

## I'll Cross the Plains with You If I Have to, But I Won't Like It

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# I'll Cross the Plains with You If I Have to, But I Won't Like It

by [CupNoodles55](#)

## Summary

Rin has duped Haru and Sousuke into visiting him for his birthday at the same time. They already hate each other; it doesn't really help that everything goes wrong on the drive from the airport.

## Notes

Y'all, I cranked like sixty percent of this out in one day — and then the rest in like three. It turned out longer than I meant it to, of course, but it's probably the fastest I've ever gotten through a multi-chapter story like this.

I think it's fun, but there are feels too, which I didn't mean for there to be so much of. I don't actively ship SouHaru, but I understand why they're a thing. I was reading through some one-shots about them, and I found myself missing the tension that's so essential to they're dynamic. In most of what I read, they were being super soft and cute toward one another, and that's fine and all, but I need explanation and build-up to that, because what I see when I look at Haru and Sousuke is a whole lot of friction. And because I'm a glutton for drama, I absolutely love to watch them fight. So that's where and why this story was born.

We're looking at this as though the OVA never happened. It's established that Haru and Sousuke legitimately hate each other, and everyone knows it. So this should be fun.

I tried to break it up into reasonably balanced chapters, but in reality, you're probably going to get some uneven uploads. So, my bad.

ALSO, OC is an Aussie, and speaks pretty exclusive English, which is depicted with italics. When there is something in his dialogue that is not italicized, it's the one or two things that Haru and Sousuke are able to understand. Apologies to all my Aussies. I tried to capture at least a glimpse of the dialect.

Okay, that's enough. Proceed.

# Chapter 1

It's hot in Australia. He doesn't much care for that. Last time, it was cold, and he didn't care for that either. But the shock of leaving one climate and entering another with such a drastic shift in between is not his favorite. Supposedly, there's nothing he can do about that.

"Let me know when you get to Rin's, okay?"

"Mm."

"Is it too much to ask you to give him a hug for me?"

"Yes."

"Okay, well, I put his birthday present in the left pocket of your book bag. Don't forget about it."

"Mm."

"Tell him I hate that I'm missing it."

"You already told him that yourself."

"Yes, I know, but tell him again, because I really *really* hate it. I'd much rather be there with you guys. I feel like my brain is going to explode."

"You'll be here after you pass your exam."

"You mean *if* I pass my exam."

"*When* you pass. You'll be fine. You're smart."

Makoto heaves a giant sigh in his ear. "Thank you, Haru-chan. I hope you're right. Did you find your ride yet?"

He's just walking out to the pick-up/drop-off bay, when Makoto asks, and his eyes scan the constantly moving crowd of cars and people. He doesn't really even know what he's looking for. Rin's "friend" most likely looks like all the other strange faces straggling around. Haru's never met him before. All he knows is that he's looking for a Lucas with blond hair ...

There's a lot of blond hair.

"No," he submits, electing simply to stand close to the wall.

"Go ahead and give Rin a call then. And don't forget to text me."

"Sure."

"Have fun, Haru-chan."

“Mm.”

The call ends. He tugs on the collar of his hoodie where he’s already beginning to sweat a little, but he doesn’t take it off. He puts the phone back to his ear instead.

“He’ll be there in like two seconds,” are Rin’s first words.

“Why couldn’t *you* come?” Haru asks dryly. His voice is flatter than he actually feels. He’d really rather not ride in a foreign car with a stranger.

“It’s the last day of training before the break. They wouldn’t let me skip out. And you’re not worth it anyway.”

“Thanks.”

“I’m joking, Haru. Relax. We’re almost done here. I just didn’t want to have you sitting there for another three hours. Lucas was closer anyway. I had him pick up- ... someone else a little earlier.”

Haru rolls his eyes to himself. That doesn’t exactly make it better. “Lucas doesn’t swim.”

“No, Haru, but you can trust him. I promise. He’s really friendly. And he’s been practicing his Japanese, he said ... I haven’t heard it yet, but you can probably have some kind of conversation with him.”

He doesn’t want to have a conversation. He means to say that out loud, but he stays silent instead. During this lull, a silver Kia noisily whips into the pick-up bay and screeches to a halt next to the curb, nearly rear-ending the van in front of it.

Very vaguely does Haru find himself hoping that this is not the car he’s waiting for, but he is also not surprised when the driver emerges with sweeping blond hair and a bleached smile directed at Haru specifically. He sticks a hand up and waves wildly, like Haru isn’t already staring right at him.

“*Hello!*”

Haru frowns just a little bit. “Is Lucas loud?”

“Mm, yeah, I suppose he can be sometimes.”

The blond man continues to wave, bouncing excitedly on the balls of his feet. “Haru!”

“Is he like Nagisa, but taller with blue eyes ... and maybe more annoying?”

“Yeah, pretty much. You see him?”

The blond man is still jumping, still waving. “Haru, *hi! It’s me*, Lucas!”

Haru sighs. “Does he drive a Kia?” he asks futilely, in a frail last attempt to be directed elsewhere.

“Yeah, silver. Haru, I can hear him screaming at you in the background.”

Haru rolls his eyes again, and then hangs up without courtesy and finally slumps over to the shiny man and his shiny car. Lucas smiles even brighter, and Haru already has a headache. The Aussie grabs his hand and shakes it vigorously the very moment that Haru makes it close enough.

*“Hey, mate! Wake from death and return to life. Good to finally meet ya! Rin talks about ya all the time. You look exactly like he said. Wow, you’ve got yourself some soft hands theah. Good grip though. Rin said you’d know this guy heah in the back. His hands are huge! Thought he was gonna break all my fingahs. I’ll put your stuff in the back, yea? You hop on in.”*

He shakes Haru’s hand the whole while that he speaks his stream of gibberish, and Haru just stares until he lets go and opens the back door, gesturing for him to get in, while he takes Haru’s bag off his back. Haru doesn’t know how to tell him he’d rather keep it with him, so he doesn’t say anything, and instead ducks his head to get in the car. But he stops short with a low bend to his back and doesn’t move any further after he catches sight of Yamazaki Sousuke’s massive bulk taking up space in the seat on the opposite side of the car.

Sousuke is scrolling through his phone, so he doesn’t notice Haru immediately, but when he does eventually look up, the quickest flash of unbridled shock crosses his teal gaze, before it’s replaced almost instantly by disgust. The squint in Haru’s gaze isn’t all that different, though Sousuke probably can’t read it.

“Oh, hell no.” Sousuke taps quickly at his phone, looking back at it to find the right number, and puts it to his ear, but Haru’s already in the motion of doing the same, and Rin answers him first.

“Rin.”

“Fuck.”

“There’s a hideous creature in your friend’s car.”

Sousuke’s face pinches and he turns away to push himself out of the vehicle. Haru stands and takes a couple of steps back as Sousuke’s hulking body stretches up to its full height and slams the door.

“Oh my god, it’s huge,” Haru says into the phone, eyes following Sousuke as he marches around Lucas and the car, and walks straight up to snatch the phone out of Haru’s hand.

Haru resists, back teeth grinding together as they fight over it tug-of-war style. The vague echo of Rin speaking gets muffled by his palm. Neither of them says anything, but the energy they resist one another with is rather deafening.

Haru tries to hug the phone close to his chest and turn his body away so that Sousuke’s grip will slip away, but the whale-of-a-man shoves their shoulders together, sending his shadow

across Haru's lithe body as he bares down on him with his weight and forcefully pries the mobile device out of his hands, giving him a good shove in the process.

Haru stumbles, but remains on his feet, and shoots Sousuke with the nastiest glare he can muster, which the larger man ignores.

"Of course, you would pull some shit like this," he's busy saying into the phone. "Why the hell would you- ..." Sousuke breathes out of his nose like a bull, jaw flexing. "No, I most definitely would not ... So you were just going to stuff us in the same car and hope that we'd hold hands on the way to your place? ... Because you could have fucking said something beforehand!"

Haru turns away. He bypasses the other man and closes the trunk of the car. Lucas has just enough time not to get his fingers crushed as he jumps back, and then smiles at Haru again.

*"Oh sorry, mate! Looks like we had a bit of a spillage in the back. Was just trying to tidy up a bit to fit your stuff. I really need to clean out my cah."*

Haru grabs his sleeve and drags him up to the open driver's door, where he shoves him in, shuts the door behind him, and then dives into the backseat.

"Go," he says in his best English as he manually locks all of the doors.

Lucas blinks over his shoulder at him. *"Oh, you're ready. Right, I'll just grab this othah guy and we'll be off, yea?"*

Haru stands, leaning over Lucas to force the driver's door shut before he can really get it open. He locks that one too and waves a hand to gesture for him to get a move on.

"Let's go. Drive. Before he gets back in."

*"Well, you're in a hurry ahn't ya? Melon field under a palm tree."* Lucas chuckles — like it's funny. *"One second, mate. I think Sousuke's still on the phone."*

"Please ..." Haru gestures with all his might. "Drive the car. Forward. Go. Now."

Sousuke's finally caught on that he's the only one not in the car, and he pounds a fist on Haru's window after trying to open the door.

*"Uh oh. Door's locked."*

Haru snatches Lucas's hand before he can press the button to unlock the car. He manually turns the steering wheel himself and pats Lucas's knee urgently.

"The gas here. The gas pedal is here. Step on it. Go."

*"Mate, I think you have to have a foreign license, if you want to drive. Have you got one on ya?"*

Sousuke's gotten around to the other side of the car by now, and he's yanking so hard on the handle that it shakes the whole vehicle.

"Nanase!"

"*Whoops, I'll get that.*"

Haru's too slow to stop him this time, and Sousuke whips the door open hardly a millisecond after the locks click. He ducks his head immediately, scowling as he climbs in and closes himself inside. Haru huffs out a pout as he plops down and turns his head away. It was worth a shot. Maybe he can get back on the plane.

"You're fucking hilarious," Sousuke grumbles, strapping on his seatbelt. He presses a button on Haru's phone, that he's still holding captive, and holds it out between them. "Alright," he sighs reluctantly. "You're on speaker."

"Haru, can you hear me?" Rin says.

Haru rolls his eyes, arms now crossed stubbornly over his chest.

"He can hear you," Sousuke gruffs in his place.

"Haruka."

"Don't call me that," Haru snaps, even though he knows he's just taken the bait.

"Okay good," Rin says. "Listen, I'm sorry, but it was the only way to get you two to agree to come down at the same time. It's not that bad, I promise. You're more alike than you think."

Sousuke scoffs.

"Trust me, you are," Rin reiterates. "For instance, you're both assholes. How could you make your best friend beg you to come hang out for *one* week? It's my *birthday*. Surely you stubborn bitches can suck it up long enough to make it a *good* week. Because I'm your friend, and you *love me*," he says. It sounds very much like a threat though.

"Not *that* much," Haru mumbles. Sousuke shoots a look at him, and he can feel it, but he doesn't look back.

"Haru, I know you're grumbling under your breath," Rin says. "One car ride, and then you guys can get through the rest of the week at least five meters apart, if you must. You'll live."

"How long is the car ride?" Sousuke demands, as though he does not agree with the "living" part of that prediction.

Rin hesitates for much too long. "Hardly over an hour."

"An *hour*?" Sousuke barks. Haru just shoots a wide-eyed glare at the phone, as though Rin can feel it from the other side. "You said you moved outside the city, you didn't say you went to the other side of the fucking continent!"

“It’s not that long,” Rin argues. His voice is dripping with exasperation.

“Fucking hell.”

“Rin,” Haru speaks up, pushing open his door. “I’ll see you when you get back to Japan.”

“Tch. Haru ...”

Sousuke has already snatched Haru by the hood of his sweater and yanks him back so hard that the door closes again. Haru wrinkles his nose and whips around to slap his hand away. Sousuke just tightens his glare and reaches over Haru to push the lock down, declaring that Haru will not be bailing on his watch.

“If I have to be here, so do you,” he hisses through his teeth.

“That makes no sense,” Haru argues back. “If I go back home, I don’t have to look at your face. And you can ride in the car with Other Nagisa by yourself.”

“You’re supposed to be here for Rin.”

“Like you want me to be.”

“I really don’t, but for whatever reason, he insists on keeping you.”

“I can hear you,” Rin’s voice shouts. “I swear to god. You’re the most selfish man-children on the face of this planet. If Lucas pulls up tonight, and I don’t see *both* of you get out of that car alive and getting along, I’m killing whoever’s left. Give the phone to Lucas, I’m done talking to you.”

Sousuke huffs in stubborn defeat and shoves Haru’s phone out for their driver, who has just been blinking over his shoulder at them during this entire exchange. His eyes brighten, and he takes the phone with a cheerful smile.

“Rin!” he shouts, voice echoing under the roof of the car. “*Yea, how ya goin?*”

“Listen,” Sousuke says harshly under his breath, turning his glare back to Haru, who looks away. “You don’t like me; I get it. I don’t like you; you know that. Let’s not waste our breath over it on this trip. I’m here for Rin, because he asked me to be. He’s an ass, but that doesn’t mean I want to make his birthday miserable. You’re supposed to be his friend too, so probably act like it, and try not to be so ... *you*. Okay?”

Haru wrinkles his nose and swings a half-lidded glare back over his shoulder. He doesn’t respond. Sousuke’s expression pinches, as though he’s really resisting throttling Haru with those meaty hands of his.

“You’re already doing it,” he nags. Haru looks away again. “*That.*” Sousuke points. “That thing, right there. You act like a perpetual thirteen-year-old.”

“You act like an old man,” Haru mumbles in return.



*“Oooh, I see ... Yea. Nah, don’t worry ‘bout it, mate. You can count on me. We’ll be theah in a jiff. No problem ... Cheers!”*

Lucas hangs up Haru’s phone and holds it out between him and Sousuke, smiling with all of his teeth. Haru takes it and lets his back fall against the seat heavily.

*“Right, we’re off then. Promise not to take too long. You two just sit back and try to get on, yea? Heard you like to have a blue at one anothah every now and then. That’s alright, we’ll get on. Be best friends by the end of the ride. Make sure you’re strapped in theah. A frog in the well does not know the great sea.”*

Sousuke and Haru both stare at him blankly. He beams at them, and then turns around in his seat.

For just the smallest, briefest of kindred seconds, Haru and Sousuke both glance at each other warily, checking to make sure they are indeed on the same page in having no idea what their driver just said. It’s agreed upon quickly, and then they’ve already turned their gazes away.

Lucas puts the car in drive, and then whips out so fast, that Haru ends up getting snapped against the door, while Sousuke chokes on his seatbelt, and the car coming up from behind them has to honk and slam on its breaks. Lucas doesn’t appear to notice.

The moment they’re out of the underpass and on the main road, Lucas floors the gas, weaving the car haphazardly through traffic, but with a content, casual smile, as though nothing is out of the ordinary. Meanwhile, Haru’s gripping the seat so tightly, his fingers are going cold. Sousuke has a hand on the handle above the window, and his jaw is locked.

*“So you blokes have been ‘round here before, I heard. Glad to be back? When’s the last time ya came? Did Rin take ya by the opera house? Most everyone wants to visit theah, when they come. Pretty famous ‘round the world. ‘Course, you guys have Tokyo Towah, dontcha? Haven’t seen it myself, but Rin promised to take me on a visit some time. Is the flight long back to Japan?”*

Haru squints, as though this is going to translate whatever this guy is saying. His shoulders are shrugged up to his ears at an attempt to keep him still while the car jerks and weaves. He looks to Sousuke out of the corner of his eye, hoping he’ll respond to Rin’s foreign friend.

Sousuke, unfortunately looks just as lost, but he does scrunch up his face with a strained thought that takes a lot of effort, before he finally says, “Lucas, *do you* ... Mmm ... *Do you — speak uh at all Japanese?*”

Haru snickers toward his lap. Sousuke whips a glare at him.

*“Ah,”* Lucas exclaims, expression brightening in the rearview mirror. Haru wishes he wouldn’t glance up so much to look at their reflections instead of the road. *“That’s right, I forgot. You’re not supah fluent in English. Sorry ‘bout that. Yea, I do speak a little Japanese. Been practicin’ to surprise Rin. Let’s see, how’s it like ... Oh yea, a greeting is the local deity who turns up providentially.”*

Haru and Sousuke exchange glances again. This time it lingers for a moment, before Haru mumbles, “Why does he keep reciting proverbs?”

Sousuke’s eyes shift as he shrugs. “I don’t know,” he whispers back. “He’s been doing that since he picked me up.”

“Do you understand anything else he said?”

“No. Do you?”

Haru shakes his head, then gives Sousuke a vague look of disgust. “Aren’t you supposed to be Rin’s ‘best friend’? Has he not been teaching you? Or better yet, wouldn’t you have picked up the language by now in an obsessive desperation to intimidate his other friends?”

Sousuke’s expression isn’t all that animated, but the hatred in his eyes is livid. “And I suppose *you* can’t be bothered to do anything that’s not sniffing the bottom of a pool.”

Haru turns his eyes away. Sousuke *tches* him.

*“Hey, hey, now. I didn’t really catch that, but I know a bad attitude when I smell one. I promised Rin I’d getchu to ‘im in one piece, so don’t go bitin’ each othah’s heads off back theah.”*

“He’s useless,” Haru huffs under his breath.

“At least he’s getting us where we need to go.”

The car pitches to the right, and Haru has to hold the door handle to keep from flying across the backseats.

Sousuke grimaces, and presses the heel of his palm to his head where it was thrown against the window. “And quickly.”

“I’m going to throw up.”

“Stop complaining.”

“No.”

This time Sousuke just sighs and chooses not to respond.

*“Have you blokes been on any of the helitours ‘round heah? Dunno how you feel ‘bout flyin, but it’s quite the way to see the city all at once. Haven’t been myself, but I told my girlfriend I’d get her in one for our next anniversary. She’s nevah been in a heli before. Neithah have I, I guess. Should be fun. They’ve got heaps of spots ‘round heah, you can go up. Smart business innit? Heaps of tourists ‘round ...”*

He keeps talking, doesn’t even seem to care that neither of his passengers are responding, nor even pretending as though they’re listening. Sousuke glances at him every now and then, but Haru’s fairly certain he’s just watching his lips move. Occasionally, Lucas drops another out-

of-context proverb in poor Japanese that Haru is also fairly certain has nothing to do with what he's talking about, and he's a little bit tempted to ask who's teaching him these things and why he thinks they mean something different.

Instead, he calls Makoto, because he's uncomfortable, and he really, *really* wishes that he'd turned around and gotten back on the plane home. Especially because he can see the glitter of the city lights on the water past the bridge, but he very well can't leap out of the recklessly speeding car, into the dark canal below. Though, probably Sousuke wouldn't try to stop him.

"He's glaring at me right now. I can feel it on my neck. It's like being watched by a starving bear on a cocaine high."

"That's probably because he can hear you insulting him, Haru."

"I know. That's on purpose. He smells like resentment and baby aspirin."

"Are you going to do this the whole car ride?" Sousuke's voice says.

Haru hunches his shoulders away, turning his nose closer to the window. He still makes sure to talk loud enough for Yamazaki to hear him though. "Makoto, forget your exam. Come save me. I feel threatened."

"Haru-chan, please," Makoto whines, and Haru can hear the exasperation in his voice. It honestly doesn't sound that off from Rin. "If you at least *try* to have a normal, non-hostile conversation with him, I am sure you'll realize spending that much of your energy trying to hate him is a waste of time."

"Oh, I'm not trying. I actually hate him." (Sousuke scoffs. Haru can hear him rolling his eyes too.) "Also, I don't think he speaks non-hostile."

"Haru, I've never had a problem with him."

"That's because you're you. You never have a problem with anyone."

"Okay, well, why don't you give him the phone then. Do you want me to talk to him for you?"

"No. You're too innocent for that. He'll make you cry."

"I can't believe this man is friends with you," Sousuke says rather loudly. (And even still Lucas has not stopped rambling.) Haru stuffs a finger in his ear. "You are a petulant child, and I feel bad for Tachibana that he has to put up with you on a daily basis. You need to set him free. You're weighing him down."

"He's like a malnourished zoo animal that's been pacing around in a cage all day, waiting for someone to throw a steak at him," Haru says, overlapping Sousuke's rant. "I kind of feel bad," he adds dryly. "No one wants to feed him, because he's so grumpy and he scares away all the kids."

"If I was Tachibana, I would have dropped you down a well ... twenty fucking years ago."

“Okay. Well, you know what, if it’s going to hurt you to be nice to him, then just stay quiet, okay? There’s no need to hurt his feelings just because you’re intimidated by him.”

Haru’s eyes squint. “I’m not intimidated by him. Also, I don’t think water buffalos have feelings.”

“Give me this.”

“Stop!”

They’re back at it — tug-of-war over Haru’s phone. And somehow Haru ends up twisted around in his seat with one foot planted against Sousuke’s ribs, while Sousuke traps his arm in a vice grip and presses an elbow to his face at the same time, because his wing-span is not of legal size. Also, they’re still being shifted and jostled by the wildly swerving car, while their seatbelts try to choke them back.

“Makoto! He’s assaulting me!”

“You’re a spoiled fucking brat! Give it!”

“You’re — hurting — me,” Haru growls through his teeth, even though he’s the one stomping repeatedly on Sousuke’s side. Though, it doesn’t appear to faze Sousuke at all, and that just makes Haru’s blood boil hotter.

*“Hey, hey, alright! Enough back theah! Don’t make me pull ovah. Crikey, I can’t believe he was actually serious about you trying to kill each othah.”*

“Give me the phone, Nanase!”

“It’s *mine*! You can’t just snatch my stuff out of my hand!”

But he does, because he’s bigger than Haru, and probably built out of iron. He wrings the cellphone free of Haru’s grip, and then the car is filled with whirling hot air as he rolls down the window and chucks the phone out into the night. Haru, with his foot still attached to Sousuke’s ribs, drops his jaw as he watches it disappear within hardly a second, probably to get run over by the next car behind them. Then Sousuke rolls the window back up and shifts him the haughtiest look of I-dare-you-to-say-something. So instead of actually saying something, Haru just starts flailing his fists at him, and Sousuke is not at all hesitant about putting him in a headlock.

*“Hey! HEY! I said enough. Stop!”*

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

Confession. I've never been to Australia, go figure. I did some research about the geography and different ecosystems in different areas of the continent ... Let's face it, this ain't going to be accurate. Let's pretend that's not a hindrance. Have fun.

Who knows how long later, they're pulled over in front of a convenience shop and being judged by the smatter of city-goers shifting in and out of the dinging door, because Haru and Sousuke are sitting on the curb like five-year-olds, being scrutinized by their blond chauffeur, who is standing over them with his arms crossed and his lips pinched.

Haru's not sure how long they've been paused here like this, not saying anything. His head is throbbing and it's hotter than before. He's even more angry now than he was when he was first forced into this situation, but he just stiffly keeps his head turned away from Sousuke next to him, who is breathing annoyingly loud.

*"Are we cooled off now, yea?"*

Neither Haru nor Sousuke respond, but it's probably less because they don't know what he's saying and more because they're both stubborn.

*"Do I need to call Rin?"*

Haru mostly understands that, because of the tone of the threat in Lucas's voice. It's sounds like when his grandmother used to warn him she would call his parents if he kept refusing to eat vegetables. Sousuke seems to catch onto it too, because he also looks up to Lucas in a rather sheepish silence. Neither of them says anything, but Lucas appears to read their expressions pretty accurately.

*"Right then,"* he says with a nod. *"Let's grab us a couple of fizzy drinks and get back on the road."*

The Aussie is back to being gratingly cheerful by the time they're all in the car and sipping on sodas in a placated silence. It's not a peaceful silence by any means, and it's mostly confined to Sousuke and Haru, as Lucas very quickly dives back into chatting to the wind, probably more convinced now that they're actually listening, except that they're really not.

Sousuke's in the passenger's seat now, staring moodily out the window that just gets darker the more that the city falls away behind them. Haru has his back against the door with his legs stretched across the whole of the backseats, sipping his soda through a straw. He doesn't really care for it, but he finds himself mind-numbingly distracted by the carbonation bubbling on his tongue. He also watches the view outside of the window that becomes less and less of

a view as the scenery goes by, and becomes eventually just a sheet of dark sky and flat land that's only really visible by the light of the moon.

They wind up in a stretch of empty grasslands, on a dirt road that seems to stretch on forever, and the ride itself become less haphazard on account of the fact that there are just simply no other cars to possibly bump into. As uninteresting as the land is to look at, Haru is quite mesmerized by how much open *space* there is. He hadn't yet been outside of Sydney, and he never planned to be really, but he had never given much thought to how big Australia is, even though he knows that because of geography class and other such nonsense.

For a while, it's not so bad. The tension levels drop a bit, Lucas's voice becomes a kind of tolerable white noise that keeps it from being too quiet, and Haru finally takes off his hoodie, which allows him more room to breathe through the heat, because the air conditioning is, for whatever reason, not reaching the backseat of the car.

They've been driving for maybe twenty minutes through the plains when the car starts making suspicious noises. At first it doesn't register to Haru, who is hypnotized by the endless waves of grass. But then the car jerks underneath them, and he blinks himself out of his daze, looking toward the front where Lucas's tone of voice also changes.

"Uh oh," he sings, and it's oddly chipper sounding even still, but it's the kind of "uh oh" that likes to laugh off the embarrassment of having forgotten to do something simple like ... turn off the oven in the middle of the night.

Haru turns around in his seat, leaning forward level with the two front seats. Sousuke is also looking to Lucas with a look that isn't quite readable, but also the spark of fresh wariness is not entirely hard to miss. Lucas is looking down at the steering wheel, which does not seem to want to do what his hands are telling it to.

The car slows down — significantly. The sputtering gets worse and the jerking more abrupt, and then just a short few seconds later, the tires roll to a stop in the middle of the road, and the engines shuts off entirely.

Aside from the muffled symphony of chirping, nighttime bugs in the background, there is silence.

Lucas purses his lips, drums his thumbs against the steering wheel, and then turns a toothy smile on them.

*"Well, gents, looks like we've run out of petty."*

Sousuke and Haru stare.

*"Dumplings over flowers. The good news is ... Oh, nah wait, nevahmind. I was **supposed** to put the jerrycan in the trunk this mornin', but I think I may have left it in the garage. Let me go and check right quick. I'll be right back."*

He gets out of the car, and both Sousuke and Haru perk up like meerkats, heads turning as they follow Lucas through the windows around the car, until he disappears behind the trunk.

“What’s he doing?” Haru asks.

“I don’t know.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know.”

“You weren’t paying attention?”

“I was looking out the window.”

Haru scoffs.

“You weren’t paying attention either.”

“I’m in the back. I can’t see what’s going on.”

“We probably just ran out of gas. I think he’s getting some from the back.”

Except that that is not what Lucas appears to be successful at, because he comes back around to poke his head in the car with empty hands. Again he smiles, but it doesn’t make Haru feel any better, mostly because it makes Lucas’s gibberish even harder to read.

*“Bad news, mates. I did leave the jerrycan in the garage. But it’s okay. Theah’s a servo just down the road, back wheah we came. I’m a fair runnah. I think I can get theah in decent time. But I need you two to stay heah, alright? It’s a bit dangerous wanderin’ ‘bout open land at night, what with all the animals. So just stay in the cah and you’ll be alright. I’ll go and get us more petty, come back, and we’ll be off again like nothing eveah happened, yea?”*

“What’s he saying?” Haru mumbles under his breath.

“I don’t know.”

“What’s he *saying*?”

“I don’t. *know*.”

*“Right then. Try not to kill each othah while I’m gone, yea? Would be a shame. I promised Rin I’d get you to him in one piece, and that’s what I plan to do. So just sit tight, yea? Seriously, do **not** go anywheah. Don’t let your daughter-in-law eat your autumn eggplants.”*

Haru literally struggles not to combust with strain. “I don’t understand.”

“I just ...” Sousuke shakes his head. “He’s not ... He’s not saying it right. It just- I don’t think it fits. It doesn’t fit. That doesn’t work there.”

*“No worries. You’ll be fine.”* Lucas gives them two thumbs up and another reassuring smile that is not reassuring at all. He pats the top of the car, and then closes the door and starts to

walk off. Both Haru and Sousuke whip around in alarm, again following his movements through the windows.

“Where’s he going?”

“I don’t know.”

“He’s leaving us. Why is he leaving us?”

“Nanase, if I knew, I wouldn’t be saying *I don’t know*.”

“He’s walking away.”

“I can see that.”

“He’s ... We’re in the middle of the road.”

“Okay, calm down.”

“I’m calm.”

“You are not, you’re freaking out.”

“I’m not freaking out.”

“Yes, you are and it’s freaking *me* out. Just shut up and sit back. We’ll be fine. I think we just need to wait.”

“Wait for what?”

“I don’t know!” Sousuke bursts. “For him to come back from wherever he’s going. I’m sure he’s not just dumping us in the desert with his car to leave us for good.”

“This isn’t the desert, there’s grass.”

“Whatever. He’ll be back. Just shut up and wait.”

Haru clicks his tongue with an exaggerated sigh that he huffs out on purpose because he knows it will annoy Sousuke, and it does. His biceps flex with strain and everything, but Haru leaves it at that and sinks back against his seat, also crossing his arms, and returns to staring out the window.

Time passes.

Haru returns to sitting with his legs stretched out over the seats.

Then more time passes.

Sousuke sneezes.

Excessively more time passes.



Haru rakes his hair back from his forehead to clear away some of the sweat that's beginning to drip down his temples.

And then more time passes.

Sousuke's breathing is annoying again.

...

"It's hot."

"What do you want me to do about it?"

"I need water."

Sousuke snorts. "Tough luck, kid."

"Don't call me that," Haru grumbles.

"Well, you act like one, so I don't know what you want me to do."

They go quiet for another moment, but it doesn't last long.

"I think he got eaten."

"By what?"

Haru shrugs. "I dunno ... A koala."

"Koalas are herbivores."

"So?"

Sousuke hisses out a long sigh.

"What if his name's not really Lucas?"

Sousuke's brow furrows. "*What?*"

"What if he was just pretending to be Lucas, and we just allowed ourselves to get kidnapped by a psychopath who's left us in the wilderness to get eaten by the koalas?"

"Okay, you know what, I can't do this."

Sousuke pushes himself out of the car. Haru's tempted to laugh, but the door opening for just that quick second allows a waft of air to filter into the suffocating heat of the car that had been building over the past who-knew-how-long, and it feels good. So Haru crawls across the seats and opens the door to get out too.

It's not that it's much cooler outside of the car, but the circulating air has a small breeze to it that cools the sweat on his brow. He sighs, and then glances up to Sousuke, who has his

hands in his pockets and is squinting back and forth between the empty stretch of road ahead of them and the empty stretch of road behind them.

He doesn't do anything for a good long while, so Haru pretends he's not there and wanders around to the other side of the car to stare out across the grasslands. There's one gnarled tree way out in the distance, and the grass is maybe tall enough to reach his knees. That's about it.

The wind picks up for a moment, and he relishes the gust of fresh air, breathing in the scent of dirt with his eyes closed. He's really thirsty, and he starts thinking about how he maybe should have taken his chances and thrown himself into the river while they were closer to the coast. He could have swam back home. It couldn't be that far.

He opens his eyes when he hears the car door open again. Sousuke has gotten around to the driver's side and is bent over, fishing around for something.

Haru stares thoughtfully at his ass during this, not necessarily because he feels inclined to, but it just so happens to be there, and he gets the tingling temptation to kick it. He only blinks away when Sousuke grumbles something under a frustrated sigh and straightens back up. He slams the door shut.

Haru at first thinks to leave it alone and go back to ignoring him, but he for some reason feels compelled to question him. "What?"

Sousuke doesn't look at him. He perches his hands on his hips. "He took the keys."

"So? The car doesn't work anyway."

"I know that," Sousuke snaps. "The trunk latch doesn't work either, which means we can't get our stuff from the back."

"Why do we need to get our stuff from the back?"

"Fine. *I* need to get my stuff from the back."

"Why?"

"Because I'm going on foot."

This time, Haru actually does allow himself a patronizing snort. "On foot where?"

Sousuke shrugs, ignoring his teasing. He opens the door to the back, and again sticks his butt out in Haru's line of sight. "Somewhere that's not here," his muffled voice says. The car shakes as he pulls at the seats, probably trying to find an alternate way into the trunk. It appears he is unsuccessful there as well. "Dammit."

He slams the door shut. Then he turns and just starts walking.

Haru waits a moment, watching his massive shoulders very slowly begin to shrink with distance. "Where are you going?"

Sousuke, without looking back, throws an arm out in front of him. “Forward.”

Haru finds himself biting at the inside of his lip, squinting just a bit as Sousuke shrinks farther and farther away. He doesn’t realize he’s doing this for a good long minute, but when he does, he forces his expression to smooth itself back out, then huffs a short sigh and walks quickly to catch up. It’s not like Sousuke is walking particularly fast, but he does have a longer stride — a lumbering one that moves slow, like a two-ton elephant. Haru waits to speak again until he’s just under Sousuke’s shoulder. Unfortunately, he’s just a little bit out of breath by then.

“What comes after Forward?”

Sousuke shrugs. “I dunno. There’s got to be some form of civilization up ahead. We were moving in this direction anyway. Maybe Rin is in the next town.”

“How do you know?”

“I don’t.”

“So why are you leaving the car then?”

“Because I don’t want to sit out here all night with you, that’s why,” Sousuke bites, snapping down a cold glare. Haru doesn’t give him the satisfaction of an expression change.

“You’d rather get lost instead?”

He huffs another bull-breathing breath through his nose. “There’s *one* dirt road moving in *one* direction. It can’t be that hard to navigate.”

“Well, not for normal people maybe.”

“What’s your point?”

“My point is you’re going to get lost.”

“Tch. Then why are you following me?”

“I’m not following you.”

“You seem pretty insistent about staying with the car, and yet here you are, attached to my hip, because you’re a child and can’t be left alone.”

“I am not a child,” Haru argues, and his tone actually lifts with a mild form of frustration as he says so and pierces Sousuke with a threatening stare. Sousuke glances down at him out of the corner of his eye, but this time does not respond. Haru scrunches his nose when Sousuke looks away again. “Just because you’re bigger than me, doesn’t mean you get to look down on me.”

Sousuke doesn’t answer.

“I’ve lived on my own for practically half my life.”

“Yeah, with a surrogate mother living a flight of stairs around the corner. You’re not convincing anyone, Nanase. I know Tachibana waits on you hand and foot. I’ve heard the stories, and I’ve seen how you two act around each other. You can’t do a thing without him, and *that’s* why you’re following me right now.”

Haru stops walking, jaw tight. He glares at Sousuke’s back as he continues forward without pause. The larger man actually has the gall to wave tauntingly over his head before he stuffs his hand back into his pocket.

Haru just stands in the middle of the road, fuming, his thoughts so clouded over that he’s unsure what to do. He refuses to acknowledge any form of authenticity in what Sousuke just said, but at the same time, he really does wish Makoto was here right now, because then they’d be able to sensibly come up with a solution together — which most likely would involve staying in the car, because Makoto would probably be too afraid to just walk out into the night in a place he’s unfamiliar with, when neither of them knows where they’re going. And that makes perfect sense to Haru. That’s probably why he doesn’t like Sousuke.

But also, the further away Sousuke gets, the more Haru’s stomach tightens into a ball of knots, because he can feel the space between them getting wider, leaving him in a growing circle of aloneness that only makes him uneasy, because he doesn’t know where he’s currently located, and he would prefer not to be lost in the Australian wilderness by himself.

He should get back in the car, that’s the simplest and most sensible thing to do. But his body decides to walk forward again. He doesn’t walk extra fast to catch up this time, but naturally his steps are quicker anyway — having adjusted to Makoto’s pace over the years, which also just seems faster because his stride is so long.

He’s never really paid much attention to how similar Sousuke and Makoto’s bodies are. Makoto’s big, but he’s never really seemed *that* big, and it’s probably because he doesn’t insist on dominating whatever space he walks into. Makoto’s bigness is more protective and comfortable, like a warm shroud. Sousuke’s is like standing in the shadow of a mountain that’s threatening to fall over.

He manages to catch up anyway.

Sousuke grunts. It’s a smug noise that communicates his satisfaction in thinking that he’s won a point over Haru.

“I’m not following you,” Haru says, even though he doesn’t really mean to.

“Sure you’re not.”

“I just figured Rin would be pretty pissed if I let you get lost.”

It’s amazing how quickly Sousuke flares up and tosses his hands around. “It’s ...” He growls through his teeth. “It’s a straight road! It’s a straight road moving in the same direction! *How* could I possibly get lost?”

“I’m sure you’d find a way.”

“I just ... wish that I had thrown you out of the window instead.” Sousuke mostly whines this to himself as he pinches the bridge of his nose, but Haru doesn’t really catch it, because he’s stopped walking again.

“Yamazaki.”

“Maybe it’s not too late. We’re literally the only ones out here. No one would know.”

“Yamazaki.”

“It’s not that hard to pull one over on Rin, and I think I could live with myself for that one.”

“*Sousuke!*” Haru hisses, sharper this time, because the dolt is not paying attention at all.

Sousuke whips a glare over his shoulder. “*What?*” he snaps.

Haru, frozen, does not respond other than to gesture with his gaze not too far out into the distance where several pairs of glowing eyes are staring at them through the shadows. Sousuke jerks to a halt with a sharp inhale. Then they’re both frozen, having a stare down with the pack of wild dogs.

“What are those?” Sousuke says under his breath.

Haru opens his mouth, closes it, and then opens it again and manages to whisper, “I- ... think they’re dingoes.”

Sousuke lifts his chin. “The things that eat babies?”

“I think that’s just a myth, but ... probably.”

“Okay.” Sousuke just barely nods. He takes a step back. The pack shifts in response.

“Don’t move,” Haru murmurs.

“Don’t tell me not to move,” Sousuke argues quietly, lips just barely moving. “We’re being stared at by things with glowing eyes and teeth. I’m not standing here to wait for them to get closer.”

“If you move, they’re going to move.”

“They’re going to move anyway.”

“They’re waiting for you to run —”

“Yeah, not shit. No thing in its right mind is going to just stand around —”

“You’re not faster than them.”

“I’m going back to the car.”

“Sousuke, seriously. If you run, they are going to chase you. And if they chase you, I’m going to have to run, and I am not a fast runner.”

Sousuke takes off in the next second. The dingo pack charges forward half a second after that, and Haru barely has time to catch it, because he’s also already turned around with a growling hiss of, “Bitch.”

Sousuke is way ahead of him in literally no time, and he’s not sure if it’s the trying to catch up or trying not to get eaten that’s making him work his legs harder than he ever has in his life. He’s grateful that he’s just had a burst of rage blossom up in his stomach to accompany the harrowing fear, because this seems to give him the boost that he needs to be *just* fast enough not to be too quickly gained on, even though, he can hear the hungry concentrated panting of the dogs practically breathing on his ankles.

Sousuke is already back at the car, and has dived in in all of two seconds. The door slams shut behind him, and Haru’s heart, which is already leaping with terror, gets lodged in his throat. He really tries not to look over his shoulder, but he kind of has to, and a truly unfamiliar sound makes it out of his throat when he catches a glimpse of his chances.

He practically throws himself against the car when he finally reaches it, but when he yanks on the handle the door doesn’t budge.

“Sousuke!”

Sousuke’s voice is muffled, shouting something back.

“Open the door! It’s not fucking funny! Bitch. You son of a bitch!”

It’s a waste of time that he does not have, so he runs around to the back of the car and jumps up on the trunk just in time for one of the dingoes to take a snap at his heel. It misses, but it’s all the encouragement he needs to scurry up to the top of the car, while the dogs yip at him, their claws scratching up the paint with ear-pinching screeches.

Haru swears he’s never been more out of breath in his life, and he swims for a living.

He pounds on the sunroof, where he can see Sousuke staring up at him from inside the car.

“Asshole! Let me in!”

Sousuke gestures wildly. Haru has to press his face against the glass to hear him. “... keys! There’s no key! He took the keys!”

“Kick it out! Use your fucking hands! I don’t care! Just open it!”

The car rocks and Haru snaps his head over to shoulder just in time to see one of the dingoes attempt to leap on top of the car, only to slide right off.

“Sousuke!”

“I’m trying!”

“Try fucking harder! Get it open!”

They continue to scream at each other while the car rocks under the attack of the wild dogs, and Sousuke presses himself up against the glass, while simultaneously pulling it with his hands, and no grip, to force it open. Haru claws at it from the outside, and the moment it shifts an inch, he grows more frantic with both a heightened sense of terror and relief. They manage to crack it open and both immediately stuff their fingers through the narrow space to pull it down, only Sousuke’s hands are too big, so Haru’s left yanking on it by himself.

One of the dogs leaps so high up against the side of the car that Haru can feel the aggression of its teeth snapping at his face, and he screams.

“Fucking ... sh-shit!”

“Pull, you gotta pull!” Sousuke’s shouting at him.

Except that Haru’s arms are kind of reedy, and they’re trembling with fear. “I can’t, I can’t, I can’t.”

“Nanase, if you don’t want to get eaten, then you have to!”

“Fuck you!” Haru shouts, yanking back with all his might. “You’re the fucking asshole that left me out here, I can’t believe you would do that!”

“Just get the damn window open, goddammit!”

The dingo leaps again and this time Haru reflexively kicks it in the jaw. It yelps and falls back to the ground, and the other pack animals are not particularly happy about it.

“Holy shit,” Haru gasps.

“Holy shit,” Sousuke echoes. “You just kicked it in the face!”

“I didn’t mean to.”

“Don’t *apologize*, just come on!”

The growling has gotten increasingly more vicious, but the window jerks down another centimeter and Sousuke’s able to get his hands through this time. He forces the whole thing back with much more ease, and Haru dives in headfirst. The heel of his shoe kicks Sousuke in the jaw as he falls onto the seat, and the larger man scoffs with pain. But the moment Haru’s fully in the car, he rights himself to immediately double back and slap Sousuke purposely across the face.

“Fuck!”

“Why would you lock the doors?!”

“We were being chased by *wild dingoes*!”

“You’re three times their size! You did that on purpose, you *knew* they would get me first! You fucking asshole!”

He swings to hit him again, but Sousuke catches his wrist this time, and when the dogs jump up against the window closest to them, they both squeal and Sousuke automatically yanks Haru against his chest, but maybe also Haru ducks instinctively into him, and then they cling to each other while the car shakes and the dingoes bark angrily.

It’s a bit of a blur, just sitting there waiting for it to stop, because Haru has his eyes squeezed shut and he’s listening very closely, but all he can really hear after a few seconds is how loud Sousuke is breathing, and really Haru’s not much better, practically hyperventilating into his chest, with his nose buried in his shirt, so it makes it even harder to catch a breath.

He’s not sure how long it lasts, but eventually everything goes still, and the muffled yipping subsides, and then Haru starts to become aware of how damp Sousuke’s t-shirt is, but he not sure whose fault that is or if it’s a collaboration of their sweat combined.

Sousuke smells like outside. He doesn’t care for it ... Like really, he doesn’t care. He’s not even sure he has a cognizant thought about it. He just notices. And then he notices how big Sousuke’s chest is. And then he notices that his face is being forcibly held captive by the hand gripped in his hair at the back of his head.

At first, he’s offended, and he wants to shove Sousuke away and tell him he doesn’t need his protection. But then he has the passing thought of teasing Sousuke for being so scared that he has to cling this tightly to Haru. But then he’s still scared himself, and he’s sure that would come out of his voice, so instead he says, “Are they gone?” And it’s completely swallowed up by Sousuke’s sternum, but he seems to hear him anyway.

Sousuke doesn’t let go of him yet, but Haru can sense the movement of him peeking out the window.

“No. They’re just circling the car.”

Haru lets a breath fall out of his lungs. It’s not relief. He just needs to breathe. “You’re suffocating me.”

Sousuke pushes him away, not very nicely, but Haru doesn’t complain, because he gets to pull in a proper breath. He feels those stormy teal eyes watching him very closely, and when he looks into them, he can’t read what’s there, but for a moment he knows it’s at least not ire. But then Sousuke blinks to himself and scrunches up his nose as though Haru’s done something despicable.

“Get off of me.”

He doesn’t realize he’s straddled over Sousuke’s right leg until now, but he removes himself quickly, before he can really think about how massive his thighs are. He shuffles over to the opposite side of the car and peeks out of the other window.



Indeed, the dingoes are pacing about restlessly, their tongues lolling out of their mouths as they pant. Two of them have even decided to park themselves on the edge of the grass, laying down like house dogs to rest.

“Fuck,” Haru breathes. “Look what you did.”

“What *I* did?”

“I told you not to move.”

“Okay, well fuck, how long was I supposed to stand there for?” Sousuke spits bitterly. “They were going to charge us either way.”

“You don’t know that.”

“And you do?”

“I can’t believe you would let them pick me off first like that.”

“That wasn’t on purpose.”

“Like hell,” Haru huffs, crawling over the center console to plop down in the driver’s seat. He props his feet up and crosses his arms, wiggling his body into the seat to get as comfortable as he possibly can.

“I change my mind,” he says as he closes his eyes. “Other Nagisa was most definitely not eaten by koalas.”

## Chapter 3

It has to be at least an hour later that everything has gone still again.

The dingoes have left, but there's a collective understanding that they're not sure how far, and there's no point in trying to wander off again anyway.

Still no Lucas, but Haru by now has stopped waiting for him to return. They're just sitting. They're just sitting in a stuffy, broken-down car in the middle of nowhere and, go figure, not a single vehicle has come through on the same desolate road. Haru's not surprised. By now he's certain of two things: Lucas most definitely kidnapped them, and, he got himself eaten when he left the car. Serves him right probably. Haru would be more remorseful, except that Lucas left them with no water, so he can't bring himself to care that much about his demise.

It's just after eleven, when Haru asks Sousuke what time it is. It isn't until then that the bonehead has the thought to call Rin, but as luck would have it, he has no service out here anyway. So they just sit. In silence.

For like, a while. Until

“What the hell is that?”

Haru looks back over his shoulder. Sousuke's eyes are trained up at the sunroof. Haru doesn't catch it at first, but then he sees several, thin legs pick at the edge of the open window with slow, searching curls. He tilts his head for a better look, and sees the silhouette of a spider the size of a fat house-cat framed against the sky.

They're silent, eyes watching it with a focus so intense it feels like the smallest shift of sound would shatter the other windows. The spider very ominously inches forward, revealing more of its underside as it perches more and more precariously on the edge of the sunroof, and Haru can feel Sousuke sweating bullets in the back.

He glances at him.

Sousuke has completely blanched, and looks as though he's concentrating very hard on not projectile vomiting across the car as he shakes his head slowly, eyes trained on the creature.

“Don't freak out,” Haru mumbles.

“You shut the fuck up right now,” he says thickly.

“It's just a spider.”

“No the fuck it is not. That is *not* a spider, and don't you dare try to convince me otherwise. Spiders are bugs. That is a mutation from hell.”

“It's going to jump at you.”

“Nanase ... I will kill you. I’m so serious right now.”

A trembling breath is very silently taken, then Haru whispers, "Close the window."

"Fuck you."

"Sousuke ..."

Sousuke shakes his head more vigorously, neither of them have blinked once, nor have they removed their gaze from the thing.

"It's right fucking there. I am not putting my hand near its face."

"It's going to get in the car, if we leave the window open."

"It's already *in* the car!" he hisses. "You close it."

"I couldn't even get it open."

"Shit," Sousuke growls through his teeth. He doesn't move. Neither does Haru.

The spider is dangerously hovering halfway in the car by now. Even if they had wanted to do something about that, they'd certainly have to sacrifice *something*. So they just wait, tensing with each passing heartbeat, and the very second that it falls, both of them leap out of the car and slam the doors shut so hard the windows shake.

Haru brushes the crawling chills from his arms, while Sousuke whines and screams quietly through his teeth somewhere out of sight. He appears by the hood of the car on the opposite side, shaking with so many things that Haru can't name them all. He's got his color back just that quickly, and it's all in his face.

“What the fuck is wrong with this place?!” he bellows, his voice echoing out across the plains.

This is answered by an unnamed shift of movement in the grass somewhere close by, and they both immediately jump up onto the hood of the car, crashing against each other with the momentum, though they hardly notice for a moment, because they're both frantically scanning the area for more threats.

“Fuck this shit,” Sousuke hisses through his teeth. Haru can feel him trembling against his arm. “God.” He shivers and wipes his palms aggressively on his thighs.

“You’re working yourself up too much —”

“Shut up. *Shut up.*”

Haru gives him a moment to calm down. It takes a while, but he has nothing else to do other than be patient, so he waits. Nothing else jumps or crawls out of the shadows, but that's not exactly reassuring. It now feels like they're being watched by a litany of things they don't know about.

Sousuke heaves a giant sigh after a long while.

“Maybe you’ll get more service if you stand on top of the car,” Haru mumbles.

They exchange glances, and then Sousuke looks behind them through the windshield. The corners of his lips set, and he digs his phone out only to slap it in Haru’s palm.

“You do it.”

“It’s your phone.”

“So?”

“You’re taller than me. You have a better chance.”

Haru can practically see the steam spiraling out of Sousuke’s ears as he presses his lips tight and closes his eyes. But after that, he snatches the phone back and heavily crawls up to the roof of the car. His feet shift with uncertainty when he’s standing, and he stares down through the sunroof warily for a good long while, before he finally holds the phone up above his head and tries to search for a bar.

This takes a while, and Haru spends that time watching him, underwhelmed by this Sousuke that looks just like a regular person furrowing his dark eyebrows and turning in slow circles on top of the car.

He looks young. Haru always forgets that they’re around the same age. In fact, Sousuke’s a few months younger than him, and that’s certainly weird to think about, especially when realizing he actually has Sousuke’s birthday memorized, and he can’t think of why. Rin or Makoto probably said something about it one time. He’s just not sure why it would stick. He usually doesn’t remember anyone’s birthday except for Makoto’s ... and Rin’s, when he demands that his friends come and visit him for a week to celebrate.

Some birthday this is turning out to be.

Sousuke lets out a tired huff and lets his arm drop back to his side. “It’s not happening,” he mumbles, stepping heavily on the windshield as he lowers himself back down next to Haru. “We’re not getting anything out here.”

They’re quiet for another moment as they both stare out ahead of them. The tension of mutual thought ripples out like static around them, but for a while yet, neither of them wants to voice anything about what they know they’re both thinking. Then Sousuke’s glances over his shoulder.

“We’re gonna have to walk.”

Haru’s chest expands. “And if we run into our friends?”

Sousuke thinks for another moment, and then points ahead. “They came from that direction. So ... I would imagine that they went back that way too. Maybe they have a den or something. If we go that way,” he shifts to point behind them, “back the way we came, we

might have better luck keeping away from them. Also, Lucas went that way, so more than likely we'll at least run into him at some point down the road."

"His body you mean."

"He's not dead."

"— or what's left of it."

"He is *not* dead. God, you are morbid."

Haru shrugs when Sousuke furrows his brow at him. The larger man then shakes his head and rolls his eyes away, letting it pass.

"Alright." He huffs out a large breath. "We should go now. The longer we wait, the more hopeless this is going to get."

Haru doesn't respond, but he follows Sousuke's lead as he slides off of the car. They're both tense at first, moving on high alert with roaming eyes, as they creep slowly around the car and start heading back in the direction from which they originally came.

It takes a good two kilometers of uneventful strolling for them to relax just a bit. And then the journey quickly becomes boring — and a little bit irritating. Maybe even more than a little bit.

Walking, for whatever reason, makes Haru's stomach aware that it's empty, and then he remembers that he's thirsty, and then he remembers that he's hot, and then he remembers that complaining about these things to Sousuke is useless, because he's not Makoto, and he can't fix it.

And then he starts thinking about how all of their stuff is locked in the trunk of the car. And then he remembers that Makoto reminded him he put Rin's birthday present in Haru's book bag.

"Dammit," he whispers.

"What?"

Haru shakes his head. "Rin's birthday present is in the car."

"It'll be fine. We'll get it back eventually."

"We left the car unlocked."

"No one's driven out here in the past two and a half hours. I think it'll be fine."

"You should carry me."

Sousuke makes a face and shoots him with a look. "What?"

Haru stares at the dirt moving slowly beneath their feet. “You’re bigger than me, and my feet hurt. You should carry me.”

Sousuke looks away again with a scoff. “I’m not carrying you. You’re fine. Suck it up.”

Haru is quiet about this for a moment, letting it go, because he only brought it up to be annoying to begin with, even though he would have actually accepted a ride on Sousuke’s back in real life, had he agreed to it. It’s just that he’s tired. There’s no other reason. He’s used to swimming. He’s not a land creature. Being on his feet is not a thing he often thinks about, and they’re making that clear to him now. It’s dry out here.

“Why are you mean?” he finds himself asking, and it’s surprising even to him that the tone of the question is actually serious.

Sousuke wrinkles his nose at him this time. “I’m not mean.”

“Yes you are.”

“No I’m not.”

“Yes you are.”

Sousuke scoffs. “Why are *you* mean?” he shoots back.

Haru makes a face, but boldly looks up at the larger man. “I’m mean to everybody. It’s not on purpose, and it’s really not mean. People just don’t like it when other people are straightforward with them. *You’re* only mean to me, and I want to know why.”

Something compromised skitters across Sousuke’s expression, and he turns his face away quickly, even though he’s too late to keep it from Haru. Haru doesn’t know what it means, but he knows at least that his hunch is correct.

“Makoto says he’s never had a problem with you, and I know that’s not just because he’s Makoto. Rin seems to like you even though you guys fight all the time, but I get it because we fight too. And you’re really gentle with Gou, and nice to Nitori and Mikoshiba, and they like you too. Nagisa and Rei even like you, and they talk about you sometimes. I’ve seen and heard about you being nice to everyone but me, and I want to know why,” he reiterates, this time with a tone of demand that he won’t accept silence for.

But Sousuke is stubborn, so he doesn’t say anything for a good long while, and when he does, his response is a displeasing mutter of “I don’t know.”

“Yes you do.”

Silence.

Haru looks away. He lets the silence stretch for a while, before he adds, “I’m mean to you, because you’re mean to me. And I’m not sorry for it either.”

Sousuke’s tone is itchingly blasé when he responds, “I wouldn’t expect you to be.”

Haru *tches* under his breath, and they walk another three kilometers in pure silence.

Then they hit a fork in the road. They stop completely.

“Fuck,” Sousuke huffs. “I don’t remember this.”

He looks to Haru as though to ask if Haru recalls the car ever turning, and he shakes his head. They were both staring out of the windows, but apparently neither of them was paying attention.

“One road that goes in one direction, huh?”

“Shut up.”

“Do you have service yet?”

Sousuke checks and immediately shakes his head. “No.”

They stand there for a moment, figuratively twiddling their thumbs.

“We’ll just have to guess,” Sousuke says. “Let’s go this way.” He heads toward the right, but looks back when Haru doesn’t immediately follow. “What?”

“I don’t think that’s right.”

“Why not?”

Haru shrugs. “No particular reason, I just don’t trust your sense of direction.”

Sousuke dramatically rolls his eyes.

“You get lost on your own school campus. How could you even blame me for that?”

“Fine then, we’ll go the other way.”

“I don’t trust that either.”

“Nanase, there are only *two* options here.”

Haru shrugs again, arms crossed.

“God,” Sousuke growls through his teeth. “I can’t. I can’t- This,” he says gesturing to Haru with both hands. “You want to know why I’m mean to you? *This* is why, Nanase. It’s because you’re ridiculous. I have never met a more sullen, uncaring, non-committal brat in my entire life. You think so highly of yourself that you just *cannot* be bothered to do anything anyone else’s way. And everyone puts you up on a pedestal just because you’re attractive to look at when you swim. It’s complete bullshit. All you do is screw over everyone you touch. We’re going this way.”

Sousuke stomps off to the right, without waiting for Haru, who just simply stares at his back for a while with a warm and unpleasant heat filling up the center of his chest. His ears ring

for a while, as though they've been struck like a bell, and it's not comfortable.

He really doesn't want to follow this man anywhere, but Sousuke's neither going to pause for him, nor turn around to try something else, and Haru can feel that aloneness spreading again. His gaze drops to the ground as he quietly rolls the inside of his lip between his teeth. Then he curls his fingers into loose fists and follows.



## Chapter 4

The stretch of silence is longer this time, and it's uncomfortable.

It's weird because Haru realizes that some of the silences before were not, as though Sousuke is an easy person to be quiet with, which ... makes a lot of logical sense, but also is unsettling. Except that now it doesn't really matter, because the silence *isn't* comfortable. But rather than it being the kind that is strained because they're searingly mad at each other, it's more like an awkward silence that is filled only with the very present and lingering echo of Sousuke's burning words.

They crawl across Haru's skin, and he tries to brush them away, but he's not very successful, and it's really not helping at all that Sousuke keeps glancing at him as though he wants to say more. Though, Haru can't tell what it is he's itching to get out, because the air around him feels hesitant, like he's contemplating whether or not he should try to erase away the words that are so stalely sitting on the air between them. But Haru doesn't attempt to say anything about it either, because Sousuke wouldn't be able to do that even if he tried.

"Fuck!"

He's jarred a bit, when his shoulders are suddenly crushed by Sousuke's dominant hands, and he's jerked off to the side, partway into the grass, and forced to stand in front of Sousuke like a shield.

He wrinkles his nose. "What?"

Sousuke points off to the other side of the road, where a large, black-gold snake is curled up in the path where Haru had just been walking. He sighs, even though his body quietly ripples with a chill.

"It's just a snake."

"Yeah? The other thing was 'just a spider' and the pack of carnivores were 'just dogs.' This place is trying to kill us."

"Didn't you read the warning on the brochure before you came?"

"You're not funny."

"Alright, I have an idea. I'll offer you to it as a sacrifice, and then make my escape while it's feasting on your enormous body."

"Would you let it go? I told you it wasn't on purpose ... And quit making jabs at my size."

"How can I? You're like a walking statute from the *Guinness Book of World Records*. I bet there's an ox somewhere that looks just like you. Did you know the ground shakes when you walk?"

“Alright, enough!” Sousuke hisses, squeezing the circulation out of Haru’s biceps.

He winces. “Relax. If we walk around it slowly, it’s not going to bother us.”

“If I get bit, I am going to strangle you.”

“You are such a baby,” Haru sighs. “And anyway, you’ll be too busy foaming at the mouth probably.”

“You’re walking in front.”

“Well, it’s not like I have a choice. You’re crushing me.”

Sousuke’s grip lets up only a little bit, but Haru takes that with gratitude. He starts forward, and Sousuke shuffles behind him, crouched a little lower as he peers at the snake directly over Haru’s shoulder. He steers them at an angle as they pass it, keeping Haru in front, as promised. The snake watches them. It coils tighter into itself when they get as close as they’re going to get, and it lets out a vicious hiss, but that’s all that it does, and they’ve overcome it in no time.

Sousuke keeps looking back over his shoulder as though it’s going to follow. Haru just rolls his eyes.

“See? That wasn’t so bad.”

“Don’t patronize me, Nanase. Some of us are made out of actual flesh and blood and are not impervious to the elements. I’m sorry that whatever created you forgot to add a sense of empathy.”

Haru purses his lips. “At least when I insult you, I’m being mildly sarcastic. How much time have you spent venting in your diary about —”

“Shit. Shit!”

Haru’s jerked to a halt again, but this time he’s not as much thrown off, because his eyes are already wide on the path in front of them, and it is actively hissing with a blanket of slow-curling snakes, all piled up on top of each other and stretched out across the entirety of the road.

“Oh, that’s way worse.”

Sousuke’s hands shoot up to cover Haru’s mouth, as though the snakes are listening to him. Now caught in the fold of Sousuke’s arms, Haru stumbles a bit as he’s dragged backward several steps.

“God,” Sousuke breathes to himself, trembling again, and this time Haru can feel it across his whole back. He’s aware when Sousuke drops his forehead on top of his hair, but he’s sure the larger man has no awareness that he’s doing so himself. Also, he’s still got his hands over Haru’s mouth, and is practically squeezing him against his chest.

“I can’t do this. Just open up the ground and get it over with.”

Haru tries to speak, but it’s entirely muffled by the larger man’s hands.

“We’re going back the other way.”

Sousuke starts to turn them both, but Haru plants his feet and urgently taps on his forearm to get his attention.

“What *now*?” he growls. “Are you innately obligated to resist every single thing that I say?”

Haru licks his palm, and he cries out in disgust, releasing him immediately. His skin is salty.

“Look,” Haru says, pointing out into the distance where a row of small, man-made lights shines an indeterminable distance away. Doesn’t matter though. They can see it, and they know that it means people, and possible cellphone service, maybe even their lost guide.

There’s hesitation in Sousuke’s reaction, but then he shakes his head, eyes darting to the path in front of them.

“No. Hell no.”

“That is exactly what we’re out here for.”

“It’s ...” He struggles, waving both hands out to the distant lights, and then pointing dramatically to the snake farm in front of them. “We are not walking through this!”

Haru’s eyes dart to the knee-length grass on either side of them. “We could ...”

“Don’t you dare. We can’t even *see* what’s in there.”

“Then we’ll just have to go really slow.”

“You’re a nut case. You have a death wish. These things are most assuredly poisonous, because probably fucking *everything* that lives here is, and you want to walk *through* them to get to the lights way on the other side? What if it’s just a power plant?”

“It’s still better than nothing.”

“Nanase ...” Then he just sighs, a long drawn out sigh, that Haru ends up counting the seconds on. “We can’t ...” He pinches the bridge of his nose, eyes closed, head shaking. “We can’t do this.”

“Yes we can. Just walk on your toes and watch where you’re stepping,” Haru says, moving forward.

“Nanase ... Nanase!”

Haru doesn’t turn back to acknowledge him. He inches up to the edge of the road block and stares down at the low-hissing snakes at his feet. They don’t lash out, so he picks up one

careful foot, and steps down lightly in a small open space of dirt within the pile. His eyes search, and he takes another step, and then one more.

“Oh my god,” Sousuke whines behind him. Haru doesn’t look over his shoulder. He just simply trusts that Sousuke will follow, and he’s aware of his large presence when he does.

“You have to be lighter on your feet than that,” he says without turning around.

“I haven’t even done anything yet.”

“Doesn’t matter. Your presence is too heavy. You’re going to scare them, and then they’ll bite you.”

“Stop it. Just stop it with that, okay?” he hisses back. “God. I can’t believe ... Ugh.” Sousuke groans. It’s half frustrated, half anxious, and it isn’t until Haru feels him take the first careful step that he looks back.

It’s comical. And were this not a very roulette kind of situation, then he would laugh, because Sousuke is visibly trying to be light by scrunching his whole body upward, but it’s very evident that he has horrible balance and has probably never walked on his toes a day in his life.

“You have to breathe,” Haru instructs. “If you don’t relax, you’re going to fall over.”

“Stop talking to me.”

He says it, but he listens — as best he can anyway. His shoulders drop a fraction, at least, and he takes his second step forward, putting him fully in the midst of the danger. Haru pauses where he is, standing deathly still as he waits and watches for Sousuke to catch up. He’s about an arm’s distance away when he glances up to Haru, who nods at him and then turns to continue forward.

It’s painstaking, the slowness with which they’re having to navigate this field of mines. Haru’s sweating even heavier now than when he was after running from the dingoes, and he’s sure Sousuke’s no different. He just hopes the snakes aren’t bothered by the occasional drop of saltwater.

A strangled noise of comes from behind him, and he turns just in time to catch his breath and throw out his hands to intercept Sousuke’s body from falling over. Except that, in order to do so, he has to lift one foot off of the ground and lean his weight forward to keep from being pulled down. So now, they’re propped against each other’s shoulders, panting heavily, grips tight on each other’s arms, and Haru can’t put his foot down.

“Oh fuck,” Sousuke moans into his neck.

“Don’t panic,” Haru breathes. “Can you push me up without falling forward?”

“No.”

“Are you saying that because you can’t or because you refuse to?”

“I *can*’t, Nanase!” he hisses. “I’m just a little bit heavy. Or weren’t all of your insults meant to remind us all!”

“Alright fine. I’ll push you.”

Sousuke snorts a laugh. It tickles on his skin. “Not with those arms you won’t.”

Haru makes a sour face, but it’s a waste, because Sousuke can’t see it. “I’m not that weak.”

“Sure. When’s the last time you did any weight training?”

“That’s not relevant.”

“Well it fucking is now. You’ve never lifted anything over ten kilos in your life, have you?”

“I’m a swimmer.”

“That hardly makes a difference right now.”

“It’s not nothing,” Haru argues.

“You’re going to put that on the table and hope that it doesn’t kill us both? I’m not sure I’m very willing to stake my life on whether or not you can bench a hundred kilograms.”

Haru lets a breath fall out of his mouth. “Why the fuck are you so heavy?”

“Because I’m 192 centimeters, and *I* weight train. Also, red meat and potatoes exist in this world, and I’m not allergic to them.”

“We don’t need to go into that.”

“Oh,” Sousuke says, voice lifting with interest. “Is that a sore spot?”

“No.”

“And here I thought the mackerel thing was just another unhealthy obsession.”

“Okay, enough. We can’t stand here forever. I’m only on one foot. And if you’re as heavy as you say, I can’t keep you up forever.”

Sousuke goes quiet, and it takes a trembling moment of thinking and breathing and sweating and trying to ignore the steady hissing underneath them to come up with a plan. He’s not sure he’s really actually got one, but they have to try *something*. The quads in his leg are already straining.

“Okay. Grab my hands.”

They adjust their grips blindly, putting more pressure into each other’s shoulders as they let go of each other’s arms to find their hands and lock their fingers together. Sousuke’s hands are huge. Bigger than Makoto’s even, and Haru has to try hard not to dwell on it too long. They’re also sweaty, but he can’t say much more for his own. They grip each other tightly.

“We’re both going to have to push, but you have to be intentional about it. Don’t overshoot. If you’re too aggressive, I’m just going to fall backward.”

Sousuke *tches*. “If you’re too light, I’m landing on my face.”

“I’m not going to drop you. I promise.”

Sousuke goes quiet again. Haru waits, tempering his breath as he focuses on the slowly settling tremble of Sousuke’s body. He calms, more trustingly than Haru expects him to, but Haru doesn’t say anything about it.

“Okay,” Sousuke whispers. “On your count then.”

Haru nods. “One. Two. Three.”

He tenses his muscles, solidifying them as best he can into unmoving rocks of defiance. For just the briefest of seconds, neither of them goes anywhere, but as they slowly adjust, the weight is redistributed and the pressure manipulated between them. Sousuke’s body slowly starts to rock back into place.

Haru’s fingers tighten between the other’s, his arms just barely shaking the further away Sousuke gets. He is heavy, truly. But Haru does not allow him to fall, as promised, and Sousuke looks at him with much more calm in his teal eyes than he has across this entire night. Haru looks at him too, a small pinch of effort etched on his brow, but he doesn’t feel weak at all. Nor is he worried. And after one more suspended heartbeat, Sousuke’s made it right way up, and Haru finds a spot to rest his other foot.

They exhale.

Their hands remain locked between them, and they take a moment just to breath and allow the sweep of relief to settle over them before its snatched back up by the realization that they’re still only halfway through the minefield.

“Alright?” Sousuke asks quietly.

Haru, whose head is down right now, still staring at the mass of snakes under their feet, just closes his eyes for a moment and tries to convince his body to stop shaking. He hadn’t thought about the amount of concentrated energy it takes to bare another human’s weight while staying steadily balanced on one foot, and now he can feel the exhaustion quivering all the more intensely up his leg. His arms don’t exactly feel completely in his control either.

“Give me a minute,” he mumbles toward the ground, and Sousuke just stands there, waiting, surprisingly patiently, as Haru tries to regain composure over his own muscles.

“Hey.”

He looks up, squinting against the burn of sweat in his eyes. Sousuke’s gaze is sincere, looking back at him this time, and it’s almost reminiscent of the look he had given him in the car for that one frozen moment that Haru was sitting on his knee. Except that this look is kinder, and maybe even a little bit soft around the edges.

It appears as though he's lost his train of thought for a moment, or that he suddenly changes his mind about what he was going to say, but then he allows himself a very small, encouraging smile.

"I'm impressed."

Haru's not very in control of the way his lips turn up at the corners. "I told you."

"You don't have to get a big head about it. I'm just trying to give you a boost of confidence so we can keep moving. We're still standing in a pile of snakes, you know."

Haru nods.

Sousuke inversely shakes his head, but it's with a breath of something like awe. "This is the wildest thing I've ever done in my life."

"At least you'll have something to tell your kids."

"I'm still not sure if I really want kids."

"No?"

"Yeah, I think they're loud. And I don't know if I trust myself to be that kind of responsible for another living thing."

"Mm ... I think they're loud too, but I suppose I've gotten used to it, being around my siblings —"

"I thought you were an only child."

"Oh, I was talking about Ren and Ran."

"Tachibana's brother and sister?"

"Yeah." Haru shrugs. "I mean, I help him take care of them often enough, they might as well be mine too."

Sousuke huffs out a chuckle and shakes his head again. "You are full of surprises, Nanase."

Haru elects not to respond to that. "Shall we continue?"

"Yeah. Your sweat's grossing me out."

"That's your sweat."

"No it's not."

"It is, but whatever."

They release each other, both of them drying their palms off on their clothes, and then they cautiously continue forward, moving even slower than before, and Haru checks back over his

shoulder more often this time, but Sousuke keeps his balance, and still seems considerably calmer than before.

Somehow, they make it, and not a single snake decides to wise up and snap at them along the way. And because that's amazing within itself, the very moment that Haru takes Sousuke's hand to help him leap the last step over, they bounce quickly away, and then stop to look back at the hurdle they just conquered.

The laughter bursts out of them breathlessly and immediately, and they have to take a moment to double over and wheeze with delirious disbelief.

Haru's feeling extremely light-headed at this point, and he's not sure how much of that is the heat, or his hunger, or the thirst and exhaustion, or if it's just all a side effect of nearly dying twice tonight (Or, maybe three times. The spider counts.).

"Holy shit," Sousuke gasps, leaning with one palm on his knee. "I can't believe we made that."

"And you wanted to go back the other way."

"We most assuredly should have gone back the other way. Are you shitting me? That was completely reckless. What kind of luck are you made out of? Because I can't tell at this point."

Haru allows himself a smirk. "I'm the good kind. You're the one that's been attracting shit like this." He gestures back to the snakes.

"Fuck you," Sousuke says, but there's no ire in it.

It isn't until now that they realize they're still holding hands, and they drop each other's grip quickly, after an awkward second of shifting glances.

Sousuke clears his throat and straightens his back, turning to walk away. "Alright, let's get moving. I'm starving."

Haru follows without any qualms this time.



## Chapter 5

### Chapter Notes

So, this chapter is like super short compared to all the others. But also the next one is SUPER long \*shrug\* There was no other way to do it, apparently. I did my best. So I'm just gonna upload them together.

"I'm surprised we haven't run into any kangaroos."

"Did you want to?"

Sousuke shrugs. "I think it'd be cool to see one up close."

"You know they kick, right?"

He pats his abs. "I'm pretty dense. I think I could take it."

Haru scoffs. "They can hold themselves up by their own tails. You don't stand a chance."

"Hey. I doubted the strength of your little toothpick arms, and you proved me wrong. Don't underestimate me."

"Alright fine. Then I *hope* we come across kangaroos, so that you can get your ass kicked, and I can say I told you so."

"Yeah, right."

They've been walking for probably another half-hour now, and the night seems to have settled around them. It's actually been a rather peaceful stroll, since they left the snake block. There's not much to see except for the lights slowly growing closer in the distance, but Haru finds he doesn't mind all that much, because they're able to carry out a normal conversation, probably for the first time since never. And he figures Sousuke can be accommodating when he wants to be.

It's not like they've never been able to relax in the same space. It's just that they're never usually left alone like this. The only times they're typically by themselves is whenever Sousuke feels the need to reinforce his dominance with fresh threats. Otherwise, they usually have the mediation of their friends between them, assuring that they behave themselves and don't rip each other's lungs out.

Haru's surprised, to say the least, that that hasn't happened yet. Not that they haven't been close to it at all over the course of the night. Haru still hasn't quite forgiven Sousuke for

using him as bait for the dingoes, but he's maybe a tiny bit more inclined to consider Sousuke's insistence that "it wasn't on purpose" as a possibility. But that's all.

"Fuck, I'm starving," Sousuke sighs.

"Mm."

"How long have we even been out here?"

"I dunno. What time is it? Do we have service yet?"

Sousuke pulls out his phone to check, and then stops in the middle of the road again.

"Fucking hell," he groans, tipping his head back.

"What?"

"It's dead."

"It's *dead*?"

"That's what I just said."

"How is it dead? What, did you forget to charge it this morning?"

"We've only been wandering around out here for hours, Nanase. How long do you expect it to stick around? Phone batteries are shit."

"Well damn," Haru says with a sarcastic lift to his brow. "If only we had *two* phones. Then we could probably use the other one to get us the fuck home."

Sousuke's eyes drop back into a soft glare. His jaw buckles. "I'm sorry, alright?"

"No you're not," Haru huffs. He turns away and keeps walking. Sousuke follows.

"Well, it's not like you were asking for it or anything," he argues, coming up on Haru's shoulder again. "You were only *intentionally* trying to get under my skin, rattling off shit about me to Tachibana."

"What do you care what he thinks of you?" Haru shoots back. "Makoto doesn't conform to my attitude anyway. He was actually trying to defend you."

"Well thank goodness for that. You know, I said I didn't understand why you two are friends, but now it makes perfect sense. You needed the most uncorruptable person that the angels could possibly make to come and feed you with a silver spoon. I just feel bad that Makoto had to give up whatever life he could have had to have to be that for you."

"You know what ..." Haru stops again, and this time he's seething with a real actual sting that he allows to show on his face. His chest pulls with air.

“Fuck you. Alright? This is what I’m talking about. We were fine two seconds ago, *actually* carrying out a *normal* conversation probably for the first time ever, then one little thing sets you off, and now you’re gaslighting me for poisoning my best friend’s life with my own existence. How is that fair? That actually hurts, you know. You have no idea what Makoto and I have been through. I *know* I hold him back. That’s one of the things that kills me about being with him. I’m always terrified that he could be doing so much more good without me. Except I *actually* happen to need him, and he needs me too. He forces me to accept that every day, and he doesn’t let me feel guilty about it either. It’s just a little bit difficult to stay sure about that, when assholes like you throw it back in my face, because then that just makes it real, and I know it’s not a thing I’m making up in my own head, even though he says it is. And I just want ...”

He huffs out a breath, and then turns away and continues walking much quicker this time, because his throat is tight and his eyes are burning. Sousuke follows, and Haru holds himself together with his arms, curling into his own body as much as he can to keep himself protected.

“Nanase ... Nanase ... Hey, I’m sorry, alright?”

“Fuck you. You are not.”

Sousuke scoffs. “Well fine, don’t take my word for it then.”

“You wouldn’t say shit like that if you didn’t mean it!” Haru snaps. “I know you’re not sorry, because it’s true. Maybe you’ll keep the next comment to yourself, that doesn’t mean you’re not thinking it. I make fun of you and act stubborn to piss you off, but at least I don’t aim for your fucking heart.”

“Nanase —”

“Don’t touch me.” He yanks his shoulder away from Sousuke’s reaching hand and moves to the very edge of the road, lengthening his stride to get away quicker.

Sousuke doesn’t say anything else, nor does he try to apologize again. Haru just keeps his teeth gritted and his head down, and they walk the rest of the way in another uncomfortable silence.

# Chapter 6

## Chapter Notes

Strap in, mates. You're in for it now.

By the time they've made it to the town that is most definitely not a power plant, they're both practically dead.

It's amazing how quickly the vacant terrain shifts back into civilized life, where the streets are not made out of dirt and there are buildings with sweet-tasting air conditioning inside.

They let themselves into the first restaurant that miraculously still has its lights on, and eat their fill of meat pies in silence. And Haru most definitely keeps his annoyance to himself when it turns out that Sousuke's wallet is back in the trunk of the car. So Haru pays for both of their meals himself, even though he doesn't believe Sousuke deserves it, especially since he ate twice the amount of food Haru did.

They don't talk about it. Neither do they talk about the fact that Haru's going to have to pay for rooms for them to stay in at the motel they find in town too. Then of course, trying to book the rooms is a nightmare, because neither of them speaks English.

It's barely a transaction, and it takes at least another hour. Then there's the matter of trying to explain to the lady at the counter that they need to borrow a phone, and where even are they, but of course, goddammit, Sousuke doesn't even have Rin's phone number memorized. Neither does Haru, but he's not going to pin that one on himself. So they fuck that one too, and ask where they can find a phone charger instead.

Jesus.

Because the problem with that is, the outlets in Australia are different, which means the standard phone chargers that the motel even *does* have aren't going to work for Sousuke's phone, and they'll have to wait until the electronic store opens in the morning to get what they need.

By this point, Sousuke is pissed, and Haru's well past had enough of him. So they take their leave from the front desk with one room key.

They tried for two, they really did, especially Haru, because he already can't stand the thought of spending a whole night with *just* Sousuke around, and to have to be in the same room is surely going to give him hives. Sousuke probably snores like a mountain troll. But they, for whatever reason, couldn't get it effectively communicated at the front desk that they absolutely cannot share, and she kept insisting that they have to, because one is all they have ready this late.

Haru literally prays on their way to the room that this isn't another same-bed nightmare that he had to endure with Rin, who, at this point, he would *much* rather be stuck with. He would literally take *anyone* else right now, even goddamn Kisumi, and that should speak enough volumes on its own.

He is tired. He is dirty. No amount of guzzling down glasses of ice water at the restaurant had quenched his thirst or cooled him down, and he knows it's because his very needy body is *dehydrated* after having gone this long without at least soaking in the bath. And his headache is now pulsing more intensely in his temple than it had all night.

He's done with Sousuke. They had their moment. They had their laugh. But that apparently is going to be it for the next lifetime, because as soon as they're free of this nightmare, Haru wants nothing more to do with him ever again.

They find the room. He opens the door. And then he literally sighs with relief at the sight of two neatly made beds.

They close themselves in the room, and Haru heads straight for the bathroom. He doesn't bother to close the door, nor does he take a moment to scrutinize the size of the tub. He just throws the curtain back, drops to his knees, and sticks his head under the faucet the moment the water starts running.

He groans, shoulders dropping as a weight is lifted graciously from his back. Getting his hair wet has never felt so relieving in his life.

The way he's bent over the side of the tub is awkward, and not exactly comfortable, but he stays draped there for an incredibly long while, dangerously close to falling asleep even. But he's aware that the rest of his body needs tending to, and also Sousuke is going to wait on him to have his turn in the shower, which he wouldn't care about if it wasn't going to affect his sense of smell all night. So he manages to pick himself up, and then finally bothers to shut the door and strip out of his grimy clothes. He's not looking forward to putting them back on like that, so he takes a moment to scrub as much of the dirt and salt left over from his sweat out of them as he can. *Then* he finally steps into the tub and immerses himself in a full bath, curling into a ball on his side to get his whole body under at one time.

He allows himself a few minutes, not nearly long enough, but the night itself has dragged on long enough as it is, and he's ready to sleep. So he pulls the plug, dries himself off, and gets over the fact that he's going to wear a towel to bed. He loves being underwater, but he doesn't care for wet clothes. Which is why he's usually sure to have his jammers on underneath his pants. But as rotten fate would have it, there's something about traveling to Australia that makes him miss that step when he's dressing. So, just a towel it is.

He's not sure how long he's been in the bathroom when he finally walks out, but Sousuke has apparently spent the time sprawled out on the floor, staring at the ceiling. Aiming not to get the bed sheets dirty, Haru guesses, but he's not going to ask. He lets Sousuke figure out for himself that he can have the bathroom now, and crawls onto the bed he deems fit for his body. It's surprisingly comfortable, and he sinks into it immediately, curling up on his side and not even bothering with the blankets. He sighs with exhaustion into the pillow.

He's aware when Sousuke pushes himself up off of the floor, but he doesn't watch him close himself into the little room. He closes his eyes and gives his body the thumbs up to shut down for a few hours, but it doesn't.

His muscles unravel, his bones sink, his heartbeat slows, but he doesn't sleep. He doesn't toss and turn at an attempt to make himself more comfortable, because he's too tired for that, but his brain refuses to shut down, and he's not sure why, but he automatically attributes it to the nagging annoyance in the back of his mind that won't let him forget there's another person in the room that he severely doesn't want to be with, and furthermore, that this person is not someone he trusts, because he's never not had to protect himself around him before.

He's gritting his teeth without realizing it.

This doesn't help of course, because it allows him to open the gateway for all of the reasons why he's always hated Sousuke. All the glares and stare-downs and the tight, rippling jaw, clenching whenever Haru happens to be around. Haru has never had to look to know when Sousuke is present and staring at him, because that teal gaze is so steely and heavy that it feels like having weights pressed down on his shoulders. And that's before he ever finds the moment to get up into Haru's space, which, at some point, he always does. At some point, Haru always finds himself cornered, taking several steps back until he can't anymore, because Sousuke knows how to press in so threateningly that Haru just feels small. And he hates that.

He hates that the most. That Sousuke is always looking down on him, always making himself bigger, always letting Haru know, without ever having to say anything, that Haru has no power when he is around. And it's not like that's something that Haru wants to begin with. He's only ever been interested in simply keeping his freedom to himself. It's not like he imposes that on anyone else. It's not like he bothers anyone with it. If he was left to his own devices, for sure there would never be any issues. But that's not usually the case, and, as though that isn't suffocating enough, Sousuke has to go and smother him even more when he inserts himself into the equation.

And Haru doesn't understand why that is. He knows Sousuke is overly protective of Rin, but why does that have to come back around on Haru when he hasn't even done anything? He doesn't understand why Sousuke feels so threatened by him, that he has to buck up and ruffle his feathers like that.

He's really no different than the starving dingoes. Or the monstrously large spider. Or the hissing pit of snakes just waiting for a reason to strike.

By the time the bathroom door opens, Haru's forgotten all about any progress they may have made over the course of the night. He feels no different than he did when he first saw Sousuke taking up space in the car.

And again, he feels that stare. He doesn't have to look, but he opens his eyes anyway, and they end up staring across the room at each other in a lock that is so silent and still, it's like neither of them are breathing.

Haru remains where he is and doesn't allow himself to look intimidated. He just continues to lay on his side, arms stuffed over his bare chest, knees softly tucked into himself. He makes his gaze cold and waits.

Sousuke is also bare-chested with a towel wrapped around his waist. And where, for Haru, it reaches down to his knees, for Sousuke, it cuts off about halfway up his thighs. His thighs are ridiculous, by the way, but Haru is too busy keeping his eyes on Sousuke's to think about them.

He also has his arms folded, though it's not as stiff. But his biceps are also ridiculous, and Haru does actually have the passing thought that Sousuke could stand to let up on the weight training just a bit. His dark hair is wet, shoulders still glistening with stray shower droplets. One races down his neck from his temple, and Haru is almost distracted by it, but when he thinks that Sousuke looks even bigger this way, he forgets about everything else under the fresh swell of irritation.

He doesn't count the seconds that pass, but there are a lot of them. And then Sousuke walks around the bed, and sits himself down on the edge, in the space between the two, and he continues to stare deliberately at Haru, who can't stay still on his side with a shift like that. So he sits up, also facing Sousuke. And there's another several seconds of silence, in which they just stare, and it's upsetting.

Then Sousuke breathes in.

"I hated you," he says, his voice low and rolling like looming thunder. "Even when we were kids. I barely knew you, but I knew I hated you. I saw you at that first tournament, and initially it was just that I didn't understand you. Everybody was looking at you. *Everybody* was watching, and it was like you had some kind of hold over the room that really got under my skin."

Haru remains silent. He doesn't know why he's listening so intently, but he doesn't interrupt.

"In sixth grade, Rin said he 'found someone he wanted to swim with,' and I didn't even have to ask to know it was you. I saw it on his face, because it was the same look that everyone had that one time, and it immediately pissed me off, but I couldn't say anything about it to him." Sousuke's jaw flexes. His eyes are dark. "He left me ... to be with you."

He pauses for a moment after saying this, pressing the words on Haru so that he'll know what they feel like. And Haru can see the rawness of his hatred. It glints off of his eyes like lightning.

"He left me to be with you," he says again. "He didn't even know you. He saw you once. He raced you *once*. And then he fell under whatever spell it is you cast on people with ..." He tosses his hands out, eyes roaming Haru's body. "... *whatever* this is. Then he came here, and he stopped talking to me after a while, and when he came back, he was *still* obsessed with you, still stuck. He told me all about it, and everything was 'Haru. Haru. Haru.' And I swear if I wasn't two seconds from ripping your name out of his throat. I don't understand it."

His eyes flash again when he wrinkles his nose. His fingers tighten on his biceps. “You’re not nice. You’re not charming. You’re not compassionate. You don’t think about anyone but yourself. You have these *obsessions* that are not normal, but no one blinks an eye at them. You pout until you get what you want, but other people have to beg and coerce you to do the simplest things. You have outlandish expectations to be left alone to do whatever the hell you want to do, and people just *conform* their lives to fit around yours. I *don’t* understand it.

“I don’t get what people see in you. They watch you swim, and then suddenly they want to be your friend, they want to be associated with you somehow. And what they don’t know is that, when they are, all you’ll do is put a foot in whatever path they’re taking. Being with you is not worth it. You’re selfish, but *no one else* can see this. No one. I don’t ...”

He raises his hands and scoffs a bitter laugh, finally looking away. “I don’t know how to *not* want to strangle you. And I don’t know how no one else wants to either. I can’t be won over by you, do you understand?”

He looks back up and his eyes are piercing, desperate even. “I’m not falling for you,” he declares. He shakes his head. “I am *not* falling for you. So you can take whatever spell you’re using and throw it away.”

Haru clenches his back teeth, chest swelling as he and Sousuke fall into another staring match, though this time it isn’t nearly as long.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” he finally speaks up. His tone is nowhere near as heated as he feels right now. “I don’t have a spell. And if I did, I wouldn’t use it on you. So you can stop resisting so hard. You might find it’s easier to breathe that way. And while you’re at it, why don’t you stop using me as an excuse to lash out whatever you’re feeling about why Rin left you. I didn’t ask him to transfer schools. I didn’t ask him to come back and tornado his way through my life. He’s my friend, and I happen to care about him, but it’s not like I’m holding him with a fishing rod. We make each other better. I’m sorry. I don’t know what you want me to do about that. I don’t know what you want me to do about *any* of this.”

Sousuke scowls. “There’s nothing you *can* do.”

“Well good, because I’m not going to.”

“Right. And why would I expect you to? Why would *anyone* expect you to? But they do, and it’s the same response every time. It doesn’t matter who comes to you with what. You can’t be bothered to accommodate anyone who might even *slightly* stop you from having things your way.”

“You’re telling me things I already know, Yamazaki,” Haru snaps. “I *know* I disappoint people, and I don’t pretend to be ignorant about it. I’m just as lost as you are. I don’t know why people expect so much of me. I don’t know why they keep coming to watch me swim. I don’t know why they want to be my friends. I never asked them to! And I never gave them any reason to believe that I’m a selfless and caring person. I know that I’m not. It’s hard for me to be around other people. I’m not good at it. It’s not that I’m *trying* to be arrogant or unpleasant, I just don’t know what to say or how to react. That’s why I need Makoto. That’s also why I drag him down. I don’t need your reminders about any of that. I’ve been dealing



with it my whole life. Do you want me to apologize that you've gotten sucked up into that too?"

"I don't need your pity."

"I don't pity you," Haru says quickly, also wrinkling his nose. "You don't deserve that. I don't owe you anything. And it's not like you need my help to feel sorry for yourself. You're not kidding anybody, throwing your weight around and threatening me like I have something to do with how angry you are. Just let it go. You're not the only person who's insecure and scared about having things taken away from you, so *stop* trying so hard to protect things I'm not even touching."

There's a visible wince in Sousuke's expression at some point during this accusation, and he inflates like a balloon. "I am *not* scared," he says, raising his voice.

"And I'm not intimidated," Haru shoots back. "I say things like that too, but the fact of the matter is it's not true, and neither of us can hide that. You're scared, and you don't know what to do about it, so you bully me. So you take advantage of the fact that I'm smaller than you, that you're taller, and stronger, and twice as thick, and you push me into corners and glare down your nose, and it scares me. Happy? Now we both feel threatened. That's that you wanted, isn't it?"

Sousuke's eyes narrow. "You don't know me."

"But you can sit here and tell me what *I'm* doing wrong?"

"No one else seems to want to."

"And what gives you the right to be the one to do that? You've never even *tried* to be my friend. Am I just supposed to accept your animosity as validation for whatever you feel like you have to say?"

"You're in the way!" Sousuke barks. "You're in the way, and you won't move. Of course I'm going to have something to say."

"In the way of *what*? I haven't done anything to you!"

"*Everything*, Nanase, I can't get rid of you! You show up everywhere. You're a nightmare I can't wake up from! You drive me crazy!"

Haru practically pops off the bed with this. "Tell me how that's my fault!"

Sousuke lunges forward. And then Haru is trapped in his hold with their lips mashed together.

Sousuke's hands are fisted around his arms again, and it hurts, but that's hardly the most concerning thing at the moment.

Sousuke's lips are wide and rough and moving against Haru's, which are kind of just shakily responding on their own, because his mind has gone blank through a spiked procession of

alert, fear, confusion, and now shock, all of which have taken exactly two seconds to sweep through him with a belly-dropping rush.

He feels himself shaking, understands that his hands are stuck between them, his fingers digging into Sousuke's abs where they had reflexively jumped up to push him away, and he's aware that there is an odd chill that raises goosebumps on his skin right before his whole body flushes with heat.

Sousuke has filled up his entire frame of view. The entire world has been condensed down to just Sousuke, stuffing whatever space there is to stuff, barely fitting in it, even though he forces it to stretch for him.

Haru doesn't know how to respond. He's gone stiff, body leaning away, even though Sousuke holds him close. The only part of him that's reacting is his mouth, and he hasn't yet asked it to, but it seems to have already submitted to what's being forced upon it, and when Sousuke's tongue sweep hotly over his, he doesn't bite him like he maybe would think to otherwise. Instead, he's flushed with a sensation that is morbidly confusing.

Sousuke pulls back after a second, and Haru's eyes blink wide, and even though his face is no longer being invaded, he's still stuck there, still stiff with his shoulders drawn up and his fingers now curled against Sousuke's hot skin. He stares up at him, mouth sealed shut, because he has nothing to say, and Sousuke's still glaring.

He looks particularly disgusted, and were Haru in a position to speak up, he'd certainly have something to say about the fact that Sousuke brought that on himself. But then he thinks maybe it's a different kind of disgusted than it seems to be, and suddenly the rush of conflict flooding the background of his gaze is really bright. A crease forms on his forehead. It's both angry and disappointed.

"I'm not falling for you," he says, except that it's under his breath, and Haru's not meant to hear it.

Then Sousuke's kissing him again.

It isn't until now that Haru notices the weight of his heartbeat. The initial shock is slowly ebbing away, but he still isn't moving. His lungs thaw out, and he hears himself breathing, loud and chaotic and interrupted underneath by a small noise that comes from his throat when Sousuke bears down with a deeper, hungrier kiss.

Sousuke's breathing heavily too, just as loudly as he had been all night, but Haru doesn't feel so much annoyed by it now as he is just still quite confused — but without any questions.

Sousuke's suffocating grip leaves his arms, sending a tingle through his veins as the blood starts flowing again. His hold slips around Haru's waist instead, and he yanks him in, nearly picking him up off the floor. The layers of towels between them create a barrier, but even still, Sousuke's body has no issue making itself and its intentions known.

Haru has all kinds of involuntary reactions to this, and it ends with everything burning hotter. He's sure he should be offended by this to some capacity, but he can't find the vigor to be at

the moment. Maybe he'll bring it up later, when it's far too late for that to be relevant. Right now, he finds a bit more of himself submitting as his hands unfurl and slide up Sousuke's broad chest, for whatever reason surprised by how hot his skin is too, how much he swells with air, how completely his body shadows his own.

For just the briefest of delirious seconds, he's not uncomfortable with this, even though he's standing on his toes again — and he should be offended. Most especially when Sousuke's hands move lower to grab him by the ass without asking, but then the new rhythm of their bodies rutting together is distracting Haru from complaining, most especially when he realizes he's participating, still without having given himself the permission to do so. But it's bone-chilling, and a bit halting to acknowledge that it feels good, and that he's now pressing *himself* closer in search of more pressure. And the way Sousuke's body moves is quite intoxicating, but he's just come up with a question to ask.

So as best he can, he pulls his mouth free and breathes, “Why are we doing this?”

“Because it's been a long day,” Sousuke growls.

He covers Haru's mouth with his own again, and his insistence silently becomes a fraction more aggressive. Haru is quiet for just a moment, but he's a bit bothered by that response.

“What if I don't want to do this right now?”

Sousuke's grip tightens, “I don't care,” he hisses heavily, mouthing at Haru's neck now.

“That's problematic.”

“Are you going to stop me or not?”

Haru says nothing. Nor does he move to do such a thing. And so Sousuke's hands slip beneath the towel on his waist and rip it away.

“Then shut up,” he says, forcing Haru's back against the bed and following to kneel between his legs.

He shucks his own towel as well, and then their bodies are sliding together without anything between them.

Sousuke ... is not gentle. It's not like Haru would have expected him to be, but he's thrown off by the static of ire sparking like friction between them, even now. It's still confusing. Because clearly Sousuke is angry with him, but instead of demanding more space, he's touching Haru with bruising fingers, and hovering over him heavily, and rolling his body against him with desperation, as though he couldn't possibly get close enough to be satisfied.

Their mouths are kissing again, and he bites Haru's lip — hard enough to send a dull pain pulsing through it for several lingering seconds afterward. His thumb is digging into his hipbone, and it tingles. His hands feel possessive and demanding, gripping him so hard that Haru can feel the sting of his blunt fingernails pinching his skin.

No, he doesn't stop him, and he's not sure why. He figures it would be the smarter thing to do, but his body doesn't react like that. Instead, it throbs with a responding need he's sure he doesn't want, but is there anyway. He's hard, and that bothers him. Sousuke is hard, and that distracts him — like a lot, because Sousuke is big *everywhere*. He's not surprised by that. But it is overwhelming. All of Sousuke is overwhelming — all of his heaviness, and his shadow, and his lack of tenderness, and his force, and his cock. All overwhelming, and Haru turns his head away to breathe. His hands actually press against Sousuke's chest this time, but he doesn't go anywhere.

One of those large hands grabs Haru's hair instead, forcing their gazes to meet. He's still glaring.

"You still scared of me?"

Haru doesn't let himself frown. His heart has moved to his ears. "Yes."

"Really?" he says, his tone not at all curious, but rather, crackling with an imminent threat. "I haven't done anything to you yet."

It's suddenly difficult to swallow, and he's not aware that he's grabbed Sousuke's wrist. "Sousuke ..."

"Are you going to stop me or not?"

Haru again doesn't respond, and this makes Sousuke's glare tighten.

"I am giving you the chance to stop this now. You've been a pain in the ass all night, and I'm pissed off. Unless you tell me you don't want it, I am *going* to take it out on you."

Haru bites at the inside of his lip to keep it from betraying him. His throat feels swollen.

"Are you going to stop me — or not?" Sousuke repeats slowly, menacingly, articulating every word.

Haru clenches his teeth and shakes his head. Apparently, that's all Sousuke needs, because he's yanking him up within the next second and forcing him to bend over in front of him, holding his head over his crotch by the back of his hair.

"Then suck it," he says.

Haru breathes for a moment — through his nose, because his lips don't want to part on demand like that. He doesn't move away, mostly because Sousuke most assuredly wouldn't let him at this point, but also because he doesn't feel inclined to. His only option then, is to just kind of stare at the weapon pointed at him, and he's impressed that it's managing to stand up and support itself on its own like that, because for sure it probably takes up a surprising percentage of Sousuke's 100 kilo body weight on its own.

He thinks about it for a second, mostly because this kind of situation calls for some kind of strategy. And then he slowly lifts a hand, curls his fingers around the base of Sousuke's cock, and opens his mouth.

He only licks it at first, familiarizing himself with it in his own way, and Sousuke doesn't respond to this. It doesn't taste like much of anything in this moment, and that's probably thanks to Sousuke having just come out of the shower. He can't say he's not grateful for that. He's still surprised by the warmth of Sousuke's skin, and just as surprised that he kind of likes the sensation of that on his tongue.

He wraps his lips around the head — is very briefly reminded of all the popsicles he's ever eaten in his life (that's probably never going to be the same again) — and then he allows his mouth to hollow out as he cautiously sucks his way down this curious piece of flesh, as much as he can, without it getting uncomfortable.

Sousuke still doesn't respond.

He thinks that's a bit unfair, what with all the huffing and puffing he's been doing, now he wants to go quiet?

Haru can feel his eyes staring down at him. His hand is still in his hair, but his grip is loose, and it doesn't do anything. He's still, very still, and Haru's not even convinced he can hear him breathing anymore. Though, Sousuke's so big that he kind of feels like he can't hear anything. But still, it's a bit irritating. He forced all of this into motion, and now he doesn't even want to appreciate it? Also, Haru feels like his threat was a bit empty, if this is how it's going to be. He doesn't want to admit that that's disappointing, but ... it's a little disappointing.

So he stops being so cautious.

He goes down deeper, filling his mouth more than he would ideally like to. He pumps the base with his fist, slightly twisting and clenching with purpose, the way he usually knows how to do with himself. And he imagines that this absurdly large appendage is just a bland popsicle, and adjusts the motions of his tongue to that image accordingly. He allows his throat to pull.

Still there's just nothing. No sigh, no moan, no shudder, just a grating silence. And after a good minute of adjusting and actually putting effort into it, Haru lets him go with a pop and looks up.

Sousuke's face is incredibly blank, and yet there's something in it that's rather chilling. He has his head tilted, just slightly, not so much curious as it is threatening. Haru can't tell what's in his eyes, but he knows it's not friendly. And for just a second, Haru begins to regret it. What specifically *it* is in detail, he's not so sure. He just knows that everything about Sousuke is sending off warning signals.

He finds himself shrinking instinctively, lowering himself back down in a silent obedience that doesn't even need a command. He kind of hates that. But his skin is crawling, so he thinks his itching pride is the least of his troubles.

He returns to what he was doing, this time with a nervous pinch to his spine, and he doesn't have to concern himself with it that much longer. Though, he's still not ready when Sousuke's grip suddenly tightens in his hair and he shoves his hips up.

Haru's whole body clenches, and he has to plant his hands on Sousuke's thighs to keep himself steady, because it doesn't stop with just that. He starts choking immediately, brow pinching as he squints against the spring of involuntary tears in his eyes. It's a bit terrifying, because he keeps automatically trying to catch a breath, but there's a dick in his mouth, and it's assaulting the back of his throat repeatedly, so his airways are partially blocked. His stomach clenches, trying to gag, even though he really can't, and it just comes out around Sousuke's cock as a horrible sound of garbled desperation.

He can only take a few seconds of it before he tries to push away, but the grip around his hair is so tight that's it's pinching, and the more he tries to pull back, the more Sousuke forces his head down. His shoulders shake. He can feel his face turning red.

It's there now though, even though his ears are ringing, he's aware of the huff of Sousuke's breath over his head. He's not sure if that satisfies him or not, but he thinks at least he's grateful it's not just silence.

Sousuke's other hand comes up under his chin and pinches his cheeks hard. "Open your jaw."

Haru obeys, though he does it with a strangled moan to let Sousuke know he's suffocating, but the larger man doesn't seem to care. He pinches harder.

"Open it," he says again, his voice sharp. "Come on, Nanase."

He opens his mouth as wide as he possibly can, and it hurts his jaw. It also gives Sousuke more room to stuff him, and Haru's fingers dig into his thighs when he does so, his thrusting twice as aggressive.

Sousuke raises himself on his knees, automatically pushing Haru back, though he's not allowed to detach himself by any means. This just gives Sousuke more range of motion, more freedom to use as much force as he likes. And Haru's whole body shakes.

The spring of tears have started to track down his face, and the muffled, gaging moans start escaping with a rather pitiful drift. He finds himself pleading for relief by digging his fingers into Sousuke's skin, but it's not until nearly too long later that he jabs Haru in the back of the throat one more time, and then pulls back, allowing Haru to gasp for air.

He remains hunched over, digging into Sousuke's thighs as a violent tremble vibrates through his body from the top of his head to the soles of his feet. His chest heaves, and he doesn't even have it in him to reach up and wipe his face. But he's not given the chance either, because he's only allowed to catch his breath for a few seconds, before Sousuke stuffs his fingers into his mouth, and pushes him onto his back.

Another moan comes out of his nose, and his brow furrows as he looks up to the shadow hovering over him, those teal eyes dark with dilated pupils. The look in his eyes is still disquieting, if not even more so now that he's filled with flames of lust. He watches a fresh spring of tears water Haru's eyes as he rotates his fingers in his mouth, pushing them too far back. Haru tries to swallow past them, his tongue roaming over them on its own.

It takes much less time for Sousuke to pull back on this, and then it seems he's even closer than before, watching Haru's face so intensely that the smaller man blushes just because of that.

Then those same fingers are touching Haru low — much lower than he's ever been touched by anyone, and he pulls in a sharp breath, his hands slapping themselves against Sousuke's shoulders automatically, though they don't push. His knees react by drawing in closer to his body, but Sousuke's back to kneeling between his legs, so this doesn't do anything to protect him, and the burn is sharp when those fingers force their way into his body.

He doesn't do it nicely, but it is taunting, a very sure and silent way of letting Haru know that Sousuke is in control of all of this now, and all Haru can do is try not to let anymore noises escape his throat. His teeth clench and his lips seal themselves tight. His breath is heavy, having only his nose to escape through again, but air is all that he allows in and out. His face is already burning with enough embarrassment as it is, he doesn't need his voice to betray him anymore than it already has.

But it's hard. It's hard because Sousuke's fingers are thick, and there are two of them shoved up Haru's ass, twisting and curling inside his body, searching, while Sousuke just stares with that storm in his eyes. Haru's hands fist against his skin again. His body keeps moving, trying to get away, even though there's nowhere to go, and Sousuke only follows him with ease.

"You're such a stubborn fuck," Sousuke says, low and quiet. He hardly blinks, watching Haru struggle. "You're not helping yourself."

A third finger gets stuffed into Haru's body, and he grimaces, biting on his lip so hard it breaks the skin. His head tilts back, and he closes his eyes at an attempt to concentrate, to hold the last pieces of himself together. Sousuke pushes deeper.

It's beginning to burn less, and feel more. More of what, he can't tell, but it's conflicting, and he doesn't want Sousuke to know that it's not completely bad. He doesn't want Sousuke to know that the feel that it is is of a kind that is ravenous and insatiable, that is hungrily asking for more, even though the fullness is already unbelievable. It's still overwhelming, and for that, it's most difficult not to make a sound.

But then Sousuke finds *it*. And when he does, Haru's body jolts and throws an arch in his back that has him trembling out of control. He sees stars behind his eyelids and feels the flush of raw goodness turn his whole body red. It's overwhelming. He doesn't make a sound, and it nearly kills him.

Sousuke lowers himself, keeping inventory of Haru's body, staying in control. He works that spot and is determined to watch Haru suffer.

Haru's heels scrape the bed restlessly, his legs shaking. He can feel Sousuke hovering his face close, can feel his breath on his neck.

"Stop resisting."

Haru shakes his head vigorously.

Sousuke thrusts his fingers faster. Haru very nearly chokes on a scream. Sousuke's breath is irritated, steaming out of his nose, and Haru can tell without having to look that his jaw is clenched.

"Goddammit," he growls, probably through his teeth. His voice is not at all kind when he snarls, "Just let it go. *Fuck.*"

He crashes his lips against Haru's again, and the term *kiss* is too sweet of a word to describe the hungry force of Sousuke's mouth and the heavy presence of his tongue. And for whatever reason, *this* is the thing that unlocks Haru's throat and forces a volley of whimpers out of his nose. Then he can't stop it. Then the moans keep falling out, like the gushing streams of a river breaking through a dam. And they're embarrassing, because they're desperate. But not the choked kind of desperate that they were when Sousuke was fucking his face. These are the kind of desperate that are pathetic and half sobbing, and very clearly begging for more.

And that's what Sousuke gives him.

And it hurts, and it burns, and it feels upsettingly good, and his body reacts without him, and his hips buck up at nothing. And Sousuke is in full control.

His mouth moves back to Haru's neck and his teeth bite. Haru is whining through gasps, and he can't believe he's being so loud right now. He half hopes that someone on the other side of the wall will bang on their door and put a stop to this so that he can scramble up whatever dignity he could possibly have left. He's suddenly forgotten how this all started, and he wonders at what point Sousuke managed to get under his vulnerabilities enough to sneak this far inside of him (and we're talking both figuratively and literally here).

"Don't you dare come," Sousuke says into his neck, when he knows Haru is about to.

Well that's a tall order to make, especially when he's still being vigorously prodded in that spot that throws all of his senses out of balance. But also, he knows Sousuke is serious about that, and he doesn't want to know what consequences are to arise if he does come early, so he responds by mustering up enough strength to push Sousuke's arm away with his foot.

The sudden loss is jarring and initially uncomfortable. His whine is small, and nearly swallowed by his heavy breathing. He's drenched in sweat by this point, and it has his hair plastered to his forehead. He opens his eyes just enough to look up at Sousuke with burning red cheeks.

He's not happy about it.

He grabs Haru under the jaw again, forcing his head back and pressing a thumb heavily against his bottom lip.

"Who said you could do that?"

His eyes are somehow both dull and menacing at the same time, and his voice comes out in another roll of ominous thunder. Haru just stares, chest still working hard for a breath.



“If you want to stop, use your words ... Do you want to stop?”

Haru doesn't respond. His body shakes instead, and Sousuke gets impatient. He pinches Haru's cheeks again, fingers sharp.

*“Do you want to stop?”*

Haru shakes his head. “No.”

“Then stop taking short cuts. Get up.”

He pulls back, giving Haru room to sit up obediently. His arms don't like it, and they tremble even underneath his insignificant weight. His body is still buzzing with the echoes of so much strain and arousal. It's a bit painful now. Everything is pulsing with an aching heartbeat of want.

He's given enough time to push himself up on his knees, and then Sousuke doesn't wait for him after that. He grabs his arms and forces his body around, nearly picking him up off the bed to face him toward the headboard that he catches himself on when he's pushed from the back.

It's startling, and his breathing becomes shallow and quick, his heart picking up with a different kind of feeling, one that raises the hair on the back of his neck and tingles on his skin with warning.

Sousuke's body is the very personification of intimidation, framing his back, and he presses himself so close that Haru has to crowd against the headboard, hands gripping the top tightly. He's stuck, pinned between two unmoving walls, only, one of them is hot and breathing down his neck. Haru's skin crawls. Sousuke's cock is resting heavily on his lower back, and he's aware of it. His shoulders are tempted to draw up when Sousuke leans his lips close to his ear.

“Are you still afraid of me?” he murmurs.

He plants his hands on the headboard on either side of Haru's body, imposing, and Haru feels even more stuck this way.

“Yes.”

“This is your last chance to stop me.”

He should accept that offer, and he knows it. He's lucky Sousuke is even being considerate enough to wait for his permission. And that intrigues him, admittedly more than it worries him. Sousuke is blunt and upfront, callous a little bit in making sure Haru knows that he's not in for a smooth ride. If he consents to this, it's coming from a place of pent-up frustration that's been building for much longer than just this one night. Sousuke is not aiming to be gentle. This is not love-making, what they're doing. Sousuke *wants* him to struggle. And Haru must truly be in a harrowing place to be so interested to know what that feels like.

They can't stop here. He's already been roused to the point that he's aching to be filled back up. He's going to regret it, he thinks. But he shakes his head.

"No."

There is a pause. Not of hesitation, but maybe of allowing Haru to brace himself this time. And he takes advantage of it as much as he can, because he's right in predicting that Sousuke's not going to take his time going in.

When he does slip his cock in Haru's ass, it's one swift movement. And it sends Haru's entire body into a spasm of instant rejection. The sound doesn't even come out of his mouth at first, and it's not because he's holding it back this time. His jaw just drops in silence, and his body throws a fit, because there is an intruder that has already broken in, and his presence is much too big to be accommodated so easily.

But Sousuke's not waiting for anybody. He's already thrusting so forcefully that the headboard rocks against the wall. And he's undone this time, no longer so tightly wound that all he does is breathe. He's growling, like a predator, through his teeth and still with all the fury in the world. And it's low in Haru's ear, but close, rumbling like a storm that calls to something deep within him.

Airless squeaks of strain make it out of Haru's throat. He still hasn't adjusted, but the fullness is unrivaled. His eyes close, and he resigns to the pain. It numbs itself down until it becomes just another sensation, twisted up inside of a knot of pleasure that never quite sits where he wants it to.

Sousuke's knee nudges his further apart and his body snaps against Haru's at a quicker pace, pushing him ever more hopelessly up against the headboard, which takes away more and more of his mobility, but also satisfies a great need for pressure against his own cock.

His voice returns, and again, it's hard to stop it once it starts. He sounds absolutely pathetic, but his moans are ringing around the room, so he can't really tune it out. Sousuke feasts on his neck again, biting in more places, vibrating his skin with low moans of his own. But his sound better, sound territorial and hungry, sound less like a dying cat and more like the thing that's killing it. One of his massive hands fits itself around Haru's neck from the other side, forcing his head back again, and he just barely squeezes, not enough to choke him, just enough to hold another power over him. His other hand though, is holding Haru's thigh like it's *trying* bust a blood vessel.

Haru grits his teeth, because the thrusting becomes meaner, like Sousuke keeps thinking about how much he hates him and is funneling that through his body. And man does it pack a punch. There's no reason for Haru to be surprised by the sheer strength of him, but he is. Or maybe it's not so much surprise as it is astonishment. He can feel the power of his thrusts traveling all the way up his spine to ache at the back of his neck.

Sousuke's teeth sink particularly deep into Haru's shoulder, and he grunts out the pain through his teeth before that dissolves back into another whine escaping through his nose. The hand that's not slowly tightening around his throat slaps his ass, and it is not playful. It stings. And the noise that comes out of Haru this time is mortifyingly obvious.

Sousuke's back in his ear in the next second. "Beg."

Haru doesn't even stop himself from whimpering. "Please."

*Smack!*

Moan.

"You fucking like this."

Sousuke's fingers are starting to become restricting. Haru doesn't deny it.

"You're still getting what you want." He doesn't sound satisfied with that. "Bend over."

He doesn't have much of a choice in the matter. The pressure pressing him up against the headboard disappears, and he's yanked backward, and then pushed down onto his palms. It's all rather quick, all rather rough, and Sousuke's vice doesn't start light this time. He bends over Haru, shadowing him as the mean thrusts turn meaner, and Haru grimaces, breath catching in the whimpers. One hand yanks at Haru's hair, forcing his head to tilt off to the side. The other arm wraps itself underneath Haru's, and Sousuke's fingers latch back onto his throat, this time with a real grip. Haru's responding moan is stained with a bit more distress.

They end up dropping forward, because Haru's arms are shaking too much to hold them up, but this changes nothing except to give Sousuke full dominance over his body, and now Haru's cheek is pressed into the pillow.

He's starting to feel rattled, weak, intoxicated to the point that he might actually throw up, because Sousuke's dick is so big that he swears he can feel it in his stomach, and that's about when the pacing stops. There's all of one weird second of relief, before Sousuke puts all of his driving power into one forceful thrust, and it *feels* even more than the very first one did. Haru's reaction is loud.

Sousuke pulls back, all the way out even, and Haru can hear himself breathing loudly again, can feel his heartbeat in his throat under Sousuke's palm. He's assaulted again, another one that reaches all the way up into his stomach, and he tries to turn his wail into the pillow, but Sousuke's grip won't let him.

This continues, and it's shocking every single time. It pushes the air out of him, leaves him gasping for more, but he can't, because there's a hand squeezing his throat. His heart is going ballistic, and he's overwhelmed again. He hardly recognizes when his body is forced down flat, and Sousuke's lying directly on top of him, keeping the depth and power of his thrusts while making them more frequent with less time for Haru to attempt to catch his breath in between.

It's too full. He's shaking so badly, he's afraid every next attack is going to split him in half. He doesn't have the tension to help his body prepare for them, to endure it. He's too small. His howls of pain start turning into dry sobs. Sousuke doesn't stop. Haru squeezes the life out of the bedding.

“Sousuke ...” he manages to choke out.

Sousuke’s breathing is ragged in his ear. His voice is harsh. “You don’t like it anymore, do you?”

He would shake his head if he had the range for that. “No,” he whimpers.

“Tell me to stop.”

He sobs some more, weakly grabbing onto Sousuke’s forearm, because it gets worse somehow.

“Use your words, Nanase,” Sousuke barks. “Tell me. to stop.”

“Please ...”

“Please *what?*”

Haru folds, and it’s not at all graceful. “Stop, *stop*” he begs. “Please stop. *Please* stop.”

He gets one more, probably punishment for how pitiful he sounds, and then Sousuke flips him back over, still rough, and Haru hiccups on the air that’s snatched out of his chest with *how* rough. Then Sousuke is once again hovering over him like a shadow, space claimed between Haru’s legs like it’s his rightful place, but as they both breathe heavily in the space between them, nothing else happens.

Haru stares up through half-lidded eyes, watching the face above him sustain another look of disgust and conflict, nose wrinkled. Sousuke’s sweating too, profusely, and Haru’s just noticed. It’s attractive, but he doesn’t want to say so, because Sousuke still scares him, and he’s afraid to say *anything*. And he’s been brought so low. He’s been brought so low, and it’s far too late to regret that. He knew that he would. He knew he would feel the tightness in his stomach, the competitive longing rubbing up against years of resistance, of stubbornness, and fighting, and swearing up and down that he hates this man, but he doesn’t. He’s still scared, but he doesn’t hate Sousuke.

And he’s not sure, but something is happening in Sousuke that gives off the same energy — it feels the same. And Sousuke’s expression even starts to smooth out a bit, the longer that they stare at each other breathing. He frowns, but it’s not angry. It’s regretful, and Haru’s not sure for what specifically.

“I’m not falling for you,” he whispers again, but it’s less sure now. It’s not punchy or motivated by anything. It’s just being spoken because he feels like he has to say so, but Haru knows Sousuke’s not talking to him.

Sousuke leans in close and kisses him again.

Except it’s different this time. Because it’s gentle. Because it’s warm. Because it holds something that’s not a frantic need to overpower. In fact, it’s quite considerate, and tempered, and withdrawn but also giving of itself. It’s a different Sousuke. And suddenly everything shifts.

The kissing continues, grows deeper, and much more passionate, allows itself to come attached with things that feel like emotion. They lap at each other's tongues, but without the starvation. Sousuke's hands touch him, but without the overexertion of his strength. They slide across Haru's skin instead, grazing the length of his waist and touching his face with tenderness.

Their cocks are still erected and hovering between them, and it's more natural to just start rolling their hips in search of friction this time. And for whatever reason, now, Haru feels more sensitive, like every little touch does something, and Sousuke's length grinding slowly against his makes him shudder with warmth this time.

The moan that escapes his nose is light and unburdened, nearly too quiet to pick up on, but Sousuke does and he breathes into it. His body moves with more purpose, but remains considerate, doesn't lay on him so heavily, doesn't force his body to move except to kindly caress his leg and fold it up toward his chest.

It's slow this time, the presence of his cock reentering Haru's body with a tentative question more than a brazen demand, as though he's asking to be let in rather than just kicking down the door, and Haru allows it. Because he can cognitively decide that he wants it this time, that he's ready for it, that he knows what's coming and knows what to expect.

Except that he really doesn't, because it's already different. Already more full, just less in a literal sense. This kind of full is bigger and more heart-stopping than that. It feels like something simultaneously outside of Sousuke and so deep within Sousuke that Haru knows no one else has ever experienced this from him before.

Sousuke moans. It's pleasant to listen to, and it makes Haru's body tingle. He raises his hips to meet the slow, languid movements Sousuke is creating, and Sousuke moans again, deeper and more genuine. Haru lets a long breath through his nose. His arms reach up to circle around Sousuke's neck.

They find themselves moving together, and being stimulated by it more. Everything stays soft and careful, but it also grows with yearning, and it's heard through all of the little noises that escape both of their throats, it's felt in the swell of energy that they create and pass between them, making balance. It's catered to by the rolling of their bodies and the sensual way they answer each other's call. It never becomes frantic, but it does become irresistible.

A crease forms on Haru's brow, because it hurts in a way that is also not physical, but only because he doesn't know if his capacity to feel all of these things is great enough to hold what Sousuke is giving him, and it gets even more intense, when Sousuke buries his face back in Haru's neck, this time with non-hostile, gasping kisses. His thick arms are holding Haru securely, but not crushingly, and in a way that communicates he's struggling to feel just as much as Haru is. His thrusts become quicker, but not meaner, and he trembles intensely, voice climbing in octaves as he groans freely into Haru's skin.

His breath moves up to Haru's ear, sending a chill down his back, his hand up to Haru's hair, without the grip this time. He's warm, and damp, and feels like ... safe.

"Haru," he moans, and it's completely involuntary.

Haru blinks his eyes open, wide with shock, and then he comes, sudden and hard, lost in a euphoric bliss of shivers and keening, both clinging to and pushing on Sousuke's body as though looking for both to keep him grounded.

He's only just aware that Sousuke is responding to this with a sudden burst of attraction, and it stimulates Haru even more as he thrusts with more hungry passion for just a quick moment, and then he's coming too. His arms squeeze Haru firmly, holding onto him like a lifeline, groaning into his shoulder, coming into his body, all while moving still, less and less desperately, until they're both slowly falling back down, rolling off of the high like coming down from an adrenaline rush after a race.

They breathe together, panting, both of them wet and now sticky, and it grows slowly quiet, still, full only of their breathing and nothing else, because they're just laying together, recovering, waking up, suddenly thinking about it all and what it means, how it moved from A to 100 so quickly, violently, softly, and carefully.

And so now what?

Haru's sure neither of them has an answer, because neither of them says anything.

After a quiet while, Sousuke pushes himself up. He looks at Haru for a moment, all of the ire, conflict, and disgust gone. Haru tries to stare back, but his eyelids are falling, and he's starting to blink slowly as the exhaustion washes over him with a surge of insistence that refuses to be argued with.

It's so dense, that he's just barely aware of Sousuke leaving him. But his presence is so big that it's hard not to miss it when it's gone. It's cold without him, and Haru suddenly feels exposed and naked, and he wonders why he never did before this moment.

He can't move. His body is officially shutting itself down, frantic to revive and repair and replenish everything that was just taken from and given to him. He no longer feels weak, just existing.

He's sure some time has passed by the time Sousuke comes back, but he's not sure how much. He feels his legs being shifted and his body being wiped down, and then he's lifted from the bed, cradled in Sousuke's large arms, and he feels peculiarly safe again. His temple nestles against Sousuke's arm, though he doesn't realize he has actively put it there. And then they're in the bathroom, and Sousuke is lowering him into a tub of warm water that immediately draws all leftover tension out of his muscles. He sighs, and allows his head to rest back against the tub, unbothered that he doesn't fully fit and so his knees are poking out. It doesn't matter at the moment, he's so tired. He looks at Sousuke, who sits down on the toilet cover across from him and leans his elbows on his knees, teal eyes trained on Haru with a fondness that is hard to understand.

There's a heartbeat of silence that drags on for an amount of time Haru cannot measure, while he just barely holds his eyes open. And then Sousuke gives him a small permitting nod.

"Go ahead," he says quietly, letting Haru know it's okay for him to let go. "I'll bring you back to bed."

Haru inhales, then turns his head away and falls asleep immediately.

# Chapter 7

## Chapter Notes

You guys ... I was supposed to post this last night, but I fell asleep \*shrugs\* Anyhow, last chapter. This story as a whole was so much fun to write and post, and I'm glad you guys seem to be enjoying it so much. Thank you for all the kudos and comments and such. Your responses are much needed food for my writing soul, and I very much appreciate it.

So, proceed. Enjoy the last bit of it, and let me know what you think!

It takes him a while to come to awareness the next morning.

It's not just that it's hard to wake up, but that he's laying there with his brow furrowed and his eyes blinking slowly for a while as he tries to separate dreams from reality, and holds a debate with himself about how much of the day before actually happened. But it's the most ridiculous of scenarios when he's thinking about it all, so he's not convinced for a while.

He's wrapped up snugly in a thick, warm comforter that has his body heat trapped inside with him like a burrito. He doesn't initially want to move, but then he actually focuses his gaze on the shadowy figure on the bed across from him.

Sousuke has his back to him. It's bare and smooth, wide and inviting. His blanket has been kicked off the bed, so there's only a sheet draped low on his waist, and Haru watches him breathe for a moment — deep, settled, and calm.

He does snore, but not like a mountain troll. It's actually quite soft, and not nearly as annoying as Haru would have expected.

He's tempted, just a little bit, to curl up against Sousuke's back and sleep for another hour, and it takes him a while to rediscover why that is. His pulse skips a beat or two, and then he's suddenly a bit too warm.

He pushes himself up, but he ends up having to do it slowly and with a grimace, because his body is all kinds of upset. His back hurts. His ass hurts. His throat feels a bit raw. And there are definitely bruises on his skin, when he looks — specifically circled around his arms and dotted across his thighs and hips. He's more intrigued by them than he is bothered that they're there, and it becomes a tangible reminder of the last little bit of the evening.

He doesn't actually recall even having a dream last night, to be honest. Which means that being abandoned by a guide that couldn't speak Japanese, on a deserted road in the wilderness of Australia's grasslands, getting chased by ravenous dingoes, and forced to leave the car by an upsettingly large spider, hopelessly searching for a cellphone signal, and having



to navigate through a road full of snakes, all with someone he most definitely used to hate only hours ago, all actually happened.

He absorbs that for a moment, lets it sink in, and realizes, despite all of that — and the massive battle of tug-of-war consistently fought within it all — he feels incredibly relieved, like a giant weight has been lifted from his shoulders, allowing him to breathe fully and deeply through muscles that ache, but are completely unstrained.

It's a bizarre feeling. But it's not at all unwelcome. It feels like free.

So he's okay with getting up out of bed, even though he has to very intentionally stretch and take it slow at first. He allows his gaze to hover on Sousuke just a little bit longer, and then ventures to the bathroom to reclaim his clothes and rake water through his hair.

He's quiet, gathering his wallet and the room key, and making his way out the door, careful not to let the blinding sunshine fall too widely over Sousuke's body.

He's not necessarily fast-moving on land, but he tries to be quick about it anyway. He remembers the very vague and confusing directions the woman at the front desk had tried to draw out for them the night before, explaining where the electronic store is. And as his luck would have it, it's only about a fifteen-minute walk from where they're staying.

He finds it easily, uses poor English and less-poor drawings to explain to the shop clerk what he needs. They have it. He spends more money, and then takes a detour into a donut shop across the street, buys two coffees and half a dozen assorted flavors of fried dough, and balances everything rather expertly in his arms on the walk back to the motel.

Sousuke's still asleep when he gets back. Haru's less quiet about moving around now, but he realizes quite quickly that Sousuke is just a heavy sleeper, so he takes his time setting everything down, breaks the power adapter out of its packaging, plugs Sousuke's phone in, and sets it on the nightstand between the two beds to gather a charge, then stares thoughtfully at the donuts for a while, before he chooses the one he wants.

It's when he sits Sousuke's cup of strongly-scented coffee on the corner of the nightstand closest to him, that he begins to stir. Haru sits on the edge of his own bed, watching, thinking quite actively about how actually attractive Sousuke is, while also quietly praising the donut shop for their work. He wishes he'd paid more attention to the name of the place. It's probably on the box. He doesn't look.

Sousuke squints back over his shoulder. Haru blinks at him, and takes another bite.

It's quiet for a good minute, and he can see that Sousuke is struggling to come to terms with reality, just like he had to. Then he sits up, shoulders slumped, hair ruffled, though it's so short it's hard to really tell the difference. He stares down at the sheet over his lap for a while, breathing slow and even. His eyes become more awake as he blinks some more, and then he turns his gaze back on Haru, who is still thoroughly enjoying his donut.

Haru doesn't bother to look away, or pretend that he's not staring. It seems to him they've never really had a problem with just *looking* at each other — quite unapologetically. So he

doesn't change that, and he allows himself to continue watching every little thing that Sousuke does, while incredibly unbothered by any of it.

Sousuke looks back over his shoulder toward the coffee Haru got him, most likely drawn by its smell again. Haru swallows his last bite and wrings a napkin between his fingers.

"I didn't know how you like your coffee, so I left it black," he says, then, almost as an afterthought, "like your soul."

Sousuke coughs up a chuckle. The corner of his lips lift in a soft smile, and Haru thinks that it's far from the worst thing in the world to look at.

Sousuke picks up the peace offering with a nod. "That's valid," he mumbles, taking a sip. He contemplates it for a second, though Haru can't tell what he thinks about it. Then he raises his eyes back to Haru and nods again. "Black is fine. Thank you."

Haru accepts this, and then reaches over to grab the box of donuts on the end of his bed. He holds it out across from him, and Sousuke takes his coffee to take it gratefully. He chooses one without much hesitation and leaves the box sitting open next to him. He grabs his coffee again, both hands now occupied, looking quite satisfied and maybe just as relieved as Haru felt when he truly woke up for the first time.

"How long have you been awake?"

Haru shrugs. "Not long ... I got the charger."

Sousuke follows the direction of his nod, looking down at the phone.

"We can probably turn it on now, at least," Haru says.

Sousuke's quiet for a moment, eating. His bites are quite big, but he chews them for a while, and Haru can see him thinking as he just stares down at the phone with a very unhurried blankness to his gaze. He looks back to Haru.

"Rin can wait." He takes another bite.

"Today's his birthday," Haru says, also not feeling particularly hurried, though they probably should both be reminded of the fact.

Sousuke shrugs. "It's early. He's got all day. We're going to be here for the rest of the week anyway."

It's not very difficult to concede to that. So Haru nods. "Okay."

Sousuke stands. His donut hand is empty, so he's free to grab the box and carry it with him as he moves to sit next to Haru, so close that their bodies brush together, and Haru is still chilled by how warm he is. He sets the box down on their laps, propped up on one of each of their legs between them. Haru carefully chooses another one, and then they eat in silence.

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*“Fair suck of the sav! I thought you two were dead! Almost got shanked just for losin’ ya. Rin’s been mad as a cut snake all night. Saw the scratches on the cah when I got back from the servo. No one in sight and theah’s a damn spidah on my seat. Those things are nasty, ahn’t they?”*

They still don’t understand what Lucas is saying, though he’s not shy at all about hugging them with relief when he arrives to pick them up from the motel. They’ve already checked out and there’s nothing to carry, so they just climb right into the back of the Kia, which is all kinds of scraped up from the attack of the dingoes the night before. Haru and Sousuke take it in in the light of day, exchange glances, and then just agree to forget about it. Though it is another tangible reminder that their wild Australian adventures were one-hundred percent not a dream.

Lucas is chattier now than he was last night, and he doesn’t even think to throw in another misplaced proverb, because he’s apparently got so much to talk about.

*“You guys wouldn’t **believe** the night I had ...”*

Haru’s content with letting him ramble on without minding it. He stares out the window as the scenery passes, fading once again from civil life to the wide stretching plains of grass. Some small part of him is rather anxious about getting stuck in the middle of the road again, but they were sure not to leave town before the car was well stocked with gas this time.

It’s a bit breath-taking in the daylight, the grasslands. There’s still not much to see, but the blue of the sky against the green and gold of the waving grass is vibrant, and it stretches on forever, like an ocean, occasionally accompanied by a distant tree. It looks so harmless and life-giving, but by now he knows it’s full of things his eyes can’t see, and he’s not at all upset that they manage to clear this stretch of road much quicker than before.

He feels a touch on his wrist and turns his gaze to Sousuke, whose eyes are staring down. He pulls Haru’s hand off of his lap and places it palm up on the seat between them, then his fingers just quietly roam his skin, gliding up and down his forearm and tracing the lines on his palm. The weight of his fingers is so light that it tickles Haru’s skin. Not so much with the kind of sensation that tempts him to laugh, but with the kind that makes him quietly shudder on the inside and notice his own pulse just a little bit more.

He watches Sousuke’s face while he does this. And Sousuke watches their hands. Eventually, he slides his fingers between Haru’s and they curl securely around his hand. Haru slowly folds his fingers too. Sousuke raises his eyes to him, and it’s with a look of tenderness so thorough that it makes Haru’s cheeks go warm again.

They concede to look away from each other at the same time, not out of embarrassment, but out of resolve and quiet submission. They each look back out of their own respective windows, and continue to hold hands between them, while Lucas prattles on in the driver’s seat, all the way to Rin’s place.

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They know they're in for it long before they even get out of the car.

Rin's already standing in the driveway, waiting for them with his hands propped on his waist and his shoulders tense. He's scowling, which is valid, and Haru and Sousuke are both quiet getting out of the car and finally putting their bags on their backs, when Lucas digs them out of the trunk for them.

They walk up the driveway toward their friend. They're not holding hands anymore. And they stop in front of him, and then just wait.

Rin's eyes narrow seethingly as he glances between them, as though he's not sure who to yell at first, or even what to say.

"You fucking jackasses," is what he lands on. Then he punches Sousuke in the stomach and kicks Haru in the ribs. Sousuke doubles over with a cough. Haru scrunches up his nose.

"Ow."

"What the hell is wrong with you two! What kind of birthday present is finding out your best friends have probably gotten themselves eaten by wild animals?!" He grits his teeth and growls, settling for aiming more kicks at Sousuke's shins. "Stupid! Both of you! I didn't sleep at all! But oh no, you're fine, just lounging around in a hotel in the next town over. I should strangle you!"

Sousuke pushes Rin's kicking leg away, so he turns to punch Haru in the arm instead.

"Ow."

Then he throws himself at them, tossing an arm around each of their necks, and squeezes them with desperation, already trembling with tears, sniffing in their ears.

"We're fine," Sousuke says. "You don't need to cry."

"I'm not crying!" Rin wails.

Haru sighs over his shoulder, because this is an inconvenience, but he's used to Rin by now, so he just waits. Eventually, he's had his fill of squeezing them to death, and his eyes are most assuredly wet and red when he pulls back. He sniffs some more and wipes his face, and the corners of his lips are turned down pitifully.

"This is a horrible birthday," he whines.

Haru pinches his lips, then reaches back and digs around in the left pocket of his book bag. He pulls out the neatly-wrapped little box with the shiny red bow on it, admittedly happy that it's still present and in-tact. He had worked rather hard on the wrapping job. It was the only

part of the gift he had anything to do with (Makoto is terrible at wrapping presents). He holds it out in front of blubbering Rin, who sniffs again, and then accepts it.

He tears the paper off rather carelessly, and Haru thinks that's a waste, but Rin's lip pokes out when he gets into the box and finds the shark tooth necklace inside. He stares at it for a while, eyes glossing up with more tears. Haru thinks he acts a lot like a toddler, but he doesn't mind.

Rin looks up and wipes the corners of his eyes. "You didn't have anything to do with picking this out, did you?"

"No."

Rin nods. "Makoto's good at gifts."

"Yeah."

"I love it. Thank you."

Haru just nods, feeling particularly accomplished, even though that was ultimately a lot of trouble to go through just to deliver a birthday present. Rin's still wiping his face and sniffing when his eyes glance between them and his brow suddenly furrows, as though he's looking at something that's not quite right.

"What's different?" he says.

Both Haru and Sousuke just blink at him with their eyebrows raised, as though they don't understand what he's getting at.

A crease forms on Rin's forehead and he leans further back, as though to get a better look at them, eyes still shifting. "What's different? Something's different."

Haru and Sousuke exchange glances.

"You're not fighting," Rin says, propping a hand on his hip.

"Ah," Sousuke breathes out, rubbing at the back of his neck. He shrugs. "I mean, you said you'd kill us if we weren't getting along when we got here so ..."

"It was a long night," Haru murmurs.

He's sure Rin doesn't notice the hesitance between them. Believe it or not, they're both incredibly good at keeping a poker face, and Rin is kind of easy to get one over on. But even still, his red eyes keep up their stare of suspicion for a bit longer, as though trying to assess what *exactly* is different other than their lack of arguing. And he's not stupid. There's something different there for sure. Haru and Sousuke just aren't going to tell him what it is specifically, and they've decided that without having to say anything to each other.

"Lucas!" Rin shouts, eyes sweeping over to the Aussie, who perks up and rushes over.

“Yeah, mate?” He looks nervous, like he’s waiting for Rin to point him toward the doghouse and chain him to the fence for losing his friends.

Rin purses his lips. He’s not even looking at Lucas. His eyes are still on Haru and Sousuke. And then after a long hovering pause, he concedes and says, “*Good job.*”

Lucas blinks, looking both relieved and confused. “*Errrm, sure, mate. No problem.*”

Rin takes them in for one last second, and then turns away with a huff, waving a hand over his head. “Don’t think any of this gives you a pass today. We’re still celebrating tonight.”

Haru and Sousuke exhale at the same time.

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Rin’s Aussie friends throw him a surprise party on a yacht. Haru’s not sure how they pull that. He figures either it’s a normal thing in this country, or one of Rin’s friends is quite privileged.

Either way, they all end up on a fancy boat just off shore, and pretty much nobody speaks Japanese. They’ve practiced a few phrases here and there on Rin’s behalf, but it’s not like Haru or Sousuke can hold a legitimate conversation with any one of them, and most likely, even if they could, they wouldn’t.

Haru’s not a fan of parties. Makoto had warned him that something like this would probably happen, because Rin’s like that, and he told Haru to be nice and sociable as best he can, but Haru doesn’t much feel like it. He spends a good portion of his time staring at the food table and being upset that there’s no mackerel, and he at least nods and responds shortly to the people who try to talk to him. Unfortunately, a lot of them seem to want to, and they keep saying that Rin talks about him all the time, and that’s embarrassing, but he decides he’ll wait until tomorrow to complain to Rin about it.

The birthday boy is pretty drunk anyway. It didn’t take him long. And he’s dancing quite ridiculously with a cup in his hand that’s spilling liquid everywhere. Haru’s glad he’s having fun. Rin is rather annoying when he’s crying.

He finds himself wandering away from everything, slipping out of the ring of warm light toward the stern of the boat, where the music and the conversations at least aren’t as loud. He presses his stomach against the rail and stares longingly down at the water below, watching the moonlight shimmer off of its surface as the sea breeze ripples through his hair.

“Please, don’t jump.”

He looks back over his shoulder where Sousuke is walking up with his hands in his pockets. Haru turns back to the water.

“You took too long,” he complains, though there’s no variance in his tone.

Sousuke steps up beside him, and Haru feels a bit better, though it's still really weird to now associate Sousuke with a feeling of safety and familiarity.

"Believe it or not, this thing only has one bathroom, and I wasn't the only one who had to go."

"So assert your dominance and push the line out of the way. Problem solved."

Sousuke chuckles under his breath. It's caught and carried off by the wind. "Seriously, Haru, don't lean that far over the rail."

Haru sighs and straightens his back to a satisfying angle, though he doesn't take his eyes from the water. "Are you going to be overprotective of me now too?"

"No."

He presses his lips together, and then shifts his gaze to the larger man. "Why not?"

Sousuke raises his eyebrows. "Do you *want* me to?"

Haru shrugs, looking away again. "I dunno. I think it's kind of flattering that you might back someone into a coke machine on my behalf."

"Tch. I thought you were bitter about that."

Haru shrugs once more. "I mean, as long as you're not doing it to *me*, I don't really care."

Sousuke half chuckles again, but it's really weak. He goes quiet rather quickly, and Haru can sense him staring down into a distant universe where he's probably rethinking life decisions.

"Haru," he speaks up, after a long while has passed. It's not like quiet thunder this time. His voice now is more like the gentle push of a small wave, and Haru looks up.

Sousuke's eyes are quite an uncanny color, not quite blue, not quite green, not quite expressive, but always looking at things with a great amount of fervor. He shifts closer, lining their arms, and Haru can feel his body heat through his sleeve. Sousuke rests his elbows on the rail and leans against it, which puts enough of a bend to his back that they're nearly level with each other.

He blinks out over the water for another pause of a moment, gathering what he wants to say, and then he looks back to Haru and sighs.

"I'm sorry," he says. And it's the first time Haru thinks he fully trusts his words. "You were um ... right about me. I took a lot out on you, because I had a lot of feelings that I didn't want to deal with myself, and you were easy to push those onto. It's not even that you really did anything wrong. It's just that ... I guess ... I was trying so hard not to like you."

He scratches at the back of his neck and heaves another sigh. "That completely backfired on me of course. And I should have recognized that. But all I knew was that I felt even more

whenever you were around, and I hated you for that.” He shakes his head to himself. “I was being a dick. I shouldn’t have pushed you around.”

Haru allows himself to absorb the sincerity in his eyes for a moment, before he shrugs like it doesn’t matter anymore. “It’s fine, I guess.”

“It’s really not,” Sousuke says. His voice comes out much quieter when he adds, “I don’t want you to be afraid of me.”

Haru rolls the inside of his lip between his teeth, and then sighs himself. “I’m not.”

“No?”

Haru shakes his head. “Not anymore.”

Sousuke doesn’t say anything in response to this, but he seems quite relieved by it, and Haru’s surprised to realize that it was that important to him.

“I’m sorry too, I guess.” Haru shrugs again. “Not really for anything specific, but I suppose I made your life hard sometimes ... and maybe said some mean things about you.”

“Maybe.”

“It’s probably not going to be all that different, you know.”

Sousuke smiles, that small little grin that’s amused and not unattractive. “I guess I can deal with that.”

“Can you?”

“Well, I would like to at least,” he says, coming out of his lean to look down to Haru with a glimmer of severity to his eyes. “If you’ll let me.”

Haru feels his cheeks going warm under that gaze, and he wonders if he’ll ever stop doing that. He doesn’t really like blushing, and also it comes with this weird belly thing that tickles and might be unpleasant were he not growing steadily more comfortable with Sousuke. He pulls in a heavy breath, as though none of this affects him as much as it really does.

“Are you making an offer?”

Sousuke purses his lips, eyes turning up toward the star-studded sky for a moment. “Well, ‘offer’ sounds kind of formal.”

“You’d rather be casual?”

Sousuke *tches*, eyes dropping back to Haru. “Not like *that*.”

“So what are you looking for then?”



Sousuke huffs out a breath. He's a bit annoyed, and Haru can tell, but mostly he's nervous, and it's comical. He scratches at the back of his neck again, and mumbles toward the deck.

"You're making this difficult."

"Just say what it is you want, Sousuke."

He breathes out of his nose. "I would like to have *you*, Haru," he says, raising his eyes again, and dropping his arm. "If that's okay with you. I don't deserve you at all, but that would make me happy. And I have a lot to do to make things up to you anyway."

Haru nods thoughtfully. "Yeah ... You do."

He can actually see Sousuke holding back a smile. His lips twitch in the corner, but that's all that he allows, even though it comes out shining bright in his eyes anyway.

"So is that a yes?"

"I guess so."

Sousuke scoffs. "You're a pain in the ass."

"No. *You're* a pain in the ass — literally. I've barely been able to sit down all day. We're going to have to fix that."

This time, Sousuke allows his lips to curl up into a grin. "Well, there's only one way to do that."

Haru smiles too, small and soft, but sure. He looks back out at the water as Sousuke shifts closer. He stands behind Haru, framing his back, and wraps his arms around his shoulders as he sits his chin on top of his head, and there's a collective final movement of them relaxing into this, into each other, and being completely comfortable with that as they stare out at the water.

"Are we going to tell Rin?" Haru asks.

"Mmm ... We'll wait 'til he gets over his hangover tomorrow."

Haru nods. "Okay."

The breeze carries the rest of the conversation away, but they don't really need it anymore. The party goes on behind their backs without them, but they're okay with that.

It's probably the very least possible ending they could have reached after such a tumultuous adventure, but they're not mad about it either. In fact, it's probably for the better this way. At least now, Rin doesn't have to coerce them into flying down to Australia at the same time — because they most assuredly won't be coming back.



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