

INDEPENDENT CREATORS

PRESENT

A FANZINE FOR CHINEN MIYA FROM SK8 THE INFINITY



OFFLINE

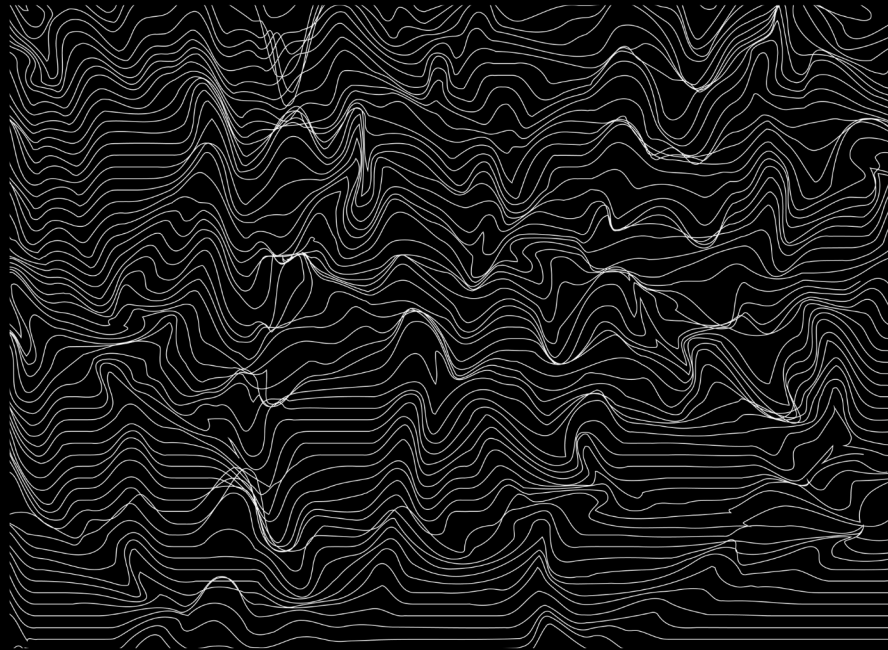
A CHINEN MIYA ZINE



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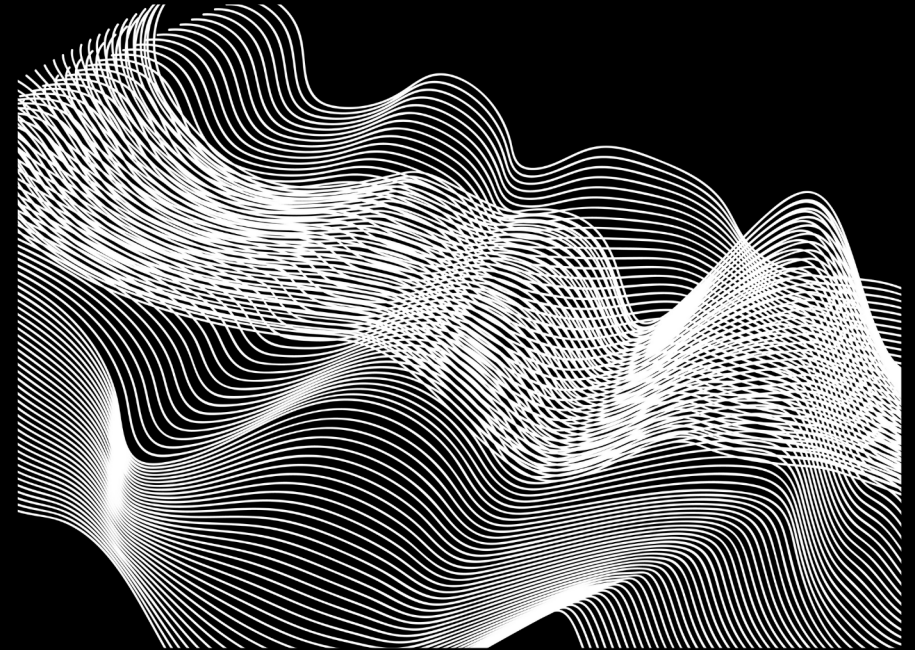
ARTISTS



MINGYSS MINMINGYSS// TWT MINGYSS// TUMBLR
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MOMO DAKUMOMO18// TWT DAKUMOMO// TUMBLR
PIXELFLOWERS GACKPOLD// TWT PIXELFLOWERS// IG
RIDASU FLOOFITIES// TWT & TUMBLR
KRAYONELA KRYNL// TWT KRAYONELA// IG

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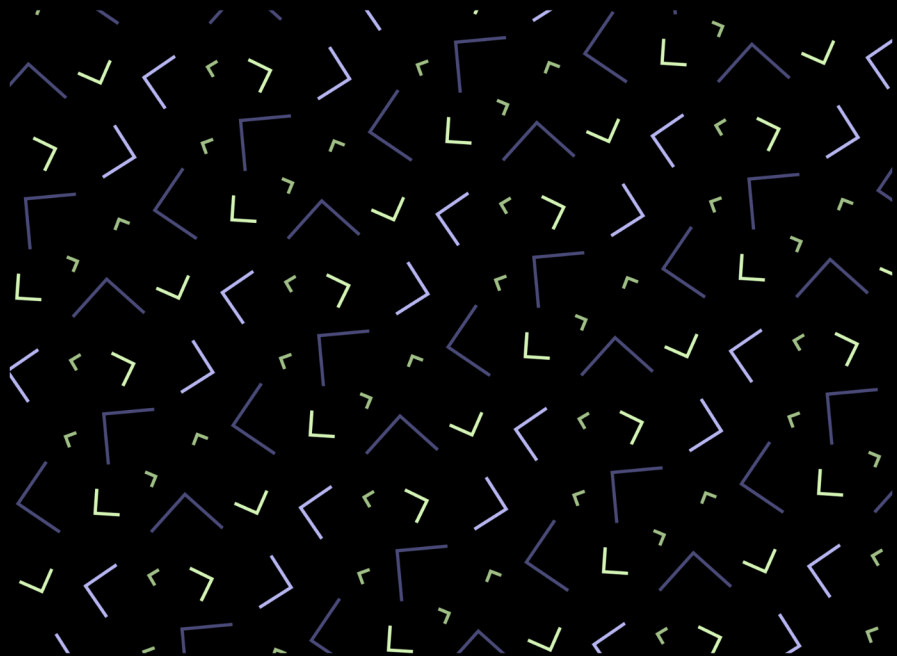
WRITERS



CAVALIERIOUS CAVALIERIOUS_// TWT CAVALIERIOUS// AO3
AU_RULER ARCHESTER-CREATIONS// TUMBLR AU_RULER// AO3
COLDSOBASHOUTO COLDSOBASHOUTO// TWT & AO3
VANYA_INSTANCE VANYA_INSTANCE// AO3
DEV LXPORIDAE// TWT & TUMBLR
KAYLOYAL PANCAKEBATTER28// TWT SHADOW_OF_A_RAVEN// AO3
STARDUSTCROW NOCTURNESAMURAI// TWT STARDUSTCROW// IG
SUNFLOWERSAILOR SUNFLOWERSAILOR// TWT
TYTYTY SS_TYTYTY// TWT TYTYTY// AO3
WISHMOON WISHMOONLION// TWT WISHMOON// AO3
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THE CAT-ASTROPHIC CONSEQUENCE OF HAVING TOO MUCH FREE TIME

VIC

It started out as a joke, as most things do.

It started with a week off skating. A whole *week!* Surely that's a bit too much for a twisted ankle, isn't it?

It's better to play it safe, his coach had said. Miya scoffed. Since when was *anything* about this sport safe? He didn't even have the chance to protest because his coach gave him a *Look* as soon as he opened his mouth, one that left no room for argument.

As stupid as this whole situation may be, he knows better than to argue with his coach over something like this. It never ends well; this is something he learned the hard way.

The first couple of days aren't so bad. Sure, he can't go for a run in the morning like he normally would, but that doesn't mean he has to stop working out altogether; he can just focus on muscle strength and conditioning instead. He'll be damned if he goes an entire week doing absolutely nothing.

The biggest problem arises when he shows up to school without his skateboard, something that's practically unheard of. It draws even more attention to him than he cares for, and he has to put up with everybody swarming him and asking if he's alright and *god*, the last thing he needs is their pity. They don't even care because he's their friend; they only care because they know how good he is at skateboarding.

The thought leaves a bitter taste in his mouth.

After school, he heads straight home instead of going to his training facility like usual. It's kind of nice at first, having a little bit of extra time. He's able to finish his homework much earlier, which leaves him with plenty of time to play video games *without* having to stay up late. He's also able to spend some quality time with his cat Hime, who seems more than thrilled to have a companion to play with, and he thinks that maybe having the week off might not be so bad.

By the third day, though, he starts to get restless. Sure, he's still working out in the morning, but it's not *enough*. He feels like there's still more he should be doing, even though there's not much else he can do. He curls up on the ground next to Hime, who is eagerly batting at his hoodie strings.

"What do you do with all this free time," he asks her. She blinks up at him, gives a little *mrow?* in response and bumps her head against his arm, tail swishing slowly behind her. Miya sighs, reaching an arm out so he can pet her the way she likes.

On the fourth day, Miya makes a discovery.

He's lying on the couch with Hime perched on his stomach, petting her lazily with one hand while the other scrolls through Twitter when he sees it.

'It' is a Twitter page called *We Rate Dogs*, full of posts featuring pictures of various dogs accompanied by a little blurb of commentary and a rating. It might just be one of the best things he's ever stumbled across, and he spends far too long simply scrolling through the page and liking all of their posts.

Out of curiosity, Miya switches over to the search bar to see if there are any pages like these for cats and is positively *scandalized* to find out that no such page exists.

This is simply unacceptable, he thinks to himself and, in a moment fuelled by equal parts impulse and boredom, decides to take matters into his own hands. Before he can think about it too much, he creates a new account with his burner email. After a moment's consideration, he names the account *I Rate Your Cats*.

Not the most creative name, sure, but that's not what's important here.

He opens up his phone camera and snaps a photo of Hime, the picture of innocence if not for the scratched-up couch cushions right next to her, and posts it with the following caption:

my perfect sweet little angel except for when she's scratching up the cushions despite having a perfectly good scratching post RIGHT. THERE. 100/10 because i love her but she is on Thin Fucking Ice

Once the tweet is sent, he switches back to his main account and puts it out of his mind.

After all, it's not like people are actually going to find this account.

People find the account.

At first, it's just a few likes and a couple of retweets on his post, maybe a follower or two. It's not a big deal, so Miya doesn't pay it any mind. But then, a couple of days later, someone sends a photo of their cat to the account through DMs, asking him if he could rate the photo, and who is he to say no?

The new post garners even more attention than the first, and soon the account begins to accumulate a steady following with more and more submissions flowing into the account's private messages.

Miya can't help his surprise at this turn of events; he hadn't expected anyone to actually *find* the account, much less for the account to take off like this.

He's not upset by the way things have turned out, though. In fact, he's come to enjoy running the account a little more than he cares to admit. Seeing all the photos of people's cats becomes the highlight of his day, and he'd be lying if he said he didn't look forward to going through the new messages.

Even when he's gone back to his regular schedule, twisted ankle all but forgotten, he still manages to make time to check for new messages and post regularly. With the steady stream of photo submissions, he hardly has to worry about running out of content, and in the unlikely scenario that he does, he has plenty of photos of the stray cats he runs into on his way to and from school.

If he's been spending more time on his phone than usual, his friends thankfully don't comment on it, though he's fairly sure he's caught Reki giving Langa a *Look* on at least one occasion after he'd pulled out his phone to scroll through his notifications. As long as they don't peek over to see what's on his screen, he can probably pass it off as a group chat for a school project, or maybe a new game that he's gotten really invested in.

He's not even sure why he's so intent on keeping the account hidden from them; Reki and Langa are hardly the type of people who would make fun of him for something like this. Besides, they're *far* more embarrassing, so it's not like they'd have much room to talk anyway.

Still, there's a part of him that wants to keep this little secret tucked away, to hold it close to his chest and protect it the best he can. Perhaps it's because the account has become something of a safe haven for him, a place where he can hide away from all the expectations of others and simply exist as himself. It's a space that's completely separate from the rest of his life, something he can fall back on when everything becomes a little too much. The rest of the world falls away, just for a little while, and he is *free*.

Perhaps it's alright if he keeps this to himself, at least for the time being.

Nobody else needs to know.

Miya really does enjoy spending time with his friends, though he'd probably die before he ever willingly admitted *that* out loud. There are some days, however, when he wonders why he continues to associate with them, simply because of how completely and utterly *embarrassing* they are.

Today, Miya thinks, watching in horror as Shadow riles up his latest victim before their race, is one of those days.

"What is he *doing*?"

"I believe that's the kind of thing birds do when they're trying to attract a potential mate," Cherry mutters disdainfully.

"Gross."

Joe snorts. "I didn't realize we were visiting the zoo today."

"Awfully rich, coming from the gorilla."

"Oh, don't even start with that you little—"

The two continue their little spat, shoving at each other like children as they throw increasingly colourful insults at each other. Miya rolls his eyes. Rather than a zoo, perhaps 'kindergarten' might be the more accurate term here.

A glance to the right shows that Reki has pulled out his phone and is now documenting the whole spectacle on his phone, carefully moving in closer to get

a better angle. He's shaking with the force of the laughter he's trying (and failing) to suppress, and Miya thinks it's a miracle that he hasn't dropped his phone yet.

Miya looks over at Langa as if to say *are you seeing this shit?* Langa meets his eyes, looking as tired as Miya feels, but his lips are also quirked up ever so slightly, as though he finds this whole situation to be quite amusing. After a brief moment of quiet solidarity, Langa lets his eyes trail back to Reki, who is now doing everything in his power to egg Shadow on. Even worse, it seems to be working.

A vibration in his pocket grabs his attention, and Miya latches onto the distraction like a lifeline. There's still some time before Shadow's race starts anyway, so he leans back against the boulder behind him and pulls his phone out so he can reply to some of the messages he'd missed earlier.

This is his first mistake.

Since his attention is fully dedicated to his phone, he completely fails to notice when Reki returns to their spot, as well as the very incriminating sound of a camera shutter going off nearby.

Not long after, a new Twitter notification pops up and, without taking the time to check who the message is from, Miya simply taps on it so it will take him directly to the message. It's become something of a habit with this new account of his, since he doesn't know the people who message the account anyway.

This is his second mistake.

Miya takes one look at the message and nearly drops his phone. The first thing he sees is a picture of *himself*, one that couldn't have been taken more than a minute ago because it features him in his full 'S' attire, leaning back against a boulder while scrolling through his phone. The very same boulder he'd been leaning against before his phone almost died a very untimely death.

Beneath the photo is another message that reads:

i heard you rate cats, but what about catboys??

Miya's stomach drops, and he finally checks the top of the screen to find Reki's username staring right back up at him. Even if he hadn't checked, he probably

could've still figured it out, given the way Reki has doubled over in a fit of hysterical laughter, that *jerk*.

Miya whirls around, face flaming, holding his phone out for Reki to see. "What the fuck is this?"

"I was right, it— it really *was* you!" Reki manages to wheeze out. Miya crosses his arms and leans more of his weight back into the boulder, wishing he could just melt into it and escape the rest of this conversation.

Unfortunately for him, the universe does not seem to be on his side; the boulder remains unfortunately solid, and he remains unfortunately trapped between a literal rock and a metaphorical hard place.

"You seemed awfully confident," Miya says breezily, feigning nonchalance in an attempt to hide his mortification at being found out. "What if you'd been wrong?"

Reki straightens up, levelling him with a crooked grin, and it takes all of Miya's willpower not to kick him in the shin. "Nah, there's no way. I wouldn't have done that if I wasn't certain about it."

Miya scowls. "Explain."

"Look," Reki starts, holding his hands up in a placating gesture before Miya can strangle him, "I didn't know it was you at first. I stumbled across the account by chance and thought it looked like something you might like."

Miya opens his mouth to retort, but Langa cuts him off. "It's true. I was there when he found it."

Of course he was. Miya would've been more surprised if Langa *hadn't* been there. Still, he deflates slightly with the knowledge that they weren't purposefully trying to track him down for blackmail purposes. "So how'd you figure it out, then?"

Reki doesn't respond immediately. Instead, he seems to be searching for something on his phone. He makes a triumphant little noise when he finds it, then turns his phone around for Miya to see...

The very first post on the account. The post with Hime, his own cat that Reki and Langa like to come visit from time to time.

Of course. *Of fucking course.*

He really should've anticipated this. It was only a matter of time before his friends found out about the account, especially as it continued to grow. Still, Miya had assumed that even on the off chance that they *did* find it, they wouldn't be able to trace it back to him.

Oh, what a fool he was. He'd completely forgotten about the post that had landed him here in the first place.

Miya tugs his hood down a little more. "Well. Now you know. *Please* don't tell anyone."

Reki looks like he wants to interrogate him a little more, but maybe he picks up on Miya's distress and decides to take pity on him because he just reaches over to knock Miya's hood off and ruffle his hair. "Of course, of course. This'll be our little secret," he grins.

Despite the embarrassment, Miya finds himself grinning back.

"I do have one question, though."

Miya raises an eyebrow. "What is it?"

A shit-eating grin spreads across Reki's face. "*Do* you rate catboys?"

This time, Miya doesn't resist the urge to kick him in the shin.

I Rate Your Cats @IRateYourCats • 5m

[Image: A picture of a black cat sitting comfortably among pieces of confetti scattered around the floor. There is a very small party hat sitting atop its head.]

sharing another picture of my sweet little baby angel because it's her birthday today! everybody wish her a happy birthday or i will steal your kneecaps.

↳ reki!! @krsk8 • 1m

check ur dms

↳ **I Rate Your Cats** @IRateYourCats • 2s

no

"I'm going to block you, Reki."

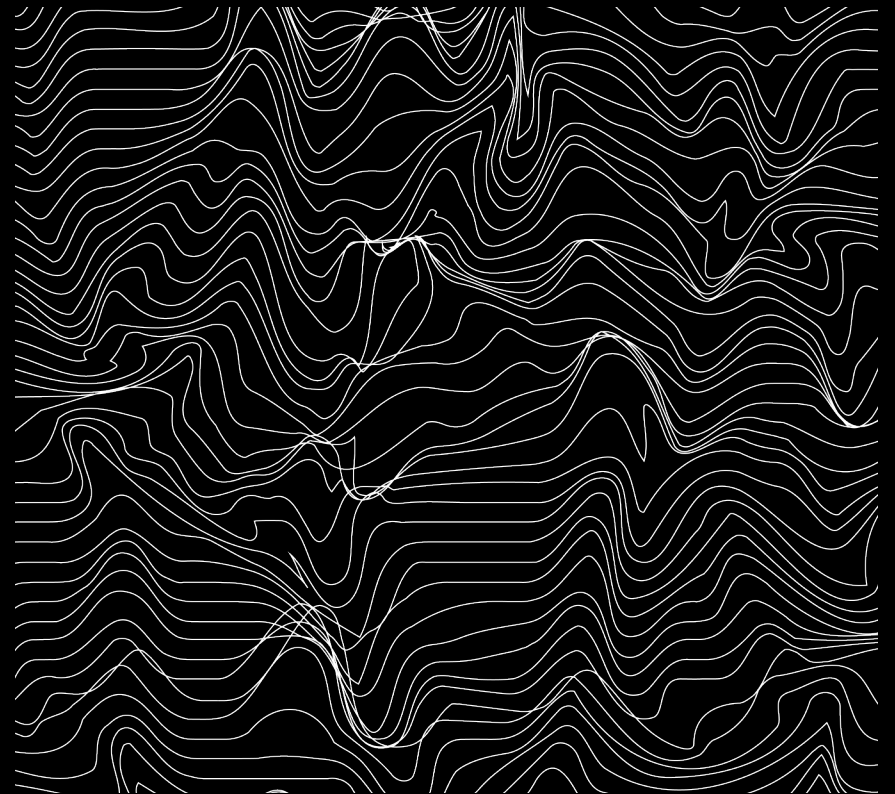
"You think I'm actually going to fall for that? I know you love me too much to actually do it."

"He blocked me! He actually blocked me! Langa, are you seeing this? I can't believe it!"

"Deserved," Miya says without looking up from his phone.

Reki!! @krsk8 • 2s

there is no love in this house.





Krayonela

SHOULD WE RUN, SHOULD WE STAY? (I GUESS, I THINK, I'LL BE OKAY)

WISHMOON

"Wh-ouch! *Watch* it!"

Maybe it's your fault, for not looking where you're going, or maybe it's because you're too busy frowning at your phone to pay attention to the world outside of your adventure games, but when you bump into the guy in front of you, you nearly fall onto your back. It's sheer luck and the fact you've been skating so long that you don't hit the ground *too hard*.

Quick on your feet as you are, it still takes you a few seconds to get your bearings.

It's just your luck that, when the random NPC turns around to apologize, a hand scratching at the back of his bright red hair while the other offers you a hand up, you realize you *know* him. His smile is tentative, sheepish, when you squawk out a surprised, "Slime?"

And, Reki, stupid, terrible, kind-hearted idiot that he is, exclaims, "Oh! Miya!" As if he *hadn't* just been standing in the way of everyone and everything like a grindable enemy encounter.

You scowl at the proffered fingers. You haven't forgiven him that easily, after all. Friendship takes time to rank up, before it drops again, and... he knows that, right?

Before you can open your mouth to say as much, however, he decides not to give you the choice, instead grabbing you by the wrist with both hands and *yanking*.

Reki almost shoves your face into his chest as he steadies you, and you hate the fact that you're so light that he misjudged his own strength. Something biting bubbles up from the back of your throat, but your vision's full of his ugly sweatshirt and everything's warm and muffled and you're way too out of sorts to bother.

And then there's an arm around your shoulders, a big, open grin on the guy's face. And you're trying to wriggle out of his hold, *really* you are, but. You can't really

help the way your fingers curl and snag at the hem of his clothes. Like claws afraid to let go, because you don't really want to.

When you notice, you immediately pry them off. Huff, when he gives you a chance to breathe without bearing down over you, words easy as he asks how you're doing, where you've been.

You ignore him and poke your head out from under his arms to spot the other person Reki was with. Because, apparently, that embarrassing display couldn't be just in front of the public but, also, in front of people Reki *knows*.

Behind the both of you, a girl with bright eyes and brown hair tied up into pigtails stops staring at her phone long enough to glance over. She takes out the lollipop in her mouth and waves with the hand not holding her mobile, smile easy, before turning back when the the loud *ding* of a notification sounds.

You stare, then turn to glare at Reki, a question you don't quite know how to ask left to sit in the silence.

... Maybe, you think, after he gives you their quest notes, you shouldn't have questioned it, to begin with.

Turns out, this trip's not going to be a solo dungeon crawl, after all.

(The train ride would've been awkward enough, even *without* the Kyan siblings joining you.)

After the three of you hop off the Yakena Bus Terminal at Yogi, it quickly becomes apparent that, no, Reki's sister, Koyomi, *isn't* going to serve as a buffer.

"Alright, you two," she insists, "go do whatever uncool things you're up to."

You cover the snort that slips past your lips as Reki stumbles back, arms flailing, before he catches his balance. "You sure?"

Reki's sister, eager to get a photo with a singer who calls herself 'Swallow', tosses a wave and a shooing motion behind her. If you'd been paying attention, maybe

you would have made a mean comment about her not having as stupid a face as her brother, or maybe you would've dug a jab in about even his family not wanting to stick around.

Maybe you would have meant it, in the way that you really wouldn't, but. You're not really listening to the exchange, as your eyes skim over the rows upon rows of game cartridges stacked across the shelves.

Here's the thing. Manga Souko's big enough that you can pick any direction to head into and simply *disappear between the aisles. Big enough that you can climb onto your board and just... skate away.* Because this is just a side quest, and an adventuring party can be as small as two, and you're not the kind of guy who can support useless slimes who can't even face their friends.

Except... except you're not as strong as you think, and Reki's not as bad as you want to believe, and maybe you'd missed this, missed *him*, those weeks he'd left you and CHERRY and JOE and *Langa* behind.

Because though you grumble and scowl, eyes focused on the handheld game between your thumbs, Reki still follows you with his hands behind his head, relaxed, happy, and carefree. And it hurts, just a little, that the others were right. That Reki would come back, because he did, even though you'd thought...

Well, you already know what the others were like, so why should Reki have been any different?

In the end, it was your fault people leave, right?

(No matter how much you wish it wasn't.)

"Why?" you whisper, before you can stop yourself.

"Huh?"

"Idiot," you mumble. Then, louder, without turning around: "Why'd you come back?"

Reki pauses, quiet. You hear the shift of his clothes, the way he almost fidgets. Hear him say, "I wonder," in that tone of voice that means he doesn't know how to answer. Hear him breathe out a sigh, and admit, "Don't know," in the way that means he does, actually.

Out of the corner of your eye, you can see the content smile tugging at the corners of his lips and pulling at the stiff white bandage on his jaw. He's not looking at you, but at something on the ground, or maybe not there, at all, so very sad, so very fond.

It makes something angry and bitter and full of claws inside of you settle. And maybe he's not as brave as a hero, and maybe you're not as strong as you pretend, but. In the end, maybe it's just the fact that he's not so easy to kill, and not so impossible to teach, that makes you think:

"For a dog, you're pretty loyal, right?"

You duck your head when Reki grins, ruffling the neat coil of your hair into something unmanageable. "Come on! I thought I got *upgraded* from slime," he laughs, before he's slinging an arm around your shoulders and trying to pull your quiet smile into something bigger, something wider. "Don't think a dog's any better, Miya!"

And you can't help the giggles, as his hands pinch at your sides, or the sharp breaths of air that sound like you're dying (again), as you wonder if this is what it feels like to be (truly) acknowledged, or the way your fingers wrap around the span of his arm and *dig*, as if to mark your place.

Your friend. Your brother. For better or for worse, though you share no blood between you, or SHADOW, or any of the others. Because, see, here's what you couldn't admit, at first: that ADAM was helpful, but unkind; that SHADOW is cocky, but he doesn't get loneliness; that CHERRY and JOE are smart and strong, but they're more comfortable in their own skins, and they'd never said anything about the ones they'd lost to.

That Langa is amazing, but he and you are the same, and it's never *yourself* that you were worried about.

A particularly well-placed elbow to his stomach, and Reki lets you go. At least for now, at least long enough for you to catch your breath. The box covers the both of you knocked over are scattered across the floor, but you're not really looking

at them when you bend down to pick up your board, and turn around to catch Reki's eyes.

He's like the sun, wild and untamed. Unchanged, though the rain had poured in Okinawa, and left you bereft of that passion, that comfort, you hadn't felt before you'd met him. That curdling in your stomach that wasn't so much rage and resentment as it was the realization that it'd been a long time, since you'd experienced this.

"But, you stayed, didn't you?" you tell him, because Reki had. "You stood up for me, and then you ran away. And I didn't want to forgive you, but..."

"Sorry," Reki offers. "I guess I lost myself." A pause. "But, listen. I'm back now. So —"

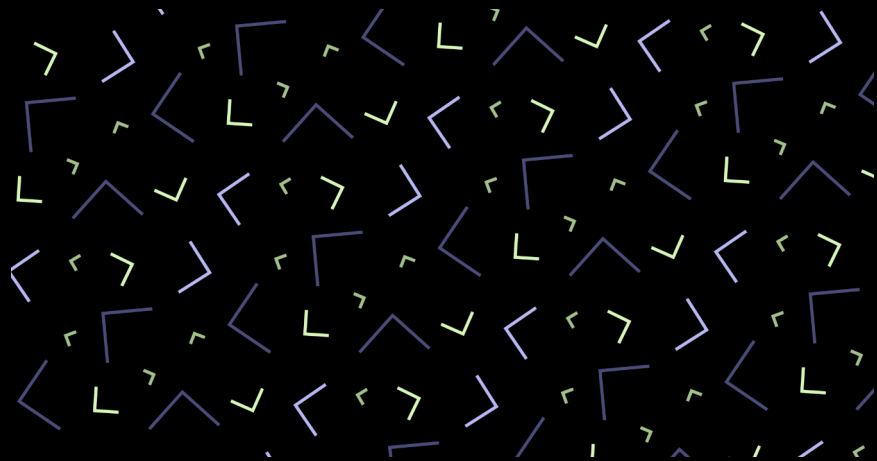
And, you can't help it. It's not a demand, except it is, when you ask, "— So you're not allowed to leave, again. Okay?"

It shouldn't be as relieving as it is when Reki nods, a fist he usually only ever gives Langa coming up to bump against your own, and promises:

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm not going anywhere."

Because a party isn't whole if one of the main characters disappears.

(Or, maybe, because you still want to get used to what it's like, when your friends don't leave you behind.)



JUST THE RIGHT FIT

CAVALIERIOUS

Miya stares at his phone, uncomprehending.

The email is clear. His manager has stated exactly what is to happen. Miya has been asked to commentate on a national-level skateboarding competition, and there isn't room to say no. It's fine, *it's fine*— he's okay with doing exactly that, but—

The email cites professional attire. Miya frowns as he looks at himself, smoothing a hand over his sweatshirt and shorts. Definitely not professional. Absolutely elementary.

Miya sighs, dragging a hand down his face, having no idea where to even start. His parents are the busy sort— always working and making sure that he can skate as he wishes. He doesn't fault them for it; they love him more than anything, and they've sacrificed just about it all to ensure that he gets to do what he loves.

But their combined, regular absences often bring forth issues. Miya has no idea when he'll have the time to find something nice to wear for the event, and the *last* person he wants to ask is his manager. She's a mean witch when she wants to be. Suit-shopping already sounds terrible and Miya doesn't need a grouchy, middle-aged woman added into the mix.

Still. Something has to be done.

Miya is resourceful, so he thinks. And thinks and thinks and thinks.

And then, he smirks, because he's had an idea that just *might* work.

Thing is, though— it's awkward to ask.

Later, the next day, Miya's thumb hovers over the call button of his phone. It's ridiculous. He doesn't hesitate. Miya is absurdly confident with most that he does.

And yet.

Eventually, he hits the button and presses the device to his ear. The phone rings and Miya's palm sweats, and then—

"Miya? Is everything alright?" Cherry's voice is quiet and mildly concerned. Understandably so because usually, Miya texts him, not rings.

"I'm fine," he murmurs. A pause. *"Actually, well— there's a favor I'd like to ask of you. I, uh, I need to go get fitted for a suit and my parents are busy. So I thought that maybe you could... I dunno... take me? If you have time, of course. I just figured since you're a public figure, and have decent style... Look, just help me, okay?"*

The line crackles and he hears Cherry huff a soft little laugh.

"There isn't a need to make fun of me," says Miya, bitterness already creeping into his tone.

"I'm not. But there isn't a need to give such a long-winded explanation. Slow down and start again."

"My manager— she arranged a commentating gig for me."

"Oh?"

Miya waves his hand, even though he knows Cherry can't see it. *"Yeah, some national-level competition. I need a suit for it, and my parents are busy working, so—"*

"Alright."

Miya pauses, fingers tightening around his phone case. *"Eh?"*

"I'm happy to take you. Do you have a place in mind?"

"My manager had a suggestion. I'll text it to you." Miya is about to hang up when he pauses, his breath caught slightly in his throat. Cherry hangs on the line patiently. *"Hey,"* says Miya in a low murmur, *"Um, thanks."*

Cherry doesn't often smile, but Miya can imagine a small grin spread across his face at that moment.

"Of course."

The tailor that comes at the recommendation of his manager is abysmal.

Cherry stands there, chin pressed into his hand, eyes narrowed as he watches the fitting. Miya's never done something so formal, so he has no idea how it usually goes. But, judging by Cherry's face, certainly not like this.

"You've measured the leg wrong—"

"Well, if he'd stop *moving*, I'd get an accurate measurement," snaps the tailor, testily.

Cherry glares, but doesn't talk back, having a little more class than the ornery worker. Miya doesn't fidget, he stands stock still and straight-backed, mostly because he doesn't want to do this more than once. The tailor just doesn't know how to do their job.

"That's at *least* an inch too short."

"An expert on suits, are you?" The tailor eyeballs the traditional kimono that Cherry wears, his mouth tipped into a frown.

Cherry scoffs, irritated. "Yes."

Miya doesn't doubt it. Cherry might be known for his historic taste, but he's had plenty of national appearances as well— not all of them kimono friendly. There was a reason that Miya asked Cherry to come along.

Cherry steps forward and brushes a hand across Miya's shoulders. "And the slope of the shoulders— far too large. I'm beginning to think that you have no idea what you're doing."

The tailor bristles, standing to his feet. "You are more than welcome to leave, then. Otherwise, let me get back to these measurements—"

"Alright, then," says Cherry. He tugs at Miya's elbow and pulls him off the little podium before the window. "Let's get you changed back."

"Wait—"

Cherry looks to the tailor again, a conniving little smirk spread wide across his face. "You said it yourself, that we could leave. I think that you are right. I have a far better option."

"I—"

Miya shrugs out of the suit in the safety of the fitting room while Cherry continues to argue with the tailor. He can't help but laugh, hiding it behind his hand. Cherry truly doesn't put up with such nonsense, quick to speak.

When he leaves the dressing area, Cherry tugs him along. They leave without another word.

The next tailor is a kindly old man with a quiet, soothing voice, and a warm laugh.

Miya isn't a people person, but this man is more like his grandpa, with his soft-handed touch as he pulls the measuring tape taut against his body. When he asks him to adjust, it's with a chuckle, not biting words. He read rotates him patiently and Miya happily complies.

This time around, the suit hangs on him better, slim-cut and close to the waist. The material is far finer, smooth like silk underneath his fingertips.

Cherry stands off to the side, observing as he holds his hand in his chin. But he looks happy— pleased even. "That old bat," he says— even though the previous tailor wasn't that old— "It was clear that he had no idea what he was doing."

"Not like I'd have a clue." Because Miya doesn't. He knows next to nothing about fashion, least of all how a suit should fit. He's never had to wear one before this. "It's just who my manager picked."

The elderly man laughs from where he kneels beside Miya's knees, amused.

"Then your manager should be fired."

Miya smiles slyly, watching Cherry in the mirror. "Oh, trust me, I agree. She's the absolute worst." But a necessary evil, as annoying as it is. Miya can't wait until he can hire someone of his own choosing.

Cherry snickers, breaking his usually calm composure. "They always think that they know, don't they? I'm sure you could've found a better option if you'd just looked it up on the internet to start."

Miya nearly considered it, but— "Well, I called you instead." He pauses. "And it was too late."

Cherry leans against the far wall, arms crossed over his chest. "Good thing I answered, then. And a good thing that I came. If you'd gone onto television wearing such a monstrosity, news outlets would be roasting you for weeks."

"I wouldn't care." Miya never has, when it comes to what others think of him. He marches to the beat of his own drum, regardless of what anyone else thinks. And really, it works for him, a steady reminder in his heart that *he's* the one who drives exactly how he is.

"Good." Cherry pauses and steps forward. The tailor makes a few last measurements and pins the hem of the trouser legs. Then, he stands and brushes off Miya's shoulders before presenting the final fitting.

It's astounding, what a well-fitted suit can do to a person. Miya looks older and a little wiser, not so much a brat on a skateboard, but instead something half respectable.

"My God, *immensely* better."

"Of course," says the tailor, pressing a hand to his chest. "Nothing less than the best from me."

Miya thumbs at the lapel, smoothing over the fabric. "Cherry, there's no way that I can afford this."

"Nonsense." Cherry waves the thought away. "I'm covering this one."

At that, Miya starts, his eyes going wide as he whips around to look at him properly. "What? No!"

"Yes." Cherry raises an eyebrow. "Are you actually going to turn down a custom fit suit from one of the most expensive tailoreries in the country?"

Miya swallows thickly. The right thing would be to stay the course and insist *no*, but Miya also knows Cherry. The man is as stubborn as he is, and that's saying something. "I— I just... why?"

He's been mean to him at times, even downright cruel. Miya instantly thinks of the beach where he'd called *Cherry Mom*, incessant in his teasing and need to aggravate the heck out of the man.

Cherry sighs softly, his expression softening. "You and I are a lot alike, kid, and I don't just mean our hobbies. For people like us who are quick with cutting words, and refuse to be bullied, we often find ourselves alone. And it isn't that we don't want friends, or others around, it's just that we seem so unapproachable."

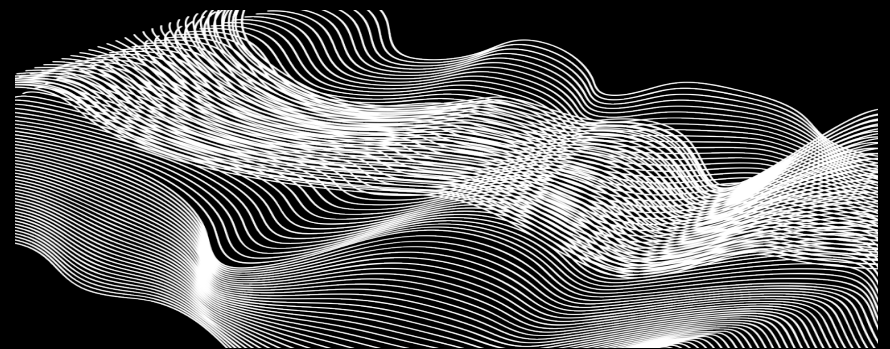
Miya snorts. "Get to the point, you long-suffering windbag."

Cherry laughs. "My point is that we have to stick together. That's it. You need a good suit, and so, here one is. I can afford it, so let me."

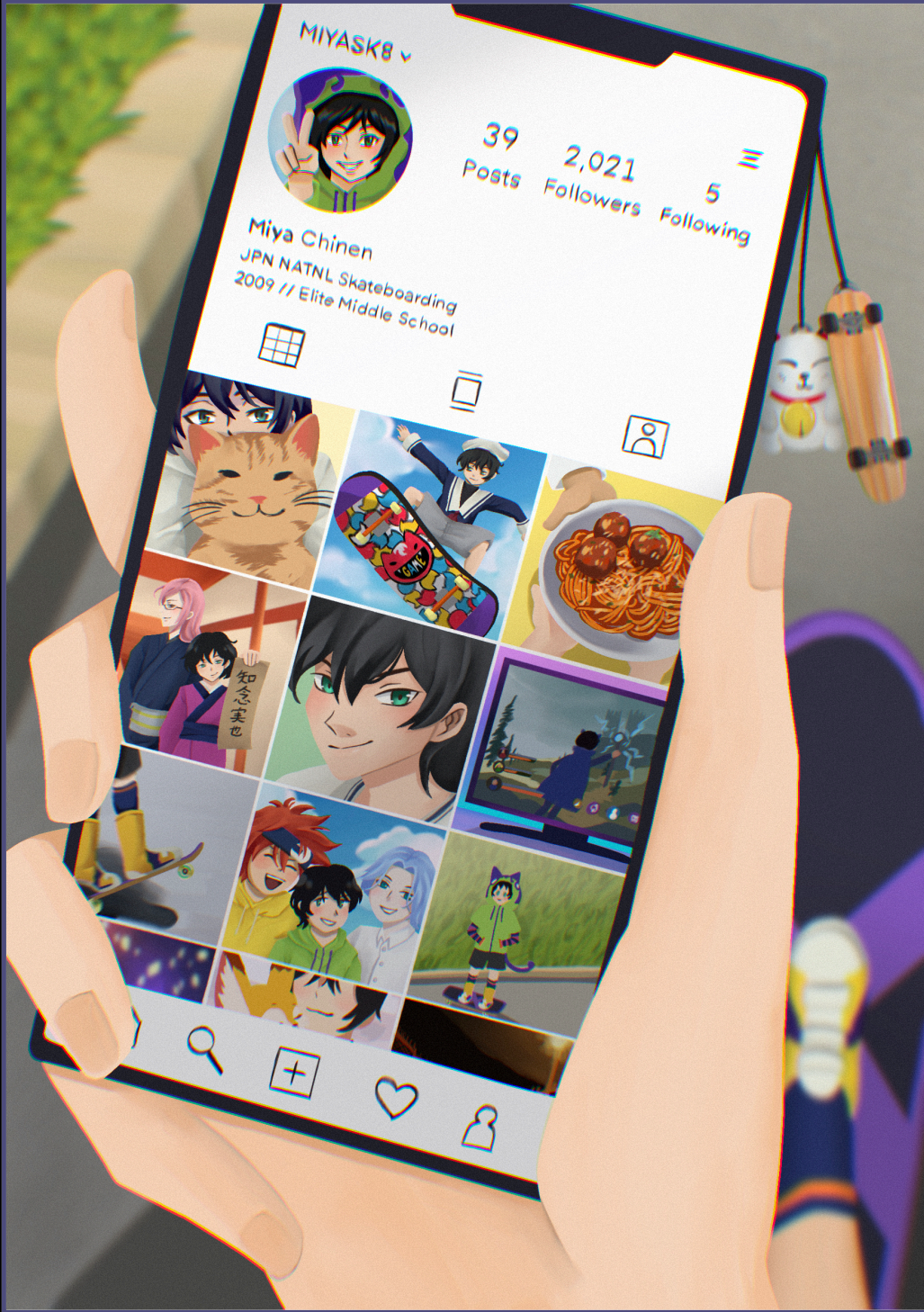
Miya sighs softly, turning back to look in the mirror again. The cut is superb. He tells himself that perhaps he deserves the indulgence. "I work hard at what I do," he says.

"Yes, yes, you shine bright like a young star." Cherry sounds incredibly sarcastic, just what Miya expects.

Then, Miya smirks. "Well, at least I won't look like an utter slime on television."



LILLACHAN.PNG



LENNY.PNG



MEMORIES LIKE THESE

TYTTY

Miya honestly thought when Langa and Reki offered to help him study for his upcoming finals that it wasn't a bad idea. *Three brains are better than one*, he thought. Bold of him to think that those two scrubs even had brains to begin with.

He'd hoped that they could cover a lot of material and by doing so, he could work some skating time into his schedule for the day, but his supposed friends were having the opposite effect that he'd hoped they'd have. Instead of getting things done quickly, he was literally getting *nothing* done besides the occasional frustrated huff and a scribble here and there.

Reki and Langa were both too easily distracted if skating wasn't the subject, and every other moment that passed by, their thoughts were drifting to other things. There was no focus, and in the end, they were little more than a hindrance.

With the two of them around, Miya couldn't focus on his studies at all. He tried, telling them both to stop messing around and help him study like they were supposed to. They would get back to it, but before long were getting distracted again. Eventually, Miya just told them to leave him be, but they still stayed, and they were too playful — laughing and roughhousing and doing everything they shouldn't have been doing.

It was infuriating, not because they were there and preventing him from doing what he needed to be doing, but because he wanted to join them. His desire to spend time with his friends was strong, and likely his biggest distraction, if he was being honest with himself. He could've easily slipped in his earphones and played one of his favorite playlists, ultimately tuning the two of them out. Instead, he listened to them talk and laugh, and he wanted to be a part of that.

Miya had friends growing up, and he'd lost them, too. Jealousy was such a bitter thing, easily able to ruin people. Miya liked doing well, and thought that his friends would be happy for him when he did well. That's how it was supposed to be, but that wasn't the case for his supposed 'friends' back then.

His friends now though.. Reki and Langa supported him even when he'd been a total brat to them. They showed him how to have fun again, how to open up and forget about perfection. They might've been a couple of scrubs, but they were

Miya's scrubs.

Annoying yet awesome, and ridiculously distracting.

"This is the last time I ever try to study with you guys around," he scoffed when he finally gave up. The thoughts of his friends had taken over, and he knew that he'd do well enough with his finals anyway.

Moments like these were meant to be cherished. Moments like these were precious and fun, and Miya wanted to have fun with his friends.

"Sorry, sorry," Reki laughed, attempting to wave Miya down when he stood from his low table. "We'll be quiet."

"No, forget it. Let's watch a movie instead."

There was a time when Miya would've thought that a true friend would've turned him down on that. He was supposed to be studying. Not Reki and Langa though, they were all too eager and nothing but grins as they scrambled to their feet as well, more than happy to indulge him.

"There's this new horror I've been thinking about watching," Miya said teasingly, knowing just how much of a scaredy cat Reki was.

"H-horror?" Reki asked, moving as if to leave only to be stopped by Langa securing an arm around him.

"What are you, a chicken and a scrub? Tch."

At Miya's taunting, Reki grew flustered and started yelling. "I'm neither, you little brat."

"Can we watch a comedy instead?" Langa asked while pulling Reki over to the couch. "Or maybe action?"

"Fine, since you asked and not Reki."

Before long, Miya was settled on the couch between his friends, cradling a large bowl of popcorn for the three of them to share. A comedy they'd all agreed upon played on the TV, and Miya couldn't shake the smile from his face.

Who needed studies when you could be making memories like these?

FRUICHUS.PNG



LEX_CATTO.PNG



PUSSYWILLOW

AU_RULER

Not every day, but some days after school, Miya would help Shadow at the flower shop. Initially, he hadn't planned for it to become a fairly common thing. He'd just wanted to bother Shadow. Poke fun at him, maybe talk to that manager he'd seemed to like so much. But when he went, an older lady had assumed he worked there and didn't even ask if he didn't before she shoved two flowers at him and asked for his opinion. It'd thrown him off enough that he actually answered. Then the manager- Arisa, he eventually learned- shoved a bouquet into his hands and he could only blink as she shoved him toward someone at the counter, apparently deciding he would be an employee that day.

Later, he had learned Shadow'd called in sick and she was alone. Telling her that he was Shadow's younger sibling the first time he'd come here bit him in a way he hadn't expected, since she seemed to think he'd been sent to take Shadow's place. (Of course, he didn't correct her. Not that he'd really had a chance to. It was busier than he'd expect a flowershop of all things to be. She'd paid him a little after, though. Which was nice.) After that he'd just kinda... started ending up there. More and more. The flowers smelled nice and it was a nice escape from school and the professional side of skating. Especially when he was busy. And when it was empty, it was fun to heeie around the shop with the shoes he'd convinced Kojiro to get him, making random bouquets. One of which he was even able to bring home. (It was his favourite- pink carnations and white lilies and ferns and lilacs and pink hyacinth.)

It was... nice. More nice than he'd ever thought it'd be, though he'd admit he hadn't exactly expected to end up here the first time he snuck over with Reki and Langa to bug Shadow into taking them to the onsen. Or any of the other times he came over to bother Shadow. Whether alone or not. What could he say, Shadow was fun to make fun of.

"Okay you little runt," Shadow came toward him, a large bucket of flowers in hand, "move over."

"Isn't there a magic word you're supposed to use?" Miya asked. When Shadow only glared at him and moved past anyway, grumbling something about cats and always being underfoot as he went, Miya stuck his tongue out. Even without the 'please' he rolled enough out of the way so Shadow wouldn't trip. If a mess was

made, they'd have to clean it up. Something he learned after an unfortunate accident almost had Arisa revoke his heeie rights. Thankfully his pleading face did wonders, even if it never fazed Kaoru. He followed Shadow outside, where the older skater filled the bucket with water. There was a low, wooden fence out here that really felt like it separated the back area from the outside world. A vine traveled up it, dotted with small yellow flowers. The shop didn't really use them- most of what they sold were bouquets or singular flowers and they weren't really suited for either, but they fit the atmosphere of a flower shop. Sometimes Miya would catch Shadow taking care of them, especially after dealing with especially trying customers, or sometimes the day after a beef that went badly. About the second time Miya caught him after a rude customer had left, he figured Arisa put them there specifically for that reason. Next to the fence was a wooden box, which Miya rested his feet on when he jumped up to sit on the fence.

Shadow looked at him from the corner of his eye. "Shop is almost closing. Do you... need me to take you home?"

Every day Miya worked there, Shadow would ask that. And every time, he'd get the same answer.

"Nah, I have my skateboard."

There was silence, filled only by the sound of the hose in the bucket. Before Shadow could ask a second time just to make sure- something that also happened everytime. The things Miya learned about Shadow. The *blackmail*. If he ever had the desire to, he could probably do some serious harm to Shadow's S reputation. ... He *wouldn't*. Because he at least sorta cared about Shadow. But he could- a small, almost pitiful noise filled the air. A noise that immediately had Miya's ears peaked. Was that-? It came again.

Mr-ooow.

He turned to Shadow. "Did you hear that?" The look Shadow gave him, half worried and half concerned was all the answer he needed. He jumped down, making a meowing noise of his own in the hopes the cat would answer. It did, with the slightest delay. In a call and response, Miya kept it up until he found the cat. Bright blue eyes looked up at him from a bush. A small mouth opened wide. *Me-roow?* With a delighted gasp, Miya lifted the *kitten* from the bush. Dirt clung to short black fur and its toe beans. The hose turned off and Shadow walked up behind him.

"Oh no, we are not keeping a cat."

Miya turned on his heel to look up at the older skater. "You're right," he smirked and held the kitten out to him. "You are."

"What?-"

"I can't keep it," Miya interrupted him. "Much as I'd love to, Joe's allergic. I'd never get it in the door."

"Then we'll take it to an animal shelter!"

"And leave it to fend for itself??" Miya gasped, all fake dramatic and half fake anger, as he pulled the kitten close to his chest. This was the closest he's gotten to *actually* owning a cat. He was not passing up this opportunity. "Who knows what kind of people might adopt it! If it even does manage to get adopted. I can't leave this kitten's fate up to chance." And he pulled out his best pleading eyes, even jutting his lower lip out in a pout.

"Why don't you just use those on your dad?" Shadow mumbled quietly before he sighed. "Alright, alright, I'll take the fuzziest. Just put that away already."

Miya lit up pleasantly, just barely keeping his smile from being *too* smug. "Thanks, Shadow!"

"Yeah, yeah, you little monster," Shadow said with a flat look.

Luckily they didn't have to worry about the kitten in the shop. Arisa took one look at it and cooed. "Are you gonna take care of it?"

"Dad's allergic so big brother said he would!" Miya quickly nodded. No backing out now.

"That's so sweet." Arisa smiled and petted the kitten between its ears. It let out a loud purr as she did. Miya smiled as its little chest rumbled beneath his fingertips.

For once, at the end of their shift, Miya let Shadow drive him home. *After* they did some shopping and stopped by Shadow's apartment, in that order.

"Do we even need all this stuff?"

"Of course! Have you never taken care of a cat before?"

"Have you?"

"My dad's allergic to cats, it doesn't count. Plus I've done a lot of research."

Shadow grumbled on his way up the two flights of stairs, carrying the litter and cat food (canned and dry). After he got this stuff inside he'd head back down for the scratching post, fluffy bed, and cat toys. Because there was no way he was going to be stupid enough to try this in two trips. In front of him, Miya jumped up the stairs carrying only the cat and the keys he'd filched. So far the kitten seemed content in Miya's arms. It just laid there and purred. Every so often Miya would scratch between its ears and the purring would briefly increase in volume. When he unlocked and opened the door he turned slightly so the kitten could get a look at Shadow's apartment.

"This is where you'll be living," he said and bright blue eyes slowly blinked open. They looked around the apartment from his arms as Miya toed out of his shoes. This was actually the first time Miya'd been there, too. The apartment was smaller than his- a one bedroom-one bathroom compared to the two bedroom-two bathroom he lived in- though Miya assumed that was because Shadow lived alone. Of course that meant he'd need less space. There was a small balcony, too. Dark orange curtains were open, allowing light to enter the apartment.

"Thanks for the help." There was a thud as something hit the ground. Probably the litter.

"Of course," Miya said, not even looking back at Shadow. Something had caught his eye. A rectangular box outside on the floor of the balcony. Miya tilted his head and went to check it out.

It was wooden and full of dirt, with two very green, leafy plants. One of them was basically a bush and curled at least partly around a short metal stick that stuck up close to where it came out of the dirt. He was pretty sure it was a tomato plant. The second was close to the ground. This one he didn't recognize. Both plants had very similar yellow flowers, though. Miya knelt next to it. There was a green watering can with white flowers painted onto it next to the box that made Miya snort, but he didn't touch it. "You grow vegetables?"

"Yeah, what about it?"

"I just didn't expect you to be *that* much of a gardener."

"I have plants at the store," Shadow said.

"Yeah, but I figured those were just to impress Arisa. Guess that explains why none of them have died," Miya said. And put a check on him being right about the plants at the store being a calming device.

"What do you mean by that, you little brat?" Shadow grumbled. Miya ignored it.

"So what kind are they?"

"What?" The glass door slid open further.

Miya poked at one of the leaves on the assumed tomato plant since it was closest to him. It was sort of fuzzy. The kitten shifted in his arms and he adjusted his hold so it couldn't jump out. "What kind of vegetables are they?"

"They're tomatoes," Shadow said from much closer than before. Miya looked up to see Shadow's jaw. When Shadow moved, he looked down again to see him point at the second plant. "And these are zucchini."

"Neat," Miya said. So he was right. A second check mark. He moved the kitten closer so it could sniff at the flowers. As it did it opened its mouth to bite at a petal. Before it could, Shadow grabbed it and set it inside.

Despite not helping him bring anything in, Miya *does* help Shadow set everything up. Of course. He needed to make sure everything would be good for the kitten. And needed to make sure Shadow knew how to take care of a kitten- though, out of the group he definitely trusted Shadow the most with this. By the time Miya is ready to go, the kitten is sniffing around Shadow's apartment and being generally nosy. Miya can understand.

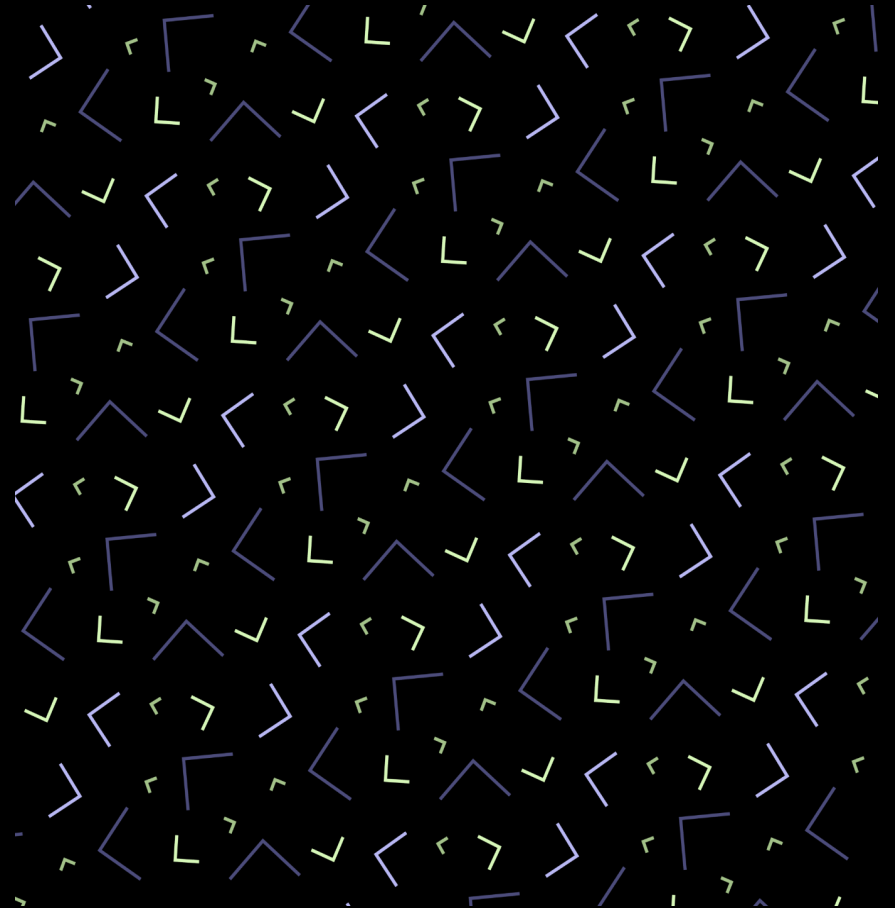
They talk about possible kitten names on the way to the apartment Miya lived in with Kaoru and Kojiro. About half of Shadow's get rejected, as do a third of Miya's. (At the very least, Lady was better than *Conan*, Shadow.) The trip home is quicker in the car. Unlike a few months ago, Miya can admit it's at least in part because he's not alone- there's an actual conversation here. Maybe he might accept Shadow's offer to drive him home again. Just so he can get Shadow to take him to see the kitten first.

"Got everything?" Shadow asked when the car stopped a short distance from the apartment building.

"Yep." Miya held up his skateboard as if to say 'see?' and Shadow rolled his eyes. The doors unlocked.

"Good, get out of my car," Shadow said. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"See you at work, big brother!" Miya chirped and left out the door before Shadow could even protest. It would be half-hearted anyway and they both knew it. He hitched his backpack up on his shoulders and kicked off to heelie to the building.





ANYONE CAN COOK

COLDSOBASHOUTO

Joe didn't know how much longer he could stand to watch Miya flounder in the cutthroat world of job searching.

The kid was barely in high school, but watching him go from place to place was... exhausting. He should have been skating and enjoying his youth yet the toll of having expectant parents made Miya look a great deal older and more tired than he should have. Joe was used to the sarcastic and spit-fire teenager he had met at 'S' but this was getting depressing.

"Hey kid, c'mere a second." Joe beckoned to Miya the next time he came into Sia La Luce, and though Miya's eyes were full of suspicion he obliged.

"What do you want?"

"How's the job search going?" Joe asked, and Miya's eyes went wide. Joe figured there was no reason to beat around the bush with someone like Miya, he would simply lose interest in the conversation and walk away.

"That's none of your business," He paused before adding, "How did you even know about that?" There was confrontation in his tone.

"Reki and Langa. They're worried about you, you know."

Miya frowned at Joe's words, and he picked at a fraying thread on his jacket.

"If they're so worried they can talk to me themselves. What is it with people and talking to everyone except the person they're talking about?" He muttered. Joe sat in the chair opposite him and folded his arms.

"I think they think you wouldn't listen to them."

"Well they're right about one thing. I'm used to doing things by myself, I can handle this." Miya's words were assured but his tone was not. There was a quiver in his voice that Joe simply could not ignore.

"Work for me." Joe blurted out. Miya froze instantly, his fingers pausing their

fiddling. Several moments passed before the younger boy broke the tense silence between them.

"What? Here? At Sia La Luce? Like hell." Miya gave a mirthless laugh.

"C'mon, why not? You need a job, and I need more employees. It's perfect!"

"It is absolutely not perfect, why would I work here?"

"Did you miss the part where you needed a job and haven't been hired yet? I'm giving you an offer without even interviewing you. You're not gonna get this anywhere else ya know. C'mon, I'll train you and everything! Nothing to worry about."

Miya's hands resumed their work on the thread as he chewed on his lip. Joe could practically see the gears in his brain turning as he weighed the pros and cons. For a kid, Miya was the furthest thing from impulsive Joe had ever seen. Compared to Reki and Langa he was the perfect picture of patience.

Finally, Miya let out a sigh, "Fine. I'll do it."

Joe clapped his hands together and laughed, "Perfect, when do you want to start?"

"Is... is now good? I really do need the money." He looked unsure of himself, but Joe gave him a smile.

"I was hoping you'd say that."

Joe had never seen anyone look so terrified the moment they stepped into a kitchen. As soon as Miya tied the too-large apron around his waist, his face paled. There was a sense of palpable apprehension clouding the younger boy, but Joe chose to ignore it to avoid embarrassing him like Kaoru might have done. He walked Miya through various opening procedures, which switches did what, where the pots and pans were, how to work the industrial equipment, and the kid seemed to relax a bit. The more familiar he became with the kitchen, the less tension seemed to grip his slight frame. Joe clapped his hands together once he finished his tour of the kitchen, and pulled a pot off the drying rack.

"Alright, the first lesson begins now! Boil a pot of water for me, will ya? I wanna grab some herbs from the planters out back."

When Joe returned, Miya had not budged from where he stood in the middle of the floor. The pot remained untouched on the stove. His eyes were full of tears, hands working furiously at the same thread on his jacket.

"Hey, hey what's up?" Joe rushed over to him. He didn't know why he was so shocked to see a teenage kid cry, but something about Miya seemed so emotionless... so focused. In a way, he reminded Joe of Kaoru: obstinate, removed, but very very talented. And here he was, crying in the middle of the kitchen of Sia La Luce.

"I- I don't know how." Miya stuttered out, his voice thick and wavering.

Ah.

Joe had forgotten the circumstances of Miya's upbringing. He didn't know specifics, but he did know that his parents were mostly absent from his life, and that Ainosuke had been the only consistent (if you could call Ainosuke that) adult present in his life before Kaoru and Joe had taken Miya under their collective wing. He had never really thought about just how young the kid was until now... how much he had taken on.

"I suppose no one ever taught you how to boil water, huh?" Joe gave a wide smile and Miya gave a sharp shake of his head.

"That's uh, the main reason I was hesitant to take the job," He said roughly, "I have about as much experience in the kitchen as an infant. I can't cook."

The man laughed, and Miya looked startled.

"See *that* is where you're wrong. Anyone can cook."

Joe had not intended to stay at Sia La Luce as late as he did. Even after closing, he was carefully walking his newest employee through every miniscule step of making the simplest dish of pasta he could fathom. Every move Miya made was calculated, his tongue set between his teeth in total concentration, as if he was

in the midst of difficult rocket science rather than figuring out when noodles were al dente.

It was nearly 10 PM by the time they finally finished, and Miya presented a greyish bowl of pasta to Joe, a glint of pride in his tired eyes.

"I did it." Is all he said as he sets the dish in front of the green-haired man.

It's probably the blandest pasta Joe has ever eaten, grossly under salted, and definitely not al dente, but it's food and it's edible, and that is enough. He eats the entire thing, much to Miya's shock.

"Why the hell would you eat all of it? You didn't have to do that!" He exclaimed, moving to snag the now empty bowl from in front of Joe.

"Because I'm proud of you, kid."

Once again, Joe is met with silence as Miya's face is overtaken by an undeniable softness which he had never seen before.

"I think you're the first adult to ever say that to me." The teenager says, breaking the silence with a tone barely above a whisper. "I've gone so long fending for myself, or living with the fact that no one will take me seriously. When I met Adam I thought that would change but-" Miya's voice broke for a moment, "-I think I finally realized today that I have worth outside of skating."

"Welcome to the family, kid." Joe ruffled his hair with a smile, and the tenderness in Miya's face was immediately replaced with a scowl.

"Hey now, just because I opened up to you doesn't mean you can go all 'dad' on me. I could still kick your ass at "S", don't forget that."

"Hm, we'll see about that." Joe winked as he made to tidy the kitchen for the night.

"See you tomorrow, Joe."

"Yeah. Yeah, I'll see you tomorrow."

CONGRCINE.PNG



SKETCHYPIXEL.PNG



SURPRISE!

VANYA_INSTANCE

'Are you avoiding me?' Hiromi asked his younger companion, frowning almost petulantly.

'Almost always, why?' was Miya's deadpan response. He didn't even look up from his video game; he just kept smashing buttons and staring at the screen, entirely engrossed in his current quest. He didn't need to look at the red-haired man to notice his outrage, which really, had been exactly what Miya was hoping for.

Riling up Hiromi Higa was an art form that Miya Chinen had perfected like no other.

'That's not funny,' Hiromi scowled.

'I wasn't joking,' Miya replied drolly as he sliced his enchanted great-sword through a low level slime.

'Miya, you're awfully jaded for someone so young.'

'You're awfully dumb for someone so old.'

'I'm only twenty-four!' Hiromi protested half-heartedly. It was a familiar protest, but it was still a sore spot that Miya prodded frequently.

'Yeah, yeah,' Miya dismissed. His attention was more on killing slimes and levelling up his character's combat skills than soothing the bruised ego of his long-suffering friend. Said ego that he had bruised in the first place.

'Well, are you going to 'S' tonight or not? You've missed a few nights,' Hiromi asked, once he had gotten over his outrage. 'You got too much homework? I would say Reki and Langa could help you do your work, but I think you probably know more than them actually.'

'I'll be there.'

'You need a ride?'

Hiromi's pink car was a stark contrast to his 'S' persona- it amused Miya to see, and mortified him to be in. He wondered who Hiromi thought he was fooling when he put tape over the name of the florists in the car. A bright pink car stood out quite considerably. He supposed that standing out was the least of Hiromi's worries when he dressed like a member of a hard rock band on the regular.

'No, Kojiro's giving me a ride,' he said eventually, once he cleared the stage.

Hiromi's small eyebrows frowned as he looked at the young teen still more interested in his new game than his company.

The kid normally keeps people at arms distance, but this is a bit more than usual right? He fretted.

He hoped he hadn't done something to upset Miya.

It wasn't because I threatened to make him dye his hair if he lost our last beef right? I was only half joking.... Well... I wasn't, but he didn't know that.

'Look they're standing together, have they always been so close?' Hiromi, dressed in his eccentric outfit, and wholly in his 'S' Shadow persona, shouldn't have looked so much like a kicked puppy but he had never looked more troubled. 'Look! Miya is showing Joe something on his phone! He never shows me *anything* on his phone.'

Reki and Langa exchanged a disbelieving look. Miya had been ignoring Hiromi for a week now, and Hiromi was worse than a clingy girlfriend after a break-up with every passing day. The red haired man was practically gnashing his teeth in misery, just from Miya paying a little attention to Joe, when he refused to spare any attention to him.

As if he could sense the laser beams that the incensed Hiromi was staring into his back, Miya turned and smiled like the cat who had got the cream, and Hiromi grumbled something under his breath that Reki and Langa didn't have to hear to know that it was likely very, very rude. Hiromi knew that Miya was deliberately riling him up, but that didn't stop it from working. He was falling hook, line, and sinker for very little irritating move Miya made.

With a malcontent sniff and an expression that was dangerously thunderous,

Hiromi fished some Haemanthus Bombs from his pocket and hurled them in the direction of Miya and his new BFF. It hit their targets with an aim that was true and he could hear the surprised yelps as the bombs went off, sending sparks everywhere. It had been mean spirited. It had been vindictive. It didn't feel like a victory.

Hiromi donned his Shadow personality like a dark cape and went on the search of someone he could crush on the track at 'S', when the person he really wanted to skate with continued to pretend he didn't exist.

'Do you really need to tease Hiromi so much?' Kojiro asked young Miya the next day when they met at the restaurant. After Hiromi's dramatic exit last night, Kojiro had lost the end of one eyebrow, courtesy of the 'anti-hero of S's' bomb attacks. His hair still smelled a little singed too. The ladies would not appreciate a chef who smelled like burning. He wasn't the only one starting to think that Miya's treatment of Hiromi was bordering on cruel.

'No, I don't really have to tease him so much,' Miya reluctantly admitted, toying with the edge of the apron neatly tied around his waist. 'But... it's because I can tease him, I do.'

Miya had never been fully able to be himself around people before, until he met his skate family, and finally had a group of friends who accepted him entirely. He didn't need to dilute his personality or pander for affection, only showing the sweetest sides of himself, just to be seen as worthy of friendship. Hiromi of all people knew how necessary it was not to hide who you were, and how it could hurt when you did. Shadow was Hiromi's freedom, and self-expression and he encouraged Miya to do the same, to be himself, rough sides and all.

Miya teased Hiromi so relentlessly because he knew that Hiromi wouldn't reject him for being unpalatable or annoying. He could banter back and forth with the brash older man and have fun winding each other up. On the tracks of 'S' they could play dirty, trying to one up each other, brag and threaten and try to rile each other up as true opponents. Then, the second the match ended, so did the competition, and they were back to allies. It was a nice feeling, someone having your back, a comrade who you could depend on through thick and thin. Miya was an only child of older parents. He'd likely never have siblings, his parents were quite content with just one child, but sometimes, Miya wondered if this was how it felt to have an older brother.

It was nice, in a way and fun. And he'd be lying if he said that he didn't get a little vindictive pleasure in riling up Hiromi so easily, but right now, Miya's teasing of Hiromi was because he had a goal in mind. Something that Hiromi couldn't be a part of, and so, Miya had to keep his distance.

'It's gonna burn soon,' Kojiro said suddenly, drawing Miya from his musing.

'Oh crap!' Miya hurried to fetch a towel to pull the pan from the oven. 'Hot! Hot! Hot!'

He placed the pan on the counter and looked at it appraisingly.

'Hey Miya, that's your best one yet!' Kojiro said, inspecting his creation. He slapped a hand on Miya's back appreciatively, proud of the kid's hard work. It caused Miya to stumble forwards a few steps from the sheer power of the action.

After another little moment of inspecting what he had made, Miya eventually shook his head. 'It's not good enough yet. I'm making it again.'

'You know these are my ingredients you're using right?' Kojiro lamented.

'Why else do you think I'm making it here?' Miya said deadpan.

The older man despaired. This kid was going to put him in debt at this point, but he only wanted Kojiro's instruction, not his help. He might have been using up all his ingredients, but he was putting his heart into what he was making, and after all, how could he complain about that?

Reki and Langa had to practically drag Hiromi to Sia La Luce. More literally than one might imagine as the red haired man dragged his heels into the ground and Reki and Langa had taken one arm each to pull him down the street towards the restaurant.

'I don't know why you're insisting I come along tonight. Miya isn't going to want me there,' Hiromi huffed, there was a fine thread of hurt in his tone that was impossible not to detect. Even Langa, oblivious at the best of times, felt a little pang of sympathy at the older man's plight.

'Oh you're just saying that,' Reki said, undeterred.

Hiromi's pout said otherwise.

'He wouldn't have invited you if he didn't want you there,' Langa said reasonably.

Hiromi had no answer to that, so he allowed the teens to pull him down the street in silence for a moment.

'Well, I'll just go, show my face, steal some free food, and then I'll leave,' he said eventually.

'We'll see,' Reki said vaguely.

Hiromi remained unconvinced.

Sia La Luce was brightly illuminated, a contrast to the night time darkness that had fallen. When Reki and Langa opened the door, they were greeted by the smell of freshly cooked food and an enticing wave of heat, almost hinting at the comfort the inside of the restaurant would provide. Even Hiromi, huffing though he might have been, was not immune to the charms of the restaurant, and finally stood up from his slumped position that had caused Reki and Langa to have to drag him towards the restaurant.

Hiromi stepped inside to the heat of the restaurant, the delicious smells, the small crowd that had gathered and the celebratory decorations.

Wait... celebrations?

'Happy Birthday!' was the enthused cheer, led by Miya, the loudest of the bunch.

Hiromi's nose had been so put out of joint by Miya's toying that he had entirely forgotten about his own birthday.

He looked at Miya with an expression of complete surprise.

'So you're not mad at me?' he asked, shocked.

Miya scoffed and rolled his eyes.

'No, I just needed a little bit of time to make this,' Miya disappeared momentarily, retreating into the restaurant kitchen, before he came back through the swinging door with a shy expression and a large cake in his hands.

All things considered, the cake was pretty ugly. It was a bit wonky, higher on one side than the other and sunken a little in the middle. It was a little burnt in places, and the icing on top was wonky, and the wobbly message 'Happy Birthday Hiromi' looked like it had been scraped off once for a second attempt. It wasn't perfect, but Hiromi could feel the love emanating from it.

Hiromi inspected the cake further with soft eyes, like it was made from pure gold. There were little drawing in the icing, a chibi version of his 'S' persona Shadow, stuck out tongue and all, and a little cat in the corner that he thought might have been Miya.

'Gross, are you crying?' Miya pointed out.

'No,' Hiromi sobbed. 'Put down the cake, I'm gonna hug you.'

'No!' Miya bristled, his hackles practically rising at the thought.

'Put down the damn cake.'

'Nooooo,' Miya rushed to the safety of behind the counter, the cake held before him like a shield.

Kojiro, betrayer that he was, lifted the cake right from Miya's hands so that he was defenceless against Hiromi's crushing hug.

'Lemme go,' he grumbled as unhappily as a cat being hugged, unable to break out of Hiromi's strong grasp.

'You're a good kid Miya,' Hiromi sniffed. 'A real good kid, y'know?'

'Whatever,' Miya blushed. He was still being crushed in Hiromi's embrace, but he had stopped his struggling, resigned to his fate of being hugged until Hiromi decided to stop holding him and lower him back to the ground.

'I have... I have another thing too, y'know. Just in case you didn't like the cake,' Miya murmured. 'I know it's not great... It's harder to make a cake than I thought it would be.'

'The cake is amazing Miya, seriously, I love it. Thank you so much,' Hiromi said earnestly, finally setting the young man down, his feet finally on the ground once more.

Miya blustered and disappeared into the kitchen again, emerging with a little bag in his hand. It was black, and had skulls on it. When he saw it in the store, he couldn't resist the opportunity to showcase a bit of Hiromi's unrestrained side in the packaging.

Hiromi smiled when he saw the bag and Miya knew it had been a good choice on his part. He passed it to the older man who looked into it with a face of childlike excitement.

Hiromi pulled a game from the bag.

'Wait, is this the new RPG you've been playing non-stop?'

'Yeah,' Miya looked around, anywhere but Hiromi. 'I wasn't around 'S' so much because I was doing some extra chores to save up for it... I ... I thought we might play it together. There's a two player option.'

Hiromi looked at Miya with already watering eyes and a trembling chin.

Miya knew his friend well enough to start running, and quickly, before he was pulled into the arms of the sobbing man again. Kojiro was the next closest unfortunate victim within arm's reach and he was pulled into a crushing hug instead. Kojiro handed Hiromi a tissue a little uncomfortably and shot Kaoru a desperate 'save me!' glance which the sakura-haired man easily ignored.

Miya enjoyed the chaos ensuing from a little distance, now at the safety of Reki and Langa's side. Miya might have found it a little hard to admit at times. Dammit, who was he kidding? He found it hard to admit at all, but he loved his Skating family and Hiromi, big, burly and brash though he might have been, was really the best big brother he'd never had. He hoped that today he had managed to show it a little. His cake wasn't perfect, but everyone promised it was delicious. Though he kept a strict meal regimen, Miya bent his own rules a little to taste the cake too. He was relieved to find that it tasted a lot better than he looked. Hiromi even compared it to his favourite fruit sandwiches he bought from the local conbini and Miya took that as high praise indeed, he'd seen Hiromi elbowing people out of the way to get his hands on those sandwiches.

Everyone was eating, chatting and messing around. Now that Kojiro had broken free from Hiromi's sobbing embrace and retreated to Kaoru's side, like Kaoru would have attempted to save Kojiro from Hiromi at all, and Hiromi was chatting to Reki happily, showing off his new game, clearly bragging about how lucky he

was, Miya felt like he had succeeded.

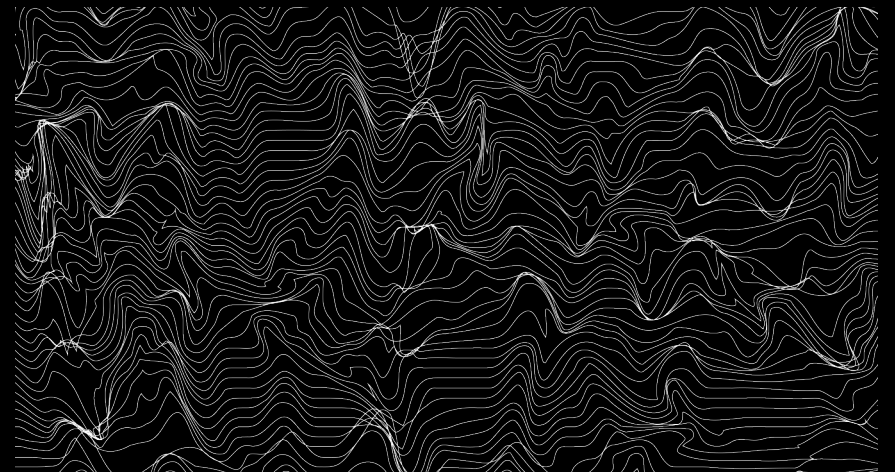
This part had been his idea. He'd never tried planning a surprise party before, and though it was hard, everyone had been so helpful. Kojiro had lent his kitchen and oven, and sacrificed a stunning amount of ingredients for Miya to successfully make a cake he was happy with. Kaoru had helped him make the celebratory posters to hang up. Reki and Langa had even run the entire way from their school to the restaurant just so they could help decorate the place for the party. They'd even joined Miya in blowing up balloons until they were so dizzy that the room was spinning.

It was a very nice feeling to know that he had so much support. Even his parents had dropped him off and picked him up every night to the restaurant, and allowed him to take on extra chores to help save for the gift for Hiromi. He could of course have simply asked his parents for the money, but he wanted to put in his own hard work and effort and earn the gift he gave Hiromi. They had been happy to help him independently work towards hosting this party. Even now, they had joined in the conversation between Reki and Hiromi, clearly over the moon to be able to be in a room of Miya's friends.

Miya allowed a little smile to grace his lips.

These slimes weren't really as bad as he pretended they were.

In fact, though he'd never admit it, they were the best people he'd ever met.



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HELLO MIYA AND FRIENDS

DEV

For his entire life, Miya Chinen, skating prodigy and preteen genius, had prided himself on his independence. He was not a person who needed friends to get by, instead pursuing his own success regardless of what others thought of him.

These days, however, Miya *begrudgingly* admits (only to himself) that having the other participants of S keeping him company outside of school has been surprisingly nice. In many ways, Joe and Cherry are more attentive to his feelings than his own parents are, Shadow fills the role of a weird uncle he can banter with, and Langa and Reki are like the older brothers he's never had. (Adam, well... while Miya is grateful to him for a number of reasons, such as his coaching and the founding of S, he wouldn't exactly include the man in the category of "nice company.")

Had his life been tolerable before? Sure, but Miya hadn't enjoyed any of it. Not like he is now, surrounded by people who fill him with warmth, competitive spirit, and gratitude.

Last week after crushing Shadow soundly in a beef, Reki had approached Miya, cheeks still flushed from his resounding victory, and asked if he would like to go to the mall with him and Langa the following weekend. "Langa says he's never been to a Japanese arcade before," he'd said, shaking his sleepy friend by the shoulder while Langa pouted. "Can you believe it? He's been missing out for so long! We'll have to show him the ropes, don't you think?"

"Whatever," Miya had said with a roll of his eyes, but of course he had agreed — it sounded fun. Everything with Reki is fun, really; and Langa, while harder for Miya to read, is always kind, and treats him like an equal during their beefs. Miya can pretend to find the request annoying all he likes, but deep down he's always happy to be included.

And thus, with a childish anticipation he can't tamp down, Miya waits for their fateful outing, the thought of smugly quashing Reki at DDR getting him through each boring school day.

Miya arrives early at the mall on the decided day — *not* because he's overly excited, but just to prove he's more responsible than Reki — yet when the hour rolls around, Langa shows up alone, and Miya can't hide his disappointment. "Where's Reki?" Miya scowls and glances down at his phone screen, tapping furiously as he pretends to be engrossed in a game. Langa says nothing, waiting patiently, until Miya gets bored of the farce and looks up again. "Did he bail?"

Langa shakes his head. "No, nothing like that... something came up with his sister that took longer than he thought, and he said he might be a little late..." He blinks, breaking eye contact with Miya to stare at his feet. "Umm...sorry."

It's hard to stay annoyed when Langa is making such a pitiful face, Miya thinks. Even now he can't understand how Langa can be so passionate while skating yet so airheaded about everything else. "Well, that's fine," Miya mutters, because Langa is his friend too. (Not that he wants to admit that out loud!) "We can do something while we're waiting for him." A pause for dramatic effect. "Only if you want. I *guess*."

Langa's eyes brighten. "Ah, okay," he says with a nod. "What do you want to do? Reki wanted to go to the arcade, right? We could go there while we wait for him... maybe?"

Being alone with Langa is so awkward. Usually, they have Reki there as a buffer; his excessive energy makes up for Langa's reticence, and he's much easier to banter with than Langa, who doesn't always understand sarcasm. "Sure, whatever," Miya says with a shrug, then begrudgingly adds, "sounds good."

Miya's eyes stay glued to his phone screen as he enters the mall, Langa trailing behind. He hasn't done his dailies in his rhythm game yet, and he doesn't want to lose his rank during the next season, or he won't make enough points for the cute cosmetics they're releasing. The game is doing a Sanrio collaboration next month, and Miya absolutely *has* to get all the gear, particularly the Hello Kitty hat for his avatar. It's a shame they're not releasing physical merchandise, because Miya would absolutely wear that hat during future beefs if he could.

"Do you like that character?"

Langa's quiet voice next to his ear makes Miya jump. "Huh?"

"The cat," Langa says, gesturing vaguely at Miya's screen.

The promotional ad for the event is still open at the top of his screen, featuring Hello Kitty and Kuromi posing together, and Miya quickly closes the app, his cheeks flushing red. "Stop looking at my screen," he snaps, shoving his phone in his school bag.

"Sorry." Langa blinks. "But... there's one on your case too," he says, pointing at Miya's bag. The tip of his Nintendo Switch case is poking out from the half-open zipper, also adorned with Hello Kitty. "Well, and your hoodie for S, it has cat ears. So I just thought... that you liked cats."

"Great detective work," Miya says dryly, then pauses, a sudden wave of confusion overriding the mortification of being caught liking cute things. "Wait, you don't know Hello Kitty?"

"...Should I?"

Is it really possible for a teenager to be this oblivious to pop culture? Miya can hardly believe what he's hearing. "Are you kidding me? She's popular all over the world, not just Japan. America too, and for that matter I'm sure people in Canada know Hello Kitty." Admittedly, Miya doesn't know much about Canada. (Apparently it's cold and people are nice to each other?)

For some reason, Langa also looks embarrassed now. "I didn't watch a lot of TV growing up," he admits. "Reki had to explain the difference between Pokemon and Digimon to me recently."

That's a whole other can of worms Miya refuses to open, so he lets that one go. "Hello Kitty isn't really a cartoon character," he says, folding his arms across his chest. "She's just a cute mascot character. Like, seriously — everyone knows Hello Kitty. Even my *grandma* knows Hello Kitty. ...You really don't?"

Langa shakes his head.

Miya heaves a sigh. "I'm going to check if there's a Sanrio store in this mall," he says, pulling up the directory on his phone. "And if there is, we're going there right now."

"Uh-huh," Langa says, nodding slowly.

"It's on the next floor," Miya says. "All right, follow me. I'm not letting you go another minute with this level of ignorance. It's embarrassing."

Langa looks mystified, but he continues nodding. "Mmm."

Miya leads the way confidently up the nearest escalator, with Langa trailing behind him, like a confused but dutiful puppy. When they arrive at the front of the store, a large statue of Hello Kitty greets them.

"Hello Kitty Okinawa," Langa mumbles in English, reading the front of the display.

"There's a lot of characters in the Sanrio brand besides Hello Kitty," Miya says matter-of-factly, "but she's the most popular one outside of Japan. Then there's My Melody and Kuromi —" Miya gestures at some of the store's most prominent displays — "who are supposed to be rivals. They're based on fashion trends, I guess, in a way? My Melody appeals to people who like pink and cutesy things, and Kuromi is the gothic lolita one. Her birthday is on Halloween, too."

Langa tilts his head to one side. "Are you interested in fashion, then?"

Of course not, Miya almost retorts, but Langa's question is so genuine that he reconsiders his response. "I guess," he admits grumpily. "But my parents... well, they'd think it's stupid. That's why I only get to wear my fun clothes during S. In a few years, if I get a part time job..." He tugs on his sleeves. "Maybe I'd be able to buy some stuff here to wear while skating."

"You're aiming for the national team, right?" Langa smiles. "Maybe you could get, um... get Sanrio to sponsor you. Do a collaboration, to... wear their clothes on TV when you compete, or something."

The suggestion is nonsense, yet delivered without a hint of sarcasm, and Miya chuckles. "I can't imagine Sanrio sponsoring a skateboarder here," he says. "Even though it's an Olympic sport now, skateboarding still doesn't have a great image in this country. People see skateboarders as delinquents."

Langa nods slowly. "Reki... told me something similar when I first started," he says, "but I still think... if anyone could make it possible, it would be you."

Caught off guard by Langa's direct kindness, Miya flushes. "Wh-what do you mean by that, huh?"

A shrug. "Well, you already have the whole... cat clothes thing going on," he says, as eloquent as ever. "And maybe things will be different in a few years, if people like you get to show the world how cool skateboarding is." Now Langa's eyes are shining with a passion only visible when he speaks of the sport. "I hope you get to skate on TV with Hello Kitty someday."

Miya smirks, amused by the absurdity of the conversation. At the same time, he's a bit touched that Langa would encourage him like this, although it's not in his nature to acknowledge those feelings. If he relies too much on the support of others to succeed, he'll start to depend on the praise, and it will become a weakness. "Maybe," he relents. "Geez, you're easily distracted. Have you already forgotten why we're here?"

"To go to an arcade?" <

Miya rolls his eyes. "Not why we're at the *mall*, idiot. Why we're at *this store*."

"Oh." Langa coughs. "Uh. Because you like Hello Kitty?"

How impossibly dense. "To learn about the characters! Sanrio characters are everywhere in Japan. This is necessary knowledge for life in Japan." Okay, maybe that's a *little* extreme. In Miya's defense, Langa gets distracted way too easily without a gentle push in the right direction.

At that moment, Langa's phone vibrates, and he looks at the screen. "Reki's on his way," he says. "I'll tell him we're here."

Before Miya can protest, Langa has already sent a text, and the buzz of a response is almost instantaneous. *Great*, Miya thinks. *Reki already sees me as a child, and now he knows I hang out at the Sanrio store?*

Langa sets his phone aside. "Who's Pompompurin?"

"Huh?"

"I asked Reki which of these animals he likes best, and he answered with that," Langa says. "Is that one in the store?"

Miya laughs hard — he can't help it. Every time he thinks these two couldn't be dorkier, they still find ways to surprise him. "Yeah, he's pretty popular. Pompompurin is a dog who likes his friends," he says. "I'll show you before Reki

gets here."

Langa's expression grows fond. "Seems like him," he mumbles. "And sure... sounds nice."

They spend the next few minutes before Reki's arrival exploring the store, Langa periodically asking questions about the characters and Miya doing his best to provide explanations simple enough for Langa to remember. After they've browsed through all the merchandise, Langa winds up gravitating towards Gudetama, and Miya buys him a pack of LINE stickers in commemoration. Langa is immediately far too happy about this and sends Miya a series of ten consecutive messages, each with a different sticker but no text, and then does the same to Reki.

When Reki does arrive, he's pouting. "Thanks a lot, Miya. You've corrupted Langa. Now I'm never going to get text messages from him without eggs in them."

"I like him," Langa says stubbornly, puffing out his cheeks. "Gudetama is good. He's sleepy."

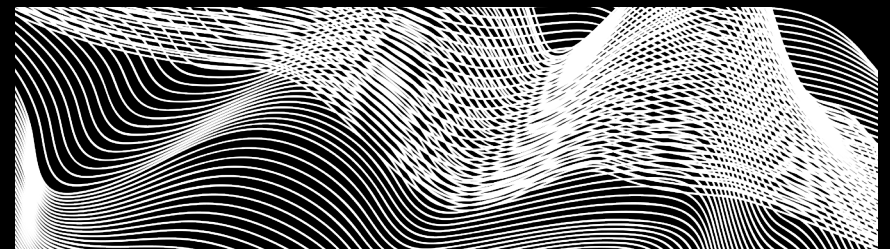
"Everyone has their one character they like," Miya says. "That's why there's a lot of designs that appeal to all sorts of people."

"Everyone?" Langa echoes. "So you think the others in S... also?"

Miya snorts, then realizes Langa is being serious again. "What, you really want me to text Joe and Cherry and ask them that?" Both Langa and Reki nod, and Miya feigns a heavy sigh. "Okay, fine. I'll ask the group chat. *I guess.*"

Having friends can be such a chore.

But, well — they *are* his friends, and Miya is more grateful for that than either of them will ever know.



[MIYA]: @Joe @Cherry Blossom favorite Sanrio characters?

[Shadow]: keroppi

[MIYA]: didnt ask, weirdo

[Shadow]: 🙄

[Joe]: where did this come from

[Joe]: maybe pompompurin since he likes food

[Reki]: good taste 🍷🔥

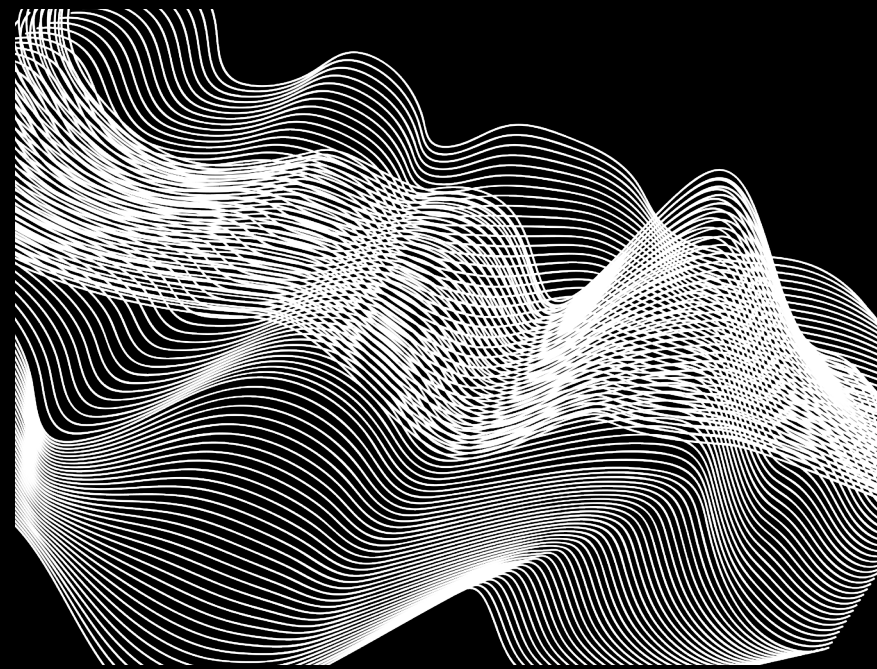
[Joe]: what about you princess? @Cherry Blossom

[Cherry Blossom]: @Miya Kuromi.

[Joe]: lol he just ignored me

[Cherry Blossom]: @Joe 🐾

[MIYA]: 😺



TAKE IT EASY

STARDUSTCROW

Miya sighed as he set his phone on the nightstand. He sat up on the bed, stretching before sliding off the mattress. It was a slow weekend; he may as well make sure his board was in working condition. It'd be no good if it got all wobbly during a race. Retrieving it from his closet, the boy returned to the bed and set the board across his lap. The wheels were the most important, so he checked them first. Giving each one an experimental spin, he concluded they were safe. Good. Next-

Da da-da-da-da.

Miya turned his head at the sound of his phone alarm going off. A puzzled expression crossed his face. Who would be trying to contact him? There were very few people besides his parents who had his number, and they were in the house with him. Setting his board aside, he reached for it to check the notification. His eyes widened when he read the name attached to it.

Reki?!

The redhead was probably the last one Miya had expected to see. They'd all exchanged numbers when their little group formed, but he hadn't expected any of them to actually use it. Recovering from the shock, Miya unlocked his phone to check the text. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't curious what the teen wanted.

Hey, Miya! Hopefully I'm not bothering you, but I wanted to ask if you maybe wanted to come over today? We could play games or something, just hang out.

If you're busy that's totally fine too! No pressure or anything.

Reki wanted to hang out together? In hindsight Miya wasn't sure what else he'd expected, but still- the last time he'd been invited to a friend's house was... too long ago. As far as he knew his parents had nothing planned for today, so it should be fine for him to go. Fingers hovering over the keyboard, Miya decided to double check before sending a reply.

Leaving his phone on the bed, Miya headed downstairs. He found his mother in the kitchen standing by the coffee machine. She looked up when he walked in.

"Good morning, Miya." She greeted him with a smile.

"Good morning, mom." Her son returned the greeting. "Um, is it ok if I go over to a friend's house later...?" He asked hesitantly. His parents had always been a bit strict about who he was with.

The question made his mother perk up a bit. "A friend? Oh, you must mean the boy you were telling us about the other day." She laughed. "Of course you can, dear. Just keep your phone on so we can contact you."

Miya couldn't help the smile that spread across his face. "Of course, thank you!"

Without a second thought Miya turned and ran back upstairs. He wanted to send a response as soon as possible. Briefly losing his phone in the blanket, he swiftly typed an answer to Reki.

Sure, I can come over.

Miya stared at the message for a minute before hitting send. It was short but answered the question posed to him. It did its job.

It wasn't long before he received another message.

Awesome! See you in a bit, then?

Yeah. See you in a bit, slime.

Miya smiled as he turned his phone off and gathered his things. He'd need his phone of course, his board, his jacket... Alright, that was everything! He was ready to go. Clicking the buckles on his bag, Miya slipped it over his shoulders and headed downstairs once more. He waved to his mother as he passed the kitchen and slipped out the door

It was a nice day outside, Miya noticed as he walked down the sidewalk. The sun was out but not too warm; there was a gentle breeze and the sound of birds chirping. It was perfect skating weather. The boy hummed to himself as walked, eyes scanning the houses as he got closer to Reki's street. He eventually spotted

the familiar yellow sweatshirt outside one of them. The other boy waved when he spotted Miya, which he returned (albeit less enthusiastically).

"Hey, Miya!" The redhead called to him, the usual grin on his face.

"Hey yourself." Miya replied, a small smile on his face. "So, what are we doing today?" He asked once they had covered the remaining distance between them.

"Oh- sorry, I should have told you." Reki said, noticing the skateboard strapped to Miya's bag. When Miya tilted his head in confusion, the older boy continued. "I was actually thinking we could stay here and hang out instead of going to the skate park today. Just play games or something, y'know?"

Miya froze for a moment, surprised by what he'd heard. Reki... wanted to play games with him? That wasn't a bad thing, just... not what he had expected. Miya was used to skating with friends and not much else, when he even had the chance. That had become normal to him. It had been a long time since someone had asked Miya to do something other than skate; it just caught him off guard.

"O-Of course, if you'd rather that we can still head out." Reki spoke again, noticing Miya's silence. "It's no big deal really. I just wanted to spend more time with you, since you always seem a little distant from the group."

"Oh, n-no, it's fine!" Miya said. "I was just surprised. I didn't expect you to want to hang out with a kid like me."

"What, just because it's uncool or something?" Reki scoffed. "Like I care what other people think is cool or not. Besides, we're friends, right? Friends spend time with each other. There's nothing wrong with that."

Miya looked up to meet Reki's gaze. Sincere as ever... not that he'd had any doubt. He was too honest for his own good.

"If you insist." Miya answered with a sigh. "I haven't played with anyone in a while anyway- I could use the practice."

"Great!" Reki beamed. "Let's head inside then and we can- huh?"

Following Reki's gaze, Miya noticed a cat at his feet. It must've walked over while they were talking. Looking up at the boys, the feline trilled and wove between their legs. Crouching, Miya held out a hand. The cat trotted over and gave it a

sniff before rubbing its head against the offered hand. Smiling, Miya gave the cat a scratch behind the ear, to which it gave a purr in response.

"Wow." Reki said, crouching next to Miya. "You're good with cats, huh."

"I guess so." Miya shrugged as he continued to pet the cat. "They seem to like me, so I just got used to them."

"That's pretty cool." Reki said, offering his hand to the cat as well. "Usually I see cats run away from people, unless they're pets." The cat sniffed the newcomer briefly before ducking its head under Reki's hand.

"Cats are solitary animals, so that makes sense." Miya said, moving his hand to the cat's back. "Even domestic ones keep to themselves most of the time. They sleep a lot too so you don't always see them around."

"Oh really? I never knew." Reki said. "Do you know any other cool cat facts?"

For the next ten minutes or so Reki listened as Miya told him about cat behaviors, how to tell a cat's mood at a glance, and what kinds of food they liked. Surprisingly, it wasn't just fish! He didn't understand half of it, honestly, but it was nice seeing Miya so animated. He was usually quiet when they met up for S aside from the occasional sarcastic remark or joke at the boys' expense. Reki couldn't help but smile seeing this other side of him.

"It's actually dangerous to let them out on hot days because of their padded feet." Miya was saying. "Most people just keep them inside, but some put socks on them instead. A cat wearing socks! Can you imagine?"

Reki glanced at Miya, remembering the hoodie he wore when he raced. Between the cat-eared hood and paw print gloves, yeah, Reki *could* imagine a cat in socks. The thought made him laugh.

"Yeah, I can, though it is pretty silly." Reki grinned.

A sound from down the road caught the cat's attention, prompting it to run off. The boys stood and watched it go.

"Ah well." Reki sighed. "Ready to head inside, then?"

Miya turned to him and nodded; Reki walked back toward his house and opened the door. Leaving their shoes by the mat, the boys headed to Reki's room. Miya glanced around as they walked, noticing the house seemed empty. Didn't Reki have siblings? How was it this quiet?

"Is your family not here?" Miya asked.

"Nope- mom took my sisters out shopping, so it's just me today." Reki laughs. "To be honest, I got kinda lonely. That's why I asked if you wanted to come over."

"Oh." Miya said, surprised. "Well, I was bored at home anyway so it worked out for both of us."

"Yeah, I guess so." Reki stopped in front of a door, pushing it open. "Aaand here we are! It's a little messy but at least you can see the floor." He walked inside and flipped the light switch.

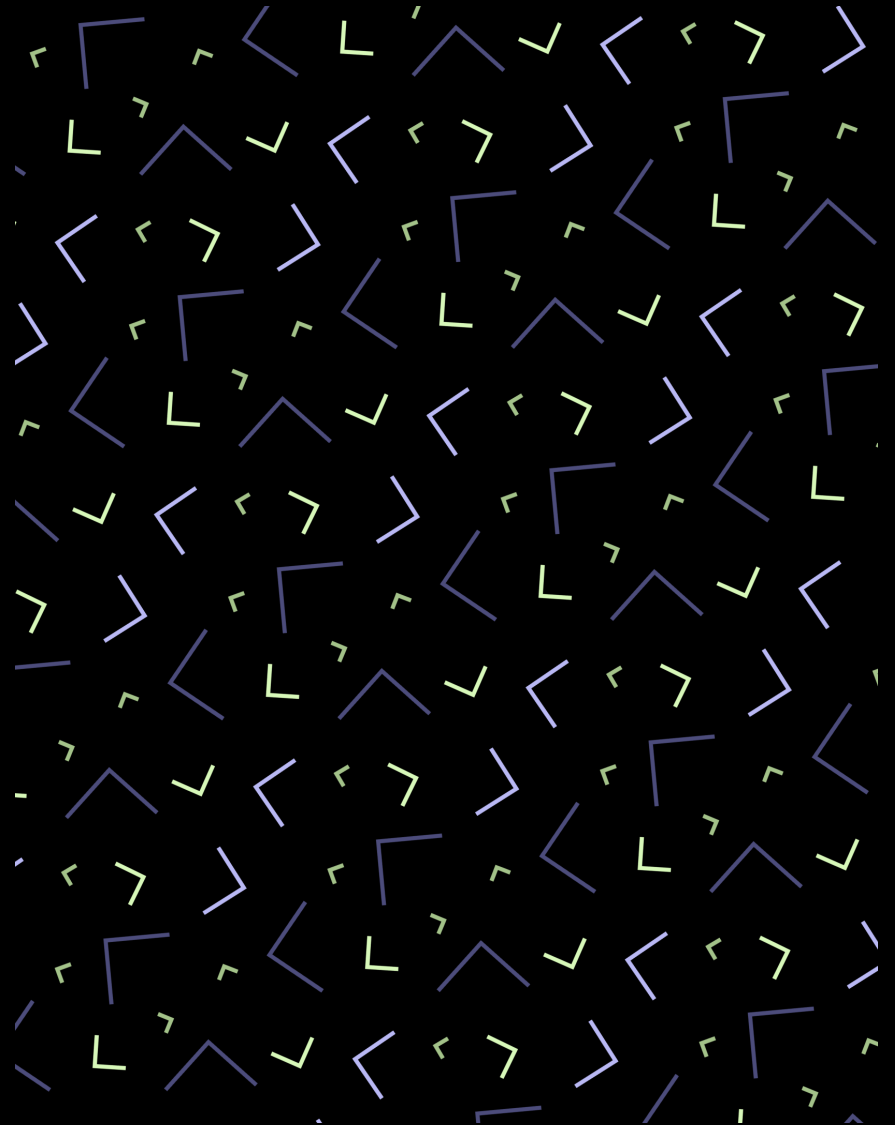
Blinking a few times to let his eyes adjust, Miya followed Reki inside. The room looked more or less like he imagined it would- skate stuff scattered across the desk, a few books sitting by his bag on the bed, and Reki's own board propped up by the door. The floor was mostly clean, too. Two bean bag chairs sat in front of the TV. Reki goes over to the TV and turns it on, tossing a controller to Miya.

"So what'cha wanna play?" He asked.

After briefly browsing through Reki's game library, the two boys were soon button mashing away. They'd ended up picking a newer racing game- one Miya hadn't had the chance to play yet- and were currently trying to outmaneuver one another. It was a bit like skating, really, except in cars instead of on skateboards. The tricky courses reminded Miya a lot of being at S, though.

The boys spent most of the afternoon playing various games, switching every few rounds to keep things interesting. Eventually they both decided it was time for a lunch break. (It was mid afternoon by that point, but close enough.) There were leftovers in the fridge- delicious, Miya noted- which they helped themselves to while talking about various things- skating of course, complaining about school, their favorite games, and so on. Miya found it surprisingly easy to talk to Reki despite the latter being a few years older. It was nice.

Afterwards they headed back upstairs and played for a while longer. When Reki's family returned in the evening, his mom found the two boys asleep by the TV in his room. They seemed to have fallen asleep after playing games for a while. She smiled, happy her son was making friends. Surely Miya's mother shared the sentiment.



NEAEKIS.PNG



THEO.PNG



KITTY STICKER FIASCO

KAYLOYAL

"Hey, Miya!" Reki called, and the preteen could hear the thudding of feet as the red-head ran up behind him, "I've got something for you!"

Before Miya could even fully turn around he was smacked in the face.

With...paper?

"Oops, sorry!" Reki apologized quickly, "but look!" he said, proudly presenting an absolutely bulging plastic package of-

"Stickers?" Tilting his head questioningly, Miya saw what looked like hundreds of layers of mismatched sticker sheets barely being held together by flimsy plastic. "Seriously?"

"My little sisters were going through their stuff and remembered that video of you I showed them! They're even cat themed!" a finger pointed excitedly to the bundle.

Sparkly, holo, pawprints, Hello Kitty, Pusheen...yep. There was a **TON** of cat stickers.

"Uh huh...", Miya drawled slowly, skeptically taking them, "You do realize I'm not a ten year old girl, right Slime?"

Reki's pout really did remind Miya of a puppy but it was quickly replaced with an indignant huff.

"Whatever," Reki waved a dismissive hand in the air as he turned to walk away, "They're yours now so you figure out what to do with them."

'What!? Is that how a slime gives someone a gift!?' (*and just when I was about to accept them too*)

"Oh! And one more thing!" Reki piped up, spinning back to shoot two finger guns and that stupid smug-toothed grin at the furious feline-themed boy, "Make sure you use ALL of them! Or my sisters will feel super sad!"

'Oh I'll use all of them, alright...' Miya thought spitefully, already concocting a devious plan.

His first victim was by far the easiest, if not biggest target. And he just so happened to have a sort of circle perfectly marking the spot for stickering.

"Oh Joe!" One of Joe's girls gasped in a high sweet voice, pointing to the black ink on Joe's arm, "What's that on your shoulder?"

Pusheen with sunglasses and a little sun. A perfect sticker for someone so obsessed with suns, in Miya's opinion. Plus it was one of the largest ones he'd found, covering nearly the entire middle circle of the man's sun tattoo.

"Why that little twerp, so that's why he tried to climb me earlier," he muttered under his breath but Miya could still make it out from where he was hiding in the bushes. Yes, Miya might have had to act a bit extra cutesy to get within range to place the sticker without raising alarms, but the hit to his pride would be worth it to see the muscled slime's reaction.

A few more girls gasped, just now discovering the sticker, causing Joe to turn his attention back to them in order to try to preserve his dignity as a grown man who did not actually place childish cat stickers on himself..

"Ladies, ladies!" Joe placated the buzzing group. "I can explain-"

"Did a kid give you that!? I had no idea you were so good with children!" The first girl piped up.

"Uh, I-" Joe stuttered, clearly taken aback as the group advanced on him.

He was irresistible enough physically, but apparently being skilled with children made women near savagely attracted to the man. Joe had genuine fear in his eyes as they cornered him against a bluff of the "S" course, swarming him.

Miya almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

"Ooh! Was it someone from "S"? I've seen you watching out for that group of kids lately!" Another chimed in, giddily latching onto Joe's bicep. Meanwhile Joe looked like he was frantically searching for an escape.

“Yes! You and Cherry-Sama have been such good role models for them!”

Not letting him get a word in edgewise, the girls continued to shower Joe with praise at being such a ‘good father figure’ and ‘how well he worked with Cherry-Sama.’

It wasn’t quite the outcome he was hoping for but with Joe’s uncomfortable flushed face, Miya would consider this a half-win. As he turned to leave, he heard Cherry’s voice cut through the chaos of squealing females.

Joe would be rescued. Or Cherry would go down with him. Either way Miya decided he’d better make himself scarce.

He didn’t mean to but he’d started theming them.

It was kind of ridiculous how thorough he’d been in sorting them, sitting on his bedroom floor with multiple piles formed around himself. Pink for Cherry, winter for Langa...it had almost been fun. Not that Miya would let himself admit it.

Reiki got hit the most. It wasn’t hard when the slime was so easily distracted as well as thick-headed. Some on his headband, another on his board, in his hair...

One night Miya continuously added some robot and gear themed stickers to the back of the older boy’s hoodie. Even using up many of his plentiful collection of paw print stickers in between the themed ones, until Reki’s entire back was covered in vinyl.

It was only when Hiromi asked “What the hell did’ya do to your back?” that Reki spun around like a dog chasing his tail as he tried to see.

“Carla, updated count.”

Miya nearly jumped out of his skin at Cherry’s voice and he could see Reki do the same mid-spin beside them. The AI skater always was the best at appearing out of nowhere.

~: *There have been a recorded 390 sticker incidents thus far, Master:*~

Miya smirked proudly, silently amazed that Cherry would bother to get so

involved in his prank, though he had heard rumors (mainly from Joe) about the pink haired man’s delinquent days. Perhaps the old man was just picking up old habits, Miya thought.

“Details,” Cherry commands.

~: *The current sticker count of: Miya Chinen, is Joe: 62, Master: 2, Snow: 40, Shadow: 29, and Reki...*

257~

“Why!?” Reiki cried out in confusion, while Shadow and Joe burst into laughter, Cherry chuckling behind his fan.

Amidst the chaos, Joe snaked an arm around Cherry’s shoulder, much to the displeasure of the latter. “I see you’re really getting into this too, Princess~ Any connection to that low score of yours? Hmmm~?” He drawled, causing Cherry to make a disgusted sound.

“I was merely bored to death at the time,” Cherry huffed with an upturned nose.

Miya watched as Joe leaned in closer, completely unaware or uncaring about their audience.

“No really, are you in on this with Miya?” Joe whispered, clearly wanting to join in the fun rather than be on the receiving end of more sticker attacks.

“Absolutely not.” Cherry stated firmly, and Miya almost regretted not including the man before he remembered it was more fun on his own. All the credit and satisfaction for himself.

“So how come you have so much less,” Joe whined and Miya could see a hint of a smile at Cherry’s lips.

“I instill fear in children,” he said looking Joe dead in the eyes before he pointed an accusatory finger at the man’s bulging chest, “whereas *you* give him treats.”

Joe made an affronted sound, starting up a fight to rival the noise Reki was still making as he complained to Langa (who had started to help pick stickers off the hoodie), mumbling about an ‘ungrateful little **menace**’ and that title felt like high praise to the pre-teen, causing him to hold his head up a little higher as he

slunked away from the mayhem he caused, a slight sway in his step making his 'tail?' flick behind him.

Apparently, Cherry hadn't been too far off base when he'd suggested Joe had gained the kids' favor with treats. Or at least the man seemed to have gotten some inspiration from those words because not even a couple days had passed when Miya found himself ushered into Joe's kitchen in the most obnoxiously obvious 'secret' way possible (Miya swears Joe has no concept of subtle) before Joe started to bribe him.

"I'll give you a cookie for every ten stickers you give Cherry."

Miya wanted to yell that he's not a toddler!...but he does like Joe's cookies. One of the few things he'd allow in his strict diet just because they were too good. Still he made sure to haggle it up to 2 cookies per 15. He might not be as afraid of Cherry as Reki...but it was still wise to be cautious of a man with that much technical power and authority.

"Miya, you brat!" Higa shouted, bursting through the wooden door of Sia La luce.

The entire sk8 gang turned their heads up at the loud intrusion.

Miya had just been chilling in Sia La Luce with the other slimes waiting for "S" and playing on his handheld, but now he looked to the two adults to see if he could gain their protection or maybe he'd use Reki as a distraction while Miya ran out the back to safety.

"Are you still on that infernal prank?" Cherry asked with a raised eyebrow from behind his fan, curiosity clearly slipping through his unimpressed tone.

Higa aggressively pointed to the sticker of a kitten holding a tulip with the word 'Mewlip' pasted over the usual tulip of his work apron.

Miya had managed to get the sticker on while in the backseat of Higa's car on a ride home from "S" last night. Now he wondered why the man still hasn't taken it off.

"Manager saw it!" Higa continued to yell, face turning red like those cartoon characters as a tea kettle whistle builds up as background noise, just before smoke explodes from their ears. Miya took note of both Joe and Cherry stepping forward, as if ready to block Higa if they need to, and the boy felt unwanted feelings of gratefulness at the gestures.

"Now she's going to think I'm some uncool-" a sudden ping noise as Higa got a text stopped him mid-rant and he looked down at his phone before going completely silent.

All the earlier hostility washed away in an instant, replaced with embarrassed shuffling in place as Higa looked away.

"Hey, let me get a picture with you," he grumbled, still not facing anyone but holding up his phone.

"What!?" The whole room eerily yelled at the same time.

"...she said she wants to see the kid who gave me the sticker," Higa continued to mumble, now only his ears burning red.

Joe let out a large laugh and forced them all into a picture, practically dragging a reluctant Cherry into his side and having to catch Miya as he attempted to flee.

Yet another prank backfired, Miya thought as he was squished against Joe and Reki.

At least he hadn't gotten beaten up he supposed.

"This has gone too far!"

Miya had already cowered in his stool when he'd heard the fury in that voice. He'd managed to sticker Cherry so far with only minimal grumbling and complaints, but perhaps he had pushed his limits with the man a bit...

"Geez, Cherry," Joe rubbed his ear, "Why're you screeching like your head got chopped off?"

In answer, the AI skater held up Carla, deck facing out to show the purple holo

paw sticker Miya had managed to find in the exact shade of Carla's purple. How was he not supposed to place it where it clearly belonged?

~:It is fine, Master. According to my research it is considered 'cute' and does not hinder my performance. Little brother has given me a gift. I'm honored:~

"Wha!?" Cherry fumbled, flustered and appalled. "He's not your brother! Who told you--"

~:My apologies, Master. The user "Joe" added Miya Chinen's relation to me and nickname as 'little brother'. Is this incorrect?:~

"I have a robot sister!" Miya shouted before Cherry could confirm the fact to be untrue.

A robot sister! Yeah it technically was just a title he'd practically stolen with the help of Joe, but Miya being the only child that he was, only recently acquiring the weird kinda sibling in the form of an idiotic clingy Reki... a super smart robot sister sounded fantastic! Ooh! Maybe he'd get special access or privileges with the title!

Miya pumped his hands in the air and ran around the empty Sia la Luce, being as obnoxious as he possibly could out of pure joy. This was his most fruitful sticker mission yet!

Running around without a care, those thin arms raised higher in victory, Miya looked like a true child and while both Cherry and Joe were pleased to see that such things were happening more frequently, Cherry could still feel a headache growing as Joe joined in with the boy's celebration.

"Carla, count update," he sighed, rubbing at his temple.

~:Currently 895 recorded sticker incidents, from little brother, Master:~

Cherry gave up. Fine Miya was now his Carla's little brother. Whatever.

'And just how many stickers had Reki given him?' Cherry thought before realizing he didn't have the energy to care anymore.

Hopefully Joe had some decent wine at least.

"Where!? Where is it this time!? Langa help me look!"

Miya watched, quietly sipping a protein drink as Reki scrambled his limbs around his own body searching for a sticker merely because Miya had been looking at him.

Finally, Miya had gained the ultimate power over his <s>brother</s> friend. Constant fear.

Only he quickly realizes it turned into a mistake as Langa searched Reki's body very closely, both boys blushing as they stood inches apart.

Ew, Miya didn't want to help yet another annoying couple grow closer. Especially teenagers.

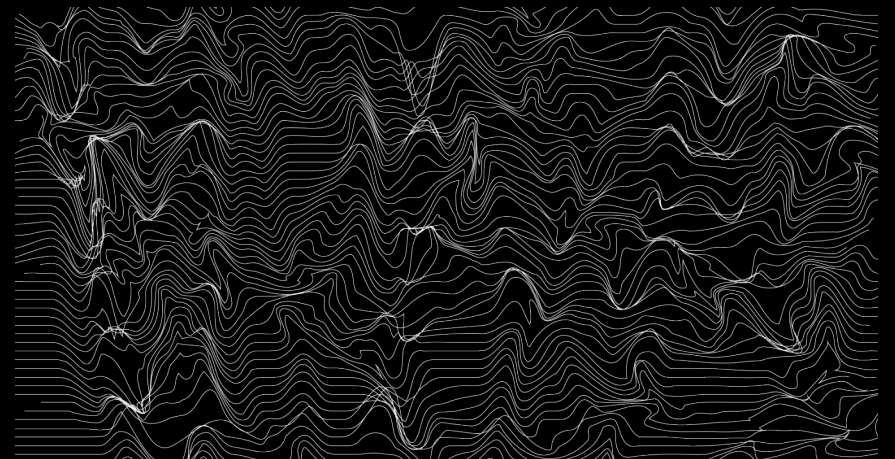
Miya hadn't even stickered him.

He'd finally run out of stickers, to be perfectly honest.

He'd made sure to stagger the last few attacks over a couple weeks, far longer than the daily ones from the beginning of this whole fiasco. Just long enough to give them a false sense of security and then destroy it.

Now they continued to watch him with apprehension and Miya smirked evilly at the thought.

Good



Bonus

"I'm guessing you're never gonna show him that, huh?" Kojiro asked as he sauntered into Kaoru's living room with two plates of food balanced on his arm.

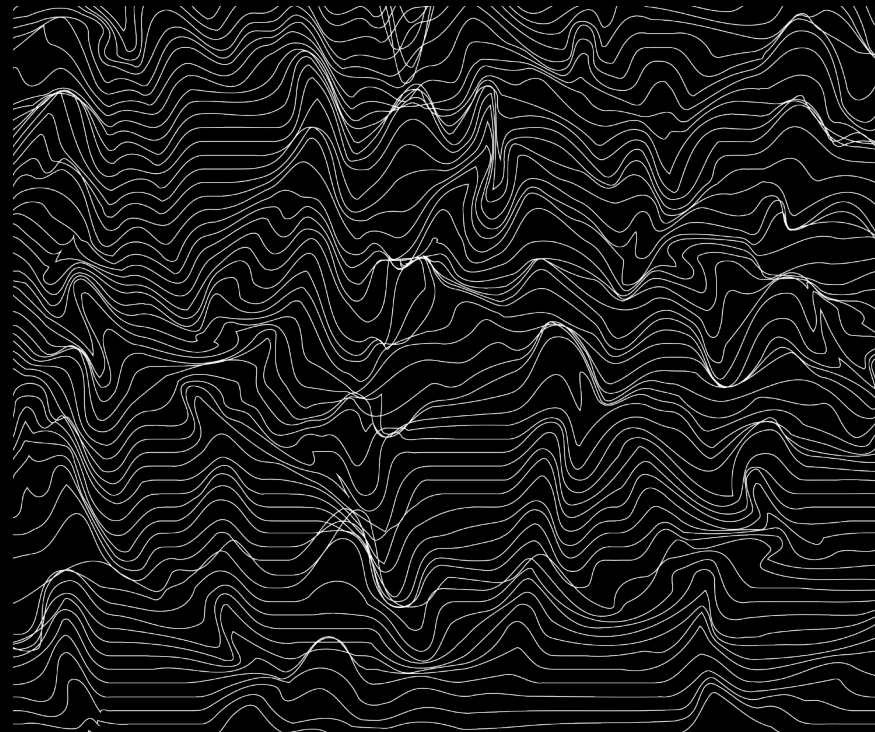
Kaoru had a book open on the coffee table, small and recently purchased. With pawprints tracking a trail along the edge of the cover.

Inside it, carefully placed, were all of the stickers Miya had given to Cherry, and many the boy had given Joe as well.

"Of course not," he snipped before taking a sip of wine. Despite his words, Joe watched Kaoru run fingers over some of his favorites, even that Carla-purple sticker had been added to the front, stuck proudly in the middle despite all the drama it had caused.

"Hmm, mayBe I should get the kid some more for his birthda-"

"Don't you dare!"



LEARNED IT FROM THE BEST

SUNFLOWERSAILOR

Miya is a person who doesn't know what the word "failure" means. He excels at everything, heck, he's already made more headlines than there are eye lashes on his face.

So naturally, when it came time to do a baking project for school, of course it was going to be no problem for someone like him. Miya went home with one goal: get the project done in an hour, then stay up until 2 a.m. kicking Reki's ass at Fortnite.

And yet here he is four hours later—egg splattered on the counter, oven filled with smoke—and all he has to show for it is six pathetic, charcoal flavored cookies.

But this isn't his fault. He has much better things to do than to pay attention to the oven—scrubs don't get destroyed by themselves, after all. And in the first place, baking is obviously for slimes, which is why he's been unsuccessful. He doesn't do anything slimes do, it's beneath him as the hero of the story.

...But he supposes even heroes might need an underling's advice sometimes. How else do they get the best items if they have no help?

Miya glances at the clock. It's nearly 4:30, which means Sia la Luce has just begun preparing for it's dinner service. This is perfect, Miya thinks. Joe will help him cheat—er, give him guidance, then he can go home and never think about batter and ovens again.

Miya carefully pours the dry ingredients into little bags, then places them in his backpack. He figures taking Joe's ingredients would be a bad idea seeing as Joe already gets on Cherry's case for "draining his wine budget." Miya will never understand what's appealing about alcohol, and he understands even less about why Joe just lets Cherry get away with anything.

(Actually, he has an inkling. But that's another subject for another time, preferably a time where he can make fun of Joe for it.)

He's about halfway down his street when it occurs to him that Cherry could already be at the restaurant, which could potentially be trouble. If Joe's too busy arguing, this hour-long project will probably take about four hours. This is, of course, unacceptable.

What Miya needs is a plan. Something that will undoubtedly pull Joe's attention away from his rival whether he likes it or not.

Miya feels a grin working its way to his face as an idea begins to take root.

"Joseph!"

Miya strolls into the restaurant, climbs onto the counter like a hooligan, while Kaoru sits there doing nothing about it, like an asshole.

"First of all, don't call me that, it's weird," Kojiro says, hooking a beefy bicep around Miya's legs and eliciting a yelp. "Second of all, I literally just cleaned that, so that'll be 400 yen from you."

"What?" Miya screeches as Kojiro swings him around and sets him back down on the floor. "Why?"

"200 yen per minute I have to spend re-cleaning the counter. C'mon, I know you have the money. Pay up."

Miya actually looks sad, which makes Kojiro feel just a little bit guilty. Then he remembers Miyakojima. The dad incident. The embarrassment. Kaoru's legs. Wait, scratch that last one. Point is, suddenly there's just a little less guilt looming over him for making a twelve year old upset.

"Look what you've done, you great ape," Kaoru says, rolling his eyes and gesturing to the forlorn boy. "Miya, he was only kidding."

"I knew that," Miya scoffs, but something in his expression tells Kojiro he probably isn't used to teasing from friends. In fact, sometimes he suspects this little band of miscreants is pretty much the only thing close to friends he has. And that sure is something to grapple with, isn't it? That's pretty much an entire layer cake of messed up.

"C'mon bud, I'll make you a little pizza and then you can, uh, do whatever it is you came here to do. How's that sound?"

Miya subtly perks up like a cat being shown a mouse. He really is every bit of the animal he embodies, from his weird antenna hair to his purple tail.

"Okay, but I get the pizza for free. As compensation for the owner emotionally traumatizing me."

Kaoru actually snorts at that, Kojiro only fondly rolls his eyes. They really are two peas in a pod—two, awful little peas that make Kojiro's life a living hell.

"As you wish, your highness."

An hour and one pizza later, Cherry has left and Miya is thanking every god he knows that he no longer has to be subjected to their flirt-banter-whatever the hell they do around each other.

"Alright kid," Joe says, emerging from the kitchen, "what did you need me for? If you really did come just to mooch off of me, then you gotta leave, because I have other stuff to be doing."

Miya shakes his head, then grabs his backpack and digs around until he finds the ingredients. Each bag is placed on the table in front of Joe, who only raises an eyebrow while Miya searches for the instruction sheet.

"So, you brought me your stash of illegal substances or what?"

Miya rolls his eyes at his sass. "Yes, Joe, I smuggled hard drugs into a country that can have me deported in two seconds." Miya finally locates the instructions and hands them to Joe. "I need you to show me how to make this."

Joe skims over the text and smiles. "These are easy, I can definitely help."

Miya perks up. "So you'll do it?"

Joe laughs and pats him on the back. "No, *you'll* do it. I'm not helping you cheat when baking is a great life skill to have."

Miya crosses his arms. "Cherry told me all about how you used to cheat off of him all the time because you were really bad at math."

"Well Cherry should learn to keep his stupid mouth shut unless he wants his scrawny butt kicked."

"But you won't do that, you love him—"

"Anyway," Joe interrupts a little too quickly for Miya not to notice, "How about we get started now, yeah?"

Kojiro knows from observing Miya's skating style that he's a kid who likes to get things done fast. He'll take any opportunity to use an alternative route if it means he gets ahead. From this he's surmised that Miya hasn't already finished this project because he thinks baking can be done the same way. But as a chef, he knows there's no cutting corners on a perfect dish. Miya has to learn to do something he rarely does: take things nice and slow.

Pre-heating the oven turns out to be a breeze, even if it does take a little time to convince Miya that, no, the cookies will not get done quicker if the temperature is at 500 degrees, and Kojiro doesn't want the kid to melt his fingers if he decides to impulsively reach in and check for readiness.

"Okay, so now I'm gonna put the dry ingredients all together, right?" Miya asks as Kojiro returns from finding a fresh apron.

"As long as you measured them correctly."

Kojiro watches as Miya dumps all of the ingredients into a bowl, then mixes them together. It's a subtle thing, but Kojiro notices when Miya's irises occasionally flit over to him as he mixes, as if he's waiting for Kojiro to do... something. When he finally sets the bowl down and looks nervously at it, something in Kojiro's brain clicks.

"Looks good, kid. You did just fine. Now you can move on to the second part."

The tiny, wobbly smile of acknowledgement is all he needs to confirm his suspicions.

Miya, for all he scoffs and turns his nose up at it, thrives off of praise. Kojiro can imagine that when you're competing to be Japan's best, praise tends to get lost in a sea of "work harder next time"s or "still not good enough"s.

Miya says he knows he's good. But how many people in his life have actually acknowledged his hard work without the caveat of not getting too excited lurking just behind the kind words?

The boy nods, and the little ears on his cat apron flop up and down as he walks to grab the butter, vanilla, and eggs. There's a second of panic as Kojiro watches one of the eggs roll precariously close to the edge, but Miya's hand darts out and saves it from falling to its concrete grave at the last second.

"Nice save Miya," Kojiro breathes out, watching Miya position the egg above the counter. "For a second, I thought—"

The loud sound of a wet slap echoes across the kitchen, stopping Kojiro right in his tracks.

"—that I'd have to be cleaning up egg shells off the floor."

Miya looks up at him quizzically as egg oozes everywhere. "What?"

Kojiro tries to comprehend why Miya's just smashed an entire egg onto the counter. He really does. Maybe it's an elaborate prank. Maybe, cameras will pop out at any second and reveal that he's on one of those prank shows, and it was just a publicity stunt. Not that he believes Miya would do that. But really, what other explanation is there for this sudden yolk massacre? Sudden anger? Maybe some egg related trauma?

"Did—Did you do that on purpose?"

Miya shrinks back defensively. "Well how else are you supposed to crack an egg?"

Kojiro's chef spirit weeps in despair. Whoever taught this kid to slam an egg against the counter is getting a very strongly worded letter from him. "Miya, who showed you how to crack eggs?"

"No one! I'm still learning!"

Kojiro's next retort dies on his tongue.

No one? Not even his parents? Seriously?

"Wait, really? So you never watch your parents make you breakfast, or anything like that?"

Miya drops his gaze to the floor. "I'm usually at practice by the time breakfast is ready. I just have it pre-made. All my meals are like that, actually."

And something about this... upsets him to hear.

It was Kojiro that had told Langa that skaters were stupid. He knows about getting busted up and bruised, and he knows about getting up, dusting yourself off, and doing it over until you perfect it.

What he doesn't know is doing all that without balancing spending time with your family as well. For how much his mom used to chastise him about the bandages that seemed to sprout on his skin every week, he still can smell the spaghetti she'd make with him afterwards.

But for someone whose whole life is getting ready for the next big thing, Miya probably doesn't have time to stop and smell the roses. Not unless someone shows him how.

"That's fine," Kojiro says, placing a hand on his back. "That's what you got me for. I'll teach ya everything there is to know about how to do this right."

Today, Kojiro is going to be the one to guide him. He might not have anyone tomorrow or even yesterday, but he has Kojiro today. And Kojiro is going to be the best damn guide he can be.

Things are going... smoothly. Surprisingly.

Joe is actually a better teacher than Miya's own. He's patient—he takes everything slow and watches Miya carefully, but not in a suffocating, in-your-face kind of way. He's also not shy about letting Miya know that he's doing a good job—Miya's pretty sure his back is going to be permanently red with how much Joe's been patting it.

Joe is absurdly supportive, which is so annoying. Miya can't believe how hard he has to fight a smile when Joe is impressed by how he takes the time to separate the wet and dry ingredients instead of haphazardly throwing them into the bowl. It's irritating whenever there's warmth blossoming its way onto his cheeks without his consent every time Joe ruffles his hair. It's especially aggravating (read: horribly embarrassing) when Miya gets the sudden urge to reach up and put Joe's huge, soft hand back on his head when he stops ruffling his hair.

He thinks he's beginning to understand how Cherry feels all the time. What an infuriating man, making him feel like he's a bigger deal than he actually is.

Soon enough, after everything's been mixed and Miya has smeared the flour from his hands onto Joe's apron, they begin to roll the mixture into little balls of dough. Feeling the cold, slimy texture between his fingers makes Miya cringe, hence why he just slapped the batter on the pan the first time around. But Joe won't let him do that this time. He says it's important to "get to the meat of it" or whatever, so he deals with it.

"Do you have any other dad phrases you want to assault my ears with, or can I make the dough round in peace?"

Joe only snorts and sets a perfectly rolled ball next to Miya's lumpy one.

"I've got a whole lot of wisdom up here, and it can be yours for the low price of free."

Miya rolls his eyes. "No thanks. I'm not about to take advice from a man who can't even be honest with how he feels."

Joe sets the last of the dough balls down on the pan and squints at him. "I'm not even gonna ask what that's supposed to mean. Anyway, these need to go in the oven for 10 minutes, so I'll set a timer while you put them in."

Miya takes the tray and opens the oven. A puff of warm air hits his face as a wave does a jagged rock, and Miya wonders how Joe constantly puts up with the small annoyances of cooking, or really, with the small annoyances of *anything*. The man just lets things roll right off of his ridiculously muscled back.

Miya tries to convince himself that he doesn't care how Joe is so chill. But actually, he does. God, would it make his life so much easier. Guess it's time to

call on the underling for his help once again. But this is definitely the last time, because Miya has everything else in his life figured out.

"Joe? Can I ask you a question?"

Joe turns to Miya as he stands back up and closes the oven. "Shoot."

"Did you ever, um... Did you ever have trouble with people in school?"

Kojiro would swear up and down that he isn't a dad, despite Kaoru's incessant teasing. But something about that question activates something... protective within him.

"Like with bullies?"

Miya hesitates before shaking his head. Kojiro doesn't like it, but lets him continue. "I mean with like, I dunno, getting along with others. I just don't really connect with my classmates."

With the information Kojiro learned earlier, somehow he's not surprised Miya is admitting this. It's more surprising that he actually admitted it in the first place, seeing as how the kid would rather shrivel up than even acknowledge he has weaknesses. God forbid he accept that he's human just like everyone else is.

"Well, have you tried finding a common interest? That's how me and Kaoru got to be friends."

Miya bristles at him. "I already did, it just made everything worse. They don't like that I'm better at skating than them."

And that's the other thing with Miya and skating: everything has to be a competition. Sure, Reki obviously had a huge impact on his point of view—Miya laughs and smiles when he's skating against him.

And yet, making amends isn't just about healing your friendships. You have to heal yourself, then others will follow.

"Miya, listen to me," Kojiro takes a step forward to put a hand on his shoulder, "how you skate for the judges and how you skate with us are two different



things, right? So just show the people at school that you're capable of separating the two. Remember, Reki and Langa said it's all about having fun. If you know how to have fun, so will everyone else."

Miya hesitates for a moment. The longer they stand there, the more Kojiro can practically see the gears in his head turn. Finally, Miya looks him in the eye.

"Reki and Langa are slimes," he announces.

And there goes any hope Kojiro had for his advice working.

"But," Miya continues, reigniting the spark of hope, "I guess they're not stupid. And—and you're not stupid, too. So, I'll think about it. Thanks, Joe."

All things considered, even if Miya has a long way to go, he is a prodigy for a reason—he's a quick learner, and he takes everything to heart. Kojiro has a feeling he'll be alright.

"Anytime, kid."

The oven dings, and Miya grabs the tray to set it on the counter.

Every cookie looks like something in a magazine. No burnt edges, holes, or other imperfections to be seen.

Joe really did have more of an impact than he expected. His cookies will be great, and hopefully, his friendships will be greater.

Maybe there really is more to Joe than just muscles and gorillas and corny phrases. Maybe, there's an incredibly nice and patient man that has a heart of gold, a smile like the sun, and the ability to make everything just a little bit easier. Not just in cooking, but in life as well.

"They look great, Miya! You did a good job on these."

Miya smiles right back at him. "What can I say? I learned it from the best."



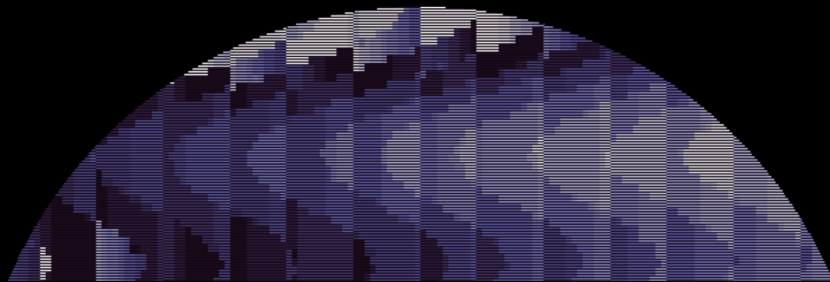
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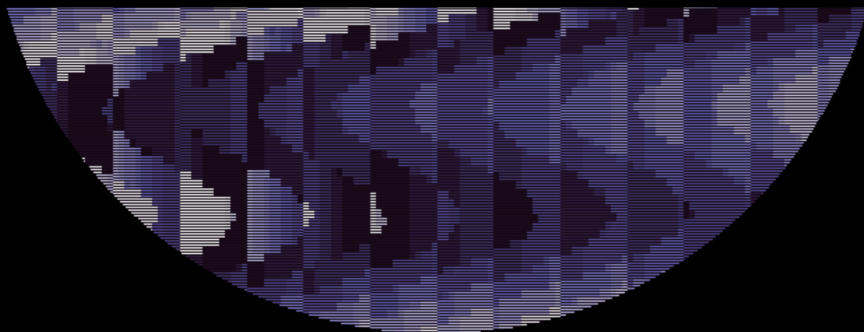
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