

"I should skip school today," said Mizuki.

She was laying against Alfric's chest, early in the morning, in bed. They weren't sleeping in the same bed, but Mizuki had made it a habit of being in his room until the moment she was about to sleep, then coming back into his room the moment she woke up. They were in Alfric's attic room, which had started spartan and now had perhaps a bit too many woodworking projects applied to it, along with a proper shelf of knick-knacks, all of them either henlings or entads, mementos of their dungeons. Alfric wasn't normally too sentimental, but he liked having those things.

He was already feeling sentimental about his time spent with Mizuki. They'd been dating for three days.

"You should go to school," said Alfric.

"You could come?" asked Mizuki. She seemed hopeful. "Spend the day in Plenarch, sit in on a class or two, meet some people, have lunch with me, that sort of thing?"

"And leave someone else in charge of the house?" asked Alfric.

"I mean, yeah," said Mizuki. She touched his chest. "Or I could skip school and just stay here with you."

"You can't skip school," said Alfric. "You're ready, get going, I've got to start the house." He didn't move though, and let her lay against him.

"It's just ... this is that wonderful time at the start of the relationship, when everything is fresh and new, when my mind is buzzing with you, and I don't want to waste it."

"The honeymoon period," said Alfric.

"Right," said Mizuki. "Exactly." She drummed her fingers on his chest.

"I don't think it's like that," said Alfric. "I think it's more ... about the time we spend together, not *absolute* time? So there's a set number of honeymoon minutes."

Mizuki laughed and pressed herself against him. "You're ridiculous."

"It makes sense though, right?" asked Alfric. "I don't think we're using up honeymoon time when we're apart."

"You should patent that," said Mizuki. "'Honeymoon minutes'. There's something there." She reached up and touched his chin. She was touching him a lot like that, as though she'd always wondered what his chin had felt like.

"That's not really how patents work," said Alfric.

“Sure it is,” Mizuki replied. “Verity was telling me that all her dad had to do was go up to some guy in the government and say ‘music box’ and that was all it took. I’m pretty sure that was the whole story.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” said Alfric. He ran his fingers through her hair. She cut it, put it back to how it had been before wizard school. He’d forgotten how much he liked it like that. “We could fill a sheet with patent ideas, find the guy, then just yell them all really fast. Lock things down, right?”

“Right,” said Mizuki. “That seems like a *much* more productive day for me than wizard school.”

Alfric frowned. “Are you just clowning around? Or are you really not going to go?”

“It’s an intensive,” said Mizuki. “A big push day for rock-petting, basically, all day exercises and meditations and stuff. Apparently it helps some people to do a grueling bout of it every now and then, non-stop. I don’t think it’s going to work for me.”

“Do you think it’s *ever* going to work for you?” asked Alfric.

“Realistically, it’s too soon to say,” said Mizuki. “Emotionally ... yeah, I think I could go another two years and never get it.” She paused. “You know, I don’t think we’ve really talked about when you were trying to become a wizard.”

“No,” said Alfric. “There’s not much to tell. I did basically all the same things you did, though I was at a Dondrian school, one which was geared more toward ‘base proficiency’. Less theory, more focus on getting a positive response from a mana stone with as little time and effort as possible.”

“Huh,” said Mizuki. “But you said you went six months? Shouldn’t a school like that, I don’t know, get results faster?”

“Does, most of the time,” said Alfric. “I wasn’t there full-time, since I was young. The aims are different, the methods different — most of the exercises you talk about I’ve never heard of.” It was a period of his life that he’d mostly forgotten, all the information filed away into some dusty corner of his mind that he never used. He usually held back when Mizuki talked about the wizard stuff, in part because it was so distant.

“Would life be a lot different if you’d made it?” asked Mizuki.

“Ah,” said Alfric. “I’ve caught on to your dastardly plan. You’re stalling, hoping that you’ll be late to school, because eventually you’ll be so late that you can say ‘oh, well I’ve already missed a bit, might as well miss the whole thing’. Well, I’m not going to allow it.”

“I’m going to be honest,” said Mizuki. “You’re giving me and my schemes far too much credit.” With incredible reluctance, she pushed herself off of him. “Urgh. Fine. I’m going.”

Alfric propped himself up on his elbows. She was wearing her robe, which he was convinced got less and less tightly cinched every time she came into his room. He’d wanted to take it slow, and

Mizuki was positively *delighted* by that, because it meant that she could push up against the boundaries.

She turned to the door and then looked back at him. “Hey, can I tell you something?”

“Of course,” said Alfric.

“I like you,” said Mizuki. She flashed him a grin, giggled, and then dashed away as though she’d done something incredibly naughty. Alfric smiled after her.

By the time he got dressed — he’d been in his pajamas — Mizuki had already left.

If this was a honeymoon period, then Alfric was loving it. Mizuki had gone against him, a battle of wills over whether or not they should be boyfriend and girlfriend, and he’d lost, which she took pleasure in reminding him about. In all his planning for a painful conversation with her, he hadn’t imagined that she’d simply bowl him over. It was a sign that he’d gotten something fundamentally wrong when thinking about her, and he was hoping to figure out what, exactly, that was.

Of course, now that they were dating, he had entirely reoriented himself. You could argue against going into a dungeon all you wanted, but once you were actually in the dungeon, the time for those sorts of arguments was over. Alfric couldn’t help but think of the enormous bear they’d fought in their second dungeon, which they’d done only after long discussion. Once the thing was decided, you gave it your all.

Moving the house had become something that Alfric had grown quite adept at, and the longer they spent on the road, the faster he went, since every mile they put behind them meant that he had more experience with the limits of the entad legs and the conditions that determined the risks involved in being on the road. The others had chided him for being slow, but in truth, he *wasn’t* all that slow anymore, he’d only needed to build up his understanding. He could comfortably set the house at a gallop if need be, though it was uncomfortable for everyone, and required an extra round of strapping things in.

“What’s on the agenda for today?” Alfric asked Isra once they were moving.

“You didn’t check?” asked Isra.

“I checked,” said Alfric. “I’m just making conversation and giving you some leeway to suggest a change in course, or offer some notes about what you’ve scouted. It was meant to be friendly.”

“I had thought maybe it slipped your mind,” said Isra. He was watching the road, but she was watching him.

“No,” said Alfric. “I’m distracted, I’ll admit, but not so much that I’m going to make mistakes.”

“It’s really just a gentle stroll through the province,” said Isra.

“I know, I know,” said Alfric. “But you’ll let me do things my way?”

"Of course," said Isra.

She looked out at the road ahead of them. There was some shocking similarity to the roads, and while Alfric kept thinking that he'd see a road that he'd never seen before, the varieties were consistent across Greater Plenarch, either dirt, stone, or cobblestone. One of their destinations for the day was actually a road, rather than a proper place, an ancient highway whose stones still stood, though there was nowhere near enough traffic anymore.

"How do you feel about doing dungeons without Mizuki?" asked Isra.

"Um," said Alfric. "I think she would hate that."

"Assuming she was okay with it?" asked Isra.

"Assuming that she enthusiastically said that she had no problems with us doing dungeons without us, then ... I guess that would allow us to do more. A lot more, maybe." Alfric frowned. "To be honest, I'm kind of liking the sedate pace."

"You are?" asked Isra. "Why?"

They were sitting by the front door, the traditional spot for controlling the house as it lumbered down the roads. The scenery was farmland, which was typical, in part because the roads going past farms tended to be more well-maintained than the roads going through forests. The house could handle steep grades with relative ease, and the legs telescoped up to get around shorter trees, but it wasn't quite as smooth or fast.

The front door had changed, because Alfric had changed it. He'd added a small deck that jutted out from the front door, along with railings to keep people from falling off. The whole assembly was removable, since the house wasn't planned to be a moving house forever, which had made the design much more complicated. There was something that Alfric was coming to grips with himself about, that he loved the feeling of *progression*, of evolution, improving things bit by bit. Woodworking had started as a bit of a lark, but it turned out that it spoke to the part of him that always wanted to make improvements.

"There's a certain *feel* to dungeoneering," said Alfric. "Not the actual dungeons themselves, the profession, the traveling, sleeping in strange places, being essentially transient ... it always appealed to me."

"Like sailing did," said Isra.

"Yes, like sailing," said Alfric. He sighed, thinking about just how into being a ship's captain he'd once been. "And there's still the fact that you're exploring things that have already been explored before, that have been seen by hundreds of people, but it's still ... I don't know. A pleasant untethering."

"I wouldn't have thought you'd like sight-seeing," said Isra.

"Why?" asked Alfric.

Isra shrugged. "It's frivolous."

"Sometimes I like frivolous things," said Alfric. He was thinking of Mizuki, though he wasn't sure whether she would like being called frivolous. "You want to do dungeons without Mizuki because ... you want to get cracking on having Verity break them open?"

"Verity used to be the one holding us back," said Isra. "I respected that. She didn't like the dungeons very much, found them too similar to a performance, and we had a brutal string of them."

"We did," nodded Alfric. "Not that the last two have been smooth sailing." He thought about the boat. "So to speak."

"I was speaking with Verity last night, and she thinks that we're hitting the dungeons too slow," said Isra. "It goes against her training."

"It does?" asked Alfric.

"For practice at something, anything, she thinks that one of the keys is feedback," said Isra. "This, what we've been doing, gives her too much time to stew, too much thinking about what happened and what went wrong, not enough, um ..."

"Rapid iteration?" asked Alfric.

"Yes," said Isra.

"Hmm," said Alfric. "I assume she didn't ask you to talk to me?"

"She's not frustrated," said Isra. "It was just idle talk on her part. She's been filling notebooks with songs of varying quality, looking forward to her performances. She likes being on the road just fine."

"And you don't?" asked Alfric. It felt like they were dancing around something, and Alfric wasn't sure what. It wasn't normally like Isra not to simply say what was on her mind.

"The next adventure for me is in Tarbin," said Isra. "I don't know when, or what it will be like, but ... I've decided that I'm going."

"Oh," said Alfric. "You know, we *do* have a moving house, and travel entads, and even if we didn't, we have the funds to move the whole party there more or less permanently."

"I know," said Isra. "I couldn't ask you to do that."

"Obviously we wouldn't tag along if that's not what you wanted," said Alfric. "But it feels like an adventure I'd like to have. I've wanted to go both east and west. Mizuki has been talking about a Kiromo holiday."

"I might do it on my own," said Isra.

"All on your own?" asked Alfric.

"None of you speak the language," said Isra.

"That's not insurmountable," said Alfric. "Translation entads."

"We don't have them, and they're expensive," said Isra. She paused. "Which is part of why I thought we might start doing a few dungeons without Mizuki."

"Ah," said Alfric. "You want to stock up."

"I was hoping that Verity might be able to pull out something for me, yes," said Isra. "It's a foolish hope, but I've talked to her about my plans."

"I don't think it's a foolish hope at all," said Alfric. "It's very realistic that she'll be able to exert some influence on the entads. Personally, I was hoping that we would get a suite of entad-finding entads. Meta-entads are vanishingly rare, so not that, specifically, but wide-area clairvoyance that offers some level of magic-sight would do it. Also, some way of taking apart buildings and storing away the materials. Really, we're overdue for a trip to Dondrian for the kinds of entad shops that would sell those things, but if Verity can just create them for us ..."

"You're excited," said Isra.

"You're not?" asked Alfric.

"With the way things are going, it seems far away," said Isra. "The next dungeon will be in three days or so, and it might be a step forward or a step back. The dungeon after that will be a week later, and the next a week after that, and we'll be in Plenarch, which means I'll have less to do. No more scouting, very little travel, just stuck in a house, in a city I don't know." She looked out at the road. "I don't think I'll like it."

"Which would make it a good place for you to leave and do your own thing," said Alfric, frowning. "I see. Alright, do you want me to talk to Mizuki, or would you rather do it?"

"I think she would take it better coming from me," said Isra.

"Maybe," Alfric frowned. "Who would we replace her with? Pinion?"

"We could go in light," said Isra. "Though Pinion would probably be thrilled to see the inside of one of these bespoke dungeons, at least once."

"I'm against going in light," said Alfric. "It introduces a new variable." He frowned. "Mizuki has ended up being our heavy hitter. Arguably she started as that, but with the armor, the sword, her command of flight ... if we get in trouble, she's invaluable." His mind was turning. "I'll think about it. Ideally, we'd borrow a seasoned dungeoneer from somewhere, but Vertex has been committed to doing every dungeon along our path, and swapping between parties is somewhat taboo."

"I can put in a message to the League," said Isra. "We could find a floater."

"Floaters," said Alfric with a sigh. "Less common than we'd like, we're dealing with an unusual situation, and there's very often a *reason* they're a floater." He thought about the year he'd spent in that position, trying to pry his way into a new party or assemble one from scraps. "I say that as someone who was a floater himself."

"We're going to need to replace Hannah too, eventually," said Isra. "She seems dead set on preaching."

"We'll have to have a team meeting soon," said Alfric.

"It would be better for me to talk to Mizuki privately first," said Isra.

Alfric thought about that. "Why do you think that?"

Isra shrugged. "If we say, as a party, that we're forging on without her ... it would put my hackles up. But if it was just a friend asking permission to get going, for personal reasons ... I don't know. With pack animals, there's a difference between being surrounded by the pack, sides chosen, and individuals meeting with each other."

"Well, you have my support," said Alfric. "I'll leave it to you?"

Isra nodded.

"And I'm going to ask Verity to try for translation entads, along with something for travel," said Alfric. "I'm serious about coming with you, even if all you get out of it is someone who can't understand the language standing next to you looking threatening."

Isra laughed and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Alfric, you're a dear friend, but you're terrible at looking threatening. Really, truly awful. It's important you know that."

"Aw," said Alfric. "What about in Dondrian, do you remember that duel I fought? I thought I was properly threatening there."

"Maybe," said Isra. She seemed skeptical.

"And if you don't want me there, or just in the region, that's fine too," said Alfric.

"I'm still thinking," said Isra. "I haven't decided. There's a convenient portal, though with the lute, it wouldn't take that long to cross the continent on my own."

Alfric nodded. "Let us know, when you decide. Personally, I'd like to see Tarbin, though they don't like chrononauts too much."

"They don't?" asked Isra.

"We're settled in Inter," said Alfric. "We provide our power to the nation in various ways, which is threatening to the other nations of the world, for good reason. But in Tarbin it goes further. The chrononaut clans had North Tarbin, were more or less rulers, and while that made them

enemies there, it *a/so* made them enemies outside their domain, to the south. The national borders were different then, but there are still stories, old wounds, things like that.”

“Ah,” said Isra. “History.”

“I’ve been told that history can stay strong, even hundreds of years later, long out of living memory,” said Alfric. “Personally, I’d like to see it myself.”

“You’d reveal yourself?” asked Isra.

“I don’t know,” said Alfric. “I don’t think I would stand out as a chrononaut. Maybe I would have a fake name.”

“You smiled,” said Isra.

“The idea of playing spy appeals to me,” said Alfric. He grinned at her.

“Well, maybe I don’t mind you being with me, if that’s the case,” said Isra. “I had no idea a *spy* would be protecting me. I’m going to get ready for the cave, I’ll see you soon.”

Alfric’s attention had wavered from the road, and he tried to refocus his attention on it. In truth, the house more or less moved itself, he was just there in case something unexpected came along, like a wagon they needed to navigate around, a building that needed to be squeezed by, or someone trying to flag them down, which happened with annoying regularity.

Bib was still with them, which surprised Alfric, given how far away they now were from Pucklechurch. The ‘scouting ahead’ that Bib did had been getting less and less reliable, and he’d vanished for a day, then came back like nothing had happened. Alfric kept Bib’s parents posted on what their son was doing, but they seemed generally unconcerned. In theory, Bib was supposed to be in school, but there was something to be said for the freedom of youth, and Alfric himself had taken months off schooling. Of course, he’d mostly had tutors, which was much different.

A few hours later, Bib appeared, racing along on his bird, and to Alfric’s surprise, he was followed by another child on a bird of her own. She was around his age, maybe a bit older, still small enough to ride one of the birds.

“Hoy, Alfric!” called Bib as he rode his bird up to the house.

“Hoy, Bib!” called Alfric. “We’re going to stop for lunch soon, have you eaten?”

“What’s eating?” asked Bib.

“Roast bear!” called Alfric. “Mashed potatoes, peas, all kinds of things. Your friend is welcome to join!”

“Girlfriend!” the unIntroduced girl called with a smile. Like Bib, her clothes were minimal, just some shorts and a sleeveless shirt. She had sun-soaked skin and sun-bleached hair, and Alfric could imagine that like Bib, she spent most of her days riding around on a bird. It wasn’t clear

where the two of them had met, and Alfric didn't expect that Bib was going to be eager to give much in the way of answers.

"We'll eat with you," said Bib. "There's a town up ahead, half a mile, they've got a park to settle in, talked to the mayor and everything!" He turned the bird around and darted off down the road, and the girl raced him.

When the house reached the tiny town, a non-central one some distance from the hex center, the park was waiting for them as Bib had promised, and Alfric settled the house in place, making sure that the attachment on the front door would allow everyone to get down easily and double-checking to make sure that it wasn't squashing anything. There were some people who'd come out to look at the walking house, and Alfric greeted them, explaining that they'd only be there for a half hour or so before continuing on. He was getting a bit better at that part of the job.

Hannah had been the one to prepare the meal, using Lutopia Two because cooking in a moving house was a bit too dangerous, and as was often the case when that happened, she'd made enough for both parties, meaning that Vertex joined them. Since it was a nice day, as it often was, they took the table and chairs out to have something approximating a picnic. Bib's girlfriend joined them, but the two children didn't eat at the table, instead setting out a blanket beneath a tree where they chatted together and let their birds peck for insects.

"She says her name's 'Bab'," said Hannah. "There's no way that's right. They laughed about it, but then didn't tell me her real name."

"Bib and Bab," chuckled Verity. "There's a song in there, probably."

"It's endless songs with you, isn't it?" asked Grig. "Say, did you want to do a duet some time? I've caught a few of your performances, and I'm afraid to say I can't keep up, but I'd be able to do a bassline or *something*."

"Absolutely," said Verity. "I think I've been hitting a wall with my songs, and having a second person to play their part would be invigorating."

"How many notebooks are you up to?" asked Isra. "Three?"

"Three," nodded Verity. "Most of it is garbage though." She squinted at Grig. "My father is desperate for me to record more songs for him, any chance you'd want to be a part of it?"

"I'm not sure I understand it," said Grig. "And ... I'd feel it was a bit of nepotism, honestly, or whatever you call it when someone gets a gig only because they're at hand."

Verity waved a hand. "You're too hard on yourself, I've heard you play."

"I'm a workman," Grig insisted. "And my work is dungeons, frankly, not crowds. Still, to have an opportunity to perform with you, I'll make a fool of myself." He grinned at her, and she smiled back. Verity had been in a series of good moods lately, though it was hard to tell whether that was because of her success with the dungeons or because of her rural 'concert tour'.

"How have the dungeons been going?" asked Alfric.

"Brilliant," answered Mardin, as Grig's mouth was full. "Tilde is rock solid."

"Thanks," said Tilde. She was sitting next to him, and had eaten quickly, finishing most of what was on her plate before Alfric was even half done. "Alfric's helped with training more than I'd thought possible."

"It's been good to have someone who shares a dedication to training," said Alfric.

He liked Tilde, overall. She was serious in a way that appealed to him, unemotional and analytical. That she was working with his old team gave them something in common, and they had similar roles within their respective parties. They'd talked about personal things only once, when she'd talked about how her father was disappointed in her, and that had been nice too, in its own way, or as nice as someone talking about something sad could be.

"Any chance you're heading to Dondrian soon?" asked Mardin. "We wanted to make a trip, sell some of the stock we've been building up, and we know you have better travel entads *and* better storage. We'd make it worth your while."

"You're supposed to say that you'll make it worth their while *after* they show resistance," said Josen. He was at the end of the table, and had been unengaged with the conversation.

"We can do it, if you make it worth our while," said Alfric with a laugh, though Josen hadn't been joking.

"We'll work something out," said Grig. "I wouldn't mind parting with some trifles, if you'd like to do that again, but we can have a private talk whose point is just this."

"To Grig, who is an actual leader now!" said Marsh, raising a glass.

"Hear hear!" said Mardin.

"We've been making out well," said Grig. "Doing lots of dungeons, not worrying too much about a full clear, low hanging fruit, that kind of thing ..." He looked at Alfric. "You were always so focused on that kind of stuff, and I feel almost guilty for not doing it anymore."

Alfric wanted to ask how they'd done it under Lola's turn as party leader, but found that he'd rather not hear more about her. Lola still cast a shadow, even though she was far away and under a more or less permanent house arrest. He'd been thinking about her more lately, largely comparing and contrasting his first girlfriend with his second.

Once the lunch was concluded, they packed everything back into the house again and got on their way. A number of the villagers had shown up to gawk at the house, and Alfric tried to give them a show as it creaked and groaned up onto its feet again. He was no showman though, and wondered whether Verity might have sold the wonder and majesty of this form of entad travel a bit better than he had. She gave them a parting song though, which she'd said would sound lovely as it faded away into the distance.

The rest of the day was rather sedate. They found the ancient roadway and went to inspect the craftsmanship of it. There was a cave with paintings on the walls, which Hannah thought had probably been from landborne dwodo some centuries ago, the place an old dwodo home of some kind. Their third stop was to a farm with exotic riding birds, some of them bastles, others from foreign lands. Normal riding birds were of a few specific breeds that had been enlarged by a cleric of Xuphin, but a few of these were 'natural', and the farmer was trying to increase the breeding population to the level he could start selling them. Isra talked with him at length, and Bib and Bab cooed at the creatures, taking a few of them for a 'test ride'.

The kids were nowhere to be seen after that, so Alfric navigated on his own, which wasn't too difficult. He really hoped that they weren't getting into trouble, given that he was *sort of* Bib's guardian, if you squinted a bit. Bib was a wild child, and he assumed that 'Bab' was as well, but Bib was also self-sufficient and respectful of space and property. Two of Bib might be a bit much though.

The summer was fading fast, faster than happened in Dondrian, where it was still warm and green. The leaves hadn't begun to turn yet, but Isra said, in dark tones, that they were threatening to.

Mizuki was home late, almost missing dinner, which had been made by Isra and Pinion working as a team. It was a staple dish of Pinion's homeland, bilberries with fish and cheese, a combination of flavors that Alfric wasn't particularly in love with, and if it had been an experiment, he might have called it a failure. Coming as it did with some history and cultural lessons enthusiastically delivered by Pinion, Alfric found it a worthwhile experience.

Mizuki was exhausted from the long day, the 'intensive' as it was called, and set her fork down having only eaten half of what was on her plate.

"What are the plans for tonight?" Mizuki asked Alfric, yawning slightly. She'd flopped on the couch after dinner and patted a place for Alfric to sit.

"Nothing, if you're not up for it," he said. "The intensive didn't go well?"

"No results, no," said Mizuki. "Did the intensive, answered questions with the researchers, got called into the bursar's office for a talk about responsible spell-casting, it was a *very* long day."

"I think Verity was going to find a place for a performance," said Alfric. "Nothing scheduled, but she's got the Bib and Bab song she wants to try out, and she's hopeful there's a tavern around here that's lacking a bard."

"Bab?" asked Mizuki.

"Oh, right," said Alfric. She seemed so sleepy. He reached over and stroked her hair, and she gave him a tired smile. "Bib got a girlfriend, apparently. She called herself his girlfriend, anyway, and he didn't disagree."

"Bab," said Mizuki. "That's ... a nickname?"

"We don't know," said Alfric.

"I think I'm going to bed early," said Mizuki. She yawned. They'd had dinner late, in part because of her, and the sun was low on the horizon.

"Alright," said Alfric. "We'll see each other tomorrow."

"Mmm," said Mizuki. She was looking at him. "You know, we could see each other today, if you come to bed with me."

"Is this a ploy?" asked Alfric.

"No," said Mizuki. "I'm just tired, and haven't seen enough of you. This is how I want to spend my honeymoon minutes."

"Okay, I'll lay with you while you fall asleep," said Alfric.

"Carry me up?" asked Mizuki.

Alfric scooped her up. He'd carried her before, but it still surprised him how light she was. He was careful to navigate the stairs so that he didn't hit her head on the side of the wall, and she hugged him close.

"You know," said Alfric as he laid Mizuki in her bed. "You're still going to have to brush your teeth and change your clothes and everything."

Mizuki groaned. "Why are you so mean to me?"

"You can wait until later," he replied. He laid down next to her.

"You know, if that was a ploy, you fell for it hard," said Mizuki. She yawned again. "And you know I could have made it up on my own. I just wanted you to carry me. It seemed fun."

"I am very aware," said Alfric.

Mizuki was looking at him, and so he kissed her. He still wasn't used to it.

"How was your day?" asked Mizuki.

"Good," said Alfric. "There were some things to see, I talked to my friends, and then you came home, which would have made it a good day even if everything else had been bad."

"You're so sweet," said Mizuki.

"I want you to know that as much as I argued against this, now that we're doing it I'm going to put in almost overbearing amounts of effort," said Alfric.

"You sent me away," said Mizuki. She prodded his chest. "Is that what maximum effort looks like?"

“Yes,” said Alfric. He kissed her again.

“Oh,” she said. “Oh, I see.” She kissed him, soft lips, tender and gentle. “You know, I’m not so tired that we couldn’t —”

“Taking it slow,” said Alfric.

“You don’t know what I was going to say,” said Mizuki.

“I do,” said Alfric.

“Alright, fine, you probably do,” said Mizuki. She kissed him again. “Honeymoon minutes.”

“Honeymoon minutes,” he agreed.

“Cuddle me while I fall asleep?” asked Mizuki.

“Teeth first,” said Alfric.

“Mean,” said Mizuki.

Alfric thought that getting ready for bed might wake her up a bit, but when she came back into the room, she seemed even more tired than before. She spent the last of her effort rearranging him so that his arm was around her, and then she burrowed, making herself warm and comfortable.

He thought about trying to have a conversation with her, but decided against it. They’d done that before, with her answers coming slower and less coherent, sometimes trailing off. He’d enjoyed that, but he wasn’t going to talk to her when she was half-asleep just for his own enjoyment.

“Hey,” he said softly after a few minutes.

She didn’t move, didn’t reply.

Alfric smiled to himself. “I like you too.”