

New Year, New Relationship

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New Year, New Relationship

by [Pikaknight](#)

Summary

Ace and his friends visit the biggest shrine in Crocus for their first shrine visit. Ace invites Lance to come with them, but Lance refuses. Feeling guilty and wanting to make it up to Ace, Lance takes Ace to somewhere special. They discuss recent events and their feelings for each other.

Set after everything going on in canon. One shot.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

“Ace! Come down here!”

Ace looked up from his red D-Gear at the mention of his name. “Coming, Mom!” he called, getting up from bed.

Tamazo, who had been complaining about being hungry, perked up and flew over to Ace. “Is it lunchtime already, tama?”

Ace looked at Tamazo, amused. “We just had breakfast not too long ago. Can’t you wait until we meet up with everyone else?”

“But Tama is hungry, Ace! I won’t survive until then, tama!” Tamazo complained loudly.

Ace rolled his eyes good-naturedly. “Mom said something about packing some food for the journey. Did you already forget?” He gestured for Tamazo to follow him and exited his room. After closing his door, he walked down the hallway with Tamazo.

“Of course Tama didn’t forget!” Tamazo huffed, crossing his small arms in front of his chest. “Who do think I am, tama?”

Ace snorted. “I’m not going to answer that.” He looked over at Tamazo, noticing how he looked depressed about having to wait for some food. “Maybe Mom will have some snacks out,” he said, trying to cheer Tamazo up.

Tamazo’s eyes lit up and started flying ahead of him. “Hurry up, Ace!”

Ace laughed. “Wait, Tamazo. I said maybe.”

But Tamazo didn’t seem to hear him, already flying downstairs and out of sight.

Ace shook his head at his partner’s impatience and followed him downstairs.

After everything that happened recently, Ace and Tamazo had returned to Vienna City to relax and to celebrate Christmas and New Year’s Eve with his mom.

The night before, Ace, Tamazo, and his mom had joined the rest of Vienna City in welcoming the new year by attending a party held at the city square.

The party had enormous amounts of food (which made Tamazo start drooling) and a lot of activities. It even had a lot of fireworks. One firework was in the shape of a dragon, surprising and delighting Ace and Tamazo. They also helped with the count down as midnight and the new year approached. When it hit midnight, everyone had shouted their greetings, welcoming the new year with more fireworks.

Ace had made plans to meet up with his friends at the biggest shrine in Crocus. Normally, he and his mother would pay their respects and make their wishes for the new year at a shrine in Vienna City on the first day of the year, but they decided to change things up this year (especially since Ace’s friends all live on Dragoza Island).

After they made their wishes, they were going to eat the lunch his mom prepared.

Rena looked up as Ace walked inside the restaurant. She was standing behind the front counter and washing the dishes she used to help prepare their lunch and the food for the journey (also known as Tamazo's food for the journey). "There you are, Ace. I was beginning to think you didn't hear me," she said teasingly. She placed the dishes she was washing in the sink.

"Why do you say that?" Ace asked, confused. He was about to ask if his mother had seen Tamazo when he noticed his partner sitting at a nearby table, eating some omelette rolls.

Noticing Ace was looking over at Tamazo, Rena laughed softly. "Tamazo came before you did and asked if there were any snacks available. Thankfully, I had made too many omelette rolls when making the food for the journey and for lunch."

Ace wasn't too surprised to hear that. His mom liked to spoil Tamazo. He looked at his mother. "Sorry, Mom. Tamazo was complaining about being hungry. He said he couldn't wait until lunchtime, and I mentioned how you might've made some snacks to cheer him up."

Rena laughed once more. "It is alright, Ace. I'm used to Tamazo and his stomach."

"Yeah. Tamazo and his black hole of a stomach," Ace said, tempted to roll his eyes. He blinked a few times, belatedly remembering his mother had called him downstairs for a reason. "Did you want me for something, Mom?"

"That is right. Come over here, Ace. I finally finished it, and I want to know what you think," Rena said, wiping her hands on a towel and walking in the direction of the living room.

Ace's brow furrowed. His mom made something that wasn't food? He followed her, curious.

His eyes widened as he walked into the living room and stopped. There was a dark red kimono on the beige couch, and there was a variety of colors of obi sashes surrounding it. The kimono had a blue dragon design on the front of it. The color of the kimono reminded him of the color of his D-Gear. "Mom, this is..."

Rena walked over to the couch, turned around and smiled. "Remember how I took your measurements before Christmas? I used it to make a new kimono for you. I know you already had one, but that one doesn't fit you anymore."

Ace walked over to the couch, unable to keep his eyes off the kimono. "Mom, this is..." He couldn't help but repeat himself, touched and grateful his mom did this for him. He finally looked up at his mother and smiled a soft happy smile. "I love it, Mom. Thank you. It has been a while since I wore a kimono to the first shrine visit."

Rena felt tempted to tear up at her son's reaction. She felt delighted Ace loved the kimono. It was worth all the sleepless nights she had to make it in time. "I'm glad you love it, Ace."

Ace tilted his head, confused. "Why are there so many obi? I only need one."

Rena laughed softly. "I couldn't decide on a color. Why don't you decide, Ace?"

Ace's eyes widened. "I get to choose? But I'm not good at fashion or color schemes, Mom. I would've been alright with any color you chose for me."

"You don't need to know fashion or color schemes to pick a sash, Ace. Pick a color you want to wear."

Ace was still unsure. He didn't want to look like a clown in front of his friends, and he knew a certain idol Guild Dragon Caller would take great delight in commenting on his color choice if he chose incorrectly. When Rena only raised her eyebrows, he sighed and looked at the colors.

There were a few different reds, greens, blues, and even some grays and blacks.

He immediately decided against the reds and greens. While he did like red, a red obi with a crimson kimono would be too much. Green would look good on Charo, but all he could think of when looking at the greens was that he would be wearing Christmas colors.

He eyed the rest of the choices, wondering what would look good. Almost immediately, he felt his eyes drawn to one.

The obi was blue. It reminded him of a blue water drop and a certain white-haired Guild Dragon Caller from Crocus.

He picked out the obi and held it in his hands, taking care not to touch or mess up the other obi laid out on the couch. He looked up at Rena. "I want this one, Mom."

Rena smiled warmly. "That is a nice choice. It goes well with your eyes."

"Eh? It goes well with my eyes?" Ace asked, confused.

"That is right. Your eyes are the same color as that obi. That's why you chose it, right?"

Ace's cheeks flushed pink. "Ah... Yeah." He cleared his throat nervously. "Of course that is why I chose it."

His mother could never know he had chosen the color because it made him think of Lance. She would *definitely* tease him about it.

Rena gave him an unconvinced look. Ace was lying to her, but she knew her son could be stubborn at times and decided to drop it. They were running out of time, and Ace still needed to put on the kimono. "You better hurry up and get ready if we want to meet up with your friends at the shrine. Do you need help putting it on, or do you remember how to do it yourself?"

Ace smiled, feeling relieved his mother chose not to push the issue. "I remember how to put it on."

"Alright. I already finished making the food for the journey as well as for lunch, so we can leave after we put on our kimonos."

“I’ll go get ready now,” Ace said, picking up the kimono carefully. He held it in his hands, marveling at how soft it was and had to resist the urge to hug his mother.

After putting on the kimono and making sure he had everything, he quickly went downstairs.

His eyes widened upon seeing his mother in a pink and blue kimono. She had her hair up in a bun held by a pair of blue chopsticks.

Rena turned around, blinking at her son’s wide-eyed look. “Oh, Ace. There you are. I forgot to give you your tabi and zōri.” She held out the ankle-high divided-toe socks and traditional sandals.

“Yeah. I was wondering where they were. Thank you,” Ace said, accepting the items. Now that his mom turned around, he could see a floral pattern on the front of her kimono.

“What do you think, Ace? I was just asking Tamazo for his opinion,” Rena said, gesturing to her kimono.

“You look good, Mom,” he said truthfully.

Rena beamed. “Thank you, Ace. Let’s grab the food then we can leave.” She walked over to the kitchen.

Ace was about to walk over and help his mother when Tamazo flew up beside him. Noticing his partner looking him up and down, he raised an eyebrow. “What is it, Tamazo?”

After a few moments, Tamazo nodded to himself and looked Ace in the eyes. He pointed to himself with one arm. “Ace looks good, but he isn’t as handsome as Tamazo, tama,” he said, boasting.

Ace snorted, shaking his head. He should’ve figured his partner would say something like that. “Thank you, Tamazo. I’m glad I got your approval,” he said dryly.

Tamazo puffed out his chest. “Anytime Ace needs help, Tamazo is there, tama!”

Ace was about to answer, but his eyes noticed his mother struggling with all the food. “Here, Mom. I’ll help,” he said, hastily walking over.

A few minutes later, they were walking along the path to the pier.

“Maybe I should go with you,” Ace said, concerned.

Rena shook her head. “I’ll be alright by myself. Besides, I won’t be alone. Haru-chan will be with me.”

“Well, yeah, but I could still come along. Just in case.”

Rena smiled fondly. “I appreciate it, Ace, but we both know Guild Dragon Callers travel by transport dragons.”

“I could choose not to,” Ace said quickly. “I don’t mind.”

“*Ace.*”

Ace bit back another protest at her stern look and nodded. If his mom said she would be alright, he had to trust her. “... Alright. But I won’t be too far away. If something happens, I’ll be there to help out.”

“How dependable,” Rena said, smiling. “Do you think we’ll have enough food? You mentioned that we are meeting your friends at the shrine and having lunch afterwards, so I made a lot.”

“Have enough?” Ace said, looking incredulous. He looked at all the bento boxes of food they were carrying. He was holding most of the food by himself while Tamazo held the rest. “I think we have more than enough.”

“Tama’s lunch was included too, tama! We’ll have a lot of food to eat, tama!” Tamazo said enthusiastically.

Rena laughed. “Both of you are right. I hope everyone will like the food I prepared.”

“I’m sure they’ll love it, Mom. Everyone here at Vienna City loves your cooking. Besides, Charo and Tiger have already tasted your food before.”

“Thank you, Ace,” Rena said. Ace couldn’t help but gulp as a suspicious glint appeared in her eyes. “Are we only meeting up with those two?”

Ace *really* didn’t like the suspicious glint in his mom’s eyes. It always meant something bad, and he had a feeling she was about to tease him. For what, he didn’t know. He found himself wishing he could walk faster and escape the inevitable teasing. “We’re also meeting up with Garnet,” he said, looking at her warily.

“Really? Just them? What about that one boy?”

“*B-Boy?*” Ace couldn’t help but squeak.

Surely his mom didn’t mean *him*, right?

Rena nodded. “The one you keep talking about. You even mentioned him in some of your e-mails,” she said, smiling at her son’s reaction.

Ace’s cheeks flushed pink much to her amusement. “M-Mom! I don’t talk about Lance that much. And of course I would mention him in my e-mails. He is not only my rival but also a friend.”

“Of course, Ace. It is normal to talk about your friends,” Rena said, reassuring him. “But with how much you talk about this Lance, it makes me wonder if something else is going on between the two of you.”

“W-What do you mean by something else?” Ace asked, resisting the urge to hide his face behind the bento boxes.

Rena sighed sadly. “Oh, Ace. You really are growing up. I always knew this day would come, but I didn’t think it would come this fast.” Ignoring Ace’s confused look, she closed her eyes and continued. “I just hope I get to meet the boy who has stolen your heart someday.”

Ace, who had opened his mouth to reassure his mom, froze and gaped at her.

Stolen his heart? She couldn’t mean Lance, right?

Rena opened her eyes and sighed at his reaction. “Ace. I know it is embarrassing to talk about things like this with your mother, but I just want to let you know I’m here for you. I hope you’ll be able tell me someday.”

Feeling guilt pool in his stomach, Ace frowned. “It isn’t like that, Mom! Lance and I...” He paused, wondering how to word it.

He and Lance were friends and rivals.

But Lance was also special to him in a way that was different than his other friends and rivals.

Realizing the direction his thoughts were going, his cheeks flushed pink. He shook his head, looking away. “Lance and I aren’t like that. Besides, Lance is...” He paused, looking disappointed. “Lance isn’t coming.”

Rena tilted her head, confused. “But isn’t he one of your friends?” She felt her heart hurt at the visible disappointment on her son’s face. He must really want to see him.

Grateful she didn’t try to imply anything, Ace nodded disappointedly. “He is one of my friends. But he isn’t coming. He doesn’t like crowded places.” He shrugged, trying to act like it didn’t bother him. “I don’t want to force him to come when he would only feel uncomfortable.”

No matter how hard Ace tried to act like it didn’t bother him, Rena could tell her son was disappointed and bothered by it. “Don’t worry, Ace. You’ll see him again soon.”

He looked back at his mom. “How do you know?” he asked softly.

Rena smiled reassuringly. “From what you’ve told me, I doubt he’ll be able to stay away from you for long. Besides, it is New Year’s. I’m sure he would love to see your face on the first day of the new year.”

Ace smiled a small smile. She was right. Even if there were periods where he didn’t see Lance, he knew the older boy was alright. And he knew they would always see each other again soon. Nothing could keep them apart for long. “Thank you, Mom.”

Rena smiled teasingly “From what you’ve told me, it sounds as if you two are star-crossed lovers. But maybe if you wish hard enough, fate will answer your new year wish to meet up

with him.”

Ace’s face turned pink. “*Mom!*” His voice rose to a shrill, making Tamazo, who had been flying ahead of them, turn around confused.

Tamazo flew closer, looking concerned. “Ace? Is something wrong, tama?”

Before Ace could speak up and say it is nothing, Rena spoke up. “Everything is alright, Tamazo. Ace is just disappointed he won’t see his boyfriend.”

“*B-Boyfriend?*” Ace barely managed to stop himself from squeaking. “I already told you. L-Lance and I aren’t like that,” he said, looking away.

“Tama has a great idea!”

Tamazo’s outburst surprised both Ace and Rena, making them look at the small dragon.

“A great idea about what, Tamazo?” Ace asked warily.

Tamazo puffed out his chest. If his arms were free, he would’ve hit his chest with one arm. “Tama was already going to wish to eat lots of food in the new year, but Tama will also wish for Ace and Lance to meet, tama!” he said proudly.

Ace groaned, hiding his face in the bento boxes. “Tamazo!”

Rena clapped her hands, delighted. “That is a great idea, Tamazo!”

As Rena and Tamazo continued talking about their new year wishes, Ace groaned once more, resisting the urge to hit his head against the bento boxes.

It was bad enough when it was just his mom teasing him. Why did Tamazo join in? He only made things worse.

Spotting the pier ahead of them, he felt relieved and grateful, wanting to escape the teasing.

At least his mom wouldn’t be able to tease him on the way there.

ZZZ

Ace waited patiently at the docks of Crocus for his mom and Haru to disembark from the boat.

Tamazo, who had immediately set his share of bento boxes on the ground, had flown off to the boat, claiming he would find Rena and Haru.

Ace had tried to call him back, saying it would be better to wait for them outside the boat, but it was to no avail.

It seemed Ace had worried for nothing. Nothing had happened on the way to Dragoza Island.

He, Lance, and the rest of his friends had stopped Jest and the rest of Dominion, but he couldn't help worrying about and wanting to protect his mom and Haru.

After setting the bento boxes on the ground beside him, one of his hands reached up and pressed lightly on the spot where his heart was, not wanting to mess up the kimono.

It had been a couple of months since they had stopped Dominion, and during that time, everyone on Dragoza Island helped rebuild the cities that suffered at Dominion's hands. The Dragonoids living on Dragoza Island had also welcomed all the humans back, telling them that Dragoza Island wasn't just their island.

It was an island where monsters, Dragonoids, and humans could live together in peace.

And during that time, Ace didn't get to see Lance.

He *did* get to see him before Christmas, but it was very brief. They didn't speak for long since Lance had been on a mission, but Ace had told him about his plans for New Year's Day.

He had invited Lance, saying how everyone would want him to come.

But Lance had refused.

He remembered the sensation of his heart dropping at the older boy's refusal. It had been unpleasant and... heartbreaking.

To his credit, Lance *had* looked almost hesitant before refusing. And after he saw what his answer did to Ace, Lance's eyes had widened.

It didn't take long for Lance's eyes to return to their normal calm state, but Lance had reached a hand out. It almost looked as if Lance had been trying to... comfort him.

But Ace had stepped away from Lance's touch, turned around, called for Tamazo and left, pouting.

He knew ahead of time that Lance would refuse. He knew Lance didn't like crowded places.

But it still didn't stop the hope from blooming in his chest at the thought of getting to see Lance on New Year's Day.

And Lance had crushed that hope with his refusal.

"Ace!"

He blinked, hearing the familiar voice. He let his hand drop and turned around. He smiled upon seeing Charo running towards him. "Charo!"

When Charo reached Ace, he couldn't help but hug his friend. "Happy New Year, Ace!"

Ace laughed, hugging his friend back. "Happy New Year, Charo!"

Charo pulled away a few moments later and smiled at him. “My best regards for the year.”

“Yeah. My best regards for the year,” Ace said, smiling. He blinked a few times, noticing his friend’s attire. “Hey, Charo... Your outfit...”

“Ah... This?” Charo asked, gesturing towards his kimono. “Mama made it for me. When I told her I was meeting up with everyone today, she said I had to look nice.” He laughed softly, feeling embarrassed. He didn’t want his mother to go to the trouble of making him a kimono, but she had laughed, saying it was no trouble. He really appreciated her making one for him. “H-How do I look, Ace?” he asked shyly.

Ace looked closely at his friend’s kimono.

It was a pretty forest green, but there was some light green on the sleeves. His obi was a forest green. It reminded Ace of a green wood drop. There was a tree pattern on the front of his kimono.

Ace nodded, smiling. “It looks good on you, Charo. Your mother did an excellent job.”

Charo beamed at his compliment. “Thank you, Ace! It is weird seeing you in dark red, though.” Noticing Ace was scratching his cheek sheepishly, his eyes widened, realizing he was being rude. “I-I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to imply that it looked bad. You look great in dark red. Your mother did an excellent job.”

Ace sighed, relieved. He smiled at his friend. “Thank you, Charo.” He blinked, belatedly remembering something. “Weren’t we supposed to meet up at the shrine?” He couldn’t help but feel worried. “Are we late?”

Charo shook his head, smiling. “You aren’t late. I was too excited to wait at the shrine, so I came to meet you,” he said, laughing sheepishly.

“I see. I’m glad you came. Tamazo left me to go find Mom and Haru,” Ace said, pouting.

Charo hid his laugh behind a hand. “As always, Tamazo marches to the beat of his own drum. I’m a bit relieved he hasn’t changed.”

Ace couldn’t stop the fond smile from forming on his face. “Yeah. Tamazo wouldn’t be Tamazo if he didn’t march to the beat of his own drum. Were there a lot of people at the shrine when you arrived?”

Charo thought for a few moments before shaking his head. “There were some people there, but there wasn’t a lot. They could be waiting for a different time.”

“That is true. It is still early in the day.”

Charo looked at the ground, noticing the amount of bento boxes for the first time. “Is that our lunch? Rena-san made a lot.”

“Yeah. She thinks she should’ve made more, though.”

Charo raised his eyebrows. “More?” One of his hands formed a fist, and he hit it on the palm of his other hand. “Because of Tamazo, right?”

Ace laughed, nodding his head. “Yeah. She is probably worried we won’t have enough considering how much Tamazo eats. Speaking of our lunch, did you bring the things you said you would bring?”

Charo’s eyes lit up, gesturing to the small, green bag he was carrying on his shoulders. “Of course! I brought paper cups, paper plates, plastic silverware, disposable chopsticks, drinks, napkins, a picnic blanket, and a trash bag.”

Ace looked at the small bag, surprised. That small bag didn’t look like it could hold everything Charo said he would bring. The bag must be bigger than it looked. He looked back at Charo, smiling. “That is good. Mom and I appreciate your help, Charo.”

The smaller boy beamed. “I’m happy I could help.”

They waited in silence for several moments before Charo spoke up again.

“Hey, Ace? Do you know who is going to meet up with us?”

Ace blinked, surprised by the question. “Yeah. You, me, Tamazo, Mom, Haru, Garnet, and Tiger. We’re also supposed to be meeting up with Grandma at the shrine.” He felt his heart hurt at not being able to include Lance’s name.

Charo blinked at the list of names, surprised Lance’s name wasn’t on the list. He was about to ask Ace about it, but then he saw Ace’s hands forming into fists at his sides. His blue eyes expressed disappointment. Charo frowned, feeling bad for his friend and wanting to cheer him up.

“Ace! I found them, tama!”

Ace turned around to face Tamazo, making Charo feel regret at bringing up the subject. Charo turned around and told himself to talk to Ace about it later.

Tamazo flew ahead of Rena and Haru and smiled smugly as he stopped before Ace. “I told you I could find them, tama! Nothing is too difficult for Tamazo, tama!”

Ace sweat dropped. He was certain he didn’t say anything like that to Tamazo. But reasoning with Tamazo was like reasoning with a brick wall at times. “Yeah. Thank you, Tamazo.”

Tamazo smiled, looking proud of himself. He noticed Charo and flew over to him. “It is Charo, tama!”

Charo pushed away the guilt and smiled at Tamazo. “Happy New Year, Tamazo! My best regards for the year.”

“Happy New Year, tama! I can’t wait until lunch, tama!” Tamazo said enthusiastically.

“Tamazo, you’re being rude. You are supposed to say the same thing as Charo,” Ace scolded.

Tamazo tilted his head, confused. “Tama?”

Charo shook his head and looked at Ace. “I don’t mind, Ace. I’m used to Tamazo.” He looked back at Tamazo. “Lunch will be something to look forward to. Have you figured out your wishes yet?”

At the mention of lunch, Tamazo started drooling. “I wish we could eat right now, tama~” He blinked a few times at the mention of his wishes. “That is right, tama. I need to remember to make a wish about Ace and Lance, tama!”

Charo raised his eyebrows, looking over at Ace for a moment. “Make a wish about Ace and Lance?”

Ace’s cheeks flushed pink at the reminder. Was Tamazo going to tell everyone about that?

Thankfully, it was at that moment that Rena and Haru arrived.

After exchanging greetings, Ace and Tamazo picked up the bento boxes once more as they headed to the shrine.

Charo offered to help carry, but Ace shook his head, claiming he could handle it. Ace thanked Charo for the offer and mentioned if he felt tired or had trouble carrying them, he would give some to Charo, making the smaller boy agree.

Rena had noticed her son’s flushed cheeks and couldn’t help but laugh to herself. Tamazo must have said something about Lance to make him that way. Her son was adorable.

They met up with Tiger, Garnet, and Ace’s grandmother, Angine at the entrance to the shrine. Each of them were wearing a kimono, although the kimonos differed by color and by gender.

Garnet placed her hands on her hips, glaring at Ace as they approached. She was wearing a black kimono. The kimono had some yellow on the sleeves, and she was wearing a yellow obi. There was also a yellow light drop design on the front of it. “You’re late! You are lucky assistant number three was here to keep me company, or I would’ve left without you.”

Ace rolled his eyes, not bothered by Garnet’s threat. He doubted she would have left without them. “We aren’t late. We’re right on time.” He looked over at Tiger. “Sorry you had to put up with her by yourself.”

Tiger shrugged, grinning at him and giving him a thumbs up. He was wearing an orange kimono. The kimono also had black on many various parts, and he was wearing a black obi. There was a red flame design on the front of it. “It is alright, Ace! I don’t mind taking one for the team, although next time, give me some warning.”

Ace was about to reply, but Garnet spoke up before he could.

“What do you mean ‘put up with’, Ace?”

Ace laughed sheepishly, looking at Angine to avoid looking at Garnet. “Sorry to keep you waiting, Grandma.”

Angine smiled at him. She was wearing a blue kimono. The kimono had some light blue on many various parts, and she was wearing a light purple obi. There was a purple floral design on the front of it. "I didn't wait long. Besides, I had your friends to keep me company." She looked at Rena. "It is good to see you again, Rena."

Rena smiled at her. "It is good to see you, too, Mother."

After exchanging New Year's greetings, everyone walked inside the shrine.

Noticing someone was missing from their group, Tiger looked at Ace, confused. "Hey, Ace. Where's Lance?"

Charo watched worriedly as Ace's smile disappeared. Ace's eyes darkened with sadness, tightening his hold on the bento boxes. The next moment, Ace was back to normal, but the smile on his face was obviously fake.

"Lance isn't coming," Ace said, struggling to keep the fake smile on his face.

"Eh? Why not?"

Garnet, who had also watched Ace's expressions and body posture, huffed. "It is obvious! Ace asked Lance out, and Lance turned him down."

Charo winced. Even for Garnet-san, that was too blunt.

Ace's cheeks flushed pink, turning his head to look at Garnet with narrowed eyes. "I-I did not ask Lance out! I invited him to join us."

"And he refused," Garnet said, crossing her arms in front of her chest. "I can't believe that guy!"

Ace shrugged, plastering on a smile. "It can't be helped. He doesn't like crowded places."

"Can't be helped? But Ace..." Tiger protested. He was about to continue when Garnet elbowed him in the stomach. Hard. "Ow! What are you doing?" he said, glaring at her.

"Can't you read the room?" Garnet asked, huffing. When he only gave her a confused look, she rolled her eyes and gestured towards Ace.

Tiger looked at Ace, eyes widening at the darkened blue eyes. Ace's hands tightened its hold on the bento boxes. Tiger also noticed Ace's smile had disappeared. Tiger looked away, feeling guilty for bringing up the subject. "Sorry, Ace," he said regretfully.

"It is alright, Tiger. You didn't know," Ace said softly. His soft voice contrasted with the expression on his face as well as his tense body posture.

A somber silence fell upon the group as they continued walking.

Someone clapping their hands from behind them caught their attention, making them stop and turn around, confused.

Angine clapped her hands once more. "What are you children feeling depressed about? We're about to pay our respects and make our new year wishes," she said, giving them a stern look. Her look softened after a few moments. "I'm sure everything will be alright."

"Grandma?" Ace asked, confused.

Angine looked at Ace and smiled softly. "Everything will be alright, Ace. You'll see."

Ace tilted his head, still confused. How did his grandma know that everything would be alright?

"That is right!"

Everyone blinked and turned to Tiger at the sound of his voice.

"Tiger?" Ace said, surprised.

Tiger looked at each of them with a grin on his face. "We can't stay depressed. We finally got to meet up with each other. This is something to be happy about."

A small smile formed on Charo's face. "You are right, Tiger. We didn't meet up for Christmas, so this is the first time we got to meet up after everything that happened."

Garnet smiled. "You say some good things from time to time," she said haughtily.

"What do you mean by that, Garnet?" Tiger yelled, glaring at her.

Ace blinked a few times as he watched his friends.

Garnet and Tiger were bickering in loud voices, not caring if anyone was looking. Charo was trying to calm them down, glancing around him apologetically at everyone who was looking at them.

"Ace."

Ace looked over at Tamazo, confused and surprised to see the serious look. "Tamazo?"

"Tama hates to admit it, but Tiger is right, tama. You can't look depressed forever, tama. Ace finally met up with his friends after a couple of months of not seeing them, tama. Ace should be happy, tama!" Tamazo said cheerfully.

"You hate to admit it, huh?" Ace said, amused. He closed his eyes, breathing in deeply then letting it out. While he still felt disappointed Lance couldn't come, he decided to enjoy his time with his friends. It was as everyone said. They finally got to meet up. His eyes opened, the corners of his mouth quirking up into a smile. "Yeah."

"Tama is happy because it is almost lunchtime, tama!"

Ace rolled his eyes. *Way to ruin the moment, Tamazo.*

But his smile didn't disappear.

He chuckled as Tamazo started flying ahead of him, telling him to hurry up.

He really did have some of the best friends a guy could hope for.

ZZZ

After paying their respects and making their wishes, everyone sat down on the picnic blanket Charo brought to eat lunch.

They were sitting in an area covered by trees. Since it was winter, the trees didn't have any leaves on its branches. And while it was chilly sitting outside, it wasn't freezing.

As Ace and Tamazo removed the coverings of the bento boxes, Charo took out everything he had brought, handing them out to everyone and starting to work on pouring tea into the paper cups.

Once Ace and Tamazo finished uncovering the food, Rena smiled at everyone. "Please eat up, everyone."

"It is time to eat!" A chorus of voices answered cheerfully.

"It is finally time to eat, tama! Tama was starving, tama," Tamazo said, rubbing his stomach with one arm.

Ace looked at him incredulously. "You snacked on omelette rolls before we left, *and* you ate all the food Mom made for you on the way here. How can you be starving?"

Tamazo shook his head. "Ace doesn't understand how Tama's mind works, tama."

"You mean I don't understand how your stomach works," Ace muttered.

"Now, now, you two. Have some food before everyone else takes it," Rena said, smiling.

Ace and Tamazo nodded and fixed their plates.

Everyone who had never tried Rena's cooking before praised her cooking, saying the food was delicious.

Ace smiled as he watched his mom smile warmly at the compliment.

As everyone continued eating, the noise level rose as conversations started to take place.

Garnet looked at Ace with a teasing smirk on her face, making him instantly wary. "Ace. I just happened to notice the color of your obi."

"Yeah. So?" Ace asked warily.

Garnet shrugged, looking away from him and sipping her tea. After waiting for a few moments, she looked back at him. "It goes well with your eyes. For an idiot like you, you

made a decent choice.”

Ace blinked, surprised by Garnet’s compliment. “Eh? Uh... Thank you.”

Garnet was being nice? Was there some sort of catch? Was she trying to trick him?

After waiting several moments for Garnet to say something, Ace shrugged and turned back to his meal.

That was weird.

“It is just... I couldn’t help but notice that the color reminds me of a certain white-haired Dragon Caller,” Garnet said teasingly.

Ace, who at that moment had been eating a piece of omelette roll, choked at her words. He coughed repeatedly, trying desperately to swallow the piece.

Tamazo and Charo, who were sitting on either side of him, sprang into action, concerned for Ace.

Tamazo immediately flew up and hit Ace’s back with one arm repeatedly. “Ace. Are you alright, tama?” he asked, concerned.

Charo grabbed his cup of tea and hastily gave it to Ace. “Here, Ace. This will help.”

Ace coughed once more, accepting the cup of tea with a grateful nod. He hastily swallowed the tea, sighing relieved as the liquid helped him swallow the piece of food.

Everyone else looked at him with worried looks on their faces.

“Ace. Are you alright?” Rena asked, already setting her plate and cup down.

Noticing his mom was about to get up, Ace nodded and smiled. “I’m alright, Mom.” He looked at Charo, smiling gratefully. “Thank you, Charo. You saved me.”

Charo smiled, feeling embarrassed at the attention. “I’m glad you are alright, Ace. Tamazo helped as well.”

Tamazo, however, started crying dramatically. “Ace! You are alive, tama!”

Ace turned to look at Tamazo, wincing as Tamazo hit his back harder. “I’m alright, Tamazo. You can stop hitting my back.”

Tamazo stopped hitting his back, making him sigh relieved.

Ace yelped as Tamazo tackled him. The force of the tackle almost made him fall over. He looked down at his partner, surprised.

“Ace! I’m glad, tama!”

Noticing Tamazo was still crying dramatically, Ace shook his head, unable to stop the fond smile from forming. He lifted a hand up and patted the small dragon on his head. “Thank you, Tamazo. I’m alright.”

Tiger looked at Garnet with narrowed eyes. “What did you do that for? You made Ace choke!”

“How was I supposed to know he would choke? Idiot!” Garnet said, glaring back at Tiger. She looked over at Ace, her look softening before turning away and sipping her tea.

It had been an accident. It wasn’t her fault Ace decided to choke at the mention of Lance.

But she was glad Ace was alright.

After Ace reassured everyone that he was alright, the noise level from earlier returned as everyone resumed their conversations.

Ace glared at Garnet. “I didn’t choose the color based on my eye color.” Realizing belatedly what he said and what it meant, his eyes widened, his cheeks flushing pink. “N-No. That’s not what I meant.”

Garnet shrugged, sipping at her tea. “And I got my answer,” she said, feeling smug at his reaction.

“That’s not what I meant,” Ace protested to no avail. He groaned, resisting the urge to hide his face in his hands. *Great. Way to be obvious, Ace.*

It was midafternoon by the time everyone finished lunch. Rena, Haru, and Angine had walked away from the group to discard the trash.

Ace was about to ask what everyone’s plans were for the rest of the day when his D-Gear rang.

He blinked, surprised. Who could’ve texted him?

Everyone that he knew had already sent New Year’s messages, and he didn’t know why any of his friends who were with him couldn’t say whatever it was out loud.

Wait...

No. That wasn’t right. There was one person he knew who hadn’t sent him a New Year’s message, although he wasn’t too surprised considering how their last conversation went.

Maybe this message was from... *him*?

No. That was impossible. It couldn’t possibly be from him... Right?

He could feel his heart beating rapidly as he reached inside his kimono and pulled out his D-Gear, unsure whether he was nervous or excited.

He clicked the button, making the message appear. His eyes widened, his cheeks flushing pink as he read the message.

“I wonder if it is a mission. I thought Dragon Callers didn’t have to work today,” Charo said, concerned.

Garnet, who had been watching Ace’s expression, scoffed. “There is no way he would react like that to a mission! It has to be a message from Lance.”

Tamazo flew over to Ace’s shoulder, reading the message. Ace realized he was there and tried to hide the message, but it was too late. “I’ll be waiting for you near the mapple tree in Linus Prairies,” Tamazo said, trying to imitate Lance’s voice. He looked at Ace and spoke in his normal voice. “What kind of message is that, tama?”

Garnet smiled smugly. “It is obviously a message telling Ace to hurry up. His *boyfriend* is waiting for him.”

Ace huffed, exasperated. “Lance is not my boyfriend!” He turned to Tamazo and narrowed his eyes. “And you! Quit reading my messages out loud.”

Tamazo tilted his head, confused. “Tama?”

Resisting the urge to roll his eyes, Ace stood up. After putting on his sandals, he looked at everyone else, surprised to see they weren’t moving. “Well? Come on. Lance is waiting for us.”

Garnet shook her head, scoffing. “No thank you. I don’t want to be a third wheel.”

“W-What do you mean by that? That isn’t true,” Ace protested, cursing as his cheeks flushed pink at the implication. To his surprise, Charo and Tiger nodded. “Eh? You two agree with Garnet?”

Tiger grinned apologetically. “Sorry, Ace, but we would only get in the way. Lance would only pay attention to you.” His eyes expressed mischief as a teasing grin came onto his face. “You can do it, Ace! Attack him with your feelings!”

Ace spluttered, his face turning pink. “T-That’s not... I don’t... We’re not like that, Tiger!”

Charo smiled softly. “You can do it, Ace.”

“Charo! Not you, too!” Ace complained, pouting.

Garnet stood up. “What are you still doing here? Hurry up and leave! You’re making Lance wait.”

“But what about you guys? What will you do while I’m gone?” Ace asked hesitantly.

Charo stood up. “I should get going, too.” At Ace’s surprised look, he elaborated. “I promised Papa, Mama, and Torlie-san that I would return home after lunch. We’re supposed to go to the shrine in Libria together.”

Ace felt disappointed his friend was leaving, but he understood. “Alright. Give my regards to your parents and Torlie-san.”

Tiger stood up next. “I should get going, too.”

Ace looked at Tiger, surprised. “Eh? You’re leaving, too?”

“I promised Rose and Eldora-sama that I would return after lunch. We’re supposed to visit the shrine in Geyser together.”

Ace frowned, but he nodded. “I understand. Give my regards to them.”

“I’m leaving as well,” Garnet said, making Ace look at her surprised. “I promised Master Herriot that I would go with her to the Dragon Caller academy. The students aren’t allowed to leave campus, so all the students visit the shrine on campus. Master and I always make sure to visit every year.”

“So everyone is leaving?” Ace said, looking disappointed.

“Ah, geez! Why are *you* looking disappointed? You’re leaving as well!” Garnet scowled. Before Ace could speak up, she pointed at him. “You better not squander this opportunity and tell Lance your feelings.”

Ace coughed, turning away to hide his flushed cheeks. “But what about Mom, Grandma, and Haru? They aren’t back yet,” he said, ignoring the temptation to protest to what Garnet said about his feelings for Lance.

Charo smiled at him. “We’ll wait for them, Ace. They didn’t go too far away, and I’m sure Papa, Mama, and Torlie-san will understand if I’m late.”

Ace was about to protest, but this time, Tamazo narrowed his eyes and hit Ace on top of his head with one arm.

Ace winced at the pain, reaching up to rub the spot Tamazo hit. “Ow! What was that for, Tamazo?” he said, glaring at his partner.

“Hurry up, tama! Didn’t you read Lance’s message, tama? He is waiting for you, tama.”

Ace felt something warm in his chest at the thought of Lance waiting for him. Was it like what everyone said? Did Lance only want him to come?

He turned around and started running away from his friends, calling over his shoulder. “Alright. I’m going. Let’s go, Tamazo.”

Tamazo quickly flew after Ace. “Yes, tama.”

Ace tightened his grip on his D-Gear as he ran.

Wait for me, Lance. I’m coming.

ZZZ

Lance stood near the mapple tree, petting his red transport dragon.

Devi floated near his shoulder, complaining about having to see Ace's Tamadora partner again.

Lance smirked, amused. He knew despite the other's complaints, Devi was fond of Ace's Tamadora partner.

It had been a while since the two of them saw Ace and his Tamadora partner.

After everything that happened a couple of months ago, everyone thought they would get some time off to recover.

And while some Guild Dragon Callers got time off, Lance wasn't one of them.

The Guild had kept assigning him mission after mission. Of course, he successfully completed them, but it had gotten to a point where Devi had started complaining about the Guild assigning them another mission.

Lance had remarked offhandedly about how Devi was acting like Ace's Tamadora partner.

Devi had predictably gotten upset, saying he was nothing like Ace's Tamadora partner.

A fond smile appeared on his face at the memory.

Things weren't always pleasant, though.

He frowned, feeling guilt as he remembered sad blue eyes.

He and Devi had only seen Ace and his Tamadora partner once after everything that happened. It was right before Christmas, but their meeting was very brief since he and Devi had been on a mission.

He closed his eyes, bringing the hand he was using to pet his friend up to his chest and touching the place where his heart was.

Ace had been happy to see him. He remembered feeling his heart beat faster at Ace's smile.

He wanted to make Ace happy more. He wanted to make him smile more.

He wanted to protect Ace and his smile.

His hand gripped the fabric of his cloak, feeling shame and regret.

Lance had decided to protect Ace and his smile. He had wanted to make Ace smile more.

And what did he do?

He had made that smile disappear.

After telling Ace he was on a mission and had no time to talk, Ace had looked disappointed. Before he could leave, though, Ace had mentioned his plans for New Year's Day. Ace had mentioned that everyone would be there and that everyone would love to see him again.

He remembered seeing that hopeful look on Ace's face as he invited Lance to join them.

And he had crushed that hope by refusing Ace's invitation.

Lance hadn't wanted to refuse the invitation, and if it was a small gathering of just their friends, he would've agreed.

But he didn't like crowded places, so he had refused.

Ace's expression had immediately changed. His blue eyes darkened with sadness, and his smile had vanished.

He remembered his heart hurting at Ace's expression, and he had found himself reaching out with one hand to comfort the younger boy.

But Ace hadn't wanted his comfort or his touch.

His heart clenched as he remembered Ace stepping away from his touch, turning around, and walking away.

Ace's expression had kept haunting him. It had gotten to a point where it appeared in his dreams.

His dreams were full of Ace and the expression on his face. He had found himself reaching out to comfort Ace, but Ace would always walk away. His feet always froze to the ground, preventing him from following Ace. It had always made him look down at his hands, wondering if there was something wrong with him and if Ace didn't like his touch.

And after waking up from *another* dream that had sad blue eyes in it, he knew he had to do something.

He knew he had to make it up to Ace somehow.

That was why he had sent the message, and it was why he was waiting for Ace to come.

Although considering their last meeting, there were no guarantees that Ace would come, but Lance felt hopeful.

If Ace wanted to see him as much as he wanted to see Ace, he was certain Ace would come.

A snort and something nudging his free hand made him open his eyes.

His friend, the red transport dragon, was looking at him, concerned. The dragon nudged his free hand again with her snout, wanting Lance to pet her again.

Lance chuckled, letting go of his cloak to resume the petting. His eyes softened at the concern. "I'll be alright. I'm just waiting for a certain idiot to show up. He is late," he said softly. "I'll be counting on you to get us to our destination."

The red dragon nodded her head, closing her eyes at the gentle petting and making a happy humming noise.

"Lance-sama?"

Lance looked over at Devi. He blinked, surprised to see Devi looking hesitant.

Devi looked at Lance, hesitant. "Devi doesn't mean to question your decision or judgment, but are you sure you want to go through with this, devi?"

Lance blinked, surprised by the question. "What do you mean, Devi?"

"You're about to show something personal to Ace and the white dumpling. Are you sure about this, devi?"

Lance remembered his plans for Ace and nodded. "Of course. This is the only way to make it up to him."

Devi nodded determinedly. "I understand, Lance-sama. Devi will support you, devi." He knew Ace made Lance-sama happy, and if Lance-sama was certain about his decision, he would show his support. He made a note to himself to make sure the white dumpling didn't get in the way.

Lance nodded once more. "Thank you."

Devi almost teared up at Lance's heartfelt gratitude. He smiled, hitting his chest with one arm. "Yes, devi!"

"Lance!"

Hearing his name shouted by a familiar voice, Lance turned around.

Ace had finally arrived.

Ace ran over to him, smiling at the sight of his rival.

Tamazo flew past him, stopping before Devi and smiling cheerfully. "Happy New Year, tama! Tama got to eat a lot today, tama! What about Devi, tama?"

Devi rolled his eyes, unsurprised the other Tamadora mentioned food. "New Year's isn't just about the food, devi." He was about to continue speaking, but then he noticed Tamazo flying over to the mapple tree. His eye twitched, feeling annoyed. "Listen to Devi when Devi is speaking to you, white dumpling!"

Tamazo, who had already grabbed more than a handful of the fruit, tilted his head, confused. "Tama?"

“You...!” Devi growled, flying over to the mapple tree.

Tamazo looked at him and smiled cheerfully. “Look, tama! I picked a lot, so we can share, tama!”

Once he was close enough, Devi hit Tamazo on the top of his head with one arm.

“Ow! That hurt, tama!” Tamazo complained. “What did you that for, tama?”

Devi huffed, crossing his arms. “That’s what you get for not listening, devi.”

While the two Tamadora started an argument, Ace stopped before Lance, scratching his cheek sheepishly. “Sorry to make you wait, Lance.”

Lance blinked, surprised by Ace’s attire. He couldn’t stop his pale cheeks from flushing a light pink.

Ace was wearing a... *kimono*?

And it wasn’t just any kimono, but a dark red one. It fit Ace perfectly, and it made him look... *handsome*. The obi went well with his eyes, and the blue dragon design was a nice touch.

Ace couldn’t help but gulp nervously as Lance stared at him. Why was Lance looking at him like that? He blinked a few times, finally noticing Lance’s eyes weren’t looking at his eyes like they normally did.

He looked down, seeing his kimono and understood. This was the first time he had worn something outside of his normal outfit in front of Lance. He looked back up at Lance, laughing sheepishly. “How does it look?” he asked shyly.

Lance belatedly realized he was staring, resisted the urge to clear his throat, and nodded. “It looks good.”

Lance probably meant the kimono, but Ace couldn’t stop his cheeks from flushing at the compliment. “Thank you, Lance. Mom worked hard on it for me.”

Lance nodded once more. He figured Ace’s mother made the kimono. After a few moments of silence, Lance turned back to the red dragon waiting patiently. He turned his head to look at Ace. “Ace...”

Ace blinked, surprised. Lance sounded as if he were calling him. His eyes widened, laughing sheepishly as he realized what it meant. He walked closer, smiling as he saw Lance pet the dragon.

Once he got close enough, he blinked a few times as Lance mounted the dragon carefully. What was he doing?

“Let’s go, Devi,” Lance called, not looking away from Ace’s eyes.

Devi looked over at Lance. “Yes, Lance-sama.” He flew over to the dragon, turning around to look at Tamazo once he sat down. “Hurry up, white dumpling! We’re going to leave you behind, devi!”

Tamazo, who was still carrying more than a handful of fruit, looked over at him. “Wait, tama! Don’t leave me behind, tama! You forgot your share, Devi!” He flew over to the dragon, gesturing towards the fruit as he sat down.

“Why do I have to sit next to *you*, devi?” Devi complained. Compared to other times, though, his complaint didn’t have any heat in it. He wordlessly accepted the fruit Tamazo gave him and started eating.

Tamazo smiled cheerfully and started eating his share of the fruit.

Now they were only waiting on Ace to climb aboard.

“Ace.” Lance held out his hand.

Any response Ace could’ve made died in his throat at the soft look on Lance’s face. He was imagining that soft, tender look, right?

And while he had no problems riding dragons before, he felt himself reaching out for Lance’s hand. As their hands touched, he almost jumped at the sparks that came with the contact.

Lance helped him up, and after Ace made himself comfortable, Lance let go of his hand to tap on the dragon’s right shoulder gently.

After two taps, the red dragon flapped her wings until they were in the air.

As the dragon flew towards their destination, Ace looked at Lance and tilted his head. When Lance sent a message, he didn’t know Lance was going to take him somewhere. “Where are we going?” he asked curiously.

Lance hummed, looking at him. “A special place,” he said vaguely.

“Do I know this place?” Ace asked, trying to get some clues on where they were going.

Lance shook his head. His golden eyes darkened with sadness for a moment before returning to normal. “You don’t.”

Ace frowned, resisting the urge to pout. “Is it far?” He had noticed Lance’s eyes darkening for a moment and couldn’t help but feel worried. Was Lance alright?

Lance thought for a few moments before shaking his head again. “No.”

Ace huffed, unable to stop the pout this time. “You… Stop being so vague.”

Lance smirked, amused at the sight of his pout.

Ace shook his head, turning his head away. “Fine. Don’t tell me.”

Lance couldn't stop the chuckle at the adorable sight.

Ace's eyes widened upon hearing the chuckle. The corners of his mouth quirked up into a smile.

When they were halfway to their destination, Ace shivered. Was it just him, or did it just get colder? When he was at the shrine with his friends, it had been chilly, but it wasn't as bad as it was now.

Maybe it was because they were flying?

He almost jumped as a hand wrapped around his waist, pulling him closer to a warm presence beside him. He looked at Lance, his breath taken away at the gentle look the other was giving him.

Lance wrapped his cloak around Ace, pulling him closer, so there was no space left between them. He waited for a protest from Ace, but to his surprise (and delight), it never came. When Ace only looked at him confused, he cleared his throat. "You were cold."

Ace smiled at him, feeling warm from the cloak around him and Lance's presence next to him. He found he didn't mind being this close to his rival. "Thank you, Lance."

Lance couldn't help but feel happy at the sight of his smile. He resisted the urge to clear his throat again, turning his head to look straight ahead. "Of course."

When they reached their destination, Lance got off the dragon and held a hand out for Ace. Smiling, Ace took it and got off the dragon with Lance's help. Lance let go once Ace was standing beside him.

Once Tamazo and Devi got off the dragon, Lance gave the red dragon one gentle tap on the left shoulder and couldn't resist petting her snout. "We might be a while. You can go to the forest if you want. I'll be counting on you for the ride back."

The red dragon leaned into his touch, making a happy humming noise.

Lance chuckled, petting her one more time before turning around to find everyone waiting for him. His golden eyes caught Ace's eyes. "Let's go."

As Lance started walking away from them, Ace and the two Tamadora quickly followed.

Ace walked next to Lance and frowned as he looked around at their destination. He didn't recognize any of his surroundings.

They had landed in a forest. The trees didn't have any leaves on them. The brown leaves lied on the ground. Some of them had pieces missing. It looked like a normal forest in winter. He could see some snow on the ground, although he couldn't tell if it was old snow or new snow.

But what unsettled Ace was that he couldn't hear any other noise besides their footsteps.

Normally, he would hear other noises (especially other monsters' voices), but he couldn't hear anything.

He bit his lip, feeling more uncomfortable the deeper they went into the forest.

When Lance had mentioned a special place, this wasn't the place he had been expecting.

He couldn't help but look over at the older boy, unconsciously seeking some reassurance. "Where are we?" he asked softly.

"We're almost there," Lance said, ignoring his question. Feeling the other's gaze, he looked at Ace, eyes softening at the visible uneasiness in his expression. "Don't worry. I'm here with you."

Ace's cheeks flushed pink at the reassurance. He bit his lip, looking around before returning his gaze to Lance. "But Lance... I have a bad feeling. I don't think we're supposed to be here."

Lance's eyes widened a little before quickly returning to their normal calm state. He hadn't known the area would unsettle Ace to this extent.

But considering the place they were about to arrive at, he could understand why.

He remembered Devi had felt uncomfortable the first time they walked through this forest as well, but at least, Devi had known what their destination was.

Ace didn't know anything, yet he was still walking beside him despite feeling uneasy in the unknown area.

After everything that happened between them, Ace had no problem putting his full trust in him. A warm feeling grew inside his chest at the feeling that Ace trusted him and forgave him.

He felt awed and appreciative of the boy's trust in him.

"This place is creepy, tama," Tamazo said, looking around. He and Devi were flying on their respective partner's free side. "Almost like a ghost is about to appear, tama." He shivered, flying closer to Ace at the thought of ghosts.

Ace couldn't help but gulp at the thought of ghosts. His blue eyes expressed his fear.

Devi, who knew where they were going, couldn't help but glare over at Tamazo. "Don't talk about ghosts, white dumpling!"

He could understand why Ace and the white dumpling felt unsettled by the area, though.

This was his third time visiting the area with Lance, and he thought it wouldn't unsettle him anymore.

But he was wrong.

It still unsettled him.

He was trying to act like it didn't bother him, though, since he was with Ace and the white dumpling.

"But it is true, tama! Is Devi afraid of ghosts, too, tama?" Tamazo said, moving away from Ace a little to look at Devi.

Devi scoffed, crossing his arms outwardly trying to portray a confident front. "Of course not, devi! I'm not a brat like you, devi!"

"Tama isn't a brat!"

"Yes, you are, devi."

Tamazo was about to answer, but Lance spoke up before he could.

"Be quiet, Devi."

Devi's ears and wings drooped, looking at Lance with sad eyes. "Devi..."

"You too, Tamazo," Ace said, exasperated.

Tamazo's eyes widened, looking taken aback. "Tama!"

"But Tamazo has a point. This place is creepy," Ace said, looking around him once more. He shivered, a frightened look appearing on his face at the thought of ghosts.

Lance noticed his frightened look and couldn't help but grab Ace's hand. Ace looked at him, surprised. The brunet's cheeks flushed pink at the touch, making Lance feel amused. Lance squeezed the younger boy's hand once before letting go and looking away.

"This place is uninhabitable," Lance said, acting outwardly that their little moment didn't affect him.

"Uninhabitable? Why? Is there something wrong with the forest?" Ace asked, confused. It was a cliché, but... the brief contact they shared lessened his fear. He didn't feel as frightened with Lance by his side.

Lance would look out for him, and he would look out for Lance.

Lance shook his head, his golden eyes darkening with sadness for a moment. "The forest isn't the problem."

Ace had noticed those golden eyes darkening and wanted to ask if Lance was alright, but a familiar noise stopped him before he could voice the words. He tilted his head, trying to recognize the familiar noise.

It sounded like... rushing water?

Upon approaching a cliff with a path, Lance stopped walking, causing Ace and the Tamadora to stop as well.

Lance turned his head to look at Ace. "Be careful. It is easy to lose your footing here. Follow me and walk carefully."

Ace smiled at Lance's concern for him. "Yeah. I'll be careful."

Lance nodded at his promise, turned his head back to the path, and started walking down the path.

Ace followed him, careful of where he was placing his feet.

The two Tamadora followed their respective partners, looking out for fragile parts of the path and warning their respective partners about them.

The Tamadora's voices, the sound of their footsteps, and the sound of nearby rushing water were the only noises as they continued down the path, and it didn't take long for them to reach the halfway point.

Ace, who was eyeing the ground nervously, looked up at Lance.

He could see Lance's blue cloak covering his strong and confident back. It almost made him want to reach out and grab hold of it.

His cheeks flushed pink at his thoughts.

He quickly shook his head and opened his mouth, thinking a conversation would distract him from his embarrassing thoughts.

But only a yelp escaped his lips as his feet touched a fragile part of the path. The fragile part of the path quickly started breaking away from the path.

Tamazo, who had been flying ahead of Ace and pointing out the fragile parts, looked back at him at the sound of his yelp. His eyes widened at the sight of Ace stepping onto a fragile part of the path and starting to fall. "Ace!" he cried, immediately flying over to Ace's side. He leaned his full body weight into Ace's side, trying to keep him from falling and push him back towards the path.

Lance immediately turned around at the sound of Ace's yelp. His eyes widened for a moment before returning to their normal calm state.

He quickly crossed the distance that separated them, reaching out with one hand to grab Ace's closest wrist. His eyes narrowed, pulling Ace away from the cliff edge and immediately wrapping his arms around him in a protective embrace when he was close enough.

He stepped backwards, bringing the younger boy with him and leaning his back against the rock wall of the cliff and couldn't stop the small sigh of relief that escaped his lips.

Ace let out a shaky, sheepish laugh. “T-Thank you, Lance.” He could feel his heart beating rapidly, although he was unsure whether that was because of his near fall or because he was close to Lance.

Lance sighed, tightening his grip on Ace and feeling both of their hearts beating rapidly. “I told you to be careful,” he scolded. There was no heat in his words, though.

Only concern.

There was no amount of words that could describe the fright he felt at seeing Ace in danger of falling off the cliff.

Thankfully, he saved him before Ace could fall.

Ace nodded against his chest, embarrassed by the proximity with his rival and what just happened. There was a part of him that was enjoying the feeling of Lance’s arms around him, though. He quickly pushed that thought away. “Sorry, Lance.”

They stayed in that position for a few more minutes before Lance reluctantly let go. As much as he wanted to continue hugging Ace, they had somewhere they needed to be.

Lance turned around, tugging his hat down to cover the pink on his pale cheeks. “Let’s go. I’ll stay with you this time.”

Ace felt disappointed Lance let go, but he understood it couldn’t last forever. Lance had wanted to take him somewhere. He looked down at the path, eyeing it nervously. His recent experience with the rocky path made him step closer to Lance, grabbing the back of this cloak with one hand.

Lance blinked, surprised at the hand grabbing his cloak. His head turned to look at Ace, noticing the boy was eyeing the rocky path nervously.

Ace looked up from the path and into Lance’s eyes, cheeks flushing pink at the intense gaze. “Sorry. Is this okay?”

Lance nodded. “It is fine. Although...” He reached out with his hand, grabbing the hand on his cloak and pulling the other closer. Ace let out a yelp as the older boy pulled him closer, blinking as Lance adjusted his grip. Ace looked down at his hand, noticing his hand was now holding onto Lance’s cloak much more securely than before. When Ace looked up at him, Lance smirked. “Hold on tight. We don’t want you to fall off again,” he teased.

Ace pouted, feeling embarrassed as Lance teased him. “Well, I’m sorry for getting distracted. It wasn’t my fault,” he said, huffing.

Lance raised an eyebrow, but before he could speak up, Tamazo flew over and hit Ace on top of his head with one arm, glaring.

Ace winced at the pain, reaching up to rub the spot Tamazo hit with his free hand. “Ow! What was that for, Tamazo?” he said, glaring at his partner.

“Tama specifically told you not to step on that spot, tama! I can’t believe you weren’t listening to Tama!” Tamazo said, placing his hands on his hips.

Ace had almost died. Again.

He felt frustrated as he remembered trying to help Ace, but failing. It was a good thing Lance swooped in like a hero when he did; otherwise, Ace would’ve fallen off the cliff.

But Tamazo was glad Ace was alright and felt grateful Lance saved Ace.

“Like I said, it wasn’t my fault. Something distracted me,” Ace grumbled.

“What distracted you?”

Ace looked over at Lance, blinking at the question. “Huh?”

Resisting the urge to roll his eyes, Lance raised an eyebrow. “What distracted you?”

Ace’s cheeks flushed pink as he recalled what had distracted him. “It was nothing,” he said quickly.

Lance gave him an unconvinced look. It was definitely *something*. Ace wouldn’t almost fall off a cliff because of nothing. He felt curious, noticing the younger boy’s flushed cheeks and feeling tempted to ask about it. But he shook off the temptation and turned his head, deciding to drop it.

He could always force Ace to tell him later.

“Let’s go. We came here for a reason,” Lance said. Before Ace or either of the Tamadora could speak, he moved forward along the path once more, forcing everyone else to follow.

When they reached the bottom of the cliff, Ace reluctantly let go of Lance’s cloak and stepped up beside him, looking at him. “Thank you, Lance.”

Lance nodded. “It’s no problem.” There was no reason for Ace to continue what he was doing, but Lance had found himself relishing the close contact with Ace and wanted it to continue.

Unfortunately, Ace had let go.

Determined not to show the disappointment on his face, he continued moving forward, causing everyone else to follow.

Several minutes later, they arrived at a waterfall and stopped walking.

The large waterfall roared as the light blue water crashed into the blue water below it, turning white as it did so. There were brown rock cliffs on either side of the waterfall, and each of the cliffs had some green moss growing on it. Ace could smell a musty odor emanating from the surrounding trees and rocks. He knew the water would be freezing if he jumped in for a

swim. He was a bit surprised the waterfall wasn't frozen, but maybe it was because it wasn't cold enough for it freeze yet.

At the sight of the waterfall, Ace found himself getting more confused.

Lance had said that this place was uninhabitable, but it didn't seem that way to him.

There was a water source, and while there weren't any fruit growing on the trees right now, he had recognized several different fruit trees. And there were probably various amounts of grasses and herbs that would grow in spring.

He even spotted a few places that could serve as dens for monsters.

Why was this place uninhabitable?

Did Lance mean uninhabitable for only Dragonoids and humans?

Just as he was about to speak his thoughts, his eyes noticed some drops. He frowned, watching the drops.

There were drops of all the elements. The drops almost seemed... restless. While the drops normally hovered in place and didn't move much, these drops were moving all around them. Some of them were moving in zigzag motions while others moved in circular motions. Some of them drifted towards the sky while others floated in between the trees around them. It was as if the drops were uneasy.

It couldn't be a Drop Impact because there weren't enough drops, but it seemed similar.

It reminded him of an area after a Drop Impact.

"Lance..."

"... Yeah," Lance said, noticing the Drops and frowning. He walked over to a different path and stopped, noticing that this path would take them to their destination. He turned his head to look at Ace. "Let's go. We're almost there."

"Almost there to what, tama?" Tamazo complained.

Ace shook his head, exasperated. "Can't you be patient?" He supposed it was only a matter of time before Tamazo started complaining, though. He was surprised Tamazo hadn't complained before now. He caught up with Lance, smiling apologetically for his partner's behavior.

Lance shook his head, wordlessly saying Ace didn't have to apologize. He continued walking, causing everyone else to catch up.

As they continued walking, Ace couldn't help but walk closer to Lance, feeling the uneasiness from before.

It was the first time he felt this uneasy from a place he had never been to before, and he couldn't stop himself from looking around, as if expecting an attack.

Lance felt his presence by his side and glanced over, noticing the visible uneasiness on his face. Instead of speaking, though, he let his hand brush against Ace's as they walked, feeling the sparks from the contact.

Ace almost jumped at the hand brushing against his and looked over at Lance, mouth agape. His cheeks flushed pink as their hands kept brushing against each other. He looked away, his mouth closing. He smiled, feeling grateful for the contact.

Lance watched Ace's reaction out of the corner of his eye, unable to stop his smirk as he noticed the color of Ace's cheeks. When he saw Ace's smile, he felt pleased.

A few minutes later, Ace blinked a few times at seeing the vast expanse of blue water from a distance.

He still didn't know where they were. Somewhere close to a lake or the ocean?

He was about to ask where they were, but his eyes noticed something out of the corner of his eye. He looked over and frowned, noticing more drops.

This time, the drops floated past them and towards the water in front of them.

Lance stopped, throwing an arm out to the side of him.

Ace let out a surprised noise as he stopped walking, almost walking into Lance's arm. He narrowed his eyes and looked at Lance. "What do you think you're doing?"

Lance looked back at him, letting his arm fall and giving him an unimpressed look. "Saving you from walking off the edge." He raised an eyebrow mockingly. "Unless you want to fall into the water?"

Ace blinked at his words, surprised. "The edge?" He looked away from Lance and down at the water, almost letting out a yelp as he noticed how close he was from walking off the cliff and falling into the water. He looked back up at Lance, laughing sheepishly. "Uh... Right. Thank you."

Lance shook his head, turning his head to look at something. "We're here."

Ace blinked a few times, confused. Here was their destination?

But there was nothing here.

He turned his head to his left, surprised to see a green bush with white flowers. Some of the flowers had wilted, but most of them looked alright, considering the season. He furrowed his eyebrows, still not understanding why Lance took him here. He turned his body and head to look in the direction Lance was in.

His eyes widened at the sight that greeted his eyes.

Destroyed houses and other buildings lied in the water below them. A lot of the destroyed buildings were resting on giant brown rocks underneath the water. Some of the houses and other buildings were almost underwater. A lot of the buildings, Ace noticed, didn't suffer a lot of damage. Some of the houses and buildings still had their colored roofs, and some of the structures of the buildings looked undamaged.

It was as if some type of disaster had hit this place.

"What... What happened here?" Ace asked, looking horrified.

Lance looked over at him, eyes softening at how it was affecting him. "A Drop Impact. No one could stop it in time."

"B-But what about the Guild? They didn't know about the Drop Impact?"

Lance looked back at the buildings in the water, scowling. His eyes darkened with anger. "Someone in the Guild caused the Drop Impact to happen."

"Someone in the Guild? Who would do such a thing?" Ace asked weakly. He couldn't believe someone in the Guild had purposefully caused the Drop Impact to happen. It just seemed so... *heinous*.

He felt angry someone would do such a thing. He wouldn't forgive the Dragon Caller responsible for causing the Drop Impact.

Who would do such a horrible thing to this village?

Lance shook his head, reining in his anger. "The Dragon Caller responsible already paid the price."

"I don't... understand."

Lance looked back at him, confused.

"Why is this place special to you? Why did you take me here?" Ace asked, feeling dizzy. He took a step away from the edge, bringing a hand up to hold his head.

What was going on?

He didn't understand anything. There was a prickling feeling in the back of his mind. It was as if something Lance said sounded familiar.

But he had never been to this place before.

And Lance had never told him anything about this place before now.

Lance walked over, placing his hands on Ace's shoulders once he was close enough. Golden eyes looked at the younger boy, concerned. "I'm sorry. I didn't think the sight would affect you this much." He admitted softly.

Ace let go of his head, wishing desperately he could protest and say that he was alright.

What was he doing?

He was acting weak in front of his rival.

But he really couldn't find it in himself to care. Lance had seen many of his vulnerable moments before.

What was one more?

His hand reached up and held onto one of Lance's, hoping it wouldn't move. It was giving him support.

He closed his eyes, groaning. He leaned his head down onto Lance's shoulder, wishing for the dizziness to disappear.

Lance kept the hand Ace was holding on his shoulder, and his other hand wrapped around Ace's waist and pulled him closer, letting his body rest against his chest. "It is alright. Take your time."

Ace was going to protest since he still wanted answers to his questions, but the only thing that escaped his lips was another groan. His free arm wrapped around Lance, clinging desperately to the comfort and support the older boy was giving him.

Lance looked up, noticing the concerned looks on both Tamadora. Normally, he would feel surprised and amused Devi was showing his emotions freely, but under these circumstances, all he could do was nod at him.

Both Tamadora were floating near their respective partner, silently watching.

Devi was the first to turn away. After shooting Ace another poorly concealed concerned look, he looked at Tamazo, regaining his composure. He was unable to stop the sadness in his eyes from showing, though. "Come on, white dumpling. Pick flowers with me, devi."

Tamazo looked at Ace, concerned. The sight of the destroyed village must've really hurt and shocked him.

Tamazo knew he had felt horrified upon seeing the destroyed village. And he had felt angry. He felt like hurting the Dragon Caller responsible for this destruction. His ears picked up Devi's voice, making him look at him. "Flowers, tama?" he asked, confused.

Devi nodded, pointing to the white flowers. "See those flowers, devi? Pick some of them for me, devi."

Tamazo turned his head to look at the flowers, eyes lighting up at the sight of them. "They look delicious, tama!"

Devi groaned, bringing his arm up to slap his forehead. Did the white dumpling think about anything else besides food and eating? He flew over to his light counterpart, hitting him on

top of his head.

“Ow! That hurt, tama!” Tamazo complained. “What did you do that for, tama?”

“We’re not going to eat the flowers, devi. We’re going to pick the flowers to make a bouquet, devi,” Devi said, exasperated.

Tamazo giggled, smiling cheerfully. “Why didn’t you say so, tama?” He flew over to the flowers, turning his head to gesture Devi over with one arm.

Devi’s eye twitched, feeling annoyed. “That’s what I… Never mind, devi.” He looked over at Lance, giving him a nod before flying over to join Tamazo.

Lance couldn’t stop the appreciation he felt at Devi’s kind gesture. While the two Tamadora weren’t too far away from them, they were giving him and Ace some privacy. He would have to make sure to thank Devi later.

Ace gripping the back of his cloak made him look back at the younger boy.

The brunet opened his eyes, recognizing belatedly that his head was resting on Lance’s shoulder.

And while normally he would feel flustered, all he could feel right now was gratitude.

He felt deeply grateful Lance was there by his side and being patient with him.

He pulled his head away reluctantly, looking up into concerned golden eyes.

“Lance. Where are we? Why is this place special to you?” Ace asked softly. His blue eyes were pleading for some answers.

Lance had wanted to wait until Ace felt better to tell him where they were, but he felt something in him relenting because of those blue eyes directed towards him. He closed his eyes, sighing. “... This is what’s left of the village, Luna.”

“Luna?” Ace asked, confused. He had never heard of that name before.

Lance opened his eyes, his arm around Ace’s waist tightening. “Luna is...” He paused, his eyes darkening with sadness. “Luna is my hometown.”

Ace’s eyes widened. This was Lance’s hometown? He had known Lance was an orphan, but he didn’t know a Drop Impact had destroyed Lance’s hometown and killed his parents.

His mouth opened, realizing why Lance’s words sounded familiar earlier.

He remembered being at the Coliseum, facing off against Lance.

Lance had been in his Reversion state and was about to attack him when Ana dropped in from the sky.

Ana had mentioned something about how his dad, King, didn't cause the Drop Impact.

Was she talking about the Drop Impact that destroyed Luna?

"Lance... I'm sorry. I... I didn't know," Ace said weakly. He closed his eyes, his body starting to shake. He remembered that Lance had looked angry with him at the Coliseum.

Was that why Lance turned on him?

Did he think Ace's dad caused the Drop Impact? And because Lance didn't know where his dad was, he took his anger out on him?

Had Lance been alone with those kinds of thoughts the whole time he was in his Reversion state?

Lance shook his head, eyes darkening at the visible pain Ace was in. He knew this would happen. He hadn't wanted to cause this much pain, but he knew what Ace was like.

He knew he would cause pain to Ace, but he still went through with it.

Why did he keep hurting him?

Feeling the younger boy's body starting to shake, he gently removed Ace's hand from his own. Once it was free, he wrapped his now free arm around the other's waist, hugging him closer in a protective embrace. "Ace," he called softly, making pained blue eyes open and look at him. "It is alright. You saved me. I'm here with you."

Ace barely stopped himself from whimpering, wanting to keep some composure in front of Lance. His free arm wrapped around Lance, unconsciously seeking comfort and reassurance.

"Ace..."

Lance saying his name broke something inside of him. Ace whimpered, feeling his eyes tear up. He didn't want to start crying in front of Lance, but he couldn't stop. Tears started falling from his eyes, making him hide his face in Lance's chest, not wanting his rival to see his tears. The tears were making visible wet marks on Lance's cloak.

Lance's heart clenched upon hearing the whimper and noticing Ace's tears. He released one of his arms, making Ace whimper at the loss of contact. The older boy shushed him gently, moving his arm up to Ace's hair. His hand caressed the brunet's hair soothingly, hoping it would alleviate the brunet's pain.

"It is alright, Ace," Lance whispered, not wanting to ruin the moment by speaking louder. "I'm here. You saved me with your light."

Ace shook his head, letting out a sob. "I'm sorry. I caused you so much pain. How can I..." He paused, breathing in deeply to try and compose himself. It didn't work. "How can I make it up to you?"

Lance's eyes narrowed. "That wasn't your fault," he said firmly. It was Jest's fault, and it was partly his own fault for letting Jest manipulate him. His eyes softened in the next moment. "We hurt each other. But you finally saved me. I'm here right now because of you."

Ace pulled away to look into Lance's eyes, tears still falling from his eyes. "*Lance...*"

"I'm not going to leave you. You aren't alone," Lance whispered, bringing the hand that was caressing Ace's hair down to gently brush the tears away.

Ace smiled a watery smile, closing his eyes at the other's gentle touch. He breathed in deeply then let it out, feeling a little better at Lance's words. "Thank you, Lance. I'm not going to leave you either," he said, eyes opening. His blue eyes had a small light in them, expressing his determination. "I'll never leave you. I'm here for you." He laughed a weak sheepish laugh. "I'm not doing a very good job at being strong for you. I know you are in pain as well."

Lance felt something in his chest lighten at the sight of determined blue eyes. He shook his head, smiling tenderly. "You are strong, Ace. Your presence and support means a lot to me." He leaned in, resting his forehead on Ace's. "There is only one person I could share this with and only one person I want by my side. And that person is *you*."

Ace's eyes widened at Lance's admission. He could feel tears starting to form once more. "*Lance... I... I... Me too. Don't leave me.*" Tears fell down his cheeks, noticing Lance's eyes softening with concern. "Please. Not again."

He wouldn't be able to take it if Lance left him again.

Lance pulled away slightly, brushing his tears away once more. "I won't. I promise," he said, knowing he wouldn't break that promise.

After everything that happened, he couldn't bear to leave Ace again. He would stay with him forever if Ace wanted him to.

Ace's eyes closed once more, feeling relief at Lance's words. He breathed in deeply to compose himself then let it out, feeling Lance brushing away his tears.

He smiled softly. Maybe it was Lance's words or the relief at his words, but he found his tears drying up. And a few moments later, his tears had stopped.

Lance was the person he trusted most, and he wanted him to stay by his side forever.

And it was because of those feelings that made him open his eyes, lean up, and kiss Lance on the lips.

Lance's eyes widened before quickly returning to normal, his heart racing at the contact. Ace's lips were soft and warm. He let his hand drop, wrapping it back around Ace's waist.

Ace felt his own heart racing at the contact and closed his eyes, moaning at the lack of response. The brunet's lips moved softly and hesitantly, encouraging Lance to respond.

Lance's eyes closed and responded to the kiss. He could feel Ace jumping slightly at his response, unable to stop the smirk from forming.

Even with his eyes closed, Ace could almost feel the smirk on the other's face, making him huff into the kiss.

It wasn't his fault Lance had surprised him by finally responding to the kiss.

Lance's lips were soft and warm. The caress of his lips was softer and gentler than Ace had imagined.

They pulled away for a breather, and Ace couldn't stop himself from shivering at the intense and passionate, yet somehow soft look Lance was giving him. They were close enough that he could easily lean in and kiss him again.

Thinking Ace was cold, Lance released one of his arms to tug the cloak around Ace.

Ace's cheeks flushed pink at the caring gesture, feeling warmth from Lance's body heat and his cloak. After all this time wondering if Lance felt the same and wondering what it would be like to kiss him, he couldn't stop the goofy, love-sick smile from forming.

Lance would've smirked or chuckled at the love-sick smile on Ace's face, but he belatedly realized he had a love-sick smile on his face as well. He couldn't stop the chuckle, finding it amusing and somehow fitting that Ace beat him to it.

Ace really was his true rival.

He would let Ace have this victory.

Instead of wrapping his free arm back around Ace's waist, he let his hand briefly brush the fabric that covered Ace's waist before letting it travel upward.

Ace shivered at the sensation of Lance's fingers, somehow feeling the touch through the fabric and feeling the hand slowly make its way upward.

Lance felt pleased and a tad smug at Ace's reaction. He knew this time Ace's shivering had nothing to do with the cold. He lightly brushed the brunet's sides before moving to his shoulder. He squeezed the other's shoulder briefly before letting go and letting his hand brush against Ace's neck and chin, finally stopping at his cheek.

Ace closed his eyes, leaning into the gentle touch on his cheek.

"Ace..."

His eyes opened at Lance calling his name, noticing the need, desire, and... *love* in his rival's eyes. The sight took his breath away.

"Ace. I brought you here for a reason," Lance whispered, not wanting to ruin the moment by speaking louder. He paused, closing his eyes for a moment before opening them. Ace felt

surprised to see the shame and regret in Lance's eyes. "I wanted to... apologize. For refusing your invitation and for... hurting you once more. I'm sorry."

Ace shook his head, smiling softly. "It is alright. I know you don't like crowded places. Besides, you sent me a message today, asking me to come. I had already forgiven you before I even met up with you." He gave him a playful look. "Why do you think I was smiling when I met up with you? I wouldn't have smiled if I hadn't forgiven you."

Lance's eyes closed, feeling deeply grateful for the other boy's forgiveness and kindness. His eyes opened, revealing his bright golden eyes. His eyes no longer expressed shame or regret. Instead, a suspicious glint was in his eyes, making Ace almost gulp nervously. "Come to think of it, you were running towards me. I almost thought you were going to hug me," he teased.

Ace's cheeks flushed pink much to Lance's amusement. "O-Of course I was running! I didn't want to make you wait long."

Lance hummed, looking unconvinced. He raised an eyebrow. "Was that the only reason?"

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Of course not! I..." He paused, belatedly realizing what he had said and what it meant. He groaned, resisting the urge to bury his face in Lance's shoulder. "That isn't what I meant."

Lance nodded, smirking. "I think it is exactly what you meant."

Ace closed his eyes, groaning again.

Lance chuckled, his eyes soft and tender.

There was one thing left to do, and Lance knew he had to beat Ace to it.

"*Ace...*" he called softly, making Ace open his eyes. "I'm in love with you."

Ace should've felt irritated his rival beat him to it, but he couldn't find it in himself to feel irritated. He felt happy Lance told him how he felt about him. "I love you too!" he proclaimed.

Saying those words made a smile form on Lance's face.

The brunet couldn't look away from Lance's smile. It was the softest and gentlest smile he had ever seen on his rival's face. It was so tender, intimate, and... *beautiful*.

He *really* wanted to kiss Lance again.

It seemed Lance either shared his thoughts or read his mind because in the next moment, Lance leaned in and kissed him again.

Ace stood on his tiptoes, wrapping his arms around Lance's neck, closing his eyes and responding to the kiss.

Lance hummed, pleased with the reaction. He closed his eyes, smiling as he fought for control of the kiss. The hand that was on Ace's cheek moved and briefly touched one of Ace's hands before slowly making its way down his arm.

While Ace did look handsome in his kimono, it was starting to irritate him. He wanted to touch more of Ace's skin. It would be much easier to touch his skin if he was wearing his normal outfit.

Ace moaned into the kiss at feeling Lance's hand making its way down his arm and under his kimono sleeve, letting Lance take control of their closed mouth kiss. He enjoyed the feeling of Lance touching his skin, but why was Lance moving so slow?

He wouldn't say it out loud, but he knew he had a weakness for Lance taking control. It just seemed so natural for the older boy to take control, and he found himself not minding at all. There was definitely something appealing and irresistible about it.

But he wouldn't give up on trying to take control.

Lance was his rival, and he wanted to beat him in battle.

Even if their battle was a lip-lock and not a Dragon Caller battle.

Lance was unable to stop the smirk from forming as the younger boy moaned into the kiss. His hand, that was still moving up the younger boy's arm slowly, finally reached his shoulder. He squeezed it, making Ace moan once more. He felt pleased at the reaction to his touch and resolved to touch more of his skin, wanting to hear it again.

It had only been several moments, but Lance knew they had to stop. There were still a couple of places he wanted to show to Ace. He reluctantly pulled away, his hand tracing a few small circles on Ace's shoulder before pulling away.

Their breathing was erratic, and both boy's cheeks were pink.

Blue dazed eyes opened, belatedly realizing Lance had pulled away. "Lance..." Ace called breathlessly. He couldn't stop himself from leaning back in, wanting to continue the kiss.

But Lance stopped him with a hand on his shoulder and a finger to his lips.

If he wanted to, he could lick the other's finger.

The thought was a tempting one, and he wondered what kind of expression Lance would show if he did go through with it.

Maybe Lance would look taken aback?

There was a part of him that felt giddy at the thought of catching Lance off guard.

"Ace..."

He blinked, surprised at hearing his name. He belatedly realized what he had just thought and coughed, turning away to hide his pink face. He couldn't stop the pout from forming as he thought about how Lance stopped him.

Noticing Ace stopped leaning in, Lance let the hand that was near Ace's lips make its way over to his cheek. He felt amused, noticing Ace's pink face and pout.

He knew the pink face wasn't because of the kissing.

What did Ace think about?

He felt tempted to ask, but he remembered why he pulled away in the first place, resolving to ask Ace about it later.

Lance couldn't stop the chuckle. Did Ace want to continue the kiss that bad? "We can continue later if you want. I still want to show you something."

Ace's face was still pink as he belatedly realized where they were. "I'm sorry," he said shyly.

Lance shook his head, unable to stop the soft, fond look in his eyes. "It's fine. They would be happy for me."

Ace didn't need clarification on who Lance was talking about. Feeling embarrassed, he hid his face in Lance's chest, mentally apologizing to Lance's parents in heaven.

He groaned. *What a great first impression. I haven't even introduced myself yet.*

Lance chuckled at his embarrassment, letting him stay there until Ace got his composure back.

After Ace got his composure back, Lance let go of his shoulder and grabbed his hand. He turned towards his left and began walking on the path that would lead him into his hometown.

Before Ace could say or do anything, he felt himself pulled forward as Lance started walking, causing him to stumble a little before following him. "Lance!" he exclaimed, surprised at the abrupt action.

Lance looked over his shoulder, tossing him an amused smirk before turning his head back to the direction they were heading in.

Ace pouted at the smirk, not understanding how Lance found his reaction funny.

A few minutes later, Lance stopped before a destroyed house, causing Ace to walk into him.

The brunet stopped and raised his free hand to rub his nose and forehead, narrowing his eyes at the boy in front of him. "Don't stop suddenly."

"... This is what's left of my house."

Ace's glare disappeared at his rival's soft voice, immediately looking at the destroyed house with sad eyes. "Lance..."

The red roof of the house lied on the ground in pieces. The brick and stone walls of the house lied on the ground in pieces as well. There were brown tree branches on top of and making its way through the destroyed house.

It looked as if the house had collapsed.

Ace stepped up next to the other boy and looked over at Lance, concerned.

Lance gritted his teeth. His free hand formed a fist, clenching it to keep repressed emotion from rising to the surface. He looked over at Ace upon feeling the other boy squeeze his hand.

Ace's eyes expressed his concern and sorrow, no doubt trying to empathize with him even though he had never experienced a comparable situation.

Lance felt relieved there was no pity in his eyes. His mouth opened, but several moments later when nothing came out, he closed his mouth, looking away and shaking his head.

This was his third time visiting Luna and his childhood home, and it still brought the emotions he had when he first laid his eyes on the destruction.

He still felt the overwhelming sorrow and frustration. Of course, there was some anger at Jest mixed in with the other emotions, but it stayed below the surface, letting his other emotions take control.

If anyone else was with him, he knew he wouldn't feel as comfortable showing this to them and letting them see his repressed emotions.

But he was with *Ace*.

Ace was someone who wore his heart on his sleeve and allowed him to see him at his most vulnerable moments.

After everything they went through and with how much he loved him, he found he didn't mind letting Ace see one of his vulnerable moments.

Turning to face Ace, he tugged him closer with the hand he was holding. Once he was close enough, he wrapped his arms around him. He closed his eyes and rested his head on top of Ace's, breathing in his addicting and relaxing scent.

It was odd because he didn't even know someone could have the scent of it, but Ace smelled like... the sun.

But in a way, it suited Ace.

Ace had saved him with his light. And it was that light, warmth, and kindness that reassured him, automatically soothing his emotions as if he were an injured dragon that needed

comforting.

... That thought actually wasn't too far from the truth.

He resisted the urge to shake his head at his thoughts, one corner of his mouth quirking up into a smirk.

Only Ace could make him think these thoughts.

Ace didn't speak, letting Lance have his moment. It was obvious Lance didn't want or need words right now. He wrapped his arms around Lance's waist, hoping his presence and warmth was helping Lance somehow.

Lance saw him at some of his most vulnerable moments and helped him through them. The least he could do was do the same (even if the circumstances for said vulnerable moment was much more serious than his own).

Ace didn't know how long had passed before Lance lifted his head and looked at him.

The brunet looked at the white-haired boy, concerned. His eyes were asking Lance if he was alright.

Lance nodded at the silent question, letting go of Ace to turn around. He breathed in deeply then let it out, composing himself once more. He turned back to Ace, apologizing with his eyes and raising a white eyebrow in question.

Ace shook his head at the apology in Lance's eyes, wordlessly saying he didn't have to apologize. At the raised eyebrow, he nodded and smiled, confirming that he was alright.

Lance nodded once more, a small smile forming at the reassurance that Ace was alright. He grabbed his hand once more, and after looking at his childhood home one more time, he looked back at Ace and cleared his throat. "Let's go. I have one more place to show you."

It was the most important one yet, and it was why Lance brought Ace here.

It was true that he wanted to make it up to Ace somehow, but it was also New Year's Day.

Which meant he had to pay a visit to his hometown and... his parents' final resting place.

His parents didn't have an official final resting place since no one put in the effort to create a graveyard, but after everything with Jest ended, he had visited Luna again.

It wasn't much, but he had created a small graveyard that served as his parents' final resting place as well as the final resting place for the other villagers who had lost their lives due to the Drop Impact.

It didn't long for them to arrive at the site of the small graveyard.

Ace looked around, eyebrows furrowing. Where were they? He knew they were still in Luna, but this place seemed a lot different compared to the other parts of Luna.

And a few moments later, he realized why.

This place looked new. It was as if someone had come and created the place by scratch.

There were some brown trees around them. The trees didn't have any leaves on them. The brown leaves lied on the ground. Some of them were in pieces. There were also some green bushes around them. Some of the bushes had flowers growing on them, although it looked like some of the flowers had wilted. While there was always a somber atmosphere (even when Ace stood outside the hometown), the somber atmosphere in this area seemed to surround this area more so than any other area. Besides their footsteps, there were no other noises.

He shivered, feeling uneasy.

And he understood why upon seeing the gray tombstones around them.

They were in a graveyard.

Lance led him over to the tombstones that had his parents' names on them. Letting go of Ace's hand, he took off his hat and stepped closer. He knelt before the tombstones, letting his hat rest near his heart, golden eyes expressing sadness.

Ace looked at the tombstones in front of Lance. He didn't recognize the names, but he knew who they were.

"Mom. Dad. Happy New Year," Lance said softly. His voice seemed to carry in the deserted area, allowing Ace to hear his voice. Lance closed his eyes, thinking about the recent events. "I'm sorry if I made you worry. But everything is alright now." He opened his eyes, turning his head to look at Ace. "Ace saved me. I owe him everything. You probably know by now, but he is also the person I love."

Ace's cheeks flushed pink at Lance's words, feeling embarrassed and honored Lance was including him in this familial atmosphere.

"Ace..."

The brunet blinked, surprised at Lance addressing him. He watched as Lance gestured to come closer, the gesture not registering in his mind at first. It wasn't until Lance gestured again that he realized Lance wanted him to come over. "Oh!" he exclaimed softly, finally stepping closer. He stopped a few steps away from Lance, still feeling as if he were intruding on this familial atmosphere.

Lance shook his head, unable to stop the soft, fond look in his eyes. He reached out with his free hand, grabbing Ace's hand and pulling at it. Ace reluctantly took the last few steps, stopping once he was beside Lance.

Lance nodded his head towards the tombstones, still looking at Ace. "Ace. These are my parents."

Belatedly realizing that meant to introduce himself, Ace laughed sheepishly. He bowed deeply. "I'm Ace's friend, Lance," he said nervously. His eyes widened, realizing his mistake. "No. That isn't right. Uh... I'm Ace. I'm Lance's friend and rival. And..." He paused, wondering how to word what he was about to say and straightened from his bow. "I love him." He proclaimed in a small voice. He shook his head, clearing his throat. "I love him. Your son, that is," he said in a louder voice.

He inwardly groaned, wanting to bury his face in his hands. *Worst. Introduction. Ever. Way to go, Ace.*

Lance turned his head to look at his parents' tombstones. "As you can see, he is an idiot. But he is a really kind and strong idiot. I'm glad I met him. This past year was rough, but I believe the new year will be a good one. Especially because I have Ace by my side."

Ace's cheeks remained pink as Lance spoke. If there was any chance of his cheeks returning to their original color, it had disappeared due to Lance's honest and kind words.

"So don't worry. I have Ace, Devi, and our other friends by my side. We'll stop the Drop Impacts and save the world together. And I'll stay with Ace for as long as he wants me around." Lance smiled a soft smile. "I'll come back and visit next year."

Lance stood up, and after nodding at Ace, he and Ace turned around. They blinked, surprised to see Tamazo and Devi floating at a distance, watching respectfully.

Tamazo handed the flowers to Devi, the small black dragon accepting them with a small grateful nod.

Tamazo floated in place as Devi flew closer to Lance's parents' tombstones. Even Tamazo knew that this place and moment was special, so he didn't dare speak.

Devi stopped by Lance, showing him the bouquet of white flowers. "Just a small offertory, devi. The white dumpling and I gathered flowers, devi." His voice was soft and devoid of any heat when mentioning Tamazo.

Lance looked back at Tamazo then at Devi. "Thank you."

After Devi placed the bouquet of flowers on the ground near the two tombstones, Lance led them out of the graveyard and into another forest.

Ace blinked, surprised to see Lance's red transport dragon waiting for them.

Lance didn't seem surprised, though, walking forward and petting the dragon as his greeting.

After everyone climbed aboard, Lance let go of Ace's hand to tap the dragon's right shoulder gently.

After two taps, the red dragon flapped her wings until they were in the air.

As the dragon started flying, Lance looked over at Ace. "It is getting late. I'll take you home."

The sun had already set, and Ace knew his mom wanted him to come home for the first dinner of the new year.

Ace's cheeks flushed pink much to Lance's amusement. He quickly shook his head. "You don't have to do that. I can ride my own transport dragon home."

"It is fine," Lance said. He nodded to his red dragon. "If you're concerned about her, don't be. She'll be alright."

The red dragon roared, agreeing with Lance's words. She didn't mind flying the long distance to take her master's mate home. She knew her master wanted to spend time with his mate for as long as possible.

And she enjoyed helping her master (even if it involved her master's love life).

Ace opened his mouth, but no protest escaped his lips. He closed his mouth, looking back at Tamazo and Devi.

Tamazo and Devi were sleeping and leaning against each other.

"Tama wants seconds, Ace~" Tamazo said in his sleep.

Ace sweat dropped. It figured Tamazo would have a dream about eating something.

He looked back at Lance, biting his lip. There was a part of him that wanted to insist on riding his own transport dragon, but there was a bigger part of him that wanted to spend time with Lance for as long as possible. He finally nodded. "Yeah. Thank you, Lance." He smiled.

Lance nodded, smiling a small tender smile. "It's no problem."

They flew in silence for several minutes before Ace spoke again.

"Hey, Lance?"

Lance looked at him, raising an eyebrow.

"Can we do this again next year?"

Lance's eyes widened for a few moments before returning to their normal calm state. Those beautiful golden eyes expressed his love and happiness. He cleared his throat, looking away from Ace to compose himself. But no matter how hard he tried to stop it, his voice came out as a hoarse whisper. "Of course."

Ace smiled, blue eyes sparkling with his love and happiness. He leaned in closer, pressing a soft kiss to Lance's cheek. "I'm glad. Happy New Year, Lance."

Lance felt the skin on his cheek tingling due to Ace's kiss. He looked back at him, letting his eyes express his love and happiness. While Ace was still close to him, he leaned in and kissed him on the forehead. After pulling back, he smiled a soft, tender smile. "Happy New Year, Ace."

It was the best start to the new year for both Ace and Lance.

End Notes

I hope you all enjoyed this story.

Happy New Year, everyone!

I was going to write a Christmas themed story (even if it would be late), but no plot bunnies came to me, so I wrote a New Year's story instead. This ended up much longer than I thought it would be, though. Oh well. These things happen sometimes.

I really wanted to write about the New Year's traditions in PAD universe. It ended up as being a mix between PAD universe traditions and Japanese traditions, though. I had read somewhere that the hatsumōde (or first shrine visit) is one of the times guys wear kimonos, so I felt I had to write everyone in kimonos (besides Lance that is).

Maybe instead of paying their respects and making their wishes towards a human god, everyone on Dragoza Island prays to a monster or dragon god.

I'm not sure if everyone is in character. It was my first time writing characters other than Ace, Lance, Tamazo, and Devi, but I did my best with them. I do feel bad for not giving lines to Haru, though. She ended up just being one of those characters who was there. I'll have to work on that in my next story.

I did try to keep a lot of the details about Luna the same. There are some differences because it is winter, but other than that, I tried to keep it the same. Lance making a graveyard for everyone in his village was just something I thought would be nice to add.

I assigned a gender to Lance's transport dragon because it was easier to write that way. It just seemed to fit. I admit, I was influenced by ayaxroses' Winter Miracle story since it has 'she' and 'her' when referring to Lance's transport dragon, so all the credit for that idea goes to ayaxroses.

Also, Ace's thoughts on why Lance turned on him are only my thoughts.

I hope everyone had a Happy New Year's Eve and a Happy New Year's Day!

See you next time!

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