

A Hanukkah to Remember

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A Hanukkah to Remember

by [Milieva](#)

Summary

While it wasn't surprising for Umi to invite herself to come to stay with him for Hanukkah, Clef wasn't expecting his cousins, Ferio and Emeraude to turn up unannounced.

With the crowded flat comes a holiday he will never forget.

Notes

Greetings, dear readers. I hope this fic finds you well.

This is a little story I actually started last year. I had the opening scene pop into my head and I scribbled it down. Nothing came of it until this year when I decided to write it for NaNoWriMo. I wrote this story and started drafting another multi-chapter fic that I will probably start posting in the new year. (Don't worry, I've also nearly got the next chapter of Sanctuary finished too.)

Obviously, this is an alternate universe fic, given it takes place in London, and Clef works in the tech industry. Emeraude and Ferio decided they would be his cousins, and there is an, as of yet, unnamed character who is their mother. (She'll probably just remain Auntie in any possible sequels.)

I have nearly all eight chapters of this story finished. They just need editing, so look forward to a new post every day.

As always, many thanks to down for the edits on this fic.

Candle One

Clef was not only awake far earlier than usual for a Sunday, but he was dressed, had just finished the washing up, and was trying to get as much dust off the bookcases as he could before vacuuming the carpet. Normally, he did his household chores piecemeal through the week, but he'd been caught up with a project at work the past fortnight and things had piled up.

The grubbiness of his flat could have been ignored if he wasn't expecting a guest.

Only last week, Umi had invited him out to Tokyo for New Year, and Clef had explained to her - once again - that he needed more than two weeks notice to sort enough time off work to make it a worthwhile visit, especially when it would mean getting time off over the holidays.

During the call, he made some comment about needing to visit his family in Cambridge, but he didn't think he'd manage it for Hanukkah even though it coincided with the Christmas lull in work at the office, for the same reason he couldn't drop everything and fly half-way across the world to spend time with Umi every time she asked. Not to mention, the trains were chaos this time year. He understood why they carried out maintenance between Christmas and New Year, but it still made travel bothersome. Then one thing led to another, and Umi invited herself to stay with him for Hanukkah.

"I'm not sure which plane I'll be able to get," Umi said. The sound of her keyboard clicked away in the background of the call. "But, I'll send you an email when I board, so you'll know when to expect me."

"Aeroplanes aren't like taxis. You can't just show up and take the first one you get to."

"Oh, don't worry about it. I'll see you next Sunday sometime," she'd said, before ending the call.

Clef had been left staring at his phone, and then around at his flat. That had barely given him a week to get things sorted - doing some food shopping being the highest priority, then cleaning up. As he still had to go to work all week, the last would probably be left to the last minute.

He'd only just finished off on the dusting and was about to switch on the vacuum when the doorbell rang.

"I thought you weren't going to make the early flight," Clef said, opening the door. Only it wasn't Umi; Emeraude and Ferio were standing in the hallway - each of them carrying an overnight bag. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Is that any way to greet your favourite cousins?" Ferio rolled his eyes and pushed in past Clef. "We did call, you just didn't answer."

"I don't have any notifications," Clef argued, pulling his phone out of his pocket - still nothing since Umi's last message. He stepped aside to let Emeraude through and shut the door behind them.

"We called the landline," Emeraude said. She looked from Clef to the soapy clothes in the washing machine and then over at the vacuum as she made her way into the living room. "I take it you're waiting for someone else? You wouldn't normally Hoover just for us."

"Landline's been out for over a week," Clef told them, crossing his arms. "Doesn't Auntie have my mobile number?"

"Not in the address book, but maybe it's on the fridge. She did have the door code for the building, which was helpful," Ferio said, dropping his bag on the floor and flopping onto the sofa. "Our journey was awful, by the way. We ended up on a bus replacement service for more than half of it."

"Well, I don't really care, seeing as I didn't invite you."

"But who did you invite?" Emeraude asked, the corner of her mouth turning up into a conspiratorial grin.

"No one, actually," Clef said primly, crossing his arms. "You didn't answer my question, why are you here?"

"Can't we just visit our dear cousin for the holiday without being questioned like criminals?" Ferio asked.

Emeraude laughed setting her bag down as she sat in the little armchair. "We came to the city to buy Christmas presents for our boyfriends."

"Ascot is *not* my boyfriend!" Ferio flailed a hand at her.

"And yet you're going to buy him a gift for a holiday you don't even celebrate?" Emeraude pulled a face at her brother. "Him, but none of your other friends?"

"Because he does, and I - Oh, shut up!"

Shaking his head, Clef went to put the kettle on, wondering if he'd actually gotten any sweet snacks when he'd done the shopping.

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The next two hours didn't pass particularly quickly. Clef did manage to get the vacuuming done and the washing switched over to a drying cycle. Somewhere in the middle of that, he got a message saying Umi had made it through customs and was headed out to find a taxi, with an excessive number of exclamation marks on the end.

When he was asked about his 'mysterious guest' for the fifth time, Clef finally gave in enough to say, "Someone I met in Japan." It had been a few years now since he'd studied abroad, but he and Umi had kept in constant contact since then. As his cousins seemed to be settling in

and he was failing to tell them to go away, they were going to meet her soon enough, but he still felt strangely reluctant to tell them about Umi. They might think- things.

They had *heard* about Umi. His wandering back to Japan on holiday several times made that inevitable. But he hadn't said much beyond his having a friend who he kept in touch with, who was in a similar industry, so they still had things to talk about.

"This time of year?" Ferio said, looking out the window at the grey sky. "The weather's horrible."

Clef just shrugged and drank his tea, finally sitting down, and as if on cue the clouds opened and rain started to pour down.

When the doorbell rang again a little later, Clef abandoned his mug and leapt to his feet to answer it.

Umi was standing there, looking slightly damp and holding out a brochure of some sort that she thrust into Clef's hands as she walked in, saying in Japanese, "Have you seen the new apartment building that's going up a few roads over? It looks like it's going to be really nice when they're finished with it. " She walked in a few steps and then stopped when she saw Ferio and Emeraude. "Who are they?"

"My cousins," Clef answered in Japanese. "They turned up unannounced. Sorry."

"That's okay. I'd like to meet them." Switching to English, Umi walked into the room with a smile far too bright and happy for someone who'd just been on a thirteen hour flight. "Hi. I'm Ryuuzaki Umi - or I guess Umi Ryuuzaki."

"I'm Emeraude DeCefiro, and this is my brother, Ferio."

"Uh, yeah, hi," Ferio stammered with a surprised look at Clef.

Clef flushed. It wasn't *his* fault if Ferio had assumed he meant a guy. Or at least someone less like Umi.

"A pleasure to finally meet you both," Umi said with a satisfied nod. She took a seat in the armchair when Emeraude offered it.

After collecting Umi's suitcase from the hallway and shutting the door, Clef put the kettle back on and flicked through the brochure Umi had given him. It was for some sort of luxury flats. She'd been pressuring him to get a better place since she'd started visiting three years ago, but these were just - too much.

Mug in one hand, Clef walked back out of the kitchen and shook the brochure at her, dropping back into Japanese automatically. "How exactly do you expect me to afford something like this on my salary?"

"I'd buy it for you, of course." Umi reached out for her drink. "You need a place with a proper bath in it, not just that little shower cubicle."

"You are not *buying* me a flat. I'm not your pet." He shook the paper again.

Ferio blinked at the two of them. "Um, sorry, I'm pretty sure that whatever you just said wasn't directed at us, but... I don't really know any Japanese."

"Sorry," Clef lied, in English. He wasn't sorry that Ferio hadn't understood *that*.

"So how did you two meet?" Emeraude asked.

"University bookstore," Umi said. "I saw this cute foreigner looking very confused with a list of required books, so I helped him."

"Then you insisted I give you my email address." Clef tugged the big cushion out from behind Ferio and dropped it on the floor to sit on. There was probably enough room on the sofa for him to fit, but he really didn't want to be squeezed in that tightly.

"I asked. Politely, even," Umi countered.

"About as well as you ask to visit." Clef rolled his eyes and picked up his tea. "You just tell me you're coming to stay with me. You never *ask*."

"How else am I supposed to see you? You refuse to move back to Japan."

"What would I do in Japan?"

"I don't know." Umi shrugged. "What do you do here?"

She knew exactly what his job entailed since she'd listened to him vent about it at least once a week. It was just an old, comfortable argument they'd had dozens of times in the past few years. Clef fell back into it easily, but he stopped and sat up straighter when he noticed the expression on Emeraude's face, switching the conversation to something bland. "How was your flight?"

"Not terrible, and I guess the food was decent this time," Umi said with a shrug. She glanced up at the little clock on the bookcase. "What did you have planned for lunch? I'm hungry."

"Food! Yes." Ferio perked up at that. "What *are* we doing for lunch, Clef?"

Before Umi could decide to pull out a phone to find the nearest delivery place that met her standards, Clef slipped into the kitchen and pulled out the rice he'd cooked earlier. It was meant for the two of them, but it could be stretched with some extra vegetables to feed his cousins.

He didn't mind Umi paying for meals from time to time, but he did like to actually be her host when she visited even if those visits were almost always last-minute affairs. While his wallet didn't stretch to cover the sort of restaurants she tended to prefer, he was perfectly capable of creating nice meals in his own kitchen within his budget.

The meal Clef had planned for this afternoon was just comfort food he knew Umi liked because after he'd been on one of those painfully long flights, all he wanted was something

simple to eat and to sleep for a week. Umi, on the other hand, looked practically fresh and happy every time she arrived - sometimes he wondered if she were even human, it was so unnerving - but that was probably just because she flew first-class, not economy. She still turned up hungry every time.

Clef's flat was not exactly set up to entertain more than one guest at a time. His actual dining area consisted of the countertop of the peninsula that divided the kitchen from the rest of the main room, and it only had two chairs. He did, thankfully, own four full-sized plates, and the four of them could fit comfortably on the floor sat around the coffee table.

While lunch definitely pleased Umi, it startled Ferio. He poked at his plate with a fork and stared up at Clef. "What is it?"

"Omurice," Clef said, repeating himself.

"Yeah, you said that," Ferio poked it again. "But what's that when it's at home?"

"It's an omelet on rice, you numpty," Emeraude said, rolling her eyes at him. She turned to Clef. "It's really nice. Thank you."

"Glad someone appreciates it," Clef said.

Umi looked up, mouth full as she said, "Hey! I like it."

"Yeah, but you don't count," Ferio said. "He made it *for* you. We just have to accept what's offered, I guess."

"That's what comes of showing up uninvited and without warning," Clef told him with a wave of his fork.

When lunch was finished, Umi helped Clef gather the plates and offered to do the washing up. Ferio flopped back on the sofa with his phone, playing some game with sound effects that Emeraude kept telling him to turn off.

"You should have a look at those flats," Umi said quietly in Japanese as she started the water in the sink.

Clef shook his head. "We'll talk about it after they leave."

They were just drying up when Ferio groaned. "Ah, man. I ran out of credit." He sat up and called out to Clef, "Hey, what's your wifi password?"

"Clef's phone's out, remember," Emeraude said.

Umi laughed, drying off her hands before heading back to the living room. "Well, Clef doesn't have an internet connection at home even when the phone line is working."

"How can you survive like that?" Ferio asked, eyes wide with horror. "What do you do with your free time?"

"I read." Clef waved a hand at his wall of bookcases.

Umi retrieved her handbag from the chair and dug out a little white box and tossed it at Ferio. "Press the button on the top, when the light goes green, put in the password on the bottom."

"Oh! Nice!" Ferio said.

Clef sighed at Umi. "Did you really bring a portable hotspot?"

"Well, it's not like I can take off work at a moment's notice," Umi said, flicking her hair behind her as she dropped into the armchair. "I need some way to connect to the office besides my phone."

Throwing the tea towel at her - and missing by a good three feet - Clef said, "You're a brat, you know that?"

"You tell me all the time." Umi just grinned at him.

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It was well past three and the sun was getting low outside when Emeraude got up and checked her bag, and then looked through it again. "Did you pick up the candles Mum told us to bring?" she asked Ferio.

Ferio wasn't paying attention, and Umi shot a confused look at Clef, who just shrugged.

"Ferio!" Emeraude snapped, and her brother finally looked up. "The candles. Did you pick them up?"

"What candles?" Ferio blinked at her.

"The *Hanukkah* candles Mum told us to bring."

The tips of Ferio's ears went red just moments before his face. "I thought you had them."

"I have candles," Clef admitted.

"Oh good. I guess that makes sense. If you didn't know we were coming with some, you'd have to go out and get some."

Clef sighed and stood up. He hadn't needed to go out and purchase any candles. He'd had plenty left over from the previous holidays of non-use. His hanukkiah had sat unused on the bookcase for years, as nothing more than decoration, really. The only thing that ever got regular use was the mezuzah by the door - yet another gift from his aunt when he'd bought the flat.

He walked back to the bedroom and pulled a box out from under the bed and carried it back to the sitting room.

It was embarrassing to open the box in front of his cousins, because it was admitting how many years he'd not only missed a night, but simply hadn't observed the holiday at all.

"Oh, Clef!" Emeraude said at the sight of the near half dozen boxes of barely touched candles.

Ferio shrugged. "I guess that gives you options," he said with a laugh. "Anyway, Umi's your guest, so she should get the first night."

Umi shook her head. "I don't know anything about this. I just figured if Clef wouldn't come to me for New Year, I'd come to London for Hanukkah, and he could explain when I got here."

"You wouldn't go visit your girlfriend for New Year?" Emeraude asked, the accusation in her voice far too reminiscent of his aunt.

Clef didn't even get a chance to correct Emeraude's assumption before Umi let out a melodramatic sigh, and said: "Well, I did ask a little too late for him to get a decent amount of time off apparently."

"We can't all work remotely for several weeks without notice," Clef agreed, eyeing the portable hotspot sat on the coffee table. One of those would undoubtedly make it easier if he did go abroad. Maybe he could mention getting one to his manager? It would be nice if he could spend a decent amount of time in Japan again, he missed it. Most of his work could probably be done remotely...

He still wasn't tearing off last minute to stay with Umi for the new year. And if he could work from Tokyo, they would expect him to be able to work from his flat, too.

Looking through the box, Umi pulled out a package of hand-dipped purple candles with gold veining that Auntie had sent last year. Clef had managed maybe two nights last year, but time and other things had gotten in the way. Also, they were just so nice, it almost felt wrong to burn them. Umi obviously had no problem with the idea of lighting them because she was following Emeraude's instructions for placing them in the hanukkiah.

Clef talked Umi through lighting the candles while he flipped through the slightly-battered antique prayer book. With him guiding her, Umi read out the English translation before Clef followed behind with the Hebrew. She managed to follow along with what he was saying well enough, even if the decades-old, penciled-in transliteration was a little smudged. When they were done, Umi sat back, knees folded neatly beneath her, smiling at the lights.

Ferio and Emeraude spent a good part of the next hour teaching Umi all the silly Hanukkah songs they'd learned from years of Hebrew school.

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Once the candles had burnt out, Clef headed back into the kitchen. It was earlier than he usually cooked dinner, but Umi was almost always ravenous the day after travelling and Ferio was already complaining that he was hungry too.

"Are you still a vegetarian?" he called out to Emeraude.

She shot back, "Is the pope still Catholic?"

"Depends which pope and who you ask," Clef said and opened a cupboard to dig out the tin of lentils shoved in the back corner.

There was a certain kind of mindfulness in cooking a recipe he knew well, which was why he often disappeared to the kitchen to help with meal preparations when his aunt's house was too full of people over the holidays. Even here, there was a little bit of calm, even if the only thing separating him from his cousins' chatter was the little peninsula. He'd started chopping vegetables when Umi came to sit in one of the chairs like she usually did when he was cooking for her.

"What are you cooking?" she asked in quiet Japanese.

"Guess." Clef grinned as he pulled out the package of spaghetti and the tins of tomatoes.

"I knew it!" Umi said. "You do love me."

She smiled so brightly it made Clef's chest feel light and he could only smile back before beaming down at the onion he was dicing. It was one of Umi's favourite meals. Sure, his pasta sauce wasn't the simmered-for-hours perfection that you got from certain restaurants, but it was tasty and they both enjoyed it almost every time Umi came to visit.

His cousins definitely seemed to like it. Emeraude was impressed by his impromptu use of lentils instead of mince for her portion even if it was the easiest thing to just save a portion of sauce for her when he'd poured the rest over the browned meat in the second pot, but it had made him all the more glad he'd invested in the portable hot top so he could cook with three pots when his two-burner hob wasn't enough, or that wouldn't have been nearly as simple.

With garlic bread and a salad, it was a nice meal.

Clef had hoped to save some of the nice loaf of bread for tomorrow's breakfast, but Ferio was still just as much of a bottomless pit as he always had been. He sighed, foreseeing his food for the week running out in about two days.

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Clef didn't think much of it when Umi said she was going to bed. With a pat on Clef's shoulder, Umi bid everyone goodnight and disappeared into the little alcove made up of the doorways to the bedroom, bathroom, and linen cupboard, and Clef sat on the floor across from his cousins while Ferio regaled them with one of his many recent misadventures.

It wasn't until they were unfolding the sofa bed later that Clef even realised what had happened. Everyone else had silently agreed sleeping arrangements without him even knowing. Not only that, but they were the sort of sleeping arrangements that went with the assumption Umi was his girlfriend, not just a friend.

"Can't I sleep with you?" Ferio complained. "Your carpet isn't that soft, and the floor's *cold*."

"You can't kick someone out of their own bed," Emeraude scolded him. "And you don't complain about sleeping on the floor when you stay with Ascot."

"How would you know if I sleep on the floor? You're not there."

Emeraude crossed her arms, "What, you're sharing his bed?"

"He has a trundle bed!"

Without a word, Clef walked back to the linen cupboard and pulled out the storage bag on the top shelf, presenting it to Ferio. "A present," he said. "It's not the thickest thing, and it probably reeks of lavender, but it should solve the problem."

When he'd fetched a sheet and another duvet, Ferio was almost cackling in amusement at the futon, and he laughed out loud when presented with the spaceship sheet set that went with it.

The futon had been a last-minute purchase when Clef moved into this flat and Umi immediately invited herself over to stay for two weeks, as it was the summer holiday for her. She'd slept on it one night before insisting she buy him a sofa bed - even arranging to have it delivered the same day, once she'd found one she liked. She also bought him two sets of high-quality bedding - pillows and all - to replace Clef's bargain-bin poly-cotton. He'd spent most of his money on the flat, and a respectable mattress and bed seemed the most important use of what spare funds he had left over. He hadn't expected to have to entertain a mere week after moving in.

But letting Umi help him furnish the rest of his flat had been a lot of fun.

Clef didn't mind her spending her money on him if she also benefited from the purchase. And a sofa bed and bookcases went a long way toward making the space acceptable for guests.

Leaving his cousins most of the extra blankets while they sorted out their beds - his flat got a bit cold overnight, even with the heavy curtains over the french doors to the balcony - Clef took a few with him into the bedroom, in case Umi got cold in the night.

He walked into the darkened room and just stood a moment staring at Umi in the light from the open door. She'd curled up to sleep on the right side of the bed, leaving the left, the side where his alarm clock and last night's water glass sat, free for him. Quietly as he could, Clef retrieved some pyjamas and slipped out to the bathroom to change.

The first thought Clef had when he crawled under the duvet was that it had to be better than sleeping with Ferio. Having shared a bed with him more than once on family holidays, Clef could say for sure that he definitely kicked in his sleep. When he was very little, he even would spin in circles as he slept, kicking Clef up the back until he was entirely upside down in the bed, feet on the pillow. Anything was probably better than that.

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to be continued...

Candle Two

Clef wasn't surprised to wake up to the sound of Umi having a quiet phone conversation. It was a typical part of her visits. At least the first day. With the time difference between London and Tokyo, it made sense that she would phone her parents the morning after her arrival - having normally sent them an email when her plane landed.

Fumbling for his alarm clock, Clef blinked at the time and sighed.

It wasn't until he'd sat up and properly started to wake up, that he realised her voice wasn't coming from the living room, but from the other side of the curtains. Clef climbed out of bed and pulled the curtains open to find Umi wrapped in her big winter coat and sitting with her laptop in her lap and phone in hand. The conversation she was having sounded far more professional than social, and Clef began to think it might not be her parents she was talking to.

Umi looked up and gave him a little wave before she continued on with her call.

Opening the door to invite her back inside - an invitation Umi readily accepted - Clef slipped out of the room and into the kitchen.

His cousins were sleeping soundly when he put the kettle on, and they slept straight through him washing rice, setting the rice cooker, and making two cups of tea, even if the click of the kettle seemed to echo through the room.

When he returned to the bedroom, Umi was just wrapping up her conversation and her smile was incandescent when she saw the second mug in his hand. She set the phone and computer aside and held out her hands. "Thank you."

"You could have woken me up, rather than sitting out in the cold," Clef said.

"I wasn't out there long." Umi wrapped her hands tightly about the warm mug. "I just needed to confirm my meeting this morning and a few other things. It's fine."

"Meeting?"

"I have a job, remember," she said, grinning as she sipped her tea.

After graduating from university in March, Umi had gone straight on to work at her family's company, and despite her spoiled-little-rich-girl attitude, she had a very strong work ethic. From what he'd heard from her friends, she'd always been top in their class, so that shouldn't have been surprising.

But if both of them were working today, who would keep an eye on his cousins? They weren't small children anymore, but Clef wasn't sure he trusted them unsupervised. He had too many memories of the mischief they had caused as children - especially when he was meant to be in charge because he was 'the oldest, and supposed to know better'.

Clef looked at the bedroom door and sighed. "How long will you be gone?"

Umi laughed. "Don't worry, I'll look after them. They're supposed to be out shopping today, anyway." She sipped her tea. "The spare key is still on the hook in the cupboard, right?"

With a nod, Clef set his now empty mug aside and went to get ready for work.

When he had finished his shower and gotten dressed, he walked out of the bathroom and back into the bedroom for socks, which he had forgotten, as usual.

Umi was still pinning her long hair up into a neat knot at the nape of her neck. Dressed for business, Umi looked a far cry from the girl he'd met a university four years ago. Her clothes had always been high quality; even if it was a t-shirt and jeans, they would probably cost as much as his entire wardrobe. There was just something about the way she looked in the well-tailored blouses and skirts that made it difficult for him to look away.

No, he always found his gaze lingering on her.

But that was understandable. Umi was beautiful. Breathtaking, even. He'd hardly been able to get a word out the first time she spoke to him, he was so startled by her.

Now, she was just Umi, and he did his best not to notice how she looked. Sometimes he even managed it.

Tearing his eyes away from her Clef wrenched open a drawer and hastily pulled out some socks before quickly retreating to the kitchen.

First thing first, he made a pot of tea, enough for four, and set to work cooking a simple Japanese-style breakfast of fish, eggs, soup, and vegetables to go with the rice. As he set out the plates and bowls, Ferio and Emeraude were waking up.

"Food?" Ferio mumbled in a sleepy voice, blinking blearily at the offering.

"No, tea is more important," Emeraude said with a grateful "Thank you" as Umi poured her a cup from the pot.

With all the distractions of the morning, Clef had just enough time to enjoy his breakfast before having to hurry out the door. Umi's reassurance that they wouldn't get up to too much trouble was more concerning than reassuring, but he pushed that thought out of his mind and made his way to work.

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A little before lunch, Clef received a text from Umi.

Umi [12:15]: Meeting Done. Out shopping.

He sent back: Did it go well?

Umi [12:16]: Of course! I'm fabulous!

This was followed by a message of nothing but glittery heart emojis.

Umi [12:17]: Meeting Emeraude and Ferio for lunch. Helping then find the perfect gifts for their boyfriends.

Clef [12:17]: Good luck.

Umi [12:18]: See you tonight.

Clef stared at his phone. Something about that last message felt ominous. Especially with the ridiculous amount of happy faces that made up the message following it.

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The first thing Clef noticed when he got home was how bright his flat was. With only two small lamps and an overhead light so rarely used Clef wasn't even sure the bulb still worked, it never got that bright. And it definitely didn't flash bright colours.

Stepping out of his shoes and walking into the room, Clef found himself staring at a very, very tall tree. If his ceilings were nine feet, this tree was nearly that. The sparkling star on top was mere millimetres from touching the ceiling. And with the whole thing decked out in glittery ornaments and far more lights than was probably even sane, it almost hurt to look at it.

"I leave you alone for one day. One day! And you've gone and decorated my flat for Christmas!"

Ferio looked up from wrapping lights around a holly garland and said with a grin, "What are you talking about? This is obviously a Hanukkah bush."

"It's a Christmas tree!" Clef argued. "And a bloody big one at that. How did you even get that in here?"

"Funnily enough," Ferio said, "Not only do they come tightly packed in boxes, but if you pay extra, someone else will bring it to your building and carry it up for you."

Clef looked at Umi who was biting her lip to keep from laughing. "This is your fault, isn't it?"

Umi shrugged, giggling. "Maybe a little."

"Technically, it's a Yule tree," Emeraude said, grinning just as much as the other two, if not more. "It's a pagan tradition predating Christianity in Britain."

"If you want to get technical, in Britain the traditions are for a Yule *log* and decorating with branches and maybe wreaths, not whole trees. That's a German Christian tradition. But I don't care what you call it," Clef said, waving his hands. "The whole point of the holiday is that we didn't assimilate to Greek culture, so why should we bring these things in, pagan or otherwise?"

"Because the lights are so shiny," Ferio said, holding up the now glowing garland.

Clef dropped into the armchair with a sigh. "We have candles."

"Your girlfriend wanted a Christmas tree," Ferio said, "Can you really deny her this?"

Emeraude added, "Plus, we're practicing. Our boyfriends celebrate Christmas."

"Ascot's not my boyfriend," Ferio declared again, not even looking up from the lights.

"He's a good as," Emeraude said, prodding her brother in the shoulder with a laugh.

Umi sighed dramatically. "I suppose, if the lights and everything are too much, you won't want this." She reached into a shopping bag and pulled out a sweater so absolutely hideous it was glorious - an atrocity of mismatched colours with a glittery gold hanukkah front and centre. When Umi reached inside and flicked a switch of some sort, the candles lit up.

It was the most awful thing ever, and Clef wanted it so badly. He took a step forward and held out his hands. "Give it to me. I *need* it."

When it was in his clutches and he was pulling off his jacket and cardigan to pull it on, Ferio spoke up.

"Now, tell Umi thank you for the pretty decorations."

"Uh, huh," Clef said, tugging the sweater over his head. He played with the controls and managed to get it lit to the correct two candles for tonight. "Nice."

"I suppose you won't be interested in gingerbread either," Umi said, feigning disappointment.

Clef looked down at the sweater, over that cooling rack covered with star-shaped cookies, and then back to Umi. "This is all bribery so I won't complain about the tree, isn't it?"

Umi shrugged, sticking her tongue out. "Actually I thought I'd ask and you'd just say yes, because I want it," she teased.

Clef couldn't help but smile at Umi when she grinned at him like that. She really did like pretty decorations this time of year, and having the tree made her happy, so he wasn't sure he could be that annoyed about it. He'd helped her decorate in Japan each time he'd been in December; she'd done so since living in Europe for a few years when she was young.

Plus, it was just that much darker in London this time of year than it was in Tokyo - two hours less daylight, if he remembered correctly. Defensive sparkly decorations to hold back the depression of never-ending night was an acceptable strategy.

And Ferio had wanted a shiny Christmas tree every year when they were children.

"Such a brat," he said, as he got talked into helping pin the holly garland along the top of his bookcases, where the lights glittered brightly. Umi looked more than pleased with herself, and kept smiling at him every time he rolled his eyes at her.

Between Clef having been at work and the surprise decorating that happened when he returned home, candles weren't lit until nearly dinner time.

Everyone decided that, as the youngest, Ferio would light the candles that night. Whether he chose the silver candles because they were 'cool' or because they reflected the tree lights rather splendidly, Ferio never admitted. He just laughed at the candles going shades of teal and pink - none of the lights were red and green - as he lit them.

They'd barely got through the blessings when the buzzer rang.

Umi leapt to her feet, grabbing her handbag off the chair as she stumbled into her shoes and out the door to Ferio's enthusiastic cheer of "Pizza time!"

As soon as the door was shut, Ferio leaned across the coffee table excitedly. "Please tell me you're going to marry her. She's glorious."

"Yes," Emeraude agreed, laughing. "Will she convert when you marry?"

"You two are just as nosey as your mother," Clef complained. He couldn't bring himself to correct their misunderstanding. No matter how much he convinced himself, he wasn't sure it was just because he was afraid Auntie would get worried he was lonely and give his details to the local temple again.

"But I totally want her to be my cousin," Ferio said.

Clef tossed the box of matches at him. "My love-life is none of your business."

"Someone who will drop everything to come spend the holidays with you must really like you," Emeraude said.

"She didn't drop everything. She's still working. She even had a work meeting this morning." Clef argued, but a hint of doubt was starting to creep in, even as he said it.

He never really gave Umi's impulsiveness much consideration. As long as he'd known her, she did what she thought of when she thought of it. That included picking up and travelling halfway across the world when Clef bought a new flat, or she just wanted to 'drop-by'. He shook his head. It didn't mean anything more than Umi demanding his email address when they first met. That was just how she was. Loud, direct, and impulsive.

Ferio was grinning at him. "But she still had to change her whole schedule to be here, didn't she?"

"It's not -" Clef started, but the door opened.

Umi stood in the entryway triumphantly carrying three boxes. Her face was flushed, and her hair was steadily escaping its knot. Clef couldn't pull his eyes away from her, his mind filled with thoughts about just what her reasoning might have been for hopping on a flight yesterday.

"This looked like everything," Umi said, carrying the boxes into the kitchen.

Ferio and Emeraude were on their feet a moment later. Ferio's chant of "Pizza pizza pizza" leaving doubt as to whether he was wanting to help or just to help himself to pizza.

Before Clef made it to the kitchen, a salad had appeared out of the fridge and a bottle of wine was procured from somewhere - he didn't see it when he came in, but he'd been a bit preoccupied by the tree. Once Clef was in the kitchen, Umi handed him a plate while they waited for the others to serve themselves.

She smiled at him, and all Clef could think was that he was glad she had come to stay.

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After dinner, Ferio insisted they attempt to play a game that was a strange cross between dreidel and poker.

Clef stared into the shopping full bag of chocolate coins. "Did you buy every package in the shop?" he asked. There had to be twenty bags in there.

"Not quite," Umi admitted, sitting down with a pair of scissors to open the net bags. "We left a few for other people who needed them."

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Despite not liking sweets, Umi was the one who ended up winning all the coins that weren't eaten by the other three, and she dumped her spoils into Clef's lap. "Happy Hanukkah!"

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The sleeping arrangements were less surprising than they had been the night before. While Emeraude and Ferio were getting their beds sorted, Clef followed Umi back into the bedroom.

"I would understand if you might be more comfortable in a hotel," he said. "It's a bit snug in here with both of them staying."

Umi shook her head. "It's fine. They're fun. I'm glad I could finally meet them." She picked up her toiletry bag and laughed. "Anyway, you're far better to sleep with than Fuu. I told you about her sleep-tickling me at the hot springs resort, didn't I?"

Clef laughed. She had told him that story - from the next room, right after it had happened. The messages, or the email, were probably still on his phone somewhere.

While Umi disappeared into the bathroom for a shower, Clef changed into his pyjamas and crawled into bed and picked up one of the new books on his bedside table. Like all the romances this time of year, it was very much a Christmas book. Sometimes he thought that maybe he should write one and submit it, then there might be a little more diversity in the stories.

He'd gotten to the characters agreeing to be in a fake relationship by the time Umi returned to the bedroom in her nightgown with her hair wrapped up in a towel. Bringing the hairdryer in

with her, she plugged it in and shook her hair free from the towel. Umi was the only reason Clef even owned a hairdryer. He never bothered for his own hair. Drying it just made the curling even more unmanageable.

Clef went to brush his teeth and get a new glass of water. By the time he returned to the bedroom, Umi had just finished drying her hair and was sat on the side of the bed brushing it.

There was just something about her hair that Clef found mesmerising. He stood and watched her for a moment before forcing himself to walk around the bed, climb under the duvet, and pick back up the book he'd left propped open on the bed.

"What's it about?" Umi gesturing to the book with a nod of her head.

"They're faking a relationship so his grandmother stops trying to interfere with his love-life," Clef explained. It was the perfect opening to ask any number of questions, or just explain to Umi that his cousins thought they were dating, but Clef just bit his tongue. Voicing that awkward fact might make sharing a bed more than slightly uncomfortable, or something.

Though Umi didn't seem to find it uncomfortable or awkward at all. She crawled into bed with him like it was the most natural thing in the world, lying quietly on the pillow with a gentle smile as she told him, "Goodnight."

"Goodnight," Clef returned, shutting his book and setting it aside to turn off the light.

Umi snuggled comfortably in the covers while Clef just lay there staring at the ceiling, thinking again about what Emeraude had said about Umi dropping everything to come visit and wondering if it were true.

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to be continued...

Candle Three

Chapter Notes

Obviously, I'm having fun playing with my favourite fic tropes for this pairing: Clef is oblivious and Umi is driving this ship.

Clef wished he could actually just die from the embarrassment of how he woke up curled around Umi. Especially when his attempt at trying to untangle his legs from hers and the duvet without waking Umi resulted in exactly the opposite.

Voice trembling with laughter, Umi murmured a sleepy "Good morning."

"Morning," Clef managed to mutter as he practically flailed out of the bed. If Umi asked him later why he fled to the shower so early in the morning, he would use getting ready for work as an excuse. Unfortunately, he was pretty sure she was well aware of the reason he took a cold shower that morning, given it had still been pressed against her when she woke.

Rubbing his hands over his face, Clef took a long deep breath. Maybe he should just admit that he found her attractive.

That couldn't possibly go wrong, could it?

They were both adults.

No, she was staying with him for the rest of the week. That might make things even more awkward. If he didn't say anything, they could just pass this morning off as being a basic physiological reaction.

Which it was!

It was a full half-hour before Clef was brave enough to shut off the shower and face Umi. He opened the bathroom door to Emeraude saying "Finally!" and shoving past him. He walked into the kitchen to find Umi dressed in leggings and an oversized sweater and leaning against the counter with a large mug of tea. She was chatting to Ferio who had the toaster out and was just putting in two more slices of bread.

"Hey," Ferio said with a little wave. "Hope you don't mind having a *normal* breakfast with toast and eggs and that kind of stuff, not your weird fish and soup."

"That's fine," Clef said. "I didn't have bread for toast yesterday, because you ate it Sunday night."

"I liked yesterday's breakfast," Umi said and gestured at the teapot beside her. "Tea?"

"Oh, yes, please." Clef opened the fridge for milk and frowned.

Apparently, the only food shopping Umi had done yesterday was purchase eggs, milk, and butter for her baking, and while Ferio had obviously acquired bread for toast, no one seemed to have thought ahead to any other meals. Given Clef had only purchased enough to feed two for the week, not four, someone was going to have to do some food shopping, and that someone was probably going to be him.

But now they'd done their Christmas shopping, his cousins should be leaving soon, and it wouldn't be too much of a problem.

Picking up the little pint of milk, Clef turned to Ferio. "When are you catching the train back?"

"We were thinking Friday," Emeraude said. "We promised to be back by Shabbat."

Clef looked across the room at her. "I thought the whole point of getting Christmas presents was to gift them on Christmas."

Emeraude just shrugged.

"That only works if you're going to see them on Christmas," Ferio said, taking a bite of toast. "Ascot's in Turkey with his aunt for the whole of winter break."

"Yeah, Zagato's visiting some of his family up north," Emeraude chimed in, as she joined them in the kitchen.

Umi slipped past Emeraude with the pot of tea, and Clef followed her out while juggling the sugar bowl, a mug, and the pint of milk. The two of them claimed the sofa.

"Are you still sure you wouldn't be more comfortable in a hotel?" Clef asked, pouring himself a cup of tea.

"Do you want me to go stay in a hotel? Because I'm fine here." Umi asked, eyeing him. "I am the one who told them they could probably stay longer if they wanted. Would you rather they didn't?"

Clef sighed and leaned back. "It's fine. Just- can you ask before extending invitations to my relatives next time?"

"Okay, I'll talk it over with you before I invite any more of your relatives to stay with us," Umi said, practically beaming at him in a way that made him feel like he'd missed something.

They sat together in comfortable silence as they finished their tea and Emeraude hurried Ferio along with breakfast. Umi didn't say anything about what happened that morning, and Clef decided maybe he'd made too big of a deal of such a little thing.

As his office closed at lunchtime for Christmas Eve, Clef decided to head to the supermarket before heading home for the evening. He'd intended to fry a chicken tonight, but it was rather small, so he needed another one to make sure Ferio got enough, and then something else for Emeraude.

Wandering through the aisles, he also picked up an extra few potatoes, tofu, and some other vegetables. Even knowing that all of that would already barely fit in the shopping bag he carried in his work bag, Clef ended up getting a package of those cheap battery-powered lights and the tiniest little glitter-covered Christmas tree. If nothing else, the little evergreen trees smelled really nice, and it would fit on his balcony when the season was over.

If those three could surprise him with an excessively lit tree, he could do the same.

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When he got back to his place, Clef was, again, the one who was surprised.

He opened the door to a cloud of smoke and a shrieking smoke alarm and was overcome with a feeling of dread. He'd only been gone a handful of hours. What had happened?

"Umi!" he called. Her name first on his lips.

"We're okay!" she called back, coughing. "We're sorting it."

He stepped into the flat and Umi was standing under the smoke alarm with a tea towel trying to wave the smoke away, not doing the best job. Across the room, Emeraude had the balcony doors open and was also waving at the air with a towel.

"What happened in here?" Clef asked.

Ferio spluttered at him from the kitchen, a fire extinguisher in his hands. "When Umi said she couldn't cook, we didn't think she honestly was unable to cook."

"That is the fastest I have ever seen oil go up in flames," Emeraude agreed.

Clef looked around at all of them, taking in the mess of shredded potato and the fire blanket thrown over the hob. "Are you all alright?"

"We're all fine," Umi assured him. "I'm glad I thought to get the fire blanket out before I let them try to show me how to do it."

Nothing seemed to be damaged on a cursory look about the kitchen, but Clef wasn't entirely sure what it would look like under the blanket. "Is my kitchen alright?"

"Probably." Umi shrugged, unworried. Clef knew perfectly well that if anything was broken or damaged that she would see to getting it fixed, even if they had to pay extra to get it done over the holidays. Though, he could manage well enough with the hotplate and the rice cooker, if necessary.

Clef set his work things down and carried the food into the kitchen. He took a moment to put things away before he braved checking the damage himself. Mostly there was a charred mess in the frying pan, and a little bit of smoke marking on the vent hood and the cabinets around it looked slightly scorched, but that could also just be smoke. It could have been far worse. He let out a sigh and looked around at the three of them, thankful they were alright.

The beeping of the smoke alarm finally stopped, and Umi walked into the kitchen with him. "Sorry. I didn't think I'd mess it up that badly."

Wrapping an arm around her, Clef said. "I really am just glad you're okay."

Umi hugged him back, and then pulled away just a quickly. "That's the cutest thing I've ever seen!" she exclaimed, rushing over to look at the tiny little tree Clef had set on the counter.

It was maybe six inches tall in a little silver pot with snowflakes on it. Clef had spent his commute awkwardly balancing it on his bags while delicately wrapping the little string of lights around it. There were so many lights that when Umi switched the power on, it was barely visible behind the glow. Maybe he could have gone with the smaller string of lights - twenty rather than eighty.

Happily picking up the little tree, Umi carried it over the end of the peninsula and set it down with great care. "There. A place of honour."

Clef laughed and then turned back to look at the mess and sighed. "Suppose we ought to get this cleaned up," he said.

Umi snapped around and shook her head, shooing him out. "We made the mess. We'll clean it up. Go sit! Go sit!" She kept shooing at him until he did go sit on the sofa.

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Clef spent the next hour to hour and a half sitting on the sofa with a mug of tea that was constantly being refilled while Umi, Ferio, and Emeraude set about putting the kitchen back to rights.

By the time he was allowed near the kitchen again, the mess of potatoes and flour that littered the counters was gone. The hob and the area surrounding it were so well scrubbed that it almost looked like nothing had even happened while he'd been away. The only hint of the fire was a tiny section under the cabinet to the left of the vent hood that was ever so slightly scorched and misshapen by the flames.

The whole ordeal made him rethink his original plans for dinner, but despite the concern, there could be a repeat grease fire, Clef still actually wanted fried chicken for dinner.

He cut both chickens into eight pieces and dumped them into the second largest mixing bowl and covered them in marinade. He did the same with the tofu in the smallest mixing bowl and then placed both bowls in the refrigerator.

The largest mixing bowl went on the counter as Clef retrieved the grater from the draining board.

He probably had enough time to manage what they failed to do before it was time to kindle the lights if he hurried.

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That night when they gathered around the little coffee table, Emeraude lit simple beeswax candles.

"I still don't know why you chose those," Ferio said, leaning back against the sofa. "They're still just as boring as when you got Mum to buy them three years ago."

"I like them," Emeraude said.

"Sometimes simple is good," Umi agreed.

Ferio said "I like a little flamboyance" as he reached over to grab the light remote and turned the tree back on.

"You can have your flamboyance in an hour once the candles have burned out," Clef told him, holding out a hand for the remote. When Ferio reluctantly released it, Clef turned off the tree. "There are some cards in the bottom of the linen cupboard. Go fetch them and we'll play a game."

"What, you don't want to play the dreidel game again?" Ferio asked.

"Not unless you want to play by the traditional rules," Clef said.

Umi laughed. "You're just afraid I'd win again."

"Nah, he just doesn't want to share his spoils from last night." Ferio got to his feet. "Because we don't have any more gelt. That was everything."

Clef cackled. "It's mine. All mine."

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"How is it that you're such a good cook and you haven't even taught Umi how to fry a potato?" Ferio asked, picking up his third piece of chicken.

"It's not like he hasn't tried," Umi said. "Cooking just takes an entirely different level of patience than baking. And to be honest, I'd rather stick to baking."

"But if you learned how to cook you'd at least have something you *want* to eat afterwards," Clef said. "Rather than a cake or cookies that you don't even like."

"I still don't understand how anyone can't like sweets." Ferio said.

Umi shrugged. "I was just born that way, I guess. Anyway, it's not like I go hungry for my lack of cooking or anything."

"Not everyone has personal kitchen staff that cook for them every day."

"There's only one cook most days," Umi corrected him, rolling her eyes. "The other three just come in for special occasions - like dinner parties or my birthday."

Clef had been in Tokyo in March to attend Umi's birthday party, so he was fully aware just how much staff were at her house on special occasions. It was definitely more than just three extra people in the kitchen. To be honest, after seeing how Umi lived, he was actually surprised she wasn't more of a little spoiled princess than she already was.

"I suppose your allowance lets you choose from plenty of restaurants, too," Clef said with a laugh.

"I've got a real job now, remember," Umi propped her chin on her hands as she grinned at him. "So I have more money at my disposal than just the little allowance my parents give me."

"Wait. You have a job and your parents still give you an allowance?" Emeraude asked, looking startled.

"Well, I mean, they have cut it in half." Umi sipped her wine.

Clef shook his head. He couldn't remember how much Umi said her allowance had been, but even at half, it was still close to what he made a week at his job, then add what was likely a very good wage to that and she had no reason to think twice about buying a last minute plane ticket in the last few weeks of December.

Not that she ever really thought twice before doing anything.

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After Umi had disappeared into the bathroom for her nightly shower, Clef had changed into his pyjamas and walked out of the bedroom to make one final cup of tea and found Ferio and Emeraude sprawled across the end of the pull-out bed talking about what looked like a magazine or something. He acknowledged them with a bit of a nod on his way toward the kettle.

"Why were you and Umi arguing about these flats when she arrived?" Emeraude asked, holding up what turned out to be the brochure Umi had brought with her. "At least I assume it was about these, given you were both speaking Japanese."

Clef poured the boiling water over the teabag in his mug. "Because I refuse to let her buy me one just because it happens to have a bathtub."

"A bathtub could be nice though," Ferio said. "I remember you used to spend ages in ours some nights. I don't know how many times I had to go use the outside toilet because you

stayed in there so long - even in the winter! Do you know how cold that toilet seat is in the winter?"

"I'm not moving just because she wants me to have a bathtub when she visits," Clef said, thumping the pint of milk on the counter before opening it.

Emeraude looked toward the bathroom. The shower was still running, so Umi wasn't coming out yet. "Have you ever considered that she might want you two to move in together?"

The idea was so absurd that Clef couldn't help but laugh. "How would that even work? Umi's life is in Tokyo - her family, her job, everything. She's not going to just up and move to London on a whim."

"It might not just be a whim," Emeraude said, bringing the brochure over and setting it between them on the counter.

The page was open to a nice looking, two bedroom flat. In the corner of the page was a note in Umi's untidy script: I like this one. There were three little hearts under it.

Setting down his tea and picking up the brochure, Clef made his way round to the nearest chair and sat down to read and reread that note again. He definitely felt like he was missing something, some clue that he should have gotten. Umi couldn't possibly want to move to London. She'd repeatedly told him that she planned to stay in Tokyo and take over the family business.

And yet...

Clef turned his head to ask Emeraude what else may have made her think that, but the bathroom door opened and Umi walked out.

She smiled at Clef, and catching sight of the brochure in his hand, she took a few eager steps forward. "Did you see the one I marked?" she asked. "It has two bedrooms with both a shower and a bathroom. That's plenty of room for a second bed, so the sofa's only a last resort for unexpected guests."

"This sofa bed's actually really comfortable," Emeraude said.

Umi's grin widened. "I know. That's why I bought it," she told her, then turned back to Clef. "There were three units still available on Sunday. We can go see the showroom if you're interested."

"You should go, Clef," Ferio said, smirking.

"Definitely," Emeraude agreed.

"You know what. I'm going to go to bed before you three start properly plotting against me," Clef said.

"Too late." Ferio pointed a remote control at the massive tree, turning on the lights, so they filled the room with glittering colour.

Clef snatched up his cup of tea, muttering "Goodnight" as he strode out of the room and away from any thoughts that there might be something more in Umi's gestures than he realised.

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to be continued...

Candle Four

Chapter Notes

A Happy Christmas to anyone who celebrates. I'm off the In-laws today for lots of food and socialising.

Clef was only half awake when Umi came into the bedroom carrying two mugs of tea. He sleepily sat up as she climbed into bed beside him, passing one of the mugs over. She pulled the duvet back over her legs with her free hand, bumping her knee against his as she settled herself against the pillows and headboard.

"Sleep well?" she asked.

Nodding, Clef watched her. His cousins' comments once again invading his thoughts. It would make sense to just ask what she wanted from him. But what if they were wrong and there was absolutely no intention behind any of Umi's actions except exactly what she said - she wanted him to have a bath for her to use when she came to London to visit.

But she had been coming to London to visit him almost every university break since he'd move back to England, except when she insisted he come to Tokyo instead.

Leaning his head back against the headboard, Clef stared up at the ceiling. He'd think about it - get his words right - before he broached the subject.

"We should do this more often," Umi said.

Clef looked over at her and then down at his tea. "What? Drink tea? We do that all the time."

"No," Umi laughed. "Well, yes. But I mean having tea together like this. Relaxed and quiet, curled up in bed. It's nice."

It was nice. Normally, when Umi came to stay, they had breakfast together next to one another at the peninsula, but this was far more cosy. Intimate even. He did want to do it more often.

"I still want you to come to stay over New Year," Umi said, pouting at him.

Clef sighed. "Umi, you know I can't just drop everything last minute, even if I do want to come to see you."

"It wouldn't be so difficult if you'd just come back to stay in Japan with me," Umi said.

That made Clef turn to stare at her. "My job is here. And my family. I can't move just because it would be more convenient for you."

Umi pulled a face at him and asked, "You're still coming to visit for my birthday, right?"

"Of course. I already bought my ticket." He'd been going back to Japan in March for Umi's birthday since he'd finished university.

"I guess I'll settle for that, for now," she said, with an over-dramatic sigh - then grinned at him, and dropped the subject.

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After the past few years, Clef was more than used to Umi turning up and taking him out to eat at restaurants he wouldn't normally frequent, most with varying numbers of Michelin stars. She'd hear about a place she wanted to try, and they would go there while she was in town. This was why he was now in possession of three respectable suits when he typically wore jeans on a day to day basis, even at work.

Not only had his cousins turned up not expecting Umi, but they most certainly hadn't packed the right clothing for the sort of place Umi was taking them out to, for lunch.

"It's fine, we don't have to go," Ferio assured them.

Emeraude nodded. "Yeah, you two should enjoy your date without us. We can sort ourselves out for lunch. It's fine."

"Nonsense," Umi said. "You two are coming with us. I've already changed the reservation anyway, so they're expecting you. I'm sure Clef and I can find something between us."

Outfitting Ferio was easy enough. He wasn't too far off of Clef's height and size at the moment, so he fit one of Clef's suits, as long as he didn't have to button the jacket.

Emeraude, on the other hand, was a bit trickier, as she had a good few inches on Umi and wasn't nearly as slender. But that didn't deter Umi from opening her suitcase and going through everything she'd brought with her, which looked like far more than was necessary for an eight-night stay to Clef, but he was notorious for under-packing for trips. Clef never did quite understand the physics of Umi's packing skills. It was as if her suitcase reached another dimension altogether. One of her skirts had an adjustable waistband, and more than one of her silk blouses were loose enough to fit Emeraude comfortably, with a warm wrap instead of a jacket to go over it.

Once everyone else was dressed Umi disappeared into the bedroom. Clef wasn't exactly prepared for what she came out wearing.

The dress was a sparkly thing. It was sleeveless, but the neckline of the close-fitting bodice barely dipped to her collarbone. The front had six lines of ruffles running down it, and the skirt flared out from the waist and stopped just above her knees. The number of frilly under-layers that fluffed her dress out could not possibly have fit in her bag. Her tights were nearly

as glittery at the dress, and with the pretty knot of hair and the sparkle of her earrings, Umi looked more than ready to go out somewhere with a much stricter dress-code than Clef was dressed for.

"Are you sure I shouldn't be wearing a tie?" Clef asked, fidgeting with his jacket.

"Don't be silly. You're dressed fine." Umi patted his arm and walked around him for her coat and shoes.

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While Clef may have gotten used to doormen, private elevators, and coat rooms, his cousins were a little startled by entering the restaurant. Even the elaborate Christmas decorations and over-the-top gingerbread winter scene - with a model train set - weren't enough to fully set them at ease as they were shown to a table that overlooked Hyde park.

"Oh, wow! Would you look at the view," Emeraude said.

Ferio let out a little whistle of approval.

It wasn't until after they'd settled in and ordered drinks that Clef properly took in the atmosphere of the restaurant with its greenery and lights. The table was set with a festive flower arrangement and silver Christmas crackers were at each place. And when the waiter returned and Umi smiled at him over her glass of sparkling water, Clef was struck with the startling realisation that this very much could have been a date - that this lunch probably *was* intended to be a date.

Christmas was a romantic holiday in Japan, and here Umi was taking him out to a very nice restaurant while looking so - so perfect.

A loud crack startled Clef enough he nearly knocked over his drink. Beside him, Emeraude and Ferio were cackling like little children. The remains of one of the crackers sat in front of Emeraude as she pulled on a silvery paper crown.

Ferio picked up his cracker and held the end out to Clef. "A little help?"

With a laugh, Clef grabbed the end and they both pulled. The crack was far less startling when you were expecting it. Emeraude helped Umi with hers, and then Clef turned to Umi and held out the end of his.

The four of them were laughing as they compared their prizes.

"What am I going to do with a candle snuffer?" Ferio asked, holding it up.

"Well it is the season for a lot of candles," Emeraude said. "I certainly don't drink enough wine for this stopper."

"Maybe we should work out what we want to eat," Clef suggested, picking up his menu out from under the broken bits of his cracker.

This was certainly not the sort of place Clef would be able to bring Umi to on her visits, unless she was the one who paid. The five-hundred pounds was far too much for him to spend on a single meal for just him and Umi. One afternoon out wasn't worth how much he'd have to cut down his budget in a month to afford that. But he was used to the ridiculous price tags now, or at least he tried to be. They never seemed to matter to Umi. She was only here to try the food out of curiosity, so Clef tried not to think too hard about how much this meal was costing the four of them, or how much Umi might have paid to change her reservations at the very last minute.

Ferio didn't ignore the price. He glanced at the menu and stared wide-eyed at it as he leaned over to point out the number printed on the bottom of the holiday menu to Clef. "Does she know how much this is?"

"Yes, Ferio, she does," Clef said, glancing at Umi. She was happily explaining the vegetarian options to Emeraude and not paying much attention to Ferio's crisis on the other side of the table.

"Clef, it's like nearly a thousand pounds for all four of us. A thousand pounds!" Ferio hissed, keeping his voice low enough this conversation was staying between them. "It's even more than that if we get the cheese plate. How can they charge more for a plate of cheese when someone's already paying a thousand pounds?"

"It must be good cheese," Clef said, trying not to laugh at Ferio's flailing.

"What does your girlfriend do to be throwing around that much money for lunch. Lunch, Clef! This is just a single lunch!"

"She works for her family business."

"Is she yakuza or something?"

"Electronics," Clef said simply. If Ferio hadn't picked up the clues, Clef wasn't going to tell him. "Do you know what you're ordering?"

"Do I look like I can read French?" Ferio asked, with a wild hand gesture. "I failed French, remember?"

Clef rolled his eyes. "There's more than enough English to work out what you want to order. Do you want beef, salmon, or turkey? There is also the mushroom dish your sister is going to have."

Ferio just muttered, "Food shouldn't cost this much."

"It costs nothing for you, as you're not paying for it," Clef told him. He looked down the menu again. "Well, I think I'm going to have the pumpkin and chestnut soup to start and then the turkey."

Ferio pulled a face on him, but let the topic rest.

When they got back from the restaurant, Clef shed his jacket and rolled up his sleeves before putting on an apron. Ferio snickered and made some teasing comment about Clef being 'a cute little housewife' that had Clef flapping his apron at him to shoo him out of the kitchen - swatting him with a tea towel when that didn't work.

Ferio just cackled as he moved out of reach.

At least, Umi shopping for ingredients to bake cookies meant Clef had more than enough of what he needed to put together a good doughnut dough.

Using his grandmother's recipe book, Clef carefully mixed together the ingredients before turning the sticky dough out onto the floured countertop to knead it well.

"And you say I make a mess when I bake," Umi said, smiling as she leaned against the counter. She'd evidently gone and changed when they returned because she was now wearing her over-sized Stonehenge hoodie. Which was a stark contrast to the careful make-up, hair, and earrings she was still wearing.

"But I clean up after myself, unlike some people." Clef rolled the dough into a ball before putting it into another bowl and setting it aside with a tea towel over it.

Umi stuck her tongue out at him, and Clef pulled a face right back at her.

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It seemed everyone else had decided to change into more casual clothing while Clef had been busy starting the doughnut dough.

It was Clef's night to light the candles, and he picked the poor little battered box of candles that Auntie had sent him whilst he was studying in Japan. While he hadn't actually opened the box or lit the candles while he was there, he kept the box near his bed as a reminder of home.

When Clef opened the box and pulled out the first candle, Umi sat up straight.

"I remember those!" she said, poking the box. "I asked you about them and you said your aunt sent them for a holiday, but you never did explain what you meant by that."

"I didn't know how to explain," Clef said, face flushing hot.

Umi rolled her eyes. "I don't know. Saying they were for ritual purposes or something would have been better than just ignoring my questions." She poked at the box again. "Why didn't you use them? It's not like you couldn't light candles in your room."

"I was busy with coursework, and... stuff." Clef carefully place candles into the branches of the hanukkah before picking up the box of matches.

He hadn't lit them or done anything about any of the holidays because he just wanted to fit in. It was frustrating enough that he was constantly assumed to be American while he was living

in Japan. Being English was seen almost as a novelty, and on top of that, to be someone who didn't celebrate Christmas just made him even stranger.

Maybe he should have embraced his differences more.

He still could.

Umi smiled at him as he lit the candles. It was the sort of smile that made Clef feel warm inside, and he realised he could have explained. He could probably have explained everything, and Umi would have listened. And then probably asked a million questions as she was prone to do.

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After the candles had burnt out, Clef got up and separated the dough into even-sized balls. He set them out on the counter to rise a second time, covering them with a clean tea towel, before putting on the rice cooker for dinner.

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Clef didn't have very many games, because he didn't often have people round to play games. Mostly he had a few decks of cards, an over-complicated fantasy board game, and Monopoly. Clef had picked up the Monopoly game in Japan partially because the idea of having the Japanese version amused him and the other was because he and Umi played it rather frequently while he lived in Japan.

Some weekends, they played for hours over the phone, both of them pretending they weren't cheating. It was always more fair when they played an online game instead, but Clef spent enough on his phone bill that he wasn't going to spend that much extra for unlimited data when the Monopoly board was right there.

Ferio pulled a face at Monopoly. "Well, that's going to be impossible to play."

"Oh, it can't be that difficult," Emeraude said. "The property deeds are almost the same, and the numbers are perfectly understandable."

"Yeah, maybe, but what about the Chance and Community Chest cards? Those will be in Japanese too."

"We could just play another card game then," Clef suggested.

Umi reached over and picked up her little laptop. "We could stream a movie or something, if you'd rather. But the screen might be a little small for that."

"Let's play Monopoly," Emeraude said. "I want to see just how difficult it is not being able to read it."

"We'll translate!" Umi said. She bounced to her feet and fetched a pencil out of the mug on the kitchen counter. She laid out the board and started writing the property names in romanji across the board.

"Hey!" Clef said. "Ask first."

Umi turned the board and kept writing as she said, "Do you mind if I transliterate your game board.?"

"You going to do all the cards too?" Clef asked.

"Not this time. That would take ages. But being able to read the board should be helpful. I call being banker," she said.

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After dinner, Clef got the deep cast-iron pot back out and filled it half-way with fresh oil.

Umi leaned over the far side of the peninsula, watching him. "Want me to get out the fire extinguisher, just in case?"

"Unlike some people, I know what I'm doing," Clef said. Then he shrugged. "But accidents happen, so it's probably not a bad idea."

He started setting out the cooling racks while Umi fetched the extinguisher from under the sink. Umi then perched on one of the chairs at the counter. While she watched him, she was also playing with the tiny tree, flicking the switch on the lights every so often as she failed to settle on a light pattern.

Clef carefully fried the doughnuts until all of them were perfectly golden brown, and while they cooled he started pulling out the other ingredients for the fillings.

Umi sat up more interested when he started melting the unsweetened chocolate in the double boiler with cream. "Oh! Chocolate. Is that one for me?"

"Maybe." Clef smiled as he started whisking the mixture. "I've got strawberry jam too, but I know you're not interested in that."

Ferio leaned against the counter. "Are they cool enough to fill, yet?"

"Almost." Clef got the jam out of the fridge and dug out a few of the piping bags he had for Umi's baking endeavours.

They spent the next hour filling doughnuts and decorating them with icing and powdered sugar. Umi kept dipping the plain ones into the chocolate cream and eating them, rather than taking the time to fill them.

It was actually a lot of fun. Clef had forgotten just how nice it was to spend a holiday with people he cared about. He should do it more often, rather than hiding away in London. Maybe he'd try to make it out to Cambridge for the New Year. A train ticket was cheaper than a plane ticket to Japan this time of year, and took a lot less time. It had been a while since he'd been to visit Auntie, and she had been asking him to come stay.

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Clef lay in bed for a long time, just staring up at the ceiling. His cousins' suggestions still spinning in his head. He couldn't shake the thought that lunch this afternoon was supposed to be a date.

But was it *supposed* to be a date, or did he just *want* it to be one?

Was this just an invention of his mind because he actually wanted there to be something more between them?

He looked forward to every single one of her visits no matter how last-minute she showed up. They had fun together when they were in the same place, and when they weren't. She was the first person he talked to in the morning, and the last person at night. But did that actually mean anything?

Clef had never sought out a romantic partner. His schoolmates never really sparked any feeling like that in him, and he hadn't spent all that much time socialising at university before Japan. Then his year abroad happened and brought Umi into his life. Not that anything ever happened between them then. She was only eighteen at the time, as well as incredibly impulsive, and he'd put her firmly in the 'friend only' category.

Had he gotten so used to thinking of her as a friend he never let himself consider they could ever be something more?

Was Umi even interested in 'more'?

Clef looked over at Umi sleeping soundly beside him. He swallowed back the flash of images in his head of Umi awake in his bed, of the smiles, the laughter. He wondered if there was anything else he could do that could get her to make the same little happy noise she made every time she ate and enjoyed the food he made.

Rolling onto his back again he stared back up at the ceiling. He had no idea if Umi was really interested. As far as he knew, she could see him as just what he'd thought he'd been, a friend.

A really good friend.

Another thought hit. What if she thought they *were* dating?

No, that didn't make any sense. Umi wasn't a patient person. Surely if she thought this was something other than a friendship, she'd have made a move on him by now, right?

He rubbed his hands over his face. How was he supposed to ask without sounding like a fool?

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to be continued...

Candle 5

Clef woke to the sound of Umi's voice, not muffled by the glass doors, but by the bedroom door. Whatever she said was followed by Emeraude laughing and Ferio complaining almost loudly enough that Clef could understand him - something about whatever it was not being fair.

Stumbling out of bed, Clef walked out of the bedroom to find Umi lounging in the armchair talking to his cousins. She looked up and waved to him. "Good morning!"

Ferio turned and flailed a hand. "Why didn't you say your girlfriend was a billionaire!"

"Actually," Umi said. "It's my parents that are billionaires. I make maybe ten million a year, but that's yen, not pounds or dollars. There's a difference of about two decimal points in the conversion."

"It's still about four times what I make," Clef said. He rubbed a hand over his face and wandered out of the conversation and into the kitchen.

"All the more reason you should come back to Japan," Umi called after him. "If you'd just let me give you a job..."

Clef leaned over the counter. "You simply giving me a job is just as bad as having your parents give me a job," he reminded her. "I have a job that I like, and I have a flat that I like. I don't need new ones just because you want me to have them." He turned to look at Ferio. "Umi told you her name on Sunday. That should have been a clue as to what her family did."

"Excuse me for not connecting the name Ryuuzaki to Ryuuzaki the computer company."

"The Ryuuzaki group makes more than just computers," Umi said with a flippant gesture of her hand. "Televisions, video players of all sorts: streaming, DVD, Blu-Ray. Not to mention, digital music players and phones." Umi sipped her drink and looked back at Clef. "Do you want to sit down, and I'll make you a cup of tea?"

"It's fine." Clef shook his head and put the kettle on. He looked over at the clock on the microwave and winced. It was nearly one in the afternoon. He'd slept the entire morning away.

Emeraude just laughed. "Clef's right, she did say who she was when we met and *all* of her tech is Ryuuzaki brand stuff." She shoved Ferio playfully.

"I did tell you she was in the electronics business," Clef called from the kitchen.

"Okay, but don't think I'm not expecting something better than a card for my birthday next year," Ferio called back.

Clef waved a hand at him. "It's Umi's money, not mine"

Umi laughed. "When's your birthday?"

"Oh, no. Don't listen to him," Emeraude said.

"I don't mind," Umi argued. "When's your birthday, Ferio?"

"August."

Clef carried his mug of tea back into the living room and sat down on the floor next to Umi's chair. "You can't just demand someone give you a birthday present."

"I'm not demanding," Ferio said. "I'm just suggesting that if you can afford it, maybe a nice gift could be possible. You know, a phone or a laptop... or... that new game system that's coming out next year?"

"I'll see what I can do," Umi laughed and Clef couldn't help but roll his eyes. Umi reached over and patted Clef on the shoulder as she laughed again.

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The last thing he wanted to do on Boxing Day was to go out more than absolutely necessary, and, thankfully, Umi didn't suggest they go out shopping or anything like that. But she was planning to take him out that evening. She didn't normally drag him out twice in one day even when it wasn't a nightmare of Boxing Day sales.

Which was why it shouldn't have been surprising when the buzzer rang not long after Clef had settled down with his cup of tea.

Ferio leapt to his feet, and Umi handed him some cash before he vanished out the door.

"I ordered your usual favourites from the Golden Duck, if that's alright? I didn't want to wake you just to find out what you wanted to eat." Umi said. Putting a hand on his shoulder, she leaned down and lowered her voice, switching to Japanese at the same time. "You were a bit restless last night; is everything okay?"

Clef nodded, replying in the same language, "Yeah. Everything's fine."

Emeraude eyed them, but Ferio reappeared a moment later carrying two bags of food and distracted them all.

They had a relatively quiet afternoon, chatting over lunch about their various plans for next year. Nothing much would be changing for Clef's cousins. Ferio and Emeraude would be working on A-levels and University coursework, respectively. Which was the same as this past year.

"Well, Clef's coming to Japan in March. He promised to visit me for my birthday," Umi said, poking Clef in the side. "Which is the least he can do since he refuses to move back to Japan."

Clef harrumphed.

Ferio elbowed Clef in the side, and hissed. "Why haven't you moved back with her? It's obvious the two of you like each other."

"Oh, don't you start that again," Clef grumbled.

But he couldn't deny that he couldn't shake the thought himself. He should talk to Umi about it tonight. They were going out again. This time to dinner and a musical, though he didn't know where or which one. That was typical of Umi's visits - fancy restaurants and theatre tickets were a common facet - so he shouldn't read anything new or different into their evening plans.

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Clef didn't have to think too hard about what he was going to wear for the night out. He only had one suit left that was clean, so it was that or nothing. He was pretty sure the restaurant dress code frowned on nothing, as did the Metropolitan police.

As usual, the comb did little to tame the wild flip the back of his hair had decided to do. Water would probably just make it curl more, but Clef still wet the comb anyway, pasting his hair down hopefully for the ten minutes or so it would likely stay that way.

Ferio and Emeraude were grinning at him as he walked out of the bathroom tying his tie. Umi said he was fine without one, but considering the dress she wore yesterday was far more than 'business casual', Clef wasn't taking any chances. Full tie and jacket.

"Looking good," Ferio said, giving a little cat-call whistle.

"Yeah, yeah," Clef muttered, fiddling with the knot of his tie because he'd obviously done something wrong and it wasn't laying straight. Or he'd been distracted and defaulted to a four-in-hand knot rather than being fancy with a Windsor.

Clef's hands and every single thought he was having came to a complete screeching halt when Umi walked out of the bedroom.

The dress Umi was wearing was as glittery as yesterday's, if not more so. The neckline dipped low, framing a silvery snowflake necklace the sparkled with gemstones. Her hair was twisted up behind her head, showing off matching earrings and smooth skin of her neck.

"Wow," Clef murmured, catching his breath as she smiled at him.

"Are you ready?" Umi asked, looking him over. "The taxi's here."

"Yes. Of course." Clef's hands dropped from his tie, and he took a few hurried steps over to the coat closet to retrieve Umi's coat for her.

"Have a good night," Emeraude said with a wide grin.

"Yeah, you two kids have fun," Ferio said. "Don't stay out too late."

Umi laughed. "I'll have him back by midnight. It is a work night, after all."

They walked out of the flat and Umi looped her arm around his and led him out of the building, into the waiting taxi.

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If Clef didn't know Umi as well as he did, he might have thought the reservations at yet another fancy restaurant were meant to impress him, but Umi was always taking him out to expensive places. They went to at least two or three of these restaurants every time she visited. Clef had once suggested that it was a personal challenge, visiting every Michelin star restaurant in London. Umi never denied it, and Clef didn't mind being along for the ride. The food was usually amazing or absolute nonsense (or both), and this place was no exception.

Toward the end of their meal, Umi reached over to steal the end of Clef's roast, but Clef managed to block her with his knife.

"Oi! Ask first," he said.

"I just want to try the roast, since I had the fish," Umi said, pouting her lip at him. "You usually don't mind."

Clef opened his mouth to argue that she already had a bit of it when it arrived at the table, but Umi used his momentary distraction to her advantage, twisting his knife out of the way and snagging the bit of meat with her fork.

"Thief," Clef declared and then pointedly ate the last of his potatoes so she couldn't steal them as well.

"I'll buy you dessert," Umi said, around her mouthful.

"It will be the most cloying sweet dessert they have, so you won't even think of trying to share it," Clef told her.

Umi just laughed and took a sip of her drink, still grinning at him.

True to his word, Clef ordered the most ridiculously sweet looking thing on the menu, but he was too full to manage more than a few bits of it. He sat poking at the brownie with his spoon while Umi sat across from him sipping a coffee.

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As they left the restaurant, Umi was an enthusiastic ball of energy on Clef's arm, bouncing along beside him as they walked down the street together. Rather than get a taxi, they walked in the direction of Victoria station, and Clef just assumed they were going to take the tube to the theatre. Umi hadn't told him what they were going to see, so he didn't know which theatre they were headed for. He just knew that most of them were northeast of where they currently were.

They took the turn toward the station, and Clef thought they must be bound for the tube, but any prodding of Umi on the subject was met with a "Just wait and see" from Umi as she cackled beside him.

Walking straight past the train station, they stopped in front of the Apollo Victoria Theatre while Umi opened her bag to retrieve her phone.

"Wicked? Really?" Clef asked, staring up at the large green and black sign. "You do remember how much I hated that book, right?"

"It's not nearly as convoluted or depressing as the book," Umi assured him, looping her arm back through his. "And the music's good."

"You've already seen it, then?" Clef stopped. "Why are we going if you've already been?"

"For the same reason you have three bookcases full of books you've already read," Umi tugged him toward the doors. "I enjoyed it once, and I'm pretty sure I'll enjoy it again. Anyway, I've only seen it in Japanese and that was years ago."

Clef pulled a face at her, but he also knew she knew his tastes well enough that she wouldn't intentionally take him to a show he would hate.

As they walked down to their seats, Umi leaned in close. "If you really don't like it, you can choose the next time."

"Next time already *is* my turn to pick."

"Then, you can choose for my next turn. So, that's three things in a row you get to choose." She tapped open another app on her phone. "Did you want anything to drink during the show? We still have enough time to order before it starts." She held up what appeared to be a menu of some of the items available at the bar.

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After the final curtain call, Umi took hold of Clef's hand and drew him back down to his seat. "We'll let the crowd clear out a little more. Our reservations aren't for a little while yet."

"Reservations?" Clef asked.

Umi smiled. "I just thought it would be nice to go somewhere for drinks after the show, just the two of us."

Once the theatre had mostly emptied out, Umi pulled Clef to his feet and led him out.

This time, they did take the tube. Two stops, changing trains in the middle, to Covent Garden. Umi guided him to a little restaurant with a red awning that was decorated with Santa and his reindeer, and an overabundance of penguins and greenery.

Inside, the decorations were just as over the top. The walls and ceilings were covered in greenery strung through with lights and baubles.

When they were led to a table next to the cosy fire, Clef couldn't help but laugh. He suddenly recognised this as the restaurant some of his coworkers had been talking about after Sandero

got engaged. Supposedly, this was one of the most romantic restaurants in Europe. In booking this place, Umi had to have found that out.

It was the most ridiculous, over the top, romantic place he'd ever been, and Clef didn't even know if this was supposed to be a date. He was too far in tonight to ask, especially not in public. He wouldn't be able to hide his disappointment if Umi's intent wasn't romantic. So he picked up the menu and pushed the thought out of his head. They could talk about this tomorrow, in private, after his cousins had gone home.

In the meantime, drinks turned out to be a two-course meal that happened to be served with a glass of sparkling wine, and he was having fun out with Umi, date or not. He was even enjoying the ridiculous decorations.

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There was something to be said for the general atmosphere this time of year, a certain kind of magic in the glittering lights. When they stepped out into the night air, the way they glimmered around Umi only made her even more beautiful.

When they stood outside waiting for the taxi, Umi held close to Clef's arm, leaning her whole body against him, and Clef couldn't take his eyes off her.

He wanted so badly to ask her to stay. If she could take one whole week away from her office on nearly no notice, surely she could take a second. New Year was in the middle of that, so her office would be closed anyway, that being an actual days-off-work holiday in Japan.

But if he wasn't able to drop everything to come to see her for New Year in Tokyo, it wasn't fair for him to ask her to stay here in London instead.

Umi looked over at him, and their eyes met. For a moment, it was as if everything around them stopped and all Clef knew was Umi.

He opened his mouth to ask her to stay, to ask a dozen different things that all ended with the two of them giving dating a shot and seeing if this friendship could survive becoming something more, but none of those words fit on his tongue. They all felt wrong somehow because the last thing he wanted to do was cause her to decide that a hotel was better and leave him alone tonight after an uncomfortable refusal.

With a smile on her face, Umi turned, hand sliding up his arm as she moved even closer.

One moment, they had been standing side by side, then the next she was in front of him, tilting her head, and Clef didn't have more than a few seconds to realise what was happening before she was kissing him.

He froze, arms to his sides, wide-eyed in confusion while a part of his brain cheered.

When he didn't move, Umi pulled back and looked at him with concern. "Is this alright?"

Regaining some sense of composure, Clef answered in the easiest way, without a single word. He leaned back in and kissed her. His kiss was slow and awkward, but it was still so much

better than his first kiss, which had been a sloppy, drunken mistake with a friend during his last year of school.

Umi leaned in, hand combing into his hair. Her mouth opened against his, and the way her tongue teased his hinted at some higher level of experience. She kept on kissing him, and he wrapped his arms about her, trying to keep up.

They finally pulled apart, breathless and smiling, when the taxi arrived.

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It was nearly midnight when they got back to Clef's flat. Emeraude and Ferio were sprawled across the sofa bed streaming some action movie on Umi's laptop. Both of them looked up when Umi and Clef walked back in.

"What time do you call this?" Ferio said, dramatically tapping his wrist where a watch would be.

Clef kicked off his shoes and loosened his tie. "Time I would be going to bed if I had a train to catch in the morning."

Emeraude laughed. "We have any time tickets," she said. "As long as we catch the train by one, we'll be home before sunset."

"So we can stay up however late we want," Ferio elaborated, with a grin. "You, on the other hand, have work in the morning."

"You're right. I should get him to bed," Umi said, putting a hand in the middle of Clef's back and pushing him toward the bedroom. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight," the other two sing-songed after them in amusement.

The bedroom door shut behind them and Umi tugged Clef into another kiss that he was more than willing to accept. Tangling his fingers into her hair and pulling her closer, he kissed her and kissed her until they were both breathless.

When he pulled back, Umi smiled at him, licking her lips. "I said I would take you to bed. Do you want me to?"

Clef looked over at the bed and then back at her. Part of him wanted to her to do that so badly, but his cousins were in the next room, and the walls weren't exactly soundproof, as the sound of another explosion reminded him. Clef swallowed and then sighed. "I do have work in the morning," he said, his face going slightly hot as he added, "And I'd like us to take our time... the first time."

Umi laughed and poked him in the chest. "This has nothing to do with the fact you've never had sex?"

Clef blinked at her. He'd never actually admitted that to her, or so he thought.

"No mention of past partners, and you've taken an awfully long time to make a move." She kissed him, a quick chaste peck on his lips. "I'm here until Sunday. We can take our time if that's what you really want."

With that promise, they separated and went to bed, though it was a while before Clef managed to wind down enough to actually sleep.

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to be continued...

Candle Six

There was no time for awkwardness the next morning, as his cousins were busily thumping about packing their things, getting ready to leave, and monopolising Umi's time before he even made it out of bed. He left them still gathering things, with a promise to see them before next winter came around, and headed in to work.

Clef's office was nearly empty that Friday. Almost everyone else was taking time off for the holidays. Clef sat at his desk checking email, trying to get caught up on the chaos of his inbox, but all he could think about was Umi sitting back at his flat.

Umi had said she had work to do, that she was just fine on her own. He knew she was, and he was reasonably certain she wouldn't get up to more trouble than the tree and garlands she'd decked his flat out with.

They'd been together most of the week. What was a few hours when they still had another day together?

But a few hours was a large chunk of the single week she was staying with him, and an even larger amount of the time they could be alone, after his cousins gatecrashing the holiday. He'd already spent a full day and a half away from her. When she left he'd only have her daily texts and emails to keep him company.

At lunchtime, Clef sent an email to his manager and shut down his computer.

He was going home.

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On the way home, Clef stopped off at the market. He picked up a couple of different sandwiches for lunch, unsure if Umi would have eaten yet, as well as a lamb joint, some new potatoes, and a nice bottle of wine.

He also visited the bakery nearby. While they did bake challah on a weekly basis, all the loaves were already claimed - typically you were supposed to reserve them at the beginning of the week - so they couldn't sell him one. Clef didn't leave empty-handed, though, the bakers made sure to send him home with a wonderful smelling loaf of brioche.

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Umi was on the phone when Clef walked into the flat. She smiled and waved at him, before saying "Clef's back. I'll talk to you tomorrow." Ending the call with a laugh, she looked up at Clef with a grin. "You're back early. Did you miss me that much?"

Clef's face heated slightly, but he rolled his eyes and carried his shopping bags into the kitchen. "Everyone else is on holiday, so I didn't see the point in staying."

"A likely excuse." Umi bounced to her feet and came to stand in the kitchen doorway.
"Anything I can do to help?"

"Not at the moment." Clef left the joint on the counter to come to room temperature and passed Umi a tuna mayonnaise sandwich. "Wasn't sure if you'd had lunch yet."

"I was going to pop down to the corner shop for something after I was done talking to Mama." Opening the package, she took a bite of the sandwich and headed back for the sitting room. "Or there's that cafe around the corner that I like. I haven't been there the whole time I've been here."

"Maybe we could go tomorrow?" Clef suggested, putting the kettle on.

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When he returned to the kitchen, Clef dumped the empty mugs into the sink and switched the washing machine over to the drying cycle, before getting out the large cast-iron casserole pot and turning on the oven.

Umi appeared in the archway with the sandwich packaging and asked "Anything I can help with?" as she put them in the bin.

While she wasn't so great with the actual *cooking* part of cooking, Umi wasn't unhelpful to have in the kitchen. Once she washed her hands, Clef set her to work chopping vegetables while he seasoned the lamb and got it in the oven before starting on the potatoes.

Together, they got dinner started well before it was time to light candles.

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The candlesticks also lived tucked in the corner of one of the bookshelves. He carried them over to the peninsula along with the hanukkah, before slipping into the bedroom to open the other box under his bed where the box of Shabbat candles sat, unopened since he'd moved in.

When he returned, Umi had the candles in the hanukkah - purple and gold, again - and was waiting with the matchbox in hand and the prayer book open.

"Oh, more candles?" she asked, eyeing the box.

Clef nodded. He stepped up beside her and placed two white candles into the candlesticks. "It's also Shabbat tonight," he said, knowing it wasn't a very good explanation. Not very explanatory, at least. "If you light those, I'll do these after."

Umi was more than happy to agree to that. After the six previous nights, she spoke the blessing nearly from memory. Her face was as bright as the lights as she smiled at him over the candles, and something about that made his heart feel light, buoyant even.

Striking the match, Clef carefully lit the two Shabbat candles and closed his eyes as he said the blessing over them. It had been so long, but the words came to his tongue from memory and he wondered why he'd gone so long without saying them.

Opening his eyes, he smiled at Umi. Everything about tonight just felt right.

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The roast smelled amazing, and it was absolutely perfect when he sliced into it. The potatoes were roasted to perfection, and Clef could hardly wait to break into the brioche loaf.

Umi set their usual places now that his cousins had returned home.

Opening the bottle of wine, Clef poured them both a glass and said Kiddush over them. The words came to his tongue, familiar, like coming home.

Umi repeated his final amen and took the glass when he offered it. "What does that mean?"

"Basically acknowledging that the seventh day is holy, and also thanking God for grapes because wine is good," Clef explained. "I'll find you the translation." He picked up the prayerbook and flicked through the pages until he did, and held it out to Umi.

Taking the book in one hand, her wine glass in the other, Umi wandered back around the peninsula to perch in her usual chair, reading. "What's this stuff about a valiant woman who is worth more than pearls?"

"Don't get any ideas," Clef said, plucking the book out of her hand. "It also says that beauty is vain."

"You think I'm beautiful?" Umi grinned at him, and took a sip of her wine.

Not dignifying that with an answer when they both knew she was, Clef uncovered the bread and ignored Umi giggling at him while he said the blessing over it. But Clef didn't even care about Umi's teasing when he bit into the piece of bread he'd torn off the loaf. The brioche tasted just as wonderful as it had smelled. From the sound Umi made, she obviously thought the same.

"I'm worth a few pearls," Umi said, stabbing her salad with the fork. "As heir to my family's company, I'm worth a lot more than that."

Clef tossed his napkin at her. "That's not what that means."

"Oh, really?" Umi snatched up the prayer book and bounced out of her seat to fetch her phone off the coffee table. She called up the virtual assistant and asked, "What does 'Woman of Valour' mean?" She scrolled and clicked on something, then compared what was on the screen with what was in the book. "So you're saying that I'm not a shrewd businesswoman? I brokered a pretty good deal for my company earlier this week, and I certainly think I'm pretty generous. I'd make a pretty good wife."

That made Clef look at her a little more sharply. He quickly pushed the thought out of his head and turned back to his dinner. "Your food's going to get cold while you debate whether or not you're valiant."

That got Umi to sit back down, but she still kept scrolling through her screen cackling, and Clef finally elbowed her to get her to stop.

When she was finished eating, Umi set her fork down, picked her glass of wine, and leaned back in her chair. "I always miss your cooking when I go home."

"Is that why you want me to come back to Japan with you so badly?" Clef teased, prodding Umi in the shoulder.

Umi pulled a face at him. "No. I want you to come back because I miss you. You live too far away."

"If you want me to come back to Japan that much, why are you trying to buy me a nicer flat here?"

"Because, if I have to come visit more often, I want a bathtub," Umi said.

"More often?"

"It seems to be the only way I get to see you." Umi leaned toward him, cupping his cheek as she kissed him.

The kiss was slow and lingering. The way she tangled her fingers in his hair sent shivers up Clef's spine almost as much as Umi's words whispered in his ear.

"I want to have sex with you," she said, as direct as ever in her immediate intentions.

"I don't have any condoms," Clef stammered. The words fell out of his mouth before he'd even fully processed what she'd said. Then he realised he hadn't even considered picking any up when he'd been out shopping.

"That's okay," Umi said, kissing him again. "I have some." Taking his hands in hers, Umi pulled him up out of the chair. Walking backward, she led him toward the bedroom.

Clef stopped just inside the bedroom door. "Are you sure?" he asked.

"If you don't want to, we don't have to," Umi said with a bright smile, not letting go of his hands. "But, yes, I'm sure."

When she kissed him again, all Clef's worries left him. He followed her back to the bed, only to have his doubts return the moment he sat down on the side of the mattress. "I have no idea what I'm doing," he admitted. "You know I've never actually..."

Umi pulled a box out of her toiletry bag and set it on the bedside table before kissing Clef on the cheek. "We'll work it out together."

And work it out they did. There was a lot of laughter and fumbling, but they both managed to thoroughly enjoy themselves.

"Come home with me on Sunday," Umi said, leaning up on an elbow. "Spend New Year with me."

"You know I can't," Clef said. He sat up and ran a hand through his hair.

Umi pouted at him. "I know you have some holiday time you haven't used yet."

"Yes, holiday time that I'll be using when I come to visit you in March," Clef reminded her. He sighed and climbed out of bed, remembering they hadn't done anything with the food before Umi had very thoroughly distracted him. Grabbing his dressing gown off the back of the door, he pulled it around himself and went out to put the leftovers away.

Umi followed him a moment later, wearing his shirt. "Come on. It'll be fun."

"It's very tempting," Clef agreed. "But you and I both know that I can't. So please stop asking."

With a sigh, Umi nodded and started gathering up their dinner dishes. "Want me to wash these?"

"Don't worry about it tonight." Clef snapped the lid on the lamb and tucked the box into a gap in the refrigerator. When he turned around, Umi was leaning back against the counter watching him. His eyes traveled down the length of her bare legs and back up again.

"Well, if you're not coming home with me, you should at least show me a good time before I leave," Umi said, grabbing hold of his dressing gown belt and tugging him out of the kitchen with her.

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to be continued...

Candle Seven

Chapter Notes

Because I was working on this chapter yesterday, I've spent half of today thinking it was already the 29th. (I've confused myself by writing about the future.)

Clef woke overwhelmed by sadness at the thought he'd lose Umi's company tomorrow. Everything was so new, so raw, and it had never been easy to watch her leave. This time, he knew it was going to be utterly devastating.

Climbing out of bed, Clef trudged to the toilet.

He paused in the door on the way out and looked back at Umi. Last night had felt so right, but now? This morning, he regretted letting himself get so close when she would be returning to Japan in little more than a day.

A glance at the box of condoms on the bedside table made him stop. It wasn't a brand he knew, and there was Japanese text across the label. Taking a step closer, then another, Clef snatched the box up and stared at it. Sure enough, it was a Japanese box of condoms.

Last night, he'd assumed Umi must have gone out and picked something up after their night out, but if these were from Japan, that meant she'd expected to have sex. Or hoped enough to plan for it.

Clef wandered out of the room, staring at the box.

Was that what the dates were? Had she been trying to seduce him? But then what? She was going back to Japan tomorrow.

He shook his head and then went to make himself a cup of tea, so he could think about this.

Sitting down on the sofa with a cup of tea in one hand, Clef dropped the condoms on the coffee table and looked over at the brochure staring up at him from beneath that blasted tree.

It felt like hours before Umi got up, she was still yawning as she walked out. "Morning," she said, stifling another yawn. She gestured at his mug. "Any left for me?"

Clef shook his head. "No, but I think we need to talk."

Umi froze, "About last night?"

"About everything," Clef told her, voice cracking as he made a gesture encompassing the whole room.

"If it's about the tree, I just thought it would be fun. If you really don't want it, I can pack it up and ship it back home."

"It's not about the tree," Clef assured her, and he held up a hand before she could speak again. "And it's not the sex - not entirely, at least."

"Did I do something wrong?" Umi bit her lip and sat down on the sofa beside him.

"You brought these all the way from Japan." Clef picked up the box from the coffee table. "Why?"

Umi took the box and let out a little laugh. "Well, I've finished university, and I have a fancy adult office job." She gave him a shy smile. "Next up on the list is acquiring a husband, but I didn't want us to end up with a baby before I managed to get you back to Japan."

Clef stared at her, suddenly finding it hard to breathe. She couldn't mean- "Umi, are you saying you want to marry me?"

"Well, I was hoping I wouldn't have to do all the work and that you'd think to ask me yourself," Umi said, pouting at him.

He couldn't take his eyes off her. "We've barely been dating more than twenty-four hours!"

"Pretty sure it was more like four years," Umi said. "You gave me your email, and we've been seeing each other ever since."

"You can't call that dating. It's not dating if we've never had a single conversation about dating!"

Umi fidgeted. "So, you don't want to marry me?"

"We haven't dated properly!"

"Well, that would be a lot easier to do if you'd just come back to Japan and marry me." Umi crossed her arms and glared at him. "I've only been asking you for *years*."

Clef didn't know what to say. She had a point.

"I don't want to just be an item ticked off a list," Clef said, voicing the most pressing concern of many. "If I'm moving- it would have to be because it was more important than anything else to be together, for both of us."

"I did try talking Mama into opening a London branch of the office for a decade, but apparently all the rights to market our technology are held by companies we work with here," Umi said, apologetically, and Clef's breath caught. "You're the only one I want to marry, Clef - don't you think we'd be a good team? Running Ryuuzaki Industries?"

He swallowed. That wasn't being a pet husband. "Your parents are going to be doing that for a while yet. What would I do in Tokyo now?" he asked.

"The same thing you do here," Umi said. "I've talked it over with Mama and Papa -"

"Did they know your plans for this week?"

"Well, they did tell me that we needed to start talking about the future." Umi shrugged. "They also said that my little trips to London were starting to get a bit expensive. Just not as expensive as buying back the retail rights to justify having an office here, apparently."

"Talking about the future would probably start with agreeing that this is dating," Clef said, waving a hand between them.

"The first email I sent you was asking if you wanted to go out sometime and I could show you where the good cafes were, and you said yes!"

"Oh. Um " Thinking back, it was entirely possible that he hadn't picked up on the difference between the different ways of saying 'go somewhere together' in Japanese back when he'd first arrived. If so, they pretty much had been dating all these years, at least from Umi's perspective.

His face must have been a picture, as Umi's lips started to twitch up. "You really didn't think we were dating?"

"No," he admitted, though her appearing when he bought his flat so they could decorate together and a dozen other things over the years seemed so much less strange if they had been dating. Though they hadn't, because he'd been completely clueless.

"Ignoring that detail, what do you think of the idea?"

Clef swallowed and studied Umi closely. Faced with saying goodbye and seeing her off on a plane, anything which would stop that in future was appealing. "You do realise I need to give notice? I can't just abandon my job and come home with you."

Umi nodded and leaned closer. "I know that."

"And I'll have to sell my flat." He waved a hand at the room around them.

"Yeah, and?"

"I don't even know where to start about getting a visa."

"I can sort that out." Umi grinned at him. "Is that a yes, then?"

"Why didn't you just ask me to start with?" Clef kissed her, feeling breathless. "Rather than all this nonsense about buying me a new flat, and getting me to come to Japan for New Year."

Umi pulled back to look at him. "Oh, I was planning to propose to you on New Year if you hadn't done it yet."

"Well, I wasn't aware we were dating, so I certainly wouldn't have thought of proposing." Ducking his head, Clef pressed his lips to her neck. "Not that I wouldn't have wanted to."

Clef nipped at Umi's ear and she shifted against him with a sigh. His hands slipped under the hem of her top easily and he stroked his hands over her skin. Umi mouthed against Clef's neck and tangled her fingers in his hair as she pulled him closer.

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Umi lazily kissed Clef's neck. Her breath was ticklish against his skin as she spoke. "I'll put on the kettle and the rice cooker, then you're making me breakfast."

"I am, am I?" Clef asked.

"Then, after breakfast, you're taking me back to bed," Umi said with a grin. "You have four years of waiting to make up for."

Clef laughed and stroked his fingers through her hair. "Maybe if you'd been more direct with your intentions, it wouldn't have taken four years for us to get here."

"How was I supposed to know 'Come back to Japan with me' wasn't direct enough? I never expected you to be so oblivious. I just thought you were just waiting for me to graduate and get settled or something, because this whole long-distance thing sucks" Getting off the sofa, Umi pulled back on her pyjamas and went to the kitchen.

Clef tugged his trousers back on and followed her. "It does suck," he agreed.

Umi started washing rice. "Are you sure you can't get time off for New Year?"

"Yes, I'm sure," Clef said. It was severely tempting to just feign sickness and follow her back to Tokyo, but that was ridiculous. He busied himself getting out mugs and making tea rather than think about that. "What do you want for breakfast?"

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After breakfast, true to her word, Umi took Clef back to bed.

This was all happening so fast, it felt like some sort of wildly vivid dream, that he'd wake up and Umi would be sleeping in the living room as usual, and he'd be in his bed alone. But the sharp sting of Umi's teeth against his neck made it all far more real than even the weight of her across his hips.

"How quickly do you think you can sell your place?" she asked, still out of breath and trembling as she pushed herself upright.

Clef slowly blinked his eyes open. "Depends how much I'm willing to sell it for."

"So," Umi said, rubbing her hands over his chest. "If you weren't worried about taking a loss, could you do in two months?"

"Are you suggested I come to you permanently in March, rather than just for a visit?"

"I'm sure we can arrange a wedding for my birthday if we start now." Umi's grin was incandescent.

"I never actually said that I would marry you," Clef teased. "I just said that I'd move back to Japan with you."

"As good as." Pulling a face at him, Umi ran her fingers up his sides to find one of the ticklish spots that made him shriek.

Grabbing hold of Umi's wrists, Clef rolled them over and pinned Umi's hands above her head. "You only just graduated. Do you really want to make such an important decision without thinking it over?"

"I have been thinking it over for years. I'm not going to change my mind now. You're the person I want to marry. Do you not want to marry me?"

Clef kissed Umi, slowly, deeply. His hands slid down her arms and up into her hair as he caught at her lower lip between his teeth.

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The sun was already quite low in the sky when Clef and Umi finally crawled out of bed and each other's arms. They pulled on comfortable clothing to protect against the chill of the rest of the flat.

After putting on the kettle, Umi leaned against the counter and stared across the living room at the window. "I always forget how dark it gets this time of year," she said. "Until it's not even four and the sun is already going down."

"Is that another reason you're dragging me back to Japan? I need more sunlight?"

"It's not like it stays that much brighter in Tokyo - Kyoto, maybe, but not Tokyo." Umi laughed and poked Clef in the shoulder. "But you are very pale."

The kettle clicked and Umi put herself in charge of making a pot of tea while Clef turned the leftover bread and lamb into sandwiches. They settled in to eat and Umi tapped the base of the hanukkah.

"It's definitely your turn tonight," she said. "What candles are you going to use?"

"Probably whichever ones we haven't used yet this week." Clef cast a glance at the storage box nearly tucked under the tree like a gift. "I think there's still one unopened box left."

That box turned out to contain hand-dipped candles that were a light cream darkening down to a dark blue at the bottom. Clef sat back and smiled at them. They were almost identical to the ones that his family had used the first year he lit the candles. Just holding them in his hand, he could see his mother's smiling face in his mind's eye. There was almost something poetic about these being the first candles he'd light since he and Umi decided they would become a family.

Shortly after he'd lit the candles, Clef's phone chimed to say he had a new email.

Saturday, 28 December at 17:15
From: Emeraude [emeraude.d@psynos.net]
To: Clef [c.decefiro@psynos.net]
Subject: Chanukah Visit

Thanks for letting us stay with you.

I hope we didn't get in the way of your alone time with Umi, but I'm glad we got to meet her.

Maybe you'll have some very happy news to share soon?

-Xx Em

Umi peered over his shoulder. "Glad to see that obliviousness isn't a family trait," she said with a laugh. "What are you going to tell her?"

"There's nothing to tell," Clef said, silencing his phone before setting it aside to turn to Umi. "It's not like I actually said that I would marry you."

"You're just going to quit your job and move to Japan for the scenery, then?" Poking him in the chest, Umi grinned. "What are you planning to do for a visa, huh?"

Clef leaned back in his chair. "I did get a very good job offer with a rather prestigious tech company this morning."

"You are totally going to marry me. Admit it," Umi said, before she kissed him.

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When Umi gathered up their dishes, Clef had assumed she was going to do the washing up. Instead, Umi deposited the plates into the sink before pulling the milk pan down off the pot rail and setting it on the hob. It wasn't until she started rummaging through the cupboards that Clef questioned her.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Making hot chocolate," Umi said, ducking down to look in the cupboards that made up the peninsula. "Or I will once I find where you've hidden your stash of chocolate."

"What makes you think I've hidden it?"

"Because you always keep things in the same place, and there is no chocolate in the usual places," Umi said. She shuffled through the cupboard, the baking tins rattling against one another.

Clef cleaned over the counter to look at her. "How do you know Ferio didn't eat it?" he asked, knowing full well that she was about to find where he'd hidden the stash.

"Because it's the unsweetened stuff. Ah-ha!" She proudly held up her trophy as she all but bounced to her feet. "While I'm sure he'd happily take on the challenge of wiping you out of chocolate, it would have to be made into something a bit sweeter first."

Umi snapped the end off the bar and nibbled at it as she got out a chopping board and knife, and gathered what Clef assumed must be the rest of the ingredients: milk, cinnamon, nutmeg, honey, and - surprisingly - the bottle of wine. Clef stared at that for a moment before he realised there was something he could be doing that would make all of this more real when Umi left in the morning.

"May I use your computer?" he asked, already crossing the room to fetch it before Umi had even answered.

"Go ahead," Umi told him, then paused in her chopping. "Wait. Why not use yours?"

"I don't have one," Clef said. He sat down at the coffee table with the little laptop and opened the internet browser to look for an estate agent. If he was going to sell his flat, he might as well start by contacting someone about doing just that. "Not since last year."

Setting her knife down, Umi walked over to the edge of the kitchen and *stared* at him. "Yes, you do. I saw it this summer. It's one of those crappy American things."

"That would be my work computer. My *personal* computer died last winter. I didn't see the point in replacing it. My phone works well enough for what I'd need one for." Which was true enough, though he did need to replace the little wireless keyboard he had been using with it, as he'd accidentally left it in a coffee shop and it hadn't been there when he went back for it.

"You don't have a computer?" Umi looked even more horrified than Ferio had been when he learned Clef didn't have wifi. She started peeling off the apron she'd only just put on and Clef held up a hand to stop her.

"You are not dragging me out to buy one tonight. If it bothers you that much, you can correct this grievous problem next year." Clef clicked on a link that looked promising. He was pretty sure it was the same estate agent who'd sold him the flat a few years ago. "When you're done, do you want to watch a movie or something before we have to go to bed?"

"Okay." Umi agreed, with an overly dramatic sigh, and went back to her chocolate.

The entire while Clef filled out the form, he heard Umi muttering to herself about how she couldn't even imagine not having a computer. He had a strong feeling that he was going to end up with the latest Ryuuzaki top-of-the-line model when he arrived in Tokyo, just as she always made sure to replace his phone every time he visited.

Even as he filled in the contact form on the estate agent's website, the thought of moving to Tokyo felt like such a strange and almost terrifying thing. Sure, he'd spent a year abroad in Kyoto - meeting Umi and evidently changing his life - but this was something far more permanent, more important.

But even terrifying, it felt *right*.

He took a deep breath and checked the details one last time before clicking 'submit'.

Shutting the laptop, Clef climbed to his feet and went back to the kitchen where Umi was whisking a little of the wine into the pot.

Tomorrow, Umi would be halfway across the world again, so he was going to make these last few hours together count.

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to be continued...

Candle Eight

Chapter Notes

I have now written the word 'candle' so many times this week - with posting both here and on FFN - that it no longer looks like a real word.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Clef's alarm clock went off far too early. He blindly reached out from under the duvet and smacked it. Beside him, Umi shifted with a loud grumble. "You're the one who booked the ten o'clock flight," he told her.

"If I didn't get the early flight, I would have had to leave yesterday." Umi rolled over to face him. "So, this is me staying as long as possible, and still being able to spend New Year with my family."

Rubbing a hand over his face, Clef dragged himself out of bed. "Tea?" he asked, pulling back on his clothes from yesterday.

"Yes, please!" Umi answered. "No, wait. *Coffee*. Extra strength."

While the kettle was boiling, Clef did a final check of the living room to make sure Umi hadn't missed anything while packing last night, as they'd been fairly distracted. He didn't find anything, but that probably meant he would find something completely obvious in a week's time. Probably when he finally took down that ridiculous tree.

They barely had enough time to finish their drinks before the taxi arrived and they dragged all of Umi's things down - he still didn't understand how she'd compressed everything back down into her luggage. Clef couldn't bear the idea of waving Umi off at the door as he had so many times before, so this time he followed her into the taxi and on to the airport.

He sat beside her in the backseat, a melancholy silence lingering between them before Umi shook her head and laughed.

"This is ridiculous. We shouldn't be so depressed," Umi said, taking his hand. "It's not like we're saying goodbye forever. It's just a couple of months. We've been apart a couple of months before."

"But this is the first time we've become engaged before putting thousands of miles between us," Clef said with a sigh.

Umi poked him in the shoulder. "So you agree that we're engaged."

Rolling his eyes, Clef smiled at her. "Did you ever doubt I'd marry you?"

"No." Umi laughed and threaded her fingers between his. "If you didn't want me around, you'd have kicked me out of your place years ago. Or just never given me the address."

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Clef wheeled Umi's suitcase into the airport for her, and Umi spent most of the wait to check in trying to convince Clef that he just wanted to get on the plane and come home with her now. She could easily get him a ticket.

Faced with the absolute reality of saying goodbye, the only thing that kept him from saying 'yes' was the fact he didn't have his passport with him - and he didn't want to arrive on a tourist visa, not this time.

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Rather than a taxi, Clef took the underground home. Being surrounded by hundreds of people was preferable to being even more alone with his thoughts in the back of a taxi. And when he got back to his flat, he simply collapsed on the sofa. He wasn't ready to face the empty bed just yet.

Umi's message tone woke him from a doze a little while later. He blindly reached for his phone and found that Umi had sent him a photo of an empty first-class sleeping pod. The picture taken through the lowered screen between the one Umi was obviously sat in.

Umi [10:31]: I don't have a neighbour. You could have been here instead.

Getting to his feet, Clef went and flopped onto his bed to take a picture featuring half his face and the empty pillow beside him.

Clef [10:33]: Or you could be here. And better rested.

Umi [10:34]: Ugh. I'm so tired.

Her last message was just an animated image of a sleeping cat snoring little 'Z's.

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Clef had only meant to shut his eyes for a few minutes, but he must have drifted back off to sleep once more, because he was startled awake by the enthusiastic ding Umi's message tone again.

This time, opening his message app showed a photograph of a beautifully presented lunch on pretty little dishes - a big difference to the plastic-wrapped things he was used to getting in economy class seating when he paid for his own tickets.

Umi [1:15]: This is the lunch you could be having.

Staring at the picture a long moment, Clef found himself feeling hungry. Lunch was probably a good idea. He dragged himself out of bed and just pulled a face at the kitchen. He didn't

feel like having lamb again, and there wasn't much else left in the fridge but butter, eggs, and a single sad-looking spring onion.

Grabbing his coat and shoving his feet into his shoes, Clef made his way down the little cafe on the corner that he and Umi often frequented on her visits.

He studied the specials board realising he'd actually have to decide what he wanted today. Normally, Umi would insist they get both of the daily specials to share. Not that Clef ever minded; he liked just about all the food he'd had at the little cafe so far. To simplify the decision, Clef just went with the first things on the board: a roast turkey sandwich and butternut squash soup.

When it arrived, nicely arranged and with a biscuit *and* a chocolate on the saucer of his teacup, he took a picture of it to send back to Umi.

Clef [1:40]: This is the one you're missing.

Umi [1:42]: Mean!

Umi [1:43]: It looks so good.

Then there were three starry-eyed emoji and one sighing panda animation in short succession.

Shaking his head, Clef grinned, and enjoyed his meal a lot more than he'd thought he would - sending her a detailed review of it when he was done.

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That night, after Clef scraped the leftover wax out of the candle wells of the hanukkah, Clef filled each one with the gold and violet candles Umi had been so fond of. He smiled as he lit them and said the blessing over them. This had been a very unexpected holiday, but it was also one of the best he'd had in a very long time. Possibly since he'd moved out of Auntie's place.

After he'd sent Umi a picture of the candles, Clef opened his email app and finally replied to Emeraude:

Sunday, 29 December at 16:35
From: Clef [c.decefiro@psynos.net]
To: Emeraude [emeraude.d@psynos.net]
Subject: RE: Chanukah Visit

What sort of happy news are you expecting?

That I have agreed to move back to Japan with Umi?

Or that Umi and I will be getting married next year?

~Clef

He couldn't help but grin as he hit 'send'. He set his phone on the counter knowing he'd just destroyed any chance of having a quiet evening - not that he wanted to be alone or quiet right now - and went to make himself a cup of tea.

The kettle had only just boiled when his phone chimed with a response:

Sunday, 29 December at 16:37

From: Emeraude [emeraude.d@psynos.net]

To: Clef [c.decefiro@psynos.net], Ferio [wanderingswordsman@psynos.net]

Subject: RE: RE: Chanukah Visit

OMG!!! CONGRATULATIONS!!!!

And then another as he was pouring water over the teabag:

Sunday, 29 December at 16:38

From: Ferio [wanderingswordsman@psynos.net]

To: Clef [c.decefiro@psynos.net], Emeraude [emeraude.d@psynos.net]

Subject: RE: RE: Chanukah Visit

So does this mean I get the new Ryuuzaki game system for my birthday?!!

He'd just picked up his cup to take it into the living room when the phone call he'd expected came in.

"Hello, Auntie," he answered, sitting down on the sofa.

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The long conversation with his aunt ended with a promise that Clef would bring Umi back to visit as soon as he could once he was settled in Japan.

After ending the call, Clef remembered that not only was it Sunday, but that tomorrow was still very much a workday - even if he was planning to turn in a letter of resignation - and he ought to be sure he had clean clothes to wear to his office in the morning.

Somehow, he hadn't done any washing in a week, and after three guests his place wasn't the wreck it had been a few days before they had turned up... but it wasn't precisely clean and tidy, either.

Gathering up his dirty clothes, Clef pulled the clean sheets out of the washer-dryer and shoved in his next load of laundry. Once it was running, he set about doing his usual end-of-week tasks: changing the bed, cleaning the bathroom, and finishing any lingering washing-up before wiping down the kitchen. He even managed to get a bit more of that one scorch mark off the cabinet by the vent, and really the slightly wrinkled shape wasn't so noticeable when there wasn't ash in the crevices.

When all of that was done, he sat back down on the sofa with another cup of tea and turned on the tree and garland lights.

The strings of lights wouldn't be worth taking to Japan with him, but he could make sure to carefully pack the tree and garlands and have them sent along with the few other things he knew for certain that he would be keeping, no matter what, for his new home - *their* home.

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Clef had just climbed into bed for the night when his phone chimed with Umi's message tone again. He picked up the phone and opened the message that was nothing but a photograph of a very foamy bubble bath with Umi's legs crossed on the edge of the tub.

Clef [00:19]: Happy to be back with your beloved bathtub?

She sent back another photograph. This one was a close up of her glitter-covered knees, that told him she must have used one of those bath-bomb things she was always buying when she visited.

Umi [00:21]: It would be better if you were with me.

Clef [00:22]: Soon.

With everything he had to do - quit his job, sell his flat, uproot his life to move halfway across the world - the next two months were probably going to feel like a terrible hectic rush.

He couldn't wait.

.*.

END

Chapter End Notes

I hope everyone has had a wonderful week, and I wish you all a happy new year.

There should be a new chapter of Sanctuary in January, and if I manage to get the first part finished and edited, there may be the beginning of the new little short fic series I also started during NaNoWriMo soon, too.

Perhaps, I may even have a sequel or two to this. I have notes for at least one sequel I wrote down last year. Maybe it might also make it up here. At the moment, I am working on completing a number of the WIPs that are lurking on my hard drive, so there may be a few longer one-shots or short multi-chapter things in the new year as well.

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