*Rose Beds*

          Mishka’s fingers tugged at the skin under his eyes, listening to the grueling sound of the alarm. October 28th marked an important date for the boy; it was the day he would have his first date. An especially big first date as there are rarely any other queer guys in town, he was lucky for Michael to ask him out. Michael was a boy you’d never think would be interested in dating people like Mishka.

         Mishka stopped the alarm, puffing up his cheeks and letting the air out as his mouth transformed into a crooked, unsure smile. A measly 5 minutes was all he had to get ready. He shuffled to his closet, grabbing whatever he sees fit. A shirt, pants, and a dark-blue bomber jacket. A half-minded decision was sure to be the lucky pick. It’s not like they were going somewhere fancy, just a flower garden near his house; a place where all first loves go.

He slipped into the new clothes, shaking his arms so the jacket would fit just right. The sleeves felt chilling against his bare skin, chilling enough to make him uncomfortable. He shook his head and looked at the reflection in the mirror, frowning at the way everything felt so uncanny. He ran a hand through his hair, desperately trying to change it in a way where it felt right. He sighed and hung his head, he had spent his last minutes getting ready, whatever he had is what he had to deal with. Looking back up to the vanity, he stepped back and looked at his body. From a distance, he looked better, he looked fine. It’s not like everyone’s eyes would be on him and only him.

Mishka smiled and exited his room, carrying a pair of sneakers to put on his way out. He bounced down the carpeted stairs and slammed himself into a dining room chair to put on his sneakers. Once on, he made his way to the front door, stopping and turning to look at himself in the mirror. His smile grew, he was finally appreciative of how he looked; and he was so ready to rule the day with Michael. Out the door he went, practically skipping from joy. If he sped-walked, he’d be perfectly on time. He puffed out his chest and put one foot in front of the other until he arrived. He stepped into the parking lot, looking around for Michael.

Michael snuck up behind Mishka, placing his hands on Mishka’s shoulders, “Boo!” Michael covered his mouth and chuckled as Mishka turned around with an expression mixed with anger and fear. That expression quickly faded when he realized who he was facing.

“Hey!” Mishka grinned at Michael, rocking back and forth on his heels. He did a quick examination of Michael’s body, “You look great,” he pointed at his hair, which was messily slicked back, “I like what you did with your hair. It suits your face.”

Michael ran a hand through his hair, “Why, thank you, kind monsieur. You don’t look half bad yourself.” He chuckled and shook his head, “I’m kidding, you look very handsome. Big fan of the blue jacket,” he rubbed the sleeve of Mishka’s jacket.

They both looked away awkwardly, Michael quietly whistling away from Mishka. Their faces were flushed with red. Before the tension breaks them apart, Mishka’s head jolts to the side with a smile plastered across his face. He pointed towards one of the few garden entrances, “I heard over there has coloured roses in season!” Mishka grabbed onto Michael’s hands, pulling him along as he rushed towards the gates. As they drew near, they were hit with a comforting, yet headache-inducing, floral scent. Mishka bathed in the scent while continuing to walk, “Flowers smell so good, yet so strong,” he mumbled his last few words.

“Tell me about it,” Michael opened the gate in front of him, gesturing gallantly for Mishka to enter first, “Anytime my mom lights a floral candle, I immediately get a headache. Love it though, completely worth it.”

Mishka scoffed, “Floral candles are *stupid*, dessert candles are the way to go.” He covered his mouth and snickered, Michael joining by his side again.

They walked along a beautifully paved washed brick path with a sculptured metal fence lining it. There were a few people scattered ahead, leaning on the fence, and walking hand-in-hand together. Blue Jays and Barn Swallows flew by, chirping their songs as they grew closer to their own loved ones. Mishka’s head turned every few seconds, he was so fascinated by the variety of colours going down the path. Roses were going down in rows, each colour fading into the next. Red to pink, pink to purple, purple to blue. Trees bordering the rose beds were fading into an assortment of reds, yellows, and oranges; the contrasting colours complimented the flowers nearly perfectly.

  Mishka stopped and turned on his heels, walking towards a bed of sapphire blue roses, a prideful, toothy grin on his face, “Twinning.” He leaned over the fence, sticking his arm out to touch the velvet petals. The roses were such a vibrant, beautiful blue, it seemed impossible to conjure up such a colour in nature. The colour bounced back onto his eyes, transforming them from a dull grey into a deep blue.

Michael put a hand on Mishka’s back, looking down at him, “Are these flowers natural? Like, are they grown this colour?”

Mishka stood up and shrugged, “Not a clue, most probably are. They probably dyed white roses to get the colours to transition nicely, though,” he smiled, “It’d probably be really difficult to find that many flowers of that many colours naturally. Seed wise. I mean, it’s probably way more expensive to do that than to just dye white ones. White ones are probably cheaper than- “

Michael frowned, furrowing his eyebrows; the left side of Mishka’s smile seemed to droop down, not as it had before. He straightened up his posture, “Can you raise your arms? Both of them.” Mishka’s face contorted into a mixture of confusion and worry, yet he complied. He raised both arms above his head, and, just like his smile, the left arm drooped down. Michael’s eyes widened and he grabbed Mishka’s hand, nearly dragging him as he rushed back towards the entrance.

Mishka stumbled behind Michael, “What- What is going on? What happened?” Michael hadn’t responded, he had just dragged him further along.

The two arrived in the parking lot at Michael’s car where he had nearly shoved Mishka into the passenger seat. Michael got in the driver’s seat, clicking the seat belt in. The engine ran on, “I think you’re having a stroke,” he looked at Mishka through the corner of his eye. He stepped on the gas pedal, swerving out of the parking lot.

Mishka’s eyes widened, looking forwards out the front window of the car. He watched the trees and clouds pass by, a thousand different thoughts flooded his head. Denial pierced his brain like needles in your thighs. Sure, his vision got a little foggy, but that happened so many times before. He just didn’t want to admit one of his worst nightmares was happening; he was informed at an early age that he was at risk of a stroke, and now that was happening. It was *horrifying*. His eyes felt like they were rolling back into his head, the world turning into a nothingness where everything felt fake. His vision faded into a black, inky mess.

Mishka awoke in a horribly uncomfortable bed, the feeling of the papery gown scratching against his bare skin made everything so much worse. His vision was dark, unable to tell if his eyes were open or not. He used his arms to get into a sitting position, the left feeling heavy. As the world cleared up, he looked around where he was; a nearly barren, dim hospital room with an IV jammed into his left arm. It took all of his willpower to not rip the tube out of him.

“Oh, Mishka!” his mother ran up to him, wrapping her arms around his torso so hard it became hard to breathe. Michael stood behind her, his face painted in relief and euphoria. Mishka’s mother placed her hands on either side of his face, looking into his eyes, “I’m so glad you’re okay,” she was so ecstatic that her words seemed to jumble together, “It was only an ischemic, you’ll be okay.” She ran her hand through his head, pulling him for another hug.

Michael looked over the mom’s shoulder, smiling down at Mishka, “Your mom told me about your high blood pressure a few days before we went out, she told me she was afraid that you’ll have a stroke.”

“Mmh, yeah…” Mishka tapped his fingers together, “I don’t think I can-,” he stopped himself, his speech slurred together where it became hard to even understand himself. He shook his head and tried to repeat himself but failed. His words tied together, and he couldn’t do anything about it.

Mishka’s mother frowned, holding his hand. She didn’t need to say anything, the look on her face was enough to say that he was going to need to be taken care of, just like a hopeless toddler. What a great way to start a new relationship.

Michael threw Mishka a small drawstring bag, “You should go and change, it’d be better than the stupid hospital gowns.”

“I don’t think I can feel my feet,” he said, opening the bag and peering inside.

         His mother raised an eyebrow, and squeezed Mishka’s foot, “Are yousure?” A head nod was made in response, so she dug her nails into him.

         “Nope.”

         She sighed, shaking her head. She grabbed Mishka’s hand to help him up, “I have a feeling you’re not going to be able to walk all that well.”

         After what felt like weeks with a billion tests after tests, he was finally discharged from the hospital without a second stroke. A week’s worth of schoolwork needed to be made up, but that’s the last thing he wants to think about. The first thing he went to do was encase himself in the blue sheets of his bed. His body melted into the mattress; it was Heaven right after Hell. He was constantly bombarded during his time at the hospital, with tons of questions he physically couldn’t answer. Every time he opened his mouth, a scramble of words came out. Every word he spoke felt like a punch in the face; it got to a point where he made a promise to himself to abandon speaking for as long as he lived.

         He burrowed himself into the pillow, turning his head to the side so he doesn't suffocate. His moment of peace and solitude and interrupted by a harsh, constant buzz on his desk. He reached out for his phone and looked at the screen, the name up the top of the screen read *Michael*. Mishka sighed, putting the phone on his abdomen, waiting for the call to naturally decline. All he could do was lie in bed until his body dissolved; he couldn’t talk, he couldn’t talk, he felt hopeless.

         An abrupt pounding came about on his bedroom door with his mom entering soon after, completely defeating the purpose of knocking. She sat down on the bed, putting a hand on his head, “I know you don’t want to talk, sweety, but Michael came to visit you,” Mishka sat up straight, “I’ll send him up if that’s alright with you.”

Mishka nodded in response to his mother. She smiled as she exited the room, the room becoming deafeningly silent.

A couple of minutes later, Michael knocked on the doorframe before entering, “Hey, how are you feeling?” Mishka sat up but with no respond. Michael frowned and took a seat at the edge of the bed, “You still don’t want to talk?”

No response.

Michael looked down at the floor, pursing his lips, “You probably just wanna rest, yea? I’ll see you later them.” He patted Mishka’s thigh and got up to leave, looking back at him one last time before shutting the door behind him.

Mishka fell back onto the bed, wrapping himself in the blanket and forcing his eyes shut. The plan was to fall asleep and wake up 5 years later to be completely normal with nothing wrong in the slightest.

Mishka’s body was sprawled across the bed, the blanket barely covering him as it was halfway on the floor. It was one of the best sleeps he has had, 20 hours of uninterrupted slumber. He rolled out of his bed, softening the fall with the rest of the blanket, and sat up. His vision was blurry and the bright lights seeping through the cracks of the door and window felt almost blinding.

 Shielding his eyes with his arm, he lifted his body from the bed with his other arm and stumbled back onto the bed. He reached for his phone under the pillow, looking at the few unread messages from Michael and his mother. He skimmed through them, half of them was Michael apologizing for what happened. The other half was Michael asking him if they could go out again, somewhere not as public; he ignored the messages and left his phone on his desk. Mishka used the wall to support himself as he walked out and down the hallway, as well as using the stair’s railings to carefully walk down. He walked slowly and kept his eyes on his feet as to make sure he didn’t miss a step and fall.

His mother greeted him as he walked into the kitchen, “Hey there, sleepy head! Are you feeling any better?” Mishka shook his head and plopped himself into a dining chair. “Ah, well, I hope you feel better soon. Are you physically hurting? You can talk an Ibuprofen if you need to.” His mom carried a plate of reheated breakfast; the smell of eggs and buckwheat wafting throughout the room. She placed the plate on the table in front of Mishka, along with a small of muesli topped with a variety of berries.

Mishka shoveled the food inside his mouth, buckwheat, eggs, and muesli, in that order. He caught a glimpse of his mom smiling at him, he instinctively smiled back at her.

His mother leaned against the kitchen island, crossing her arms, “Michael wanted to take you out today or tomorrow, are you up for that?”

“I guess,” he mumbled through the food lingering in his mouth.

“You guess? Not very enthusiastic, are you?”

“I’m gonna embarrass myself,” he placed the empty bowl on top of the empty plate, putting the spoon on the side of the bowl.

The mother shook her head, “No, you aren’t. It’s just you and Michael, he’s not going to judge you.” She shook the empty dishes and placed them in the dishwasher, “You need to go get fresh air, plus I already told him you’re up for it,” a sort of devilish grin came upon her face.

Mishka shot his mom a thumbs up and dragged himself back upstairs and into his bedroom. The only thing about his outfit that he changed was instead of shorts, he put on black sweatpants. He didn’t care to impress anyone anymore, he already reached rock bottom.

He sat in the kitchen, scrolling aimlessly on his phone to pass the time as he waited for Michael to pick him up. His mom went out for work and the house was completely silent, all he could hear was the hum of the heater outside.

That silence was quickly shut down by a harsh knock on the front door. He stumbled over to the door, leaning against the wall with his arm and opened it.

Michael beamed at Mishka, “Hey! Are you ready?”

Mishka gave a slumped shrug in response.

Michael disregarded the uneasiness of the situation and held out his hand for Mishka to take, to which he did. Michael helped him to his car, which was parked on the side of the street.

“I think you’re gonna like where I’m taking you,” Michael said, looking at Mishka with a wide smile.

The drive there seemed to take forever; it was like Michael was making the drive long on purpose, it was incredibly scenic, however. Michael swerved into a barren parking lot that was within a forest with oranging leaves.

“We’re here,” Michael exited the car and quickly ran over to the other side, assisting Mishka to stand. Mishka slouched a bit on to Michael, trying to keep himself up by putting his hands on Michael’s waist. Michael led the way to their destination with confidence, grinning the entire time there and kept glancing at Mishka to see his face; he could hardly contain his excitement. He shoved his way through the rocks and shrubs, finding their final destination at huge, beautifully bright blue lake. “Ta-da!”

 Mishka’s eyes widened at the beauty of body of water; there were aquatic plants scattered around, trees hanging low above the large variety of rocks, and birds cooling off in the water. The lake was so clear, you could see water run through all the rocks and pebbles.

 “Isn’t it gorgeous?” Michael inquired, taking a seat on a rock. He motioned for Mishka to come and sit next to him, and he obliged.

 Mishka ran his hand through the water, freezing to the touch but it was a nice refresher into the natural world. He scooped some water up with his hands and splashed what was left onto Michael’s legs, who retracted from shock. Mishka let a small smile escape, quickly hiding it by looking down at the water. He took this moment to relax and breathe in fresh air. Michael wrapped an arm around his waist and soaked in the purity of the moment. The wind flew through the leaves of the trees and the across the surface of the water. Birds drank from the cool water, small droplets plopped right back into the water. It was calm and genuine, a perfect place to sit down and breathe.

 Michael peered at Mishka, “You wanna go back to my place?” Mishka widened his eyes at him, and his face turned red. In a moment, Michael realized what he had said, “Oh my God, not like that! I meant, do you just wanna hang out at my house for a bit? Just chill out.” Mishka snickered at Michael but agreed, letting Michael pick him bridal style.

 Michael let Mishka in his room, everything was neatly placed and organized. Michael closed the door behind him and sat down at his desk.

Mishka lied down on Michael’s bed, tilting his head so he can see Michael. Michael’s head perked up, “Oh, I have to grab something real quick, I'll be right back.” He slipped out of the room, leaving the door slightly ajar behind him.

Mishka sat up straight, looking around the room. He rolled off the bed and stood up straight, darting towards the drawers installed into Michael’s desk. He slowly opened the bottom drawer, wincing from the fear of the metal joints creaking. The wooden compartment fell forwards, creating a soft clack as the edge clashed into the upper drawer. Mishka adjusted the placement of the compartment and peered into it- bingo! He snatched a lightning-blue leather journal that was closed shut with a paired velcro piece. He leaned back and carefully tore off the velcro, one tooth at a time. His handwriting was close to being illegible, it seemed like he was writing to get it over with. Flipping through the pages, he caught glimpses of the journal entries, all of them being seemingly boring; school life, family drama, job applications, everything you'd find in an angsty teen’s diary. He skimmed through the more recent entries, curious to see if *he* was important enough to be included in Michael’s little world. He read through a page from November 9th:

*11/09/22*

*It feels like Mishka is getting used to everything, especially for being super neglectful of himself in the beginning. He's been in physical and speech therapy for about 2 weeks now and we've had a single conversation, which is more than before. His mom has expressed her concerns about him and she's glad that I've been here with him, it just gives me an excuse to be around him more. It feels horrible seeing him go through the distress and I just want to be with him the entire time.*

Mishka had a toothy grin plastered on his face as he gripped the two ends of the notebook. He just wanted to roll around the floor and laugh out of pure ecstasy.

*He loves me…*

*He loves me!*

He couldn't stop reading the entry over and over again, so absorbed in the drug-like feeling that he hadn't even noticed Michael staring at him by the doorframe. Mishka looked up from the notebook, eyes widening at the sight of Michael. He tossed the notebook to the side and leaned against the bed, “Sup…”

Michael’s face distorted into an amused look, “Were you snooping on me?”

Mishka avoided the question entirely, “You love me.” He couldn't stop smiling at Michael or tapping his fingers together out of the intense emotion.

“What?”

“You,” he pointed at Michael, “love *me*,” he then pointed at himself.

Michael stifled a laugh and sat down shoulder-to-shoulder with Mishka, “Of course I do, did you think I didn't?”

“W-well, yea! Obviously,” he slumped down against the frigid floor, “I felt like such a burden, like the only reason you were around me was because you just felt like you had to take care of me! I can barely walk- or talk- and you just have to do everything for me.”

Michael looked at Mishka with an apologetic look, “I didn't think like that at all, trust me. Honestly, if anything, it made me feel closer to you. I mean, it made me feel like we were an elderly couple who couldn't be apart.” He kissed Mishka on the lips, slowly pulling back from him, “You are great.”

His eyes widened and he grabbed something from his pocket, a small black box.

“Jeez, are you proposing already?”

Michael shrugged, “Kinda.” He opened the box and a sleek slate ring with a small amethyst gem showed. He slipped it onto Mishka’s left ring finger, “Promise ring.”

Mishka raised his hand in front of his face, smiling like a teenage girl. He nuzzled into the crook of Michael’s neck, “I love you.”

It was nearing Valentine’s Day, there was red everywhere, red hearts, red flowers, and red clothes. Anything that could be red, was red. Mishka indulged in the red apocalypse as he dressed in a red-striped sweater.

Michael picked Mishka up from behind, spinning the two around in a circle, “Hellooo!” He let Mishka down and grinned at him.

“Hey!” He gave Michael a peck on the cheek. Mishka held out a hand towards Michael, “Maybe this time we won't have a hospital visit.”

Michael giggled and interlaced his hand with Mishka’s, “We can only hope.”

Mishka dragged Michael to the same rose beds as before, past the blue and towards the red. A beautiful arrangement of reds and pinks, perfect for Valentine’s Day. The two leaned against the fence, admiring the variety of roses as well as each other. Michael pulled Mishka in for a kiss, grabbing his cheeks as a singular rose petal flew by their heads.