

1 - Coming Home

Von Gravitas

"So, loverboy not picking you up this time?"

Too tired after a long flight to act as ladylike as she usually prefers, Mai is still wrestling with her luggage on the conveyor belt when her travelling companion's question hits her. Still, her gaze automatically flickers over the line of waiting cab drivers and relatives at the exit. *How unnecessary, you know he won't be there.*

She isn't a huge talker when it comes to her relationship. That is, *in* her relationship, she can talk for hours (though usually it'll be Katsuya who actually does the job). She just isn't usually one to share the details of it with what passes for friends when you spend most of your time on the road.

Fellow duelists, judges, the occasional journalist specializing on international gaming competitions... Once you've been in the game for a few years, you start recognizing each other. Go for a drink sometimes, or even a meal or a movie with those you find more tolerable than most. When your next destination is the same, you might even travel together for a while.

So, in spite of her policy to not talk about her private life with work acquaintances, perhaps it's no huge surprise that the person who helped her pass the last hour and a half with a friendly-yet-slightly-pointless argument notices the suspicious absence of a welcome committee.

"No. He has an early shift tomorrow. We'll meet after."

Although that decision seemed perfectly reasonable when they made it, Mai can feel herself getting defensive as soon as the words leave her mouth. *We're fine, though*, she has to stop herself from saying. *Really, we don't need to do the whole airport ritual every time.*

And isn't there something to be said for a relationship that is secure, *settled* enough not to constantly need that kind of excitement? None of that is anyone's business except for her own and Katsuya's, though. So she just says her polite goodbyes and, tugging on the handle of her trolley with just a little more force than necessary, marches off to find a taxi.

Still, the absence of their usual *welcome home* ritual sloshes uncomfortably in her stomach like that last cup of coffee that you *knew* you shouldn't have been drinking.

The cab ride to the hotel is filled with absent-mindedly touching her unkissed lips and then promptly chastising herself for being so dramatic. What's the big deal? She will see him, first thing tomorrow morning, for brunch. There'll be all the time in the world for hellos and kisses then. And *there's really not a single reason why a grown independent woman would behave like a lovesick teenager. Except.*

Her mind skips over the *except*. Keeps being drawn back to it, but then shying away from going there fully, and performing an awkward exhausting dance with itself until after a long, hot shower, it finally gives in and lets her fall asleep.

By the time her alarm rings, the uncertainty has turned into a much more welcome giddiness. *An hour until he'll be here! Half an hour! Ten minutes!*

She even starts humming to herself while putting on makeup, so when her phone starts to buzz on the sleek stone counter, it takes her a moment to realize.

"Heyyyyy, cupcake. I'll be right down."

One eye is still unfinished and gives her face a slightly asymmetric touch, but that'll just have to wait.

Barely stopping to grab her keycard, she flings the door open, herself through it and... into an outstretched pair of arms.

"Whoha. Sorry, I couldn't wait." With all the force with which she slammed into him, his face is in her hair and his laughter vibrates through her and his first kiss lands on her ear, almost simultaneously with his greeting. This entire morning is messy, and not at all like something out of Mai's life, but right now, she couldn't care less.

"Well, warn me, dork." Impatiently, she buries her hands in his hair, pulls him towards her, and this time, their collision is much more precise, drawn out, and way, way too satisfying. Several times, one of them seems to decide that finally, it is time to move inside, but each time, the other pulls them back, extending the moment and adding another deep kiss. No shy, playful pecks for these two, not after almost two months.

Only after several minutes, when they finally break apart, can Mai fully appreciate Katsuya's getup. He smells suspiciously showered and after-shaved – especially for having just finished an early breakfast shift full of egg-frying and pancake-flipping. But that's nothing compared to the clothes that go with this impression. "You look fancy."

Katsuya pats down his blazer with a self-conscious grin, but clearly pleased with the admiration in her voice. "Yeah. I guess they got tired of my bringing you up ever thirteen seconds, and there wasn't as much of a breakfast rush as usual today, so my boss let me go an hour early. Figured I'd let you catch up on your sleep and use the time to get cleaned up. So you don't have to be embarrassed for dragging your sloppy boyfriend into a fancy hotel for once."

It's probably more him than her who is embarrassed, though he usually gets over it as soon as he gets to inspect the bed. Still, Mai isn't above appreciating what this jacket does for his shoulders, and paired with a new, tight-ish pair of jeans and one of his favorite t-shirts, he can definitely wear the hell out of this ensemble. She's about to

say as much, but Katsuya has just entered the bedroom, and froze in his tracks.

"You got a double."

Oh yeah. This was going to be a surprise. After breakfast, she was going to feign having forgotten her wallet or her phone or her... something in her room, and get him to join her in fetching it 'before they go out.' It was, of course, going to be completely transparent, but he still wouldn't guess what she was up to, since this is in their usual repertoire of 'sneaky' ways of getting him to her room and having sex at hours where normal people go to work or shop or do respectable people things. It's not a terribly smooth maneuver, and Mai is pretty sure most of the hotel staff who occasionally witnessed their little spiel saw through it in an instant. Hell, probably even Katsuya knows that. But up until now, he has always refused to let her pay for his stay. Since going back to his place isn't really an option, and Mai really can't fathom staying at the sort of place he can afford for any amount of time, they are stuck with this.

Ordinarily, she doesn't mind. Doing this little charade, and secretly paying for a second guest when Katsuya isn't looking, is a small price to pay for her boyfriend's dignity and a nice clean bed to fuck in. Plus, it can be kind of fun. Making up ridiculous 'secret' escape routes and pretending to flirt with staff members to distract them at 'crucial' moments.

But this time, she just had a craving for something more conventional. For the boring glow of walking through the hotel doors tonight and holding her boyfriend's hand while nodding a greeting at the receptionist. She just hoped Jou would see it as the 'look, I did something special for us' gesture it was meant to be, and not feel embarrassed because she went over his head with paying for this share. Actually, with all the little routines and familiarities their relationship is settling into lately, she was almost sure he would.

Until now, that is. Now, she suddenly tenses up at the sight of his stunned form, blocking the way through to the bedroom and preventing her from getting a better look of his face. A few seconds trickle by until he moves again, slowly at first, making a round of the room and taking it all in.

"Wow, this is great..." At first, Mai thinks he is about to say thank you, and almost turns away to brush it off. Really, this isn't what she wants their relationship to look like. She has the money to spare, and if she gets to enjoy his company while she's at it, that's all the better. But Katsuya doesn't say anything of the sort. Instead, his eyes wander over the little loveseat in the corner, the chair that, right now, holds a few of her clothes, the impossibly soft carpet and, of course, the bed. Taking in the possibilities. Now this, she can get on board with.

On the other hand, her stomach really is calling for some breakfast. And if she knows anything about her man, it's that he can appreciate a good buffet. This room isn't going anywhere, and neither is any of them, not for the next couple of days.

"I know, right? I'm starving, though, so before we properly enjoy it, why don't we sign you in and have that fabulous brunch we planned? I just need to finish my makeup, won't be more than five minutes."

With the promise of brunch making up for the postponed prospect of sex, he barely looks disappointed, and just nods. "Sure. Take your time. I'll just be here. Getting a feel for the place." Damn that little wink he has. How could she ever pretend not to be into that for as long as she did?

While she is working on her other eye, she can hear him rummaging around the room, drawing back the covers of the bed, opening and closing a drawer, peeking into a closet. "Wow, Mai, I really love this place. Look at that, they even put two chocolates on my bed. No, wait, is that yours? I LOVE those chocolates. And have you felt those sheets? Oh, yeah, you slept in them. 'Course you have. I love that fabric, I can't wait to..." Apparently, actually saying it goes against his attempt to class things up today. It's endearing, really, the pause in his monologue, especially since it only lasts for a few seconds.

Then he picks up again, cheerfully narrating all the things he loves about the room, and Mai has to bite her lip to stop herself from laughing. How amazing he is, this silly, affectionate man, always full of love and excitement. Driving him through every hour of his day, shining out of his eyes. Like it is now. He has finally made his way into the bathroom, and his reflection appears beside hers in the mirror. Mascara brush in hand, pausing mid-sweep, she stops for a moment and watches him.

"Look at all those samples they gave us. I love how they always put them in these tiny bottles, even if you're there for, like, a week, and they know they'll be replacing them. And I lo-" He cuts off, suddenly aware of the complete stillness with which she's been watching him.

In the silence that now stretches between them, their eyes meet in the reflection and Mai has the sudden urge to clear her throat. She tries to, but the sound that slips through her lips is unexpected.

"I love you."

There's a definite spark of exhilaration in his expression, followed by confusion, and just a hint of panic. Desperately grasping for words, he circles through all of those and back, until finally settling on a kind of forced casual tone that clearly belies his embarrassment and confusion.

"You know you don't have to sweet-talk me, you already payed for the room and I think I proved that I'm not above putting out for good food and a smile..."

When he realizes she isn't laughing along, he breaks off, face growing an even deeper shade of red.

"Shit, you're serious."

She nods slowly, finally breaking off eye contact. Setting down her mascara with what sounds like a terribly audible sound in the silence that greets this gesture. "You don't have to say it back, you know."

Her tone is almost casual, but the hurt still settles heavy in her empty stomach. Furiously blinking away the tears that are stubbornly trying to ruin her freshly applied makeup, she doesn't notice his arms wrapping around her. Not until his hands settle on the spot right above the heavy knot in her belly. "Don't be ridiculous, I wanna say it. You just surprised me."

One of his fingers traces up the curve of her neck, gently nudging her chin up until their eyes meet again in the mirror.

"I love you, too. And welcome home."