

Cinderella Mission

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Cinderella Mission

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Summary

Himuro will be gone by midnight. That's as much as Atsushi knows. Well, that and the fact they've got less than 15 hours.

Is the Universe granting them a gift or a curse?

Whatever the answer, the two of them don't wanna miss this chance.

Not this time.

Notes

I should have added more tags but I didn't want to risk giving away certain spoilers. On the other hand, I didn't want to make anyone uncomfortable by reading this, so if you've got issues with mentions of death, I suggest you stop right over here.

For those giving this one a chance, thank you in advance and please, don't hate me. Thanks. :)

A year ago today

Atsushi was dreaming of Himuro when he was snatched out of his sleeping peace. The thunder that barged into his dreamland came in the form of a loud ringing sung by the alarm clock sitting on his bedside table.

The grunt that escaped his mouth was muffled by the pillow he had buried his face on, and synchronized with the loud thud of the clock as it was knocked down by his heavy hand.

If he kept his eyes closed, he might be able to resume his dream, Atsushi assumed. He could still feel the warmth the smiling face of Murochin had caused his sleeping mind to send down to his chest. He didn't want to let go. Just a bit more and he would dive right back into that dream. Breath in, breath out and...

The buzz from the very same table came to finish what the thundering alarm clock had started.

“Uugh geez. What a pain!” Pressing his face harder against the fluffy pillow, he mentally counted to ten.

Why did life always try so hard to keep him away from Himuro anyhow?

The vibrating noise wouldn't stop, and all Atsushi could do was accept the loss as he missed any left ticket to his recent imaginary paradise. When the stubbornness that prompted him to keep his eyes shut tight could no longer win against the bothering trill, he once again hovered his hand over the table and got hold of the quivering device. For a fraction of a second, he debated whether he should just send the mobile flying against the closest wall.

Buying a new one or having it fixed would be even more annoying, of course, so he quickly decided against it. And instead, he brought it closer to his swollen face, waiting a moment longer before he turned his head and stared at the culprit with only one opened eye.

<Please connect the charger. The battery is running low. Less than 5% remaining.>

The fluffy pillow had to muffle yet another grumble as Atsushi realized his mobile had been whining for such a stupid reason.

“ Just shut off already!”

In fact, he was going to offer the pain in the butt gadget some help in doing that, but then his eyes caught sight of a more relevant notification.

<1 new message from Kurochin.>

Rolling on his back and letting out a defeated sigh, the sleepy young man unlocked the mobile screen and hoped the phone wouldn't die on him as it went.

The screen was darker than usual as means of saving power, but the sunlight that steadily breached through the closed window of his one-room apartment helped him read the contents of the mail just fine.

“Murasakibara-kun, long time no see! I hope you have been doing fine.

My apologies for texting you so early in the morning, but our current time zones are not favoring either of us, I am afraid.

That aside, I must say I am writing you this message because well...” He actually stopped at Kuroko's unusual hesitation. Kurochin might hesitate in face-to-face conversations, but hardly in writing. Atsushi knew that much, so it puzzled him. As he read the following sentences, though, it all became clear.

“... Taiga-kun and I are going to visit Himuro-san tomorrow afternoon (in our time zone), and I was wondering if we should bring anything on Murasakibara-kun's behalf?

I hope this is not inconvenient.

Please let me know as soon as you read this, okay?

Kuroko”

Atsushi never wondered if the mobile perhaps sensed his own hesitation. What he did do was stare while an empty battery icon blinked on the screen before it went black.

“Hm~” staring at the white ceiling above him, he let things sink in.

Right. The last time he'd seen Himuro was over a year ago. A year and a few days, to be precise.

Atsushi didn't usually give that much thought. He didn't enjoy those recollections in particular for they pained him in more ways than he'd ever deemed possible.

After reading Kuroko's message, though, it seemed pointless to try and stop the memories from surfacing.

He'd been with Himuro a bit over a year ago, and yet, it wasn't hard at all to remember every detail of that farewell.

He could still remember the clothes Himuro was wearing—the dark blue jeans, the white t-shirt under a black jacket adorned by stylish purple stains. He could envision Himuro in front of him wearing those, because they were very Murochin-like, after all. He could still remember because damn Murochin dared be so good-looking and cool it was annoying at times.

Atsushi tried to keep those memories shut down inside of him, but he knew if he tried just a little, he would still be able to recall Himuro's scent. Maybe, without much effort, he could even feel Himuro's temperature again as he evoked the hug they had shared, a touch that allowed him to assess their heat for a brief moment.

With his eyes closed and deprived of the whiteness of the ceiling above him, he could summon up the sight of Himuro's smile then, and he could almost hear the words he'd said.

"Thanks for coming to the airport with me, Atsushi."

"Hm hm. It's fine," Atsushi had replied, leaving it at that instead of giving away clues about how his presence there had very little to do with the earlier promise of kisses and candies.

He wouldn't say it—it should go without saying, frankly—but there was just no way he would skip that occasion. Back then, he knew it would take a while before they met again, so he secretly wanted to spend as much time as possible around Himuro.

It was almost as though he knew there wouldn't be many chances afterwards—if any at all.

He didn't admit it; still, the never-fading smile poorly hidden in the corner of Himuro's mouth told him there was no need to. Himuro always saw through his act, didn't he? Damn Murochin and his abilities.

Maybe that was the time Atsushi learned just how tough an enemy time could be. They barely got to talk before Himuro had to cross the security gate and disappear in the boarding area. Atsushi didn't say much while they were still in the lobby—instead, he had just prompted Himuro to keep on talking. Nevertheless, he did listen intently as Himuro summarized the goals of his trip back to his hometown. He caught the apology hidden between the lines, for they both knew Himuro probably wouldn't even have considered looking for universities in America to get himself transferred to if he had trusted Atsushi's response to his drunken confession over the phone, a couple of weeks before, would be a positive one.

In the airport, Atsushi hadn't said anything on that matter, because he was aware nothing was definitive just yet. Himuro could still make his mind. He was going to visit colleges. No transfer was in the works so far. And if Himuro decided to move back to America, well, as troublesome as that may be, Atsushi was sure they could find a way to make things work.

It wasn't like he wanted to be the boyfriend of anyone other than Murochin anyway.

Now, looking back, he almost wished he'd been a little more selfish. He could have asked Himuro to stay. He could have prevented everything, couldn't he? Or could he?

As usual, Atsushi tried to push the upsetting guilty away. It was useless, in the end. He'd heard that many, many times over. He'd told him so other hundreds of times.

For now, he could replace that emotion with the sweet taste some of those memories still brought him.

"Well, I guess I should get going," Himuro had said, his fingers clutching the straps of his backpack with clear hesitation. "I still need to go through customs and security."

Atsushi had nodded. And silent still, he'd fumbled his pocket for something he had saved for that particular moment. A proud smile took his lips as he handed the premium chocolate bar

to Himuro.

“A treat for you. I bet it will be better than the snacks they'll offer in-flight.”

“Damn right,” Himuro had smiled back, fondness displayed in his eye. “They didn't label it economic class for no reason.”

They both had chuckled at that.

“Thanks, Atsushi.”

He had shrugged in lieu of muttering a “you're welcome”, and stood there awkwardly. Perhaps he wasn't the only one who wanted to hug and kiss before they had to part; however, he was just as aware the crowded Narita airport was no place for PDA involving two guys who already stood out too much.

Since Himuro had certainly been aware of that too, he just added, “So... Enjoy the rest of your stay in Tokyo. And take good care of yourself and of my place too, alright? Don't you dare turn it into a dumpster.”

He was smiling that chilly smile of his, so Atsushi just huffed.

“I will behave. I'm not a kid, Murochin.”

Himuro had then placed his hand on Atsushi's shoulder, finding support to tiptoe and lean closer so that he could murmur in his ear, “You're definitely not a kid, Atsushi.”

Atsushi could still remember the warmth that had spread on his cheeks as he got the implied meaning in his boyfriend's words.

Damn Murochin leaving him behind with such a memory.

In spite of the urges a comment of that nature may have raised, he would have been glad with a simple soft peck before they parted. He would always regret how the last contact he'd managed to have was that touch of Himuro's hand on his shoulder.

Not a hug. Not a kiss. Just that brief proximity before they were waving goodbye.

“Have a safe flight.”

He still remembered his jinxed words, though everything that followed was now a big blur in his mind. He didn't need nor want lenses to help him discern the blurry memories. They were too painful. They were too annoying. They messed him up, even now.

Atsushi slouched out of bed, throwing a glance at his phone and forcing himself to decide to charge it for a bit, at least. Kuroko had meant no harm in his suggestion and was probably still waiting for an answer. He'd even been mindful of their different time zones and careful to send a message one day in advance so Atsushi wouldn't miss that event in particular, being one day ahead in Japan. Also, Atsushi was no longer a brat and, well, being polite wouldn't hurt. He could just hit a “no, thanks” as a reply and that would do.

Kurochin would understand .

As he searched for the charger, his eyes fell on a picture frame he kept on top of a small altar at a nook in the room. His mother's teachings instantly came to his mind. She'd once told him and his siblings they should always keep it in mind that the ones who stayed must move forward and do everything in their power to make sure their loved ones have a smooth and happy crossing towards their new lives.

Many people around him believed that. Atsushi guessed he did, too, to an extent. He'd been trying to live up to those lessons.

It was easier said than done, though.

As if to soothe the burden he felt while he found himself unable to apply his mother's teachings to his life, even after long, he recalled a piece of advice Akashi had once given him.

"It's going to hurt for a long time. Maybe longer than you expect or would rather it did." The pair of ruby eyes weren't turned in his direction. They looked away, lost in the green of the trees in the park that surrounded them. "And I do not mean to sound cliché, Atsushi, but it does get better eventually. Give yourself time. Don't give in to guilt or to any dark emotion you may be feeling. You should never let it get the best of you."

They both knew Akashi was speaking from experience, and that made those words sink heavily in them both.

"I won't, Akachin. I just... Wish it weren't this painful. It's... Annoying."

"I know," a sad smile had accompanied Akashi's affirmation. "Trust me, I know."

An outside noise brought him back to reality. Blowing the reminiscences off his head as if he were shooing a fly away, Atsushi glanced at the picture frame one last time and proceeded to get his charger once and for all.

His stomach was starting to growl, but he still waited for the device to be brought back to life before he took care of breakfast. Being an adult had changed him, who knew.

"Kurochin, hi.

Thanks for your offer, but that won't be necessary.

Just tell him hi for me.

Thanks."

He stared at the screen and didn't ignore the way his index hovered over the send button before touching it.

Kurochin would understand, wouldn't he? And, perhaps, so would Murochin.

Murochin knew him better than anyone, after all. Didn't he?

He swallowed, pushing all of the things that threatened to surface again down the pit they belong in.

“Pancakes for breakfast. Yes, yes!” he muttered at himself.

That was the distraction he needed. And exactly what his rebellious tummy was screaming for.

The delicious smell of the homemade syrup seemed bittersweet to his nostrils.

Or maybe, it was just that no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't keep the blurry memories from rushing straight back to him.

Even if they weren't distinct, he could still recall the scenes. He could still see the images printed in the newspaper and broadcast on every damn news channel.

He could recall the wave of tweets targeted at Kagami as though he were Himuro's actual sibling.

And he could never forget the direct messages and phone calls he had received when the awful confirmation was issued, almost a week after the farewell.

The steamy cup of chocolate he'd poured himself was supposed to taste sweet, but his taste buds begged to differ this time.

The memories still felt too real, despite being cloudy.

They still felt like a blow to his chest.

One year ago. Or so. It still felt like hours ago. Or something like that.

Atsushi sat down in front of the altar, placing the tray with the half-filled cup and a plate yet full of pancakes between himself and the small sanctuary.

He stared at the picture frame once more, now from a closer angle. He studied it, and as he did, he barely noticed a wry smile forming in his lips.

His chest felt heavy with a longing he still hadn't gotten used to. He wasn't supposed to let sadness get the best of him, right? He ought to help his loved one be happy where... Wherever he may be.

And so, Atsushi forced a proper smile, eyes still on the photograph as he said, “Hi, Murochin.”

It wasn't the first time he talked to Himuro since he'd been gone. Perhaps because a whole year had passed and that day marked such a dreadful anniversary, he wasn't really sure how he should go about it, then.

"It's been a while," he tried, sipping on his slightly sweeter hot chocolate before continuing. "I hope things are okay there? It's a bit weird starting a conversation when I can't see Murochin's expressions. I have to speak a lot, and that's kind of a pain. I..." He wanted to say he missed Himuro, but so much for helping him with his happy ending in his new life.

"I dreamed of you last night," he added, instead, and took a pause to serve himself a portion of pancakes. "Well, actually, it was this morning. I was swept out of it, though. So annoying!" He pouted, somehow knowing if Himuro were there, he would beam at him with one of his affectionate smiles.

He took another turn for silence as he munched the pancakes and enjoyed the cocoa taste. His heart felt a bit more peaceful now, for some reason. He felt closer to Himuro than he'd felt in months, which was odd, yet far from unpleasant.

"So... I've been cooking new recipes lately. College is nice, nicer than high school in a way, I guess. I have to buy utensils for some classes today. I would invite you to come along if I could. But maybe you would find that boring? Although... It's more like you would say it's cute that I'm attending the culinary arts school. It's not cute, though, okay?"

He smiled to himself, imagination taking the best of him. He couldn't have those interactions with Himuro anymore, however, he could still dream and imagine them. Maybe that was enough?

He stared at the picture in front of him again—not that his eyes had really wandered much from it anyway—and felt a twirl in his chest.

No, it wasn't.

But there was nothing he could do, now.

"Anyways, it's going to be a busy day for me, so I should get prepared," he stretched his arms as he said so. "I... hope you're doing fine, Murochin."

He pretended not to feel the lump in his throat.

"It's a pain that you're gone," he added, mentally. He closed his eyes and was surprised to feel a sudden warmth engulf him.

It felt like a tepid breeze coming through the window, except the windows in that small apartment were too small to allow such invasion. Moreover, they were still closed.

Atsushi kept his eyes closed. It wouldn't hurt to indulge himself in that.

Slowly, the warmth turned into heat, and the breeze that seemed to caress his skin apparently was replaced by a rather substantial touch. It almost felt like arms wrapping around him. Except he was alone.

Noticing that the sensation wouldn't go away—on the contrary, he now had the distinct feeling he was being embraced—Atsushi opened his eyes wide.

He was afraid of turning around and looking. He was certain he had lost his mind. Or maybe, he had fallen asleep and was back to the dream he'd wanted so bad to return to?

His body tensed up as he slowly gazed down and spotted the arms around his own and hands placed above his.

Dark fabric with purple stains covered the familiar arms wrapping him.

It had to be a continuation of his fresh dream.

“Muro... chin?”

Make Believe

Chapter Summary

Is it a dream? A lame joke? What is Atsushi supposed to expect? They're running out of time, and a quick choice must be made.

Chapter Notes

I'm so very sorry I said this chapter would be posted shortly! That was supposed to be true, but I also wanted to have advanced a bit further with chapter 3 before posting this one. Life, a potential tendinitis and a hiatus to work on another fanfic happened, so I had to change plans a bit. Since it's himumura day today (no longer in Japan, but oh well... It is in my time zone), I thought I should at least post this.

If you're still keeping up with this or if you've just recently started reading this work, thank you! I hope it will be worth your time, regardless of being a shorter chapter. ^^

It had to be a dream. It had to be a dream. It had to be a dream.

Either that or he had gone crazy.

“I see you chose to live in my apartment.”

He looked up from the mess he'd caused only a few minutes before, as he knocked down the cup of chocolate and nearly sent some pancakes flying right after.

It had to be a dream because the person standing in front of him while glancing curiously around the room was none other than Himuro.

Unless he had a twin brother, which Atsushi was fairly certain wasn't the case.

“Hm,” he nodded, too stunned to say anything.

After the apparent inspection was over, Himuro knelt down and offered him help. Again, Atsushi was too shocked to deny it; therefore, for a while, they simply cleaned the mess as though it were the natural thing to do.

Nevermind if a potential ghost were the one helping you at that, of course. Nevermind if it were the ghost of your boyfriend no less.

After the initial hug, Himuro hadn't presented many explanations. Before Atsushi's awkward and panic-induced turn that had caused his breakfast to be compromised, all his visitor had said was, "I'm sure you're surprised, just... Don't be afraid, okay?"

Well, he wasn't afraid. He was dizzy. In fact, confused would be the perfect choice to describe it.

It had to be a dream, so he pinched himself to prove that point.

It hurt.

What a realistic dream!

"You kept an altar for me. That's very thoughtful."

Atsushi had just gone fetch a wet tea cloth to wipe the floor when he heard the casual comment. When he approached Himuro again, he noticed the other was still kneeling down while staring at his own photograph. Himuro's face was even, and Atsushi swore he would spend a million dollars to know what was going on in his boyfriend's head if he could.

Although he shouldn't be treating that as an ordinary situation, because it was far from being one.

Wet cloth still in his hand, he decided to start with the easier questions.

"So, Murochin... are you alive?"

The question sounded stupid even to his ears. Dreams usually weren't logical, though, so he should be okay acting a little dumb. He would wake up any minute now, right?

Himuro blinked at his question, then smiled. His smile was as blank as the even expression he sported the second before. For reasons Atsushi failed to understand, it made a foreign anger rise inside of him. It was sudden, and it burned the pit of his stomach.

The boiling sensation only got worse as Himuro replied in a calm tone, "Not in the way you're asking, no."

Was that a joke? If it wasn't a dream, then it had to be a prank. It had to be a cruel, disheartened joke, for Atsushi saw no explanation as to why Himuro would appear in front of him a year after he'd been deemed dead.

A plane crash with no survivors. He could see it in the headlines as a vivid and stinging memory.

It had to be a prank.

"Why are you here?" Atsushi asked, looking down at the person who reminded him of his lost love. He almost spat the words in an attempt to release the abrupt fury.

The cloth he'd been holding fell off his hand, but he paid it no mind.

“Because I wanted to see you.”

“You mean haunt me? That's pretty disgusting.”

Atsushi had no idea phantoms could look hurt. The moment he saw the pained expression on Himuro's face, however, he instantly regretted his words.

He should be feeling happy; still, dark emotions were getting the best of him.

“I'd hoped you'd want to see me, too. I know this isn't normal or anything, but... Gosh, I swear I would have died again to be here with you if that's what it took.”

The lump in Atsushi's throat was back, and it was close to unbearable.

“It's a pain that you're here,” he thought, slowly coming to understand he was frightened. Atsushi wasn't afraid of ghosts. He was scared by the idea the one in front of him would disappear from his sight all of a sudden, again.

“How are you here?”

This question sounded more plausible, although he hated that he had asked it with a faltering voice.

“I can't say much,” Himuro stood up, probably sensing it was safe to approach Atsushi then. “What I can say is I've been granted some kind of Cinderella mission.”

“Cinderella...?”

“Yes,” he did something that looked like he was swallowing. “I'll be gone by midnight. Probably for good.”

Time seemed to stand still exactly like it had the year before. Atsushi felt the blood run cold on his veins just as it had when Kuroko had called him, a year ago.

“Murasakibara-kun, I'm so very sorry to be calling you to say this. I wanted to talk to you in person, but I am afraid circumstances will not allow it.”

He'd known it then. Kuroko didn't need to say anything else, because he'd known right away, right when his mobile had rung.

“I just heard from Taiga-kun... It's been confirmed.”

“Oh. I see.”

“I'm very sorry for your loss, Murasakibara-kun. Ours, in fact. We all are going to miss Himuro-san very much.”

“Yeah. Thanks for letting me know, Kurochin.”

As they hung up, he had stood there, frozen on the spot. He'd been expecting that news. Severely injured people who had been rescued were losing their lives one after another, according to daily news. Himuro wasn't among them. His body hadn't been found till that day, apparently.

There had been hope, yet Atsushi had prepared himself for the worse.

At least, he thought he had.

“Atsushi? Are you okay?”

He felt Himuro’s hand on his arm and that pulled him back to the present moment, again.

It had to be a lame joke. Ghosts shouldn't be able to touch living beings, should they?

He tried to look for rational explanations to the miracle that stood in his room (once upon a time he'd been the one labeled miracle... Tables had turned, huh). And as he also tried to calm down his unstable heart, he searched for clues that might prove Himuro had survived. He wanted to believe his boyfriend was simply playing him—regardless of how ill a joke that may be.

There was something about Himuro’s aura, though. Not to mention it was hard to overlook the clothes—the exact same clothes Himuro was wearing a year ago—and his unchanged semblance.

The tic tac of the alarm clock cut through the silence as if it had just been brought back to the living world as well.

Himuro would be gone by midnight.

Atsushi threw a glance at the clock.

They had less than 15 hours.

Be it a dream or a sick joke, he didn't want to risk missing the chance. He didn't want to waste any second of this illusion before the alarm yanked him out of it.

“Well then, Murochin... What are your plans for your mission?”

Atsushi watched as the slate-grey eye he could see widened, and a smile painted with a touch of relief took form in Himuro’s lips.

“Hm...” he looked up, locking eyes with Atsushi. “What d’you say we go on a date?”

Don't think twice

Chapter Summary

The race against the clock isn't the only challenge that awaits Murasakibara and Himuro. Can they handle being around people? What are the chances of their date being compromised?
A mix of emotions surfaces as they go.

Chapter Notes

I'm not even sure anyone is following up with this story yet (though I hope people will read it eventually ^^)... Anyway, my apologies for another big delay. This chapter was supposed to be a single chapter, but I ended up splitting it into two parts (so chapter 4 shouldn't take long to be posted). It's gotten lengthy, but I hope that's good news. Once more, thanks for reading!

“Alright, this should do.”

By *this*, Himuro meant the quick disguise he'd come up with. He had taken his bangs off his eye using a hair clip and covered his beauty mark with a small acne healing patch they managed to find in the bathroom's cabinet. He still looked quite recognizable, but since most people wouldn't expect a person to come back from the dead with what looked like a very fleshed body, Atsushi believed the plan of introducing Himuro as a relative of the undoubtedly deceased Tatsuya Himuro would work.

That was plan B, of course. Plan A consisted of avoiding as many people that may recognize him as they could.

Their date route should have that covered, of course.

“Actually, Atsushi... Do you mind lending me one of your jackets?”

“Not really, but... You're still really small compared to me, see? And my clothes are... Real?”

“Well, I'm real too. I'm just dead.”

Atsushi frowned, then opened his wardrobe and tossed at Himuro the smallest sized jacket he could fetch.

“Okay,” Himuro looked at the loose fabric covering him as he wore the piece of clothing. “It works.”

Meanwhile, Atsushi examined his wardrobe in search of clothes that would also work for him. He wanted to pick something he wouldn't mind not wearing ever again once that day was over.

As magic wore off, everything would turn back into pumpkins, rats and the like, wouldn't it? Better safe than sorry and miserable. Atsushi must come up with ways to prevent himself from getting hurt in advance.

There would be no happy ending for them. He was no fool; the closure of the so-called Cinderella mission was rather clear to him.

So he made his outfit choice carefully and as quickly as he managed to.

“Maybe I should wear sunglasses too?” Himuro wondered out loud, sitting in Atsushi's bed. “And a hat?”

“Suspicious.”

“Huh?”

“The more you try to disguise, the more suspicious you're gonna look.”

“Good point.”

Himuro fell silent, and for a moment Atsushi almost glanced over his shoulder to make sure he was still there. But then, as he took off the t-shirt he wore as part of his sleepwear, he felt eyes on him.

“I didn't know angels were allowed to be perverted,” he mumbled.

He didn't need to look to know Himuro was grinning.

“So I'm an angel now? No longer a ghost trying to haunt you?”

“Don't stare, Murochin. I don't want you to be sent to hell.”

“At this point, I don't really care.”

Atsushi caught the sourness in Himuro's tone. He remained silent, though. It didn't take asking to realize most of the answers to any question he dared make would be nothing but another “I can't say much.” Asking would be boring and pointless, so he decided he would spare himself of that.

He finished dressing quietly, ignoring the burning sensation a pair of insistent eyes directed to his back caused him.

“Can we go now?”

“Sure,” Himuro replied, making no attempt to stand up.

Atsushi also stood still, wondering what was up with Himuro. From what he had grasped of their initial post-reunion talk, the clock was their opponent of the day. And while that was true, he still wasn't finding even the faintest shade of rush in the familiar face he was assessing with speculative eyes.

“Come over here. I need to tell you something first.”

Atsushi knitted his brows before crossing the room with calculated steps. When he finally did, he stopped in front of Himuro and waited.

Hopefully, his typical bored facade would be enough to hide his actual expectation.

“The truth is...” Himuro started, lacing fingers with Atsushi and standing up at last.

Only a few inches separated them from each other. There was no difficulty nor resistance, so Himuro easily found his way, his lips reaching for Atsushi's with zero effort.

They kissed. They kissed, and it was different from before, although Atsushi couldn't explain how so. Maybe it only felt strange because he knew that wasn't supposed to be real.

It still felt good, though, and eased his heart a bit more.

“So, the truth is...” Himuro repeated, lips still close to the ones they had just touched. “I'd been looking forward to this.”

Atsushi nodded, with hopes that would stand for a “me too” just fine, and wrapped his arms around Himuro, keeping him close until he was sure they both would agree on canceling the date. Coming to think about it, the idea of spending the remaining hours in that small room seemed nice. They didn't have much time left anyway.

“So... Shall we go?”

Atsushi swallowed and reluctantly let go.

“Uh huh. Let's!”

The first trial was about to start: avoiding the neighbors.

“You know, I still think I should have worn sunglasses.”

“It's fine, I told you. That old lady moved after I moved in. She wasn't staring because she recognized you.”

“You sure?”

They crossed the street, having chosen to walk all the way to the nearest station rather than commute by bus.

“Am. She was staring for another reason,” Atsushi insisted with a mumble.

“And you happen to know that reason?”

Atsushi shrugged as he uttered, “Maybe.”

He could tell by Himuro’s tone and amused smile the other was likely aware of the reason, too. And since he knew Himuro all too well, he could also tell his own annoyed reaction was the source of his phantom boyfriend’s amusement.

“I’m all ears, Atsushi.”

He sighed loudly before responding. He sighed because he knew he was being teased yet was falling for it all the same.

“It’s always been like that,” he explained, at last, sounding dismissive on purpose.

“Yeah? What does that mean?”

Another loud sigh. The afterlife hadn’t made of Himuro any less cunning, as far as he could see.

“Women have always stared at you as if you were a human-sized candy. From young girls to grannies, it’s always been like that.”

“Oh... is that so?”

Even though Himuro sounded like he wasn’t entirely convinced, Atsushi knew better than to be fooled by his modesty. And so, Atsushi nodded like it was no big deal.

“Funny thing though,” Himuro added after a brief silence. “I’ve only ever seen one person look at me as if I were this big candy they wanted to devour, you know? And they seemed really into candy, as far as I remember.”

Atsushi didn’t respond. He couldn’t find words to counter that without looking pathetically embarrassed or thoroughly thirsty. Pretending obliviousness and evading the topic sounded like proper actions, for now.

“Sooo, Murochin, where are we going first?”

“Don’t you need to buy utensils or something? I thought I heard you say you would ask me to come along if you could.”

“That’s why you’re here, then?” he couldn’t hide his surprise. “You could hear me from up there?”

Himuro shrugged.

“Not really. Maybe it was all a big coincidence? I only heard you ‘cause I was already nearby.”

“Oh.”

“So downtown it is?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

They spent the rest of their walk towards the station silent, as they sometimes would *before*. Atsushi had always appreciated how Himuro didn't ever force him into talking. He would always respect Atsushi's need for silence and communicate with him in ways that were highly welcomed by Atsushi.

Now, it seemed Himuro was also silent so that he could absorb the surroundings. Atsushi had no idea if he would be able to see or visit the living world in a less human form when the spell expired. He decided not to ask, though. Instead, he discreetly observed how pleased Himuro looked by just being there, in a place that had once been ordinary for him.

The walk wasn't rushed, yet in no time they were at the station. The place was rather crowded for a Saturday, which made Atsushi peculiarly anxious. Despite the recent situation with his neighbor, he hadn't discarded the hypothesis he was hallucinating and Himuro was nothing but an illusion made up by his mind. Being around people would be another great trial; if they did stare at him with eyes that suggested he was a lunatic for talking out loud to someone they couldn't see, then... Well, maybe he would change plans and have himself checked into an asylum.

“Wait, mommy! Tama-chan fell down!”

They both looked while a little girl in front of them cried out to her mother, who was pulling her towards the ticket gate. Tama-chan seemed to be the stuffed animal the girl had dropped a few inches from their feet.

Almost as though he had planned it, Himuro was quick to respond. Atsushi watched as he knelt down and picked up the plush.

“There you go, Tama-chan. Back to your owner,” Himuro said, holding the toy and handing it to the girl. He was still crouching so that he and the kid would be leveled.

The girl beamed and wiped the welling tears off her eyes before she accepted the plush.

“Thank you, big brother! Thank you very much!”

“Make sure you hold Tama-chan tight during your trip so that she doesn't get lost, okay?”

She nodded emphatically and turned to her mother after bowing one last time.

“Thank you,” her mother said with a note of apology to her tone and a glint of infatuation to her eyes that seemed to prove Atsushi's previous point right.

Himuro smiled, offering the woman a slight bow, then turned his full attention back to Atsushi.

“Yeah, I know. You're not the only one who can see me. And that's why we need to be careful from here on.”

They were like fugitives on the move, and it was somewhat thrilling. Maybe, if Atsushi ignored the final turn that mission was bound to take, it wouldn't be that bad. Himuro was still there, and it almost felt like he had never been away.

“Fine,” he agreed, following Himuro further into the station. “Remember, you can always hide behind me.”

He snickered and was rewarded with a surprised look and a burst of cheerful laughter.

Yeah, it almost felt like it used to.

Initially, when Himuro told him the best date course would be going places that were either too private or too public and thus, crowded, Atsushi wasn't so sure the second option was that safe.

He had tried to counter it, of course. As he had asked Himuro whether the chances of them running into people they knew were higher if they were to visit popular dating spots, the immediate reply had been, “Haven't you ever watched detective movies or TV shows? The more people, the easier the chances of getting lost in the crowd and dismissing whoever might recognize you.”

“I'm not sure that works so fine in reality, but whatever.”

“Trust me. We'll be fine. I've got this.”

Himuro had sounded confident enough, and apparently, he was right. So far, they had been able to walk around as normal, living people would. Once they got to downtown, they did see a flock of noisy women surrounding a blond guy who might or might not have been Kise, but they weren't seen. All according to plan.

After fighting their way through a mass of people ranging from typical office workers to high schoolers and foreigners of all heights and ages, they made it to the store where Atsushi hoped he would be able to buy every single item on his shopping list.

He hadn't planned on visiting more than one store before, and now he absolutely didn't want to waste his (their) time on that. Still, he was kind of happy he got to have Himuro by his side during that task.

“So, what are the things you need to get? I can help look for them.”

Atsushi grabbed his mobile and showed Himuro the list, analyzing his reaction from the privileged line of sight their height difference provided him.

“I'm not sure what most of these things are, so I'll look for the first four.”

“Heh. I'm glad you know what a round baking pan is at least.”

“Well, this list has pro stuff. ‘Food Network celebrity starter pack’”, Himuro pretended to read instead of sticking to the actual title, ‘Baking utensils’. “Really cute, if you ask me.”

He glared at Himuro, but deep down both knew the bickering was in nature flirting covered by a very thin veil.

“Sooo... I'll go get the pro items in that section,” Atsushi pointed to an aisle in the other end of the store. “We can meet there later.”

Himuro nodded.

“Don't get yourself lost, Murochin. See ya!”

He waved and walked away after making sure Himuro had seen his discreet grin.

“Just watch me,” the answer was an audible hiss.

Atsushi chuckled. It was hard to believe Himuro wasn't alive and breathing when his behavior remained the same. Who could have guessed ghosts would be so easily teased? One would have thought people would be beyond all of their human flaws in the afterlife, but it seemed that letting go of them was not that simple.

Then again, letting go itself was never easy, Atsushi had learned. Before he turned in the aisle he was heading towards, he looked over his shoulder to guarantee Himuro was still there, somewhere. He wasn't actually worried Himuro would get lost in the store, despite his awful sense of direction. The store wasn't that big anyway. What was driving Atsushi up the wall was the idea that Himuro could just vanish in the air like a thin cloud on a summer day.

He took another look at his list, checking the time just as he was done memorizing the items he had to search for.

It was still a bit after 11 in the morning, but it felt like it was late enough. In a rush his seeming languid moves didn't match with, Atsushi tossed one item after another into his shopping basket, covering most of the store aisles within a time worth of a Guinness nomination. He bumped with Himuro here and there, and noticed—with both relief and amusement—the challenged looks Himuro flashed him every time. Once he was done, he nearly ran to the meeting point.

Himuro was then coming in his direction, carrying another basket with the requested items. He signaled for him to walk towards the counter, but Himuro froze on the spot before giving another step ahead. The slate-grey gaze was directed to the queue. Atsushi tried to follow it, though he couldn't pinpoint what had set Himuro on alert mode.

“You go ahead,” Himuro finally said, having just walked closer and moved his basket contents to Atsushi's. “I'll wait outside.”

“Hm? Why?”

“That's Okamura's girlfriend over there, isn't it?”

“Gorilla-senpai’s?” With a frown, Atsushi threw another look at the queue and did spot a person who looked somewhat familiar. He had no vivid recollection of Okamura’s girlfriend—yes, they had been introduced, and yes, he was probably too bored to care by then. She, on the other hand, may remember him and Himuro fairly well.

“Think you can dodge her just fine?”

“Huh? You’re the one I should be asking that,” he held Himuro’s gaze. “Try not to run into Gorilla-senpai.”

“Roger that.”

Atsushi watched as Himuro disappeared in one of the aisles like an actual ghost. Life was still finding means to get in their way, he thought as he proceeded to the checkout queue.

Better rush before the clock got in their way, too.

Atsushi’s heart seemed heavier than ever in his chest when he left the store. He nodded goodbye to Okamura’s girlfriend—what was her name again? Ayaka? Sayako? It didn’t matter—and carefully looked around, eyes eager yet discreetly looking for a certain ghost.

Himuro was nowhere within his field of view. And to make matters worse, the recent conversation he had just had with that woman wouldn’t stop replaying in his mind.

She had noticed him just when he’d gotten his paper bag from the hands of the cashier with what everyone should realize was clear haste.

“Murasakibara-kun, right? Long time no see!”

He had turned to her and looked down, only to see she was also carrying a similar bag. He was in no mood for chit-chat (he probably wouldn’t even if his ghostly boyfriend weren’t waiting for him outside, but that was beside the point); however, he’d been putting manners to use more frequently than his high schooler self would dare give a damn about. Adult life kind of forced you to do that. And so, he didn’t smile—she was smiling plenty for the sake of them both—but offered her a soft bow instead. That was a response polite enough that didn’t cost him a lot of effort. Win-win.

“What a surprise to meet you here. Don’t tell me you’re buying stuff for your girlfriend?” She’d covered her mouth in a way Atsushi struggled to decide whether was funny or irritating. He had settled with the latter, and had to breath in and swallow an annoyed sigh. People always assumed that. While he was used to questions of that sort, it didn’t make them any less bothersome. Quite to the contrary.

“No,” he had replied, then added not to leave it at that brusque answer, “I’m attending Culinary Arts school.”

Her jaw nearly dropped open when she heard so. Atsushi had known right away what would come next.

“Really!? I thought you'd be playing basketball professionally by now.”

Bingo. People always assumed that, too.

“Nah. It's not like I liked the sport anyway,” he had explained, fully aware everybody knew what big a lie that was.

“Oh, I see,” she had smiled, then let her mouth become a straight line. “By the way, I heard about that teammate of yours. Himuro-kun, right? You guys were close, from what I remember.”

True. And the spirit of the said teammate of his was waiting outside in an unexplainable fleshed body, so she'd better get to the point because Atsushi wanted to leave. Immediately.

“I'm sorry for your loss,” she had said at last, to which he simply bowed, again.

If she had the time for pointless conversation, well, he sure as hell didn't. Not today. And talking about Himuro's death had never been his favorite topic to start with.

“So, I should go now. Say hi for Gori--Okamura-senpai for me.”

“Hmm... sure.” She had averted her gaze for a split second. “We're no longer together, but I'll do if I see him.”

He had blinked at that. So even his senpais faced heartbreaks, huh? Maybe he should offer the woman a token of sympathy.

“Uh... Sorry to hear that.”

“Thanks,” she had smiled wryly. “It's life, right? Not everybody is meant to stay together.”

That powerful—and so truthful—affirmation had fallen down on him like a blow to the head, and kept thundering in his mind. She had no idea how right she was.

Atsushi tried to shut down the thoughts while he paced in front of the store, throwing glances to his surroundings whilst trying to also ignore the cold sweat that was running down his spine.

Had they done anything wrong? Had Himuro's pass to the mundane world expired before the promised due time?

Maybe that had been the point of his talk with Okamura's ex. Somebody had to bring him back to reality.

Fists balled, he stopped pacing and decided to wait a bit more. That was Murochin he was talking about. He could have gotten lost while attempting to escape an acquaintance's notice. The streets were crowded and polluted with all kinds of distraction. Perhaps Himuro had strayed a bit, but he would find his way back. Atsushi wouldn't bother searching for him—chances were that would have them lose each other in the crowd, and that would be annoying.

So he waited. He kept his hands balled into fists, and eventually started shaking his leg. He puffed from time to time, too. Waiting was a pain, and Atsushi would let Himuro know that when he was back.

He'd better be. He'd better have a good excuse for taking so long.

He'd better not leave to never come back, again. Not this soon.

The seconds wouldn't stop passing, and his frustration was suddenly rising at the same upsetting pace. It was as though life was teaching him all over again just how much passion was tied to loss. He hated losing ever since he could remember. He was sure he had learned to hate getting attached to anything that might have him frustrated even before that. Deep emotions seemed to always play a role in that sort of mess. Passion, love, raw excitement... they eventually led to a disturbing sensation of loss. Frustration came right after.

Atsushi absolutely didn't want to deal with any of that. Not no more. Not anymore.

The final straw had been Himuro's death. He was done. He had been done ever since. He couldn't take any of it. No, not again.

Atsushi took a step. He wouldn't resume his pacing. He would go home and maybe awake from that insane dream while he was on his way.

Atsushi was done. He could no longer bear the ticking of the clock, the cheerful passersby, the fact that Himuro wasn't coming back.

He took another step and looked, glared around. Then he added a few more steps between him and the shop's window.

One step further, and he spotted a dark-haired guy walking towards him. The man was wearing black square spectacles and carrying a plastic bag in his right hand.

Atsushi had too many questions when that smiling devil approached him, but he had also too many emotions to convey. He responded to the smile with a scowl and grunted, "That took too long."

"My bad. I thought I had to take some precautions."

Atsushi kept silent. He wanted to be mad like he was just a second ago. He wanted to let Himuro know he was mad. He wanted to show him it was all so disturbing. It had been a real mess for a year now. It was such a crazy mess right now.

Instead, he grabbed Himuro's hand and watched him widen his gaze as he did.

"Don't leave my side again, Murochin."

"Fine, but are you aware we're in public here?"

He was. He didn't care. So he just walked, decided to pull Himuro by the hand like a child were that necessary.

It wasn't. Himuro tagged along, and from the corner of his eye, Atsushi could see he was smirking. Himuro looked like he was enjoying himself.

Atsushi realized so was he.

As they forced their way through a wide sea of people who just weren't ready to face a pair of young guys walking hand in hand, they were met with a tsunami of reactions. Because they looked like newlyweds in keeping the hands that weren't being held busy with the bags they carried, they were showered with expressions of spite, awe, and even hatred.

They didn't care. Atsushi fought back each of them with frightening glares just as Himuro fought with cold smiles.

They kept their hands tightly pressed together as they directed themselves towards the main street.

“Where are we going now?”

“What about someplace near the sea? I bought some snacks. We could have a picnic or something.”

“Are angels allowed to have credit cards or money?” Atsushi raised his brow, seriously concerned.

Himuro chuckled before answering, “that's a secret.”

Just then, a group of high schoolers who likely belonged with the flock of women that earlier had surrounded Might-be-Kise walked past them, giggling and exchanging whispers. Atsushi thought they were mocking them and was ready to look daggers at the teens when he heard one of them say “so adorably lovey-dovey!”

He understood they somehow supported them. He didn't care about their support, but it felt good noticing somebody else acknowledged what was going on as both right and true.

He was walking hand in hand with Himuro. They didn't have much time left. Still, whatever time they did have left was precious. Whatever was going on was real.

Atsushi wouldn't let anyone steal any other second of their time together.

He held Himuro's hand even tighter and was pleased as he felt how Himuro squeezed his in return.

“By the way, Murochin...”

“Hm?”

“You look nice with glasses.”

Date

Chapter Summary

The clock is ticking. As the time they've got left runs out, Murasakibara and Himuro make the best they can out of it. If only it wasn't all the time they've got left.

Chapter Notes

Just how did I let this happen!? I feel so ashamed that after I promised to update this soon, it actually took me OVER A YEAR to do so. There's no excuse for this other than me being lazy and doubting myself (and being unable to write the very last line of this work help).

Well, for those who might be waiting for this chapter... thanks for your patience and hope it's worth your wait. Apologies for taking so long to post it.

The green grass welcomed them as if it had been a tapestry set in a private place for their sole convenience. When they had gotten back to the station earlier on, with no particular destination in mind, all they knew was they needed to be away from the crowd. For this part of their date, they craved peace and calm.

They didn't need to discuss it to know that was what they both wanted. But they did need to make their decision take form in spoken words.

“Say, Murochin... Are you fine with Sumida river or Tama river?”

They were near the stairs that led to the platforms in the station when Atsushi had asked so. Their alert mode was still on as countless people surrounded them. They needed to get away and make sure just a little of their time was consumed in the process.

“Make it Tama. Maybe that little girl from earlier and her plushie were giving us a hint?”

“Who knows...”

Had fate wished for them to be there or not, the fact was that once they got to Kanagawa, they quickly found a perfect spot along the trail beside the Tamagawa riverbank. The green grass welcomed them just as the calming river did.

They sat down and dropped their bags by their feet, sighing in unison and laughing as they did.

“Still a duo, huh?”

“But I'd still crush you in basketball.”

“Ohh I'd love to see you try.”

“Too much of a pain.”

They exchanged a glance that contained so much more than challenge and teasing. Atsushi wanted Himuro to read in his eyes, even if he made a poor job in conveying his feelings, well, he wanted him to read it there just how much he'd missed him.

He didn't expect to find the exact same message in the eyes that mirrored his.

“You're gonna make me blush.”

“Right back at you, Murochin.”

A smile touched their lips, and then their lips touched. It was brief, it was enough.

It felt so right it hurt. But Atsushi didn't want to get started on how much he hated the pain. So he decided to try asking the things he wanted to know. He wanted to ask while he still could.

The past midday sunlight was shining upon them, after all.

“So... Was it too bad when it happened? Do you remember how you died?”

As he waited for an answer—be it in words or in a silence that told him Himuro couldn't talk about it—he fished the bag Himuro had been carrying and explored its contents.

Potato chips. Umaibo. Nerunerunerune (bless this celestial Murochin). Many sorts of chocolates (all of his favorites). Strawberry milk and a can of coffee he knew wasn't intended for him.

For some reason, that sight brought a strange lump to his throat. He swallowed it down and grabbed a chocolate bar.

“You're welcome,” Himuro said, watching him tear the candy wrapper eagerly. “As to your question... I can't say I remember it. It's a bit blurry. When I, say, woke up... it took me a while to understand I was... I was no longer alive.”

Himuro took off the spectacles he'd been wearing yet and played with it a bit before continuing.

“Time is different when you're dead. For all I know, I could have realized the truth just yesterday. I just know that when I did, I couldn't... okay, this is gonna sound weird,” he stopped and shook his head. “I couldn't *live* with the fact I had left you. I mean, I was dead and still... I don't know how else to put it.”

Atsushi nodded. He got Himuro's meaning, but he was surprised at the same time. Was he worth such a transcendental feeling?

“Hm... didn't you think of your family and stuff?”

Himuro let his gaze get lost in the soothing view in front of them. He brought his bent legs closer to his chest and held them, resting his chin on his knees. He looked like a lost child, and that almost drove Atsushi to hold him. All Atsushi did though was observe and wait.

They didn't have much time, but he knew better than to press for certain answers.

“Maybe I did. But then I guess I understood I had lived enough time as their kid. Of course, I'm sure they were miserable. It upsets me thinking I won't get to see them in a long time, too. But even so...”

Atsushi tried to brush off the memories of the day of the funeral before they became as clear as a recollection from yesterday. He hadn't made it to America—from the moment they'd found Himuro's body, everything happened on short notice. Instead, he had stayed in Japan, in his room. He had cried, though he wouldn't let Himuro know, now. He had thought about Himuro's parents.

Losing their only child.

He chose not to tell Himuro about how his father happened to be in America when everything took place, almost as if destiny had cruelly set things to be that way. He chose not to share what he had learned from Kuroko, that the Himuros thought their son would have preferred to be buried in the U.S. rather than in Japan.

Instead, Atsushi pushed the memories to the back of his mind. He did it so that he wouldn't let all of that sadness overbear him like it had the year before. Like it was just yesterday.

They didn't have much time before it happened again. He wouldn't let a boring sentiment get the best of him.

“You know,” Himuro started after a brief pause. “I realized how I felt about you very soon in the game. If my memories aren't messed up by my current state, I'd bet it happened right before the Winter Cup.”

Atsushi wasn't sure where Himuro was getting at, but he was fine with listening. He munched on his chocolate and listened, watching joggers and couples and people with dogs on leashes promenade across from them.

“And I remember I freaked out. I was ashamed and worried and confused. I was scared as hell.”

“Hm? Really? You never let it show,” as he said so, Atsushi licked his fingers with the same naive expression he'd sport back at the time Himuro was referring to.

“I *couldn't* let it show. You would have noticed. There were times you looked at me as though you suspected something and I nearly flipped.”

But Himuro's poker face would hardly let it show, whether he believed it or not. Fine, Atsushi had indeed learned to read him as they grew closer. But he couldn't have guessed that. It had taken a while for him to even acknowledge his own feelings.

So Himuro had liked him for such a long time?

He fumbled for a pack of Pocky, suddenly in need of something to keep on chewing so that he would swallow his self-consciousness down as well.

"I didn't want something like what happened with me and Taiga to happen to us." Atsushi almost choked, then turned to Himuro, a mix of confusion and evident jealousy in his semblance. "Geez, Atsushi, don't give me that look! I didn't like him that way. What I mean is, I didn't want to let something get in the way of our friendship. That's what happened between Taiga and I. You know the story."

"Oh. You should have said so sooner." Atsushi filled his mouth with another pair of the sweet sticks, clearly relieved.

Himuro sighed.

"I still don't get you sometimes."

Letting his arms fall beside his still bent legs, Himuro slid the hand that was closer to Atsushi's side down the grass. And it wasn't conscious, there wasn't even a silent request being made there, but Atsushi responded anyway. He saved one hand to the snacks and used the other to cover Himuro's.

"I really don't," Himuro insisted with a small smile, then continued. "Anyway, confessing to you shouldn't have been on the plans. I told myself that was off the table. But then my friends had to get me drunk..."

"You're blaming the alcohol, Murochin. That's lame, even for a ghost."

"Are you making fun of me?"

Atsushi shrugged, making no attempt to conceal the way the lines of his mouth were curving upwards.

If only time could just stop.

Atsushi remembered wishing that as he listened to a drunken Himuro blabbering at the other end of the phone, shamelessly repeating "I've been in love with you for so long, Atsushi. Won't you go out with me?"

He remembered feeling second-hand embarrassment and wanting to punch Himuro for pulling such a ridiculous prank at 11 p.m. when he wanted nothing but sleep.

But he'd wished for time to stop at the same time, for never had he been witness to Himuro in such a wild state. And because a tiny part of him kind of liked hearing Himuro say he liked him, even if it was just a silly, pain in the ass prank.

He still remembered hissing that he would hang up, that he wanted to go back to sleep, and that Himuro should go home and do the same.

Then he remembered rolling on his bed wide awake and cursing Himuro for messing with his sleep. He remembered wondering why Himuro would bother to do a childish thing like not even he would—and people often labeled him as childish, so there must be something wrong there.

He remembered asking himself if he would take Himuro up on his date invitation. Would he go out with Murochin? How would that even work? What would that even mean?

He remembered reaching the conclusion that maybe he would, that maybe it would be nice. He remembered smirking at himself like an infatuated teenager and feeling stupid at the same time.

He remembered cursing Himuro all over again before forcing himself to sleep.

Himuro apologized for the inconvenient call a few days after the whole incident (his pride probably hadn't allowed him to come forward sooner).

“Hm... Did you mean that, Murochin? The confession?” Atsushi had asked then.

Even if Himuro had denied, Atsushi would have known. The split second of silence gave Himuro away.

“Would you hate me if I did?”

“No.” Atsushi's silence had been bashful, too. “I like Murochin, so... no way.”

They had gone on a date no much longer after the alcohol-free mutual confession.

Atsushi remembered their first date was awkward. It was the same as hanging out together, except it wasn't. He remembered deciding they should hold hands because that was what couples did (his sister read enough shoujo manga and watched plenty of dramas in front of him when she was a teenager and he was a kid for him to know). He recalled his hesitation, and then his annoyance when Himuro tried to outdo him just because he was younger, and Himuro had this whole age complex that led him to believe he should get the upper hand in their relationship.

He remembered feeling powerless when Himuro kissed him, and then great when he kissed him back.

It kinda tasted like sweets.

If only time could stop, they could live all of that again.

If only Himuro was actually alive.

“Atsushi?”

Himuro was staring at him, both eyes fixed on him, no bangs acting as a curtain. He was there, wearing Atsushi's jacket and bathing in the mild sunshine.

Atsushi blinked the tears he hadn't noticed away.

Memories could be such a pain.

"It's fine. I just got something in my eye."

Himuro didn't say anything. He leaned forward and placed a kiss on the corner of Atsushi's left eye, then let his lips travel closer to his ear and said, his voice close to a whisper, "I just wish I had confessed sooner. Then we would have had more time."

"Enough, *Cindechin*."

"Cinde-chin?"

"You said this is a Cinderella mission, Murochin. Then you're Cindechin."

Himuro started laughing, so much so that the two of them waved the sorrows away, for the time being.

"It's not fair you get to be the prince!"

"Say, Cindechin, can I carry you bridal style?"

"Don't you dare!"

The green grass welcomed their presence and their playing, as they lay on the meadow, teasing one another, tickling and kissing and ignoring everything else (even the fact that their younger selves would never dare be this carefree).

If only they had more time.

If only this wasn't all the time they had.

A dark purple sky with fainting shades of orange lit their path as they walked towards a bench at an entertainment park. Atsushi was glad he'd gotten a double victory this time: not only were they getting to sit down and rest, but he also happened to be unabashedly enjoying a cute cat-shaped vanilla ice cream.

He had realized at some (late) point in their date Himuro was the one pulling the strings. Himuro had been the one to decide that they should go all the way from Kanagawa to Akihabara, and now, as they sat and watched their surroundings Atsushi noticed every place they'd been to was somehow a date spot.

"Say, are you Murochin's doppelganger?" he asked after tasting the dessert for a few seconds.

Himuro turned to him, blinking.

“Kind of late to be asking that, don't you think?” he sighed, but there was a hint of amusement to it. “Why do you ask?”

A few licks to the ice cream followed before Atsushi responded.

“The Murochin I knew thought Japanese style dates were weird.” And yet, they had almost completed the full course: a picnic, going to an arcade, then to a fancy restaurant with private rooms because the snacks had only fueled Atsushi's appetite (and because they didn't want to deal with all the staring this time), and finally an amusement park. This was likely the final stop before they headed home.

“I still do,” Himuro affirmed in self-defense. “But I guess the situation calls for a different perspective. It was nice giving it a try... I feel young and alive again.”

“But you sound like a grandpa.”

“I guess you're right.”

They giggled at that, then Atsushi let his giggle be accompanied by a smirk.

“I'm glad you're no longer sulking, Murochin.”

“Huh!?”

“You were being such a sore loser at the arcade... as expected.”

The glare behind the dark spectacles was priceless. It made Atsushi want to pat himself on the shoulder thrice.

“You've got some nerve trying to tease me when you don't actually know how I am here and what I'm capable of in this form.”

The wicked glint in Himuro's eyes was as fake as his glasses, Atsushi could tell. Still, he held his ice cream cone as though he was afraid and muttered, “Scary.”

They tried not to laugh this time. Instead, they turned their looks towards the path before them. Kids rushed past every now and then, keen on visiting certain parts of the park or having their parents buy them certain treats. Couples strolled as infatuatedly as they could, usually making their way to the Ferris wheel. People sparkled, and they looked so vibrant. They looked alive.

Meanwhile, the two of them observed, watching life unfold in front of their eyes—the sort of life Himuro would be saying goodbye to for the second time in a few hours.

“Say, Murochin... What would you do if you had more time?”

“Who knows?”, he shrugged. “Perhaps I'd go visit my parents. Though maybe I'm scared of flying now?”

Atsushi nodded. The idea of everything happening once again was frightening even for him.

“I guess I'd play streetball again. It would be a good way to enjoy a bit of my time here.”

“That's annoyingly Murochin-like,” Atsushi grumbled.

Himuro laughed, and it sounded light and pleasant. “Well, I can't lie. I enjoy playing as much as my boyfriend does.”

Atsushi fought a blush that threatened to cover his cheeks and a pout that tried to form in his lips, and stood up. He threw the last piece of the ice cream cone in his mouth and settled with that move, offering Himuro no comment.

“So, what's next?” Himuro stood up as well, then buried his hand into Atsushi's pocket and took out his mobile. The action was so fast and smooth, Atsushi was left speechless. “Damn. We're running out of time.”

Atsushi had noticed that, too. It was a bit past 7 p.m. Himuro returned the mobile to Atsushi's pocket once he was done checking the time.

“Let's go to a photo booth,” Himuro decided without waiting for an answer.

Atsushi accepted it without complaints. He was having fun, even if he wouldn't state it out loud. And it was easier having Himuro make the decisions.

As they resumed their walk in the park, looking as lively as the other people did, he asked, “Do ghosts appear in pictures?”

Himuro tilted his head, then replied, “Not sure. But I bet angels do.”

“It's almost 9, Murochin. If you wanna do it, I'll just sit there and watch.”

“It's not that fun doing it alone, you know?”

“It's not fun, period. Besides, I'm tired. You made me walk too much.”

Himuro didn't defend himself. If his temporary body could feel as Atsushi's did, it probably was exhausted as well. Not that that was keeping him from being in the nearest court to his former (and currently Atsushi's) apartment. After they'd topped their date with a claw machine match that resulted in Atsushi giving Himuro a bird plushie and watching him sulk yet again, they had returned to the apartment only to drop the shopping bags and find the hidden treasure Himuro wouldn't give up on: his old basketball Atsushi had kept as some kind of souvenir.

They barely had any time left, but Himuro wanted to play. He wouldn't visit his folks, but he would drag Atsushi to a damn court.

Sitting by a rock bench, Atsushi watched as Himuro pretended to have given up convincing him and bounced the ball, stepping towards the hoop. His moves were as elegant and precise as ever, and they bothered and enchanted Atsushi at the same time.

He stared as Himuro warmed up, shooting hoops casually. It was so cruel that this was all the time he had to do so.

Atsushi knew just how stupidly passionate about that sport Himuro was.

He sighed out loud when he realized his body was forcing him to make that move. He stood up and followed Himuro, almost as though magnetized by him.

“I thought you were tired.”

“Heh. I felt like crushing you one last time.”

The sky above them was dark and starry, and they could enjoy that night forever; still, they had only but a few hours left.

They shared a wistful smile before Himuro tossed him the ball.

“Come at me with all you’ve got, love.”

Stay with me

Chapter Summary

As midnight approaches, the idea of saying goodbye becomes even harder. There's too much to be said, and little time left. Still, their hearts can communicate better than their mouths. And so, Atsushi and Himuro try their best to cherish what needs to be cherished, and say what needs to be said.

Chapter Notes

Here I come again, with a small chapter this time but with what may be good news to some of you: since I decided to split another chapter into two, this means there'll be another one (the sixth and final one). Stay tuned! Also, I'd like to thank everyone who's been encouraging me not to drop this fanfic. I had a tough time coming up with the latest chapters, but I can guarantee you'll get to read the ending (even if it's not the best ending ever). Thank you for taking time to read this, really! :)

Atsushi took the battery out of the alarm clock, placing the muted device back onto the bedside table. The tic tac had been getting on his nerves, diverting his attention from where it should be. By silencing it, he had given his ears the chance to enjoy the pleasant sound of heavy breathing.

He was telling himself the both of them were breathing, just as both of them had trembled and sweated and reached pure bliss.

It felt too real not to be true. Even if it was all granted by a higher power, even if it was a delusion, it felt real.

They had probably just committed a great sin, and Himuro was closer to facing judgment for that, but in his face, Atsushi saw no regrets. On the contrary, there was a smile, and perhaps a shadow of sadness for they would be parting soon, but that was about it.

So Atsushi kept looking at him, ignoring the expiring minutes as they vanished. He tried to memorize Himuro's features while he felt the touch of his fingertip as Himuro traced random, invisible circles on his bare chest.

“Say, Atsushi... what made you move to this place?”

The question sounded abrupt, despite Himuro's calm tone. It seemed misplaced when they had so little time left.

Atsushi decided not to tell the entire truth. There was no point in confessing a part of him wanted to remain close; that he had secretly wished to hold on to anything that might keep the image of Himuro alive in his heart. Saying it out loud wouldn't bring Himuro back to life. He knew it because he had admitted that to himself in silence many times over. It never worked.

Even now, he couldn't say it did.

“I had to move to Tokyo. And I knew that you enjoyed the place and that the landlord wasn't a pain, so I decided to try here first. It wasn't rented, so I chose to live here.”

“I see...” Himuro leaned on his elbow, eyes scrutinizing Atsushi, although no other question on the matter followed.

He seemed to know.

“When the time is up, promise me you will be alright?”

He seemed to know, which was even cruel. The tic tac had stopped, and Atsushi wouldn't check the hours at this rate, but he knew the closure was near. They had spent over an hour on the court, only to rush back home and hurriedly, while exchanging heated kisses and touches, make way from the doorstep to the shower, and then to his bed.

At that point, Atsushi knew their countdown had become a bomb about to blow. And exactly because he knew it, he wanted to make believe that time didn't exist.

A sudden pressure on his chest and a lump on his throat manifested as Atsushi considered Himuro's recent demand, and they told him he couldn't make any promises.

He leaned in and kissed Himuro instead, tasting the lips that felt so real, holding on to the naked body that he didn't want to be an illusion under his sheets. He noticed how Himuro responded, how the two of them were grabbing the same string of hope and wishing they wouldn't have to say goodbye.

He topped Himuro, pinning him on the bed with his hands, decided to have his way with him again, just to prove to himself that their connection was true even now. He wanted to feel the ecstasy as many times as possible, he wanted to taste the sweetness of it until the dream was over. By then, maybe they would have realized no accident had ever happened.

Perhaps they would fall asleep when their bodies could no longer keep up with their longing, only to wake up and find out there was life—that Himuro had been alive all along and there should be no more pain.

Every kiss he planted on Himuro then was meant to make such wild dream come true. Magic had happened. It could happen again. Himuro didn't have to go.

“Atsushi...”

“Hm?” He was feeling drowsy, and everything seemed cloudy at sudden.

“I love you. Even if you forget about it eventually, I want you to know it now. I really loved you, and I really love you.”

“Stay, Murochin,” he mumbled, sounding sleepy and spoiled to his own ears. “I love you, too, so you have to stay.”

He didn't see Himuro's grim smile, but he could sense it. He felt his tightening embrace as well, and the warmth and the wetness of teardrops falling on his face as Himuro gave him one last kiss (a chaste one, light as a feather).

A dispersing glow pushed him to sleep as softly as a lullaby.

It was midnight.

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