

CHAPTER FIVE

WHAT DO YOU FEEL

It's already been five long years for her. Playing, laughing and crying; here comes Azile Alarie's 6th birth year. And the neighbour next building has become her guardian cum secret keeper despite the age gap. As promised, Azure has never left her alone. Even if grandpa complains himself to 'not spoil her too much'. Azure just feels a contentment in fulfilling all her wishes, as he expected anyone to do it for him back when he was in Azile's place. Their feelings have always been simultaneous, despite the situation.

Plus, Azure discovered a strange phenomenon all these years. Whenever she faces an injury, he has to face it too. Once when she was playing with her load of toys, her feet stumbled upon one and made her fall hard on the ground full of mini plastics, resulting in scratches and slight bruises. Miles away Azure was riding his bike, coming back from work. Surprisingly the café's owner didn't fire him, thanks to his talent and skills. In the middle of the highway, scratches and bruises appeared on his skin out of the blue. He panicked and accelerated his bike so fast to reach her that ended up in an accident too, resulting in a fracture. When he finally got to see her, he found out that her injuries will reflect on him but his injuries will stay up-to him only. Equality not served. Since then, he keeps getting hurt like a toddler. Connection so strong that not only physical pain, he can sense her emotional conditions too. When she is sad, when she is cheerful, he'd know it all. To Azile, Azure is no less than a god.

Coming to present, she is now sticking her head out of the window. Waiting for him to come in his bike and helmet with a lot of expected gifts as always.

"Grana," she sighs, glancing at grandpa.

"Have patience sweetheart. Have patience." She mumbles, busy in knitting her a muffler, "Must be busy with his girlfriend."

Her face falls, she stomps one foot like a puberty hitting child, "Hah!"

"Hah!? Is it a trending sigh or something?" he shakes his head, "Just like your father. Azure does that too. And now you. Very well. Hah..."

Her eyes widen, she points her index finger at him, "You did it too! Same blood same blood!"

He laughs, "No dear, Azure is not your blood."

She pouts, muttering "He is my soul." Grandpa pauses, looking at her in surprise, "H-He said that himself! Why does he have a girlfriend though, am I not enough?"

Grandpa looks sceptical, "How are you enough as a *girlfriend*!?" she chuckles, "Do you even know what that means?"

"Oh, come on... That is simple!" she shrugs, "Am a girl. We are friends."

He sighs in relief, "Hush... of course you are." He ties the yellow muffler around her neck, his fingers worn out and wrinkly, "There she goes. My prettiest little girl." His voice soft and affectionate.

"Is this my birthday gift?" she squeezes the fabric softly around her neck, looking down and twisting her upper body left and right.

"Yes... you don't like it?" he asks gently, searching her face.

"It's nice. But I like red colour more." She mutters, looking at him in slight disappointment, "Don't you know it?"

His smile falters, he flusters. Embarrassed because he didn't know. Fact is she never told, "I-I know it. Of course, sweetheart! I just thought yellow would suit you-"

"Nah, you wear it." She casually pulls the muffler off and keeps it on his lap, "You're are old, you will catch cold." She goes back to the window, waiting, "Azure will bring me the best presents!"

Grandpa purses his lips, clutching onto the discarded muffler with a saddened smile, hinting shame. Something he has been working on since last week. The presence of Azile's future self in her life, outcasts that one person in her present to whom she matters the most. Azure remembers that day, he didn't take grandpa's handwoven gift too in that time. Sad cause that was the only gift he got, while he should've cherished that gift until the very last, it proved that grandpa was the only person who has been by his side since the beginning and until the very end. But he was too late to realise, and carried that guilt to this life.

The vroom sound of Azure's bike hits Azile's ears. She stands up, excitedly running towards the door. "Azure!" she squeals, clapping her hands as he enters, "You must have so many toys behind you right?" she giggles, moving to look behind him. She sees a lady standing there, smiling solemnly at her. A pang of hurt fills her little heart.

"She is Kazumi. My girlfriend." Azure speaks, his face straight and voice flat as he sees grandpa sitting there alone, holding the fabric.

Azile stutters, "H-Hey Kazumi..."

"A very happy birthday Azile." She greets gently, smiling.

Azile looks back at Azure, tugging onto his pant, "Today is my birthday..." she trails off.

"Yeah I guess." He mutters, not even looking at her in the eye before walking past inside the house to sit beside grandpa. Azile's heart shatters into pieces, her favourite person neither wished her nor brought her presents. Kazumi clears her throat awkwardly, leaning down to console her. As soon as she opens her mouth, Azile walks away towards Azure, ignoring her.

"You didn't get me presents?" her voice low and soft, brimming with hurt and fear that it's true.

Azure takes a deep breathe, his eyes avoiding hers, "Well, I got busy with my girl you know? I forgot to buy anything for you-"

"Your girl? Who?" her voice cracks, he glances at her briefly before looking away again, pointing at Kazumi leaning against the doorframe. Rubbing her temples.

"Don't expect me to buy everything for you. I am sure grandpa gave you a gift anyways. Aren't you satisfied?" he looks at grandpa, who is sitting silently, still holding onto the muffler. One word strikes him-Pathetic. And he hates to see him like that.

"But I don't like the colour." She whines softly.

"Is that so? Maybe then you aren't getting any gifts today." He turns to grandpa, "Grana, would you tie it around my neck?"

Her eyes widen, glistening, "That is mine!" she yells.

"Not anymore. You didn't want it right? Plus, grandpa worked so hard for this. You know he made it himself; you won't even find something like this in shops. He even hurt his fingers while knitting it. Why shall he waste something so priceless on you!" I vent out, all the blame I had on myself.

"Enough you punk!" grandpa slaps my back, Azile's eyes brimming with tears.

Kazumi yells, "God, she is a kid! Or age doesn't matter to you!?"

“Kid or not, a lesson must be taught.” He finally looks at her, and she breaks down, wailing and sobbing, running into grandpa’s lap. Perhaps it’s a moment, where she experiences a new emotion—GUILT, but has no idea how to get over it. She cries her eyes out, clinging to grandpa like a lifeline. Azure watches her, even feels the sharp sting of her pain. It makes his own eyes well up, but five years as a man have taught him the art of control, hiding his feelings.

Grandpa rubs her back, whispering comforting words to console her, before looking back at him with worry, “You’re too harsh on her sometimes. She just said what she wanted, you can’t expect courtesy from a six-year-old.”

“But she still hurt you.” He mumbles, staring at Azile’s body trembling in regret, he feels a pang of the same thing.

“And so, you hurt her back.” Grandpa sighs, hugging her gently.

“Are we playing karma evil returns here?” Kazumi chuckles, still standing on the doorway.

Azure pauses, before he finally caves in, tugging onto Azile’s dress softly, “Hey little one, listen to me for a second.”

She bawls her eyes out even more, “You made me so sad!!” she vents out, “First you did not buy me gifts, now took my last gift too, and made me cry on my sixth birthday!” her sniffles are intense, she glares at him, “Don’t talk to me!”

“Pfft!” he stifles a laugh, “Alright, just say, ‘I am sorry, grandpa. I love you so much.’ You’ll see; it will feel lighter.” She hesitates, not to apologise, but unsure if that will turn out okay. “Just say it.” Azure urges.

“S-Sorry grandpa, I love you so much.” She mumbles, sniffing her sobs. Her eyes glistening with tears.

Grandpa laughs softly, hugging her in the gentlest way, “I love you too sweetheart.” And Azile feels a strange sense of

contentment, learning what to do after doing something wrong. As long as wrongdoings don't go too far. She takes the muffler and wraps it around her.

Azure smiles, glancing at Kazumi who gives him a reassuring nod. He tugs onto Azile's dress again, "There, that wasn't so hard, was it? Now come here."

She clings to grandpa even more, whining, "Go away! Don't! Don't!"

"Hahaha! Don't what?" Azure's big hands wrap around her tiny waist, lifting her into the air like a bulldozer.

She squeals, "Don't hold me like that! Ah! Grana save!"

He tickles her relentlessly, making her laugh between tears. Azile looks so hilarious like this, that all three of them start laughing. The tension disappears like a fog in the late mornings, a moment that neither of them had in a similar lifetime before this. After a few chuckles, Azure slows down, giving her a break as he wipes her wet eyes and cheeks.

"Here, blow your nose." He covers her nose with his handkerchief, "There you go."

She sneezes, sniffles, murmurs, "I hate you so much..."

He scoffs, shrugging, "The feeling is mutual." They bicker.

Grandpa raises an eyebrow, "So now, Is this really it?"

Azure shakes his head, "Of course nah." He turns to Azile, kneeling, "Climb on my back. We need to go somewhere."

She blinks, without any questions obeying what he said, climbing on his broad back, "There we go, dragon."

"Goodnight grandpa!" Azure bows slightly, Kazumi gazing at him fondly. Azile notices her and scowls childishly, her arms tightening around Azure's neck from behind.

“Ow! Stop choking me!” he yells softly.

Kazumi gulps, stepping forward, “Is it okay if I tag along?”

“No.” Azile straightly rejects.

“Did she ask you? She asked me.” Azure speaks.

“It’s a surprise I know. I want to have fun and I think Kazumi will be an alien-” he interrupts her by a smack on the ass from behind.

“She means outcast.” He whispers to Kazumi, “I will meet up with you tomorrow, okay?”

She nods, sighing, “There goes my man. Why is she so possessive?”

“Cause am her only friend. Plus, she is just a kid. Don’t mind much.” He smiles, kissing her cheek softly.

“Let’s go!!” Azile snaps, pulling his hair.

“Ah! Yes-yes your highness! Your demands are my responsibility!” he playfully runs away, making her giggle.

Kazumi watches them wistfully, running a hand through her hair, “For some reason, I don’t want her to grow up any further under my boyfriend. I feel something is slipping through my hands. Silly me.” She mutters to herself.

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Meanwhile Azure and his little old self travel along the curvy roads of a hill top, speeding off on the bike, wrapped in the winter climate of Japan. It will be one of Azile’s memorable nights, and she knows it. He feels a little bad, about making her cry on her birthday. So, he wants to make it up for her.

“See how helpful grandpa’s gift is.” He comments, watching her head covered, looking like a yellow ball.

"Yes-yes I know. His gifts are always helpful. But what do you have?" She tilts her head up, gazing at him.

He shrugs, smirking, "Nothing."

"Liar. Lying is sinning you said." She pouts.

"Riling you is fun; I said that too." He chuckles, killing the engine at a spot. "Close your eyes, brat."

She obeys, shivering in excitement. He puts her down the motorcycle, his large hand covering hers as he leads the way. His warmth eliminating the atmospheric cold. Their feet crunching the snow layers softly, her heart beats steadily as they walk in silence, hand in hand. Azure stops at a point, leaning down to get close to her ears.

"Open." He whispers, only then she relaxes her tightly squinting eyes, fluttering them open. Just to go wide eyed.

Before them is a huge pine tree, secluded, but decorated like a Christmas tree. Glowing and twinkling with golden and blue mini lights all along the leaves, small candies hanging down the branches. While the snow is still falling, not heavy but serene. For Azile, the place is no less than a magical wonder land, that makes her large blue eyes sparkle. One glance was all it took to mesmerize her. Under that tree, there are six packed gifts and many other little stuffs. Azure suddenly realizes that he is damn creative when he wants to be.

"Azure..." her voice cracks with emotion.

"By the way, happy, happy birthday..." he whispers, cringing at his own words and how 'early' he wished himself.

"You're so fast." She taunts, smiling at him sarcastically.

It makes him snort a laugh, clearing his throat, "Now you may inaugurate your offerings."

“But the colours are so beautiful!!” she giggles, running around the tree. Not realising that it’s her colours. According to Azure, she looks all golds and sapphires. Hence, the lights are used.

First gift opens her to a large tent house, made of white cotton net, that is designed as if little flakes of snow are embroidered in it.

“Wow! Is this my new home?” she exclaimed.

“If your standards are that low to consider a tent as your home then suit yourself.”

They set up the tent below the tree and get inside it, laughing together as they look out at the view through net. They began decorating inside the tent with electric lamps and fairy lights, adding a floral fragrance candle for final mood. Things Azile had never come across, it fascinates her.

Her second gift is a two layered birthday cake, flavour of red velvet that will become her new favourite. With many more dishes like Shushi, croissants, hot noodles, tofu etc. It’s feast time, and they eat like they were on a hunger strike for two months.

“Why are you eating so fast?” his voice muffled with mixed dishes.

“What can I do? You’re stealing from my plate. This treat is for me or yourself?”

Third gift is a beautifully embroidered red gown, which floats around her as she swirls in it. Azure quickly clicks a few grayscale pictures of her, his eyes adoring but mind putting a barrier that reminds him of her future self, his past self.

“Azure! Be my prince and dance with me!” she offers with a dramatic poise.

“Grow your height first, princess.” He shatters the poise with his coldness.

Fourth gift is a game of Othello, which he teaches her how to play right there. Fifth gift is a pair of shoes, beautifully designed, glazing. Sixth gift is small little box.

“Now what’s in there?” She examines the box.

“Whatever it is. Guess a new favourite.” He mumbles, his mouth full of cake. When she opens it, and finds a simple origami swan. That makes her mouth go ‘O’. Wondering how this miniature is made from paper.

“Oh my god! This is so cute!” she cries, “I love this!”

“Hah, told ya.” He smiles, remembering how he loved to make paper structures when he was her.

“Teach me too please.”

“Yeah-yeah I will see.” He playfully ruffles her hair. This night is heaven for Azile, a moment she would want to go through every time. Just the two of them, in their small world. Azure is a god to her, who knows how to please her just right, and how to intentionally displease her too. Though, she can’t help but wonder what he feels towards her. Varying emotions always can be seen on his face. Sometimes detest, remorse, fear. Sometimes fonder, protectiveness, humorous.

What does one feel for oneself after making blunder after blunder in their life? You despise your actions, feel like a crap. But at the end, you end up desperately finding comfort and happiness, all for yourself. Even when you know you might not deserve it. But a human is always selfish up to an extent by nature. The urge to never see Azile sad is what Azure wants, and he would secretly wish for it until death.