

Moss on Stone

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/1012846) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/1012846>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Major Character Death
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Jrock , Alice Nine , SID (band) , BVCCI HAYNES
Relationships:	Kenzo/Hiroto , Aki/Kenzo , Tora/Hiroto
Additional Tags:	Suicide Attempt , Terminal Illnesses
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2010-10-20 Words: 19,797 Chapters: 5/5

Moss on Stone

by [invisiblehabits](#)

Summary

"Nobody wants to be alone."

Chapter Summary

A few days later Kenzo was back where he spent most of his free time, gravel paths deserted before his eyes, gravestones as silent as ever. He didn't need company, didn't desire voices around him. The only voice he wanted to hear rested ten feet away, six feet down, forever silent.

Their story started with a collision, an accidental meeting brought on by chance and chance alone. Kenzo wasn't even in his regular grocery store, just a tiny convenience store on a random corner far from his apartment. He was out of cigarettes and went into the first available establishment, never thinking twice about it. His life was simple and routine bound, had been for too many years and would've stayed so if not for the moment when his eyes slid to a row of candy and lost focus on the path in front of him. One minute he was looking at chocolate covered animal crackers and the next he was sprawled on the floor, a bundle of human limbs and strawberry blond hair awkwardly keeping him pinned down.

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry! I'm such a klutz!"

It was the first words Hiroto ever spoke to him, and his apology was rewarded with anger and rudeness.

"Yes you are, get off me you fucking idiot."

Hiroto got up, mostly shoved by Kenzo, with embarrassment and humiliation burning on his cheeks. Big brown eyes tinted with sadness meeting unforgiving black ones, an end before any chance of a beginning. Or so it would've been had Hiroto been anyone else, lived by any other code or been any less determined. Something sparked that day, despite it all, despite Kenzo – a new beginning.

- - -

A few days later Kenzo was back where he spent most of his free time, gravel paths deserted before his eyes, gravestones as silent as ever. He didn't need company, didn't desire voices around him. The only voice he wanted to hear rested ten feet away, six feet down, forever silent.

"Hi."

Someone sat down next to him on the bench and had Kenzo not been so utterly shocked he would've told whoever it was to fuck off. This was his sanctuary, the only place he felt a semblance of calm in the raging anger that was his life. On the outside Kenzo was like most people, a little more snappy and a little less social, but nothing to put him aside from the

masses. He went to work and completed his tasks on time, lived alone and never caused a fuss. Inside however, inside he was a raging inferno of negative emotions he didn't know how to vent, because no one cared.

"You? What do *you* want?"

It was the kid from the store, the one even smaller than Kenzo himself. Calling him a kid was probably unfair, in fact they looked to be about the same age. But he was a nuisance, much like children were, and Kenzo wanted him gone.

"I thought you looked lonely over here."

"Maybe I want to be."

Normally his rudeness worked like a charm, no one wanted to be around a man who was flat out foul and insolent as a first impression. Kenzo responded any approach, no matter how kind or caring, with insults and mean remarks, it was his nature and as soon as people realised as much they took off. Normally it only took a sentence or two on his behalf, but it was still time and effort he'd never get back.

"Nobody wants to be alone."

- - -

He had no idea how it happened. One day he was trying to fight off unwanted attention, the next he was sitting down at a café, sipping coffee laced with so much sugar it could be sold as candy and eyeing strawberry blond hair suspiciously. Hiroto, that was his name, the boy that'd run into him and simply never left. He'd showed up nearly every time Kenzo went to the cemetery, sitting down next to him on the bench to talk and smoke a few cigarettes. Kenzo never replied, only snapped and begged to be left alone, but his wishes were never granted.

He had no idea why he'd agreed to meet at a different spot, why he'd showed up to the tiny little café hidden away on a backstreet he didn't even know existed. It would've been so him to say yes and then simply ignore the meeting, but somehow he knew the blond would only come back to the bench and look at him with sad eyes and ask why he stood him up.

"You came, I'm glad."

Hiroto sat down opposite of Kenzo, a bright smile on his face even as sadness still tinted his big brown eyes. His coffee contained a bit of cream and nothing more, just enough to round off the flavour and cool the liquid down to a drinkable temperature.

"I came so you'll leave me alone."

"That doesn't make sense."

"You don't make sense!"

He was getting irritated, irritated for being him which was saying something. Kenzo hated not being in control and in front of Hiroto he felt entirely out of it, as if the blond could see right through him. It was unnerving and made him jumpy, uncertain of what to do and how to act. How do you get rid of someone who only clings harder the more you try to push them away?

“I get that a lot.”

Even when saying such a thing the smile never left Hiroto’s lips. Most people found him strange, childish in the way he just kept trying, never gave up on anyone. Even the people who’d known him all his life, who knew *why*, said it didn’t make sense. He didn’t expect Kenzo, who had only just met him, and unwillingly so to that, to grasp what he was trying to do. Some days Hiroto wasn’t even sure he knew himself.

“Then stop it.”

“I don’t think I can.”

The normal thing would’ve been to ask why, show curiosity at a rather obvious invite. Hiroto was an extremely open person and he let it be known with every word off his tongue, every action carried out by body and mind, but Kenzo was the opposite. He didn’t like questions and so he asked none.

They finished their coffee in silence.

- - -

Kenzo grunted as a shadow fell across his face. The day was bright and sunny and he wanted nothing more than to absorb the warm rays in peace and sleep, so what if it meant skipping class and probably getting in trouble later. There was always a way to talk yourself out of problems, he was good at excuses.

“Get away.”

It didn’t matter who it was, he didn’t want them around. Especially not if they were blocking his sunlight.

“Always so polite.”

Black eyes opened just in time to see the water bottle tip over and luckily closed just as quickly. There was little he could do about his face getting flushed though and with a yelp Kenzo turned onto his stomach, coughing as water run down his nose unpleasantly.

“Aki! I’m gonna bloody kill you for that!”

Aki was in no position to reply, the tall youth was currently rolling around on the grass laughing his heart out. Biting his lip Kenzo pondered what to do, then mentally smacked himself for even asking. With surprise on his side he easily overpowered his friend and pinned him to the ground, sunlight reflecting prettily in the brand new metal studs in Aki’s lower lip.

“Got ya...”

His grin was met by Aki's own and the one year older purred delighted.

“I should waterlog you more often if this is the reaction I get.”

“If you want me on top of you all you have to do is ask.”

Ignoring the dull ache in his lip Aki reached up and caught ragged lips with his own, enjoying the way Kenzo immediately took control of the kiss and swallowed his sounds of appreciation. Kenzo kept his eyes open even as Aki closed his and felt a familiar tingle between his thighs, it really was too hot to be clothed anyway.

- - -

“Why do you come to the graveyard every day?”

“Didn't anyone ever tell you you ask too many questions?”

“Yes, many.”

They were back on the bench, Kenzo bench which had somehow become their bench. Hiroto still did most of the talking, about the weather, the news, things that happened in his university classes. He was older than his classmates, but he'd chosen to work after high school and thus never continued his education. Now he studied medicine, wanting to become a doctor one day and help people, at least that was what he'd said. Kenzo wasn't sure if it suited him or if he'd become a damn annoying doctor.

“Good, then shut up.”

“Why?”

Perhaps the kid, it really was unfair to call someone two years younger a kid but he didn't care, really was retarded, his answers rarely impressed. Kenzo lit up another cigarette and glanced sideways at Hiroto.

“Because it's rude.”

He realised his mistake just as the words left his lips. Hiroto chuckled.

“Says who?”

In a way Kenzo wanted to smirk at that, he'd been corned and there really was no point in trying to talk his way out of it. But it'd been so long since he felt genuinely amused the actions got stuck somewhere halfway. He snorted and that was all, but the sound wasn't quite as hostile as normally. Hiroto smiled, he knew he'd won this round and more importantly, Kenzo knew it too.

- - -

Winter slowly crept over Tokyo, bringing cold in its wake and reviving Hiroto's senses. He had nothing against summer and sun and warmth, but winter meant happy memories for him. Nearly every memory he had brought sorrow with it, but Hiroto still had a way to distinguish between the happy and the plain sad ones. Winter, to him, meant sitting indoors cuddled up underneath a blanket with a mug of hot chocolate, warm limbs wrapped around him as a movie played on the TV.

"What are you smiling about?"

Kenzo looked impossible small where he sat curled in on himself on the bench, knees drawn up to his chest and hidden beneath at least a couple layers of fur. Hiroto tilted his head to the side at the rather endearing sight.

"You look cute."

He got a raised eyebrow for that one before Kenzo ignored him altogether in favour of blowing out a giant cloud of smoke. Hiroto sat down in his usual spot and took off his mittens.

"Here."

"What?"

"Your hands are practically blue, take them."

It was painfully obvious Kenzo wasn't used to such treatment, Hiroto had noticed it early on in their acquaintanceship. He had no way to know for sure, but he was rather certain Kenzo was a *very* lonely man.

"I can't smoke with gloves on."

"Look."

Surprisingly enough he was allowed to grab Kenzo's hand and put the mitten on it. He could see understanding light in black eyes even before he pulled the top of the mitten back and revealed the clever secret of the garment. Inside the mitten there was a glove with the tips cut off, leaving about half of the fingers bare and clear to hold a cigarette.

"Keep them, that way only your fingertips have to freeze, and I doubt you've got much circulation left in them anyway."

Kenzo looked uncertain, almost at a loss of what to do even, but eventually he picked up the other mitten as well and put it on.

"I don't want your pity."

"It's not pity, see it as...an early Christmas present."

He was pretty much expecting a clever comeback to that statement, or at the very least a snort, but he only got silence and a shrug. Hiroto smiled and lit up a cigarette of his own, that

reaction was worth the loss of a pair of mittens.

- - -

“Why smoke if you wanna be a doctor?”

Hiroto chuckled softly, it was a question he often got from his classmates. He was the only one in class who smoked and even the quite nasty pictures of blackened lungs didn't make him want to stop. Smoking too held memories, a lot of memories.

“I smoke because I like it.”

“You'll make a fucked up doctor.”

It might be true, he definitely wasn't the ideal picture of a medicine student. He didn't work out all that much, didn't eat as healthy as he could've, preferred rock concerts over outdoor walks, and smoked at least a few packs a week.

“As long as I can save some lives I'm good.”

Kenzo flashed his eyebrows and flicked the cigarette butt down the gravel road.

“No pressure.”

- - -

Hiroto looked up as a tray was put down and someone took a seat on the opposite side of table. It looked like a senior student and he had never seen him before, Hiroto knew for a fact he would remember a face like that!

“Do you mind? I thought you looked lonely over here.”

The loop-sided smile directed his face had Hiroto all but blushing. It was ridiculous, the guy was probably some kind of prefect or similar, a senior student being kind to a painfully obvious newbie.

“No, no, thank you.”

“First day?”

Hiroto looked up surprised, met surprisingly pale eyes full of welcome and generosity.

“Yes, I just transferred from a different school. How did you know?”

The other guy smiled, nearly smirked, in a way that had him blushing. Hiroto wasn't sure anyone had ever looked at him like that and it made him feel special in ways he wasn't sure he should when it was a man looking at him. Scratch that, he knew he shouldn't feel special or like it when a man looked at him like that, but even more he knew it was men he wanted to look at him like that. It hadn't been easy to accept, but Hiroto had realised women held no interest to him whatsoever.

"I would've remembered seeing you around. I'm Tora."

Hiroto smiled insecurely, half afraid this was some kind of joke and he'd get bashed if he played along.

"Hiroto, thanks for keeping me company."

Tora shrugged.

"Nobody wants to be alone."

- - -

The more time they spent together, the less Kenzo understood Hiroto. The young blond was an enigma unlike any he'd encountered, patient in a way Kenzo himself had never been, kind to the brink of being naive, and on top of it all some weird mixture of curious and crazy. It was confusing to say and the least, yet the most troublesome part was he found he grew more fond of the company by the day.

"You never told me who you come here for."

"None of your business."

Kenzo didn't want the company, or rather he didn't want the bond that came with spending time with someone. He didn't want to connect with another human on a personal level because he didn't want the pain that came when that person went away. Hiroto would leave, disappear or let him down one way or another, it was just a matter of time.

"Want to see my grave?"

It was a ridiculous way to word it and Kenzo almost hated himself for understanding exactly what it was Hiroto meant by it. Somewhere in the cemetery there was a grave holding a person dear to Hiroto, a grave he visited regularly and needed to come back to. It had nothing to do with himself, it wasn't where Hiroto would rest one day, it wasn't *his* grave in that sense. But it was his in the sense that *he* cared for it, that the person resting there had once been his one way or another.

Kenzo got that, understood it so perfectly well, and that alone scared him. He wanted to say no, wanted to walk away and never be bothered with the offer ever again, but maybe, just maybe, it meant Hiroto would understand too.

"Okay."

- - -

He could still see his bench from where they were standing in front a rather new tombstone. In many ways it was strange they hadn't seen each other before, him and Hiroto, but then they hadn't been looking. Or at least he hadn't, whether Hiroto had seen him before he didn't know, didn't care either. Hiroto also hadn't been around very long, merely two years according to the date of death.

Amano Shinji, 2008

The sadness he'd seen in Hiroto's eyes so many times was more evident than ever standing there, looking at a simple black stone. Kenzo recognised the look, the longing, the grief, but he didn't understand how the blond could smile. The slight curve of his lips made an already innocent face even softer and if you avoided his eyes you couldn't tell he was in pain at all. But he was.

"Everyone called him Tora."

He said it so casually, almost as if he was introducing them, and it made Kenzo even more angry, not that he knew why. Hiroto wasn't looking his way, but he could practically feel the younger's hope he'd question the name, the person, anything. A normal man would've, Kenzo was pretty sure of that, but he was also certain he did *not* qualify as normal, not by a long shot.

Snorting he turned on his heel, not a word of goodbye as he walked away, escaped, fled what he didn't know how to handle. The sound of Hiroto moving closer to the grave was almost drowned by the rustling of his own clothing as he dug around his pocket for a cigarette, lighting it up only on the third attempted click of his lighter.

"That's Kenzo, the one I told you about."

He stopped as he heard his name, tempted to turn around but scared to draw attention to himself. It didn't make sense, the graveyard had been deserted as far as he could see, there was no one Hiroto could be talking to. No one except...

"I don't think he means to be rude, he's just..."

Glancing over his shoulder Kenzo saw Hiroto seated in front of the black stone, carefully picking twigs and leaves away from its top and the space in front of it. The way his fingers kept touching the cold surface, stroke it as if it was alive and able to feel the almost intimate touches, made him certain Tora had been Hiroto's lover. He wondered what had happened to him, yet he didn't want to know. Swallowing hard and inhaling deep, soothed by the familiar feeling of acrid smoke going down his lungs, he kept walking.

"He doesn't talk much, as you might've noticed, so I can't know for sure, but I think he's rather lonely."

Somehow Kenzo knew Hiroto was looking at him while speaking those words, yet he didn't even turn around to glare.

- - -

It took ten days till Hiroto saw Kenzo again, and when he did the other looked like he hadn't slept at all since their last encounter. In all honestly he wouldn't be too surprised if that was the case, Hiroto was fairly certain Kenzo came to the graveyard everyday. Whether he'd stayed away altogether or been around when he wasn't was impossible to tell, but either way Kenzo had spent less time than normal on 'his' bench.

“Did I scare you last time?”

Kenzo raised an eyebrow as he looked up at him, then took a final drag on his cigarette and tossed it on the ground. Pulling his knees up, much like he'd been sitting the day Hiroto gave him the mittens, he crossed his arms on them and leaned his forehead on the arms. He practically folded himself into a box and Hiroto tipped his head to the side curiously at the sight.

“I'm used to crazy people.”

Perhaps he should be offended, but Hiroto was mostly glad he got a reply at all. To be honest he'd been worried he'd gone too far when talking to Tora in front of Kenzo, it wouldn't have been the first person to take off when faced with the way he handled his loss. Knowing they were at least on speaking terms still, or whatever their condition was supposed to be called, he dared to take a seat next to the curled up man.

“Do you think I'm crazy?”

“You're talking to a dead man.”

It would be hard to argue such a statement, but luckily Hiroto wasn't about to. He *was* talking to a dead man, no need denying obvious facts.

“Have you never tried speaking to the one you lost?”

Kenzo didn't answer for a long time, he just sat there, head bent down and breathing deep and steadily. For a while Hiroto even thought he'd fallen asleep, but it was too cold for that to happen, right? Right. Eventually the black haired head rose and another cigarette was lit.

“Why would I?”

“You don't believe in a life after this? That he or she-”

“He.”

Hiroto nodded, happier than he was letting on Kenzo was actually talking to him, sharing things whether he realised it or not. Whomever it was lying in the grave Kenzo came to be near it was a male, that was the first information Hiroto had ever learned about him.

“That he can hear you if you speak to him then?”

Kenzo didn't answer at first, didn't know how to answer that question. More than anything he wanted to talk to Aki again, hear his voice and his laughter, feel his arms and his lips and his body.

“Talking won't bring him back.”

“It might help keep you sane.”

“I'm not the one talking to the dead.”

“I’m not the one drowning in guilt and grief.”

The small frame stiffened and the hand froze halfway to lips, apparently Kenzo hadn’t expected him to see through him like that. Or at the very least not speak up about it. He seemed beyond uncomfortable and while he felt slightly bad about it, Hiroto was also oddly proud for getting a proper reaction.

“Who said I was guilty?”

Defensive, cold, curt.

“Your eyes.”

Kenzo finally looked at him and what Hiroto saw wasn’t entirely easy to decipher; hurt, pain, confusion, fear, all mixed up in black and seasoned with anger. Kenzo didn’t like his questions, didn’t want to be cornered like this, but he still wasn’t getting up and leaving. Hiroto wasn’t sure if he was more relieved or surprised, perhaps equal amounts of both.

“What do you know anyway?”

“Nothing, but you could tell me.”

Chapter Summary

Kenzo allowed himself to be pulled close, down onto a bed to be touched and tortured with pleasure until it was the only thing he could remember of the night.

He practically stumbled in through the window, Aki's arms the only thing preventing him from crashing to the floor and messing up his face even more. His cheek stung badly and there was still a trivial ringing in his ear, but at least the dizziness had passed on the midnight walk over to Aki's house.

"What happened baby?"

Aki sounded terrified as he took in the slight swelling on Kenzo's left cheek, pressed lightly on what felt very much like a budding bruise if you asked the owner.

"Mum found the condoms."

"Oh shit..."

They both knew where Kenzo kept his condoms, same place as Aki kept his in his room, and what could be found in the same drawer. Everything they needed to make themselves, and more importantly each other, feel good.

"So she knows?"

"That she'll never have grandchildren? Yeah."

He could never tell how much he loved the arms enveloping him just then, pulling him into a tight embrace and allowing him to hide his face, his tears, in a long neck. No one but Aki would even know he was upset, on the verge of tears even, partly because he would never allow himself to break in front of anyone else.

"Does she know about us?"

Contrary to what you might think there was little to nothing selfish about the question. Aki didn't care if Kenzo's mother knew he was gay, the likelihood of her telling his own parents was slim to none, and should it happen he could deal with it. His parents wouldn't be thrilled to have a gay son, no Japanese parents would, but they would no doubt deal with it better than Kenzo's family. The way Kenzo snorted against his neck didn't bode well though.

"You know I can't shut up when I get pissed and provoked."

“Fuck Zo...”

“Fucking is what got me into trouble in the first place, but yes please.”

He needed the physical contact, the closeness, the feeling of someone wanting to be near him and the knowledge he was loved, all of which he found in Aki. Pulling back slightly he caught studded lips in a needy kiss, mumbling words against them.

“Fuck me.”

Aki only hesitated for a moment, wondering if he was really helping or causing more damaged to an already frail mind. But he knew Kenzo, better than anyone, knew he would never ask for this unless he wanted it, needed it on a level some might not consider sane. Aki knew, because he was the same way.

“Come here.”

Kenzo allowed himself to be pulled close, down onto a bed to be touched and tortured with pleasure until it was the only thing he could remember of the night.

- - -

Hiroto set the mugs down on the table, aromatic coffee competing with the smoke emitting from Kenzo's cigarette in the air. In all honesty he wasn't too fond of indoor smoking, but he knew there was no way Kenzo would stay unless he could smoke and since he didn't have a balcony there was little he could do but offer. He was half surprised the dark haired loner had agreed to come to his apartment, it was the first time they met somewhere other than in public.

“Do you want anything?”

“No.”

Kenzo had no idea why he'd agreed either. He didn't want to open up, didn't want to talk or let in, it only ever led to pain. But the idea of being alone again, completely alone without a small body showing up every now and then, hurt all on its own, and that scared him more than anything. Kenzo feared that no matter what he did pain would come from it.

“Why do you care about me?”

An almost teasing smirk found its way onto Hiroto's plush lips, only his very apparition was way too innocent to ever carry out the action properly. With a stab of pain he tried to ignore Kenzo realised who would've mastered it perfectly.

“Who says I care?”

Hiroto giggled shortly, probably too amused and, just maybe, a bit mocking too. Raising his hands he begged Kenzo to remain seated when he tried to get up, anger flaring in his eyes, probably intent on leaving already.

“No, no, no, I’m sorry, please stay.”

“You sure?”

Hiroto nodded fiercely, childishly if Kenzo may say so, and pushed the sugar bowl across the table without being asked to. Hiroto knew his eyes were open books, that he could never hide what he was thinking or feeling, not that he tried to, but when you spent a little time around Kenzo you realized he wasn’t all that hard to read either. At least not his immediate wants and desires, like sugar for his coffee.

“Will you tell me about him?”

No need to specify who he was talking about. Kenzo was positive he *didn’t* want to talk about it, yet he didn’t get up this time either.

“We grew up on the same street.”

It was a start, words spilling past bitten lips easier than either of them would’ve thought.

“I don’t even remember a time without him.”

Not true, Kenzo could vividly recall too many years he’d spent without Aki. But that was not the point, not now, not ever again.

“Who was he too you?”

Hiroto had no idea why he wanted to know these things, why he was so curious about Kenzo’s past and his emotions. It was so painfully obvious the older didn’t want to talk about them, yet he kept pushing, kept hoping though he didn’t know what for. It didn’t make sense but then he rarely did, at least that was what people had told him most of his life.

“He was my best friend.”

His voice was steady when he said it, but his eyes, his eyes were a turmoil of unspoken emotions he obviously didn’t know how to vent. Hiroto had a feeling this person had been a lot more than a best friend of Kenzo’s.

“How long since you said his name?”

For a brief moment Kenzo hated Hiroto, truly hated him for his ability to see through him and understand. He seriously doubted someone who hadn’t lost a person very dear to them would even ask such a question, they wouldn’t understand simply saying a name could be too painful to describe.

“That long, huh?”

Silence settled between them, which in itself wasn’t very strange or unusual, but somehow it seemed a bit more awkward than normally. Hiroto watched Kenzo light up and finish a cigarette, then light up another one with the end of the of the first. It tickled his nerves enough to light up one of his own, the first he’d ever smoked inside his apartment.

The minutes ticked by and the ashtray filled with butts at an alarming speed, some of which belonged to Hiroto but the majority by far to Kenzo. He'd always been an excessive smoker, something Aki told him ever so often, but it kept his hands and mind alike occupied. When he didn't want to think he smoked, he just wished there was something to do when he didn't want to feel.

"What's his name?"

That most definitely didn't prevent him from feeling.

"Aki. His name was Aki."

He didn't know why he replied, wished he hadn't the second the name rolled off his lips, in fact he wasn't even sure he'd meant to give it up. Aki belonged to him, the memories were his alone and he didn't want to share them, no one would understand either way. And it hurt, just like he'd know it would hurt to hear the name spoken out loud. Crushing the cigarette in the ashtray he stood up and walked out, tried to escape the pain, and Hiroto let him.

- - -

"What made you sit down at my table that day?"

Tora looked down at the bundle in his arms, Hiroto all wrapped up in fussy blankets and one of Tora's own shirts that was undoubtedly too big for the younger. The sight warmed his heart and he smiled softly.

"I told you that day, you looked lonely."

Hiroto looked up at the older, his boyfriend since a few months back. Had anyone told him back then, on that first day in school, Tora would become his boyfriend he would've probably laughed at them. Of all people Tora was perhaps the last you'd expect to be gay. But he was, very much so, and Hiroto felt like the luckiest man in the world to have caught him.

"But...when you...came on to me, how did you know I would be interested? How did you know I was...into guys?"

It was endearing, the way Hiroto could be so very confident one minute and a stuttering wreck the next. Had he not known the younger behaved like that around everyone Tora might have gotten annoyed, irritated by the fact Hiroto obviously didn't trust him. Only, the fact he was speaking, however stuttering and insecure, proved he trusted Tora a great deal more than most others.

Tora buried his nose in the fluffy sweat smelling hair and inhaled deeply, allowing the scent to flow through his senses and calm him.

"I didn't."

Hiroto glanced up once more, then settled with cuddling closer to the strong chest and enjoying the feeling of being close.

“So why did you do it then?”

“Because I liked you and wanted you to be more than a friend.”

It made him smile, a goofy grin that nearly split his face in two. No one could make him feel as happy, as adored and special and important, as Tora.

“You weren’t afraid I’d turn you down?”

“Of course I was, I wanted to be with you, not be rejected by you.”

“I’d never reject you.”

He curled his fingers in the soft material of the T-shirt Tora wore and the older smiled, Hiroto could feel it against his scalp.

“I know that now.”

Despite the comfort he was feeling, Hiroto shifted till he could look Tora in the eye, once again marvelling over the beauty of his pale eyes. He’d heard from classmates that some people found Tora scary, but he couldn’t see how or why. Yes, he was tall and different with his paler eyes and skin, but how could anyone honestly look at him and see anything but beauty?

“What if I had rejected you? If I hadn’t been gay and had turned you down?”

“You’ll never get anywhere if you don’t take risks. I don’t have time to wait for the things I want to come to me, so I go after them.”

Hiroto felt fingers in his hair and then he was tugged closer, into a kiss that was soft but not quite as soft as the ones they normally shared. It was tinted with something new, something different and slightly dangerous, without going exacting. A shiver ran down his spine, not an entirely unpleasant feeling, and a soft moan just made it past his lips.

“Is this where I take a risk?”

His eyes were huge and slightly clouded, kissing Tora felt very good after all, and he bit his lip slightly in nervousness. Tora gently tugged it free though.

“You wait till you’re comfortable taking them.”

They both knew they weren’t talking about risks in general just then but rather a very specific one, a line to cross, a very important step to take.

“But you said-”

“This is something I can wait for Pon, I assure you that.”

Hiroto smiled and leaned forward, molded lips together again and tried to tell Tora he wouldn’t make him wait too long without actually having to push the words past his lips. He

wanted to, he really did, but it was scary at the same time.

"It...scares me a bit."

"I don't want you to do things you feel uncomfortable doing Pon, ever! But don't let fear hold you back in life."

"I won't, I promise."

- - -

Kenzo got a few days to recover from the conversation, something he valued yet detested. He didn't want Hiroto around to ask more questions, didn't want to open the wound further or think back on what had been, what he'd lost. Only he couldn't stop thinking of it, not now when he'd started, when he'd allowed himself to truly think of Aki and their past, when he'd said the name. As much as he hated the questions, Kenzo found himself wishing Hiroto would come around simply to... To what? Occupy him?

"I wasn't sure you'd come."

He didn't know if he surprised himself or Hiroto more by talking first.

"You missed me?"

There was the same innocently teasing tone again, the one Kenzo wanted to erase entirely because it sounded like a failed attempt at being Aki. Hiroto sat down next to him and lit up a cigarette, nose slightly red, probably from the cold. He had no idea why he suddenly noticed such details.

"I saw you over by the grave."

Avoiding the question he at least admitted to having kept his eyes open, paid attention to not only Aki's grave but Tora's too. It was new, to both of them, and while it annoyed Kenzo it made Hiroto happy. It made him feel special, because he very much doubted Kenzo paid a lot of attention to the people in his surroundings.

The silence was more comfortable this time around, as if being back in their normal setting had a calming effect on them both. They smoked and kept their thoughts to themselves, Hiroto wiggling his toes inside his boots, amused by the fact it didn't show on the outside, while Kenzo stared out over the graves in front of them. One which no doubt belonged to Aki.

"His name is still Aki you know."

Kenzo stiffened, much like he had during their last conversation on this bench, but it passed quicker this time. Hiroto could still see the tension lingering in the curved spine, even through the layers of fur it was obvious Kenzo was no way near relaxed, but the hand going to his lips didn't shake and neither did his voice.

"What?"

“You said his name *was* Aki. I say it still is.”

“He’s dead.”

His voice was dead saying that, dead, empty, hollow, free even of the pain Hiroto *knew* he was feeling right then. There was a big difference between knowing something and actually saying it out loud, why he couldn’t tell, but he knew so from experience.

“As long as you remember him he isn’t gone though, and that means his name still *is*.”

“What are you, five years old?”

Angry words spat out harshly, defenses more than accusations if you knew to recognise that fact. Hiroto understood and Kenzo knew he did, which only served to make him even angrier.

“No, they say I’m naive though. You said I was crazy.”

“That doesn’t bother you?”

He was trying to scorn, taunt and insult, *shut up*, but Hiroto merely shook his head with honest eyes and it made Kenzo snap for real.

“He’s dead! Gone! Killed years ago! I’m here and he’s not and it doesn’t fucking matter if his name *is* or *was*. He isn’t here, that’s all I care about!”

He didn’t even realise what words he was using, what information he gave away in his anger, but Hiroto did. He heard and he got another piece to the puzzle, understood a tad bit more. He also realised it wasn’t wise to let Kenzo in on that just yet.

“If he isn’t here, why are you?”

Kenzo opened his mouth to retort, throw a smartass reply in Hiroto’s face, only he couldn’t think of one. His mind was completely blank, because the only reason he had to be here went straight against what he’d just told Hiroto. At least it did after what the blond had just said.

“You come here to be close to him.”

It wasn’t a question, Hiroto knew because that was why he came too.

“This is the only physical thing we’ve got left of them and though it isn’t much it’s *something*. Coming here makes me feel closer to Tora and I bet you feel closer to Aki here as well, why else would you come here every day?”

“I don’t have to come here every day, I just have nothing better to do.”

Excuses, pathetic and useless.

“But you can’t sleep if you don’t.”

He didn't reply to that, it was true after all and nothing he said would make Hiroto believe otherwise. The days he'd stayed away, ten days, the longest he'd ever gone without coming here, he had barely slept at all and eaten even less, he'd been a mess and it'd proven once and for all how badly he needed Aki. Or what was left of him, as Hiroto put it.

Kenzo stood up to leave, to escape the fear and confusion in his mind, but nimble fingers caught his sleeve in a surprisingly strong grip, pulled at him and begged him to turn around.

"Stay?"

And he did. He didn't know why, wasn't even sure he wanted to, but something about the way Hiroto looked at him made him anyway. Sitting back down, on the opposite side of the bench, creating a distance that was hardly there, he smoked. One cigarette, two, four, *six* in a row until his already smoked lungs were practically burning. They didn't speak, just sat there in silence, trying to ignore the chill of winter and each other alike, as time trickled by. Kenzo was used to staying this long, but the sound of another person breathing next to him, however softly, was unsettling.

"You're fucking everything up."

Hiroto looked at him silently, clearly waiting for an explanation without actually asking for it. Kenzo wanted to ignore him, let him sit there and wonder with unavowed questions in his eyes. But he tipped his head to the side, patiently waiting and that was a sort of silent provocation all on its own.

"This used to be..."

"A recess of sorts? A haven from yourself?"

He *really* hated the way Hiroto understood everything he *didn't* say. It shouldn't be possible, Kenzo'd spent years building up defences around himself, his emotions, his past, his memories, and no one could see through him anymore. No one even bothered to try. Except for Hiroto, Hiroto read him like an open book after having spent barely any time at all around him.

Only that wasn't entirely true anymore, he didn't know how much time they'd spent together but Kenzo assumed it added up to at least a few days by now. And Hiroto, unlike anyone else, saw him in his true self, with his defences lowered as much as they ever went down, he saw him here where he normally relaxed.

"I would like to meet him."

It was perhaps the last thing of all he would've expected and for a long while Kenzo just stared at the small blond. He knew the kid was crazy, enough so to talk to dead people, and that he was unweariedly naive and curious. Still.

"Why?!"

Hiroto looked at him for a while longer, huge brown eyes staring calmly into antsy black ones, then shrugged and turned his head to the ground as he crushed the end of his cigarette underneath his both.

“It is obvious Aki was very important to you, I just thought it would be nice to meet him.”

Another long silence prevailed, one where Kenzo clearly battled with himself. Hiroto let him, in no way in a rush and more than ready to take no for an answer should that be Kenzo’s decision, only he didn’t need to share that detail.

Kenzo never agreed verbally to the request, he just lit another cigarette, painfully aware of how few there were left in his pack, and stood up. Something in his demeanour told Hiroto he wasn’t trying to run away again, there was an uneasy calm lingering over the small frame which gave away his thoughts. Briefly Hiroto wondered how long it’d been since Kenzo approached Aki’s grave, but he pushed the question to the back of his mind and for once kept from uttering it.

He was scared, not that Kenzo would ever admit to the cold feeling in the pit of his stomach as he closed the distance between the bench and Aki’s gravestone for the first time in... He didn’t even know how long. Probably since Aki’s birthday, which meant the beginning of February and now Christmas was coming up, time past quickly. But not quickly enough.

Not a word slipped past his lips as they reached the grave. He just stopped and stared, pain in his chest sparking stronger than ever as his eyes rested on the letters of the oh so beloved name. Behind him Hiroto looked down and gasped, most likely in shock.

“Oh Kenzo...”

Ichiki Akihito, 1998

A lonely tear trickled down Hiroto’s cheek, not because he was in pain or hurting but because he realised *how long* Kenzo had been. Stepping past the dark haired man, just as he lit up yet another smoke, he crouched down in front of the grave, much like he had in front of Tora’s. Though he didn’t touch it, not aside from picking away a few leaves that wished to stain the resting place.

“There, I think you prefer it being nice and clean here, don’t you? Kenzo should bring you some flowers, or perhaps a candle, flowers would only freeze in the cold.”

He would’ve expected to feel jealousy, but Kenzo just kept quiet and stared at the tiny frame picking on leaves and twigs, talking to himself as if there was truly someone there listening. Someone who could appreciate his concerns and return them, reply to kind words and offer gentle favours in return to what was given him.

“I’m Hiroto, by the way, Kenzo is my new friend. I know he hasn’t introduced us, but you know him better than anyone so I assume it doesn’t surprise you.”

To his great surprise Kenzo felt tears sting the corners of his eyes while watching, listening, being forced to think and remember. He wasn’t sure Aki knew him anymore, knew for a fact

the other wouldn't recognise him as far as behaviour went. He'd never been a good boy, no teacher's pet or one to follow the rules, he'd always been crude and crass. But he'd never been bitter, not while Aki was around to drain the pent up emotions out of him. He'd never been cruel.

"He would've liked you."

The words spilled past his lips only after he'd ensured no traces of wet weakness lingered in his eyes. He refused to cry, would never admit to being close to tears while standing here. Tears were pointless, they wouldn't bring Aki back to him. But while he wasn't willing to offer Hiroto his emotions, he felt he could share his words, his thoughts.

Hiroto looked up at him, eyes as calm and open as always, always tinted with sadness that maybe, just maybe, wasn't all for his own dead lover just then.

"Tora wouldn't have liked you."

Offensive words said in the purest, more innocent way imaginable. Honest words that could not be contradicted.

"Few do."

"He did."

A soft nod towards the simple grey stone, another spike of pain through his chest. They barely hurt anymore he was so used to them, and at the same time they were excruciating.

"He isn't here anymore."

"I am."

- - -

Aki laughed and dove beneath the waves, deep down where the water was cold and swam fast, trying to get away. It was futile of course, he could never escape Kenzo under water, the younger might be smaller but he was like a fish in the sea, all fluent motions and incredible speed. In no time he caught up with Aki, closed his arms around the naturally toned body and tickled his sides. Aki squealed wetly and let the air out of his lungs, a cause for panic if he didn't know Kenzo was already bringing them to the surface. Gasping for breath he leant on the other in the water, knowing Kenzo could keep them both afloat, mumbling words into wet curls.

"I love you."

"You're the only one who does."

He wanted to object, wished desperately he could tell Kenzo it wasn't true, that his family at the very least loved him for the wondrous ball of attitude and personality Aki knew he was, all heart and emotions covered by a hard shield. Only he couldn't, because he believed the words Kenzo spoke. It'd been two months since his mother found out her son was gay, fucking

and being fucked by his best friend, the fact they were in love was beyond her comprehension. She'd steadfastly refused to talk to her only son since, chosen instead to focus all attention on her daughter, not that there was anything new in that.

"Forget it."

As always Kenzo knew what he was thinking about. Aki looked at him where they trod water, black hair plastered to a golden forehead he looked more beautiful than ever.

"How can I? It's my fault they won't speak to you."

"No!"

Kenzo pressed their mouths together harshly, a hard kiss to both shut up and prove a point.

"No. Don't ever let them get to you like that, don't listen to their bullshit and their lies, isn't that what you told me?"

He grabbed Aki's hand and tugged, begged the other to come with him to the shore and the sun kissed rocks. Aki complied, swimming to land to climb the slippery slope up to their favourite spot of all sun, no shadows. Wet and naked they laid down directly on heated stones, Kenzo with his head on Aki's chest, little rivulets of water sneaking from his hair across the older's chest.

"I don't need them."

"They're your family..."

Kenzo pulled his fingers lazily across toned muscles and tanned skin.

"You're my family."

Propping his chin against Aki's peck he stared up at his best friend, his lover, his everything really. Kenzo knew he was slightly addicted to Aki, but the older boy was the only one who truly cared about him, who put him first and made him feel like he actually mattered every now and then.

"I love you."

It wasn't often he offered the words, mostly he just showed that he cared in various ways. Aki knew to value the statement, yet all he did was tangle fingers in damp curls and close his eyes with a content sigh. Kenzo smiled and cuddled closer, lay his head to rest again and within moments he was fast asleep, lulled into dreams by a heartbeat beneath his ear and the sun rapidly drying his skin.

Chapter Summary

He could practically feel the knuckles caressing his cheek and the knowledge it was all in his head made his chest ache slightly.

Hiroto lit another candle, the third, and smiled as he took in the image he'd created in front of Tora's tombstone. It was still winter and too cold to bring flowers, but he'd found lanterns in pretty colours and although they would soon be destroyed by rain and sleet and frost they looked pretty now.

"Here you go, Tora. Something pretty to look at, though I'm not sure they'll give you much warmth."

In his head he could hear the older man chuckle and shake his head, say he didn't need warmth where he was now. That was the true reason he spoke to Tora, because it made it easier to imagine his voice, hear his responses and reactions as if he was still alive. Perhaps it made him insane, but it brought him comfort and it harmed no one so he saw no reason to quit his behaviour.

'He is here as always I see.'

Looking over his shoulder Hiroto watched Kenzo for a moment, small body seated on the same bench as always, curled in on itself against the cold and smoking. He wasn't sure it should make him quite so happy to see the other was still wearing the mittens he'd given him.

"I honestly don't know what to think of him."

Turning back to the grave he absentmindedly trailed the carved out letters with his fingers, sighing softly as he wished once more Tora wasn't gone. He was moving on yes, but it didn't mean he didn't miss the man buried in frozen soil beneath his feet.

"He is so..."

'Bitter? Crass? Cruel?'

"No, not cruel... Do you really think he's cruel?"

The lack of reply in his head was completed by an image, Tora's characteristic look of one eyebrow raised in a clear unspoken question. No words had even been needed when he sent that look at someone and Hiroto smiled sadly, though he didn't know if the sadness was for Tora or for Kenzo. Glancing briefly over his shoulder again he worried his lip softly.

“I don’t think it’s fair to say he’s cruel. He’s hurting, much in the same way I was, still am, only far, far more.”

In the six weeks or so since he’d gotten to see Aki’s grave, Hiroto was rather proud to say he and Kenzo had developed something of a friendship. He had learnt where Kenzo worked and where he lived, they met up for lunch a couple of times and coffee a lot more. Mostly they met at the cemetery and then moved on to some corner café or another, simply because it was too cold to stay outdoors for very long. Kenzo didn’t agree of course, he was quite content to sit and stare at falling snow with teeth clattering so bad they threatened to fall out, but Hiroto usually managed to pull him indoors.

“He’s definitely crass though, can’t argue there. But something tells me he always was, not sure why.”

‘And the bitterness?’

A soft wrinkle appeared on the normally smooth childlike forehead at the imagined question.

“I honestly don’t know why he is so bitter either, because I’m not arguing that he is. He doesn’t share much you know, not about Aki or other things that truly matter, that would explain.”

He could practically feel the knuckles caressing his cheek and the knowledge it was all in his head made his chest ache slightly.

“I miss you, you know. I’m trying to do what you told me to do and move on, but it’s hard. Everyone says I’m doing really well, but they don’t know me like you did. And they don’t understand...”

Tora had been a very social and likable person and Hiroto knew a lot of people were experiencing the loss of him; his family and friends, his colleagues and a bunch of other people who hadn’t really known him at all but still chose to grieve him for reasons Hiroto didn’t know. But none of them had been Tora’s lover, none of them had made the choice he’d made at the mere age of seventeen and stuck by it for six years. Six years he wouldn’t trade for anything.

“Kenzo would understand. Aki was more to him than a best friend, I can see it in his eyes.”

Looking over his shoulder again, he’d realised he liked looking at Kenzo, he sighed softly.

“I don’t know what to do. I’m pretty sure he’s not what you had in mind when you told me to find someone else but... I think I might be falling for him.”

It was illogical, Kenzo had given him little to no reason to like him. Except he’d trusted him enough to let him know about Aki, not much but Hiroto had a feeling it was a hell of a lot more than he’d offered anyone else.

‘Follow your heart Pon, it’s what you do best.’

“I’m scared.”

‘Scared you’ll end up hurt again? End up like him?’

He nodded slowly, eyes still trailed on the small smoking figure on the bench. Perhaps Kenzo felt him stare for he turned his head slightly, glanced sideways in Hiroto’s direction, eyes locking briefly and letting the younger know he knew he was there.

‘You know what to do Pon.’

“Yeah, I don’t want to be scared anymore. And I’m tired of being alone.”

‘Then go.’

Hiroto hoped Tora, wherever he was, wasn’t crying as he stood up on slightly stiff legs and walked over to Kenzo’s bench. To the one who was still alive, at least on the outside, and whose voice he could hear for real.

- - -

Something was wrong, Hiroto could tell so the moment he laid eyes on Tora. The older man was nervous, enough so to have sweat trickle down his temple and Hiroto felt worry seep into his system.

“What’s up baby?”

His mind was already painting pictures, all dark and hurtful, tinted with betrayal and emotional abuse. A few days ago he’d swallowed back his fears and given himself to Tora, because he was fairly certain what he felt inside when looking at the taller was love. Now he was afraid his feelings were not reciprocated after all, that Tora wanted to get rid of him and was simply nervous to tell him so.

“Pon, I need to talk to you.”

“What is it?”

It was barely a whisper, all the insecurity Tora had worked so hard to rub out returning in an instant. Tora saw it and it made him want to smack himself.

“Come here baby.”

Hiroto accepted the offered arms, despite the fear in his chest, and curled up on the tiny couch, felt the arms close loosely around him. Looking up at Tora he tried desperately to not be afraid while he waited for the other to say whatever was on his mind.

“Don’t look so scared, please.”

“I’m sorry, but...you seem so nervous.”

Tora didn’t reply to that, which in itself was enough of an answer, and for a long time they just sat in silence. Hiroto waited patiently, happy for each moment he got to stay by the older, and slowly he began to suspect Tora wasn’t trying to break up with him at all.

“Just tell me.”

He didn't know what it was, only that Tora had something he needed to say and hearing it had to be better than nervously waiting for it to be said while his mind painted continuously darker pictures. Tora closed his eyes for a moment and when he opened them again fear was clearly visible.

“I'm dying Pon.”

“What? That's not funny, Tora.”

But it wasn't a lie, he could easily tell so when looking into the pale eyes he'd grown to love. Tora was scared, Hiroto had never seen him even flinch at anything before yet here he sat with nothing but blunt fear in his eyes.

“You can't die...”

Tora wished he could make a promise not to, mostly because he didn't want to die! But also because he could see the same fear he felt inside light up in Hiroto's eyes and he wanted to protect the small man from anything that might hurt him, which right now was himself.

“I'm going to.”

He tightened his arms around the small body slightly, seeking comfort as much as giving it and Hiroto didn't know if he should pull away or press closer. He wanted to run and hide, forget he ever heard anything about death, and at the same time his godforsaken curiosity and stupid desire to know more made him cling tighter. Or maybe that was the love he felt.

“Why?”

Why are you dying? Why can't I keep you? Why did you make me fall in love with you if you knew?! Tora read all those questions into the whispered word, they were ones he imagined he would've asked himself.

“Several years ago I was diagnosed with CUP, carcinoma of unknown primary.”

It was the easiest question to answer really, he could reel off information about his illness in his sleep. So well sometimes he forgot not everyone else was equally informed.

“What does that mean?”

“It means there's a tumour somewhere in my body, but the doctors can't find it.”

“You've got cancer?”

Hiroto found it hard to speak in anything but whispers and there was still a strong desire to both up and run and hold on for dear life, however long that might be. Tora nodded slowly as the term was thrown out in the open.

“Yes, I’ve had surgery several times to remove metastasis tumours and gone through both chemo- and radiation therapy. But unless they find the primary tumour I stand little to no chance of survival.”

They were hard facts to process for a seventeen year old mind who had barely accepted he was gay, only recently fallen in love for the first time, and just given his virginity away. A few days ago he’d felt on top of the world, not an emotions he was familiar with, and like he could do anything as long as he had Tora. He had been happy! Now...now he didn’t know what he felt.

Tora swallowed thickly and carefully pulled his knuckles over Hiroto’s cheek in a sort of backwards caress. There were tears wetting the skin, but he wasn’t sure if Hiroto was aware of it himself.

“I’m sorry.”

It was his turn to whisper now.

“I meant to tell you earlier, but...”

He had no real defense though. Not telling was selfish on his behalf, especially since he’d taken Hiroto into his bed knowing full well what it was he was giving. The truth, for what it was worth, was that he didn’t want to lose Hiroto based on something he couldn’t control. It didn’t make his behaviour right or acceptable though.

“I need some time to think.”

The words sounded frightfully final, but Tora didn’t try to stop the small body as it released itself from his hold and stood up. Hiroto looked him in the eye for a good minute without saying anything, light reflecting in the wetness still on his cheek.

“I’ll call you.”

Tora bit his lip hard enough to break it as he watched the younger turn around and walk out the door. He wanted to run after him, beg him not to leave, say the words that lay on the tip of his tongue, but he didn’t. He’d been selfish enough already, all he could do was give Hiroto the choice he should’ve had from the beginning.

- - -

Sitting down next to Kenzo, purposefully closer than usual, Hiroto wondered if this choice would be a good or bad one. He felt nervous, enough so to make his hands slightly clammy, but at least they didn’t shake as he lit up a cigarette. And Kenzo didn’t move away, that detail was very important.

- - -

Hiroto never called back. Instead he waited six days before going back to Tora’s and never bothered knocking once he got there. He walked straight through the front door and took a seat next to his very shocked lover on the same couch they’d been during their last

conversation. Tora had almost given up hope, figured he'd scared the younger away or angered him beyond repair by not telling him the truth from the beginning. He had not expected Hiroto to walk through the door, the only thing giving away something was wrong the very grim look on his face.

"I tried staying away."

He hadn't expected that comment to be the first out of Hiroto's mouth either.

"But it hurts, I don't know why but it hurts not talking to you every day. I hate waking up alone and going to bed without having seen you all day. I feel misunderstood and get all insecure again when you're not around."

Hiroto finally looked up, met Tora's pale eyes, and though the fear from a few days ago still lingered it was mixed in with determination.

"Is that love?"

Tora felt his throat contract at the question, reading the answer in warm brown eyes already.

"I think so... I've been so close to calling you all week, because not talking to you hurt me too. Every time I've turned around in bed at night the past few days I've woken up because something felt wrong."

Something had been missing, the body he'd been sleeping next to almost every night for the past few months, long before they'd actually slept together.

"Do you love me?"

Hiroto sounded so much older than his seventeen years just then, but he looked even younger than he was. He always did, it came with his innocent eyes and petite frame, but it was intensified by the moment. Tora reached out, barely allowed his knuckles to touch the other's cheek, but it was the first physical contact they'd had in almost a week.

"Yes I do. It's why I told you. And why I waited so long."

In there was an apology, a plea for forgiveness for allowing them to get so close before informing that they would inevitably be torn apart whether they wanted to or not. Hiroto grabbed his hand and turned it around, pressed the palm against his cheek and leaned into it briefly before kissing the knuckles that had every possibility in the world to harm him but only ever touched him softly. He was still holding Tora's hand, resting it in his lap after he'd shifted so he was seated crosslegged and facing the older.

"How long have you got?"

He felt oddly calm asking it, much more so than he'd thought he would, and surprisingly Tora seemed equally calm in his reply.

"I don't know. Years most likely, but there's no way of telling how many."

It was as if the pain was ebbing away as soon as they were together again, as if it got easier to talk about it once they'd made up their minds. True the words had not been spoken yet, but there was no reason for Hiroto to ask questions unless he meant to stay. And he asked questions alright, for a few hours they remained seated on the couch with Hiroto asking everything he could think of and Tora replying to the best of his ability.

In the end Hiroto looked up at Tora, curiosity sated for the time being and content with just being close. He felt older, more mature, than a few hours ago.

"I don't want you to die, but I know I can't do anything about it."

He didn't hesitate, didn't choke or tear up in any way. He sounded sad at the prospect yes, but looking at him Tora felt more confident than ever he'd chosen the right person to trust and love.

"I won't hold it against you if you leave."

"And I make no promises I won't."

It was honesty at a level neither of them had experienced before. The words they spoke carried the potential of being very hurtful, but the way in which they were said made them comforting instead. There was no secrecy between them now, no false hope or empty promises.

"But right now I want to stay. I'm scared, I am, but I promised I wouldn't let fear hold me back and I want to be with you."

Hiroto cuddled closer, rested his head on Tora's strong shoulder and closed his eyes. He felt exhausted and wished he could go to sleep right then and there, but he didn't know if their conversation was over just yet. Tora had told him he loved him and it probably would've made sense for him to say the same thing, but even if he might feel it, which he was pretty sure he did, he felt no need to say the words this night and that was oddly comforting in and of itself.

Tora hugged the tiny body and buried his nose in the sweet smelling hair, trying desperately not to cry as he felt his fears ease and hope fill his heart. For the time being it seemed like he would get to keep Hiroto, and he honestly wasn't sure if he deserved it or not.

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me, I haven't done anything."

"You've done more than can be expected of you."

"I'm just...following my heart."

He might as well have said that he loved Tora, in many ways it was what he meant. But it also meant that he was doing something for himself, something he had chosen to do without influence from anyone else, and that felt good too. But he was still exhausted and Tora felt him yawn against his neck.

“Let’s go to bed.”

Hiroto nodded and mumbled something incomprehensible against pale skin, making Tora chuckle as he lifted the small body with ease. Tonight they would both sleep properly for the first time in almost a week.

Chapter Summary

Kenzo could *feel* Hiroto's eyes widen at the wording, incomprehension and disbelief filling the space between them on the bench. He wanted to smirk, shrug it off like he did everything else in life, but somehow Hiroto had managed to enter the one topic that *mattered*.

Kenzo didn't know what was going on in his life anymore. Ever since the day Hiroto came to sit closer than normal it was as if he'd never stepped back again. The younger had pulled him along to the cinema, dragged him out to restaurants and shopping malls, invited him back to his place and somehow even managed to invite himself over to Kenzo's apartment. Kenzo didn't know what shocked him most, the fact he went along with all those things or the fact he found himself almost longing for whatever the tiny blond would come up with next.

They still spent a lot of time at the cemetery though, it wasn't where they'd first met but it was the place they had in common, the only thing they had in common. Or so it would seem.

"What did you like to do before this?"

Before Aki died, before your life was consumed by guilt and grief. It was what Hiroto meant, but he was kind, or perhaps tactful, enough not to voice it. A few weeks ago Kenzo would've ignored the question in favour of silence, a couple of months back he would've bitten Hiroto's head off for daring to ask about his past.

"I...liked to swim..."

He hadn't been to the ocean in twelve years. He'd gone there once shortly after Aki died, to sit in their spot and feel the chilly winds ruffle his hair. Only it wasn't the same without pliant arms wrapped around him, arms that should've protected him from the winds that seemed to blow straight through his heart that day. He'd never gone into the water that day and he'd never gone back since.

"And I used to drum."

It was barely a whisper, spoken so low he was sure Hiroto hadn't heard. He didn't see the way soft brown eyes sparked with interest at the statement, focused only on keeping back the wave of emotions his confessions brought on.

"How come you don't anymore?"

Hiroto had an idea, assumed Kenzo had stopped after Aki died because somehow drumming too reminded him of his lover and friend. He still hadn't gotten an admission Aki and Kenzo

had been lovers, in many ways he thought they seemed to young to have been in the full sense of the word, but somehow he knew they had been.

“My parents sold my drum kit after I drummed for two days straight.”

There was more hate in his voice right then than Hiroto had ever heard before. He’d never even heard Kenzo mention his parents before and now he thought he knew why, it was quite obvious the black eyed man hosted no warm feelings for his family.

“You could get a new one.”

He hesitated a moment before suggesting it, not knowing the full story behind the hate in Kenzo’s voice made him slightly insecure. But he didn’t want the conversation to die down and surprisingly Kenzo didn’t let it either.

“Not one Aki carved his name into.”

It was easier speaking Aki’s name now than it’d been in years, but digging up memories like this brought Kenzo more pain than he was willing to admit. He’d put a lid over his emotions for the past decade or so, simply because without a way to vent them it was easier to try and ignore them. They were always there, always hurting and boiling in his blood, but he’d learnt to mostly push them away. Until Hiroto came along.

“They sold it after he died?”

Kenzo crushed the cigarette he’d been smoking and lit a new one, feeling the familiar sting of salty tears in his eyes even behind the acrid burn of hate and bile in his throat.

“Yeah, they took away the only outlet I had left.”

Hiroto swallowed a bit more loudly than he’d intended to. It was obvious Kenzo still had found no other outlet, that he carried around things inside that were anything but healthy to keep pent up and for a moment Hiroto felt almost scared. And at the same time he wanted to make the other man snap, for his own sake. He wanted to tear down Kenzo’s defences and make him feel what he clearly refused to let himself feel, make him realise what had happened wasn’t his fault.

“What did you do? After they took your drums, I mean.”

He’d expected Kenzo to retort, snort, do something, instead he got silence, thick and suffocating.

- - -

He stared at himself in the mirror, face streaked with tears and throat sore from too much screaming. Not two days had passed since he’d come back from a walk, one he’d been forced to take after his father quite literally threw him out of the house, to find an empty spot where his drum kit used to be. When he closed his eyes he could still see the kanji spelling out Aki’s name and the knowledge he’d never see that when he drummed again, if he ever got to drum again, hurt almost as badly as the knowledge he’d never see the boy who carved them.

Scratch that, nothing came even remotely close to the pain of knowing he'd never see Aki again.

He'd yelled and screamed, demanded to know where his drums were and that he get them back, he'd even gone so far as striking out at his father. Big mistake when you were a lot smaller and barely worth the clothes on your body, definitely not as much as the money even a battered drum kit could bring in.

"Kenzo! Get back here, I'm not done talking to you!"

"Leave me the fuck alone!"

"Watch your language you ungrateful excuse of a son!"

The words didn't become him, he'd long since grown used to the insults and constant barbs thrown at him. His father had never struck him though, not before today and looking in the mirror he could see the bruise starting to form on the side of his face. Pulling the shirt over his head, dropping his pants to the floor, he desperately searched for other marks, made by other hands and for entirely different reasons, marks he'd begged and pleaded for.

Fresh sobs wrecked his body as he realised the last of them were gone, every bruise and nip and bite Aki had left on him the night before he died had faded and healed. He had nothing left and no new ones would ever come. Somewhere in the back of his mind he was aware of his father still screaming through the door but he paid no attention to him or whatever shit he was spewing, it didn't matter, it wasn't important and he couldn't be bothered with it.

Black eyes scanned the bathroom counter for something, anything, to ease the pain burning him from inside. They landed on his mother's nail file, slender and metallic with a promisingly pointy tip. He didn't think twice as he picked it up, he just wanted the pain to stop, he wanted it all to end.

- - -

Kenzo slowly pulled the sleeves of his jacket and shirt up, revealing pale forearms with even paler scars decorating them, long and jagged and ugly. He had no idea why he did it, why he let Hiroto in on that secret, lowered his guard and shared things he'd never shared with anyone outside his family. But Hiroto had asked and this was, in all honesty, the easiest way to answer.

Unlike what he'd expected though, Hiroto neither gasped nor whimpered at the sight, he didn't pull away or flee the scene. The blond just remained quiet, tentatively reaching out to brush fingertips over elevated scar tissue and Kenzo allowed it. It was the most intimate moment he'd experienced since Aki died, just sitting there and letting Hiroto touch the proof of his weakness, his need with no receiver. There was nothing sexual about the act the blond performed, but it held an importance beyond anything Kenzo had let happen in the past twelve years.

And it scared him, it scared him far more than he was willing to admit.

“They saved you, that must mean they care at least.”

He almost wished Hiroto hadn't spoken, because the words only proved he had no idea what he was talking about, that he didn't know Kenzo's parents in the slightest or anything of what his life had been like.

“It had nothing to do with me, they just wanted to avoid another stabbed body in their household.”

Kenzo could *feel* Hiroto's eyes widen at the wording, incomprehension and disbelief filling the space between them on the bench. He wanted to smirk, shrug it off like he did everything else in life, but somehow Hiroto had managed to enter the one topic that *mattered*.

“They needed to save me to save *her*...”

- - -

Kenzo gasped softly as Aki gave him a slightly rough elbow in the side, he was sore from the night before and he knew Aki revelled in the knowledge, in making him gasp and moan in delicious pleased pain. There was nothing sweeter than the ache Aki left inside him, making muscles burn to show him he was loved.

“Asshole.”

“What, can't handle me?”

It was teasing beyond what his parents would ever accept, but they were still outside the house and so they hadn't broken any rules yet. Kenzo had promised not to 'indulge in his disgusting habits' inside his parents' house, but nothing had been said about the garden. Besides, they were only touching and kissing innocently.

“I should get the mail.”

“Oh, peacekeeping are we?”

Aki chuckled against his neck, knowing far more than anyone else but trying to ease the situation nonetheless. They hardly ever hung out at Kenzo's house anymore, not since his mother found out the true nature of their relationship, but Kenzo needed clean clothes and so there was little choice left but to head over there. It might've been easier for the younger to go alone, but Aki wasn't about to let him face his parents on his own. He knew for a fact they stayed at least a bit calmer if he was around too.

“Shut up and go inside, I'll be right there.”

The taller chuckled and pecked him on the lips before he kept on walking while Kenzo headed over to the mailbox by the road, gathering random letters whose addressee he didn't care about. If a letter or two happened to be for him he assumed someone would inform him later on.

He flipped through the envelopes mindlessly as he crossed the driveway up to the house, mostly to have something to do, when a terrified scream pierced the air. Kenzo was so shocked he dropped the mail and stood unmoving for several moments while the echo died down. It'd been a female voice crying out, one he recognised but didn't quite want to acknowledge at the time being. His sister, not quite sane but up till then mostly loved none the less.

It took a minute, maybe two, before he was able to move, dashing through the front door to find his mother hugging his sister in the hallway, blood splatter all over her, a common kitchen knife on the floor next to the pair. Kenzo couldn't breathe as he passed the two, followed the blood pattern to the kitchen and felt his existence crumble at the core.

Aki lay in a puddle of his own blood, gasping for air with several stab wounds to his chest. Kenzo didn't think, he acted on impulse, closing the few feet between them to wrap his arms around Aki, press hands against bloody wounds in a futile attempt to stop the bleeding.

"Call an ambulance!"

But no one listened. His mother was too occupied trying to comfort and calm down his baby sister, where his father was he didn't know. Kenzo was all alone, fighting a losing battle as Aki looked up at him with fear and disbelief in his eyes, gasping for breath even as he was drowning in his own blood.

"No, no!"

Kenzo pressed harder on the wounds, cradled Aki's head to his chest even as he felt the life rapidly seeping out of the body.

"Don't leave me, please!"

Aki tried to say something, lips moving but words concealed by blood bubbling over them. Kenzo could do nothing but sit there and cry helplessly as eyes glazed over and the steady flow between his fingers decreased when there was nothing left to spill.

- - -

It should've been Kenzo crying, instead it was Hiroto shedding tears as the story fell past bitten lips in pained whispers. Kenzo had no idea why he was sharing the story, it hurt beyond belief to think back on that day and actually tell the story of how Aki died.

"Your sister killed him?"

Kenzo didn't reply at first, merely lit up another cigarette and tried to will the image of Aki's eyes, scared and unable to comprehend the situation, from his mind. He didn't want to remember it, not when awake, and therefore he shouldn't speak of it. But he'd started, for the first time in *years* he'd opened his mouth to talk about things that truly mattered and now he couldn't shut up again.

“Yeah, she was....I don’t know, paranoid or some shit like that. Aki walked into the kitchen and she got scared and stabbed him.”

His voice was barely above a whisper, hurt and pain and sorrow flying past his lips much faster than words and Hiroto *felt* more than he heard the sadness. Reaching out he carefully placed a hand on Kenzo’s shoulder, wanting to touch and comfort but not daring to go all the way. Kenzo stiffened beneath his fingers but he didn’t shrug it off, mostly because Hiroto didn’t say anything. Most people would try to comfort verbally, show that they cared and understood by stating random shit he didn’t care about in the slightest. Hiroto remained silent after having *listened*, showed that he was there, but didn’t speak up, even though Kenzo knew the blond was one of the few who came close, though not all the way, to understanding how he felt.

Hiroto squeezed the shoulder slightly, dried the stray tears absentmindedly, but otherwise remained still and silent. What happened to Kenzo was so similar to his own story, yet different in every way imaginable. He understood the pain of losing a lover, but not like *that*. Everything he’d never understood about Kenzo suddenly seemed a lot less puzzling, even if he still didn’t have the full picture. Sitting there right then he was confident he would though, he knew he’d just been let in, trusted in ways he wondered if anyone had before, and it made him both proud and scared.

- - -

Hiroto sighed and dropped his cigarette to the ground, crushed it with his boot even after he heard the sharp hissing sound that told him it was already dead. Winter was finally losing to spring, chasing away the chill and bringing muddy wetness in its wake. He wondered what Kenzo thought of this season, if he liked the budding warmth enough to ignore the annoying mud that stuck to shoes and clothes and everything else, but he couldn’t ask because the older wasn’t there. Ever since the day he’d told about Aki’s death Kenzo had more or less avoided him. Not as bad as the first time, Hiroto had seen the other around every now and then, but several times Kenzo had left after he arrived at Tora’s grave but before he could approach the bench and it hurt more than it should.

He was starting to wonder if he’d made a mistake, if he would’ve been better off walking away from the bench than sitting down that day. Kenzo was such a troublesome individual, tainted by loss and grief to an extent Hiroto could never imagine. And at the same time it was that loss and grief that drew him in, had allowed Kenzo to worm his way beneath Hiroto’s skin and into, if not his heart just yet then at least his bloodstream.

Looking left and right he sighed again as he still couldn’t see the small man, couldn’t feel pitch black eyes glaring at him from a distance or beckoning him closer in their own silent call for attention. When his eyes landed on the simple grey gravestone he’d long since learnt to recognise as Aki’s, he only hesitated a minute. He’d spent a lot of time talking to Tora in the past few weeks, even more than normal, almost as much as right after the older died, but Tora had no answers to give him and though Hiroto knew he couldn’t talk to Aki the way he was ‘talking’ to Tora he still wanted to.

It felt strange, approaching Aki’s grave without Kenzo walking next to him. He knew he wouldn’t be upset if the roles were reversed, if Kenzo or anyone else visited Tora’s grave. But

Kenzo was a lot more possessive of Aki and his grave than Hiroto had ever been of Tora, Tora was too possessive to allow Hiroto to be the same, but he'd never minded belonging to the older. Still he squatted down in front of the grave, wishing he could sit down properly but knowing it'd ruin his jeans beyond repair, and traced the letters of Aki's name with his eyes.

"Hello Aki. I'm not sure if you remember me or not, I'm Hiroto, Kenzo's friend..."

A heavy sigh, heavier by far than he'd allowed himself to utter in a long time, slipped past his lips. Hiroto tried to always stay positive, mostly because he needed to or he was certain he would've long ago buried himself in a swamp of depression and grief, much like Kenzo had. But lately he found it harder to keep the frown from his face and the sighs from his lips, and though he didn't want to admit it, it was all because of Kenzo.

"Well I'd like him to be my friend, but I'm not sure he feels the same way about me."

To be honest he didn't even know exactly what 'feels the same way' fully meant. His own feelings towards the small black eyed man were confused and conflicting, a crazy mixture of sympathy and understanding, hope to be understood in return, fear of letting someone close again, a touch of annoyance at his overall behaviour, and maybe something more.

"I wish you were here to explain him to me, how he thinks and functions, plus it'd take away his pain and I'd really like to see that happen too. He told me how you died and it was painful to hear, mostly because of how it affected him. For his sake I wish you were still here."

It didn't matter such a thing would mean he stood no chance of being understood or find consolation in Kenzo, Hiroto knew the pain of loneliness and if he could he would always save someone else from feeling it. Had there been a way he would've brought Aki back for Kenzo, even if he couldn't bring Tora back for himself in the same way.

"But you're not here, whereas I am and I was wondering....hoping, that maybe you'd be okay with me getting to know Kenzo better. Would you? I think I like him, you see. It might sound strange, he's been rather...cold after all, but I think you out of all people should understand, there are just these small things he does..."

Hiroto smiled at the thought, memories of the past months flying back in mindless illogical patterns, all of them helping to raise his mood. Kenzo offering him an already lit cigarette, Kenzo accepting a fleeting touch or sharing a memory, however insignificant it might seem it still meant a lot to him. The curve of his lips faltered slightly as he thought of the things shared lately, Aki's death and the time following, the suicide attempt. Those were important things and it made Hiroto feel special, trusted in a way he hadn't since that day eight years ago when he first learnt what CUP stood for.

"I know I can never be you or take your place, no more than Kenzo can ever replace Tora, I wouldn't even want to. I just don't want to be alone anymore, and I don't want Kenzo to have to be, and...I'm pretty sure you wouldn't want him to be either."

"Don't talk as if you knew him."

The words were hissed from behind him and startled Hiroto so bad he almost ended up seated in the mud nonetheless. He knew the voice though, low and laced with smoke, even when it held far more emotion than he'd even heard before. Turning around he stumbled as he got to his feet.

"Kenzo."

"Don't talk as if you knew him."

There was a warning in the statement, but also a nearly concealed pain that made Hiroto think he was right on track. He also wondered how long Kenzo had been standing there, listening to his one-sided conversation with Aki, but found he didn't care, almost wished the older had heard his confessions.

"I didn't know him."

"Then why the hell are you talking to him? You don't have that right."

He was hissing, like an angry cat, and Hiroto assumed a lot of people would've been scared. Or at least weirded out, it was hard to scare people when you were tiny, he should know. But looking closer it was easy, well not too hard anyway, to tell Kenzo was scared, though of what Hiroto wasn't entirely sure. The hissed words were protective, possessive even, leaving little doubt as to whom Aki belonged, to whom Kenzo belonged in return.

"You'd rather no one talked to him? That he be alone too?"

It was a cruel thing to say, provocative in the way Hiroto had realised was the only way to get Kenzo to truly open up. Nothing else seemed to work and he was getting desperate and Kenzo was already angry, bordering on furious even though he was eerily calm on the surface, what did he have to lose? His friendship, as it was, yes, but hadn't he just admitted he wanted more?

Kenzo *was* furious, positively fuming where he stood, fists clenched so hard blunt nails cut through his skin as he tried not to knock the other out.

"Don't you fucking dare judge me."

"I'm trying to get to know you."

He tried desperately to keep the frustration out of his voice, because Hiroto *was* beginning to get frustrated with Kenzo. A part of him wanted to shake the black eyed man and scream at him, slap him out of his stupid shell of egoistical self-pitying, another wanted to just walked away. Every time he thought he was getting closer to Kenzo, every time the other seemed to open up even the tiniest bit, he always retrieved even further into himself afterwards, and it was getting tiresome.

"I didn't ask you to."

Something inside Hiroto snapped at that. He'd somewhat understood Kenzo wasn't used to kind treatment, that he'd grown up to harsh words and little love, that losing Aki had pretty

much robbed him of any traces of happiness, but Hiroto was! His parents had always been there and no one, *no one*, could be more loving and kind and caring than Tora! What had happened to Kenzo wasn't fair, but neither was his behaviour.

“Yeah well maybe I am just a masochist. I chose to love a man I knew was dying and I choose to want to get to know a stubborn, rude, idiot.”

Kenzo paused, lighter halfway to cigarette he paused and just stared.

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why do you do it? Why do you put up with me?”

It was an honest question, because just like Hiroto had assumed, Kenzo was not used to people caring, or even bothering to try. He'd grown up fast and hard, been left lonely and cold, and learnt that it was less painful to stay that way.

“I made a promise to move on.”

Chapter Summary

He didn't want to go inside, didn't want to face his family, the reason Aki was dead and he alive. Kenzo needed them to be the same, both alive or both dead, he couldn't be what Aki was not.

Hiroto looked up from his book as the beeping of the heart monitor changed to indicate Tora was waking up. Pale amber eyes fluttered open slowly and immediately sought his. Tora eyes hadn't changed, still warm and alive and loving even as the rest of his body was but a fraction of its former self.

"Hey."

Putting the book aside he reached out and softly grasped Tora's hand, weak and skinny and nothing like the hand that used to hold and protect him. Hiroto was the one to hold and protect now.

"Hey."

Tora turned his hand around, a simple action requiring a lot of energy on his behalf, and intertwined their fingers. He could never express how grateful he was Hiroto was still here, even now. He imagined he would've been a lot more scared had he been alone.

"How long did I sleep?"

"About two hours."

They both knew Tora needed a lot of sleep, that his body was drained most of the time and he simply lacked the energy to stay awake for long periods of time. Hiroto didn't blame him but Tora hated it, it felt like such a waste of time, time he no longer had. They'd gotten six years together, the best six years Tora could've ever asked for.

Two times Hiroto had seen him through treatment for minor metastasis tumours already, and though Tora had offered him to leave both times the younger had refused. Then, seven months ago, Tora had been diagnosed with a late state of pancreatic cancer and they'd both known this was the end. Pancreatic cancer was rare and incurable unless discovered early, on top of it all it was uncommon among young people and though he'd experienced a lot Tora felt far from old.

"Pon."

He coughed slightly and Hiroto immediately held out a cup of water, complete with a straw for him to drink through. Tora drank greedily, for once not afraid of nausea since he was given no chemotherapy this time, merely palliative care. Had it not been so sad it would've almost been funny; at 25 the doctors were doing everything they could to ease his passing.

Hiroto gave him a soft kiss as he put the cup back on the table next to the bed.

"You were saying?"

"I was trying to say I need to talk to you."

"I hate it when you say that."

Tora frowned slightly.

"Why?"

"It reminds me of the day you told me you were dying, you said exactly those words then 'Pon, I need to talk to you.'"

Tora smiled softly, sadly, trust Pon to remember such a thing from that day. The only thing Tora remembered was the fear and hopelessness he felt when Hiroto walked out the door, the empty feeling in his chest as he was convinced the small man would never come back again.

"Sorry, what did you want to say?"

The way Tora looked at him had his heart bubbling over with love and his chest ache painfully at the same time. It was a look he'd been given a lot in the past few days, one that told him Tora knew he didn't have much longer but wished he had. It was almost apologetic with only a few traces of fear; he didn't want to die but Tora had accepted fate had finally caught up with him and he was going to.

"First of all I want to thank you."

He raised his hand before Hiroto had even opened his mouth to protest.

"Shut up and listen to me, I know I don't have to but I want to do it. You didn't have to stay with me these years. In many ways I expected you to leave the first time I got a metastasis, but you didn't. You stayed and you gave me a chance to love and be loved before I died."

They'd decided to speak openly about it, since avoiding the subject would not change the inevitable. Still, they were hard words to speak and even harder to hear.

"I don't have long now, I can feel it, and I hate the fact I'm leaving you alone to deal with it on your own."

Tora closed his eyes momentarily, not because it was hard to see the tears pooling in Hiroto's eyes but to try and keep his own at bay. They were still there when he opened them again, met sad brown ones with a gaze so fierce and emotional Hiroto almost gasped.

“You are mine! You will always be mine and whatever comes after this life I will wait for you there, but...”

He swallowed thickly, suddenly drained again after his short outburst but he would not succumb to sleep again, not now. Tugging weakly at the hand in his he made Hiroto lean forward and kiss him, wishing desperately he had the strength and energy to hug the smaller man.

Hiroto leaned his forehead against Tora’s and felt two fat tears trickle down his cheeks as he closed his eyes. He wanted the closeness, the small amount of physical touch he could get while there was still time.

“But?”

“You have a life to live.”

They were silent for a long time, so long Hiroto was positive Tora had gone back to sleep. He had a feeling he knew where this conversation was going, what Tora was trying to say to him, and he honestly didn’t know how to react.

When the older spoke again he was so startled he pulled back, but Tora miraculously tightened his grip on the smaller hand in a silent plea he stay close at least.

“The idea of someone else ever touching you is killing me even faster than this disease. But...the thought of you being alone, it’s even worse.”

“You’re asking me to find someone else.”

A tear slid from the corner of Tora’s eye, rolled softly over his temple to disappear in his dull black hair, since long robbed of its natural shine.

“I’m asking you to move on, to live your life even after I am gone.”

Hiroto closed his own eyes for a moment, let the words, the request sink in and contemplated the full meaning of it. He knew Tora wasn’t asking him to go out tomorrow and pretend it’d never happened, but rather he didn’t let this death be the end of his own life. Hiroto, hopefully, had many years left before his time was up, years he ought to fill with life and movement.

“Okay.”

He opened his eyes slowly, wiped at his tears as he met Tora’s gaze.

“I promise to live my life and in time I’ll try to find someone else to love.”

Despite it being his request, the words hurt more than anything Tora could remember ever having heard or felt.

“But don’t forget me, I think I fear that more than anything.”

Hiroto smiled at that, a real smile shining through his residue tears.

"You idiot, I couldn't forget you if I tried."

Tora slipped into unconsciousness five days later. He died the following night.

- - -

Hiroto dried a stray tear from his cheek, wiped his nose on the sleeve of his jacket as it was running far more than his eyes. His chest hurt having told that story, emotions swirling around inside him in a tornado and more than anything he wanted a hug. But he didn't expect Kenzo to provide such comfort.

"And before you ask, I'm *positive* Tora *didn't* have someone like you in mind!"

It was snappy, not too different from the way Kenzo had gone after him earlier, but it felt justified. Perhaps Kenzo felt the same way since his only reaction was to light another cigarette. No retort, no remarks, barely even a glare aside from the sideways glance at the strawberry blonde.

"Doesn't explain why you put up with me."

Hiroto snatched the cigarette from between bitten and ragged lips, ignoring the fact it was the wrong, and far too strong, brand while Kenzo just looked shocked at the act.

"Maybe I just want some fucking sympathy, ever thought of that?"

He sounded angry but looked more disappointed, the constant shadow of sadness still lingering in his eyes as he turned to look at Kenzo. He handed the cigarette back, and Kenzo took it without really thinking, in favour of lighting one of his own brand.

"I took a chance the day I came over to you, I know that, but I did it because you looked as lonely as I felt. You were always here so I figured you had lost someone too and I hoped...I hoped..."

"You hoped I'd understand."

And just like that Kenzo showed he did, he *did* understand what it was Hiroto was trying to convey. Hiroto just stared at him, a mixture of shock and happiness tumbling around his brain. Perhaps he was stupid, naive even for being him, in thinking it meant something, but despite the sadness in his eyes Hiroto was a very positive person and he *wanted* it to mean something, and so in his head it did.

"Then what?"

Kenzo's words, in his world of spiraling negativism and constant darkness mere understanding seemed impossible. Only one person had ever understood him, only Aki had ever tried to. Deep down he knew it wasn't true, that he at some level had chosen to lock everyone else out.

“Then I’d like to understand you, if you’d let me.”

Smoke trickled over bruised lips while Kenzo processed the words, the request to be let in where no one had been allowed for twelve years. The mere fact he considered it showed just how much closer Hiroto had gotten to him than anyone else. Moments turned to minutes, cigarettes exchanged for new ones, then Kenzo made up his mind.

“I’m not all that complicated.”

Hiroto had been convinced there would be no more talking this day, uncertain whether Kenzo would talk to him the way he wanted to at all. Clearly he’d been wrong.

- - -

The house looked cold and unwelcome as he stepped out of the taxi, ignoring the driver’s attempts to give him his change. He’d used the last of his money to pay a taxi home, the only place the nurses would allow him to go when no one came to pick him up. It was irresponsible to let a suicidal teenager out on his own, but the ward was constantly filled and Kenzo’s room was needed for someone else.

He pulled his thumb over his forearm, felt the bandages beneath the clothes but not the pain the action should cause. There was so much pain inside him the spikes shooting from his self-inflicted wounds seemed dull and insignificant in comparison. He didn’t want to go inside, didn’t want to face his family, the reason Aki was dead and he alive. Kenzo needed them to be the same, both alive or both dead, he couldn’t be what Aki was not.

The taxi drove away, driver in the end probably grateful for the unintended tip, and he took the first steps towards the house. If no one was at home he could, hypothetically, go upstairs and finish what he’d started, bring a knife from the kitchen and cut so deep he’d only be able to do one arm in the first place. The idea to lie down on his bed and fall asleep to the steady drip-drip-drip of his own blood hitting the floor, knowing he’d never wake up again, it was beyond appealing.

Barely had the thought crossed his mind when the front door banged open, missing his face by an inch or so yet Kenzo didn’t even flinch. If anything he regretted it didn’t hit him, since it was his parents standing on the other side, blocking his way and preventing his plans.

“Please move.”

That earned him a backhanded slap hard enough to send him tumbling down the stairs again. Catching himself on his injured wrists he hissed, pain way too sharp to be ignored or forgotten, a fresh reminder of how badly his parents wanted him not dead even when their actions clearly proved he was not welcome home. Ignoring the pain and trying not to drown in the emptiness inside, he pushed himself up again.

“Please move.”

He was too tired to fight, to argue, he just wanted to be alone.

"I just want to go to my room."

His father snorted in disgust, flexing his fingers as if he contemplated hitting him again, but it was his mother who spoke.

"Stop being so selfish Kenzo!"

It was practically spat out, as if even talking to him left a bad taste in her mouth, and for a moment anger flared in black eyes once more.

"Selfish? Selfish?! How the fuck have I been selfish?!"

He never once raised his voice, the words tumbling from his lips as pained hisses. Tears stung at the corners of his eyes but he refused to shed them, refused to give his parents the satisfaction of seeing him cry, knowing they'd broken him. They had, of course, a long time ago. Kenzo was as broken as they got, but he'd never been crushed until now.

"Get yourself together."

His father spat on the ground, barely missing his shoes and somehow Kenzo thought that was only due to bad aim.

"The fact you have to ask merely proves my point."

She walked down the stairs and Kenzo cursed his lack of height as she stood in front of him, grabbing his wrist and digging her nails into the bandages. He actually whimpered at that, but he steadfastly refused to cry still.

"This, this proves your selfishness. Have you even considered what this is doing to your sister? Don't you think she's been through enough already?"

Kenzo had never felt more abandoned in his life. He was used to nasty comments and diminishing actions, life without family love, but he'd always had Aki to balance it all out. And even though his baby sister had always come first, been more important for reasons Kenzo didn't know, his mother had never been this cruel, never made it quite so clear how unimportant he was compared to her.

"What about me? She killed-"

Another slap, not backhanded but it stung even worse, perhaps simply because it was to the same cheek as before but more likely because it interrupted him. It proved her unspoken point.

"Get over it, wallowing in self-pity won't undo anything. Now you're coming inside to apologise to your sister, she's been very upset because of you."

He tore his arm free, ignored the way her nails cut into his skin and the warmth that surfaced where something ripped open again. Perhaps it'd be enough, Kenzo didn't mind a slow and drawn out death, he'd be happy to bleed out agonisingly slow as long as he was allowed to die.

"I hate you."

It was the first time he ever said the words to her face and it didn't even feel as good as he'd thought it would. In fact he didn't feel much at all, only pain and hurt and emptiness sucking him down in a seemingly bottomless hole. He turned around and ran, tuned out her screams and ran blindly across streets, praying a car would hit him just to end the pain, but they all steered away.

He didn't stop until he stood before Aki's grave, gazing down at the candles and the flowers, the name etched in cold stone. He remained there, standing, staring at the letters forming the name of the one person who had made his life bearable until the sun set. And when the darkness stole away the last light, hid the name in its void and blocked it from his view, something finally broke inside Kenzo.

He screamed, in the dead of night with no one around to see or hear he fell down on the ground and screamed.

- - -

"I never stopped."

Kenzo tapped two fingers against his forehead almost mindlessly and Hiroto swallowed thickly, shocked and quite appalled by the story he'd been told.

"Most days I can't hear my own thoughts, there's just screaming."

"You never saw anyone? I mean...someone to talk to, professionally?"

Hiroto had gone to see a therapist for a few months after Tora's death, he still had her number if there was ever a time he felt particularly sad or low, and his loss had not been nearly as traumatic as Kenzo's. As hard and painful emotionally, no doubt, but a lot less traumatic. But Kenzo just snorted.

"I had no money, my parents disowned me after that day, cause I was upset about my best friend dying in my arms."

Best friend, lover, other half. Aki had been *everything*, Hiroto was not so naive as to think otherwise.

"Wouldn't have wanted to see anyone either."

"You never spoke about it?"

It was barely more than a whisper, because suddenly Hiroto understood the bitterness in Kenzo, the loneliness, so much more as black eyes turned to look at him, answer written in them long before he pushed the words past his bitten lips.

"Who would've listened?"

Hiroto didn't reply, for all his ability to talk talk talk about nothing he could find no words suitable for the moment. He opted instead to move, close the distance between them and wrap his arms around Kenzo, pull him close into a tight embrace to try and show, once and for all, that he was *there*, that Kenzo no longer had to be *alone*.

The first reaction was for Kenzo to go completely rigid. For several long moments he stood stiffly in the tight embrace, then he hesitantly closed his own arms around the tiny body in some kind of awkward response. When Hiroto only ever tightened his grip further, pulled him even closer and showed that it was okay, Kenzo shocked himself. He began to cry.

- - -

Kenzo woke up in a bed not his own. It took him a few moments to realise that he was lying on top of another person, a few more to grasp the fact he hadn't had any nightmares. Every night for the past twelve years his dreams had been plagued by blood and disbelieving eyes, causing him to wake up in a state of near exhaustion every morning. Kenzo hadn't felt rested since the last time he fell asleep on Aki, until now.

"Good morning."

Fingers carefully combed through dark hair as Hiroto felt the breathing change, then the body stiffen as realisation obviously dawned on Kenzo. It wouldn't surprise him if Kenzo didn't recall much from last night, he'd been pretty distraught. Twisting his blonde head to the side Hiroto glanced at his alarm clock.

"Well, good day at least."

"What happened last night?"

Like Hiroto had assumed, Kenzo couldn't remember much of anything past the time he'd started to *cry* last night. He hadn't cried in years, at least not in a waken state and definitely not publicly for other people to see. But even through his confusion and worry, emotions strong enough to make his mouth dry and his spine tingle with slight fear, he couldn't bring himself to move off the warm body. He'd missed the feeling of a heartbeat beneath his ear more than he cared to admit, the steady rise and fall of a male chest much more comfortable than any pillow.

"You cried."

Hiroto didn't know how else to explain it.

"You cried and you clung to me for hours, refused to let go even as it got dark, so...I brought you home."

"Your home, not mine."

The younger's hummed reply rumbled through his chest and into Kenzo's head and he found himself liking the feeling.

"Did I say anything?"

For a split second Hiroto contemplated being cheeky and ask something along the lines of ‘like what’, but only for a moment, the thought gone in the blink of an eye. He had Kenzo wrapped around his middle, talking in timorous whispers but he was *talking!*

“You asked me not to go away.”

Fingers tightened in the shirt Hiroto still wore, causing Kenzo to realise for the first time they were both still fully dressed. He had asked Hiroto to stay, begged him not to leave rather, and as much as he would’ve liked to claim he was talking to memories, reliving the day he simply couldn’t forget, Kenzo knew it wasn’t entirely true. And waking up here, in Hiroto’s bed, *on Hiroto*, proved the younger had stayed. Or had let him stay, had...taken care of him in a sense.

Sadly Kenzo didn’t know how to handle kindness, he was not used to receiving it. Trying to sit up however, he felt the fingers in his hair tighten just a fraction, Hiroto intuitively knowing he was about to leave.

“Stay...”

Whispered words, a plea to mirror the one from the night before. They were so very alike yet so very different, both had loved and lost, both were hurting inside and neither wanted to be alone, but where Hiroto was trying to move on, trying to see a future and life even after Tora’s death, Kenzo was locked down in himself and tangled up in grief so badly he didn’t know how to get out. Hiroto had a key, but he didn’t know if it fit and Kenzo didn’t know if he wanted the younger to try.

“Please stay, we don’t have to talk if you don’t want to, but just... I really don’t want to be alone right now.”

Kenzo wavered. Everything he was and had been for the past twelve years told him to run, memories of Aki flaring and telling him to get away, run, preserve what had been and not break promises made in a different kind of life. But somehow the whispered plea echoed inside him, bounced back from the huge hole Aki had left behind, and as the fingers in his hair softened their grasp, offered him a way out after all, Kenzo hesitantly relaxed, lowered his head back down to rest on top Hiroto’s clad chest once more.

They stayed there, just like that, fully clothed and Kenzo resting on top of Hiroto, for a couple of hours. Sometimes one or both of them fell asleep for a short while, but mostly they seemed to be awake yet silent, caught in their own thoughts even as Hiroto’s fingers kept combing through Kenzo’s hair. Every now and then he’d scratch the scalp instead and each time he did Kenzo would draw lazy patterns on Hiroto’s stomach, seemingly without thinking or even registering his actions. It was nice and lazy and comfortable, would’ve been even more so if Kenzo had been able to shut off his thoughts.

“I don’t know how to deal with kindness.”

Hiroto could barely hear him he was whispering so lowly.

“What?”

“No one’s ever been kind to me.”

“Only Aki.”

Hiroto’s shirt felt slightly rough beneath Kenzo’s cheek as he nodded slowly, feeling it easier to act than speak up. It hurt to admit how empty his life had been, acknowledge the huge part Aki had played in his life and thus the massive hole he’d left behind.

“But you never let anyone try either, did you?”

He didn’t want to admit to it and he had no idea why. It had never bothered him before, the fact he’d closed down and stopped trying, stopped caring about anything but the past, but now it suddenly did. Faced with Hiroto’s strength, his bravery though he didn’t want to acknowledge it as such even when he saw it, Kenzo felt small in ways beyond physical appearance.

“Let me try.”

A hard swallow stirred Hiroto’s body at his whispered words and Kenzo stiffened, not sure if he should be scared or comforted by the hand tightening slightly in his hair.

“I know how scary it can be, opening up and letting someone in. It took me a while to be able to talk to someone about Tora and to open up again, and you’ve been alone for so long...”

His voice was a mixture of sympathy and sadness and Kenzo couldn’t tell who he was feeling sorry for. The arms wrapping around him, seemingly unconsciously, to hug him close suggested he was the one being pitied though and it should probably make him angry, would’ve made him furious had it been anyone else, but somehow it felt oddly good to be comforted. Not as good as when Aki had held him, fucked him good and hard only to whisper just the right words of calm and comfort afterwards, but Hiroto was trying, and that was more than anyone had bothered to do in a very long time.

“I was fucked up before Aki....died.”

A warning, and he didn’t even stutter uttering it.

“What did Aki do to offer comfort?”

Kenzo didn’t know if he should laugh or cry at that. It was easier, much easier than he would’ve thought, to talk about Aki with Hiroto, and at the same time it was the hardest thing in the world. In the end he settled for a wet eyed half smirk, or something along those lines.

“Fucked me.”

Coming from anyone else it would’ve sounded like a crude joke, but Hiroto was fairly certain it was the absolute truth. And it gave him an unexpected chance to get answers he, with his godforsaken curiosity, had been craving.

“You...you were so young when Aki....died. Did you really have time to...”

Now Kenzo was smirking for real, gaining a bit of courage when he didn't feel entirely pushed down, and he turned his head to look up at the younger.

"Fuck? For years."

An adorable blush spread over Hiroto's cheeks at the bluntness. He couldn't imagine it, well he could but it seemed wrong, only not. It didn't make sense! To have done such things *for years* at the age of fifteen! At fifteen Hiroto hadn't even fully understood he was gay.

"I've never actually...fucked someone."

Why was he admitting such things all of a sudden?! It made him blush even more and he wished he could've hid from the smirk still on Kenzo's lips. A more pondering, slightly scared but also somewhat determined look slowly replaced it though and the dark head dropped down to rest on Hiroto's stomach once more.

"You could...learn."

And just like that Kenzo had decided to try, try and change his life, try to live again. Small fingers closed nervously in fabric and even smaller ones in dark hair. Hiroto swallowed and Kenzo closed his eyes. In fear, nervousness, worry, who knew.

"I could."

A lonely tear rolled down Kenzo's temple, disappeared in Hiroto's shirt as he dared cuddle closer, seek warmth, comfort, life!

I'm sorry Aki...

'You idiot, I've been waiting twelve years for this.'

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!