-deception, always so excruciating to meet directly. It is as if Nagisa has nurtured a wisdom that lies deep beneath his youthful exterior, and it is as if Nagisa is himself afraid of this wise old soul as he immediately tempers his speech with frivolity. "I speak from my own experience, of course. Every day when I wake up, I practice my acting faces in front of the mirror. I might do a look, which is supposed to be an innocent, how-can-you-hurt-me sort of puppy face" —he demonstrates it to Haruka— "and I'll think it's the cutest, most perfect face and I want to do that as much as I can, but
then I'll go on set and the director will scream at me for reading the scene wrong because I'm supposed to be the devious-type shota."

"Do you get that often?"

"What? Devious-type shota?"

"No, criticism."

"Not enough, Haru-chan, not enough. If you want to get really good at something, you gotta let all that criticism slam you in the face, then you pick up the shattered pieces of your ego and throw it in the bin where it belongs. Your ego has nothing to do with the quality of your work."

Nagisa is speaking in general terms but why does the whole conversation feel like an attack on Haruka’s person? Why does it hit so hard, so close to home? Those words prove true—something is shattering in Haruka. It is his conception of himself. It is the idea, from the childhood susurrations of teachers and friends, that he is special.

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_There’s an old saying my late grandma taught me. At ten, you’re called a prodigy, at fifteen a genius. One you hit twenty, you’re just an ordinary person._

_Right on schedule, Grandma._

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"Aki, I want you to be completely honest with me about my work."

It's the start of a new term and for one of his units, Haruka's enrolled in the same subject as Aki, _Traditional Animation Techniques_.

Aki stares at him with a small frown. Sometimes, she looks a bit too much like Makoto when she does that. "If you say so, Haruka."

"No, I mean like, completely honest. Devastatingly honest. I want to get better in my work." Haruka is practically emanating determination—his hands are curled into tight fists as he rearranges his pencils on the desk.

"…Did something happen to you last term?"

"Well—kind of. I didn't do as well as I hoped."

"Oh no. I'm so sorry to hear that!"

"That's okay. I have resolved to do better this time."

"If you don't mind me asking, what did you get?"

"Oh, well, it didn't affect my GPA that badly, but it was a shock to get my first B."

A smile strains across Aki's face. "Oh," she couldn't help saying. "I guess that's bad for you, huh?"

It's not the sort of question Haruka has an answer for so he looks down at his drawing pad. _The lesson's about to start anyway._
Argh!!!!!!!! I don't know where to begin, Makoto. I'm so sorry you have to deal with this. I mean, it's not all that surprising but then it just really sucks when it happens. Those things, you know?

I don't even know if I have an answer for what you can do to help your sister. It's like, if anyone told my sister that she shouldn't do something because it was for boys only my mum would jump on their asses SO BAD, if Gou isn't already on it herself. And I'll be cheerleading in the background.

✿

(.toUpperCase():

It's just worse when a teacher does it?! Yeah like obvious much, but to young kids it's the only world they know. Have your parents done anything? I totally get your worry that your parents will say that the teacher is right. It's just like, this Asian thing. Actually, fuck Confucianism, man, Confucianism is the source of all problems with Asian societies now. The only reason why it became the dominant ideology is because it provides the framework for the state control of individual behaviour and because of that it caused all this damn rigidity.

So I asked my friend, and she said that short of causing an infernal shitstorm you just have to BE that positive influence for your sister. Which may be a bit hard because you're a dude and we have this male privilege thing in the way. But issues of privilege should be addressed on a systemic level and on an individual basis you just have to be mindful of its effect but pointing that out to others yourself is a no-no because that brings you close to indulgent wankerdom.

Anyway!! Yes we only have vague, mostly theoretical advice to offer you. It's hard because we're not in a position to dictate things to our elders, and I need you to tell me more about how your parents are dealing with this, but meanwhile I dunno, just call them and really plead Ran's case, you know? Tell them how much she loves soccer, and maybe own up to your influence in this a little, to take the heat off her. Like, let them blame you for showing her Lionel Messi videos on YouTube. But make sure she hears none of that.

Is Ren feeling embarrassed about having his sister on the same soccer team? You need to get him on Ran's side, stat.

Be strong, Makoto!!! And tell Ran we always knew she was strong enough for all this. She has my full support! She has Naf's support too! (Naf is the name of the friend I told you about--think I never got round to mentioning her name, whoops.)

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Haruka pulls out a chair at the Starbucks in Harajuku and slips into the seat. Across from him sits Mikoshiba, and Haruka offers him perfunctory thanks for his time, as good manners demanded of the situation. With that attempt at common courtesy cleared, he goes straight to the topic of the marathon.

"Not a problem, always nice to catch some daylight when I can. The marathon went great, I came in well under my target time." They have a window seat and Mikoshiba is tapping his fingers idly on a book he's put on the table. The title is obscured by his hands.

"Was Gou there?" Haruka asks, taking a sip from his long black.

"Why do you ask? Yes, she was there, to look at muscles."

"Are the two of you dating?"

"No." Such a quick reply. Either Mikoshiba is supremely confident or he's hiding something.
"Gou's my friend. I need to look out for her," Haruka presses, as if his point is obvious.

"Did her brother hire you to stalk me?"

"I have nothing to do with her brother." Haruka's reply is knee-jerk reflexive.

Mikoshiba sits back into his chair, and sips at his hojicha tea latte. The shopping crowd outside the cafe buzzes innocuously. "There's no way we're dating—why would you make such an assumption?" Mikoshiba's eyes narrow above the rim of his mug, eyes fixed on Haruka. "If it helps put your suspicion to rest, I just broke up with my ex and I'm still recovering."

Haruka frowns. \textit{Just broke up}? The idea that Gou might be a rebound is filling him with dread. "I just need to check that nothing untoward is happening to Gou."

"I hope not. We don't actually interact that often."

Haruka eyes Mikoshiba warily. Either Mikoshiba is conjuring some really bold lies, or...what? Why is the situation so infuriatingly hard to read?

"I just happen to see her a lot, but we mostly lead parallel lives. I used to stay in Ikebukuro and that's when I started bumping into her all the time."

"And what happened from there?"

"Nothing much. She made the suggestion that we should swap houses because she was in Ikebukuro so often—which is not a very practical suggestion as her apartment's so much nicer than mine—but anyway, I am allowed to snooze on the couch at her place after work. It was very kind of her since I'm mostly off work in the day anyway, so there's no one at home to disturb my sleep."

"You said you used to stay in Ikebukuro. Did you move?"

"Oh, the apartment's still around. I go back once every"—at this point Mikoshiba uses his fingers to count—"four or five days. So it's like I hardly stay there."

The whole thing sounds extremely fishy to Haruka. "What...do you do? Why don't you need to go home?"

"I'm doing my medical clerkship," Mikoshiba says, eyebrows raised to the highest they can go at his surprise interrogation. "It's been the worst year of my life."

Haruka doesn't know how to continue. He has no interest in what Mikoshiba does for a living. "Let's talk about running," he suggests instead.

"Yes, I think that's what we were here for. I brought a book for you."

It's Murakami Haruki: What I Talk About When I Talk About Running. Haruka wonders to himself, \textit{what are the kinds of guys who read Murakami? A medical student who finds the time to read? It must be to get the girls.}

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"So I really don't get this Mikoshiba guy. He's like not-dating Gou but he's hanging around her all the time," Haruka says, settling on the sleeper couch next to Makoto. "Worse still, he's totally on the rebound."

Makoto nearly drops his laptop onto the floor with shock, which sends Hamachi scurrying away
from his lap. After a flurry of motion in which he manages to save his laptop, he uses both hands to bend the screen back to the correct angle.

"What? What did you say? Why did you suddenly bring up this topic?" As Makoto speaks, he is typing rapidly at the keyboard, occasionally pausing to adjust his black-framed eyeglasses and to read over whatever he just typed.

"Calm down, Makoto. I asked Mikoshiba out for coffee today to ask him about running. But mostly I ended up asking him about Gou."

"Oh, right, you told me he entered the Tokyo Marathon. So are they really dating?" Makoto has this really noisy, heavy-handed two-fingered way of typing.

"Impossible to tell. It all hinges on your definition. Anyway, any news on Ran?"

Makoto stops typing, chews his lip in hesitation, and makes a face. "The school says they'll let Ran play till end of term. Never mind that she's top in assists for their league and third top scorer. Actually, scratch that, even if she were the worst player on the team they have no right kicking her off for a reason like that." Makoto's fervent gesturing ends in an upturned hand, flung out hard for emphasis.

"No!" Haruka doesn't know what else to say, except that this feels so inherently wrong to him. "No!" he exclaims again, allowing himself unnecessary repetition, because he is that fond of the twins.

"Are your parents pressuring the school on this?" Haruka finally says, when he's strung together the words.

Makoto shakes his head meekly. "I called the coach. That's how I got him to let her stay on for the term but I think my mum is going to tell Ran to give up on it anyway."

"No!" Haruka says again. That's not allowed to happen! "Give me your phone," he snaps at Makoto.

"It's almost midnight!" Makoto says. "Are you seriously going to call them now?"

"Your mum's still awake watching doramas at this hour."

Makoto obliges, handing over the phone. Haruka enters the passcode to unlock it. Opening up the recent calls list, he sees that almost the entire screen is occupied by Makoto's family. Haruka selects the home number to dial.

"Hello Obasan. It's Haruka. Please let Ran continue to play soccer."

There is an astonished pause. Haruka can almost hear the dialogue from the television across the phone. "Oh, hello, Haru-chan. So nice to hear from you, except that it seems Mako-chan got you involved too," she tuts disapprovingly.

"No, he didn't get me involved, I got involved myself. Please let Ran play soccer."

Mrs Tachibana gave a heavy sigh. "I will consider it. You are such a sweet boy, Haru-chan."

"Don’t consider. Just do it," Haruka urges.

Mrs Tachibana gives a bemused laugh. "Bye, Haru-chan. Good night!"

Haruka ends the call. He looks at Makoto. "I feel like I wasn't taken seriously," he articulates.
"You know my mum," Makoto says, looking at him with a wistful smile.

"What?" Haruka says, uncomfortable with the way Makoto is looking at him. He doesn't appreciate feeling like he's missing out on something.

Makoto gently shuts the laptop cover, eyes averted from Haruka. He chews on his lip again, like there's something else eating at him.

"What are you not telling me, Makoto?" Haruka demands.

Makoto looks up from his laptop and shuts it decisively. "A few things, Haruka," Makoto admits, unable to look at him, fingers twisting around the corner of that wretched old blanket on the couch he refuses to throw away. "I think we should talk."

Haruka lets silence weave through them like a shuttling loom.

"Do we have to? Is it really something I need to know?" Haruka asks after a while, when the silence threatens to congeal, because he fears Makoto is going to start spilling.

"I think it is right you know," Makoto says, bringing a hand to his mouth. He presses a thumb in between his lips, wedging the thumbnail between his teeth and chews on it nervously.

Terror sinks into Haruka's heart like the biting frost, like the steely crackle of cold taking over, like the violent split of an ice shelf crumbling into the inky sea. Unwittingly, he finds himself reaching out to grab Makoto by the shoulders, fingers sinking into warm flesh.

"Do you think it's going to hurt me?" Haruka says, thinking of how Makoto falls into easy likeability everywhere he goes—how, without asking, he commands the loyalty of those around him, even when he's a country boy thrown into a city like this, a city filled with people who have everything more.

"If you think it's going to hurt me then don't you dare tell me," Haruka says, digging in, almost reeking with desperation. *I trust you more than I trust my own heart. Please don't let me know unnecessary things. Please just be all that I believe in.*

Makoto is looking like he can't even bring himself to look at Haruka all of a sudden, as he brings his legs up to sit cross-legged on the couch, legs retracting into himself, fingers clenching over the edge of the seat. Through his glasses, which have slipped low on the nose bridge, Makoto takes a quick glance at his laptop then looks away, clutching his blanket towards himself.

Out of nowhere, a stinging burn builds at the corners of Haruka's eyes. His vision is getting blurry, and his heart is hammering, his stomach so hollow, will so weak, brain a tangled mess of neuroses. "I miss home," Haruka suddenly cries, thinking of the star-strewn Iwatobi waters, the dark waves his blanket of comfort. Two years and he misses home, two years and he misses the empty old house of wood and straw, misses the scent of burnt incense in the bright of day, misses lying in his bed, misses grilling cheap cuts of mackerel on the stove. Two years and he misses the Makoto he loves, the Makoto who isn't so self-assured in school with an army of friends and the Makoto who isn't out there busy winning medals and the Makoto who will look at him without having something lodged in his heart that Haruka doesn't have access to. He misses when Ran and Ren didn't have any other troubles other than who got to sit next to their onii-chan, he misses when Obasan didn't think of him in conspiratorial terms. Should he have even moved here? Should he have even gone to university? Should he have made like Coach Sasabe and become a swim coach in a small town, delivering pineapple pizza when swimming runs out? *I am a small town boy, with a small town heart.*
There is an irrational fear that Makoto is outgrowing him, the way Makoto has outgrown clothes his whole life—sleeves too short for ever-extending arms, shoulders bursting the seams of shirts, ankles too bare with lengthening legs, trousers always threatening to fall from being tugged down too low to mask the lack of material. Could it be that Makoto’s heart is outgrowing Haruka, larger than he can grasp, heavier than Haruka can lift?

_I wonder if Makoto knew all along that the creature that lurked at the bottom of all water was me. I wonder if Makoto knows how he called this monster out to shore and tamed it, leaving it toothless in an unfamiliar world._

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Haruka returns to his prof with some sketches of how he would have modified his Tokyo Marathon assignment, because he went to all the effort of collecting interviews and illustrating from them. Prof Mishima beams at him and praises him for showing a willingness to take feedback to the next level. Haruka relates to her what Nagisa told him about criticism and they have a chat about the design process. Then she asks him to help her out at an international design conference to take place later this year and Haruka agrees.

Haruka soon finds himself attending meetings alongside Prof Mishima, and two meetings in, he starts to feel the need to have some web presence so that he doesn't feel left out when everyone exchanges contacts and business cards. He starts to feel the need to have business cards of his own, and he brings this up to Prof Mishima, who very kindly helps him through his process of establishing a visible presence.

"I'm still uncomfortable with the idea of social media," he moans to Aki during one animation class. "People are so unpredictable online. I don't like the invasion of privacy that comes with having all these other people know what's going on in your life."

"I have a blog," Aki tells him, like a confession. "It's mostly for myself, and I don't have many followers, but I feel happy posting there. It's not quite under my name and it's more for my non-official stuff, but I really like the surprise of random people liking or commenting on my stuff. I guess maybe it's because my online circle is so small every comment I get is a comment I treasure."

"What kind of comments do you get, Aki?"

"Ah, people are mostly nice to me online. Most of my commenters are actually my ex-classmates anyway, saying 'good work, Zaki-chan' or 'more of that, Zaki!' I suppose that's the good thing about having a small blog—no unsolicited criticism or trolls. That sort of stuff might kill me forever. I mean, if I wanted that, I'd turn to my profs, or you, Haruka!"

"Where's your blog?" Haruka asks. Two years in the same university and he never knew that about Aki.

"Get the link from Makoto-kun, you silly head," Aki replies with a laugh.

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_OMG I'm so sorry Makoto!!!!!!! So sorry to have made you worry like that about Gou. It's okay! It's okay! I called her in the end and she cleared things up with me. Onii-chan, she said, you should have just asked me right from the start, in Sydney, and then I felt so embarrassed."

Now I feel doubly embarrassed for having dragged you into this. Gou thinks you're very sweet though, taking her to Disneyland just to slip in some innocuous-sounding question to ask her if she
had any troubles and so on. She said you shared your Deep Secrets with her too, although she absolutely refuses to tell me anything about it. I can't imagine what problems you might have, Makoto. You're like Mr Perfect. I bet the neighbours are still talking about you and everything, and you're probably giving all the kids in Iwatobi low self-esteem with how much their parents talk about you. Heh heh, just kidding, oh god Makoto if you're going to get sad and angsty about this too I'm going to fly to Tokyo just to give you a slap on the head.

I gave a bit more thought to what you said about staying on in uni, and you know, I think it kind of makes sense for me? I'm not 100% sure yet, but since anyone who knows fuckall to do with their lives stays in school until they get a clue, I guess I'll stay on for the honours year at least. Naf tells me to remember Marx was an economist and that I should make it my mission to dismantle the system from within. I have no idea where you got the idea I'd make a good TA though, I mean, did you get it from Nitori? Ahahaha. I think he's like the only person in the world who would say that about me, which is kind of sweet, I guess. He's started his research thing in Australia and he's like, Rin-senpai! Rin-senpai! Let's meet up! And I'm like, ummmmm have you seen a map of Australia I am at the opposite end of where you are. You're closer to continental Asia than you are to Melbourne. But then Australia is like totally part of Asia these days but it's not really my place to talk about this or whatever.

Anyway. I guess I'll meet up if he really wants to. I think about what you tell me and I keep telling myself, every little social situation is better than being cooped up alone, and so far, it's still working. I think about how keeping a friendship is always worth it. I'm so glad we're friends again, just friends.

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"Hey, what's Aki's blog?" Haruka tries to ask, as nonchalantly as he can, over a ramen dinner. It's by the place near his school where students get an extra discount. They're here because Makoto decided to pick him up after class today, swinging by to wait for him with a small cluster of hand-picked flowers.

Makoto replies with the URL, and before he is done speaking, Haruka decides to whip out his phone and get Makoto to spell it out. Makoto follows up with a silly, awkward laugh, the way he does when there is more he wants to say.

"Yes?" Haruka replies, allowing Makoto to continue.

"You know, I kind of found her blog by accident, and mentioned it to her in passing. It used to have the title 'Musings of a Self-Confessed Fujoshi', and the day after I told her I found her blog, the title changed to 'Aki Loves Tofu'. I haven't told her that I know what she did."

Makoto is chuckling to himself, clearly tickled by this story. Haruka doesn't see why this is so amusing. With his chopsticks, he clips the slice of narutomaki from his ramen and slips it into his mouth, browsing Aki's blog on his phone with his other hand.

"When was this?" Haruka tries to humour Makoto by getting him to talk more.

"After she helped us move in."

Oh, Haruka thinks, but doesn't say it.

"Yeah," Makoto says. "You know, I've told you this story before."

Makoto is smiling at him like it's so cute Haruka doesn't remember. Is this supposed to remind
Haruka of his flaws? Since when did Makoto get so impudent?

"My mother called," Haruka says, changing the topic.

"What did she say?" Why does Makoto always look so interested even though he already knows—

"Same old. 'I hope you're eating well.' 'Have you found a girlfriend yet?'" Haruka looks away with resignation, resting his chin on a hand, elbow on the table.

Makoto shakes his head, still smiling. "Are your parents really gonna sell your house?"

Of all the topics, Makoto has to bring up this one. "No buyers yet." Luckily enough.

After dinner, they head to the supermarket on Haruka's insistence: always visit the supermarket near closing time for the best discounts. Makoto laughs at him for having such a housewife mindset, and facetiously complains that Haruka never lets himself receive a treat, and Haruka gets huffy at Makoto. You brought me to that fancy restaurant that time you got your Olympics reward money and we both hated it, remember? We're country boys, simple things are good enough for us.

***

Rain pours down in sheets of water, heavy and thunderous on the bus stop shelter. A chilly spring wind blows across the street, and the rain visibly slants from the force of the wind. Right now, Haruka's canvas shoes are getting soaked through. Sitting down before the seats get wet, he slips his feet out of his shoes and dangles them in the air with his toes.

"Are we still waiting for the guest of honour to arrive?" Izumi Takashi moans. Izumi is a fellow third-year illustration student on hi-bye terms with Haruka. The quality of his work has improved since first year in figure drawing class, so he is fairly acceptable to have in the group.

"Don't be so hard on Hiroko-san," Aki says, as she fishes a folding umbrella out of her bag, opening it with one violent motion. Kurokawa Hiroko is one of Aki's friends in school, hoping to major in digital animation. Haruka checked online for samples of her work and he was admittedly impressed. Although if she keeps up with this tardiness Haruka might lose patience.

"If Kurokawa-san has a habit of being late, we should tell her to meet us thirty minutes before," Haruka suggests, the solution seemingly elegant in his mind.

"Sorry, Haruka," Aki replies from under her umbrella, held sideways to prevent splashes from the road.

"Some hot tea would be nice," Izumi says, scooting down next to Haruka, as if that would make the waiting okay. Haruka is thinking that they should get on the next bus to Izumi's apartment where they can begin work on the group assignment and have Kurokawa meet them straight there.

"Say, Nanase," Izumi continues. "Where are you from? I see you in class all the time but we haven't gotten around to introducing ourselves. I'm from Yokohama, so I try to go home as much as I can to see my parents."

"Not turning up at the doorstep with a gift of unwashed laundry, are you, Takashi-san?" Aki interrupts, voice full of laughter.

Izumi laughs too, taking it in the spirit it was meant. "So where are you from, Nanase?"

It's not a question Haruka likes to answer. It always feels a bit embarrassing having to explain where
exactly his town is located—that is how small it is. "Iwatobi town, in Chugoku. It's near Tottori city."

"Oh, I've heard of that!" Izumi exclaims. "I have a cousin who has a friend who met someone from there on a hiking trip or something. Have you heard of the Legend of the Iwatobi Town Stripper?"

"No," Aki says. "What's that about? I've never heard of it my entire life and I lived there until I was fourteen!"

"It's a recent thing. Legend has it that there is this man—a young man, some say, but others say an adult man—who goes around stripping at random, right in front of children and in sensitive public areas. No one knows why he does it, but what is extraordinary is the speed at which this man takes off his clothes. There's no stopping him."

"Never heard anything like it." Haruka insists. This is ridiculous.

"What does he do though, besides stripping? Is he a flasher? Does he touch himself in public?" Aki is taking an extraordinary amount of interest in this.

"Shouldn't be anything harmful, I guess. He's done it so often the authorities have decided to ignore all calls about him. But imagine if you were just sitting around enjoying your day and some guy suddenly decides to start stripping in front of you."

Aki begins with a laugh, but then stops herself and says, "But in a way, I feel bad for this guy? It probably isn't very good for us to make fun of him because it must be a real mental illness."

"Was he hot though?" Kurokawa's finally arrived and this is the first thing she says. "I mean, if he was hot I wouldn't mind all that stripping. They should turn it into a tourist attraction."

"Hiroko-san, I think that sort of thing already exists in many places." Izumi says.

"And I'm sure you've been to many of those."

"Never! I am a decent guy!"

Haruka clears his throat. "Shall we get going?" he asks, standing up. The conversation needs to move away from this topic.

"Bus isn't here yet," Kurokawa points out. There's something about her bluntness that's rubbing Haruka the wrong way.

Haruka grudgingly lowers himself back into the seat. Given how late Kurokawa was they could have walked towards Izumi's place and still have reached before she arrived. With nothing else to do, he stares into the distance, watching the rain splash into puddles.

"Gorgeous, isn't it?" Haruka hears Kurokawa say. Who is she talking to? He turns to look at her, and he sees that she's just commenting out loud. Kurokawa is looking up at the transparent bus shelter roof and observing the patter of rain through it. It looks like they're under a pool without getting wet, the grey sky almost silver with pale light refracting off the ripples, raindrops falling like a dancer's feet, splashing out in leaps and bounds, rippling out in concentric circles like a tranquil, Zen art form.

"Wow," both Aki and Izumi say, necks craned upwards towards the waterlogged bus shelter roof. They stay like this for a while, the four of them, in silence, observing the rain. All four are absorbed in the beauty of this random moment and they almost fail to notice their bus wooshing up. They end
up having to chase after the bus for twenty metres in the rain until the driver decides to stop for them, and, dripping wet, finally board the bus. Aki and Izumi and Kurokawa are nearly falling over themselves with laughter at the absurdity of the situation, of people so engrossed in the beauty of nature’s little things they forget to get on with life’s necessities like catching a bus to get somewhere. Most people have it the other way around, Izumi says. Most people are so busy trying to catch a bus they forget how pretty the rain is.

"Must be a design student thing," Izumi concludes, and it's weird because for the most of his life Haruka thought he was the only one who did stuff like that. It's weird to see some trait he holds unique to himself repeat in other people, like they're of the same kind. There is, at the same time, a sense of belonging and a sense of loss. But this is how discovery works—delight for the new and a mourning for the innocence that will never be regained, Haruka realises, and when he gets used to the feeling he decides he likes it after all. Maybe this time, group work will be different.

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"Makoto. Come here." The words slip like a command from Haruka's mouth, harsher than he means for them to sound.

Makoto unfurls his legs, which were crossed like wings atop his creaky secondhand wheelie chair. He slips on his bedroom slippers and shuffles over to where Haruka is sprawled on the couch, yawning with a rub of his tired eyes and a push of his glasses up the nose bridge. He picks Saba up to clear a space on the couch, and sits down holding the cat on his lap.

"Can you help me translate this?" Haruka points at an email open on his laptop screen. The email is written in English so Haruka figures that Makoto will do a quicker job of deciphering it for him than if he tries it himself. Back in high school, they were both equally bad at English but since Makoto got into the University of Tokyo where he has acquired a legion of friends, Haruka also figures that hanging out with all those exchange students must have vastly improved Makoto's English.

At mealtimes and shared moments Makoto seems to enjoy regaling Haruka with tales about his numerous friends, from all around Japan and all over the globe. The previous time Haruka sneaked a peek at Makoto’s Facebook profile (of course Makoto has one, and of course Haruka doesn’t) he saw that the friends count had jumped again, and there was some Italian girl called Francesca inviting Makoto to visit her in Italy anytime.

"It's not hard," Makoto told him then, about communicating with gaijin. "You just have to use whatever word they can understand and figuring out what they mean is part of the fun of becoming friends."

"So, about this email," Makoto says, squinting as he tries to translate and summarise, stroking Saba idly on the head. "It's the editor of a surfing magazine and they saw your sea-inspired illustration featured on a design website and I think they want to put your work in their magazine. Something like that."

Haruka peers at the email. That's what he thought when he scanned through it briefly. He just wanted Makoto to confirm it for him.

"Haru-chan's getting recognition," Makoto says excitedly, squeezing his shoulders. Haruka responds with a series of incoherent grunts in protest, so Makoto kneads and massages his shoulders in a bid to get Haruka more relaxed.

"Go away," Haruka complains, and Makoto leans in to kiss him on the cheek before he lets Saba go and scampers back to his own laptop. Haruka can see him open the website the magazine editor
mentioned, the one featuring his artwork. The idea that there are so many pairs of eyes around the world looking at his work is too overwhelming.

*I blame Aki for this,* Haruka thinks to himself automatically. *It's all Aki's fault for making me set up some account on some silly website in order to put my work out there.*

Makoto has a wide smile on his face as he scrolls through the pages of Haruka's work, clicking on link after link. "*Your sea monster series really blew up on the Internet, huh?*" Makoto comments, finger rubbing the bottom of his chin. "*Maybe everyone sees a bit of themselves in there.*"

*And it's a good thing.* Haruka has to arrest the flow of negative thinking in his brain and redirect them. He neglects to do this more often than he should, too easily returning to the comfort of his old thought patterns. *It's a good thing people want to see my work. Aki's a great friend for making me do this.*

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*The liminal space is a space of transition, the threshold where boundaries dissolve. It is in these spaces where we uncover our true selves, where our minds open and where we encounter new thoughts and new ideas. Public transport can therefore be seen as the liminal space of urban geography, the gap between departure and arrivals where we transit between home and work, work and play, comfort and discomfort. In a metropolis such as Tokyo where living space is scarce and daily schedules punishing, the time we spend on public transport becomes the only real time we have to ourselves. It is in this time, suspended between places of personal obligation, that intimate flashes of our private sides occasionally break through the walls we have put up around ourselves. In this series of photographs taken on the Tokyo metropolitan public transport system, I hope to capture these human moments, the moments where boundaries of social custom dissolve.*

Haruka is looking at a photo of himself. It's not just a photo of himself, but of himself leaning on Makoto's shoulder, eyes closed, having fallen asleep. Aki took this photo that day they decided to go watch that gig because Makoto's friend was playing bass for the band.

Aki had run the photo by them after she developed the negatives, begging them to let her use it in her photography show because it was one of her best pictures. Haruka is looking at the silver gelatin print of the black and white photograph, and is once again disturbed by how intimate the photograph is. Makoto's face is mostly obscured, and actually, Haruka's face is partially obscured too, so it's not obvious what their identities are, but the photo still feels like the most public admittance of their relationship ever. And now it's on a gallery wall, in between a photo of a high school girl putting on makeup on the Tokyo Metro, and a photo of a middle-aged man looking at some fairly explicit illustrated porn.

Sure, Haruka's best friends know about him and Makoto, and most people their age are completely fine with this sort of thing, but Haruka has never bothered to tell his parents nor does he really want to. Of all the people from an older generation, Makoto's parents are the closest to acknowledging its existence and they do it in a confused way that has its own charm. And all that aside, Haruka's a very private person and so even if it is completely socially acceptable—which it still isn't, not even in 2017—he isn't the sort to go about advertising his relationship status.

But it's Aki, and the photo does have its own artistic merit, and he's not immediately recognisable. It'll be fine, he tells himself, *and even if the whole school knows that's fine too. People who make a moral fuss out of this sort of thing aren't the sort of people you want to know anyway. And everyone who knows you and Makoto isn't surprised in the least by the fact that you're together.*

*So why is this photo so surprising to you?*
"Is that you?" Kurokawa blurts, stepping up behind Haruka. They've all decided to pop by Aki's show before the group meeting. "Didn't know your ugly mug could look so...at peace. It's a lovely photograph, mind, but no thanks to you."

Haruka has to resist the urge to frown in irritation. Dwelling on her words, he realises that Kurokawa's right, in a way. The photograph is surprising to him because it's beautiful, and he's never quite seen his relationship with Makoto as beautiful. Makoto was just always there, filling up the holes in his life like water seeping into dry sand, so deceptively effortless and yet substantial. Maybe he should ask Aki for the proofs to take home to Makoto. It's going to make him so happy.

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Yessssss!!!!!!! That's SO FUCKING AWESOME. So fucking stoked. Are you telling me you got your Amakata-sensei to raise hell to the higher-ups at MEXT so that Ran can continue kicking it with the boys? Okay, so it sounds like Ran has to form her own all-girl team so that they can play in the boys' league but um, if she ever has trouble finding teammates, I'm sure the promise of a Hot Date with her Very Hot Older Brother will do the trick, don't you think? (*=^▽^=*)

Nah, I'm sure Ran can form a team on her own. If not, just get Amakata-sensei to work her magic again. Not that I know her too well, but back when we had those joint practices all she ever did was sit around under an umbrella so I thought she was like...a vampire or something? But now I know she's awesome. Gomen, gomen, should never have doubted your Amakata-sensei. m(_ _)m Any woman who can take a sketchy swimsuit modelling past and turn it into a lesson on body shaming deserves to be the next minister of MEXT or something. Too bad it's still run by a bunch of balding old men. (´∀`)©

Also, I watched that documentary you linked to me and yeah like I dunno, it's very exciting on one hand, the rise of Asia's economic might but it's also like mehh, the place is still run by patriarchal arseholes and I don't want that sort of thing to spread, you know? And then it's also like, still capitalism. The underlying message I took away from that documentary is that Asia is one big consumption land and that's supposed to be a good thing? But it's not. Increase in consumption is not an indicator of freedom of choice. I think there is this persistent myth that capitalism comes with freedom of choice but no decision is ever made in a social vacuum and just because per capita GDP has risen in the global south doesn't mean the wealth is evenly distributed or that social freedoms have increased.

Like, there are all these defined gender-based roles that are so hard to shake off. I think about my mum, and how she wasn't working when she was married to my dad. She was fine being a housewife and letting my dad go out to work as a fisherman and it was only when he died that pure necessity made her get a job, and then she turned out to be so awesome at it she's now the Managing Director, like, the first in Japan at her bank? I asked her about the thing that people keep saying, that Asia is squandering billions by denying girls equal opportunities in the workplace, and you know, she said it's one thing to talk about putting more women in the workforce but choice and equality are so far away from this it's laughable. It's assuming that women even have a choice when the majority of people already work out of necessity, and demeanes the importance of the work of caring for the household. She said that it's more important that women get support wherever they currently are because that stuff isn't even happening, like women in lower income families need state support and women in the workplace need someone to personally look out for them because systemic, entrenched bias is making anti-discrimination laws useless. Pretty wise for a banker, don't you think? All this aside it's very weird to think about Japan's role in this, because our economic trajectory is closer to that of the Western nations and that's kind of um, downwards. And you know how pretty much all of Asia still secretly hates us for um, things. Would like to hear your thoughts on this! I know at Todai they're very into integrating ancient Eastern history but then also like, how
much of it is rekindling Asian-sphere imperialism in its own form.

Also, just the other day, Naf and I were having a discussion about codes of masculinity in Australia, and it's really changed. Like, maybe it used to be about footy and blokes and beer, but it's taken a huge turn towards the home. I dunno, maybe it's years of Better Homes and Gardens and Masterchef but the ultimate modern Aussie man is The Dad, the dad who can cook and build pizza ovens and treehouses for the family and who is great with kids. On one hand, it's kind of cool and long overdue, but on the other it's like, man, this stuff only becomes valued when men do it? That's problematic as.

I don't know. You're so fun to talk to, Makoto! Tell me more about that anarcho-feminist journalist during the Meiji your lecturer mentioned. I don't even know what I'm doing in this world sometimes, I'm kind of like, totally useless. I just swim a bit and I'm freakishly lucky that my swimming actually makes money for me, on the balance. I get sad all the time, and when I get sad I just feel like buying new shoes. And then I feel like a parody of myself when I'm like, Say No To Capitalism when I have a banker for a mum and I keep falling prey to nice shoes. Noooo consumer-capitalist paradigm noooo.

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Message beep.

Message beep.

2 new messages: Okasan

Haruka slams a hand down on his cellphone, flipping it over so he can't see the screen. After a while, he decides to chuck his sketchbook on the cellphone for good measure. It's late at night and Haruka is sculpting some figurines out of modelling clay. I don't need to be interrupted with bad news. For some reason, his group has decided to go with stop-motion animation using 3D figurines, and Haruka and Izumi are in charge of creating the characters. Kurokawa is doing the sets, and Aki is in charge of filming and lighting. The story they've come up with is a modern fable on oceanic pollution, with a character inspired by a Polynesian goddess who begat tuna from lightning. At first, they thought it was a genuine traditional story Izumi learned from his Hawaiian mother, until they found out that Izumi only heard about it from the internet. Haruka's currently making the tuna, but these aren't normal tuna. No. These are supernatural tuna which will exact revenge on ignorant beachgoers who clog the sea with plastic waste. Haruka chuckles to himself as he attaches the fins on his clay tuna.

The front door unlocks with a click, and he looks up to see Makoto come home with a wide grin plastered on his face. Makoto shakes his wet umbrella outside the door—is it raining outside?—before bringing it in and leaving it to dry on the kitchen tiles before stumbling over to the dining table to plant a huge, sopping wet kiss on Haruka’s cheek.

"Hello, Haru," Makoto greets, and no matter what state Makoto is in, Haruka's name is always soft on his tongue, like a secret prayer offering to the gods, reverent and laced with abnegation.

Makoto's breath is tinged with alcohol. That's because he was just at some "wine appreciation party" organised by some French exchange student in his Buddhist Philosophy class or something. The idea sits uncomfortably with Haruka, because him and Makoto and Aki—they're supposed to be beer people with their bargain deals on weeknights at the local izakaya. They're not wine people, full of fancy and too smoothly erudite, verging on pretension. An image of a slick, sophisticated Makoto pops up in his mind, a black turtlenecked Makoto waffling on academically about existentialism with a glass of burgundy in his hand. Ugh, I bet that's what they did at the party, Haruka thinks, although
Makoto isn't in a black turtleneck. He's in his favourite Uniqlo soft jersey blazer.

"I think I'm really developing a taste for wine," Makoto says, with a self-effacing laugh. "Thanks to Gabrielle-san I now realise that...different types of wine actually taste different. It was great because we ended up having this conversation about intoxication and moral agency...while intoxicated! Haha."

Haruka looks at his little tuna creatures. Do I have to continue this conversation? "Is this Gabrielle-san the one with really rich parents?" he asks Makoto.

Makoto immediately frowns. "No!" The reply is underscored with noticeable defensiveness. "Gabrielle-san is the one doing the comparative analysis of Kūkai and Derrida on textuality. She's totally a normal person like us from some small town near Lyon. You're probably thinking of Celine-san, the French-Vietnamese one who lives in Paris."

Haruka has never met these people and can't quite bring himself to care. He decides instead to concentrate on Makoto's face, Makoto's loose, inebriated face. Makoto can be so adorably expressive, Haruka thinks, and then he makes a mental note to use some of those expressions for his stop-motion characters.

Makoto's frown fades and the smile finds its way back. "Isn't it nice, talking like this? I love talking to you. Tell me about what you're doing, Haru."

It's Haruka's turn to frown, looking away. Makoto should know by now that all this stuff is for that group animation project with Aki.

"My fish figures are almost done," Haruka says, holding one up for Makoto, a bluefin tuna with exaggerated fins and a tiny pair of wire-frame glasses. *This is the know-it-all character who is actually a big dork, and yes, some aspects have been heavily borrowed from friends.*

"What's this one called?"

"Erm, here's the script," Haruka says, handing Makoto a sheaf of paper.

"I want you to tell me," Makoto replies, and Haruka spies, out of the corner of his eyes, Makoto dragging a chair over and sitting on it back to front. *Does Makoto get so brazenly flirtatious with just a bit of alcohol?*

"I need to work." Haruka puts the script back down on his table and returns to his pile of maguro-chans.

After a while, Haruka realises that Makoto hasn't moved and takes another quick glance backwards. Makoto has his hands folded over the back of the chair and his head tilted to one side, resting atop his crisscrossed arms. He's sleepily watching Haruka work with the most absurdly lovey-dovey face Haruka has ever seen. Haruka feels a rash comment slide up his throat, about to spew with words ugly and unkind, because that's the way he infuriatingly is and will always be, stubbornly uncomfortable with overt emotions. It's an uncontrollable reaction.

Makoto saves the moment by speaking first. "I'll read your script." His voice is saccharine and his request so gentle it almost hides the fact that he has grasped the situation perfectly and just saved himself some hurt.

Loose leaves of paper shuffle noisily and find their way into Makoto's hand. Makoto reads the computer-typed and hand-annotated words silently while Haruka returns to his work, concentration fraying. *Why does Makoto have to do this? Why does he put himself in harm's way all the time?*
"Did you come up with the story?" Makoto asks him.

"No. It was a group effort."

*Makoto's smiling at me. Makoto's always smiling at me.*

"What?" Haruka throws out the word like a spit.

"Nothing," Makoto says, smile broadening. He closes his eyes, then stretches his long arms ahead of him. "I got an email from Ama-chan-sensei the other day. One of the other teachers has to go on maternity leave so they're a bit short on people for the first years' camp this summer. She said she'll be happy if I could go as a teacher's assistant."

*Why is he telling me this?*

"Do you think I should go?" The words tumble so effortlessly out of Makoto that Haruka realises he must have rehearsed this for a long time.

Haruka doesn't want to reply. It's such a stupid thing to ask him about. "Why are you asking me, Makoto? You should go if you want to. You don't need my permission. You are your own person, you have your own interests and so on. You should stop being so wishy-washy and make your decisions on your own."

"Haru..."

"Don't 'Haru' me! Don't drag me into this! Why should what I think impact what you want?"

Makoto cannot say anything in reply, bound to silence by Haruka's outburst. *I screwed up*, Haruka realises in a flash. *I screwed up*, and the overwhelming feeling in him is a bubbling, boiling anger, like an evil brew from a burning cauldron. It's his capacity to hurt Makoto that frightens him and it's the sheer futility of not being able to stop Makoto from getting hurt that angers him. *I need to get out of the house, Haruka thinks, I need to get out of the house before this situation escalates. The pressure is boiling like a sealed pot and it's going to explode if I don't get out.*

Haruka stands up abruptly from the table. "I need to take out the trash," he announces to Makoto, and sweeps the cluster of empty cardboard boxes from the modelling clay he's been using into the not-yet-full trash container. They use a series of stacking tubs to separate their trash, and Haruka takes the paper bin out of the stack to bring with him.

Makoto doesn't make a sound, or maybe Haruka's moving too quickly to hear. Haruka takes the creaky old elevator down their apartment block, trying not to seethe, trying to push all thoughts, any thought out of his mind, trying not to think about the messages from his mother or Makoto's practised request. Stepping outside to the main trash area, Haruka realises that there's a storm raging, and suddenly recalls the news reports from this morning about a possible category two typhoon. *Did Makoto come home in a storm for me?* Haruka thinks of the way he didn't even look at Makoto when he stepped through the door, didn't even notice the details on Makoto, cannot remember which of Makoto's shirts he wore out today, cannot recall if Makoto's hair was dripping wet or if his blazer was soaked through. *Why would Makoto do such a silly thing when his French friend would almost certainly be happy to let him stay over in this kind of weather?* There is an ache in Haruka's heart as he thinks of how he lashed out at Makoto just because something else was eating at him. He thinks of the blurry figure at the back of his mind as he tromped his way out the door, the blurry, pathetic, waiting figure, and regret clumps like a hairball in his throat, dry and furry, stubbornly refusing the violent convulsions of the body to hurl it out in a rasping cough.
Go back to Makoto, a voice in his head tells him. Go back to Makoto and tell him you're sorry. The typhoon wind whips a fury around him, and Haruka's completely drenched to the bone. The air is chilly and Haruka curses himself for being so immersed in himself he can't tell what the outside world is like.

He turns and walks the short distance back to his apartment, having emptied the tub of paper trash into the recycling bin. He takes the elevator up and when he reaches his floor the door opens and Makoto is standing there, umbrella in hand. So he's been using that fancy typhoon-proof umbrella they bought on a whim, fed up with countless broken umbrellas. On seeing Haruka, Makoto's face is so overcome with surprise and tenderness Haruka finds it hard to look at him. Makoto lets the umbrella fall to the floor as Haruka steps out of the elevator.

"I'm sorry," Makoto says, voice cracking, as he clings onto Haruka in the elevator lobby. "I shouldn't have asked you a question like that. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."

Haruka can feel Makoto's arms wrap tightly around his shoulders. Why is Makoto always sorry for everything? Why is Makoto always sorry for everything? What is wrong with him? Why is he sorry for things that are not even his fault? Why is he sorry when I was the one who did him wrong? Makoto begins sobbing into Haruka and Haruka's own apology dies in his throat as guilt and regret take over his whole body, robbing him of everything—his voice his courage his self. Haruka starts to feel like an empty puppet standing here, that Makoto is hugging a false, soulless impostor of a person he loves.

"I'm so glad you're back," Makoto says, and the idea that Makoto knows Haruka came back for him is so terrifying the empty soulless puppet Haruka begins to speak in his stead.

"I was just back to get my parka."

"I have it for you," Makoto says, choking up once more, pushing the waterproof parka in its small pouch into Haruka's hands. He has everything prepared, Haruka realises. You're so stupid, Haruka thinks but cannot say to Makoto. You're so stupid to love me.

Taking the parka from Makoto, Haruka curls his fingers around Makoto's arm and prays him away. "I'll go for my walk now," he tells Makoto, resting the recycling tub outside their front door, expressionless as he does. "And you should go for the camp."

He can feel Makoto nod sadly in the crook of his neck, letting go. Haruka pushes the elevator button, and the digital screen above the elevator door counts its way slowly back up to their floor. The door rattles open, heavy metal and reinforced glass, opening into a shaft of stark fluorescent light. Haruka steps in, watching Makoto watch him go, and as the door closes he suddenly pushes the button to open it again.

"Walk with me," he blurts to Makoto, feeling like he's about to burst with ugly emotion, and there is a dumbfounded delight in Makoto's face as he bends over to pick up the black storm umbrella splayed on the floor. Makoto steps into the elevator with him, falling in alongside him with both hands wrapped around the hilt of the umbrella as if it were a sword and Makoto a shining knight.

Haruka pulls on his parka and they step out the apartment entrance into the storm together, the typhoon-resistant umbrella unfurling from sword to shield. Haruka realises then that there is no one else who will weather the worst of his days with him, and today has been pretty bad. The rain falls on them like lesions from the sky, a galeforce reckoning of lethal nature. Haruka walks as he always does, in a quick, steady rhythm that does not falter in spite of the wind and Makoto clings onto his arm as if fearful of being blown away. Rain, wind, storm, thunder, all that stuff is fine with me. It's all the other things about life that bother me, but they seem less scary in the storm. You silly boy with your wavering heart, don't you realise that because you are here I can fear nothing. Haruka's stride
gets stronger with each step, as if channeling the power of the typhoon.

"What possessed us to do this?" Makoto shouts at the top of his lungs, above the howl of the wind, crouching ever lower behind Haruka. There is no one else on the street, and the light from the street lamps blurs into impressionistic daubs from the downpour. The city feels like their very own, bare and defiant, concrete standing up to the force of nature. *Tomorrow, let everything be washed and renewed.*

Haruka swats the umbrella from Makoto with a mad laugh, rejuvenated by the raging storm. He grabs Makoto by the sides of his face and pulls him in. Rain falls down Makoto's face in glassy sheets and Haruka presses his tongue to Makoto's cheek, licking up the raindrops as he does.

"My parents sold my house. A bunch of developers swooped in with proposals to redevelop the area." The words spill painlessly out of Haruka but his voice is drowned by the deafening wind.

"What did you say? I can't hear you," Makoto screams back at him, hands reaching up to touch Haruka's cheeks.

Haruka looks at Makoto. *What the heck*, Haruka decides. He's not sure if repeating his words will be as easy as the first time.

"I said, isn't this fun?" Haruka yells instead at Makoto, through the swirling storm. Makoto frowns and nods at him, lip bitten in uncertainty. Haruka closes his eyes and presses a kiss to Makoto's lips. Makoto kisses him back furtively, and another laugh escapes Haruka, absurd yet genuine.

"You idiot," he whispers into Makoto's mouth, kissing him back in between words. "You big, lovely idiot. I love you like I love the rain." *Shelter from the storm, safe harbour, rock fortress, indomitable mountain, home away from home, but I was always cruel nature's fury and don't you know I am a bad thing for you.*

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"So it's no big news that at any art school we've got the special people and the normal people, and it's no secret that I'm a normal person. Now, I'm not really directing anything specifically at you, Haruka, but you know, it's no secret you belong to the special group. It's a problem with the system I think, the way all attention is concentrated to the people at the very top. What it really says is that: here, these are the people worth your time, and everyone else, forget about them. But why? It's not nice for the rest of us to be ignored like that. And I don't know if you know, but I've spent so many nights worried that I was worthless because I wasn't good enough compared to everyone else, but then I had a good talk with my professor about this and he said that well, the superstar effect is what it is, that the ones who get attention will get even more attention, but that just means I have to believe in my own work all the more. Because no one else is going to do it for me if I don't do it first myself. Even if I feel my work isn't as good as others I shouldn't make a habit of pointing it out, because then that's all anyone will remember after that, that I said my work wasn't good enough. And my prof also told me that we all have our individual voices, and it's not about how I compare to all these other people that are out there, but how I can offer something that's different and my very own, shaped by my own experience. If I don't think my voice deserves to be heard no one is going to listen to me. And that's it. And he also said that it's no big deal for me to end up in an average job doing average work as long as I can make a living out of it. There's paid work for stuff that just needs to be done and it's no indignity to choose to make a living that way. So there it is. Zaki-chan has a voice. Zaki-chan believes she deserves to be heard, too. Zaki-chan's not going to let the amazingness of other people's work get her down anymore, because that's a selfish way of looking at things in a way, to be unable to view other work except in terms of how I look right next to it. I just have to be true to myself."
Aki stares into her empty beer bottle, eyes as googly as the owl on the label. She shrugs drunkenly, failing to squeeze any more drops of beer from it, and begins peeling idly at the sticker label on the bottle.

Haruka is frozen into place by her outburst. What...what on earth was Aki trying to say? That his work made her feel bad all this time? That she was jealous of him? What is she trying to do to their friendship? Haruka's throat prickles with dryness as he fights the urge to slink under the table and slither away hoping no one will notice.

This is awkward as hell. "I thought your liminal space public transport photography series was really good," Haruka finally digs the words out to say. "Actually, I kind of wanted to ask if I could use that photo of me..." Haruka's voice trails off. He wanted to ask Aki for permission to use her photo of him as his profile picture in the contributors' page of an indie magazine.

And actually, he asked her out for beer tonight because he wanted to tell her he landed a really huge commission with a really huge international sportswear brand, thanks to the network of contacts he acquired through helping Prof Mishima for the design festival. There is, at his core, a screaming, helpless baby. He has absolutely no idea how to act in situations like these and this is the sort of thing he depends on his friends for but sometimes he takes it for granted that they'll be there for him when they have their own lives to get on with.

"So, what's it with you this time?" Aki suddenly asks, as if she can read what's on his mind. Does she learn this stuff from Makoto or what? Maybe we need to stop hanging out for a bit. "Scored something really major?"

"Er..." Haruka begins, and the name of the brand falls from his lips.

Aki stares at him with a flabbergasted expression. She squints and peers even harder at him, as if unsure if she is imagining things.

"Fuck you!" Aki suddenly exclaims, and Haruka's mouth falls open in shock. He's staring back at Aki, and after a while, she breaks into a sardonic grin and shows him the middle finger. Two middle fingers. "What is the point of my existence when there are people like you? And you're still in school!"

Haruka still has no idea what to say, seized with fear at Aki's abrupt descent into unpredictability.

Aki begins to laugh and then clutches her face in a bid to control her laughing, but after a while she merely slides down to lie horizontally on her booth seat. Haruka does a quick glance around to check that no one is shooting them judgmental looks, and the coast is thankfully clear.

Aki isn't surfacing from her booth seat. "Aki, Aki," Haruka barks under his breath. "Are you okay?"

Aki still can't stop herself from laughing. "You are the best and worst friend I've ever had, Nanase Haruka. I don't get how you can be such a genius at drawing and such an oaf at dealing with people."

"... My bad."

"No, it's fine. I'll be okay. I'm supposed to be New Aki, who believes in herself."

"I like New Aki," Haruka replies.

"I didn't ask for your approval! Oh, but why does your approval make me feel so good? I hate you, Haruka."
Haruka takes a swig of his beer from the glass. Nope, he still has no idea what to say in reply. But he genuinely likes this honest version of Aki. It's like a shock to the system, like jumping headfirst into a cold plunge, but he feels like he can work better with this version of Aki.

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Nagisa's movie is finally out and they're invited for the premiere. Makoto has only the Hello Kitty earmuffs and his stoic, unflappable boyfriend for defence.

The stoic, unflappable boyfriend is perhaps more than enough. They thread through the small crowd into the cinema, trying to avoid any attention. Makoto spends the entire movie clutching onto Haruka and whimpering pathetically into Haruka's sleeve. He doesn't absorb a single word of the movie and every time someone screams on screen he screams too, eyes tightly shut, so that he doesn't have to hear what happens next to these poor characters, dropping appendages left right and centre to cannibalistic zombies.

Haruka spends the movie nonchalantly throwing popcorn into his mouth and stroking Makoto's lap reassuringly.

Is popcorn even appropriate for a movie premiere? Where did the popcorn even come from? At some point Makoto begins to suspect Haruka is getting a really big kick out of this, Makoto's overt displays of terror feeding directly into Haruka's masculine ego, each fearful scream like a whisper that says "I need you", each burrowing of the head like a tantalising stroke of the cock.

After the movie premiere, Nagisa invites them to the afterparty but Haruka flatly refuses.

"Makoto doesn't need to hear people recounting in vivid detail the extreme gore and macabre death scenes."

"Ah, Haruka-senpai, but I don't think people are really talking about that. I think they're talking about the fashion sense of the female lead," Rei muses.

"Why is the female body always up for scrutiny?" Gou interjects.

"But it was interesting that of all the main characters, it was actually the female ones who made the best situation of the whole ordeal, no?" Mikoshiba says placatingly.

"It was okay. A bit different to have the evil genius scientist behind the zombie virus be a loving mother of four, and also okay that she was brought down by the quiet, bookish town librarian. But the town librarian's boobs have too much screen time."

"Ah, I didn't notice that at all..." Mikoshiba admits apologetically, and Gou crosses her arms and glares at him.

"Did no one find the scene where I had my brother saw off my infected leg very moving?" Nagisa interrupts.

Makoto instantaneously cringes with a squawk, hands clapping over his ears. He knows it's bad of him to feel this way, but when Haruka shoots Nagisa a subtly murderous glance the sight of it makes him ridiculously happy.

"Okay!" Nagisa says with a clap of the hands. "Those of us who want to go to the afterparty can come with me, and those of us who want to be boring losers and spend the rest of the night cooped up at home can go right ahead!"

"Nagisa-kun, I don't think spending the rest of the night cooped up at home is boring for Haruka-senpai and Makoto-senpai..."
Nagisa leaps up to put a hand over Rei's mouth. "Rei-chan, it is forbidden to say such things in public!"

"Wha—what?" Rei gasps, as he struggles to pull Nagisa's hands, sticky and everywhere like tentacles, from his face. "I do not know what you mean. I am simply saying that Makoto-senpai will have had too much stimulation from this movie..."

"No!" Nagisa exclaims, and the rest of Rei's words are muffled. There is an ensuing struggle, and finally, catching his breath, Rei gasps out in short bursts, "too much stimulation...needs relaxation techniques to release the tension..."

Makoto can practically feel Haruka dying on the spot next to him.

They bid goodbye to the group and take the train home, and on the window opposite them Makoto can see the dim reflection of a softly grinning Haruka. Sitting side by side, Haruka is pressed up very closely against him, distinctly invading his space, Haruka's leg on the other side shaking with impatience. Makoto tries not to smile to himself as he thinks of how "you won't be getting any sleep tonight" from recurring visions of a horror flick has turned into a lascivious "you won't be getting any sleep tonight".

Such a needy boyfriend, Makoto thinks, trying not to chuckle to himself.

When they reach home Haruka nearly lunges at Makoto and rips his clothes off. Makoto is all bashful and embarrassed about it because, what the hell, is watching him suffer through a horror movie that big of a turn-on for Haruka? For the heck of it, Makoto puts the Hello Kitty earmuffs on Haruka's head, and Haruka is so intent on fucking he doesn't even stop to rip them off.

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Hours pass and it is an ungodly time and Haruka's still going at it with him when Makoto hears the sound of a car rolling up in their neighbourhood. There is a slamming of a door, and what sounds like a group of people spilling out noisily.

There is a sudden whoop of an exclamation, like someone has fallen down, followed by raucous laughter and a very conspicuous "shh, please don't disturb the neighbours!"

"Haru," Makoto whispers into Haruka's slick, perspiration-coated chest. Haruka last changed the expression on his face twenty minutes ago despite the exertion of prolonged thrusting. Haruka's orgasms are slow to build, requiring a great deal of time and effort. In a way, Makoto admires Haruka for being able to hold out for so long. When it's Makoto's turn to top, which is not very often as Haruka is difficult to penetrate and grumbles a lot, most of the time and effort is spent trying to get inside Haruka, and once he's in Makoto is generally so overwhelmed he has trouble not coming right off the bat. But on the whole, they don't do a lot of anal as it takes a lot of time—unless they mean to take up a lot of time, like tonight, for example. "We might have visitors."

"What?" Haruka exclaims, face finally contorting, nearly bouncing off Makoto with offence. He tears off the Hello Kitty earmuffs for emphasis.

"I'm just saying. Here. Let me finish you off quickly."

"What?" Haruka's face is so visibly annoyed it has a charm of its own. "Just relax," Makoto coos into Haruka's shoulders, gently massaging him, and then he does that thing he knows that sends Haruka through the roof. That done, he shoos Haruka off to the bathroom, stashes the lube and condoms back into their hidden corner, and goes out to the balcony to peer downstairs. There is a sleek, shiny
black limousine parked on the opposite end of the street, looking extremely out of place amongst the leafy trees and plain, middle-class apartment blocks, sleepy with darkened windows. There doesn't appear to be a driver waiting in the limo. *There is only one place this vehicle could have come from,* Makoto thinks to himself as he wipes himself and pulls on his clothes. *Does this count as vehicular hijacking? Vehicular theft? What possessed anyone to commandeer this ostentatious vehicle?*

The doorbell rings. Makoto gives the room a quick once-over to check that everything is freshened up and in place, and answers the door. He is greeted by a party of friends clutching bottles of absconded champagne and takeaway bento boxes stuffed with stolen canapés. *So no one here has the class to resist pinching free food,* Makoto notes with mirth in his heart. *They're all the same, them country people."

"Surprise!" Nagisa exclaims in a loud whisper. His black and white tuxedo is slightly dusty around the knees. *Yup, he was the one who fell down,* Makoto notes to himself. "Why is your neighbourhood so quiet?"

"Isn't that obvious? It's because this is one of the lower-density cities in the greater region of the metropolis of Tokyo and it is of sound reputation, therefore comprised mostly of middle-income families and households," Rei prattles, also in a whisper. All of his friends are still in the same outfits they wore for the premiere—Rei is in a flashy purple velvet brocade blazer and dark violet trousers that have a silky sheen. *They're all tipsy,* Makoto realises behind his unwavering hospitable smile. *They're all drunk and one of them drove the limo here and the others let this person do it? They could have all died. This is not funny at all."

Haruka has emerged from the bathroom to join them, and Makoto can feel Haruka's annoyance at the constant whispering. He flashes Haruka a reassuring smile, hoping it will calm Haruka down.

"It's fine to speak in normal tones. Just as long as we don't get too carried away," Makoto advises the rest, speaking for Haruka.

"Why are all of you here?" Haruka asks curtly. Wow, he must be really annoyed, Makoto thinks.

"Bringing the party to you," Mikoshiba announces grandly. "How do you like all the food I grabbed?" *Wait. Isn't Mikoshiba the one whose parents are top surgeons in Japan? So he was the one going about stealing the free food? Hmm, makes you wonder what kind of upbringing someone like him has had…*

Makoto shakes the thought from his head and graciously accepts the offer of food from Mikoshiba, who has undone the top two buttons of his crisp white shirt, worn under a dark, skinny-cut navy suit, oozing casual confidence.

Gou leans back into a wall and peels off her shimmering gold heels, inordinately high and studded with lethal-looking spikes. The fabric of her dress is a print of Van Gogh's *A Starry Night*. Makoto is very enamoured of her dress. He likes it so much he supposes he wouldn't mind wearing it himself, if only to get himself swathed in fabric like that.

"Heels," Gou comments with a sigh. "On one hand they are like the torture devices of the patriarchy, designed to keep a woman in a painful and sexualised state, but on the other hand, when you get a pair that looks like this it kind of screams *I am here to crush the balls of the patriarchy.* Also, let's talk about how the extra height erodes the physical privilege that males have, being taller on average. Of course, this only works if no one needs to move, because asking a girl to run in heels is...nevermind."

Makoto smiles at Gou to indicate that he wouldn't mind if she went on, but Gou just sighs again and
reaches out to hold him for support like a crutch.

Mikoshiba is looking in their direction, so Makoto tests a bit of his mind-reading powers on him. 
*Let's see—"Maybe I should become a podiatrist...hmm..."*

"Actually," Nagisa says, cutting onto everyone's thoughts. "We are gathered here today for the benefit of our most esteemed teacher-to-be, Tachibana Makoto. While we were at the party, the thought that our beloved Mako-chan was cowering in fear, all lonely and unable to fall asleep at home was too much for our weak and little hearts to bear, and while our efforts are pale and unworthy of your greatness, we hope that Mako-chan-sama will appreciate the effort we have made to put his mind at ease after the extremely agonising ordeal of a gory horror movie. Therefore, I present to you...the bloopers and behind-the-scenes reel of *The Devil's Onsen: The Devil's Onsen Club!*"

Nagisa whips out a digital tablet from behind his back with a dramatic flourish.

"How is this supposed to help?" Haruka snaps. *I can't believe he's still so pissed off. "What if you just scare him more?"

"But Haru-chan...it's funny stuff," Nagisa pleads defensively, voice faltering in the strength of Haruka's determination to protect Makoto from further psychological trauma. "I begged the director to let me use these clips." Nagisa begins to pout, but gathers himself in a curiously Rei-like manner, lifting an pointed finger as if to begin instruction. "The point is to destroy the perceived reality of the movie by showing how it's all elaborately constructed fiction."

"I'll watch," Makoto says with an accommodating smile. He's learned all about unpacking the narrative in classes in school and has never quite thought to apply this in a practical way to fend off the psychological grip of his personal phobias.

They adjourn to the living area and crowd around the tablet properly before Nagisa does the honour of pressing the play button. He has managed to compile a tightly-edited video of hilarious bloopers that completely undermine the horror premise of the story. *The Devil's Onsen Club* is a twisted variety show where the main cast travels around Japan, reviewing various hot springs with full zombie facial makeup on, discussing the best places to eat humans in a format just like the numerous ramen review shows so popular on television.

Many inadvertent mishaps and pranks occur throughout as well, and by the end of the night, washed down with a good dose of champagne, they have all split their spleens from laughing and they collapse on the extended sleeper couch in a tired heap, falling asleep in some really nice clothes entirely inappropriate as sleepwear.

As he drifts out of consciousness, Makoto briefly wonders who will be responsible for dealing with that conspicuously parked limousine when they wake up.

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"Isn't it sooo cute?" Kurokawa says, lifting up the large-scale replica of one of the tuna characters in their animated short, adjusting the eyes so that they point to the centre of the exhibit. It's Haruka's favourite character, the granddaddy of all tuna, called Wotan.

*It's not supposed to be cute, it's supposed to be intimidating and sagely,* Haruka thinks, but that's all right. They are at the tail end of the school term and the animated shorts will be put up in a small gallery space in the school. Each group gets allotted a section to showcase their work, and to dress it up they have decided to go with a large-scale replica of one of their sets.
If he means to be truthful, this is the most enjoyable group project Haruka has ever worked on. It is strange to realise how similar they all are, at their core, with the same kind of sensitivity to beauty and the same sort of all-consuming appreciation for aesthetics, and stranger still to see this similarity being expressed in ways so vastly different from his own.

There have been many sleepless nights in between, the days where nothing seemed to work and they had to retake scene after scene, and there were the serendipitous days where everything worked and they could wrap up early, and then there were all the breaks they took, filled with coffee and cheap snacks, trivial talk and laughter.

Izumi is on a stepladder, holding up some metal brackets as Aki drills them into the plasterboard wall. The school has provided each group with a television screen to use for the work. The television screen will be linked to an iPad where they've designed a small interactive app to play the video on command instead of looping it on the screen, because Haruka pointed out that looping videos can be seriously annoying, and Kurokawa agreed on the grounds of narrative completeness. If people start watching the video halfway through, they might miss the real message of the story.

Their gallery space is dressed up with actual discarded trash, mimicking the Great Pacific Garbage Patch viewed from underwater, where the story begins. They've gone to the effort of making most of their film out of recycled materials, save for the modelling clay. They have just a few more finishing touches to make to their space, and tomorrow, the gallery will be open to the public. With the rest of his assignments for other units complete, Haruka's already looking forward to catching up on sleep when he gets home.

They mount the television screen onto the brackets, cover it with a decorated border so that it blends into the set, plug it in, and test the video. Around them, the rest of the groups in the class are at various stages of completeness with their own spaces, the slower ones nearing total panic.

"Nice work," a classmate, Sakamoto, calls out to them, peeking out from behind a dividing screen. "Can I borrow your stepladder?"

"Sure, sure," Izumi says, stepping off it. He folds it flat and hoists it off the ground to bring it over. As he does, the top of the ladder catches against the fishing net filled with trash they have attached to the ceiling and it brings the whole thing down with it. Bits of discarded flotsam come tumbling towards the floor and with a heavy thud, Wotan the grandaddy tuna is squashed by an old rice cooker.

Haruka is frozen in place with shock. What is wrong with people? It should have been more than obvious there were many dangling bits on the ceiling. Was it so hard to just be a little more careful?

Aki is crouched to the ground with her arms wrapped over her head. After a while, she begins to stand up, looking nervously at Haruka.

"O-M-G," Sakamoto says, spelling the acronym, on behalf of everyone in the room. She hurriedly grabs the ladder from Izumi and slinks away, thrusting her hand on her forehead in the gesture for sorry.

Shit," Izumi says, and falls to the floor on his knees, facing his groupmates, bending over prostrate. "I'm sorry, I'm very very sorry! I will take it upon myself to fix this. Sorry—shit—I really am so sorry, sorry again." With much sorrow, Izumi lifts his head from the floor to acknowledge each one of his groupmates: Kurokawa, Aki, and then Haruka. On seeing Haruka's expression, his face contorts into one of absolute terror.

Looking up to see what Izumi had seen on Haruka's face, Kurokawa begins to laugh inappropriately,
then stops herself when Aki gives her a nervous look.

"Stop this," Haruka lashes out at Izumi. "There is no point to apologising. It’s too late for this sort of thing. Ishimaru-sensei is going to come by to lock up the gallery soon, so it’s best if I fix the whole thing myself."

"Hey hey hey hey—" Kurokawa instantly cuts in. "Why just you, huh? Is it because you think you're so much better than the rest of us you don't trust us to work to your exact specifications? Are you trying to gatekeep us from our own work?"

"I didn't say that—" Haruka replies, fists clenching. Why would anyone try and pick a fight when there's not enough time to spare? Why create all this discord when the work itself is at stake?

"But you mean that," Kurokawa growls at him. *What's her problem? Doesn't she know how to back down? No one here wants a fight except her.* Haruka's frown deepens, fringe falling over his eyes like a curtain.

"Stop, please!" Aki exclaims, jumping in between them, facing Haruka. "What the hell is going on? This project was going so well until—until—"

Aki's voice trails off as she looks around her. The rest of their classmates have been staring at them in complete silence. When they realise that Aki is looking back at them, they scurry off back to their own sections, trailing dull murmurs.

"The project is still going well! The project's still going well, *okay*, because it’s not over! Let's all just band together and get this fixed. It's always faster in a team," Aki pleads.

"Wasn't that what I was just trying to say," Kurokawa grumbles indignantly, picking up the debris.

Haruka opens his mouth to fling a retort back at Kurokawa when Aki shoots him a deadly glare so cold it cuts Haruka down like a blade of ice.

"Stop being such a diva, Haruka! Get over yourself!" Aki snaps at him, burning with ferocity.

It hits Haruka like a punch to the gut. When was he ever a diva? When has he ever acted selfishly, like a diva? He was always the one trying to get things done as smoothly as possible, and if that meant sailing solo, then so be it—

*Get over yourself.* Aki's words ring in his mind. Haruka is reminded of Makoto's countless patient smiles, of all the times his friends spent fretting about a decision that all hinged on him that he was avoiding having to make, because he hated the idea of dependence. *Isn't it enough, a part of his brain is screaming, isn't it enough I got over myself all those times? Why do I have to keep doing it over and over again?* And yet Aki's words will not leave him—

*Everyone has skin in the game, and there's nothing that says I have more to lose than the rest of them. There is nothing to say that life is a zero-sum game, that if I give something of myself away it means that someone is taking it from me.* It occurs to Haruka that daily he benefits from concessions made to him, when people are polite to him, when people acknowledge him but don't try and make small talk because they know he hates that, when people tiptoe around his numerous quirks and neuroses.

"Okay, let’s do this together," Haruka concedes, and Izumi smiles at him, finally getting off his knees.

They manage to hang the net and assorted trash back to the ceiling in hardly any time at all. The set
itself is slightly damaged but there's nothing that cannot be fixed. Just a bit of dusting here, and a bit of patching up there. Was I taking everything too seriously? Haruka realises belatedly. His hissy fit does seem absurdly, ridiculously, improbably out of proportion.

Except for Wotan. "What do we do with it?" Kurokawa asks Haruka. Wotan the tuna fish is damaged beyond repair.

"Sorry," Haruka mumbles to Kurokawa, feeling bad for arguing with her.

"I asked you a question, stupid," Kurokawa says with a light laugh. "But apology accepted."

"Er..." Haruka begins, but follows it up with an uncertain shrug. He looks at the time, and Prof Ishimaru is due to appear in five minutes.

"Um..." Izumi says hesitantly. "Do you think we should leave Wotan as he is? Like, as a lesson to show how human activity has destroyed countless marine creatures."

"Yeah! I think that works!" Aki adds. "We could even do up a little plaque that says exactly that. RIP Wotan, killed by careless human activity."

Kurokawa shoots a look at Haruka, and as if on cue, the two of them start laughing together, Kurokawa in her round, bellowing belly laugh and Haruka in his pursed-lip silent quivering.

Aki and Izumi start laughing too. "I cannot believe we are really doing this," Aki says, as Izumi scribbles out the memorial plaque on the rectangular lid of a discarded plastic container, extracted from the overhead collection of trash.

Prof Ishimaru drops by to chase everyone out, and bursts into good-natured laughter on seeing their quick coverup of Wotan's unfortunate fate. With the gallery locked, Aki turns to her groupmates and asks if they want to do something fun together to celebrate the end of term and the start of the summer holidays.

"Karaoke sounds good," Izumi suggests.

Haruka sucks his breath in, hoping someone will protest the idea. Unfortunately, no one does, so he steels himself and says, "We can go but I am not going to sing."

"Awwww, why not?" Aki tries to egg him on.

"I can't sing."

"I can't sing either, but that's never stopped me," Kurokawa retorts flippantly.

Izumi laughs. "Well, if anyone has other ideas we can do that too."

My idea of fun is staying at home to sleep, Haruka thinks darkly, heart palpitating at the thought of being forced to be sociable.

"I know," Kurokawa says. "Let's go clubbing! It's only 6pm, so that gives us some time to go home and nap for a bit. I think there's a really big DJ at Ageha today. How about we meet at Shibuya station at midnight?"

"Sounds good!"

Haruka's heart is seized with apprehension. Desperately, he tries to convince himself that all nightclubs are dark enough for him to stand unmoving in a corner, waiting for time to pass.
AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA WTFFFFFF WTFFFFFF MAKOTO. Okay, so it's my fault for watching the video in the middle of a lecture on interest rate policy but WTF I was doubled over in laughter and my friend wondered if there was something wrong with me so I showed it to her and then we were both trying so hard not to laugh out loud in the middle of the lecture ohmygod Makoto I can't believe it. Of course it would go viral I'm glad the director allowed it to be out on the Internet I also watched that clip of Nagisa on that gameshow where he wrestled in the nude with squid why is this even a thing. I can't believe he's in talks to get his own show. Our little devil.

I told Nagisa what I thought of his video and then he decided to tell me the story of how he "borrowed" the limo from the premiere WHAT THE HELL MAKOTO WHY WEREN'T YOU THERE TO STOP THEM? But omggggg it is so fucking hilarious I was still laughing on the tram home I think everyone thought I was a madman, and then I was laughing so much I forgot to look out for ticket inspectors and then I got fined for jumping the tram again. γ (￣ー￣)γ

I hope my agent doesn't hear of this LOL. Well...if you see any scandalous news about a gold-medal winning Olympian too skint to pay the tram fare just pretend you don't know me, Makoto. Can you believe the other day my agent emailed me about appearing on cereal boxes? Do you get emails like that, Makoto. I said no I wasn't going to do cereal boxes cos that's just a bit too silly but holy hell it's a lot of money. Maybe I should do it anyway, but only for Crunchy Nut? But wait, no, if I appear on Crunchy Nut I will never be able to buy another box again.

YOU ARE A TERRIBLE INFLUENCE, MAKOTO. I can't believe you told me those shoes would look good on me. So I got them. Here is a pic of me in them. Do I look good, Makoto? (´▽ʃƪ)♡ (Better say yes or the consequences are dire.) What the hell, Makoto, aren't you supposed to be like Bodhisattva Makoto and ascetic and unworldly or whatever why are you encouraging your friends to buy stupidly expensive, materialistic footwear.

I see you decided to go on the camp. It should be very fun! I had to do that every year I was in school here and we were even left completely alone for this survival section I'm surprised no one died of snakes or anything. Actually there was this one boy who was in the same tent as me who found a large wolf spider on his face when he woke up one day and then the whole tent ran screaming in tears towards the teachers. I think we were like, fifteen? Never believe anything they say about boys not crying. LOL. But nevermind, Japan is not Australia you should have far less snakes I hope although I hear that mamushi adders are alive and well where you are going and there are also wildcats and no phone reception so you can't call for help LOL Makoto do not die or I will be Very Sad. Stay on the safe path.

xx

"How do I look?"

Haruka smooths the front of his cargo jacket as Makoto looks up from his computer screen.

"Looking good," Makoto says.

"Are you just saying that to make me happy?"

"You look good enough to suck," Makoto corrects himself. He does an exaggerated wink at Haruka that is the complete opposite of sexy.
Haruka frowns. "Wanna fuck right now? I've still got time."

"Haru, are you trying to avoid having to go out? You can't deceive me..." Makoto says teasingly.

"All right, fine, you don't know what you're missing out on," Haruka retorts petulantly.

"As much as I'd like to make sweet love to you right now, Haruka, I have a three-thousand word essay to complete by eight tomorrow morning, so I'm sorry I can't accompany you tonight either."

"Yeah, whatever, Prince Genji is totally more important than me," Haruka's face wrinkles. He stands there hesitating for a long time before going up to kiss Makoto goodbye. "See you in the morning," he says, fondly.

He meets up with Aki at Kokubunji station and they take the train to Shibuya together. Aki is dressed in a long tulle skirt and a striped sailor top and sensible peach-coloured ballet flats. Haruka sees that she's wearing the owl necklace he got with Makoto for her birthday and suddenly remembers that Makoto always compliments people in situations like this so he tells Aki that he likes her outfit, which he actually does.

"Thanks," Aki says. "You look good too. It's very you."

_What's very me? What's that supposed to mean?_ Haruka glances at his reflection on the train windows. He's in a military green cargo jacket, a blue and purple plaid shirt and dark brown chinos, rolled up at the cuff, and cerulean and navy blue polka-dotted socks. He has niceish shoes on his feet, the pair Rei made him buy to wear to Nagisa's movie premiere. He shrugs Aki's comment off—it's too much effort to figure out if there is some hidden meaning behind it.

They're the first to arrive at Shibuya station, and Haruka suddenly realises that they should have left the house half an hour later. Because Kurokawa set the time, the rest of them forgot to add half an hour to it so that they don't have to wait around for her. Izumi shows up around ten minutes after they reach, wearing a leather jacket and waxed skinny jeans. He apologises for being late, but Haruka reminds him that Kurokawa will always be the latest. The three of them laugh inappropriately about this, as Izumi reveals that he has brought a bottle of whisky and green tea from home for them to pre-game on the cheap instead of buying all their drinks in the club.

Five minutes later, Kurokawa shows up so they have to tell her that they were just gossiping about her lateness and she was early by her own standard. Kurokawa laughs it off too. "Sorry guys, but I'm not going to change for anyone."

They hop on the free shuttle to the club, which is by the bay near Odaiba, towards Disneyland. It is pulsating with laser lights, people and music. Haruka has only been clubbing once before this, that time Nagisa decided to drag them to the dodgiest place right smack in the middle of Roppongi, a seedy middle-eastern themed club filled with what looked like S&M leather bears. _Come to think of it, it is quite offensive to appropriate ethnic themes for nightclub decoration, no?_

The club he is currently at looks very modern, and extremely large. Apparently the DJ guesting tonight is really popular, although Haruka wouldn't know because it's not really the sort of music he listens to. They sit by the waterfront watching the queue lengthen, taking their time to drink Izumi's green tea and whisky mix, which is actually really nice.

When they do finally get up to join the queue, Haruka feels a little wobbly on his feet. _This is dangerous_, he thinks to himself, and suddenly feels like laughing about it. As they get nearer and nearer the entrance, Haruka begins to feel genuinely pumped about the whole clubbing thing, and he nods his head to the beat of the music. He surrenders money for the cover charge unquestioningly,
and when they get in, Kurokawa shoves them onto the dance floor immediately. She is wearing a skirt with perplexing tassels that sway hypnotically as she shimmies about. Aki has a huge grin on her face, and dances with her arms held out in front of her, bent at the elbow and with hands balled into fists at chest height. Izumi has become very talkative and is going on and on about how he's practiced a lot at shuffling, and then does this series of steps with his legs, which Haruka takes to be a demonstration of his shuffling skills, although Haruka doesn't quite see where the shuffling is involved.

"Thirsty?" Kurokawa yells at him at some point. Haruka nods, and then Kurokawa disappears off presumably to get drinks. She doesn't come back, and after a while they start to get worried and Izumi drifts off to look for her.

After an even longer while, Izumi has apparently disappeared too, so Haruka suggests to Aki that they should go look for the other two. They head towards the bar, and everywhere they look they are unable to spot Kurokawa or Izumi, so Aki asks him if he wants a drink and Haruka nods, and he finds a glass of gin and tonic thrust into his hand.

He's halfway through the glass when he realises that Aki paid for the drink.

"How much was it?" he screams at her, above the din of the music. "I'll pay you back!"

"I love this song!" Aki yells back at him.

_Huh?_ "I'll pay you back!" he screams again at Aki.

"Hold my drink!" Aki says, and she thrusts her glass of gin and tonic onto Haruka's other hand. She begins to get really into dancing, and Haruka's left to stand there feeling awkward. After a while, Haruka starts to get concerned for Aki, because what if she has had too much to drink and people try to take advantage of her? Haruka cannot let that happen to Aki, because she's such a good friend, so he decides to finish her drink for her so that other people can't spike it or anything. Haruka's own mother always talks about how girls shouldn't do things like go to nightclubs because they're full of predatory men and the more he thinks about it, the more worried Haruka starts to get for Aki. I need to look out for her, Haruka thinks to himself.

He suddenly grabs Aki by the wrist and tells her that they need to find Kurokawa and Izumi, because what if they're lying in a pool of vomit, choking to death somewhere?

He drag Aki all through the club, and they stumble to an outdoor section where...all of a sudden...by the moonlit night, with an ethereal glow of turquoise blue, sits a square-shaped pool in the middle of the outdoor section.

Haruka stands there gobsmacked, staring at the pool, consumed by its magnetic attraction, his heart beating staccato in twisted rhythms of lust. He looks at Aki, who is swaying from side to side in tune with the music.

"No one told me there would be a pool!" he shouts at Aki.

"I didn't know either!" Aki shout back. A really chill, loungey remix of an old song starts to come on, a song from three, four years ago? Aki starts to sing along to the English lyrics of the song: "We've come too far...to give up...who we are..."

_I just got really lucky_, Haruka thinks, hungrily eyeing the gleaming pool, like a magical wellspring of joy. Slowly, Haruka begins to remove his jacket.

"The hell?! Haruka? What are you doing? Haruka!"
Aki reaches out to grab his hands as Haruka moves to unzip his fly.

"No!" Haruka exclaims, struggling against Aki's grip. "Let me go!"

All of a sudden, someone else rushes up and grabs him from behind. *What the fuck?* Haruka thinks, struggling against the unknown grip.

"Calm down!" a voice says, and he realises it's Izumi. Haruka stops struggling so that Izumi will let go of him.

"Wha...why are you stripping?" Izumi asks, jaw gaping like a gormless goldfish.

It suddenly occurs to Haruka that Izumi is the one who knows about the Legend of the Iwatobi Town Stripper and Haruka is so terrified of being found out he quickly zips up his pants and wriggles his jacket back on. Izumi is still staring at him open-mouthed and Haruka has a nasty feeling Izumi *knows*, but Izumi isn't saying anything so Haruka can't say anything either.

Aki is blithely back to dancing, and on noticing him and Izumi just standing there motionlessly, she asks if they want to go back inside. Everyone agrees, and Aki grabs the both of them and drags them indoors. As they squeeze through the crowd, Izumi lets Haruka know that Haruka's secret is safe with him. They find Kurokawa at a table with a group of girls who are apparently her high school classmates, and she pours a generous splash of vodka into four glasses, one for each of them, topping up the remaining third of the glass with Coca-Cola.

"Why so glum, Nanase?" Kurokawa nudges him with a glass. "Let's all drink to a project well done!"

"It's not graded yet," Izumi points out.

"Don't worry, we have Nanase in our team so we're bound to get an A. So here's to getting A's for the rest of our uni life!"

"I wish but I don't believe it'll happen for me," Izumi mutters.

"Here's to *that*," Aki says sardonically, with a low clink of Izumi's glass.

Haruka clinks glasses with everyone and downs the drink in heavy gulps. After a while, he starts to feel relaxed again and he even begins to dance. He also starts to think kindly of everyone around him, and feels grateful that he had Aki and Izumi to stop him from getting into the pool. *It's okay if I can't have pool-chan tonight,* he thinks. *It's okay because I've got enough friends for that sort of thing to not matter. I can enjoy myself well enough dancing on dry floor in a club because I have friends. It's so nice to have friends. I can't believe someone like me actually has friends. So this is what it's like to be a normal person, with normal friends doing the kind of fun stuff normal people do.*

The drinks keep flowing mysteriously without end, and from time to time Haruka remembers he has a duty to look out for his teammates so he finishes their drinks for them in order that they will not get totally wasted.

Later in the night, or more accurately, in the early hours of the next morning, Haruka goes out to the pool lounge again and he feels nothing. *Don't need you anymore,* he thinks, directing his thoughts at the pool, bitter as a jilted lover, bitter like the bite of tequila. *I'm stronger than you think, I'm stronger and happier than I ever was when I was with you.*

"Are you okay?" Aki asks, shaking him by the arm. Her eyes are so large and bulgy, like she's trying
Haruka does a quick shake of his head, as if flicking imaginary water from his hair. "Never been better!" he suddenly exclaims.

"I think you need to go home," Aki mutters under her breath. "Come with me, I'll send you home safely."

Izumi and Kurokawa decide to leave the club with them too, and they walk in broad zigzags towards the shuttle bus stop, catching a bus back to Roppongi. The days are getting long in the summer and a faint blush of salmon pink is creeping into the indigo sky. When they step off the bus onto the streets of Roppongi a reckless and completely wasted gaijin whizzes towards them on a bicycle, with a group of his friends chasing drunkenly behind him. He crashes into a lamppost along the street and falls off the bike, unhurt but confused, and Kurokawa begins to laugh at the comical scene.

"You can have the bike," the gaijin says in English, in an American accent, as he stumbles away grinning to himself.

"Yes!" Kurokawa exclaims, and picks up the bike to mount it. She begins pedalling and starts to pull away from the group. That's not...that's not safe is it? Haruka begins to run after her, yelling at her to watch out for oncoming traffic, and somewhere behind him Aki and Izumi are yelling at the both of them to stop.

Kurokawa is strangely adept on a bike despite being way over the limit and despite being in a tight and restrictive skirt. She does a quick turn to circle around Haruka like a bird of prey, and Haruka suddenly decides to ask for a go on the bike. Kurokawa dismounts, and Haruka takes over the old, slightly rusty bicycle. Haruka starts laughing absurdly to himself as he rolls up and down the hills of Roppongi, feeling the wind in his hair, watching the sun rise in champagne gold and grenadine pinks.

Losing the will to make him stop, Aki and Izumi decide to take their turns on the bike as well, and when the morning traffic thickens with the threat of throbbing sobriety they decide to call an end to the revelry. After giving the bike unthinkingly to a homeless person, they put themselves back on the train, homeward bound. As the train hurtles out of the station it suddenly strikes Haruka that it might have been the worst thing they've done all night, because what if the homeless guy gets accused of stealing the bike? A sudden bout of nausea hits Haruka, and he feels like he could puke any moment.

Aki insists on walking Haruka back to his apartment, and somewhere in the back of his alcohol-addled mind his mother's voice is screaming at him, asking him how in earth he can sink so low as to let himself be the girl of a relationship and he is indignantly shouting at his mother that she knows nothing of girls today, girls as wonderful and independent and capable and brave and grounded as Aki is, who pays for his drinks and sends him home safely.

The last thing Haruka remembers before he blacks out is Makoto opening the door for them and pulling him in. He hazily remembers Makoto pouring Aki a glass of water and asking if she wants to take a quick nap at their place. There is the distant chatter of Aki saying to Makoto "he was sooooo drunk I couldn't believe it", "he did some really weird things", "kept stealing everyone's drinks" and "you should see the way he was dancing, I was so scared someone put something funny in his drink but then I realised it was just him".

Haruka is woken up hours later by the sound of Makoto reheating food in the microwave. Aki is gone. "Sounds like you had a lot of fun last night," Makoto says warmly.

"How's your assignment?" Haruka asks drowsily, through a thumping headache.
"Done and dusted. Time to enjoy the summer holidays!"

That's nice, Haruka means to say, but he ends up groaning blearily as he watches Makoto from their loft bed. Through the door connecting the bedroom to the kitchen, Makoto is slurping at a spoonful of his reheated green curry dish.

Makoto smiles at him, and lowers a dollop of rice in the curry to moisten it. "Aki said there was a pool at the club."

"I didn't jump in."

"I figured you didn't, because Aki didn't say anything else about it. That's incredible, for you."

Makoto crosses the threshold to have his meal on the couch. Haruka knows Makoto is feeling proud of him.

Haruka pauses to consider the thought that Aki didn't mention how he actually did begin to strip.

"You know why I didn't jump in, Makoto?"

Makoto looks up at him quizzically.

"Because you weren't there, and I was afraid no one would pull me out."

"Really?" Makoto asks, his voice gentle yet disbelieving.

Saying it makes it true, Haruka thinks, as he watches the secret smile threaten to take over all of Makoto's face, Makoto's lovely, radiant face.

***

Haruka has just returned from inspecting a print run, the one for the really big sportswear label. He can't quite believe how much money there is for something like this. The money is so silly that he can't bring himself to think about it. And though it is seeing his work go out in print that fills him with a sense of real accomplishment, knowing he has that extra bit of cash doesn't hurt at all.

Haruka returns home to find Makoto sitting at his desk, black-rimmed glasses perched on his nose, calculator in hand. Makoto doesn't use the calculator except when he's going through his monthly expenses, and sure enough, Haruka sees a flash of the bright green cover of their shared account bank book.


In truth, Haruka has no idea what his real bank balance is anymore. He simply knows that in recent months he has had no need to look at it obsessively like he used to, as if staring at his account balance would make the numbers jump up magically. He tosses the bank book on the television stand and goes to hover around Makoto. Makoto is doing the thing he learned from his mother, in which he reconciles every item on the transaction history to receipts and records of expenses he keeps for the month.

"I see you've been putting more and more money in our shared account," Makoto says to him with a warm smile. I'm proud to see that your work has paid off, Haruka knows Makoto is thinking.

When they first moved to Tokyo they had a habit of splitting everything fifty-fifty, but this practice proved much more hassle than it was worth. Haruka lost track of whatever he paid for that he was supposed to collect back from Makoto, and he was making Makoto feel uncomfortable about the
meticulous way Makoto kept track of all expenses. So they decided to open another account, separate from their individual accounts, for the purpose of paying shared expenses. Due to legal restrictions, the shared account is in Makoto's name, but Haruka doesn't mind that at all.

To make things fair, they have each agreed to contribute the same base percentage of their earnings instead of the same numerical amount, and anything else they put in is just something extra that they feel like doing. It's a system that has worked very smoothly as Makoto always manages to keep track of where the money is going and Haruka, frugal to a fault, is always good at keeping the costs down.

Makoto chews on the tip of his pen as he matches the line items to numbered receipts in his expenses notebook. Afterwards, all this stuff will go neatly into a pocket folder, to be filed away. Mrs Tachibana has done a really good job of raising a child into an adult, Haruka thinks, and anyone who doesn't find responsibility sexy can go fester by themselves. Actually, anyone who doesn't find responsibility sexy will certainly find themselves in a world of pain.

So glad I have you, Haruka thinks, and Makoto looks up to smile at him as if in reply. Haruka smiles back but then he has to look away, almost out of shyness. He sees a stack of printed worksheets with haiku poems by Bashō, accompanied by questions asking the students to reflect on their own experience of hiking. Of course Makoto would prepare this sort of thing for Amakata-sensei's school camp.

"All packed for tomorrow?" Haruka asks, in what he hopes is a sprightly voice. It takes a lot of work for him to put expression into his words.

Makoto leans back into his chair with a wide grin. "Yeap, feel free to go through my items and discard anything you feel unnecessary."

Haruka turns to search for Makoto's baggage. He sees the large backpack lying on the couch, keeled over like a fat caterpillar. He suddenly remembers to turn back and respond to Makoto, flashing a sly smile as he does. What makes Makoto laugh? Nagisa?

"Ahh, and what do we have here today? Is this an overstuffed sausage, or is this Makoto's backpack for camp? Let us now answer the question—has Makoto overpacked again?"

“What are you doing?” Makoto asks, more weirded out than amused. “Are you….are you trying to put on an act?”

It's my impression of Nagisa, blockhead.

Haruka unbuckles the top and loosens the drawstrings. Whatever, he dismisses, and he regrets trying to do the flashy gameshow host thing. Where is Nagisa when you need him?

The backpack is so full Haruka finds it hard to feel his way around the inside, so he turns the backpack upside down and tips everything out. He rifles through Makoto's belongings, checking that all the essentials are there. He notices Makoto looking suspiciously at him and wonders he should try talking again.

"Why do you need so much stuff?" There is one family sized bottle of shampoo with an extra refill packet, one family sized bottle of conditioner, two family sized bottles of shower gel and three different kinds of sunscreen—one for the face, SPF 50, one for the body, and one waterproof spray-type sunscreen. Makoto’s toiletries pouch is more like a sack of rice, and just as heavy.

"I'm going as a teacher's assistant," Makoto says defensively. "And you know how kids always forget to bring stuff—all these can be lent out to the forgetful ones."
Haruka looks up at Makoto. *The excuse sounds valid.* Unable to poke holes in Makoto's argument, he returns to digging through Makoto's stuff.

"Do you really need three different hoodies when you already have a parka and you're going to wear another one tomorrow?" Haruka's voice is getting a teensy bit whiny. There are so few things he can remove. Maybe Makoto's getting too good at this.

"Okay fine, take one out," Makoto concedes.

"I'm taking two out."

Makoto doesn't protest. *Score. Nanase one, Tachibana one.*

Haruka counts the shirts, and the shorts, and the sweatpants. There are long-sleeved shirts, and there are short-sleeved shirts. He removes one of each silently, without informing Makoto.

He moves on to the laundry pouch containing the underwear, and unzips it to inspect the contents. Haruka recalls the first time he did the laundry for the both of them and he threw away several of Makoto's thinnest, holey-est underwear only to have Makoto actually shed tears upon seeing them in the recycling bin. Since then, Haruka takes extra care to dispose of Makoto's oldest and most worn underwear discreetly, pretending to know nothing of their fate when Makoto asks.

Makoto is keeping a watchful eye on him as he sifts through the underwear pouch.

"Don't..." Makoto says, and Haruka knows what Makoto is about to say. *The longer you've had a piece of underwear the more time you've had to become attached to it.*

"I'll mix them up," Haruka says to assuage Makoto, and Makoto nods sadly, turning back to his work.

Haruka steps over to the wardrobe under their loft bed and pulls out from the travel laundry pouch the nice, stylish boxer briefs he bought for Makoto, replacing them with the really hopeless Y-front briefs Haruka remembers from four years ago.

*Four years.* Who the fuck holds on to underwear this long. As Haruka walks back towards the couch he swings by Makoto to ruffle his hair and kiss him on the forehead.

"There's a good boy," he says to Makoto.


Haruka laughs, undeterred. *I love it when you snark like that.* Makoto serves up a lot of shit sometimes, decorated so nicely with sweet smiles and kind eyes people lap it up unquestioningly. But Haruka always knows, and he'll be damned if that's not his favourite thing about Makoto. It's almost like an inside joke Haruka will fiercely guard from outside intruders.

Haruka gathers the edited bundle of Makoto's camping stuff, and squeezes them back into the backpack. It seems only marginally less full. *I guess it's better to be safe than sorry on camp. The first aid kit is there, the torchlights and the maps, everything should be fine. Nothing's going to happen to Makoto.*

"I can't believe you'll be gone for more than a week," Haruka mumbles, without looking at Makoto.

"Why?" Makoto asks. On his computer screen, Haruka can see some open attachments from
Amakata-sensei, with info about the camp. "Are you gonna miss me?" Makoto asks teasingly.

Haruka gives him an irritated look and walks off to the kitchen to pour himself a glass of water. It's not like this is the first time they'll be apart. They've been apart before, when Haruka makes the occasional trip to see his parents in Hiroshima. But when he thinks about it, Haruka realises that he's always the one leaving Makoto behind. How does he feel now that it's his turn to wait at home for Makoto?

From the bedroom comes the strains of a strumming guitar. Makoto's practising the camp song again, Haruka thinks, and he is reminded of how he adores Makoto's guitar playing. Such a complete package, that Makoto. Tall and handsome and gentle and kind, good in studies and sport and music, and yet so unaware of his perfection. Is there any real flaw to him? Such a genuine and humble boy, Makoto wears his popularity like no one else could.

Yes, I'll miss you when you're gone. Part of me will be missing when you're gone.

Haruka quietly opens the closet under their loft bed where he stashes his belongings. He's looking for that candle that Aki bought him for his birthday a month ago, a scented candle that smells like the ocean breeze from the garden porch of a summer home. Haruka thinks of how he kind of promised to let Makoto have a night of true romance all those years back, and how in all these years they've never needed the fairytales to get by, the reality of their relationship harsher, harder, more painful and yet better than anything that exists in stories meant only to make people feel good about themselves. It's better than anything Haruka has ever known, and if there's an even better out there Haruka doesn't want to know what it is. He doesn't need to know what it is. Makoto is enough to fill him with lifetimes of happiness, over and over.

He takes the box with the candle to the kitchen and tries to unwrap it as silently as he can. With the leftover tissue paper gift wrap, Haruka tears it into strips and fashions little rosebuds out of it, reaching to his workstation on the dining table for lengths of wire to tie them together. He uses the stove to light the candle, and carries it with him as he walks into the bedroom, turning off the main LED ceiling light with its purely functional white glare, holding the tissue paper roses in his other hand.

Noticing Haruka, Makoto stops playing on the guitar, his mouth falling open in surprise. Haruka can barely bring himself to look at Makoto, shyness drawing over him like a curtain, and he sets the candle down in a safe corner of Makoto's desk.

"These flowers are for you," he says, pressing the crafted bouquet into Makoto's waiting hand.

"Thank you," Makoto says, lips pursed, looking like he's about to cry.

"Why did you stop playing?" Haruka asks gently, settling down next to Makoto on the edge of the couch. "Play me your favourite song."

Makoto tries to smile through a chewed bottom lip. He shakes his head to ready himself, and then, arranging the guitar back into position on his lap, begins to pick at the strings, playing an old song they first heard when they were teenagers.

With his room slippers, Haruka begins to tap his feet on the floor, holding the rhythm to accompany Makoto's melody. Makoto begins to sing the lyrics of the song, and Haruka can't stop himself from smiling. Haruka really can't stop himself from smiling. It's like there's a spring of emotion bubbling within him, threatening to burst the walls of his guarded heart.

Through grey skies and blue days Makoto was there for him. Through the mental illness, the
depression and the loneliness and the withdrawal from the world Makoto held on to him, never
letting him go. It has never once mattered to Makoto who Haruka is—ugly as he is, gifted as he is,
selfish as he is, special as he is—all that matters to Makoto is that Makoto saw someone who needed
help and that Makoto is always there to help him. There is a world of mundane things he goes
through with Makoto every day, washing the dishes, scrubbing the toilet, folding the laundry, eating
food, soaping oneself clean, a world of mundane things that he would never have pushed himself to
do without Makoto. Maybe it's not appreciated enough, the sheer bravery of everyday life, it's not
appreciated enough, the sheer courage it takes to be able to look after yourself again, to see a future
in your life, to be undaunted by the prospect of tomorrow. I owe that to Makoto.

The song is coming to an end, and Haruka looks up at Makoto, gently outlined by the burning flame
of the candle on his desk. Makoto is still strumming and singing, so Haruka decides to join him for
the last line.

*Without you, it's a waste of time.*

Makoto's fingers have not left the guitar, and they're still playing purely out of muscle memory, but
his face has gone completely vulnerable and his voice has trailed off in deferential silence.

Haruka repeats the last line at Makoto, and he can see Makoto's lip tremble, he can see the tears
streaming down Makoto's face, he can see all the love that Makoto has for him written in lines across
his body, lines that Haruka wants to read back at him, lines that Haruka wants to follow into the next
world and the one after next, and the one before this.

"I love you," Haruka says to Makoto, standing up to cross the gap between them, resting a hand on
the side of Makoto's cheek.

Before him, Makoto is dissolving into racking sobs, his whole, large form crumbling into tears, and
through his sobs Haruka can see that Makoto is still trying so hard to smile for him, even now.

"Hush, you silly boy. There's nothing to cry about. Tomorrow you're going on the trip of your life.
You will have a great time there, and all the students will love you. You will teach them what it
means to be part of a team, what it means to be responsible for yourself, and what it means to be
responsible for others. You will find your real purpose in being a teacher, from a great mentor like
Amakata-sensei, and you will give meaning to all these young lives. They will learn from you and
you will learn from them, and when you come back I want to hear about every single thing you did,
no matter how boring you think it is." Haruka presses Makoto close to him, close to where his heart
is.

Makoto takes a deep breath and returns the hug.

"There, there," Haruka continues, stroking Makoto's chlorine-bleached hair, greenish from all the
swimming he did for Haruka. "It's getting late now, don't you think? Let's wash up and go to bed."

Makoto's arms cling onto Haruka even tighter for a minute or so, and then Makoto lets go of him. A
faint smile crosses his face. "But you don't really mean bed-bed, do you, Haru-chan? I'm sure you
have other ideas in mind," Makoto says, with a still-crackly voice.

"Ah, you caught me," Haruka quips, light as a feather.

Makoto stands up and presses a kiss to Haruka's lips. "Let's get ready then," he says, steadying
himself for a moment before shuffling towards the bathroom, head tilting backwards to check that
Haruka is following him.
"We're not in that big of a hurry," Haruka calls out. "Since you have three hours on a plane tomorrow I can take three hours from you tonight."

"The sleep equation doesn't work that way, Haru! Sleeping on a plane sometimes makes a person feel less rested than they did before." Haruka can hear the sound of the bathroom taps running.

*This is where you need to come in to put Makoto's mind at ease,* Haruka tells himself. With a cheeky grin Haruka decides to rid himself of all clothes, and wriggles his way like a slippery eel into the bathroom entirely nude.

"Makoto," Haruka tries to say in a seductive tone, leaning against the bathroom wall. The smooth, seamless surface of the unit bath wall is surprisingly cool and refreshing to lean against, and Haruka thinks he should plaster himself to it in the nude more often. Makoto is brushing his teeth in the rough way he does, toothpaste foaming extravagantly at his mouth. He looks at Haruka with raised eyebrows.

Haruka decides to try a sexy thing and he leans forward to lick some toothpaste from the corner of Makoto's mouth. Makoto's worrisome brows furrow adorably in response.

"What do you intend to do with toothpaste in your mouth?" Makoto asks him, voice muffled by all the foam.

Haruka pauses to think. He could, technically speaking, just eat the toothpaste, but that's kind of too weird, even for him. *Okay, this isn't such a good idea after all.* He looks up to make eye contact with Makoto. "Guess I'll brush my teeth too." Haruka retrieves his blue and white toothbrush from the holder to start on the task.

Makoto has moved on to washing his face, and as he does Haruka tugs impatiently at Makoto's shirt in a bid to remove it. With cleanser foam on Makoto's face and toothpaste foam in Haruka's mouth, Haruka decides to kiss Makoto, open-mouthed, and Makoto is forced to rinse his mouth again as he rinses his face. For good measure, Makoto decides to splash water playfully at Haruka, so Haruka splashes him back, the splash more forceful than he actually intends it to be.

Makoto yelps in shock and, on finding that his clothes are entirely soaked with water and toothpaste, has no choice but to remove them. He flings the soaked t-shirt at Haruka in mock anger, and Haruka makes a show of being terrified. The show of terror practically annihilates any defence Makoto has against him and Makoto drops everything to pull him close, to check if he's okay, and to kiss and hold him tenderly. Haruka loves it when Makoto is so defenceless before him like that, and he kisses back at Makoto so passionately that Makoto literally goes weak at the knees.

"Bedtime?" Haruka says suggestively, feeling the weight of Makoto pressing onto him.

"As you say, Haru-chan," Makoto replies, and through all the admiration on Makoto's face, Haruka catches a hint of incredulity, as if Makoto can't believe the Haruka that is happening to him.

***

*I made a mistake.* Makoto is sure of it now, that he shouldn't have agreed to go on the camp. Haruka doesn't want him to leave. Everything that Haruka is doing right now, for him and to him—it's because Haruka doesn't want to see him go. And the funny thing is that Makoto knows this ahead of Haruka. Makoto has a feeling Haruka hasn't realised this within himself, but the more he thinks of it the more keenly he feels that Haruka doesn't want him to go for the camp, not at all.

*Then why did you dump the responsibility on him? Why did you ask him for permission to go on the*
camp? You knew what you were doing then and you have to acknowledge it now. You knew that you were transferring the responsibility of being the bad person to Haru. How could you do such an evil thing? Haru was right to get angry with you back then. If you’d made the decision to go, and you simply told him you were going to be gone, then you would be the bad person for leaving Haru behind and then you would only need to endure the resentment he would have for you, as you have always done.

Are you such a coward that you had to force him to make the choice for which he had no say? You knew that Haru would know that you wanted to go, and that Haru would never say he didn’t want to see you go even if it was the opposite of what he wanted.

Do you think there’s a chance you can call Ama-chan-sensei and tell her you fell badly ill? Do you think you can ask one of your teacher-trainee friends in school to go in your place? They might have to arrive at the island one day late but it's still better than nothing.

Why did you do this? Why did you do all of this? Why did you trap yourself between honouring a professional agreement and your obligations to Haru? Why did you make the coward's choice of giving the decision to Haru so he can only have himself to blame?

There is an almost physical ache within Makoto to see Haruka so happy right now. A sense of betrayal bears down on his soul, so heavy and so sharp it feels like it is about to rip him asunder into broken pieces that can never be put back together. What if I am no longer the person Haru thinks I am? What if I'm a sham, a sham and a coward?

How did it end up this way? How did it end up with a version of him that’s trying so hard to be happy for Haruka because Haruka is happy for him right now? When will Haruka realise that he cannot bear to have Makoto away from him, and what will Haruka do when it happens?

"You're scared, Makoto," Haruka says plainly.

Makoto tries to smile. Makoto is trying his damndest to smile. "I'm trying not to be scared."

"You'll be okay," Haruka says. "Even though you're terrible with directions you'll be okay. You'll be with a group, and it's always safer in groups."

It's you I'm worried about, Makoto thinks, but cannot say. If he tells Haruka the truth now, the truth might stop him from going on the camp. And it would be grossly irresponsible to abandon going on the camp especially as it starts tomorrow, even as it feels irresponsible to leave Haruka alone, too.

"I want you to forget about whatever it is that's hanging on your mind," Haruka says to him, kissing him sideways by the shoulder blade. "I want you to be relaxed and refreshed for tomorrow."

Makoto can't help it—"P-Promise me you'll be okay," he blurts to Haruka, voice soft and nearly begging.

Why did you do that? Why did you make things worse? Now if Haru finds himself not okay, what if he ends up blaming himself?

"Of course I'll be fine, Makoto. I have the cats to take care of, and if I get lonely there are friends I can talk to. It's all good."

Eyes squeezed shut, Makoto can feel Haruka caressing his chest in broad circles, Haruka wedging a leg suggestively in between his legs. A kiss, pressed to his arm. "What is all this darkness in you, Makoto? I want to take it from you, I want to take all this fear and confusion from you and I want to shatter it before your eyes."
Haruka moves to straddle him under the covers. "Is it because you held the darkness from me for so long that it started to become part of you too? Don't let it feed on your soul, Makoto. Come back, come back to me, Makoto."

Don't let Haru-chan down. You cannot let Haru-chan down. "I'm here."

"We'll be fine," Haruka says, bending over to kiss him. "We're big enough now, even though we came from a small town. We haven't quite found our way, but we're still young and we're still looking."

Makoto wraps his arms around Haruka's neck, drawing Haruka close to him. You have to believe him. All you have is your faith, at times shaky and at times plodding and at times burdensome, but it was your faith that carried you through each time.

"We've come such a long way," Haruka continues. "Such a long way since kindergarten. Do you remember—we happened to sit next to each other, and everyone laughed at you for that picture you drew of your parents."

"I remember that," Makoto says, surprised that Haruka is bringing this up now. "You redrew the whole thing for me and submitted it to the teacher under my name." He feels Haruka sliding onto him, feels Haruka sliding a hand between his thighs. But maybe I shouldn't be surprised. I should be grateful Haru-chan wants to remember.

"And somehow it made the teacher angry and we both got a scolding for that, remember?" Haruka presses a kiss to Makoto's collarbone, another kiss to the centre of Makoto's chest. Is this affectionate, talkative Haru-chan the Haru-chan I've always longed to see?

"Teachers can be so weird," Makoto says, finally breaking into a laugh. "You also used to say all colours were equal, and got pissed off at everyone who said they had a favourite colour." Haruka's fingers flutter around his bellybutton, trailing downwards to his cock. Makoto runs a hand along Haruka's back in return, and he can feel Haruka lean back into his touch.

"And I wouldn't let anyone touch the crayon box. I didn't want them to keep using the same colours over and over again." Haruka bites gently at the skin around Makoto's neck, not enough to leave a mark, but enough to startle Makoto.

"You were the king of crayons, everyone was basically in thrall to you." Makoto pulls Haruka downwards, until Haruka is lying flat on top of him.

"I had a very good system going! There was a very fair rotation," Makoto can feel Haruka rubbing up against him with slow but sustained pressure.

Makoto tries not to laugh as he recalls a five-year-old Haruka staunchly refusing to let him have the green crayon to colour his trees. "There's no reason why you can't use pink for the trees! That is how the sakura trees look like in spring!" Haruka was years ahead of everyone. No one else saw things the way he did. Maybe not even now; no one can see things the way Haruka does.

"Four years since we got together, we're going through our third year of university, the two of us in this big city, and it was you who made it all worthwhile," Haruka says to Makoto, taking Makoto's cock into his hand.

With a laugh to disperse the weight of that line, Makoto lets Haruka get to work on him—Haruka's hands are skillful and his touch is fine, pulling in long, languid strokes, as slow as Haruka wants it, as slow as Haruka can make him go, and there is that steadfast denial of Makoto, even as Makoto asks...
for more, and Haruka's not letting him have it. Haruka's not letting Makoto find any relief, and Makoto's toes are curled tightly against the sheets and Makoto's fingers are gathering the blanket into a messy ball, and Haruka's holding on to Makoto in that unforgiving grip, and Makoto's begging, begging for a mercy that only Haruka can grant him, begging for all the times he did something that Haruka didn't like, begging for Haruka to love him back like he loves Haruka—

—and there, Haruka doesn't fail him, Haruka never fails him.

_It's okay to believe, you've only ever been right to believe._

***

The morning comes and Haruka's helping Makoto strap on his backpack.

"You've got your water bottle?" he asks curtly, tightening the backpack straps around the waist. "You've got your compass?"

"Yes, yes," Makoto says, struggling to put on his socks with Haruka fussing over him.

"So, tell me where's north," Haruka says, and Makoto releases the small carabiner with the compass dangling off a strap from his backpack. Makoto lets the compass orient itself, the black ball swirling in liquid, and it comes to a wavering halt.

"The arrow is pointing to you," Makoto says, with a repressed grin at Haruka.

"As it should," Haruka replies nonchalantly, hooking the carabiner back in its place on the side strap of Makoto's backpack, pulling Makoto upwards. He dusts Makoto's backpack as an extra measure, and then makes Makoto check for all the essentials again.

"All right," Makoto says softly, gathering him into a hug. "I have to go."

"Have lots of fun," Haruka replies, trying not to choke up. _This is so silly. It's no big deal._

"I will," Makoto promises. "And you take good care of yourself."

"I'll try to," Haruka says, vaguely.

They have such difficulty letting each other go. Makoto hoists the guitar from the floor and onto his right shoulder, and a duffle bag containing the tent and sleeping bags onto his other shoulder.

Makoto waves to something behind Haruka, and Haruka sees that Makoto is waving at the cats. Haruka catches the cats, holding them one to each arm, and brings them up to Makoto for a kiss. Saba claws possessively at Makoto's face, while Haruka grabs the more unsentimental Hamachi, helping her to wave her paws at Makoto.

The elevator dings, and Makoto disappears inside it. Haruka stares at the empty elevator lobby for a while before closing the door. He then remembers that he can still catch Makoto leaving from the balcony and he dashes outside, calling out to Makoto's bulky figure as it crawls along the sidewalk.

Makoto is rubbing at his eyes. _What a silly boy, no one needs to cry about this at all_, Haruka thinks at Makoto. He waves and waves at Makoto, until Makoto's tiny figure disappears around the building at the corner of the street.

Haruka takes a deep breath. This is not as bad as he feared. Smiling wistfully to himself, he goes to the kitchen to pour himself a glass of water to sip. He goes back to the bedroom, and decides to put
himself in Makoto's computer chair. He swivels around, from side to side. It's such a quiet morning, he realises. The air is so fresh and the sky newly bright on this summer day. He sticks out a leg to poke at Saba with his toe for fun. It's so quiet.

Setting his half-drained glass on the table, Haruka sees a blinking green light at the corner of Makoto's laptop. He pushes up the screen.

The following programs have canceled shutdown.

Silly boy, Haruka thinks. Makoto must have been in such a rush this morning and forgot to turn it off properly.

Haruka puts his hand on the mouse, moving the cursor towards the button to force close all the programs, when he suddenly decides to cancel shutdown and review the open programs out of curiosity. Perhaps there is something important that needs to be saved first, he supposes, trying to justify this action.

The web browser has been left open at the camp song attachment, with a message box saying that there are several tabs open, asking the user to confirm if all tabs are to be closed. Haruka clicks on 'cancel' with a distant smile at the thought of how forgetful Makoto can be about little things like this, and then decides to explore the open tabs. He arrives at Makoto's email.

We'll be bringing most of the necessary materials, Amakata-sensei writes, but since you've already printed your worksheets just bring them along too. Looking forward to seeing you at Ishigaki Airport!

Haruka sees that Makoto has five new email messages. He clicks to go to the main inbox. The new emails are mostly notifications and newsletters from mailing lists, nothing important.

Makoto sure has received a lot of messages from his gaijin friends on Facebook wishing him a good trip. And this morning his phone was buzzing non-stop from his Japanese friends wishing him the same.

Haruka scans further down the inbox page. There is an email thread with over two hundred messages. He clicks on it, unable to contain his curiosity.

Hello Makoto! the email begins, and as Haruka scrolls down, expanding email after email in the thread, he can feel his heart hammering against his chest. His eyes dart from side to side, reading and rereading the email contents, dread settling in like an inky cloud.

tell Ran we always knew she was strong enough for all this.

I told Nagisa what I thought of his video

Why is Rei suddenly emailing me about emotional turmoil

p.s. any update on the Gou situation?

someone is studying medicine at Keio.

Nitori's going to be in Australia for a semester

I'm so glad we're friends again, just friends.

It feels like something is caught in Haruka's throat. What on earth has been going on between Rin
and the rest of Haruka's friends this whole time? *When did this start? When did this start?* The thought pings relentlessly around Haruka's mind.

*When did Rin become involved in everyone's lives again? Why didn't anyone tell me? Was it the Olympics? It must have been the Olympics. How dare everyone else become friends with Rin again without telling me!*

His throat dry and inexplicably scraped raw, Haruka drains all the water from his glass and scrolls through the email thread again, disbelieving.

*How on earth is it possible for Makoto to go two hundred emails without mentioning me?*

*How on earth is it possible for Rin to go two hundred emails without mentioning me?*

*What is wrong with them?*

Haruka's heart is beating so loud, so fast, it feels like it might just jump out of his throat.

*Makoto's such a nice boy and of course he'll reply attentively to everyone, no surprises there. It was Rin who emailed first, so it must have been Rin who never brought me up and Makoto was too sensitive to mention me somehow.*

Haruka's still staring at the screen, frozen in place, unable to tear himself away. He scrolls through the emails mindlessly, up and down, faster than he can read. Nagisa, Rei, Gou, Ran, Ren, Amakata-sensei, Nitori, Mikoshiba. Everyone. Everyone but me.

*Why didn't Rin think of me?*

*Why didn't Rin ask about me?*

*Why didn't Rin care about me at all?*

*What does he think he's doing with all my friends?*

Haruka pulls away from the laptop in shock, almost hyperventilating. The computer chair is swivelling too forcefully with momentum and he grabs on to the TV shelf for balance. And then Haruka sees it.

*My bank book.*

He swiftly grabs the bank book and tears off the cover, eyes jumping straight to the account balance.

*Holy hell, it's a lot of money.*

It's a lot of money.

***

"Wow, what happened? Haruka? You look unwell!" Aki cries in alarm.

Haruka turns suddenly to her and grabs her hands pleadingly.

"I'm so glad you came at such short notice, Aki! Thank you so much for agreeing to look after the cats. I am very sorry to bother you like that, but this was totally unplanned, and I am greatly indebted to you for it."
"Where are you going?"

Haruka turns to face Aki. With a frown of concentration on his face, he says to her, "The developers are chasing us out."

"I can't believe they'd do that!" Aki is looking at him with that concerned face, and Haruka breaks eye contact. In that same instant, he realises that his suitcase is lying open beneath him, stuffed to the brim with winter clothing and threatening to expose his lie. Discreetly, he sticks out a foot to kick the cover down.

"I know!" Haruka adds forcefully. "Totally ahead of schedule."

Aki sighs sympathetically. "I miss Iwatobi."

"Don't tell anyone that I'm gone. I want to break the news about losing my house myself," Haruka tells her.

"All right then," Aki says, lifting the cat carriers. The cats begin to meow, disgruntled. "Saba and Hamachi are in good hands, so you head on home. Don't get too sad."

Haruka is fiddling nervously with his carry-on bag, the zippers on his backpack suddenly slippery and elusive. "Thank you for being such a great friend," he says to Aki, pulling her into an unplanned hug. "I'll see you again in August, before you head off to Pratt for exchange."

Aki smiles at him, returning the hug. "See you, Haruka."

"I'm going home," Haruka says out loud, repeating himself to Aki, as if it were the truth.

Chapter End Notes

If you're interested, you can see where some of the Tokyo locations mentioned in chapter three are in relation to each other if you follow this link: https://31.media.tumblr.com/a2079df4d4c562945b193dbc162db339/tumblr_inline_n0u6bmEdAi1qr
Melbourne Loves Haruka

Chapter Summary

Haruka dashes off to Melbourne. HOW DARE RIN STEAL MAKOTO FROM HIM. Nitori apparently uses Crème de la Mer.

Chapter Notes

IMPORTANT TRIGGER WARNING: This chapter is potentially VERY TRIGGERING for people who have struggled with depression and thoughts of suicide. Please avoid reading this if you are not in a safe headspace at this time.

Content warning: there will be discussion of a past coercive relationship--older man/underage boy

General warning: please have on standby a failproof happy place because this is one heavy chapter. It's also very long, so, just like chapter three, I recommend downloading the PDF or ebook version so you can bookmark it and come back another time.

One other thing I feel like pointing out: it occurred to me that the time it took for me to get this chapter out was WAY LONGER THAN IT TOOK FOR TONY ABBOTT TO FUCK UP AUSTRALIA I AM SO ASHAMED.

Beta as usual by potionwine, whom I may have severely damaged I AM SORRY. All remaining mistakes are mine.

This chapter also has a soundtrack I am extremely proud of. Listen to it here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For those who've come across the seas

Shut up, listen, love, darling, baby sweetheart. No one's asking you to forget yourself—it's you they want to see after all. It's you they love, and all I'm asking you to do is bring out the you that is easy to love. The you that doesn't need to come with a disclaimer or the need to have a lawyer look up all your boundaries beforehand. We believe in you—heck, we're on your team. We are all made up of a multitude of truths, and not all of that has to be true all the time. It is a truth that I'm a father, but when I'm at work—like I am at this present moment—I'm not a father. I'm your agent and it's my job to be responsible for the business side of things. You are too young to close yourself out from anything. Take everything as a learning experience. We're looking for the best possible synergies—all I'm asking—no—begging for, is for you to bring out the part of yourself that agrees for the occasion and leave the rest for another time. Repeat after me: every new experience is an experience of worth. Just give everything a shot. I feel you, I truly do. If I could choose, I wouldn't work for money either. But don't you understand that the great thing about the system is that you can be against it on principle and yet still have it work for you?
Me, I've got a family to look after, kids to send to school, and you—you've got your ambition to fund. So smile for the cameras and know your place, which is in their hearts. And once you seal your place in their hearts that's when you can do anything you want and they'll think it's the only thing for you to do. Get them behind you. We're all behind you.

***

R I N   M A T S U O K A (private release only)

Bursting onto the scene in the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow swimming for Australia, and proving he was no fluke at the Pan Pacific Swimming Championships just weeks later in Queensland, Rin Matsuoka has captured our imagination with his blistering pace and his efficient, powerful butterfly stroke.

As a first-generation migrant from Asia to Australia, Rin Matsuoka is honoured to represent the cosmopolitanism and diversity of multicultural Australia. The Melbournian has a self-confessed reliance on coffee to get him through his lectures at the University of Melbourne, an Endorsed Elite Athlete Friendly University of the Australian Sports Commission. When he is not hard at work in the pool, he can be found working towards a Bachelor of Commerce in Economics, with the full encouragement of his mother, Jun Matsuoka, the first female Senior Managing Director of Nomura Securities in Japan. Besides swimming and studies, Rin enjoys watching other sports and is a fan of the Hawthorn Hawks and Barcelona FC.

When going out with his friends, Rin Matsuoka enjoys having Korean BBQ, and listening to K-pop on his Samsung Galaxy S7. In return, Samsung and Optus are proud to reaffirm their longstanding partnership with Rin Matsuoka, supporting him through his early years through to his explosive 2016 Olympics performance, where he brought home a total of three golds and two silvers, equaling the same haul the much-loved fellow Australian swimmer Ian Thorpe achieved at his first Olympics in Sydney 2000.

As an official sponsor of Team Australia, Nestlé has selected Rin Matsuoka to represent several premium and popular brands internationally. Rin Matsuoka enjoys a broad appeal, particularly in the growth markets of Asia, where his Asian origins combined with his all-Aussie confidence allows him to effortlessly bridge the gap between East and West and become a truly global star.

Rin Matsuoka trains at the MSAC with fellow Team Australia swimmer Gemma Pickett, who picked up two silvers at the 2016 Summer Olympics. Under the guidance of Melbourne Vicentre Head Coach Viktor Golomshtok, Australian swimming is finally experiencing a resurgence in popularity thanks to Rin Matsuoka's heart-stopping performances, overcoming a brief period dogged by scandal and medal drought.

Poised to reach his physical prime at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, we look forward to building strategic relationships that will power Team Rin Matsuoka to record-breaking success!

***

The air smells of hot chocolate, fried dough, roast coffee. The ground? Acceptably clean. The restrooms? Maybe not so clean, and not to mention the puzzled expression on the barista's face when he heard the word "restroom".

—The toilet's over there.

Toilet? That was what I thought too, only my American tutor told me to say 'restroom' for toilet in English.
Not to mention the customs officers pulled me aside for extra questioning because they sensed something "fishy".

And most of all, don't talk to me about accommodation. I have none.

The city thrums: bright sky, clean air, cold morning. Trains scrape to a stop and hiss into life again. The station is not so busy that it's uncomfortable, but it breathes a steady stream of passengers.

Laces undone—set coffee cup on floor. Kneel down, tie laces, knot loop knot. What do I do now? What do I do? The sinking of the guilty heart, the stomach lurch of incorrigible anticipation.

Tell yourself: you've always wanted this. You've wanted this since you were twelve, to run away with him to a foreign city, get lost in a strange land and do everything new together. *When no one knows who we are, we can be anything we want to be.*

"Excuse me."

Haruka looks up. It's a woman. Blond-streaked hair under baseball cap, leggings, sneakers, puffer jacket.

"Do you know where the aquarium is?"

"Yes, I do know," Haruka says, without missing a beat. "Just head down this road and turn left at the river. Do not cross any bridges, it is on the same side."

"Great! Thanks!" The woman turns behind her to what looks like her husband and gestures for him to follow her. He has a baby carrier strapped to his chest and another child clinging to his left leg. *Seahorse daddies carry the young. Have a good time at the aquarium.*

Haruka nods and looks away. He's actually headed in the same direction, but he lets a moment pass so that he doesn't have to walk in step with the woman and her family. He doesn't want to risk the chance of being forced to strike up conversation.

*Head down to the river and cross the bridge to get to the casino, and behind the casino, find the intersection of City Road and Power Street. The image from Google maps is imprinted in memory.*

Walking along the road to Rin's apartment, a cattle truck hurtles past at an unsafe speed. From behind the grilles Haruka can hear the dismal moo of livestock awaiting slaughter. *Some omen this is. A stupid gamble with unknown stakes.* The casino building looms, drawing Haruka nearer to what feels like doom.

All the buildings here are made of glass. The architecture is on the staid side but at least the glass shimmers a watery green against against the spotless blue sky.

Rin's building is easy to find. There are shops along the exterior, cafés and newsagents and bakeries, and to the side, the entrance to the residents' lobby overseen by a concierge booth.

"Hi there! How may I help you?" the concierge calls out, beaming at him with a wide smile.

Haruka stalls his inward cringe at the overt friendliness and pivots on his heel to face the concierge. She exudes a warm, motherly vibe but her appearance is made younger by the bright smile and vivid orange headscarf framing her face. Haruka stares at the golden nametag pinned above her chest. *Sharifah.*

"Hi," Haruka begins hesitantly, suddenly doubtful of his ability to handle English. "I am looking for
"a friend."

"Yes?" Sharifah says, smile unwavering.

Haruka reaches for his phone to pull out the address he stored, taken from Rin's email to Makoto.

Sharifah begins to laugh on seeing the address. "So he has friends," she comments to herself, under her breath. Just as suddenly, she stops laughing and fixes a steely gaze on Haruka, eyes narrowing. "Or are you a stranger looking for trouble?"

Haruka is caught off his guard and forgets to formulate a reply.

"Your 'friend' is not in at the moment. I think you should give him a call and get him to pick you up later."

The ability to string a sentence is lost on Haruka as he remains standing wordlessly in front of the concierge booth. So maybe, in the real world, it's not possible to turn up at the doorstep of someone's house and expect to be taken in. But of course. It seems so obvious, so natural now.

*A lot of money for a wasted trip.*

Sensing that Haruka has no indication of moving, Sharifah decides to continue. "I'm very fond of Rin, but I can't be sure of who you are or what intentions you have. You have to give me more information about yourself, and then I'll decide if I want to help you."

"I am Haruka Nanase. I am Rin's childhood friend. I come from Japan."

"Thank you for telling me that, Haruka—if you don't mind me calling you Haruka, but that doesn't give me a reason to trust you."

"I..." Haruka says, but falters. This isn't working out like he imagined at all.

"Okay, I'll give you a chance, Haruka. Don't hold me to it but Rin is usually home in the evening. If you decide to swing by later today I can try to get you on the intercom and he can decide if he wants to see you."

"I...what time is that?"

"Late afternoon, evening? No guarantee. If you're his friend you should have your own way of contacting him but I'll pretend that it's because your phone died on the way here."

Haruka can only stare wordlessly at Sharifah. His phone is decidedly alive and in his palm, and he just used it to show her Rin's address.

"If you came in from overseas I recommend that you take a nice stroll around the city and grab some lunch while the sun is out. Would you like a list of great coffee places around the area? Melbourne has very good coffee and I can tell you which cafés have free wi-fi."

Seized by a sudden social anxiety, Haruka flees the building without further ado, struggling to rein his panic in. He ends up having to wheel his small suitcase back to the train station to check it in at a locker, where he is forced to cough up an unholy sum because it is all-day deposit only.

The loss of unnecessary sums of money disturbs Haruka so much he soon forgets about the awkward encounter with Rin's apartment concierge and ambles mindlessly around the city grid looking for something to do.
A quick review of his overseas adventure would read thus: a series of unwise decisions slowly escalating into potential homelessness. He should've taken a copy of the tourist guide at the airport. So far, Haruka has passed several little alleyways but he isn't in the mood for spontaneous discovery. As is his usual coping mechanism, he thinks: what would Makoto do?

Makoto wouldn't have flown halfway around the world completely uninvited, for starters. It didn't even occur to Haruka that perhaps he needed to apply for a visa until he was two hours into his flight. Maybe the whole reason why Haruka is doing something so stupid in the first place is because Makoto isn't here to stop him. So—Makoto has to accept his responsibility in this whole sorry affair. And actually, if Makoto and Rin hadn't emailed each other so vigorously to begin with, there would be no need for Haruka to snoop around checking that nothing untoward was happening. So the fact that Haruka is stranded and homeless, with only one hundred and sixty-seven Australian dollars on his body (he started out with two hundred but shed seventeen for the airport-to-city shuttle bus, four for the coffee at the station and twelve for the locker) – it follows that this dire situation is entirely Makoto's fault.

Rin's fault too, if he ever decides to show up. Doesn't Rin know that it's not acceptable to be emailing people's boyfriends behind their backs with gratuitous selfies just to show off new shoes? Was it necessary for cardigans to fall off-shoulder when taking a selfie and was it even necessary for a photo showcasing new shoes to extend so far upwards as to include the rest of the person?

Hunger gnaws and Haruka decides to grab some lunch at a fish and chips shop, ignoring the surfeit of sushi stands along the way. He is on holiday, he reasons, and the fish and chips shop promises something more exotic for his taste buds. He stares at the menu for a long while before ordering a species of fish he has not encountered before. The meat of this fish is tender and boneless, almost tofu-like in how fleshy and sweet it is, coated in a golden brown layer of crisp, beer-battered flour. The satisfaction of good fish calms his nerves and Haruka resumes roaming the city with newfound purpose. The worst that can happen is that Rin never wants to see him again and Haruka will simply take the opportunity to enjoy this vacation solo. He finds a bustling square with a tourist information centre, and arms himself with some brochures and flyers before setting off again. There are obviously hotels within the city grid, so the most desperate option is to check into one, and with some quick calculations, Haruka's bank balance can withstand that brunt. Hostels would be a more sensible option, though they are not apparent from the streets, as hostels are wont to be, so maybe he can ask for help with that if necessary. But the idea of asking strangers for help in a foreign tongue is perhaps too much to ask of him, and he snips into a shop that looks like it might have some travel guides.

The shop, as it turns out, sells mostly magazines, though there are travel books by the counter. The shop staff are on the side of overly chirpy in their enthusiastic greeting and Haruka fears being made to feel obliged to buy something when he only means to browse, so he casually sidles up to some distant shelves to thumb through some magazines.

On one of the shelves Haruka discovers the surfing magazine he contributed to several months ago. It figures he would find this here. He did receive some free copies of the magazine because of his contribution, but the satisfaction of seeing the actual thing for sale in a shop is an undeniable thrill. He picks up the magazine to browse through it, just because.

"'Scuse me," a person next to him says, reaching across Haruka to search for the same title. Retracting her arm with the magazine in hand, she does a double take at Haruka. Haruka watches warily as she flips the magazine to the contributors’ page, where her eye darts down towards his profile picture that was cropped from Aki's photo.

"You're Haruka!" she exclaims.
"Too late to run."

"...Do I know you?" Haruka utters, feeling a sharp aversion to the situation.

"Yeah? I'm Kali. Kali Menon. I'm sorry, I realise we haven't actually met in person but we've been exchanging emails about your work."

Oh, Haruka realises. Kali is the creative director of the magazine they're both holding in their hands.

"It's great to see you face-to-face! What are you doing here? I thought you lived in Tokyo."

"I'm visiting a friend," Haruka mumbles vaguely. It feels embarrassing to say because he can't even be sure of the truth in his words.

"Cool," Kali replies. "If you ever want me to show you around I'll be glad to. Just shoot me an email. Do you want my number?"

It can't hurt. He passes his phone to Kali for her to key her number in.

"By the way, we've got an event going on this Saturday night, kind of like, a book launch party. It'll be great if you can come! Let me know and I'll put your name on the guestlist."

Haruka nods wordlessly.

"Fancy bumping into you here, huh? Why are you looking at yourself anyway?"

I'm not, Haruka silently protests. "You too," he points out to Kali. "Why are you looking at your own magazine?"

Kali begins to laugh awkwardly. "Er...I was going to check out the competition but decided our magazine is so much more attractive anyway." She puts the magazine back on the shelf without reading it and bids Haruka a hasty goodbye, claiming that she has to get back to work.

Haruka checks the time, and realises he should probably head back to Rin's apartment to wait around in the hopes of catching him. As he leaves the magazine shop, he decides to grab one of the top-selling magazines on sale for the week, to occupy his time just in case.

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Fucking Melbourne and its fucking tsundere weather.

Rin pulls his cap further down his head. This morning, after training, the sky shone bright and clear, but the sky is now shrouded a gloomy grey and the patter of rain is beating upon him. A gust of brutally cold wind whips around his body and Rin has to hunch over his tiger-print eco-friendly reusable hemp grocery tote to protect it from the rain.

Perhaps it is a good decision after all to have skipped changing out of his training clothes, because Rin has his sports jacket around him and plastic thongs on his feet, the kind of outfit that can get wet without the need for him to fret. But his bare toes are nearly freezing in the cold and if he is to stumble on the pavement while on his way home he thinks that they might just snap off. And Coach will kill me for it.

In truth the reason why Rin hadn't changed this morning is not because he was running late after training, although he was running late after training. Rin did go home, after all, to put down the canvas holdall he uses for training and pick up his uni bag, the duo-toned large leather tote he stashes
his textbooks and stationery in. On usual days, he might take the opportunity to change too, and he
had wanted so badly to wear his new suede brogues, only that the fisherman sweater that would have
completed his outfit is still at the dry cleaner's, which is why he gave up entirely on his appearance
and skulked to class in his sports gear and thongs. It is a fortunate thing he isn't wearing his suede
brogues in this rain.

Upon entering his apartment lobby Rin does a quick check into his grocery tote to see if the
macarons got wet. Both boxes of the macarons are fine. He takes out the smaller box and hands it to
the concierge.

"Ooh, La Belle Miette! Thank you, sweetheart. You're always so kind. How was your day?"
Sharifah asks him.

Rin makes a little frown and gestures at his frumpy rain-spotted outfit. Sharifah chuckles good-
naturedly in reply. She gestures for Rin to come closer.

"You have a visitor," she tells him in a hushed tone. "He's actually sitting over there. He's been
sitting there for hours. I can't decide if he's a stalker or not, but he gives off really weird vibes."

"I don't have stalkers—" Rin begins, because that's just absurd, he’s not that famous, but as he turns
around to take a quick glance at the person Sharifah is referring to—

Fuck. Stalker indeed.

What the fuck is that Nanase doing here? Oh my god he has one of those hipster Swedish backpacks,
the Fjallala Kraken or something, and he's even reading one of those pretentious artsy indie
magazines oh my god can he get any worse when did he become such a stereotype—

Rin turns sharply to face Sharifah in great alarm. "Hide me," he mouths to her.

"Yo," a voice behind him says.

Rin spins on his heels again. All this spinning on about-turns is making him dizzy.

Haruka has evidently noticed him and is standing approximately one metre away from Rin, with a
palm held out low in a form of greeting.

"I've been waiting for you," Haruka says, and Rin almost wants to throw up at his sheer gall.

"So, do you know him?" Sharifah interrupts protectively, directing the question towards Rin. Bless
her soul.

At this moment Rin realises that Haruka is staring at his grocery bag. Rin cannot help but shift his
gaze to see what Haruka is looking at and he realises that Haruka has been silently eyeing the bulk
pack of toilet roll peeking out of Rin's grocery tote.

Rin rips off his cap in anger to confront Haruka, but as he does so he gets the distinct sense that he
has ruined his ponytail and the rain has made his hair curiously crunchy and he probably looks really,
really shit right now.

"Let's go upstairs," he says to Haruka, too ashamed to be standing around in public looking like this.

Sharifah has a worried look on his face so Rin mouths to her that he should be all right. I hope.
Fingers crossed.
Haruka steps into the elevator with Rin. He watches as Rin scans his key card and only three numbers show up on the touchscreen where a number panel should be.

\[G, 8, 35.\]

Rin presses the square bordering "35".

"What's on level eight?" Haruka asks Rin. He assumes the G is for ground floor, and 35 for Rin's apartment.

"Pool," Rin says, irritably.

"Can I see?" Haruka asks, before he can stop himself.

"No. It's probably too small anyway."

"Probably too small?"

Rin shrugs. "I've never been there."

You live here, Haruka thinks, trying not to frown. "Do you want me to help you with your things?" he says to Rin, because Rin appears to be struggling with his grocery bag.

"No," Rin snaps back at him, arms hugging defensively around the crinkly plastic bulk pack of toilet paper.

The elevator opens into a small, disappointingly blank lobby. Rin heads towards a door in the corner, the one with a mirrored panel with the number 8 etched on it.

\[3508: \text{level thirty-five, apartment eight. Easy enough.}\]

"Welcome to my apartment," Rin says grudgingly, pushing the door open.

"Why are you wearing those when it is supposed to be winter?" Haruka asks, as Rin kicks his plastic footwear into the gap under his shoe cabinet.

"I can wear thongs whenever I want."

...*Thongs?*

Upon seeing Haruka's puzzled expression, Rin's face contorts into horror.

"Tch. Footwear. Footwear! Thongs are footwear here," Rin adds hastily. Haruka can swear there is a blush creeping into Rin's cheeks. He's so cute when flustering.

"Have you eaten?" Rin asks, as he moves to the kitchen counter to get his groceries organised. Another open concept kitchen, just like Gou's apartment. Unlike Gou's apartment, this is far more monochromatic. The black and white artwork above the couch catches Haruka's eye—it seems to be a Senju Hiroshi waterfall painting.

Haruka suddenly remembers that Rin asked him a question. "Yes," he replies, a delayed response.

"What did you eat?"
"Fish and chips."

"Huuuuh?" Rin says incredulously, as if he's never heard of the thing.

"It was good. It is this fish called flake. It was very tasty."

For some reason that statement sends Rin into a flurry of rage.

"Huuuuh?" Rin says again. "Flake is shark, baka, and it's not good to eat shark!"

"Why?" Haruka is bristling at the insult. "I can eat shark if I want to eat shark."

"It's high in mercury, for one," Rin counters.

"How was I supposed to know? I hadn't even known flake is English for shark until today."

"Just don't eat it...don't eat sharks," Rin mutters, sounding inexplicably desperate and soft.

"Whatever. Sharks are evil."

"Sharks are not evil!" Rin exclaims, jumping into the defensive, throwing a packet of smoked salmon forcefully on the kitchen counter to make his point. "Sharks are not evil, sharks are necessary for the marine ecosystem..." Rin blathers on, stabbing the vacuum sealed packet of smoked salmon with a sharp knife, ripping the plastic wrap wide open. "You better watch what you eat...you're going to get mercury poisoning sooner or later..."

The springy twitch of warm bread popping out of a toaster interrupts Rin's rambling. He puts the lightly-browned pieces of toast on a plate and arranges slices of smoked salmon on it. He pulls an avocado out of his grocery bag, slices it in half, and begins knifeing thick chunks on top of the salmon. When the salmon is completely covered in avocado he puts the untouched portion into the fridge along with the remainder of the smoked salmon.

Rin takes a slice of the bread and begins eating it. He looks at Haruka and pushes the plate with the other slice in Haruka's direction.

"I'm not hungry," Haruka says, but then decides to pick out the slices of salmon to nibble on anyway.

"Tch," Rin says dismissively, and shoves the leftover avocado and toast bread into his mouth. Taking his cell phone out of his pocket, Rin looks at the time and draws a diagram to unlock his phone, and begins composing a message.

"What brings you here?" he asks without looking at Haruka.

"Why can't I be here," Haruka replies obtusely.

"Aren't you supposed—I don't know," Rin huffs, exasperated.

"Makoto's away at camp. So he says I should take a nice break too."

"Is this your definition of a nice break?"

"It would be, if you tried being nicer."

Rin shoots Haruka a deathly glare but says nothing else. He proceeds to take some breadsticks and hummus out of the fridge and munch on them noisily.
"Where are you staying," Rin asks, after a while, although it sounds more like a comment.

"That's a very good question."

"What?" Rin nearly cries in alarm. "Did you just arrive or something? Do you not have any accommodation booked? Do you even know how to travel, Haru—"

"I was hoping to stay with you."

Rin looks like he might either die, or kill Haruka on the spot. Maybe both.

"You're not supposed to do that! You can't go to someone's house unannounced and tell them you're going to stay there!"

"Why not? It saves money, doesn't it?"

"That's really rude, Haru!" Rin looks genuinely appalled.

"It's not like I don't have backup plans. If you're so against the idea, and it looks like you are, I have a list of hostels I am going to check into. There is a backpackers' house on Elizabeth Street and I will go there tonight."

"Backpackers' house?" Rin repeats, like he's never heard of the thing either. There is a deep frown on his face. "Look, all right, all right, I don't want to chase you out, geez, but do you think you could let me have some advance notice next time? You're lucky my mum isn't around to take the other room."

...Other room? For some reason it didn't occur to Haruka that there would be another room. He thought that—well, nevermind.

Rin digs around the kitchen drawers. He tosses a set of keys on the table. "If you'd told me in advance you were coming I would have planned for it, but I'm busy tonight. Here are the spare keys, you'll just have to grab some Maccas for dinner or something. Sorry."

"Maccas?"

"Maccas...McDonald's. Look, just let me know when you're coming next time, okay?"

With that, Rin throws his hands up in the air and strides off, opening the door leading to the bathroom. Catching a glimpse of the inside, Haruka realises that this bathroom might be nicer than the one at Gou's apartment. Haruka grabs the door handle before it closes and pokes his head inside.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Rin whips his head to the side to give Haruka an exasperated look.

"What?" Haruka asks. It's not like Rin's begun stripping or anything. The bathroom is sparkingly clean with shiny, almost iridescent black mosaic tiles. The bathtub is western-sized with a clean, straight-edged finish. The accompanying taps are sleek and minimalistic in design, and, affixed to a stand, there is a moveable showerhead in the shape of a large, tapering disc. Attached to the ceiling above the bathtub, Haruka sees the pièce de résistance—a square rainshower panel. He has to resist the urge to start stripping and jump into the bathtub himself.

"I need my bathroom, so please excuse yourself. And will you please stop caressing my tiles." Rin has a nonplussed expression on his face.
Haruka hadn't even realised he was doing that. He stops, tilts his head away, and retreats, closing the bathroom door. Immediately after, he hears the click of a lock.

*Rin seems very testy today. Or maybe he's always testy and I just forgot.* Haruka smiles to himself, mind conjuring memories of the old Rin.

With nothing to do, he wanders back to the kitchen. Rin's phone is buzzing where he left it on the kitchen counter, and out of curiosity, Haruka goes over to see who is calling.

...Nitori Aiichirou?!


After some time, Nitori seems to have decided to hang up, and Haruka reaches out to inspect Rin's phone. Haruka's a visual learner, and as he recalls, this was what Rin did to unlock his phone just now—*Yes. Right on the first try.*

The entirety of Rin's life as recorded on his cell phone lies open for Haruka to see. Haruka dismisses the missed calls alert and heads for the messages section, where texts from Nitori are incoming.

*Rin-senpai! Just finished my shopping, will head back for a bit before going out again.*

*Thanks for sending me the location of the restaurant! I'll see you there at 7!*

Haruka scrolls upwards and opens up the restaurant location. It seems to be along the river. Is this what Rin is preoccupied with for tonight? Is this...a date? What is Nitori doing here?

Bristling with burgeoning jealousy, Haruka decides to explore more of Rin's messages. The reverse-chronological list seems fairly mundane, with texts from his coach about training schedules, appointments to be fixed with his physio, group chats with schoolmates about assignments and readings, texts with his mother and sister, and then Haruka comes upon the thread with Makoto.

By this point, it feels like his heart is hammering so fast it might soon burst out of his ribcage and leave him dead. He's seen the email exchanges, but what do Makoto and Rin message each other about? From the looks of it, the last text was exchanged a week ago, of a photo. Haruka's mind is flush with conjecture of more brazen selfies from Rin directed towards Makoto. With bated breath, Haruka enters the message thread, and sees that the photo is of...

...a sleeping kitten.

Haruka doesn't know whether to be disappointed or relieved. He scrolls upwards, realizing that... on an albeit infrequent schedule, Rin and Makoto have been spamming each other with pictures of cats in various positions, accompanied by short, bland messages.

*Good morning! (And a picture of a yawning cat)*

*Tired after training! (And a picture of a cat massaging another cat)*

*Look at this cat I found near the station! (A picture of a cat perched on a fence)*

The blandness of the messages somehow only stirs Haruka into an emotional frenzy. *What kind of stupid people would waste so much time messaging other people such stupid pictures?*

*What lies behind messages like "Happy Friday!" or "Boo...Monday again"? Such inanity is the*
preserve of teenage couples, middle school teenage couples at that. Haruka feels a stab of embarrassment on behalf of Rin and Makoto, and the embarrassment soon turns to rage. Haruka cannot understand—there is nothing incriminating going on. Everything is seemingly so chaste, so innocuous. And yet—and yet he has this nasty premonition that something else is going on that no one is telling him about.

*It's not fair*—the torrent of inexplicable jealousy is pouring back into the twisted wells of Haruka's heart, the same jealousy that struck him when he first encountered all those emails between Rin and Makoto. What right does Rin have to Haruka's life? Why can't Rin leave Haruka alone, why does he have to stick his grubby fingers everywhere when he thinks Haruka isn't looking, snatching away what belongs to Haruka?

The lock of the bathroom door springs open, and Haruka immediately covers his tracks by exiting all apps and locking Rin's phone. For good measure, he plops himself on the couch and pretends that he has been sitting there the whole time.

Rin doesn't even acknowledge Haruka when he exits the bathroom in a flurry of towels, trailing a gingery, peppery scent.

Haruka decides to head inside the bathroom after Rin shuts his bedroom door without ado. The bathroom is surprisingly dry—only the bathtub is wet, so Rin must be very diligent about bathroom splashes. All the toiletries are organised meticulously by function, and all of it comes in expensive-looking bottles. Haruka squeezes a small drop of Rin's shower gel onto his palm, and lifts it to his nose to inhale deeply. *Is this what Rin smells like up close?* The bottle reads that it is a coriander seed body cleanser. There is a skip in his heartbeat as a confusion swirls within Haruka. He was angry with Rin two minutes ago and now that unspeakable longing is creeping up on him again. Why is Rin so endlessly frustrating? *What am I even doing here?* Rin had called him rude for springing up unannounced and he has a valid point. Haruka feels like a feral child sometimes, left alone to bring himself up as he was—he failed to pick up on the finer points of social etiquette and it's like when he ran away from the concierge this morning, or failed to greet the magazine editor properly—why is it that he only realises his transgression after the fact?

The bathroom door suddenly opens and Haruka finds Rin staring incredulously at him. "Move," Rin says brusquely, and goes up to occupy the space in front of the mirror, which is amply lit by a border of frosted glass. Rin takes out this...tiny velcro-like rectangular mat and slaps it on his head to keep his fringe away from the face. He spritzes some...mist on his face and pats it down lightly with his fingers to help absorption. He unscrews a jar of what looks like moisturiser and dabs it onto his skin in little dots, then rubs it in with a circular motion. With his face done, Rin removes the little sticky mat from his hair and puts it back into a drawer.

Next, Rin reaches for the bottle of argan oil on the stand and shakes a few drops onto his hands, smoothing out the tips of his hair. Afterwards, Rin plugs in the hair dryer and begins drying his hair, using a round hair brush to straighten it out as he does. There is a sudden rawness in Haruka's throat as he realises he wants to reach out and touch the soft, silky hair on Rin's head. He wishes that he could call all of that *his*.

With the hair dried and fluffy-looking, Rin inspects his face in the mirror once more, seemingly bothered by something on his chin. He opens another drawer and takes out a small tube of stuff and squeezes it on the back of his hand, dabbing it onto his jawline with the pads of his fingers.

"...What's that?" Haruka can't help asking, utterly fascinated. He's never seen anyone do this before —on some theoretical level, Haruka is aware that there are people who have a strict skincare regime,
but Haruka simply uses water for everything and finds it works well enough. On days where his skin feels particularly dry, he goes only as far as pinching Makoto's moisturising lotion.

"It's CC-cream," Rin states like it is obvious, until he notices Haruka's blank face. "Colour-correcting cream. I'm just trying to hide some spots."

...Make-up? Haruka thinks with a small measure of horror. Why does Rin...need make-up? Haruka thinks that Makoto already pushes the limit with his cocoa butter lip balm sometimes.

"It takes work to look flawless, okay?" Rin explains, a hint of desperation in his voice.

Haruka turns his face away and decides he should probably leave the bathroom. He returns to the couch and presses a cushion in front of his body like a barrier against the world.

Does Rin always put in so much effort or is it because he is out to impress at his special date tonight? The thought of the special date physically sends an ache tearing through Haruka, and resentment threatens to seep from the pores of his body, large and ugly and unrefined, so unlike Rin's primped and delicate pores.

Like a man possessed, Haruka suddenly throws the cushion back in place on the couch and storms out of the house as he hears Rin call out vainly, insipid, shallow, from his bedroom, "Should I wear the normal leather jacket or the drapey leather jacket?"

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Haruka had only meant to take a walk by the river, hoping that the sight of water would calm him down. He can't explain it, and he pins it down to sheer coincidence that his angry stomp to the river ends in front of the restaurant Rin is supposed to have his special date at.

He stands there unmoving and stares at the restaurant for a long time. Rin's still at the apartment, probably preening away trying to style his scarf in a very particular way that will help him achieve whatever look it is that he wants to impress Nitori with.

"May I help you?" A member of the wait staff approaches him. Haruka sees that her nametag reads Claire.

"Yes, Claire, thank you. This evening, I have a reservation. It is under the name of Rin Matsuoka."

"Ah, Rin Matsuoka," Claire says with a broad smile. "For two? This way please."

"Excuse me, in fact, it will be for three, please, thank you."

"Oh, no problem. Hold on a moment." Claire goes up to a table for four and removes one set of cutlery and wine glasses, leaving three. "This way please," she indicates to Haruka afterwards.

"Would you like something to drink while you wait?" Claire says, handing him a menu.

"For me, the water, please."

"Sure," Claire says, and she disappears to fetch the glass of water.

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"For you," Rin says, handing Nitori the box of macarons from La Belle Miette. "The best macarons I've ever tasted, to thank you for tonight's dinner. You really shouldn't have."
"Oh, Rin-senpai, it's nothing at all. Thank you so much for showing me around Melbourne."

"Heh," Rin begins awkwardly. "I'm sorry I couldn't actually show you around in person for the most part, although I hope you liked my recommendations."

"Your recommendations were excellent, Rin-senpai. I thought the State Library had such beautiful architecture. I'm such a big fan of old buildings."

"I hope you had a good experience in Australia overall."

"Good? It was amazing! It was incredible to get the opportunity to work at the research institute. It really strengthened my conviction to be a marine biologist! It is absolutely heart-wrenching to see firsthand the effect of man-made global warming on marine life. And Australia has so many stretches of stunning, vivid natural beauty!"

"Yes, um, yes, I am glad you told me all about this. The restaurant I chose for tonight serves only sustainable seafood, so I hope you will enjoy it."

"Of course! As always, you make such a thoughtful choice, Rin-senpai!"

This is getting a little embarrassing. Because Nitori had gone to the extra effort of flying to Melbourne to meet up with him, Rin's ingrained inner senpai meant he felt obliged to show Nitori around. Along the way, Nitori insisted on being given the honour of treating Rin for this final dinner, because Rin had paid for all the waffles, gelato, flat whites, yo-yo biscuits, thick-cut chips, sushi handrolls and assorted nibbles in-between, and it seemed to Rin a bit too rude to keep tussling over the issue so he finally gave in. Rin-senpai! I do not mean to be presumptuous but please give me this small chance to thank you with a dinner at your favourite restaurant, although I know it does not in any way match up to what you have done for me....

The restaurant is an easy choice for Rin. It is a lovely place he often visits when his mother is in town, moderately priced but not so cheap as to make Nitori feel irrelevant. It is an added bonus that they serve only sustainable seafood.

"Hi Claire," Rin greets.

"Oh! Hey! Rin! Your friend's waiting," Claire says, gesturing towards a particular table.

Friend? Huh?

"Oh," Nitori says, before Rin even has the chance to react. "Nanase-san's here too?"

What? How? Haru—? Rin wants so desperately to drag Nitori away and tell him that it is all a mirage, that he is mistaken about the restaurant, and then perhaps skulk up to Grossi Florentino and beg for a table and pass them his card at the door or something so that Nitori can't intercept the payment because none of that, not one iota of that, will ever make up for the disaster that is Nanase Haruka showing up unannounced for a dinner that Nitori has insisted on paying for. How do I salvage this without making a scene? How?! Rin is struggling to dull the screams in his mind, trying not to blow up at Haruka.

"I hope you don't mind that I was early," Haruka says, going only so far as to lift up a palm, butt apparently glued to his chair.

"Oh no, not at all," Nitori says, completely unfazed. "I'm so glad you could join us, Nanase-san."

Oh god, Rin thinks, feeling like he's withering, feeling like he's about to throw up, feeling like he
won't be able to eat anything for days, much less force down this meal. *This is not in the script. How is it humanly possible to act as if all this is not entirely unplanned?*

"Nice to see you here too," Haruka says to Nitori in a manner so unfeeling Rin would have been better off if Haruka had just kept his mouth shut.

"How wonderful it is," Nitori begins, sounding genuinely excited, "to have this opportunity to catch up with each other. How are you, Nanase-san? I trust you are doing well?"

Haruka makes a vaguely acquiescent sound as he gulps down some water. Rin takes the seat adjacent to Haruka, and it is taking all his willpower not to throttle Haruka by the neck right now.

Setting his glass down, Haruka eyes Nitori silently as if to say, and what are you doing here? Unable to withstand Haruka's effrontery any longer, Rin angles a sharp kick at him under the table, but it barely makes a dent in Haruka's dispassionate stoicism.

"Ai has been studying in Australia for a semester, working alongside international experts at the Shark Bay Ecosystem Research Project. This is his last night before he goes back to Japan and I hope that he leaves with *favourable memories of his time here.*" Rin wonders if the last line will penetrate that thick skull of Haruka's.

"Thank you, Rin-senpai!" Nitori gushes, beaming away wide-eyed. If there is a just and fair god, Nitori would have half the embarrassing enthusiasm he has for Rin and Haruka would have twice the social graces he has now. This is enough to persuade Rin into unshakeable atheism. Rin compulsively rearranges the cutlery laid out in front of him to calm his nerves, making the spaces between the cutlery equidistant and perpendicular to the table.

"Very well," Haruka says, leaning forward to pick up his wine glass, which Nitori had requested be filled with a lovely sparkling salmon-pink rosé. With his other hand Haruka suddenly grabs Rin by the hand Rin is rearranging cutlery with, and squeezes it emphatically. "Rin and I would like to offer you a toast."

There is a flicker of shock registering on Nitori's face, but he tries to hide it with a blink. "T-thank you, Nanase-san." Nitori's eyes darts from side to side as he takes in the tableau before him.

*Oh fucking hell, fuck fuck fuck.* It takes Rin all he has not to snap the stem of his wineglass in half and throw it on the floor in anger. Maybe stab somebody with the shards. *Maybe Haru.*

"Let's order food," Rin finds it in him to mutter through gritted teeth, dragging his hand off the table to shake it free from Haruka's grip like it's infected. *What is with the handholding? Is Haru seriously trying to pretend we're a couple? Is this what he becomes when Makoto isn't around to watch him?*

"The scallops sound amazing," Nitori gushes. "The char-grilled tuna too. Do you think we should order some oysters to share?"

"I'm getting the char-grilled tuna for the main," Haruka cuts in. "And the smoked ocean trout to start."

"Oh, in that case shall I order the blue-eye cod for my main?"

Haruka furrows his brow. "The blue-eye cod sounds nice. I think I'll get that instead."

"Ah..." Nitori begins, but finding nothing more to say, laughs submissively.

"If you want the cod you should just go for it, Ai," Rin tells him, jumping into the conversation.
"Rin-senpai! It's fine, everything on the menu sounds so good I can't decide. Why don't you choose
for me?"

"Choose for me too, Rin," Haruka inexplicably interrupts, apparently serious.

What?! Rin is completely, totally, absolutely mystified by Haruka's behaviour tonight. Why is Haru
acting this way in front of Ai? It's frankly just so embarrassing and yet Haruka has not shown one jot
of self-awareness or shame.

"Er...," Rin stutters. "Okay fine, Ai should get the salmon, Haru can get the tuna, and I'll get the cod.
And both of you can have some of mine." Dammit, I was here for the beef, Rin thinks darkly to
himself.

"You mentioned you were doing research on sharks," Haruka states, after Claire has taken their
orders and left. It sounds like Haru's opening an interrogation on Ai.

"Yes! Well, not just sharks, although I do hope to become a shark expert, but that's a long way down
the road!" Nitori punctuates his sentence with a bright laugh. "I was just shadowing the researchers
at Shark Bay and the whole experience was so amazing."

"What kind of sharks?"

"Oh, all kinds! Wobbegongs, hammerheads, tiger sharks, black tip reef sharks, white tip reef sharks,
even the great white..."

"Why sharks?"

"They're just so fascinating! They are a woefully misunderstood species, and so little is known about
them despite all the media attention they get. There is so much sensationalist misinformation floating
around out there when, you know, most sharks are harmless towards humans, and humans have been
doing far more damage to sharks than they ever will to us."

"Ai hates Shark Week," Rin interjects. "All hyped up pseudo-documentaries spreading
misconceptions of the threat sharks pose, he says."

"Ah! Not me!" Nitori corrects with a nervous giggle. "I'm just quoting one of the researchers I
worked under..."

"Nevertheless," Rin says, a smile finally pushing its way through to his face. He genuinely admires
Nitori's passion for his work. Nitori's enthusiasm for marine biology is infectious and a good deal
more palatable to Rin than Nitori's enthusiasm for...Rin himself.

"Is it true that sharks are afraid of dolphins?" Haruka asks, intently curious.

"Not likely. The vast majority of dolphins I saw had scars from shark attacks."

"You saw dolphins too?" Haruka makes it sound like a sore point.

"Of course, Nanase-san, sharks and dolphins inhabit the same regions and depths of the ocean."

"Are all dolphins perverts?" Rin puts forth salaciously.

"Most animals are perverts!" Nitori laughs. "Yes, dolphins participate in auto-erotic and socio-sexual
behaviour but the same can be said of many other species, mammals especially. But it is incorrect to
attach descriptive labels for human behaviour to animals when we do not fully understand their
cognitive process. They do not have the same moral and ethical reasoning as we humans."

Right. Rin still finds it hard to shake off his shock whenever some sex-related topic comes up with Nitori, like a little brother syndrome. Maybe it's because he suspects that Nitori, as a biologist, is far more mature about sex than he will ever be.

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"Please excuse me for a moment," Nitori says as he stands, dropping his crumpled napkin on the table next to the empty dinner plates.

Finally, Rin thinks. He can faintly hear Nitori asking a waiter for the lavatory, and when Nitori is comfortably out of earshot Rin turns to Haruka.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he demands angrily. "Why do you keep showing up without notice?"

"What," Haruka says expressionlessly, sipping intently at his wine.

"You know very well what! How did you find out I was having dinner at this exact place?"

"I didn't. I happened to take a walk down to the river, and I saw this nice restaurant that served nice seafood."

"Quit lying, Haru. You were sitting at my table before I got here!" Rin hisses.

Claire pops up to clear the empty plates so Rin pulls away from Haruka and leans back into his chair to stew in anger.

When Claire leaves, Rin starts talking again. "Look, Haru, it's fine if you want to pretend to be my friend or whatever and we can have some fake happy dinner, but the problem is that this dinner was meant to be a special treat from Ai. For me, not for you. And now you suddenly appear and act like we're a couple so of course Ai's going to want to pay your share too, which is completely unreasonable because he didn't even know you were going to show up..."

Haruka frowns, processing something in his mind. "Okay, my bad, so why don't I pay for everyone's dinner then?"

"What? No, no. You don't know how much Ai had to beg for this opportunity and now it's like you're going to undermine his good intentions—why do you always have to screw everything up, Haru?"

"Why do you sound so distressed? It's just dinner."

"Look, I just—I just don't want Ai to feel unwanted, okay?"

"Why? Do you like him?"

"No! No!" Rin's face wrinkles. "I like him, but not in that way! It's because I don't like him in that way that I need to—you know—let him down gently or something."

"You're just stringing him along if you keep this up."

"I'm not stringing him along! I mean, I'm not even sure if he like-likes me in that way, so all I'm trying to do is keep the friendship going, okay?"
"Why don't you just make it clear that you are romantically unavailable and friendship will be the only option?"

"What? No!" Rin protests.

"I don't get it."

"I don't get you, Haru! I don't understand what you're trying to do, I don't understand what's going on beneath that impenetrable skull of yours, I don't..."

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Nitori is heading back from his bathroom break when he sees Rin and Haruka leaning very close to each other, whispering agitatedly about some topic or the other. He pulls out his chair and settles back in place.

"I'm back!" he announces cheerily, unfolding his napkin, which must have been re-folded by Claire while he was away. He pulls the napkin across his lap, keeping his eyes averted as he tries to give Rin and Haruka space to finish their conversation.

"Just in time. Dessert's here," Rin says to Nitori as Claire brings the dessert plates over. She checks in on their level of satisfaction so far and Rin tells her that they're having a great time and the food is just right as always. Nitori smiles and compliments her on her attention to detail.

Nitori has ordered the chocolate pavé with macadamia praline while Rin got the panna cotta and Haruka got the lemon pudding with lemon sorbet. The plates are set in front of them.

"Rin told me you offered to pay for dinner," Haruka abruptly begins as soon as they dig in. "But as I turned up unannounced I think it is right that I should—"

At this point Rin suddenly cuts in, grabbing Haruka by the hand. "I am really, truly sorry about this, but will you please let Haru and me have the honour of treating you to your last meal in Australia? As your senpai it is only right for me to do this." Rin's hand tightens around Haruka's in an emphatic squeeze. They glance at each other for a moment, and then Haruka squeezes Rin's hand in return. They've been touching each other all night. I am such a fool to think I could get Rin-senpai's attention this way when he was taken all along.

"S-Senpai, forgive me if I have overstepped my bounds!" Nitori exclaims, trying not to stare too obviously, too jealously, too intrusively at their intimate touching.

"Please be assured you have not, Ai," Rin tries to persuade, and Nitori would have been convinced if not for the way Haruka is looking at him—Nitori dips his head and tries to choke back his tears. His chocolate pavé, smooth and rich just seconds ago, now burns like ash in his mouth, rough and tasteless.

"I must have stolen too much of Rin-senpai's time away from Nanase-san and Nanase-san got angry. Still, they are so gracious as to spare me a few hours of their time for this farewell dinner. How did I even think I could compete with someone like Nanase-san? I am a bumbling dorky loser who should be glad Rin-senpai even acknowledges I exist."

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"Thank you for dinner!" Nitori says with a deep bow. "Nanase-san. Rin-senpai."
"It's nothing, it's nothing," Rin replies shiftily, avoiding eye contact with Nitori. "Come, we'll walk you back to your hotel."

"Thank you!" Nitori exclaims again, the dazzle of admiration for Rin returning into his eyes.

Haruka tries not to seethe with annoyance, and instead slips an arm possessively around Rin's waist. "Which way is your hotel?" he asks Nitori as he pulls Rin towards him.

"It's that way," Nitori replies lightly, with a smile. Haruka catches sight of Nitori's gaze lingering on him and Rin, so he decides to nuzzle Rin in the neck and Nitori immediately looks away.

"What the hell are you doing?" Rin hisses, lips close to Haruka's ear. Rin moves to pry Haruka's hand off his back but Haruka succeeds in twining his fingers around Rin's.

"I couldn't help myself," Haruka whispers in reply, and then he realises that although Nitori is looking away, his ear is cocked towards them like he's eavesdropping. "You are irresistible tonight," Haruka continues, pushing his voice lower until it's almost a growl. Nitori's head visibly twitches as he looks down to face the floor. He falls out of step, slipping half a pace behind them.

"What the...?" Rin snaps, in a quiet tone only Haruka can hear, thrown off-guard by Haruka's forwardness, and he's looking at Haruka like he wants to slap him at any moment.

To counter, Haruka decides to land a kiss, a small peck off-centre on Rin's lips, and he can literally feel Rin soften against him.

"Tch," Rin says, when Haruka pulls back, but he allows himself to fall into Haruka's body. Haruka hooks his chin on Rin's shoulder, and looks outward with a little smile, arm curling tighter around Rin. They are walking by the river, and the promenade is bustling with street buskers and families and group of friends and other couples and no one pays any mind to what they are doing. It is fine for two people to kiss and touch in public. There is music and laughter and the shouts of young children, and to one side the river flows on undisturbed, and above them the sky is punctuated by bursts of fire from the riverside display, welcome heat in the chill of winter. The night seems young and full of promise.

"Nanase-san, I didn't know you were in Melbourne too," Nitori begins from somewhere behind them, trying to strike up conversation.

"Well, I am," Haruka replies, and Rin elbows him for the unsatisfactory reply, so Haruka playfully nudges Rin in return.

"Come on, Haru. Answer Ai's question. Why are you here, huh?" Rin looks up at him with a smile so sweet Haruka wants to bite down on him.

"I am here...for work," Haruka says, spontaneously conjuring a lie. He suddenly thinks of his encounter with Kali the magazine creative director this afternoon, and he tells himself that it's not really a lie if he can sort of cover his tracks. He tries to nibble on Rin's ear but Rin shies away from him.

"Don't..." Rin pleads softly, coy and evasive. It makes Haruka smile enough to stop trying.

"What do you do for work?" Nitori asks hesitantly, as if unsure if he should leave Haruka and Rin alone to their very public display of affection.

"I'm an illustrator," Haruka replies, but the words are muffled because his mouth is pressed to the tender skin on Rin's neck. His breath ruffles the short, downy strands of hair on Rin’s neck that glow
orange intermittently as the riverside display spews fire into the sky.

"What do you draw?" Nitori continues prodding. Haruka has no idea where Nitori means to go with this, but so long as he has Rin trapped in his arms he doesn't quite mind anything.

"I was commissioned to do the illustrations for Nike's rising stars campaign."

"Oh—oh," Nitori stammers, voice suddenly shaky.

They fall into silence for a few paces, before Nitori suddenly runs ahead, stops, and bows towards them.

"Rin-senpai! Nanase-san! I think I will see myself the rest of the way! I am very grateful for your company and I hope we will meet again soon! Once again, thank you for tonight's dinner! It was very delicious."

Nitori's voice is increasingly strained and sharp, like a badly played violin. With a quick turn on his heels, he picks up his speed and breaks into a run, tearing away from them.

"Ai...Ai! Ai!" Rin calls out, stunned by the sudden departure. He looks at Haruka with helpless shock on his face, and then he pushes Haruka away in a rough movement and chases after Nitori.

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"Ai! Ai!" Rin feels slightly pathetic running after Nitori yelling his name, but it is his fault after all—he did get a tad too carried away fooling around with Haruka, which is something he really shouldn't have let himself get into but Rin doesn't really want to think about that either.

"Ai, please stop, please. I'm sorry—I'm sorry."

"No, Rin-senpai. It is I who should be sorry." Nitori takes a deep breath and turns around. His face is shining with spilled tears.

"You've...you've been crying," Rin says, and then wants to kick himself. That much is obvious and doesn't need repeating. "Are you alright, Ai?"

Nitori takes another deep breath but dissolves into sobs again.

Rin takes a few steps forward to rest an arm on Nitori's shoulders. "Shh, shh," Rin tries to console him. "Please tell me if there's anything I can do to make you feel better."

"I'm alright! I'm alright!" Nitori bravely insists, but his voice cracks again. "I was such a fool! I was such a fool to think I could even compare. He's so talented and good-looking and accomplished—so perfect for you. But at least now I know for sure. I'll be okay."

"Compare...? Who?"

Nitori sniffs and shakes his head. "Nanase-san makes you happy, doesn't he? Then I wish you all the best."

That Nanase has been pissing me off the entire day. But it's not the sort of thing Rin wants to explain to Nitori, so he can only apologise: "I'm so sorry that things turned out this way. I really didn't mean to hurt you." There is an awkward pause and Rin scratches his head, wishing he didn't have to be in this situation. "Do you think you can find it in you to forgive me?"

Nitori takes a deep breath. "I should be thanking you, Rin-senpai. I feel like I can finally move on
now. I'm sure one day I can find the happiness that is meant for me," he says, voice steady and clear.

"I'm certain you will. You will find someone much, much better than you can imagine, someone who truly deserves you."

"Really?" Nitori asks, wistful and misty-eyed.

"Yes, really. You should thank your lucky stars you don't have to deal with me. I'm actually kind of a rotten person."

_And rotten people only deserve other rotten people. Maybe that's why Haru's here._

"I'll keep that in mind," Nitori says with good humour, calming down. "Funny but I really do feel like a chapter just closed. I really do feel much more okay now than before. Only—I've gone and bought these huge cartons of cereal with Rin-senpai's face on it to bring home with me."

"Oh," Rin squawks, trying not to groan in embarrassment. They must have been from the sponsorship deal he had to do as part of the Olympic team. Frankly, it makes going to the supermarket such a pain, especially when Rin has to get to the cereal aisle. "You should give them away, or maybe draw silly moustaches on them. I'll even help you, I mean it."

Somehow, his words make Nitori laugh. It's such a relief for Rin, and he lets his hand slip away from Nitori's shoulder.

"Maybe I'll throw darts on them when I'm angry," Nitori suggests jokingly, and then laughs once more when he sees the reaction on Rin's face.

"Yes, of course, go ahead. Do as you please," Rin obliges, wiping away the brief spike of terror from his expression.

With a contented sigh, Nitori leans forward into the railing on the side of the riverbank. A gust of wind blows across between the two of them, rustling through their hair. "I really do feel like a new person now. I can't believe it."

"Glad to have helped," Rin adds with a hint of wryness. What does it say about him that it took Nitori only five seconds to get over him?

"They're not going to disappear so quickly, you know, these feelings about you," Nitori tells him, disarmingly prescient. "I'm just telling myself that I know I can get over it with time."

"Sorry," Rin mumbles. _Despite the obviously heterosexual porno mags, Ai really did harbour some sort of a crush on me._ Rin stares into Nitori's guileless, beaming face. _Humans are such a mystery._

"If it's alright with you, Rin-senpai, let's bid farewell now. I do hope we shall meet again when we have the chance."

"Of course. You have my number."

"Rin-senpai!" Nitori exclaims, in that old, familiar tone. It's sweet as birdsong to Rin's ears.

Rin breaks into a smile and pulls Nitori into a hug. "You know, you can call me Rin now. I haven't been your senpai for a long time and I doubt I was any good at it."

"I'll think about it, Rin-senpai," Nitori replies, bursting into cheerful laughter.

"Sure," Rin says, voice softening. For some reason, tears are pricking his eyes. Nitori deserves
someone so much better, so there's no point crying over losing him now is there?

"Ai, what time is your flight? I could send you to the airport if you want?"

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Rin comes home in an apparent funk and refuses to speak a word to Haruka, choosing to lock himself in his bathroom, so Haruka guesses that he's probably primping away again.

The bathroom door unlocks and Rin makes a beeline for his bedroom.

Haruka is officially transparent.

He steps into now-vacated bathroom and steps on the pedal of the little silver bin tucked under the sink. There are wadded up cotton balls in there, smudged with the skin-toned remains of Rin's outside face. Hanging above the silver bin is a coordinating toilet roll dispenser, with a toilet roll of exceptionally thick and soft paper, embossed with little dolphins. *Is this the kind of toilet roll Rin uses*, Haruka thinks darkly. Near the toilet roll, there is a small amber glass bottle. It seems to be a posh poo deodoriser of some sort. Haruka's face wrinkles as he wonders what kind of person affords this extravagance.

Haruka lifts his toe off the rubbish bin pedal and decides to go fetch his toothbrush. Although he brought his own toothpaste Haruka leaves it in the bag and chooses to use Rin's instead. He chooses to use Rin's hotel-like glass tumbler to rinse his mouth, and when he's done he puts his toothbrush right next to Rin's and becomes fixated with the sight.

Haruka entertains the thought of taking a photo of this, two toothbrushes crossing in a glass tumbler. If he had Twitter this would be the kind of thing to post on there, but Haruka doesn't care to have a Twitter.

Haruka entertains the thought: he would caption the photo "on holiday with my boyfriend".

Haruka entertains the thought: *Rin as my boyfriend*.

Haruka is a bundle of nerves, lovesickness and guilt, yearning and forgetting.

Tells himself: *It's okay. It's your holiday.*

Haruka grabs the edge of the sink until his knuckles go white and then decides to wash his hands for the third time since brushing his teeth. Rin's hand wash smells of mandarin, rosemary, cedar. It smells of sophistication, a comfortable lifestyle, having enough to indulge in small things. It smells complex yet genuine, it smells of a mind that seeks introspection at the end of a weary day.

Haruka flicks the light switch off and leaves the bathroom. He stands at the hallway leading to the two bedrooms—one on his left with the open door and the cold, single bed. The other, with the closed door and Rin behind it.

*Easy enough.*

Haruka opens the door and finds Rin sitting upright on his bed, legs tucked under the covers, pillows stacked behind his back, scribbling something into a journal.

Haruka goes over and slips beneath the quilt to lie down right next to Rin. There is a pleasant warmth emanating from Rin's body. Haruka wants to slide his hands all over Rin, to create more heat under the friction of his touch, but instead he merely perches his head on the crook of Rin's elbow.
where Rin has his pen held between his lips, gnawing at the tip.

"What are you writing?"

"My swim journal," Rin says, tilting the journal page for Haruka to see. It's covered with scribbled numbers and swimming terminology.

"Do you do this every day?"

"Yes."

Haruka wonders what it would be like to flip through all of Rin's swimming journals, to uncover Rin's obsession and dedication which he once found loathsome and a real bother. Would he find all of Rin captured in between the detailed training recaps of repetitive drills and targeted exercises, records of perceived exertion vs actual velocity, breathing patterns, stroke rates, heart rates, anaerobic capacity, kick tests, pull tests, speed tests, recovery time? Would that be all of Rin—his perfection, his pursuit for perfection?

Haruka presses a kiss to where Rin's bare shoulder is—it tenses in response. He kisses the shoulder again, and the shoulder eases, falling towards the bed.

I want you. The thought burns in Haruka, a single thought like a spark on kindling, a single thought that sets everything aflame, carried through time by the simmering embers of lust repressed, longing denied, love unspoken, bursting into the all-consuming fire of a raging heart, a raging want, a raging need.

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Haru, Rin wants to say but cannot say. Haru, Rin wants to say, but his voice has been robbed from him. He opens his mouth, he wants to scream, in anger, in fury, what makes you think you can come here and ruin me, but words have abandoned him. He's ruined, already is. Five thousand miles and this is all Haruka wants, to fuck him up, to fuck. Is it so surprising, after all, when Rin's thought about this for years. A voice, like a potent whisper echoing in his head: You want this too, don't you? You've always wanted to break through that cool exterior, to watch him want you. Watch him run after you, throat parched, panting, watch him need you, beg for you, seven years, four years, and nothing to show for it until now—he wants you now. What if there's never going to be another now? You can learn to love this now, enjoy this now, because there'll never be a next time if you don't let him have it now. Does it matter that you were mad at him this afternoon for barging into your house, your life? Does it matter that you're still livid at him for ruining the dinner that was supposed to be just between you and Ai? Does it matter that you're tired now and you have to wake up in seven hours for another day of training? You've already lost one hour of sleep, what's another hour going to matter? Does it matter that you know how the lack of sleep always hurts you to the bone, how Coach is going to scream at you, does it matter that you can't sleep because you are so mad you could scream at yourself, does it matter that you almost couldn't bring yourself to return home knowing he would be waiting there, waiting for this to happen? Let him have it, let him have what he wants and tell yourself you wanted it too so it hurts less.

"Rin," Haruka says, voice jolting him back to the present, "Rin." It takes a good while for Rin to register that Haruka has done nothing but hover over him, propped up by the arms, mouth open in shock, eyes trembling with concern. "Rin, you're crying."

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"Rin, are you okay? Tell me what happened, my darling child, please tell me. I'm here to listen—"

"I used your emergency credit card, the one I swore I wouldn't touch," Rin cries out, doubling over, slamming his body into a cold brick wall, dull and faded like the overcast sky. He throws a fist-sized sleeve into his mouth to stop his traitorous lip from trembling. He would punch himself senseless if it would kill the uncontrollable shaking, kick himself to the ground if it would keep his body from betraying him.

"What are you talking about, Rin darling? I gave you that card so you could use it if you needed to. Did something happen that called for it?"

"I'm in...I'm in Birmingham."

"Birmingham? England?! What's going on in Birmingham? Why are you—what are you—"

"T-training. I got—I got called up to the national squad, mum."

"National squad? What national squad? You don't mean swimming?"

"Mummy...what else is there?"

"Oh my god! Rin—oh my god—which national squad?"

"Australia. Commonwealth Games."

"Oh my god, Australia? Are you serious? What are you going to do?"

"I don't know, mum, I don't know! Why do you think I'm asking you? I got a call and I just went online to buy a plane ticket using your credit card without thinking! That was so stupid! I don't know what I'm doing anymore."

"What was the call about? What did they tell you?"

Rin falls silent. Sorry about what happened. But you know I've got friends. They'll give you a chance.

Rin braces himself: "I don't know how much you've heard, mummy, but I think some stuff happened and like, some of the national swimmers had to be taken off the squad for questioning or something."

"Oh my god! What happened?"

"I don't know either! I didn't hear much about it until now, mummy. I think they're trying to play it down but I hear the police might be involved."

"Oh my god, that's terrible! That sounds truly awful! I hope they're all alright."

"They're just being interviewed and stuff, mummy. I don't think it's that major."

"If the Australian police is privately interviewing national swimmers on the eve of an international competition I don't think it's not major, Rin darling."

"Well, but—" Rin tries to insert a forced laugh. "This is my chance, isn't it? They suddenly don't have the numbers for the squad and they're scraping the bottom of the barrel."
"Rinrin—you're not the bottom of the barrel!"

Rin tries to laugh it off but it's getting hard.

"Listen to me, Rin dear, I don't want you to do this if you're not ready to. I want you to think this through. Is it better for your career if you let this pass, and show yourself in a couple of years when you've had the chance to prepare yourself?"

"What if there's no next time, mummy? I don't know when a next time is going to happen, mummy."

"There's always a trade-off, Rinrin, and I want you to think very clearly about what you're trading off if you decide to swim for Australia."

There's no way I can think clearly about anything now, Rin wants to tell his mother, but as soon as he admits it to her he knows she will fly over immediately, singlehandedly pull him out of competition and send him swiftly back to Japan.

"I'm fine," Rin lies to his mother. "I can live with this."

***

Haruka wakes up in the morning and Rin is gone. Rin's side of the bed is neatly made as if he had not been there at all, as if Rin hadn't broken down in the middle of the night, gasping and howling like he was being eaten alive by something inside of him, crying so wordlessly as if he had been swallowed into an inaccessible vacuum.

Last night was too confusing. At first, Haruka was immediately guilt-stricken and terrified and he was about to run out of the room with a quick apology, but he was so petrified he couldn't even move or say anything else either. He was frozen in place while Rin just kept crying, and crying, and crying, until Haruka finally tried to roll off the bed discreetly only to have Rin suddenly, desperately, feverishly grab onto his hand, not letting him go. It was like when Rin kept acting like he was angry at Haruka all through dinner but at the same time let Haruka kiss and touch and play with him in front of Nitori. What the hell does he want?

Haruka's hands clench into fists as he thinks about how he can't figure Rin out no matter how hard he tries, but then he thinks of Rin's sobbing face and wonders if it's even important to have Rin figured out if he's allowed to just love Rin. To love and treasure and hold and kiss away the tears—Haruka's heart aches and he relents, fists coming undone.

He picks himself off the bed and makes his side so that it matches Rin's side neatly, bedcovers up above the pillow and smoothed out, edges tucked in. It suddenly occurs to him that it's not that the entire bedroom is windowless, but that the windows are floor to ceiling and the blinds are merely drawn. Looking around, Haruka notices a panel of switches and flicks it up and down to get the blinds to open. There is an opaque blind that retracts, followed by a translucent day blind, and a panoramic view greets Haruka, cityscape sharply outlined in the high definition of bright daylight, almost blinding.

Everything looks like a toy miniature from high up. The river glistens like a small, shimmering road, and across it Haruka can see the sprout of buildings forming the city grid. The sight is enough to put a smile on his face, and he wonders what it'll be like to open these blinds for Rin every morning, to watch daylight kiss Rin awake, to smooch Rin silly, brightening his face.

Feeling adventurous, Haruka throws open Rin's wardrobe doors to explore the contents. They would have spent the night before deciding on Rin's outfit for the day. Rin would have coyly fished for
compliments, modelling his various outfits for Haruka, and Haruka would only offer objective, clearheaded advice. The night would have ended with Haruka peeling off Rin's clothes, Rin sinking into the bed flat on his back, Haruka pressed atop him, Rin complaining that he hasn't written in his swimming diary, Haruka promising to write it for him the next day.

Haruka smiles to himself as he runs his hands over the jacket Rin wore last night. Rin went for the "normal" leather jacket after all. Hanging right behind it is the drapey jacket that was the other choice. Rin's wardrobe is fastidiously organised, first by colour then by type, and upon inspection, the drapey jacket would have looked superb on Rin. Designer senses tingling, Haruka pries for the clothing tag to check the label.

As I thought. The jacket is by no means cheap, and Haruka's gone to Ragtag enough times with Makoto to know he can't even afford the secondhand version. The closet door is a full-length mirror, and Haruka decides to put on the jacket just to see how he would look.

The jacket makes him look too much like Rin. Haruka takes it off and rifles through the clothing rack for other things to try on, and it surprises him to find Zara and Uniqlo in between the Rick Owens, Ann Demeulemeester and Phillip Lim.

Curiosity satisfied, Haruka puts all the clothes back exactly the way he found them and goes to the kitchen to make some breakfast. There is a note on the island counter.

Out for training and classes. Will be back in the afternoon. Help yourself to anything in the fridge.

Haruka opens the fridge. It is very well-stocked, but Haruka goes straight for the opened packet of smoked salmon left from yesterday. Closing the fridge door, he decides to check the freezer compartment. There are various cuts of meat but a disappointing lack of fish.

In the pantry area Haruka finds half a chia seed wholemeal loaf. There is a box of cereal leaning against the wall, and Haruka picks it up to find the portrait of a smiling young woman with straw-yellow hair in the Team Australia tracksuit on the back of the box. With a frown Haruka wonders if it's anyone Rin knows.

Haruka opens the various drawers and cabinets looking for plates and utensils. Along the way, he decides to explore all the kitchen cabinets for fun. Rin has such a glorious assortment of kitchen equipment—solid and top of the range. Haruka also finds a recipe box full of meticulously handwritten recipe cards, and a small collection of much-thumbed but well-maintained cookbooks.

There is a stray recipe card left outside the box. Haruka picks it up and scans through it.

Matcha Soufflé Roll Cake (makes a 28cm roll)

Haruka flips the card over and flips it back. He looks at the ingredient list, then opens up the pantry cabinets and refrigerator, taking stock. It occurs to him that he can make this cake for Rin. There is even some white chocolate sitting around he can use for the filling. Haruka cannot explain the sudden urge. All he knows is that he still feels guilty seeing Rin cry like that last night, so he thinks that he can make Rin happy again by baking a nice cake.

Haruka checks the pantry and refrigerator for the ingredients again. He has everything he needs except whipping cream for the white chocolate filling. If he's making something for Rin he wants it to be very nice, and with the whipping cream he could even make a salted caramel spread for an additional layer of filling. And if there is still any cream left over, he can use it to make some Western-style sauces for dinner tonight, the kind that go best with Western-style fish. Something a little different to expand his culinary skill set, especially as Rin has such beautiful knives and
equipment sitting around.

Chucking the smoked salmon back into the fridge, Haruka makes a quick breakfast of cereal and milk, looking up the nearest supermarket while he still has wifi. He takes a few snapshots of the location on Google Maps to help with finding it.

Haruka changes out of his sleepwear to leave the apartment and when he gets to the shoe cabinet by the main door, curiosity gets the better of him again and he gets distracted poking around Rin's collection of footwear.

The first shoe Haruka sees is the blasted pair of fancy sneakers Makoto totally enabled Rin to buy. The selfie sneakers. A smidgen of doubt wobbles through Haruka as he wonders if Rin is deserving of the white chocolate cream and salted caramel filling Haruka is going to go to the effort of making.

He looks through the other shoes, all inordinately expensive and improbably pristine in condition. Haruka reaches for a pair of brogues and, on lifting it to his nose to inhale the expensive leathery scent, he sees that it's from Prada. Flipping it sole-up, it occurs to Haruka that he has almost the same-sized feet as Rin, which is a very convenient fact at this moment. Haruka tries on several pairs of Rin's shoes for fun, and decides that it can't hurt to wear a pair for the grocery trip. There is a mirror right by the doorway, and he eventually decides to put on the selfie sneakers because they go best with his current outfit. The sneakers are high-top, monochrome black, with a champagne gold plate wrapping around the back of the ankle. Face wrinkling in disgust as he reads the name on the designer label (how could Makoto encourage such extravagance!), Haruka slips his feet inside and fastens it up by the laces. His feet have never looked snazzier.

***

The baking ingredients are easy to find, but the seafood section of the supermarket is stressing Haruka out thoroughly. How is it possible that supermarkets in Australia are well stocked in all manner of Asian groceries, with mirin, miso, wasabi in a devoted section, alongside sesame oil, rice vinegar, hoisin sauce, Thai chilli etc., but have such a dire lack of mackerel? There aren't even any prepacked horse mackerel fillets in the frozen section. The only mackerel Haruka can find are sorrowful medallions of the Spanish kind drooping in a small corner of the seafood counter, overshadowed by other evidently more popular species of fish. The lack of consideration for mackerel greatly offends Haruka, and he regrets taking the detour to check out the seafood section.

Haruka marches out of the supermarket with only a tub of whipping cream. It is late morning and the winds are unnaturally cold, as if the sun is too shy to come out this day. He hurries back to the apartment shuddering all the way and cursing in his mind. The weather app on his phone didn't make it seem particularly cold or anything. Haruka feels like he is starting to understand why Rin acted the way he did when he came back from Australia, if the weather is so miserable all the time.

"Hello there, Nice Shoes," the concierge says as Haruka enters the lobby.

Haruka has an immediate urge to duck and crawl under the concierge counter to sneak into the lift for a quick, unnoticed escape. "Good mooorning," he replies hesitantly but formally, with a quaint hint of a posh British accent, sounding like a character from a language-learning podcast series because that was how he brushed up on his English on the flight here.

"Morning, Haruka. What do you have there today?"

Haruka's pulse starts racing. He hopes that Sharifah doesn't think he wore Rin's shoes without permission. "The shoes have been worn for under one hour!"
Sharifah stares at him quizzically. After a while, she bursts out laughing. "You didn't have to tell me that. I was asking about your shopping bag. But it's okay, I won't keep you any longer. Have a nice day!"

"What I have in my bag is cream for whipping," Haruka answers, because he wants to prove that he can understand the question perfectly.

"Pardon?" Sharifah purses her lips like she is concentrating very hard on trying to figure something out.

Haruka's brows instantly jump into a frown. He has no desire to repeat himself if it's only going to make him feel foolish. "I am baking a cake."

"Oh! Yes, of course, I am so sorry. How delightful! What's the occasion? What kind of cake?"

"Just cake. For Rin."

"You're such a sweetie, Haruka! Don't tell Rin I said this, but I'm so glad he finally has real visitors. He's such a lonely boy, that one. Take good care of him, will you?"

Stunned by the exhortation, Haruka is unable to formulate a reply, so he wordlessly waves to Sharifah and sidles shiftily into a waiting lift. Sharifah's words gnaw ceaselessly at his heart like an open can of worms, at his rotten, insubstantial heart. Can he believe her? Can he believe that Rin is a lonely boy trapped high up in his tower of glass, surrounded by beautiful but superficial things, the novelty of which fades quickly into a reminder of how oh-so-empty he feels inside? Can he believe that all Rin ever longed for is for someone to make him feel less lonely, someone to dote on him and hold him and let him know how alive he is in the dead of night?

I want to save you, Haruka thinks, fixating on Rin. I want to be the one who wipes the tears from your eyes and the one you tell all your secrets to. I want to be the one who will always love you no matter what, I want to be the one who lifts you up, I want to be the one you always come home to.

It feels like there is a hole where his heart once was. Lump in throat, thirsty no matter how much water he drinks, Haruka sets about making the matcha roll cake with nothing but love, unanswered love, hurting at every single nerve ending in his body.

***

The cake is done and Haruka breaks the sheet of tempered chocolate he has prepared into angular shapes. He will stick the shards atop the cake and finish off with a drizzle of caramel strings. The cake itself was baked with an inlaid geometric pattern made from shapes he traced onto parchment paper. Haruka thinks of how Rin must be getting home soon, despite several false alarms of noise from neighbours going about their business outside the apartment.

Haruka imagines that Rin will come home with a grumpy face, mad at something that happened during training, and he will comfort Rin with sweet words, apron still tied around his waist. He will find a moment to say that he made something special for Rin, and he will reveal the matcha roll cake sitting prettily on its dish and he will watch Rin's face light up. I hope you didn't spend too much time on this, Rin will mutter, trying to grouse like an old man to hide a childlike excitement, and Haruka will say, oh, no, it was hardly any effort at all, despite the fact that Haruka is exhausted with baking. Haruka will offer to feed Rin the first bite, and Rin will oblige after some rounds of coy schoolgirl playacting, and Haruka will kiss the excess cream away from Rin's mouth, and Rin will melt into his arms like chocolate, and...and then...
Haruka stares at the island kitchen counter, trying to visualise if there's enough space on it for sex. Perhaps he should clear the fruit bowl and packet of hot cross buns and wipe the surface down one more time. Haruka gets so absorbed in disinfecting the empty countertop he doesn't realise Rin has returned home.

"What the fuck are you doing?" are the first words from Rin's mouth.

Haruka whips around instantly, dropping the spritzer bottle and wiping cloth on the benchtop. "You're home!" he says to Rin, sounding more shocked than welcoming.

"Of course I'm home," Rin counters, getting annoyed. "Were you baking?"

"Was I not supposed to?" Haruka suddenly snaps, provocative and trouble-seeking. He realises after he's spoken that he's thrown away the mental script he took so much effort to plan.

"I smell matcha roll cake," Rin begins, nostrils flaring. "Was that what you're making?"

Haruka doesn't like the way Rin is talking to him, as if Rin is trying to snatch control of the situation. "Yes," Haruka declares factually, but doesn't offer anything more.

"You can't get past my sense of smell," Rin warns, and it sounds like he's trying to imply he's won for having such a good sense of smell.

Whatever. Haruka decides it's time to bring out the matcha roll cake onto the kitchen counter.

Rin is momentarily stunned on seeing the cake. "Haru..." he says, voice falling soft. "How did you make this? Did it take a lot of time?"

"No. It was hardly any effort."

Haruka is expecting his script to resume, but Rin's face contorts into sheer incredulity and antagonism.

"Hardly any effort? What the fuck? How is this hardly any effort? Is this what you call 'hardly any effort'?"

Why the hell is Rin acting so difficult? "It's not a complex recipe," Haruka points out.

"Not complex," Rin repeats, drawing inverted quotes with his fingers. He breaks into maniacal, absurd laughter, then stops. "Fuck you, Haruka. I've tried this three times and I couldn't get it to roll properly every time."

"Why are you shouting at me like it's my fault you can't follow the recipe?"

"What the fuck! I'm not here to have my baking skills insulted. Especially not by you. I've had enough of you, Nanase Haruka. I've had enough of feeling inferior to you. I'm not here to have you show me how much better you are. I already know that. But you—you don't know a thing about how hard it is for me, okay? Just leave me the fuck alone. I wish you hadn't shown up. Go away."

Rin flees to his bedroom, choking down huge sobs the whole way.

Haruka chases after Rin only to have the door slammed in his face. He puts his hands on the door and presses his ear to the cool flat surface, wondering if Rin is crying against it on the other side.

I never meant to hurt you, is what Haruka thinks. Each time you hurt I feel like it hurts me double.

"Come on, Rin," is what Haruka says. "It's just a stupid cake. Don't cry."
"Just a stupid cake," he can hear Rin howl behind the door. "And I can't even make it."

Why do I keep saying the wrong things? Why does everything I say make it worse? Haruka feels a gasping helplessness welling up.

He doesn't get any more reaction from Rin, and the sobbing seems to fade after a while. Haruka decides to slip back to the kitchen to clear everything. He catches sight of the matcha roll cake and wants to throw it away.

Stupid, stupid of me to spend so much time on it. Stupid, stupid of it to make Rin cry like that.

Rin's bedroom door opens. He's fully dressed. His face has cleared up but his jaw is set hard. He's clearly seething but it's like he hasn't cried at all. Does Rin have some miracle...product that he puts on his face to make the tears leave no trace?

"I'm going out."

"Where are you going?"

"None of your business."

"If you don't want my cake I'll dump it."

"Haru—there's no need—"

"You're obviously not going to eat it, so why bother?"

"Haru..."

"I mean it. In fact, let me throw it away right now—"

"Stop! Haru. Just—why do you have to do this?"

"I made it for you. It hurts that you hate it."

"Haru..."

"Well, so do you want the cake or not?"

"Look, Haru, I'm not here to—fuck it. Give me the cake. I'll take it."

Haruka inspects several knives from the kitchen drawer and whips out a large, jagged bread knife, intending to slice the cake for Rin. Do you want me to feed you? Do you want me to feed you? Haruka rehearses in his mind.

"Oh my god put the fucking knife down! Put the knife down and get away from me I'm taking the whole cake what the fuck Haru."

"The whole cake? How will you eat it? With your hands?"

"Huh?"

Haruka stares intently at Rin, still grasping the bread knife.

"What? Oh...oh er, haha, er," Rin begins to hem and haw, scratching at his head. "I wasn't going to eat the cake right now...."
"What were you going to do with it then?"

"I was...look, it's none of your business okay?"

"No. I made the cake. I have the right to know."

"No! You said you made it for me. So it's mine. So I can do whatever I want with it."

"No, it's still my cake because you didn't want it."

"No! It's *my* cake because you gave it to me!" Rin emphasises his point with a pouty stomp, of the kind only spoiled children can give.

"At no point did you accept this cake. Why change your mind?"

"Tch. I suppose I have to ask your permission for everything now, huh? Well, if it bothers your royal arse so much I was going to present it as a gift to a friend."

"What friend? You have no friends."

"Who said that? Of course I have friends. I have many friends I treasure and as it turns out, *you're not one of them*. Tough luck, Haru."

"Fine. The cake goes into the rubbish bin."

"Oh my god jeez Haru stop this. Okay fine wow do I have to tell you everything about my life I was going to give it to Ai as a last minute gift at the airport happy now?"

Haruka finally drops the bread knife back in the drawer and slams it shut. "I do not allow it."

Rin's face is crosser than the loaf of hot cross buns that Haruka cleared aside into the pantry, but he suddenly puts on an air of indifference: "Okay, throw it away. I don't care for the cake beyond giving it away and I'm running late. Bye." Rin pulls out his phone to check the time and saunters off to put on his shoes, a pair of taupe grey suede brogues.

"No—wait—"

"Yes, Haru, what is it?" Rin asks sweetly, eyes wide open and round. *So Rin's changed tack. It works.*

"Take me with you." Again, Haruka teeters on the cusp of being left alone at home.

"After last night? No chance in hell—"

"Please!" Haruka's eyes shine with desperation. In a flash, his mind digs up more reasons to plead his case. "You are right! I behaved badly last night. I will give Nitori the cake as an apology!"

"Really, Haru?" Rin tsks cynically.

Haruka turns his head away to stare at the kitchen bin. *It's either Nitori or the trash...*

"Okay fine. You can bring the cake. Hurry up."

***

"Where did you get the car from?"
"My cousin."

It's a gently-weathered Honda Civic, almost ten years old. *Such a family car.* Haruka knew it couldn't be Rin's.

The matcha roll cake is on Haruka's lap, safely ensconced in a cardboard box that Haruka insisted they go to a baking supplies shop to acquire because he couldn't let a product of his go without proper packaging. Haruka turns the box inside out so that the rough grey surface is on the outside, and ties it up with natural twine for that raw, earthy look. With his black ink pen he makes a few typographic markings on the box, all while the car is moving.

"I hate you," Rin says.

"Shut up and drive—don't stop in the middle of a traffic intersection."

"Dummy, I'm doing this thing called a hook turn? Not that I'd expect you to know. It's this Melbourne-only thing... Do you really think I'm that stupid? I'm a very good driver, I'll have you know..." Rin begins to rant.

Rin comes to a sudden halt as another car cuts into their lane without warning. He curses under his breath but is surprisingly restrained otherwise.

They finally make it out of the city grid and to the road outside Nitori's hotel. It occurs to Haruka that he recognises the logo from looking through branding design anthologies in the past. It is a chain of limited-service, budget-friendly yet design-conscious hotels. Haruka almost hates Nitori for choosing to stay here. The room rates are unbelievable.

"Scoot," Rin says as he pulls over by the curb. When Haruka doesn't react, Rin nods towards the hotel entrance, where Nitori is struggling with a large amount of personal belongings. "Go help him."

Haruka frowns at Rin but obliges.

"Nanase-san!" Nitori greets with a bright smile.

"Here," Haruka mumbles, and grabs the stack of brown cartons off Nitori, leaving him to push his two large wheeie suitcases. Before this, Haruka had no idea that they made suitcases this size. *How much overweight baggage is this guy going to have to pay? Does he have no idea of minimal packing?*

Nitori is additionally burdened with a massive camping-sized backpack and a leather satchel strung across his shoulder. "Thank you so much for your help!" he tells Haruka.

Rin opens the boot to fit the luggage in, and the activity soon resembles a brain puzzle, like a game of Tetris. "How did you end up with so much stuff in just six months?" Rin grumbles.

Nitori breaks into guilty laughter by the side of the car, watching them. "I actually had to ship some stuff home...this is the remainder..." 

"Ai. Learn to throw stuff away, will you?" Rin attempts to fasten the bulging boot with a bungee cord.

"Hehe," Nitori simpers.

Heaving a sigh, Rin goes around to the driver's side of the car, while Nitori beats Haruka to the
passenger seat, leaving Haruka to crawl into the backseat alongside the paper cartons and the backpack.

"So sorry to trouble the both of you again," Nitori says, when they're all in the car. "You really didn't have to go to all this hassle."

"Don't say that. It makes us happy to spend this time with you. Right, Haru?"

Haruka reluctantly emits a vague noise.

"This is so fun, Rin-senpai. If only we were going on a road trip together!"

"We should do that sometime! A pity you had to leave so soon. It's not much but if you stayed around for a few more days we could have driven up to the mountains for skiing."

"Skiing!"

"Yeah, well the powder here is kind of crap, but you know."

"Rin-senpai, what truly matters is the company you're with!"

_I hate them_, Haruka thinks, sulking unseen in the backseat.

"Yeah, no, nothing beats Niseko for me," Rin says. "Remember that time the swim club went there for winter camp?"

You were only at Samezuka for a year. Why do you make it sound like you've been there forever.

"That year!" Nitori agrees, and they both start laughing. "Niseko's always great, one of the best. I remember the captain handover..."

"I still can't believe Azuma climbed up that flag pole!"

"It was so hilarious when Nakagawa-senpai had to sing a song for those foreign ladies, don't you think?"

"Really? I still hate him for suggesting that game at the onsen."

"I hear Kawamura-senpai's group got high on stuff..."

"Oh my god did they really? Isn't Kawamura like, in charge of his family's distribution arm now? I can't believe the captain didn't find out? That group's always getting in trouble."

"Captain was out with the night skiing group! I only know because Tanaka-kun told me."

"I can't believe Tanaka is going to be a lawyer. Do you remember that time he tried to cook a fish from the school's koi pond?"

Huddled alone in the backseat, Haruka is feeling a sharp sense of exclusion. He feels like he's stuck in a nightmare loop of the kind of idle talk that private school students engage in all the time, endless gossip about other people as if they are of any concern. Haruka could care less.

"Did Rin-senpai see the photos of his sister getting married in Bali though?"

"No. Are they any good? Let me see."
"They're amazing! Look!"

"Oh, wow."

"Isn't it? Tanaka-kun even sent me this video of the fireworks at the wedding. Look—here it is."

Nitori shows his phone to Rin, and Haruka catches a glimpse of a transparent wedding aisle laid over a swimming pool. **Huh, it does look nice.**

"Her dress is so pretty. Is that her husband?" Rin comments.

"Yeah he's a Swiss guy. Speaks perfect Japanese and really sweet."

"How nice. I guess they can go skiing in Switzerland, huh?"

"Switzerland's okay, I guess, but it's also like, people go there to be seen? Austria's much better if you want the serious powder, for Europe."

"Oh really?"

"Yes! Let me know if you want to go!"

"Sure! I have to give an arm and leg for time off training though!"

They laugh again.

*Weren't the two of you in a swimming club? Why is there all this talk of...skiing and powder?* Haruka pauses to consider his feelings towards the frozen version of his beloved matter. **It can be nice but...it's not so immersive. The liquid form is still the best.**

Haruka fishes for his bottle of water and sips some of it while blocking out the rest of Rin and Nitori's conversation, which soon turns to the topic of food. Nitori seems to have an unhealthy love of vegetables, going on about how he misses Japanese vegetables most of all. **What a herbivorous guy. Doesn't he know Rin only cares about meat? Why is Rin pretending to be so interested?**

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"Is it okay if I drop the two of you off here while I go park the car?"

"Senpai, you really don't have to send me all the way to the gate! I wouldn't want to trouble you any further, especially as you've done so much already..."

"Don't worry about it—it's been a real pleasure to have you around."

"Senpai!"

Haruka fetches an airport trolley and begins loading Nitori's copious belongings on it. By the time Rin and Nitori finish simpering at each other, he has all of Nitori's items neatly loaded.

"Nanase-san! You shouldn't have gone to the trouble! Thank you so much!"

"No problem," Haruka mumbles, pushing the trolley into the terminal, stopping in front of the big index board. **Which flight are you on?**

"SQ228! Please let me take it from here," Nitori says, vainly wrestling for control of the trolley.
Haruka frowns at the index board. "I took Singapore Air too," he says, surprised that he has something important he wants to forewarn Nitori about, and a barrage of complaints falls from Haruka. "I figured out from reading the menu that they always do an Asian meal and a Western meal option, and there's always a red or white meat option. When I flew out of Tokyo, the Asian option also happened to be the white meat option which happened to be fish, but they ran out of it by time they got to my seat. It is an outrage they do not carry enough food for all passengers to get what they want."

"Oh no..." Nitori says, sounding genuinely sympathetic. "I hear good things about their food though, so I hope your meal wasn't too bad?"

"I didn't like it. It was too greasy and it just wasn't what I wanted, which was fish."

"Oh no..." Nitori says again. "Maybe you should try specifying a pescatarian diet when you do the check-in to ensure you always get a fish course?"

Haruka stops in his tracks. How is it that it has never occurred to him until now? Maybe he should make more effort to show an interest in Nitori because he doesn't seem so bad after all.

Nitori seizes upon the break to gain control of the trolley. "Nanase-san! I do not wish to trouble you but do you think you can look after this bag for me? It would be good if you sat by that door just in case Rin-senpai doesn't know where to find us."

Nitori thrusts his hefty backpack onto Haruka, who doesn't react.

"Nanase-san! You know how strict airports can be about baggage sometimes," Nitori whispers conspiratorially. "If it is no hassle please stand where the counter staff cannot see you with my backpack so that I can sneak it in as a carry-on!"

Haruka stares at the backpack. It's clearly not carry-on size, much less within the weight restriction, but he obliges Nitori and sits at the far side facing the doors, looking out for Rin.

Nitori returns in a remarkably short amount of time, divested of all his personal effects save for the leather satchel. He takes the backpack off Haruka, and they sit and wait for Rin, while Nitori begins removing layers of winter clothing, stuffing them into whatever space he can find.

"Looking forward to summer weather?"

"Ah, a Barbour jacket? Makoto almost made me get one, actually. It was a really good deal at 60% off at the department store, plus we get members points for the purchase, but I didn't need a new jacket..."

"I'm bad at small talk," Haruka thinks, exhaustion setting in as he tries to find the right conversation starter. Enacting scenarios in his mind, the conversation's already over before it's happened.

"The weather's going to be so different when I get off the plane," Nitori begins, breaking the silence. "I'm not sure I can get used to the humidity again."

Haruka makes an acquiescent grunt. "Yes, I felt it very much when I first got here. This place is very dry."

"Your skin is cracking!"

Haruka looks right at Nitori.
"S-sorry Nanase-san! I didn't mean to be so blunt!"

"It is true I have lost much moisture."

"Nanase-san, would you like to try some of my face cream? It may not work best for you but it should help." Nitori pulls out a transparent ziplock bag from his leather satchel. There is something very captivating about the vintage sheen of the leather satchel, although it looks battered and well-worn on the surface. Haruka wonders if it's appropriate to ask Nitori where he made such a vintage find. From the ziplock bag Nitori retrieves the small tub of face cream and scoops out some of it with a small spatula.

"You have to warm it up first, with your hands. Just rub them together, like that."

Rin appears just as Haruka is spreading the face cream in slow circles on his cheeks, a move he learned from watching Rin do his face in the bathroom. Discreetly, Rin passes him a nice paper bag containing the matcha roll cake in its box.

Almost forgot about that.

"Nitori," Haruka says, clearing his throat. Something inside him is feeling very deeply pained at having to take the lead in this situation. "I may have been rude to you last night. For that, I am sorry. Please accept this from me."

"Nanase-san!" Nitori exclaims, as if he had no recollection of the previous night's events. "How abrupt!"

"Please accept this." Haruka removes the cake box from the bag and passes it to Nitori with both hands, the way he learned from Makoto.

"Thank you, Nanase-san. It is very kind of you. May I ask what is it?"

"Matcha roll cake. I made it."

"You made it?" Nitori's eyes are suddenly glassy, like they're brimming with tears. "May I have a look?"

"Go ahead."

Nitori cracks open the box and his face literally lights up on seeing the cake. "Nanase-san! This is exquisite! I can't believe how much work this must have been. The packaging is so beautiful too. I can see you put a lot of thought in this. I am truly honoured to receive this wonderful gift from you."

Nitori is getting very emotional. Haruka looks to Rin for help, but Rin just shrugs at him.

"Nanase-san!" Nitori says again, beaming in gratitude. "Your effort will not go to waste!"

It would be a lie to say that Nitori's words don't make him feel good. The relief of it is far preferable to Rin's extreme rejection, no matter what Haruka initially hoped.

***

"Farewell—Rin-senpai, Nanase-san." Nitori takes a deep bow towards them.

They bow in return.

"Hope to you see you again soon," Rin says, and he goes up to hug Nitori.
"Rin-senpai," Nitori says, burying his head into Rin's chest. Haruka feels a sudden sense of relief that Nitori's finally leaving.

Rin squeezes Nitori and then lets go of him.

"Nanase-san. Thank you once again for the cake. It was so delicious."

Because they had time to spare at the terminal, Nitori suggested they divide the cake to share on the spot. It pleased Haruka to note that Rin ended up eating most of it anyway. *Rin must really like my cake no matter how he acts about it.*

Haruka realises that Nitori is suddenly standing before him. He tries not to frown. Nitori is lunging forward. *Is Nitori trying to hug me?* Haruka thinks with horror, icicles forming all over his insides. They are standing too close. Haruka readies himself to inch backwards, away from Nitori, but then he sees that Nitori has merely bent over to pick his backpack off the floor.

Hoisting his backpack onto his shoulders, Nitori raises a hand to wipe at his eyes, all while clutching his passport and boarding pass, and Haruka catches a glimpse of a gold border on Nitori's boarding pass.

*Suites?*

Nitori smiles at them and waves them goodbye as he crosses into the immigration area.

Haruka remembers jostling with a large crowd to board his flight at Narita.

Haruka remembers the sign on the other uncongested lane. *Suites, First Class, Business Class.*

"Rin."

"Yes?"

"Is Nitori rich?"

Haruka thinks of himself complaining about the Economy class food to Nitori.

Haruka thinks of how fast it took Nitori to check in, even though he had so many things.

Haruka thinks of how Nitori kept trying to get him to keep a distance from the check in counter —*why?*

"Haru, you can't just go around asking if people are rich. That's vulgar."

Haruka thinks of Nitori's weathered and tattered everything. Clothes, backpack, paper cartons.

The well-worn, not vintage, leather satchel. The Barbour jacket. The face cream that works.

Haruka's hand jumps to his face. It hurt to put on the face cream at first but his cheeks are literally gaining moisture.

"—But yeah," Rin continues, shifting uncomfortably.

"How rich?"

"Tch."
Impeccable manners. The obsession with vegetables that Haruka has never heard of. Skiing in Europe.

"If you must know—*one percent type.*"

Fuck, Haruka thinks, suddenly ashamed of himself. Fuck. He thought he could compete with Nitori but he's been totally outclassed. Fuck, he thinks again, because he may have made a serious fool of himself in front of Nitori. Why would Rin ever choose him if he could be set for life with Nitori?

It feels awful now, to think of how he thought of Nitori as an unworthy competitor for Rin's affections. *What does Nitori have that I don't have?* Haruka knows now. *Everything.* Haruka feels foolish for suggesting to foot the entire bill in return for his intrusion at last night's dinner, and he feels thoroughly humiliated on realising that he forced Rin to save his face by splitting the bill. It's just the way he was brought up, to feel guilty about owing other people anything. Haruka thinks of how Nitori graciously accepted the offer of a treat without being thrown into deep-seated insecurity, and he wonders why he wasn't brought up that way instead, to feel unashamed when receiving something.

Haruka thinks of Nitori's deceptive manners, deceptive because they oil the social interactions so unobtrusively he hates Nitori for it. Why did Nitori have to speak to him as if they were equals? It would have been far better for Nitori to make it clear from the start that he stood well above Haruka, and Haruka would have backed off. Maybe it should have been obvious from how much Rin didn't want him around that Haruka was in unwelcome territory. Haruka is mortified to think that he believed he had money just because he got a few jobs that paid him enough to make a trip halfway around the world, when someone like Nitori could see Rin whenever he wanted. It is embarrassing that this trip is something he’s longed for since he was twelve and yet it takes him nearly a whole decade, at twenty-one years, to fulfil it.

A sense of injustice is building in him, the same sense he felt when Rin first said he would be going to Australia. *Don't go where I can't follow.*

***

"Is it easy to go to Australia?"

"Haru-chan, you would have to take a plane."

"I know that, grandma. Is it easy to take a plane?"

"It depends on where you want to go."

"Australia?"

"That may be a little difficult for us, Haru-chan. Plane tickets are very expensive. Is there something you want to see in Australia?"

"Nothing."

"Haru-chan, you wouldn't ask that question unless it was important. What is it?"

"Koalas."

"You want to see koalas? Do you think it will be just as good if grandma brought you to the zoo? We can do that next weekend."
It is another five years before Haruka boards a plane for the first time, at the age of eighteen, accompanying Makoto to support him at the Asian Games in Incheon, South Korea. Makoto has been selected to represent the country. Haruka has quit swimming with finality.

***

"You should go for Nitori."

"Huh?"

"Nitori would be a good match for you."

"What the fuck are you going on about? I told you yesterday I don't like him in that way."

"But why not? He's such a good catch."

"What, just because he has money? Are you fucking serious, Haru?"

Haruka climbs into the passenger seat. He pulls on his seatbelt a little too hard and it clicks into place a little too loud. The last thing he sees before he turns to face out the passenger window is Rin climbing in on the other side, Rin's expensive suede brogues, Rin placing a hand on the steering wheel, the expensive watch on Rin's hand.

*I hate you. I hate you for having the money to go to Australia to learn swimming and I hate you for having the money to come back to Japan to enrol at an expensive private academy because you decided you didn't like it in Australia. I hate you for saying that you had a rough time in Australia because how can you hate it so much when you jumped at the first chance you had to swim for them?*

*I hate that I mean nothing to you. I hate that you're too good for me.*

"Look, Haru, I don't know what world you live in but even if I liked Ai there is no way I could ever get with him. He's—how do I say this? He's *old money*. Serious connections. I don't want to say this, but he's never been bullied in his whole time at school, and while it sounds very nice to say that it's because he's lucky enough to meet innately good people, that's just not how the world works. The real luck is in being born into the kind of family that can watch out for him. He doesn't even know this himself—it's just the unwritten rule in school. I shouldn't be telling you this but he seriously pissed his parents off by insisting on a *commercial* flight back to Japan. That's the level we're talking about here. And you know how it is with these types—you don't marry *into* the family, you marry the *entire* family. Not that I think his parents would ever accept him marrying someone like me. I mean, it's not even legally possible in Japan..."

*Shut up. Shut up. You've clearly thought about it. You've entertained scenarios in which you are together.*

"I don't care what you think about Ai, okay? But don't you fucking dare judge him. He's a very sweet boy. He could have been a complete ass hat of a spoilt brat but all he wants is to live as normally as he can. You know, he goes to Tohokudai and he spends his weekends helping out at the earthquake resettlement shelters and everything. He defied his parents’ wishes to study marine biology because it's something he truly wants but he's also managed to get them to put in more work into sustainability issues."

*Whatever. And all the poor commoners like me don't get any praise for the work we put in sorting our trash into recyclables.*
"Okay, you don't care, that's fine." Rin clenches his jaw but leaves it at that. They course through the freeway in silence. There is a long stretch of flatness, the winter sun setting at late afternoon, night cloaking the land, fluorescent lights flickering from grimy buildings, lane markers flashing yellow and black and white. They whizz past artefacts of the fading Western post-industrial dream—fast food restaurants, petrol stations, honking trucks, warehouses shut for the day—scenes that feel at once foreign and familiar to Haruka.

Rin turns out of the freeway and starts speaking again.

"You know, I borrowed the car for the entire weekend and I wanted to do fun stuff with you. But you're making it seriously difficult, Haru."

Oh, so it's my fault again. Everything's my fault.

"I made this reservation at a restaurant tonight but if you don't want to go I'll cancel it."

Rin stops at a traffic junction in the middle of a suburban high street. The sides are lined with small shops and eateries, Greek and Indian and Chinese and Middle-Eastern, with dimly lit interiors and the few customers of the day.

"I was going to suggest we go fishing tomorrow too. But if you're going to be unhappy the whole time I'd rather not do anything."

"Rin." There it is. A sound. The apology sits on the tip of his tongue. I'm sorry. I love you. Don't hate me. I don't want to make you sad. Let's do it. Let's have dinner and let's go fishing.

Rin is staring expectantly at him, waiting for him to continue. But the words don't come. They simply don't.

"Tch," Rin says, but drives on. The restaurant Rin brings him to is warm and bustling, with enthusiastic prose about the local provenance of the produce, a decent wine menu, and it's full of smiling people who don't have a problem with spending money.

***

Half-light by Barwon Heads, about an hour before the tide flushes high over the estuary. Cold air of eve before the moonrise glow, blue mist of dusk like a creeping veil. The southwesterly wind finds little warm flesh to bite. Rin is poking through the mud with a stainless steel pump, pulling small crayfish from their burrows.

Water ripples clear like a mirror under the riverine bridge.

Haruka stands there with a Shimano graphite rod and a 1000 reel. 3kg braid, swivel, fluorocarbon for the rig. Hands working fast over the moistened line, pulling the knots tight with pliers. Two droppers and a sinker. A Paternoster rig. This should suffice.

Bail open, swing the rod back, flick forward.

Faint plop in the water.

Rin climbs back up to the bridge with his bucket of small crustaceans.

"This is a yabby," Rin says, pushing a small blue crayfish into his face.

Haruka jerks one degree backwards. The yabby's claws are waving about in the air, dangerously
close to his nose.

Rin returns the yabby to the red plastic bucket. "They're great as live bait. Of course, we could just eat them too."

There is an awful dragging sound, rough plastic scraping over stone. "I'll be sitting here on the esky," Rin tells him, plonking his butt on the icebox. There is only one rod between the two of them.

Haruka is using a soft plastic bait. He enjoys the challenge of moving the bait around in an enticing manner to seduce hungry fish.

There is a bite. It is an easy reel in.

"Put that back," Rin says, almost as soon as Haruka pulls out the flapping salmon. "It's still juvenile."

Haruka frowns at Rin but does as he's told.

"We have bag limits on what you can take home," Rin lectures. "No fish under a certain size. There's even an app for this now."

We.

Irritation burns under his skin. What right does Rin have to speak for Australia as "we"?

"Alevin, fingerling, smolt, parr," Rin says, utterly incomprehensible. Haruka chooses to ignore him because it's too much effort to ask Rin to explain when he could just be babbling nonsense.

"English terms for salmon at different stages of their life," Rin offers.

Why does Rin know it in the English?

"Where did you learn to fish?"

Rin looks surprised to hear him speak.

"Uh, Australia?"

"I thought it'd be something your dad taught you."

Rin laughs. It sounds awfully cynical. "My dad was never around to teach me how to fish. Besides, the kind of fishing he did was with trawler nets in the open sea. The commercial stuff. The kind that Ai says is really bad for marine biodiversity."

"So who taught you how to fish?"

Rin laughs again, bitter and grating. "And how did you learn to fish, Haru?"

"Self-taught," Haruka mutters, trying to get his response over and done with. He waggles the braid line, a tad too energetically, and there is another bite.

"Still too small," Rin admonishes, as Haruka unhooks the fish and puts it back into the river. The fish wriggles out of his grip and slides away into the darkened areas. It's a brown trout—Haruka can recognise this—the recreational fishing pond he goes to has plenty of them. "Give me the hook."

Haruka stands idly while he watches Rin angle the hook through the tail of the yabby, keeping it alive yet pinned to the spot.
Rin reaches into a ziplock bag for prawn heads saved from last night's dinner and throws a smattering into the water.

The yabby dangles helplessly from the end of Haruka's line, pincers waving in a futile distress call.

Haruka throws the line out again into the water.

"I went on fishing trips with my coach," Rin begins, after the line settles a good distance away.

"For training camp?"

"No, completely unofficial stuff."

Haruka doesn't understand why anyone would bother with things like that. It's like Makoto and Amakata-sensei. Haruka will never understand the kind of people who find it appropriate or enjoyable to become friends with someone of a far higher rank, like teachers or coaches or whatever. He doesn't know why it bugs him so much.

"Makoto does things like that too. He's always been the teacher's pet and he still visits our old teachers in school every time we go back. I just don't get it." Haruka's almost complaining, *Almost."

"Huh?" Rin says, like he suddenly has hearing problems.

"I don't like it when people act outside of their defined relationships. Teachers and students shouldn't be friends."

"I'm in complete agreement," Rin says.

Haruka is incredulous. "Says the guy who went fishing with his coach."

"Yeah, I found out the hard way. Fishing...wasn't just fishing."

*What the fuck are you talking about?*

Rin laughs again, hollow and joyless. "Never mind that, it's all in the past."

"Never mind what?" *You can't just bring me into some remote place and say things like that and then try to laugh it off.*

"Forget it."

"Rin—" Unknowingly, Haruka has reached out to grab Rin on the arm.

"I said, forget it!" Rin huffs at him, jerking his arm away as he stands up from the esky. *And don't touch me.*

Why? Haruka thinks, face flushing hot with anger. Why can't I touch you? Why did you bring me here acting like it would be a fun thing when you only meant to tell me confusing things only to suddenly go all evasive on me when I try to understand what's going on in that incomprehensible head of yours.

"What did your coach do to you?" Haruka asks. What could happen in a remote place like this, shaded and shadowy, to two people who were all alone? A horror dawns within Haruka, horror because he is beginning to realise that there is the possibility of other people who want things from Rin that Haruka wants for himself. "When did it happen?"
"Nothing happened," Rin mumbles, falling back onto the esky, pulling the sides of his jacket into a tight wrap, arms crossing his body. "Don't tell anyone, don't say a word about this, okay?"

"I don't even know what you're talking about!" Haruka blurts obtusely, stubbornly provocative, insistent on prying more information even though he can see that it is hurting Rin. Haruka just wants to Rin to confirm what he is beginning to suspect, he isn't going to believe it until it can no longer be denied. He just wants to be certain. He just wants to know, because the pain of not knowing is already eating him alive.

"It was really stupid of me, okay? I know that. I know I was really dumb to think I could trust my coach because he was so nice to me. He was like, he was like a surrogate father to me, okay? No one else believed in me except for him, and looking back now I should have seen the signs coming because no one in their right mind would ever believe in me. It was all an act, it was obviously an act."

"Did he—did he hurt you?" The fishing line snags along the web of low-slung mangrove roots. Haruka has to wrestle with it for a while, which gives him a good opportunity to avoid looking at Rin.

"What do you mean by 'did he hurt me' Haru? Yes, he fucked me, and no, I agreed to it. I said I would let him. I didn't say no to him. How could I, after he did so much for me as my coach? There wasn't even the possibility of no. Obviously I had wanted it. I was so desperate for affection I let it go on. But worse stuff happens to other people."

"After all that I've done for you... "No—"

"'No' What the fuck does 'no' mean, Haru. It means fuck-all, that's what it means."

"I don't allow it. How could it happen under my watch? "How old—how old—"

"Why do you need to know, you fucking pervert? What does it matter? Fourteen, I was fourteen."

Haruka ends up pulling a tangled mass of slimy green stuff out of the river. He extricates his rig from the jumble and the tangle is so hopeless he has to change up the rig. He casts the line out in the other direction, but it gets caught against the wind and falls weakly under the bridge. Only the swirl of the current pushes the rig away from them.

"I gave up swimming for you. I gave up swimming that year you came back crying. I gave up swimming because I thought it would make you swim better. That it would make you happier. It was my bargain with the swim gods, the pool gods, the water god. That if I gave up swimming all my special powers would be transferred to you and you would be happy."

"I wanted you to be happy, swimming."

Haruka is struggling, struggling. He isn't even aware that he's lost his grip on the fishing rod until Rin snatches it angrily from him.

"Everything I did—swimming, not swimming, it was for you. I swam so you would love me, I didn't swim so you wouldn't hate me. Why did none of that have any effect? Why didn't it give you what you wanted? Why didn't it make you happier?"

"I wanted to be your first. Now I find that someone else forced his way there before I could get to you."

"Happy now? You're the only person I've told about this. Don't you fucking dare breathe a word of it to anyone else or I'll drown you. I mean it."
"I'm not happy!" Why would you say that? Why would you ever say that? Don't you know how much I love you? You were everything to me. You were my first everything. My first crush, my first love, my first wet dream. Do you know how horrifying it is to realise that at the same time I was dreaming of you someone else was making you cry?

"I—I love you, Rin," Haruka bursts out.

"What the fuck? So what? So fucking what?" It looks like Rin has got a bite. He begins reeling the line in, but the fish decides to fight, too. The line tenses and the tip of the graphite rod arcs towards the water.

"Everything I did was for you."

"That's not true."

"I gave up swimming for you."

"And look what that accomplished."

"I spent half my life wishing I could be in Australia with you."

"Mathematically speaking—"

"Now I think—if only I was by your side, all those years, I could have protected you. I could have saved you."

"Look, I'm beyond saving, Haru. And don't you have Makoto? Jesus fucking Christ you have Makoto." Rin is furiously reeling away, intent on bringing this voracious fish up to land.

"Only—only because—"

"You could have at least said something back then, Haru! You could have at least told me that you liked me. God knows I had this hopeless crush on you too, but that was nearly ten years ago. Fucking hell, Haru, I didn't even know how much it meant to you until today. I mean, I had some vague idea in high school but I thought you meant it in a friendly way. Move on, Haru. I can't be responsible for you throwing your entire life away. I know maybe it was my fault for practically forcing you into the relay in grade six but that was all I wanted. It was grade six. Just swimming. I didn't ask for you to develop this massive, unhealthy crush on me. I can't be responsible for you being upset I abandoned you for Australia or for not knowing how much you wanted me to call or stay in touch and then things got awkward anyway."

"Why did you bring me here then?" I didn't believe I was special until you said I was. How dare you name the power in me then act like you're not responsible for it.

"Well, Makoto says you like fishing."

Why? Because your dad was a fisherman? Because you went on fishing trips with your coach who tried to act like your father?

"Why did you become interested in me in the first place?" Haruka is resentful, resentful and angry. He can't tell if Rin has truly moved on, or is acting like he's moved on. Rin doesn't think of me the same way I think of him.
"You were the fastest swimmer I had to beat, in those days."

"Because I reminded you of your father?"

"What? No. Okay look, yeah, maybe for a short time I thought you did but then I found out that's invalid anyway because my mum says you're nothing like my dad."

"What's...your dad like?"

"Happy. Cheerful. Nothing like you." Between Rin and the fish, Rin is winning. He's not fighting with the rod any more, just reeling the line in slowly, dragging the fatigued fish upstream.

"Good. I don't want to be your dad. I want to love you. I want to love you."

"Yeah, you're totally different. I gave up on the dad thing. You're your own person. Maybe I couldn't see it before but after the Olympics and whatever, yes, you're not my dad. And what am I to you, Haru? Am I my own person? Or are you still holding on to some twelve year old version of me who will smile at you forever? Let me go, Haru. I know you came here on a twenty hour journey from Tokyo to see me and all, but you have to let me go."

"I thought I did. I thought I did when I said bye to you in Rio. But the moment it looked like I no longer mattered to you..."

"I came here because I missed you," Haruka offers like a desperate prayer, hoping to appease the gods, god, this god, his Rin.

"Are you sure it's not because you wanted to see just how unhappy I am without you?"

"Please. Please stop hurting me. Let me in. I never meant to hurt you. I never meant—"

"I do fine without you." Catching his fingers into the line Rin pulls the rest of the way by hand from the water, trailing a large black bream that goes calm in between his palms.

Heartless under the winterwhite moon, this chill spell, hush of wind rattling the bare-bone branches, dark, the tendrils of the night. The fish falls limp as Rin spikes its brain with a sharpened screwdriver, pliant in death under strong-armed force. Glint of a deba blade, knifetip pushed under the gills to sever the major blood vessels at the spine. Score the fish at the other end for the same. To finish, run a wire through the spinal cord so the muscles don't contract, don't let the meat go soft. Be quick and they won't know what's hit them.

Rin throws the fish into an ice slurry. The bleeding fish, pale on the underbelly, turns the water a cartoon punch red.

***

"Hey! So this is what you've been up to."

"Captain Mikoshiba."

"I'm not your captain any more, hey."

Rin shrugs. "What are you doing here?" He's not too keen on being accosted in the locker room.

"Swimming. I swim too, you know."

August 2014 and it is the Pan-Pacific Swimming Championships at the Gold Coast, Australia.
Without meaning to Rin glances over at the Team Japan area, but finds no other familiar faces.

"Not as fast as you though. Phew." Mikoshiba makes a whooshing sound. "You're amazing, you know that? I saw a video on YouTube. Just phenomenal. It makes me sad."

"Why?" Rin wants to get out of this conversation as quickly as possible but Mikoshiba is taking his time to ramble on.

"I'm sad that I can't go around telling people I'm your captain anymore."

"Is that sad?"

"You broke our hearts leaving so wordlessly like that. You even had to have your sister drop by to pick up your things for you? If only we could've had a proper goodbye."

"There wasn't enough time."

"I know, Matsuoka. I can see that now. No one had any idea why you left us so suddenly but finally I understand—you have a higher calling. I'm really proud of you for beating everyone else, only I'm so foolish as to search for any small reason to share in your glory. But that's just me, that's pure selfishness on my part—all those medals you won? They're yours alone. You should celebrate."

"Captain, you're pretty fast too. Didn't you break a bunch of tournament records?"

"That was last year. I'm not as good as I was," Mikoshiba shrugs it off like it doesn't really bother him. An enthusiastic smile threatens to return to his face so Rin cuts in:

"How can that be? You're not even near your prime—"

"My body is wrecked. If you remember that shoulder injury I had last autumn—I've never really been the same since. I'm not really supposed to be doing competitive sports anymore, but I couldn't give up on this opportunity. I mean, I delayed college entrance so I could pursue swimming full-time, but at this point it doesn't look like I can take it any further."

"So what are you going to do then?"

"No point being sad about it, is there? I'm really glad to have at least one chance to compete internationally, and I'm really glad to see you doing so well at the same event."

"Don't say that, captain..."

"Not your captain, Matsuoka."

There is an awkward pause. Rin collects his belongings and puts them into his bag.

"Hey, you know that old friend of yours?"

Rin freezes. Please don't let it be...

"Which one?" he asks Mikoshiba as casually as he can manage, zipping up his duffle.

"Tall one. Tachibana. We offered him a scholarship but he turned it down. Such a pity. He's really good."

"Why him?" Rin asks slowly, trying not too appear too interested. What about Haru?
"Why not? He's the kind of boy the school board really likes. Well-spoken, excellent grades, great attitude. 'Leadership potential' type."

"And...the others?"

"The others?" Mikoshiba eyes widen a little in surprise. "I don't think they were up for consideration."

Why not?

"They didn't submit any applications? None that I know of. Actually, Tachibana didn't apply either—I recommended him. But I guess he didn't want it at all."

Rin's heart is hammering away—he can't even tell what for. Fear? Shock? Samezuka offers a variety of scholarships—couldn't Haru at least get the swimming one? Haru's fast enough, isn't he? Is Haru not good enough?

***

From the air: the two spires of the Incheon bridge, flanked by wings of cable stays, flaring into a triangle over the incessant blue of the sea.

Makoto by his side, hands quivering. Rei has confirmed over and over the safety record of the airline they're taking, and the model of plane they're on, and the relative safety of the whole affair but Makoto's such a big baby that Haruka has to take care of.

Two hours: Osaka to Incheon.

September. They're here for the Asian Games.

Or, more accurately, Makoto is here for the Asian Games, and Haruka is here to look after Makoto.

Because Makoto wouldn't survive without me.

Makoto's parents said: Haru-chan, why aren't you swimming too? We thought you were the best at swimming.

His own parents said: Haruka, what about all those trophies you won? How come of the two of you, Makoto's now the real swimmer?

Makoto swims. I only ever wanted to be free.

Rei said: But for the vagaries of life, I could be representing Japan too, but my butterfly stroke is so dazzling it was deemed too hazardous for the general population to witness, for they would forget to function for a day and that would be a real hindrance. Alas, I am confined to sitting in front of the television set. But make no mistake, when the world is ready to behold my glory I shall emerge from my cocoon to reveal myself in spectacular fashion...

Nagisa said: Mako-chan, fight fight fight!!!

Gou said: Haruka-senpai, how do you feel about this?

Makoto said: I couldn't have done this without you.

It's a lie. Makoto couldn't have done it without the talent spotters and the national funding and the Japan Swimming Federation. Makoto could have done it without him. Makoto's just being nice.
Just as Haruka stops showing up for swim practice the scouts turn up at the joint session with Samezuka and say that Makoto has the physique to go all the way.

Just as Haruka asks for his name to be removed from the members list at the swim club Makoto gets a letter for a scholarship interview with Samezuka.

"I'm not going," Makoto told him.

Haruka made Makoto go.

"They rejected me," Makoto told him, weeks after the interview, not looking at him, voice too flippant.

Don't lie to me.

Try as he might, Haruka couldn't find the scraps of any letter from Samezuka in Makoto's room, or his school locker, or in his pockets.

Please say you'll swim for me, Haruka said to Makoto then, giving up.

At Incheon, Makoto manages to pick up one medal: a gold in the medley relay.

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**Rin Goes to Rio**
by Greg Klein for the New York Times
_August 14, 2016_

In 1976, the Australian songwriter Peter Allen wrote the number one hit, “I Go To Rio”. Forty years later, a young Japanese-Australian swimmer takes heed and blazes through the Games of the XXXI Olympiad in Rio de Janeiro, almost singlehandedly signaling a new era of swimming after the reign of America’s superstars.

Stalwarts of Australian swimming are still puzzled as to his rise, for although he swims under the country’s banner there is something not quite local about him. He comes from an ever-growing pool of global citizenry who straddle state boundaries with two or more passports, and the lack of a clear national identity challenges the claim to patriotic representation that is taken for granted from Olympic athletes. To what extent can the general populace of a country call an athlete their own when more than one country has been critically involved in their development?

Fortunately, for the rest of the world, these questions can be easily dismissed, leaving us to appreciate the dynamic power of Rin Matsuoka’s swimming.

When I first meet him, after his record-breaking 100m butterfly final, apropos of the host country, the immortal Ayrton Senna quote crops up in conversation:

“You commit yourself to such a level where there is no compromise. You give everything you have, everything, absolutely everything.”

I posit that the above holds true for all professional athletes, and doubly so for record-breaking athletes. And yet, Matsuoka’s swimming has been described as technically practised to the point where the way he moves in the water comes across as effortless. I tell him that watching him swim the butterfly is so beautiful that it is almost like a performance of ballet.

"Why ballet?" Matsuoka replies. "I appreciate the analogy to a form of visual art, but I do not like
being told that swimming is a form of art. My swimming is pure work. Ballet may seem like art, but I’m sure if you asked the dancers they would say it is all work too. There is this notion where saying something is artistic is a compliment, because it stems from a cultural value where art is elevated above work, by being the antithesis of work. I reject the false dichotomy of art and labor. To me, all art is work, and I would rather the art be appreciated as the product of unimaginably boring hard grind."

I point out that as he said, descriptions of hard work are often too technical and can hardly be expected to capture the mind of the casual spectator.

"I do understand that," Matsuoka smiles wryly. "But why? That’s the important question itself. For sports, especially, it must be completely obvious that the road to perfection is relentless practice. And yet everyone’s always digging for that something more, some supernatural or extra-narrative element that they can focus on, and then the value of hard work just fades away, or it just doesn’t seem important. And then you get all these people who could do so much better if they tried, but they don’t believe that they can because they haven’t got that special ‘it’, and they give up too early, with only feelings of jealousy or bitterness remaining. That’s a story that doesn’t have to be."

I mention that at the top level of competition, the differentials between each athlete are so minute that there must be other important factors at play for an athlete to consistently beat the rest.

"Of course, I do not deny that there are other important factors in getting to the top, but these are possibly more boring than anyone wants to hear. There is always the question of funding and support, which go a very long way in determining success, and I don’t mean it in a dramatic way. It’s not about parties with sponsors and parents who overcome impossible odds. It’s about the cumulative effect of being able to maintain the nutritional requirements of the sport, to travel to the competitions that matter, having access to transport in order to get out of the house for daily training—all the minute, mundane details adding up."

"So what makes a winner?" I prompt him. Matsuoka pauses to think for a while, and in truth, I am thoroughly under his spell. He is erudite, and speaks of his swimming with a sureness of self. He will not feign humility to pretend otherwise, yet, at only nineteen years of age, he is strikingly devoid of the grating arrogance of youth. You get the sense that he knows what he wants to do, and he is simply going to get there.

"Winning is about harmony," Matsuoka concludes. "It is the harmony of all the work put in during practice meeting the conditions that you’ve been preparing for."

I tell him that his words almost seem informed by philosophical Zen Buddhism. I get a glimpse of a less guarded side, softer and more open.

"Please don’t put that in. It’s embarrassing, just because someone’s Japanese, that the words ‘Zen Buddhism’ have to be mentioned."

"Not your thing?" I ask.

He doesn’t want to be a stereotype. He doesn’t want to be defined in terms set long ago by other people. Only he can define himself—as Rin Matsuoka.

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The kitchen tap is weighted. It turns on and off perfectly, unlike the temperamental plasticky thing he has at home with Makoto that has only two modes: a pissy trickle of water or a gushing jet that sprays everywhere.
Haruka fills the rice pot with water and begins massaging the grains. Rin has one of those expensive, sleek-looking rice cookers from that elephant brand that Makoto's begging him to buy all the time.

The water swirls around his hand, turning a milky, translucent white.

"Do you have plants?" he asks Rin.

"Huh?"

"I could water the plants with the rice water if you happen to have plants."

"No, I don't have plants," Rin mutters, sounding puzzled.

Back home, Haruka drowned Makoto's pot plants by watering them too much. Eventually Makoto gave up on his gardening aspirations and adopted a marimo which the cats proceeded to maul to shreds.

Haruka pours the murky water away and starts again.

"Why did you quit swimming?" Rin asks, drizzling soy sauce and ginger over the whiting they also caught, which he has prepared into fillets. "I mean, you can't have quit just because of me, right?"

So what if it's because of you?

With the rice water clear on his fifth rinse, Haruka pours it away and refills the pot with the right measure for cooking, a thumb section above the grains of rice. He sticks the pot in the fancy cooker along with the steamer basket of chopped vegetables. Haruka collects Rin's discarded fish heads and bones and puts them into a stock pot, leaving it to simmer.

"I mean, you were so good at swimming. You would've been awesome if you tried."

"Stop 'iffing' me." Haruka digs around Rin's cabinet for the spices, neatly repackaged into airtight canisters with a glass window.

"But I believed in you, Haru!"

"How exactly? By not talking to me? By abandoning me? Leaving me alone? It's too late. My life has taken a different direction."

"Sorry." Rin slides the tray of whiting into the oven to bake. "Haru, are you happy, at the very least?"

With half an hour until the rice will be ready, Haruka ties up a small bag of spices and drops it into the stock pot.

"I don't care about happy. It's just something that takes up my time."

"Haru..."

I wish you'd just shut up. It's not some fucking huge deal that I stopped swimming.

Silence befalls them. Rin potters off to get some readings done while they wait for the food. Haruka takes out his phone and finds nothing to do with it after going through his email for work. He sits and stares at the clouds of steam puffing out of the rice cooker, watches the incandescent orange glow of the oven. His mind drifts off to planning tomorrow's meals: breakfast, lunch and dinner, cooking for Rin.
The fancy rice cooker chimes a merry tune. The rice is done. Haruka spoons the rice onto plates and divides the vegetables while Rin gets the whiting out of the oven. A simple, quick dinner because Rin has to go to sleep soon. Haruka is used to the amount of rice Makoto eats and he gives Rin the same. Rin doesn't say anything so Haruka knows he's got it right.

"If you reboil the stock every four days or so you can keep it indefinitely in the fridge," Haruka says while looking at the quietly bubbling stockpot, as Rin scarfs down his dinner in huge, noisy mouthfuls.

Haruka thinks of how much he would have to eat if he chooses to become a swimmer. He thinks of how little free time Makoto has, how Rin freaks out if he deviates from his daily schedule. He wonders if there are any reserves of effort in him for this kind of life.

Probably not. Everyone who knows him knows he's been saying the same line over and over: no, it's too much effort. I let Makoto swim for me, so he can put in all the work and I can feel happy when he wins. You know me, you know I'd have given up at the first sign of discomfort. When Makoto comes home aching and sore all over I can smile to myself that I bypassed all of this. Swimming at the Olympics? This amount of effort for completely uncertain reward? Not my thing.

Foolishly, a secret part of him still imagines an alternate life, where he swims in the lane right next to Rin at the Olympics and where Makoto is on his team for the relay. When they win, Makoto and Rin tell him, because of you, Haru. Because of you.

They give me too much credit.

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Haruka can hear Rin rattling about the house. He checks his phone. 6:07 a.m.

The bathroom taps go on and off. Haruka thinks that the bathroom pipes must go around the guestroom because it's so noisy in here. He pushes himself out of bed.

Rin is still in the bathroom when Haruka ventures into the kitchen.

"Do you want me to make breakfast for you?" Haruka calls out to Rin.

"I've eaten. There is some leftover smoothie in the fridge, you can have that if you want."

Haruka opens the fridge and sees a glass tumbler of goopy green liquid.

"What's inside?" he asks, just as Rin opens the bathroom door.

"Kale, banana, berries, whey powder."

Haruka tastes it apprehensively. It's nice.

"I'll be back after eleven. We can have the bream for lunch, the meat should have settled by then. I'm planning to bake it in salt, unless you have other ideas. After lunch I've got to go for this...fashion show thing, and then zero plans for the evening," Rin says.

"What are you doing at the fashion show?" Haruka imagines Rin walking down the runway in scanty underwear and an athletic jacket he will remove at the end of the runway, all while flashing a cocky smirk.

"Uh, sponsor thing. I just have to show up and mix around for the sake of it. I have a plus one invite,
but I've already asked my other friend."

"Oh," Haruka says. The image of Rin strutting his stuff on the catwalk lingers on his mind.

"Yeap," Rin says, then digs around his letter stand on the console by the doorway. "I have uh, I have this list I made for Ai about the tourist attractions, you can look through it and see if there's anything you want to do."

Haruka stares blankly at the list. He didn't come here for this...he came to Melbourne to see Rin.

"Can I watch you train?" he asks, looking up at Rin.

"Oh. Well. Shouldn't be a problem. I'll just text my coach."

"Is this the..."

"No, no! Jeez Haru, different guy. The previous guy was arrested. Totally different coach."

"Oh," Haruka says again, blankly, and the tension eases a bit. "Is this guy good?"

"Yeah, of course, Haru. What do you think?"

*How am I supposed to know what to think. I can't tell what's going on in your pretty head.*

"You'll like him. He's really funny and he's got like, this thick Russian accent. It's really hilarious."

*I don't see how that's supposed to make me like him.*

"Come on, Haru," Rin says, cutting into his thoughts. "I've got to go now so if you want to see what I do you have to follow me. I run to the aquatics centre as a warm up. It's not that far."

Rin is by the doorway, and he has on his feet...the same pair of monstrous five-toed shoes that Rei wears to go running.

"...Why?" Haruka can't help but ask, fixating on the shoes, appalled that Rin would make such a deeply unaesthetic choice of footwear.

"Rei recommended them to me. I only have one pair, so you can wear these runners instead," Rin says, holding up a thankfully normal-looking pair of running shoes.

Haruka gets changed, and soon finds himself out of the apartment and into the cool winter morning.

The sky is still dark, citylights low. Friday night shenanigans are over and only the debris is left—broken glass bottles, indeterminate wet splotches. A smattering of other early morning joggers on their way to the park. When they pass Rin says hi to them and Haruka nods rigidly in acknowledgement, feeling out of place. Years of Tokyo living stripped him of that small-town urge to greet everyone on sight, although it was always Makoto who did the greetings for him anyway.

*Haru-chan is shy*, they would comment, people like Tamura-san, and his grandmother only further stoked that image of him. *I'm not shy. I just don't want to talk*, was his standard reply, resentfully directed in voiceless thought, even back then, back when he was taller than Makoto.

The aquatic centre is nondescript, a large grey structure in the budding dawn. Rin signs him in, and leads him past the small pools of senior folks engaged in aquarobics into the indoor full-sized pool. The lanes are marked by speed for lap swimming, and Rin heads towards the far end to put his things down.
There is a tall, Santa-shaped man with a cap on his head and a gaudy lavender and seafoam green tracksuit right out of the nineties.

"Hey Coach," Rin says, and the coach grunts in reply. "This is my friend Haru. He's just here to see what I do."

"Do you swim?" The coach asks, and it takes Haruka a while to figure out what he says.

"I brought my swimming costume," Haruka says.

"O-K. Maybe you want to experience my famous Viktor Maximovich Golomshtok training regime later?"

Haruka is still trying to figure out what the coach said when Rin answers for him. "Yeah, he can do maybe an hour!"

"Who's this?" Another voice pipes up. Haruka turns behind to see that it's the blonde girl on Rin's cereal box.

"My friend," Rin says.

"Friend? Like, friend friend?"

"Friend."

"Oh, like, friend."

"No, not friend, just friend."

Haruka frowns. That was a completely indecipherable conversation.

"I'm Gemma," the cereal box girl says, turning to Haruka.

"Haruka," Rin supplies for him.

"Haruka...san?"

"Haruka is fine," Haruka says, trying not to cringe on the spot.

"Cool. Haruka it is. Welcome to our swim club, and as you can see, there is Rin, me, and those people over there are the juniors, and those over there are fellow seniors, and their names are..."

Gemma rattles off a bunch of names Haruka doesn't catch, along with some identifying characteristics. Her English is too fast and if he ever needs to use those names Haruka decides he'll just ask again.

"—So, all in all, we're like a pod of sharks."

"Sharks don't come in pods. Orcas come in pods," Rin cuts in.

"Oh okay Mr Perfect English. What are sharks then?"

Rin shrugs. "School? Shoal? I may have heard 'shiver' being used."

"Yeah okay," Gemma says, turning to Haruka. "Do you know what he said about me once? It was on national television too."
Haruka stares blankly. *Everything's suddenly in English.*

"He said, 'I love Gemma. She's such a *raconteur*.' What the fuck does that mean?"

"I've explained it a hundred times. It's a compliment."

"Yeah but how many people knew what you were saying?"

"I don't love you any more, Gemma," Rin says mock-petulantly, and Haruka tries not to frown. Is Rin flirting with this Gemma?

"That's fine, I'm not your type anyway," Gemma says, and then inexplicably gives Haruka a once-over.

"Hey," Rin says, snapping his fingers to get Gemma to look away from Haruka.

"You know, I'm taking Japanese in school this year and there is this word I learned..."

"That is not a word you learned in Japanese class, Gemma."

"Okay, fine, it's a word I learned while searching the Internet for Japanese homework..."

"No. Stop. Just no."

"Okay senpai."

"How old are you?" Haruka abruptly asks, just to be sure he can rule her out as a love rival.

"What, me? Sixteen this year," Gemma says.

"Dude, Haru, don't tell me you're going to be an old perv about this."

"No perverts," the coach's voice suddenly booms, sounding like a Tolkien wizard. "Perverts must be weeded out and crushed like picnic ants."

Haruka doesn't understand what the coach is saying so he looks away. The coach eyes him beadily.

"Only the guilty have fear in their hearts," the coach says, wagging a finger.

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*The water is alive. Once you dive in, it will immediately bare its fangs and attack. But there's nothing to fear. Don't resist the water. Thrust your fingers into the surface and carve an opening. Then you slide your body through that opening. Moving your arms, your head, your chest...*

Haruka breaks the surface of the water and takes a gasp of air, retreating back to the start point, treading water upright. The old pair of goggles have fogged—time and disuse must have worn off the coating. He spits in the goggles, the right, the left, and then swirls the lenses around.

"Warm up well. I'm gonna race you later," Rin says.

*It's not going to be a fair fight.*

"Come on, I'll give you a headstart."

"I just want to swim," Haruka says, looking away.
The coach looms, sharp shrill of a whistle. Go.

Haruka pulls the goggles up around his head, adjusts the fit. They're snug. Inertia suddenly binds his limbs and he lets himself sink, the gleam of the surface line rising up past his goggles. *I don't want to move.*

Underwater, he sees Rin kick off with a pair of fins. Like the ignition switch of an engine, something in his brain clicks, his heart starts to run. He pulls himself out of the pool and dives in again, cold.

Haruka will do eight hundred metres of swimming for warm up. Sixteen laps in a fifty metre pool—Rin's doing double times twenty laps, with fins on the first set, without fins on the second.

The first few laps are okay, even pleasant, as Haruka begins to recall how much he enjoys the water. It is refreshing to let the water slip smoothly past his skin once more, to grab and pull onto it, to feel the water. At the four hundred metre mark the feeling starts to fade as his lack of physical fitness starts to kick in, the lactate burning through his muscles, his neglected lungs struggling to take in enough oxygen. The laps start to wear on, the repetitive strokes start to feel boring, and then Haruka begins to get lazy, to rely on muscle memory, he starts to glide instead of pulling himself through the water. *But I'm not a swimmer anymore. Rin's the swimmer. Rin does so much better. Is there a point to this?*

By the six hundred metre mark Haruka just wants to float in the water, to forget the rest of the world, to throw away the obligation of having to swim for a goal, in defined patterns. He wants to let the water take him, to fall into its all-consuming embrace. At the seven hundred metre mark he hears Rin call him by name—*Haru, just another hundred to go, just two laps! Elbow up, body straight—come on Haru, show me that beautiful swimming form again.*

The final two laps are no less of a drag. Haruka becomes irritated, and he begins to fight the water, his body alignment going totally off. Rin's coach starts to shout at him to get his body back in line.

When Haruka finishes his warm up Rin's already a good way into his second set. Rin's coach helps him out of the water and he grabs a short break.

"How do you feel?" the coach asks him.

Haruka shrugs. He doesn't know what to say. He's out of shape. He's embarrassing, he's shamefully ordinary. He looks around for his water bottle just for something to hold on to.

"You have very good form, starting out. But the more you swim, when you feel fatigued, that's when you start to drop form. That is also natural. Happens to everyone. It takes practice to get rid of the fatigue."

The coach scribbles something in his notebook.

"I can see you are the kind who has talent, no? You have natural intuition for the water. As Rin's coach I went to watch some of his old swimming videos, and he had a very funny catch. Also he used to roll his hips too much. It took so much work to rewrite his muscle memory to get the catch better."

Haruka nods, squeezing water from the sports bottle into his mouth.

"Rin told me you used to swim together."

Haruka starts to get heart palpitations. He dreads being put on the spot. Of all the questions, the one he likes answering the least is why he quit swimming. He's not obliged to provide an answer, ever,
which is what Makoto tells him. When people start to get too close to dropping this bomb of a question Makoto always has some premonition to jump in right before and divert the topic.

*There's no Makoto to save me now.*

"Anything you can tell me about how Rin used to swim?"

Haruka frowns. So the coach wasn't going to ask about him quitting after all? What a relief.

"No?" The coach prompts.

Haruka shrugs. "He's obsessed."

The coach laughs, big and booming, and then throws a kickboard at Haruka. "O-K I want you to do a drill, just a one-arm pull. Put your hand in the middle of the kickboard, kick moderately, and stroke with your free hand. Do you remember how you entered the water in your first few laps? That was good. Keep that up. We want to work on getting some flexibility back into your shoulders."

The coach tears out a page from his notebook and passes it to Haruka. It's a training menu. It reminds him of the days Coach Sasabe and Gou tried to wrangle him into following a prescribed routine.

Rin is in the fast lane tearing into his main set, 20x100 with rest intervals of 15 seconds, 10x swim, 10x pull.

Haruka gets into the medium lane with the juniors. It doesn't look like he'll get much attention from Rin during training. The thought comes rushing back to Haruka that swimming is ultimately a lonely and isolated sport. So much for swimming with Rin in a team. The relay part is like icing on a bitter cake of hard grind. He's getting a taste of the reality and he supposes he can go through with it for fun just for today, but he's made too many other choices that took him away from this path. It doesn't do to dwell on what might have been. If he had bothered to carry on swimming, if he had bothered to continue being a good swimmer, would he get any more attention from Rin?

If he had trained himself into the best swimmer in the world, would Rin love him more?

Haruka pulls his arm, fingers slightly parted, elbow kept high and bent at the crook, trying to keep his mind clear and conscious only of his movement through water. The kickboard surges forward with each stroke, and there is the sweet spot where he holds the water in both mind and body, and each pull feeds into a sense of satisfaction. The calming effect of the repetitive movement puts his mind back at ease, as he lets go of his impulse to impress Rin. In the adjacent lanes are recreational swimmers, beginner swimmers, intermediate swimmers, people swimming for fun and for the joy the water brings to them.

*That has always been enough for me.*

The swell of discontent ought to know its death by now. The water, his world of comfort and safety, was never his alone to begin with. There have always been people who love the water, what does it matter if they claim a natural or unnatural affinity? The water is there for all, and in it he’s always had his own place no one else could touch. He doesn't need to prove to anyone that he is the water's favourite by being the best swimmer in the world, he doesn't need to fear anyone stealing the water from him by being better than him at swimming.

*I can share the water.*

***
Haruka gets to jump off the starting block, which isn't allowed outside of the reserved lanes. One foot in front, knees slightly bent, lean forwards and touch the fingers to the plate—it's the track start he prefers and is used to.

Rin has gone from a track start to a grab start at the Olympics and he's gone back to a track start at the recent World Championships—and finds the differences are not conclusive.

Rei would say the importance of the start lies in flight time, aerodynamics and movement in a perfect parabola, less so the starting position.

Haruka swings his arms forward and soars into the water.

"Not bad!" Gemma exclaims. "It's really not bad for someone who hasn't swum in a long time."

Rin won, of course, even with the fifteen metre delay, but you know what? It doesn't matter anymore.

"You could do very well, with more training under belt. Look at your timing! You have heard of Masters swimming, no?" Rin's coach is jabbing a thick, sausagey finger at his stopwatch.

"Haru doesn't like to know his time. He doesn't want to be bogged down by these unnecessary details."

"Okay then," the coach says, and resets the stopwatch with a quick squeeze of some buttons.

Haruka's brain finally catches up with the translations, and wait, hang on—why was Rin putting words into his mouth?

I wanted to know my time.

Rin is happily splashing around in the pool, hogging the lane. Does he really have to cherish every victory against me? I was so obviously out of form.

"Warm down, warm down!" The coach barks at them.

Haruka draws his legs upwards to kick off against the wall when the coach does a spinning motion with his hand.

Flip turn? Too much roll? More roll?

Haruka can't decipher what the coach means so he swims off, freestyle. His actions are met with a sharp whistle.

"Turn around! Backstroke!" the coach booms at him.

Haruka dips his head into the water, wondering if he can fake being too far away to hear the coach. As he dawdles, Rin swims up to him.

"Swimming backstroke is a great way to stretch out the muscles that are contracted in freestyle, since they work opposite muscle groups," Rin supplies, resting his head on the lane divider with a gleeful
What is Rin trying to imply? Haruka plunges his face underwater to avoid showing any reaction. When he raises his head again Rin is smiling at him with the sweetest smile, and oh, to hell with everything.

Haruka flips over on his back and begins windmilling his arms. In less than three seconds he crashes into the lane divider and he can hear Rin laughing at him.

How the fuck does Makoto manage this? A person needs eyes on the back of their head, or some sort of extra sensory perception in order to swim backstroke. Someone who can see even without looking.

"Come on, Haru," Rin cheers him on, and there is no sound on earth that gets to Haruka more than this. Rin cheering him on, Rin perched on the lane divider beaming at him.

At his last stroke Haruka crashes headfirst into the wall.

"No matter," Rin bursts into a fit of giggles, reaching out to yank off Haruka's swim cap and muss his hair. "Fail again, fail better."

The training session is over and Rin scampers off to the locker room where he gleefully jumps into a bathtub of ice.

"Wanna get in?" Rin shoots him a flirty wink.

Someone else from the senior squad bursts into the locker room and tries to jump in with Rin. It only succeeds in causing an explosion of ice cubes all over the tiled floor.

Haruka puts a toe on a stray ice cube and shudders as the cold spikes up his foot. Makoto hates the ice bath the most but Rin seems to enjoy it in a twisted way. Or maybe Rin is just happy today.

"Oi Haru," Rin calls out, almost in a sing-song as he steps into the showers. "Can we screw the bream? I'm craving a good burger right now."

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"There's no fish," Haruka says, almost accusative. There are vegetarian options but no fish.

"Well, duh, you come here for the awesome beef burgers."

Haruka frowns.

"If you want to be this way, Haru, fine. There's a bento place nearby, go buy your fish there or something."

Haruka ends up with a grilled unagi bento, mackerel shamefully missing from the menu of the faux-Japanese restaurant. With his takeaway box he goes to wait for Rin outside the burger joint, which is busy and wafting a greasy, meaty, grilled scent.

They are headed for the lake beside the sports centre where they have trained all morning. As they walk, Rin begins to scarf down the lamb souvlaki he bought as a supplement to his burger. Haruka wants to say something about how rude this would be back home but it's not like he cares about these rules. He just wants an excuse to talk to Rin.

They find an empty bench overlooking the lake and sit down. The sun is bright, the air is cold, and
before them is a quintessentially Australian vista of people going about various sports. Sailing and rowing on the lake, joggers and cyclists on the path, and the occasional pet dog.

It turns out that Rin's coach is jogging too.

Wet bits of Rin's burger are dribbling down his chin, damp lettuce, tomato seeds, mayonnaise, egg yolk and oily beef juice when his coach comes up to say hi.

"Hi," Rin replies, from behind the towering mound of bread and meat.

"This boy," the coach says, both exasperated and charmed, looking at Haruka like it's an inside joke.

Haruka nods and, needing to break off eye contact, pokes at the pickles in his bento set with his chopsticks.

Rin and his coach exchange a few niceties, a few reminders of the next training session, and then the coach is off again.

Rin goes back to wolfing down his burger. It's like he's been starved for days. Haruka looks down at his unagi set. Without a word, he sets his half-eaten box aside and goes running after Rin's coach.

"Ex-curscme," he calls out. They're almost at the other side of the lake from where he was sitting, just around the bend. Rin is almost a tiny speck.

"Yes?" the coach replies in that deep, sonorous voice.

"My time. Do you know my time? I wanted to know at training."

"Oh," the coach looks pensive, running through thoughts. "I may not remember exactly..."

"That's fine. What do you think of it? Was it good? How do I improve?"

"Ah, it was normal time. Normal time is good. You lack fitness. You can improve. Definitely everyone can improve with practice."

There's the question that burns. Do I still have a chance? If I start training now do I have the chance of being as good as Rin?

The coach claps a hand on his shoulder. "I hope you're not asking me to make you an Olympian."

Was it that obvious?

The coach laughs like it was a funny joke he came up with. "Son, what do you do now? I mean school, work, this kind of thing?"

"I-I draw stuff."

"Artist? Illustrator?"

Haruka shrugs.

"Are you any good at it?"

Haruka is a little taken aback by the directness of the question. "People like my stuff."

"Do you like it?"
Haruka is vague and noncommittal again.

"Here, I rephrase. How long have you been doing this seriously?"

"I'm in my third year of my degree."

"Good. You know, research shows that in general, it takes about six years of dedication to be recognisably good at something. So, I want you to think about what is it you want, and if you're willing to put in those six years. Rin's been doing what he does for a very long time, even through the times when he complained and cried about how much he hated it. If you count back six years from his first Olympics that's when he was thirteen. He's been going without a major pause since at least that age."

Haruka opens his mouth, but then closes it with nothing to say.

"The worst thing you can do to yourself is to leave everything half-done, thinking the grass is greener when you jump that fence. The grass is only green if you take care to grow it well. You told me people like your work. It would be a waste not to keep it going."

Haruka looks away, at the wind-puffed sails flying over the lake.

"Six years. If it doesn't work out after six years you can come back to me. Maybe I'll make you a coach!"

The coach starts laughing at himself again, like his remark was particularly hilarious. The humour is lost on Haruka, but the coach waves him on and he mumbles a word of gratitude before returning to the bench.

Rin throws him an annoyed look as a warning, but ends with a grin to show that he doesn't hold a grudge. "Stop running away like that, will you? I've been staring at your food for the last ten minutes wondering if I should finish it."

"...Sorry."

***

"You don't belong here any more than I do."

In defence of Rin Matsuoka

Did you hear what Rin Matsuoka said about Australia?

I say: Did you hear what they're saying about Rin Matsuoka?

Never mind that his medal haul at the Summer Olympics three months ago, his first, was enough to put him into the top ten of our greatest Olympians.

From the way it's been made to sound, it's like only half those medals realistically count as Australian because Matsuoka never bothered to learn the rules of cricket.

I suppose, if you think that way, it's no big jump to conclude that Matsuoka is being especially ungrateful by saying he doesn't feel Australian.

Does it take only one honest interview to throw the country into such deep insecurity about our identity?
Never mind that the quote has been taken wildly out of context. In the same sentence, Matsuoka actually said he felt "neither Australian nor Japanese".

Those were his exact words.

Some people are unable to understand this feeling. The statement reads like a rejection of their core identity to them. It's like we’d gone out on a limb to extend to him the privilege of calling himself an Aussie and he tells us it's worth nothing.

But for some others, like myself, it's the first time I hear in words the kind of feeling I had to struggle with when I first moved here.

What does it mean to be Australian? Nearly two hundred thousand people arrive here every year, some even risking life and limb to do so over open sea. They continue to do so despite the increasing hostility from mainstream media, who are all too happy to lay the blame of society’s problems at their feet. Because they refuse to assimilate, these migrants are tearing apart the very fabric of Australian society.

When you consider what is implied by their definition of Australian society, you can only come to the conclusion that there has not, nor will there ever be, an essential version of what it means to be Australian. For if there ever is to be one, it must start with the acknowledgement of the indigenous Australians. They would be the core definition of what a true, original Australian is.

Everyone else came by boat.

Or by plane. Does the difference really matter? It is strange, because the Australia I live in sometimes seems so divorced from the Australia I see in the media. The Australia I live in is made richer by the signs of what the ignorant call a refusal to assimilate. I am happy when the safety warnings come in at least five different languages. I am happy when the market air blooms with the fruit of this stubborn refusal, of old flavours that become new by being here. I am happy that pronouncing my neighbours' names is a lesson in itself. I am happy that people weren't happy to have a definition of Australia shoved down their throats.

There are a lot of us. Australians, confessed with a dose of mild embarrassment. Australians, even though you hate it. Australians, just because of our passports.

Australia, we are so much more than that.

***

"You look terrible."

"I don't dress for your pleasure, Haru!"

If Rin wants to go out in public looking like this, that's his choice then. Haruka doesn't know whether to avert his gaze or stare in admiration at how Rin thinks this is normal, acceptable outside wear.

But no one else seems particularly bothered by this clashing eyesore of an outfit, least of all Rin's friend Naf, who told Rin that he looks awesome. Haruka's not sure if he can trust the judgment of someone who also told him, on finding out what he studies at uni, that "the good design imperative is the malignant tumour of capitalism through which the kyriarchy mediates and sustains oppression". Haruka's not even sure if some of those words are real words in English.

Rin and Naf have swept themselves into a corner, whispering something or the other about the
prevalence of cultural appropriation in fashion and the reproduction of western standards of beauty.

Rin claims that this is the only way he can enjoy himself, at an event he has to attend for sponsorship reasons.

Haruka's not sure if Rin can see the dramatic irony in his words versus his behaviour.

"Darling, you look desperately in need of another drink. Here, take this."

Haruka looks up and finds a glass of bubbly thrust into his hands. A kooky, fashion-type woman is looking at him. At his university, some of the professors look like that too, so it's nothing remarkable to Haruka.

"...Thank you."

"Are you here with anyone, darling? I do hope you're having fun." The woman takes off her dramatic sunglasses, which she was wearing indoors.

Haruka's eyes dart to the side, avoiding eye contact.

"My name's Edith, Edith de Vries, darling," the woman says, extending a hand towards him.

Haruka mumbles his name in reply.

"Tell me more about yourself, darling. What do you do?"

Haruka's not sure why this woman is so interested in him. He rolls out the stock answers: third year visual comm student at Musashino Art University, majoring in illustration, the studio he's with, the freelance projects he's worked on, etc.

"So that's why you look familiar!" Edith bursts into laughter. "You're Emiko's student! I must have seen you at the conference in May."

Oh. Oh.

Haruka tries to rein in his rising social anxiety. Why is he always on the wrong foot in social situations? Hasn't he learned anything by now? Why can't he remember anything about other people when they seem to remember so much about him?

"I'm sorry, Emiko and I were classmates at Central St Martins," Edith supplies by way of explanation.

The only thing left for Haruka to do is cross his fingers and pray Prof Mishima doesn't hear anything about how uncommunicative he is to her ex-classmate. Haruka tries to put in more enthusiasm in his replies, hoping to leave a good impression, hoping he can erase the bad start.

It takes effort, but by the end of the conversation Haruka manages to find out that Edith is the head of visual merchandising at the department store that is hosting the fashion show, and that she's currently developing the concept for the Christmas displays. Haruka goes to the extent of figuring out Edith's willingness to feature emerging talent, and finds an opportunity to put himself under consideration if she ever needs some artwork for the displays.

Heart still racing after Edith is called away to a group of acquaintances, Haruka goes to look for a drink to quench the dryness he gets in his throat whenever he gets too nervous and is forced to speak at length. He finds Rin chatting to a ridiculously good looking young man at the bar, tall, blond, bronzed and bespectacled, but before Haruka can think of cutting in between, Rin waves himself
away and shows up behind Haruka grinning widely.

"...Did you get his number or something?"

"Huh?"

"That guy you were talking to."

"What??" Rin asks cluelessly, eyebrows dipping into a confused frown. "Oh!" Rin says after a while, a small, private smile spreading over his face. "Oh my god Haru did you think I was flirting with him?"

Without meaning to, Haruka feels the tension ease from his shoulders.

"That's not—that's never going to happen. Do you know who he is?"

Haruka looks at Rin. The answer is obviously not.

"Right. Um. Lachlan Fitch-Robertson. School dux in my year. The school I went here, I mean. I lost out to him, actually. I was second. So um, I kind of hate him. Yeah. I hate him. I don't even know why he's here. He's like dating a model or something. How disgusting."

Haruka has no idea what Rin is talking about.

"Anyway I just found out he thinks I'm heaps cool and stuff. So I can't hate him anymore. But I still hate him. He like, he said he had a secret crush on me during school because I was perfectly comfortable being by myself and didn't need to surround myself with a group of friends. And then he said he didn't really lean that way which is a pity but like, what's up with that queerbaiting shit I'm not interested in you mate."

Rin takes a swig of Haruka's sparkling wine, having snatched the flute from him.

"Oh my god I can't believe he thought I was a cool loner type! I mean, I didn't have friends because I hated everybody and I thought everybody hated me. I mean, I was dying of insecurity every single day I was in that school. I mean, losing out on school dux said everything about how I felt there. I can't believe he doesn't hate me. Even though I still totally hate him."

You're actually kind of hard to hate, Haruka thinks, as Rin grins into the empty flute.

***

Tell me of your jealous heart, your twisted, wicked heart, narrow and unyielding. Tell me of the jealousy that spurred you on, tell me how you got to be so strong on the blood and sweat and guts of your rivals, whom you crushed in defeat. You trod and trampled on my dreams too, did you know that? You killed a version of the future I had for myself and still I want you. I want you to look at me with that fire in your eyes, I want it to be me, me, who makes you so much better. I want it to be me you see, neck and neck to the finish line, my time you look for on the board, you looking for my time first so that when you finally get to yours, you know where you stand—next to me. You've beaten me, but this is not the last. We'll meet again, we'll keep meeting, in endless meets and always equal tallies. There's no one who beats you like I do, but you're better in a way that I can't be. I want it to be me, you see, I want it to be me—for you.

***

"See you, motherfuckers! Down with wage labour! Unconditional basic income!"
"Your friend is really weird," Haruka mumbles, as Naf waves them goodbye at the train station. After the fashion show, the three of them went for dinner together, Korean fried chicken and beer at Rin's behest, while Haruka consoled himself with the fishcakes on the menu.

Naf has to leave because she's got a full day of work tomorrow as a store assistant, the sort of part time work typical of university students. Presumably she was dissatisfied with the necessity of the exchange of labour for money as means of survival.

"Now now," Rin says jovially, flapping a hand. "I'm sure it wouldn't be so weird if you familiarised yourself with the concepts."

Haruka shrugs. He thinks this friend of Rin's might get on quite well with Aki, whom he long suspects is predominantly asexual with a side of unhealthy interest in seeing men kiss other men.

Turning away from the station, Haruka begins walking back in the direction of Rin's apartment.

"You know," Rin starts to blabber, throwing his arms behind his head, "the fact that the amount of money I get is totally disproportionate to the importance of the work I do really highlights the injustice of the system."

"...you could stop taking the money."

"Oh Haru, I could, but if I didn't take it the money might go to even more objectionable people who have not begun to realise their complicity..."

Haruka tunes out Rin's blabbering. So they do occupy different worlds on this planet, different spaces with different realities. He shoves his hands in his pockets, and as he does, his mobile phone buzzes.

Haruka's first thought on drawing out his phone is Makoto, even though it's a little improbable. At this time, Makoto's probably still in the thick of the jungle singing campfire songs to a host of adoring schoolkids. There is a bite of guilt and homesickness as Haruka turns his phone over to look at the screen.

*Hey, just checking to see if you're swinging by tonight?*

Haruka stares at the message. It takes him a while to figure it out but he realises it's from Kali the magazine creative director.

"Rin."

"Hmm?"

"Do you want to go to a party with me?"

"Huuh?"

"I was invited to a party. It's on tonight, in fact."

"How are you...what are you...where? Haru you've only been here four days why are you being invited to parties that I've not heard of?"

"It's at this place called St Kilda."

"St Kilda?" Rin exclaims, like the place is out of bounds for Haruka. "What's it even for?"
"Some pop-up book launch magazine party. I did some illustrations. For the magazine."

Rin throws Haruka a dirty look like a kindergartener with a snatched toy.

"What? No sponsorship deal? Not in line with your branding image? Do you need to call your agent for permission?"

"Well, er, no, my agent doesn't control me like that. I mean, that's not how it works! Anyway I'm surprised it's not in Brunswick or something. Jeez...fine, I'll go. Whereabouts? I'll take you there."

Haruka raises his phone, flashing the screen at Rin. "I have the directions," he says. "It's near the beach."

***

Candlelit salt air crystallising into: friends, laughter, music by the evensong sea, chorus of waves lifting, soaring, crashing into the stone grey concrete pier barnacled and moss green. Fairy lights of purple and pink dot the wrought wire white fence running along the wood deck top to the weathered old kiosk, pale yellow, patter of feet lost in human chatter.

"You're here!"

"Yes I'm here. I brought a friend, if you don't mind."

"Oh, no problem at all," —and the look, that look, flicker of recognition on Kali's face, the sideways glance, the barely suppressed smile—

Yeah, I brought a friend.

Rin gives him a look like, this is so hipster, and another look, like, this is so pretentious, and a look like, god Haru why are you bringing me to places like this and Rin, Rin, stop acting like you don't secretly enjoy all of this, you can't build a convincing case for yourself if you keep on with this secret smiling when you think I'm not looking.

The food is all comfort, muffin cups of mac and cheese, jaffles, mini burgers, chips, dim sims, spring rolls and spanakopita. There is even a barbecue with sausage sizzles.

The beer is craft, small-scale and locally produced. Haruka grabs a bottle and leans on the railing. Something's darting about in the water and it looks like penguins. Haruka decides he'll keep the empty beer bottle for Aki, who collects the stuff.

He turns around to face the party and sees Rin attempting to flirt with the sausage sizzler by the other side of the pier.

"Having a good time? This is Matt, my boyfriend, and Matt, this is Haruka, who did the issue ten cover," Kali begins, popping out from nowhere.

"Hey Haruka, I do the layouts for the magazine," Matt says.

Haruka nods coolly.

"And you should meet Colbie. She is why we're having this party. Surf photographer, she's got a book out and she also did the cover of issue eleven."

Kali drags someone by the arm out of the crowd. There are some customary greetings, and Haruka soon finds out Colbie is about to do a shoot of a research voyage on the Great Pacific Garbage Patch.
He tells her that he just did a project on it due to a school project last semester, and he soon finds himself caught in a passionate discussion about marine preservation. Haruka almost surprises himself with his ability to mingle and socialise with people who are virtual strangers just minutes ago. He finds it hard to believe how much he can say when he used not to bother with talking at all. He can go on about the problem of excessive packaging in his country, which his lecturers try to get him and his classmates to think critically about. He can convincingly discuss the pervasiveness of plastic waste in the ocean, parroting information that Rei so kindly dug up for him. He gets to learn, in turn, about the pointlessness of shark culling, about carbon levels and ocean acidity and the damage it's causing to coral reefs everywhere. Most of all, he's pleasantly surprised to find mutuality in his love for water and all things associated with it, he's pleasantly surprised at his willingness to share in this love.

 "Come on, let's dance!"

 Haruka is interrupted by the heavy swing of an arm draped across his shoulders. It's Rin, bubbling with cheer, flecks of burnt sausage at the corners of his mouth.

 "Hey," Rin says to the group in a saucy voice, like the smear of mustard across his lip.

 Haruka sees Kali, Colbie and Matt staring at him open-eyed, unsure of how they should react. Rin tries to bury his head in Haruka's neck and Haruka can see Kali, Colbie and Matt exchanging glances.

 Haruka raises a palm, trying to indicate that it's okay, trying to apologise for the interruption, but as he does Rin is dragging him farther away from them to an empty spot on the dancefloor.

 "My offer to teach you surfing still stands!" Colbie shouts from where she stands, as the increasing volume of the music threatens to drown her out.

 "Who are they?" Rin asks, lacing his fingers behind Haruka's neck.

 "Friends," Haruka replies noncommittally, but he likes that his answer doesn't have to be a lie.

 There is the sway of Rin's hips brushing up against his body, there is Rin, pulling him closer, and Haruka is suddenly embarrassed, looking around surreptitiously to check if people are staring.

 But no one's looking at them—they're all in their own groups of three or four or two, filling the air with the sparkle of friendly conversation. Matt's cracking open another beer bottle, Kali has an arm around his back, and she's leaning into him. Colbie is talking, but then she catches Haruka's eye and she smiles warmly. All is okay. Haruka can breathe a little easier.

 Nightfall, bathed in the amber glow of papercup candles, this angel light, this fairy night, edged with shadows from bodies swaying in time to music. The air shimmers with raised spirits come out to play, out for hell and out for high water. The gates of heaven can't keep anyone from falling, and fallen we are on this god-given earth, we dark souls, we roam and devour, the night we call ours, the night our light, where everything hidden is unhid, the hide on our backs, the bumps in our souls, the sores in our hearts.

 "I can't believe they're playing my favourite song," Rin calls out to him, like they're standing across a gulf, like Rin isn't right in front of him, as if Rin's arms aren't wrapped around his neck.

 No, I had no idea it was your favourite song.

 ***
Rin laughs, like the sound of forgetting. Rin laughs, like he's forgotten all that has ever happened to him, like this isn't some ordinary Saturday night run of the mill coolkid party, just another excuse for alcohol. To think that he should hear this song at this moment, his favourite song, the song that saved him when he couldn't take it anymore, in his days of loneliness and isolation, walled off by the ramparts of cold blunt rock he built around his heart, his heart that grew weak when he let nothing in, malnourished, his faint heart, his half heart. What of his heart? He is so sick of this heart, the half-heart, this half-life, the half-healed scabs so easily torn open. What of the scars? The scars of his half-torn heart, his weak-willed self stitched up by fear, interminable fear, oppressive fear. He prayed and prayed and nothing in heaven would listen to him. Heaven has no care for half-born wretched children and the demons took him. With fear they ate into him, possessed, he grew into that ugly form, he pleaded with them and they called him half their own, they will give him unholy strength so long as they can feast on him. He can feel them, their teeth on his skin, sucking the blood out of him, their hands around his wrists, shackles he can't escape from. Can he shake them off? Can he bury them, kill them, cast them out? He doesn't want them anymore, the demons on his back. He doesn't want all this pain and all this hurt and running away. He is done, so done, with that feckless heart.

***

"You're such an idiot, you know that?"

Something hits Haruka in the back—there is a dull thud against the thick fabric of his winter jacket. He bends down to pick up the offending object, which has fallen and is halfway lodged in the sand. It's Rin's shoe, brogues of a camel grey ecru sort of shade, just like the sand, but made of suede.

"You could have waited a little for me," Rin complains, running barefooted up to Haruka, clutching his other shoe. Rin's socks are spilling in an unseemly manner out of the pockets of his camo print trousers.

Rin doesn't bother to put the brakes on his running and he crashes straight into Haruka, laughing, laughing into Haruka's shoulders, whacking Haruka in the arm with the other shoe.

They are on the beach beside the pier, having left the party early so Rin can keep to a semblance of his daily schedule. Rin said they should take a taxi, but Haruka wanted to walk along the beach, so Rin is allowing him ten minutes of the beach before they head back.

Haruka grabs the remaining shoe from Rin to stop the insufferable whacking. He quickens his pace to force Rin into walking alongside him, which Rin does. Rin is still holding onto Haruka, hanging off him by the arm, and Haruka is still holding onto Rin's shoes, brushing the sand off the pair of suede brogues for Rin.

Haruka likes the way Rin's shoes feel in his hands, smooth and velvety and luxurious. He likes the way Rin feels on his arm, like a weight tethering him to the ground, keeping him moored.

He likes the way Rin feels on him. In the background, the music from the party can still be heard. The inky sea heaves and falls in the night, like a giant sleeping creature. Without notice, Haruka spins around to grab the laughing Rin in his arms, and Rin spills onto him like an incoming wave. Face to face, Haruka tangles his fingers in Rin's hair, Rin's complicated hair, pulling Rin close to kiss him on the cheek, his tofu-tender cheeks, unblemished except for the blush of sakura pink blooming across them. Haruka kisses Rin on the lips, those petal-soft lips, taking Rin's bottom lip in-between his teeth, biting down gently, the texture reminding him of sashimi. Haruka can feel the sharpness of Rin's teeth with his tongue, edges like they could really cut, and there is a thrill of danger down his spine, rush of blood—everywhere.

"Oh god, oh god," Rin whispers softly, hand creeping under Haruka's jacket, searching for skin. "I
think—we'd better go back."

Rin's words don't register. Haruka is lost, so lost, on this dark night beachside with Rin. He can hear the roar of the sea, the roar of his racing heart. There is Rin, right here in front of him, Rin, looking at him with that devastating smile on his face, eyes shining. There is Haruka's brain, which feels flooded with euphoria, perhaps a side effect of the alcohol at the party, but Haruka starts to feel like he's floating away. He is so wasted on Rin, all he ever wanted was Rin, Rin who can lay waste to his heart like nothing else.

"Let's go, you silly," Rin says, laughter woven into his voice, pulling Haruka along. "It's starting to rain anyway."

Haruka blinks—suddenly he registers the patter of raindrops on his face. He lets Rin take the lead, half-running half-dragging him, bright eyed and barefooted, to the roadside to flag down a taxi.

It winds Haruka, to feel his palm sit so comfortably on Rin's palm, lifelines and heartlines pressed up against each other, like the inevitable meeting of fates. If Rin is a fisherman then Haruka is the foolish fish that fell for his bait, hooked by the lip, the nose, the heart, fighting pointlessly by fin and tail until Rin reels him in completely.

They climb into the taxi and Rin lets go of his hand, smiling at him, a maddening smile, as teasing as it is captivating. Rin tells the taxi driver his address and then looks out of the window at his side, away from Haruka.

The small droplets of rain pelt the car windows in smears that fracture the streetlights into gemstones. Rin's face is lit by the amber streetlights, the angles of his cheekbones falling into shadow like the sadness that Haruka wants to eat from Rin. Haruka wants to eat away the glossy tears from those memories, tears wasted on chasing burdensome dreams. Rin is so happy tonight, so happy that it feels like someone's torn the heart out of Haruka and made it soar.

The drive back to Rin's apartment is paved with the rubies and emeralds of traffic lights, stop and start, like they've always been, and when they leave the taxi Rin takes up Haruka's hand again, and it's so beautiful, Rin is so beautiful that when they get into the empty elevator Haruka has to press Rin up against the mirrored surface and take a deep breath of Rin, to try and breathe in all of Rin.

There is nothing between them now, nothing. Rin gasps and tries to scan his keycard and Haruka presses the wrong floor for Rin, Haruka presses the square with the number eight.

"I want to see your pool," Haruka almost growls, like an order, into the skin of Rin's neck, and Rin laughs gaily at him.

The lift doors open and Rin playfully pushes Haruka outside, and he gives a teasing smirk as he tries to close the lift door on Haruka. Haruka tries not to frown, not to give in to Rin's silly games as he stops the doors from closing and pulls Rin out with him. They get to the pool deck, and Rin is surprised that the doors to the pool enclosure are not locked.

"Are we going to go for a swim?" Rin asks cheekily, uncircling the animal print scarf from his neck, revealing a flash of his collarbones, framed by the fisherman's knit sweater he's wearing that is festooned with infuriatingly multicoloured pom-poms.

What a horrid sweater, Haruka thinks, unable to comprehend Rin's sense of fashion, and with that he pushes Rin into the pool, pom-pom sweater and silly suede brogues and all.

Rin yelps, a high-pitched animated sort of yelp, somewhere between a squeal and a shriek.
Haruka stands over him, over the drenched and quivering Rin, feeling a little like the lord of the pool.

"You bastard," Rin hisses at him, and Haruka has to face a barrage of insults for wrecking Rin's expensive clothes, soggy and limp from the water.

"You bastard," Rin repeats, and lunges at Haruka to pull him in. Haruka's trousers are not fully off when Rin manages to grab him by the ankles and he trips spectacularly into the pool, landing with a large flop on the belly, which really, genuinely smarts.

The pool water is not as cold as Haruka thought it would be, as it is heated in the daytime and nestled indoors. The water laps gently against his skin and Haruka peels off his sodden trousers to throw them by the side of the pool.

"You...you were wearing those all along?" Rin asks in horror, with reference to Haruka's purple striped jammers.

Haruka doesn't bother to reply as he does a few laps along the darkened pool, while Rin climbs out and tries to wring his clothes dry in vain.

"Tch," Rin tuts loudly, intending for Haruka to hear him. "I could get in trouble with building management for this. In fact, I'm beginning to worry that what we did in the lift was captured on camera."

"Ask them to destroy it," Haruka dismisses blithely.

Rin picks up his clothes and tells Haruka that he is going to return to his apartment right this instant, and threatens to leave Haruka by the pool all night if Haruka doesn't follow.

Haruka's jaunt in the pool has freshened him up well enough, and he's satisfied enough to pull himself out and follow Rin home. The two of them drip an incriminating trail of water all the way to Rin's apartment, where Haruka pounces on Rin as soon as Rin opens his apartment door.

Haruka kisses Rin hard against the back of the solid wood door, turning the lock on the handle for Rin, hearing the door latch spring into place. Nothing and no one else can come in, no interference or interruption will stop them tonight. Haruka kisses Rin until Rin goes weak in his arms and they have to come up for air.

"H-Haru—" Rin gasps, dropping his apartment keys on top of his shoe cabinet. "B-bedroom."

They are both still thoroughly wet, glistening with droplets of pool water. Rin is clinging on to Haruka, Rin has left his clothes on the floor. Rin is glowing, by the soft half-moon outside the open windows, Rin is shining, pearly wet skin against Haruka's skin. Rin is falling, onto his back, onto his bed, Haruka's hands to soften the fall, Haruka's hands by the back of Rin's head to lay him down gently atop a pillow. Haruka is climbing on top of Rin, Haruka is on top of Rin, Haruka is pressing his hips upward, pressure against Haruka's crotch. Haruka is sliding on top of Rin, slippery skin against slippery skin, Haruka's cock is hard, so hard, against the warmth of Rin's hairless crotch. Rin is writhing beneath him, writhing with want, kissing Haruka with hungry kisses, open-mouthed, begging. Haruka caresses Rin's face with his hand, palm to cheek, wiping small droplets of water from Rin's face tenderly with a thumb, Rin kisses that thumb, the tip of it, and Rin takes Haruka's thumb into his mouth and sucks on it. The inside of Rin's mouth is so hot, and smooth, and wet, and it makes Haruka growl, cock rubbing harder against Rin's thigh, against Rin's belly. Rin moans in reply, a needy, hungry moan, asking for more of Haruka, more of Haruka inside of him. Haruka pulls his thumb out of Rin's mouth and reaches downward to drag it slick on the underside of Rin's cock, his other fingers wrapping around the thickening length. Rin moans, even
louder than the first, and it's Haruka's name that is on his lips.

Rin draws his legs up, up around Haruka's back, whimpering with need. Haruka sucks on his own thumb, the same thumb, to coat it with more spit and he brings it to Rin's puckered hole and he massages it with the pad of his wet thumb as Rin's hips buck upwards in response. Haruka can feel Rin clenching and unclenching around his thumb and he pushes his thumb in and it makes Rin scream.

Rin is so tight around his finger and Rin's eyes are pricking with tears. Does it hurt, Haruka asks, softly into Rin's ears, brushing Rin's matted fringe to one side with his other hand.

The lube is in the drawer, Rin replies with a small nod to indicate its location, and Haruka pulls out his thumb and sniffs it compulsively, the smell of Rin, storing it into memory. Inside the bedside drawer is a box of tissues, which Haruka wipes his hands on before reaching for the lube and condoms next to it. He tries not to dwell on the ready presence of these items, tries not to think of who else Rin might have invited home. Tonight, he can have Rin for himself. Tonight, Rin belongs to him.

Haruka takes the bottle of lube, water-based, and the regular box of condoms. Rin is lying there on the bed, unclothed save for the moonlit glow that falls like a veil across his naked body. Rin is lying with his legs open for Haruka, with his head to the side, looking at Haruka with an impatient smirk, those come-hither eyes, a hand wedged under his pillow.

Haruka is kneeling on the bed, kneeling before Rin, and Rin extends a leg towards him, hoping to hook Haruka by the torso and draw Haruka in towards him. Haruka catches Rin by the foot and runs his fingers down Rin's calves, he holds up Rin's foot by the ankle as he leans in to kiss Rin on his foot, like kissing the feet of a sultan. Haruka presses the underside of Rin's foot to his face and he places a kiss where the arch is. Rin's toes curl in response, the little heads of his toes pointing towards Haruka, the arch growing higher. Rin's toenails are perfectly trimmed and clean. Everything about Rin is beautiful, so achingly beautiful. Haruka kisses Rin along the inside line of his leg, silently, reverently, and Rin moans in response. Haruka wants to make Rin moan louder, with more urgency, Haruka wants Rin to call out to him like Haruka is the only one for him in this world, the only one who can make him scream with want.

And Rin is calling, calling out for Haruka, hips twitching seductively, demanding that Haruka do something, demanding that Haruka cut the lull in action. Whatever Rin demands, Haruka has to obey, and Haruka bows before him, his Rin, and takes Rin's cock into his mouth.

With lubed-up fingers Haruka pushes deep into Rin's asshole as he takes all of Rin into his mouth. The sensations are almost paralysing with their intensity—he can feel Rin thrust upwards, he can feel Rin's cock hitting the roof of his mouth, he can feel Rin pushing his hips down on his fingers. Slowly, Haruka draws Rin's cock out of his mouth, tongue pushing at the ridges of the veins, until he reaches the tip, threads of saliva drawing thin bridges, and he flicks at the slit with his tongue as he looks straight into Rin's eyes, and Rin's mouth goes slack, another gasp escapes Rin's throat and Haruka tastes the precum from Rin, clear and a little sour. Haruka takes Rin deep into his throat again as he tries to pull his fingers out from Rin's bottom but meets resistance from Rin, it feels like Rin doesn't want his fingers out, it feels almost like his fingers are being sucked back in. Rin is crying Haruka's name like a whimper, eyes squeezed shut and Haruka works harder at Rin's cock, faster and sideways and every way Haruka knows, all while massaging Rin with his fingers inside of Rin, searching for that sweet spot that would make Rin lose it.

Rin's hands are scrabbling at his sheets, and when he calls out in words, Haruka's name is broken, Ha-Ru—Ha—Ru, disjointed syllables punctuated by the need for air. Rin's balls have drawn in
a little, and he's rocking against Haruka in a steady rhythm, and when Rin comes into Haruka's mouth Haruka drinks all of him, all of Rin, Rin's come slipping down his throat, the sour tang on his tongue, the lingering taste of Rin.

"I'm going to fuck you now," Haruka announces curtly to Rin, and unceremoniously rearranges Rin's legs for a good handle. Rin giggles at him, a silly, childish giggle, and nods, flush and meek in his afterglow, so pliant to Haruka's touch.

Haruka rubs at his own cock, pumps it hard enough to roll the condom on, and lubes it generously before pushing inside of Rin. Rin whimpers back at him, and presses the side of his face into the pillow.

"Let me know if it hurts," Haruka clarifies explicitly to Rin.

Rin smiles sweetly at him in return, chewing on his bottom lip, and something about the way Rin smiles melts away the facade of unsentimentality over Haruka's heart. He loves Rin, he adores Rin, so much that it hurts, this hurt that he's been carrying with him all this time, this hurt that he's been denying all this time. He would let himself be hurt by Rin again, he would let himself be hurt by Rin all the time, if it leads to such sweetness and such pleasure.

Thrusting his cock inside of Rin, Haruka's body stiffens as he feels the heat of Rin all around him. The tightness of Rin is overwhelming, and he pauses, tensed, to collect himself, eyes falling shut as he tries to catch his breath.

Haruka suddenly feels Rin's hands around his cheeks. "Look at me, Haru," Rin pleads, and Haruka has to listen, looking at the relaxed glow of Rin's face. "Don't be afraid to fuck me hard. I want you to fuck me harder, like this."

Rin grinds his hips around Haruka's cock, and Haruka's breath hitches.

"Relax, Haru, relax a little," Rin coos into Haruka's ear, and Rin draws Haruka down closer to him, trailing his fingers down the back of Haruka's arms. "Don't come so soon, I want you to fuck me all night."

Haruka takes in a sharp breath of air as he tries not to moan uncontrollably. Rin tilts his head upwards to meet Haruka's lips with his own, and Rin kisses Haruka lightly, mouth-to-mouth, kisses so light they're nearly weightless, and it's driving Haruka to the edge, it's driving him nearly insane with want. Haruka bears down on Rin with a heavy kiss, and Rin greets him with a sharp thrust of his hips, taking Haruka in full-hilt.

Haruka gasps audibly, overcome with the heat of Rin. Haruka's heart is going so fast he can almost hear the pump of blood rushing about his body, he can hardly see right, his head is so light and giddy.

Mmm, Rin moans, a pornstar kind of moan, right into Haruka's ear, straight to Haruka's cock. Right there, like that. Harder, harder, give me more, give me more of you. Your cock feels so good inside of me. Your cock feels so good, Haru. I want you, I want your cock, I want all of your cock. Do it like that, mmm, yes, like that, hard like that. Harder—a gasp, a whimper—harder. Fuck me hard, so hard. As hard as you can give it. I'm not going to break, Haru. I'm not going to break—anymore. Harder—a sharp gasp—oh yes, oh god, like that yes. You're so good, Haru. So good. Oh—ah. Oh yes.

Rin's moans are falling into incoherency, the words dropping off into pure vowels, even as he keeps asking for Haruka to go harder, even as Rin asks for more. Haruka is going into Rin as hard as he
can, as hard as he can give it to Rin, and still Rin asks for more. Is there no limit to Rin? Is he so insatiable? Haruka is thrusting, Rin is yelping, and Rin is twisting, hipbones pushing impatiently against Haruka's grip, and Rin is biting on his lip, Rin's mouth is falling open with pleasure, and Haruka is melting, melting from the exertion of Rin around his cock, melting into uncontrollable gasps and growls and all manner of sounds, calling out Rin's name, Rin's name a prayer, Rin's name a chant. Rin is quivering, beneath him, and Rin is melting like he's been possessed, Rin is shouting in gibberish and devil's tongue, Rin is shaking, like he has a demon to expunge, demons to expunge, not one, not two but multiple, innumerable demons. Rin is clawing at him with violent sobs, head thrown back and eyes rolled up and Rin is crying, everything about Rin is turning loose. *Come on me*, Rin manages to utter at Haruka, *I want you to come on me*. Rin is shaking, his whole body is shaking and alive, frighteningly alive and the feeling of it on Haruka's cock is unbearable, so unbearable it's impossible for Haruka to think and Haruka has no idea how he manages to do as Rin tells him to, how he manages to slip out of Rin and slip the condom off him at the exact moment he falls off the edge of Rin's orgasm into his own, coming onto Rin in great spurts and shouts, spilling onto Rin ribbons of pearly white come from the tip of his cock, coming and coming until he is completely dry inside, until it feels like all of himself is drawn out on Rin's bare chest and torso. Haruka spills over, falling on top of Rin, spent and hoarse and teary and he sees the same of Rin, Rin's tear-stained face and his exhausted smile and his hoary laugh and Rin curls an arm around him and Haruka buries his face in Rin's neck, and between them is the glue of sticky come and sweat, filthy and disgusting but sweet and glorious at the same time.

***

Haruka wakes up in the morning to bright sunlight. The blinds are open and there's a good chance they were never closed at all last night. It is fortunate that Rin lives so high up with such an unobstructed view of the city that they aren't likely to suffer from unexpected voyeurism from neighbours, intentional or otherwise.

It is hot under the covers. Haruka finds beads of sweat pricking through his skin, and the smell is both musty and sour. The sheets are soiled, crackly in patches and damp in others. Broadly, Haruka sweeps the heavy quilt aside to face the rush of cool air. The air is not nearly as cool as he expected it to be. Haruka pushes himself off the bed to examine the heating control panel. Rin is too lavish with the temperature. Haruka turns the heater off completely and saunters to the bathroom, nude, to clean up.

Rin is away at the sports centre, training as usual, customary note on the kitchen benchtop for Haruka.

Entering the bathroom, Haruka splashes his face with water and takes a piss. He is so dehydrated here. He needs to drink more water. The bedsheets are disgusting. He should wash them for Rin.

Haruka spends his morning doing the chores for Rin. He spot cleans the soiled bedspread and quilt cover before running them through the sleek washing machine. He finds a robo vacuum and sets it on the floor after having to go on the Internet to read the operating manual. He takes Rin's dirty plates out of the dishwasher and hand-washes them, not knowing how to operate one.

Haruka fills the water jug with tap water and watches it drain through the filter. The water is so bright, just like the outside light. It swirls, crystalline, in a hypnotic circle, as Haruka pours it into a drinking glass. Haruka presses the glass to his lips and the thin rim of it is almost chewy. The water is so soft, so clean, so bright and refreshingly tasty.

Haruka almost drains the entire jug and has to refill it again.

The laundry cycle ends and the washing machine chimes a jolly tune. Haruka takes out the sheets
and puts them through a dryer cycle.

By the time Rin gets home Haruka has the bedsheets refreshed and pristine, back in place on the bed.

Rin is impressed, and he looks at Haruka like he's genuinely happy.

"I've got a surprise for you too," Rin says, rustling through his shopping tote to produce a plastic grocery bag that he subsequently brandishes at Haruka.

Haruka takes it. Peering inside, he sees a mirror-silver surface marked with dark stripes.

"Mackerel—" Haruka exclaims breathily to Rin.

"Yes, mackerel," Rin agrees, and then presses a kiss to Haruka's cheek.

Rin pulls out a large bag of salt, and announces to Haruka that he will be baking the bream they caught the other day for lunch in a thick crust of salt—Haruka can prepare the mackerel for dinner.

Haruka is still frozen in place, frozen by the lingering thought of Rin's lips pressed to his cheek, of Rin buying fish for him, of Rin cooking fish for him, of Rin's sun-filled airy apartment and the boring Sunday mornings occupied by routine chores. I could live like this forever, Haruka starts to think.

Rin pulls out his box of recipe cards and shuffles them around. "Do you have any objections to sautéed potatoes?"

Haruka doesn't indicate anything, so Rin decides to go ahead. Haruka is transfixed, watching Rin tie the apron around his neck, watching Rin run the potatoes under water, watching Rin boil the potatoes and peel them.

Haruka's throat has gone dry again. What is it about Rin that makes Haruka want him so much? What is it about Rin that makes Haruka so endlessly insatiable, so relentlessly in want, in need of Rin?

Rin turns his head to smile at Haruka and Haruka unthinkingly reaches out to wipe Rin's nose with his thumb, which earns him a quizzical look from Rin.

Haruka stutters that there was some dirt on Rin's nose from the potatoes. Looking away, he takes the peeled potatoes from Rin and helps Rin slice them into thin rounds.

Rin decides to nuzzle Haruka while Haruka is trying to concentrate on the potatoes. It almost makes him drop the knife, it almost make him shave off his unwary fingers.

Haruka can feel Rin's arms wrapping around him from behind as he tries to spread the potato slices evenly in the pan, his entire body screaming with distraction.

After a while, Rin lets go of Haruka to check on the fish in the oven and Haruka doesn't know if what he feels is relief or disappointment.

"Any plans for the rest of your weekend?" Rin asks him lightly.

"No," Haruka mumbles. "But my friend asked me to go surfing tomorrow. I guess I might go, if you'll be out for training and classes."

There is a soft tut from Rin. "You're so settled here, huh? You've been invited to parties and you've already got friends and you're doing things like—surfing."
Haruka doesn't really get what Rin is trying to say but—the seed is planted. Haruka thinks: it doesn't feel so different. It doesn't feel like he's away from home. It feels like another home. It feels like he could fall into life here, with Rin. It's so easy he's already doing it. A small set of friends he doesn't mind, a comfortable apartment that he can cocoon in, cleaning and caring and packing without much mind for the rest of the world.

With Rin he has: a quiet Sunday homecooked lunch of perfectly moist bream, accompanied by crisp warm sautéed potatoes fragrant with a sprinkling of herbs. Elderflower cordial for Rin, and pure, unadulterated water for himself.

Washing up is easy as Rin teaches him how to use the dishwasher, but Haruka is left with a smidgen of distrust for it. He could wash the dishes by hand for Rin, it would be so romantic, but Rin tells him not to bother as he goes off to do his schoolwork, assignments and readings. Haruka retrieves his laptop and tablet from his bag and plants himself next to Rin at the coffee table, and Rin shares the thick wool blanket with him. Haruka goes through his email and takes up his work, firing off progress invoices to clients and rejecting unwanted offers, zipping files and sending them off to various parties and then doing up actual artwork proper. So much of his work can be done remotely. Haruka doesn't even really need to be physically present where his clients are. He can really do this. He can just live here with Rin.

In the late afternoon Rin heads out to the gym for his dry training session, working with weights to tone his muscles. When Rin gets back Haruka asks if he wants a therapeutic massage.

"Huh," Rin snorts. "Are you really that capable of anything?" It sounds like a rhetorical question.

*I learned it for Makoto—* Haruka thinks, but that name, he doesn't want to think of it. It's falling behind into distance. It was a birthday surprise. It's all in the past.

"Okay, let's see how you compare to my physio. But you're not going to replace Jules anytime soon," Rin states plainly. "She makes awesome kimchi and she likes to give me the extra."

*Of course I'm not—I learned it just for fun. It made Makoto happy. But that's in the past, too.*

Haruka gets Rin to strip down to his underwear and lie flat across the sofa. He pushes and prods into Rin's flesh, getting Rin to relax, feeling Rin yield to his touch, feeling Rin go soft under his hands. He gets to touch Rin all over, slowly, in circles, everywhere, and it makes Rin giggle.

"You're not trying to take advantage of me are you, you giant perv."

*I'm not,* Haruka silently protests the accusation. "I'm done," he says out loud to Rin, if being called a pervert is all he'll get as thanks.

Rin sighs, but his face is flush with happiness. After a while, he gets up, picks his clothes off the floor and announces that he'll be taking a bath.

"You can join me if you like," Rin adds teasingly.

They scrub down—somehow, even though there's more space in this bathroom than there ever was in his apartment with Makoto, Haruka finds himself jostling with Rin all the time, elbows and limbs always clashing. It's new, they're just new, and Haruka just has to learn the rhythm of Rin, the way Rin goes about his life and Haruka just has to fall into tandem. It's not that they're always destined to be up against each other, fighting for the same space. It's not that Makoto is so natural for Haruka they never had any problems. It's not that Makoto was so natural for Haruka. It's not. It's not.

Rin chases him out in order to run the bath, and when Haruka gets back in again he complains to Rin
that it's too hot for his liking.

"Suck it up," Rin dismisses.

Haruka settles in, trying not to wriggle around too much, dying to turn on the cold tap and temper the heat.

Rin is sitting across him, and their legs are tangled up in each other's. Haruka slides his legs up against Rin's, because Rin's legs are shaved and it feels so smooth.

"Do you mind if I add bath salts?"

Haruka tries not to frown. Okay, he relents, and lets Rin do as he pleases.

Rin happily tosses in large spoonfuls of bath salts, frothing the water to dissolve the salts, and then he looks at Haruka like he wants to level up to a bubble bath and Haruka tries to quell his objections to the unnecessary frills sullying the water.

After churning up a thick cloud of bubbly foam, Rin settles back in place and sighs. He scoops up a handful of foam and blows it in Haruka's direction.

Small bits of foam, like soapy snowflakes, attach themselves to Haruka's damp fringe and disapproving face. It makes Rin laugh at him and Rin's laugh makes Haruka soften.

"I'm not a good person," Rin tells him.

Yeah? Haruka thinks darkly, looking away. You and me both, you and me. He rests a hand on Rin's submerged knee and caresses it idly.

"Yeah," Rin says, talking to himself. "The things I've thought, sitting by myself in a bath..."

What?

The water slops. Rin has moved closer to Haruka, Rin has his hands cupping Haruka's cheeks, Rin is climbing over Haruka's legs to sit on Haruka's thighs.

"I've thought some really bad things," Rin says to him in a low whisper.

Haruka places a hand on the crook of Rin's arm. I've thought some bad things too, sitting in my bath. I sat in my bath from thirteen to eighteen, longing for you, blaming myself, blaming myself for your unhappiness and my selfishness, my selfishness in wanting you.

"I've thought some really bad things, alone, by myself, shaving down in the bath. I used to shave down in the bath. Just sitting there, in the bath, with a razor."

Haruka's breath catches. "Rin," he calls out, grabbing Rin by the arm. "Rin."

"It's okay," Rin says, kissing Haruka lightly on the shoulder. "I'm okay now."

Rin's legs are wrapped around Haruka and Rin's butt is rested on Haruka's thighs, drawn up into a slope. Haruka is rising, rising to meet Rin, and he meets Rin by the mouth, kissing Rin, kissing into Rin.

"I'm still a bad person though," Rin tells him with a self-deprecating laugh. "Bad and selfish."

You and me, Haruka thinks. You and me, as he feels Rin slide forward on his thighs, you and me, as
he grabs Rin's bottom with a wandering hand, you and me, as he pulls Rin down with him under the water line, the bath their refuge, each other their only air, the bath that's trapped them both.

"You're crazy," Rin gasps at him when they break the surface. The foam has gone stale and the water is a pale, soapy grey.

"I'm crazy," Haruka doesn't bother to deny, and it gets a smirk out of Rin.

"How crazy," Rin asks, peppering Haruka's chest with fluttery kisses.

Try me, Haruka thinks, as he thrusts upwards into Rin's fisted palm. Rin laughs at him in reply, shoulders quivering, and Haruka can feel the laugh in the little shake of Rin's hand around his cock. Haruka closes his eyes and leans back into the slanted surface of the bathtub end.

"Are you clean," Rin whispers to him, and Haruka is straining to focus and to understand what Rin is asking him when he feels Rin guide his cock to where Rin's asshole is, his dick is rubbing at the surface of it, Haruka is dribbling precum from his dick but the water is also washing it away, and Rin is trying to squeeze Haruka's dick into his ass.

"Are you crazy." Haruka croaks hoarsely at Rin. There is friction, a lot of friction, and it feels more like Rin is trying to burn his dick off than anything else.

Rin is chewing on his bottom lip, eyebrows knit in concentration, and from the look of it he's hurting too much to even reply.

"Rin, stop. You don't have to do this at all—" Haruka tries to say, and Rin is nodding at him but Rin is also still trying to sit on Haruka's dick without any lubrication, and what surprises Haruka is how much his own dick actually hurts in the process. There's just so much friction it burns, it literally burns, there's no way his cock can get in there, and yet Rin is so insistent on getting it in.

"Rin," Haruka calls out again, hoping to call Rin to his senses. Rin is looking at him with tears streaming down his face and why, why the hell would Rin ever choose to do this, why the hell would Rin ever think it's okay to go through so much pain without promise of reward and it hurts Haruka so much, it hurts Haruka so deeply and it really fucking hurts, both Haruka's heart and his dick and he tries to pull Rin off him but oh god, that's the part that hurts even worse than ever.

There is Rin, his tear-stained precious face, Rin, who's hunched over like he's a failure for being unable to take Haruka's dick and Rin, his lovely Rin, his sad and lovely Rin, problem of his problems.

"We can still fuck," Haruka says to him. "But only if we use lube."

Rin nods—is he still up for it, even with all that pain? Haruka holds on to Rin and he holds Rin close and he kisses Rin lightly. He wants to make all that pain go away for Rin. He combs Rin's wet hair with his damp-wrinkled fingers and Rin leans on his chest with those shiny eyes, tracing patterns into his skin.

"We can use the argan oil I suppose," Rin relents in a whisper. Haruka gets up to retrieve the bottle from where he saw Rin leave it the other day, and shakes a few droplets out onto his palm.

"Don't use so much," Rin admonishes, and Haruka tries not to protest, if this is what Rin wants. Rin sees the look on Haruka's face and adds that they can go slow.

Haruka nods. There is a thin coat of oil on his dick and he's fucking Rin without any condoms. He's fucking Rin underwater. They tried to fuck without any lube. Makoto would be so horrified. Makoto
would have collapsed from horror by now. Why does Haruka still think of Makoto? He doesn't need to worry about what Makoto thinks of him, not at this time, not this present. Makoto doesn't know.

Rin is sinking onto Haruka, straddled atop Haruka, trying to ease Haruka's cock inside of him and even with the oil there is still so much tension, so much tension as Haruka moves inside of Rin, and Haruka's cock is dribbling, dribbling so obscenely with so much precum Haruka never knew he had and it feels incredible, it feels so intense, each push inside of Rin, each push getting easier, going in deeper with each push, and each pull out leaves him nearly crying for more, and it's just him, inside of Rin, skin on skin, Rin with tears down his face that Haruka licks away for Rin and a smile, a beautiful smile pushing through Rin's tears. When Haruka finally comes Rin is still riding steady on his cock, the beautiful slow thrust of Rin's hips moving up and down, the small swivel in the action that Haruka can feel on his cock and he's coming inside of Rin, the come a sudden burst of lubrication and Haruka can feel all of his own come on his own cock inside of Rin. Haruka doesn't want to pull out until he goes soft again, and when he slips, limp, out of Rin, the come follows, trickling out of Rin's hole and down the inside of his thighs.

They have to wash up all over again, and after that it's just dinner, prepared by Haruka for an exhausted Rin flopped over on the dining table eyeing and flirting with Haruka as Haruka grills the mackerel until the skin curls crunchy and he serves it with a side of wilted spinach, rice and miso soup like he does back home.

***

Rin has a full day of training and classes, his worst day, Mondays, Rin complains, leaving Haruka to go about by himself.

Colbie arranges to pick him up at the edge of the city, and from there it is an hour's drive to Torquay. Mondays are her days off, and her brother runs a surf shop and since it's a weekday there will be almost no one to jostle with. It's winter—they will have to contend with the cold but it's during this time that the swells are consistent.

It will be Haruka's first time at surfing, but it's fine—Colbie is actually a qualified surf instructor although she photographs for a living. She says she stopped teaching a while back due to some personal issues, but Haruka's not the kind to press. They get to her brother's surf shop where Haruka gets fitted for a wetsuit. Haruka sees an old photo of Colbie's family, and Colbie smiles at him. Haruka understands now—and it's remarkable yet completely ordinary at the same time. Colbie seems glad that he's treating it like no big deal at all. Colbie's brother decides to follow them to the beach and Haruka receives some instruction on the beach, he has to practice the motions on dry land and sit through some theory before he is allowed into the water, which is cold—bloody cold.

Haruka has enough luck to stand up on his first try and he starts to feel like he's really good at this. He starts to pretend like he's the king of the waves and Colbie and her brother are so generous with the compliments that Haruka feels like he's really accomplished. Colbie tells him of when she stopped surfing for a while, because she became too afraid of putting on muscle bulk during her transition. Haruka tells her that he's glad she's around to teach him and he likes that his words make Colbie happy. He likes that it makes him feel socially adept, a great deal of an improvement from what he used to be.

They take a break for lunch, hiding in a fish and chips shop for heat and Haruka chooses garfish this time. Haruka asks what goes into this fried dumpling thing called a dim sim and Colbie says she has no idea, except that there's always a dim sim with fish and chips, and it's not to be confused with dim sum, which is the food served at a Cantonese yum cha. Colbie's brother shrugs and says he's never met a person who has any idea what goes into a dim sim. It's like how no one has any idea what goes
into a meat pie and sausage rolls.

"Emu meat," Colbie suggests. "I've read that some of it is emu meat."

Haruka tries to quash his queasiness at the thought of this vague, indeterminate meat stuff. He looks back at his garfish, fried with the skin still on the way it's supposed to be, and tries to find relief in his identifiable, indisputable fish. The flavour is sweet and delicate, highlighted by a squeeze of lemon, and after a while Haruka forgets about the mystery of processed meat.

The afternoon sun is surprisingly warm and Colbie's brother attributes it to global warming. All Haruka knows is that he gets to laze around on the beach next to his surfboard, and when he picks it up to surf again Colbie tells him that the shadows that sometimes appear in the waves are that of dolphins.

It makes Haruka smile when he gets up on his next wave and he can see that Colbie's right, there actually are dolphins surfing alongside him and all of a sudden a feeling spikes in him. He has the urge to take a photo, and the first person he wants to show the photo to is Makoto. He wants to take a photo of the dolphins if there is a way to do it without drowning his phone. He wants to show Makoto that he's surfing and text Makoto that he's finally doing it like how Makoto always said he should. Makoto was the one who always joked that Haruka should give it a try, and Haruka wants to tell Makoto that his instructors say he's very good at it, almost supernaturally talented.

When Haruka wipes out and has to take a break, he lies on the beach thinking about touching the dolphins and wondering what on earth he would ever say to Makoto.

*Look, Makoto, dolphins!*

*I'm surfing, like you always said I should.*

*Oh, I'm in Australia.*

*I miss you.*

*But I don't really want to go back.*

*Is it ok with you, if I never go back?*

*What if I want to stay with Rin?*

*Will I still be able to visit you?*

*Will you let me?*

Haruka looks to the side. The beach faces west and the sun is setting on them, so Colbie and her brother are walking up to him.

"Time to head back," Colbie says, beckoning for him to get up.

"You look deep in thought," her brother points out bluntly.

When Haruka booked his flight here he bought a return ticket. His return flight is tomorrow, Tuesday, and he will arrive back in Tokyo early Wednesday morning. On Thursday, Makoto will return from his camp. Makoto doesn't have to know anything about what happened. Haruka can go on with his life, pretending that these seven days never happened, his seven days with Rin, where he had Rin all to himself.
But one week is not enough for Haruka. He's had a taste of Rin and doesn't want to go back.

Makoto's happy. Makoto's happy where he is in life, happy enough to go on this camp. Makoto has his legion of friends and Makoto is so easy to love that he will surely find someone to replace Haruka in no time at all.

Haruka's not special—there are so many out there who can do a better job than him of taking care of Makoto.

"I was just thinking of the dolphins," Haruka says for no reason at all.

"You can't actually touch them, you know?" Colbie says. "This being Australia, we have some law saying you can't go within seven metres of a dolphin. It's to protect them."

Haruka should never have let Makoto get close to him.

In the car, Haruka takes out his phone and looks at his message box. He's had no new messages, and he goes into his chat with Makoto to see when Makoto last logged on.

Makoto was last online before Haruka left for Melbourne.

Haruka wants to type something—but he doesn't know what. *Makoto—I'll be away for a while*, but then he’ll have to explain his absence. And Haruka has no good excuse to cover up.

*Makoto—I'm leaving you*—there's no way Haruka would ever type that, even as the thought lingers on his mind. It's too final. Haruka can't accept the finality of it. It might be too much for Makoto to bear as well, not unless Haruka can put his substitute in place.

*Makoto*—Haruka types, and seeing the name is too much for him. Haruka wonders if he should just delete Makoto from his phone and block his number. It wouldn't work—too rash, too silly, and too many intersections of mutual friends. Haruka would have to block everyone he knows in Tokyo.

Haruka's fingers linger on his keypad. His last text exchange with Makoto was: *where are you/2nd floor toilet, outside the bookshop*.

Haruka isn't sure he can bring himself to say the truth. His fingers land on the keypad, and the message is sent before he can think about it.

*Miss you baby. chu~*

***

On Tuesday morning Haruka begs to go out with Rin. Rin has a tutorial to attend in the morning, and during lunch he'll pick up the car from his cousin who works in the city.

After lunch, Haruka is supposed to have his things packed. Rin will send Haruka to the airport, just like he sent Nitori off at the airport.

Haruka waits for Rin while Rin has his tutorial. During that time he walks around the campus grounds, grabbing a cup of coffee, flat white, like Rin told him to. Haruka isn't usually fond of milk in his coffee but it's all right. It's nice. The coffee is good. The coffee has been very good the whole time he's been here.

Haruka sits on a random bench in the campus grounds clutching his coffee cup. His hands are shaking. Is it the coffee? It can't be the coffee. It's his nerves, obviously. What is he going to tell Rin?
Rin, you don't have to send me to the airport.

But it's so crazy, so crazy for him to say that to Rin. There are things Haruka will need to do in order to move in with Rin. If he wants to see this through, he has to be sensible about it. He has to change schools. Haruka has to find a university here that he can attend and apply to transfer. The student visa will be good for a few years at least, good enough to stay with Rin. After the student visa expires, can he get a work visa? If it's too hard to get, what other means does he have? He could get married to Rin. If he got married to Rin, is he eligible for permanent resident visas? If he got married to Rin, what would he tell his parents? It might be wise to get married quietly, privately at first, just for the visa, and years later he and Rin can have a proper, traditional ceremony for the sake of their parents.

Haruka can leave open his bank account in Japan—that's where he can manage payments from his Japanese clients. He will need to work on his English—he seems to get on fine with his limited ability but he doesn't always understand what's going on. The apartment lease with Makoto—he could pay his half for the next year or until Makoto finds another place, he has to do that for Makoto at the least. Makoto will keep the cats. What about Aki and Nagisa and Rei? They might hate him, or worse, be disappointed in him. Can Haruka live with that? He can lie low and beg for forgiveness years later. Would it be fair to Gou, if she becomes the intermediary between all that is going on in Australia and the mess left behind in Japan?

Haruka is besieged with a sudden hatred for his identity. He doesn't want to have this life anymore, he doesn't want its entanglements and its closed doors. He did not ask for this distinct identity. All he ever wanted was to blend in and be anonymous, unnoticed, without people to bother him. If he had been invisible he could have followed Rin everywhere in the first place. He could follow Rin everywhere and blend seamlessly into Rin's life. Haruka doesn't want to be himself anymore, he just wants to be part of Rin's life, part of Rin.

His hands are still shaking. The coffee cup is empty. Haruka fiddles with it then sets it aside and draws out his sketchbook. The campus grounds are beautiful with their old stone buildings and pathways. It's almost out of a movie. Haruka tries to draw what he sees—the weathered tiles, the dried leaves in the swirling wind.

A small bud falls onto his sketchbook and Haruka looks up. He's been sitting under a ginkgo tree. They have ginkgo trees in Australia? Haruka wonders if it's a sign, if it's something he'll have to fight.

Haruka gets a message on his phone and it makes him jump—Rin's tutorial is over. They can go have lunch and they'll pick up the car. I'll tell him at lunch. I'll tell him how much I love him at lunch.

They go for lunch—Rin has an Otway pork belly sandwich. There is only one fish sandwich available—so Haruka goes for that—beer-battered flathead with lemon tartare. Rin eats his pork sandwich with such relish and gusto that Haruka doesn't feel like interrupting to talk about himself. Maybe, he could go back to Japan after all. He could go back, pack the rest of his things, leave Makoto a handwritten note and leave the country all in the same day, before Makoto returns on Thursday. He just has to work quickly.

Haruka is suddenly beset with a bout of virtual lockjaw. He can't open his mouth, he is too scared to speak, as if speaking would disrupt his present reality and pull him back into the other—the one he is reluctant to head back to. Why is he so reluctant? It's not as if his life there was crushingly awful. It was nice, in fact. But Haruka doesn't have many friends and those he has he is a consistent letdown to. He's so scared of letting them down he'd rather cut off all contact. He's such a shitty friend. He persistently does stupid things that embarrass them. He can't think straight. He doesn't want his old
life anymore, his old, wasted life. He doesn't want to exist. Existence is painful. He just wants Rin to subsume all of him until Rin's life is all of his, and Rin can live for him.

Rin is less lonely when he's around and Haruka is less lonely when he has Rin.

Rin collects the car keys from his cousin and they drive back to Rin's apartment.

Haruka goes to the guest room—it's where he left his things, and Haruka lives so lightly that he's packed in no time.

Rin is sitting on the guest room bed looking at him. If they have sex now, Haruka can accidentally forget the time and miss his flight. Haruka can accidentally miss his flight and run back to Rin.

Rin helps Haruka gather his things and put them in the car. "I'll see you downstairs," Rin says.

Haruka doesn't want to leave the apartment. Can he pretend to faint now? To just lie on the floor and never get up and Rin will come rushing back to him and pick him up in his arms and kiss Haruka tearfully.

Haruka is in no condition to take a flight.

Rin is calling Haruka on his cellphone. "What's taking you so long?"

Haruka steps outside the apartment, closes the door, and walks to the elevator with leaden feet.

"Do you want to buy anything before you go back?" Rin asks him as they get in the car. "Gifts, souvenirs, anything?"

Haruka is frozen in the passenger seat. He wishes he doesn't exist, not in this corporeal form that has to return to Japan.

Rin reaches to the back seat and draws out a paper bag from nowhere. "Give this to the guys, will you? Save the Pods for Gou, those are her favourite. Nagisa loves the strawberry Tim Tams. The muesli is for Rei."

Rin dumps the bag on Haruka's lap and Haruka catches a glimpse of the inside. There are several bags of really fancy-looking expensive chocolate.

Rin steps on the pedal and the car moves out of the carpark. They drive along the same route to the airport, Rin's phone on a satnav app to guide the way.

"I'm so jealous you get to go back to the rest of them," Rin gushes at Haruka. "It's not fun being so far away."

*I could stay with you,* Haruka thinks. *I want to stay with you.*

They drive in silence for some time.

"I hope you had fun here," Rin says, as the signs begin pointing towards the airport. "It's sweet to have a good break sometimes, huh?"

Haruka wishes Rin would stop talking about how Haruka has to leave.

"You get to go back home," Rin says, wistfully. "You get to go home to Tokyo lights and late night ramen and infinite combinis."
"You get to go back to Makoto," Rin says, so softly Haruka almost misses it.

Haruka tries not to frown. He looks down, inwardly vexed, and his gaze lands on that souvenir bag with all the fancy chocolate.

Rin laughs, a strange, strangled laugh. "I guess the both of you are even now, huh?"

*What?*

"It was his idea, wasn't it? I guess he felt so guilty about that time."

*What the fuck is Rin going on about?*

"Anyway, it's been really nice having you. You're still as weird as ever."

Haruka doesn't respond, so Rin tries to look at him with that childish, romantic grin.

"I know it was very intense between us and all, but um, I've got to say, at the end of the day, Makoto's erm, better. He's um, more considerate. You're so lucky you get him all the time."

Haruka still has no idea what the fuck Rin is talking about, or why the fuck Rin needs to talk about Makoto at all.

It makes Haruka angry.

"Why do you keep mentioning Makoto?" *How is Makoto involved in any of this?*

Rin looks like he's been slapped for a moment.

"W-wasn't it his idea? For you to take a holiday? For you to visit me?"

*Fuck.* Haruka is caught in the web of his own lies. Makoto wouldn't ever suggest something so stupid. Makoto has to know, if he ever allowed something like that, what would happen. This is exactly what would happen. If Makoto ever allowed Haruka to visit Rin surely Makoto knew that they would end up fucking. Haruka and Rin. Makoto isn't so stupid as to let Haruka cheat on him so blatantly. Rin just doesn't know Makoto.

*Why would Rin think that Makoto would have allowed all this to happen?*

"Be good to him, will you?"

*Why the fuck can't Rin shut up about Makoto?*

Why? Why? Why? Haruka is on the verge of abandoning Makoto for Rin. Haruka is going to do this by pretending Makoto doesn't matter to him anymore. Why does Rin have to keep reminding him of Makoto?

"Stop talking about Makoto," Haruka says through gritted teeth, his hands fistng by his sides. He doesn't need his guilt dredged up in front of him. He doesn't need to be reminded of what he's about to do to Makoto.

"Oh," Rin quietly whispers, and turns back to driving.

Haruka can see Rin's lip tremble. He can see Rin bite down on his lip, trying to choke back tears. It throws Haruka into confusion and disarray. *Why the hell does Rin need to cry about this?*
"I'm sorry," Rin tries not to sob. "I'm sorry. It's not my place to bring it up. I shouldn't be talking about your boyfriend like this to you."

What the hell?

"It was just that one time? It was just once...." Rin is almost whimpering, like he's in pain.

"What 'one time'?' Haruka asks, as slowly as he can manage, puzzlement getting the better of him. Did he accidentally hurt Rin again? Why is Rin so confusing?

Rin suddenly stops crying and looks at Haruka with confusion on his face. Haruka's eyes widen—if only Rin will tell him what's wrong.

"Th-that time in the Olympic Village? When Makoto and I..." Rin's voice trails off as he stares into the distance, wonderstruck.

It feels like every nerve in Haruka's body is screaming. What about the Olympic Village? What the fuck is Rin talking about?

"Y-you didn't know?" Rin asks, in a voice of complete amazement.

Of course I didn't know, Haruka's brain is screaming at Rin. If I knew I wouldn't be asking you, would I? Haruka's brain is screaming and screaming and screaming. What the fuck happened in the Olympic Village? What the fuck did Rin and Makoto do, in the Olympic Village?

Rin's face says it all.

"It-it was my fault, I swear! My fault! Just blame it all on me..." Rin begins to plead desperately.

They are at the airport. Rin has pulled over. They are in the waiting zone. Haruka has a flight to catch. He can't even bear to look at Rin. He trusted all of them to be decent people. He trusted his friends not to betray him.

Haruka is supposed to be the only rotten one of the lot.

Rin isn't saying a word. Rin is just sitting there, hands on the steering wheel and chin perched on his hands like he's some fucking cat.

Some fucking cat that dared to steal Makoto from him.

Haruka yanks roughly on the door handle, he wants the fucking car door to open. Haruka wants to kick the car door open, to get it to open faster. He practically flings himself out of the car. The bag of souvenirs is in his way. Those fucking chocolates, from Rin. Why are they from Rin? They're in Haruka's way. He throws the paper bag back on the passenger seat he just vacated. Rin looks like he's going to say something. Haruka can't stand to hear anything Rin says now. He closes the door. It slams shut. Maybe Haruka didn't intend for such force. But it's too late now, he's slammed the door on Rin. So be it. Rin has popped the car boot for him, and Haruka takes his luggage out from the back. Rin hasn't gotten out of the car to help him at all. Screw him then. Maybe Haruka never needs to see Rin again.

Haruka wheels his suitcase angrily into the terminal, seething, his feet pounding the floor in quick, relentless steps. He needs to get away from this place. He needs to get away from Rin.

Haruka is through the terminal doors into the departure hall. The big flipboard is in front of him, the classic airport flipboard. Where would you like to go today? Where is your destination?
Haruka lets go of his suitcase handle and falls to the floor on his knees. He starts to cry. He can’t stop crying. He’s so fucking pathetic, crying on the floor in broad daylight in broad public. Everyone in the terminal must be looking at him. He can’t stop crying.

*Run after me, you idiot*, Haruka thinks, even now, pleading for it to happen, pleading voicelessly for Rin. *Run after me. If you run after me I’ll stay with you forever.*

But Rin—Rin isn’t the type to run after people. Only Makoto would do that for him.

**Chapter End Notes**

**THIS CHAPTER IS THE WORST I’M SO SORRY**

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Because it seems to take me over five months to get a chapter out these days...um, please be assured that this story is supposed to have a happy ending (uh...as happy as it can get with all this shit going down). If you want to know what the hell the happy ending looks like, please look to the direct sequel [*A Very Fishy Christmas and A Fishy New Year*](link)

Extended footnotes to the chapter on this [link](link)!
Gou Dreams of Tokyo

Chapter Summary

Haru shows Rin a sight that Rin has never seen before.....a sight about Makoto.

Chapter Notes

This fic was started a year and a half ago...four episodes into the original series, so it really is the least canon-compliant thing, and the longer I took a break the harder it became to go back to writing. To be honest, I think this chapter is only 60% of what it could have been a year ago--but I'd left it for too long and it was starting to go really stale. I honestly don't know if it's the kind of thing that's worth anyone's time either...there's not much by way of plot. At this point I've almost forgotten what goes into the next and final chapter, which is a whole other battle as well.

Whatever you read of it, I hope you found it amusing anyway. Thanks for sticking by.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“You see, loneliness is the price we have to pay for being born in this modern age, so full of freedom, independence, and our own egoistical selves.” –Natsume Soseki

Their eyes meet.

Haru-chan's eyes are always so blue.

There is a squelch, and Haruka is pulling his lube-moistened fingers out of Makoto. Makoto heaves a sigh—has he been holding his breath in the whole time?

Makoto smiles at Haruka, and Haruka looks away.

"Haru...Haru-chan. You can put it in now, if you want."

Haruka whips his head back towards him, eyes flashing. There is a smidgen of annoyance, and Makoto tries not to shrink away. You know he doesn't like it when you call him Haru-chan.

Makoto tries to brighten his smile, hoping Haruka can read the apology hidden within.

Haruka returns with a softened expression.

Is he afraid of hurting me?
Don’t be afraid, Makoto thinks. There’s no way you’ll hurt me.

Haruka breaks eye contact to survey his own cock, full with blood and anticipation, and hesitantly decides to slather on more lube.

"Come on Haru-chan, I’m waiting," Makoto says, drawing his knees up higher towards his chest.

Haruka puts his hands on Makoto’s folded legs to steady himself, then lets one hand fall downward to guide his cock inside of Makoto.

Makoto inhales sharply. Immediately, Haruka is looking right at him again. Does it hurt?

He tries to smile. "Keep going, Haru," and his voice is clearer than he’d thought it would sound.

Haruka breaks eye contact again as he eases the rest of his cock in, past the tight ring of muscle at the sphincter. Makoto is foolish enough to think he was prepared for this, but it still hurts more than he expects, the stretch of his own anal opening trying to accommodate the length of Haruka. He tries faintly to keep the smile on his face throughout. It’s their first time—not the first time at sex, that was a couple of months ago—but the first time they’re trying this butt stuff and Makoto spent weeks trying to get himself ready, tentatively at first with his own fingers, and then with various objects of increasing circumference and a copious amount of lotion, all while inwardly trying to convince himself that none of that had taken his butt virginity from him ahead of Haruka, not the carrot or the banana or the suspiciously-shaped dog toy that nearly killed him with incriminating shame to buy from the supermarket. It’s Haruka who will take his butt virginity from him. He can’t give Haruka any reason to stop now that Haruka’s made it all the way in.

Haruka pauses to check on Makoto and Makoto smiles foolishly in return.

"I’m okay, Haru," he promises. It just takes getting used to.

Haruka begins to slide his cock out, very slowly at first. Makoto smiles and nods encouragingly, to let Haruka know he has the go-ahead to move as he pleases. Haruka returns with almost imperceptible acknowledgement and looks away with his eyes squeezed shut as he begins thrusting into Makoto, straining to go as slowly as he can as his breaths get shallower. After a while Makoto becomes used to the feeling of it, the way his body gives in to Haruka, the way the sensation of Haruka’s cock moving inside of him sends a wave of pleasure that pulses from deep within his bowels. It’s like he can feel Haruka’s heartbeat against his own, his breaths syncing up to Haruka’s so that they’re breathing at the same time, the same air lingering between their mouths. It feels a little like Haruka has uncovered the most hidden part of him and Makoto gives, he gives himself to Haruka and lets Haruka finish up inside of him while he trembles and smiles to a Haruka whose eyes are firmly closed in concentration, that same face Haruka makes when he gets to soak in a bath filled with pool-temperature water.

Haruka is bent over, propped up by his arms, trying to catch his breath. He pulls out. It only leaves Makoto with a longing to have him for longer.

"How was it, Haru-chan?" Makoto can’t help but ask, and then inwardly berates himself for even expecting a reply.

Haruka’s arms wobble and he collapses next to Makoto on the tatami floor.

"T-thank you..." Haruka mumbles unsteadily, not looking at him, and Makoto’s foolish heart breaks.

Do you even love me, that foolish and broken heart wonders. Did you even think of me at all, when you were inside of me?
Try to smile. Just keep smiling. You can learn to be happy with this. It could have been much worse. Makoto lies on his side on the floor, feeling so naked and so bare and the next thing he knows Haruka crouches into his back.

"Makoto..." Haruka whispers. "Makoto, are you there?"

"Yes, Haru," Makoto says simply.

"It's my turn to make you happy," Haruka replies. "I want...to make you happy too."

"Okay, Haru." But why, Haru?

Haruka is suddenly leaning over to look at him and Makoto falls in the deep blue of those eyes. There is a momentary pause, a fumbling of words. "I...I want you to be with me. I want to be with you. Let's be together. Always."

Makoto turns to face Haruka fully and a smile pushes through on his face. "Always," he repeats, a wishful, lovelorn promise too readily made.

***

—Makoto? Oh my god I finally got through to you. I've been trying to call since yesterday.

—Is—is everything okay, Rin?

—Is Haru there with you?

—No? I just got out of camp, Rin. I only get back to Tokyo tomorrow.

—I screwed up, Makoto. I screwed up so badly. It's all my fault. I'm so sorry. I told him. I didn't know. I honestly didn't know. I thought you would have told him by now. I'm so sorry.

—Who?

—Haru? Yeah. I kind of accidentally told Haru about what we did in Rio.

—Is Haru okay? H-how did he react?

—I don't know. Um. He left in a huff. We were at the airport.

—Airport?

—Melbourne airport. Some harebrained scheme of yours huh, Makoto? ...Makoto? You there? I guess the two of you are even now, huh? Was that what you were trying to do? Even out the score?

—Rin. It's okay. Don't worry about it. Thank you for telling me. I'll take it from here.

—Makoto. Listen to me. I don't know where he is right now, actually. He left the car in a hurry and the cars behind were honking at me and I was scared. In shock too. He looked like he could kill someone.

—Haru was supposed to catch a flight, right? Do you know what time he's supposed to land?

—Um, he would have landed this morning. If he got on the flight. I have no way of saying for sure. I just wanted to check if you know whether he’s landed.
—I guess I'll find out soon. Thank you Rin.

—You sound so calm about this. Sorry. Maybe I shouldn't have said that. Just call me if you need help, okay?

—Thanks for the offer, Rin. Please don't worry about it.


—Bye, Rin.

—Bye.

—Bye.

—Bye...Rin. Let's hang up. Count of three.

One, two.

***

Remember when you were just kids and Haruka made an igloo for you? I don't mind the cold, Haruka said, only eight years old but looking like a grown man in his grandfather's coat, with sleeves that Haruka's grandmother had shortened so that it would fit Haruka's arms just right. *But if Makoto hates the cold, then I'll protect Makoto from it.*

Remember when you tried to help with the igloo but only managed to melt the snow faster than it was supposed to? Remember how you sat by the side watching Haruka work, only moving, only helping when Haruka told you exactly what to do?

Remember how useless you felt, fetching things from inside the house so it felt like you were doing something.

Remember how safe you felt, curled up in a blanket inside those walls that Haruka had built. Remember how Haruka pretended to be cooking fish on a shelf inside the igloo. Remember how Haruka fed the imaginary fish to you, and how you pretended it was the tastiest thing in the world.

Remember the times when you had to pull Haruka out of the bathroom. If you lost Haruka you lost your shield. You wouldn't know what to do with yourself.

Remember your first night in Tokyo surrounded by unopened boxes, a fort around the futons unfurled on the floor. Haruka asked you to lie down with him and you did, nestling in the crook of Haruka's arm. *It's so different,* you whisper to Haruka, seeking reassurance. It's scary.

*And yet you're still the same,* Haruka replied. Don't ever change, Haruka said, kissing you lightly on the forehead.

Remember when you thought you were fairly established in a relationship with Haruka, and it was just supposed to be like any regular night. The lights were off and you were curled up in bed in between the wall and Haruka. You deliberately pushed your butt back until it brushed against Haruka's crotch, you pretended it was accidental and Haruka pretended like he didn't feel anything, until there was no denying Haruka's obvious boner, and then you went down on him, the cock you know so well you don't even need a light to see the map of all its veins, the fold of his foreskin, the evenness of the shaft, how it curves upwards, the symmetry of his glans, the extra sensitive patch on his balls. You learned to take all of Haruka into your mouth and you could taste the dribble of his
precum. When he came you could feel the extra thrust down your throat and his hands were fisted in your hair and in his suppressed gasps you could hear a name, just the once—Rin—and you just kept going like you hadn't heard it at all, licking him clean of all come, your mouth soft around him. You knew from how quiet he was after that he felt bad about it, and that you didn't have to make him feel worse so you acted like you hadn't heard and kissed him goodnight as usual. You couldn't sleep but you knew you had to pretend you were, so that when he thought you were sleeping he could hug you tightly from behind and cry hot tears into your back.

All the twenty odd years of their lives are stacked in memories that are threatening to collapse on Makoto. They were always overburdened with a kind of loneliness, him and Haruka, and maybe it is all too oppressive, the tangled knot of their isolated past, and maybe they have always been looking for an escape from each other. And there is Rin, bright with a promise of a future and a different kind of sadness that sought to be cured, Rin who is altogether too easy to fall for.

So this is how they fall, Makoto and Haruka.

***

"I don't believe in love triangles," Rei declares indignantly, folding his arms with a prissy turn away from the stapled document on the bench.

"Aww, come-on, Rei-chan," Nagisa pleads. "This is just a read-through for my script. Help me please? This is just another job, and it means money on the table. I just need to practice my lines."

"I'll help you," Gou offers. "It's just a script."

"I could too," Mikoshiba Seijuurou offers. "What's the plot?"

They are gathered at the small gym inside Gou's apartment. Nagisa is contractually obligated by his talent agency to keep a slender physique, and to save on expensive personal training fees and a gym membership, Nagisa has enlisted Mikoshiba to help with a fitness routine. On occasion, Rei and Gou join in so that Nagisa doesn't have to work out alone.

Gou would rather they train in a more public gym so that she can feast her eyes on well-built members of the public. She has never been particularly good at sport, so Gou's idea of a workout is strolling on the treadmill at a pace that allows her to observe bodybuilding videos at the same time.

"The plot," Nagisa explains, "revolves around our main characters: the cool guy, a girl-next-door type, and a sexy, hot transfer student. Girl-next-door obviously has a crush on cool guy but cool guy's gonna end up with hot transfer student. And girl next door will go to America to realise her dreams of being a teacher."

"Why does she even need to go to America to become a teacher? This doesn't make sense," Rei huffs.

"I guess it's to get her out of the way," Mikoshiba suggests. "Although my sister is studying in America too."

Nagisa, Rei and Gou exchange awkward looks. Ever since Gou's breakup with Chigusa Hanamura a month back, there have been some rather hamfisted attempts to pair her up with someone else. Chiefly, Mikoshiba Seijuurou seems to be waving an assortment of his siblings in front of her in the hopes of catching Matsuoka attention.

"Well," Nagisa declares. "I play the role of the guy she will bump into at the airport. I am also going to the same college in America but I hope to become a professional baseball player. There is promise
of new love between us."

Nagisa's words are met with a heavy sigh from Rei.

"It's just not beautiful at all."

"Anyway, come on, let's just get this done. I have to go to Osaka for filming tomorrow."

Gou picks up the script, but is interrupted by a text message alert on her phone. It's Hana-chan, asking if Gou would like to meet up again, out of the blue.

***

It's a consolation to be home. Makoto is dividing the rice from the rice cooker in preparation for dinner. It's not like he's actually lived in this home though—his family moved to Tottori City after Makoto moved out for university. It's more convenient for his father's work, and it's easier for Ran and Ren to get around. His mother's even started working part time at the post office. They no longer have a house—this is a family apartment, a kitchen, living and dining, and three bedrooms—one for the parents, one for Ran and one for Ren. Makoto's residual belongings are in storage and when Makoto is back home he gets tacked onto Ren's room like a spare.

They're in middle school now, the twins, and his mother tells him Ren is becoming sullen and morose, even more withdrawn than before. Ran does well as always, their mother has come to accept "too exuberant" comments from the teachers as a sign that Ran's all right. Makoto's mother tells him it would be good if he could have a brotherly talk with Ren—to check in on his teenage problems. *He would trust his big brother more than he would trust us as his parents, I'm sure.*

Everything feels strangely mundane. Ran barrels through the door, back from soccer training, dumps her stuff in the washing machine and sets the laundry cycle to start. She eyes a piece of steaming chicken karaage on the kitchen counter and Makoto enables her, sliding her a piece skewered on a toothpick. Their mother asks Ran to call her twin brother down for dinner when she's done showering and Ran agrees, a practiced, automatic response.

"How are things in the family?" Makoto asks in the guise of a throwaway question when he really means: how are things between you and dad. His parents have always been together as far as he knows, and his parents have always been madly in love with each other.

*Have you or dad ever had any problems with your relationship? How do you stay together for so long?*

It's pointless. Makoto knows what he did to Haruka is completely indefensible. To frame it into a question—what do you do when you've cheated on the person you're in a committed relationship with—is to highlight how wrong the action is. There are boundaries in a relationship—and most people would've said Makoto definitely crossed the line when he slept with Rin. Thing is—Makoto knows he could've owned up to that, apologised for sleeping with Rin to Haruka—and Haruka would accept it. Even if it means apologising to Haruka for the rest of his life, Makoto could do it. It's what happened after—choosing to stay in touch with Rin, talking to Rin, laughing at Rin's jokes, kidding himself with the excuse that Rin needed a friend, becoming emotionally involved—that's the boundary Makoto crossed from which he can never return.

And to think—Makoto's done all this wrong and he still has the cheek to go about life normally. His family would be disgusted with him for what he has done. It's his weakness, his utter weakness that makes him unable to do the right thing, to make himself vanish when he's in places he shouldn't be. Instead he clings on in vain when it's his presence that becomes the problem.
Mom, dad, I cheated on Haru. And Haru was so angry he flew to Australia to confront Rin about it. How did I lie to myself for so long, thinking what I did was okay so long as I kept it all hidden? What will you do if you find out that your child is a total disappointment?

***

So here's a recap of what happens after Haruka literally falls to his knees and cries on the airport floor:

It causes a considerable degree of alarm to fellow passengers, visitors and airport staff. A tourist information staff in particular, Phyllis, comes up to Haruka to pass him some tissues and asks if he is all right. The sudden public attention is more than enough to stem the tears. Haruka withdraws into himself, and when Phyllis asks if he is a student here Haruka nods. When Phyllis asks if he is returning to his home country for good Haruka nods. When Phyllis asks if he sorely misses his friends in Australia Haruka nods.

And so a whole story is spun, without any effort on Haruka's part.

Haruka is kindly helped through the gates, and numbly he boards the plane.

The plane departs the airport, and half a day later Haruka finds himself back in Narita, greeted in Japanese by the chirpy female voice over the PA.

For the entire duration, it had seemed like there was some outside force pushing Haruka along even as he barely lifted a finger.

Now Haruka has returned to Tokyo, where, as if on autopilot, he finds himself back in the apartment. Can this apartment really be home, if it is rented under Makoto's name? Can it be home, if Haruka's real home lies at the opposite end of Japan in Iwatobi?

The house is empty, as empty as he feels.

A quiet rage simmers, a futile, directionless rage. What is Haruka so angry about? He's not sure himself. He simply feels like a wounded animal, betrayed, cornered, trapped.

What is Haruka so angry about?

He stands ramrod straight in his apartment with his hands tightly fisted by his side, his fingernails pressing into his palms and it hurts and he's shaking and he sees Makoto's computer.

Makoto's computer, which started all of this.

Before leaving for Australia, Haruka had cleanly shut down the computer. It was done to leave no trace that Haruka had seen those emails at all. What for? Why did Haruka do that? Haruka thought he could go to Australia to confront Rin about getting too close to his boyfriend.

The cruel reality is that Makoto has been gone for a long time. Makoto has slipped away from Haruka, no longer belonging to Haruka, spreading himself out in the world without Haruka.

And Haruka had thought he could sleep with Rin to make up for how abandoned he felt. Well, the joke's on him, because Makoto beat him to that.

Haruka cranks open Makoto's laptop and powers it on. He gets to the login screen and enters the password. All of Makoto's passwords are variations of Haruka's birthday. Login page, email, ATM pin. Makoto's such an easy fool. Anyone who knows Makoto enough can hack through all his
accounts.

He opens up Makoto's email just to read through that entire thread with Rin again. How dare they think they can get away with this? How dare they act like everything's innocent?

Consumed by anger, Haruka exits the email thread to scroll through the rest of Makoto's email. He's going to read everything in detail or he might miss what's going on between the lines, the way it happened with Rin. By clicking on the Facebook notification emails, he gets into Makoto's account.

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To his credit, Makoto keeps his activity to a minimum, so Haruka has to scroll some way back, past the messages asking Makoto to visit, messages thanking Makoto for his well wishes and support, and messages just to say hi, to finally see a post from Makoto himself, thanking people for birthday messages. When Haruka scrolls deeper into the timeline he sees the neverending stream of birthday messages. Where the hell do all these people come from? The Japanese names in there are one thing, they're probably the people that Makoto talks about all the time in idle chatter that Haruka tunes out. But there are all these unknown people, unknown names, all posting in a mishmash of languages.

Like, who the fuck is Zhao and Denis and Fabian, Cristina, Ji-Hyun, Rebecca and Liliyana? Why do they even care to wish Makoto a happy birthday?

They don't know a single fucking thing about Makoto. Welcome to the internet, where people can act like they're your best friend without knowing you at all.

One of the birthday messages catches Haruka's eye. It's in English, from a person called Kitty Cat McKitty. Haruka clicks on the name.

Kitty Cat McKitty has five mutual friends with Makoto.

Kitty Cat McKitty has zero pictures of their real face.

Kitty Cat McKitty has a photo of an artfully arranged brunch platter on their wall, with a modest number of likes, Gou Matsuoka being one of those who liked the photo.

Kitty Cat McKitty is online.

Haruka's heart almost stops dead.

He clicks on the chat box with Kitty Cat McKitty.

The chat box is empty. Either all previous conversation has been cleared or there have been none to date.

Kitty Cat McKitty is typing.

Kitty Cat McKitty stays typing for a long time, and then disappears without leaving a message.

Haruka's seen enough. He's seen enough to close everything and shut down the computer in a fit of rage. Makoto has been leading a life of duplicity. Whenever Makoto cowers in fear or
embarrassment or acts like he's afraid and insecure, is that all a show for Haruka? Makoto clearly
doesn't need Haruka around to be wildly successful at life. Makoto seems perfectly content to let all
these other people have a piece of him.

This is what Haruka gets for being ordinary. He gets passed over without a second glance while
people like Makoto, like Rin, get to bask in the adoration of their fans, living with their heads stuck
far up above in the cloud of dreams.

***

The door unlocks with a click. Hesitantly, Makoto pushes it open and sticks his head through the
opening. All is quiet.

The kettle whistles as it comes to a boil and Makoto jumps, startled. Haruka's home....right?

Haruka emerges from their bedroom to pour himself a cup of coffee. Makoto is frozen in the
doorway, too afraid to move.

"You're home," Haruka states coolly, bringing his coffee mug with him back to their room.

"I'm home," Makoto whispers, but Haruka hasn't lingered to hear him. Makoto removes his shoes
and drags his camping supplies inside with him. Haruka is at his desk, working on his laptop.

Makoto casts a quick, sideways glance. "I'm going to run the laundry," he announces but feels
unheard. "Anything I can help you with?" Makoto tries again.

Haruka has his earphones in and maybe he can't hear Makoto.

Makoto bites his lips and tries not to let his fear overcome him. He looks around nervously, and
notices that the cats are missing.

Where are the cats? Makoto wants to ask, but he can't bring himself to say something so trivial and
decides to save the question for later.

In their bathroom, he loads the washing machine with all his soiled clothes from camp. He starts the
laundry cycle, then finds he can't bring himself to go out of the bathroom so he slumps to the floor
and watches the clothes go round and round in the washing machine.

Makoto shuts his eyes as he tries to get a grip. He has to do the right thing here. His parents didn't
bring him up to hide in bathrooms trying to dodge the consequences of his actions. If he made a
mistake he has to own up to it, honestly and with no excuses. Makoto can do this. It's fine if Haruka
hates him for the rest of time, but if they address the mess they're in they can begin to work
something out, right?

Makoto washes up at the sink, wiping his face with a warm cloth. With a deep breath he opens the
door to the bathroom and sees that Haruka is still at his desk. Haruka's having a typical day at work
on his laptop. There's no indication that Haruka even stepped out of the house, except for the missing
cats. They can pretend. They don't have to acknowledge anything that happened with Rin until the
chokehold of their pretence hollows them out.

No.

H-Haru, Rin told me what happened. C-can we talk about it? Makoto's about to open his mouth,
utter the words that have been running through his mind when Haruka notices his hovering presence
and snaps.
"Was it fun?"

Makoto crumbles in response. "H-Haru I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

"I asked you a question. Was it fun? At camp?"

"S-sorry Haru. Camp was fun."

"That's nice. And fucking Rin? Was that fun too?"

"H-Haru! Please...I'm sorry."

"How many times? How many times did you fuck?"

"Haru. I'm sorry. I admit I cheated on you—"

"How many times did you make Rin come? Did he beg for your cock to fill him up?"

"W-why are you doing this, Haru? T-the sex was just one thing—"

"How hard did he make you come? Enough to make you forget your name? Forget who you are?"

"H-hear me out, Haru! Please!"

Haruka glares at Makoto so coldly it's like a sharp icicle to the chest.

"...I did have sex with Rin at the Olympic Village. It was on my last day there. Haru, I'm sorry I was too cowardly to be honest about it with you. Then... then Rin began to confide in me, and I... I became emotionally involved. It was something I should have been open about to you from the start. I'm sorry I betrayed your trust. I – I will bear the consequences of my actions. But please can we just have a serious talk about where to go from here?"

"I—I came back for you, Makoto." Haruka chokes out abruptly. "I went to Australia while you were away, and I came back for you."

"I know. Rin told me," Makoto replies quietly. "Rin told me you went to Australia to see him. And that he told you about what happened at the Olympic Village." Makoto purses his lips, then forces himself to continue. "When did you decide to go to Australia to see Rin?"

"Why are you asking this?"

"Would you have told me about the trip at all if Rin hadn't told you about what we did?"

Haruka doesn't answer.

"What was it that made you say that you came back for me?" Makoto presses.

Still Haruka doesn't answer.

"You like Rin too, don't you, Haru? I know you always have. Rin was your first love and he means a lot to you. I thought about it, Haru, and I'm sorry to have stolen all this time from you selfishly, asking love from you when your feelings were reserved for another. I thought about it, Haru, and I don't think we should be together anymore."

Almost as if he is making a deliberate show of ignoring Makoto, Haruka turns back to his laptop. He clicks around aimlessly until he gets too restless to stay silent for longer.
"I came back for you, Makoto. Did you not hear what I said? I could have stayed with Rin instead of coming back, and I chose you."

Makoto bites his lip. He knows full well what Haruka is implying, what Haruka is trying to suggest. He means for them to ignore the mess they're in and try to carry on as if that is a possibility. Thing is, they're drowning. You can't ignore the water if you're drowning.

"Why, Haru, why? Why did you choose me? Isn't Rin your number one? You flew all the way there for him—"

"Rin was just sex! Rin was just sex—that's all he wants anyway."

Makoto's jaw falls open but he is empty of any comeback. Of all the comments, that's not one he expects from Haruka at all. "H-How dare you, Haru. How dare you say that of Rin?" And then—Makoto realises. "Was that—was that what you wanted to hear from me, too? That Rin was just sex for me and nothing else? Because it can't be further from the truth. Not for me, and not for you either. Let's not pretend we can brush him aside."

Haruka snaps. "Is this what it is, Makoto? You coward. Just admit the truth. I see that you've chosen Rin. You've chosen Rin for a whole year and you don't care anymore when I say that I choose our relationship over everything else! You're sick and tired of me. Was that why you got involved with him? Because he showed you attention in a way that I can't? Here I thought you were asking to repair our relationship—you just want me to break it off so that you can be free of me. You're such a wimp, you can't even do it yourself. You want me to be the bad guy. Fine. It's over. You don't have to waste time meddling with me. Go on and be happy. I won't hold you back any longer."

"Haru! That's not what I meant! H-Haru…P-please. I'm sorry—"

"Shut up, Makoto. Stop pretending you care about me."

Makoto feels like he's been kicked in the gut. But maybe Haruka's right about him. Haruka has always known him better, better than anyone, himself, even. There's no way Makoto should be allowed to keep up with Rin while still trying to stay committed to Haruka. That's not how a relationship works.

Haruka seems resolved to recover from the tirade, going to splash his face with water and returning from the bathroom to plant himself in front of his laptop again. He opens an existing file and calmly works on it.

For Makoto, it's like being caught in a riptide, being suddenly dragged far from the shore, far enough for the ground to recede and Makoto's thrashing around in the jaws of dark water, with no support for his legs, his feet have no hold. He crashes on the nearby couch feeling like an empty shell.

It's untenable, so unworkable, completely intolerable. There is a dry raspiness in Makoto, like he wants to cry, or heave, but everything he feels is buried so deep down to expel it from himself will break him entirely.

I need help, Makoto realises, at the same time he realises that he's refused help so many times in his life that he has nowhere to go. All their friends think of them as the everlasting, infallible couple. How does Makoto even begin to shatter that illusion? Their social circles, the spaces they inhabit, every single aspect of their life would be divided into disparate shards, cracking wherever lines are drawn and sides are taken.

Exhausted to the bone, Makoto's eyelids droop over bloodshot eyes and he falls into the limbo of
slumber.

***

Makoto's phone is buzzing. It's so fucking annoying. Why does Makoto have people looking for him all the time? Haruka could have fallen off the map into nowhere and no one would come looking for him.

Once upon a time, Haruka could have counted on Makoto looking for him.

The thought sends an involuntary stab to his heart. Makoto's phone has been ringing off the hook and yet he has the bloody cheek to continue snoozing on the couch.

For a brief second, Haruka entertains the thought of flinging Makoto's phone out of the window. Unable to stand the disruption any longer, he crosses the room to peer at the buzzing slab nestled loosely in Makoto's palm.

*Matsuoka Rin.*

This takes the cake. Haruka would laugh if he could but there is nothing left in him, only bitterness and cynicism.

It's not even two hours since they officially broke up and Rin's already looking for Makoto.

Haruka stands there, eyeing the mobile phone beadily, silently daring Makoto to wake up and answer the call right in front of him.

Makoto does wake. Makoto wakes with a start and accidentally drops the phone on the floor. Blearily, he fumbles around for it, and when he gets up off the couch his eyes meet Haruka's.

Makoto's eyes dart away immediately, towards his phone.

Haruka watches the realisation dawn on Makoto's face when Makoto reads the caller's name.

*Go on, pick up that call.*

He can read the guilt off Makoto's face like an open book.

"I-I'm not going to pick it up," Makoto says in a shrinking voice.

*We'll see about that,* Haruka silently challenges.

Makoto sits up weakly on the couch and feebly tries to hide behind a cushion. There is an impasse and after another failed attempt Rin stops calling.

Haruka shrugs it off and walks away. No more calls. He can return to work.

The doorbell rings when he is almost at his desk again, giving him the fright of his life. He hopes Makoto didn't see him jump.

Makoto has picked up his phone and put it to rest on the TV bench.

The doorbell rings again.

Haruka impatiently glances at his own phone quickly. No messages, no calls. No one's given any indication of dropping by. He tries to quell the disquiet in his brain. It's probably Aki? With the cats?
Even though he told Aki he would go to her place to pick up the cats.

Makoto is looking forlornly at the door like a puppy hoping to be let outside.

Haruka puts his earphones on and tries to ignore everything.

The doorbell ringing becomes incessant, a cacophony of the buzzer being pressed on and off impatiently.

Haruka rips his earphones off and goes to open the front door in a huge, sudden swing, ready to drop kick whoever stands in front of it.

"Hi," Rin says.

***

Here are three things Rin knows about himself—

One: he gave up love for fame. His coach has warned him, and his agent too—if Matsuoka Rin wants to be a household name, Matsuoka Rin has to forgo all the distractions of life to work on his goal singlemindedly. Rin has no space for love in his life.

Two: Makoto and Haruka have been together literally forever. No matter his feelings for Haruka, no matter his feelings for Makoto, Rin doesn't belong. Rin never belongs. He blitzed through their lives in sixth grade and again in high school and through the whirlwind of his whims Makoto and Haruka held strong to each other.

Three: Rin isn't the sort to let things die. If it is humanly possible to fix something, to make things right, Rin will be there working at it with all his blood, sweat and tears. Achievement is solely a human concept, which can only be fulfilled by human effort. And the line of responsibility is clear—Rin slept with Makoto and Haruka on separate occasions that have converged into a maelstrom that now threatens to tear apart the bedrock, the very existence, of their relationship. There's no way Rin can allow Makoto and Haruka to break up on account of him—it's just so absurd when Rin has been absent from large swathes of their lives.

Scanning the rows of mailboxes for the address matching an old email from Makoto—Rin spots the one labelled plainly as "Tachibana/Nanase", reads off the unit number and resolves to see through his plan. What is with reclusive homebodies who avoid calls as if phones are instruments from hell?

Jabbing at the doorbell relentlessly, Rin is about to give up this course of action when it opens dramatically.

"Hi," Rin says, trying not to fluster.

Haruka gives him a look so cold it would have snapped the muggy summer air into a shower of snowflakes.

"Uh," Rin stutters, drawing an uncertain hand to comb through his hair, which accidentally dislodges the cap he’d thrown on when leaving the airport. He catches his cap before it falls to the ground and, feeling acrobatically accomplished, finishes with a self-satisfied smirk before he can stop himself.

Haruka bristles. What are you doing here, Haruka glares as if to say.

"I tried to call but like, no one picked up at all," Rin declares pointedly, leaning on the doorjamb with a fold of his arms.
Haruka lets go of the door, and Rin swears it was done with the deliberate hope that his pretty face will get squashed on the backswing.

Such hospitality, Rin thinks as he holds the door away from him and squeezes into the apartment before Haruka can do anything else. Whilst removing his shoes Rin extends his neck to assess that Makoto is hiding on the couch.

So, this is how their apartment looks like. Of course Rin is curious. Not to say a little jealous. It's certainly very cosy, but also sufficiently well ventilated as to be suitably airy and bright despite the tight spaces.

He runs an idle hand alongside the squat fridge in the kitchen/doorway. It's so quaintly aged, bearing the hallmarks of a succession of previous owners.

"What the hell are you doing here," Haruka growls at him.

Rin raises his eyebrows with a casual shrug. "Nothing...just checking on you I guess." Some fit of madness leads him to raise a fist to punch Haruka affectionately in the shoulder. "Hey," he tries to say, softly, but Haruka's furious glare cuts him off. Okay, Rin shouldn't have done that. *This is awkward.*

Haruka's eyes widen and his nostrils flare, his hands curling into fists. Before anything can happen, Makoto interrupts.

"Hey there, Rin. What brings you here?" Makoto smiles in that infuriatingly sweet way of his, the smile that smooths over the bumps of awkward social interactions.

That sweet smile of Makoto's is met with marked displeasure on Haruka's face.

*Not looking good. Deep breath, start the speech.*

"To make things clear—it's all my fault," Rin begins. "I was getting a bit worried, especially with Haru—and I realised I didn't want to leave things hanging on such a sour note. So uh, yeah. I did a bad thing. I wanted to seduce Makoto at the Olympics and it worked. Pin it all on me. I'm ready to take the blame. Don't be angry with each other."

"Is that what you came here for?" *What does it take to wipe the incredulity off Haruka's face?*

"Rin," Makoto calls out in a gentle tone. "Please don't tell me you literally just stepped off a plane."

"Huuh, what else? I didn't swim here, that's for sure."

There is a wan tug on Makoto's lips. "Well then, Rin, you must be feeling tired. If you like you can use the shower to freshen up."

Hold on, asking me to shower? Does Makoto know how much he sounds like a bad porno? Rin is about to blurt that out when he catches the look on Makoto and Haruka's faces. Right. They need some time to themselves. Rin's totally overstepped his bounds. Well, that much is obvious too.

"Okay, yeah, a shower is nice." Rin shifts at the shoulder strap of his lone backpack.

A fresh towel is thrust into his arms and Rin himself is thrust into the bathroom. The door is closed on him. Rin suspects Makoto and Haruka are whispering feverishly on the other side, so he locks the door with an audible click to send the message that he will give them the space they need.
Then promptly presses his ear to the surface of the door. He sure hopes that Makoto and Haruka don't devolve into a messy argument. What on earth was he thinking, intruding upon them like this? Oh god, Rin thinks in a moment of despair at his sheer recklessness, smushing his face into the towel. If this fails it'll cost him days of his life in jet lag and missed training...

It suddenly occurs to him that this towel belongs to either Makoto or Haruka. Whose is it? It's plain white and the pile is loose in the manner of a used towel. Or maybe Makoto and Haruka share towels indiscriminately, so they've both used this towel. He lifts the towel to his nose for another investigative sniff. Yeah, he wouldn't put it past them. Makoto and Haruka are so...weird that way.

Maybe he should take a shower after all. Rin puts his backpack on the washing machine and peers around the bathroom. Various toiletries line the shelf and alongside the rim of the small bathtub. It's almost like a fascinating anthropological snapshot of how a couple lives, Rin thinks. The twin toothbrushes, the twin mugs, the shared tube of toothpaste. The razors and the different brands of aftershave.

There's a girly eau de toilette on the shelf, green tea and lotus. Speaking of which, half the toiletries are exceedingly girly in fragrance. A cherry blossom scented shower gel, a green tea scented facial cleanser, berry scented antibacterial handwash. Then again, the other half of the toiletries consist of misshapen, lurid lumps of bar soap that probably originated from a Lush boutique. Rin knows this because his sister likes Lush. Not because he's a real expert on toiletries or anything.

*Might as well strip and shower,* Rin thinks. Goodness knows if Makoto and Haruka are going to call him out when they're done with their private discussion.

***

How does love die? Haruka didn't ask for his love to die. Haruka had no idea his love was in the throes of death, not at all. He believed his love to be in spanking, robust health until it was brutally murdered. Haruka's love was murdered in a sneak attack, a faceless casualty in an armed robbery gone awry. It could have happened to anyone. It had to have happened to him.

The two of them are out on the balcony. "Haruka, we need to talk", Makoto begins, with his brows so furrowed.

What is there to talk about when everything is clear in front if them? Rin admitted it was all his fault, so all they have to do is get on with their lives from here. The blame is on Rin, so Haruka and Makoto can get back together. Carry on with their usual lives. The life they had together.

"Haru," Makoto says with a shaky voice. "It's over between us."

The words fly past Haru's ears, not sinking in. Haru look away and out from the balcony. The sidewalks are grey and a flock of pigeons are fighting over some torn bit of bread. Haru lets the silence drag on, hoping the silence would consume them both.

Makoto clears his throat and tries again. "It's over between us, H-Haru." Makoto's voice wavers and breaks towards the end.

Haruka is angry. What is the whole point of this? What is the whole point of Rin showing up to shoulder the blame if Makoto is going to throw all that away? Why does Makoto insist on breaking up when they don't have to, not anymore now that Rin admits to having seduced Makoto?

*I didn't intend for us to break up, Makoto. I was ready to take you back. I came back for you. I was going to pretend that nothing ever happened. I'll overlook your mistakes if you overlook mine. This is...*
how we are, we accept each other's faults and all.

There is no one else who will accept all my faults. No one else who will not get angry even when I've done wrong.

I need you, Makoto. I need you to fix all of my broken pieces.

Don't leave me.

With a heavy sigh Makoto looks up, away from the distant spot he was gazing at and meets Haruka’s eyes. His face is kind, ever patient, a little chagrined but he looks like he will relent.

Even without saying a word, Haruka knows Makoto’s heard him. Makoto will take him gently by the hand, pull him close, and promise never to leave Haruka.

Makoto’s about to smile, that timid smile of his. He will apologise for having slept with Rin. Haruka will forgive Makoto, and wait for Makoto to hug him. Makoto will hold onto Haruka like Haruka's the only person in the world who has been there for him when he needed someone, and Haruka will be that person for Makoto. Haruka will be the person who protects Makoto from the evil reaches of the messy, complicated world whenever it threatens Makoto's fragile world.

"Ch-cherry blossom shower gel? Hah. I wouldn't have put either of you down for it but I guess you can't always predict what people do."

Rin.

In an instant, Makoto's focus is turned away from Haruka.

"Rin! You're done! Did you manage to find everything in the bathroom all right?"

The intruder has a towel draped over his head. His hair is still damp and he’s is rubbing at it with the towel, elbow raised level with his head. "Heh heh, yeah. You know, I'm guessing the cherry blossom shower gel is yours. Only because I recognised the bar soap as Sea Vegetable from Lush, and Sea Vegetable is definitely Haru's."

Makoto's lips are stretched thin with a patient smile. "Yeah, you got me," he replies with a forced chuckle and a shrug.

Haruka tries not to glare at Makoto. If Haru had known Rin would appreciate the cherry blossom shower gel so much he would have thrown Makoto's bottle away. Then bought one for himself. Would Rin have reacted in a different way if the soap belonged to Haru?

Rin seems to have finally noticed the tense atmosphere when he wipes the smirk off his face and replaces it with one of concern. "I hope I wasn't interrupting anything," he says softly. "Are you guys okay?"

How oblivious does Rin have to be? Can't he even read what's going on here?

Makoto shakes his head and takes a deep breath. "Haru and I have broken up," he says.

"What? No. Come on. You can't be serious."

Haruka's hands clench into fists. He glares at Makoto, demanding an answer. You were going to apologise to me and we were going to make up. You were going to apologise to me.

Haruka wants to scream but he can't. Is it Rin? Rin's fault again? Rin's fault for showing up and
"Please tell me you're not serious? Look, I came here to—I came here to fix you guys back together. Everyone knows you're meant to be. You can't just throw all that away. And all because of me? Like, come on, I'm nothing. I may be a total slut who sleeps with every guy that looks at me but I don't want to be the kind of guy that breaks couples up. Don't do this. It's my fault for sleeping with the both of you and I want you guys to be clear on this so that we can all just leave this in the past and move on. I'm not the relationship sort. The two of you clearly are. So. You know, don't let me ruin what you have. The two of you, you have such a wonderful thing going. Don't let me ruin it. I'm a disaster and I'm going to go away right after this but—please say you'll get back together? I'm sorry for being such a huge manslut."

"Rin—Rin, stop. Please. Don't talk about yourself like this." Makoto sounds incredibly pained.

"Don't—don't say it like I had no idea what I was doing. I'm not going to act like it was all down to a moment of weakness. I slept with you because I wanted to. I kept up all those emails because I wanted to. I'm not going to try and shift the blame. It's a fact I cheated on Haru, and that's where the wrong is. There's nothing wrong with you as a person, Rin. The problem is with what I've done. I will accept responsibility for it."

*You were going to apologise to me.*

*You were going to beg for my forgiveness.*

*Makoto!*

Makoto looks at Haruka squarely. "Haru, that's why I said I don't think we should be together anymore. I don't think I can give you the commitment you deserve. And...and you've always liked Rin, haven't you? You're free to pursue him now."

Haruka doesn't know what to say. Rin is standing there with his mouth opening and closing wordlessly like a goldfish and looks like he wants throw another fit. Makoto seems to catch that and clarifies his answer.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said—I meant to say, Rin is free to choose who he likes too. But I don't think it's fair for me to stay involved. If you don't mind, I'll find somewhere else to sleep tonight. I'll come back for my things at some point—but please let me go now." Makoto stops nervously twisting the hem of his t-shirt, purses his lips, and then steps towards the closet to throw a fresh set of clothes into his rucksack, which is not yet fully emptied of the things Makoto had packed for camp.

Rin looks at Haruka with a searching gaze, searching for help that Haruka is holding back.

Haruka says nothing.

Rin turns his back on Haruka, tsking under his breath. He approaches Makoto from behind and reaches out a hand to grab him by the elbow, stopping him from folding yet another t-shirt into his rucksack. There is a moment where Rin and Makoto's eyes connect, and Makoto immediately tries to shrug Rin off.

"You're hurting me, Makoto," Rin says in a clear voice. "Please stay."

A sense of indignation rises like the sinister tendrils of smoke from the burning, boiling vat of poison within Haruka. *Who is Rin to ask Makoto to stay? Who is Rin to come into their house and act like he can ask Makoto to stay?*

*How dare Rin...*
How dare Rin say the words that Haruka cannot say.

***

Now what?

Where do they go from here?

It's no use. It's no use just standing around staring at each other while the big question looms.

Now what?

Rin releases his grip on Makoto’s elbow, and Makoto thinks that he should get back to packing up but he can't bring himself to. It's not like he has a clear plan, it's not like he knows where to go if he steps out of the house. Most probably he was going to just check into an internet cafe and crash for the night, crash until he can find another life to start over with.

He wouldn't be able to face his friends, much less ask them for help, but maybe he can ask his coach? Coach Kimura might help him out but Makoto has no idea how much time it will take for him to find a new place to move into. Makoto has no idea if his bank account can withstand it, paying the rent on this place and the new one until he's divided everything of his life away from Haruka.

It's funny because Makoto will be left with so little after taking Haruka out of the picture. It will really be like starting a new life.

"M-Makoto. Don't leave," Haruka chokes out from where he's standing.

Don't leave me. Don't change things. Makoto can hear what he’s trying to say.

It would be so easy, to fall back into the patterns of what they know.

But—what Makoto is trying to do now, is that easy too? Haruka would accuse him of cowardice, of trying to run away, of abandoning him. Maybe it's because Makoto is trying to run away. But how can it be easy to run away from the only life you know to make a new one? That's not easy at all, shame on the people who think it is. It takes a hell of a brave soul to make a new life. Well, then is it the right thing to do? Is it right for Makoto to run away? For some, running away might be the only remaining option. But Makoto's not in a situation so dire he has to run away.

Somewhere between a coward and a goody-two-shoes lies Makoto, who lacks the bravery to let go and start anew, who was taught to always seek reconciliation as the right thing. Makoto who clings to the past and his friends and all the stories he's been told, even when the burden of the past and the demands of other people and the tired old narratives with their prescriptive "should haves" grow ever so heavy.

He closes his eyes, and gives in. "Okay, I'll stay. We don't have to decide on anything now, but let's talk it out, please?" He turns to them. "Let’s talk it out. We can’t – we can’t keep on not saying anything."

There is a huge smile of relief on Rin's face, which disappears when Rin gives a quick glance over to Haruka, who is blank-faced as usual.

Makoto knows Haruka doesn’t want to talk. But Rin is here, searching for answers. They have to talk. How can Makoto make them talk? If Makoto pushes things to the point of breaking, he can take the blame when things break. He'll have a real excuse to leave, then. Makoto lets his rucksack fall to
the floor as he takes a seat on the very edge of the couch. He folds his arms across his chest, fiddling with a wayward strand of thread on his shirtsleeve.

"Haru. Rin. The both of you mean a lot to me. We started out as friends, and I would like that to remain even if nothing else works out between us. And if the two of you decide to get together after this, you will have my support. That's all, I guess."

"And you? What about you?" Rin asks hastily.

"I'll find my own way. Don't worry about me."

"Makoto. What's your honest opinion of me? And Haru? What do you truly think of Haru?"

"Haru's my best friend. And Rin—you're a great friend—"

"Would you ever consider being in a relationship with me? Come on, honest opinion," Rin interrupts to challenge.

Makoto is keenly aware of Rin’s gaze on him but he can’t bring himself to meet it. "Honestly? It would hurt Haru too much, so, the answer is no," Makoto replies softly. It’s the truth but inwardly there is a twinge of pain almost too much to bear.

"Okay, I'll accept that." Rin looks away, at the ground, but seemingly regains his composure in a matter of seconds. Makoto feels awful that he can't offer any support to Rin, having hurt him with a rejection. Haruka's been standing silently in a corner—can't he see? If only Haruka can see how he can be the one to support Rin.

"Rin, what do you think of Haru? Would you consider being in a relationship with him?" If only Makoto can get Rin to confess how much Haruka means to him, Haruka will realise how easy it is to be the one that Rin needs.

Rin sighs heavily, falling onto the other end of the couch. "I've had a crush on Haru for like, forever, I'll admit that. I guess I've had a crush for so long it's just become a part of everyday life for me and I've found a way to get on with life despite it. And, you know, over the past year or so, I kind of found someone who made me really happy because, you know, he talks to me and asks me questions about my life and seems genuinely interested to hear me out and I thought—Haru doesn't do this to me, or for me. For the longest time I waited and hoped that Haru would say something to me, to say out loud that he's interested in me too, but—nothing. I'll only be in a relationship with Haru if he opens his bloody mouth and asks the fucking question himself, alright? Don't do it for him, Makoto. Don't you dare."

It stings. It really stings that Rin has to say all of this. Makoto's in a real bind now—he knows that Rin is right. Haruka has to be honest about who he wants to be with, it's the only way they can all move on. But Makoto knows well enough just how much Haruka hates talking about his feelings to know that this can end badly. It's just not a done thing, to ask Haruka to confront his feelings.

"So—Haru—what do you think? What do you really think of me? And what of Makoto?" Rin isn't backing down.

"I...I...love Makoto, and I...I love Rin too. I don't...I don't want to choose."

"That's not good enough, Haru. Who is Makoto to you? What does he mean to you? And who am I to you? If you can't answer this you can forget about keeping either one of us."

Makoto looks up from the ground and tries to make eye contact with Rin. Rin's going too far. Rin
has to know Haruka can't be pushed like that—but Rin cuts him off with an angry glare.

"So? Anything?" Rin prods with a nod at Haruka.

"Makoto is...he is the sun and moon to me. I...don't think I can live without him."

Makoto's arms fold tighter around himself. What is Rin trying to do?

Rin starts off with a frown but his expression softens. "That's uh, poetic. And—who am I to you?"

"You are...a bright spark. Like a shooting star."

Rin turns to Makoto with a look on his face like he wants to comment on Haruka's lack of literary finesse.

"Shooting star...not falling star, right? Fair enough, Haru. I like you, but I also kind of like Makoto, too. I could give either one of you a shot."

Makoto can feel two pairs of eyes turning on him.

"Your call, Makoto. This could go in several ways—you can pick Haru and I'll take my leave, or you can pick me and I'll try my best, or if you insist that Haru and I should get together, I'll give that my best too," Rin leans back into the wall behind him, with an unconscious scratch at his neck revealing pale, freshly-scrubbed skin. Rin is really attractive, even though this isn’t really the time for Makoto to admit to such thoughts. And Haruka’s still standing there, stock still, arms by his side, a looming presence that can’t be ignored.

Rin is trying to force a choice. But although he has not voiced it, Makoto feels the same as Haruka—a choice is too difficult to make at the moment. Makoto's heart is palpitating. He feels like he's getting a little lightheaded. His hands are scrunching the fabric of his trousers over his knees.

"What's with the choosing? I...like the both of you too," Makoto barely manages to answer.

"Th--that's perverse!" Rin recoils in horror.

"What?" Haruka shoots back almost instantly. "How is that more perverse than...stealing my boyfriend?"

"Your boyfriend wasn't stolen, he said it was his own volition!"

"Now now..." Makoto hurriedly cuts in before Rin and Haruka lunge at each other. "It's not common...but it's not unheard of either..."

"Threesome sex?" Haruka asks with genuine wonder, seemingly convinced it is what Makoto has in mind.

"No!...no...I meant a three-way—."

"Oh my god, you guys are perverts!" Rin exclaims huffily, crossing his arms defensively with a quick snap across his chest.

"—relationship?" Makoto tries to finish off, but he can feel the heat already rushing up his face to the tips of his ears. "I meant a three-way relationship...!" Makoto's voice virtually cracks from embarrassment towards the end.

This is all so wrong. Everything's gone wrong. I've made a mess of things. Makoto’s body burns
with the heat of his own shame. He tries not to squeak as he scampers off to the bathroom to hide. His face is so red. It's so inappropriate. What was he thinking, using words like "three-way"? They were just embroiled in a heated argument and Makoto was about to throw away his life as he knew it and someone had to bring up lewd insinuations and it's all Makoto's fault! He's trying not to scream at himself for undermining the seriousness of the conversation, for screwing everything up right when they were close to working something out. What if Haru takes the threesome thing too seriously? What if Haru wants to have sex now? What if...?

_I must be a vivid tomato red_, Makoto thinks, splashing his face repeatedly with cold water until he stops blushing from embarrassment. He unwittingly catches his reflection in the mirror, and then he realises—he might need a cold shower too.

***

"Um," Rin tries, punctuating the silence. "Um, Haru? Is Makoto okay?"

Haruka looks at him like it'll take too much effort to reply.

Rin scowls.

"He's just embarrassed. He'll get over it," comes the half-assed reply.

"Are we supposed to like, say anything? You know, uh, offer some comfort?"

"He'll be fine," Haruka tries to dismiss it.

_Um_, Rin thinks, but decides against saying any more. A moment passes, and Rin swears he can hear the shower being turned on. He has absolutely no idea what is happening. He's not a bloody mind reader.

The showering sounds only seem to intensify. There's some serious showering going on. Makoto has chosen to leave the conversation halfway to shower?! Huh? And here Rin thought Haruka was the only water-obsessed one.

"Is this normal?" Rin mutters at Haruka, no matter how futile it may be to expect a real answer. _Wait_—what if Makoto drowns himself in the bathtub?! What with all that talk about getting out of Haruka and Rin's way...

"He'll be fine."

"Do you think we should like uh..." Rin lets his voice trail off. He wants to say "do something", but do something is not concrete enough to penetrate Haruka's thick skull.

Haruka seems to catch Rin's drift. He gives Rin a pithy look, and begins to muse out loud. "...Surprise him in the shower? I tried that once...it was not a good idea..."

"Huh?!?!" Rin exclaims, alarmed and very, very appalled. "What on earth are you going on about, Haru?"

"I flung the curtains aside with the purpose of revealing myself, but it only gave Makoto the fright of his life and he wouldn't stop screaming. He slipped and almost cracked his head too. I could have put him in a coma."

Something clicks in Rin's brain. _Ah, yes_. Keep in mind that point about Haruka and Makoto being perverted weirdos. Rin is genuinely concerned about Makoto's wellbeing, not his own libido. The
thought hadn't even crossed his mind.

Goodness.

Haruka still seems enraptured by the memory. "Come to think of it, it was after Halloween night where Makoto's friends had insisted on watching a horror movie at their party."

"Um. I can imagine how traumatic it is," Rin tries to offer sympathetically since he's doing this bonding thing with Haruka. "Both for him and you."

"Nngh," Haruka emits by way of acquiescence.

The seconds extend into minutes as Rin finds himself facing Haruka while at a complete loss for relevant conversational topics.

"Um, Haru. Are we really doing this?"

This...three-way relationship. How does it work? How do they go on dates? They would need to set up group chats for all their nonsense.

Haruka looks at Rin quizzically.

"It sounds like a good idea to me," Haruka breathily admits.

Rin leans back into the couch with a sigh. "I guess you're right. But don't you think it feels too easy? Like, it's just way too simple a solution to a complicated problem."

"I..." Haruka begins but trails off. "I have something I want to share with you about Makoto."

"Hmm?"

"It's...it's my favourite thing about Makoto. I've never told anyone."

Rin bolts up from the couch, leaning forward to hear. Haruka's voice doesn't carry very far, damn him.

There is a flash of a moment where Rin realises he's leaning up close towards Haruka and it sends a thrill down his spine. Haruka's telling him a secret and hell, this is as intimate as it gets. When does Haruka ever tell Rin anything truly private?

"Makoto can get hard just from being screwed in the butt," Haruka confides like it's a classified state secret. "And he stays hard throughout."

What.

Rin accidentally chomps down too hard on his tongue as he tries to stop himself from yelling out loud.

What is Rin getting himself into?

When he said he liked both Haruka and Makoto, Rin had envisioned cultivating a deep relationship over time, over intimate dinners and all night chats. Rin did not imagine he was condemning himself into pervert hell where people delighted in all manner of unnatural fornication.

Haruka is looking at Rin, eyes shining with a quiet determination. "I'll let you try," he says in a hushed whisper to Rin.
Huh? Rin's brain is still valiantly keeping itself from explosion when Haruka makes some bold strides towards the bathroom and pounds on the door three times with a demanding rhythm.

"Makoto. Are you ready?" Haruka demands imperiously.

"I-I'll be done soon," comes Makoto's shy, nervous reply from behind the door.

_Oh my god_, Rin thinks, as he begins to suspect the whole thing is staged from the beginning. An elaborate, staged role play to implicate Rin into a night of kinky wish fulfilment. How could Rin have missed all this? And Makoto...? Wait. It all started when Makoto asked Rin to have a shower. That's it. That's where it started.

_Oh my god._

Makoto emerges from the bathroom fully clothed, actually, with the towel draped entirely over his head so that no one can see his face. _It's like a bridal veil?_ Rin thinks before he can stop himself, and then he wants to kick himself for falling into that same pit of depravity as Nanase Haruka.

Makoto claps his hands on his face, over the towel. "I'm sorry," Makoto begins to apologise, drawing out the last syllable. "I'm sorryyyyy for the interruption. I—I couldn’t continue that way."

"Shush," Haruka barks at Makoto. "There is something I want to show Rin."

"Ehh?!" Makoto asks quizzically as he lifts the veil—no—_towel_—oh-so-innocently away from his head. His face is imbued with a rather becoming pink blush.

"Now that we are in a threesome, let us consummate this special arrangement—" Haruka announces.

"Ehh?!" Makoto repeats with dawning horror.


"Hold up Haru, you don't get to boss Makoto about for sex—not with me around—" Rin cuts in, as if protecting Makoto’s um, virginal, um, not-virginal honour. Damn that veil—no—_towel_. It’s just a towel.

"It's okay, Rin. This is for you," Makoto gently persuades, a pretty smile blooming across his face, apparently having made a complete turnaround in the time Rin took to blink in staggered disbelief. How does Makoto latch on so quickly to the script? Rin still has no idea why and how things suddenly turned into this. Oh wait—it must be Haruka, the original perv, perv primigenius, avant-perv, perv bar none—who has ostensibly been thinking about sex the whole time.

_F-For me?!!_ Rin thinks. There are sirens going off in his head, like he should get out of this situation before it's too late but Makoto is coming for him on one side and Haruka on the opposite...

And Makoto and Haruka have him trapped in between.

The towel is still draped over Makoto's head in a bridal manner. "Are you sure about this?" Rin asks Makoto, as his fingers brush against the towel to slip it off Makoto's damp hair.

"I am sure about this," Haruka replies without hesitation from somewhere behind Rin, as Haruka begins nuzzling Rin from the back.

Makoto nods at Rin with a radiant, kind smile, and with a light brush of fingertips along Rin's jaw, he leans in to kiss Rin on the mouth. "We love you very much, Rin," he whispers in between kisses.
“We”? “We”?! Rin feels like he's being assimilated into the Borg here.

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It's unnerving to be surrounded by Makoto on one side and Haruka on the other. It's almost like being encased in a singular entity in all three hundred and sixty degrees. The way they move—the way Makoto and Haruka move, it's almost like it's choreographed. They simply don't get in each other's way, like they're communicating on some psychic level so that when Rin is kissing Makoto on the mouth, with Makoto's kisses so gentle and open, Haruka kisses Rin on the nape of his neck, with Haruka's hands wandering up Rin's shirt while Makoto caresses Rin by the cheek. When Rin turns his head to kiss Haruka, parting that tiny mouth of Haruka's with his lower lip, Makoto works his way down Rin's chest, rolling up Rin's shirt to let Haruka have a good feel of Rin's abs. When Rin leans forward to run his hands over Makoto's freshly showered body, he pushes his butt back to press into Haruka's crotch. When Rin leans backwards into Haruka, soft and pliant with an arm thrown back around Haruka's head, Rin pushes his crotch into Makoto's crotch, and Makoto bucks his hips into Rin in response.

From the back Haruka has wedged a venturing thigh between Rin's legs, so Rin widens his stance to let Haruka through. He falls back more onto Haruka as he rolls his hips gently along Haruka's thigh, which elicits a stunted grunt. It makes Makoto smile to hear Haruka and it puts Rin at ease to see Makoto's warm smile, as warm and welcoming as his mouth.

Rin can feel Haruka getting hard through the fabric of their pants, so he tries to catch Makoto's gaze with a quick dart of eyes towards the floor to let Makoto know that Rin intends to go down on Haruka. Up till now Rin has been trying to keep his attention evenly divided between Makoto and Haruka. Makoto nods in acknowledgement as Rin slides to his knees in front of Haruka, running his hands down Haruka's sides to stop, tantalisingly, at the waistband. Makoto steps up to close the gap where Rin was, and Haruka's eyes widen before he closes them to kiss Makoto hungrily. Haruka places a hand around Makoto's neck, fingers wrapping around Makoto's throat, thumb kneading into one side. Rin is momentarily distracted, watching the other two. Is this the way they do foreplay or...what? It looks like Haruka could choke Makoto anytime like this, and he's kissing Makoto really aggressively, but Makoto's only responding with these needy little gasps like he wants Haruka to go harder. It's kind of turning Rin on, but Rin's also trying to contend with a growing sense of general trepidation, like he wants to check in with Makoto if he's okay. Haruka moves to grab Makoto along the jut of his hipbones, and his fingers are digging in hard, harder, until it hits a point where Makoto raises a hand to where Haruka is grabbing him, gently massaging the back of Haruka's hand and Haruka loosens his grip to a level Makoto is comfortable with.

Rin shakes his head to himself, still trying to learn the ropes of Makoto and Haruka's intense nonverbal communication. He decides to get on with things the way he knows, catching his fingers on the rubber waistband of Haruka's thin cotton lounge shorts and pulling them down. He tugs at the shorts in the opposite direction he wants Haruka to step from, but Haruka has no idea what Rin wants and doesn't budge.

"Haru, step away," Rin commands, a tad annoyed.

There is a smile across Makoto's face as he opens his eyes to look at Rin. Makoto gently guides Haruka to step out of the tangle of fabric while Haruka remains preoccupied with hoovering his mouth all over Makoto's face.

Haruka is half hard, so Rin takes Haruka's cock between his palms and rubs it until it gets to full length. Haruka has a really nice cock, damn it. It is curved in the right way so as to be able to hit all the right spots every single time. Honestly, that guy has way too many natural gifts it's just not fair
for the rest of the world, Rin thinks, but quickly realises it's not something he should complain about if he can enjoy the benefits of this…blessing.

He cups Haruka's balls with one hand as he works his tongue slowly along the shaft, putting on his best expression of enjoyment in case any one of Makoto or Haruka cares to look. He sucks at Haruka's cock hungrily, and then pauses to become more teasing, holding back when Haruka is expecting more until Rin decides it's time to increase the pace again. With this rhythm of holding back, going in deep, holding back again and then going in slow, so slow until Haruka's knees are buckling and Haruka's almost begging until Rin takes in all of him in one shot, Rin gains control over Haruka, as Haruka begins losing his cool, sweat prickling through his skin.

One down, one to go. Rin makes eye contact with Makoto. *I can take two cocks at once,* Rin tries to say through the sultry look in his eyes. Rin can reach over and pull down Makoto's pants. He can have a cock in each hand, have the cocks meet where his mouth is while he pumps at both, see who comes faster, have them both jizz on his face—but Makoto doesn't seem to have the same idea in mind. After making eye contact, Makoto smiles warmly back at Rin as he peels the t-shirt off Haruka to trail wet kisses down Haruka's torso, down until Makoto is level with Rin, kneeling in front of Haruka.

Oh. Is this how they apologise? Sorry, Haru, for sleeping with each other without you, that one time in Rio. It's totally our fault for leaving you out. Really? Is this what this is? Makoto has his face wedged in the grove of Haruka's free-growing pubic hair, and Makoto is lapping at the base of Haruka's cock like an obedient puppy dog. Even the way Haruka has his hands tangled in Makoto's hair, it's kind of like a dog owner with their pet dog.

Rin realises that Haruka is looking at him with a tiny frown. Right, Haruka isn't pleased that Rin has stopped. It wasn't like Rin meant to stop, he was just…observing once more how it is like between Makoto and Haruka. Which is...utterly fascinating.

*I'm not going to let you monopolise Makoto,* Rin thinks indignantly at Haruka, and reaches out with a hand to touch Makoto on the chin, tilting his face away from Haruka's crotch so that Rin can kiss Makoto right there, in front of Haruka, just centimetres away from Haruka's protruding cock.

Sorry Haru, but your cock will have to wait.

Rin presses himself to Makoto, presses fervent kisses into Makoto's skin, his nose, his cheeks, his lips. To be honest, it's been too long, although Rin had given up hope on thinking he can taste Makoto again. One year's been too long to wait to get to have at this sweetness again, to get to feel safe and loved and taken care of, as illusory as these feelings may be when they happen during sex. Like a hungry child gorging on candy, Rin is just trying to stuff himself full of Makoto, but even a little bit of Makoto is more than enough to make him happy, just the little touch of Makoto's fingers to the small of Rin's back, or the lilting, warm call of Rin's name.

Rin feels something prodding at the side of his head. It's Haruka's cock. Rin looks up at Haruka to tsk at the intrusion but he sees that Haruka looks somewhat sheepish. It's probably accidental, then. Rin supposes Haruka's waited long enough for him too, so it's fine, Rin will turn his attention back to Haruka.

As Rin leans in to suck Haruka on the balls, he sees Makoto zero in on the tip of Haruka's cock with
puppylike excitement. Makoto easily takes Haruka in, Makoto's head bobbing up and down energetically as he has a noisy time of it with wet, smacking sounds that make Haruka shiver with pleasure.

Rin begins to feel a tad indignant that it's Makoto who's doing that to Haruka, not him, so he wrests Haruka's cock away from Makoto to go down on Haruka with all he can. Makoto looks at Rin with a concerned surprise, then smiles generously to let Rin know it's okay. They can both go down on Haruka. Haruka's going to go crazy, they'll make it a sure thing.

Rin is dragging his tongue in zigzags along the length of Haruka's cock, and Makoto peppers tiny kisses on the other side. Haruka's eyes have widened as he tries to process the sight in front of him, while Haruka's jaw goes slack with uncontrolled moans as Haruka is overcome with the reality of having Rin and Makoto go down on him at once.

Makoto and Rin take turns wrapping their lips around the head of Haruka's cock, leaving the other to work at the base. At times their fingers touch around Haruka's cock, at times they steal kisses while the other still has his lips around Haruka. When Haruka's balls stiffen and he's about to come Rin and Makoto share a side each of Haruka's cock and Haruka spurts with a garbled shout into both their faces.

Haruka is gasping for air and weak in the knees and the look on his face when he gets back to the present—to see the mess of his come webbed across both Rin and Makoto—that's a look Rin will file as one to remember.

Haruka slides to the ground, naked and exhausted, as he gazes distantly at Rin and Makoto with an expression that is a mixture of gratitude and pride.

It takes a while before Rin realises that in between Haruka's panting, Haruka has been trying to say something.

"At...at the start...I...I meant to suggest that Rin fuck Makoto..."

Right. That thing about Makoto that Haruka wanted me to see.

How ludicrous, Rin thinks, only to realise that Makoto is looking at him with that gentle, imploring face. Never in all his life has Rin encountered anyone with such an innocent, angelic expression.

"Fuck me?" Makoto asks, in a sugar-sweet cupcake voice.

"D-don't look at me like that!" Rin huffs indignantly, throwing a cushion at Makoto. "Not when you're asking to be pounded in the ass!"

"You can do it on the couch," Haruka interrupts. "The couch is a good place to start."

Rin glares at Haruka. Is Haruka going to be bossing him around on the best way to fuck Makoto for the whole time Rin will be at it?

There's never been a bigger boner killer if there's one. What if Rin gets stage fright and...can't perform? Haruka probably has some ridiculously stringent standards on how to fuck Makoto.

"Haru," Makoto coos sweetly. "I think we can let Rin explore by himself. It will be no fun with someone telling him what to do, no?"

Even though Makoto's right...Rin is feeling kinda weirded out about the way Makoto phrased it. Exploring Makoto...like what is Makoto supposed to be? Virgin land waiting for human explorers to
cultivate it? That's not how it works, Rin thinks with a stab of irritation. Where is...Makoto's sense of self?

They have shed all clothes and Makoto has lain back on the couch with his legs drawn open as if waiting for Rin, with a patient little smile.

Haruka is staring intently from a corner and knowing Haruka, he's probably salivating with voyeuristic excitement.

"I...I can't do this," Rin blurs out, feeling discouraged by all the eyes on him. "Shouldn't there be some kind of prep? Some foreplay?"

"You can foreplay if you want. No one's stopping you," Haruka replies without humour.

"This is too weird," Rin almost wails, panic rising. "I need help. Haru. Can you do something? Help."

Makoto's face falls as he hears what Rin says. "Rin, are you okay?" Makoto says in a soothing tone, brushing Rin's cheeks lightly with his fingertips.

There is an overflow of concern on Makoto's face. It's too much for Rin to handle. It's just too much. Why is Makoto so concerned about him? Why does Makoto have such huge reserves of concern? Isn't it painful, to care so much and so deeply? Tears prick at the corners of Rin's eyes. How does anyone deserve Makoto? How does anyone deserve Makoto waiting so patiently for them with--with open legs and open heart and open mouth and open asshole and everything?

"Rin--" Makoto can't stop calling out in that gentle tone of his, thumb wiping away at Rin's tears. "Rin, it's okay. You don't have to do it if you don't want to. It's okay."

Haruka has moved from his chair to crouch down beside Rin. "Don't cry, Rin," Haruka says. Haruka gets a look from Makoto, which Rin can't read, and then Haruka puts his arms around Rin and corrects himself: "Rin, you can cry if you want. I'll be here. We'll be here. For you."

The floodgates have burst. Rin falls into wracking sobs as he curls into Haruka while Makoto holds his hand. He doesn't deserve this. All his life he's never thought that anyone could, or should love him because he's on a different level. He's supposed to be on a different level where he gave up on human things like love, friendship, happiness so that he can achieve superhuman goals.

Five minutes later, Rin feels all cried out and, wiping the remainder of tears from his eyes, he chokes out in between sobs, "I...still want to see that sight you told me about, Haru."

Haruka jumps to attention. "I'll help," he declares in all seriousness. Turning to Makoto, Haruka raises two fingers and says, "Are you ready?"

Rin is still holding onto Makoto's hand as he watches Haruka get to work with Makoto. Haruka spreads Makoto's knees apart as he dives in for a rim job. Makoto's body twitches and twists in pleasure as Makoto squeals in adorable, puppylike yelps whenever Haruka hits a sweet spot. The condoms and lube have been laid out in preparation on the side table and Rin passes Haruka the lube when Makoto gets to a point where he's a writhing, begging mess, begging and begging for something to enter him.

Haruka lubricates his fingers with surgical precision, and with a verbal warning pushes one finger into Makoto. Makoto moans with relief, and Makoto is all flushed and sweaty on the couch, smiling at Rin as Haruka moves another finger in to spread Makoto wider. Makoto's hips buck, and as Haruka licks and fingers Makoto's asshole, Rin sees that Haruka is right, Makoto is getting hard all
without being touched on the cock.

Makoto’s moans are getting more constant, and after a while Rin realises that Makoto has been calling out to him.

"Rin...ah! I...ah...want you...ah, in my mouth...ah! Please."

Rin is hit by a flush of sudden embarrassment, stricken by how unashamed Makoto is about getting penetrated. Unwilling to disappoint Makoto, Rin nods and Makoto reaches out for Rin's cock, taking Rin's cock into his mouth as it grows into fullness.

Makoto’s mouth is so easy, so accommodating, even as the involuntary jerks of pleasure from being fingered by Haruka threaten to have Rin come into unpleasant contact with teeth. It doesn't happen, Makoto seems determined not to let it happen, and Makoto only breaks into throaty moans that reverberate around Rin's cock.

Makoto is fully hard from Haruka's fingering, his cock waving in the air like a beacon guiding ships to port.

Haruka is trying to catch Rin's eye. "Makoto's ready now. Do you want to fuck him?"

With a gasp Rin lets his cock fall out of Makoto's warm, lush mouth. "Can I?" Rin asks Makoto breathily, and Makoto nods sweetly.

Rin rolls the condom on with shaking hands, and lubes his cock generously for fear that Haruka would criticise him for using too little lube.

"Okay?" Rin calls out, a little hesitant, as he positions his cock to enter Makoto.

"Okay," Makoto replies with a cute laugh.

Rin throws another look at Haruka just to be sure, and Haruka returns with a serious nod.

Rin pushes into Makoto, and as he does, Makoto's cock does a little wavering twitch. It's just as Haruka described. *I'm so embarrassed*, Rin thinks to himself, as Makoto's cock twitches again when Rin tries to pull out.

Rin looks to Haruka for help. Haruka nods more fervently to egg Rin on. *Oh my god I'm fucking Makoto under Haruka's supervision, that's what this is*, Rin thinks, his embarrassment deepening.

"Rin," Makoto calls out. "Come up and kiss me."

Haruka gestures an OK and recedes a few steps back to watch from a distance. *Okay, okay, I gotta stop looking at Haruka for approval*, Rin thinks.

With some repositioning, Rin clambers over Makoto, and is greeted with a kiss from Makoto to put him at ease. Kissing Makoto back, Rin feels his nervousness melt away as Makoto runs soothing touches all over Rin's body. Rin goes slow with Makoto at first, pushing in slowly, grinding in a circle, pulling out slowly, until Makoto beckons him to go faster. Rin tries it a few ways until he finds the angle that makes Makoto dissolve in moans and puppy yelps, and Rin burrows his head in Makoto's chest as he concentrates on thrusting better and better, getting more and more response out of Makoto. Amidst the sweat Rin can still smell the freshness of Makoto's shower, how comforting all of Makoto is. Makoto is so fuckable, so incredibly fuckable, from how fresh and clean he starts out to slick of sweat and the muss in his hair that tells you you're doing your job at making him lose it. Makoto's so fuckable because he's so responsive, like the perfect sex toy if there ever was one,
attuned to all your needs and with all these little buttons that set off little reactions of delight. It's no wonder why Haruka guards Makoto so jealously but hang on, Makoto's not a toy. He's a real person and all the little reactions, like the puppy yelps and the loud moans and the begging, that's all part of the way Makoto enjoys sex and you know what, and it's all really hot to Rin.

It's incredibly hot the way Makoto's swollen penis is wobbling with each thrust, just like Haruka mentioned, and the way it's so huge and the way it wobbles—it really turns Rin on and the more Rin watches Makoto's cock the more hypnotic it gets—oh god Rin really wants to sit on that cock. Rin wants to sit on that cock and grind himself silly, until he's lost all brain function.

Rin is still thrusting into Makoto but with each thrust he gets further obsessed with the idea of grinding himself on Makoto's cock, until he is so overcome with need he pulls out of Makoto and scrabbles to hurriedly pull a condom on Makoto and Rin plants himself on Makoto's cock with a loud cry.

"Rin!" Makoto exclaims with concern, as Rin sinks further on Makoto's cock, letting Makoto fill him up inside, twisting his hips to and fro to let Makoto's cock fill him up all around.

From somewhere behind, Haruka stands up from his chair with considerable alarm, causing the chair to scrape and rattle against the floor. "Rin," Haruka barks, like he's shocked at Rin's failure to fuck Makoto through to completion.

"I'm sorry Haru," Rin wails, overcome by the singular goal of grinding away on Makoto's cock until his brain oozes out of his ears. Don't be disappointed in me.

"No, it's okay," Haruka suddenly replies, snapping into focus. "I will take over the duty."

What duty, it's just sex, Rin thinks, but at this point something frizzles in his mind as his fervent grinding on Makoto hits a pleasure point.

Rin is aware of Haruka coming up behind him, as Haruka leans in to kiss Rin on the shoulder. "Stop moving for a while," Haruka commands.

Rin is getting too messed up to protest so he does as he's told, falling onto Makoto while gasping for air. Makoto brushes his fringe aside and kisses Rin sweetly, but the kisses are interrupted with a long gasp from Makoto as Rin presumes this is the point where Haruka has entered Makoto, so Rin starts grinding madly again, grinding with all he's got.

Makoto is reduced to incoherent moaning as he gets to have Rin on one end and Haruka in the other. We make a good team, huh, Rin thinks with some small measure of pride at Haruka. It's their turn to drive Makoto crazy.

It's crazy because Rin can practically feel when Haruka moves inside Makoto, it's like Rin can feel an extra thrust through Makoto, and it makes him want to ride Makoto's cock harder. Rin can feel Haruka's hands all over his back and torso, Haruka is embracing Rin from behind while fucking Makoto continuously, and Rin is just bouncing mindlessly off Makoto's cock because it's crazy, it's crazy how good this is making him feel, when he can lean back into Haruka and kiss Haruka while Makoto's cock fills him up inside and Rin feels like he's on the verge of losing his mind. Rin wants more, more, more and there's something so insatiable in Rin it's driving him crazy.

"Haru," Rin gasps out, as he feels another satisfying thrust from Makoto, who has a bright flush fanning out from his chest all the way to from the tips of his ears, who is weakly trying to hold himself together in face of the onslaught from Rin and Haruka. The way Haruka is fucking Makoto to the point of oblivion, Rin wants that too. Rin wants what Haruka is giving Makoto too. "Haru,"
Rin gasps again from sheer neediness. "Fuck me—haah—fuck me too."

Haruka stops moving for a second while he pauses to consider. "Don't you already have Makoto?" Haruka breathily points out.


"Is-is that possible?" Makoto squeaks, burying his tomato-red face into a cushion as Haruka thrusts particularly hard, so hard that Rin can feel it too.

"Yeah," Rin pleads, throwing in a few moans of pleasure. "Lots of lube. We can do it with lots of lube. I need you—" Rin almost screams with desperation, willing Makoto and Haruka to listen to what he's saying—"I need you both inside me. I want you. I want you both. Lots of lube, okay? And it'll be fine. Lots of lube."

*It's you I'm worried about*, the expression on Makoto's face seems to say, as Makoto peers at Rin from behind the cushion. I can handle it, Rin thinks with a tender heart at Makoto, but Rin realises that the one he needs to prod along is Haruka.

"Haru, get in me," Rin commands, determined.

Haruka's stopped moving as he gets lost in thought once more. Haruka pulls out of Makoto in a slippery move, and whips the condom off to replace it with a new one. By now, Rin feels like he can trust Haruka to be generous with the lube, so he takes some deep breaths to prepare himself.

"How do I get in?" Haruka asks after a while, apparently befuddled in spite of his expertise.

"Just shove it in," Rin huffs dismissively.

Rin feels Haruka rubbing a well-lubricated cock around his entrance, already stretched out with the fullness of Makoto. Makoto ends up releasing a little gasp when Haruka's venturing cock slides up against the base of his own cock.

"I-I can't. It's too tight," Haruka mutters with another half-hearted prod at Rin. Makoto looks like he's getting too close to the edge with Haruka's wet cock slipping alongside Makoto's with all the failed attempts to enter Rin.

Rin is getting annoyed. At this rate, Makoto's going to come before Rin can have the both of them inside of him.

"J-just shove," Rin huffs again, reaching back with his fingers to widen himself for Haruka.

Rin's annoyance seems to spur Haruka into annoyance, which leads Haruka to quit dawdling around, and with a little help, Haruka pushes into Rin in a quick move that has Rin falling atop Makoto with a shout. Makoto immediately grabs Rin's hand with a reassuring squeeze.

They're doing this.

Rin is feeling impossibly stretched out in a way he hasn't felt before. It's good, Rin thinks, despite the initial hurt just to get both cocks in. It's good now, it's good as Haruka's assiduously adding more lube, it's good as Haruka attempts to do a long thrust, it's good with all the reassuring touches from Makoto.

As Haruka slides in and out, with slow, long pulls, Makoto seems to dissolve into a quivering mess.
“Rin, you're so tight! Ah! It feels so good! It feels so good to be right next to Haru...” Makoto exclaims, voice stretched as if Makoto is on the verge of breaking, tears squeezing through his tightly shut eyes.

"Rin," Makoto calls again, eyes slowly opening. "Rin, is it good for you too? Are you feeling good?"

Makoto's questions drift past Rin's ears. Rin wants to reply, but he's feeling so full, so strangely sated it's almost like he's floated off into another plane. Vaguely, Rin is aware that he's teary yet smiling, clutching onto Makoto loosely with one hand. It's amazing, the thought surfaces in Rin, like breaking though water to see the shimmer of the sun in the waves. Haru's so amazing, Rin thinks, the smile on his face getting wider. The way Haruka moves inside of him is so amazing, so industrious. The way Haruka moves is making Makoto so happy. Haruka's amazing for being the only one with enough presence of mind to keep thrusting. Makoto seems to have reached a point of total bliss, his fingers squeezing hard against the cushion his face is buried under. Why is Makoto so shy? I want to see Makoto's face, Rin thinks, but his thoughts are muddling through the dense fog of Haruka's beat, Haruka's steady pounding that feels so good, so relentlessly good.

"I-I'm coming," Makoto emits in a thin voice from behind his cushion. "It's-it's too good. Rin, Haru, you're both too good."

Rin is only dimly aware of Makoto's words, feeling at the height of contentment. Rin tries to settle down on Makoto's broad chest to close his eyes and be lulled to sleep with Haruka's rhythmic thrusts, but is rudely interrupted when Haruka reaches over to rip the cushion away from Makoto's blushing face.

"H-Haru..." Makoto's breath hitchs. Rin raises a lazy arm to swat at Haruka. *Don't steal Makoto's pillow,* Rin thinks for inexplicable reasons.

"Mmmngghff," Haruka replies, and it's too much effort for Rin to figure out what Haruka means.

Makoto's breaths are getting shallower, and Haruka's breaths are getting shallower. Rin starts laughing, for no reason at all, except that he simply feels so happy in this moment, and at some point Rin is dimly aware that Haruka and Makoto are making a lot of noise but Rin is too happy to care, happiness is coming to him in little waves that ebb and flow and Rin is warm all over and everything feels so indescribably blissful, and Rin is laughing, laughing, and then Rin crashes into a deep sleep.

***

Haruka is rudely awoken with a start. There is a rustling noise in the kitchen.

*What's going on?*

Haruka feels a weight on his arm and it's Makoto, sound asleep and curled up in all of the blanket. Slowly, Haruka tries to roll out of the flattened couch and steps on a slimy, squelchy thing on the floor.

In the kitchen, there is more rustling and a dim light comes on.

Haruka looks down. He’s stepped on a used condom.

*Gross. Who threw it there?* Haruka thinks with a frown, and then recalls it was himself.
He groggily stumbles into the kitchen to find Rin hunched over a box of bite-sized cookies, cramming them by the fistful into his mouth.

"What are you doing?" Haruka demands.

Rin spins around with an expression like a deer caught in headlights. His cheeks are puffy from an overload of cookies and when he speaks Haruka can see the crumbs spilling out from his mouth.

"Haru! I-I was ravenous. Like, really hungry. Sorry. Late night munchies." Rin shrugs.

Do you want me to cook something for you, Haruka thinks.

"Yeah, um, really sorry. I've gone through one packet of Pocky, five bars of Kit Kat, one packet of seaweed, two slices of cheese and now...these cookies," Rin guiltily admits.

*It's okay,* Haruka thinks, and moves to get some pots and pans out of the kitchen cabinet.

"W-what are you doing, Haru?" Rin asks in a raised whisper.

"I can cook," Haruka replies with a smidgen of irritation that Rin can't tell what Haruka intends to do.

"Nah, it's okay Haru. I'm almost full from the snacks."

Haruka looks at him from the corner of his eyes. Fine. He returns the saucepan to the cabinet shelf and closes the door.

"What time is it, Haru?" Rin asks.

Haruka looks around—they don't really have a clock in the kitchen. He usually checks the time on his computer, or by asking Makoto.

He shrugs.

"Jeez," Rin mutters, and then digs around his pockets for his phone. "Huh? It's already six a.m.!

So? Haruka thinks, watching him chew down the cookies.

"This is a bit of an odd question, but of all people I think you would know. Where's the nearest pool? Big enough for me to swim laps in."

Haruka continues staring. *Training?*

There is a sudden lump in his throat. *What time did they fall asleep last night? Isn't Rin exhausted from all the sex?* After all, Rin was the first to give way into sleep. Is Rin honestly going to train at the pool barely a few hours after all that physically strenuous sex?

*Skip training for a day. Lie on the couch with me. Let me play with your hair while you munch on more cookies.*

"...You don't know?" Rin prods questioningly. "I need to keep up with my routine," he pleads, anxiety settling in on his face.

Haruka's heart wrenches involuntarily. *Rin is so hardworking. How many other people are there on earth who can come close to Rin's work ethic?* He spins around and heads back into the bedroom, digging around in the dark until he finds Makoto's wallet.
"Rin. Take this," Haruka declares, holding out Makoto's season pass to the national gymnasium. "This is where Makoto goes to swim. You can take the train from here—it's half an hour away."

Rin looks at Haruka, seemingly captured and grateful. He takes the pass, their fingers touch, and he gives Haruka a smile for that but quickly looks away to inspect the pass with too much feigned concentration.

"Hey—wait. Haru. Did you just take Makoto's stuff without asking him?" Rin questions incredulously.

Why is Rin asking such inane questions?

"Jeez, Haru, do you guys really not have any boundaries?" Rin tsks.

Haruka looks away. Rin is right. Haruka didn't ask Makoto for permission to take his things. There's a twinge of guilt winding its way up Haruka's heart. He's never really...asked for Makoto's permission about a lot of things.

Rin shrugs at Haruka again and turns for the bathroom where he left his bag last night. "If Makoto's looking for it, just say I took it. You can sort out the rest of the story."

From where Haruka can't see him, Rin calls out, "Hey, Haru." His voice is tender, threaded with fondness. "Since I'll be in the city, do you want to go out for lunch? I can meet you after I'm done training."

He emerges from the bathroom with his cap on his head and his bag around his shoulder.

Don't go, Haruka thinks. Don't leave me.

Rin is waiting for a response.

"Yeah, okay," Haruka mumbles, looking away from him. "We can have lunch."

Rin turns to leave.

Don't you know? Haruka thinks, gazing at the shadow of Rin. Don't you know that whenever you leave you take my whole heart with you?

Rin turns back with a bright smile at Haruka, and then presses a huge kiss to Haruka's lips.

"I love you, okay? Haru—I love you, I've loved you—for such a long time and I didn't think I'll ever get to say it to your face. So I'll say it now—I love you, Haru."

Don't cry, Haruka thinks at himself.

"See you for lunch, Haru," Rin says with a big wave, and he steps out of the door laughing softly.

Haruka closes the door behind Rin, and then leans on it while lost in thought. Rin comes and goes, and Haruka still feels like he can never be sure when Rin will come back, or if he will return at all.

If you say you love me, why did you only call Makoto when you showed up?

***

"Haru...Haru...."
Haruka opens his eyes. He had gone back to sleep after Rin left the apartment for the pool.

Makoto shakes him by the shoulder again. He is fully dressed, and his facial expression is particularly worrisome. Haruka groggily props himself up from the couch and he sees that Makoto has his rucksack packed. Makoto’s leaving too? Where on earth can Makoto go? This is absurd.

"Haru, your mother just called me..." Makoto begins, in his gentle, placating tone.

"What is it?" Haruka snaps, willing him to get to the point.

"You have a flight to catch. Right now."

What?

"Haru, I'm not kidding..."

Are you fucking serious? Haruka wants to yell. Why does no one ever tell me anything?

"Haru..." Makoto soothes. "Your mother tried to call you many times but she says she couldn't get through. She wants you to go back to Iwatobi. Your family is the only one that hasn't moved out and the developers are bringing forward the construction start date, so you'll have to get all your stuff out by the end of the holidays. She says she's sent you an email with your flight details. She bought a ticket for me too, so I can help out."

Haruka looks away, trying to ignore Makoto while he processes all the information. He catches sight of his backpack alongside Makoto's—Makoto must have packed his things for him.

"Haru, we need to leave now," Makoto says.

We can't leave. Rin just got here. It's too much too fast. Haruka's only just returned from a long-haul flight a couple of days ago.

"Rin? What about Rin?" Haruka demands furiously, angry with his parents for one, and maybe he's angry with Makoto too, for waking him up and dumping a fuckton of shit on him.

When did Haruka's mother call? Haruka hasn't received any bloody calls. He springs to his feet, tearing his desk apart for his cell phone in a fit of rage.

"Haru, what are you doing? You need to get changed! We need to leave now! The flight's at noon!"

"My phone," Haruka growls at Makoto, one arm outstretched.

Makoto reaches into his left pocket to retrieve Haruka's cell, placing it squarely in Haruka's palm. The phone is fine, the buttons work and all. He scrolls through his recent call list, and it doesn't seem like he's received any calls since he got back.

It is then he notices the time.

"Did you say the flight's at noon?"

According to Haruka's phone, it's already noon.

And then—shit shit shit.

It hits Haruka that his phone has been stuck on Australia time because—his phone has been on
When he disables airplane mode, a flood of angry messages come in from his mother belatedly. There is a slew of missed calls from Rin dating back to the evening past. So Rin did try to call Haru after all, not just Makoto. Haruka feels guilty for some reason. Guiltier still, that they now have to leave Rin in Tokyo.

"Let's go," Haruka says.

Running to the station, they hop on the train towards the city. By the time they get to the domestic terminal at Haneda they'll only be just in time if they're lucky.

"About Rin—" Makoto begins once they're on the special rapid service towards Tokyo station. "I have no idea where he went. He wasn't around when I woke up. I tried calling him but he didn't pick up either, and I left him a message—but he hasn't replied."

"He's at the pool," Haruka interrupts impatiently, as if Makoto had forgotten all about it.

"Pool?" Makoto asks, and Haruka realises that he can't get mad at Makoto for not knowing because Makoto wasn't awake at the time.

"Yeah, Rin got up at about six in the morning and suddenly panicked about missing out on training, so I gave him your gym pass to use."

"Oh—so that's where he went," Makoto muses. "I guess he must be swimming right now, that's why he isn't picking up the calls. I sent him a message to apologise that we'll be caught up for the whole of today and we'll try to return tomorrow, although your mother wants you to stay for Obon. I guess I can head back to Tokyo first, and you can join us when you're done. I don't know when Rin is leaving though, so I'm not sure if we can even catch him before he has to go back to Australia."

Makoto is just babbling on, and the train sways a tad too violently and Haruka grabs onto a handle for balance, trying to quell his directionless rage. He's angry with his parents but he has no right to be. They had agreed that Haruka could skip Obon this year, why are they calling him back now? Haruka is angry with Makoto but he has no right to be, either, not when Makoto is doing all he can to help Haruka in this moment. Haruka is angry with Rin but this is just as undeserved, it's not like Rin has any hand in what's happening to Haruka's home in Iwatobi.

Hang on.

Just before Haruka left for Melbourne, he’d said some stupid things to Aki to explain his absence. Haruka had said—and he thought he was conjuring some ridiculous lie—that the property developers who bought up his old house were going to chase them out early.

They were only supposed to clear the plot by the end of October.

 Fucking karma.

His fists clench as he realises that the only person he might want to punch is himself, for tossing about careless lies.

Anger swells all over, pushing him nearer to a boiling point where everything that spills from him will be ugly. Haruka hates everything right now, from the inertia of the train pulling in and out of stations that causes him to jerk back and forth, to his burden of a backpack that adds to his imbalance. Haruka hates the young kids laughing about some joke by the next door of the train, and he hates the middle-aged lady standing two inches too close into his personal space. Haruka hates,
I was supposed to meet Rin for lunch, he suddenly recalls, and then notices Makoto looking at him quizzically.

"I can send him another message to apologise for that," Makoto hurriedly supplies the solution.

Haruka leaves him to type away at his phone while he looks at his shoes out of guilt.

"Makes us such assholes though," Makoto says quietly under his breath. "Leaving him alone in Tokyo just like that."

Makoto's worrying about everything again. It's not that Makoto's wrong, but Haruka feels like it's something they can't do anything about so they'll just have to let this one go and hope for the best.

"Rin has his family here," Haruka offers, hoping it will quell Makoto's worrying before it becomes contagious. "Rin can look for them when we're not around. We'll just have to find some other way to make up for this."

Makoto nods and doesn't say anything else. It is a quick change to the train for Haneda, and at the terminal Haruka finds himself caught in a mad dash all the way right up until he finally boards the plane for Tottori with Makoto right behind him.

"Thank you for agreeing to go shopping with me," Gou says to Rei when they meet up at the station. It's a muggy summer day and Gou presses the side of her chilled water bottle to her face.

"No problem! I needed to buy some office attire too, so this is a perfect opportunity."

The sunlight is glaring and the air is filled with the musty smell of evaporating drains. It is the weekend but the crowds are thinning.

"Seems like everyone's going home for the holidays, huh?" Rei says. "My brother was posted to Singapore for work, so my parents decided to take a vacation to visit him."

"So that's why, Rei-kun. I didn't expect you to be a fellow Obon orphan this year."

"Yes, it is nice to have company. And what about you, Gou-san?"

"The usual," Gou smiles. Her brother's in the opposite hemisphere and her mother is away on a golf trip with her business associates.
With Rei, Gou plans to purchase some work-appropriate outfits in preparation for an internship. She doesn't intend to spend much time on the shopping—it really isn't her thing to stand around and browse for hours, and blazers and shirts are really not exciting enough to warrant so much of her time.

They head to the women's department first. Gou manages to select, try on, and purchase a rotation of three outfits all in the space of fifteen minutes. After, they take the escalator to the men's department, and Rei immediately gets into a conundrum trying to choose between two pairs of trousers. In truth, they look almost identical to Gou, and boredom creeps up on her because there really isn't much by way of eye-candy in the men's department. The posters and mannequins all feature fully-clothed men and muscles are short in supply. She wanders off to find a seat, leaving Rei to agonise over a series of merino wool sweaters for the fall—v-neck? round neck? navy blue? forest green? deep crimson?

Gou finds an array of benches that allow her a good view of the underwear section, and she indicates to Rei that she will be resting there. There are posters of accomplished famous people dressed in the undershirts, declaring in a quote their love for the underwear material. It feels like such a glaring omission to Gou that her brother is not one of these models. Her brother has the kind of physique that will improve underwear sales by 1000%.

The buzz of her phone breaks the monotony in the day. Gou looks at the caller ID, and to her surprise, it's her brother. Speak of the devil.

"Hello?"

"Gou. What are you doing right now? Are you free?"

"Onii-chan! Why do you ask? I'm supposed to be shopping, but I've bought everything I wanted and it's getting boring."

"Oh! That's great. Do you want to have lunch?"

"Lunch? Aren't you...? Onii-chan, where are you right now?"

"Um. Tokyo," her brother replies vaguely.

Gou instantly jumps up from her seat, as if she were brought back to life. "Onii-chaaan!!! What are you doing in Tokyo? Which part of Tokyo?"

"Uh...where are you? Let's meet for lunch. I've got nothing to do and I'm hungry."

"Onii-chan..." Gou repeats, feeling suspicious about her brother's true intentions. "Well, I'm in Ginza right now, you can come and meet us. I'm with Rei-kun actually, but I don't think he'll mind if you show up. There's a cafe next door, shall we meet there?"

"Sure, what's it called?"

"Rose Bakery."

"A bakery? Do they serve savoury food?"

"Yes of course, onii-chan," Gou replies. I'm not trying to trick you into eating sweets, silly. And then it suddenly occurs to her—"It's at the top floor of Dover Street Market, by the way. The one in Ginza." That nugget of information should seal the deal with her brother.

"Oh..." her brother says, tone changing from apprehensive to ponderous. "I'll give it a try."
"Rin-san, what brings you to Tokyo?" Rei asks, as the three of them settle into an empty table at the bakery.

"It's unexpected, yeah," Rin says. "But it seemed like a good time to see my family.... Hey, where's Nagisa?"

What kind of answer is that? Gou thinks incredulously. And changing the topic so quickly! Her brother is clearly hiding something. It isn’t part of his repertoire to drop in unexpectedly on his family. Whenever he has had to come back, he's always discussed it with their mother—usually because their mother pays for the flight as well.

Rei replies that Nagisa is in Osaka for some filming business, to which Rin halfheartedly follows up with more questions. For someone claiming to be excited to see his family, her brother sure spends a lot of time glumly checking his phone.

Gou's suspicions only increase.

The next time Rin checks his phone Gou pretends to steal some food off his plate, so she can lean in close and catch a glimpse of his messages.

She doesn't manage to see much. The name is in three characters, and—without letting her imagination run wild, Gou has a pretty strong feeling her brother has been attempting to message Tachibana Makoto.

Isn't Makoto-senpai supposed to be away on summer camp?

Gou has a sudden strong urge to say this out loud to Rei, just to see how her brother would react, but it seems a tad too cruel for a younger sister to do so she lets it slide.

Rin complains about the portion sizes of the food—his burger is too small, and it is accompanied with more vegetables on the side than there is meat in the patty—and how dare Gou take the precious little of his burger away from him!

Gou innocently suggests that her brother could order another serving. Rin waves it off, saying he'll find somewhere else to eat if he gets hungry in a couple of hours.

As Rei tries to recount his sweater conundrum to Rin, Rin, who has been staring at his phone, suddenly says to them, without any context—“Do you think a person can make it to Iwatobi by tonight?”

It's like someone has broken the glass to the fire alarm in Gou's brain. There is the wail and blare of sirens. "A person"?!?! If Makoto-senpai is helping Ama-chan-sensei at camp, and the camp finishes in time for everyone to return to their families for Obon, and if onii-chan wants to go to Iwatobi...does that mean onii-chan is in Japan to see Makoto-senpai???

Onii-chan...Makoto-senpai is a taken man...he is with Haruka-senpai...do you not have any moral qualms about this?

The reality is that Gou has absolutely no idea what is going on, and that in all likelihood she has let her imagination run wild...but what is true love...if not running after the one you love for a final confession? This must be very important to her brother....

"Onii-chan! Why Iwatobi?!!"
Her brother looks stricken with surprise, and regret washes into his face for mentioning Iwatobi.

"Uh...uh...don't you think we should be tending to dad's neglected grave?" Rin mutters warily, and Gou knows for sure something fishy is up, although she has no idea what. Their father's grave is a little neglected though, since none of them live close enough anymore.

"Onii-chan! In that case...let's be filial children together!"

Her brother narrows his eyes at her, as if questioning her true intentions. "Um...yeah, why not? Let me check for tickets..." Rin begins apprehensively, whipping out his phone and searches around for available tickets. Rei has a look of extreme confusion on his face, so Gou drags Rei off to buy some cakes as dessert, and hints to Rei that Rin is going through a state of emotional turmoil and they should be supportive.

They return with an assortment of pastries, both savoury and sweet. Rin declares that all the plane tickets are sold out for the weekend and leans back into his chair, defeated.

"Regardless, let's have a good weekend together!"

"Yes, Rin-san! We will make the best of our time together!" Rei adds in.

Gou pushes the plate of carrot cake in her brother's direction and persuades him to take comfort in it, which he does, particularly as it has a generous layer of savoury cream cheese topping.

With a coffee to top it off, Rin indicates that he would like some retail therapy at Dover Street Market, so Gou and Rei tag along, a worry mounting in Gou that her brother has fallen into a treacherous rabbit hole from which there is no rescue. Never fall in love with a married man, is the thought that echoes in her mind, a lesson gleaned from a saturation of literary romance.

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"Onii-chan, you don't need a new wallet."

"Well then. Gou, it's time you replaced that ratty old thing of yours."

"Onii-chan, I don't need a new wallet either. And it's not ratty!"

This seems to upset her brother more than is necessary so Gou gives up and decides to allow him to shop away to his heart's content. If nothing else, maybe her brother needs a moment of distraction. And if it makes him happy...a small treat doesn't hurt from time to time, right? Gou stumbles upon Rei trying on an avant-garde vinyl trench coat of a holographic material, and decides to compliment him on the bold choice.

"It's not like I can afford it anyway, Gou-san," Rei sighs resignedly, having returned the trench coat to an attentive store employee who is now out of earshot. "I hope Rin-san is okay," Rei adds.

"Let him buy something if it makes him feel better," Gou says. "And as for us normal people..." she shrugs, at a loss, feeling like she doesn't know how to help her brother. Their Uniqlo plastic bags rustle forlornly by their side in sympathy, filled with affordably-priced blazers and office slacks.

It feels like there is a rift, sometimes, between the world Gou inhabits versus the world her brother inhabits. She loves her brother too much to ever resent him for it, but when he's trying to buy an expensive leather cardholder for the sole purpose of containing travel cards which don't have a lot of value in themselves, she finds herself worrying if her brother puts too much store in material goods because he doesn't have enough emotional support in his life.
But Makoto-senpai...is the wrong person...for this job...

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"R-Rin-senpai!"

Rin looks up from the glass counter on which a store assistant has placed the limited edition cardholder design for his browsing pleasure. With this cardholder, Rin can separate his travel cards from his wallet, which will save him the trouble of having to extract his whole wallet in order to tap in on a bus or train, which means a smaller chance of having stuff fall out from his wallet, although Rin's never really had stuff fall out from his wallet before but he's seen it happen to people. Which is as good an excuse as any to buy a cardholder, mind. Besides, it's new and shiny and sleek and cool, and it will make him look especially cool when getting in and out of public transport, and if either one of Makoto or Haruka has the chance to see him look this cool, well, let's call an ambulance for their emergency nosebleeds. No, Rin's not angry at them. Rin's not angry at all, as he takes out Makoto's seasonal gym pass from his pocket to test the cardholder with, and thinks about the morning with Haru in the kitchen, with the promise of a nice lunch all up in flames. So much for thinking there would be a new start.

"Ai?"

"Rin-senpai!"

"What are you doing here?" Rin asks, and then realises he's the anachronistic one.

"M-my sister wanted to buy something, s-so I'm just helping her!" Nitori stammers. There is an awkward silence.

"Well, I'm here to visit my family," Rin offers, feeling like Nitori is curious but knowing Nitori doesn't dare to ask.

"Oh, for Obon? That's always nice, isn't it?"

"Yeah..." Rin replies distractedly. "Are you going back this year?"

"Of course, you know my parents will insist on it. I'm actually...headed home right after this, Rin-senpai. This is a last minute pit stop for my sister."

"Ah, are you taking the bullet train?" Rin mutters absentlymindedly, as he tries to look at the zip wallets of the same limited edition material. Why doesn't Gou need a new wallet? Can't she show some support for her brother right here? Is it so cheesy for siblings to have matching accessories? Oh, hmm, she's with Rei. Why are they so far away? What are they doing?

"Oh..." Nitori is suddenly evasive, which prompts Rin to look up from the counter at Nitori.

"I-I'm flying there, actually..." Nitori stammers, abashed.

"That's nice," Rin says, and he tries not to show any resentment in saying it. "I kind of came back last-minute and all the tickets back to Iwatobi have been booked out."

"Oh! Have they! Well, I suppose they would be..."

"Yeah...sucks," Rin decides on purchasing the reddish-violet version of the limited edition cardholder.
“What about the train? Surely there must be seats available?” Nitori asks, genuinely concerned.

Rin grimaces. The train would take a really long time and he would have to make a few transfers, which seems like an unpleasant hassle, and there would be no one to pick him up from Tottori, which means extra trouble finding a taxi that will take him all the way to Iwatobi, so—all in all—too much work to overcome.

Nitori looks thoughtful for a moment, and then pipes up, "Rin-senpai. I do not mean to be presumptuous, but if it suits your plans, please accept the offer of a lift from me!"

The store assistant passes Rin a paper bag containing his latest purchase, neatly tied up with a grosgrain ribbon.

Rin realises he must have been staring at Nitori for too long when Nitori nervously continues babbling.

"R-Rin-senpai. It may not be that helpful after all, since I will only be able to take you as far as Osaka Airport. How you get to Iwatobi from there...is another question...and I regret being limited in my capacity to assist..."

"Ai. What are you going on about?"

"I-I-I could give you a lift to Osaka, Rin-senpai! It is half the distance from Tokyo to Iwatobi. You might be able to catch a direct train from there."

"Lift? Ai, didn't you say you were fl—"

Oh my god.

Customarily, an offer such as this should be rejected. It's just not the done thing...it would be impossible to repay such a debt.

"Ai, don't worry about it. It's just too much bother."

"B-But Rin-senpai! I am serious! It is ecologically beneficial for you to take a lift and you will be closer to your destination!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, Rin-senpai! If you come with me, the environmental impact of our travel will be split amongst two, instead of one..."

Rin’s shopping bag is almost slipping from his fingers as his grip had loosened while he was lost in thought. Going to Iwatobi has crystallised into actual possibility. In a far corner of the store, he sees Rei and Gou chatting gravely to themselves. It wouldn't be right for him to drop the two of them just to go to Iwatobi either...

"Ai, if I came with a cargo load of...a few extra people...would that change your offer?"

Nitori's expression brightens. "Rin-senpai! It would further divide our ecological burden!"

I could kiss you, Rin thinks at Nitori, but then realises it would be super awkward and totally regrettable. Nitori's just being a great friend, expecting nothing in return, and it would be trite of Rin to...turn it into anything else. Rin beckons to his sister and Rei, but they only wave back at him.

"Ai. I suppose you don't mind if my sister and the glasses dude come along?"
"Ryuugazaki-kun? Of course not."

Nitori remembers the name. Nitori is amazing.

"Ai. How and where do I meet you? When do we take off? Is there really no one else on the plane besides us?"

"Ah...well...there's the pilot, but that's it. If you like, I can pick you up in about an hour's time? Where would you like me to pick you up?"

"Um, I guess Jingu Gaien or surrounds. I'll text you?"

"That sounds great! I will see you in an hour then? It will take us an hour to get to Itami airport. You should be able to reach Iwatobi by nightfall."

"Ai. Saying thanks feels almost contrived in the face of such generosity, but you deserve to know, okay? You are brilliant, generous, kind, in a way that makes me so unworthy but I am forever grateful to have you as a friend."

"Rin-senpai!"

There is a moment where they are just standing there, exchanging smiles with each other, smiles that are unafraid and true, and there it is, Rin realises. The comfort of friendship, and the belief that everything will suddenly, magically, be all right.

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The flight is about eighty minutes long. They've taken off and all they can see outside their window is a bed of clouds.

The flight attendants come by with a drinks trolley to offer refreshment. They get a cool hand towel and a single serve pack of rice crackers each. Haruka asks for water and takes his time to sip away, while Makoto tears into the rice crackers with gusto.

Having drained the water, Haruka tucks the empty bottle into the seat pocket and leans back, pleasantly hydrated. Makoto catches sight of Haruka and decides to split the round disc of his rice cracker in half to share.

It's half but it's not really half. Haru always gets the slightly larger half. It's the same with ice creams, cookies, hotdogs...anything and everything they've shared. Makoto splits it, and with his clumsy hands he claims it's pure accident, that there's always a slightly larger half. This half is never significantly larger, always a precise amount of a little bit more, so that complaining about it just seems petty.

It pisses Haruka off.

Haruka snatches the smaller half from Makoto and then chomps on it to stop Makoto from taking it back. Stop doing that. Stop doing that uneven half thing. Stop acting like it's equal.

Makoto smiles at Haruka like he knows what Haruka means. It's so infuriating, the way Makoto smiles at him. Haruka can almost hear Makoto saying it out loud, it's at the forefront of Makoto's thoughts. Haru-chan takes such good care of me, Makoto expression of gratitude and fondness is as good as saying.

It's not taking care of you if I'm giving back what you gave of yourself to me.
**Haru-chan, Haru-chan, Haru-chan**, the softness in Makoto's smile says, with the subservient eyebrow droop and hidden eyes.

**Enough with that already.** Hasn't it always been the other way around? Yet Makoto keeps saying that line even though he knows Haruka hates it. Haru-chan takes such good care of me, when Haruka's doing the sort of thing he should be doing anyway, Haru-chan takes such good care of me, when Haruka has his dick inside of Makoto, fucking away furiously, fucking away hard at the yawning hole of emptiness Haruka felt within himself.

**What fairness is there in that?**

Makoto is sipping at his cup of tea. Makoto is folding his arms across his chest. Makoto is closing his eyes and trying to fall asleep so he doesn't annoy Haruka any further.

**Why do you love me?**

**Why do you follow me everywhere?**

Haruka feels bad. With things the way they are lately, maybe Makoto's right, they really shouldn't be together anymore—and yet they both did the thing with Rin—and there's that whole other thing with Rin they still have yet to work out.

**Makoto's not really asleep, he's got to stop pretending.**

Haruka shakes Makoto lightly by the shoulder.

"Makoto, you apologised to me yesterday, and now it's my turn to apologise to you."

Makoto's eyes flutter open, and just meeting Makoto in the eye breaks Haruka's heart.

"I'm sorry that I looked for Rin in Australia without telling you."

Makoto's shoulders heave, he looks like he's inhaling in order to reply and Haruka has to cut Makoto off now because he has to finish saying this.

"I did it because I logged into your computer without your permission and read your emails, which was something I shouldn't have done either."

Makoto's face changes a little—his lips stretch, and purse—and Haruka's not done talking.

"I don't know if I can explain why, but I was overcome with jealousy when I read your emails. I think—I think I didn't want to lose you to other people, and it felt like I was losing you. I was jealous, most of all, at how you seemed to bring out this good side to Rin. I realise now it was a horrible thing for me to do, because you're at your best when you're helping people."

There are tears in the corners of Makoto's eyes, and when he speaks his voice wavers but doesn't break. "Haru, I'm sorry too. I'm sorry to have broken your trust. I could have been open about what I did with Rin from the start. Maybe we could have worked something out earlier. Regardless, it was wrong of me to go behind your back in the first place."

Haruka shakes his head. "Listen, Makoto. I created the conditions for you to be so scared of telling me. Do you understand? I have fault in this, too."

Makoto's arms fold tighter across himself. He looks like he still wants to protest, to dispute the line of fault, but after a while his posture relents and Makoto's arms fall undone.
"We both had a hand in this? Haru, we both tore away that pillar of trust that had always supported us."

Haruka looks away. They've been together all their lives, their paths so intertwined that hardly anything ever stood between them. Where there were walls and boundaries with other people there was none for them, except maybe trust, the huge unspoken wall of trust that they hid behind—and that's broken now, too. For the first time Haruka feels like he's seeing Makoto in his entirety, all of Makoto's faults and his whole imperfect being and Haruka realises that there is no other version of Makoto except this one, none the better for Haruka to love.

Because we grew up together I had the pleasure of watching you grow, even if I didn't realise it the whole time—that you were always yourself and though you were shy, delicate, fragile, sometimes shrinking, you were always surprisingly resilient, always growing, my little dandelion bloom.

Makoto notices Haruka gazing at him and seems to decide it's safe to speak up.

"It's funny, Haru. You know, last night, I was going to beg for you to take me back on that balcony, but Rin appeared and you said those things and I just thought. How can Haru say that Rin was just sex for him? How can Haru ever say that? I was really angry with you last night, Haru, but everything went the way it did in an unexpected way. I think we're good now, Haru, you and me, because we made our apologies, but please apologise to Rin too, okay? Rin was never, and will never be just sex for you."

There is a long pause. Makoto’s words had taken Haruka by surprise. Haruka was expecting Makoto to reassure him how much Makoto loved him in return. And it's not like Rin could've known what Haruka said to Makoto, which was in the heat of an argument, but Haruka understands he's wrong. People are responsible for what they say, and even more so for what they say under duress. Haruka betrayed that he was ready to throw Rin under the bus in order to preserve an untenable status quo, and it's Haruka's responsibility to make amends.

The old Haruka would've soured immediately, whipping up a maelstrom of hidden fury in defence, fury that would poison his every thought, every move, until the days pass enough for him to brush it aside, dormant until the next storm.

Haruka wonders if Makoto can still hear his thoughts the way he used to, but sometimes it’s good to say things out loud anyway. "Makoto—thanks for letting me know you were angry with me."

Haruka decides that he likes when Makoto actually tells him when he's angry with him.

Haruka may have to thank Rin for that too.

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"Onii-chan, what's going on?!

"Pack up, nerds, we're going to Iwatobi."

"Rin-san! Please provide a more comprehensive explanation, if you will!

"I found us a ride to Iwatobi. Well. Only halfway. But if we leave now we can catch the train from Osaka to Iwatobi in time. Don't worry about tickets, I've got you both covered."

"Rin-san! This is too short notice! I don't have time to pack!"

"I can just buy you stuff from Uniqlo next door."
"That's too extravagant!"

"Well, I have a few spare sets of clothing if you don't mind that."

Rei exchanges a skeptical look with Gou, but agrees to go with Rin's plan.

"Hurry up," Rin pushes along. They are headed back to Gou's apartment for her to pack her belongings for a weekend away. Rin has a few spare sets of clothing he leaves around for just in case—and he's happy to share those with Rei. Their mother would have enough leftover toiletries taken from hotels on business trips, unless Rei is particular about his daily ablutions, which—come to think of it, he might be, but wait, the train takes them to Tottori and they can always swing by Rei's family apartment or any pharmacy, whatever suits Rei best, really.

There is some hasty packing, and when they're done, Nitori is already waiting by the lobby in a chauffeur-driven limousine.

There is an audible gulp from Rei. "Rin-san," he says hesitantly. "What 'ride' to Iwatobi is this?"

"Follow my lead," Rin declares, waving off Rei's concerns with an air of confidence, taking broad strides towards the limo.

The limousine ride is hushed—Rin senses a surge of questions from his sister and Rei that they dare not ask. Nitori is polite, Gou and Rei are polite in return, making small, friendly talk, but there is an air of something unspoken.

The limousine drops them off at the airport.

They whizz through the terminal via a dedicated fast lane meant for business travellers. It takes them three minutes from the airport to the plane, which is a first for Rin in all his years of travelling for international competition. This is different of course—this is the private jet experience, courtesy of Nitori, and Gou is glowering at her brother like, what kind of favour has Rin dared to ask of Nitori?

The plane seats only eight—in sumptuous, buttery leather and polished mahogany. After takeoff, Nitori asks if they would like soda, they nod yes, and he pops off to the pantry for refreshment.

"Rin-san...are you sure about this?" Rei asks in a forceful whisper. Are you sure we can repay the favour is probably what he means.

"It's okay, I got this," Rin replies. In truth, Rin hasn't really got anything, and he's unsure if attempting to return the favour to Nitori will even be a good idea.

"Everyone, please feel free to take a beverage!" Nitori returns from the pantry bearing a tray laden with an assortment of drinks. It occurs to Rin that...in addition to taking a free plane ride from Nitori, he is now being served drinks by young master Nitori, which is about as ridiculous as the whole thing can get.

"Thank you, Nitori-kun," Gou says. "Thank you for giving us a lift too."

"No problem at all, Matsuoka-san! I am happy to be able to help you return to your ancestral home for Obon."

"Indeed, it is right for us to honour such traditions to our ancestors," Gou responds with admirable composure, and then she gives a strange look to Rin as if she has some inkling of his real reason.

"Are you returning home too, Nitori-kun?"
"Yes, Ryuugazaki-kun. My family lives in Kyoto."

"Ah! Kyoto! They have the Gozan no Okuribi every year, don't they?" Gou prompts.

"Yes! The daimonji! I love watching the fires go up each time. It's so festive too! Let me know if you'd ever like to come by and watch!"

"I will keep that in mind, Nitori-kun!"

"Summer's the best, isn't it? I love the fireworks and the dancing and the yukata..."

"I do agree! For me, I love the contemplative nature of sending the spirit boats out..." Rei joins in.

It occurs to Rin that he's experienced fewer summers in his life than others. He left Japan in the spring and in the junior high years when he studied in Australia, he returned during his holidays to a wintry Japan with its biting cold. He did have that one sweet summer surrounded by friends, and he did have the one Summer Olympics (though not exactly in summertime).

It is just as well that he's done this—this crazy chase spurred by the crazy heat, or love, or obsession, or some inexplicable drive to run after Haruka and Makoto to yell at them. Even if nothing works out at the end of all his yelling, there's one thing Rin's already learned—that he has friends in his sister and Nitori and Rei—friends wonderful enough to stay by his side even when he is being ridiculous.

"We'll be landing at Itami airport soon," Nitori says. "We will disembark at the regular terminal, but we can take the express lane on our way out. After that, I regret we must part ways. It should not be difficult to get to Shin-Osaka station from there."

"Thanks so much, Nitori. We couldn't have done this without you."

"Not a problem at all, Rin-senpai. It has been great to see you. Let me know when you next come to Japan to visit!"

The city draws into view. The can see the outline of Osaka from here.

All of a sudden, Rei jolts up from his seat. "If we're in Osaka let's look for Nagisa-kun! He does not know Rin-san is here, and I'm sure he'd want to say hi!"

"Onii-chan! Do you think we'll have the time?"

Rin shrugs. "Yeah, why not?"

"We should message him in advance, but we're on a plane..."

"It is not a problem, Ryuugazaki-kun. Usage of mobile phones is permitted on this flight."

Rin and Rei exchange looks before Rin draws out his phone to look at it too—he had set it to airplane mode prior to boarding—right. He's on a private jet.

***

"Rin-chan! Rin-chaaaan!"

Having just got off the most surreal experience of her life, Gou finds herself in a dessert cafe in Osaka. None of the three of Gou, Rei and Rin were particularly keen on dessert since they already had one round in Tokyo, but a dessert cafe is a huge Nagisa magnet.
There are some particularly enthusiastic hugs exchanged, and they settle down into the booth seats.

"What brings you here, Rin-chan?"

"We're on our way to Iwatobi actually," Rin replies.

"Aww, I can't believe you didn't tell me anything about it until now!" Nagisa cups his chin in his hands and gives Rin his best puppy-eyed stare.

"Uhh..." Rin hedges, and Gou immediately jumps to her brother's defence.

"Nagisa-kun, let's look at the cakes by the counter!" Gou practically drags him by the elbow to the glass counters, brushing aside the sense of déjà vu about this.

"Gou-chan, what happened to Rin-chan?" Nagisa asks worrily once they are out of earshot. Nagisa seems perceptive enough—can Gou trust him?

"Something has happened to my brother," Gou confides. "I'm not sure what, but I think he's about to do a stupid thing."

Nagisa claps a hand over his mouth, looking at Gou with the most rounded eyes. "Gou-chan, w-what can I do?"

"I think my brother is going to make a love confession!"

"Love confession?! No way!"

"Yes! I think he is in love with Makoto-senpai and he seems determined to make a confession once and for all!"

Nagisa gapes. "Oh noooooo! But what about Haru-chan?!"

"Precisely! We have to make him see sense! He heard that Makoto-senpai and Haruka-senpai had gone off to Iwatobi and he became so distraught and now he's resorting to extreme measures like chasing them all the way to their house!"

"But Gou-chan! If Rin-chan's going to make a love confession—I mean—I always thought it was Haru-chan that Rin-chan liked!"

"H-H-Haruka-senpai?? My brother is in love with Haruka-senpai?"

"Yeah! Haven't you noticed how...weird...Rin-chan acts around Haru-chan?"

"Well...um...now that you mention it..." It is true that when they were young, her brother talked about Haruka non-stop. The reason why Gou thought it might have been Makoto is because she saw that her brother was messaging Makoto...which doesn't sound like much to go by now.

"See? You've got it wrong, Gou-chan. Rin-chan is doing this for Haru-chan. He has realised his mistake in rejecting Haru-chan all those years back and he wants to ask for forgiveness. Maybe he wants to give his blessing to Mako-chan and Haru-chan too, for their continued happiness. We should not stop him, and instead help him with our best efforts."

*Could it really be?*

Nagisa returns to the booth with an order of three cakes and the largest serving of parfait available from the menu.
"Rin-chan, we will be here for you no matter what!" Nagisa declares, digging a spoon into the oversized mountain of parfait, decorated with brightly-coloured sugared fruit and cream. "Here, open your mouth, you must eat more to gain more energy!"

Rin recoils instantly from the incoming fork, laden with a large dollop of mango and strawberry-studded soft serve.

"Aww! Rin-chan! Eat some dessert please? I ordered all this for you!"

"No way! My teeth are rotting just from looking at all this sugar!"

"Aww! Rin-chan, that's no fun! Rei-chan, would you like some parfait?" Nagisa turns the same fork and aims it towards Rei's mouth. With a glance at Rin, Rei bravely gulps the contents in a self-sacrificial move, taking one for the rest of them.

"Rin-chan! In my current film, the main character confesses to her true love at a summer festival too! She is rejected, but being able to say the truth takes a load off her chest and she ends up meeting a much better guy! Just so you know, I happen to be playing the much better guy."

Rin flashes a grin. "I'm sure you're the much better guy, Nagisa," he says mock-reassuringly.

"Aww, Rin-chan! You're so mean. Despite that, you will always have my support no matter who you choose to love."

Rin's eyes instantly narrow in suspicion. "What makes you say that?"

As if on cue, Rei jabs Nagisa in the ribs on behalf of Gou. "Oh-oh...nothing!" Nagisa puts on his best innocent angel face for cover.

***

It is 8pm. Gou watches in vain as the last direct train from Osaka to Tottori pulls out of the station. For some reason, dessert with Nagisa turned into dinner with Nagisa as they reasoned that they could catch the last train, which is not a possibility anymore.

Maybe it'll work out for the better if they can't get to Iwatobi after all. Nagisa seems convinced that a moment of truth is necessary, while Rei tries to provide some balance and levity with his words and Gou—Gou just doesn't want her brother to get hurt.

Rin thanks the ticket counter staff and then spins in an about turn with the tiniest stomp on the ground. "I know, let's just drive..." he mutters with a degree of grimness that is almost rabid as he stalks out of the station booth. "We've come this far. Let's rent a car. I'll drive us all there."

Her brother is relentless in his pursuit. "Onii-chan, what do you mean, driving?"

"Yes...let's rent a car," Rin ignores them in favour of muttering to himself as he whips out his phone in search of the nearest car rental centre.

Nagisa gasps with what sounds like delight, chasing after Rin and getting with the program effortlessly as only he can. "Road trip! Road trip!"

"Onii-chan! Wait!"

"Nagisa-kun! Stop enabling Rin-san!"

It's a lost cause. Half an hour later, Gou finds herself in the passenger seat of a silver Subaru Forester,
pulling out of the car park of a car rental company.

"I wanted maroon, but I'll take what I can get at the moment," her brother says. "Is there anyone else of you who can drive?"

Gou raises her hand.

"You...?"

"Yes, me!! You mean mummy didn't tell you?!"

"Uh," Rin pauses. "Maybe...she did...?"

"That means she didn't!! As usual!"

"I'm sure she did! I'm the one who forgot! Look, I'll let you drive if you want."

"You're always defending mummy."

"Gou. I'm counting on you to be my backup driver, okay?"

"Okay." Gou tries not to pout.

There is an ominous silence from the backseat. Gou looks over to check that things are not too awkward and finds that Rei is folding plastic bags into the seat pouch.

"Gou-chan, Rin-chan, I must warn you that there's a good chance Rei-chan will get carsick," Nagisa says on noticing her stare.

"I-I will be strong," Rei promises, posture rigid.

"So er...Nagisa, Rei, any plans to get your driving license?" Rin asks casually.

"Nope," Nagisa returns blithely.

"I...I did try," Rei confesses.

"Rei-chan memorised all the theory!"

"Oh, did you? What happened then?"

"I failed at the practical," Rei confesses, a blush creeping up his cheeks.

Rin tries to restrain from tsking. Always the same with Rei. "If you need a few pointers I'm willing to help," he offers.

"Rin-san...you're too kind..."

Rin shrugs nonchalantly and hands his phone to Gou so that she can navigate them through the busy traffic junctions of Osaka city. "Gou, please help find the way to Iwatobi in Google maps."

"Whereabouts in Iwatobi?"

"Um...whichever place you know best...Haru’s house?" comes Rin’s noncommittal reply.

Gou immediately receives a sharp kick to the back of her chair. It’s Nagisa, and when she looks back to shoot him an evil glare, he waggles his eyebrows at her. I told you it’s Haru-chan he’s looking for,
that triumphant grin seems to say.

Okay, well. Gou still can’t quite shake off the feeling that there’s something else. She enters the destination in Google maps, turns on the navigation, and then realises that while her brother’s phone still lies unlocked in her palm she could always just sneak a look at his messages...

“Onii-chan, can I look at your apps?” Gou asks innocently. “I want to see what games you have.”

The question sends Rin flustered. “No!” he hurriedly exclaims, reaching over to snatch his phone away from her and only succeeds in accidentally pressing the home button.

“Oh my god onii-chan you have Grindr!!!!,” Gou exclaims, the prospect of getting to view endless expanses of muscle on display sending her excitement through the roof.

The entire car seems to have fallen into an instant silence.

“Um,” Rin stutters, going red in the face. “You’re not supposed to know about such things, Gou.”

*Oops.* Maybe Gou shouldn’t have said it out loud. She may have inadvertently embarrassed her brother in front of Rei and Nagisa. Speaking of which, Rei and Nagisa seem awfully quiet about this too.

“I-I can’t say I’m surprised,” Rei says while adjusting his glasses with his hand stretched across his face, shielding his expression from Gou. His tone is factual and yet vague at the same time.

Gou clears her throat. “Sorry, but I’m also really curious about how Grindr looks like from the inside…am I allowed to peek? I won’t do anything, I promise…I just want to see…”

“Gou-chan!” Nagisa suddenly exclaims. “If that was all you wanted to see, I could have downloaded the app on my phone to show you!”

*Ohh…* Gou muses. It hadn’t occurred to her to ask Nagisa for Grindr access. The idea of it sounds kind of wrong to her.

Rin coughs. “Nagisa probably has the app *pre-installed* on his phone just for you, Gou,” he suggests pointedly. “Nagisa’s probably tested out the app a few times too, just so he can teach you how to use it, am I right?”

“Rin-chan’s such a meanie! I do not have a personal Grindr account!” Nagisa wails in reply.

“Come on, Nagisa, it’s not really something to be ashamed of…” Rin teases.

“In that case, Rin-chan should have no qualms about showing Gou-chan his Grindr account!”

Gou latches on to Nagisa’s words. Her brother totally shot himself in the foot there. “Yes!!! Onii-chan!! Show us that you’ve got nothing to hide!”

“Fine, I don’t use it that much anyway,” Rin grumbles, warily eyeing Gou and Nagisa.

Gou is about to start up the app when Rin starts coughing inexplicably. “This is the last chance to kill your account before Gou logs in….,” Rin follows up his words with more coughing.

“Rin-chan, what are you going on about…” Nagisa asks.

“Someone was online…this afternoon…,” Rin continues vaguely.
Someone? There are only four of them in this car—Gou’s clearly never been on Grindr, it can’t be Rin, and Nagisa claims not to have an account.

“Rei-kun, are you hiding something from us?” Gou wonders out loud.

“I most definitely am not,” Rei declares primly.

“If you say so…” Rin shrugs. “Gou, open up Grindr and pass me the phone.”

Gou does as she’s told. On startup, she is hit by visions of naked torsos and her pulse quickens while her head starts to spin. This is everything she imagined it would be…

Rin seems to be searching for something. When he’s found it, he holds his phone aloft for everyone to see.

“Well then, explain this,” Rin declares imperiously.

The photo is a closeup of an upper body—and it’s definitely Rei’s. Gou’s an expert at this…what surprises her is how her brother can recognise people by their muscles too.

“H-h-how can you tell?” Rei begins to fluster. “It’s such a generic photograph!”

“Rei-kun, your right deltoid is clearly visible in this photo, and your deltoids have a distinguished curvature to them. There is a commanding heft to their appearance.”

“What are you talking about, Gou-san?” Rei utters in disbelief.

“Gou’s right. These are from the photos you sent me during our thirty day yoga challenge.”

“Oh! Were you guys doing a yoga challenge?” Nagisa asks.

“Yeah, why?” Rin questions.

“So that was why you and Rei were talking about…how to bend over doggy-style…and stuff…” Nagisa muses.

Gou turns to look at her brother, who tsks like the cranky old man he can be when he’s exasperated.

"It's downward dog," Rin scoffs.

“Anyway, to clear my besmirched name, that account belongs to Tanaka Tarou, a parody account Nagisa-kun and I set up to amuse ourselves with last year…if it has been accessed today it was not me but Nagisa-kun. Hence—Nagisa-kun, please explain yourself.”

“I-I was bored! I had to sit for five hours in the makeup chair today just for a five-minute scene!”

“Fair enough. At any rate, this information was only shared because I believe we are in a circle of trust in this car—please do not advertise what you have learned today, unless you would like to be the face of Tanaka Tarou.”

“Ooh—circle of trust—let us see Rin-chan’s account then! We will not say a word to anyone else!”

Gou taps to look at Rin’s profile pic—it’s one of those anonymous headless shots—and to make things worse, her brother is fully clothed—in the ugliest, tackiest holiday sweater possible…while holding a grey Persian cat—with the feline being the main focus of the photo.
“Onii-chan…why are you called Chris?” Gou points out, unable to decide between laughing or being appalled at “Chris’s” show of chastity.

“’Cause I don’t want to be in the headlines?” Rin shrugs. “Anyway, isn’t that the fluffiest cat you’ve ever seen? She belongs to my friend Naf and she likes to watch people poop. Hahaha.”

Gou doesn’t know how to respond to being told that a cat has watched her brother poop. The cat obsession though, that’s one thing her brother has in common with Makoto…

With Rin’s permission she responds to some people looking to chat just for fun, and shares the juicier bits with Nagisa and the rest until they get tired of it.

***

The night wears on. The traffic out of Osaka is slow as hoardes of people make their way out of the city, heading home over the weekend for Obon. Rin looks at the clock. It is nine-thirty, and Nagisa is hungry.

"I'm hungryyyy," Nagisa wails in despair. "And we're stuck in traffic!"

Rin tsks. His sister and Rei and Nagisa have not been a handful thus far, but the prospect of having to deal with a hungry Nagisa is more than what Rin wants to deal with. Rin's fingers dance impatiently on the rim of the steering wheel.

It suddenly occurs to him that—"Hey, Nagisa. If you look in my duffle bag you'll find a paper bag of sweets. I got them from Australia and they were meant for you guys."

Nagisa's eyes widen. "Rin-chan, you're the best!"

There is some rummaging in the backseat. Nagisa has clambered over the seats to access the boot and he has unzipped Rin's bag, heading straight for the crumpled brown paper bag as if uncovering treasure.

"Wow, Rin-chan! This is amazing! Raspberry white chocolate Tim Tams? Ooh look, there are Pods. Gou-chan, don't you love these? I can't believe it! There are even muesli bars for Rei-chan! Rin-chan clearly cares for all of us. Rin-chan is the sweetest and bestest. Rin-chan you are most generous and kind. Rin-chan...there is a lot of chocolate in this bag...and they look really fancy, Rin-chan."

Nagisa has a bag of chocolates raised high, accompanied by a quizzical look, like he wants to know who these chocolates are for.

Dammit.

It's not as if chocolates aren't massively popular and great as generic gifts. Why does chocolate have to be associated with a particular person, just because all the other treats can in fact be associated with specific persons?

The truth is that the entire paper bag was not meant to come from Rin. Rin had bought it for Haruka on the presumption that Haruka would need to present his friends with gifts upon return from a holiday to Australia. Rin was right to assume that Haruka is the type to neglect social niceties like getting souvenirs for people back home, but he hadn't known at the time that Haruka lied about being on holiday and that no one had known about him being gone at all. These chocolates—they were meant for Haruka to give to Makoto, and maybe Rin was overcompensating a little because he felt bad about sleeping with Haruka but in no case were the chocolates supposed to be a direct gift from Rin to Makoto.
"Mummy really loves chocolates, doesn't she?" Gou asks, looking at Rin like she knows she is coming to his rescue.

"Yeah...mummy loves chocolates," Rin latch's on to the convenient excuse. "Don't touch all of those, Nagisa. Leave some for my m...mother."

"Awww!!! I can't have all of the chocolates? Rin-chan, you should've bought more so I can have some too!"

Rin shoots Nagisa a mock-furious glare then laughs it off. As he turns his attention back to the road, he catches Gou eyeing him suspiciously.

"Keep some for mummy," she reminds in a sing-song voice like she knows something else is going on.

"Yeah, I will, I will," Rin tries to wave off the guilt. "There you go again, bringing mummy into the picture when you want the upper hand. What do you want?"

It is one of Gou's most effective negotiation techniques that Rin is defenceless against.

Ask you later, Gou types out on her phone and shows it to him.

Rin frowns at his sister.

"Onii-chan, what's with you and mummy anyway? Why do you do everything she says?"

"Do you not do everything mummy says? Are you undergoing the rebellious child stage?"

"I'm not a rebellious child!"

"Oh, really?"

"Onii-chan!" Gou huffs.

Rin laughs. Through the mirror, he catches a glimpse of Nagisa and Rei falling asleep in the backseat.

"Gou, if you have any problems with mummy, with anyone, let me know, okay?"

"Yeah, I will," Gou replies in a somewhat pouty manner.

"Yeah," Rin says. "You know, the thing with mummy that you said—why am I always so eager to please mummy—it's kind of weird. But it also has to do with, um, Finding Nemo."

"Finding Nemo? The Disney movie?"

"Yeah," Rin sticks a hand behind his neck to ruffle his hair sheepishly. "I don't know if you were old enough to remember it but—it wasn't too long after dad died. Maybe half a year or so. Mummy put on a movie to cheer us up. And it was Finding Nemo. But after the movie I kind of started bawling and wouldn't stop."

Gou looks at Rin with an expression that seems to betray multiple exclamation marks.

"Yeah, it's really stupid. Mummy tried to comfort me, and asked me what made me cry, and you know, I said—I said I wish dad were still around because I wanted dad to be like Nemo's dad for me. I wanted to have that kind of father-son relationship."
"And? What happened? What did mum say?"

"It's not anything mummy said. It's more like, I regret saying all that. Because, you know, after I said all that, after I said I wished I had a dad to run after me if I get lost and all, mummy got this look on her face, and it's really hard to describe, and it doesn't matter how old I was then, I could tell. I could tell it was this look of—it's like complete heartbreakness and this gaping sense of inadequacy, and I've come to realise, slowly, painfully, that I never want to make mummy feel that way ever again.

And, you know, for almost all my life mummy was the one being like Nemo's dad to me, not dad, so it just goes to say mummy's really amazing and all, and I feel guilty about failing her in some way or the other."

"Onii-chan," Gou sighs, hushed and filled to the brim with affection. "Mummy is really, really proud of you."

"Really?"

"Yeah! She gets so happy whenever she receives a call or message from you. Onii-chan, if you want the truth, I guess I'm kind of jealous sometimes. She spends so much on you..."

"But mummy always says you're the perfect kid—you've never caused any problems for her and she doesn't need to push you at all for you to get wonderfully good grades and stuff. You manage to do really well even without much help."

"I guess that's true, but I don't really want to be telling mummy my problems either. I don't really feel like it's something I can talk to her about."

"You can talk to me, Gou. I want to hear your problems." Rin's heart is palpitating weirdly. He's guilty for neglecting his sister too. It hits Rin how the world out there is so full of things outside of his existence, and it converges on him how everyone he knows is a world of their own with their own world of problems. It's humbling, most of all, to realise that sometimes the most he can do is listen in and be there.

Gou suddenly lands a light, playful smack on his arm. "Onii-chan, you tell me some of your problems too, okay? I feel like I'm just guessing at them most of the time."

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It's eleven, dark, and the only light comes from the interminable tunnels they shoot through at high speed. Sound changes when they go in and out of tunnels, the flatter, broader sound outside versus the echoey insides of tunnels. Gou is driving—she has taken over from her brother after their last toilet break at the roadside station. Rin had begun to yawn too much, too often, the yawns contagious in the small space of the car and Gou had told her brother she could take over until the next pit stop.

Freed from driving, Rin is taking a short nap, dozing off by the side and propped up by an elbow resting on the car door. Gou thinks that her brother looks really harmless while sleeping, like a tame, docile little kitten.

A particularly large swerve in the road tips Rin's head out of his palm and he wakes up, shifting around blearily to check on everyone. He tastes his own mouth for a moment before beginning to speak.

"Rei—you okay back there?"

Rei has been awake for the past hour or so, his arms tightly folded across his chest and his jaw clenched, face plastered to the cool surface of the car window to his right.
"Rin-san. I am doing well, thanks to the vent that Nagisa-kun opened in this window," Rei replies with a tap on the glass to make his point.

Nagisa wakes with a start. "What's going on?" he asks, looking around with alarm until he realises that nothing unusual is happening. He stretches with a yawn and rustles through the bag of snacks. "Hey, what's this boring music? It's putting everyone to sleep," he complains amidst the sound of yet another plastic food wrapper being torn open.

"It's not boring music!" Rei jumps in defensively. "It is my collection of seventies prog!" He’d volunteered to connect his phone via Bluetooth to the car’s audio system in order to show off his supposedly well-curated playlists.

“No, that’s just Phil Collins, Rei,” Rin shoots back.

Gou tries and fails to stifle a laugh.

“Fine, since no one here appreciates my efforts, why don’t we listen to someone else’s music?"

“Me! Me! Me! I volunteer,” Nagisa hastily exclaims, already attempting to connect his phone.

“Do I want to hear your music…?” Rin asks warily, exchanging looks with Gou.

Nagisa gets about five minutes of airplay before Rei screams for Nagisa to take it off before his throbbing headache worsens from the cacophony of bleeps, bloops and vocals shifted to a pitch too high for comfort.

“Aww, Rei-chan, but they call this the music of the future and you’re the one always attending talks like ‘the future of robotics’, ‘artificial intelligence in the 21st century and beyond’ and so on.”

“What’s is it even, Nagisa?” Rin asks, his expression revealing a combination of curiosity and fear.


Rin is perplexed but intrigued. “To keep from aggravating Rei’s headache, we should play something else I guess. Gou?”

“Eh?? Me??” Gou had not expected to be singled out like that. “I-I’m not sure if my music is to everyone’s tastes either.”

Her brother shoots her a look like, can’t be as bad as Nagisa’s right?

Gou can only shrug doubtfully as she hands over her phone for his judgement.

“What—what are these bands even? How do you pronounce the names?”

She laughs nervously. “Which one? There are many names in there…”

“Mes..Meta…Metsatoll?”

“Oh! Metsatöll. They’re an Estonian heavy metal band. The name sort of means ‘wolf’, and they use many ancient Estonian folk instruments in their music, which is also influenced by traditional folklore and imagery dating back to the 13th, 14th centuries…”

“Wow,” her brother says, and it strikes Gou how little he actually knows about her.

Rin seems to have been similarly struck because he proceeds to gamely say, “I’ll listen to it.”
It puts a smile on Gou’s face, and since no one’s asleep anyway she cranks up the volume. They whizz through mountain passes pummeled by the brutal riffs and berated by the growls of a man singing lyrics that Gou tells the rest are actually motivational and inspiring, imploring young people to forge their own paths in the world.

***

The mountainous section of the route is over and the blinking lights of human activity loom into view. It’s past midnight, and most of the houses are dark save for a few spare lights shining through windows. The buildings are low and spaces are wide. There is a weariness to the city, a feeling that with each passing day it loses more and more of its residents in ways particular to the young and the old.

Rei has been holding in his sick for want of sanitary conditions and Nagisa has been in need of nourishment for his growling belly so they find a late-night family restaurant in Tottori City to stop for a break.

Gou pulls into a parking lot near the Café Restaurant Gusto, a family restaurant serving comfort food with an all-you can drink option. Rin downs a couple of cups of coffee in one go, gearing up for the final leg of driving from Tottori to Haruka’s house. Gou’s energy levels are on the plunge too. She pours herself a cup of tea, then decides to get a second cup for Rei while he’s still holed up in the toilet, the poor thing.

Nagisa wants pasta and dessert while the rest of them aren’t particularly hungry. They are in the non-smoking section but the stench of cigarette smoke wafts over even though the restaurant is largely unoccupied at this time of the night, dotted with the few customers spread across various corners, mostly disheveled men in their mid-thirties who are most probably intercity truck drivers.

Rin claims to feel peckish after seeing Nagisa’s food arrive so he places an order for a hamburg steak. Rei emerges from the toilet and makes a face on being presented with the sight and smell of food. Gou slides a cup of an isotonic sports drink across the table for him to replenish his lost electrolytes. It prompts him to thank her for being their ever-thoughtful manager, always concerned about the balance of nutrients in their bodies.

Halfway through his hamburg steak, Rin gets up in urgent need of the toilet (must be all that caffeine), and when he’s out of earshot Nagisa immediately convenes an emergency conference.

“Has anyone thought about what we’re supposed to do when we reach Haru-chan’s house? I mean, does Rin-chan have a speech prepared? Will he be reading his confession off a letter?”

“N-Nagisa-kun!” Rei almost chokes. “You are jumping to conclusions! We do not know Rin-san’s true intentions. We should only do what he instructs us to do. And unless any of us have received explicit instructions, it is unwise to do anything out of the ordinary.”

“But Rei-chan, nothing about this situation is ordinary. I was thinking—you know the movie ‘Love, Actually’? I think Rin-chan should make his confession in the same way as that man who pretended to be a choir.”

“You mean the stalker dude who turned up at Keira Knightley’s doorstep?” Gou asks warily.

“Nagisa-kun, ‘Love, Actually’ is actually a terrible movie! Gou-san is right, not only is that ‘friend’ a stalker, it is a movie and movies are highly unrealistic depictions of what happens to people!”

“But how will Rin-chan convey his love and blessings to Haru-chan? He can’t be denied this one
opportunity to express his true feelings.”

“I still think it’s Makoto-senpai that onii-chan is in love with!”

“It’s Haru-chan!”

“Makoto-senpai!”

“Stop!” Rei exclaims. “If Rin-san has not told us, it is not right for us to speculate on his personal affairs!”

Nagisa and Gou fall into silence. Rin still hasn’t returned from the bathroom.

***

There is a growl, a deep rumble, like the sound of rolling thunder emerging from Makoto’s belly. Haruka looks up from his packing. Makoto smiles sheepishly at him, then looks away to busy himself with wrapping up various vases with newspaper.

Haruka checks the old clock for the time. It’s late, very late—and they’ve forgotten about eating. He has been so absorbed in packing up and tidying the house before his parents arrive that he’d forgotten about eating.

Admittedly, the pangs of hunger have not caught up to Haruka, not even at this time. It’s exactly what people always say about him—he’s got an inhuman ability to concentrate on the task at hand.

Makoto—on the other hand—Makoto must have been hungry for some time now, except he hasn’t complained and has just continued to help Haruka as best he can, always pushing himself to some ridiculous physical limit where he can break at any moment.

A nagging sense of guilt creeps into Haruka—it is his responsibility to feed Makoto well and he’s failing at that. He puts aside his half-filled paper carton and goes to the kitchen. It’ll take about half an hour for the rice to cook. When he turns back to look at Makoto, Makoto is wiping away at the beads of sweat on his forehead, in the process leaving streaks of grey from his dust-coated fingers.

There is an apron belonging to Haruka’s mother tied around Makoto to keep the dust from his clothes. It has a faded flowery print edged with red string, and there is a matching headscarf which Haruka asked Makoto to wear to keep the dust away from his hair. Haruka is moved to recall a conversation he once overheard between Makoto’s parents.

“I feel like we married him off when we sent him to Tokyo! Our eldest boy!” Mrs Tachibana exclaimed, as she washed dishes in the kitchen.

“It’s true he hardly has the time to see us these days,” Mr Tachibana agreed, wiping the washed dishes dry with a dishcloth before returning them to the rack. “But don’t you think Haru-kun takes good care of Makoto? If we married him off…at least it’s to the right guy,” Mr Tachibana added with a chuckle.

“Haru-chan’s a sweet boy,” Mrs Tachibana replied, but her tone was more wistful than anything, as if she rued losing Makoto to Haruka.

The curry bubbles when it’s ready to accompany the steaming, freshly cooked rice. Haruka draws out two clean plates and portions the food onto it before carrying the plates out to the kitchen. He tells Makoto to come over for dinner.
Makoto looks at him like he’s so grateful that he has someone to make dinner for him, but Haruka feels undeserving of it. Haruka feels like he’s at fault because he’d forgotten about dinner until nearly midnight. Haruka feels like he’s failed Makoto’s parents. He hasn’t taken good care of Makoto and had left Makoto to be hungry for hours.

“Smells good, Haru, what is it?” Makoto smiles broadly as he pulls out a chair.

Haruka glances at Makoto and then turns away, feeling ashamed. “Mackerel curry,” he mumbles. They had stopped off at the market on their way home and naturally he had paid a visit to his favourite mackerel monger.

Makoto takes a few bites. “It’s really good, Haru.”

Haruka begins to feel annoyed all over—this is the most ordinary meal one could speak of—there is nothing about this meal that requires skill and nearly everything about it is cheap and convenient. How many times have they done this? Why does Makoto have to speak of it like it’s the best meal he’s ever had? When Haruka looks up from the table he sees Makoto looking down sadly at his plate. Makoto only looks like that when he thinks no one is looking at him.

As soon as he realises that Haruka is looking, he tries to cover up his sadness with a smile.

What’s wrong? Haruka wonders, and then it hits him how he can’t read Makoto in that moment and his insides seize up with fear.

“Rin hasn’t replied to our messages at all,” Makoto confesses. “I wonder how he’s feeling.”

Haruka almost breathes a sigh of relief to learn that Makoto is just worried about Rin. Haruka was beginning to think Makoto resented his mackerel curry and wished he didn’t have to eat it.

“Give me your phone.” He can fix this.

Makoto meekly passes his phone over with a resigned tug of the lips.

Haruka unlocks the phone and dials Rin’s number.

Rin picks up after six dial tones.

“Makoto?” Rin’s voice is laced with concern.

“Why didn’t you reply to Makoto’s messages?” Haruka demands.

“I—the cheek of you, Haru,” Rin tsk immediately. “You think you can just leave me in Tokyo like that?”

“It’s not something we could have controlled—” Haruka shoots back instantly. “It’s not like we knew this was going to happen.”

“How did you not know, Haru? You’re telling me you had no idea your parents needed you back home? This stuff doesn’t come out of nowhere.”

It leaves Haruka without much defense. “Rin—look, I’m sorry this had to happen. But we can’t change the situation now—“

“You can’t change the situation now—” Rin accuses. “—because you’re not willing to!”

Haruka feels like he’s backed up against a wall. “What do you want me to do?” he almost yells.

“Rin? We’re really sorry about what happened. Please don’t be angry with us. We’ll make this up to you. We’re hoping to get back to Tokyo by tomorrow, okay? Let’s meet up and do something nice together. Anything you want. It’ll be our treat. Rin. Please?”

There seems to be a long pause while Makoto has the phone pressed to his ear. What is Rin saying? Haruka wonders.

Finally, Makoto puts the phone down without a word.

“What did Rin say?” Haruka asks immediately.

“Rin didn’t say anything. He just hung up on me.”

***

Rin returns from the bathroom after he’s certain that Haruka and Makoto have given up on calling him.

He knows he shouldn’t have hung up on Makoto like that, but god, it was painful, so painful to hear Makoto practically begging him for forgiveness—when it seems pretty clear that Makoto isn’t to blame for this at all. Haruka’s not exactly to blame either, but Rin can’t help reacting in anger when the first words from Haruka are an immediate accusation.

Those idiots, Rin bristles to himself. Their inability to do anything proactive is almost comical. Rin’s clearly the only one with a real solution in mind—if Haruka and Makoto aren’t able to be there for him, he’ll go to them. And because they’re so thickheaded and can’t conceive of such a thing ever happening, Rin is even more determined to give them the surprise of their lives. Haruka and Makoto may be wringing their hands helplessly now—but just wait till Rin gets to see the look on their faces when he shows up on their doorstep. This may hurt now but just wait for the payoff. Matsuoka Rin cannot be stopped. If there is something Matsuoka Rin wants, he will make damn sure he gets it done.

Rin returns to the table to rally the rest, scarfing down the remnants of his hamburg steak in record time. The three of them—his baby gays, as Rin likes to think of it—are unusually quiet.

As they clamber back into the car, Rin decides to put on some of his music to lift the mood.

“I suppose my music can be considered mainstream compared to what you nerds listen to, but it’s good stuff nonetheless,” he declares with growing cheer.

The baby gays are exchanging shifty looks with each other.

“Why so silent? Come on, I’ll teach you the lyrics to this song. Let’s all sing along.”

Rei looks like he is about to voice his protest, so Rin cuts him off before he can say a word.

“Now this song, it’s by a band called The Killers, and the song is in English, but the lyrics are simple. You just have to join in for the refrain, which goes—‘I’ve got soul but I’m not a soldier’.”

“Rin-san, why are you doing this?”

“No ifs and no buts from you, Rei—just sing along.”
“What do the lyrics mean, Rin-chan?”

“Just sing along, Nagisa.”

“Onii-chan—is this your mantra for life?”

“It’s a mantra as good as any."

Gou is the first to join Rin in his singing, and for a moment, Rin feels like he is about to explode with pride for having such a great and supportive sister. Soon enough, Rei and Nagisa join in too, and the noisy silver Subaru pulls into the dead quiet town of Iwatobi.

Chapter End Notes

bloomejasmine drew a picture of the threesome scene! Please see/like/flail/RT it at this link! :D :D :D

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