

"Good morning," Milo mumbled, quickly slipping on his surgical mask as he turned over to face the creak of the door opening, an older woman with long white hair and a similar mask entering as she balanced a silver tray in her hands. "Pills before breakfast? That's a new one, Mira."

"Jeffrey is just running a bit behind with the breakfast cart, so make sure you—" The younger boy cut her off with a wave of his hand and a curt nod before finishing her sentence.

"Eat before I take my medication, I know, I know. You think I would've had it down by now. It's not like I haven't lived here for seven years,"

"Mister know it all, telling me that isn't going to stop me from reminding you. Let it be the one day I don't remind you to eat first and your stomach doesn't absorb these properly," The nurse huffed with a dramatic sway of her hips and a rough hand planted onto one side, the shivering aura of her sneer making him quickly back off.

"To receive a scolding from Mira this early in the morning, you must've forgotten to watch your mouth, Indigo," Jeffrey chuckled as he leaned his shoulder against the door, propping it open while he wheeled in the aforementioned breakfast cart.

"Sweet, waffles! My favorite! You always know to get me the good stuff, big guy. I appreciate it."

"That'll be the last time I make them too if you don't learn how to treat my wife," His eyes spoke with a joking glare, Milo unable to see the smarmy twist of his lips hidden under the white sheet. He felt a nervous shiver crawl up his spine at the sight, nodding rapidly in his submissive response. If not for the terrifying glare, he was afraid of what those overgrown muscles could do to him. Weight training was a frightening hobby.

"Ugh, I got it, I got it! Please don't pretend to kiss like that in front of me," Milo refused to look as they Eskimo-kissed through the thin sheet dividing their noses, both supplying a stream of fake giggles as they dramatized their display of affection.

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His room covered in posters of his favorite bands and random drawings, pictures with his best friend and some with the nurses, others with his parents. He could walk about certain floors freely but had to keep his mask on no matter what, as he was diagnosed with Tuberculosis from an early age after contracting the disease from a tainted transfusion. "Gray," Milo grinned as he dialed up his friend through a video chat on his phone, angering the boy who had yet to wake himself willingly. "You up yet?" "Obviously, otherwise I wouldn't have answered. What did I tell you about waking me up before nine?"

"Just because the nurses are nice and enter your room without waking you up before seven doesn't mean I have to. So, what did Jeffrey make you for breakfast?"

"Not telling, wouldn't want you to be jealous of the special treatment I get from him," The raven-haired boy said with a tired smirk as he pulled himself up from the familiar light blue hospital sheets.

"Shut up, I got waffles too, you're not the only one that gets the good stuff. But I can't for the life of me understand why you like your breakfast cold," Milo squirmed at the thought of such steamy food going to waste and faltering to the soggy state his best friend liked so much.

"We've been over this, it's just a personal preference. Nothing like you putting tabasco on your eggs."

"That's a proven, world-wide agreed flavor. You're the weirdo here,"

"Yeah, yeah, sure, keep telling yourself that. Anyways, what's on our agenda today? Another game of Uno? Although, I don't think you can make a comeback after my last triple skip and draw four; fucking slayed you, my guy."

"You wanna say that to my face? I'll take you on, day or night, it doesn't matter. But we've got plans, remember? Lilliana wants to play dress-up with us today, and you've already canceled on her four times. We're going." Milo said matter of factly as he stuffed his mouth with another forkful of Belgian fluffiness.

"Oh, come on, it wasn't like I did it on purpose, getting a fever is a totally legit reason to cancel plans. No way Mira would let me leave my room if I told her I got sick. Lilliana catches stuff pretty easy too, I don't need that on my conscious."

"Sure. It definitely has nothing to do with the fact that the kid wants to marry you, right?"

The call quickly went silent, and Milo cackled with his head thrown back, careful not to choke on the orange juice he'd just taken a swig of.

"Knew it, that liar," He rolled his eyes and finished off the rest of his meal before taking the daily medications Mira had left.

It wasn't long before he was dressed and standing in front of Gray's room with a thick padded mask held around his ears, repeating a constant knock on the door as he beckoned his friend to come out. Dressed in the sweats he refused to live without, the two made their way to the elevator after checking in with Mira at the front desk, letting her know where they'd be.

Their ride down a few floors was full of silent jabbing as Milo looked at Gray with a sly and raised brow, nudging him with his elbow as he attempted to tease him.

"I have a seven-year-old in love with me, but it's still not as lame as the guy who dyed his hair pink for fun," He sneered, poking at the gelled style his best friend bore, dark roots already growing back in.

"You're just mad that you can't pull off such a nice color, it's only cool if you wear it right," Milo smirked and swatted at him. "Bet you that Lilliana's gonna ask if you brought a ring with you this time."

"Oh god..."

"Gray! Milo! You came!" The young girl lit up as the two walked into the playroom located in the cancer ward. Before them sat a table in the corner with three cups, a tray of random sliced fruit, and some cubes of bread and poundcake settled on its surface.

"We got your invitations," Milo's grin flashed through his eyes as he waved the pink envelope he'd settled in his back pocket ahead of time. "Thank you, it's been a while since either of us got to go anywhere as nice as this."

"Y-Yeah, really appreciate it," Gray let an uneasy smile through as she beamed expectedly at the older boy, her eyes entirely infatuated with his presence. He was never great when it came to talking with kids, even worse when she looked at him so lovingly.

"I'm wearing the scarf you gave me, Gray, isn't it cute?" She pointed to the blue wrap with snowflakes that hid the loss of her hair, wearing a blue dress to match. Blue, his favorite color, and now hers, respectively.

"Really cute, Lilliana." He said and pat her head, Milo nodding as he accepted the polite behavior of his stoic friend.

"So, what kind of tea do we have today?" The pink-haired boy asked as he took a seat, moving his head for Gray to acknowledge he needed to pull Lilliana's chair out for her.

"U-Um, I'm not sure! I'll go look in the dress-up chest for your hats, so you pour it yourself. And I won't look if you put something—I mean, pour my tea for me!"

"What'd I tell you! She always does that, isn't it the cutest?" Milo laughed as they eventually made their way back up to their own floor after the party came to its conclusion. It was an event filled with everyday chatter, light snacking, and the very intense aura of a young girl expecting her marriage proposal looming overhead and clinging to the air like heavy syrup. Needless to say, the social event ended quickly, in favor of the idolized teen.

"Having fun over there? How would you like it if some kid tried to force you into marriage at every chance they got? What kind of movies has that girl been watching, I swear..." Gray grumbled with an annoyed sigh, crossing his arms.

"Just say yes and give her a ring, where's the harm in it? It'll make her happy."

"You know where it is. I'm not going to promise something like that, it'll bring bad luck,"

It was smart to be careful when it came to personal feelings for sick people like them. They were told to be optimistic, but you never really knew what could happen when they were too ill to leave the hospital. There was the daunting thought of the day that you finally gave in and let yourself say the things you were holding back, only for it all to come crashing down around you. Death was always lurking with its string of curses and calamity. But to Milo, there was an upside to the legend of other worlds, as he knew someone deeply connected to the phenomenon.

"You sure you're allowed to be walking around like this, Lorelei? Doesn't it break some universal rule, letting a mortal see you and all?" Milo asked as he lay back in his bed, curtains drawn open and moonlight shining down on the odd pair as they spoke quietly later that night. In the chair next to his bed sat a girl with soft curly hair and solemn brown eyes that matched her dark skin, clad in her usual black clothes with a scythe resting against the wall beside her.

"I told you, it's fine. Not much I can do since you've already seen me." She sighed with a shrug of her shoulders, eyes glued to his phone screen as she played Tetris.

The two met one night after Milo went on an impromptu pudding raid through the geriatric ward, catching sight of the otherworldly being leading a soul to its place in the afterlife. It was a pretty magnificent sight to say the least, especially after he found out she wasn't some wackjob trying to off the elderly with an oversized scythe.

"Don't you have some kind of mind wipe ability? I figured that was a given. And I'm pretty sure you only wanted an excuse to keep playing that game," He grinned as his chin rested on his knees, happy he didn't have to wear a stuffy mask when she was visiting; Death's daughter.

"That's what everyone thinks," Lorelei rolled her eyes. "But really, the only thing I do is guide souls to their rightful place."

"And play games on my phone. I'm going to write this in a book one day. 'Grim Reaper's Daughter; subtitled, She Plays Tetris on Her Breaks'." He said, spreading his hands against the air for emphasis.

"No one would read that, I hope you know,"

"What are you talking about? That's just gonna be the title of my diary, I don't need the Bigfoot chasers breaking down my door and asking me to confirm their sightings of a weird soul-stealing girl who likes to play video games."

"I'm not weird," She spat and huffed with a pout, ignoring him as he snickered. "Nice, next level!"

"Don't you have work to do? Not that I'm rooting for it," Milo asked as she finally looked up from his phone, her lips curved in a soft smile.

"Not today, I just came to hang out with you," He felt embarrassed and attempted to hide his pinkened cheeks, nervously handling the sight of her sweet expression. "Is that okay?"

Before Milo could give the reaper his answer, his phone interrupted his voice with a ringtone set for a particular person, who, of course, just had to make a video call to him in the middle of this particular night. Lorelei was still in the middle of playing on his phone, her finger meaning to slide the next descending block. Instead, she was, unfortunately, interrupted by the green answer button that flashed itself into existence.

"Hey, dude, I can't sleep so—wait, who the heck is th—"

"What was that?! I can't really hear you, sorry!" Milo shouted and haphazardly smacked his phone from her grasp and onto his bed, throwing a blanket over the electronic rectangle. He shot a hand up and waved for Lorelei to make a hasty exit, the girl understanding well enough and bidding him an awkward goodnight before hopping out the window.

"Shit..."

"Don't even think about trying to play off last night," Gray said as he forced his way into Milo's room a moment later, making the boy quickly jump out of bed to hurriedly tug on his mask. "Who the heck was in your room? I know what I saw!"

"...Was there someone in here with me? I really don't know what you—"

"I'm not blind, dumbass. A girl, curly hair, black hoodie. And the lights couldn't have been playing a trick on me, it was deadass the middle of the night, so fess up." The raven-haired boy insisted as he crossed his arms, raised his left brow, and tapped his foot on the marble as he waited for an answer.

"I can't say," Milo groaned and hid his face under a pillow, able to feel Gray's glare begin to engulf his form. "She's...a friend. And a very private person,"

"Dude, do not give me that. A girl going out of her way to visit some guy in a hospital at one in the goddamn morning has to be someone who—"

"—Is just a friend." Milo forced out his interruption from underneath the packed bundle of feathers in an attempt to move onto another subject.

"I get that," Gray sighed and grunted, rolling Milo on his back and away from the center of the bed so he could take a seat beside him. "You've never mentioned her before, does she always come busting in here during the middle of the night? I'm surprised Mira hasn't caught her tryna sneak in."

"She has her ways," The pink-haired boy chuckled before deciding to sit up and lean onto his friend's shoulder. "I'd like to introduce her to you, but..."

"Nah, she's a private person, I get it," Gray said with a soft smile. "You gotta at least tell me one thing though,"

"What?"

"She's not your best friend, right? Because I was sure I claimed the only free spot you had,"

"You're a goddamn baby, you know?"

"Gimme an answer, why don't you? It took a lot out of me tryna make sure you stayed right in the head."

"Don't talk as if you're the normal one here," Milo scoffed and flicked Gray's bicep. "But I guess I can say that you're my best friend. If you really needed to hear it that badly,"

"I'll go back to my room before Mira finds out I'm missing from my bed. I don't want to get Jeffrey's punishment oatmeal for breakfast. Shit's bland as all hell,"

"Yeah, no way am I missing out on Cinnamon Bun Saturday," They let out a simultaneous chuckle before Gray stood from his seat beside Milo. "G'night, dude,"

"Night, fam,"

Milo put aside his mask and huffed a congested breath of air.

The next morning, they had the lousy oatmeal for breakfast, shockingly.

But that was expected, Mira always caught them doing things they weren't supposed to be doing. The ability to expect was comforting and gave Milo some mental peace. Living in a world where death surrounded him wasn't the most reassuring thing.

The only anomaly he could account for after all these years was the introduction of Lorelei. Other than her, his life consisted of a strict schedule. When to wake up, when to eat, when to spend time with his friend, when to be subjected to daily physicals.

It'd been a shame when she suddenly stopped her sporadic series of visits, though Milo was sure she had more important things to attend to.

"You've been gone for a while," Milo said as he set down the book he was reading. "I was kinda worried, you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm okay, thanks for asking," Her smile was solemn as Lorelei took a seat in her usual chair. "I was trying to avoid this conversation...or...you, I suppose."

"You get in trouble with the big guy downstairs?" Milo snickered. "I guess I can imagine Death being mad at you for goofing off with me when you're supposed to be out working."

"It's not that," She turned her gaze towards the marble flooring. "This time, I...I have to take Gray with me."

"Wha—wait, no...no no no! No, you can't. I mean it Lorelei, I know it's your job, but you really can't!" He shot up quickly from his bed, wide eyes in a panic as he tried to plead

through forming tears. "He's my ...he's my only friend! My best friend! I just saw him, he was fine! And Lilliana...Lilliana needs him more than anyone, he's her first love!"

"...I can let you say goodbye, but really, I have to take him. It's his time."

"R...Right now? I mean...can't I have a couple more days with him? Please?"

"That's why you haven't seen me in a couple weeks, Milo...I let you have as much time with him as I could, I swear."

He pushed aside his dangerously bleached hair, wiping his cheeks of their salty paint and sniffing as his nose began to drip.

"This is why you don't make friends with humans, huh?" He let out a dry laugh as she nodded bitterly, Milo understanding well enough.

"I...I need to go pick up Lilli, we'll be right there, okay?"

His movements lacked reality, time distorted as he left his room and headed for the elevator. He felt stuck in between feelings of anger and grief, though it felt more comfortable to ignore the swell of pain in his chest.

"I just need to get Lilliana to him, I'll focus on that," He wheezed, hoping his puffy under eyes wouldn't give anything away.

He slipped into her room once the nurse at the front desk of the ward was distracted by another patient calling out for juice.

"Lilli...hey, Lilliana, it's me, Milo. Can you wake up for me, kiddo?" He gently shook her shoulder while whispering closely to her ear. "We've gotta go see Gray."

"Hmm? Gray? I wanna...see Gray," He laughed a bit at her immediate response, the seven-year-old rising from her sheets as she yawned and rubbed her tired eyes.

"You have to be quiet, okay? We'll be in big trouble if we get caught sneaking out," Milo smiled as she nodded weakly, wrapping her noodlish arms around his neck as he lifted her into his arms.

He pressed a warm hand to her back, peeking out the door to make sure the coast was clear. Quiet and rushed steps took them to the elevator, which luckily had yet to have left their floor.



Lilliana fell asleep as soon as they got on, Milo swallowing the thick knot stuck in his throat.

The walk back towards Gray's room was filled with anxiety, his heavy steps carrying them to the end of the ward. Time was slow, and yet it still moved too fast. Even as Milo stood outside of his room, the reality of the situation had yet to sink in. There was still time to believe that Gray was going to be just fine, that his heart wasn't going to give out in the next few moments.

"Hey, Gray," The pink-haired boy cleared his throat, his heart rate rising steadily as he looked down upon the weakened form of his friend. "How're you feeling?"

"Crappy," Gray shrugged, groaning as he moved to slightly sit forward. "Your friend over here filled me in. But, I gotta say it was kind of a jerk move to keep a literal god's existence from me. Like, super unfair."

"It would've broken like a hundred cosmic rules, don't blame me," Milo played him off, nodding to Lorelei who stood quietly against the wall.

"Lilliana, time to get up again," He placed her on his sick friend's bed, the change in position enough to stir her from her mild slumber.

"Gray...! Did you want to play? Is that why we came to visit?" Lilliana asked, with curiosity brimming in her eyes. It almost hurt knowing that her bright gaze would quickly be smothered.

"You and Milo came, came to say goodbye. I'm sorry, Lilli, I have to leave,"

"That...that doesn't sound like a fun game...Are you—don't be mean!"

Gray hacked a large and booming cough before he could attempt to calm down Lilliana's sudden burst of misdirected anger. He gripped his chest over his heart, flinching with every heave as the pain stung him with every convulsion.

Gray needed a heart transplant, and he'd had two since his parents learned about his congenital heart condition. The replacements he received never seemed to last as long as everyone hoped, but that fact never kept Gray down.

"This...this should have been me! You're not supposed to be...! I'm the one who's dying!"

"Don't talk like that, man, you're going to be okay. Right now, just look at yourself, Milo...it's alright,"

"You were the one, the one that had a chance, Gray. No way am I ever leaving this place for good. I know I don't have a lot of time left...but you were so...so...close."

"It's not fair!" Lilliana wept loudly into her pale palms. "I don't want to say bye! What about my next tea party!? You promised to come!"

"I got this for you," Gray coughed as he pulled out a small jewelry box from underneath his blanket. "I could never put it in the tea like you wanted since I didn't want it to get damaged."

"Really...?" She sniffled, wiping her tears on her pajama sleeves before opening the small box. The ring was thin and silver, a series of small blue gemstones embedded into its surface.

"It's too big for you now, so don't lose it, alright? It was going to be a gift for when you regained your health. I know you wanted to get married, but—"

"I'm too young," Lilliana shook her head. "Mommy told me."

"This is to remember me by, okay? I'm glad I had someone like you around to love me so much. I'll miss you a lot, Lilliana."

It was hard to watch the child cry herself to sleep while she stained his blanket with her tears, Milo worried she'd make herself sick with all the grief she poured from her system. It was hard for him too, and being strong in this situation wasn't going to fly.

"I'll see you around, Gray," Milo choked out, offering his best friend a watery smile, lifting Lilliana from his bed. "It might be a while till I get to see you again."

"For sure," The raven-haired boy rolled his eyes, tears slipping onto his thinned cheeks as he waved goodbye. "See you soon,"

"Can you tell me if Lilliana will be okay?" Gray asked as the door closed behind the two. "That kid deserves a happy life outside of this place,"

"She names her first son after you," Lorelei said with a nod and smiled stiffly. Gray choked a sob, his smile breaking apart his quivering lips. "And she'll still be holding onto your ring."

"Keep Milo company for me, will you? He can't handle this by himself, I don't want him to be alone."

"... It's a promise,"