

it's so quiet.

it's dark, too, but the reading light next to me illuminates the book. i can feel her smile, and i can see her eyes, dancing in the light of the fire. the curling tendrils of steam from her coffee rise and swirl away into the darkness, twisting into spirals in the light.

"you haven't read a word, have you?" her voice takes me by surprise.

"i have; maybe two or so." it's a lie, but that doesn't matter. i said it to make her laugh and it works.

"no, really."

"then no."

"why not?" she knows why. i'll tell her anyways.

"i can't focus. this all seems too perfect." i reach out to pick up toast. the kitten struggles briefly before promptly falling asleep in my lap. "i mean, i've dreamed of this since i was twelve and now that it's happening it feels like i'm in a perfect dream, and i'm afraid i'll wake up, and it'll all be gone."

"toast doesn't seem to be dwelling on it too much."

"toast doesn't care. all she wants is coffee and butter."

"ever think we should've called our pets something else?"

i smile, put butter the kitten on my shoulder and invite coffee the shiba onto the couch. "nah. makes me happy every time i say their names."

"brilliant point. i am clearly dating the correct person."

i shove her playfully. she takes her blanket and wraps me in it. "are you happy?"

"over the moon." it's true. i can't believe any of this. "look at us. we're home. we're in college. the college of our dreams. we're far away from the usa, we've got a pretty home and our dream jobs. we've got each other, and coffee, and toast, and butter. i don't understand how it's possible for me to be this lucky."

"believe it. because tomorrow you're going to wake up and all of this will still be here. ideally. unless, like, nuclear armageddon happens in which case maybe not." we laugh. she yawns. "alright, short-ass. i'm tired as hell. let's go to bed."

i smile. "Okay."

she takes my hand. " love you forever."

"love you too."

~

the light wakes me up and so does her voice. it's soft and tired and rough from sleep but it's familiar. 'iris. c'mon. Breakfast."

"ten more seconds," i manage, blinking.

"one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. now c'mon. get up, tiny tim."

"we agreed that you wouldn't call me that if I didn't call you empire state. i'm vertically challenged, 'member? you're, like, fuckin, extra long baguette or some shit." i push my pillow into her face. "or sentient tree."

she pushes it away. "prefer sentient tree. yeah, call me that, and i'll call you vertically challenged. or like, thumbelina, maybe."

i snort. "screw off."

she raises an eyebrow. "either way, thumbelina-" she pauses to jokingly smother me in her blanket. "Breakfast."

it's a few more minutes of banter and coaxing before she's gotten me out, wrapped in my fuzzy blanket and already hounded by toast and butter, the kittens. coffee the shiba's still asleep in his bed. i'm forced to drop the blanket because apparently, it presents "a substantial fire risk." bullshit. it's probably that sentient tree is jealous of my perfect cover for the cold drizzles that are a staple of dutch march.

it is only now when we realize we are both, indeed, wearing the same shirt; cutesy couple shirts we wore precisely once (1) on the day after our engagement and left as pajamas in our shared wardrobe. it's not fair that she always looks better in the same clothes than me.

"iiiiiiiisss!" she calls. "clean up after yourself. look at this counter, girl. there's enough crystallized sugar here to turn it into an ice rink."

she's right, but it's not my fault my taste buds are so sensitive i need to add three packets of sugar into my tea. "i'll make breakfast if you clean the counter, deal? and if you throw in laundry, i'll make scones."

amber snorts, but she nods. she'll do anything for my scones. to be fair, *anyone* will do *anything* for my scones. amber has previously theorized that my secret ingredient is angel tears or beyonce's soul. in truth, it's just three cups of sugar and a heck of a lot of milk.

"why you can't just balance the freaking spoon ..." she mutters, wiping down the counter in our tiny kitchen. we are uni students, after all. our house is modern and pretty, but quite little.

"scones."

"mmph."

~

the light filters through the blinds and falls on the table, covered in a blue tablecloth and piled high with scones. i turn them up to see the street, wet from the morning showers and surrounded by a halo of gold from the sun. the canal glitters. amber is on her third scone, too busy eating to talk, and so i sit, watching kids ride by on bicycles and dogs chase after them.

"d'ya reckon we can get a discount on croissants if we buy six hundred at once? i mean, it's all we eat. might as well buy a year's supply in advance." i finish my tea.

she snorts. "only if you agree to a lifetime's supply of sour patch kids." she pauses. "wait, do they even have sour patch kids here? Our dutch is so rusty we wouldn't even be able to ask."

i do a quick google search on my phone. "heb je zure patch kinderen?" i sound everything out.

amber raises her eyebrows. "snazzy. clearly a highly important thing for us to know." she finishes off her third scone, licking her fingers clean of maple syrup and powdered sugar.

i balance the maple syrup bottle on her head. "je bent een sukkel."

she squints at me. "what did you say i was?"

"a dork."

"screw off, you absolute spoon of a human."

"sukkel."

she laughs. "come on, thumbelina. the corner store is waiting."

i groan. "noooo. can you go this time? i made you the scones. plus, i went last time. and i didn't even forget your weird gummies."

"first of all." she stops to down her cup of coffee. "you made me the scones in exchange for a clean kitchen and laundry. i believe that is enough. second, those gummies are my lifeblood and you forgetting them almost destroyed this relationship." she sighs dramatically and pretends to cry. "i just ... can't ... have a fiancée ... that forgets my gummies!"

"sentient tree, those gummies are terrifying. they're fucking black, amber."

"hate on me, hate on my fiancée, hate on everyone i love, but hate on my gummies? this is an abomination."

"please?"

she takes one look at me and sighs. "fine, iris. i'll go."

i smile and pull her into a kiss. after so many years of being together, it doesn't give me butterflies or takes my breath away. but it does surround me in peace, in familiarity, and i can remember what it felt like. like stars, mostly. i love her and her stars.