

This Is Why I Don't Read Romance

This Is Why I Don't Read Romance

"I told myself it was just fiction. Then I proved myself wrong."

By

Omar Rashid Lone

A Novel of Love, Distance, and the Books
That Teach Us Who We Really Are

Copyright © 2025 Omar Rashid Lone
All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored,
or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior written permission from the author.

First Edition, 2025

ISBN:

Cover & Interior Design: Omar Rashid Lone

"Even in dreams, I am searching for you."

— Franz Sakamoto

Table Of Contents

Chapter 1: I Highlighted the Kissing Scene.Don't Judge Me.....	3
Chapter 2 :If He Knows, I'm Transferring Schools.....	18
Chapter 3 : It Was Just a Gardening Club... Until It Wasn't.....	28
The Confession Of My Heart.....	39
Chapter 4 : The Door Between Us.....	40
Chapter 5 : The Prince on the Shelf.....	51
Chapter 6 : The Uncertainty Of The Mind.....	68
Chapter 7 : Fragments of Belonging.....	76
Chapter 8 : The Space Between Worlds.....	85
Chapter 9 : Confessing His Love.....	96
Chapter 10 : 桜の恋 (Cherry Blossom Love).....	126
Chapter 11 : 花の終わり (The End of Flowers).....	156
Chapter 12: 冬の沈黙 (Winter's Silence).....	179
Chapter 13 : 忘却の芸術 (The Art of Forgetting).....	214
Chapter 14 : 花はそっと散る(Flowers Fall Gently).....	236
Chapter 15 : When Silence Became Forever.....	260

Chapter 1: I Highlighted the Kissing Scene. Don't Judge Me.

I never checked it out.

Not once.

The book sat untouched in the school library for what looked like years — dust between the pages, spine curled inward, cover yellowing at the edges. It was hidden in the back corner of the Bungaku section — Japanese literature — but it wasn't even by a famous author. No glittering awards. No film adaptation. Just a plain paperback with a title no one recognized and a cover that looked like it had been designed on a school computer in 2003.

Which made it perfect.

I found it by accident seven months ago, during my second term of first year. I had ducked into the library to avoid group project day — a perfectly valid form of self-care — and ended up thumbing through the shelves in the quietest, most untouched part of the room.

It was the only copy.

And for seven months, I was the only one who knew it existed.

No one checked it out. Not even me. I just... visited it.

Daily.

Fifth period break.

Back left table, third seat from the window.

If anyone asked, I was "reviewing material" for Literature class. No one ever did. They were too busy whispering, or napping with their heads down, or practicing their confessions in the stairwell.

The book became mine.

Not legally. Not out loud.

But in this way certain things belong to people who notice them first.

And he noticed it first.

Well. Sort of.

Franz Sakamoto — half-American, whole problem. Soccer team star, hair like he forgot to brush it and still made it work, and a laugh that always arrived before he did.

He found the book once, back in April – the second week of school.
Sat down. Read the first ten pages. Smiled. Left.

That's it.

No one else touched it. Not before. Not after. Except me.

He probably doesn't even remember it. But I do.

Every time I read it, I remember the way he tilted his head when something made him laugh. The way he turned pages like he was trying not to wake them up. I memorized that. Like a complete lunatic.

Since then, I've read it cover to cover at least twenty times.

I started highlighting the lines I liked in soft pink – mostly dialogue. Mostly kissing. And – I don't know – I think I started believing it said something about me. That's how I saw it. That I was the kind of girl who knew how to love something quietly.

And, yes, okay, I did write **one anonymous note** and slip it inside the back cover. Just a scrap of notebook paper that said:

"Some stories feel safer when no one else is reading them."

I left it there like a secret. And then I forgot about it. Kind of.

Until today.

Because today – **the book is gone.**

And **Franz Sakamoto** is sitting in my seat.

By the window.

With my book.

I nearly dropped my lunch tray.

He has the paperback open, one hand holding the corner of the page, head tilted exactly the way I remember. His brows knit slightly – not confused, just focused. I can tell he's in Chapter Seven. I know because the pink highlighter bleeds a little through that part. I may have re-highlighted it twice.

That's the kissing scene.

My knees go loose.

I duck behind the nearest row of shelves like I'm being hunted. My heart's in my throat. My thoughts are throwing elbows.

He found it.

He found *my* book.

And what if he finds the note?

I peek again.

He's still reading. One hand brushing his hair back, casually flipping the page. Not a single hint of judgment on his face.

Until he stops.

Smiles.

Oh no.

He found the note

He's *reading* the note.

His smile is quiet. Almost... shy. Like someone just told him a secret and he's deciding what to do with it.

I crouch lower behind the manga shelf, as if crouching has ever solved anything in the history of human panic. I'm half-hidden behind volume 27 of *Kaguya-sama: Love Is War*, peeking through the tiny gap between the covers like I'm in an emotional hostage situation.

Okay. Think.

This is bad. This is *extremely* bad.

This is "I-wrote-a-love-letter-to-a-novel-and-now-my-crush-is-reading-it-like-he-owns-it" bad.

I bite my lip so hard I taste cherry lip balm and self-loathing.

He's still holding the note. He folds it once, then again, fingers slow and careful, like he doesn't want to wrinkle it.

WHY is he folding it?! What is he doing?! What does he WANT with it?!

My face is so hot I'm convinced it's going to set off the fire alarm.

I could run. I could just crawl out from behind the shelf, pretend I forgot something in the science wing, and sprint until my shoes give out. I could feign illness. I could claim amnesia. I could drop out of school entirely.

Or.

I could do absolutely nothing.

Which is my specialty.

I sink down further, knees to my chest, heart beating like a cheap metronome on piano day. Through the cracks in the shelf, I can still see him — casually leaning back in *my chair*, legs crossed like this is just any other lunch break. As if the world didn't shift slightly to the left the moment he opened that book.

His head tilts again. Noticing something.

He flips back two pages.

My breath stops. That's where I underlined this line:

“*Sometimes love is just longing with better lighting.*”

That one nearly broke me.

He's reading it now, pink ink glowing against the yellowed paper, and I swear I can see his mouth move just slightly, like he's testing the words out on his tongue.

Okay. Okay, no. I can't be here.

I press a hand to my face. Then both.

The book is a diary and he's reading it like it belongs to him.

He doesn't even know he's holding a heart. My heart.

I squeeze my eyes shut and whisper the only prayer I know:

“Please let the ground open and eat me. Thank you.”

No ground movement. Typical.

And then—suddenly—there's *movement*.

A chair slides back. A body stands. A shadow lengthens across the tile floor.

I peek again.

He's walking. **With the book.**

In his hand. Folded note tucked into the back cover.

He's heading toward the counter.

I don't even realize I'm standing until my shoulder smacks into a low shelf and a stack of old math workbooks avalanches to the floor like bricks of shame. The crash echoes.

He looks up.

Eye contact.

Direct.

His gaze locks with mine from across the room, warm and unreadable. Not smirking. Not smug. Just... aware. Like he knew I was there the whole time.

I freeze.

I am a girl.

I am a shelf.

I am a ghost in a uniform skirt.

And then, with the smallest possible nod, **he checks the book out.**

He taps his ID card to the scanner, thanks the librarian, and tucks the book under his arm like it's no big deal. Like it's not radioactive.

Then he walks out. Calm. Unbothered. Still holding my note.

And I stand there in the wreckage of old math books, feeling like someone just rewrote my entire story without asking.

Fifth period is math.

Or torture. Hard to tell.

I float into the classroom eight minutes late and completely disoriented, my shoes making that awkward squeaky sound against the polished floor like they know I've lost all dignity.

The teacher looks up. I bow. Mumble something about library duty. He waves me in.

I sit down at my desk. Back row, third from the window. Safely behind someone's obnoxiously tall head.

And that's when I see it.

The book.

On Franz Sakamoto's desk.

Top corner, just sitting there.

Like it belongs there.

Like it's not a grenade that could blow up my entire emotional ecosystem.

I freeze mid-pencil-case unzip.

There he is, two rows ahead, diagonally to the left, casual as a breeze. Elbow propped on the desk, chin resting on his palm, looking out the window like a studio Ghibli character during a turning point in the plot. He hasn't opened the book yet. But it's there. Taunting me. In plain view. Like some kind of literary scarlet letter.

And worst of all? No one else notices.

Nobody knows what that book is.

Nobody knows it's *mine*.

Except me.

And him.

Does he know it's mine?

Did he guess? Did the note give me away?

I should've written it in hiragana. No — kanji. No — *invisible ink*.

My brain is screaming. My face is trying to melt off. I try to pretend I'm writing something in my notebook but I'm literally just drawing tiny gravestones.

Franz shifts slightly in his chair. His fingers tap the edge of the book.

Does he like it?

Does he think it's stupid?

Is he rereading the kissing scene? (I triple-highlighted it. In glitter gel ink. Like a clown.)

And worst of all:

Does he still have the note?

I bet he does. I bet he's folded it into a neat little square and tucked it somewhere between the pages like a psychological trap. Or maybe he threw it out. Maybe it's already in the trash.

Maybe he read it, laughed, and used it to wipe up condensation from a vending machine soda.

I spend the next forty minutes forgetting how numbers work and seriously considering the pros and cons of switching schools.

At the end of class, I don't even wait for the bell. I'm halfway out of my seat when I hear a soft *thud*.

I glance sideways.

Franz is packing up. And the book is still with him.

He slips it carefully into his backpack, like it's something he wants to keep from bending. That matters. *That means something*, doesn't it?

He catches me looking.

Just for a second.

His eyes meet mine — and they're not cold. Not teasing. Just... still. A flicker of something unreadable, like he's remembering something he hasn't decided whether to say aloud.

Then he looks away.

Zips his bag.

And walks out.

And I swear —

As he passes my desk, I catch the faintest upward curve at the edge of his mouth.

Not a full smile.

But close enough to ruin me for the rest of the day.

The school bell sounds like it's coming from underwater.

I gather my things in a daze, slipping my notebook into my bag without looking, like muscle memory's doing the work while my brain replays *that look* on repeat. Not a smirk. Not nothing. Just... *something*.

Something I'll be thinking about until I'm ninety and embarrassing my grandchildren.

My feet carry me through the quiet hallway, past the club posters peeling off the bulletin board, past the dusty trophy case full of people I'll never meet. The floor squeaks under my shoes — one of them always drags slightly on the right side. It's embarrassing when people notice. No one does today.

Shoes off at the genkan. I swap into my outside loafers, tuck my uniform blazer tighter around me, and step into the late afternoon.

The sky is soft grey, like someone turned the contrast down. A breeze pulls at my skirt hem. The air smells like vending machine coffee and dried leaves and the last stretch of summer giving up.

Students chatter behind me, but their voices blur — like I'm underwater again.

My route home takes me past the back fence of the school, the one with the vines climbing up like they're trying to escape too. I walk slower than usual. My legs feel like jelly.

The book.

The note.

Franz.

It all happened. Today. In real life. No dreams, no dramatic anime filter. Just me, writing something dumb, and him — actually reading it.

I will try to replay what I wrote. I can't remember the exact words. Something about how the book made me feel. Something about the kiss on page 178. Something about how no one ever touches this book but me and maybe that means I'm the only one who understands it.

I cringe so hard I physically flinch. A leaf crunches under my foot like punctuation.

What if he knew it was me?

What if he didn't?

Which is worse?

My hands are cold. My face is hot. I'm thirteen emotions at once and none of them are peaceful. I don't know if I want to hide under my futon forever or print the note out on glossy paper and frame it in neon lights.

I stop at the corner vending machine. The one that only ever has melon soda left. I bought one. Just to feel something.

As I press the cold can to my cheek, something flickers across my mind:

He didn't throw the note away.

He took it.

He kept it.

Maybe that means something.

Or maybe it means absolutely nothing and I'm inventing entire universes out of seven seconds of eye contact.

Either way... I know this much:

Tomorrow, I'm going back to the library.

I brush my teeth while internally screaming.

Not out loud. Just that kind of internal, slow-motion panic that hums under your skin like static. It's been there since yesterday. Since the fifth period. Since Franz Sakamoto put my book into his bag like it belonged there.

The note.

The kiss scene.

The entire literary crime scene.

I swish mouthwash aggressively and stare into the mirror like it might give me a flashback to exactly what I wrote. It doesn't. All I remember is that it was dramatic. Romantic. Possibly illegal levels of emotional vulnerability.

And now he's seen it.

Or maybe he hasn't.

Maybe he skipped the pages.

Maybe he thought the note was already in the book when he found it.

Maybe he's the kind of boy who doesn't even read notes.

(No, he's not. You saw him reading. He paused on page 178.)

I smack my forehead gently against the mirror.

"There's no way he knows," I say to no one.

"Right?"

School is worse when your heartbeat lives in your throat.

I try to walk casually down the hallway – which of course means I'm walking like a robot who just learned what knees are. Every footstep echoes too loud. Every conversation sounds like it might be about me, even though it obviously isn't.

Franz isn't in the hallway.

Good.

Or bad.

Unclear.

I go to my locker. Nothing in it.

I turn around and—

He walks by.

Franz.

Same uniform. Same slightly-too-long hair. Same way-too-relaxed energy for someone holding my emotional world in his backpack.

He doesn't look at me.

I mean, not really. Maybe a flicker. A glance. But it's too fast to be sure.

He turns down the corridor, toward his homeroom.

The book's not in his hand today.

Which means it's... still in his bag?

Still with him?

Still not thrown away?

My brain is now juggling seventeen contradictory emotions and dropping all of them.

By lunch, I've rewritten our entire relationship six different times in my head.

In one version, he's secretly impressed by my note.

In another, he's preparing to show it to his friends and laugh about it over melon bread.

I sit in my usual seat by the window, take out my bento, and eat two bites of rice without tasting any of it.

And that's when I see it.

Him.

Outside.

Through the window.

Franz, sitting alone by the fence near the soccer field, one knee up, balancing a book in his lap.

My book.

Not a copy.

The book.

He's reading it.

Right now.

In the sunlight.

Like it's just a story.

Like it's not full of me.

He's not even hiding it.

The way he sits — so casual, so *unbothered* — like this is just any other book, any other lunch break. Like it's not the same book I poured every stolen thought into. Highlighted. Annotated. Laughed with. Cried with.

I swallow a mouthful of rice wrong and nearly choke.

"Are you okay?"

Miyu leans toward me from the next desk, eyes narrowing.

I nod too fast. "Yeah. Totally. Just... went down the wrong way."

She raises an eyebrow but doesn't press. Thank the literary gods.

My eyes slide back to the window. He's still there.

Franz. The boy who doesn't talk much. The boy who just happens to be reading the exact pages I marked as "*so soft it hurts*."

I press my fingers to my lips.

He turns a page slowly. Pauses. Leans back against the chain-link fence behind him.

A breeze ruffles his hair, and the sun catches in his eyelashes like something out of a shōjo manga. I can barely handle it. I want to crawl under my desk and stay there until graduation.

Miyu leans in again. "What are you staring at?"

“Nothing.”

“Are you sure? You’ve barely touched your karaage.”

“I’m just not that hungry.”

She frowns. “You’re never not hungry.”

I look away from the window. “I think I might be dying.”

Miyu blinks. “Excuse me?”

“Emotionally.”

Pause.

“Okay, *what did you do?*”

The thing about Miyu is that she’s both terrifying and loyal, which makes her the most dangerous kind of friend. She’ll absolutely interrogate me until I confess everything, and then *help hide the body*.

“I may have left a note in a book,” I whisper.

Her eyes light up like it’s Christmas.

“No. You didn’t.”

“I did.”

“In *which* book?”

I lower my voice even more. “You know the romance novel? Back of the library? Untouched since 2012?”

She gasps. “The one with the awful pastel cover and the fake gold lettering?”

I nod.

“You *love* that book.”

“I know.”

She stares at me. “Who was the note for?”

My eyes flick automatically to the window.

Miyu follows my gaze.

“Oh my god,” she breathes. “Franz?”

I bury my face in my arms.

“You wrote Franz Sakamoto a secret love letter?”

“It wasn’t a love letter!”

“It was definitely a love letter.”

“It was... more like an explosion of feelings in sentence form.”

Miyu’s practically vibrating with excitement. “Wait—does he have the book?”

I nod, still hiding.

“And he’s reading it? Right now?”

I peek up again. He’s turned another page. He’s smiling now.

Smiling.

Not laughing.

Just... soft. Focused.

He lifts his hand and brushes the edge of the page like it matters. Like it’s real.

I can’t breathe.

Miyu looks between him and me. “Oh my god. This is better than all the school festival dramas combined. You’re living in a fanfiction.”

I groan. “Do you think he knows it’s me?”

“Are you kidding?” She grins. “If he doesn’t yet, he’s about to.”

Same Day – Lunchtime

The handwriting isn't neat.

It's fast. Emotional. The kind you write when you forget anyone else might read it.

Franz turns the page slowly. Not because he's savoring the story — though it's better than he expected — but because he's still thinking about the folded note he found tucked behind chapter twelve.

The ink is slightly smudged.

The words are underlined in pink.

The heart drawn in the corner is tiny, but it's there.

He doesn't know who left it.

And that's the part that gets him.

Not because he's desperate to find out — but because some small, quiet part of him **hopes** it's her.

Her, the girl with the shy eyes and quiet footsteps.

The one who sits near the window in Class 1-D.

The one who flinches when someone laughs too loud.

The one who *never* talks to him — not directly — but who always lingers just a second too long near the library doors.

He noticed. Of course he noticed.

She moves like she's trying not to disturb the air. Like she's always somewhere in her head.

The same way *he* used to be, before people started noticing him for the wrong reasons.

Franz shifts his weight, leans back against the fence, and glances up at the classroom windows.

He catches movement.

Two girls. Bent over something. Laughing. Hushed.

He thinks he sees her peek toward him.

Only for a second.

His fingers tighten around the paperback.

Maybe it's wishful thinking.

Maybe it's her.

Maybe it's not.

But when he unfolded the note yesterday, and saw the line – “*The kiss on page 178 made me feel less alone*” – it stuck in his chest like a skipped heartbeat.

Not just because of what it said.
But because whoever wrote it... gets it.

And he wants it to be her.
Even if he's wrong.
Even if he never finds out.

Still – he keeps the note.
Folded neatly.
Tucked between the pages.

Just in case.

Chapter 2 :If He Knows, I'm Transferring Schools.

"Okay," Miyu says, leaning over her desk like a detective about to crack a case. "What exactly did he do when you looked out the window?"

I pull my bag into my lap and whisper, "He turned the page. Slowly."

She narrows her eyes. "And?"

"And he smiled."

She gasps dramatically. "A *Franz Smile*?! That's basically a confession. The boy barely blinks at people."

"I'm telling you," I say, clutching my pencil case like it's holy protection, "there's no way he smiled at the story. He knows."

Miyu leans in, voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper.

"But does he know it was you?"

"I don't know!" I whisper-shriek. "But if he does, I'm going to disintegrate into the linoleum floor and you'll have to explain my tragic, cringey end to the school counselor."

Miyu grins. "I'll bring tissues."

I press my forehead to the desk, muffling a groan. The room smells like chalk and floor polish and other people's breakfast, and I suddenly wish I were anywhere else.

"It's fine," she says, poking my shoulder. "He probably thinks it was someone else. Someone mysterious. Like that third-year girl from the art club with the eyeliner."

"I hate how impossible that is," I mumble.

She shrugs. "I mean, unless he's already guessed it was y—"

The door slides open.

We both stop breathing.

Franz walks in, quiet as ever, with his usual half-tired expression and bag slung over one shoulder. His hair is slightly messy like he just ran a hand through it, and his earphones hang loose around his neck.

He glances toward us.

Eye contact.

One second.

Two.

I blink first. Obviously.

Miyu freezes like a squirrel caught mid-theft.

He walks to his desk and sits down like nothing happened.

The book is still in his bag.

The teacher's footsteps click softly on the wooden floor as he moves to the front of the room. Mr. Takahashi, our literature teacher, adjusts his glasses and flips open a textbook with the practiced ease of someone who's given this same lesson a hundred times.

"Good morning, Class 1-D," he says with a calm smile. "Today, we're going to talk about themes in literature — specifically, how authors use symbols to convey hidden meaning."

He scans the room, eyes landing briefly on me. My stomach twists into a knot.

"Yui," he calls.

My head snaps up.

"Can you tell us what a symbol might be in the story we're reading? Something that means more than just what it is?"

Everyone turns their attention to me.

I clear my throat, trying to sound confident even though my heart is pounding like a taiko drum.

"Well... a symbol is like... an object or idea that represents something deeper. Like the cherry blossoms in the story, which stand for fleeting beauty and the passage of time."

Mr. Takahashi nods, clearly satisfied. "Excellent. That's a thoughtful answer."

I sink back into my seat, cheeks burning.

Franz is already flipping open his own book.

Not *my* book — some other novel, his favorite manga, maybe. But I can't stop glancing over.

What would he think if he *did* know about the note?
Would he think I'm ridiculous?
Or maybe, just maybe, would he think it was sweet?

I bite my lip, staring out the window again, watching a single cherry blossom petal drift lazily to the ground.

The classroom hums with the soft sound of pages turning. Mr. Takahashi leans slightly forward, looking thoughtful.

"Franz," he says, "what do you think literature teaches us about love? Can anyone share a meaningful quote or idea?"

Franz shifts in his seat, glancing down at the book open before him. His lips move silently for a moment before he speaks, voice calm and steady.

"Love is the quiet promise beneath the chaos, the space between two heartbeats where everything else fades away."

The room falls silent.

That line isn't from the textbook. It's from *the novel* — the one tucked carefully in his bag. The one Yui wrote the note in.

Mr. Takahashi raises an impressed eyebrow. "Very poetic, Franz. That's a beautiful way to describe love."

Miyu nudges Yui under the desk, eyes wide. I stare down at my hands, heart thudding wildly.

Franz looks up briefly, his gaze sliding across the room — lingering for just a moment on me.

I look away quickly, cheeks burning.

Did he mean to say that?
Does he know where it came from?

Mr. Takahashi smiles warmly, folding his hands on the desk. "Thank you, Franz, for that thoughtful answer. And now, to add a little excitement to our class..."

He pulls a flyer from his bag and holds it up. "I'm pleased to announce a poetry and short story competition open to all of you. Whether you're an experienced writer or just someone with a story to tell, this is your chance to shine."

The room perks up; even the usual chatter quiets down.

"The theme is simple: 'The Many Faces of Love.' Write a piece that captures what love means to you—funny, serious, messy, or sweet."

Mr. Takahashi's eyes twinkle. "The winner will receive a private tutoring session with a published author—plus their work featured on the school website."

A low murmur of excitement spreads through the room.

I glance at Miyu, who's already biting her lip, scheming.

And then I look toward Franz.

He's closing his book slowly, a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

Could this be my chance?

To put my feelings — my secret stories — out into the open?

Or will this just make everything more complicated?

Later that afternoon, the library is quiet except for the soft rustle of pages and the distant hum of fluorescent lights.

I crouch behind a bookshelf, Miyu practically vibrating beside me, eyes fixed on the far corner where Franz sits alone.

He pulls the worn paperback — *my* book — from the shelf with gentle reverence. The cover's edges are frayed, but he handles it like a treasure.

My heart skips.

He flips carefully to the chapter where I'd left the note, fingers tracing the paper like it's the most fragile thing in the world.

Then, slowly, he pulls a fresh sheet from his notebook and scribbles something.

Miyu leans closer, whispering, "Is he... writing a reply?"

He slips the new note carefully inside the book and replaces it on the shelf, exactly where he found it.

My breath catches.

For a moment, I wonder if I should step forward.

But I stay still, watching him through the gap in the shelves.

Then he looks up – directly toward me.

Our eyes meet for the briefest second.

And then, just like that, he stands and walks away.

The book stays behind.

And so does my hope.

The next morning, I'm at the library before class, heart pounding like I'm about to break some unspoken rule.

I slide my fingers along the worn spine of my book, eyes darting around to make sure no one's watching.

Carefully, I pull the book from the shelf and open it to the page where I left my note.

And there it is.

A new slip of paper, smaller this time, tucked between the pages like a secret.

Hands trembling, I unfold it.

The words are written in neat, flowing Japanese calligraphy:

花びらは
そっと風に乗る

**“The petals
Gently ride the wind”**

It's simple.

Quiet.

Beautiful.

And somehow, it feels like it's meant for me – or maybe for us.

A small smile tugs at my lips.

For the first time since the note, I don't feel so alone.

Maybe this story isn't just mine anymore.

The hallway is buzzing with energy. Bright posters line the walls, shouting things like:

✿ SPRING CULTURAL FAIR IS COMING!

📝 Volunteers Wanted! Sign-Up Sheets on the Board!

🎭 Drama Club! 🎨 Art Display! 📚 Literature Booth! 🌱 Gardening Club?

I'm walking calmly. Casually. Like a normal girl who is definitely *not* here to find out what Franz signed up for.

Miyu follows behind me, arms crossed. "You're doing the face."

"What face?"

"The 'don't-mind-me-I'm-just-here-coincidentally' face. It's suspicious. Stop it."

I school my features into something resembling neutrality. "Better?"

"Now you just look constipated."

We stop in front of the board. Names are scribbled across each sheet, each one a different kind of chaos.

Franz's name is there.

"Franz Shiraishi - Gardening Club (Reading Corner Renewal Team)"

"Gardening?!" I whisper-squeak.

"Plot twist," Miyu mutters.

Without thinking, I grab the pen hanging from a string and scribble my name under his.

"Yui Takahashi"

Right under his neat, elegant handwriting is my messy, nervous scrawl.

Miyu leans in. "You do know we're talking *actual gardening*, right? Like, with dirt? And bugs? And nature?"

"I can fake it," I say, voice shaking slightly. "For literature. For... plants. For reading ambiance."

"For Franz," she deadpans.

I pretend not to hear her.

Later That Day: The First Gardening Meet-Up

Sunlight filters through the campus trees as we gather behind the school building. There's a half-withered patch of soil where the reading corner is being rebuilt. Some benches. A tiny broken fountain.

Franz is already there, sleeves rolled up, kneeling in the dirt with a quiet focus that somehow makes *planting* look poetic.

I try not to stare. I failed.

He glances up, notices me — and gives the smallest nod.

That's it. No smile, no words. Just a nod.

But it lands in my chest like thunder.

I nod back, awkwardly. Then immediately trip over a rake and nearly face-plant into a bush.

Miyu snorts from somewhere behind me.

"Smooth," she says.

"Shut up," I hissed.

"Hey," Franz says suddenly. His voice is soft, but it carries. I turn, startled.

He's holding out a small trowel. "Want this one? The other tools are kind of dull."

I take it from him, our fingers brushing for half a second.

"Thanks," I mumble.

He nods again, already turning back to the soil.

It's nothing. Just a tool. Just a polite gesture.

But my stomach flips like he handed me a rose dipped in poetry.

Yui Takahashi doesn't belong in a garden.

She stabbed a patch of soil like it personally offended her, flinching every time a leaf touched her sleeve. I'm not sure she even knows how to hold the trowel — she's gripping it like a weapon, not a tool.

And yet...

I keep looking up.

I'm supposed to be spacing flowerbeds around the benches. Ms. Kaneko gave me detailed plans, and the rest of the group is quietly working. No one's talking much.

Except my thoughts. They're annoyingly loud today.

Because she's here.

Her.

The girl from the library.

I don't know her well — not really. But I've noticed her before. Small, quiet, always with a book half-hidden in her lap. Her laugh is rare, but when it comes, it has this way of breaking through the silence like sunlight between clouds.

And today, she joined a gardening club.

I doubt it's because she's passionate about weeding.

She trips over a rake, panics, pretends nothing happened — then tries to act casual and almost steps on the same rake again.

I look away, smiling without meaning to.

She doesn't see me watching her. Or maybe she does. Her eyes keep flicking over, then away. Like she's afraid I'll catch her staring.

The same way I'm afraid she'll catch me.

A breeze lifts her hair for a second — and she laughs, brushing it back with her wrist, smudging dirt on her cheek.

It's ridiculous.

It's kind of adorable.

I reach for a tray of seedlings but accidentally knock one over.

Smooth.

Focus.

But my mind drifts again – back to the library, to the book, to the note I found tucked between the pages. It wasn't signed. Just a nervous, honest scribble from someone who had clearly read it more times than they meant to admit.

I replied. I wasn't sure why.

And now, I keep wondering if she was the one who left the note in the first place.

Yui Takahashi.

She's not graceful. She's not quiet. She smiles like she's trying to hide it, but then forgets to.

And for some reason, I can't stop watching her.

I'm almost done planting the last row when I realize I need the trowel I left by the tool crate.

At the same time, she reaches for it.

Our hands meet halfway.

Not a bump. Not a quick brush.

Her fingers press lightly against mine for just a second – warm, small, uncertain.

She blinks at me, startled, like she wasn't expecting me to actually be *there*.

Then she pulls back, holding the trowel out to me with both hands, eyes darting away.

"Sorry," she says. Too quickly. Too softly.

I take it, but my attention's already somewhere else – on the faint curve of a smile that almost formed before she turned away.

The air between us feels... different.

For a moment, I think about the note in the library book. The way it felt personal. Nervous.

Like it had been written by someone who didn't want to be seen – but wanted to be found.

And now, I can't stop wondering if the person I've been looking for has been standing in front of me all along.

Chapter 3 : It Was Just a Gardening Club... Until It Wasn't

If my heart beats any louder, the entire gardening club is going to hear it.

I'm telling myself it's because I nearly grabbed his hand.

I mean — I *did* grab his hand. For about three seconds.

Well, maybe two.

Okay, one and a half. But still.

It was warm. And real. And a thousand times more dangerous than it should have been.

I wasn't even supposed to be here.

I only joined because I found out he was in it, and I thought — stupidly — that I could just, you know... be around him without doing anything weird.

Apparently, that was optimistic.

“Yui, you’re smiling like a creep,” Haruka whispers beside me as we collect the gloves and tools.

“I’m not smiling,” I whisper back.

“Yes, you are. You’re doing that thing where you try to *not* smile but your cheeks still give you away.”

I make a face at her, but she just smirks knowingly.

She’s been my best friend long enough to spot trouble — and I can practically see the “I told you so” loading behind her eyes.

When the session ends, I don’t rush home. Instead, I linger at the back of the group, watching him walk ahead with the others.

Franz doesn’t look back.

But I keep hoping he will.

Because for some reason, that one-and-a-half-second touch won’t leave me alone.

I tell myself to go home.

I even walk halfway to the gate before my feet betray me and take a sharp left.

The library is quiet at this hour. After-school club noise fades somewhere far down the hall, replaced by the soft hum of the old air conditioner and the faint rustle of pages.

I head straight to the novels section, pretending I’m here for totally normal reasons, like... checking out a new book.

Except my eyes go straight to that shelf.

The spine is there, waiting for me – same place as always.

I hesitate before reaching for it, the way someone might before touching a sleeping cat they're not sure will claw them.

But the book slides out easily.

My fingers flip automatically to the marked page.

No note.

My stomach sinks, even though I told myself not to expect anything.

I close the book slowly, holding it against my chest for a moment before sliding it back into place.

That's when I notice something new – tucked in the next book over, half-hidden in the shadow of the shelf.

I glance around. No one's watching.

My hand moves before I can think.

I freeze, fingers hovering over the edge of the paper peeking out from the other book's pages. It's not our book – not the one that started this – which almost makes it worse.

Like he's moved the conversation to a new hiding place.

A private room inside a private room.

I slide the book out just enough to see its title: *The Sound of Distant Rain*.

I've never read it, but the name feels almost too perfect, like it's a quiet code.

Carefully, I open it where the scrap is wedged.

It's not just a plain note this time.

The paper is lined, ripped from what looks like an old notebook. The ink is darker, as if he pressed the pen harder.

Two short lines, again in Japanese:

夢見ても
君を探している

"Even in dreams,
I am searching for you."

My throat tightens.

I read it again, slower.

It doesn't sound like something random you'd leave for anyone.

It feels like a confession whispered from somewhere far away — or maybe from just across the classroom.

I can picture him writing it, head tilted, brow furrowed just enough.

And suddenly my heart's pounding so loudly I'm sure the librarian will hear it from her desk.

I slip the note back exactly as I found it, though it takes effort.

Part of me wants to keep it. Fold it into my pocket like a secret I can carry around.

But I don't.

Because if I take it, the thread between us might break.

And I'm not ready for that.

I place the book back on the shelf, turn to leave—

—and stop.

Across the room, in the far aisle, Franz is standing with a book in his hands.

He's not looking at me. Not exactly. But he's facing my direction.

For a second, I swear I see the corner of his mouth curve.

Then he turns the page, casual, like I'm just another student in the library.

I tell myself to move. To leave. To breathe.

Instead, I stand there a few seconds longer, wondering if maybe...

he's been here the whole time.

That night, I couldn't focus on homework.

Every time I try, the note's words sneak back into my mind, slipping between equations and vocabulary lists like they own the place.

Even in dreams, I am searching for you.

I've never had anyone say something like that to me — not in real life, anyway.

And okay, maybe he didn't say it to me. But... What if he did?

I roll onto my back, staring at the faint glow of the ceiling in the streetlight.
Maybe this is how people end up doing reckless things.

I sit up, grab my notebook from the desk, and open it to a clean page.
The pen feels heavier tonight.

If I'm going to answer, I can't just scribble something plain.
He wrote poetry – twice. That means I have to at least try to match him.

My pen hesitates over the paper, then starts moving.
Five syllables. Seven. Five.
The rhythm feels safe.

月明かり
君を照らして
眠れない

“Moonlight falls on you
and I cannot fall asleep
thinking of your face”

I stare at it for a long time, the ink still glistening faintly under my desk lamp.

It's too much. Too obvious. Too... me.
But it's also the first thing I've written that I don't want to erase.

I fold the paper once, twice, and slip it into my pencil case.
Tomorrow, I'll decide if it belongs in the pages of a library book.

For now, it belongs to me.

***“Romance is not something I read;
it is something that happens to me against my will.”***

The note sits in my pencil case like a live wire.
I can almost feel it through the fabric of my bag as I walk to school, the morning air cold
enough to make my fingers ache.

By the time I get to the gates, I've already told myself three times that I won't leave it.
And five times that I will.

The library's on the way to my classroom, which makes things worse.
Each step closer, the decision gets heavier, like I'm carrying a stone instead of a piece of folded paper.

When I pass the open doors, the faint smell of paper and dust spills into the hallway.
My feet slow.

It's too *early*, I tell myself. No one's here yet. I could slip it in, and no one would know.
Except him.

I step inside.

The novels section is quiet, the morning light spilling over the shelves in pale strips.
I walk straight to ***The Sound of Distant Rain***, heart racing as I pull it out.

My fingers hesitate on the folded haiku.

Just do it.

I slipped it between the pages, exactly where his note was.
The sound of the paper sliding in feels louder than it should.

I'm about to put the book back when—

Footsteps.

I spin around, clutching the book against my chest.
Franz is standing at the end of the aisle.

We both freeze.

For a moment, neither of us says anything. He looks at me, then at the book in my hands.
A small, unreadable smile tugs at his lips.

“Morning,” he says quietly, like the word is meant to be hidden between us.

I manage a nod before shoving the book back into place and slipping past him, my pulse in my ears.

The rest of the day, I can't decide if I want him to find it...
or if I'm terrified he will.

Miyu finds me just outside the classroom before first period, blocking my way like she's been waiting for me all morning.

Her eyes scan my face once, and she grins.

"You saw him."

I pretend to be confused, shuffling past her to my desk. "What are you talking about?"

"You have that look," she says, sliding into the seat beside mine. "The '*I just ran into my crush and survived but barely*' look."

I groan, dropping my bag onto the floor. "It was nothing. He just... came into the library while I was there."

Miyu leans in, her voice dropping. "And?"

"And I left the note," I whisper.

Her eyes widened like I just told her I committed a crime. "Yui! You actually did it?"

I shrug, trying to act casual, but my cheeks are already warm. "It's not a big deal. He probably won't even notice."

"Oh, he'll notice," Miyu says, smirking. "Boys like him always notice. They just pretend they don't until it drives you insane."

The first two periods crawl by.

The literature teacher's voice fades in and out, like she's talking from the other end of a tunnel. Every time the door opens, my chest tightens, but it's never him.

The third period is worse. I sit there replaying the morning over and over – the way Franz looked at me, like maybe he knew something.

Or maybe I imagined the whole thing.

By the time the lunch bell rings, Miyu hooks her arm through mine before I can escape.

"You're coming to the cafeteria," she says, "because you look like you're about to pass out, and I refuse to watch my best friend faint over a boy."

The cafeteria is loud, packed with first and second years. I pick at my sandwich while Miyu talks about a drama she's watching, but my attention keeps drifting.

Across the room, I spot him sitting with two friends, head bent slightly as he flips through a book.

I can't tell if it's the book.

"Stop staring," Miyu hisses, nudging me.
"I'm not—"
"You are."

She grins like she's enjoying this way too much, and I shove the rest of my sandwich into my mouth just to stop talking.

After lunch, we have P.E. I should be thinking about the relay practice, but all I can think about is whether he's been to the library yet.

The sun is warm on the field, and Miyu is running beside me during drills.

"You're so distracted, you nearly tripped over the starting line," she says, panting.

I laugh, but it's hollow. "Just tired."

When the final bell rings, Miyu suggests walking home together, but I tell her I need to grab something from the library.

She smirks knowingly. "Right. Something."

The library is quieter than it was this morning, most students already gone for the day.

I hover near the novels section, pretending to browse.

The book is still there, exactly where I left it, but I can't tell if the note is gone.

My fingers itch to pull it out and check — but then I hear footsteps approaching.

I turn just enough to see him.

Franz.

He walks down the aisle, stopping right in front of the shelf.

For a second, I think about staying... but my courage fails.

I step back, hiding between two taller shelves, my heart hammering.

From my hiding spot, I see him take the book out.

He doesn't open it right away. Instead, he stands there, running his thumb along the spine like he's memorizing the feel of it.

Then he flips it open.

And smiles.

I can't hear anything, but at that moment, I know — he's read it.

The paper is exactly where I thought it might be.

I didn't check this morning — too many people in the library, too much risk.

But now, with the place almost empty, I can take my time.

I slide it out from between the pages, unfolding it carefully.
 Her handwriting is neat but just a little uneven, like she hesitated with each stroke.

月明かり
 君を照らして
 眠れない

“Moonlight falls on you
 and I cannot fall asleep
 thinking of your face”

I read it twice, then again.
 It's not just a poem. It's... a confession, hidden inside seventeen syllables.
 The kind of thing you can only write when it's too dark for anyone to see your heart.

I glance over my shoulder out of habit, but no one's there.
 Still, I can almost feel someone's eyes on me — like the air itself is aware of what I'm holding.

I slip the note back inside the book, not at the end of the page where I found it, but tucked deeper, a little harder to find.
 A quiet challenge.

Whoever wrote it...
 I want it to be her.

And if I'm being honest, I already suspect it is.

That morning in the library, I hadn't even noticed the title of the book at first.
 What I saw were her hands — pale against the dark spine, moving with this slow, deliberate care like she was touching something fragile.
 There was a softness in the way she held it that made me pause before speaking.

She probably thought my eyes were on the cover.
 But the truth is, I barely saw the book at all.

I remember the faint tremor in her fingers when she slid it back onto the shelf.
 The way the tips brushed the spine one last time, like she didn't really want to let go.

Maybe I'm imagining it.
 But if I'm not... then this isn't just about a book anymore.

I stop just three steps before the library door.

It's ridiculous, really — how something so ordinary, just a pair of glass doors and a quiet room behind them, can make my stomach twist into knots.

I tell myself I'm just... busy. That I don't have time to browse. That I'll come tomorrow.

But the truth is, I can't face the possibility of seeing him again — not so soon after that morning. The memory is still too fresh: his unreadable smile, the single word, *Morning*, like it belonged only to us.

Miyu walks beside me, slowing when I don't stop.

"You're not going in?"

I keep walking. "Not today."

Her eyes narrow slightly. "You? Skipping the library? Are you sick?"

I roll my eyes, but my laugh sounds hollow even to me.

We head for class, but the whole time my mind is anchored in that hallway behind us. The scent of dust and ink. The spine of my book under his hand.

That night, I dream about opening the book and finding nothing inside.

Franz slips the first note into the pages just before the first period.

A single sentence.

He doesn't know if she'll see it today. But he comes anyway.

The next morning, I walked faster past the library door. If I move quickly, maybe I won't think about it.

It doesn't work.

Through the glass, I catch a flicker of movement — a boy's profile bent over a table. For a second, my breath catches. Is it him?

I turn my head away before I can confirm.

Miyu notices my pace. "We're not late. Why are you speed-walking?"

"I just... want to get to class early," I mumble.

But all through literature, my thoughts are tangled.

What if he was there, waiting?

What if he opened the book first?

What if there was something inside it this time — and I'll never know?

At lunch, I glance toward the library again. The door looks the same as always. Too normal for how much it pulls at me.

Franz finds the book untouched.

He adds the second note, sliding it neatly behind the first.

A fragment of poetry this time — something he read once and couldn't forget.

By Day 3, the urge feels physical. Like hunger.

During math, the numbers blur in front of me. My pencil hovers over an empty square, but I'm thinking about the feel of the paper, the sound of the book's spine cracking open.

When the bell rings, Miyu grabs my wrist. "Okay. Spill. You've been weird for three days."

I pretend not to know what she means. She doesn't buy it.

On the way to class, I pass the library again.

This time, I slowed down. Just a little. Long enough to see that the table near the window is empty.

And yet... I still don't go in.

Franz checks again at lunch. Still untouched.

He hesitates this time before leaving the third note.

If no one reads these, am I just talking to myself?

It's raining.

The windows are streaked with water, and the library glows warm behind the glass. It looks like the perfect place to be — soft lamplight, hushed air.

I almost reach for the door handle. Almost.

But Miyu's voice pulls me back. "C'mon, let's get seats before the teacher starts."

I keep walking, my wet shoes squeaking against the floor.

All day, I keep picturing what the library must smell like right now — paper, rain-soaked coats, the faint tang of dust.

Franz comes in with damp hair, his uniform collar slightly wrinkled.

The fourth note is longer. A memory of watching the rain in silence. He tucks it carefully behind the others

I almost do it.

The hallway is empty, and the air smells faintly of old paper drifting from the open doors. I step closer, one hand lifting –

Footsteps. Someone coming from the other end of the hall.

I turn sharply and walk away, heart pounding like I've been caught doing something wrong.

In class, Miyu passes me a note: *Are you avoiding the library... or someone in it?*

I crumple it without answering.

Franz finds the fifth note slipping forward slightly in the book, like it wants to be found.

Still, it's undisturbed.

I tell myself I don't care anymore.

If someone else takes the book, fine.

It's a lie, and I know it.

By now, the avoidance has turned into a ritual – a small daily punishment I can't explain. Each time I pass those doors, my chest tightens.

That night, I lay awake wondering what would happen if I walked in tomorrow.

Franz adds the sixth note. He stares at the stack for a long time before closing the book.

He tells himself tomorrow will be the last.

The Confession Of My Heart

She hasn't been here. Not once.

Seven days, and the chair where she sat that morning is always empty.

Maybe she's avoiding me. Maybe she doesn't care.

Still, I come.

Still, I write.

The seventh note is the simplest of them all:

"This is the closest I have been to falling in love."

I date it, like the others. Slide it in behind the rest.

The book is thick with unsaid things now, each page holding a piece of the week.

When I leave, I glance toward the door, half-expecting her to walk in.

She doesn't.

Chapter 4 : The Door Between Us

By the time I finally push myself toward the library, my legs feel like they've been tied with invisible strings all week.

It's early. Too early for anyone else to bother coming in before the first period.

I reach the hallway. The doors are ahead, glass panes glowing faintly from the warm light inside. I can hear the faint hum of the old air conditioner and the muted shuffle of someone moving between the shelves.

I tell myself not to hope. But my heart doesn't listen.

I grip the strap of my bag tighter and take a step forward.

And then — movement.

From the far side of the library, near the back exit, someone's silhouette appears. Tall. Lean. A few strands of hair catching the light.

It's him.

Franz.

He doesn't see me. His head is slightly bowed, one hand in his pocket, the other brushing against the shelf as he walks. For a second, I think he's about to turn my way, but instead, he pushes the side door open and slips into the corridor beyond.

The sound of it closing is almost painfully soft.

I stand there for a moment, staring at the space he left behind.

Then I push open the main doors.

Inside, the air feels heavy with something I can't name. I walk straight to the back, to *my* shelf, and there it is — the familiar spine of the novel, waiting.

My hand trembles as I pull it free. The weight feels different this time. Thicker.

When I open it, something flutters out — not one, but several folded slips of paper, fanning out like petals onto the table. Seven in total.

My throat goes tight.

The first one is dated a week ago. The handwriting is neat, deliberate.

"Some words are only safe in the dark."

The second:

"Every page is quieter without you here."

The third:

"Rain is lonelier when there's no one to watch it with."

The fourth:

"Some silences feel like they're listening."

The fifth:

"I think I've been writing to you, even when I didn't know your name."

The sixth:

"If I write enough, maybe the spaces between words will hold me together."

And the seventh – the last –

"This is the closest I have been to falling in love."

I stare at them, my fingers pressed lightly to the paper like I'm afraid it will crumble.

None of them say my name. None of them *need* to.

I let the seventh note rest in my lap, the ink still whispering its meaning at me.

Slowly, I reach for my bag and pull out a pen and a small square of paper. The words come quickly, without thinking, almost as if they'd been waiting in me all week:

"I didn't fall in love. It chose me – for you."

The pen hovers for a second after the last word. My heart feels unsteady, like I've just said something out loud in a crowded room.

I fold the paper once, neatly.

Standing, I wander a few shelves over and slide out a different book – one I've never read, but its title catches my eye like a quiet dare:

The Boy with Silhouettes of a Prince.

I open it somewhere in the middle, slip my note inside, then carry it back to the original spot and place it beside his book – the two spines leaning together like they've been conspiring in my absence.

It's silly, but I picture him finding it. His fingers brushing the cover. The pause before he opens it.

I take a step back, just looking at the pair.

Then, without another glance, I turn and leave the library, my footsteps soft against the carpet.

Some stories begin quietly.

Some begin with someone deciding to be found.

The sun is already low when I step out of the main building, my bag slung over one shoulder.

The air smells faintly of chalk dust and the fried bread from the cafeteria that never really leaves.

I head toward the gate, not thinking about much — or at least trying not to — when I see her.

Yui.

She's standing with Miyu and two other girls, their laughter drifting faintly in the late afternoon air. Her hair catches the light in a way that makes the edges almost glow, and for a second, I forget to keep walking.

My pulse gives a small, traitorous jump.

She hasn't seen me.

I lower my gaze, pretending to adjust my grip on my bag, and keep moving. Past them. Past the gate. Out into the street.

The whole way, I can feel the shape of her in my peripheral memory — the way she stood, the sound of her voice threading through the air like it didn't even know it had caught me.

I tell myself it's better this way.

And still, my chest feels heavier with every step I take.

Two days pass before I return to the library.

Not because I don't want to — but because sometimes wanting something too much makes you afraid to touch it.

When I finally step inside, the familiar quiet wraps around me like a held breath. I head toward the shelf out of habit, my hand brushing the spines until I reach it. Our book.

It's still there, leaning slightly to the right.
But now... there's another.

The Boy with Silhouettes of a Prince.

The title alone stops me. My fingers rest on it for a moment, as if asking permission. Then I pull it from the shelf and feel something shift inside the pages.

A folded square of paper slips into my palm.

I don't open it right away. My chest is tight, and for a second, I'm almost afraid the words will prove me wrong.

Finally, I unfold it.

"*I didn't fall in love. It chose me – for you.*"

The handwriting is the same as the haiku.
The same as the first note.

I let out a slow breath I didn't know I was holding.

No name. No signature.

But I know. Or maybe I just want to know so badly that it feels like knowing.

I glance toward the library door, half-expecting her to walk in. She doesn't.

Still, I can't stop the small, uninvited smile tugging at my mouth.

I slide the note back into *The Boy with Silhouettes of a Prince* and return it gently to its place.
No reply. Not yet.

Because if I write something now, it'll be rushed – and this doesn't deserve to be rushed.

The decision follows me out of the library and into the rest of my day like an uninvited guest.
I'm supposed to be taking notes in history, but my pen keeps drifting into blank spaces,
sketching half-formed sentences I cross out before they're even whole.

At lunch, I sit with the usual group, but I barely hear them. Words are circling in my head,
half-formed, never enough.

Then, across the courtyard, I see her.

She's standing by the vending machines with Miyu, unwrapping something from a paper bag. She laughs at something her friend says, and the sound — light, unpracticed — catches me off guard.

And just like that, I know what I'll write.

The reply falls into my mind all at once, like it's been waiting for her to pull it into focus.

It's not long. It's not complicated.

But it feels exactly right.

I haven't written it down yet.

Some words are better when they've been carried in your chest for a while, so they come out steady when it

The thought follows me through the rest of the day, a quiet thread running beneath every conversation, every clatter of chalk against the blackboard.

By the time the final bell rings, I already know I'm going back to the library.

The place is almost empty this late in the afternoon. The librarian sits at the front desk, flipping slowly through a magazine. She doesn't look up as I head toward the back shelves.

The two books are right where I left them — leaning against each other like they've been conspiring.

I take *The Boy with Silhouettes of a Prince* down first, sliding her note carefully to the side.

I pull a blank slip of paper from my notebook. The pen feels heavier than usual in my hand.

For a moment, I just sit there, the words pressing against the inside of my mind, waiting for me to open the door.

And then... I write.

It isn't long. Just enough to hold what I want to say.

When I'm done, I read it once, then fold it and tuck it deep between the pages, where only someone looking for it will find it.

I place the book back exactly as it was, spine aligned, edges even.

No one should know I was here.

As I step outside, the air feels cooler, sharper. The sun's almost gone, staining the sky in thin ribbons of gold.

And for the first time in days, my chest feels lighter.

Like maybe this game we're playing — whatever it is — has only just begun.

Franz let the book rest in his hands a moment longer, the spine cracked but holding, like something that had been opened often yet never broken.

He turned a page and found a short poem, one that seemed to wait for whoever needed it most:

*"I miss you as one misses the truth—
not constantly, but with sudden violence.
When it comes,
it is the kind that stops the breath
and refuses to be spoken aloud."*

— F. Kafka

He read it twice.

The words weren't long, and they weren't sweet, but they clung to the mind like rain on glass.

They didn't say love.

They didn't need to.

Franz closed the book quietly, as if the air around it had grown too fragile to disturb.

The front door gives its usual soft click when I unlock it, but the house isn't quiet.

There's a low hum of voices — serious, clipped, with none of the warmth of small talk.

I step into the hallway, the smell of coffee and printer ink thick in the air.

In the living room, my mother is on one side of the couch, my father on the other. Between them, a man in a dark suit sits with a leather folder open on his lap.

A lawyer.

The papers on the table are spread out like a battlefield — neat, precise, but sharp enough to cut.

My father glances at me, his expression unreadable.

“Franz. You’re home.”

It’s not a greeting. More like a reminder that I exist.

My mother’s lips press into something almost like a smile, but it doesn’t reach her eyes.

“We’re just... sorting out arrangements.”

I don’t need to ask what kind.

The lawyer looks at me briefly – assessing, maybe pitying – before turning back to his notes. His pen scratches across the page like it's in a hurry to finish.

I stand there for a moment, my bag still slung over my shoulder, feeling like an intruder in my own home.

No one tells me to sit down.

No one tells me to leave, either.

So I do what I always do when the air feels too heavy to breathe.

I retreat to my room.

Only this time, even behind the closed door, the voices don't fade.

I shut the door, drop my bag on the floor, and pull my headphones over my ears.

The music is low, almost just a hum, but it's enough to muffle their voices.

Almost.

Even through the steady rhythm, I can hear fragments from the living room.

“...not fair to uproot him...”

“...your work schedule isn't stable...”

“...he's our son, not a suitcase to pass around—”

I flip open my diary – not the school one, the *real* one – and let the pen rest against the page. It's easier to breathe when I'm writing.

The words come slow at first, then all at once:

君を知る
前の世界は
白黒だ

“Before I knew you,
the world was only
black and white.”

I sit back, staring at the ink.

It's not for anyone else to see. Not yet.

But it's hers, all the same.

In the living room, voices rise and fall, circling the same arguments.

No verdict. No ground gained.

I turn the page and keep writing.
If I can't control where I end up...
Maybe I can still choose who I carry with me.

From my room, I hear the sound of papers shuffling, the scrape of a pen across the table, the low murmur of a voice I don't recognize.

The lawyer.

"...custody agreements, travel permissions, schooling transfer forms," he says, his tone as neutral as an automated message.

He could be talking about insurance claims. Or grocery lists.

Footsteps.

The front door opens, then clicks shut.

His car pulls away, leaving behind a silence so thick it's almost physical.

My parents haven't spoken for a while.
Or maybe they do, but I stop listening.

I keep my headphones on, pen tapping against the page until the ink smudges along the side of my hand.

Every so often, I pause, thinking I'll hear someone call me.
No one does.

The day drags in slow motion.
Shadows crawl across my desk as the light shifts outside.

By the time my mother knocks softly and says, "Dinner's ready," it's almost a relief to hear a human voice directed at me.

Downstairs, the table is set — three plates, like nothing's changed.
We eat in the kind of silence where every clink of the fork feels too loud.

I cut into my food, but I'm not tasting it. My mother's hands keep fidgeting with her napkin, folding and unfolding the corners until they look like creased wings. My father chews with his jaw set tight, eyes fixed somewhere just past my shoulder.

It's not that I don't know what's happening. I just don't want to say it out loud.
Because if I do, it's real.

The voices from earlier still echo in my head — my mother's clipped sentences, my father's pauses that lasted too long, the lawyer's steady, practiced tone. Words like "arrangement" and

“transition” and “best interest of the child.”

It’s strange how they can talk about you like you’re not sitting in the next room, trying to drown them out with music.

I wonder if Yui has ever sat at a table like this – where no one is fighting, but no one is really there either. I imagine her across from me, saying something that makes my father’s brow loosen, or my mother actually laugh. It’s stupid, but the thought feels like a rope thrown across some dark water.

My father asks how school was.

I say “fine” without looking up.

The lie sits heavy in my throat, because “fine” doesn’t cover seeing her that morning, or writing the reply I still haven’t decided how to give her, or wondering if she even thinks about me outside that library.

No one says the word divorce.

But it’s in the room anyway, sitting in the empty spaces between us.

I stab at the vegetables on my plate, more to move them around than eat them.

The lawyer said something earlier about “permanence.”

I hate that word.

It makes it sound like whatever they decide, it’s carved in stone – that I won’t get a say in where I belong.

My mother glances at me between bites, like she’s checking to see if I’m still holding together. My father keeps drinking water like he’s washing down something bitter.

I keep thinking about the reply I wrote for her. It’s tucked into my notebook, folded so neatly it almost feels fragile. I want to give it to her. I also want to burn it.

School is the only place where I can pretend things are normal – where I can walk past her in the hallway and think about books instead of lawyers, about her smile instead of custody papers. But even there, she’s not really mine. And here, at home, I’m not really anyone’s.

The clock ticks louder than it should. My fork scrapes against porcelain. My mother asks if I want more rice, and I say no, even though I’m still hungry.

I’m not sure if it’s because I want to leave the table, or because I want them to notice that I’m not okay.

After dinner, I head upstairs without a word.
The house feels smaller than it did this morning.

In my room, the air smells faintly of pencil shavings and the cologne sample I spilled last month. I toss my bag onto the floor, pull my headphones over my ears, and let music fill the space where my thoughts should be.

But she slips in anyway.
Yui, with her fingers brushing the spine of a book.
Yui, biting her lip when she's nervous.
Yui, in the morning light at the library, looking at me like—
No. Not at me. At the book.

I reach for my notebook. The folded page with my reply to her is still there, tucked between the lines of unfinished sentences. I unfold it, read it once, then twice. I'm tempted to change the words, make them sharper, more certain. But something in me says to leave it. It's honest the way it is — maybe too honest.

Downstairs, my parents' voices rise and fall in muffled bursts, like waves crashing against walls. I turn the music up.

I stretch out on the bed, arm draped over my eyes, pretending I'm not counting the hours until I see her again. The music fades into background noise, my mind drifting toward the way her laugh sounded that one time in class, like she forgot anyone else was there.

The last thing I think before sleep takes me is the same thing I've been thinking all week:
I hope she reads it.
And I hope, somehow, she knows it's for her.

Chapter 5 : The Prince on the Shelf

The library is quieter than usual, like the air itself is holding its breath.
I make straight for the corner where *her* book lives.

I pull it from the shelf, fingers brushing the familiar cover, my pulse ticking faster.
Nothing.
The pages are exactly as I left them. No new note. No answer.

For a second, disappointment sours the back of my throat. Maybe I imagined all of it. Maybe whoever wrote those words has decided to stop.

Then... I see it.

Right beside the novel — another book, one I've never noticed before. *The Boy with Silhouettes of a Prince*.

It's leaning against her book, too deliberately placed to be random.

I pulled it out.

The cover feels warmer, as if someone's hands were just here.

Inside, tucked between chapter five and six, is a folded slip of paper.

I open it slowly, almost afraid to read it.

In neat, careful handwriting:

I didn't fall in love.

It chose me – for you.

I stare at the words until they blur.

She didn't sign it, but she didn't need to.

Something in my chest tightens, sharp and certain.

I close the book and check it out, the paper still pressed inside.

For the next week, I'll carry it with me everywhere — and read it cover to cover, not because I care about the story...

but because she touched these pages, and maybe, in some strange way, we're reading it together.

I leave the library with the book under my arm, the paper burning a hole through the pages like it's carrying more heat than ink.

Part of me wants to turn around, march straight to her classroom, and just... ask.

Ask if it's her.

Ask if she meant it.

But the thought stops me cold on the stairs.

What if it isn't Yui?

What if I'm just a fool building castles in my head, only to find out she doesn't even know I exist beyond the occasional "morning" in the hallway?

The afternoon sun is blinding outside, painting everything in warm light, but it doesn't reach the knot in my stomach.

I tried to picture her face if I told her. Would she smile? Laugh? Or would she tilt her head with that polite confusion people wear when they're trying to let someone down gently?

I walk home slower than usual, the book still clutched to my chest like a shield.

At my desk that evening, I opened it again.

The reply is still there — five simple words that somehow feel heavier than anything I've read in years.

It chose me — for you.

The words make me want to believe. They make me want to believe so badly it hurts.

But then doubt slips in like a shadow.

If it's her...

Why hasn't she looked at me the way I look at her?

Or maybe she has, and I've been too blind to notice.

I closed the book. Not tonight. Not yet.

I'll read it slowly, one chapter at a time, as if the answer might be hidden somewhere in the story.

And maybe, by the time I reach the end, I'll know if I'm brave enough to write my own.

The kitchen smells faintly of miso soup, but the air is heavy, too still, like it's waiting to break. My mother and father sit across from each other at the table, not quite looking at me when I walk in. A folder lies between them, papers stacked neatly inside.

"Franz," my mother says, her voice careful, too careful. "We need to tell you something."

I already know. Maybe not the words, but the shape of them has been forming in the silence of this house for months.

My father clears his throat. "Your mother and I... we've decided it's best to live apart. The court has granted custody to your mother. You'll be moving to the U.S. with her."

The words hit like ice water. My fork slips against the plate, metal scraping louder than it should.

Move.

U.S.

With her.

It feels like a wall sliding down between me and everything I know. Between me and—

Yui.

Her name flares in my mind before I can stop it. Not out loud, never out loud, but sharp and bright like a wound.

I picture her standing in the library aisle, fingers brushing the same worn spine mine did. Her handwriting, curling like it's meant to be whispered.

I didn't fall in love. It chose me – for you.

The words echo so hard in my chest, I can't breathe.

My father is still talking about “transition periods” and “visitation rights,” but it all fades. All I can hear is the clock ticking above the fridge and the pounding in my own head.

I'm leaving.

And I don't even know if it's her.

If Yui is the one behind the notes.

If she even sees me.

I stare at my plate, untouched. My hands curl into fists under the table. I want to shout, to beg for time, for answers, but the words stay locked behind my teeth.

Instead, one thought loops endlessly, louder than the sound of my parents' voices, louder than the scrape of chairs, louder than the world itself:

I can't go without knowing.

Dinner ends without really ending. My father excuses himself first, retreating to his study with that same stiffness he wears like a suit. My mother clears the plates, humming a tune under her breath, too soft, too practiced. Like she thinks pretending will make the cracks invisible.

I sit there, hands flat on the table, staring at the empty bowl in front of me. I can't move.

The words circle my head:
You'll be moving to the U.S. with her.

America.

The word doesn't feel real, like a place I've only seen in movies, not somewhere I'm supposed to live. Not somewhere I'm supposed to start over.

I climb the stairs to my room and shut the door quietly, but the silence inside feels heavier than the one downstairs. I drop my bag to the floor, sit on the edge of the bed, and press my palms to my face.

I should be crying. I should be angry. I should feel something for them.
But all I can think about—

Is her.

Yui.

Her soft laugh slips through the classroom when she whispers something to Miyu. The way she tilts her head when she's lost in thought. Her fingers tracing the spines of books like they're alive, like she's memorizing them.

And those words.

I didn't fall in love. It chose me – for you.

I clutch at the diary on my desk, the one where I keep all the poems I never show anyone. My handwriting scrawls across the pages like shadows, half-finished thoughts, lines I was too afraid to write all the way.

I flip to a blank page. The pen trembles in my hand.

I write:

*If I leave without knowing, will the weight of it follow me?
If you're not the one, why does your smile fit so perfectly inside the spaces my parents broke?*

I pause, pressing the pen harder against the paper until the ink pools.

The truth is simple.

I don't want to go.

Not because of this house, not because of this city, not even because of this country.

But because of her.

I close the notebook, shove it under the mattress like it's a crime.

The rest of the night passes in fragments. My mother knocks gently to tell me goodnight. I mutter something back. My father's footsteps echo down the hall. Then, nothing but the low hum of the fridge downstairs and the faint glow of the streetlight outside my window.

I lie awake, staring at the ceiling, earbuds in, music too low to drown out the noise inside me.

Every time I close my eyes, I see the library. The row where the book waits. Her hand brushed against mine, almost. Her eyes, if they're hers, reading my words.

And the thought returns, steady and sharp, a vow forming itself in the dark:

Before I leave, I have to know.

The clock blinks past midnight. Still, my chest won't settle. The air feels heavy with words unsaid, things unfinished. Eventually, exhaustion drags me under, but the last thought I cling to before sleep takes me is her name.

Yui.

The library is quiet, almost empty at this hour. I step inside, the smell of paper and wood welcoming me like it always does. And there—

She's there.

Yui.

Standing in the row where *our book* waits, her fingers tracing the spines like she's rehearsing courage. Her friend Miyu isn't with her today. It's just her.

For a moment, I forget why I even came. Forget the documents, forget the flight that's waiting for us in a few days. All I see is her, framed by the shelves, the light from the high windows soft against her hair.

She turns. Our eyes meet.

It's only a second, but it feels longer. She smiles — small, nervous, expectant. Like she's waiting for something.

And my chest twists because I know exactly what she's waiting for.

A reply.

The reply.

But my throat closes. My legs feel like they belong to someone else. Because what do I say? Yes, it was me all along? Yes, I read every word and prayed it was you? Yes, I want it to be you more than anything?

I want to. God, I want to.

But then my mother calls from outside the library door. “Franz, come on. We don’t have all morning.”

Yui’s smile falters. She blinks, once, twice, as if she’s trying to understand what she just heard.

Her lips part like she’s about to say something – but then she hears it too. My mother’s voice again. Louder this time. Talking to a teacher now. Talking about America.

Yui freezes. Her fingers fall away from the book’s spine.

And in her eyes, I see it: the realization.

That I’m leaving.

Maybe for good.

I want to go to her. To explain. To tell her everything. But my body betrays me. I lower my gaze, shove my hands in my pockets, and walk past her without a word.

Her silence follows me out of the library like a shadow I can’t shake.

My steps feel heavier than they should as I leave the library, like every tile I cross is dragging me down.

My mother’s already at the entrance, talking with the principal and a staff member holding a stack of papers. She looks tired, a polite smile fixed on her face, but her hand is firm around the documents when they’re finally handed over.

“Let’s go, Franz,” she says softly, like she knows I don’t want to.

I glance back. Through the glass door of the library, I catch one last glimpse of Yui. She hasn’t moved. She’s still standing there, still staring at the shelf where our book rests. Her hands hang at her sides now, empty.

For a moment, I imagine turning around. Running back. Telling her everything. Just one word – wait. Just one sentence – don’t forget me.

But my voice never comes. My legs keep moving.

Outside the gate, the air feels different. Too sharp, too wide. My mother thanks the staff, and together we step out of the school grounds.

The gate closes behind me with a dull clang.

I don't look back this time. Because if I do, I might not be able to keep walking.

And somewhere behind those walls, in the quiet of the library, Yui still waits for a reply that I can't give her. Not today. Maybe not ever.

The sound of the library door closing is still echoing when I finally let myself move.

My fingers brush the spine of the book where I'd left my reply, the words inside burning in my memory: *I didn't fall in love. It chose me for you.*

But he didn't touch it. He didn't even glance my way.

My chest tightens as I rush to the window. Through the glass, I catch sight of him walking across the courtyard – his shoulders tense, his steps quick, like he's running away from something invisible. His mother walks beside him, clutching a thick envelope of papers.

"Yui!" Miyu's voice snaps me out of the daze. She's breathless, like she's run here from another part of the school. Her eyes are wide, almost panicked. "Did you see? Franz... he's leaving. With his mom."

The words feel wrong, like they don't belong in the air.

"Leaving?" My throat is dry.

Miyu nods, biting her lip. "I overheard the staff... They said his parents are divorcing. He's going back to America. Today."

Today.

The floor tilts under me. I grip the window frame to steady myself, but the world still feels like it's spinning too fast.

The book is still there on the shelf, holding my words like a secret I thought he'd find. But maybe he never will.

Through the glass, I watch him and his mother step out of the school gate. He doesn't turn back. Not even once.

My breath hitches. The world blurs.

It feels like someone just ripped a page out of my story — the most important one — and left me staring at the empty space where it used to be.

A week.

Seven mornings of walking into class and staring at the empty desk by the window.

Seven afternoons of opening my notebook, only to scribble the same line over and over without realizing it: *Did you find my words?*

Seven nights of lying in bed, half-dreaming of the library door swinging open, of him walking in like he always did — quiet, steady, unshaken — until I wake up and remember he's gone.

The ache doesn't dull. It just... settles in, like it's part of me now.

"Yui," Miyu whispers, leaning across the desk. She thinks I don't notice, but she's been watching me all week. "You can't keep sulking forever."

"I'm not sulking," I mumble, eyes fixed on my textbook. The words blur together.

"Yes, you are," Miyu says firmly, snatching the pencil out of my hand. "Look at you. You barely eat, you don't laugh at my jokes anymore, and—" she lowers her voice — "you haven't gone near the library once."

I flinch.

She's right. The library used to be my sanctuary, my secret place. Now it feels haunted. The shelves whisper memories I'm not brave enough to face. Every time I pass the door, I walk faster. I don't want to know if the book is still there, if my words are still waiting for someone who'll never return.

Before I can reply, another classmate — Rika — joins in, plopping into the seat behind me. "We should drag her to karaoke," she declares, as if she's solved everything. "A few songs, some soda, and she'll stop looking like her puppy died."

Miyu swats at her, but she laughs. "I'm serious. It's been a week. He's not coming back, Yui. And you're still here. With us. So... let us cheer you up, okay?"

Their voices are light, teasing, but underneath is something softer. Care. Concern.

I want to tell them they don't understand. That it wasn't just a crush, not just some passing thing. That my words are still trapped in that book, sitting quietly in the dark, waiting for someone who's already an ocean away.

But instead, I nod.

Because maybe Miyu's right. Maybe if I go sing terrible songs, eat fries, and laugh at Rika's ridiculous dance moves, the ache will loosen, just a little.

Maybe.

I force a smile. "Fine. Karaoke. But only if you sing first."

Miyu beams like she's won. "Deal."

Still, as the class goes on, my gaze drifts – back to the window, to the seat that should have been filled. Empty, like a blank page.

The air in California feels different—too wide, too bright. Even the sky feels bigger than it should be.

Our new house isn't really *new*. The paint on the porch is peeling, the walls smell faintly of dust and someone else's life. Boxes sit stacked in every room, some still taped shut, some spilling clothes like they're refusing to settle here.

Mom moves around like a shadow, making calls, flipping through classifieds, writing notes in her tidy handwriting. She's looking for work, trying not to show me how tired she already is. Every time I catch her frowning at a bill, she passes on a smile before I can say anything.

The first day at my new school, I walk in with my head down, pretending I don't hear the whispers. Being a *transfer student from Japan* apparently makes me curious. I don't care.

By lunch, I've found a quiet table near the back. I'm halfway through a stale sandwich when a boy drops into the seat across from me.

"You're Franz, right?" His accent is heavy, his grin easy. He sticks out his hand. "I'm Diego."

I nod, shake his hand.

"Are you looking for work or something?" he asks suddenly, like he's read my mind.

I blink. "...Yeah. Why?"

"My uncle owns a small convenience store down on Main. Always needs someone to stock shelves, ring up customers, that kinda thing. Not glamorous, but it's steady."

For the first time since arriving, something like hope stirs in me. A rhythm. A way to stop feeling like my life's been pulled out from under me.

"Think he'd hire me?" I ask, trying to keep my voice steady.

Diego smirks, like it's already settled. "I'll put in a word. You seem like the type who shows up on time. That's all he really cares about."

I nod, murmuring thanks, but inside my chest something aches. Not because of the job—because of the thought I can't push away.

Would Yui laugh if she saw me in an apron, bagging groceries, stumbling through English with customers?

The thought hurts, but it's the first time I've let myself imagine her here, in this new life.

And it makes me realize how much of me is still back there, in that library aisle.

Three months.

Long enough for the seasons to shift.

Long enough for teachers to stop glancing at the empty seat in the corner of the classroom. But not long enough for me to forget.

Yui sits by the window, her gaze fixed outside where sunlight catches the dust drifting lazily in the air. Her notebook is open, but the page is still blank. Miyu nudges her under the desk.

"Hey. He's looking at you again."

Yui blinks, following Miyu's chin tilt. At the back of the room, the *new boy*—transfer student, tall, messy hair—smiles awkwardly when their eyes meet.

He'd tried sitting near her once. Asked her about the class schedule. Even offered to carry her books.

But Yui's response had been the same every time: polite nod, silence, nothing more.

Because no matter how kind his smile is, it isn't him.

No one is Franz.

On the other side of the world, Franz wipes sweat from his forehead as he stacks a crate of canned goods in the corner of a cramped convenience store. The fluorescent lights hum overhead, a constant, buzzing reminder of where he is—and where he isn't.

The little bell above the door jingles. A girl's voice cuts through the static.

"Hey, Franz. You look like you're wrestling that box to death."

He glances up to see Jane, her short blond hair tucked behind her ears, her hands full of soda bottles she's supposed to restock. She grins at him like she always does—bright, persistent, like sunlight that refuses to be ignored.

Franz mumbles something under his breath, half-smile tugging at his lips despite himself. He's quiet, keeps his words short, but Jane doesn't seem to mind. She talks enough for the both of them.

"You know, most people would just ask for help. But you? You'd rather break your back than admit defeat."

He shrugs, and she laughs, shaking her head before heading to the fridge aisle.

For a moment, Franz lets himself breathe.

But when the bell above the door jingles again, when a couple of high school kids wander in laughing, he feels it—the ache that never leaves.

Back in Japan, would Yui laugh like that with her friends? Does she still go to the library? Does she still slip notes into books, waiting for words that will never come?

He hasn't written anything since the night his world broke in two. But in his pocket, folded and worn, is her last reply.

I didn't fall in love. It chose me—for you.

He reads it every night before he falls asleep, afraid the ink will fade, afraid the words will vanish like a dream.

And yet, across the ocean, Yui still dreams of him.

Two worlds.

Two silences.

Both waiting for something that feels impossibly far away.

Franz wipes down the counter for the third time in ten minutes, pretending to focus on the task. Jane chatters beside him, telling some story about her weekend, her laugh easy and bright, filling the small store like sunlight.

He wants to respond, to laugh along, but his mind keeps wandering. He pictures Yui, the way her fingers lingered over the book's spine, the quiet way she had given him her words. *I didn't fall in love. It chose me—for you.*

Jane nudges him with a soda can. "Earth to Franz. Are you even listening?"

He startles, mumbling something. She laughs, shaking her head, and goes back to sorting shelves. She's easy to be around—always patient, always teasing in the right way—but every time he smiles at her, a tiny part of him recoils.

Because smiling at Jane isn't the same as smiling at Yui.

He wonders if he's unfair, letting Yui's memory shadow everything here, making him distant, awkward, hesitant. Jane is kind, attentive, real—but he can't stop thinking that his heart is still half a world away.

By the end of the shift, Jane is humming as she locks the door. Franz lingers at the counter, staring at the worn wooden surface, at the notes he's memorized, at the little crease in the paper that he can't fold back the same way twice.

He hates that part of him is pulled toward her, toward comfort, toward ease. But another part, the one that beats fastest and tightest, belongs to a memory thousands of miles away.

He exhales slowly, realizing something that both frightens and excites him: he has to figure out what he really wants.

Because right now, there are two hearts tugging at him in different directions—and neither can be ignored.

The apartment smells faintly of cardboard boxes and takeout. Even after three months, it hasn't felt like home. The walls are bare, the furniture mismatched, and the quiet hum of the refrigerator is louder than any conversation I want to have.

Mom bursts into the living room, a bright smile plastered on her face. "I got it, Franz! The finance company called—Executive Manager position! Can you believe it?"

I force a smile, nodding. "That's... great, Mom."

She claps her hands like a child. "I want us to celebrate! Pizza, cake... and friends! Why don't we invite some of your new coworkers?"

I glance down at my sneakers. My heart isn't in the celebration. Not really. I still think about Japan—the school, the library, the quiet streets, even the small cracks in the classroom floor I used to stare at while hoping Franz... no, Yui...

I mean... I stare at her memory.

I clear my throat. "We could invite Jane, maybe a few others from the store?"

Mom beams. "Of course! She's your friend now, right?"

I nod again, swallowing the lump in my throat. Jane. She's kind, she's funny, she makes the hours at the store bearable—but she isn't... her.

By the time the pizzas arrive, the apartment is buzzing. Mom fusses over plates and soda, laughing as she tells me how proud she is of herself. I sit on the couch, picking at the crust, my mind somewhere else entirely.

Jane plops down beside me, a grin plastered on her face. "Hey, you look like you're thinking about something serious. Spill it."

"I'm fine," I mutter, not meeting her eyes.

She nudges me lightly. "Sure you are. You always look like that when you're pretending. Come on, eat some pizza."

I take a slice, chewing slowly. Every bite tastes like home should, but doesn't. I want to tell her. I want to tell my mom, but the words won't come. I miss my father. I miss the familiar rhythm of my life in Japan. I miss... everything I left behind.

Cake comes later, candles lit. Mom's friends cheer and clap, and I manage to smile, faintly. Jane leans over and whispers, "You okay?"

I nod, forcing it again. "Yeah... just... tired."

When the guests leave, Mom turns to me. "You did okay, Franz. I know this isn't easy for you."

I shrug, staring at the ceiling. She doesn't understand—not fully. She can't feel the empty spaces where my old life used to be.

I head to my room after cleanup, dragging my feet. The lights from the living room fade behind me. I collapse onto the bed, staring at the ceiling, and pull the folded note from my pocket.

I didn't fall in love. It chose me—for you.

It burns the same, bright and impossible, across oceans.

I close my eyes and let the silence take me. Between the boxes, the laughter, the fake celebration, I'm still in Japan. Still in that library aisle. Still reaching for something I may never hold again.

The bright chatter of the classroom feels like a distant echo to Yui now. She sits at her desk, head resting on her hand, notebook open but untouched. Her friends pass notes and whisper jokes, but she doesn't look up. Miyu nudges her, laughs, waves a pen in front of her face – but Yui barely reacts.

"Yui, are you even listening?" Miyu hisses quietly.

Yui forces a small shake of her head. "Mm," she murmurs, not meeting her friend's eyes.

Her teachers have noticed too. Mr. Sato, her literature teacher, frowns when she doesn't volunteer answers anymore. Her essays are shorter, less vibrant, missing the spark they once had. Even the smallest praise barely earns a smile from her now.

At home, the contrast is just as sharp. Her mother moves around their small apartment and the kirana-style store below – arranging vegetables, frying small snacks for customers, and packing orders for delivery. The modest but steady income from the store and the little eatery attached to it provides stability. They manage just enough to feel secure, even if it isn't extravagant.

Her mother glances at Yui over a basket of laundry. "Yui, eat something," she says gently. There's no rebuke in her voice, only concern. Yui barely nods, picking at the edges of her toast.

It isn't that she's unhappy about life in general. The world around her continues, steady and reliable. It's Franz. His absence has cast a quiet shadow over her, a slow, creeping weight that makes her laugh less, speak less, notice less.

At school, even the sunlight streaming through the windows doesn't seem to reach her anymore. She walks the hallways with her shoulders slightly hunched, like she's carrying something invisible but impossibly heavy.

And though no one says it aloud, the change is unmistakable. Her friends whisper in worry. Her teachers glance at her essays and attendance. Even her mother senses the shift in tone at dinner, the silence that lingers longer than usual.

Yui doesn't cry. She doesn't scream. She simply becomes... quieter. A shadow of the girl who once filled every corner of her world with chatter and laughter.

Yet in the small, unnoticed moments, she still clings to Franz. The book she left in the library remains on her shelf, carefully positioned. Occasionally, she traces the edges of the pages with her fingertips or scribbles tiny haikus in her notebook when no one is watching. These little rituals are her way of keeping the connection alive, even across the vast ocean that separates them.

Yui sits by the window in the classroom, staring blankly at the empty seat that should have been his. Miyu slides into the desk beside her, exasperated.

"Yui, seriously," Miyu snaps, voice low but firm. "He wasn't your boyfriend. Nothing was official. He doesn't even know it was you who wrote the notes. You need to get over him."

The words hit harder than Yui expects. She blinks, staring at the light glinting off the notebook in front of her. *Was it all just in my head?* she wonders. Maybe she had misread every glance, every small smile, every silent moment in the library.

She closes her eyes for a moment, taking a shaky breath. Questions spiral in her mind: *Did he even feel anything for me? Was I just... imagining it all?*

Miyu sighs, shaking her head, muttering under her breath. "You need to stop torturing yourself."

Yui's lips press together. She wants to argue, to defend her memories, but her chest tightens. Maybe Miyu is right. Maybe she's clinging to a shadow.

Half a world away, Franz sits on his bed in the dim glow of his desk lamp. Jane's laughter from earlier at the store still rings faintly in his ears. She's a good friend—kind, reliable, warm—but he hasn't stopped thinking about someone else entirely.

He unfolds the note again, smoothing the creases with careful fingers. *I didn't fall in love. It chose me—for you.*

A doubt creeps in, uninvited. *What if it wasn't her? What if she never even knew it was me? What if I've been holding on to a fantasy all this time?*

The words feel heavy, pressing down on him in the quiet apartment. For all the small comforts of his new life—the store, Jane, even his mother's pride—he can't shake the thought: maybe he's mistaken, maybe he's been clinging to someone who'll never feel the same.

And so, in two separate worlds, the same question lingers.

Yui: *Was it ever real?*

Franz: *Did I misread everything?*

Two hearts, oceans apart, both uncertain, both aching.

Chapter 6 : The Uncertainty Of The Mind

Franz went to school, but his mind was not there; it was across oceans thinking about her. He wanted to know if it was her or not, but there was no way to know that now, or ever.

At the store, he was welcomed by a big smile from Jane. "Oh hi, Franz, you are late today," she asked him.

She started talking nonstop. Franz picked up his uniform and started to help with the customers. Jane kept talking, but Franz was not present at that moment; all he was thinking about was Yui.

"Hey Franz, are you okay? You seem lost today. Is everything alright?" Jane asked.

"Yeah, everything is fine, just some school stuff, nothing else," replied Franz.

After their shift, Jane invited Franz to a party celebration. She had been accepted to Columbia University and was hosting a party.

Jane: "You have to come, no excuses."

Franz: "Yeah, sure."

At home, Franz was still looking at the note, still thinking about Yui. His mother called him down for dinner.

"Franz, honey, come down. Dinner is ready, and look, Jane is here."

Franz: "Jane! When did she come?"

"Why don't you go down and ask her yourself?"

Jane was staying tonight. "Her parents are out of town, and they asked me if she could stay here."

Franz: "Hi Jane, how are you? How was school? Mom, has she told you she got into Columbia University?"

"Oh really?" Franz's mother asked Jane.

"Yes," replied Jane.

Mrs. Sakamoto showed her around the house and told her about their time in Japan. Jane asked, "Was there someone close to Franz there?"

Mrs. Sakamoto: "Close? You mean to ask if Franz had a girlfriend," smiling.

Jane replied, "No, I didn't mean that," while blushing.

Mrs. Sakamoto replied, "If that's not true, then why are your cheeks red all of a sudden?"

"No, it's nothing," said Jane.

Mrs. Sakamoto told Jane, "My son is not the typical boy that girls like. You see, he is a bit too introverted. He will only talk when it's absolutely necessary; he just stays to himself."

But recently, he has been too quiet. Since we came from Japan, he hasn't talked much to me. He used to tell me all about his day before, but I don't know what has gotten into him lately."

Jane: "Maybe he misses his dad."

Franz stood at the threshold of Jane's apartment, the muffled sounds of laughter and music spilling from the open door. The party was in full swing, yet Franz felt unmoored — the usual warmth that gatherings brought him felt distant, like a dream he was watching but not living. Jane's insistence that he come tonight had shaken loose something reluctant in him. He stepped inside, clutching a paper cup, fragile and trembling.

The room shimmered with golden string lights and the hum of conversations. Faces blurred—smiling, shouting, swirling—an indistinct tide of noise that washed over him without landing. Jane appeared at his side, radiant and steady, her smile both sheltering and elusive.

"Relax," Jane whispered, nudging him. "You don't have to talk to anyone if you don't want to." The words landed but already felt like they belonged to someone else.

Franz nodded, the movement feeling like a ritual he performed but couldn't truly claim. The crowd swirled on, bringing a murmur of laughter and music from all directions, but in Franz's mind, everything shrunk to fragility — the notes he held in his pocket, the memory of Yui's quiet presence, the unspoken words left between pages.

A tall boy with tousled hair approached with a grin. "Jane! You made it! And you brought company!"

Jane looped her arm through Franz's. "This is Franz, my work buddy."

Introductions passed like waves — names, classes, favorite shows — but Franz only half heard, his mind a labyrinth of uncertainty and yearning. A broken joke earned a laugh. For a moment, he felt a flicker of warmth, an ember of belonging.

Later, Jane led him to the balcony, the night air cool and heavy. The city lights below flickered with a quiet dissonance, shadows stretching long and uncertain.

“You’re different out here,” Jane said softly. “Not just because it’s new... but because I see something in you others don’t.”

Franz searched her eyes, but found only a reflection of his own hesitation.

Jane’s voice lowered; her confession was a fragile thread cast into the dark: “I like you. More than a friend.”

The words hovered, delicate and tremulous. Franz’s throat closed, and the silence between them became a vast gulf.

Take your time, Jane said without speaking, and stepped back into the glow inside.

Franz stood alone on the balcony, the city whispering secrets in light and shadow while doubt and longing knotted deep inside.

When the party ended and the rooms emptied, Jane sat beneath the dim lamp alone. Her smile faded into whispering silence.

“Maybe someday,” she breathed to the shadows, “he’ll see me the way I see him.”

No voices answered. The night held only her secret, a shadowed confession in the hush.

After the guests left and the apartment grew still, Jane remained seated beneath the dim lamp, shadows pooling around her like silken veils. The music and laughter had faded into nothingness, replaced by an unsettling quiet that pressed against her like a heavy fog. Her fingers traced absent patterns on the rim of an emptied glass, but her mind was elsewhere — tangled in fevers of dreams and half-spoken desires.

In the growing silence, she whispered to herself, as if speaking truths too fragile for any other ear.

“Maybe someday... just maybe... he’ll see me.”

The words dissolved, swallowed by the still air.

The next morning, Franz awoke to pale sunlight filtering through thin curtains, the harshness of reality settling in moments before the world outside stirred to life. He lay motionless for a heartbeat longer than usual, the weight of yesterday's confessions pressing against his ribcage like a foreign body.

At the kitchen table, his mother's cheerful chatter felt distant, fragmented by the fog inside him. Jane was already up and bustling, her bright energy both comforting and painfully out of reach.

"Morning, Franz," she called, popping a piece of toast into her mouth.

He offered a faint smile — a gesture that felt more like practice than expression. Her gaze lingered on him, knowing something unsaid lay beneath the surface.

The day stretched like a taut wire, each moment filled with the mechanical rhythms of work, the drone of customers, the endless chores that demanded his attention but not his heart. His movements were automatic — sorting cans, ringing up groceries — while his mind drifted across continents, chasing the ghost of a girl who lived only in his memory and those fragile notes.

Jane's questions came intermittently, casual but earnest. "You okay?" "Need a break?" "What's on your mind?"

Each time, he deflected with a shrug or an evasive smile. He wasn't ready to untangle the knots inside.

At school the following day, Yui sat quietly by the window, her gaze lost in lingering shadows outside. The empty seat beside her ached like an absence carved into the very wood. Miyu's voice pulled her back, a tether yanking her from the depths.

"You're not yourself," Miyu said, brow furrowed. "You need to stop disappearing."

Yui forced a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "I'm fine," she murmured.

But the truth echoed louder in the hollow spaces she tried to fill with ink-stained pages and whispered haikus.

Back in the quiet of the store, Franz found himself alone for a brief moment, the low hum of the refrigerator a steady pulse beneath his frantic thoughts. He pulled the worn note from his pocket once more, smoothing the creases like a sacred map.

I didn't fall in love. It chose me—for you.

The words pulsed with both hope and ache.

Jane appeared then, her smile softening as she slid a soda can into his hand. "Earth to Franz," she teased gently.

He looked up, forcing the faintest grin.

"Come on," she said. "Let's get back to it."

Yet within him, a silent war raged – between holding onto the fragile promise of notes exchanged in secret, and stepping tentatively into a present that refused easy answers.

Later that evening, alone in his room, Franz took out his diary. The pen felt heavier than usual as he began to write, the words pouring out in fragmented thoughts and shadows.

君を知る

前の世界は

白黒だ

Before I knew you, the world was only black and white.

He paused, staring at the ink as if it might reveal the path forward.

The silence outside was thick, nearly suffocating.

Meanwhile, Jane lay in her own room, the weight of the day settling like dust on her skin. She whispered into the dark, her voice barely a thread.

"I'm here. Waiting. Hoping."

Her confession, spoken only in the solitude of night, resonated with the ache of unseen love.

The days folded into one another—filled with moments of absence and fleeting presence, with words left unspoken and notes folded between pages. The connection between Franz and Yui remained a fragile lattice of longing and uncertainty, stretched across oceans and silence.

The following day, the dull hum of routine settled heavily over Franz, a familiar shroud weighing down every step he took. The fluorescent lights of the convenience store flickered weakly, their failing glow mirroring the flicker of hope in his heart. He moved through the aisles like a ghost – present in body but adrift in mind.

Jane was there, brimming with her usual warmth, but even her radiant smile couldn't pierce the fog around him. She chatted animatedly about a book she had been reading, a novel full of hopeful endings and unexpected beginnings. Franz listened, tangentially aware of her words but unable to grasp their full comfort.

Later, alone during a brief lull, he pulled out the worn notes from his pocket, smoothing the creased paper with fingers trembling ever so slightly.

I didn't fall in love. It chose me—for you.

Those words had become his mantra, a bittersweet anchor in a sea of uncertainty.

Meanwhile, Yui sat by her bedroom window, the soft glow of her desk lamp casting gentle pools of light over scattered sheets of paper. Her pen hovered uncertainly above fresh paper, poised to pour out all the unspoken emotions she carried like a fragile secret.

Below her breath, she whispered lines that had been forming in the quiet spaces between classes, behind whispered conversations, and amidst the solitude of stolen moments.

Moonlight on still water,
Reflections ripple and sigh—
Your name on my lips.

She set the pen down carefully, the ink still wet—a testament to feelings too delicate to fully voice, yet too powerful to keep contained.

At school, Miyu watched Yui with growing concern.

"Your head's been elsewhere," she said softly. "You don't have to carry this alone."

Yui gave a small, grateful smile, her eyes flickering with vulnerability.

"I'm scared," she whispered.

Miyu took her hand gently. "Then let's not be afraid together."

Back at the store, Jane leaned over the counter as Franz wrestled with a box of sodas.

"You're holding in a storm," she said quietly, meeting his eyes with unexpected tenderness.

He hesitated, words lodged somewhere beneath the surface.

"You don't have to face it alone," she added, a subtle invitation to trust, to be seen.

Franz swallowed, a flicker of warmth hesitating in the cold.

That night, under the stillness of a watching moon, both Yui and Franz lay awake, worlds apart but bound by fragile threads of longing and unspoken hope.

Franz lay back on his bed, the faint glow of the desk lamp framing a quiet refuge amid the turmoil of his thoughts. The worn note, fragile and folded with care, trembled between his fingers as if it carried the weight of a thousand unspoken words.

I didn't fall in love. It chose me—for you.

The phrase etched itself deeper into his mind with every repetition. The fragile promise and its haunting uncertainty pulsed like a heartbeat he could neither grasp nor release.

He stared up at the ceiling, tracing the intricate shadows cast by the lamp—the ghosts of dreams and fears entwined in shifting patterns. Somewhere beyond his closed door, muffled voices whispered—a discordant reminder of things unsaid, lines drawn and redrawn in a home unraveling at the seams.

His fingers slid across the rough wood of his desk, seeking something steady. But the room felt like a fragile cage, a silence thick enough to drown in.

A single thought circled again and again, louder than any voice in the apartment:

The distance between us is more than miles.

It was not just the ocean between them. It was an unseen divide—a fracture growing beneath their shared moments, stretched across time and silence.

His gaze drifted to the window, where the night pressed close, indifferent and vast.

Tomorrow might bring a hundred questions, or none at all.

But tonight, all he could do was cradle her words close, whispering into the dark,

"Hold on."

Chapter 7 : Fragments of Belonging

Franz shifted uncomfortably in his desk chair as the murmur of students filled the classroom around him. Mr. Benny, the English Literature teacher, was at the front, animatedly discussing symbolism, but Franz's mind was elsewhere—caught between the rhythmic hum of the fluorescent lights and the distant memories of an ocean beyond reach.

"Franz, would you like to share your thoughts on the poem we read yesterday?" Mr. Benny's voice sliced through the fog.

Startled, Franz straightened. "Uh, yes, sir. I think the poem's imagery reflects how memories can both comfort and trap us—like shadows that linger even when we want to move on."

A few heads nodded; Mr. Benny smiled encouragingly. "Well put. Shadows are often cast by light, and our memories are no different."

After class, Franz lingered by his locker, fumbling with his books when a voice called out.

"Hey, Franz! Are you coming to the club meeting later?"

Diego, with his easy smile and confident air, leaned against the locker next to him.

"Yeah, I think so," Franz replied, managing a small grin.

Jane joined them a moment later, her eyes bright. "You've got to show up, Franz. It's not the same without you."

Later, in the break room of the convenience store, Franz moved through the routine—stocking shelves, greeting customers—while Jane chatted beside him.

"You're quieter than usual. Is everything okay?" she asked, handing him a soda can.

Franz hesitated. "Just... thinking."

Jane smiled softly. "You know I'm here if you want to talk."

Franz nodded, grateful but unsure how to begin.

That evening, Mr. Benny's words echoed in Franz's mind as he sat alone in his small apartment, the worn note from Yui folded carefully beside him.

His new life was full of faces and routines, but the distance in his chest remained—a silent echo of a connection stretched across continents.

Franz settled into the worn leather chair in the small student lounge, the hum of idle conversations swirling around him like a distant storm. Diego flopped down beside him, grinning lazily.

"So, what's the deal with you and Jane? Seems like everyone's talking."

Franz blinked, caught off guard. "Nothing. We're just friends."

Diego raised an eyebrow, chuckling. "Sure, that's what they all say."

Before Franz could answer, Jane appeared, carrying a tray with two cups of coffee. She handed one to Franz, her fingers brushing his briefly—a small touch that sent an unexpected warmth coursing through him.

"I'm serious, Franz," Diego continued, undeterred. "But don't worry. Jane's a good person. You're lucky to have her around."

"I know," Franz murmured, eyes fixed on the swirling steam.

Later that week, in Mr. Benny's English Literature class, the topic shifted to identity and masks people wear.

"Literature often reveals the tension between who we are and who we pretend to be," Mr. Benny said, scanning the room. "Have you ever felt like you're playing a role, hiding parts of yourself?"

Franz's heart quickened. He thought of Yui, of the notes they shared, of the secrets tucked between pages.

"Yes, sir," he said softly. "Sometimes it feels like the real self is just a shadow in the background."

Mr. Benny nodded. "A powerful insight. Remember, exploring those shadows is the path to understanding and growth."

Walking home that afternoon, Franz's thoughts clashed with the crisp fall air. Jane walked beside him, animated and carefree.

"Have you thought about joining the poetry club? It might help you express what's on your mind," she suggested.

Franz smiled faintly. "Maybe I will."

That night, alone in his apartment, Franz unfolded Yui's note again. Her handwriting was the same—familiar, uncertain.

I didn't fall in love. It chose me—for you.

His fingers traced the words. Distance had never felt heavier.

Franz sat at the small kitchen table, the stark glow of the overhead light casting long shadows. Jane's laughter from the living room filtered through the thin walls—a comforting melody, yet somehow painfully out of reach. Despite her presence, an unseen weight pressed down on him, a silent gravity pulling his thoughts back across the ocean.

His phone buzzed—a message from Miyu. A simple “Are you okay?” that seemed to echo the question resonating unanswered inside him.

He wanted to respond, wanted to say everything—the ache of missing Yui, the tangled mess of trust and distance—but no words came. So he slipped the phone aside and stared at the worn note lying on the table. The fragile paper held fragile hope, but also a gnawing uncertainty.

Days blurred in routine, Franz moving through his jobs and classes like a ghost haunted by memory. At school, Mr. Benny caught his distracted gaze again.

“Franz, your mind wanders much lately,” he said quietly after class. “Remember, sometimes facing what haunts us is the only way forward.”

Franz nodded, the weight of his silence heavier than the words.

Late one evening, Jane found him on the balcony, staring into the cold night sky.

“You’re holding something back,” she observed gently.

He offered a hollow smile. “It’s not easy to explain.”

She reached out, her hand brushing his arm. “You don’t have to face it alone. I’m here.”

His chest tightened. Here, in this new place, amidst new faces, yet all he could think of was Yui—the girl whose absence echoed louder than any presence.

A sudden call from home shattered the fragile calm. His mother’s voice was strained, hints of worry threading through her words.

“Franz, there’s talk of transfer forms again. Your father and I...”

The words hung heavy. Each syllable pushed him further from familiar ground.

That night, torn between two worlds, Franz clutched the note once more.

I didn't fall in love. It chose me—for you.

The promise felt both a blessing and a curse.

He whispered into the dark, "I want to stay... for you."

But the shadows deepened.

Franz sat across from his mother at the breakfast table, sunlight filtering softly through the kitchen window. After a brief silence, she leaned in slightly, her voice gentle but earnest.

"Franz, there's something you might not know."

He furrowed his brow, uneasy. "What is it?"

"I spoke with your father last week," she began carefully. "He's arranged for you to spend the holidays with him."

Franz blinked, caught off guard. "I didn't know."

His mother's eyes softened, tinged with a quiet sadness. "It's been in the works for some time, but I thought it best not to tell you until everything was confirmed—for your own peace of mind."

A complex swirl of emotions rose—surprise, anticipation, hesitation—yet beneath it all, a long-harbored hope. He let out a quiet breath, a genuine smile breaking through.

"I'm really looking forward to going back to Japan—seeing Dad, the familiar streets, even the rain," he said softly.

She reached across the table, placing her hand over his in a gentle squeeze. "It makes me happy to see you smiling again. You deserve that."

The kitchen was still, suffused with a fragile hope—an unspoken promise that some bonds, though stretched and weathered, were not broken.

Over the next few days, Franz found himself carried by a mixture of excitement and quiet reflection. Preparations for the trip unfolded with hesitations and bursts of cautious joy. His mother helped him pack, carefully folding familiar clothes, slipping little notes of encouragement inside his suitcase.

"You'll find your way," she said one evening, voice steady but eyes moist.

Franz nodded, heart swelling with gratitude and the shadow of unspoken uncertainties.

On one quiet afternoon, Jane stopped by the house, bringing warmth and casual laughter into the somber space.

"So, Japan," she said brightly, handing Franz a cup of tea. "Sounds like an incredible trip."

"It is," Franz replied, smiling at the thought of returning home.

Franz strolled through the crowded halls of his school, the usual noise and chatter feeling lighter somehow, as if layered beneath a sudden brightness. Diego, spotting him near the lockers, grinned widely. "Hey, Franz! You're in a good mood today. What's up?"

Jane appeared at Franz's side, her eyes curious. "Yeah, you're practically beaming."

Franz chuckled, shrugging. "I guess I'm just looking forward to the holidays. Going back to Japan for a visit."

Diego nudged him playfully. "That's great! But there's always something more, right?"

Franz hesitated, then smiled. "I just needed something to look forward to. You know, the usual."

Diego glanced at him knowingly. "Come on, you can tell us. This isn't exactly how you usually are."

Jane leaned in with a teasing smile. "Yeah, Franz. We're your friends. You know you can trust us."

Franz looked between them, debating for a heartbeat. Finally, he said quietly, "There's someone I'm hoping to see while I'm there."

Diego's eyes lit up. "Ooh, that sounds serious."

Jane smiled encouragingly. "Who's the lucky person?"

Franz shrugged, a shy smile playing at his lips. "It's complicated. I'm not sure it's luck. But it's someone important."

Diego and Jane exchanged glances but said nothing, giving him space.

As they walked down the hallway, Franz's smile remained genuine, but beneath it, a swirl of thoughts churned—hope, anxiety, and the weight of long-distance untold stories.

"You'll tell us more when you're ready," Jane said softly. "We're here."

Franz nodded gratefully, feeling a mix of relief and vulnerability. "Thanks. That means a lot."

The bell rang, scattering students to their classes, but the cheerful exchange lingered, a quiet island of connection amid the bustle.

The morning sun filtered through the tall pines, dappling the winding trail with patches of golden light as Franz, Jane, and Diego mounted their bicycles. The cool mountain air was crisp and fragrant, carrying the faint scent of wildflowers and pine sap. They set off at an easy pace, tires crunching along the loose gravel, laughter and friendly teasing filling the space between them.

Diego, always the jokester, leaned closer to Franz as they pedaled in sync. “Hey, man, I’m counting on you. Don’t forget to bring me something weird from Japan—like those crazy candy bars or some crazy keychain. Something no one here’s ever seen.”

Franz chuckled, shaking his head but smiling. “You got it. I’ll find something special.”

Jane trailed slightly behind, taking in the scenery but also listening intently to the banter ahead. Inside, her heart felt like a cage of contradictions. Franz was genuinely happy—lighter, more animated in a way she hadn’t seen in months. The thought should have comforted her. Instead, a cold realization gnawed at her: this happiness was tied to a trip she knew more about than he’d shared.

She wondered how much of his excitement was for what he could say aloud—the return to familiar streets, his father, a holiday break—and how much was quietly dedicated to the secret hope she knew he carried.

Her eyes flicked to him as he laughed with Diego, unaware of her watchful gaze. A pang of jealousy mixed with tenderness struck her in equal measure.

Jane sucked in a breath. How long could she keep pretending these feelings were nothing? She had learned to smile when Franz talked about Japan, to laugh when Diego joked, but the ache in her chest deepened every time Franz mentioned his plans.

“You’re really going, huh?” she finally said softly when they paused near a clearing overlooking the vast valley below.

Franz nodded, wiping a bead of sweat from his forehead. “Yeah, just a few weeks now. Can’t wait to see my dad again. And... the city.”

Jane stared out at the horizon, a swirl of clouds mirrored in the river’s slow curve. The quiet beauty around them contrasted sharply with her turbulent thoughts.

Diego joined them, grabbing a water bottle from his pack. "Are you guys seeing some sights or just biking and gabbing?"

Jane forced a laugh, "A little of both, I guess."

As they rested, Jane's mind drifted inward, memories stirring of stolen glances, of the small moments that had become so charged with meaning—Franz's hesitant touch, the way his voice softened when he talked about distant places.

She thought about the unknown girl in Japan to whom Franz rarely referred, a secret that kept their worlds separate.

What was she to Jane? A phantom shadow lurking between the edges of friendship and something more tenderly painful.

When they resumed cycling, Jane found quiet moments beside Franz, wanting to bridge the gap but wary of unveiling her heart.

Diego sped ahead, his laughter fading into the whispering pines.

In the silence, Jane's thoughts became clearer, resolved.

She would be his friend—no less—no more. But inside, she braced herself for the inevitability of change, and the gentle heartbreak of loving someone tied to a distant shore.

As the trail wound back toward the town, the three friends rode side by side, shadows stretching long behind them.

Jane's smile returned, genuine yet guarded, as the evening sun dipped low.

The day had been filled with laughter, light, and an unspoken farewell to all that was about to shift.

Jane pedaled her bike slowly down the winding trail, the wind tousling her hair and the sun warming her face. Around her, the trees whispered ancient secrets, but her mind traced a different path—one shadowed by memories that fluttered like fragile leaves.

She thought back to the first time she noticed him—Franz. Not as the boy who laughed with Diego or as the quiet stranger from a distant land, but the Franz whose smile hid a world she longed to enter.

It was months ago, in that crowded classroom where he seemed both present and distant, his eyes often cast downward, lost in thoughts she could only guess. Jane had tried to draw him out, to share moments that lingered in stolen glances and half-spoken words.

But there was always a wall—a quiet barrier impenetrable, reinforced by his silence and the delicate distance he kept.

One afternoon, when they had sat beneath the sprawling maple behind the school, Jane had gathered the courage to share her feelings. Her voice had been barely above a whisper, her heart pounding like wildfire.

“Franz,” she had said, “I think I like you.”

He had looked at her then, eyes widening—not with the spark of shared feeling, but with something somber and unready.

“I... I don’t think I’m the right person,” he’d replied gently, the pain hidden in his words deeper than any rejection.

Since then, Jane had carried the ache quietly, wrapped in friendship and the bittersweet hope that maybe, somehow, he could see her—not just as a friend, but as something more.

But today, as the trail stretched on and the world shone bright around her, Jane knew some hearts were destined to love quietly, from afar, their stories unfolding in hushed echoes beneath the trees.

She breathed deeply, steeling herself to be the friend he needed, even if it meant loving him in silence.

Franz stood at the threshold of his front door, a worn suitcase by his side and a quiet anticipation fluttering in his chest. His mother stood beside him, eyes glistening with a mixture of pride and something deeper—hope, worry, perhaps both.

“You’ve got everything? Passport, tickets?” she asked softly, her fingers brushing a stray lock of hair from his forehead.

Franz nodded, pulling her into a brief but warm hug. “Yeah, Mom. I’m ready.”

She smiled, the crease of a lifetime of love and sacrifice lining her face. “Be safe, Franz. Remember, no matter where you go, this is home.”

Outside, Diego and Jane waited by the car, their faces bright with encouragement.

"Franz, don't forget that weird snack," Diego joked, lobbing a playful grin.

Jane stepped forward, closing the space between them. Her smile held something bittersweet, a silent promise beneath the words.

"We'll miss you," she said simply.

Franz returned each hug, feeling the weight of their friendship settle warmly around him.

As the car pulled away, his mother stood watching, the fading figure of her son a tapestry woven of hopes and quiet prayers.

Franz's heart beat steady with the promise of reunion and the uncharted path ahead, carrying with him the strength of those left behind and the whisper of what was to come.

Chapter 8 : The Space Between Worlds

At Kansai International Airport, Franz's father was waiting for him. He hugged Franz and they headed for Kyoto. On the way , franz was very happy that he will finally be able to Yui after a year, his father saw this and could not wonder but ask him

Mr Sakamoto "Hey Franz, you are smiling a lot , what's the reason? I know it's not seeing me".

Franz Smiling" Nothing Dad , It's just being back here , that's all".

"The drive is long , get some sleep" says his dad. "Yeah sure"

Franz leaned his head back, the soft drumming of the rain syncing with the beating of his heart. Each drop that slid down the window stretched his reflection into shifting fragments – half boy, half memory. Osaka's lights faded behind them, replaced by long stretches of highway winding through quiet valleys.

Mr. Sakamoto kept one hand steady on the wheel, the other drumming lightly against the steering column in an absent rhythm. The heater whispered through the cabin, carrying the faint smell of coffee from the thermos wedged between them. For a while, there was nothing but the rain, the road, and the steady hum of tires against wet asphalt.

Franz's phone buzzed once – a message from an old class group chat he hadn't checked in months. Someone had posted a picture of the school library festooned in winter lights. He stared at it for a long moment, thumb hovering over the screen before locking it again. The library. Even the photo made his chest ache.

"You really missed this place, huh?" his father said, eyes still on the road.

Franz smiled faintly. "Guess I did."

"You used to complain about Japan being too quiet," Mr. Sakamoto teased, glancing at him. "Now look at you, dreaming out the window like a poet."

Franz chuckled softly, shaking his head. "America's noisy. You start missing the silences."

Twenty minutes later, the rain had softened to a mist. The car climbed into the taller passes of the Meishin Expressway, where green road signs pointed toward Kyoto and Nara. Mist clung to the pines, glowing silver under the headlights. Franz's gaze followed the curve of the mountains, the faint outline of old temples appearing and disappearing through the fog like ghosts of memory.

"Remember that summer trip here when you were ten?" his father said suddenly. "You tried to catch fireflies by the river and ended up falling in."

Franz laughed, a real laugh this time. "You were too busy taking photos to notice."

"I noticed when you screamed loud enough to scare the whole riverbank."

Silence settled again, gentle and easy. Franz turned toward the window, letting his thoughts drift — to that last night before he left. The air had smelled like rain then, too. Yui had stood by the train platform, hair sticking to her cheeks, pretending to be fine. She'd said, "Don't forget to write." He never had. He just didn't know what words could fit everything he wanted to say.

The city lights of Kyoto began to shimmer faintly on the horizon, scattered like spilled gold. His father switched lanes, the GPS softly announcing the next exit. "Kyoto — forty minutes."

Franz exhaled slowly, his breath fogging the glass. "It's weird," he murmured. "It feels like I never left, but also like I'm coming back to someone else's story."

Mr. Sakamoto glanced at him again. "That's what growing up feels like. You leave one world and come back to find it keeps spinning without you."

They passed through a toll gate, the car's EZ-Pass beep echoing faintly in the cabin. The highway dipped, revealing the dark ribbon of the Uji River below, its surface catching the moonlight. For a moment, Franz felt caught between those reflections — the glow of his new life abroad and the quiet pull of everything he'd left behind.

"Your mother would've liked this," Mr. Sakamoto said softly, almost to himself. "You are coming home for the New Year."

Franz nodded, swallowing the lump in his throat. "Yeah. She always loved Kyoto in the winter."

For the last stretch of the journey, Kyoto's skyline grew clearer: the temples, the faint arc of bridges, the hum of vending machines glowing against the sleeping streets. Lanterns swung outside late-night diners, and bicycles leaned against signs still glistening from rain.

Franz straightened, eyes wide, heart beating faster. Somewhere out there — maybe walking home from cram school, maybe watching the same rain — Yui was part of this night too. The thought filled him with warmth he couldn't name.

Mr. Sakamoto turned into the familiar narrow roads that led toward their old neighborhood. "Home in five," he said, his voice softer now. "You should text your friends tomorrow."

Franz smiled faintly, pressing his forehead to the cool glass once more. "Yeah," he whispered. "Tomorrow."

Outside, Kyoto shimmered like a dream returning to life.

Franz scrolled through the week-old messages one more time. Among the scattered texts, one caught his eye — a simple chat from their mutual friend: "Kyoto will miss you. Don't forget us!" It made him smile softly. Yui's messages had always been quieter, her words careful and steady, like the steady pulse beneath his racing thoughts.

He pocketed his phone and looked upwards as the early morning light filtered through his window. Outside, the city was slowly waking up — steam rising from street vents, shop shutters rattling open. Familiar sounds wove through the cold winter air: distant temple bells mingling with the rhythmic clink of footsteps on stone paths.

Dressed warmly, Franz stepped outside with his father toward the nearby Shinto shrine. The streets were already humming with people carrying woven pine decorations, candles flickering in winter breath, and footsteps soaking in the sacred hush of *hatsumōde* — the first shrine visit of the year. His father guided him reverently through the crowds, hands folded as the cold air filled their lungs.

They approached the towering vermilion torii, the gateway where past and future met. Here, prayers were whispered for health, hope, and renewal — for all the year would bring. Franz closed his eyes, considering the distance of the last twelve months, the quiet hope of reunions and the fragile promises of new starts. He silently wished for Yui's smile to greet him again in the unfolding days.

As they tossed their coins into the offertory, the temple bells chanted overhead, and the scent of incense wound through the crowd like an ancient song. Despite the cold, something warm and unspoken settled deep inside Franz. Kyoto was not just a city of stone and lantern light anymore; it was the space between worlds where past and present tangled with possibility.

He turned to his father, whispers of festival music still drifting on the breeze. “Tomorrow, we’ll celebrate properly. Maybe see the city like we used to.”

Mr. Sakamoto smiled, pride and something softer shining in his eyes. “Tomorrow, you’ll find more than memories.”

Franz looked up to the snowy eaves, the first snowflakes drifting lazily in the soft lantern light. For the first time since he’d left, he felt that the space between the worlds wasn’t empty anymore.

Later that evening, Franz sat at the dining table, the warmth from the kitchen wrapping around him like a soft blanket. The familiar view from the old wooden window showed lanterns bobbing gently outside, casting playful shadows on the snowy street. His father poured tea, the rich scent of roasted green tea mingling with the aroma of simmered vegetables and grilled fish.

Franz picked up his phone, his fingers hesitating before snapping a photo. The school gate loomed quietly in the fading light, framed by bare cherry trees and a dusting of frost. He tapped the screen, captioning it simply: Back where it all began.

As he posted the picture to Instagram, the nervous flutter inside him grew—like the first breath before a dive. He wondered who would see it first, who would remember.

Yui’s phone buzzed softly at her side. She glanced down; it was a notification—a new post from Franz. Her heart skipped. It was the familiar school gate, the same one she passed every morning for years. Her fingers trembled slightly as she tapped to open it.

A small smile bloomed across her face—soft, shy, like a secret shared in whispers. She felt the warmth of his return ripple through her, like rays of sunlight after winter rain. Tomorrow was the school reunion, the first time in a year they’d be in the same space again.

She carefully set the phone down, her eyes sparkling with anticipation. Grabbing her coat, she peered out the window at the lantern-lit streets, already picturing the fragile moments ahead—the hesitant greetings, the subtle glances, the words they might finally say.

The night stretched on, full of quiet hope and the promise of new beginnings.

Yui was sleepless for the night.

The house was quiet except for the soft hum of the heater and the faint ticking of the clock on the wall. Everything felt unusually still, as if time itself had paused to listen. I sat by the window, fingers wrapped around a warm mug of tea, staring out at the pale flicker of lantern

light in the street. The chill outside settled deep in my bones, yet inside, my heart felt like it was skipping beats in an erratic rhythm I couldn't quiet.

I didn't expect to feel this nervous, not after a whole year. But the moment Franz posted that photo—the one by the school gate—it was like a jolt coursed through me. The gates where we had met so many times before, now captured in his hands. Somehow just seeing it there, glowing on my screen, made all the months apart feel less like a chasm and more like a bridge.

What was I expecting? That life would continue without him? That the spaces between us hadn't stretched wider with time? No. I knew, deep down, that everything had shifted. The laughter we shared, the quiet moments in the library where every page we turned seemed to fold a little more of us into the margins—all those memories had settled into the corners of my mind like old photographs, worn yet forever cherished.

And now, as the hours crawl by until morning, I'm left with the sound of my own thoughts echoing louder than the distant temple bells. Sometimes I wonder if he feels the same—if those quiet nights in America carried the weight of this city and my name. If he remembers the way I always saved the corner seat in the library, tracing the words of the novel with a trembling finger, hoping one day he might read them too.

It's almost painful how familiar everything feels, yet how unfamiliar it is simultaneously. The cold nip in the air, the soft powder of snow on the rooftops, the scent of pine and incense drifting from the shrine—we grew up with these, yet tonight, they seem draped in a new kind of waiting.

Waiting for what, though? I try to tell myself it's just excitement, the flutter in my chest a harmless dance of anticipation. But beneath that lies something fragile—fear, perhaps. Fear that when we see each other again, the distance won't just be measured in miles but in the change time etches on people.

Will he smile the same way? Will his laughter still catch in his throat when he sees me? Or will I be nothing more than a shadow of someone he once knew?

I sip my tea, the heat chasing away some of the cold, but not the ache. The room holds a thousand silent questions, and I'm no closer to answers. Outside, snowflakes curl softly like whispers, each one a tiny, delicate hope.

I want to believe that tomorrow is a day for beginnings—that the space between worlds can shrink, that hearts separated by oceans can still beat in a shared rhythm. But deep down, the truth is messy. It's tangled in the moments we missed, the words we left unsaid, the time that stretched us thin.

So I sit here, wrapped in a blanket, staring at the stars just beyond the curtain, imagining what I'll say, what he'll say, when we cross that threshold again. And in the quiet, I remind myself: no matter what, this—this waiting, this hope—is already a kind of love.

Yui sat quietly in her room, the soft glow of a small lamp casting long shadows on the tatami mats. Outside, the world slept beneath a heavy blanket of snow, the silence punctuated only by the gentle creaking of old wooden beams in the moonlit night. Inside, her heart was anything but still.

First love, she had heard once, was like a wild fire—bright, all-consuming, beautiful but often destructive. And yet, the fire that once scorched a young heart was also what warmed it like nothing else could. In the stillness, Yui could feel that flame flickering within her, fragile yet defiant against the cold weight of time and distance. It was this fire that kept her awake, threading together memories and hopes into an unbearable sweetness.

She thought about Franz—about the way his smile reached his eyes, lighting up their shared world in ways words had never quite captured. Those late afternoons in the library, the stolen glances and whispered notes, the soft flush of shared secrets between pages—those moments were etched into her like a second skin. But nostalgia, as tender as it could be, was a double-edged sword. With every remembered gesture, she also felt the ache of absence, the hollowness left by a year apart.

Love, Yui realized in the quiet hours, was never simple. The first love is often the one that teaches the hardest lessons. It is raw and untested, burning fiercely with the purity of discovery yet vulnerable to the tides of change. It is less about permanence and more about the beauty of the moment it exists within.

And within that flame lies paradox. The heart yearns for connection so intensely that the rest of the world disappears, yet life's currents will inevitably shift. People grow, paths diverge, and the blazing certainty of first affection sometimes dims or morphs. For Yui, this was an unspoken truth she was only beginning to face—the understanding that what once felt irreplaceable might one day be just one of many choices.

Even now, as she awaited Franz's return—her heart fluttering at the thought of seeing him again—there was a part of her that understood the fragile impermanence of it all. The city, with its ancient shrines and lantern-lit streets, had remained much the same, but she and Franz had changed. The distance between them was more than physical; it was the silent space where new experiences, new feelings, and new possibilities had begun to take root.

In those lonely nights stretched between messages and memories, she had glimpsed the sweeping horizon beyond first love—the spectrum of emotions that come with growth and

self-discovery. She knew, without fully accepting it yet, that the burning fire she held could one day cool into glowing embers or rekindle anew with fresh light elsewhere.

Yet there was something precious in this moment—the here and now of waiting and hoping. The uncertainty that clings to young love is a shared human experience, a delicate tension between fear and desire, between the pull of the past and the promise of the future. It is where innocence and experience intertwine, shaping who we become.

Yui's fingers absently traced the rim of her tea cup as she thought of the morning to come. The first day back at school, the hesitant glances, the fragile words they might exchange—each event a step across the narrow bridge suspended between childhood and adulthood. Like the cherry blossoms that bloom briefly in the spring, first love blooms with a beauty born of impermanence and grace.

There is an elegance in young love's vulnerability—a willingness to hope without guarantees, to give without certainty, to carry fragile dreams wrapped tightly against the cold winds of reality. It is this tenderness that makes first love unforgettable, even if it is not forever.

And sometimes, the burning passion of first love is less about forever and more about awakening. It is what opens the heart, teaches empathy, courage, and resilience. It is the seed from which all future loves grow, better understood and more deeply felt.

Yui closed her eyes, envisioning Franz in the distance, walking those snow-lined streets toward her. She imagined his familiar smile, the tremor in his voice, the comfort of shared silence after years apart. In that imagination, she found strength—strength to face the uncertain future, to embrace the evolving chapters of love and life.

No matter what dawn might bring, Yui's journey through first love was a vital beginning—one marked by passion, pain, hope, and growth. It was a story being written not just in letters and glances but in eternal moments of becoming.

And as night deepened, carrying with it the hush of dreams and the glow of lanterns outside, Yui's heart beat steady and sure—not simply because of who she loved but because she was learning to love herself in the process.

Morning light filtered softly through Yui's shoji screen, casting delicate squares of gold onto her futon. The air was cool but gentle, carrying the faint, comforting aroma of rice cooking from the kitchen. Outside, the neighborhood stirred awake in quiet rhythms—the distant caw of a crow, the slow shuffle of tires on wet pavement, and the muffled laughter of children on their way to school.

Yui's eyes fluttered open before her alarm, her heart already fluttering faster than usual. She lay still for a moment, listening to the subtle cadence of a world moving around her, but not quite yet inside her. The gentle hum of the heater blended with the soft purring of Tama, her tabby cat, who curled up beside her pillow and nudged her hand expectantly.

Slowly, she rose, wrapping her hands around a small charm she kept on her nightstand—a gift from a friend, said to bring courage and clarity. Her fingers trembled slightly, tracing the smooth surface as if drawing strength from it. Her gaze wandered across the room, landing on the little yellow highlighter she had used to mark her favorite lines in that worn novel. It sat there patiently, waiting for her to return to it—but today the words felt heavier, charged with the weight of coming moments.

Downstairs, the faint clatter of dishes and the warm scent of miso soup drifted upward. Her mother's voice rose softly in greeting as Yui padded barefoot across the floor. "You woke early," her mother smiled, setting a bowl on the table. "Excited?"

Yui swallowed, nodding as she took a seat. Tama hopped onto the windowsill, basking in the pale sunlight and flicking her tail, unaware of the storm of thoughts in Yui's mind. The simple act of sharing breakfast felt like a fragile anchor amidst the swirling sea of her emotions.

Suddenly, Yui's phone buzzed in her bag. Her breath caught, and her hands paused mid-motion as she pulled it out—a message from a classmate wishing her luck for the first day back. Another from a friend: "Don't trip over your own feet, okay?" A weak smile tugged at her lips. Normalcy, laughter, life moving on—yet beneath it, the quiet hope of one more message, one from him.

Questions flickered through her mind like shadows in dawn light—What if things have changed? What if we're no longer the same? What if the space between us is wider than I imagined?

She paused, meeting her mother's gentle gaze. "I'll be fine," she said softly. "I just... want today to be good."

Her mother reached out, squeezing her shoulder. "It will be. Just be yourself."

The clock ticked steadily onward, the school bell faint on the breeze. Yui gathered her bag, smoothing the creases in her uniform one last time, and glanced toward the window. The streets were alive now—students heading toward classrooms, shopkeepers opening shutters. The city pulsed with familiarity and change.

With a deep breath, Yui stepped outside, the cold air crisp on her cheeks. Tama watched from the doorway, eyes bright and silent, as if wishing her courage. The morning sky was pale but steady, the promise of a new day unfolding like a soft lantern guiding the way.

As Yui approached the school gate, she spotted Miyu waiting near the familiar cherry blossom tree, its branches bare but holding the soft promise of spring. Miyu's face lit up the moment she saw Yui, her eyes sparkling with friendly mischief.

"About time you showed up," Miyu teased, folding her arms. "You've been a nervous mess all morning, haven't you?"

Yui blushed, looking down at her shoes. "Maybe a little."

Miyu grinned knowingly. "Heard the big news, by the way. Franz is back."

Yui's heart skipped. "You've told everyone?"

"Only the important people," Miyu whispered conspiratorially, winking. "Don't worry, your secret's safe with me. But you should see the way you light up when you talk about him. It's kind of obvious."

Yui sighed, a mix of embarrassment and relief washing over her. "I can't help it. It's been so long... I just want things to be like they used to be."

"Maybe they can be," Miyu said, pushing a strand of hair behind her ear. "Just don't forget to breathe, okay? You're amazing—Franz would be lucky."

The two friends shared a smile before turning toward the school entrance, the courtyard buzzing with students and the crisp air full of possibility.

The classroom buzzed with low murmurs and the scratching of pens against paper as students settled into their seats. Warm sunlight streamed through the large windows, casting long shadows across the desks and brightening the colorful posters pinned to the walls. The faint aroma of chalk dust and freshly polished floor mingled with the anticipation hanging in the air.

Yui sat near the back, her hands folded loosely over her notebook, but her eyes were distant, tracing patterns of light on the tabletop as her mind wandered. The voice of Mr. Han, their literature teacher, seemed to float from far away, his words about symbolism and metaphor barely registering.

Her thoughts kept drifting back to Franz – the easy smile he had when he'd first stepped into the classroom the previous year, the way his laughter had broken through the quiet, and now, the hope flickering in her chest that their reunion would be more than a fleeting glance.

The classroom clock ticked audibly, nudging her back to the present, but the flutter of her heart made it hard to concentrate. She tapped her pen nervously against the page, the cadence echoing the rapid beating in her chest.

“Yui,” Mr. Han’s voice was quiet but firm, pulling her from the fog. His gaze met hers, a knowing softness in his eyes. “Focus, please. This part is important.”

Startled, Yui blinked and looked up, cheeks coloring as she nodded. She refocused on the blackboard, where Mr. Han was illustrating how a well-placed symbol could reveal a character’s inner conflict without stating it outright.

The familiar academic language felt oddly distant from the storm of her emotions, yet she clung to it as a lifeline. She reminded herself that Franz was still just a boy, like her, subject to the same fears and uncertainties.

Beside her, the quiet rustle of pages turning was punctuated by Miyu’s wistful glance in her direction — an unspoken encouragement, a shared secret. Miyu’s subtle smile said more than words: she knew because she had been with Yui through all the highs and lows, the whispered hopes, the secret notes.

Yui inhaled deeply and steadied her hands. Maybe this wasn’t just a class to pass—it was a moment to prove to herself that she could balance the fragile weight of hope and the steady march of everyday life.

Mr. Han’s next comment sparked a new surge of attention from the class. Yui’s eyes brightened as she scribbled notes, the rhythm of routine grounding her with comforting certainty. Yet, beneath the surface, the silent promise remained — tomorrow could be different. Tomorrow, she might finally close the distance that had stretched so long.

Chapter 9 : Confessing His Love

Franz stared at his phone, thumb hovering over the send button like it held the weight of the world.

“Just send it,” a small voice in his head urged. “It’s just a message. Nothing big.”

But another voice—louder, cautious—countered, What if they think you’re just being weird? What if it changes everything?

“It’s just a group chat. The six of us. No big deal.”

“But it is a big deal. What if Yui sees it and thinks you’re desperate? Or worse, not interested in her at all?”

He hesitated, fingers trembling as words blurred on the screen: “Hey, does anyone want to meet up this weekend?”

“Too vague.”

He sighed. “I can’t say it outright. Not yet.”

“Why not? What’s to lose?”

Everything.

His heart pounded—the fear of rejection, the hope of connection.

“Maybe she’s waiting for you to say something.”

“But what if she’s moved on?”

Another breath. A pause. He scrolled through past messages, memories flickering—her smile, the secret notes.

“Just press send. See what happens.”

“Maybe tomorrow.”

“Now.”

His thumb brushed the screen and tapped. The message sent.

Relief and dread crashed together as the message joined the digital world, the first step toward something he barely dared to dream.

Franz lingered over his phone, the cursor blinking as if impatiently waiting for a reply. This wasn't just any casual message—it was the key to unlocking a weekend that might bring old friends back together. But beneath the casual invite hid a turmoil of feelings and silent hopes. With a deep breath, Franz finally tapped out his words, sending the message into the void where it would soon ripple out to six different sets of eyes. What none of them knew yet was how much this simple text would stir hearts and untangle what had long been kept quiet.

Franz: Hey, does anyone want to meet up this weekend?

Takeshi: Finally! I'm free Saturday.

Rina: Saturday sounds perfect. Where are we meeting?

Koji: Anywhere but the usual spot. Gotta change it up, right?

Miyu: New place then? Suggestions?

Yui: How about Café Natsuki? It's quiet and nice for chatting.

Miyu: Ooh, that sounds cozy.

Takeshi: I'm down for Natsuki. Heard they have great desserts.

Rina: Matcha latte is my weakness there.

Koji: Quiet café suits me better than arcade noise anyway.

Franz: (typing) Great place.

Miyu: Looks like the plan is set!

Yui: Glad everyone agrees. I think we'll actually be able to catch up there.

Takeshi: Can't wait to see everyone. Haven't hung out in months.

Rina: Me too. It's gonna be good.

Koji: What time are we thinking?

Franz: Maybe around 3? Gives us time to sleep in and still hang out.

Miyu: 3 works for me.

Yui: Same here.

Takeshi: Perfect. Café Natsuki at 3 it is!

Rina: Can't wait! This is gonna be fun.

Koji: Looking forward to some chill time.

Franz: (typing) Looking forward to seeing everyone.

The weekend finally arrived, but with it came a quiet, growing tension – a subtle tightening deep in the heart that neither Yui nor Franz could ignore. Days of anticipation condensed into sharp, fluttering fears like butterflies trapped beneath ribs. The promise of reunion, once a source of warmth, now carried the weight of uncertainty.

For Yui, it was the fear of change—would the past still fit neatly into the present? Could old smiles still find their way through new silence?

For Franz, the hesitation was heavier—timing, words, the shadow of everything left unsaid. What if the moment slipped from his grasp?

As the clock ticked forward, each second drew them closer to a meeting colored by hope, fear, and the fragile hope of beginnings.

The crisp autumn air nipped playfully at Yui's cheeks as she and Miyu meandered down the winding lanes toward Café Natsuki. The streets were dappled with the golden glow of lanterns, flickering softly as if to mark the passage of time itself. Leaves swirled in lazy circles around the swollen gutters, while the warm scent of roasted chestnuts wafted from a nearby vendor's cart.

"So," Miyu began, her voice light but tinged with curiosity, "how are you feeling about this?"

Yui bit her lip, eyes fixed on the cracked pavement beneath their feet. "Excited, I guess... but also kind of scared."

"Scared of what?" Miyu asked gently.

Yui let out a breath. "What if it's not the same? What if Franz has changed? Or worse, what if I have?"

Miyu smiled reassuringly, bumping her shoulder. "Change isn't a bad thing. Maybe it's just... different. You two are both different people now, but that doesn't mean you can't find a new rhythm together."

They turned a corner, and the calm murmur of the city seemed to settle around them like a warm blanket. Yui's thoughts spiraled inward but surfaced occasionally to meet Miyu's steady gaze.

Meanwhile, Franz ambled down a parallel street, the steady click of his shoes against the stone paving echoing his swirling thoughts. He paused momentarily, watching a stray cat dart beneath a parked bicycle and vanish into the shadows.

"Keep it simple," he told himself. "Say hello, ask how she's been."

But the words felt fragile, like glass shards threatening to cut more than heal.

Does she even want to see me? the thought crept in unbidden.

The streetlights cast long shadows, and Franz's breath formed fleeting clouds in the cool air. The café was just ahead, its soft glow spilling onto the sidewalk—a beacon of possibility.

One step closer. One chance.

As he picked up his pace, the world around him faded into quiet anticipation.

Yui and Miyu's conversation picked up again, voices low.

"Remember that time we stayed here all night studying for finals?" Miyu asked, a faint laugh in her tone.

Yui smiled wistfully. "Yeah, I barely slept, but it felt... special. Like we were invincible."

"Maybe that's how weekends like this will feel," Miyu said, "like a fresh start."

Yui nodded, tightening her scarf against the chill. "Yeah, a fresh start."

Franz's footsteps slowed as he approached the café, unsure whether to go in or pause a moment longer in the street's quiet embrace. The nervous energy was a pulse at his temples.

A fresh start.

He pushed open the door, the bell's chime cutting through the evening hush.

Inside, the warm light and soft murmur welcomed him. Change was possible here. He just had to be brave enough to take it.

Franz stepped into Café Natsuki, feeling the warmth of companionship and nostalgia mingle in the quiet hum of chatter and the aroma of fresh coffee. Takeshi, Rina, and Koji were already seated, faces bright with smiles that both welcomed and eased his nervousness.

“Hey, Franz!” Takeshi called, waving him over.

Franz returned a small, tentative smile, nodding a greeting to each of them as he slid into the open chair beside Koji. The air held a momentary stillness, everyone catching their breath before life flowed again in easy conversation.

As Franz settled, his eyes flicked repeatedly to the door, anticipation coiling in his chest. The bell jingled softly, and Miyu appeared, exuding quiet confidence, her gaze sweeping the room. Behind her came Yui, whose appearance to Franz was a delicate balance of familiar and new — dark hair shimmering subtly under the amber glow, eyes brimming with a shy hope that sent a flutter through him.

Miyu leaned in, catching Yui’s eye and whispering playful encouragement, teasing out small smiles and light laughter that danced between the two. Franz watched, a silent observer caught in the tide of old memories and new possibilities.

Conversation blossomed around the table, meandering through the past year’s highs and lows—jobs, dreams, struggles, and random adventures painted in vivid detail. Miyu’s teasing softened the mood whenever Yui’s nerves peaked, helping the group feel both intimate and comfortable after so long apart.

Franz found moments to speak honestly, sharing cautious hopes and subtle feelings he’d kept tucked away, while stealing glances at Yui, whose shy responses and brightening smile told their own story.

The conversation, light but rich with the weight of the past year, drifted from the trivial to the significant. Takeshi eagerly filled the space with stories of his new job, the challenges and little victories, his enthusiasm genuine and infectious.

“So, Franz, what have you been up to?” Rina asked, a spark of curiosity lighting her eyes.

“Mostly work, trying to find my footing.” Franz kept his tone calm but couldn’t shake the slight nervousness in his voice.

Koji leaned back, cracking a grin. “Sounds like you’ve got some stories too. Spill.”

Miyu’s eyes flicked toward Yui, who was quietly listening, cheeks flushed. She gave Yui a knowing smile and nudged her playfully. “Don’t worry, we’re all just dying to catch up.”

Yui laughed, a soft sound that seemed to surprise even her. “I’ve been traveling a bit, actually. Trying to find some inspiration for my art.”

“That’s amazing!” Takeshi’s enthusiasm was genuine. “Where did you go?”

“Mostly northern towns. Quiet places. Lots of walking and sketching.”

Franz’s eyes lingered on Yui’s face, noticing the subtle excitement in her voice. It was moments like these that made the tension between them both palpable and heartwarming.

As the conversation flowed, Miyu jumped in with a bright idea, breaking the comfortable chatter. “Why don’t we plan a weekend trip together? Something fun to look forward to.”

The table brightened, suggestions flying quickly. Rina proposed a beach trip; Koji wanted to hike in the mountains. Takeshi joked about a city escape filled with food hunts.

Yui and Franz exchanged a glance, a silent agreement passing between them.

“That sounds perfect,” Yui said finally, her smile radiant.

Franz nodded, the fragile hope in his chest feeling a little stronger. “Yeah. A fresh start.”

Plans solidified amid laughter and growing warmth, their reunion blossoming into a promise of new memories yet to come.

As the evening in Café Natsuki settled into a comfortable rhythm, Franz’s mind quietly unraveled his hopes and fears in tandem with the laughter and chatter around the table. Look at her—Yui. The way the light catches her hair, the nervous little twists of her fingers. Is she as unsure as I feel? Or is this moment more fragile for her than me? He swallowed the lump in his throat. Every word counts. Every glance means more than it should.

Across the table, Yui’s heart fluttered with unspoken excitement and anxiety. Miyu’s occasional teasing nudges brought flashes of laughter but also reminded her of the emotional weight sitting between her and Franz. She caught Franz stealing glances and quickly looked away, cheeks warming.

He’s here. He really is. But can I be the person he remembers—or the one I want him to see now? She grasped the warmth of her cup, channeling courage from friendship and hope.

Around them, the others glanced back and forth, sensing the unspoken tension but respecting the space it needed—a silent acknowledgement of the history wrapped in tentative new beginnings.

As the conversation meandered from work stories to weekend activities, Miyu's voice broke through with a spark of enthusiasm. "Why don't we all plan a weekend trip together? Somewhere new, a fresh start for everyone."

Eyes lit up: Takeshi suggested a seaside town, Rina pitched hiking trails with scenic views, Koji joked about food markets and city sightseeing.

Franz smiled softly, feeling the fragile hope widen in his chest. Yui brightened beside him, nodding gently.

As the evening wound down, chairs scraped softly and gentle goodbyes were exchanged. Franz stood, holding the door open for Yui. Their eyes met—brief, profound.

In that shared glance, months of silence spoke loudly. A fragile promise hung in the air: this was only the beginning.

As Miyu and Yui walked side by side through the quiet streets, the evening air cool but not unkind, Miyu's teasing voice broke the comfortable silence.

"So," Miyu started, a playful tilt in her tone, "did you see how Franz was looking at you? You were practically glowing."

Yui's cheeks warmed instantly. She glanced at Miyu, half-exasperated, half-amused. "Stop it! You're making it worse."

Miyu chuckled softly. "Worse? Come on, you were hiding behind that scarf like a pro. But I saw the little smile you couldn't hide."

Yui shook her head, though her smile betrayed her nerves melting away. "I'm just glad tonight went... well."

Miyu reached over and gave her a gentle nudge. "It did. And hey, maybe next time you and Franz can let someone else do the teasing."

They rounded the corner, nearing Yui's home, the glow of street lamps casting long shadows. Yui slowed, touched by the warmth of the evening despite her racing heart.

"Thanks for tonight, Miyu," she murmured as they stopped outside her door.

Miyu grinned. "Hey, anytime. Don't forget to text me about that trip plan. We've got memories to make."

Yui nodded, stepping inside with a deep breath, the door closing softly behind her. The night was quiet now, but the promise of what was to come lingered brightly.

After Yui closed her front door gently behind her, the silence of her room welcomed her like a soft blanket. The glow of the streetlamp filtered softly through the curtains, casting long shadows that danced across her familiar surroundings. The evening's chatter lingered in her mind, mingling with a quiet flutter of anticipation and nervousness she hadn't expected to feel so deeply.

Her mother's voice drifted from the kitchen, casual but warm. "You're home, honey! Dinner's almost ready."

Yui took a deep breath, setting down her bag and running her fingers thoughtfully over the scarf still wrapped around her neck. The gathering with friends had been everything she'd feared and hoped for — awkward moments softened by laughter, old memories mixing with tentative new hopes.

She thought back to Franz's steady gaze, the way his presence seemed to both calm and stir a new courage inside her. Miyu's playful teasing echoed softly in her ears, a reminder that she wasn't alone navigating these complicated feelings.

As she moved through the evening routine — a quiet dinner, casual conversation with her mother about daily life and upcoming plans — Yui felt a gentle transformation. The fears hadn't vanished, but they had softened, replaced by a cautious optimism that this reunion might be the first step toward something meaningful, not just between them, but for all of them as friends.

Later, as she settled by the window with her sketchpad, the city lights twinkling beyond, Yui's thoughts drifted to that weekend trip they'd planned — a fresh chance to rewrite the story, one small step at a time.

The next few mornings blended into a comforting rhythm. Yui rose early, the pale light of dawn spilling through soft curtains, drawing delicate patterns on her bedspread. Her mother was already bustling about the kitchen, her warm humming filling the spaces between the clattering of dishes and the scent of brewed tea.

"Breakfast's ready, Yui," her mother called. Yui slid into the kitchen, greeted by the familiar smells and the comforting presence of her mother bustling between stove and table.

They shared a slow breakfast, words dancing lightly over news of neighbors and quiet plans for the week. Yet beneath the ordinary, Yui's thoughts wandered often to Franz and the lingering echo of last night's reunion.

Back in her room, sketches took form under her pencil, scenes from their planned trip materializing with strokes both hesitant and hopeful. The brush of color on paper was a comforting ritual, a bridge between apprehension and anticipation.

In the quiet moments, Yui wondered about Franz's days, whether his thoughts circled hers as often as hers did his. The mingling of old affection and new possibility surfaced in whispered hopes she kept guarded like fragile seeds waiting to bloom.

Her phone buzzed one afternoon—a message from Miyu, light and teasing about preparations for the trip that only deepened Yui's smile. The promise of connection, of shared experience beyond nerves and past regrets, crept quietly into hope.

Each evening, she found herself by the window again, sketchpad resting forgotten as her gaze lifted to the horizon. The city lights below mirrored the spark of new beginnings within her—small but steady embers ready to cast their glow.

Though the path ahead was still shaded with uncertainty, Yui's heart found a tentative peace in the knowledge that some stories, no matter how tangled, held the possibility of new chapters written together.

On the other side of the town, the morning light spilled gently through Franz's bedroom window. The soft glow brushed his face, calling him awake. The familiar creak of the wooden floor beneath his feet grounded him even as his mind already drifted elsewhere—heavy with the echoes of the reunion just days past and the fragile hope stirring quietly within.

He dressed slowly, the weight of unspoken words tugging at his thoughts as he prepared for another day. Downstairs, the aroma of brewing coffee mingled with the faint sounds of his father's morning routine. Their interactions were taciturn but warm in a way that only years of shared silence could build—a steady, sometimes unspoken bond.

"Morning," his father said quietly as Franz entered the kitchen.

"Morning," Franz responded, his voice thick with unsaid feelings.

Their breakfast passed with the clatter of dishes and a few exchanged remarks about work and weather, but beneath lay Franz's restless emotions. He craved connection, yet feared vulnerability. The reunion had reopened emotions he thought long buried.

Throughout the day, Franz moved through tasks with a distracted mind. In meetings, his attention flickered to memories of Yui's smile, the hesitant glances, the subtle warmth they shared amid the group. His phone buzzed with messages coordinating plans for the weekend trip, and with each ping, his heart quickened.

Even at night, as the city quieted, Franz found little rest. He stared out at the street below, the bustle of life contrasting with his inner turmoil. His relationship with his father, full of unspoken expectations and quiet support, weighed on him heavily. He felt caught between honoring those ties and pursuing the new path unfolding with Yui.

In solitude, emotions tangled—the hopes for renewal, the fears of repeating past mistakes, the hesitation over what truly lay ahead. He pondered how to bridge the distance, how to speak what was left unsaid.

Franz's world was a complex interweaving of duty and desire, past regrets, and future possibilities. The days stretched long, each moment charged with the promise and peril of change—his heart cautiously opening in hopes that this time, the story would be different.

Early one morning, Franz found himself awake before the sun, the quiet stillness of his room offering a rare sanctuary from the usual rush of responsibilities. His gaze drifted to the cityscape beyond his window, the familiar silhouette of rooftops bathed in soft dawn light. The previous night's reunion replayed in his mind—the flicker of Yui's smile, the way her eyes held both warmth and uncertainty, the teasing laughter shared across the table.

His relationship with his father was a constant current beneath his daily life—sometimes steady, sometimes turbulent. Downstairs in the kitchen, the morning ritual unfolded with practiced familiarity. The scent of strong black coffee mingled with the rustle of newspaper pages.

"Morning," his father greeted without looking up, voice carrying the weight of years and unspoken understanding.

"Morning," Franz replied, settling into the worn wooden chair.

Their breakfast was quiet, punctuated only by the small talk about work demands and the weather. Yet beneath the surface, Franz felt the tangle of emotions he rarely voiced—his longing for connection, anxiety over the future, and the hope sparked by Yui's presence.

At work, Franz tried to focus, the hum of computers and the rhythm of meetings filling his hours. Still, his mind often drifted back to the weekend trip they'd planned. The thought of exploring new places, of making fresh memories with old friends, sparked moments of joy amid the monotony.

Messages from the group pinged softly throughout the day, plans solidifying amidst jokes and shared excitement. Each notification was a gentle reminder that life was moving forward, tangled with the possibility of rekindled bonds and newfound happiness.

Evenings at home were a time for reflection. Franz often sat by his window, watching the city lights flicker like distant stars, feeling the weight of his own hopes pressing quietly in his chest. Conversations with his father, though reserved, carried a deep significance—a foundation of support alongside subtle tensions born from different expectations.

In these moments, Franz wrestled with fears and dreams, grappling with how to express what had long remained hidden. The reunion with Yui had opened doors he thought were closed forever, and now the path ahead was illuminated by both uncertainty and promise.

Franz acknowledged the flaws and complexities within himself, recognizing that growth would be neither swift nor simple. But within the quiet spaces of his day, amid the ebb and flow of familiar routines, a tentative courage began to take root.

The story of Franz was one of patience—learning to balance the burdens of the past with the fragile blossoming of new beginnings, and hoping that this time, the narrative might be reshaped by honesty, connection, and the possibility of renewed love.

The morning sunlight sifted softly through the curtains, casting a muted glow over the familiar clutter of a room. The hum of the city beyond the window was distant but persistent, a steady reminder that life rolled steadily onward. The scent of coffee drifted from the kitchen below, mingling with the slightly stale pages of the newspaper spread across a worn wooden table. The low creak of footsteps on hardwood announced a familiar presence — someone already moving through the morning ritual with well-practiced calm.

Conversations were minimal but carried a weight that went beyond words—the kind of understanding formed over years of shared spaces and unspoken expectations. There was comfort in that silence, but also the invisible threads of tension and unresolved hopes.

The day unfolded in a series of routines: the clatter of keyboard keys in a crowded office, the fleeting pleasantries exchanged in passing, and the constant mental tug toward memories half-remembered but vividly felt. The image of a shy smile, the gentle teasing laughter, and the magnetic pull of a quiet gaze lingered beneath the monotony.

Messages pinged sporadically, breaking the dull hum of daily tasks with bursts of life—plans crystallizing, jokes shared, a hint of something new weaving through old connections. The anticipation mingled with the familiar responsibility, creating a complicated harmony that was difficult to unravel.

Evening arrived with the subtle shift of light, and the quiet of the apartment became a cocoon for reflection. Outside, the city lights flickered to life, mirroring the flicker of emotions that surfaced beneath layered defenses. The steady presence of a worn photo on a shelf, the soft

ticking of a clock, and the occasional sigh in the stillness all spoke to times past and choices yet to be embraced.

In the earlier years, conversations had been more frequent, more direct; now they were distilled into moments of quiet regard, glances that carried volumes, and gestures charged with meaning. The weight of expectations balanced precariously against the fragile hope of understanding.

The day's end often found the figure at a window, watching the world blurred by distant lights, thoughts tracing the shadows of moments shared and those still waiting to be written. The promise of a forthcoming journey—a weekend trip, a chance to breathe new life into old friendships—sparked quiet excitement, mingling seamlessly with the cautiousness born of past wounds.

Careful steps toward change, measured breaths in the face of vulnerability, and the slow, tentative opening of a heart long guarded marked the subtle progression of this ongoing journey

The morning sun spilled gently over the packed bags scattered across Yui's room. The air buzzed with quiet excitement, and a faint shimmer of nerves blended with the promise of escape from routine. Yui's fingers traced the edges of a carefully folded scarf, a hidden reminder of continuity amid the shift. Below, the scents of breakfast mingled in the kitchen where her mother bustled with a mix of pride and concern — a silent benediction for the journey ahead.

Miyu was already in the living room, animated and brimming with ideas, her hands flying as she detailed the itinerary, the museums, the hikes, the cafes — a collage of experiences stitched with laughter and long-ago memories. Franz arrived shortly after, his usual composed demeanor softened today, edged with purpose. The others trickled in — familiar faces lighting the room with easy camaraderie, the collective excitement a thread weaving them closer.

As they loaded the cars, a subtle undercurrent stirred beneath the surface — the knowing glances, the secret smiles Miyu exchanged with Franz, the careful attention to timing. Yui caught only fragments, the laughter ringing around her tinged with an unfamiliar rhythm that tugged at her curiosity and suspicion.

The road stretched ahead, a ribbon unspooling beneath shifting clouds. Conversations ebbed and flowed, stories revisited and new ones began, the kind that stretch time in playful tension. Franz sat beside Yui at one moment, offering a quiet joke or a shared glance that flickered with unspoken meaning. Yet, beneath this, Franz's mind orchestrated a delicate plan — one involving every friend, every joke, every moment designed to build toward a final crescendo.

Evening fell softly as they reached their destination – a quaint inn nestled among whispering woods, the air cool and ripe with a promise of renewal. They settled into rooms, the quiet buzz of preparation mingling with restlessness. Yui found herself lingering by the window, the sky a tapestry of stars unwinding limitless nights.

The first light of dawn crept softly through the curtains, casting a pale glow over the slumbering inn. One by one, the quiet stirrings of morning took hold as the house gently woke. Yui was the first to open her eyes, a slower heartbeat marking the crossing between dreams and the new day. She lay still for a moment, soaking in the warmth of the bed, the smoothness of the cotton beneath her fingers. Then came the soft creak of floorboards down the hall, footsteps padding quietly – someone else awakening to the possibilities hidden between the moments of sleep and wakefulness.

Franz was not far behind, his room bathed in the muted gray of early morning. The steady rituals of preparing for the day began with a measured calm – pulling back the curtain to let the light in, the small splash of cold water on a face that wore a layered complexity of anticipation and nerves. He moved through the motions with a practiced ease, yet beneath the surface lay the careful weight of the plan unfolding silently in his mind.

The other friends emerged gradually – shared spaces filled with whispered greetings and soft laughter exchanged over the routine of freshening up and gathering belongings. The inn's walls absorbed these intimate sounds: the clinking of glass as someone fetched water, the rustle of fabric being smoothed, the tap-tap of shoes on wooden floors as the group began to converge.

In the communal dining room, the scent of brewed coffee mingled with the aroma of fresh bread and scrambled eggs. Sunlight caught the gleam of polished cutlery and the cheerful tumble of flowers arranged simply at each table. The atmosphere held a serene comfort, yet an undercurrent of anticipation wound tightly beneath the easy chatter.

Yui slipped in quietly beside Miyu, who had arrived early to secure a long table for the group. The two exchanged smiles, a silent communication of support and shared history. Across the room, Franz found his seat near the window, the world outside a stillness tinged with promise. His eyes met Yui's briefly, a flicker of something unspoken passing between them, weighed down and lifted up all at once.

Breakfast unfolded slowly – plates filled and refilled with the kind of food that grounded the spirit while nursing the body. Talk flowed in meandering loops, weaving stories of past adventures and playful jabs at forgotten mishaps. Between exchanges about the route ahead and subtle jokes about who would tire fastest on the hikes, the group found a comfortable rhythm.

But beneath the surface, certain moments shimmered with quiet meaning: a glance held a second too long, a word left hanging in the air, the small involuntary smile slipping past lips otherwise composed. Franz was careful to keep the plan tucked behind his calm gaze, while Miyu's eyes surveyed the room, a conductor attuned to the crescendo yet to come.

Yui's thoughts raced beneath her serene exterior. Each bite, each smile, was colored now by the knowledge that this trip was more than an escape — it was the fragile ground on which futures might tilt and fall. Her fingers brushed against a folded note tucked inconspicuously in her jacket pocket, the handwriting as familiar as an old song. The weight of it was both a comfort and a question mark.

The final moments of the meal stretched longer than necessary, the warmth of shared company clinging to the edges of conversation. When the plates were cleared and the last sips of tea savored, a hush seemed to fall — a collective pause before the day fully unfurled.

The group rose together, footsteps light with cautious hope, carrying with them the echoes of breakfast's past and the promise of stories unfinished.

Yui's room was bathed in a gentle morning light, the kind that softens edges and highlights the quiet chaos of an upcoming journey. She sat on the edge of her bed, carefully arranging her clothes and accessories, her mind drifting between preparations and lingering thoughts — especially about Franz. The distant sounds of the others starting their routines created a comforting background hum, but her heart fluttered with a mixture of anticipation and nervousness.

Miyu barged into the room with her usual energetic burst, eyes gleaming with mischief. She dropped onto the chair beside Yui, her grin widening as she caught sight of the subtle blush spreading on Yui's cheeks. Miyu's teasing tone was gentle but insistent, "You're blushing, Yui! Did someone stay in your thoughts all night?"

Yui's face flushed a deeper shade, and she hurriedly looked away, fumbling with a bracelet on her wrist. "It's nothing," she muttered, voice trembling slightly. Her hands trembled, betraying her attempt to sound casual, but Miyu was too quick — her smile mischievous even as her eyes warmed with affection.

"Oh, come on," Miyu teased softly, leaning closer. "You can't hide that color. It's practically glowing. Franz must be on your mind — or maybe someone else?"

Yui's cheeks burned brighter as she tried to divert her gaze, but Miyu pressed on with playful persistence. "You should tell him. You never know — maybe he's feeling the same," Miyu whispered conspiratorially.

Yui's heart pounded faster, visualizing Franz's smile, his tentative words from earlier, and the plan they all had crafted for the trip. She felt a sudden rush of warmth and uncertainty — was it hope? Or nervousness about confessing her feelings? Miyu's teasing only made her more flustered, yet deep down, she appreciated her friend's honesty and support.

Miyu's laughter rang softly in the room. "I'll leave you to get ready, but don't forget — it's okay to blush. It shows you're alive, Yui." With that, she flicked a teasing wink and escaped, leaving Yui to her thoughts and the fluttering sensation in her chest.

Still blushing, Yui reached for her makeup mirror. She brushed her hair quickly, trying to steady her nerves. The trip was meant to be fun, a chance to reconnect and maybe, just maybe, find her courage. Her cheeks still tingled with Miyu's teasing, but beneath that, something stronger took root — a quiet determination that, come what may, she would face her feelings—one careful step at a time.

In the dim light of Franz's room, the quiet tension between the three friends filled the space like a living thing. Franz sat on the edge of his bed, eyes focused on the small box resting in his palm. Beside him, Kenji leaned back in his chair, the calm center of gravity. Ryu tapped his fingers thoughtfully, nerves bubbling beneath his easy facade.

"We have one shot at this," Franz said slowly, breaking the silence. "I don't want Yui to suspect anything until the very last second. We have to coordinate perfectly."

Kenji nodded. "Right, but what's the plan exactly? You say you want everyone involved?"

"Yeah. You and Ryu are the only ones she'd trust enough to notice a setup," Franz replied. "We'll use the trip to get the group aligned. Then, during dinner, you guys create a distraction or a moment that pulls her attention away for just a minute."

Ryu grinned, but his eyes were serious. "Like what? I'm no good at acting."

"You don't have to act," Kenji said. "Just be natural. Maybe break out some old story or joke from the group. Something to make her laugh or focus elsewhere."

Franz ran a hand through his hair. "Okay... but what if she says no? What if I misread all this?"

Kenji's voice was steady. "Then you don't do it. But you won't know unless you try."

Ryu's fingers drummed on the desk. "What if she gets upset? I mean, this could blow up in your face."

Franz's shoulders sagged briefly. "I know. But I can't keep pretending. I have to be honest with her. Even if it hurts."

Kenji pulled out his phone, scrolling. “And the ring?”

Franz lifted the box, revealing a simple silver band set with a delicate gemstone. “Something small and meaningful. Yui’s not one for flashy things.”

Ryu nodded approvingly. “Nice choice.”

Franz sighed, eyes drifting toward the window. “I’m just scared, you know? What if everything falls apart?”

Kenji smiled softly. “We all are. But whatever happens, we’ve got your back.”

The three shared a moment of quiet solidarity. Franz tightened his grip on the ring box, resolving building amid the swirling doubts.

The lunch table sat quietly bustling with the casual chatter of friends on a sunny afternoon, the clinking of cutlery and soft hum of conversations folding into the rhythm of the day. Franz and Miyu huddled close with Kenji and Ryu, their voices dipping into a private murmur just out of earshot.

“You’re sure she doesn’t suspect anything?” Miyu asked, her eyes sharp yet gleaming with excitement and a pinch of worry.

Franz nodded, running a nervous hand through his hair. “As far as I can tell, she’s completely oblivious. That’s why it has to stay this way. The surprise will mean everything.”

Kenji, ever the calm anchor, added, “She’s a tough one to read, but we’ve got her distracted enough. Our timing needs to be flawless.”

Ryu leaned forward, lowering his voice. “So the proposal, at dinner, right? What if something goes wrong? What’s the backup plan?”

Miyu’s grin was sly. “Plan B’s simple. We keep it light. Franz just tells her how he feels, no dramatic theatrics, no ring. But we’re betting on the perfect moment.”

Franz’s heart beat faster at the thought, the weight of the secret tightening around him. “I keep thinking – what if she says no? What if I ruin everything?”

Kenji’s voice was steady. “You won’t. Because what matters is that you’re honest, not perfect. She’ll feel that, no matter what.”

The conversation was rich with tension and hope. Just then, Yui appeared at the edge of the table, a quiet smile on her lips as she adjusted her stir-fry on her plate. Catching a glimpse of the clustered group's intense focus, she hesitated.

"Hey, everyone," Yui said softly, drawing their attention.

Franz's smile faltered; Miyu swiftly masked her expression. "Hey, Yui! What's up?"

Yui's gaze lingered suspiciously but settled when no one met her with anything but warmth. "Just grabbing a quick bite," she replied, then excused herself politely, glancing away from their heavy expressions.

As Yui walked off, the group exchanged quick glances, then Miyu chuckled lightly. "That was close. Let's change the subject before she gets any ideas."

Kenji smiled wryly. "Agreed. So, Ryu, you owe us that embarrassing story from your last trip."

Ryu groaned but grinned. "Alright, alright. Prepare yourselves."

The laughter resumed, the private plan tucked away for later, as the group settled back into the comfort of friendship and casual banter.

The sky outside had surrendered to night, a velvety black punctuated with stars gleaming like distant lanterns. Inside the rustic inn's common room, the fireplace roared, sending flickering shadows across the worn wooden beams and softened faces of the group. The scent of burning pine mingled with faint hints of rose and lavender from the candles scattered about, creating an intimate cocoon far from the anxieties of the day.

Franz settled beside Yui, careful not to crowd her but drawn in by the quiet strength she emanated. Her eyes reflected the flames' dance — sometimes bright with laughter, other times distant, almost elusive. The atmosphere was thick with unspoken thoughts; conversations winding and unwinding like smoke curling toward the rafters.

Kenji, seated opposite, spun a story from a past trip, his voice light but his eyes sharp with reminiscence. "Do you remember when Ryu got us hopelessly lost? We thought we'd have to camp in the woods for days!" He laughed, the memory vivid enough to fill the room with warmth.

Ryu's grin was sheepish but good-natured. "Hey! It was an adventure. Besides, I found that amazing berry patch." He leaned forward, conjuring the taste with a playful look. The group chuckled, the moment easing a fraction of the tension coiling around Franz.

Miyu, keenly aware and omnipresent, flitted between listening and nudging the flow of conversation. "Those were the days, huh? But this trip, something about it feels different," she said softly, eyes flickering toward Franz and then away.

Franz swallowed, the weight of his secret plan pressing upward. "Different in a good way, I hope," he murmured, voice low but earnest.

Yui met his gaze briefly – a quiet understanding passing between them before the talk shifted again.

As the night unfolded, the talk grew more reflective. Stories sprinkled with laughter gave way to discussions on fears and dreams. Yui shared softly about her hopes to paint again, the art studio in her mind a sanctuary she hadn't touched in months.

Kenji chipped in with tales of his father's advice on following one's passion despite uncertainty. Ryu spoke hesitantly of past regrets, and the courage it took to keep moving forward. The fire's crackle underscored the sparse confessions, stitching together a tapestry of vulnerability.

Franz found himself opening up more than he expected. The trust was palpable. He spoke about the ache of keeping feelings locked away, the price of silence.

Miyu caught his eye, a silent encouragement weaving through her smile.

A lull settled, companionable and heavy. Outside, the wind ruffled leaves, carrying the distant call of night creatures.

Franz's mind drifted to the moments when tension flickered in Yui's laughter, when her glance held questions unasked. The ring in his pocket seemed heavier suddenly.

Conversation slowly resumed – this time filled with lighter jabs and teasing, a protective barrier against the vulnerability just shared. They reminisced about old inside jokes, childhood antics, and the quirks that made each of them unique.

Hours slipped by unnoticed.

The group moved as one toward their rooms eventually, footsteps light, voices softened but hearts fuller.

Franz: Okay, team. Tomorrow's the big day. Is everyone ready for the hike and the plan? Don't forget, keep this 100% secret from Yui.

Miyu: Ready! Got my backpack packed with snacks and extra jackets. Should we leave early to avoid midday heat?

Kenji: Good idea on early start. The weather forecast looks clear, but mountain weather can be unpredictable. Let's play it safe.

Ryu: I'll bring extra water and some emergency supplies. Franz, you got the ring safe?

Franz: Locked and secured. Honestly, I can't believe this is happening tomorrow. Nerves are kicking in hard.

Miyu: You'll do great. We all believe in you. Yui's going to be surprised — you got this!

Kenji: Just remember to breathe. The best proposals are simple, honest, and from the heart.

Franz: I know, but the pressure is real. What if she says no? Or get upset? (4/37)

Ryu: You won't know until you try. She might surprise you — it's a risk worth taking.

Miyu: We've all got your back no matter what. You're not alone in this. (6/20)

Franz: Thanks, guys. I don't know what I'd do without you. Any last-minute tips? Kenji: Stay present. Don't overthink. Let the moment unfold naturally.

Ryu: And keep it relaxed. If nerves hit, just smile and be honest.

Franz: Easy to say, hard to do. Okay, so timing — we get to the mountain top during golden hour, yeah?

Miyu: Exactly. It's the perfect light, and the crowd will be smaller

Kenji: We'll help create a little distraction to give you a moment alone with Yui.

Franz: What kind of distraction?

Ryu: Something to break her focus smoothly. Could be a joking story, or a sudden call to explore something nearby

Miyu: I'll keep the group's mood light and chatty; no one will suspect a thing.

Franz: Good. And after the proposal, we all celebrate together, right?

Kenji: Of course. Whether it's a yes or a heartfelt no, we stand by you.

Franz: What about the ring? Should I say something about it before I get down on one knee?

Ryu: Keep it simple. Let the ring speak for itself. Your words are what matter most.

Miyu: Agreed. Say what you feel, then let the moment breathe.

Franz: I'll try not to mess it up. This is the hardest thing I've done.

Kenji: It won't be perfect, but it will be real. And that's enough.

Franz: So, who's on distraction duty when?

Ryu: I'll take the lead when you signal. We'll create a little ruckus or story time to flip her attention for a few minutes.

Miyu: I'll handle the rest of the group, keep everyone happy and relaxed.

Franz: Sounds like a plan. Uh, what if she wants to turn back halfway up the hike?

Kenji: Gentle encouragement. Maybe remind her you promised a surprise view? If she's feeling unwell, we opt for a safe route.

Franz: Got it. The backup plan is always safe first. What if she's overwhelmed during the proposal?

Miyu: Then it's okay to pause. Wait with her, no rush. Emotional moments don't have timelines.

Franz: I'll keep that in mind. Well, I guess this chat is probably the last I'll get before tomorrow.

Ryu: We'll be here. Ready for whatever comes.

Kenji: Get some good rest tonight. Deep breaths tomorrow morning.

Miyu: Yes, and drink lots of water! Okay, signing off now. We believe in you, Franz.

Franz: Thank you all, seriously. Can't express how much this means to me.

Franz: Quick, last thing: The signal for distraction will be?

Ryu: A subtle tap on your arm.

Franz: Got it. One tap, distraction starts. Perfect

Miyu: Just remember, be yourself. You've got this.

Franz: One more... What if I trip or say the wrong thing?

Kenji: That would just make it more genuine.

Franz: Haha, thanks. Here goes everything.

Franz: Alright, I'm off to try and sleep now. Goodnight, team.

Ryu: Goodnight, Franz.

Kenji: Sweet dreams, brother.

Miyu: Dream big!

Franz: Thanks. See you all in the morning.

Franz: Oh, one last note — make sure Yui doesn't see this chat!

Kenji: Don't worry about that. It's locked down tight.

Ryu: The secret's safe with us.

Miyu: Absolutely.

Franz: Okay! Time for real rest now.

Franz: Thanks one more time, all of you.§

Franz: Tomorrow's going to change everything.

The morning light filtered softly through the curtains, casting a golden hue over the inn's rustic interior. One by one, the group stirred awake, the familiar sounds of rustling sheets and quiet stretches filling the rooms. The air felt crisp, carrying promises of new beginnings and the weight of the day ahead.

Yui emerged from her room first, her breath catching slightly at the soft murmur of voices and the scent of fresh coffee wafting through the hall. She smiled at the scene unfolding—friends laughing, preparing backpacks, sharing tentative plans for the hike. Franz appeared beside her, a steady presence amid the morning bustle.

Kenji checked the supply list one last time, while Ryu tossed snacks into a shared bag, their actions purposeful yet tinged with the unique nervous excitement that came with adventure. Miyu, ever the organizer, moved gracefully through the group, coordinating final details, her eyes flickering warmly toward Franz and Yui, aware of the fragile emotional dance underlying the day.

Franz paused by the window, looking out at the mountain looming in the distance, its silhouette carved sharply against the brightening sky. Every breath felt deeper, every beat heavier—a heartbeat synced to the plans whispered in the quiet hours of the night.

As the group gathered their gear and double-checked essentials, the lodge seemed to hold its breath, the silence before departure thick with anticipation. Laughter and casual chatter masked the undercurrents of hope, fear, and longing quietly exchanged with every glance and touch.

Finally, with backpacks secured and spirits steadied, they stepped outside, the cool mountain air biting lightly at their cheeks. The path awaited, winding upward through the trees, toward a summit that promised breathtaking views and, for Franz, a moment that could change everything.

Together, they began the trek, footsteps light on the earth, hearts heavy with unspoken words and dreams carried silently beneath the surface.

The morning sun spilled gold and amber across the mountainside, caressing the tops of evergreens and dappling the forest floor with warmth. The group gathered outside the lodge, breaths visible in the crisp air, each step crunching on fallen twigs and leaves, a rhythmic welcome to the day's journey. Their backpacks were packed not just with water and snacks but also with the weight of unspoken emotions and anticipation.

Franz tied his boots with focused determination, stealing glances toward Yui as she adjusted her jacket, her cheeks flushed with the cool morning breeze. The moment was simple, yet electrifying—a canvas awaiting the colors they would paint with each step.

Kenji checked the map one last time, tracing the winding trail they would follow. "Roughly six miles up, with some steep parts," he predicted, as familiar as ever with their every move.

"Looks like a perfect day for a hike," Miyu said, her bright smile complementing the blue sky, her voice lightly weaving confidence into the morning air.

Yui caught Franz's gaze for a brief instant, offering a small, hopeful smile. No words were needed; those moments of connection were the foundation on which the day would unfold.

The path beckoned. Dirt and stone and roots wove a tapestry beneath their feet as they walked, the forest alive with birdsong and rustling leaves. The chatter was easy at first—recounting past adventures, teasing each other gently, the laughter weaving around them like a shield against the weight of hidden truths.

Franz's thoughts constantly flickered between the natural beauty around him and the plan nestled deep in his heart. With every joking story from Kenji and light teasing from Ryu, he felt both buoyed and daunted by the task ahead. Yui's light laughter was a melody that guided him forward, caution mingling with hope.

The group paused at a widened clearing, breath misting in the cold mountain air. Snowmelt trickled in thin streams, the water clear and sharp as it skipped over granite, sparkling in the sunlight. Mingled scents of pine and damp earth surrounded them, grounding the moment in the vivid reality of the mountaintop.

"This is going to be one for the books," Miyu said, her eyes shining with excitement and something softer — the thrill of secrets shared and plans unfolding.

Franz exhaled slowly. The physical exertion was a welcome distraction, muscles pulsing, lungs drawing steady breaths. Yet beneath the surface, his heart raced with questions, doubts, and a fierce determination to make this day unforgettable.

As they resumed walking, the sun climbed higher, warming the skin, brightening the shadows beneath the firs. The trail steepened, roots becoming steps, the path narrower. Conversations grew quieter, more thoughtful, punctuated with soft gasps and occasional pauses to absorb the serene grandeur of their surroundings.

Yui walked beside Franz, her presence a steady comfort amid the fluttering nerves. Every so often, their hands brushed, tentative contact sparking warmth and silent promises.

The group's pace slowed naturally, synchronizing with the rhythm of breath and heartbeat. The mountain embraced them, its vastness underscoring the enormity of the moments taking shape.

At a bend in the trail, Kenji slowed, scanning the horizon. "Not far now," he said quietly, the group inclining their heads toward the distant peak bathed in light.

Franz's gaze lingered on Yui's profile, illuminated against the backdrop of soaring trees and bright sky. Tomorrow's plan was wrapped tightly in a moment they had yet to reach. Each step was a quiet march toward what he hoped would be a new beginning.

The trail grew steeper, winding like a serpent through ancient trees whose thick branches formed a protective canopy overhead. The sunlight filtered down in fractured beams, playing over moss and rocks, dappling the forest floor in a gentle dance of light and shadow. Each step became a mindful act; the rhythm of their breath weaving together the quiet cadence of steady progress.

Franz felt the familiar burn in his thighs, the pulse in his gut stirring both resolve and agitation. He tried to keep his focus on the conversation flowing naturally, yet his thoughts twined involuntarily around the plan that hovered ahead—the moment he'd rehearsed in his mind countless times. Yui's presence beside him was a steady force. The soft rustle of her jacket,

the slight exhale she let out as the climb became tougher, the occasional small smile she tossed his way: these intimate details filled his senses.

Kenji, ever the steady pace-setter, kept his voice light. “Remember that time we got caught in that downpour? Thought we’d never make it back to camp.”

Ryu laughed, the sound rich and easy in the mountain air. “Yeah, and Franz tried to play it cool but ended up drenched to the bone!”

Franz shook his head, grinning despite himself. “I was just prepared for anything.”

Miyu, bringing up the rear, joined in effortlessly. “Prepared? You looked like you stepped out of a waterfall.”

Their laughter echoed between trunks and boulders, weaving relief into the physical effort. Yet beneath the humor, there was a quiet opening, moments where the usual facades slipped, revealing hopes and fears. Yui confessed how the mountain reminded her of childhood trips with her father, the bittersweet mix of joy and loss lacing her words.

Franz listened intently, touched by her vulnerability. It was the kind of moment where things felt fragile, precious—and yet real.

The group slowed near a small spring bubbling through the roots of a giant cedar. They paused, kneeling to drink and refill water bottles. Franz’s fingers brushed Yui’s as she handed him the bottle, a jolt of electricity passing unspoken.

Kenji took a breath. “This is more than just a hike, isn’t it? It’s about where we are... but also where we’re going.”

Ryu nodded. “And facing what scares us—whether the mountain or what’s in our hearts.”

Franz swallowed hard. The words resonated deep inside, echoing his own swirling doubts.

The trail grew rocky, and the wind whispered cold against exposed skin. Yui paused, looking out over a valley sweeping beneath them, the world laid open in green and gold. Her gaze faltered, then fixed back on Franz.

“Are you ready?” she asked, voice soft.

Franz took a steady breath, meeting her eyes with gentle conviction. “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

The group resumed the climb, the path narrowing, the silence rich with meaning and anticipation. Every crunch of gravel beneath boots was a heartbeat drawing them closer to a summit—and to truths they'd long held at bay.

The trail narrowed sharply as they neared the summit, winding along a crag-edged ridge that let their eyes sweep over endless forests and winding rivers far below. The air thinned, cooler and crisper, filling their lungs with freshness but quickening their breath. Each step demanded more focus, the uneven terrain challenging balance and strength alike. The serenity of the mountain amplified the weight of the unspoken, the tension between exhilaration and nerves palpable.

Franz stayed close to Yui, their pace almost synchronized, breaths coming in matching rhythm. The friends around them spread out in a loose line, their footsteps soft but sure against the rocky path. The beauty of the landscape was both a balm and a brusque reminder of how large the moment approaching truly was.

Kenji glanced back, offering a word of encouragement that melted into the vast blue sky.
“Almost there. Just a bit more.”

Ryu, carrying a small bag of supplies, chuckled nervously, “If I trip and ruin everything, someone just smack me, okay?”

Miyu, usually the soul of steady calm, displayed a rare hint of anxiety beneath her strong façade.

“Stay focused, Ryu,” she teased. “This is our moment to shine.”

Franz’s heart thundered against his ribs as they rounded a bend and the summit plateau came into view, bathed in the golden light of late afternoon. The world stretched beneath them in sprawling splendor—rolling hills, sparkling lakes, and the last whispers of winter snow atop distant peaks.

Yui paused, breathing deeply, her expression a complex weave of awe, fatigue, and something closer to hope. Their eyes met briefly, and in that shared glance, Franz felt the fragile thread of courage knot tightly in his chest.

The group settled on smooth stones and patches of grass, exhaustion mingling with elation. Conversations died down into hushed tones, the communal energy softening, preparing for the quiet crescendo of the moments to come.

Franz ran his thoughts in a frenetic loop, picturing the scene perfectly: the setting sun painting the sky streaks of pink and orange, the gentle murmur of wind as he knelt, Yui's face lit by a glow not just from the light but something deeper.

His throat tightened. He struggled for steady breath, counting steps inside his mind, willing the world to pause just long enough for his words to find their mark.

They moved deliberately now, the terrain giving way to an open ridge bathed in the warm glow of golden hour. The air was thinner, each breath sharper, each step slower and more purposeful. The group's chatter tapered into soft encouragements and gentle laughter, a delicate thread anchoring the swelling tension.

Franz's heart beat wild and steady, every muscle attuned to the moment's magnitude. Around him, the friends took subtle cues, their presence at once supportive and unobtrusive. Conversations folded into the rustling of dry grasses and the distant call of mountain birds.

Yui's gaze drifted to the panoramic vista, the valley stretching wide with rivers sparkling like silver ribbons. A wind brushed her hair loose from her jacket, and her cheeks glowed pink against the fading light. She glanced at Franz, still unaware of the intricate plan quietly unfolding around them.

Kenji approached with a quiet nod, signaling that the moment for their carefully orchestrated distraction was near. Ryu's mischievous grin flickered briefly before he shifted into position.

Miyu, ever the orchestrator, exchanged a final whisper of encouragement with Franz, her eyes shining with friendship and hope.

The group naturally clustered, their easy disguises of casual hikers cloaking the purposeful choreography beneath. Laughter sparked, stories surfaced, and the group's energy became a gentle tide nudging toward the unknown.

Franz's pulse hammered in his ears. The ring's weight in his pocket grounded him, yet it also elevated the stakes. He reminded himself silently: honesty above all.

As the sun dipped lower, casting shadows long and golden, Franz breathed deep and prepared for the moment – the moment that could change everything or leave them standing at an emotional precipice.

Ryu brushed off his backpack and stepped forward, a quiet smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Alright, I've got one for the books." The group shifted, curious, as he began.

"Remember that night at the lake when Franz decided he was the 'master chef?'" His voice dropped into exaggerated seriousness. "We were all starving, and he said, 'Trust me, I've got this.' What could go wrong, right?"

Laughter bubbled up around the circle.

Kenji chimed in, his grin wide. "Yeah, except Franz forgot to bring... you know, the ingredients."

"Not just the ingredients," Miyu added with a smirk, "he didn't even bring the stove."

Ryu raised an eyebrow. "Those marshmallows never stood a chance."

"Oh man," Franz groaned, pretending embarrassment. "I was innovating! Fire-cooked marshmallows are... artisanal."

The group roared, light and warm.

Miyu nudged Kenji. "And what about the time Franz tried to lead us on that 'shortcut'?"

Kenji laughed. "In the middle of the forest? We ended up lost for two hours."

Franz grinned sheepishly. "Lost in nature is nature, too."

Yui smiled, the warmth spreading like sunlight.

Ryu lowered his voice, leaning in conspiratorially. "But seriously, this hike is different. Not just another adventure."

Kenji nodded. "It's about taking steps we've been afraid to take."

Miyu tied her scarf, eyes reflecting flickering light. "Steps toward truth."

The chatter softened as the group caught the mood.

Ryu grinned, "Anyway, Franz has planned something big for today, something special. We're all in this together, like always."

Laughter and shared glances stitched a quiet bond.

Franz's breath hitched as the world seemed to slow, the mountain's quiet vastness folding around them like a whispered secret. His voice became fragile threads weaving through the twilight, a tremulous song carried on the soft wind.

"Yui," he murmured, "all this time—through pages worn and words unfinished—I searched for a sign, a hand reaching back through the silence."

He pulled from his pocket the fragile book, cradling it as if it breathed his hopes, its tattered spine a fragile spine of memory. "These notes, these scattered fragments of longing... they might not have been yours, and yet, in every line, I found you."

The fading light fractured through the trees like liquid gold and shadow, painting their faces with fading dreams and flickering possibility.

Kneeling on the stones warmed by the day's last sun, Franz revealed the ring, a small universe held in delicate metal, a promise shimmering with light and quiet fears.

"I don't know where this journey leads, if the path is certain, or if the notes were ever truly yours," his voice cracked with raw honesty. "But here, now, beneath the endless sky, I offer my heart to you—imperfect, open, waiting."

Her eyes glistened with unshed stars, tears pooling like liquid light.

A word, barely a breath, broke the silence—"Yes."

In that moment, time unraveled: the mountain held its breath, the sky stretched infinite, and two souls intertwined beneath the vast cathedral of the heavens—bound by hope, by fear, by the fragile beauty of beginning.

Chapter 10 : 桜の恋 (Cherry Blossom Love)

The word still echoed in the hollow of my chest—yes. Such a small sound, barely a breath against the mountain wind, yet it had shifted the entire axis of my world. I stood there, Franz's arms around me, feeling the steady thrum of his heartbeat against my cheek, and wondered if this was what it meant to be unmoored and anchored all at once.

The ring felt strange on my finger. Light, yet impossibly present. I kept glancing at it as we began our descent, the simple band catching fragments of the dying light. Was this real? Had I really said yes? The metal warmed against my skin, and with each step down the rocky path, the reality settled deeper into my bones.

"Careful here," Franz murmured, his hand steadyng mine as we navigated a particularly steep section. His touch was different now—or perhaps I was different, hyper-aware of every point where our skin met, every casual intimacy that had transformed into something weighted with promise.

Behind us, I could hear Miyu's delighted laughter, Ryu's teasing voice, Kenji's warm congratulations still ringing in my ears. They had known. All of them had been part of this

carefully orchestrated moment, and the thought both embarrassed and touched me. How long had Franz been planning this? How many secret conversations had I walked past, oblivious?

The mountain path stretched before us, winding through pines that released their sharp, clean scent into the cooling air. My legs moved mechanically, one foot before the other, while my mind spun in widening circles. What did this mean? What had I just agreed to? The questions weren't born of regret but of wonder—the dizzying sensation of standing at the edge of something vast and unknowable.

"You're quiet," Franz said softly, concern threading through his voice.

I looked up at him, at the vulnerability still raw in his eyes, and felt something crack open in my chest. "I'm just... processing."

"Good processing or—"

"Good," I interrupted, squeezing his hand. "Very good. I just can't quite believe this is happening."

His smile was sunrise after a long night. "Me neither."

The group had given us space, dropping back to form a comfortable distance. I caught Miyu's eye as I glanced behind, and she winked, making an exaggerated heart shape with her hands. I felt heat rush to my cheeks and quickly looked away, but I couldn't stop the smile that tugged at my lips.

We walked through lengthening shadows, the mountain releasing its hold on us gradually, stone giving way to softer earth, sparse vegetation becoming lush. Each step down felt like a step forward, away from who I had been an hour ago toward whoever I was becoming.

"I was terrified," Franz admitted suddenly. "That you'd say no. Or laugh. Or—"

"Laugh?" I stopped walking, forcing him to turn toward me. "Franz, why would I laugh?"

He shrugged, a gesture so boyish it made my heart ache. "Because I'm not... I mean, look at you. And then there's me, with my messy feelings and this whole elaborate plan that could have gone wrong in a hundred different ways."

I reached up, my free hand cupping his cheek. "You're an idiot," I said softly. "A beautiful, thoughtful idiot who just made me happier than I knew I could be."

His eyes searched mine, and I saw the moment he believed me, saw relief and joy and something deeper flood his expression. He leaned down, forehead resting against mine, and we

stood there in the middle of the path, breathing the same air, existing in the same impossible moment.

"Come on, lovebirds!" Ryu's voice carried down the trail. "Some of us are starving!"

We broke apart, laughing, and continued our descent hand in hand. The world had changed. Or I had changed. Or perhaps change was simply this: choosing to walk forward with someone, uncertain of the destination but certain of the company.

As the lodge came into view below, warm lights glowing against the gathering dusk, I felt the weight of the day settle over me like a blanket. Exhaustion and exhilaration mixed in equal measure. My feet ached, my legs trembled with effort, but my heart—my heart felt impossibly full.

"What happens now?" I asked, the question slipping out before I could stop it.

Franz glanced at me, his expression thoughtful. "Now? We figure it out together. One day at a time."

One day at a time. It seemed both too simple and impossibly profound. But as we reached level ground and the group converged around us with hugs and congratulations and plans for a celebratory dinner, I realized that was exactly what I needed to hear.

I didn't need guarantees or roadmaps. I just needed this: his hand in mine, friends who cared, and the promise that tomorrow would come with all its uncertainties and possibilities.

That night, lying in bed with the ring still on my finger, I traced its smooth surface and let myself feel the full weight of what had happened. Somewhere in the building, Franz was probably doing the same, replaying the moment, wondering at it.

The thought made me smile into the darkness. We were in this together now, whatever this was. And for the first time in longer than I could remember, the unknown didn't frighten me.

It felt like standing at the beginning of something beautiful.

The next morning arrived wrapped in mist, the mountain breathing fog through the valley like sighs. I woke before my alarm, my hand instinctively reaching for the ring to confirm it was real. The metal caught the grey light filtering through the curtains, and my stomach flipped with the same dizzying sensation as yesterday.

Downstairs, the smell of coffee and fresh bread drew me to the dining area where Miyu was already seated, cradling a steaming mug between her palms. She looked up as I entered, and her knowing smile made me simultaneously grateful and embarrassed.

"Good morning, girlfriend-of-Franz," she teased gently.

I slid into the seat across from her, hiding my face behind my hands. "Please don't."

"Oh, I absolutely will." But her voice was warm, affectionate. "How are you feeling?"

How was I feeling? I lowered my hands and stared at the worn wooden table. "Like I'm walking on air and also like I might throw up. Is that normal?"

"Perfectly normal," she assured me. "Big moments tend to feel surreal until they settle into your bones."

Franz appeared in the doorway then, hair still damp from the shower, and our eyes met across the room. Something electric passed between us—recognition, acknowledgment, a shared secret that was no longer secret at all. He smiled, tentative and hopeful, and I felt my own lips curve in response.

"Morning," he said, his voice doing that thing where it softened just for me.

"Morning."

Miyu glanced between us and stood, stretching theatrically. "Well, I suddenly need to go... anywhere else. You two enjoy breakfast."

As she disappeared, Franz took her vacated seat, sliding a plate of pastries toward me. "You should eat something. You barely touched dinner last night."

He was right. The celebratory meal had been a blur of laughter and toasts and well-wishes, but I'd been too overwhelmed to do more than push food around my plate. Now, my stomach growled in response to the flaky croissants, and I reached for one gratefully.

We ate in comfortable silence, stealing glances at each other like teenagers. It should have felt awkward—this newness, this shift in dynamic—but instead it felt like coming home. Like something that had always been waiting to happen had finally found its moment.

"Can I ask you something?" I said, brushing crumbs from my fingers.

"Anything."

"When did you know? That you wanted... this?" I gestured vaguely between us, unable to articulate the enormity of this.

Franz set down his coffee cup, considering. "Honestly? I think I knew the first time I saw you in the library, surrounded by all those books, completely absorbed in your own world. You looked

so... complete. Like you didn't need anything or anyone, and I wanted to be someone you chose to let in anyway."

My throat tightened. "I've never felt complete. I've always felt like I was waiting for something, searching for something I couldn't name."

"And now?"

I met his eyes. "Now I think maybe I was searching for this. For you."

The words hung between us, fragile and true. Franz reached across the table, his fingers finding mine, and we sat there connected by touch and confession until Kenji's voice echoed from the hallway, breaking the spell.

"Bus leaves in thirty! Pack up, people!"

The drive back to campus felt different from the journey out. The same roads, the same scenery rolling past the windows, but I was changed. We all were, in ways both obvious and subtle. Franz sat beside me, our hands intertwined on the seat between us, and I watched the mountain grow smaller in the side mirror until it disappeared entirely into the landscape.

"What are you thinking?" Franz murmured, his thumb tracing circles on my palm.

"That mountains always look different when you're leaving them. Like they're keeping secrets about who you were when you arrived versus who you are when you go."

He leaned closer, his voice low enough that only I could hear. "And who are you now?"

I turned to look at him fully—this person who had somehow become the axis around which my world was reorienting. "I'm someone brave enough to say yes. That's a start."

His smile was answer enough.

Back in the familiar chaos of campus, reality reasserted itself in increments. Classes to attend, assignments to complete, routines to maintain. But everything felt filtered through a new lens, colors brighter and sounds sharper, as if saying yes had opened some previously closed door of perception.

That first evening back, Franz walked me to my apartment, our pace deliberately slow, neither of us ready to let the day end. At my door, we stood in the flickering hallway light, suddenly awkward again.

"So," he said.

"So," I echoed.

"Can I see you tomorrow? Properly, I mean. Like a date?"

A date. The word felt both thrilling and terrifying. "I'd like that."

He leaned in, and for a moment I thought he might kiss me, but instead he pressed his lips to my forehead—gentle, reverent, full of restrained longing. "Goodnight, Yui."

"Goodnight."

I watched him walk away, his hands in his pockets, and felt the strange sensation of missing someone who had only just left. Inside my apartment, I found myself unable to settle, moving from room to room, touching familiar objects that suddenly felt like artifacts from a previous life.

My phone buzzed: Thank you for saying yes. I promise I'll spend every day trying to deserve it.

I read the message three times before responding: You already do. Sleep well.

That night, I dreamed of mountains and cherry blossoms, of hands held and promises whispered, of all the beautiful uncertainty waiting to unfold. And when I woke, the ring was still there on my finger, solid and real, proof that some dreams were brave enough to become truth. §

Our first official date was on a Saturday, under a sky that couldn't decide between rain and sunshine. I changed outfits four times, each choice feeling simultaneously too casual and too formal, until Miyu physically removed the clothes from my hands and declared I looked perfect.

"You're overthinking," she said, adjusting the collar of my simple cream sweater. "He's already seen you at your worst—remember that time you had the flu and looked like a zombie? And he still asked you to be his girlfriend."

"That's not helping," I muttered, but I stopped fidgeting.

Franz arrived exactly on time, carrying a single cherry blossom branch—not yet blooming, just the promise of flowers to come. "I couldn't find actual blossoms this time of year," he admitted, "but I thought... maybe we could press it in that book? So when it does bloom, we'll have it forever."

And just like that, my nervousness evaporated. This was Franz. The same person who left notes in library books, who planned elaborate mountaintop proposals, who somehow always knew exactly what my heart needed before I did.

"It's perfect," I said, taking the branch carefully. "Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise. Trust me?"

I thought about all the ways I already trusted him, all the small and large moments that had built this foundation between us. "Always."

We took the train to a part of the city I rarely visited, the buildings older here, streets narrower and winding. Franz led me through a maze of alleys until we emerged before a small art gallery I'd never heard of, its windows fogged with age and mystery.

"I remembered you mentioning you wanted to see more contemporary Japanese art," he said, suddenly uncertain. "There's an exhibition here—emerging artists working with traditional techniques. I thought... but if you'd rather do something else—"

I kissed his cheek, surprising us both. "This is perfect. You're perfect."

Inside, the gallery was quiet, nearly empty except for an elderly couple examining ink paintings in the far corner. We wandered through rooms painted in muted colors, letting the art speak in its own language. Franz stayed close but gave me space, understanding instinctively when I needed silence to absorb what I was seeing.

One piece stopped me in my tracks—a mixed media work combining calligraphy and photography, words bleeding into images, images dissolving into text. The artist had written about longing in the negative spaces, about all the things left unsaid between people who care about each other.

"What are you thinking?" Franz asked softly.

"That I'm tired of negative space," I said. "I want to fill all the gaps with words, with honesty. I want you to know everything."

He took my hand, threading our fingers together. "Then tell me. We have time."

We had lunch at a tiny ramen shop tucked beneath a bookstore, the kind of place with only six seats and a menu written in chalk. The owner recognized us as first-timers and insisted on preparing his specialty—a rich tonkotsu that steamed our faces and warmed us from the inside out.

"Tell me something I don't know about you," Franz said, slurping noodles with unselfconscious enthusiasm.

I considered the question while chasing a piece of bamboo shoot around my bowl. "I wanted to be a mangaka when I was little. Drew hundreds of pages of terrible sequential art and convinced myself I'd be published by age twelve."

"What happened?"

"Reality, I suppose. And fear that I wasn't good enough." I paused. "I stopped drawing for a long time after my father died. It felt... wrong, somehow. Like I didn't deserve to create beautiful things when everything felt so ugly."

Franz's chopsticks stilled. "And now?"

"Now I'm starting to remember that creation isn't about deserving. It's about processing, about making sense of the chaos. And maybe..." I met his eyes, "maybe having someone who believes in me helps."

"I do," he said simply. "Believe in you, I mean. I think you could do anything you set your mind to."

The certainty in his voice made my chest tight. How long had it been since anyone had faith in me like that? Since I'd had faith in myself?

After lunch, we walked without destination, following streets that curved and climbed, discovering hidden shrines tucked between modern buildings, vending machines selling hot drinks that warmed our cold hands. Autumn was deepening into winter, the air crisp enough to see our breath, and I found myself walking closer to Franz, our shoulders bumping companionably.

"Your turn," I said. "Tell me something I don't know."

He was quiet for so long I thought he might not answer. Then: "I'm afraid all the time. That I'm not enough, that I'll disappoint people, that everything good in my life is just borrowed and eventually I'll have to give it back."

The rawness of the admission stopped me mid-step. "Franz..."

"I know it's irrational," he continued, staring at the ground. "But that's how anxiety works, right? It doesn't care about logic. And when you said yes on that mountain, part of me was terrified because it meant I could lose something real now. Before, it was all hypothetical. But now..."

I turned him to face me, my hands on his arms. "Now it's real, and real things can be lost, and that's scary. I get it. But Franz, you're not borrowing me. I'm choosing you. Every day, I'm choosing you. And yes, someday we might lose each other—people do—but isn't it better to have this, even temporarily, than to never have it at all?"

His eyes searched mine, and I saw the fear there, but also hope. "You really believe that?"

"I have to," I said honestly. "Because the alternative is being too afraid to live, and I'm tired of being afraid."

He pulled me into a hug, his face buried in my hair, and we stood there on a random street corner while the city moved around us. When we finally pulled apart, something had shifted—another layer of pretense stripped away, another brick in the wall we were building together.

We spent the rest of the afternoon in a secondhand bookstore, the kind with stacks reaching the ceiling and that particular scent of aging paper and possibility. Franz showed me his favorite philosophy section while I dragged him to the art books, and somewhere in between we found ourselves in the poetry section, reading verses aloud to each other in hushed tones.

I discovered a slim volume of Yosano Akiko's work and opened it randomly, my eyes falling on lines about spring and longing and the courage required for love. Franz leaned over my shoulder to read along, his breath warm against my neck, and I felt the words resonate through both of us.

"Buy it," he urged. "I want to hear you read it out loud when we're old."

The casualness of the statement—when we're old—made my heart stutter. He said it like a certainty, like there was no question we'd grow old together, collecting memories and moments and poetry books along the way.

I bought the book.

As evening settled over the city, painting everything in shades of blue and gold, Franz walked me home. At my door—the same place we'd stood just nights before—the awkwardness had transformed into something sweeter, more anticipatory.

"I had a really good time today," I said, inadequate words for the depth of what I was feeling.

"Me too." He hesitated, then reached up to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, his fingers lingering against my cheek. "Can I kiss you? Properly this time?"

My breath caught. "I thought you'd never ask."

He leaned in slowly, giving me every chance to pull away, but I didn't want to. When his lips met mine, soft and questioning, the world narrowed to just this—the warmth of his mouth, the gentle pressure of his hand cupping my face, the way my heart seemed to expand and contract simultaneously.

It was nothing like the dramatic kisses in movies, no fireworks or swelling music. It was better—quiet and real and filled with all the tenderness we'd been building toward. When we pulled apart, we were both smiling, foreheads pressed together, breathing the same air.

"Wow," he whispered.

"Yeah," I agreed. "Wow."

That night, lying in bed with the poetry book on my nightstand and the taste of him still on my lips, I felt something click into place. This was what it meant to be chosen, to choose in return. Not the grand gestures or perfect moments, but the quiet accumulation of honesty and vulnerability and trust.

The first days stretched into the first week, each moment adding to the foundation we were building. We fell into rhythms—morning coffee before classes, lunch when our schedules aligned, evenings spent studying in comfortable silence or talking until our voices grew hoarse.

Franz started leaving notes again, but this time they weren't anonymous library discoveries. They were small pieces of paper tucked into my textbooks, slipped into my jacket pocket, hidden in my coffee cup. Thinking of you, they'd say. Or You're brilliant or simply Mine with a heart drawn in the corner.

I kept every single one

Our friends noticed the change immediately, of course. Miyu cornered me in the campus café three days into our relationship, her eyes gleaming with curiosity and mischief.

"So," she said, drawing out the word as she slid into the chair across from me. "You and Franz."

I tried to hide my smile behind my coffee cup. "Me and Franz."

"Details. I need all of them." She leaned forward conspiratorially. "How's it going? Is it weird? Good weird or bad weird?"

"Good weird," I admitted. "Really good weird. It's like... everything's the same but also completely different. Does that make sense?"

"Perfect sense." Miyu stirred her latte absently. "You know what I love about you two? You were friends first. You actually like each other as people, not just as romantic interests. That's rare."

Was it rare? I'd never thought about it that way. But she was right—I genuinely enjoyed Franz's company, his thoughts, his quirks. The romantic feelings were layered on top of a foundation of real friendship, which made everything feel more solid somehow.

"I'm scared I'll mess it up," I confessed quietly.

Miyu reached across the table to squeeze my hand. "You won't. And if you do, you'll fix it. That's what people who care about each other do—they mess up and they repair. It's not about being perfect; it's about being willing to try."

Her words stayed with me as the days accumulated into weeks. There were awkward moments, of course—times when we weren't sure how much physical affection was appropriate, when old insecurities surfaced, when the newness of everything made us stumble over our own feet. But we talked through it, laughed through it, learned each other's languages of love and reassurance.

Franz, I discovered, was a quality time person. He didn't need grand gestures or expensive gifts; he just wanted to be near me, doing mundane things together. Grocery shopping became an adventure when he was there, turning it into a game where we'd find the most ridiculous items and invent stories about who would buy them. Doing laundry in the campus facilities transformed into impromptu dance parties, the two of us swaying to music from his phone while our clothes tumbled dry.

I learned that his love language was also acts of service. He showed up with coffee on mornings when I had early classes, remembered when I had presentations and texted encouragement, helped me organize my chaotic notes when I was drowning in coursework. Little things, constant things, that added up to a quiet declaration: I see you, I'm here, you matter.

In return, I discovered my own ways of loving him. I'd sketch small drawings on the margins of his notebooks—silly doodles of us as cartoon characters, or elaborate designs inspired by whatever we'd been discussing. I'd send him photos of beautiful things I encountered throughout the day—interesting shadows, perfectly arranged fruit at the market, graffiti that looked like art. Each image was a way of saying: I thought of you, I want to share my world with you.

We developed rituals, small routines that became the architecture of our relationship. Thursday nights were for cooking together in his tiny apartment kitchen, attempting recipes that were often too ambitious and frequently disastrous. We burned rice, over-salted soup,

somehow managed to ruin instant ramen, but we laughed through every failure and ate our mistakes with good humor.

Sunday mornings were sacred—we'd meet at the library before it got crowded, claiming our favorite corner table by the window. We'd work in comfortable silence, feet tangled under the table, occasionally looking up to exchange smiles or share interesting passages from whatever we were reading. Those quiet hours felt like meditation, like we were building something substantial in the spaces between words.

One particularly cold evening, Franz showed up at my door with a bag full of art supplies—fancy sketching pencils, quality paper, a set of watercolors I'd been eyeing but couldn't justify buying.

"What's this?" I asked, bewildered.

"You mentioned you wanted to start drawing again," he said, shifting nervously. "I thought... maybe you needed the right tools. Or maybe just permission. Consider this both."

I felt tears prick my eyes. "Franz, this is too much—"

"It's not." He stepped inside, setting the bag on my small kitchen table. "You're talented, Yui. I've seen those margin drawings you think I don't notice. You shouldn't hide that part of yourself. The world deserves to see what you create."

That night, I drew him. Not from memory or imagination, but with him sitting across from me, self-conscious and fidgeting. I captured the way his hair fell across his forehead, the slight crookedness of his smile, the kindness in his eyes that I was only beginning to fully understand. When I showed him the finished sketch, his expression softened into something almost reverent.

"Is that really how you see me?" he asked quietly.

"That's exactly how I see you."

He kept the drawing, tucking it carefully into his wallet where it would crease and fade with time. But whenever he pulled it out to show someone—and he did, often, with embarrassing pride—I saw the wonder still present in his face, as if he couldn't quite believe someone saw him as beautiful.

We had our first real disagreement three weeks in, a stupid argument about scheduling that spiraled into hurt feelings and misunderstandings. I said something sharp about him not prioritizing us; he retreated into wounded silence. We went to bed upset, in separate

apartments, and I lay awake staring at the ceiling, feeling the wrongness of it like a physical ache.

At two in the morning, my phone buzzed: I'm sorry. I don't want to fight. Can we talk?

I called him immediately, and we talked through the darkness, voices soft and honest, working through the hurt until we found our way back to each other. We learned an important lesson that night—that conflict wasn't failure, but rather an opportunity to understand each other better, to build bridges instead of walls.

"I'm not used to this," I admitted, curled up in bed with the phone pressed to my ear. "Being this vulnerable with someone. It's terrifying."

"For me too," Franz said. "But I'd rather be terrified with you than safe and alone. Does that make sense?"

It made perfect sense.

By the time our first month rolled around, the initial awkwardness had melted into something more comfortable, more genuine. We'd survived our first fight, navigated new territory together, built inside jokes and shared memories. Franz suggested we celebrate with dinner at the ramen shop from our first date, claiming it was tradition now.

"We've been there once," I laughed. "That's not tradition."

"It is if we keep going back. Come on, I want their tonkotsu to be the taste we associate with us."

So we went, and the owner recognized us this time, greeting us like old friends. We ate in comfortable silence, occasionally sharing bites from each other's bowls, and I thought about how much had changed in just a month. How much I had changed.

Walking back through lamp-lit streets, Franz's arm around my shoulders, I felt a contentment I'd never experienced before. Not the manic happiness of new love, but something deeper—a sense of rightness, of pieces fitting together in ways that made a more complete picture.

"Hey," Franz said suddenly, stopping under a streetlight. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For saying yes. For taking a chance on us. For being patient with my mess and letting me see yours." He cupped my face gently. "For being exactly who you are."

I rose on my toes to kiss him, tasting ramen and promise. "Thank you for asking."

As we continued home, hand in hand beneath the autumn stars, I understood that these were the moments that mattered—not just the grand declarations but the quiet choosing of each other, day after day, in a thousand small ways. This was what it meant to build something real.

And we were only just beginning.

Winter arrived with a vengeance, transforming campus into a monochrome wonderland of white and grey. The first real snowfall happened on a Tuesday morning, fat flakes drifting down like confetti from a celestial celebration. I woke to Franz's text: Look outside. The world is magic today.

He was right. I pressed my face to the cold window glass, watching the way snow softened every harsh edge, muted every sound. Within minutes, another text arrived: Meet me at the library? I have something to show you.

I bundled up in layers—sweater, coat, scarf wrapped twice around my neck—and ventured into the transformed landscape. The walk to the library usually took fifteen minutes, but I stretched it to twenty-five, savoring the crunch of fresh snow under my boots, the way my breath created temporary clouds in the frozen air.

Franz was waiting outside the library entrance, stamping his feet to keep warm. When he saw me, his face lit up with that particular smile he reserved just for me—the one that made me feel like I was the only person in his universe.

"Come on," he said, grabbing my mittenend hand. "Before someone else discovers it."

He led me not into the main library but around to the side entrance, up a narrow staircase I'd never noticed before. We climbed three flights, my curiosity building with each step, until we emerged onto a small rooftop terrace I hadn't known existed.

The view stole my breath. Campus stretched below us, buildings and trees dressed in white, the world hushed and perfect. But that wasn't what Franz wanted to show me. In the far corner of the terrace, sheltered by an overhang, he'd created a small sanctuary—a weatherproof blanket spread over cushions he must have carried up, a thermos of what I assumed was hot chocolate, and a stack of books carefully wrapped in plastic bags.

"What is this?" I breathed.

"Our place," he said simply. "I found it a few weeks ago and have been waiting for the right moment. I thought... we needed somewhere that was just ours, you know? Somewhere we could come and shut out the world when it gets too loud."

I turned to him, overwhelmed. "You made this for us?"

"For you," he corrected. "Well, for both of us. But mostly I wanted to give you space to breathe, to create, to just be without performance or expectation."

We settled onto the cushions, huddled under the blanket with steaming cups of chocolate warming our hands. The snow continued falling, and we watched it in comfortable silence, our shoulders pressed together, perfectly content.

"Tell me something," I said eventually. "Something true."

Franz was quiet for a moment, considering. "Sometimes I wake up afraid this is all a dream. That I'll open my eyes and you'll just be the girl in the library I was too scared to talk to, and none of this will have happened."

"It's real," I assured him, squeezing his hand. "We're real."

"I know. Logically, I know. But feelings don't always listen to logic." He turned to look at me, snowflakes catching in his dark hair. "What about you? Tell me something true."

I thought about all the truths I carried, the heavy ones and the light ones, and chose carefully. "I'm happier than I've been in years. And it scares me because happiness feels fragile, like ice that could crack at any moment. But I'm learning to trust it anyway, to trust us."

"We're going to be okay," Franz said with quiet certainty. "Even when things get hard—and they will—we're going to figure it out together."

I wanted to believe him. In that moment, surrounded by snow and warmth and possibility, I did.

The rooftop terrace became our refuge. We'd meet there between classes, during lunch breaks, in the stolen hours before sunset. Franz brought art supplies and I'd sketch while he read, occasionally looking up to find him watching me with soft eyes. Sometimes we'd talk for hours; other times we'd simply exist beside each other, comfortable in the silence.

One afternoon, I started a new project—a series of illustrations depicting moments from our relationship. The proposal on the mountain, our first kiss, quiet mornings over coffee, the way Franz looked when he was lost in thought. Each drawing was a love letter rendered in graphite and ink, capturing not just what we looked like but what we felt like.

"Can I see?" Franz asked after I'd been working for an hour, his curiosity finally overcoming his restraint.

I hesitated, then turned the sketchbook toward him. His expression shifted as he took in the images—surprise giving way to something deeper, more vulnerable. When he looked up, his eyes were bright with unshed tears.

"Yui, these are... you see us like this?"

"That's how we are," I said. "That's the truth of us."

He pulled me close, the sketchbook forgotten between us, and I felt his heartbeat against my cheek—steady, real, present. "I love you," he whispered into my hair. "I know it's soon, and maybe I'm not supposed to say it yet, but I do. I love you."

The words hung in the cold air, precious and terrifying. My own heart seemed to pause, then race ahead. I'd known, hadn't I? On some level, I'd known this was where we were heading. But hearing it spoken aloud made it undeniable, irrevocable.

"I love you too," I said, the words feeling both natural and monumental. "I think I have for a while now."

We kissed there on our rooftop sanctuary, snowflakes melting on our skin, the world reduced to just us and this moment and the promise we'd just made to each other. When we finally pulled apart, we were both crying and laughing, overwhelmed by the enormity of what we'd confessed.

Love. We were in love. The simple, complicated, beautiful, terrifying truth of it settled over us like the snow settling over the city.

The library became our second home in a different way after that. We'd claim study rooms and transform them into temporary cocoons, surrounding ourselves with books and notes and each other. Franz started reading his philosophy texts aloud when he got stuck, using me as a sounding board, and I'd show him paintings and photographs that inspired my artwork, explaining the techniques and emotions behind each piece.

We taught each other our languages—not just words but ways of seeing the world. Through his eyes, I learned to appreciate abstract thought and existential questions. Through mine, he began to notice beauty in small moments, the artistry in everyday life.

"You've changed how I experience things," he told me one evening as we packed up after a long study session. "Before you, I lived so much in my head. But now I'm present, paying attention to textures and colors and all the details I used to miss."

"You've changed me too," I admitted. "I used to be so caught up in feeling that I forgot to think. You've taught me to question, to analyze, to look beneath the surface."

"We're good for each other," he said, and it wasn't a question.

"We really are."

As winter deepened, we explored the city together, finding hidden pockets of warmth and wonder. Small museums tucked into unexpected buildings, cafés with mismatched furniture and poetry readings, jazz clubs in basements where we'd nurse drinks and listen to music that felt like liquid emotion.

Franz introduced me to his favorite used bookstores, the ones where the owners knew him by name and would set aside books they thought he'd like. I showed him the art supply stores I haunted, the ones with dusty corners full of discontinued papers and vintage brushes that sparked my imagination.

We collected experiences like other people collected objects—each memory a treasure to be stored away, examined later in the quiet moments when we were apart. I started keeping a journal, not of events but of feelings, trying to capture what it was like to be this happy, this known, this loved.

One particularly freezing Saturday, we stayed in his apartment all day, a rarity for us. We cooked breakfast together—or rather, he cooked while I sat on the counter offering unhelpful suggestions. We read books side by side on his couch, legs tangled under a shared blanket. We talked about everything and nothing, the conversation flowing easy as breathing.

"What do you want?" he asked me at one point, the question seemingly coming from nowhere. "In life, I mean. What does your ideal future look like?"

I considered carefully. "I want to create things that matter. Not necessarily famous or commercially successful, but art that speaks to people, that makes them feel less alone. I want to travel, see the world through different lenses. And I want..." I hesitated, then pushed forward. "I want someone to share it with. Someone who understands that I need both adventure and quiet, both company and solitude."

"That sounds perfect," Franz said softly. "What else?"

"Small things. A place with good light for painting. Shelves full of books. Maybe a cat, or two. Sunday mornings with nowhere to be and no one to perform for." I turned to look at him. "What about you?"

He was quiet for a long moment, his fingers tracing patterns on my knee. "Honestly? Whatever you just described sounds pretty much like my dream too. Maybe with a little more structure—I like routine—but the core of it... yeah. Art and books and travel and quiet mornings. And you." He met my eyes. "Definitely you."

The certainty in his voice made my chest tight. We were barely three months into this relationship, too soon to be planning futures together. But in that moment, it didn't feel too soon. It felt exactly right.

Winter began its slow retreat in late February, and with it came a restlessness I couldn't quite name. Franz noticed, of course—he always noticed.

"What's on your mind?" he asked one evening as we walked through campus, the last patches of dirty snow clinging stubbornly to shaded corners.

"I've been thinking about my mother," I admitted. "She wants to meet you. Officially, I mean. She's been asking for weeks."

Franz's steps faltered slightly. "And you've been avoiding telling me?"

"Not avoiding, just... postponing. My mother can be a lot. She has opinions about everything, and I'm worried she'll—" I stopped, frustrated with my own fears. "I'm worried she'll find something wrong, and then I'll start seeing it too."

He stopped walking, turning me to face him. "Yui, I'm not perfect. Your mother will definitely find things wrong with me because things are wrong with me. I'm anxious, I overthink, I have bad habits and fears I haven't conquered. But none of that changes how I feel about you, or how we are together."

"I know that. Logically, I know."

"Then let me meet her. I want to know the people who made you who you are. Your mother, your family—they're part of your story, which means they're important to me."

So the following weekend, I brought Franz home. My childhood apartment was small, filled with my mother's eclectic collection of ceramics and the lingering scent of incense she burned every morning. She greeted us at the door, her appraising eyes taking in every detail of Franz's appearance, his posture, the way he held my hand.

"いらっしゃい," she said, her formal greeting carrying weight. "Come in."

Dinner was a careful dance of conversation and observation. My mother asked questions in her direct way—about Franz's family, his studies, his intentions. I cringed inwardly at each inquiry, but Franz answered with honest simplicity, never trying to embellish or impress.

"What do you love about my daughter?" my mother asked, the question landing like a stone in still water.

Franz didn't hesitate. "Her honesty. The way she sees beauty in things other people overlook. How she's brave even when she's scared. The way she draws in the margins of notebooks when she thinks no one's watching." He glanced at me, his expression soft. "I love that she makes me want to be more present, more aware. She makes me better."

My mother was quiet for a long moment, then nodded slightly—a gesture I recognized as approval, however grudging.

After dinner, as Franz helped with dishes despite my mother's protests, she pulled me aside in the small hallway.

"He's good," she said simply. "Nervous, but good. He looks at you like you're precious."

"He is good," I agreed, relief flooding through me.

"Don't take that for granted. Good people who see you clearly—they're rare. Hold onto him."

Her blessing, characteristically practical and unsentimental, meant everything.

The walk back to campus felt lighter, Franz's hand warm in mine despite the cold. "That went okay, right?" he asked, endearingly uncertain.

"That went better than okay. My mother likes you. She doesn't like most people."

"Really? She seemed pretty tough."

"She is tough. But she's also fair. And she saw what I see—that you're genuine, that you care." I stopped under a streetlight, pulling him close. "Thank you for being willing to meet her, for being yourself instead of trying to be what you thought she wanted."

"I just want to be part of your life," he said. "All of it, not just the easy parts."

As spring began to show itself in tentative green shoots and longer daylight, our relationship settled into a deeper groove. We'd survived our first season together, navigated family

introductions, built routines that felt like home. The initial rush of new love had matured into something more sustainable—still exciting, but grounded in daily choice and commitment.

I started a new art series inspired by the concept of 間 (ma)—the Japanese aesthetic of negative space, the beauty in what's not there. Each piece explored the spaces between us and Franz, the comfortable silences, the moments of separation that made reunion sweeter. It was my most ambitious work yet, and Franz became my first audience, offering thoughtful feedback that pushed me to dig deeper.

"This one," he said, pointing to a mixed media piece combining photography and ink. "The space here feels lonely rather than peaceful. Is that intentional?"

I studied it with fresh eyes. "No, you're right. I was trying to capture contentment, but it reads as isolation." I made notes, grateful for his honest eye.

"I love watching you work," he said. "The way you get completely absorbed, like nothing else exists."

"That's how I feel when I'm with you," I confessed. "Like the rest of the world fades and there's just this—us, in our own bubble."

"Is that good or bad?"

"It's good. Really good. As long as we remember to come up for air occasionally."

We did make efforts to maintain our individual identities, to nurture friendships outside of us. I had regular coffee dates with Miyu where we'd dissect life and relationships. Franz maintained his weekly game nights with Kenji and Ryu. We gave each other space to be separate people, which paradoxically made us closer.

One particularly beautiful spring evening, Franz surprised me by arranging a small exhibition of my work at a local café. Nothing major—just my 間 series displayed on their walls for a month—but it was my first time showing publicly, and I was terrified.

"What if no one likes them?" I fretted as we hung the pieces.

"Then they have bad taste," Franz said firmly. "But Yui, that's not the point. You made something meaningful, something true. You put your heart into physical form. That alone is worth celebrating."

The opening night was small—friends, some classmates, café regulars. But people engaged with the work, asked questions, shared their interpretations. An elderly woman stood in front of one piece for fifteen minutes, tears streaming down her face.

"This reminds me of my late husband," she told me. "The way you captured the space between presence and absence. It's exactly how grief feels."

I held her hand, overwhelmed that something I created could touch someone so deeply. Franz watched from across the room, his pride evident in his expression, and I felt a surge of gratitude so strong it almost knocked me over.

This was what love could be—someone who believed in you enough to make your dreams tangible, who celebrated your victories as their own.

As we walked home that night, the spring air mild and full of possibility, Franz pulled me close under the blooming cherry trees.

"I'm proud of you," he said simply.

"I couldn't have done it without you."

"That's not true. You would have found your way eventually. I just got to witness it."

The cherry blossoms drifted down around us like pink snow, and I thought about how far we'd come in just a few months. From that mountain proposal to this moment, we'd built something real and precious—a private world where we could both be vulnerable and strong, separate and together.

"I love you," I said, the words coming easier each time.

"I love you too. Always."

Spring matured into early summer, and with it came a deepening of everything between us. Six months had passed since that mountain proposal, and what had begun as tentative exploration had transformed into something unshakeable. We knew each other's rhythms now—when to push and when to hold back, when silence was comfort and when it signaled retreat.

Franz's mom and dad, his mom visited from USA , for franz they had tried to put aside their differences , they invited us to their summer house by the coast for a weekend, and I was nervous in a different way than I'd been with my mother. His parents were warm but observant,, and I felt the weight of their assessment even as they tried to make me comfortable.

"Don't worry," Franz whispered as we unpacked in the guest room. "They already love you. My mom hasn't stopped talking about how talented you are since I showed her your exhibition photos."

"You showed her my work?"

"Of course I did. I'm proud of you. I want everyone to know how brilliant you are."

That weekend, I learned where Franz got his thoughtfulness—from a father who noticed when anyone's glass needed refilling, from a mother who remembered everyone's preferences and dietary restrictions. I saw him with his sister, their easy teasing and obvious affection, and understood the foundation that had shaped him.

On our last evening there, we walked along the beach at sunset, the sky painted in impossible oranges and purples. Franz's parents had given us space, understanding the need for young lovers to have moments alone.

"This is nice," I said, my feet sinking into cool sand. "Your family."

"They like you. A lot."

"Really?"

"Yes my love". He replied

I leaned into him as we walked. "I don't think you'll mess it up. We might mess it up, together, but that's different. That's... fixable."

"You really believe that? That we can survive mistakes?"

"I have to believe it. Otherwise, the fear of failing would keep me from trying." I stopped, turning to face the ocean. "My father used to say that the only unforgivable mistake was refusing to learn from your errors. Everything else was just... practice."

Franz was quiet, letting the moment settle. Then: "I miss not having known him. From everything you've told me, he sounds incredible."

"He would have liked you," I said, certain of it. "He valued authenticity above everything else. You're the most authentic person I know."

The summer semester brought new challenges. Franz was preparing for important exams that would determine his graduate school prospects, and the stress showed in tension he carried in his shoulders, in abbreviated texts and cancelled plans. I tried to be understanding, supportive, but I'd be lying if I said it didn't hurt when weeks would pass with only brief stolen moments between his study sessions.

One particularly difficult week, I barely saw him. When we finally managed to meet for coffee, he looked exhausted—dark circles under his eyes, hair disheveled, that slightly manic energy of someone running on too little sleep and too much caffeine.

"I'm sorry," he said immediately. "I know I've been absent. Just a few more weeks—"

"Don't apologize for pursuing your dreams," I interrupted. "I understand pressure. I just... I miss you."

His expression crumbled. "I miss you too. God, I miss you even when you're sitting right across from me because I'm too stressed to be fully present."

"What do you need? How can I help?"

He thought about it, really considered the question instead of offering an automatic dismissal. "I need to know you're still here. That when I come up for air, you'll be waiting."

"I'm here," I promised. "I'm not going anywhere."

We developed a new rhythm during those intense weeks—I'd bring him food when he forgot to eat, sit quietly in his apartment while he studied, leave little notes of encouragement tucked into his textbooks. They were small things, but they mattered. And when he finally finished his exams, the relief and gratitude in his eyes told me everything about how much my support had meant.

To celebrate, we took a spontaneous trip—just two days, but it felt like a lifetime. We found a small inn in the mountains, far from campus and responsibilities, and we slept late and explored hiking trails and talked about everything we'd been too busy to discuss.

"I want to do something different," Franz said on our second evening as we sat on the inn's porch watching fireflies dance in the gathering darkness. "Not just follow the expected path. I want my life to mean something beyond credentials and career advancement."

"What do you want to do?"

"Teach, maybe. Not at a university necessarily, but... share ideas with people who need them. Philosophy isn't meant to be locked in academic towers. It's supposed to help people live better lives."

I loved this about him—the way he'd been pushed toward pragmatic choices but kept circling back to purpose and meaning. "You'd be an amazing teacher."

"You think so?"

"I know so. You have this gift for making complicated ideas accessible. And you care—really care—about helping people understand, not just proving how smart you are."

He pulled me close, my back against his chest, his chin resting on my shoulder. "What about you? What do you want your life to look like in five years?"

Five years felt simultaneously impossibly far away and frighteningly close. "I want to be making art that matters. Maybe teaching too, or running workshops for kids who need creative outlets. I want to have traveled more, seen more. And I want..." I hesitated, then pushed forward. "I want you there. In whatever form makes sense, but there."

"Same," he said simply. "All of it, but with you."

As our first anniversary approached, I found myself reflecting on how much had changed. A year ago, I'd been wandering through life, going through motions, carrying grief and uncertainty like weights around my neck. Now I woke up with purpose, with excitement for what each day might bring. Franz hadn't fixed me—I'd done that work myself—but he'd created space for me to heal, to grow, to become more fully myself.

I wanted to do something special for our anniversary, something that captured what this year had meant. I returned to the original book—the one with the notes that had started everything—and I added my own note. Not anonymous this time, but signed with my name and dated on our anniversary:

One year ago, you asked if I would be yours, and I said yes. It was the easiest and most terrifying decision of my life. Thank you for seeing me, for choosing me, for building this beautiful thing with me. Here's to all the chapters still unwritten. I love you. —Yui

On the actual day, we returned to the mountain where he'd proposed. It felt right, coming full circle, standing on that same summit and looking at how far we'd traveled—not just in distance but in depth.

"A year," Franz said, wonder in his voice. "It simultaneously feels like forever and like we just started."

"Both can be true," I said, taking his hand. "We've built forever in these twelve months."

He pulled me close, and we stood there wrapped in each other as the sun began its descent, painting the sky in familiar golds and pinks. "I have something for you," he said, reaching into his backpack.

He produced a small package wrapped in simple brown paper. Inside was a leather-bound journal, blank pages waiting to be filled, and tucked in the front was a note in his handwriting:

For all the moments we'll collect in year two, and every year after. Let's fill this together. —F

"We can use it as a shared journal," he explained. "Pass it back and forth, write about our days, our thoughts, our hopes. So even when we're apart, we're still in conversation."

It was perfect. Thoughtful and practical and romantic all at once—so very Franz.

"I have something for you too," I said, handing him the original book with my new note marked by a ribbon.

He read it slowly, carefully, then looked up with eyes bright with emotion. "You signed it."

"No more anonymous notes. No more hiding. Just us, being brave together."

He kissed me then, deep and tender, a kiss that tasted like promise and permanence. When we pulled apart, we were both crying, overwhelmed by the enormity of what we'd built and what still lay ahead.

As darkness fell and we began our descent, I thought about the Japanese concept of 一期一会 (ichi-go ichi-e)—one time, one meeting. The idea that each encounter is unique and will never recur in exactly the same way. Our anniversary felt like that—a singular moment in the continuum of our relationship, precious precisely because it was unrepeatable.

"What are you thinking about?" Franz asked, reading my contemplative silence.

"About how grateful I am. For this year, for you, for us. For having the courage to say yes."

"Best yes I've ever heard," he said, squeezing my hand.

The walk down was easier than the climb up had been a year ago, our feet sure on paths we now knew. We'd walked this journey together, learning each other's paces, when to lead and when to follow. It was a metaphor almost too perfect—this mountain we'd climbed together, this descent into the next phase of our lives.

Back at the lodge where we'd stayed after the proposal, the owners recognized us and insisted on giving us the same room. We sat by the window, sharing tea and comfortable silence, the shared journal open between us as we took turns writing our first entries.

Day 365, Franz wrote. Still can't believe I get to love you. Here's to 365 more, and then 365 after that, and on and on until we've lost count and it doesn't matter anymore because we'll just be us, together, and that will be enough.

I read his words and felt my heart expand impossibly. Then I took the pen:

Day 365. The best year of my life. You've taught me that love isn't about perfection—it's about showing up, being honest, choosing each other even when it's hard. Especially when it's hard. I choose you today and every day after. My love, my best friend, my home.

We fell asleep that night tangled together, the journal on the nightstand like a promise, the year behind us a foundation, the years ahead a canvas waiting for our brushstrokes.

The next morning, sunlight streamed through the windows, warm and golden, and I woke before Franz. I watched him sleep for a moment, his face peaceful and young, and felt the full weight of my love for him—not the wild, desperate love of early days, but something deeper. A love that had been tested by stress and distance and daily life and had not just survived but deepened.

This was what it meant to build something real: not grand gestures and perfect moments, but the accumulation of ordinary days, choices made and kept, small kindnesses and large forgivenesses. We had built a world together, brick by brick, word by word, kiss by kiss.

Franz stirred, his eyes opening to find me watching him. "Morning," he mumbled, voice thick with sleep.

"Morning."

"What are you thinking about?"

"Everything. Nothing. How lucky I am. How much I love you."

He pulled me closer, pressing a kiss to my forehead. "Lucky us," he corrected. "Lucky both of us."

And it was true. Whatever challenges lay ahead—and I knew there would be challenges, because that was life—we would face them together. We had proven we could weather storms, could adapt and grow and choose each other again and again.

As we packed up to leave, preparing to return to our regular lives, I felt a contentment I'd never experienced before. Not the absence of fear or uncertainty, but the presence of trust—in myself, in Franz, in what we'd built together.

"Ready?" he asked, backpack slung over his shoulder.

I took one last look at the mountain visible through the window, then turned back to him.

"Ready."

Hand in hand, we walked into our second year together, carrying our shared journal and all the love we'd accumulated. The future stretched ahead, unknown and beautiful, and I wasn't afraid anymore.

Because I wasn't facing it alone.

Because we were home in each other.

Because love, it turned out, was exactly this: choosing each other, day after day, in the sacred ordinary moments that built a life.

Cherry blossoms drifted past us as we left, pink petals like confetti celebrating our journey, and I smiled.

桜の恋—Cherry Blossom Love.

It was the perfect name for what we'd created. Beautiful, transient, eternal.

All at once.

Chapter 11 : 花の終わり (The End of Flowers)

Airports are terrible places to say goodbye.

The fluorescent lights are too bright, washing out skin tones and making everyone look exhausted. The constant announcements create a soundtrack of departures, each one a reminder that someone is leaving, that someone is being left behind. And the crowds—all these strangers rushing to their own destinations, oblivious to the small tragedies playing out around them.

I stood in Narita International Airport on August fifteenth, my boarding pass crumpled in my sweating palm, and tried to memorize Yui's face one more time. As if I hadn't already committed every detail to memory over the past year.

A year. One miraculous, unexpected year that I never should have had.

Let me explain: I came to Japan for a two-week vacation. That was it. A post-graduation trip before diving into the next phase of my life—graduate school, career building, all the responsible adult things I was supposed to be focused on. Two weeks to see temples and try sushi and maybe find some philosophical inspiration before returning to reality.

I met Yui through mutual friends on day three. By week two, I was in love. And on that mountain, after barely two months together, I proposed. Reckless, impulsive, completely unlike my usual overthinking self—but it felt right in a way nothing else ever had.

The problem was my return flight was booked for three days later. Three days, and then back to America, back to the life waiting for me, back to a future that suddenly felt unbearably empty.

Then my mother called.

My well-meaning, boundary-challenged, occasionally-brilliant mother had taken it upon herself to accept a place for me in a year-long study abroad program. She hadn't consulted me. She'd just heard about the opening from a friend, decided it was perfect for her son, and committed me to twelve months of intensive Japanese philosophy and cultural studies.

I should have been furious. And I was—for about thirty seconds. Then it hit me: I didn't have to leave. Not yet. I could stay in Japan, stay with Yui, have a full year instead of three days.

So I said yes. To the program, to the unexpected gift, to the possibility of building something real instead of just a beautiful vacation romance that would fade into wistful memory.

That year became everything. We went from strangers to friends to lovers to something deeper—partners, truly. We learned each other in all the ways that matter: how we handle stress, how we communicate, how we fight and make up, how we support each other's dreams while pursuing our own.

But the program had an end date. My visa was tied to it. And no amount of wishing or hoping could extend it further. August fifteenth was always coming, and we both knew it.

Now here we were.

"You should go through security," Yui said, her voice steady despite the tears streaming down her face. "You'll miss your flight."

"I don't care about the flight."

"Franz—"

"I don't want to leave you." The words came out broken, desperate. Every cell in my body screamed at me to stay, to throw away the ticket and the life waiting back home, to choose her over everything else.

But we'd had this conversation a hundred times in the past month. I had graduate school commitments starting in three weeks. She had exhibitions lined up, her mother who needed her, her entire career being built here in Japan. Neither of us could just abandon our lives, couldn't make that sacrifice without eventually resenting it.

So we'd chosen the harder path: distance. Faith. The belief that what we'd built was strong enough to survive separation.

Yui reached up, cupping my face, forcing me to meet her red-rimmed eyes. "This isn't goodbye. This is just... a different chapter. We're going to make this work."

"How do you know?"

"Because I refuse to believe otherwise. Because you're worth the hard work. Because love doesn't stop just because geography changes." Her voice cracked, betraying the fear beneath her conviction.

I pulled her close, breathing in everything that was her—cherry blossoms and charcoal and that lavender soap. I tried to memorize the weight of her in my arms, the warmth of her body against mine, the way she fit perfectly against my chest.

"I will love you across seven seas," I whispered fiercely. "Across oceans and continents and however many thousands of miles separate us. I will call you every day. I will write you letters. I will count down until I can hold you again. Distance changes nothing—do you hear me? Nothing."

She pulled back to look at me, tears streaming freely now. "Promise me."

"I promise. Yui, I swear to you—my heart, my time, my future, all of it is yours. Geography is just logistics. We'll figure it out."

"I love you," she said, and it sounded like both a declaration and a prayer.

"I love you too. So much it scares me."

The final boarding call crackled through the terminal speakers, my name specifically mentioned this time. We'd delayed as long as possible. The moment I'd been dreading for months had arrived.

"You have to go," she said, but her hands gripped my jacket like she physically couldn't release me.

"Come with me to the gate."

She shook her head. "I can't watch you walk away. I need to remember you like this—facing me, here with me, even as you leave."

I understood. Some people need clean breaks; others need gradual goodbyes. Yui needed to remember me present, not disappearing down a corridor.

So I kissed her. Poured everything I felt into it—love and fear and desperate hope and the promise that this wasn't an ending. When we finally broke apart, several people around us had stopped to watch our drama unfold, but I didn't care.

I picked up my bag, the weight of it insignificant compared to the weight in my chest. "This isn't the end."

"This isn't the end," she echoed. "Just the hard part before the happy ending."

"I'll call you when I land."

"You better."

I forced myself to step back. Then another step. Each one feeling like tearing away pieces of my own soul. Yui stood there, arms wrapped around herself, tears flowing but wearing the bravest smile I'd ever seen.

"Franz!" she called out as I reached the security line.

I turned.

"Across seven seas," she said. "I'll love you across seven seas too."

I raised my hand in a wave, trying to memorize this final image of her. Then I turned and joined the queue, showed my documents to the uninterested security officer, and walked through the checkpoint.

When I looked back, she was gone.

The seventeen-hour flight was a blur of numbness. I sat by the window, staring at clouds and endless ocean, trying to process the magnitude of what had just happened. I'd left her. After building a life together, after becoming so intertwined I couldn't remember who I'd been before her—I'd walked away.

For what? Graduate school? Career prospects? All the practical, logical reasons that suddenly felt hollow and meaningless?

I pulled out my phone in airplane mode and scrolled through photos. A year of memories compressed into pixels: Yui laughing at my cooking disasters, both of us on that mountain, her asleep on my couch, our rooftop sanctuary, countless selfies from countless ordinary moments.

How was I supposed to function in a world where she wasn't just a room away?

But I'd made a promise. Across seven seas. Every day. Whatever it took.

I opened our shared journal and started writing:

*Hour One Without You:

Thirty thousand feet above the Pacific, heart still in Japan. Everything feels wrong. The seat is uncomfortable, the air is stale, my chest physically aches like something vital was removed.

They say distance makes the heart grow fonder. I don't need my heart to grow fonder—I'm already drowning in how much I love you. What I need is to figure out how to survive this.

But I meant every word at the airport. Seven seas. Seven thousand seas. You're mine and I'm yours, and I refuse to let distance destroy what we've built.

I miss you already. Desperately, completely, painfully.

This is just the hard part. We'll survive it. We have to.*

When the plane finally touched down in San Francisco, I turned off airplane mode and immediately called her. It was early morning in Japan, and she answered on the first ring, her voice thick with tears or sleeplessness or both.

"I'm here," I said. "Made it safely."

"Good," she whispered. "That's good."

"Did you sleep?"

"Did you?"

Neither of us had. We talked for an hour in that airport terminal, me sitting with my luggage while travelers rushed past, her probably curled up in bed clutching her phone. We didn't say anything important—just filled the silence with our voices, reassuring ourselves that the connection was still there despite the distance.

When we finally hung up, I felt fractionally better. Still heartbroken, still terrified, but less alone.

This was our new reality: stolen conversations across time zones, love maintained through screens and words, faith that technology could bridge the gap until we could be together again.

As I collected my bags and headed toward the exit where my mom would be waiting, I made a silent vow. This separation was temporary. However long it took—months, a year, whatever—I would find a way back to her. Or find a way to bring her to me.

Distance was just a problem to be solved. And I'd never been afraid of hard problems.

California felt wrong.

That was the only way I could describe it. Everything was technically familiar—my childhood bedroom that my mother had kept exactly as I'd left it, the streets I'd driven down a thousand times, the coffee shop where I'd spent countless hours studying. But it all felt like a stage set, like I was walking through someone else's life wearing a costume that no longer fit.

"You're awfully quiet," my mother said over breakfast three days after my return. "I thought you'd be excited to be home."

Home. The word stuck in my throat. When had Japan become home? When had a small apartment in Tokyo and a rooftop sanctuary and a girl with charcoal-stained fingers become more real than the house I'd grown up in?

"Just jet lag," I lied. "Still adjusting."

She studied me with that particular mother-vision that sees through everything. "Or you're missing her."

I hadn't told her much about Yui. A girlfriend, yes. Someone important, yes. But I hadn't explained the depth of it, the way loving her had fundamentally changed who I was.

"I am," I admitted. "It's harder than I expected."

"Long distance is always hard, sweetheart. But if it's meant to be—"

"Please don't finish that sentence with 'it'll work out,'" I said, perhaps more sharply than I intended. "That's not how life works. Things don't just magically work out because we want them to."

She raised her eyebrows but didn't push. That was one thing I appreciated about my mother—for all her boundary issues, she knew when to give space.

That evening, I had my first real video call with Yui since returning. We'd texted constantly, sent voice messages, had brief conversations when our schedules aligned. But this was different—actually seeing her face on my laptop screen, the familiar backdrop of her apartment behind her.

"Hi," she said softly, and just that one word made my chest ache.

"Hi yourself. What time is it there?"

"Almost noon. What time is it there?"

"Eight at night. We're really living this time zone thing, aren't we?"

She smiled, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. "Seventeen hours. That's how far apart we are now."

"Only in time. Not in any way that matters."

We talked for two hours, burning through my evening and her afternoon. She showed me a new series she was working on—ink drawings exploring the concept of distance. I showed her my new room, the campus where I'd start graduate school in a week, the view from my window that was disappointingly ordinary compared to the views we'd shared in Japan.

"I miss you," she said when we were running out of things to show each other, falling into the honesty that late-night conversations always bring.

"I miss you so much it physically hurts. Is that normal?"

"I don't know. I've never felt like this before."

"Me neither."

The call ended because she had to meet Miyu for lunch, and I had to pretend to sleep even though my body clock was still convinced it was mid-afternoon. We said goodbye reluctantly, and when her face disappeared from my screen, the loneliness hit me like a wave.

This was my life now: stolen hours across time zones, love maintained through screens and words, the constant low-grade ache of her absence.

Graduate school started, and I threw myself into it with perhaps too much intensity. Seminars on epistemology and ethics, dissertation planning, teaching assistant responsibilities. I kept busy because being busy meant less time to dwell on the empty space beside me, the phantom presence of someone who should be there but wasn't.

I called Yui every day, as promised. Sometimes just for five minutes between classes, sometimes for hours late at night. We established patterns: good morning texts (her evening, my morning), quick check-ins during lunch breaks, longer video calls on weekends when schedules aligned.

But it wasn't the same. How could it be? I couldn't reach through the screen and touch her face. Couldn't surprise her with coffee when she was stressed. Couldn't pull her close when she was sad or celebrate her victories with anything more than words and emojis.

"Tell me about your day," she'd say, and I'd recount lectures and academic discussions, trying to make them sound more interesting than they felt. In return, she'd tell me about art projects and exhibitions, sending photos of works-in-progress, sharing the small triumphs and frustrations of creative life.

We were trying. God, we were both trying so hard.

But the cracks were starting to show, hairline fractures in the foundation we'd built.

Like the time I missed her call because I was in a seminar, and by the time I called back, she was asleep. The next morning (her evening), when we finally connected, there was a brittleness to her voice that hadn't been there before.

"It's fine," she said. "I understand you were busy."

"But you're upset."

"I'm not upset. I'm just... I had something I wanted to tell you, and by the time we could talk, the moment had passed."

"Tell me now."

"It doesn't matter anymore. It was one of those things that needed to be shared in real-time."

I felt the weight of that missed moment, the way small things could become significant when you couldn't just reach across a table and connect. "I'm sorry. I'll be better about checking my phone."

"Don't apologize. This is just how it is. We have different lives now, different schedules. We can't expect to be available every second."

She was being rational, reasonable. But I heard what she wasn't saying: I needed you, and you weren't there.

Or the time I was exhausted from a particularly brutal week—three papers due, teaching responsibilities piling up, sleep deprivation making everything harder—and I was shorter with her than I meant to be.

"Can we keep this quick?" I'd said when she called. "I really need to get back to this paper."

"Oh. Sure. I'll let you go."

"Yui—"

"No, it's fine. Good luck with the paper." And she'd hung up before I could apologize, before I could explain that I wasn't tired of her, just tired in general.

We made up the next day, both of us apologizing for different things, but the incident left a residue of hurt that didn't quite wash away.

The physical distance was one thing, but the emotional distance that came with it was harder to navigate. We couldn't read each other's body language through a screen, couldn't pick up on

subtle cues that would have been obvious in person. Text messages lacked tone, leaving too much room for misinterpretation.

I started keeping a more detailed journal, not just our shared one but a private record of this experience. Trying to process the complexity of loving someone I couldn't touch, the strange liminal space of being committed but separate.

Week Six:

Talked to Yui for an hour today. She's excited about a gallery opportunity—some curator saw her work and wants to include her in a group exhibition. I'm proud of her, truly. But I also felt this flash of resentment that I won't be there to celebrate with her. That someone else will see her face light up with joy in person while I get a pixelated version through a screen.

Is this sustainable? Can love survive on virtual connection alone? She feels simultaneously very close and impossibly far away.

My classmates noticed my distraction. One of them, Marcus, cornered me after a seminar.

"You've been somewhere else lately. Everything okay?"

"Girlfriend in Japan," I said, as if that explained everything. And maybe it did.

"Ah. Long distance. That's rough."

"Yeah."

"My brother tried that for a while. Didn't work out."

I didn't want to hear about his brother. Didn't want to add another data point to the pile of long-distance relationship statistics that everyone seemed eager to share.

"We'll make it work," I said, more to convince myself than him.

That weekend, Yui and I had a good call—one of those rare ones where the connection was smooth, where we found our rhythm again, where laughter came easy and the distance felt manageable.

"I've been thinking," she said near the end, her face soft in the glow of her laptop screen.

"Maybe I could visit? In a few months, when I have a break? It's expensive, but I've been saving..."

Hope flared in my chest, sharp and bright. "Really? You'd come here?"

"I want to see your world. Meet your mother properly. Understand what your life looks like now."

"That would be... Yui, that would be everything."

"Let me look at dates and prices. No promises yet, but I want to try."

After we hung up, I felt lighter than I had in weeks. A visit. A real, physical reunion. Something concrete to look forward to instead of just endless days of absence.

I marked potential dates on my calendar, calculated how many weeks until various breaks in her schedule, started mentally planning what I'd show her, where we'd go, how many hours I could hold her before she'd have to leave again.

But beneath the excitement was a nagging worry: what if seeing each other again made the separation even harder? What if a taste of what we were missing made the hunger unbearable?

I pushed the thought away. We'd deal with that when the time came. For now, I had hope, and that was enough to keep going.

Seven seas, I'd promised. Across seven seas.

I was learning that some seas were rougher than others, that the distance wasn't just measured in miles but in missed moments and misunderstood texts and the accumulation of small hurts that couldn't be soothed with a touch.

But I wasn't giving up. Not yet.

Not when she was still the first person I thought of when I woke up and the last person I wanted to talk to before sleep. Not when hearing her voice could still transform a terrible day into something bearable. Not when the mere possibility of seeing her again could fill me with such desperate, painful hope.

We'd survive this. We had to.

Because the alternative—a world where she wasn't mine and I wasn't hers—was unthinkable.

Three months into our separation, I became an expert in time zones and international shipping.

I learned that packages sent to Japan took anywhere from seven to fourteen days, depending on customs and luck. I learned which courier services were worth the premium price and which would leave Yui standing in endless lines at the post office. I learned to pack care

packages with things that wouldn't melt or break or get confiscated—books, art supplies, handwritten letters, small meaningful trinkets that said I'm thinking of you across seven thousand miles.

The first package I sent contained a sketchbook with thick, high-quality paper—the kind she'd admired in a Tokyo art store but deemed too expensive. I'd gone back and bought it before leaving Japan, hiding it away for this exact purpose. Inside the front cover, I wrote:

For all the art you'll create while I'm gone. I can't wait to see what these pages become. Every blank space is a promise of something beautiful. Just like our future. —F

She video-called me the moment it arrived, tears streaming down her face, holding the sketchbook like it was made of gold.

"Franz, this is too much—"

"It's not enough. It'll never be enough."

"I love it. I love you."

"I love you too. Now fill those pages with something amazing and send me pictures of every single one."

She did. Over the following weeks, she'd photograph her work-in-progress and text me updates. I watched her art evolve through pixels on my phone screen, each image a small window into her world that I was no longer part of.

In return, she sent me packages too. A care package arrived in mid-October containing: Japanese snacks I'd become addicted to, a hoodie that smelled like her perfume, a USB drive full of voice messages she'd recorded—just her talking about her day, telling me stories, reading poetry aloud in Japanese. I listened to those recordings on repeat, her voice filling the silence of my empty apartment.

We maintained our shared journal, mailing it back and forth every few weeks. The entries grew longer, more detailed—both of us trying to capture not just events but feelings, trying to preserve the intimacy that distance threatened to erode.

One of her entries from November:

Day 87 without you:

Miyu asked me today if it's worth it—this constant ache, this living in two worlds at once. I wanted to tell her yes immediately, but I hesitated. Not because I doubt us, but because some days the missing you feels bigger than the having you.

Does that make sense? I love you completely, desperately, with every cell in my body. But some days I'm so lonely I can barely breathe. And then I feel guilty for feeling lonely because you're lonely too, and me being sad just makes your burden heavier.

I don't know how to do this. But I know I'm not ready to stop trying.

Reading that entry broke something in me. I called her immediately, despite it being 3 AM her time.

"Hello?" Her voice was thick with sleep.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to wake you, but I just read your journal entry and—"

"Franz, it's okay. I'm glad you called."

"It's not okay. You're hurting, and I can't fix it. I can't hold you or comfort you or do anything except apologize through a screen."

"You being sorry doesn't help either of us." Her voice was gentle but firm. "This is just hard. We knew it would be hard. But Franz, we're doing it. We're making it work, even when it hurts."

"Are we? Making it work?"

"We're still here, aren't we? Still choosing each other every day. That counts for something."

She was right, but it didn't make the ache any less sharp.

The holidays approached, bringing their own complications. Thanksgiving passed with me at my mother's table, FaceTiming Yui during what was early morning for her. She held her phone propped on her desk while she got ready for her day, and I watched her do her makeup, mundane intimacy made precious by scarcity.

"I wish you were here," I said.

"Which here? Your here or my here?"

"Any here. Just... the same here."

She smiled sadly at the screen. "Someday. Not today, but someday."

December brought the reality that we'd spend the holidays apart—her first Christmas, my mother's insistence on family traditions, the impossibility of affording last-minute international flights. We'd known this was coming, had discussed it logically, but logic didn't make it hurt less.

We scheduled a special video call for Christmas morning (her evening), and I set up my laptop with absurd care—good lighting, minimal background noise, a small wrapped gift placed within camera view.

When she appeared on screen, she was in pajamas, hair piled on top of her head, makeup-free and beautiful. Behind her, I could see a small decorated tree—something she'd never bothered with before but had set up this year because, as she later told me, she wanted to feel connected to my holiday.

"Merry Christmas," I said.

"メリークリスマス," she replied. "Can I open yours?"

"Only if I can open mine."

She'd sent a package that had arrived three days earlier, and I'd exercised superhuman restraint not opening it. Now I tore into it while she did the same with hers on her end.

Inside my box: a leather journal embossed with my initials, a framed photograph of us from our rooftop sanctuary, a knitted scarf in my favorite color that she'd made herself (badly—the stitches were uneven and it was slightly lopsided, which made it perfect), and a letter.

I looked up to see her holding the necklace I'd sent—a simple silver pendant engraved with coordinates: the exact location of the mountain where I'd proposed.

"Franz," she whispered, fingers trembling as she held it up to the camera. "This is..."

"So you always carry that moment with you. So you remember that even when we're apart, we're standing on the same earth, under the same sky, connected by more than distance can measure."

She was crying, and I was crying, and somewhere through the screen our hearts were breaking and healing simultaneously.

"Read the letter," I urged.

She opened it carefully, and I watched her face as she read:

My love,

This is our first Christmas apart. It won't be our last—distance and life will separate us at times, and that's just reality. But I want you to know that geography changes nothing about my commitment.

You are the first thought when I wake and the last before sleep. You're the voice I hear when I make decisions, the face I see when I imagine the future. You're home, even when home is seven thousand miles away.

I don't know when we'll be in the same place again. I don't know how long we'll have to endure this separation. But I know that however long it takes, you're worth it. We're worth it.

Across seven seas, remember? That wasn't just airport poetry. That was a promise.

Merry Christmas, my beautiful girl. I love you beyond reason and despite distance.

Always,
Franz

She folded the letter carefully, clutching it to her chest. "I don't deserve you."

"That's my line."

"No, I mean it. You're so good at this—the letters, the gifts, the words. I feel like I'm failing at long distance. Like I'm not doing enough."

"Yui, you're doing everything. You're staying. That's enough."

But I could see the doubt in her eyes, the wear that months of separation had created. We were both tired—tired of missing each other, tired of half-connections, tired of living lives that ran parallel but never quite touched.

January brought new challenges. My dissertation work intensified, requiring more hours and mental energy than I'd anticipated. Yui's exhibition schedule picked up, meaning late nights at the studio, weekends consumed by gallery obligations.

Our call frequency dropped from daily to every-other-day to whenever-we-could-manage. Each time we talked, we promised to do better, to make more time, but life kept getting in the way.

I missed her birthday by six hours—fell asleep after an exhausting dissertation defense meeting and woke to twelve missed calls and a text that simply said: It's okay. Get some rest.

But it wasn't okay. I'd missed her birthday. Something I'd sworn I'd never do, and I'd done it anyway.

I called her immediately, apologizing profusely, sending flowers to her apartment (they arrived two days late), but the damage was done. Not catastrophic damage—we recovered, we moved past it—but another crack in the foundation.

"We're not doing great, are we?" I said during a call in late January.

She was quiet for a long moment. "We're surviving. That's something."

"But barely. Yui, I feel like we're losing each other in slow motion."

"What do you want me to say, Franz? That everything is perfect? It's not. Long distance is exactly as hard as everyone said it would be."

"So what do we do?"

"We keep trying. What else is there?"

But I heard the exhaustion in her voice, the same exhaustion I felt. We were both running on fumes, keeping this relationship alive through sheer stubbornness more than actual joy.

That night, I wrote in my private journal:

Month Five:

I'm terrified. Not of losing her to someone else or to dramatic betrayal. I'm terrified of losing her to slow erosion—the gradual wearing away of connection until one day we look at each other through screens and realize we've become strangers who used to be in love.

How do we fight that? How do we keep the spark alive when we can't touch, can't spontaneously grab coffee, can't fall asleep beside each other?

I still love her. God, I love her so much it makes my chest physically ache. But is love enough when the logistics are impossible?

I didn't have an answer. And that terrified me most of all.

February arrived with the kind of cold that seeps into your bones and doesn't leave. Or maybe I was just cold from the inside out, the warmth of Yui's presence too far away to reach me.

Six months. Half a year since I'd held her, kissed her, seen her face without a screen between us. The anniversary passed without fanfare—we were both too tired, too worn down by the daily grind of maintaining connection across impossible distance.

My dissertation advisor scheduled more frequent meetings, pushing me to refine my thesis, to contribute to research projects, to prepare for academic conferences. Graduate school, I was learning, wasn't just intellectually demanding—it consumed your entire life if you let it. And I was letting it, partly because I needed to succeed, partly because being busy meant less time to dwell on everything I was missing.

"You look terrible," Marcus said bluntly one afternoon as we grabbed coffee between seminars.

"Thanks. Really boosting my confidence."

"I'm serious. When's the last time you slept more than five hours?"

I had to think about it. "Tuesday?"

"That was four days ago."

"Then four days ago."

He shook his head. "This is about the girlfriend, isn't it? The one in Japan?"

"It's about a lot of things. Dissertation work, teaching responsibilities, trying to maintain a relationship with someone I can't actually be with—"

"So end it."

The words hit me like a physical blow. "What?"

"End it," he repeated, not unkindly. "Look, I'm not trying to be cruel. But you're running yourself into the ground trying to be in two places at once. Something's got to give."

"She's not the thing that gives."

"Maybe she should be. If this relationship is making you this miserable—"

"I'm not miserable because of her. I'm miserable because I can't be with her."

"That's the same thing, Franz. Different words, same result."

I wanted to argue, to defend what Yui and I had. But the truth was, I was exhausted. Not just physically, though that was certainly part of it. I was emotionally depleted, running on empty,

going through the motions of my life while my heart remained stubbornly seven thousand miles away.

That evening, I had a scheduled call with Yui. But my advisor scheduled an emergency meeting at the same time—some crisis with my dissertation proposal that needed immediate attention. I texted her:

So sorry, have to reschedule. Advisor emergency. Tomorrow same time?

Her response came an hour later: Sure. Tomorrow.

No heart emoji. No understanding message about how these things happen. Just: Sure. Tomorrow.

I tried not to read too much into it. She was probably busy too, probably didn't have time for lengthy texts. But doubt crept in anyway, that insidious voice that whispered: She's pulling away. You're losing her. This is how it ends.

The next day's call was strained. We were both trying—too hard, maybe—to pretend everything was fine.

"How's the exhibition prep going?" I asked.

"Fine. Busy. You know."

"And Miyu? How's she doing?"

"She's good. Dating someone new. It's still early but seems promising."

We were filling time with surface-level updates, avoiding the deeper conversations that had once come so naturally. When had we become this? ~~People who talked at each other rather than with each other?~~

"Franz," she said suddenly, interrupting my rambling story about a departmental meeting. "Are you happy?"

The question caught me off guard. "What?"

"Are you happy? With your life, with grad school, with... this?" She gestured vaguely, encompassing the screen, the distance, the relationship itself.

"I'm... managing. It's a lot, but I'm managing."

"That's not what I asked."

I wanted to lie, to reassure her, to say everything was perfect. But I'd never been good at lying to her. "I'm not unhappy. But I'm not sure I'm happy either. I'm just... existing. Getting through each day until the next one."

She nodded slowly, her expression unreadable through the slightly pixelated video. "Me too."

The admission hung between us, heavy and honest and terrifying.

"What do we do?" I asked.

"I don't know. Keep going, I guess. What else is there?"

But her voice lacked conviction, and I suspected mine did too.

March brought a small miracle: spring break. A full week where I had no classes, no teaching responsibilities, no immediate deadline pressures. I could visit. I could actually, physically go to Japan and see her.

I checked flight prices with desperate hope, calculating how much I could afford, how much debt I was willing to take on for a week with her.

The answer was: too much. Between tuition, living expenses, and the reality of graduate student stipends, I simply didn't have the money. Not for a flight that cost more than two months of rent, not for a trip that would drain my savings and leave me struggling for months afterward.

I called Yui to tell her, hating myself for every word.

"I can't come. I'm sorry, I tried to make the numbers work, but—"

"It's okay," she said quickly. Too quickly. "I understand. Finances are tight."

"I'm so sorry. I wanted to see you, I wanted—"

"Franz, stop. It's okay. Really."

But I heard the disappointment she was trying to hide, the way her voice went flat and careful. She'd been hoping too. Maybe even started planning, imagining my visit, and now that hope was crushed.

"What if you came here instead?" I suggested. "Might be cheaper from your end?"

"I have the gallery exhibition. I can't miss it. It's—it's a big opportunity."

"Right. Of course. I'm not asking you to skip that."

"I know. But Franz, even without the exhibition, I don't think I could afford it either. I've been putting money into my art supplies, and my mother needed help with some expenses, and—"

"Hey, it's okay. We don't need to explain our financial situations to each other."

Silence stretched between us, filled with all the things we weren't saying: This is too hard. This isn't sustainable. We're both drowning and there's no rescue coming.

"So we just... keep waiting?" she finally said.

"I guess so. I don't know what else to do."

"Neither do I."

After that call, I sat in my apartment staring at my calendar, counting the months since we'd last been together. Six. And now it would be at least another three or four before there was even a possibility of reunion. Maybe longer.

A year. We'd be apart for a year, possibly more. How did people survive this? How did relationships endure such prolonged absence?

I missed her in ways that had become physical symptoms. Trouble sleeping. Loss of appetite. A constant heaviness in my chest that no amount of logic or distraction could lift. My mother noticed when I came home for a weekend.

"You're not eating enough," she said, watching me push food around my plate.

"I'm fine, Mom."

"You're not fine. You've lost weight. You look exhausted. And you're on your phone constantly—"

"I'm just checking messages—"

"From her." It wasn't a question. "Franz, honey, I'm worried about you."

"There's nothing to worry about."

"Isn't there?" She set down her fork, giving me her full attention. "You're making yourself sick over this relationship. Is it really worth it?"

Everyone kept asking me that. Is it worth it? As if love could be reduced to a cost-benefit analysis, as if I could just decide she wasn't worth the pain and walk away clean.

"She is," I said firmly. "Yui is worth it."

"Even if it's killing you?"

"I'm not dying, Mom. I'm just... struggling. There's a difference."

"Is there?"

I didn't have an answer for that.

April brought more missed connections. A call cut short because her internet died. A message misunderstood, turning into a small argument that took three days to fully resolve. Time zone confusion that left me waiting for an hour while she slept, having mixed up the conversion.

Small things. Individually, they were nothing. But cumulatively, they were everything—each small failure adding to the weight we were both carrying.

"I'm tired," she admitted during a late-night call. It was early morning for her, and she looked exhausted, shadows under her eyes that I could see even through the screen.

"Me too."

"Not just physically. I'm tired of missing you. Tired of video calls that never feel like enough. Tired of going to bed alone every night and waking up to an empty apartment."

"Yui—"

"I'm not saying I want to end this," she continued quickly. "I'm just... I'm being honest. This is so much harder than I thought it would be."

"I know. God, I know."

"Do you ever wonder if we made a mistake? If we should have just... let it end when you left Japan?"

The question stabbed through me. "Do you wish we had?"

"No. Yes. I don't know." She rubbed her face tiredly. "I love you. That part isn't confusing. But sometimes I wonder if loving each other is enough when everything else is working against us."

"What are you saying?"

"I don't know what I'm saying. I'm just... I'm overwhelmed. And lonely. And I don't know how much longer I can do this."

My heart was racing, panic setting in. "Are you breaking up with me?"

"No. Maybe. I don't know. I'm just being honest about where I am right now."

We sat in heavy silence, the weight of her uncertainty pressing down on me through the screen.

"I don't want to lose you," I said finally, my voice breaking. "Yui, please. I know this is hard. I know we're both struggling. But please don't give up on us."

"I'm not giving up. I'm just... I'm at my limit, Franz. I don't know how much more I can take."

"Then we'll figure something out. A visit, a plan, something concrete to look forward to. Just don't leave me. Please don't leave me."

"I'm not leaving," she said, but she didn't sound convinced. "I'm just... I need to think. Can we talk tomorrow? I'm too tired to have this conversation properly."

"Yeah. Of course. Tomorrow."

But when we hung up, I felt like I was drowning. Like everything we'd built was slipping through my fingers and I was powerless to hold on.

I stayed awake all night, staring at the ceiling, running through every conversation we'd had over the past months, trying to pinpoint where it had started to fall apart. But there was no single moment, no dramatic betrayal or massive fight.

Just distance. Just time. Just the slow, inevitable erosion of connection when two people couldn't actually be together.

At dawn, I wrote in my journal:

Month Seven:

I think I'm losing her. Not to someone else, but to the weight of this distance. We're both so tired, so worn down. And I don't know how to fix it. I don't know how to love her hard enough across seven seas to make up for not being able to hold her.

Maybe everyone was right. Maybe long distance doesn't work. Maybe love isn't enough when geography and life circumstances conspire against you.

But I can't give up. Even if she does, I can't. She's still the best thing that ever happened to me, and I refuse to believe this is how our story ends.

I won't let it be.

Chapter 12: 冬の沈黙 (Winter's Silence)

Silence, I learned, has weight.

It presses down on your chest, makes breathing difficult, turns seconds into hours. Yui hadn't called. Hadn't texted. For fourteen hours and twenty-three minutes—yes, I was counting—there had been nothing but silence. And in that silence, I was drowning.

The last thing she'd said before hanging up was: I need to think. Can we talk tomorrow?

Tomorrow. That word felt like a life sentence.

I sat at my desk through the entire night, watching the sky shift from black to grey to the pale wash of morning. My phone remained stubbornly silent beside me, screen dark, no notifications. I'd checked it approximately every three minutes—another obsessive habit I'd developed in the past seven months—terrified I'd somehow missed her call, knowing I hadn't.

My laptop was open to a half-written dissertation chapter that I couldn't focus on. The words blurred together, meaningless. How was I supposed to write about existential philosophy when my own existence felt like it was unraveling?

I don't know how much longer I can do this.

Her words played on loop in my mind, each repetition like a knife twisting deeper. What did it mean? Was she saying she wanted to break up but couldn't bring herself to do it directly? Was she waiting for me to be the one to end it, to spare her the guilt? Or was she genuinely just exhausted and needed space to process?

I wanted to call her. God, I wanted to hear her voice, to talk this through, to fix whatever was breaking between us. But she'd asked for time to think, and calling her would be violating that boundary. So I sat in my apartment, paralyzed between action and inaction, drowning in silence.

My mother knocked on my bedroom door around eight in the morning.

"Franz? You up?"

"Yeah," I croaked, my voice rough from disuse.

She opened the door, took one look at me—still in yesterday's clothes, unshaven, red-eyed—and her expression shifted to concern. "Did you sleep at all?"

"Not really."

"Is this about Yui?"

Everything was about Yui. Every thought, every fear, every moment of my existence had become tangled up in her presence or absence. "We had a difficult conversation. She needed space. I'm giving it to her."

My mother sat on the edge of my bed, studying me with that particular maternal mixture of love and worry. "Franz, I hate seeing you like this."

"I'm fine."

"You're not fine. You haven't been fine for months." She paused, choosing her words carefully. "Maybe it's time to consider whether this relationship is healthy for either of you."

"Don't." I stood abruptly, needing to move, to do something with the anxious energy coursing through me. "Please don't tell me to end it. Everyone keeps saying that, like it's simple, like I can just stop loving her because it's hard."

"I'm not saying stop loving her. I'm saying maybe love isn't enough when the circumstances are impossible."

"It has to be enough. What else is there?"

She looked at me sadly. "Sustainability. Balance. Being able to function in your actual life instead of just surviving day to day."

I wanted to argue, to defend what Yui and I had. But looking at myself objectively—sleep-deprived, unable to focus on work, consumed by anxiety—I couldn't deny that she had a point. This wasn't sustainable. I was barely functioning.

After my mother left, I finally gave in and texted Yui:

I know you need time. Just wanted you to know I'm here whenever you're ready to talk. I love you.

Three hours later, she responded:

I love you too. I'm sorry about yesterday. Can we video call tonight? 8pm your time?

Relief flooded through me so intensely I felt dizzy. She was still here. Still willing to talk. Still saying she loved me.

Yes. Absolutely. I'll be here.

I spent the day in a strange state of suspended animation—anxious anticipation mixed with dread. What would she say? Had she decided we should break up? That she needed a break? Or had she simply needed a night to process her exhaustion and was ready to recommit?

I cleaned my apartment obsessively, showered, shaved, changed clothes—as if looking presentable through a screen would somehow improve the outcome of our conversation. At 7:45pm, I was already sitting in front of my laptop, waiting.

She called at exactly eight o'clock. Her face appeared on screen, and my heart clenched. She looked as exhausted as I felt—dark circles under her eyes, hair pulled back messily, wearing an oversized sweater that I recognized as one she'd stolen from me before I left Japan.

"Hi," she said softly.

"Hi. How are you?"

"Honestly? Not great. You?"

"Same."

We sat in awkward silence for a moment—something that had never happened between us before. We'd always been able to talk, to fill silences comfortably. But now there was a distance between us that had nothing to do with geography.

"I'm sorry about yesterday," she said finally. "I shouldn't have dumped all that on you and then just... shut down."

"Don't apologize for being honest. I'd rather know where you are than have you pretend everything's fine."

"But nothing I said was fair to you. You're struggling too, and I made it all about me—"

"Yui, stop. This isn't about fairness. We're both drowning, and we're allowed to say so."

She nodded, blinking back tears. "I've been thinking a lot since yesterday. About us, about what we're doing, whether..."

She trailed off, and panic seized me. "Whether what?"

"Whether this is working. Whether we're helping each other or just making each other miserable."

"We're not making each other miserable. The distance is making us miserable. That's different."

"Is it? Franz, when was the last time we had a conversation that wasn't about how hard this is? When was the last time we were actually happy instead of just getting through another day?"

I tried to think back. Our anniversary call had been bittersweet. Christmas was painful. Every recent conversation had been tinged with exhaustion and longing. "We have good moments—"

"Moments, yes. But Franz, we're living for moments instead of actually living. My art is suffering because I'm too sad to create. You're not sleeping, not eating properly. We're both just... existing. Waiting for some future reunion that we can't even plan because we don't have the money or time."

"So what are you saying? That we should give up?"

"I don't know what I'm saying. I just know I can't keep doing this the way we have been. Something needs to change."

"Then we'll change it. We'll figure out a visit. I'll get a part-time job, save money—"

"And when? In three months? Six? And then what—we get a week together and then another year of this?"

Her words hit like physical blows because she was right. Even if we managed a visit, it would just be a temporary reprieve before returning to this unbearable distance.

"What do you want me to say?" I asked, hearing the desperation in my own voice. "That I'm okay with losing you? I'm not. Yui, I would do anything to make this work—"

"That's the problem. We're both willing to sacrifice everything, and we're destroying ourselves in the process."

"So we should just... what? Break up? After everything?"

"I don't want to break up," she said, and she was crying now, tears streaming down her face. "Franz, I love you so much. But I don't know if love is enough anymore. I don't know if we can survive this."

I felt like my chest was caving in. "We can. We will. We just need—"

"What? What do we need that we don't already have? We have love, commitment, good intentions. And it's still not working."

Silence fell between us again, heavy and terrible. I stared at her pixelated face on my screen, separated by technology and distance and circumstances neither of us could control, and felt utterly helpless.

"I can't lose you," I said finally, my voice breaking. "Yui, please. Don't give up on us."

"I'm not giving up. But we can't keep doing this. We need to be realistic about our options."

"What options?"

She took a shaky breath. "We could take a break. Not a breakup, but... space. Stop trying so hard to maintain constant connection and just... let ourselves breathe. See if that helps."

"A break." The word tasted bitter. "That's just a breakup with false hope attached."

"Or it's a way to gain perspective. To figure out what we really want without the pressure of daily check-ins and mandatory video calls."

"Is that what this has become to you? Obligations?"

"Don't twist my words. You know that's not what I meant."

But I was spiraling now, fear turning to defensive anger. "It sounds like you've already made your decision. Like you're just looking for my permission to walk away."

"That's not fair—"

"None of this is fair! You think I want this? You think I like feeling like I'm losing you in slow motion? But I'm still here, still fighting, still believing we can make it work—"

"And I'm tired of fighting!" Her voice rose, sharp with frustration. "I'm exhausted, Franz. I'm twenty-three years old and I feel ancient. I love you, but I'm so tired."

The anger drained out of me, leaving only hollowness. "I'm tired too."

We sat in silence again, both of us crying now, both of us broken and hurting and completely lost.

"What do we do?" I asked finally.

"I don't know. I really don't know."

The call ended shortly after, both of us too drained to continue. No resolution, no plan, just two people who loved each other and had no idea how to make that love sustainable across impossible distance.

I sat staring at my dark laptop screen long after she was gone, feeling the weight of winter settle into my bones. Cold. Silent. Unbearable.

Somewhere in Japan, Yui was probably doing the same thing—sitting alone in her apartment, crying, wondering how something that had felt so right could go so wrong.

And between us: seven thousand miles of ocean and no bridge strong enough to cross it.

And across seas, oceans, and time, there was another suffering her fate.

My mother called on a Tuesday afternoon, which meant she had something serious to discuss. She never called midweek unless it was important—or unless she was worried.

"*ψい、元氣？*" Her voice carried that particular tone of concern wrapped in casualness that mothers perfect over decades.

"I'm fine, Mom. How are you?"

"Don't deflect. I spoke with Miyu's mother yesterday. She mentioned you've been... struggling."

Of course she did. In our community, mothers talked, which meant privacy was a pleasant fiction we all pretended existed. I made a mental note to gently murder Miyu later.

"I'm not struggling. I'm just busy with work—"

"Is this about the American boy?"

Franz. She always called him "the American boy" as if he didn't have a name, as if reducing him to his nationality somehow made him less real, less significant.

"His name is Franz, and yes, we're going through a difficult time. Long distance is hard."

"Then why are you doing it?" She asked it so simply, as if the answer should be equally simple. "Yui, you're twenty-three. This should be the best time of your life—building your career, enjoying your youth. Instead, you're crying over video calls and making yourself sick over a boy who isn't even here."

"I'm not making myself sick—"

"Miyu's mother said you've lost weight. That you barely leave your apartment except for work. That you're not eating properly."

Wonderful. The full surveillance report. I closed my eyes, counting to five before responding.
"I'm fine, Mom. Just stressed with the upcoming exhibition."

"The exhibition you almost pulled out of because you were too depressed to create?"

How did she know that? I'd mentioned it to Miyu in confidence, and apparently confidence meant absolutely nothing in our social circle.

"I didn't pull out. I'm participating. Everything is fine."

"Everything is not fine." Her voice softened slightly. "Sweetheart, I'm not trying to be cruel. I'm worried about you. This relationship is making you miserable."

"You don't understand—"

"I understand perfectly. You fell in love with someone who lives on the other side of the world, and now you're both paying the price for that choice."

"It's not that simple."

"Isn't it? Yui, listen to me. I know you think this is romantic—the long-distance love, the waiting, the sacrifice. But I've watched you wither over these past months. Your art is suffering. Your health is suffering. And for what? A boy who can't be here for you?"

"He's not just 'a boy.' I love him."

"Love shouldn't make you this unhappy."

The words hit harder than I expected, maybe because they echoed my own doubts, the thoughts I'd been trying to suppress. "I have to go, Mom. I have a call with Franz soon."

"Of course you do. You always have a call with Franz. When was the last time you spent an evening with your actual friends instead of waiting for him to be available?"

"That's not fair—"

"Life isn't fair, sweetheart. But you're making it harder than it needs to be. Think about what I said, please. Really think about whether this relationship is worth what you're sacrificing for it."

She hung up before I could respond, leaving me sitting in my apartment with her words echoing in the sudden silence.

When was the last time I'd seen my friends? Really seen them, not just quick coffee dates squeezed between Franz's schedule and mine? When was the last time I'd created art without the cloud of sadness hanging over me? When was the last time I'd felt like myself instead of just "Franz's long-distance girlfriend who's barely holding it together"?

I looked around my apartment—the space that had once felt like a sanctuary now felt like a waiting room. Everything was in limbo. I hadn't redecorated since Franz left because it felt wrong to make changes without him. I hadn't bought new furniture because what if he came to visit and didn't like it? I'd put my life on pause, waiting for a future that never seemed to arrive.

My phone buzzed with a text from Franz:

Ready for our call? I miss your face.

I stared at the message, feeling a complicated tangle of emotions. Love, yes. But also resentment. Exhaustion. And beneath it all, a growing seed of doubt that my mother had just watered.

I texted back: Can we push it back an hour? Something came up.

His response was immediate: Is everything okay?

How did I answer that? No, everything isn't okay. My mother just spent twenty minutes telling me our relationship is destroying me, and I couldn't really argue because part of me thinks she's right.

Instead, I typed: Fine. Just need to handle something. Talk soon.

I called Miyu, who answered on the third ring. "Before you yell at me, I didn't tell my mom anything specific. She just noticed you've been MIA and put two and two together."

"Your mom told my mom I'm withering away and never leave my apartment."

"Are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Withering away. Yui, when was the last time you came out with us? Last weekend we invited you to that gallery opening and you said you had to call Franz. The weekend before that, you canceled dinner because of the time zone thing. You're becoming a hermit."

"I'm not—" I stopped, because she was right. I'd been declining invitations, canceling plans, organizing my entire life around Franz's schedule. "It's just temporary. Once we figure out a visit—"

"You've been saying that for months. And even if you do visit, then what? You get two weeks together and then back to this?"

"Why is everyone suddenly against us? You liked Franz. You thought we were good together."

"We did. We do. But Yui, that was when he was here. When we could all see how happy you were. Now?" She paused. "Now you're just sad all the time. And we miss you. Not the version of you that's counting down hours until the next call—the actual you. The one who used to drag us to weird art installations and stayed out too late drinking cheap wine and laughed without it sounding like it hurt."

I felt tears building but forced them back. "I don't know how to do this. I love him, Miyu. But everyone's right—I'm miserable. And I don't know if that's because of him or because of the situation or because I'm just not strong enough to handle long distance."

"Maybe it doesn't matter why. Maybe what matters is that you're not okay, and something needs to change."

After we hung up, I sat with my sketch pad, trying to draw something—anything—but my hand wouldn't cooperate. Every line felt wrong. Every image that came to mind was tinged with melancholy. I was supposed to be preparing pieces for the exhibition, but all I could create was sadness.

An hour later, I called Franz as promised. He appeared on screen looking hopeful but wary.

"Hey. Everything okay? Your text worried me."

"My mother called."

His expression shifted to understanding. "Ah. Let me guess—she thinks you should break up with me."

"She didn't say it that explicitly, but yes. That was the general message."

"What did you tell her?"

"That she doesn't understand. That it's more complicated than she thinks." I paused. "But Franz, she had some points. Points I've been trying to ignore."

"Like what?"

"Like how I've isolated myself. How I'm not creating good art anymore. How my whole life has become about waiting for you instead of actually living."

"So what are you saying?"

There was an edge to his voice—defensive, scared. I understood it. I felt the same way. But we couldn't keep avoiding this conversation.

"I'm saying maybe everyone's right. Maybe this isn't sustainable. Maybe we're holding on to something that's actually hurting us more than helping us."

"We talked about this yesterday. Are we really doing this again?"

"We didn't resolve anything yesterday. We just... stopped talking because we were too tired. But Franz, the problems are still there. My mother is still worried. My friends miss me. My art is suffering. And I don't know how to fix any of it without changing something fundamental."

"So change something. Take more time for yourself. See your friends. I'll be more flexible with schedules—"

"It's not about schedules!" The frustration bubbled over before I could stop it. "It's about the fact that maintaining our relationship takes so much energy that there's nothing left for anything else. I'm exhausted, Franz. Emotionally, physically, creatively—I'm running on empty."

"Then what do you want from me? Tell me what to do and I'll do it."

"That's exactly the problem. You can't fix this. Neither of us can. Because the fundamental issue is that we're seven thousand miles apart and neither of us can change that reality."

Silence fell between us, heavy with all the things we were thinking but not saying.

"Your mother got to you," Franz said finally, and there was bitterness in his voice. "She convinced you this is impossible, and now you're giving up."

"Don't blame my mother. She's just saying out loud what I've been thinking for weeks."

"You've been thinking about ending this for weeks?"

"I've been thinking that maybe we made a mistake. Maybe trying to do long distance was naive. Maybe love isn't enough when everything else is working against us."

"So that's it? Your mother disapproves and your friends miss you, so you're just going to throw away everything we built?"

"That's not fair—"

"None of this is fair! I'm fighting for us while you're letting everyone convince you to give up!"

"I'm not giving up. I'm being realistic!"

We were both raising our voices now, months of tension and exhaustion spilling over into an argument that neither of us wanted but couldn't seem to stop.

"Realistic," Franz repeated bitterly. "That's what people call it when they're too scared to keep trying."

"And stubborn is what people call it when they refuse to admit something isn't working!" I shot back. "Franz, why are we doing this? Why are we making each other miserable? Is this really what love is supposed to feel like?"

"It feels like this because it's hard. Because we're fighting for something worthwhile—"

"Or because we're too proud to admit we made a mistake."

The words hung in the air between us, brutal in their honesty.

Franz's face on the screen looked stricken, like I'd physically struck him. "You think we're a mistake?"

"I think trying to maintain this relationship across impossible distance might be. That doesn't mean what we had wasn't real or important or beautiful. But Franz, maybe it's okay to acknowledge that circumstances defeated us. That we gave it our best and it wasn't enough."

"It could be enough if you'd stop listening to everyone else—"

"I'm listening to myself!" Tears were streaming down my face now. "I'm listening to the part of me that's dying slowly because I can't be with you but I also can't move on. I'm stuck in limbo, and Franz, I can't do it anymore."

"So what are you saying? Are you breaking up with me?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I don't know."

"That's helpful. Really helpful, Yui."

"I'm sorry I don't have all the answers! I'm sorry I can't just keep pretending this is fine when it's clearly not!"

"I'm not pretending it's fine. I know it's hard. But I thought we were in this together—"

"We are. But maybe being together means being honest about when something isn't working instead of just powering through out of stubbornness."

Franz was quiet for a long moment, and when he spoke again, his voice was flat, emotionless.
"So you want out. Just say it clearly instead of dancing around it."

"That's not what I said—"

"It's exactly what you said. You're just too afraid to be direct about it."

"Don't put words in my mouth—"

"I don't need to. You've made yourself perfectly clear. Your mother thinks I'm a waste of your time, your friends miss you, your art is suffering, and apparently, I'm the problem. The convenient problem that lives seven thousand miles away and can be discarded when it gets too difficult."

"Franz, that's not—"

"I have to go. I can't do this right now."

"Wait, don't hang up—"

But the screen went black, and he was gone.

I sat staring at my laptop, at my own reflection in the darkened screen, and felt completely hollow. That hadn't gone how I intended. I hadn't wanted to fight. I'd just wanted to be honest about my struggles, to have a real conversation about our options. But instead, we'd hurt each other, said things we couldn't take back, and left everything in worse shape than before.

My phone buzzed with a text from Franz:

I'm sorry for hanging up. I just needed space. I love you. I'm scared we're losing each other, and I don't know how to stop it.

I typed back through tears:

I love you too. I'm scared too. I don't want to lose you. But I also don't know how to keep doing this.

His response came several minutes later:

Can we talk tomorrow? When we're both calmer?

Yes. Tomorrow. Get some sleep.

You too. I'm sorry for yelling.

Me too. Goodnight, Franz.

Goodnight, Yui.

I set my phone down and looked around my empty apartment. Outside, Tokyo hummed with life—people going about their evenings, living their lives, not trapped in impossible long-distance relationships with no clear solution.

My mother's words echoed again: Love shouldn't make you this unhappy.

But what if you loved someone and the circumstances made happiness impossible? What if you had to choose between love and your own wellbeing? Was that giving up, or was it self-preservation?

I didn't know. And that uncertainty felt like its own form of torture.

I picked up my sketch pad one more time and finally managed to draw something: two figures, separated by an ocean, reaching toward each other but never quite touching. The space between them filled with all the words we couldn't say, all the touches we couldn't share, all the love that somehow wasn't enough to bridge the distance.

I titled it 冬の沈黙—Winter's Silence.

Then I closed the pad and went to bed, hoping tomorrow would bring clarity that today had failed to provide.

The fate was not good on Franz's Side too

I forgot to eat on Tuesday.

Not intentionally—I just... forgot. Sat at my desk for fourteen hours straight, staring at the same paragraph of my dissertation that had been making no sense for three days, and didn't realize I hadn't consumed anything except coffee until my mother knocked on my door around nine at night.

"Franz, I made dinner—" She stopped mid-sentence, taking in the state of my room. Laundry piled in corners. Empty coffee mugs covering every surface. Curtains drawn even though it was evening. Me, still in yesterday's clothes, unshaven, looking like I'd been through a war.

"I'm not hungry."

"You need to eat something. You're wasting away."

"I said I'm not hungry." The words came out sharper than I intended, and I saw her flinch.

"Franz—"

"Can you just leave me alone? Please? I have work to do."

She left quietly, and I felt immediately guilty but couldn't muster the energy to apologize. Everything felt like too much effort—basic human interaction, personal hygiene, pretending I was okay when I clearly wasn't.

My phone buzzed. Another text from Yui. We'd been trying to "communicate better" after our fight, which mostly meant sending careful, measured messages that said nothing real.

How's your day going?

How was my day going? I'd spent four hours trying to write two paragraphs. I'd snapped at my mother for the crime of caring about me. I'd contemplated just giving up on my dissertation entirely because what was the point of any of it when the person I loved was slipping away and I was powerless to stop it.

Fine. Busy with work. You?

I couldn't tell her the truth. Couldn't add my deterioration to her list of worries. So I lied, as I'd been lying for weeks now, pretending I was handling this better than I was.

Wednesday brought a meeting with my dissertation advisor, Professor Chen. I'd missed our last two scheduled meetings—one because I'd overslept after being up all night on a call with Yui, another because I'd simply forgotten it existed.

"Franz, I'm concerned," she said, looking at the pages I'd submitted—work that would have embarrassed my undergrad self, let alone a graduate student. "This isn't your usual quality. The argumentation is weak, the citations are inconsistent, and honestly, it reads like you wrote it in a single sitting while distracted."

Because I had. At three in the morning, fueled by desperation and caffeine, trying to produce something—anything—to show I was still capable of academic work.

"I'll revise it."

"That's what you said about the last draft. Franz, what's going on? You were one of my strongest students. Now you're barely meeting minimum requirements."

"I'm just having a rough semester—"

"This is beyond a rough semester. Your work is suffering. Your attendance is sporadic. Other faculty have mentioned you seem withdrawn, distracted. If there are personal issues affecting your performance, we have resources—"

"I don't need resources. I need time. I'll do better, I promise."

But even as I said it, I knew it was a lie. How could I do better when I could barely function? When every ounce of my mental energy was consumed by anxiety about Yui, about our relationship, about the slow-motion disaster of our lives falling apart in parallel?

"I'm giving you two weeks," Professor Chen said, her tone kind but firm. "Two weeks to submit substantial revisions. If you can't deliver, we'll need to discuss whether continuing in the program is in your best interest."

The threat of being kicked out should have terrified me. Instead, I felt nothing. Just a distant acknowledgment that I was failing at yet another thing, adding it to the growing list of ways I was disappointing everyone.

Thursday, Marcus invited me to grab drinks with some classmates. I almost declined—as I'd been declining most invitations—but my mother's worried face when she'd seen my room guilted me into accepting.

The bar was crowded, loud with conversation and laughter. Our group claimed a corner booth, and for the first hour, I tried. I really did. Participated in conversations, laughed at appropriate moments, ordered a beer I didn't drink.

But I kept checking my phone. Yui should be awake now—it was morning in Tokyo. Why hadn't she texted? Was she okay? Was she having second thoughts about us? Was she with her mother, having another conversation about how I was ruining her life?

"Earth to Franz," Marcus said, waving a hand in front of my face. "You still with us?"

"Sorry, what?"

"I was asking if you'd started writing your conference proposal. The deadline's next week."

Conference proposal. Right. The thing I'd forgotten about entirely. "Not yet. Been busy with other work."

"You always say that. 'Busy with other work.' But Franz, you're not actually doing the work. I've seen you in the library—you just stare at your laptop for hours."

"Thanks for the observation."

"I'm not trying to be a dick. I'm worried about you."

"Everyone's worried about me. Everyone has opinions about my life. It's getting really old."

The table went quiet. I'd said it too loudly, too aggressively. Everyone was looking at me.

"Franz—" Marcus started.

"You know what? I need some air."

I pushed out of the booth, grabbed my jacket, and left without saying goodbye. Behind me, I heard someone say, "What's his problem?" and someone else respond, "The girlfriend thing. He's been a mess since she stayed in Japan."

Outside, the cold air hit me like a slap. I stood on the sidewalk, breathing hard, fighting the urge to scream or punch something or just break down completely.

My phone buzzed. Marcus: You okay, man?

No. I wasn't okay. I hadn't been okay for months. But admitting that felt like admitting defeat.

Fine. Just needed space. Going home.

I walked the three miles back to my apartment instead of calling a ride, hoping the physical exertion would calm the chaos in my mind. It didn't. By the time I arrived, I was just cold, exhausted, and still completely unmoored.

Friday morning, I woke to five missed calls from Yui and a text: We need to talk. Call me when you wake up.

My stomach dropped. Nothing good ever started with "we need to talk." I called her immediately, not even pausing to fully wake up.

"Hey," she answered, her voice flat. "Thanks for calling back."

"What's wrong? Your text scared me."

"Nothing's wrong. Well, everything's wrong, but nothing new. I just... Franz, this isn't working."

There it was. The words I'd been dreading. "What isn't working?"

"This. Us. The way we're trying to maintain something that's clearly destroying us both."

"We can fix it—"

"Can we? Because from where I'm sitting, we've been trying to fix it for months and it's only getting worse. You're struggling. I'm struggling. We're both miserable, and for what?"

"For each other. For what we have—"

"What do we have, Franz? Really? We have scheduled phone calls where we both pretend to be okay. We have messages that say nothing real. We have a relationship that exists entirely in theory while our actual lives fall apart."

"That's not fair."

"Isn't it? Be honest—when was the last time you were genuinely happy? Not just relieved to hear from me, but actually happy?"

I couldn't answer. Because she was right. Happiness had become something I remembered rather than something I felt.

"That's what I thought," she said quietly. "Franz, I love you. But I think we need to acknowledge that love isn't enough to overcome impossible circumstances."

"Don't say that. Please don't say that."

"Why not? Because it hurts? It hurts either way. The truth hurts, and the lie that we can keep doing this hurts. At least the truth has the benefit of being honest."

We talked for another hour—in circles, in tears, in desperate attempts to find a solution that didn't exist. Eventually, we agreed to "think about things" and "talk more later," which felt like just delaying the inevitable.

After we hung up, I sat in my apartment—my disaster of an apartment with its unwashed dishes and unmade bed and general evidence of my inability to function—and felt something crack inside me.

I was losing her. Not to someone else, not to a specific betrayal or dramatic event. I was losing her to logistics, to geography, to the simple reality that love couldn't bridge an ocean when neither of us had the resources to cross it physically.

And I couldn't fix it. I couldn't problem-solve my way out of this. I couldn't think harder or work smarter or try better. The situation was simply, fundamentally, impossibly broken.

Saturday, I didn't leave my room. Ignored my mother's knocks. Ignored Marcus's texts checking if I was alive. Ignored everything except the thoughts spiraling in my mind—variations on the same theme: I'm losing her, I'm losing her, I'm losing her.

I tried to work on my dissertation and ended up staring at a blank screen for three hours. Tried to eat and managed two bites before my stomach rejected it. Tried to sleep and lay awake replaying every conversation with Yui, analyzing every word for hidden meanings, torturing myself with might-have-beens and if-onlys.

By Sunday evening, I'd hit some kind of bottom. Not rock bottom—there were surely lower places to fall—but a bottom nonetheless. I sat on my bedroom floor, back against the bed, phone in hand, scrolling through photos of Yui. Hundreds of them. Our entire relationship documented in digital images that felt simultaneously very recent and impossibly distant.

Her laughing at something I'd said. Both of us on that mountain. Her asleep on my couch. The two of us at our rooftop sanctuary. Her showing me a new piece of art. Me attempting to cook and failing spectacularly while she documented my culinary crimes.

We'd been happy. So fucking happy. How had we gotten from there to here?

I called her without planning to, needing to hear her voice, needing connection even though every conversation lately just made things worse.

She answered on the fourth ring. "Franz? It's late there—"

"I can't do this." The words came out broken. "Yui, I can't lose you. I can't."

"Franz—"

"No, listen. I know everything is falling apart. I know we're both barely hanging on. But I can't accept that this is how it ends. After everything, after all the promises and plans and love—I can't just let it go."

"I don't want to let it go either," she said, and she was crying now too. "But Franz, wanting something isn't enough to make it work. We've wanted this to work for months, and look where we are."

"So what do we do?"

"I don't know. I honestly don't know."

We stayed on the phone for an hour, mostly in silence, just the comfort of knowing the other was there. When we finally said goodnight, I felt even more hollow than before.

After hanging up, I just... broke. Completely, utterly broke. All the tension I'd been holding, all the fear and frustration and grief—it came pouring out in ugly, gasping sobs that I couldn't control.

I cried for what we'd had. For what we were losing. For the future I'd imagined that was slipping away. For the person I'd become—bitter, angry, barely functional—so different from who I'd been when I was with her in Japan.

I cried until I had nothing left, until my body was empty and my mind was quiet, until exhaustion finally, mercifully pulled me under into dreamless sleep there on the floor of my room, still fully clothed, phone clutched in my hand, tear-stained and broken.

And somewhere across seven seas, I knew she was doing the same thing.

Both of us drowning alone, unable to reach each other, unable to let go.

Winter's silence had never felt so suffocating.

Love, they say, conquers all.

But love never promised to conquer distance. Love never promised to survive when two people, no matter how deeply they care, are torn apart by circumstances neither can control.

In California, a boy lay on his bedroom floor, exhausted from crying, phone still clutched in his hand. His dissertation sat unfinished. His friendships were fraying. His mother worried in the next room, listening to the silence that had replaced her son's laughter. He was drowning in an ocean that had no name—not grief, not quite, because she wasn't gone. Not anger, because there was no one to blame. Just the slow, suffocating weight of loving someone he couldn't reach.

In Tokyo, a girl sat by her window watching the city lights blur through tears. Her sketchpad lay abandoned, filled with half-finished drawings that all told the same story: separation, longing, love that hurt more than it healed. Her mother's words echoed in the apartment's silence. Her friends had stopped inviting her out. She was disappearing—not physically, but in

all the ways that mattered. Fading into a ghost version of herself, haunted by a relationship that existed only through screens and scheduled calls.

Seven thousand miles between them.

Seventeen hours of time difference.

And an ever-widening gap that no amount of love could bridge.

They still said "I love you" every day. Still made promises about visits that might never happen. Still held on to hope that was becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish from delusion.

But hope, like love, has its limits.

And both of them were reaching theirs.

Two people, two separate prisons of circumstance, both suffering the same fate in different languages. Both wondering the same thing: When does perseverance become self-destruction? When does love become the thing killing you rather than the thing keeping you alive?

Neither had the answer yet.

But the question was growing louder with each passing day.

The cruellest part? They were both fighting the same battle, carrying the same burden, drowning in the same despair. But they were doing it alone. The very distance that was destroying them also prevented them from being there for each other in the ways that mattered most.

A hug couldn't travel through fiber optic cables. A comforting touch couldn't be transmitted via satellite. Presence—real, physical, tangible presence—couldn't be replicated by even the best technology.

And so they suffered separately, together. Connected by love, separated by everything else.

The universe, it seemed, had a cruel sense of irony. Giving them each other only to place them in worlds that couldn't coexist. Letting them taste happiness just long enough to make its absence unbearable.

Some love stories end with a bang—betrayal, drama, explosive confrontations that provide closure through their very intensity.

This one was ending with a whimper. A slow fade. A quiet surrender to forces bigger than either of them could fight.

And perhaps that was the saddest ending of all.

Some love stories end with a bang—betrayal, drama, explosive confrontations that provide closure through their very intensity.

This one was ending with a whimper. A slow fade. A quiet surrender to forces bigger than either of them could fight.

And perhaps that was the saddest ending of all.

But let us return to Tokyo, where another heart was breaking under different pressures, carrying burdens Franz would never fully know about.

My mother started coming over unannounced.

It began two weeks after our last phone argument—the one where she'd told me I was wasting my youth on the American boy. I'd thought the conversation was over, that we'd agreed to disagree and move on. But my mother has never been good at letting things go when she's convinced she's right.

The first time, she brought groceries. "You're not eating properly," she said, pushing past me into my apartment before I could protest. She took one look at my kitchen—empty cupboards, unwashed dishes in the sink, evidence of someone who'd given up on basic self-care—and her lips pressed into that thin line of disapproval I knew so well.

"I'm fine, Mom."

"You're not fine. Look at this place. Look at yourself."

I glanced down. Old sweatpants, Franz's hoodie that I'd been wearing for three days straight, hair unwashed and pulled into a messy bun. When had I stopped caring about my appearance?

"I've just been busy—"

"Busy wallowing. Busy destroying yourself over someone who isn't here." She started putting away groceries, moving through my kitchen with efficient disapproval. "Yui, this needs to stop."

"What needs to stop?"

"This." She gestured vaguely, encompassing me, my apartment, my life. "This obsession with a relationship that's clearly making you miserable."

"I'm not obsessed—"

"You are. And it's affecting everything. Your art, your health, your future. Do you know what Mrs. Nakamura told me? That the gallery is concerned about your upcoming pieces. That they're all too dark, too depressing. That buyers want beauty, not despair."

Shame burned through me. The exhibition. I'd been so consumed by my relationship drama that I'd forgotten other people were counting on me, had invested in my work, expected me to deliver something worthwhile.

"I'll fix it—"

"When? Between crying sessions and video calls with Franz? Yui, you need to make a choice. Your art or this boy. Your future or this fantasy. You can't have both."

After she left, I looked at my recent work spread across my studio space. She was right. Everything was dark—muddy colors, harsh lines, images of separation and longing. Beautiful in their pain, maybe, but not what I'd promised the gallery. Not what my career needed.

I tried to create something lighter, something hopeful. But my hand wouldn't cooperate. Every brushstroke carried weight. Every image felt haunted.

My mother's visits became regular. Every few days, she'd appear with groceries or cleaning supplies or just that look of concerned disappointment that made me feel like a child who'd failed a test. And with each visit came the same questions, the same arguments, the same pressure.

"Have you thought about what I said?"

"When will you admit this isn't working?"

"How long will you sacrifice your life for someone who can't be here for you?"

I stopped telling Franz about these visits. Stopped mentioning my mother's escalating campaign to end our relationship. He had enough to worry about—his dissertation, his own struggles. Why add my mother's disapproval to his burden?

But the secret-keeping created distance between us. When he'd ask how my day was, I'd edit out the difficult parts. When he'd ask if everything was okay, I'd lie and say yes. And with each small deception, the gap between us widened a little more.

Three weeks into my mother's campaign, she brought her sister—my aunt Keiko—for reinforcement.

"Yui, sweetheart," Aunt Keiko said in that gentle voice that somehow felt more condemning than my mother's direct approach. "We're worried about you. We've all seen how much you've changed since Franz left."

"I'm just adjusting—"

"You're withering," my mother interrupted. "There's no other word for it. You're disappearing."

They stayed for two hours, both of them taking turns explaining why long-distance relationships never work, why I was too young to tie myself to someone in another country, why I deserved someone who could actually be present in my life.

By the time they left, I felt hollowed out. Exhausted not just from the conversation but from the constant effort of defending a relationship I wasn't even sure I believed in anymore.

That night, Franz called at our usual time. He looked terrible—worse than I'd seen him in weeks. Dark circles under his eyes, hair disheveled, that hollow look I was becoming too familiar with.

"Hey," he said, attempting a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "How are you?"

"I'm okay. Tired. You?"

"Same. Long day. Dissertation stuff."

We talked for twenty minutes, both of us carefully editing our realities, both of us pretending things were fine when everything was falling apart. When we hung up, I felt lonelier than if we hadn't talked at all.

The exhibition was in six weeks. I had three pieces finished—none of them what the gallery wanted—and five more to complete. I tried to work, but every time I picked up a brush, all I could hear was my mother's voice: You're destroying yourself. This needs to stop. Choose your future.

Miyu came over one evening, took one look at my apartment and my face, and immediately went to my kitchen to make tea.

"Your mom's been at you again," she said. It wasn't a question.

"How did you know?"

"Because you have that look. That cornered-animal look you get when people pressure you about Franz."

"She's not wrong though. I am a mess. My work is suffering. Everything is falling apart."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I don't know. Keep trying? Give up? I honestly have no idea anymore."

Miyu sat beside me, her presence comfortable and undemanding. "Can I ask you something honestly?"

"Sure."

"If Franz showed up tomorrow and said he was moving back to Japan permanently, would that fix everything?"

I started to say yes immediately, then stopped. Would it? Or had we changed too much? Had the distance created wounds that even physical proximity couldn't heal?

"I don't know," I admitted. "Maybe? Or maybe we've just been apart too long. Maybe we're different people now."

"That's not the answer of someone who's sure about her relationship."

"I'm not sure about anything anymore. I love him. God, I love him so much it physically hurts. But Miyu, I don't know if love is enough."

"Then maybe you have your answer."

After she left, I sat in my apartment—the space that used to feel like sanctuary but now felt like a cage—and tried to imagine my future. Two paths stretched before me:

One where I kept fighting for Franz, kept trying to make long-distance work, kept putting my life on hold for visits that might never happen and a reunion that grew more uncertain every day.

One where I let him go, focused on my art, rebuilt the life I'd been neglecting, tried to become myself again instead of just "Franz's long-distance girlfriend who's barely surviving."

Both paths felt impossible. Both paths involved loss.

But one path involved losing him. The other involved losing myself.

And I was terrified to admit which one scared me more.

My mother came by again the next evening. This time she brought my grandmother.

"ゆい、座りなさい," my grandmother said in that voice that made disobedience impossible. "We need to talk."

I sat.

"Your mother tells me you're in love with an American boy," she began, her ancient hands folded in her lap. "And that this love is making you sick."

"It's more complicated—"

"Love is always complicated. But child, let me tell you something I learned long ago: love that makes you less than yourself is not love worth keeping. Real love should make you bloom, not wither."

Her words hit harder than all my mother's arguments. Because my grandmother had loved deeply—had lost my grandfather ten years ago and still spoke of him with reverence. She knew what real love looked like.

"But I do love him," I whispered.

"I don't doubt that. But love alone doesn't build a life. Love needs partnership, presence, shared reality. Can this boy give you those things?"

"Not right now. But maybe someday—"

"How many 'somedays' will you sacrifice before you admit it's not coming?"

I had no answer.

After they left, I opened my laptop and looked at flight prices. Not to visit Franz—I couldn't afford that—but just to see. To imagine. To pretend there was a path where this worked out.

The numbers on the screen blurred through tears. Even the cheapest option was three months of rent. Even if I could afford it, when would I go? For how long? And what would change after I left?

Nothing. That was the answer. Nothing would fundamentally change.

We'd get a week or two together—bittersweet reunion, desperate intimacy, pretending the clock wasn't ticking. Then back to separate continents, separate lives, separate struggles. Back to the slow erosion of connection that no amount of video calls could prevent.

I looked at my unfinished artwork. At my mother's disappointed face. At the reflection of myself in my laptop screen—pale, tired, hollow-eyed.

When had I become this person? And how much longer could I sustain it?

Franz texted: Miss you. Hope you're having a good day.

I stared at the message for a long time before responding: Miss you too.

Three words that meant everything and nothing. Three words that were becoming harder to type with each passing day.

I loved him. That hadn't changed.

But love, I was learning, wasn't always enough to overcome impossible circumstances.

And the question that kept me awake that night, staring at my ceiling, listening to Tokyo's endless hum outside my window: At what point does holding on become foolishness? At what point does loyalty become self-destruction?

I still didn't have the answer.

But I was getting closer to finding it.

There are moments in life that arrive with terrible inevitability. You see them coming from miles away—like watching a train approach while standing on the tracks, knowing you should move but finding yourself frozen, hoping against hope that somehow physics will bend, that somehow the impossible will become possible.

This was one of those moments.

Two people who loved each other, separated by an ocean neither could cross, were about to have the conversation they'd been avoiding for months. The conversation that would end what distance had already broken.

Sometimes love dies with fury and betrayal. Sometimes it dies with a bang.

But sometimes—perhaps most cruelly—it dies quietly, with two people who still care deeply for each other acknowledging that caring isn't enough to overcome impossible circumstances.

This is that story.

Franz

The call came three days later. I'd been expecting it, dreading it, but when my phone finally rang and Yui's name appeared on the screen, my hands still shook as I answered.

"Hi," she said softly.

"Hi."

Silence stretched between us—not comfortable, not companionable, just heavy with all the things we'd been avoiding.

"We need to talk," she finally said. "Really talk. Not the careful conversations we've been having where we both pretend everything's okay."

"Alright. I'm listening."

"Franz, I can't do this anymore."

Even though I'd been expecting it, the words still hit like a physical blow. "Can't do what?"

"This. Us. The long-distance, the constant pain, the way we're both destroying ourselves trying to hold on to something that isn't working."

"But we can make it work—"

"How? Tell me specifically how we make this work. Because I've been trying to find an answer for months, and I can't."

I grasped for solutions, anything to stop this conversation from going where I knew it was headed. "I could try to come visit sooner. Or you could come here. We just need to see each other, reconnect—"

"And then what? We get two weeks together and then another year of this? Franz, a visit isn't a solution. It's a temporary bandage on a wound that won't heal."

"So we need to be more creative. Maybe I could defer my studies for a semester, come to Japan—"

"And give up your education? Your future? Franz, listen to yourself. You're suggesting solutions that would destroy your life just to keep us together. That's not love. That's desperation."

She was right. I knew she was right. But I couldn't accept it. "Then tell me what you want. Tell me what would fix this."

Yui

His voice broke on the last word, and I felt my heart crack along with it. This was the hardest thing I'd ever done.

"I want you to be okay," I said quietly. "I want to stop hurting you. I want us both to be able to live our lives without this constant weight."

"So you want to break up."

"I don't want to. But Franz, I think we have to."

"No." The word came out fierce, desperate. "No, we don't. We can keep trying—"

"We've been trying. For eight months we've been trying, and look where we are. You're failing your classes. I can't create art. We're both miserable. Our friends and family are worried. Franz, when does trying become foolishness?"

"When we give up."

"Or when we finally admit that some circumstances can't be overcome by willpower alone."

Silence fell between us. I could hear him breathing on the other end, could imagine his face—the way his jaw clenched when he was fighting tears, the way his eyes would look hollow and lost.

"I love you," he said, and his voice was breaking. "Yui, I love you so much. That has to count for something."

"It counts for everything. But Franz, love isn't always enough. That's the lesson neither of us wanted to learn, but here we are."

Franz

I wanted to argue. Wanted to fight. Wanted to refuse to accept this. But looking at myself—at what I'd become over the past months, at the disaster my life had turned into—I couldn't deny her truth.

"Okay," I said, and the word felt like surrender. "If it's already decided, then I respect your decision."

"Franz—"

"No, I mean it. This isn't easy for you either. I can hear it in your voice. You're not doing this to hurt me."

"I'm not," she said, and she was crying now. "God, Franz, this is killing me. But I can't keep drowning. And I can't keep watching you drown either."

"I know. I understand." I took a shaky breath. "Okay. Take care of yourself, Yui. Please."

"You too."

I wanted to say more. Had a thousand questions burning in my chest—Will you think of me? Will you regret this? Is there any chance we'll find our way back to each other someday? But what was the point?

"I wanted to ask you a thousand questions," I said instead. "But what's the point now?"

"Ask me someday," she replied softly. "But right now, Franz, I'm stuck in my own problems. I need to fix myself before I can give you answers."

"I'm sorry I caused you problems."

"You didn't cause them. The distance did. Circumstances did. You just... you loved me. That's all you did. And I'm sorry that wasn't enough to make this work."

I searched my mind for the right words, something meaningful to say in this final moment. A Japanese phrase came to me—one I'd learned during my year there, one that felt appropriate now.

"[translate:神様があなたを守ってくれますように], " I said. "May God protect you. I leave you in His care, since I can't be there to do it myself."

Her sob came through clearly across the seven thousand miles. "Franz—"

"Goodbye, Yui. I hope you find everything you're looking for."

"Goodbye, Franz. I hope you do too."

The call ended.

I sat staring at my dark phone screen, at my reflection in the black glass, and felt something fundamental break inside me. Not just my heart—that had been breaking for months. Something deeper. The hope I'd been clinging to, the belief that love could overcome anything, the naive faith that wanting something badly enough could make it real.

All of it shattered.

And then I started crying.

Not the quiet, dignified tears of someone processing grief. But ugly, gasping sobs that felt like they were being ripped from somewhere deep in my chest. I cried for what we'd had. For what we'd lost. For the future that would never happen. For the person I'd been when I was with her—happy, whole, myself—and for the broken shell I'd become.

Yui

I set my phone down carefully, as if it might shatter, and stared at it for a long moment. It was done. We were done.

I'd expected to feel relief—some lessening of the constant weight I'd been carrying. Instead, I just felt empty. Hollow. Like I'd cut away a part of myself and was now bleeding slowly from the wound.

But beneath the pain was something else. Something I was almost afraid to acknowledge: a tiny spark of relief. Of freedom.

For the first time in eight months, I didn't have to worry about missed calls or time zone math or carefully editing my reality to protect him. I could just... be. Focus on my art. Rebuild my friendships. Become myself again instead of the ghost I'd been turning into.

It felt like betrayal to feel relieved. But I did.

I picked up my sketchpad and, for the first time in weeks, drew something that wasn't about pain or separation. Just a simple line drawing of a bird in flight. Free. Unburdened.

My mother would be pleased. My friends would welcome me back. My art could breathe again.

And Franz... Franz would heal. Eventually. We both would.

At least, that's what I told myself as I forced myself to look forward instead of back.

Franz

My mother heard me crying. I know she did—my bedroom wall wasn't that thick, and I wasn't exactly quiet about it. I heard her footsteps pause outside my door, heard her hand touch the doorknob.

But she didn't come in.

Maybe she knew there was nothing she could say. Maybe she understood that some pain has to be endured alone. Maybe she was just giving me space to fall apart in private.

I cried until I had nothing left. Until my body was empty and my throat was raw and exhaustion finally pulled me under into merciful unconsciousness, still fully clothed, still on my bed, phone still clutched in my hand.

I didn't leave my room for two days.

My mother left food outside my door—I heard her quiet footsteps, the soft clink of plates being set down. I didn't eat any of it. Couldn't stomach the thought of food when everything inside me felt dead.

On the third day, I finally emerged. Showered. Shaved. Looked at myself in the mirror and barely recognized the hollow-eyed stranger staring back.

My mother was in the kitchen when I came out. She looked up, relief flooding her face.

"Franz—"

"I'm okay," I lied. "I'll be okay."

She didn't believe me. I could see it in her eyes. But she didn't push. Just hugged me tight, and I let her, even though I felt nothing.

Yui

By the third day after our breakup, I was already seeing friends again. Miyu took me to lunch, carefully not mentioning Franz unless I brought him up first. The gallery curator called to check on my progress, and I could honestly say I was working again—creating pieces that didn't feel like they were drowning in sorrow.

My mother came by and, seeing me actually functioning, actually creating, smiled with such relief that I felt guilty for how worried I'd made her.

"I'm proud of you," she said. "I know that wasn't easy."

It wasn't. But it was necessary.

Life, I was discovering, went on. The sun still rose. Tokyo still hummed with energy. My heart still beat, even if it felt bruised and tender.

And somewhere across the ocean, I knew Franz was experiencing his own version of this—the strange, painful process of learning to exist without someone who'd become fundamental to your sense of self.

I wanted to text him, to check if he was okay, to maintain some thread of connection. But I knew that would be cruel. Clean breaks heal better than ragged ones.

So I focused on my art. On rebuilding. On becoming the person I'd lost somewhere in the midst of trying to love someone I couldn't reach.

And if sometimes I cried when I saw something that reminded me of him—if sometimes I reached for my phone to tell him about my day before remembering I couldn't—well, that was part of healing too.

The betrayal, if you could call it that, wasn't intentional. It was simply survival. I chose myself. And maybe, to someone watching from the outside, it looked like I moved on too quickly. Like I didn't grieve enough. Like I didn't really love him if I could function without him.

But they didn't see the nights I spent staring at my ceiling, wondering if I'd made the right choice. They didn't see how I carefully avoided places we'd been together, songs we'd loved, memories that hurt too much to touch.

They just saw me rebuilding. And mistook survival for betrayal.

Chapter 13 : 忘却の藝術 (The Art of Forgetting)

There is an art to forgetting someone you once loved.

It begins, as most difficult things do, with pretending. You pretend the absence doesn't hurt. You pretend you're fine when people ask. You pretend that hearing their name doesn't send a sharp pain through your chest. You pretend until the pretending becomes muscle memory, until you almost believe your own performance.

But beneath the performance, the wound bleeds quietly.

In California, Franz stopped pretending after three days.

His mother found him on the fourth morning still in bed, curtains drawn against the daylight, phone face-down on his nightstand as if even looking at it might summon more pain. She didn't say anything at first—just stood in the doorway, watching her son exist in a state that couldn't quite be called living.

"Franz," she said softly. "You need to eat something."

"Not hungry."

"You need to get up. Shower. Go outside—"

"I said I'm not hungry."

She left a plate of food by his door anyway. It sat there untouched until evening when she quietly removed it, replaced it with another that would also go uneaten. This pattern would continue for days.

Franz's advisor sent increasingly concerned emails about missed meetings, unsubmitted work, deadlines rapidly approaching. He read them with distant acknowledgment, as if they pertained to someone else's life. His dissertation existed in another universe—one where he still cared about existential philosophy, where abstract concepts mattered, where he could think about anything other than the hollow ache where Yui used to be.

Marcus came by on day six.

"Dude, you look like shit," he said, which was generous. Franz looked worse than shit. He looked like someone who'd forgotten how to be human.

"Thanks for the visit. You can leave now."

"I'm not leaving. Come on, we're going out."

"I don't want to go out."

"I don't care what you want. You're starting to smell, your mom is worried sick, and your advisor is about to kick you out of the program. So we're going out. Even if I have to drag you."

They compromised: Franz showered and came downstairs, but refused to leave the house. They sat in the living room, Marcus talking about departmental gossip and upcoming conferences while Franz stared at the wall, contributing nothing but his physical presence.

"She broke up with you," Marcus said finally, abandoning pretense. "It sucks. I get it. But Franz, you're letting it destroy you."

"I'm not letting it do anything. It just is."

"So fight back. Get angry. Go out and hook up with someone random. Throw yourself into work. Something. Anything except this." He gestured at Franz's general state of collapse.

"I don't want to hook up with someone random. I don't want to work. I don't want anything."

And that was the truth of it. The breakup hadn't just ended his relationship—it had ended his ability to want, to hope, to imagine a future that held any appeal. Everything felt gray and distant and fundamentally meaningless.

Marcus left eventually, promising to check in again, threatening to drag Franz to therapy if he didn't start functioning soon. After he was gone, Franz returned to his room, to the darkness, to the endless loop of thoughts that went nowhere and solved nothing.

Across seven thousand miles, Yui was pretending better.

She went to work the day after their breakup. Showed up at her studio with coffee and determinedly cheerful energy, greeting her colleagues as if nothing had fundamentally shifted in her universe. She worked on her exhibition pieces with focused intensity, letting the rhythm of creating drown out the thoughts she couldn't afford to entertain.

"You're here early," Miyu observed, finding Yui at her easel at seven in the morning.

"Couldn't sleep. Figured I might as well be productive."

"Yui—"

"I'm fine. Really. It was the right decision. I feel... lighter. Like I can breathe again."

Miyu studied her with the particular insight that comes from years of friendship. "You don't have to perform for me."

"I'm not performing. I'm choosing to move forward instead of drowning. There's a difference."

"Is there?"

Yui didn't answer. Turned back to her canvas, her brushstrokes perhaps a bit more aggressive than necessary. But she was working. That counted as functioning. That counted as healing.

Her mother visited that evening, bringing groceries and thinly veiled relief.

"You look better already," she said, which was both true and false. Yui looked functional. Put-together. The opposite of the withering girl she'd been during those final months with Franz. But if you looked closely—which her mother chose not to—you could see the tightness around her eyes, the way her smile didn't quite reach the depths it used to.

"I feel better," Yui said, and this lie came easily. "You were right, Mom. The relationship was making me sick. Now I can focus on what matters."

"Your art."

"My art. My career. My life here, not some fantasy future that was never going to happen."

Her mother beamed, vindicated. Hugged her tightly. "I'm so proud of you, sweetheart. I know it wasn't easy, but you made the right choice."

After she left, Yui stood in her apartment—the one she'd kept frozen in time for Franz, the one she'd been afraid to change without his input—and started rearranging furniture. If she was moving forward, she needed to erase the ghost of him from her space. New layout. New art on the walls. New routines that didn't include checking time zones or waiting for calls.

She worked until two in the morning, furniture dragged into new configurations, old posters replaced with her own artwork, the apartment transformed into something that was wholly hers rather than a shrine to a relationship that no longer existed.

When she finally collapsed into bed, exhausted, she managed almost four hours of sleep before the dreams came—Franz's face, his voice, his hands in her hair—and she woke crying before dawn.

But by the time the sun rose, she'd composed herself. Washed her face. Made coffee. Opened her sketchbook and worked on exhibition pieces until it was time to go to the studio.

Function. Forward. These became her mantras.

Different speeds of healing, the same destination eventually. Or so they both hoped.

Franz's mother called his advisor on day seven. Professor Chen came by that afternoon, finding Franz in pajamas on the couch, unshaven, hollow-eyed.

"Franz," she said, her voice kind but firm. "This can't continue."

"I know."

"Do you? Because from where I'm standing, you're throwing away your future over a relationship that ended. I understand you're hurting, but you have responsibilities. Work that's due. Standards to maintain."

"I know," he repeated, and meant it. But knowing and caring were different things.

"I'm giving you two weeks. Two weeks to pull yourself together and submit substantial work. If you can't do that, we'll need to discuss a leave of absence from the program."

A leave of absence. Academic speak for "you're failing and we're giving you a graceful exit before you destroy your career completely." He should have been terrified. Should have been motivated into action. Instead, he just felt numb.

"Understood."

After she left, he sat staring at his closed laptop. His dissertation document existed somewhere in there, mocking him with its incompleteness. He should open it. Should work. Should do something productive.

Instead, he picked up his phone and scrolled through old photos of Yui until his mother gently took the phone away, saying nothing, just squeezing his shoulder before leaving him alone with his grief.

Meanwhile, Yui attended a gallery opening with Miyu and their art school friends. She wore a dress she hadn't worn in months, styled her hair, put on makeup. Looked like the old Yui, the one before Franz, the one who knew how to exist in social spaces without anxiety about missed calls or time zone math.

"It's good to have you back," one friend said, hugging her tightly.

"It's good to be back," she replied, and almost believed it.

She laughed at jokes. Discussed art theory. Made plans for weekend meetups she knew she'd actually attend instead of canceling. She was present. Functional. Moving forward.

Only Miyu noticed the way she checked her phone compulsively, as if expecting a message that wouldn't come. Only Miyu saw the momentary flash of pain when someone mentioned long-distance relationships. Only Miyu understood that Yui's healing looked like recovery from the outside but felt like survival from the inside.

"Are you okay?" Miyu asked on the train home.

"I will be," Yui said. Not a lie, but not quite truth either. A statement of intent rather than current reality.

Two different people, two different continents, learning the same painful lesson: that loving someone and being able to sustain a relationship with them are entirely different skills. That sometimes love isn't enough. That you can make the right decision and still feel like you're dying.

Franz would stay in his room for three more days before his mother finally insisted he see a therapist.

Yui would maintain her functional facade for two weeks before having a complete breakdown in her studio, sobbing so hard that Miyu had to physically hold her until the storm passed.

But for now, in these immediate aftermath days, they both performed their chosen roles. Franz, the visibly broken. Yui, the functional survivor. Both of them bleeding quietly beneath their respective performances.

The art of forgetting, they were learning, begins with pretending you already have.

Two weeks after the end of the world—or what felt like the end of the world, though objectively the earth continued spinning and people continued living their ordinary lives—the differences in their healing became stark.

Franz sat in his first therapy session, courtesy of his mother's insistence and his advisor's ultimatum. Dr. Patricia Morrison, a woman in her fifties with kind eyes and an unshakeable patience, asked him the standard questions: How are you sleeping? How's your appetite? Have you had thoughts of self-harm?

"I sleep too much. I don't eat unless forced. And no, I don't want to hurt myself. I just want to stop feeling like this."

"Like what, specifically?"

"Like someone reached into my chest and removed something vital. Like I'm walking around missing essential organs but still somehow expected to function normally."

"That's grief," Dr. Morrison said simply. "You're grieving the loss of a relationship that was central to your identity. That's a normal response."

"It doesn't feel normal. It feels like I'm dying."

"You're not dying. But the version of yourself that existed in that relationship is. And that's a genuine loss worth mourning."

The session helped marginally. Gave names to feelings, validated his pain, provided coping strategies he probably wouldn't use. But at least it was movement. At least it was acknowledging the problem rather than drowning in it silently.

After therapy, he went to campus for the first time in two weeks. Walked through familiar halls that felt alien now, everything filtered through the gray lens of his depression. His office mate, Chen Wei, looked up in surprise when Franz actually appeared.

"You're alive. We were starting to take bets."

"Hilarious."

"Seriously though, you good? You look like you've been through hell."

"Long-distance relationship ended. Turns out I'm not handling it well."

"Shit, man. That's rough." Chen Wei offered the particular sympathy of someone who understood academic pressure combined with personal crisis. "You need help catching up on work? I can share my notes from the seminars you missed."

The kindness almost undid him. Franz blinked back unexpected tears, managing a rough "Thanks, yeah, that would help," before retreating to his desk to stare at his still-unopened dissertation file.

He managed one paragraph that day. One terrible, badly-written paragraph that he'd probably delete later. But it was something. A small victory in the war against complete non-functionality.

That evening, Marcus dragged him to a department gathering at a local bar. Franz went reluctantly, nursing a single beer in the corner while his colleagues talked and laughed around him. He felt like a ghost among the living—present but not really there, watching life happen without being able to participate.

A new graduate student, Emma Chen from the philosophy department, approached him. Pretty, confident, clearly interested.

"You're Franz, right? I've heard about your dissertation proposal. The existential dread and modern connection stuff? Sounds fascinating."

"Thanks," he said flatly, giving her nothing to work with.

"I'd love to hear more about it sometime. Maybe over coffee?"

She was asking him out. He understood that. And she was attractive and intelligent and probably wonderful company. But all he could think was: She's not Yui.

"I'm not really in a place for that right now. But thanks."

Emma took the rejection gracefully and moved on. Marcus appeared moments later, looking disappointed.

"Dude, she was into you."

"I know."

"So why—"

"Because I broke up with the love of my life two weeks ago and I'm not ready to pretend I'm over it by going on mediocre coffee dates with people I don't care about."

Marcus raised his hands in surrender. "Fair enough. Just... don't close yourself off completely, okay? Eventually, you'll need to let yourself live again."

Franz wasn't sure he believed that. But he nodded anyway, finished his beer, and went home to his empty apartment where at least he didn't have to pretend to be okay.

Meanwhile, in Tokyo, Yui was pretending with increasing skill.

Two weeks post-breakup, she'd established new routines that deliberately excluded any Franz-related habits. No more checking her phone obsessively. No more mental time zone calculations. No more structuring her schedule around call times. Instead, she filled her days with work, friends, and deliberate activity that left no room for dwelling.

Her art was improving. Or at least, it was changing. The dark, melancholic pieces she'd been producing during the final months with Franz were being replaced by work that gallery owners actually wanted—vibrant, emotionally complex but not devastating. Art that spoke to human experience without drowning the viewer in despair.

"This is brilliant," her gallery curator said, examining her latest piece—an abstract interpretation of transformation, butterflies emerging from cocoons rendered in bold, hopeful colors. "This is what I've been waiting for. The depth is still there, but now there's light."

Yui smiled, accepted the praise, felt the complicated satisfaction of professional success mixed with personal emptiness. The art was good because she was channeling her pain into something productive. But that didn't mean the pain wasn't real.

"The exhibition is in two months," the curator continued. "If you can produce four more pieces at this level, we'll have a stunning show. Career-making, potentially."

Career-making. The words should have thrilled her. This was what she'd been working toward her entire adult life. But standing there in the gallery, surrounded by her art, all she could think was: Franz would have been so proud.

Then immediately: Don't think about Franz.

She'd gotten good at that—catching herself before the thought spiral could begin, redirecting her mind toward productive tasks. It was exhausting, this constant mental policing, but it worked. Mostly.

Her mother visited less frequently now, satisfied that Yui was "back to normal." Her friends had stopped asking if she was okay, interpreting her functionality as healing. Only Miyu remained skeptical.

"You're doing too well," Miyu said one evening over wine at Yui's newly rearranged apartment.

"What does that mean? Should I be doing worse?"

"I mean you're performing recovery so effectively that I'm worried you're not actually processing anything. You're just... performing."

"What's the difference? If I act okay long enough, maybe I'll become okay."

"That's not how emotions work."

"It's how mine work. Miyu, I can't fall apart. I have an exhibition in two months. I have a career to build. I can't afford to be the girl who's still crying over her ex-boyfriend."

"It's been two weeks."

"Exactly. Two weeks. That's plenty of time to start moving forward."

Miyu looked at her with something like pity, which Yui resented. "Just... don't be surprised if it catches up to you later. You can't outrun grief forever."

"Watch me."

After Miyu left, Yui allowed herself exactly ten minutes of thinking about Franz. Ten minutes to remember his laugh, his hands, the way he looked at her like she was the entire universe. Ten minutes to feel the ache of his absence. Then she set a timer, and when it went off, she closed that mental door and returned to work.

This was her system. Limited, controlled grief. Just enough to acknowledge the loss without drowning in it. It was working. Sort of.

The weekend brought different challenges for both of them.

Franz attempted to work on his dissertation Saturday morning, managing three hours of actual productivity before the crushing weight of it all became too much. He found himself crying at his desk—not dramatic sobbing, just quiet tears that wouldn't stop flowing while he stared at words that meant nothing.

His mother found him like that, came and sat beside him without speaking. Just her presence, solid and grounding.

"It's going to get better," she said finally.

"When?"

"I don't know. But it will."

"What if it doesn't? What if I never stop feeling like this?"

"Then we'll deal with that. But Franz, grief isn't linear. You'll have good days and bad days. Today's a bad day. Tomorrow might be slightly better."

It wasn't, particularly. But the day after that was marginally less awful. And the day after that, he managed to actually eat breakfast without feeling nauseous. Small victories.

Yui spent her weekend at an art supply store, then locked herself in her studio, working twelve-hour days on her exhibition pieces. Creating was the only thing that quieted the noise in her head. When she was working, she didn't have mental space for Franz. There was only the art, the process, the singular focus of creation.

Miyu stopped by Sunday evening and found her covered in paint, exhausted, surrounded by half-finished canvases.

"Have you slept?"

"Some."

"Have you eaten?"

"Probably."

"Yui."

"I'm fine. I'm working. This is what I should be doing."

"Working yourself to death isn't healing—"

"It's better than falling apart. Miyu, please. I need to do this my way. Everyone keeps waiting for me to break down, but I'm not going to. I made a choice. I'm living with it. I'm moving forward. Why can't anyone accept that?"

Because it looked like avoidance rather than healing. Because functional didn't mean okay. Because Miyu had known her long enough to see the cracks beneath the facade.

But she didn't say any of that. Just helped Yui clean up the studio, ordered food, and stayed until she was sure Yui had eaten and would actually go home and sleep.

Two weeks in, and they were already healing at different speeds.

Franz was visibly broken but slowly, painfully beginning the work of putting himself back together. Therapy. Small amounts of productivity. Acknowledging his pain rather than hiding it.

Yui was visibly functional but perhaps not healing at all. Just channeling, redirecting, performing recovery so convincingly that everyone believed it except the person who knew her best.

Different methods, same goal: learning to exist without the person who'd become essential to their sense of self.

The art of forgetting requires first acknowledging what you've lost. Franz was doing that work. Yui was not.

And that difference would matter, eventually.

But for now, two weeks after their world ended, they continued on their separate paths. Franz barely walking, taking tiny steps forward. Yui running at full speed, determined to outpace the grief she refused to feel.

Both of them pretending, in their own ways, that they were fine.

Neither of them actually fine at all.

One month after the end, both of them had built new architectures for their lives. Structures designed to hold them upright, to keep them functional, to create the illusion—or perhaps the eventual reality—of moving forward.

Franz had returned to his dissertation with grim determination.

Not because he'd suddenly rediscovered his passion for existential philosophy, but because the alternative was academic failure and disappointing everyone who still believed in him. His advisor met with him weekly now, monitoring his progress with the careful attention of someone watching a recovering patient.

"This section on Sartre is solid," Professor Chen said, reviewing his latest submission. "You're getting back to your old form."

"Thanks," Franz said, feeling nothing at the praise. The work was competent, yes. But it felt mechanical, like he was going through motions rather than genuinely engaging with ideas that once fascinated him.

"How are you doing? Generally, I mean."

"Better. I'm functioning."

It wasn't a lie. He was functioning. Attending classes. Meeting deadlines. Showing up to departmental events. He'd even gone on that coffee date with Emma Chen, though it had been exactly as mediocre as he'd predicted—pleasant conversation with someone perfectly nice who simply wasn't Yui.

"I don't think I'm ready to date yet," he'd told Emma honestly after their coffee turned into an awkward hour of him clearly being elsewhere mentally.

"I can tell," she'd said kindly. "But hey, when you are ready, I'm around."

He appreciated her grace but doubted he'd take her up on it. The thought of touching someone else, kissing someone else, felt wrong in a way he couldn't articulate. Like betrayal, though he had nothing to betray anymore.

His therapy sessions continued weekly. Dr. Morrison had him doing exercises—journaling about his feelings, challenging negative thought patterns, gradually building new routines that weren't centered around Yui's schedule.

"You structured your entire life around her," Dr. Morrison observed during their fourth session.
"Now you need to rebuild a life that's for you, not in relation to someone else."

"I don't know how to do that."

"You learn. It's not quick, and it's not easy, but Franz, you were a complete person before you met her. You can be complete again."

He wasn't sure he believed that. Yui hadn't just been added to his life—she'd become fundamental to it. Removing her felt like removing a load-bearing wall. The whole structure threatened to collapse.

But he was trying. Going to the gym with Marcus three times a week. Attending a poetry reading that had nothing to do with Yui or Japan or memories he needed to avoid. Taking a weekend trip to visit his cousin in San Diego, forcing himself out of his usual environment.

Small steps. Painful steps. But steps nonetheless.

The hardest moments came unexpectedly. Walking past the Japanese restaurant where he'd taken Yui during her imagined visit. Hearing a song they'd both loved. Seeing couples holding hands on campus and feeling a physical ache in his chest.

He'd deleted her number from his phone—Dr. Morrison's suggestion—but he'd memorized it long ago. The temptation to text her, to check if she was okay, to maintain some thread of connection, appeared at least once daily. He resisted. Barely.

"Missing someone is normal," Dr. Morrison reminded him. "You don't have to feel guilty about it. You loved her. That love doesn't just evaporate because the relationship ended."

"Then what do I do with it? Where does it go?"

"You carry it. And gradually, it transforms. The sharp pain becomes dull ache becomes bittersweet memory. But that takes time."

Time. Everyone kept talking about time like it was a magical healing force. But time just felt like distance from happiness, from the version of himself who'd been whole.

In Tokyo, Yui was also rebuilding, but at a pace that looked more like acceleration than healing.

One month post-breakup, her exhibition was taking shape beautifully. She'd completed six pieces, needed only two more, and was ahead of schedule. The gallery was thrilled. Her mother was proud. Her friends were relieved to have the "old Yui" back—the one who showed up to things, who laughed genuinely, who seemed present rather than perpetually elsewhere.

She'd redecorated her entire apartment, bought new furniture, changed her hair. Physical transformations that signaled internal ones, or at least that's what she told herself. The space no longer held Franz's ghost. She'd exorcised him through rearrangement and deliberate forgetting.

Her social calendar filled rapidly. Gallery openings, dinners with art school friends, weekend trips to Kyoto and Osaka. She said yes to everything, kept herself constantly occupied, left no room for the silence where thoughts of Franz might creep in.

"You're handling this remarkably well," her mother said during one of her now-infrequent check-in visits.

"I made the right choice," Yui replied automatically. "I can see that now. The relationship was holding me back."

It sounded true when she said it. Almost felt true. But late at night, alone in her rearranged apartment, she'd sometimes find herself calculating what time it was in California, wondering what Franz was doing, if he was okay, if he hated her.

She'd push those thoughts away quickly. Forward, not back. That was the rule.

Miyu remained skeptical of her recovery.

"You're going to crash," she warned one evening. "You're running on adrenaline and avoidance. Eventually, you'll have to actually feel this."

"I've felt it. I made my peace with it. Now I'm living my life."

"You're performing your life. There's a difference."

"Why does everyone think I'm performing? Maybe this is just who I am now. Maybe I'm better off without him."

Miyu looked at her sadly but said nothing more. Some lessons, her expression suggested, had to be learned rather than taught.

The exhibition loomed closer. Two months away, then six weeks, then one month. Yui threw herself into the final preparations with obsessive intensity. This show would prove

something—to her mother, to her friends, to herself. That she'd made the right choice. That she could have a successful career. That she was fine, better than fine, thriving actually.

She started sleeping less, working more. Her art took on a manic quality—still technically excellent, but with an edge of desperation that some viewers would interpret as passion and others would recognize as pain barely contained.

Meanwhile, Franz had a small breakthrough in therapy.

"I think I'm angry," he admitted during his sixth session.

"At Yui?"

"At the situation. At distance. At the fact that we loved each other and it wasn't enough. At..." He paused. "Maybe at her, a little. For giving up. For making the decision unilaterally."

"That's healthy," Dr. Morrison said. "Anger is part of grief. You're allowed to feel it."

"But she was right. The relationship wasn't sustainable. I know that logically."

"Logic and emotion are different systems. Logically, you understand. Emotionally, you feel abandoned. Both can be true."

The permission to be angry helped. He wrote pages of angry journal entries that he'd never send—accusations, questions, the full messy truth of his feelings unfiltered by politeness or consideration. It was cathartic. Necessary.

He also, tentatively, began to imagine a future without her. Not enthusiastically, but as a possibility rather than an unbearable void. Maybe he'd finish his dissertation. Maybe he'd find work in his field. Maybe, eventually, he'd meet someone else who he could actually be physically present with.

Maybe.

It didn't feel real yet. But it felt slightly less impossible.

One month after their breakup, both of them existed in states of careful reconstruction. Franz building slowly, acknowledging each piece of the foundation. Yui building rapidly, piling accomplishments on top of unprocessed grief.

Neither of them had contacted the other. Both of them thought about it.

Franz had typed and deleted dozens of messages: Are you okay? I miss you. I'm sorry. Do you ever think about me?

Yui had composed similar messages in her head: I hope you're healing. I didn't want to hurt you. This is harder than I expected.

But neither sent anything. The silence between them had its own gravity now, becoming more difficult to break with each passing day.

Different methods of healing, different speeds of recovery. But both of them still carrying the weight of what they'd lost, whether they acknowledged it or not.

The art of forgetting, they were discovering, was less about erasure and more about learning to live with ghosts. Some ghosts quiet and manageable. Others loud and demanding attention.

Franz was learning to live with his ghost.

Yui was still running from hers.

And in two more months, at her exhibition opening, that difference would matter profoundly.

Three months after the end of them, Yui stood in a gallery surrounded by her own work, wearing a black dress she'd bought specifically for this night, and felt nothing like triumph.

The exhibition opening was exactly what she'd worked toward. Crowded. Well-attended. Critics from notable publications. Collectors examining pieces with that particular intensity that meant potential sales. Her gallery curator beaming with pride. Her mother dabbing happy tears. Friends congratulating her on the culmination of months of obsessive work.

"Stunning," someone said, gesturing to her centerpiece—a large canvas depicting transformation through destruction, phoenix imagery rendered in bold strokes that somehow managed to be both violent and beautiful.

"Thank you," Yui replied automatically, her exhibition smile firmly in place.

She'd perfected that smile over three months. Warm but not desperate. Confident but not arrogant. The smile of an artist who'd made it, who'd arrived at some important threshold. The smile that hid the hollow echo chamber of her chest where feelings used to live before she'd trained herself not to feel them.

The exhibition was titled "Metamorphosis"—her curator's choice, though Yui had agreed it fit. Every piece documented some form of transformation. Butterflies emerging from cocoons. Landscapes shifting from winter to spring. Abstract representations of death and rebirth. Beautiful work. Technically excellent. Emotionally resonant to everyone except the artist herself, who'd created it all from a place of careful numbness.

"Yui Tanaka?" A voice interrupted her thoughts. Male, unfamiliar, speaking Japanese with perfect Tokyo intonation.

She turned. Found herself looking at someone vaguely familiar—around her age, handsome in an understated way, wearing glasses and a dark jacket that suggested he understood art world aesthetics.

"Yes?"

"I thought that was you. We were in Mizuki-sensei's advanced painting class together. About a year ago? Though I don't think we ever really talked."

She studied him more carefully. The face registered somewhere in memory—yes, he'd been there, sitting in the back usually, quiet but talented. She'd never noticed him much. During that class, she'd been consumed by Franz—counting down until his evening calls, sketching him in her notebooks margins, existing more in California than in her actual surroundings.

"I remember the class," she said carefully. "But I'm sorry, I don't remember your name."

"Takeshi Yamamoto. I'm not offended—I kept to myself mostly. But I always admired your work. Even back then, you had this..." He gestured vaguely at the paintings surrounding them. "This ability to capture emotional truth. It's only gotten stronger."

"Thank you. That's kind of you to say."

"I mean it. This piece especially." He moved toward one of her paintings—a woman's silhouette dissolving into cherry blossoms, the figure both disappearing and becoming something more beautiful through its dissolution. "There's grief in this. But also acceptance. Like you're painting someone learning to let go of something they loved."

His observation cut too close. Yui felt her carefully maintained composure waver for a moment before she caught it, smoothed it back into place.

"Art is interpretive," she said, the safe response.

"Of course. I might be projecting. I went through a difficult breakup myself recently. Maybe I'm seeing my own experience in your work."

And there it was—an opening for connection. Someone who understood loss, who might understand her if she let him. Yui found herself actually looking at Takeshi rather than through him. Really seeing him for perhaps the first time despite having shared a classroom for months.

Had he always been this perceptive? This easy to talk to?

"I'm sorry about your breakup," she said.

"Don't be. It was necessary. Sometimes people grow in different directions." He paused. "Would you want to get coffee sometime? I'd love to hear about your artistic process, how you developed this series."

A man asking her out. Or maybe just asking for professional conversation—the line was deliberately unclear. Three months ago, even one month ago, Yui would have said no immediately. But now, standing in this gallery full of people celebrating work she'd created to avoid feeling anything, she found herself hesitating.

What was she holding onto, exactly? Franz was gone. They'd ended. She was allowed to have coffee with someone, to make new connections, to continue living her life.

"Sure," she heard herself say. "Coffee would be nice."

They exchanged contact information. Takeshi promised to text her about scheduling. He moved on to examine other pieces, leaving Yui standing there feeling something she hadn't felt in months—a tiny flutter of possibility. Not excitement, not quite. But something adjacent to it.

Miyu appeared at her elbow moments later. "Who was that?"

"Someone from our old painting class. Takeshi Yamamoto."

"The quiet guy who did those incredible landscape pieces?"

"I guess? I barely noticed him then."

"And now?"

"And now he seems... interesting. We're going to get coffee."

Miyu's expression flickered with something Yui couldn't quite read. Concern? Disapproval? "It's only been three months."

"I know how long it's been. And it's coffee, not a marriage proposal. I'm allowed to have coffee with people."

"Of course you are. I just..." Miyu trailed off, clearly choosing her words carefully. "Just be honest with yourself about what you're doing and why."

Before Yui could respond, her curator was calling her over to meet a collector interested in purchasing three pieces. She excused herself, slipping back into her role as successful

emerging artist, pushing thoughts of Takeshi and coffee and what any of it meant to the back of her mind.

The evening continued. More congratulations, more sales, more evidence that she'd made the right choice three months ago. Her career was thriving. Her art was resonating. She was exactly where she needed to be.

And if there was still a Franz-shaped hole in her chest that no amount of professional success could fill, well, she'd gotten very good at ignoring it.

Meanwhile, seven thousand miles away, Franz sat in his apartment grading undergraduate papers and trying not to calculate what time it was in Tokyo.

Three months post-breakup, and he'd made genuine progress. His dissertation was back on track. His advisor had stopped looking at him with concerned pity. He'd even gone on a second date with Emma Chen, though they'd mutually agreed they were better as friends after spending most of dinner talking about their respective ex-situations.

"You're still in love with her," Emma had observed, not unkindly.

"Is it that obvious?"

"You brought her up three times without seeming to realize it."

He'd apologized. Emma had waved it off. They'd parted as friends, and Franz had gone home feeling both relieved and depressed—relieved he didn't have to pretend interest he didn't feel, depressed that he apparently couldn't stop talking about Yui even when actively trying to move on.

Dr. Morrison said he was making progress despite that. "You're functioning. Working. Engaging with life. The fact that you still love her doesn't negate that growth."

"When will I stop loving her?"

"Maybe never completely. But it'll hurt less. Eventually."

Three months in, and it did hurt fractionally less. The sharp, constant pain had dulled to an ache. He could go hours without thinking about her now, sometimes even a full day if he stayed busy enough. But she was always there in the background—a ghost he'd learned to live with but couldn't fully exorcise.

He'd had one moment of weakness two weeks ago—had typed her name into Instagram, curious if she was okay, if she ever thought about him, if she'd moved on.

Her account was private now—it hadn't been before. That change felt significant. Like she'd closed a door he hadn't even realized was still open. He'd hovered over the "Follow Request" button for ten minutes before closing the app without pressing it.

What would he even say if she accepted? What would seeing her life in filtered photos accomplish except reopening wounds that were finally, slowly starting to close?

Marcus had found him staring at his phone and physically removed it from his hand. "Stop torturing yourself. She's not your problem anymore."

"She was never my problem. She was my person."

"Was. Past tense. Franz, I know this sucks, but you need to actually move forward. Not just say you're moving forward while secretly obsessing."

He'd been right. Franz had deleted Instagram from his phone entirely after that. Out of sight, out of mind. Or at least, out of sight leading to gradually less often in mind.

Tonight, he was grading papers and halfway through a documentary about Camus when his mother called.

"Just checking in. How are you doing?"

"Fine. Working."

"I'm proud of you, you know. I know these past months have been difficult, but you're handling it well."

"Thanks, Mom."

After they hung up, Franz sat in the quiet of his apartment and took inventory of his life. Dissertation progressing. Teaching responsibilities handled. Friendships maintained. Therapy helping. Physical health recovered. Mental health... improving. Slowly. Painfully. But improving.

He was surviving this. Actually surviving it, not just existing in a state of perpetual grief.

And maybe that was enough for now.

He didn't know that at that exact moment, Yui was exchanging phone numbers with someone new. Didn't know she was smiling at Takeshi Yamamoto in a way that looked almost genuine. Didn't know she was taking tiny steps toward something that might eventually resemble moving on.

But even if he had known, what would it change? They weren't together anymore. They'd both agreed—or rather, she'd decided and he'd accepted—that their relationship couldn't survive the distance. So she was allowed to do whatever she needed to heal. Even if that meant coffee with someone who'd been there all along, invisible, waiting to be noticed.

Different speeds of healing had brought them to different places.

Franz was slowly, methodically working through his grief with professional help and support systems.

Yui was running from hers straight into the possibility of something new.

Neither approach was wrong, exactly. Just different.

But the question remained: Was Yui actually healed enough to notice someone new? Or was she just replacing one attachment with another to avoid dealing with the loss of the first?

The art of forgetting, it turned out, was easily confused with the art of replacement.

And Yui, standing in her successful exhibition surrounded by people celebrating her work while Takeshi Yamamoto's contact information sat in her phone like a small promise, was about to discover that distinction the hard way.

Chapter 14 : 花はそっと散る (Flowers Fall Gently)

The alarm went off at 6:47 AM, three minutes before Franz actually needed to wake up, a buffer he'd built in for the days when getting out of bed felt physically impossible.

This was one of those days.

Franz lay in the pre-dawn darkness of his bedroom, staring at the ceiling, and performed the same internal negotiation he'd been conducting for weeks now: Five more minutes. Just five more minutes of not having to pretend.

But five minutes would become ten, then twenty, then an hour, and then he'd miss his morning routine, and people would notice, and someone would ask if he was okay, and the entire carefully constructed facade would require emergency repairs. So at 6:50 AM exactly, Franz forced himself upright, planted his feet on the cold floor, and began the performance.

Step one: Shower. Not because he particularly wanted to be clean, but because appearing put-together was essential to the illusion. He stood under water that was slightly too hot, letting it scald his skin, the physical discomfort a welcome distraction from the constant ache in his chest that had become so familiar he barely registered it anymore except in moments like this.

Three months and two weeks since Yui had ended it. Everyone kept telling him he was doing so well. His mother. His advisor. Marcus. Even Dr. Morrison in their last session had said, "Franz, I'm really proud of your progress. You're clearly healing."

He'd smiled and thanked her and said all the right things about feeling better, about moving forward, about building a life that didn't center around someone seven thousand miles away.

He'd lied to his therapist.

That felt significant, like crossing some threshold into a new category of dysfunction. But he couldn't tell her the truth—that he wasn't healing, that he was actually getting worse, that the progress everyone saw was just him getting better at performing normalcy while privately disintegrating.

Step two: Shave. Franz stood in front of his bathroom mirror, razor in hand, and studied his reflection with clinical detachment. Dark circles under his eyes—concealer would handle that. Weight loss making his face gaunt—he'd force himself to eat breakfast where his mother could see. The hollow look in his eyes—well, there wasn't much he could do about that except avoid prolonged eye contact.

He'd lost fifteen pounds in three months. Everyone assumed it was intentional, a healthy response to stress—"throwing himself into fitness" as Marcus had admiringly put it. Franz hadn't corrected that assumption. Easier to let people think he was on some wellness journey than admit he simply forgot to eat most days, that food tasted like cardboard, that his appetite had died along with the relationship.

Step three: Get dressed. Franz chose his clothes carefully—a button-down shirt that used to fit but now hung loose, jeans held up by a belt cinched two notches tighter than before, a jacket to hide how much weight he'd lost. He looked like a functional graduate student. Like someone who had his life together. Like someone who was healing.

The mirror reflected a lie, but it was a convincing one.

Step four: Check phone. This was the dangerous part of the morning routine, the moment when the performance was most vulnerable to collapse. Because every morning, without fail, Franz checked his phone hoping for a message that would never come.

No new notifications.

He'd deleted Yui's contact information weeks ago—Dr. Morrison's suggestion, meant to create healthy boundaries. But he'd memorized her number. Had memorized every way to reach her. And some mornings, like this one, he'd open a blank text message and type and delete the same words over and over:

I miss you.

Are you okay?

Do you ever think about me?

I'm not doing as well as everyone thinks.

I'm dying without you.

He never sent them. Just typed and deleted, typed and deleted, until his hands shook and his vision blurred and he had to physically put the phone down and walk away before he did something irreversible.

This morning, he managed three cycles of typing and deleting before forcing himself to put the phone face-down on his desk and step away.

Step five: Breakfast with his mother. This was crucial. If he ate breakfast where she could see, she wouldn't worry. Wouldn't ask questions. Wouldn't look at him with that expression of concerned helplessness that made him feel like a burden.

"Morning, sweetheart," his mother said as he entered the kitchen, her smile warm but her eyes scanning him the way they always did—checking for signs of distress, for cracks in the facade.

"Morning, Mom."

"You look nice. How'd you sleep?"

"Fine. Pretty well, actually." Lie number one of the day, delivered smoothly. He'd been awake until 3 AM, staring at his ceiling, mentally replaying conversations with Yui, torturing himself with might-have-beens and if-onlys.

"That's good. I'm so glad you're doing better."

"Yeah, me too." Lie number two.

He forced down scrambled eggs and toast while discussing his dissertation progress (exaggerated), his upcoming seminar (he was dreading it), and weekend plans with Marcus (he'd probably cancel). His mother seemed satisfied, relieved even, to see him eating and talking and appearing functional.

The performance was working.

After breakfast, Franz returned to his room to gather his materials for campus. His laptop bag. Books. The dissertation chapter he'd supposedly been making great progress on but had actually stared at for hours without writing a single coherent sentence.

His room had become his cell. Neat, organized, giving no indication that its occupant was barely holding himself together. He'd learned early that mess invited questions—worried phone calls, surprise visits, concerned intervention. So he kept his space immaculate, his bed made, his desk organized.

Only one thing remained from before—a small photo, hidden in his desk drawer, that he allowed himself to look at once a day. Yui at their rooftop sanctuary in Tokyo, laughing at something he'd said, cherry blossoms in her hair. He'd taken the photo on one of their early dates, back when everything felt possible.

He pulled open the drawer now, looked at the photo for exactly thirty seconds—he timed it, because more than thirty seconds led to spiral thinking, to checking his phone, to potentially breaking and actually texting her.

Thirty seconds. Then he closed the drawer and stepped away.

Step six: Leave the house. This required a specific mindset shift. Inside his room, he could be himself—broken, grieving, barely functional. But the moment he walked out that door, he became the version of Franz that everyone needed him to be.

He stood at his bedroom door, hand on the knob, and took three deep breaths. Adjusted his expression. Relaxed his shoulders. Softened the tension in his jaw. Put on the mask.

Then he opened the door and walked out.

"Have a good day!" his mother called from the kitchen.

"You too, Mom!" He kept his voice light, casual, the voice of someone who was fine, who was healing, who was moving forward with his life.

The morning air was cold as he walked to his car. Winter refusing to fully release into spring, much like his grief refusing to transform into acceptance. But he smiled anyway, waved to a neighbor, maintained the performance even though no one was watching closely.

Because that was the thing about performing recovery—you had to commit completely. Any crack, any moment of letting the mask slip, and people would see. They'd want to help. They'd ask questions. They'd be concerned. And Franz couldn't handle anyone's concern right now because it would require him to acknowledge how not-okay he actually was.

So he got in his car, started the engine, and drove toward campus like a person who had somewhere to be, something to accomplish, a life worth living.

The radio played some pop song about heartbreak and healing. Franz turned it off.

Fifteen minutes to campus. Fifteen minutes where he didn't have to perform for anyone, where he could just exist in the transitional space between private suffering and public functionality.

His hands gripped the steering wheel too tight. His chest felt constricted. His breath came shallow and fast—the beginning of the panic attacks that had become increasingly frequent, though he'd told no one about them.

Not now. Not in the car. Hold it together.

He focused on breathing. In for four counts, hold for four, out for four. The technique Dr. Morrison had taught him, back when he was still being honest with her about his symptoms.

By the time he pulled into the campus parking lot, the panic had subsided to manageable anxiety. He checked his reflection in the rearview mirror—looked fine, looked normal, looked like someone who was healing.

The mask was secure.

Franz grabbed his bag, got out of the car, and walked toward the philosophy building where his office was. Students moved around him, living their normal lives, dealing with their normal problems. No one looked at him and saw someone barely surviving. They just saw another graduate student, maybe a little tired, but generally okay.

The performance was seamless.

"Hey, Franz!" Chen Wei called out as Franz entered their shared office. "You're here early. Productive morning?"

"Yeah, got some good work done." Lie number seven, or was it eight? He'd lost count.

"Nice. Hey, some of us are grabbing lunch later if you want to join."

"Sure, sounds good." He probably wouldn't go. Would make an excuse about dissertation work or meeting with his advisor. But agreeing in the moment kept things smooth, kept people from wondering if he was isolating himself.

Franz settled at his desk, opened his laptop, pulled up his dissertation document. Stared at it. Felt nothing. The words meant nothing. Existential philosophy, the theoretical framework he'd once been passionate about, now felt like abstract symbols arranged in arbitrary patterns.

But he pretended to work. Typed occasional sentences. Deleted them. Retyped slightly different versions. Created the appearance of productivity.

His phone sat face-down on his desk, and he thought about Yui approximately once every three minutes. Wondered what time it was in Tokyo. Wondered what she was doing. Wondered if she ever thought about him or if she'd moved on completely, effortlessly, leaving him trapped in this endless loop of grief while she flourished.

The morning passed in this way—performing work while accomplishing nothing, performing healing while deteriorating, performing normalcy while coming apart at the seams.

And no one knew.

That was the worst part. Not the pain itself, but the isolation of it. The knowledge that he was drowning in plain sight while everyone congratulated him on learning to swim.

Flowers fall gently, the chapter title suggested. But Franz's fall was anything but gentle. It was violent, agonizing, a slow-motion collapse that he had to hide behind smiles and lies and the exhausting performance of being okay.

And he didn't know how much longer he could keep it up.

The philosophy department seminar started at 10 AM, which meant Franz had thirty minutes to prepare his presentation on Sartre's concept of bad faith—ironic, given that he was currently living the very definition of it, lying to himself and others about his true condition.

He sat in the seminar room, laptop open, notes scattered, looking every bit the engaged graduate student. Around him, his colleagues chatted about their research, complained about teaching loads, discussed departmental politics. Normal academic life. Franz participated just enough to avoid standing out—a comment here, a knowing laugh there, the minimal social performance required to pass as functional.

"You ready for this?" Marcus asked, sliding into the seat beside him. "Your section on self-deception is pretty dense."

"As ready as I'll ever be."

"You've been killing it lately, man. Whatever you're doing, it's working. Your work's been solid."

Franz accepted the compliment with a modest nod, let Marcus interpret his recent productivity however he wanted. The truth—that he'd written most of his presentation during a 2 AM bout of insomnia-fueled desperation—didn't need sharing.

Professor Chen entered, and the seminar began. Franz watched his colleagues present their work, nodding at appropriate moments, asking questions that demonstrated engagement without revealing that his mind was seven thousand miles away, wondering if Yui was awake yet, if she was thinking about him, if she'd moved on completely.

Then it was his turn.

Franz stood, moved to the front of the room, and became someone else entirely. The mask didn't just cover his face in this moment—it consumed him. He became the articulate graduate student who had fascinating insights about existential philosophy, who spoke confidently about authenticity and self-deception, who commanded the room's attention.

"Sartre argues that bad faith is a form of self-deception where we deny our fundamental freedom and responsibility," Franz heard himself say, his voice steady, professorial. "We pretend

we're constrained by circumstances beyond our control, when in reality, we're choosing our constraints."

Someone asked about contemporary applications. Franz provided examples without missing a beat, his academic training carrying him through even though he felt hollow inside.

"Consider someone who claims they can't leave an unhealthy situation because of external factors—financial, social, whatever. Sartre would argue they're in bad faith, denying their freedom to choose differently."

As he spoke, part of his mind observed the irony: here he was, describing exactly what he was doing, pretending he had no choice but to perform normalcy when in reality he was choosing this performance, choosing to lie, choosing to deteriorate in private rather than ask for help.

But acknowledging that would mean changing it. And change felt impossible.

The presentation went well. Professor Chen praised his analysis. Colleagues engaged thoughtfully with his arguments. As he returned to his seat, several people offered congratulations on strong work.

"See?" Marcus whispered. "Told you you're killing it."

Franz smiled, nodded, accepted the praise while feeling absolutely nothing except exhaustion from maintaining the performance.

After the seminar, he had office hours—two hours where undergraduates could come discuss their papers or ask questions about course material. Franz sat at his desk, door open, available and approachable. The image of a helpful, engaged teaching assistant.

Three students came by. He helped them work through philosophical concepts, provided feedback on their draft papers, asked guiding questions that led them toward insights. He was good at this part—helping others think through problems while his own remained unsolvable.

"Thanks so much," one student said as she left. "You explain things way better than the professor. You should teach your own course someday!"

"Thanks. Good luck with your paper."

He meant none of it. Or rather, he meant it in the abstract way you can mean something while feeling completely disconnected from it. Like watching himself play a role in a movie, hitting all the right beats, delivering lines convincingly, while the actual Franz sat somewhere distant and unreachable.

Around noon, Marcus appeared in his doorway. "Lunch? That group thing I mentioned?"

Franz had forgotten he'd agreed to this. Calculated quickly—going meant more performance but would reinforce his "doing well" narrative. Not going meant explanations, potential concern, cracks in the facade.

"Sure, let me grab my jacket."

The group consisted of six graduate students from various departments, meeting at a campus café that was too loud and too crowded. Franz ordered a sandwich he wouldn't finish, coffee he didn't want, and settled into the role of "Franz who is healing and functioning normally."

The conversation flowed around him—department gossip, upcoming conferences, relationship drama, weekend plans. He participated just enough, laughed at jokes, offered comments when required. To anyone watching, he was simply one of the group, engaged and present.

"How's your dissertation going?" someone asked.

"Pretty well. Making steady progress." The lie came easily now.

"That's great. I heard you went through a rough breakup a few months back. Glad you're doing better."

"Yeah, it was hard for a while. But I'm good now."

I'm dying. "Moving forward, you know." I can't breathe. "Focusing on work." I'm breaking apart.

The discrepancy between what he said and what he felt had become so vast that Franz sometimes wondered if he was experiencing some form of dissociation. Like he'd split into two people—the one who performed for others and the one who suffered alone, and they barely knew each other anymore.

Lunch lasted an hour. Franz managed to eat half his sandwich, enough to avoid concerned looks. He laughed at the right moments, contributed to conversations, played his part flawlessly.

As the group dispersed, Emma Chen fell into step beside him. They'd been friendly since their failed coffee date, the kind of friendship built on mutual recognition of heartbreak.

"You doing okay?" she asked quietly, once they were away from the others.

"Yeah, fine. Why?"

"I don't know. You just seem... I can't quite put my finger on it. Like you're here but not here."

Franz's heart rate spiked. This was dangerous. Emma was perceptive, and any crack in his facade with someone who actually paid attention could lead to uncomfortable questions.

"Just tired. Dissertation crunch time, you know how it is."

"Right. Yeah." She didn't look entirely convinced. "But hey, if you ever need to talk—"

"I'm good. Really. But thanks."

He excused himself quickly, claiming work he needed to do, and walked away before she could probe further. His hands shook slightly as he made his way back toward the philosophy building. That had been close. Too close.

The afternoon brought more performance opportunities. A meeting with Professor Chen to discuss dissertation progress, where Franz presented his work with confidence he didn't feel. A chance encounter with the department chair, requiring small talk about upcoming deadlines. Running into former classmates who wanted to catch up, necessitating cheerful updates about his life.

Each interaction required energy he didn't have. Each smile, each reassurance that he was "doing well," each lie about his mental state, drained him a little more. But he couldn't stop. Because the alternative—admitting the truth, showing the cracks, letting people see how not-okay he actually was—felt impossible.

By 4 PM, Franz was back in his shared office, alone finally. Chen Wei had class. The building was quiet. He closed the door, locked it, and allowed himself five minutes of not performing.

He put his head down on his desk and just breathed. Tried to anyway. The tightness in his chest had returned—anxiety, panic, the physical manifestation of performing normalcy while internally collapsing. His hands trembled. His vision blurred. The room felt too small, too close, suffocating.

Five minutes. Just five minutes of not pretending.

He set a timer on his phone. Allowed himself this small window of authenticity. Let his face reflect what he actually felt—exhausted, broken, barely holding on. Let his body shake without trying to control it. Let tears fall without forcing them to stop.

Five minutes where he didn't have to be okay.

The timer went off. Franz lifted his head, wiped his face, composed his expression. The mask went back on. He had another meeting at 4:30, then needed to work at the library until evening because going home too early would concern his mother.

More performance. More lies. More exhausting maintenance of a facade that was growing heavier by the day.

He checked his reflection in his phone's black screen. Looked fine. The concealer had held up. His eyes were a bit red, but he could blame that on tiredness from long hours of work. Nothing to suggest he'd just spent five minutes having a mini-breakdown.

The performance continued.

That evening, Franz sat in the library, laptop open, supposedly working on his dissertation. In reality, he was reading Yui's old texts. He'd backed them up before deleting her contact information, saved them in a folder he'd labeled "Research Materials" so no one would question it.

Reading their conversations had become a form of self-harm he couldn't stop. Like pressing on a bruise to confirm it still hurt. He scrolled through messages from their early days—flirty, hopeful, full of plans for the future. Then the later messages—strained, desperate, both of them trying so hard to make impossible circumstances work.

The last message she'd sent, the morning after their breakup call:

I hope you find peace, Franz. I hope you heal. You deserve happiness, even if it can't be with me.

He'd never responded. Hadn't known what to say. Still didn't.

Franz closed the messages, cleared his browsing history—paranoid habits of someone hiding things—and stared at his dissertation document. Managed to write two sentences before deleting them.

A text from his mother: Will you be home for dinner?

Probably working late. Don't wait up for me.

Truth: he couldn't face another meal where he had to perform being okay, had to manufacture appetite he didn't feel, had to answer questions about his day with carefully constructed lies.

He stayed in the library until it closed at midnight. Drove home to find the house dark, his mother asleep. Crept to his room like a ghost, managing to avoid any interaction.

Only then, finally, could he stop performing.

Franz sat on his bed in the darkness of his room and let himself feel the full weight of the day. The exhaustion of constant performance. The loneliness of suffering in silence. The growing suspicion that he was getting worse, not better, and that the lies he told everyone were becoming increasingly difficult to maintain.

But tomorrow morning, the alarm would go off at 6:47 AM.

And he'd do it all again.

Because the alternative—admitting he was drowning, asking for help, letting people see the real extent of his deterioration—felt more impossible than the performance.

So the flowers would continue to fall gently, appearing graceful and natural to anyone watching, while Franz continued to be crushed beneath their weight.

Wednesday afternoon at 2 PM meant therapy with Dr. Morrison, and Franz prepared for it the same way he prepared for any other performance—with careful attention to what story he needed to tell.

He sat in the parking lot outside her office building for ten minutes before his appointment, mentally rehearsing. The goal wasn't to reveal his deteriorating state. The goal was to present just enough struggle to seem authentic while demonstrating clear progress toward healing. Too well-adjusted and she'd be suspicious. Too broken and she'd want to adjust his treatment, maybe suggest medication, maybe express concern that would ripple out to his mother, his advisor, everyone he was working so hard to convince he was fine.

The sweet spot was "healing with occasional setbacks"—the narrative everyone expected and wanted to believe.

Franz checked his reflection in the rearview mirror one last time. Composed expression. Slight smile. The face of someone doing the hard work of recovery.

He walked into the building, took the elevator to the third floor, and settled into the familiar waiting room. Dr. Morrison's office had always felt safe before—a place where he could be honest, vulnerable, authentically himself. Now it felt like just another stage where he had to perform.

"Franz," Dr. Morrison appeared in her doorway, warm smile in place. "Come on in."

He followed her into the office, took his usual seat on the comfortable couch. She settled into her chair across from him, notepad ready, expression open and genuinely interested in his wellbeing.

That genuine care made lying to her feel particularly terrible. But he did it anyway.

"So how have you been since our last session?" she asked.

"Pretty good, actually. I feel like I'm making real progress."

"That's wonderful to hear. Tell me more about that."

Franz had prepared for this. "I'm sleeping better—still some rough nights, but definitely improving. My appetite is back. Work is going well, dissertation is on track. I went out with friends a few times, which felt good. More normal, you know?"

All lies. Or rather, careful distortions of truth. He was sleeping terribly—three, maybe four hours a night. His appetite was nonexistent. Work was barely happening. And while he had technically been out with friends, he'd spent those times performing rather than connecting.

But Dr. Morrison nodded, making notes, looking pleased. "That's really significant progress. How are you feeling emotionally? Still having those intense grief episodes?"

"Less frequent. Less intense when they do happen. I'm learning to sit with the feelings without being overwhelmed by them."

Another lie. The grief episodes were constant, overwhelming, getting worse if anything. But admitting that meant admitting everything else was falling apart, and Franz couldn't afford that level of honesty.

"And how often are you thinking about Yui?"

"Less and less. I mean, she still crosses my mind, but it's not consuming like it was. I can go hours now without thinking about her."

The truth: he thought about Yui constantly, obsessively, every few minutes. Checked what time it was in Tokyo reflexively. Mentally composed texts he'd never send. Scrolled through old photos like someone picking at a wound. But Dr. Morrison didn't need to know that.

"That's exactly the kind of progress I'd hoped to see," Dr. Morrison said, her expression genuinely proud. "Franz, I have to say, you've really done the work. Many people struggle much longer with this kind of loss."

The praise felt like acid. Here was someone who'd helped him, who cared about his wellbeing, who thought she was witnessing successful therapy. And he was lying to her face, undermining the entire therapeutic process.

"Have you thought about dating again? Testing the waters?"

"A little. I went on that coffee date with Emma I mentioned last time. We decided we're better as friends, but it felt good to put myself out there."

True, technically. But he'd left out how completely hollow the entire experience had felt, how he'd spent the whole time comparing Emma to Yui and finding everyone lacking.

"That's healthy. Not every date needs to lead somewhere. Just practicing being open to connection is important." Dr. Morrison leaned forward slightly. "How are you managing when difficult emotions do come up?"

"Using the techniques we discussed. The breathing exercises. Journaling. Going for walks. Reaching out to friends instead of isolating."

More lies. He wasn't journaling anymore except to write unsendable letters to Yui. He took walks but spent them lost in memories. He was actively isolating, canceling plans, avoiding genuine connection.

"And have you had any thoughts of self-harm? Any moments where you've felt truly hopeless?"

This was the critical question. Answer wrong and there would be interventions, crisis protocols, phone calls to his emergency contacts. Franz knew how to navigate this.

"No, nothing like that. I'm sad sometimes, sure, but I'm never in that dark place. I can see the path forward, even when it's hard."

The lie came easily, smoothly, with just the right tone of honest self-assessment. In reality, Franz had spent more than one night lying awake wondering what the point was, why he should keep going when everything felt meaningless. Not actively suicidal, not planning anything, but hovering in that gray space of passive death wish where you don't want to die but you don't particularly want to keep living either.

But you couldn't tell your therapist that. Not if you wanted to maintain the illusion of successful recovery.

Dr. Morrison made more notes, nodding with satisfaction. "Franz, I'm really proud of how far you've come. When you first came in three months ago, you were in crisis. Now you're functioning well, engaging with life, processing your grief in healthy ways. This is exactly what healing looks like."

Each word of praise made Franz feel worse. She believed him. Genuinely thought her treatment was working. Had no idea that her patient was spiraling while sitting right in front of her, performing recovery so convincingly that she couldn't see the truth.

"I'm thinking we might start spacing out our sessions," Dr. Morrison continued. "Maybe move to bi-weekly instead of weekly. Give you more independence, more trust in your own coping mechanisms. How would you feel about that?"

Panic flared in Franz's chest, but he kept his expression neutral. Losing weekly therapy meant losing his one scheduled moment of almost-honesty, even if he was lying through most of it. It meant less oversight, which should have felt freeing but instead felt terrifying.

"That sounds good," he heard himself say. "I think I'm ready for that."

"Excellent. Let's schedule our next session for two weeks out, and we'll see how you do with the increased space."

The session continued for another twenty minutes. Dr. Morrison asked about his support systems—he lied and said they were strong. Asked about his daily routines—he lied and said they were healthy. Asked about his goals for the next few weeks—he lied and said he felt optimistic.

By the time the session ended, Franz had constructed such a complete fiction of his mental state that even he almost believed it for a moment. Almost.

"Keep doing what you're doing," Dr. Morrison said as he left. "You're really turning a corner here."

Franz thanked her, scheduled his next appointment, and walked out into the late afternoon sunshine feeling more alone than he'd felt in weeks.

He'd just lied to his therapist. Systematically, deliberately, convincingly. Had performed successful recovery so well that she was reducing his care because she thought he didn't need it anymore.

The isolation was complete now. He wasn't being honest with his mother. Not with his friends. Not with his advisor. And now, not even with the one person whose entire job was to help him navigate his mental health.

Franz sat in his car in the parking lot and felt the weight of all those lies pressing down on him. The performance had extended into every corner of his life. There was nowhere left where he could be authentic, no relationship untainted by deception.

He was utterly, completely alone with his deterioration.

His phone buzzed. A text from Marcus: Beer tonight? You seem like you could use it.

Even Marcus, his closest friend, could only see that something was slightly off. No one could see the full extent of it because Franz had become too skilled at hiding.

Can't tonight. Dissertation deadline. Rain check?

Another lie. He had no deadline. Just couldn't face another evening of performing normalcy while internally screaming.

Franz started his car and drove, no particular destination in mind. Just driving to delay going home, to postpone the next performance. The radio played quietly—something instrumental, nothing with lyrics that might trigger memories.

He thought about the session with Dr. Morrison. About how easy the lies had come. About how she'd believed every word. About how he'd successfully convinced a trained mental health professional that he was healing when he was actually falling apart.

If he could fool her, he could fool anyone.

That realization should have felt empowering—proof of his acting skills, his ability to maintain the facade. Instead, it felt devastating. Because it meant no one would save him. No one would notice he was drowning. He'd performed so well that everyone believed the performance.

He was on his own.

Franz drove for an hour, winding through neighborhoods he didn't know, past houses full of people living ordinary lives with ordinary problems. Eventually, he ended up at a park on the edge of town—mostly empty on a Wednesday afternoon, just a few joggers and dog walkers.

He parked and sat on a bench, watching strangers pass by, and allowed himself to really feel what he'd been suppressing all day. The exhaustion of constant lying. The loneliness of suffering in silence. The growing fear that he was getting worse instead of better, that the spiral was accelerating, that eventually the performance would become impossible to maintain.

But what were his options? Tell the truth and face everyone's concern, their interventions, their disappointed realization that he hadn't been healing at all? Admit to Dr. Morrison that he'd been lying for weeks, undermining the therapeutic process? Confess to his mother that her relief was premature, that her son was still drowning?

All of those felt impossible. More impossible than just continuing the lie.

So that's what he would do. Continue performing until... what? Until he actually healed? Until he couldn't maintain it anymore and everything collapsed? He didn't know. Couldn't see that far ahead. Could only see the next performance, the next lie, the next day of pretending to be okay.

Franz sat on that bench until the sun began to set, the park emptying out, shadows growing long. Then he drove home, put on his mask before entering the house, and told his mother his therapy session had gone really well.

"Dr. Morrison thinks I'm making great progress," he said, and watched his mother's face light up with relief.

"Oh sweetheart, I'm so glad. I've been so worried, but you really do seem so much better."

"I am," Franz lied. "I really am."

And she believed him, because the performance was that good.

Later that night, alone in his room, Franz lay in bed staring at the ceiling and thinking about flowers falling gently. About how destruction could look graceful from the outside. About how you could be coming apart completely while everyone around you saw only beauty, only progress, only healing.

He'd built a prison out of lies and trapped himself inside it.

And he had no idea how to get out.

Friday night. 11:47 PM.

Franz's mother had gone to bed an hour ago, and the house had settled into that particular silence that meant he was finally, completely alone. No more performances required. No more masks. Just him and the truth he'd been hiding from everyone including himself.

He sat on his bedroom floor with his back against the bed, laptop open in front of him, and did the thing he'd promised himself—promised Dr. Morrison, promised Marcus, promised everyone—he wouldn't do.

He looked for Yui online.

Started with Instagram. Her account was still private, his follow request from weeks ago still pending, unanswered. That non-answer was an answer. She didn't want him to see her life. Didn't want that connection. Had moved on so completely that even digital proximity felt like too much.

The rejection of a follow request shouldn't have hurt this badly. But it did. God, it did.

Franz moved to other platforms. Found her art gallery's website, which featured several of her pieces from the recent exhibition. The description called her "an emerging artist exploring themes of transformation and rebirth." Transformation. Rebirth. Like she'd died and been reborn without him.

He clicked through the images of her work. Beautiful pieces, technically stunning, full of life and color and hope. Nothing like the dark, grief-stained work she'd been creating during their relationship's final months. She'd moved on. Artistically. Emotionally. Completely.

While he was still stuck in the same moment three months ago when she'd ended it.

The unfairness of it hit him like a physical blow. How was it possible that she was thriving while he was barely surviving? They'd lost the same thing. Why wasn't she drowning too?

Franz's hands shook as he continued searching. Found mentions of her exhibition opening on various art blogs. One included photos from the event. He zoomed in, searching the crowds for her face, and found her—smiling, radiant, alive in a way he barely remembered being.

And standing next to her in one photo, talking to her, making her laugh: a man. Japanese, around their age, looking at her with obvious interest.

Franz stared at that photo until his vision blurred. Who was he? A friend? A colleague? Something more? Three months. She'd waited three months before—what? Replacing him? Moving on? Finding someone who could actually be physically present instead of seven thousand miles away?

His rational mind knew he was spiraling. Knew he was reading too much into a single photo. Knew that even if she was dating someone new, she had every right to. They'd broken up. She owed him nothing.

But rational thought was losing its grip.

Franz grabbed his phone, opened a new text message, typed her number from memory. His fingers moved before his brain could stop them:

Who is he?

He stared at the message. Didn't send it. Deleted it. Typed again:

Did you ever really love me? Because you seem fine. Better than fine. Thriving. While I'm dying.

Deleted. Typed:

I saw your exhibition. Your art looks amazing. You look amazing. You've moved on so completely. How? Tell me how you did it so I can stop feeling like this.

Deleted. Typed:

I miss you I miss you I miss you I miss you I miss you

Deleted. Typed:

Do you ever think about me? Even once? Or have you forgotten I exist?

Deleted. Typed:

I'm not doing well. Everyone thinks I am but I'm not. I'm so not okay. I need you to know that. I need someone to know that.

Deleted.

Franz threw his phone across the room. It hit the wall with a satisfying crack, fell to the floor. Possibly broken. He didn't care. Didn't care about anything except the rage building in his chest, hot and sharp and finally finding an outlet.

He was angry. Furiously, violently angry in a way he'd never allowed himself to be before because anger felt wrong, felt unfair, felt like blaming Yui for making the choice he knew was probably right.

But fuck what was right.

Fuck the rational understanding that long distance was unsustainable. Fuck the mature acknowledgment that sometimes love isn't enough. Fuck the performative healing everyone kept congratulating him for. Fuck all of it.

Franz stood abruptly, pacing his small room like a caged animal. Three months. Three months of pretending to be okay. Three months of performing recovery. Three months of lying to everyone including his therapist. Three months of slowly losing his mind while everyone praised his progress.

And Yui? Yui was fine. Yui was thriving. Yui was at gallery openings looking beautiful and talking to other men and creating art about rebirth and transformation.

She'd transformed right out of needing him.

The anger morphed into something else. Something darker. Franz looked around his room—the room he'd kept immaculate, organized, giving no indication of his mental state—and felt sudden violent hatred for it. For the performance it represented. For the lie it told.

He grabbed the books from his desk and hurled them across the room. Then his notes. Papers scattered like snow. His lamp—didn't throw it, but knocked it over, watched the bulb shatter. The photo of him and Yui hidden in his drawer—he pulled it out, looked at it, her laughing face mocking him with its happiness.

He should destroy it. Burn it. Rip it to pieces. Move on like she had.

But he couldn't. Instead, he held it and sank back to the floor, all the rage draining out as quickly as it had come, replaced by something worse: despair so profound it felt like drowning in slow motion.

"I can't do this anymore," Franz said out loud to his empty room. "I can't fucking do this anymore."

But what choice did he have? Keep performing until—what? Until he actually healed? Until he broke completely? Until someone finally saw through the lies?

His phone screen was cracked but still functional. 12:23 AM now. In Tokyo, it was mid-afternoon. Yui was awake, living her life, probably not thinking about him at all.

Franz opened their old text conversations again. Read through every message. Every "I love you." Every "I miss you." Every plan they'd made that would never happen. Every promise that had turned out to be empty.

Had she meant any of it? Or had he been more invested the whole time? Had she been looking for an excuse to leave, and distance provided a convenient one?

The thoughts spiraled darker. Maybe she'd never loved him the way he loved her. Maybe he'd been a temporary experience—the American exchange student, the brief adventure, something to tell stories about later. "I dated this guy once, from California, it was intense but obviously not sustainable."

Maybe he'd been disposable all along.

Franz's breathing came faster, shallower. Panic attack incoming. He didn't fight it this time. Let it come. Let his chest constrict and his vision narrow and his body shake. Let himself feel the full physical manifestation of the mental collapse he'd been hiding for months.

He gasped for air like a drowning man. Which, in a way, he was. Had been drowning since the day she ended it, just very slowly, very quietly, while pretending to swim.

When the panic attack finally subsided, Franz lay on the floor of his destroyed room, surrounded by scattered papers and broken glass and the physical evidence of his unraveling, and felt nothing. The anger was gone. The despair was almost gone. Just emptiness remained.

He pulled up Instagram again. Her private profile. The follow request still pending.

He unfollowed. Took back the request. Removed that last pathetic attempt at connection.

Then he blocked her.

Not because he was moving on. Not because he was healing. But because he couldn't keep torturing himself by trying to access a life that no longer included him. Couldn't keep checking if she'd accept his follow request. Couldn't keep hoping for some crumb of acknowledgment.

The block was self-preservation, not progress. A tourniquet on a wound that wouldn't stop bleeding.

Franz searched for other social media. Found her Twitter, her art portfolio website, every digital footprint she'd left. Blocked. Blocked. Blocked. Cut off every avenue of digital stalking, not because he didn't want to see her anymore, but because he needed barriers between himself and his own destructive impulses.

It was 1:47 AM.

He retrieved his phone from where he'd thrown it. Screen cracked but functional, like him—damaged but still operating. Opened his notes app and typed what he couldn't send:

Dear Yui,

I lied to my therapist today. Told her I'm healing. Told her I barely think about you anymore. Told her I'm ready to reduce our sessions because I'm doing so well.

The truth is I think about you constantly. I dream about you every night—the dreams where we're still together are the worst ones because waking up feels like losing you all over again.

I've lost fifteen pounds. I sleep maybe four hours a night. I can't focus on my dissertation. I'm lying to everyone—my mom, my friends, my advisor, my therapist. Everyone thinks I'm recovering and I'm actually getting worse.

I saw a photo of you at your exhibition. You looked happy. Really, genuinely happy. And I'm glad you're happy. I really am. But it also breaks me because I'm so not happy and the unfairness of it is killing me.

How did you move on so easily? How are you okay? Do you ever think about me? Do you miss me at all? Or was I just easier to forget than I thought?

I blocked you today. On everything. Not because I'm angry (okay, maybe I'm a little angry) but because I can't keep checking if you'll acknowledge me. Can't keep hoping you'll reach out. Can't keep torturing myself with your life that doesn't include me anymore.

I don't know how to stop loving you. I don't know how to be okay. I don't know how to survive this. Everyone thinks I already have, but I haven't. I'm drowning in plain sight and no one can see it because I'm too good at pretending.

I don't know why I'm writing this. You'll never read it. I'll never send it. Maybe I just needed to tell someone the truth, and the only person I can tell is the one person I can't reach.

I miss you. God, I miss you so much it feels like dying.

— Franz

He saved the note in a folder with dozens of others just like it. Unsent letters to someone who'd never read them. Evidence of his deterioration that no one would ever see.

2:34 AM now. Franz looked at his destroyed room—books scattered, papers everywhere, broken lamp, his careful organization demolished. The physical manifestation of his internal state finally visible.

He should clean it up. Should restore the illusion before his mother saw. Should maintain the performance.

But he was so tired.

So desperately, achingly tired of pretending.

Franz curled up on the floor, still fully dressed, and closed his eyes. Sleep wouldn't come—it never did easily anymore—but at least he could rest. Could stop performing even if just for a few hours.

Tomorrow the alarm would go off at 6:47 AM. Tomorrow he'd clean up this mess. Tomorrow he'd put the mask back on. Tomorrow he'd continue the lie.

But tonight, for just a few hours, he let himself be broken.

Let himself be the truth everyone thought they were seeing but actually weren't.

Flowers fall gently, the chapter suggested.

But sometimes flowers don't fall. Sometimes they're crushed underfoot, ground into the dirt, destroyed utterly while everyone admires the beauty of their descent.

Franz was being crushed.

And he was completely, utterly alone with it.

Chapter 15 : When Silence Became Forever

Time has a particular quality when you're waiting to die without quite admitting that's what you're doing.

Franz didn't mark the days consciously. Didn't cross them off a calendar or count down to some specific end point. But six months passed like water through cupped hands—impossible to hold, leaving only the sensation of loss.

September became October became November became December became January became February became March.

The performance continued. Refined itself. Became so convincing that Franz sometimes forgot which version of himself was real—the functioning graduate student everyone saw, or the hollow man who existed in the spaces between performances.

October

His dissertation defense was scheduled for May, with comprehensive exams in late March. Six months to finish everything. A deadline that felt both impossibly distant and terrifyingly close. Franz worked on it in fits and starts, producing pages that his advisor called "excellent" and "insightful" while Franz felt nothing about them at all.

"You're really hitting your stride," Professor Chen said during one of their October meetings. "I'm impressed by how you've turned things around. Earlier this year, I was worried about you. Now? You're one of my strongest students."

Franz smiled. Thanked her. Felt the compliment slide off him like water off stone.

He'd lost twenty-three pounds now since the breakup. People had stopped commenting on it weeks ago. The narrative had settled into campus lore: Franz had gotten into fitness as a healthy coping mechanism after a bad breakup. Everyone believed it. He'd bought new clothes that fit his thinner frame—button-downs that no longer hung loose, jeans with a smaller waist size—maintaining the illusion that this transformation was intentional, controlled, healthy.

In reality, he ate maybe one meal a day. Food tasted like ash, like cardboard, like nothing worth the effort of chewing and swallowing. His stomach had shrunk to the point where eating anything substantial caused physical discomfort—cramping, nausea, a heavy fullness that felt wrong. But he ate enough to perform normalcy, always in front of his mother or friends, always with visible effort that they interpreted as healthy appetite returning.

His monthly therapy session with Dr. Morrison happened mid-October. They'd successfully transitioned from weekly to bi-weekly to monthly appointments—a trajectory that she viewed as evidence of successful treatment and Franz viewed as proof he could fool anyone.

"How are you feeling about the reduction in sessions?" she asked, settling into her chair with that expression of genuine care that made lying to her feel particularly vile.

"Good, actually. I feel like I have the tools to manage on my own now."

"That's wonderful to hear. And how often are you still thinking about Yui?"

"Rarely. When I do, it's more nostalgic than painful. Like remembering an old friend."

The lie came smoothly. The truth: he thought about Yui constantly, obsessively, every few minutes of every day. Had created three fake Instagram accounts and two fake Facebook profiles to monitor her life since she'd made her main accounts more private. Checked them multiple times daily, sometimes hourly, torturing himself with images of her continuing existence without him.

"And you mentioned you'd been on a few dates. How's that going?"

"It's been nice. Nothing serious yet, but I'm open to possibilities. It feels good to be putting myself out there."

Another lie. He'd been on exactly one coffee date with Emma Chen that had gone nowhere, and the thought of touching anyone else, kissing anyone else, felt not just wrong but physically impossible. Like asking him to speak a language he'd never learned.

"Franz, I have to say, you're a real success story. Many patients struggle for years with the kind of loss you experienced. The fact that you've processed it so healthily in under six months is remarkable."

Her pride felt like acid in his chest. Here was someone whose entire profession revolved around detecting mental health struggles, and he'd convinced her so thoroughly of his recovery that she was using him as an example of successful therapy.

"Thank you. I couldn't have done it without your help."

"You did the work. I just provided the framework." She made some notes. "I think we can move to check-ins every two months unless you feel you need more frequent contact."

"Every two months sounds perfect."

After the session, Franz sat in his car in the parking lot and stared at nothing. He'd just successfully convinced his therapist to reduce his care even further. Had lied so convincingly that she thought he was healed.

The isolation tightened around him like a noose.

That evening, October 15th specifically, Franz discovered something that would haunt him for the remaining months of his life.

He was scrolling through Yui's Instagram—one of his fake accounts had been accepted as a follower weeks ago, some art-adjacent profile he'd carefully curated to seem legitimate—when he saw a new photo. Yui at an art gallery opening, looking radiant in a black dress, surrounded by friends.

And there, just slightly in the background but unmistakably present: a man. Japanese, around their age, looking at Yui with an expression Franz recognized because he'd once worn it himself—interest, attraction, the particular attention you give someone you're drawn to.

Franz zoomed in on the photo. The man wasn't touching Yui, wasn't even standing particularly close. But he was there. Present in her life in a way Franz would never be again.

He clicked on the tagged names. Found him: Takeshi Yamamoto. Profile public. Artist, based in Tokyo, mutual friends with Yui and several people from her art school cohort.

Franz spent two hours that night going through every photo on Takeshi's Instagram, searching for more evidence of connection with Yui. Found a handful—group photos from art school, a casual shot from a café, nothing definitively romantic but enough to confirm they knew each other.

He created another fake account specifically to follow Takeshi. To monitor. To torture himself with the emerging narrative he could see developing.

At 2 AM, Franz typed another unsent letter in his phone's notes app:

Month 5. I saw a man in your photos today. Is he someone? Or am I paranoid? I have no right to ask. No right to care. You've moved on. That's what I keep telling everyone—that you've moved on, that I've moved on, that we're both fine.

But I'm not fine. I'm disintegrating. And the thought of you with someone else makes me want to stop existing entirely.

I know that's unhealthy. I know I should delete these fake accounts, stop checking on you, let you live your life without my digital ghost watching from the shadows. But I can't stop. It's the only connection I have left to you, even if you don't know I'm there.

Does he make you laugh? Does he understand your art the way I tried to? Does he get to touch you, kiss you, hold you while you sleep?

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I don't know what I'm apologizing for—for still loving you, for not being able to let go, for being this pathetic.

I miss you. I miss you so much it feels like dying.

He saved the note with all the others. October had fifteen such entries now, averaging one every two days. A chronicle of deterioration no one would ever read.

November

Thanksgiving arrived with its own particular brand of torture.

"You're coming home for the holiday, right?" his mother asked during their weekly phone call.

"I wish I could, Mom, but I'm really behind on the dissertation. I need to use the long weekend to catch up."

"Franz, you need to take breaks. You're working yourself too hard."

"I know, but May will be here before I know it. I can't afford to fall behind now."

"Where will you eat Thanksgiving dinner?"

"Marcus invited me to his family's place." Lie.

"Promise me you'll actually go? I don't want you alone."

"I promise." Lie.

"And you're eating enough? You sounded tired last time we talked."

"I'm fine, Mom. Really. Just the usual grad school stress."

"Okay. I love you, sweetheart."

"Love you too."

Franz spent Thanksgiving alone in his apartment. Didn't eat. Slept three hours that night, maybe four. Wrote seven unsent letters to Yui, each one more desperate than the last.

November also brought clear confirmation of what Franz had suspected in October: Yui and Takeshi were spending time together. Not in every photo—Yui was careful, or maybe it was too new, or maybe Franz was reading too much into innocuous friendship—but they appeared together with increasing frequency. A museum visit. A dinner with mutual friends. Another gallery opening.

Franz studied these photos with obsessive detail. The way Takeshi looked at Yui. The way she smiled near him—genuine, warm, the smile Franz remembered from their early days. The way they stood just slightly closer than casual friends typically would.

November 18th brought a photo that nearly broke him: a group shot from someone's birthday party, ten or twelve people crowded around a restaurant table, and there in the middle were Yui and Takeshi, sitting beside each other, her head tilted toward him, both of them laughing at something off-camera.

They looked natural together. Easy. Like people who fit.

Franz spent that entire night awake, staring at that photo, zooming in and out, searching for evidence that he was misinterpreting, that they were just friends, that he was being paranoid.

But he wasn't paranoid. He could see what was developing. Yui was moving on. Had moved on. Was building a life that didn't include him with someone who could actually be physically present.

The rational part of his brain—the part that was rapidly losing its grip—knew this was healthy, good even. She was supposed to move on. That was the entire point of ending their relationship. So she could live her life without the weight of impossible distance.

But rationality did nothing to ease the visceral pain of watching it happen.

His physical health continued its decline. November brought new symptoms: tremors in his hands, especially when tired. Frequent headaches—tension, probably, or dehydration from not drinking enough water. His vision occasionally blurred. Concentration became increasingly difficult. He'd read the same paragraph of research five times and retain nothing.

But he continued producing academic work somehow, operating on autopilot, his brain compartmentalizing to the point where one part could write coherent philosophy while another part screamed silently in the background.

"You look exhausted," Chen Wei observed one afternoon in their shared office.

"Dissertation. It's brutal."

"When's the last time you slept a full night?"

"I don't remember." At least that was honest.

"That's not sustainable, man. You need to take care of yourself."

"I'll sleep after exams."

Chen Wei looked skeptical but let it go. Everyone let it go. Franz's performance was too practiced, his explanations too reasonable, his function too apparently normal for anyone to push past his deflections.

By the end of November, Franz had lost twenty-eight pounds total. Had slept more than four hours in a night maybe twice all month. Was existing on coffee, occasional food when forced, and the kind of dissociative momentum that comes from being too broken to stop moving.

He wrote thirteen unsent letters to Yui in November. The tone was changing, becoming darker, more explicitly about suffering. But he saved them all, never sending, maintaining his digital silence while privately unraveling.

December

The holidays brought their own particular hell.

His mother wanted him home for Christmas. Franz constructed an elaborate lie about a research opportunity that required him to stay near campus, access to specific library archives that were only available during the break. She was disappointed but understood. Or rather, she believed the performance.

He spent Christmas Eve alone in his apartment. Didn't bother with decorations. Barely acknowledged the holiday except to send his mother a cheerful text—"Merry Christmas! Library's quiet today, getting so much done!"—accompanied by a selfie he'd taken earlier that month when he'd looked slightly less dead.

Christmas Day he worked on his dissertation for twelve hours straight, producing seven pages that were probably nonsense but had the appearance of academic rigor. Ate nothing. Slept two hours that night.

December also brought what Franz came to think of as "confirmation": a photo posted by one of Yui's friends, clearly from a Christmas party. Yui and Takeshi in the center of the frame, his arm around her shoulders, both of them smiling at the camera. The caption: "My favorite couple and their art talk that goes over everyone's head ❤"

Favorite couple.

Franz stared at that caption until the words stopped meaning anything, just shapes on a screen, destroying him letter by letter.

So it was confirmed. They were together. Yui had moved on completely. Had found someone new. Someone present. Someone who could hold her, kiss her, be there in all the ways Franz never could be again.

The rational part of his brain—now barely a whisper—reminded him this was good, this meant she was happy, this was what he'd wanted for her even in their final conversation.

But the rest of him—the vast, screaming majority—felt like someone had reached into his chest and crushed his heart with bare hands.

He typed and deleted seventeen messages to Yui that night. Each one increasingly unhinged:

I saw the photo. You look happy. I'm glad you're happy.

Delete.

Is he better than me? Does he make you laugh? Does he know about me? Do you tell him about the American boy who loved you and lost you?

Delete.

I can't do this anymore. Seeing you with someone else is killing me. Actually killing me.

Delete.

Did you ever really love me?

Delete.

I hope he's good to you. I hope he gives you everything I couldn't.

Delete.

I'm not okay. Everyone thinks I am but I'm not. I'm dying without you and I don't know how to stop.

Delete. Delete. Delete.

Instead, he wrote it all in his notes app, another unsent letter that he'd never send but couldn't stop himself from writing:

Month 7. You're with someone else now. I saw the photo. "Favorite couple," her friend called you. So it's real. It's official. You've moved on.

I should be happy for you. I want to be happy for you. You deserve someone who can actually be there. Someone who doesn't require time zone math and expensive flights and sacrificing everything for a relationship that was always going to be impossible.

But I'm not happy. I'm devastated. Absolutely, completely devastated.

I know I have no right to feel this way. We broke up. You've moved on. This is healthy and normal and exactly what you should be doing.

But knowing something rationally doesn't stop it from destroying you emotionally.

I wonder if you ever think about me. If you ever miss what we had. Or if Takeshi (I know his name—I've been watching your life like a ghost you don't know is there) has replaced those memories completely.

Everyone thinks I'm doing so well. My therapist is proud of me. My advisor compliments my work. My mom thinks I'm healing. My friends think I've moved on.

They're all wrong. I'm getting worse, not better. I'm barely sleeping. I've lost almost thirty pounds. I can't concentrate. I can't feel anything except this constant, aching absence of you.

But I keep performing. Keep lying. Keep pretending. Because the alternative—admitting the truth—feels impossible.

Merry Christmas, Yui. I hope you're happy. I really do.

I'm not.

By New Year's Eve, Franz was a ghost of himself. Literally—when he looked in the mirror, he barely recognized the gaunt, hollow-eyed man staring back. Thirty-one pounds lost now. Clothes hanging off a frame that was becoming skeletal.

But he kept performing.

January

January brought the new year and absolutely no hope with it.

Everyone around Franz seemed energized by the fresh start—New Year's resolutions, renewed academic focus, the collective delusion that arbitrary calendar changes meant something. Franz went through the motions, nodding along to conversations about goals and plans and futures he couldn't imagine living to see.

His dissertation was supposedly on track. He'd somehow produced enough pages that Professor Chen remained satisfied with his progress. How he'd written them, he couldn't say. They existed—words on a page that formed coherent arguments—but he had no memory of crafting them. Autopilot had taken over completely.

"Your section on existential dread is particularly strong," she commented during their January meeting. "Quite personal. Raw. It's your best work."

Of course it was. He was writing about existential dread while experiencing it in its most acute form. The irony wasn't lost on him.

His physical deterioration was becoming harder to hide. The tremor in his hands was constant now, not just when tired. He'd started wearing long sleeves to conceal how thin his arms had become. His face was gaunt, cheekbones prominent, eyes sunken. Dark circles that no amount of concealer could fully hide.

"Are you sick?" Marcus asked one day, studying Franz with open concern. "You look... I don't know, man. Really thin. Really tired."

"Just stressed. You know how it is with exams coming up."

"This is more than stress. When's the last time you ate a real meal?"

"Yesterday." Lie. He'd had half a protein bar three days ago.

"I'm worried about you."

"Don't be. I'm fine."

The performance was starting to crack. People were noticing. Franz needed to be more careful.

He started forcing himself to eat small amounts when others could see. Carried food with him—granola bars, fruit—and made a show of eating in public. The food made him nauseous, and he usually threw it up later, but the performance was maintained.

Yui's social media showed her thriving. Her art exhibition from months ago had led to more opportunities—a gallery in Osaka wanted to show her work, an art magazine had featured her in an emerging artists spotlight. And Takeshi appeared in nearly every personal photo now. Not just present, but clearly integrated into her life. Her partner.

Franz had stopped pretending he was casually checking on her. He was stalking her digital life obsessively, checking multiple times daily for updates, studying every photo for evidence of... what? That she was miserable without him? That wouldn't happen. She was clearly happy.

Mid-January brought a photo that Franz stared at for three hours straight: Yui and Takeshi at what looked like a winter festival, both wearing heavy coats, his arm around her waist, her head leaning on his shoulder, both of them smiling at the camera with that particular intimacy of people who are comfortable together, who belong to each other.

Franz saved the photo to his phone. Then deleted it. Then looked it up again and saved it again. Then deleted it. A cycle he repeated dozens of times, unable to stop himself from returning to the image that was destroying him.

That night he wrote the longest unsent letter yet—pages of stream-of-consciousness pain that he'd never share with anyone:

Month 8. I'm not going to make it much longer. I don't mean that as a threat or a dramatic statement. Just an observation. The machinery that keeps a person functional is breaking down in me. Sleep maybe two hours a night. Eat almost nothing. My hands shake constantly. My vision blurs. I read the same sentences over and over and they mean nothing.

But somehow I'm still producing academic work. Still showing up to things. Still lying to everyone. The performance has become so automatic I don't even think about it anymore. My mouth forms the words "I'm fine" without my brain's permission.

You look so happy in your photos. Really, genuinely happy. Takeshi treats you well, I can tell. The way he looks at you—it's how I used to look at you. Like you're the entire universe.

I should feel good about that. Should feel glad you found someone who can give you what I couldn't. But all I feel is this crushing, suffocating jealousy that makes me hate myself.

I've become someone I don't recognize. Someone who stalks his ex-girlfriend's social media through fake accounts. Someone who lies to his therapist. Someone who's slowly starving

himself and calling it stress. Someone who writes pages and pages to a person who will never read them and wouldn't care if she did.

My comprehensive exams are in March. Two months away. I need to survive until then. Finish what I started. Then... I don't know. I can't see past March. Can't imagine a future beyond that deadline.

I'm so tired, Yui. So desperately, achingly tired. Not just physically—though I am that too—but tired of performing. Tired of lying. Tired of pretending. Tired of existing in this half-life where nothing feels real except the pain.

I miss you. I will always miss you.

February

February was when Franz began to understand he was actually dying.

Not metaphorically. Not dramatically. But actually, physically dying.

His weight loss had reached thirty-five pounds. His body was cannibalizing itself, burning muscle for fuel, shutting down non-essential functions. He was cold all the time—his body unable to maintain proper temperature. His hair was falling out in the shower, coming loose in his hands. His heartbeat felt irregular, fluttering strangely in his chest.

He Googled his symptoms one night and found himself reading about starvation, malnutrition, organ failure. The timeline from severe malnutrition to serious medical crisis: weeks, maybe a few months depending on the individual.

He closed the browser. Didn't tell anyone. What would he even say?

His monthly check-in with Dr. Morrison happened early February. She noticed immediately.

"Franz, you've lost a significant amount of weight. Are you eating?"

"Yeah, just... stress. You know how grad students are. Living on coffee and deadline pressure."

"This seems like more than typical grad student stress. Have you considered seeing a doctor?"

"I'm fine. Really. Just two more months until exams, then I can relax."

She looked unconvinced but couldn't force him to seek medical care. Made him promise to eat better, to take care of himself, to call if he needed support before their next scheduled session.

He promised. Lied. Walked out knowing he'd probably never be honest with her.

February brought Valentine's Day, which Franz spent alone in his apartment, studiously avoiding social media for twenty-four hours because he couldn't bear to see whatever romantic gesture Takeshi had made for Yui.

But he broke after midnight, checking her Instagram with shaking hands, and found what he'd dreaded: a photo of flowers—red roses, classic and romantic—with the caption "Grateful for you" and Takeshi tagged.

Franz set his phone down carefully, as if it might explode. Walked to his bathroom. Looked at himself in the mirror—hollow eyes, gaunt face, a body that was giving up on living.

"You're pathetic," he told his reflection. "She's moved on. She's happy. And you're here dying because you can't let go."

His reflection stared back, offering no comfort.

That night he typed a message directly to Yui—not in his notes app, but in an actual text message:

I saw the flowers. He seems like a good man. I hope he makes you happy. I hope you're living the life you deserve.

I'm not doing well. I know you don't want to hear that, and I'm not saying it to manipulate you or make you feel guilty. Just... I need someone to know the truth. Even if you don't respond. Even if you've blocked this number.

I miss you. I will always miss you.

— Franz

His finger hovered over the send button for ten minutes. Then he deleted it all. Wrote it in his notes app instead with all the others.

Sending it would accomplish nothing except making Yui feel guilty, disrupting her happiness, pulling her back into a situation she'd rightfully left. Franz's suffering was his own to bear. He wouldn't weaponize it.

By the end of February, Franz could barely recognize himself. Thirty-eight pounds lost. Sleeping one to two hours per night. Eating almost nothing. His body was shutting down, but his brain continued producing academic work through sheer dissociative momentum.

He wrote eighteen unsent letters in February alone. The tone had shifted from longing to something darker, more existential, more explicitly about the impossibility of continuing.

March

March arrived with the promise of spring and the reality of Franz's comprehensive exams.

The exams were scheduled for March 28th—written tests covering his entire field of study, the final major hurdle before dissertation defense. Everything he'd been working toward for years would be tested in eight hours of writing across multiple subjects.

Franz prepared mechanically. Made study guides. Reviewed notes. Met with study groups where he participated just enough to maintain the illusion of normality.

"You ready for these exams?" Chen Wei asked during one study session.

"As ready as I'll ever be."

"You've been killing it all year. You'll do fine."

If only he knew. Franz was barely holding himself together, the exams approaching like a finish line to a race he'd barely survived. He couldn't see past March 28th. Couldn't imagine what came after. His entire focus had narrowed to this single goal: finish the exams, complete what he'd started, and then...

And then what?

He didn't know. Couldn't think that far ahead.

Early March brought one more devastating photo: Yui and Takeshi at what looked like a rooftop gathering, sunset in the background, his arms wrapped around her from behind, her head tilted back against his shoulder, both of them laughing. The pure joy in her face was unmistakable.

She looked more happy with Takeshi than Franz ever remembered her being with him.

That realization broke something fundamental that had been barely holding together.

Franz stopped eating entirely after that photo. Stopped pretending to eat. His body was running on fumes, on nothing, on the last reserves before complete shutdown.

His mother called March 15th. "Franz, I haven't heard from you in over a week. Are you okay?"

"Sorry, Mom. Exam prep. I've been completely buried."

"You sound tired."

"I am. But they're almost here. Just two more weeks and I can rest."

"Promise me you're taking care of yourself."

"I promise." The easiest lie. He'd told it so many times it meant nothing.

"I love you, sweetheart. Call me after your exams. I want to hear how they went."

"I will. Love you too."

He meant that. At least that was true.

The week before exams, Franz wrote his final unsent letter—though he didn't know it would be his last when he wrote it:

Month 9. Almost to the exams. March 28th. Been working toward this for years and now it's almost here and I feel nothing about it. No anxiety. No excitement. Nothing.

You look so happy in your recent photos. Like you've found everything you were looking for. I'm glad. Really, I am. Someone should be happy, and it clearly can't be me.

I don't know what happens after the exams. Can't see past that date. Maybe I'll finally crash completely. Maybe I'll sleep for a week. Maybe something else. I don't know.

I wanted you to know—even though you'll never read this—that I tried. I really tried to move on, to heal, to be okay. Everyone thinks I succeeded. But I didn't. I've just been performing for nine months, and I'm so exhausted I can barely remember what being real feels like.

I love you. I will always love you. That's the one true thing in all of this.

I'm sorry I couldn't be what you needed. I'm sorry the distance was too much. I'm sorry for everything.

— F

March 27th, the night before his exams, Franz lay in bed not sleeping, staring at his ceiling, and thought about how flowers fall gently while being crushed underfoot.

Tomorrow he would take his exams. Would finish what he'd started. And then...

He still couldn't see what came after.

But he'd lived this long. Surely he could survive one more day.

March 28th began like every day for the past two years—with the alarm piercing the early silence at 6:47 AM. Franz lay in darkness, the ceiling above a canvas for the shadows that danced across his mind. A familiar negotiation unfolded in the abyss of his thoughts: whether it was worth the effort to rise, to face another day that felt like a slow march toward oblivion.

His body was alien, fragile—too light, too weak—like a house rotted from within. Forty pounds lost, muscles wasted, skin stretched taut across bones that seemed ready to break. His breath was shallow, each inhalation a labor. Yet the day demanded motion, and motion demanded strength he no longer possessed.

He opened his eyes fully once more, eyes glazing over the cracks and stains of the ceiling. He didn't know this would be the last time. He didn't know that today, eight hours of grueling exams would be his final stand, a test not just of knowledge, but of survival.

The bathroom light flickered to life as he forced his trembling body upright. The cold water poured over brittle skin, an icy cascade that failed to warm, only numbed further. He stayed under the spray longer than usual, as if to wash away the weight accumulated over two dark years.

When the water finally ceased, he reached for a razor with hands unsteady. The blade bit unevenly—two small nicks bloomed with blood, the crimson drop feeling too heavy for his godless veins. Even his blood seemed thin and reluctant now, unable to sustain the life it once had.

Dressed in his threadbare costume of a button-down shirt and faded pants, he looked in the mirror with hollow eyes. A ghost stared back. A man pretending to be human. His gaze flickered to his reflection's frailties—the sunken cheeks, the gaunt jaw, the haunted sadness behind his eyes—and turned away without a word.

In the kitchen, his mother watched him closely, worry darkening her eyes but held back by hope and years of practiced trust. Her smile was thin, her voice gentle.

“Big day,” she whispered. “How are you feeling?”

“Nervous. But ready,” Franz replied, voice steadier than his hands.

She reached out, grasped his arm as if to tether him to the world. “You look so thin, sweetheart. Are you sure—”

“Mom, we’ve been over this. Just stress. After today, I can relax.”

The lie slipped out smoothly, practiced and polished. She seemed to accept it, though the tremble in her hands betrayed her.

She drew him close, holding him longer than usual, tears glossing her eyes. "I'm proud of you," she said softly.

"Thanks, Mom," he whispered back—the only truth of the morning.

With trembling steps, Franz left, the weight of the day heavy in every worn shoe. Getting into his car, the cold bite of early spring enveloped him. Outside, buds strained through the thawing earth, indifferent to the dying man focused only on the next hours to come.

The campus emerged from morning fog, alive with chatter and movement. Life was starkly normal for all but Franz. He moved toward the building that housed his future's final test—a building that might as well have been a tomb.

Inside the exam hall, the hum of nervous students filled sterile air. Thirty anxious souls gathered, carrying their years of study like shields. Franz slipped into a seat near the back, isolated and invisible.

His heart thudded unevenly as Professor Chen entered, radiating calm confidence. She handed out sealed envelopes, instructions clear and unforgiving.

"This is your chance to demonstrate mastery," she said softly.

Franz's fingers trembled as he broke the seal, unfolding the paper. The first question stared back at him:

"Discuss Sartre's concept of bad faith in contemporary society."

The cruel irony was palpable—he, the living definition of bad faith, was about to write on self-deception while drowning in it.

His pen moved sluggishly, propelled by autopilot—writing essays on Camus, Kierkegaard, the absurdity of existence, the burden of being-toward-death—theories he understood more deeply than ever but to which he could no longer ascribe hope or belief.

As hours stretched interminably, his vision dimmed, the world swimming. His script blurred but his hand kept moving in silent defiance.

Finally, when the proctor called time, he laid down his pen, sustained by nothing but will.

The exam was done. Franz had survived the final hurdle—not triumphantly, but at the barest edge of existence.

His body sagged, and he prepared to face the world outside once more.

Franz stepped out of the exam center, his legs heavy and unsteady beneath him. The late afternoon sun spilled across the campus, casting long shadows as students hurried past, eager to move on from the grueling day. But Franz moved slowly, as if wading through water, every step laden with exhaustion and the weight of two years of silent suffering.

His heart beat erratically, eyes scanning the world but seeing only fragments, disconnected from reality. Then, a buzz in his pocket pulled him back—a notification from one of his carefully crafted fake accounts.

His hands trembled as he pulled out his phone, fingering it with numb fingers. The screen flickered to life, and the photo loaded slowly: Yui and Takeshi, smiling in a carefree selfie, arms wrapped warmly around each other, faces radiant with genuine joy.

A caption in delicate Japanese script read: "Congratulations, you two! ❤️"

The words hammered into Franz's heart, slicing through the fragile veneer he'd built. No ring. No official announcement. Just a simple, unmistakable declaration of a shared, happy life without him.

His breath hitched, panic stirring beneath the surface. He pressed the phone to his chest as if it might shatter under the weight of the truth.

"Not here. Not now. Not in front of all these people," he whispered urgently, voice shaking.

But the panic was relentless. His chest tightened, lungs grasping for air that refused to come. Vision blurred; black spots danced at the edges. Limbs wobbled threatening collapse.

He clutched the cold stone wall, fingers digging into the rough surface for grounding, fighting the suffocating wave crashing over him.

Eyes wild, he stumbled toward the parking lot, each step a battle against the rising tide of despair.

At his car, he fumbled with his keys, breath ragged and shallow. The moment he slid into the driver's seat, the tears came—free and unrelenting, consuming every shred of restraint.

Fists clenched on the steering wheel, his body shook with sobs born of a shattered soul. Years of pain, loss, and unreachable love pooled into this crushing moment of vulnerability.

His vision burned with salted tears as he whispered broken apologies to the empty cabin of the car.

Two years of silence, performance, and unseen suffering had led to this singular second of utter destruction.

Franz was no longer the composed graduate student. He was a man unraveling, exposed in the solitude of his car, broken beyond repair.

Franz's tears blurred the cracked screen of his phone as he forced himself to focus on the grueling task ahead—copying every anguished message from his notes and pasting them into texts to send to Yui. Two years of hidden pain, raw confessions, and desperate cries spilled meticulously into the message interface. His hands trembled violently, heart pounding erratically, breath shallow but deliberate.

Each message was a shard of his shattered soul, a final attempt to pierce the silence that had imprisoned him for so long. He pasted one after another, sometimes pausing as his vision swam, his body weighed down by exhaustion and panic.

A cruel calmness settled as he approached the last message—his final words of love and sorrow. His finger hovered, trembling, above the send button: "I am sorry, my love. I will always hold on to you."

With a shaky breath, he pressed send.

The messages began to send, the screen flashing "Sending...", but the signal faltered, messages stalling in limbo.

Desperation clawed at him—he needed to get home, to a place with better reception, to make sure she finally knew.

His trembling hands found the car keys. His legs, weak and unsteady, managed to carry him there. He slid behind the wheel, sobbing silently, the full weight of years collapsing into this suffocating moment.

His chest heaved; the sobs wracked him, robbing his control.

Defying all reason, he started the engine.

The world jerked as his foot pressed the accelerator. Shadows danced indistinctly through his blurred vision. Panic and grief collided in a haze of fractured thought.

Minutes later, approaching a familiar intersection just miles from campus, Franz's fractured focus was shattered by movement—a truck careening against the red light.

In the heart-stopping seconds before impact, time slowed to agonizing clarity.

His eyes locked on the truck, his body tensed to react, but trembling limbs betrayed him.

With a terrifying crunch, metal collided, glass shattered, and his world exploded in pain and darkness.

Blood poured, searing taste filling his mouth. His phone tumbled from the console; the messages stopped short—unseen, frozen in time on the cracked screen.

As consciousness ebbed, a solitary thought echoed in the void: Yui.

Paramedics arrived swiftly at the accident scene, their movements practiced and urgent. Voices barked commands; machines beeped. Amid shattered glass and twisted metal, they fought to stabilize Franz. His breathing was shallow. His pulse faint but present. Blood pooled around him—a crimson reminder of fragility.

The ambulance lights pierced the dusk as Franz was loaded inside. The van roared to life, sirens shrieking through the streets en route to the hospital.

Meanwhile, a calm but grave phone call was placed to Franz's mother. The officer's voice was measured but heavy.

"Ma'am, this is Officer Simmons. We're contacting you regarding an accident involving your son. He was found unconscious and critically injured. He's being transported to the trauma center now."

Her breath caught, pulse quickened, shock settling in cold.

In the ambulance, monitors beeped erratically. Paramedics worked fervently—IV lines started, oxygen administered. Franz, eyes fluttering, grasped consciousness briefly.

With faint voice, breaths ragged, he murmured, "I love you, Yui... Sorry, Mom. I failed to be a good son."

Then his eyes closed.

Minutes later, the monitor flatlined.

Despite frantic efforts, life departed from the fragile form they'd fought for. The hospital would receive him no longer breathing.

Franz was gone.

His last words hung between lights and sirens—a final confession, a farewell, an eternal silence.

Franz's mother burst through the hospital doors, her breath ragged and desperate, hands trembling as they reached for the wall to steady herself. The sterile fluorescent lights overhead cast a harsh, unforgiving glow across the white corridors—cold, clinical, indifferent to the agony building in her chest.

She scanned the faces of nurses and doctors rushing past, searching for answers, for hope, for anything but the truth she already felt settling like ice in her bones.

A doctor emerged from the trauma ward, his face grave, eyes carrying the unbearable weight of words no parent should ever hear. He approached slowly, each step measured, as if delaying the inevitable might somehow soften the blow.

"Ms Muller," he began, voice low and gentle. "I'm Dr. Patterson. I'm... I'm so very sorry."

The world tilted.

"We did everything we could. Your son sustained severe trauma from the accident—multiple internal injuries, significant blood loss. The paramedics worked tirelessly, and our team fought for him, but..." He paused, the silence heavy with finality. "Franz passed away en route to the hospital. He didn't make it to surgery. I'm truly sorry."

The words hit like a physical blow. Her knees buckled, legs giving way beneath the crushing weight of grief. She would have fallen if not for the doctor's steady hand on her arm.

"No," she whispered, the word barely audible, a desperate denial of reality. "No, no, no..."

Tears broke free, cascading down her face as her body shook with sobs that came from somewhere deep and primal—the place where a mother's love lives, where the bond with her child is woven into her very soul.

"He promised me," she choked out between gasping breaths. "He promised we'd have dinner tonight. To celebrate. He said... he said after today he could relax. Why? Why couldn't he just wait? Why did he leave like this?"

Her voice broke completely, dissolving into anguished cries that echoed through the sterile hallway. Other families in the waiting room turned away, unable to bear witness to such raw, devastating grief.

She spoke to the empty air, to the son who could no longer hear her, pouring out all the things she'd wanted to say that morning but hadn't—all the warnings her instinct had screamed but her hope had silenced.

"I knew something was wrong," she sobbed. "I knew. I saw it in your eyes this morning. You looked so tired, so thin, so... fragile. Why didn't I stop you? Why didn't I hold on longer? Why didn't I make you stay?"

Her hands covered her face, tears streaming through her fingers. "I love you, Franz. I love you so much. I'm sorry I didn't see how much you were suffering. I'm sorry I believed your lies. You didn't have to go through this alone, baby. You didn't have to pretend for me. I wish... God, I wish I could have done more. I wish I could have saved you."

The doctor stood silently, giving her space to grieve, his presence a quiet anchor in the storm of her devastation.

After several moments, a female paramedic approached hesitantly, her own eyes red-rimmed, clearly affected by the tragedy she'd witnessed. In her hands, she carried a clear plastic bag containing Franz's belongings—his cracked phone, his keys, his student ID, his wallet. The mundane artifacts of a life that had just ended.

"Ms. Muller," the paramedic said softly, her voice thick with emotion. "I was with your son in the ambulance. I wanted... I thought you should know."

Franz's mother looked up, face ravaged by tears, desperately seeking any final connection to her son.

The paramedic's voice trembled as she continued. "He regained consciousness briefly. Just for a moment. He was in pain, but he was lucid enough to speak." She paused, swallowing hard, her own grief evident. "His last words... he said, 'I love you, Yui... Sorry, Mom. I failed to be a good son.'"

The silence that followed was suffocating.

Franz's mother's face crumpled anew, a fresh wave of agony washing over her. Her hand pressed to her mouth, stifling a cry that threatened to tear her apart from the inside.

"He thought he failed?" she whispered, voice breaking. "He thought he failed me?"

The paramedic's eyes filled with tears. "He seemed... at peace when he said it. Like he'd been holding those words inside for a long time."

"No," Franz's mother shook her head violently, clutching the bag of belongings to her chest like it might somehow bring him back. "No, you didn't fail. You never failed. You were my everything, Franz. My beautiful boy. You were never a failure. Never."

But the words fell into the void where her son used to be, unanswered and too late.

She held his phone in trembling hands, the screen cracked and dark, unaware of the hundreds of unsent messages trapped inside—two years of silent suffering, of hidden pain, of a love that had slowly destroyed him from within.

She clutched his belongings—cold, impersonal objects that were all she had left of the son who had been full of promise, intelligence, kindness, and a capacity for love so deep it had ultimately consumed him.

The harsh hospital lights continued their indifferent glow. The world kept turning. People moved through hallways, lived and died, found hope and lost it.

But for Franz's mother, time had stopped at the moment her son's heart did—forever frozen in the unbearable present of a mother who had lost her child, who had missed the signs, who would spend the rest of her life haunted by one single, devastating question: Why didn't I see?

March 29th dawned in Tokyo with the kind of gentle spring warmth that promised renewal, hope, and the quiet persistence of life moving forward. Cherry blossoms were beginning their brief, spectacular bloom—petals drifting through the air like pink snow, carpeting sidewalks with fragile beauty.

Yui woke to sunlight streaming through her apartment windows, the city already alive with its characteristic hum of morning traffic and distant conversations. She stretched, feeling the pleasant ache of a good night's sleep, and reached for her phone on the nightstand—a habitual gesture, checking messages, scrolling through social media, beginning her day the way millions of others did.

There were messages from friends. A notification about an upcoming gallery showing. A text from Takeshi asking if she wanted to grab lunch later. Normal. Ordinary. The kind of morning that held no indication that across the ocean, in a hospital in California, a man who had once been the center of her universe had just died thinking of her name.

She replied to Takeshi with a cheerful affirmative, added a heart emoji, and got out of bed to start her day.

In her studio later that morning, Yui worked on a new piece—an abstract exploration of transformation using bold colors and sweeping brushstrokes. The painting was coming

together beautifully, each layer adding depth and complexity. She lost herself in the work, in the meditative rhythm of creation, her mind quiet and focused.

This was the life she'd built for herself over the past two years. After the painful but necessary breakup with Franz, she'd thrown herself into her art with renewed determination. The distance had been impossible. The relationship unsustainable. She'd made the right choice, even if it had hurt terribly at the time.

And gradually, the hurt had faded. Time and work and the gentle presence of Takeshi had helped heal the wound. She'd moved on—not forgotten Franz entirely, but filed him away in the category of "past loves" that everyone carries. A beautiful chapter that had ended so something new could begin.

She didn't know that Franz had never filed her away. That he'd been carrying her with him every day for two years, that weight growing heavier until it had finally crushed him completely.

Around noon, Yui cleaned her brushes and headed out to meet Takeshi at their favorite café—a small place near Shibuya that served excellent coffee and even better pastries. The walk was pleasant, cherry blossoms creating a canopy of pink and white overhead, petals occasionally landing in her hair.

Takeshi was already there when she arrived, sitting at their usual table by the window, scrolling through his phone. He looked up when she entered, his face brightening with genuine warmth.

"Hey," he said, standing to kiss her cheek. "How's the new piece coming?"

"Good. Really good, actually. I think it might be my best work yet."

They ordered—matcha latte for her, black coffee for him, splitting a slice of strawberry cake—and fell into easy conversation about their respective projects, mutual friends, the logistics of an upcoming exhibition they were both participating in.

This was what Yui had wanted. What she'd needed. A relationship with someone physically present, someone she could see and touch and build a life with. Someone who understood her world because he lived in it too, not seven thousand miles away struggling to connect through screens and time zones.

She felt happy. Genuinely happy in a way she hadn't been during those final months with Franz, when the distance had felt like a physical pain and every goodbye after a visit had been its own small death.

"You seem distracted," Takeshi observed, studying her face with the attention of someone who'd learned to read her moods.

Yui blinked, pulled from her thoughts. "Sorry. Just thinking about the exhibition. Nervous, I guess."

It was a small lie. She'd actually been thinking about Franz for a moment—a fleeting memory triggered by something, maybe the way sunlight hit the café window, maybe nothing at all. But the thought had come and gone quickly, like the shadow of a cloud passing over.

She didn't know that at that exact moment, Franz's body was being prepared for cremation. That his mother was sitting in a funeral home making arrangements no parent should have to make. That his phone—cracked and dead—sat in a plastic bag among his belongings, holding two years of messages that had never reached her.

That afternoon, Yui returned to her studio and worked for several more hours, making good progress on the painting. She took a break around three to scroll through Instagram, posting a photo of her work-in-progress with the caption: "New piece coming together. Sometimes you have to destroy what you've built to create something better."

The irony was lost on her. She couldn't know that Franz had seen her posts obsessively for two years through fake accounts she'd never detected. That he'd studied every image of her new life like archaeological evidence of what he'd lost. That each photo of her smiling had been both sustenance and poison to him.

By evening, she met up with a group of friends for dinner—six of them crowded around a table at an izakaya, sharing plates of yakitori and karaage, laughing at inside jokes and stories from their respective weeks. Yui felt warm and included and loved, surrounded by people who knew her and cared about her.

One friend, Mika, leaned over during a lull in conversation. "You seem really happy lately. Like, genuinely content. It's nice to see."

Yui smiled. "I am happy. Things are good. Work is good, life is good."

"Takeshi is good?" Mika teased with a knowing grin.

"Takeshi is very good," Yui confirmed, feeling her cheeks warm slightly.

The conversation moved on to other topics—someone's upcoming wedding, plans for Golden Week, the latest gallery gossip. Normal friend talk. The kind of evening that would be forgotten in a week, just another pleasant night among many.

Yui didn't know that in California, Franz's friends were gathering too—but at Marcus's apartment, drinking beer in shocked silence, trying to process the news that one of their own had died. That Chen Wei was crying in the bathroom, guilt-stricken that he hadn't seen the signs. That Professor Chen was at home composing an email to the department about a "tragic loss" while wondering what she'd missed.

March 30th arrived with rain—unusual for Tokyo in late March, but not unheard of. Yui stayed in, working on administrative tasks for her upcoming exhibition, responding to emails, updating her website. Tedious work, but necessary.

She thought about Franz briefly that day—a longer thought this time, sparked by seeing an old photo on her computer while organizing files. They'd taken it during his last visit to Japan, at a temple in Kyoto, both of them smiling at the camera with the kind of unguarded happiness that comes before things fall apart.

She looked at that photo for a full minute, feeling a complex swirl of emotions. Nostalgia. Regret. Relief. Sadness that it hadn't worked out mixed with certainty that ending it had been right.

"I hope you're doing well," she said quietly to the image on her screen. "I hope you've moved on too. I hope you're happy."

She didn't know he was dead. That he would never be happy again. That he'd spent his final moments thinking of her name.

She closed the file and went back to work, Franz's image filed away once more in the archives of her past.

That evening, Takeshi came over. They cooked dinner together—a simple pasta dish with vegetables—and watched a movie on her couch, his arm around her shoulders, her head resting comfortably against his chest.

"I'm glad we found each other," Takeshi said during a quiet moment in the film.

"Me too," Yui replied, meaning it.

This was her life now. This was her present and her future. Franz belonged to her past—a chapter that had closed so a new one could begin.

March 31st brought a commission inquiry from a gallery in Osaka—exciting news that had Yui on the phone for an hour discussing details, possibilities, logistics. Her career was taking off in ways she'd dreamed about but hadn't quite believed would happen.

She met with her mentor that afternoon, showing him her recent work, receiving praise and constructive feedback that would help push her art to the next level. On the way home, she stopped at an art supply store to pick up new canvases, already planning her next several pieces.

Her phone buzzed with a text from her mother: "Coming to Tokyo next week. Dinner on Thursday?"

She replied: "Yes! Can't wait. Love you."

Life was full. Life was moving forward. Life was good.

She still didn't know that halfway around the world, Franz's funeral was being planned. That his mother was going through his apartment, finding evidence of the deterioration no one had seen. That his death was already rippling outward—friends grieving, professors shocked, a university community processing the loss.

April 1st arrived—a day of small ironies, given the date. Yui spent the morning at the gym, the afternoon back in her studio. She posted another progress shot of her painting on Instagram, this time with the caption: "Almost there. Can't wait to share the finished piece."

Takeshi commented with a fire emoji and "So proud of you."

She smiled at her phone, heart warm with affection and belonging.

That evening, she video-called her mother, chatting about ordinary things—family news, her father's recent golf game, her cousin's new baby. Normal family conversation, full of love and mundane detail.

"You sound happy, sweetie," her mother observed.

"I am, Mom. Really happy."

"Good. You deserve it after everything."

Yui knew her mother was referring to the breakup with Franz, the difficult months that had followed, the slow rebuilding of her life and confidence. Her mother had worried about her during that time, had seen the toll the long-distance relationship had taken.

"I'm okay now," Yui assured her. "That's all behind me."

And it was. Franz was behind her. Filed away. A past chapter that no longer defined her present.

She didn't know he was literally behind her now—gone, buried, past in a way that was permanent and irreversible.

April 2nd was a Friday, and Yui spent it preparing for a friend's birthday party that evening. She bought a gift, wrapped it carefully, chose an outfit that made her feel confident and pretty.

The party was in Roppongi, at a trendy bar with craft cocktails and a view of Tokyo Tower. Yui arrived with Takeshi, immediately swept into hugs and greetings and the warm chaos of friends celebrating.

She drank, she laughed, she danced. She felt young and alive and full of possibility. Someone took a group photo—fifteen people crowded together, arms around each other, smiling at the camera. Yui posted it with the caption: "Love these humans ❤️"

The photo would eventually reach hundreds of people through shares and tags and the mysterious algorithms of social media. None of them would know that one person who'd once loved Yui desperately was now beyond the reach of any post or photo or digital connection.

April 3rd was a Saturday, and Yui woke up with a mild hangover but a happy heart. She spent the morning in bed, scrolling through her phone, drinking water, recovering slowly.

Around noon, she finally got up and made herself a proper breakfast—toast with avocado, a fruit salad, green tea. She ate on her small balcony, watching the city move below her, feeling grateful for her life.

She thought about Franz again—just briefly, a passing thought triggered by something she couldn't identify. A memory of his laugh, maybe. Or the way he used to listen to her talk about her art with such genuine interest and understanding.

"I hope you're okay," she thought, sending the wish out into the universe without knowing it was too late. "I hope you've found someone who makes you happy."

She finished her breakfast and went about her day, Franz's memory fading again into the background of her consciousness where he'd lived for the past two years—present but not central, remembered but not dwelt upon.

By evening, she was back to normal, meeting friends for dinner, laughing at jokes, making plans for the following week. Her life continued its forward motion, full of art and friendship and the gentle presence of Takeshi.

April 4th brought news of the Osaka commission being confirmed—a major career milestone that had Yui celebrating with champagne and excited phone calls to friends and family.

"This is huge," Takeshi said, kissing her enthusiastically. "You're on your way."

"I can't believe it," Yui kept saying, joy bubbling up. "This is actually happening."

That night, she couldn't sleep—not from anxiety but from excitement. She lay in bed making mental plans, imagining possibilities, feeling the rush of dreams beginning to materialize.

Franz had felt that way once too—about his dissertation, about his future, about the possibility of a life with her. But his dreams had died piece by piece over two years, until he'd had nothing left but the weight of loving someone who'd moved on.

Yui didn't know any of this. Couldn't know. She was busy living while Franz was busy being dead.

April 5th was a Sunday, and Yui went to her parents' house for the family dinner she'd promised. Her mother cooked her favorite foods. Her father asked about her career with genuine pride. Her younger brother teased her about Takeshi with the affection of siblings who actually like each other.

It was a perfect family evening—the kind that creates warm memories, that makes you feel loved and supported and like you belong somewhere safe.

Driving home that night, Yui felt content in a way that was almost spiritual. Her life had come together. The painful past had given way to a beautiful present. She was okay. She was more than okay.

She didn't know that in California, Franz's mother was sitting alone in her son's empty apartment, holding his cracked phone and wondering what secrets it held. Didn't know that his friends were creating a memorial fund in his name. Didn't know that Professor Chen had cancelled classes to attend his funeral.

Didn't know that the man who'd loved her enough to destroy himself was being mourned by everyone except the one person he'd wanted most to know he existed.

April 6th arrived, and Yui's life continued its beautiful trajectory. She worked, she created, she loved, she lived.

And Franz remained dead, his messages still trapped in a broken phone, his truth still undelivered.

The cruel irony of it all was that Yui was genuinely happy. Had genuinely moved on. Was genuinely building a good life.

Which meant that when the truth finally reached her—when those messages finally sent, when she learned Franz had died—it would destroy her in ways she couldn't currently imagine.

But for now, she was blissfully, beautifully, tragically unaware.

Life in Tokyo continued. Cherry blossoms fell gently, creating carpets of pink and white. The city moved forward with its relentless energy. Spring deepened into its full glory.

And Yui lived, not knowing that seven thousand miles away, the person who'd once been her entire world had stopped living while thinking of her name.

The silence between them was complete now. Permanent. Forever.

But she didn't know that yet.

She would soon.

The funeral had been small. Intimate. Twenty-three people gathered in a chapel that felt too large even for that modest number, as if the space itself was emphasizing Franz's isolation, the way he'd pulled away from everyone in those final two years.

Franz's mother had stood at the front, numb with grief, listening to Professor Chen speak about her son's "brilliant mind" and "promising future"—words that felt like mockery given how that future had been extinguished on a highway intersection three miles from campus.

Marcus had spoken too, voice breaking as he talked about their friendship, about late-night philosophy discussions and shared coffee and all the small moments that make up a life. But even Marcus had admitted, tears streaming down his face, that he hadn't really known Franz these past two years. That his friend had become a stranger wearing a familiar face.

Chen Wei hadn't been able to speak at all. Had sat in the back row crying silently, shoulders shaking, tormented by the knowledge that he'd sat across from Franz nearly every day and had somehow missed that his friend was dying.

The service had lasted forty-five minutes. They'd played Franz's favorite music—Chopin, melancholy piano pieces that seemed to capture something essential about who he'd been. His mother had placed a photo of him on the casket—not a recent one, but from two years ago, before the deterioration, when he'd still looked like himself.

Afterward, there had been a brief reception. Quiet conversations, shared grief, the particular awkwardness of a funeral for someone so young. People had offered condolences that felt inadequate. What could anyone say? There were no words sufficient for this kind of loss.

By evening, everyone had gone. Franz's mother had returned home alone to a house that felt impossibly empty, her son's absence a physical presence that filled every room.

For three days after the funeral, she couldn't bring herself to enter his apartment. The landlord had been sympathetic, had given her time, but eventually she'd have to clear it out. Eventually she'd have to sort through the material remnants of her son's life and decide what to keep and what to discard.

On the fourth day—April 6th, the same day Yui was having dinner with her family, laughing and feeling blessed—Franz's mother finally steeled herself to face his apartment.

She drove there in the late morning, parked in his usual spot, and sat in her car for ten minutes gathering courage before she could make herself go inside.

The apartment was exactly as he'd left it that final morning. Coffee cup still in the sink. Bed unmade. His bag—the one he'd taken to the exam—gone, now in a police evidence locker somewhere along with the clothes he'd been wearing when he died.

The normalcy of it was devastating. This was a space configured for someone who was coming back. Someone who'd left temporarily and would return. Except Franz would never return.

His mother stood in the entryway, breathing through waves of grief, before forcing herself to move deeper into the apartment.

The living room was tidy. His desk held his laptop—closed, password-protected—and stacks of papers related to his dissertation. Books lined the shelves, philosophical texts with worn spines marking the ones he'd read most frequently. It all looked so normal. So ordinary.

But when she opened his bedroom door, the illusion of normalcy shattered.

The room was a disaster. Not messy in the way a busy student's room might be, but destroyed in a way that spoke of violence, of psychological breakdown, of suffering so intense it had manifested physically.

One wall had holes in it—fist-sized dents in the drywall where he'd clearly punched it repeatedly. The closet door hung slightly crooked, hinges damaged. His desk chair was overturned. Clothes were scattered across the floor, some of them torn.

And the walls. God, the walls.

They were covered in printed photos. Dozens of them. Maybe a hundred. All of Yui.

Photos from their time together—selfies, candid shots, pictures from trips they'd taken. But also newer photos, clearly printed from social media. Yui at galleries. Yui with friends. Yui with Takeshi.

Some of the photos had writing on them—Franz's handwriting, increasingly illegible, words like "gone" and "lost" and "why" scrawled across images of Yui's smiling face.

It looked like the room of someone who'd been slowly losing his mind. A shrine and a tomb combined, evidence of obsession and desperation and a grief so consuming it had eaten away at sanity itself.

Franz's mother stood frozen in the doorway, hand over her mouth, tears streaming down her face as she finally—too late, always too late—understood the depth of her son's suffering.

"Oh, Franz," she whispered to the empty room. "Oh, baby. What did you do to yourself?"

She moved through the space carefully, as if afraid of disturbing something sacred. Opened his desk drawers and found journals—pages and pages of writing, increasingly dark, chronicling his deterioration. Found medication bottles—antidepressants prescribed but barely taken, sleeping pills that hadn't helped. Found letters he'd written but never sent, including several addressed to her apologizing for lying, for pretending, for failing to be the son he thought she deserved.

Each discovery was a knife to the heart. Each piece of evidence of his hidden suffering was proof of her failure to see, to help, to save him.

In his nightstand, beneath old receipts and loose change, she found the bag of his belongings from the hospital. The police had given it to her, but she hadn't been able to look through it yet. Now she forced herself to open it.

His wallet. His keys. His student ID, the photo showing a version of Franz from two years ago, healthy and whole. And his phone—screen badly cracked, the damage spider-webbing across the surface, but otherwise intact.

She pulled it out carefully, this device that had been with him in his final moments. The battery was completely dead, had been since the accident. She searched through his drawers until she found his charger, then plugged it in, not even certain why. What did it matter what was on his phone? He was gone.

But still she waited, watching the screen remain black for several long moments before the charging icon finally appeared.

She sat on his bed—unmade, sheets still holding a faint scent of him—and held the phone in her trembling hands. It would take several minutes to charge enough to power on. She waited, surrounded by evidence of her son's psychological collapse, trying to understand how she'd missed it all.

The signs had been there. His weight loss. His exhaustion. The way he'd pulled away. But he'd been so convincing. So practiced at lying. And she'd wanted to believe him. Had needed to believe that her son was okay, that graduate school stress was the extent of his problems.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to the room, to his memory, to the ghost of the boy he'd been. "I'm so sorry I didn't see."

The phone vibrated in her hands. Enough charge to boot up.

She pressed the power button and watched the screen flicker to life. The lock screen appeared—a photo of Yui, of course. Young and beautiful and smiling, frozen in a moment of happiness that now felt like an accusation.

Franz's mother didn't know his passcode, tried a few combinations—his birthday, her birthday—before remembering that the Face ID might still work. She held the phone up to her own face, knowing it wouldn't unlock for her, but then remembered that police had mentioned it had been damaged in the crash, that the Face ID might be disabled.

She tried one more combination—the date he and Yui had met, which she remembered him mentioning once—and the phone unlocked.

The home screen was simple. A few apps. Nothing unusual except for the sheer number of photo albums labeled with Yui's name.

She opened his messages first, not sure what she was looking for but feeling compelled to understand her son's final days, final hours, final thoughts.

The message thread with Yui was at the top. The last message was timestamped March 28th, 5:47 PM—less than two hours before the accident.

But the message showed as "Sending..."

No, not just one message. As she scrolled, she saw dozens. Hundreds. All timestamped from that same time, all showing as unsent, queued but never delivered.

Her heart clenched as she began reading them.

The pain in them was devastating. Two years of accumulated suffering poured into message after message. Confessions of love. Admissions of lying. Descriptions of his deteriorating mental and physical health. Evidence of the fake accounts he'd used to watch Yui's life. Proof of obsession and desperation and a grief so consuming it had hollowed him out from the inside.

"I've been dying for two years," one message read. "Actually dying. I've lost almost forty pounds. I don't sleep. I can't eat."

"I watched you fall in love with him," another said. "Watched you build a life. Watched you become happy in ways I couldn't make you happy because I was seven thousand miles away."

"I'm so tired, Yui. So desperately tired. Not just physically but tired of pretending. Tired of performing. Tired of lying. Tired of existing without you."

Message after message, each one more heartbreak than the last. A chronicle of psychological collapse written in real-time, meant for Yui but never delivered.

And at the very end, the final message:

"I am sorry, my love. I will always hold on to you."

Franz's mother sobbed, clutching the phone to her chest, finally understanding. He'd been trying to reach Yui in his final moments. Had typed out everything he'd been holding inside for two years. Had finally decided to tell her the truth.

But the messages had never sent. Had been trapped in digital limbo, queued but undelivered. Franz had died believing Yui would finally know, would finally understand. But she'd never received them.

The phone was connected to WiFi now. It had been charging for twenty minutes. And as Franz's mother sat there crying, the phone suddenly vibrated in her hands.

The messages were trying to send again.

"Sending..."

Then: "Delivered."

One by one, every message Franz had typed in his final hour started delivering. The phone was catching up, processing the queue, sending everything he'd written.

Delivered.
Delivered.
Delivered.

Hundreds of messages flowing out across the ocean to Tokyo, to Yui's phone, each one a piece of Franz's shattered heart finally reaching its intended destination.

His mother watched in horror as the messages sent, one after another, a flood of pain and truth and desperate love finally escaping the prison of unsent data.

"No," she whispered, but there was no way to stop it. No way to call them back. They were gone, delivered, on their way to a woman who had no idea Franz was dead, who would open her phone to find a deluge of messages from a ghost.

The final message delivered last:

"I am sorry, my love. I will always hold on to you."

Read receipt: Delivered.

And thousands of miles away in Tokyo, Yui's phone began to buzz.

Yui was in her studio when it started. She was working on the final details of her commissioned piece for the Osaka gallery, adding small touches that would bring the whole thing together. Music played softly in the background—something instrumental and soothing. She felt good. Creative. Productive.

Her phone was on the table beside her, face-down so she wouldn't be distracted. But then it started buzzing. And it didn't stop.

One buzz. Two. Three. Four. Five.

She ignored it at first, focused on her work. But the buzzing continued, incessant and urgent.

Ten. Fifteen. Twenty.

Finally, irritated, she set down her brush and picked up her phone.

The screen was flooded with notifications. Messages. Dozens of them. All from the same number.

Franz.

Her heart stuttered. Franz?

She hadn't heard from him in over two years. Not since their breakup. She'd assumed he'd moved on, deleted her number, built a new life the way she had.

But now her phone was exploding with messages from him, one after another, the notifications stacking up faster than she could process them.

Thirty. Forty. Fifty.

"What the hell?" she whispered, unlocking her phone with trembling fingers.

The messages opened, and Yui began to read.

The first one: "Yui, I saw the photo. You're with him. I want you to be happy, truly."

Her confusion deepened. What photo? What was he talking about?

She scrolled down, reading more:

"But I need you to know—I never stopped loving you. I tried. God, I tried so hard. Everyone thinks I moved on. My therapist thinks I'm healed. My mom thinks I'm doing well. My friends think I'm over you."

"They're all wrong."

"I've been dying for two years. Actually dying. I've lost almost forty pounds. I don't sleep. I can't eat. I lie to everyone about how I'm doing because admitting the truth feels impossible."

Her hands began to shake. What was this? What was he saying?

More messages loaded, the phone still receiving them:

"I just took my comprehensive exams. Wrote for eight hours about philosophy, about meaning, about existence. And all I could think about was you. How I exist in this half-life where nothing feels real except missing you."

"I created fake accounts to watch your life. I know that's wrong. I know that's unhealthy. But I couldn't stop. It was the only connection I had left to you even though you didn't know I was there."

Yui's stomach dropped. He'd been watching her? For how long?

She kept reading, the messages coming faster than she could process them emotionally:

"I watched you fall in love with him. Watched you build a life. Watched you become happy in ways I couldn't make you happy because I was seven thousand miles away."

"I should be glad. I AM glad. You deserve someone present, someone real, someone who can give you everything I couldn't."

"But it's also destroying me."

Tears began forming in Yui's eyes. This couldn't be real. This had to be some kind of breakdown, some kind of crisis he was having. She needed to call him, to make sure he was okay.

But the messages kept coming:

"I don't know why I'm telling you this. You've moved on. You're getting married. The last thing you need is your ex-boyfriend having a breakdown in a parking lot."

Getting married? What?

"But I needed someone to know the truth. Even if you don't respond. Even if you've blocked this number. Even if reading this makes you angry."

"I needed someone to know that I tried to be okay, and I failed."

Her vision blurred with tears. She tried to scroll faster, to get to the end, to understand what was happening.

"Do you ever think about me? Did you ever really love me or was I just a temporary thing? Was I disposable?"

"I know that's unfair. I know you loved me. But you moved on so easily and I can't and I don't understand how you did it."

"I'm so tired, Yui. So desperately tired. Not just physically but tired of pretending. Tired of performing. Tired of lying. Tired of existing without you."

No. No, no, no. This sounded like—

"Everyone thinks flowers fall gently but they don't. They're crushed. Ground into dirt. Destroyed. That's me. That's what this has been."

"I wanted you to know before..."

Before what? The message cut off incomplete.

More messages:

"I love you. I will always love you. That's the one true thing in all of this."

"I'm sorry I couldn't be what you needed. I'm sorry the distance was too much. I'm sorry for being too weak to let you go."

"I hope he's good to you. I hope he makes you laugh. I hope you're happy. I hope you forget about me and live a beautiful life."

And finally, the last message:

"I am sorry, my love. I will always hold on to you."

Yui stared at the screen, tears streaming down her face, hands shaking so badly she nearly dropped the phone.

The timestamp on all the messages: March 28th, 5:47 PM.

That was over a week ago. Why were they just delivering now?

She tried to call him, fingers fumbling on the screen. The call went straight to a generic voicemail: "The number you have reached is not available."

She tried again. Same result.

Panic rising, she opened her laptop and searched for his name online, adding "Boston", "university", "Writing" and "Psychology" to narrow results.

The first result made her blood run cold.

An obituary.

No.

She clicked on it with trembling hands, praying it was a different Franz, a different person, anyone but—

But there was his photo. His face. Younger than she remembered, taken before the weight loss he'd mentioned, before the deterioration. But unmistakably him.

"Franz Heinrich Sakamoto , 24, of Boston, MA, passed away tragically on March 28th..."

The words swam in her vision. March 28th. The same day as the messages.

She kept reading, each word a knife:

"...died as a result of injuries sustained in a motor vehicle accident..."

"...funeral services were held on April 1st..."

The phone slipped from her numb fingers, clattering on the floor.

Franz was dead.

He'd been dead for over a week.

And she'd had no idea.

While she'd been living her life—working on her art, laughing with friends, having dinner with her family, feeling blessed and happy and grateful—he'd been dead.

While she'd been posting on Instagram about her new commission, he'd been buried.

While she'd been kissing Takeshi and planning her future, Franz had been gone, his body cold in the ground, his life ended on a highway intersection while trying to send her messages that hadn't delivered until now.

The realization hit her with physical force. She doubled over, gasping for air, a sound somewhere between a sob and a scream tearing from her throat.

He'd died thinking of her. His last thoughts, his final moments, had been spent typing out two years of hidden suffering to send to her.

And she'd never known. Had never suspected. Had been going about her life completely oblivious that the man who'd once been her entire world was deteriorating, was dying, was suffering so intensely that he'd lost forty pounds and couldn't sleep and had been lying to everyone about being okay.

The guilt was instantaneous and crushing. She'd ended the relationship. Had moved on. Had built a new life. All reasonable, all justified, all the right choices for her own wellbeing.

But Franz hadn't moved on. Had never moved on. Had spent two years in silent agony, creating fake accounts to watch her life from the shadows, loving her with an intensity that had literally destroyed him.

And now he was gone. Completely, permanently, irreversibly gone.

And there was nothing she could do. No way to respond to his messages. No way to tell him she was sorry. No way to explain her choices. No way to offer comfort or closure or any kind of resolution.

The silence between them was absolute now. Final. Forever.

She picked up her phone with shaking hands and read through the messages again, slower this time, absorbing every word of his pain.

Two years of suffering, documented in message after message. Evidence of psychological collapse. Proof that while she'd been healing and growing and moving forward, he'd been spiraling down into a darkness so consuming it had eventually killed him.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to her empty studio, to his memory, to the ghost of what they'd once been. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know. I didn't know."

But sorry meant nothing now. Sorry couldn't reach across the void of death. Sorry couldn't undo anything.

She thought about their last conversation, over two years ago. The breakup call. How she'd been firm but kind, explaining why the distance was too hard, why she needed to move on, why they couldn't keep doing this.

He'd agreed. Had told her he understood. Had wished her well.

All lies. All performance. While telling her he understood, he'd actually been beginning a slow descent into suffering so intense it would eventually kill him.

Yui scrolled to the last message again:

"I am sorry, my love. I will always hold on to you."

Those were his final words to her. Written in his last hour of life. Typed while crying in his car after seeing a photo that had shattered him. Sent while driving distracted, which had probably contributed to the accident that killed him.

She'd killed him.

No—that wasn't fair. That wasn't true. She'd made healthy choices for herself. Had ended an unsustainable relationship. Had moved on like people are supposed to do.

But the guilt didn't care about fairness or truth. It settled into her chest like a stone, heavy and permanent.

She looked at the messages on her phone—hundreds of them, each one a testament to pain she hadn't known existed. Evidence of love so intense it had become pathological. Proof that sometimes, letting go is impossible no matter how necessary it is.

And she understood, finally, the full weight of what had been lost.

Not just Franz's life, though that was tragedy enough. But also the possibility of closure. Of understanding. Of mutual forgiveness.

He would never know why she'd made the choices she made. Would never hear her explain that ending their relationship had been about survival, not lack of love. Would never understand that moving on had been the hardest thing she'd ever done, that it had taken months of grief and healing.

And she would never get to tell him. Never get to apologize for pain she'd caused unintentionally. Never get to say goodbye properly.

The silence between them was complete.

No closure.

No forgiveness.

No chance to explain.

Just these messages from a dead man, delivered too late, proof of suffering she could never ease and love she could never reciprocate and pain she could never heal.

Yui sat on the floor of her studio, clutching her phone, surrounded by her art—bright colors and bold strokes and evidence of a life well-lived—and sobbed for the man who'd loved her too much, who'd destroyed himself in silence, who'd died alone on a highway thinking of her name.

Outside, Tokyo continued its relentless forward motion. Cherry blossoms fell in gentle drifts. The sun moved across the sky. Life persisted with its characteristic indifference to individual suffering.

But in that small studio, time had stopped. Yui was frozen in the unbearable present of grief and guilt and the devastating permanence of loss.

Franz was gone.

And she would have to live with that forever—with the knowledge that he'd suffered, that she hadn't known, that she'd been happy while he was dying, that his last thoughts had been of her.

The weight of it was crushing.

The silence was absolute.

And there was nothing—nothing—she could do to make it better.

She looked at her phone one more time, at the final message glowing on the cracked screen:

"I am sorry, my love. I will always hold on to you."

And she whispered into the empty air:

"I'm sorry too. I'm so sorry."

But her words went nowhere. Reached no one. Meant nothing.

The silence remained.

Forever.

Some Stories:

Some stories are not written to comfort. They are written to witness.

This is a story about silence—the kind that grows in the spaces between what we say and what we mean, between the masks we wear and the truth we hide, between the love we feel and the words we never send.

Franz was not weak. He was human. He made the mistake we all make: believing that if he could just hold on a little longer, perform a little better, hide a little more convincingly, everything would somehow be okay. He believed that his pain was his burden alone to carry. That asking for help was failure. That love, if it was real enough, could sustain him through anything.

He was wrong.

Yui was not cruel. She was also human. She made healthy choices for herself, set boundaries, moved forward with her life. She did everything we're told to do after a relationship ends. She healed. She grew. She loved again.

And still, someone died.

This is not a story with villains. It is a story about the unbearable distance between two people who loved each other but could not save each other. About the limitations of love when confronted with geography, circumstance, and the invisible weight of mental illness. About how we can look directly at someone and still fail to see them.

The tragedy is not that Franz died. The tragedy is that he died alone, in silence, convinced that his suffering was something to hide rather than share. That he spent two years performing wellness while disintegrating from within. That he believed, until the very end, that he had failed rather than understanding that he was sick, that he needed help, that his pain was real and deserved compassion—especially his own.

The tragedy is also Yui's—the burden she will carry forever, not because she did anything wrong, but because there is no closure for grief this complicated. No forgiveness to seek or grant across the void of death. No way to explain, to understand, to resolve. Just the permanent, crushing silence of loss.

If you are reading this and you recognize yourself in Franz—if you are performing wellness while drowning, if you are lying to therapists and loved ones, if you are convinced that your pain is yours alone to bear—please know this: your suffering is not a failure. It is an illness. And like all illnesses, it deserves treatment, compassion, and care.

Ask for help. Please. Even when it feels impossible. Even when the performance seems easier. Even when silence feels safer.

Because silence, eventually, becomes forever.

And if you are reading this and you recognize yourself in Yui—if you have lost someone and discovered, too late, the depth of their hidden suffering—please know this: you are not responsible for another person's pain. You could not have known what they chose to hide. You made the choices you needed to make for your own survival.

Guilt is natural. But it is not truth.

You loved them. They loved you. And still, it ended in tragedy. That is the unbearable randomness of human existence—that we can do everything right and still lose everything.

This story is dedicated to everyone who has ever suffered in silence. To everyone who has ever discovered a loved one's hidden pain too late. To everyone who carries the weight of impossible choices and unresolvable grief.

Your pain matters.

Your story matters.

You matter.

And silence—the kind that kills—is always, always a choice we can refuse to make.

Speak. Even when it's hard. Especially when it's hard.

Because the alternative is this: a phone full of messages sent too late, a love that destroys, a silence that becomes forever.

We can do better. We must do better.

For Franz. For Yui. For all of us still here, still fighting, still trying to find the words.

With love and hope for healing,

"In the end," He carried her absence like a second skeleton—something beneath his skin that bore the weight his body could no longer hold. In the mirror, he searched for the man he had been, but found only the architecture of what remained after love had quietly, methodically, consumed every vital thing. The tragedy was not that he died. The tragedy was that he had been dying all along, in full view, and we—all of us who loved him—mistook his slow erasure for strength. We mistook his silence for healing. We mistook his performance of survival for the survival itself.

And when the silence finally became complete, when his last breath carried her name into the void, the question that haunted those left behind was not 'Why didn't he speak?' but rather, 'Why did we make silence seem easier than truth?'

Some transformations happen in the light. Others occur in the dark, unseen, irreversible—a man becoming a ghost while still breathing, a love becoming a tomb, a life becoming a memory before it has finished being lived.

"This is not a story of what was lost".

"It is a story of what was never truly seen."