

Summer Sanctuary

Von me_meron_pan

Prolog:

Green fields, fresh air and the sound of seagulls drawing circles in the sky. With the scenery passing by like this and the sound of Max singing along to this summer's biggest hits on the radio, it almost felt as if they were on their way to vacation.

Probably everyone in the car thought that.

"I can't stand this indisicion~" Max sang along, doing his best impression of Ronald Orzabal.

Yes, it felt like summer vacation. Not that Ash had ever been on summer vacation before, but he felt exactly the same he would feel when watching one of those summer movies where a bunch of teens were on their way to stay at someone's parent's house for a few days and having parties and quickies going on. Or at least that's what he imagined those summers would feel like.

Their almost five hour drive up to Cape Cod turned out to take even longer with Ibe and Eiji wanting to stop whenever they passed a nice spot for memorable pictures, but Ash wouldn't mind. No one would mind.

It was summer after all and they had all decided to take some time to unwind.

"We should grant them one last summer..."

Max recalled the night he had talked with Shunichi about it.

They were aware - the things which were about to come wouldn't be pleasant and the chances were high that at least one of them, his eyes lingering on Ash, wouldn't make it out alive.

His jade green eyes looked sad in a nostalgic way, staring off into the distance as they passed a small seaside town.

Max felt sorry for the boy, his pain probably indescribable.

"Everybody wants to rule the world~" he decided to sing along again, shaking the thoughts off. It was time for vacation after all.

A small cottage near a cliff. It looked like someone had taken it right out of a picture book. Made out of white wood, small window casements with a nice amount of wild flowers growing around it. The old couple who had rented them the cottage had

obviously taken care of their little treasure.

Shunichi and Eiji had to take pictures of the house first before anyone was allowed to enter, Max getting their stuff out of the trunk while Ash stared off into the wide horizon in front of them.

"How about we go see beach first?" Eiji suggested as soon as they were done taking pictures. He had gone on and on about how he wanted to see if the beach was any different to the ones in his home town.

A questioning gaze to Ibe, a nod was all it took for Eiji to pull Ash along.

"Youth!" Max chuckled as he scratched the back of his head, watching the two of them taking off to head to the beach.

"But hey! Dinner at six, alright?" he called out to them, making sure they wouldn't be late.

"You definitely are a father." Shunichi joked as he helped his friend carrying their stuff inside. The open entryway, a small porch with a hollywood swing and a couple of windowboxes with white flowers growing inside.

The perfect picture book dream.

The ocean breeze going from one window through the other in the house was refreshing, making unpacking not as exhausting as they had imagined it to be in this summer heat.

"How about we leave it be and go take a look at the beach as well?" Shunichi suggested with a wink, visibly eager to get some relaxation.

"You had me at '*leave it be*', friend."

~

Of course the camera wouldn't stay at home and so both of them took a stroll across the beach, Max helping Shunichi finding good spots and angles for his pictures.

After a while they came across the boys, caught up in playing volleyball.

Running around, laughing like maniacs, Eiji calling out for Ash to toss him the ball.

It was nice to see them this carefree for a change, was what both Max and Ibe had thought as they watched.

"Wanna join them old man?" Max asked the other, winking at him this time before pushing his elbow into Ibe's side, taking off in a sprint.

"Got some spots left for old geezers like us?"

"We'll crush you guys!"

Summer vacation.

~

"Oof! I need a break, guys! Time out! Time out!" Max called out first, drops of sweat

rolling down his forehead as he finally casted his already unbuttoned shirt aside.

"I am pretty tired as well." Shunichi chimed in, letting himself fall into the sand.

Ash rolled his eyes, chuckling as his eyes wandered over to Eiji.

He didn't seem bothered or out of breath at all.

Stunning.

"How about I get you guys some ice cream from over there?" Max suggested, the treating vacation mood of a father rolling over him all of a sudden as he spotted the small ice cream truck surrounded by teens and families who were also busy enjoying their summer.

"I'll help you, old man." Ash decided to tag along.

There was silence between them, just some laughters from afar and the sound of waves crashing against the shore. A calm moment as sunlight warmed their skin.

"Enjoying it so far?" Max broke the silence as they waited for their turn to order, leaning against the side of the truck with his arms crossed against his chest.

Ash only nodded in reply, giving a smile. It was an honest one and yet weakend from the troubles they had already gone through.

It was that moment Max swore he'd make their stay in Cape Cod one of Ash's brightest memories. He still remembered his first vacation with Jessica and Michael, how they built sandcastles and looked for seashells...

"Choose whatever flavors you like, my treat."

"Why so generous all of a sudden?" Ash asked with a rised eyebrow, a bratty grin on his face.

Max rolled his eyes, shrugging it off, "A simple 'thank you' would've been enough." he chuckled in the end.

Banana, pican, chocolate chip, cherry.

Ash got the same combo for Eiji.

It was a combo neither Max nor Eiji would ever forget.

A lot of things happened in the next day, things Max would always remember.

Like the laugh of two boys fishing in the river before throwing each other in with their clothes still on, or Ash's tired gaze as his head popped out from the high grass they were resting in, the shade of that old tree in front of their cottage shielding them from the sun.

The sound of their loud bragging as they decided to climb the tree, seeing who could climb it faster, who could climb higher, or their soft talk over the camp fire in a warm summer night as they knotted some friendship bracelets.

It felt soothing to see Ash this carefree, easing some of the heaviness around Max's heart.

He was sure, if Griff could see them, he'd be the happiest.

Hot days at the beach passed, warm nights under the bright stars went by and withing the blink of an eye, they'd be on their way back to New York again.

The night before they'd went back home too was... something Max would never forget.

~

It was a breezy yet warm evening with their last day well-spent sightseeing around the peninsula. Their dinner was Max's long promised barbeque with self-made burgers and spareribs made after old Glenreed family recipes. There were jokes and laughters, not a moment spent in silence. Light-hearted and happy, accompanied with the soft strumming of a guitar Shunichi had found in the living room. No one had known the photographer knew how to play.

Max was pretty sure Ash's laughter had set the mood.

He couldn't help but think about how much more he wanted to see Ash smile like this, wanted to hear him laugh till his face was all red and breathing a secondary task over laughing.

"Beautiful..."

As the hour turned late, Shunichi and Eiji had went to bed already, leaving Max and Ash cleaning the dishes.

"I am gonna sit outside on the porch and have a drink before heading to bed but if you're tired, feel free to go to sleep. I'll clean the rest." he offered, making his neck crack a little.

"Shouldn't old geezers like you go to bed early? Don't you wanna join Eiji and Ibe for their morning yoga?"

"Little brat..."

Ash took up on the offer in the end, heading upstairs to get ready.

With Max having time on his own, his thoughts to himself, he finally leaned back in the hollywood swing on the porch.

He had spent the whole day in the car, discussing and bickering over where to go next before spending the rest of the evening in the kitchen and in front of their grill.

"What a pain..." he sighed to himself, taking a sip of his beer. "At least he got to smile some more... so guess it was worth it..."

He found himself smiling at the thought of Ash finally having some fun.

"God Griff, your brother is amazing..."

And all of a sudden, a fit of sadness broke through that mellow mood of the evening. It took his everything not to tear up, pinching the bridge of his nose as he furrowed

his brows cursing under his breath.
"Shit, Griff... What am I supposed to do?"

It was the sound of the front door opening, a soft creaking filling his ears as he winced, quickly wiping some small tears aside as he looked up to face the blonde youth once more.

"Huh? You crying or what?" Ash asked with a cunning grin, one eyebrow raised.

"What's with you brat? Need daddy to put you to bed?" Max teased back before taking another sip from his half-empty bottle of warm beer.
Disgusting.

Silence on both ends, Ash joined the other man. They sat next to each other, the warm summer breeze blowing through their hair as the distant sound of crashing waves filled the night. Ash's restless leg brought the hollywood swing into movement, rocking them back and forth with a silent creaking.

"I don't want it to end..." it broke out of the teen. "I don't want to go back to New York." he sighed, a little hesitant still but it didn't take long for his tongue to finally unwind.

"I- I want to stay here a-and enjoy my time with Eiji and you guys... I-I want to be seventeen for a little longer..."

Max didn't notice at first, only when Ash's voice cracked a little, he could also feel his body shake next to him.

"Ash..."

The blonde turning his head to the side was enough to shut Max up again.

"I feel like a normal boy for the first time - *just this one time... I want things to stay as they are...*"

Pain.

Anger.

Sadness.

A mix of emotions rushed over Max all of a sudden, the urge to protect this boy growing stronger than ever before.

"Want to come a little closer? I-It's cold after all..."

A blatant lie, both of them knew and yet, neither of them cared.

Without a word Ash followed, sitting sideways to cross his legs over Max's lap, clinging onto him like a child.

He was acting on instinct as he put both of his arms around the boy, one hand stroking his back while the other brushed through some of those blonde strands.

It somehow reminded him of Michael, how he'd be woken up at night because his baby had a nightmare.
How many nightmares Ash must've had...

"I-It's okay. You can stay like this a little longer. T-There's nothing we need to rush..."

Max had no idea what to tell Ash after all, but he knew one thing for sure.

"I'll always be there to protect you if you want to be seventeen again. I promise."

"Thanks, Dad..." Ash whispered into his chest, hiding his face as slender arms wrapped around Max's strong body.

"It's okay, Son." he chuckled, rubbing the boy's back before they'd spend some more time sitting, relaxing in silence as the waves kept crashing in the distance.
They were both mending some wounds, both soothing each other's pain.

The had found their little summer sanctuary...