

the thing about illicit affairs

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the thing about illicit affairs

by [fakecharliebrowne](#)

Summary

“You think too much,” Zenitsu says. Tanjirou glances at him, and sees that Zenitsu has been weaving wildflowers into a thin crown. He ties off the last flower, before he turns to Tanjirou and plops it unceremoniously onto Tanjirou’s head. It slips down into his eyes, but Tanjirou is quick to right it, a fond smile tugging at his lips.

“I know,” he replies. “How long have you been awake?”

Zenitsu shrugs. He picks up a wildflower from the pile he’s picked in front of him, and begins working on another one of his little crowns. “What do you think love feels like?”

or; The night before they're supposed to be married, Nezuko breaks off her engagement to Zenitsu.

Notes

title from illicit affairs by taylor swift bc i would move mountains for that song

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

The night before she's supposed to be married, Nezuko comes to Tanjirou's door with a strange look on her face. Tanjirou opens the door, gesturing for her to come in without so much as a greeting.

Nezuko comes in, still with that distant look in her eyes and visible worry on her face, and presses a quick kiss to Tanjirou's cheek as she passes. She takes her seat in the center of the room where Tanjirou had been drafting a letter to Giyuu and Urokodaki by candlelight, and flops onto her back like she used to when they were kids and she was bored by her muzzle.

Tanjirou takes his seat beside her, and reaches out with his good arm to run a hand through her hair. She shifts, and instead takes his hand in her own, squeezing slightly.

"What's on your mind?" he asks, breaking the silence that has settled over the two of them like a blanket. Nezuko doesn't drop by nearly as often as she used to, when the final battle was still fresh in everyone's minds and Tanjirou had only just been released from the Butterfly Estate.

Nezuko stares at the ceiling, her eyes unblinking. "I'm getting married tomorrow," she states. She furrows her brow, just barely. "I'm getting *married. Tomorrow.*"

"Yes," Tanjirou replies, blinking in confusion. "Did you forget?"

Nezuko takes her hand away, sitting up and leaning back on her wrist, using her other hand to run a hand through her hair. She cut it recently, so it falls only to her shoulders instead of to the small of her back. She's never given Tanjirou a concrete reason as to *why* she made such a decision, but Tanjirou doesn't feel a great need to pry. Even four years after the battle is over, Tanjirou still has nightmares about it, still can't smell wisteria without his chest tightening. Everyone is coping differently, and for Nezuko that means a drastic haircut to distance herself from the demon she used to be.

"No, it's not—" She cuts herself off, a troubled look on her face. "It's not that."

"Then what is it?" Tanjirou asks. There's a sneaking feeling of dread settling over his stomach that he knows what this is about, but doesn't want to admit it to himself. He still remembers how he felt when Nezuko came to him for the first time, interrupting his conversation with Inosuke to gush about her first kiss with Zenitsu, how he was so sweet and so nervous about it even though he'd been making passes at her since they were kids. He still remembers how she'd knocked on his door in the middle of the night nearly a year ago, excitedly informing him that she was getting married,

that Zenitsu had proposed to her.

He remembers the strange look in her eyes whenever she thought nobody was looking, the way she never seemed to initiate the contact between herself and Zenitsu. The way her eyes followed Kanao, when Zenitsu's eyes only followed Nezuko.

He remembers how *happy* Zenitsu had been when Nezuko said yes.

Tanjirou knows where this conversation is going. He just wishes he didn't. "Nezuko," he says again. "What's going on?"

Nezuko digs the heels of her hands into her eyes, shaking her head. "I don't think I love him!" she exclaims, then gasps as if she hadn't meant to say it. Tanjirou gazes at her sadly, at the same time she turns to him to see how he's reacted to her confession. Eventually, she turns away again, fiddling with a lock of hair hanging next to her face. "I don't think I'm in love with him," she repeats. "I can't marry him, but it's too late now."

"No, it's not," Tanjirou tells her. "You aren't married yet. But—you have to tell him. And you have to be honest."

Nezuko presses her lips into a thin line. "What if he reacts poorly? What if he hates me? What if he *cries*?"

"He will," Tanjirou replies. "He'll cry a lot. But you already know that going into it. And—I don't know, I think Zenitsu has matured since I first met him. If you're honest with him about your feelings, he'll respect that."

"But he could still hate me," Nezuko whispers. "He could hate me, and never want to see me again, and he's your best friend and I'm your sister and he's also *my* best friend. I don't know what I'd do if he hated me."

Tanjirou sighs. "I don't think he'll hate you. He'll be hurt for a while, yes, but—he could never hate you."

Nezuko turns wide, tearful eyes on him. "Promise?"

And Tanjirou knows it's not his promise to make, not something he can really uphold, but she's his little sister, his only living family, so he says, "Promise."

Nezuko pulls him in for a hug, tucking her head underneath his chin like they used to after nightmares, back when they still lived together. Now, though, Nezuko lives with her fiancé and Tanjirou lives alone, though Inosuke pops in from time to time with a few stories from his time roaming the wild. Even the end of the war against demons could not tie the wild boy down, it seemed.

Tanjirou presses a kiss to the crown of Nezuko's head, pulling back with his hand on her shoulder. He squeezes her shoulder, offering a small smile. "Go," he encourages. "You have to tell him before it's too late."

Nezuko gazes up at him, before she forces a smile and steps back, nodding. "I know. Don't be surprised if one of us shows up here, soon."

Tanjirou nods. "I'll be waiting."

He walks her to the door, and then he watches as she walks away until he can no longer see her. A small part of him worries about what danger she could be in, what could happen to her, but he quiets that part of him with a quick reminder that there are no demons anymore. The only thing that poses a threat to her is another human being, and he knows she can defend herself against one of those.

Still though, Tanjirou thinks there might always be a small part of him that is ready to fight, constantly on the defensive and reaching for a nichirin blade he doesn't have to carry anymore. And he doesn't carry it—instead, it hangs on the wall above his futon, both a reminder and a reassurance. A reminder of all he has lost, a reassurance that there is no reason to be afraid anymore.

No matter how many times he sees it hanging there, Tanjirou can't help but feel that the war will never leave him, not really. Who is he without the Dance of the Sun God or the Breath of Water? What is he without a new mission, a crow circling overhead as he treks from place to place, never slowing down long enough to grieve, to miss those he's lost and no time to find himself after he lost the only thing he ever was?

Tanjirou sighs and closes the door, heading back inside to resume writing his letter to Giyuu now

that Nezuko is long gone. The wind picks up just as the door slides shut, blowing a cool breeze into Tanjirou's home that makes him shiver as he ambles back to the letter set up near the candle on the floor.

He wonders who will come to him first. He wonders where Nezuko will go, if not to him. And, if he's being honest, he doesn't really think Nezuko will be back; she knows that Tanjirou is Zenitsu's best friend, his only living support system, and will therefore decide to go somewhere else and let Zenitsu have Tanjirou for the next period of time. She's kind like that, always has been. Tanjirou lays back, staring up at the ceiling, and contemplating whether or not he should send Nezuko a letter soon, seeing as he likely won't see her for a while in her effort to give Zenitsu some space.

He's asleep before he's able to come to a decision.

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Tanjirou is roused halfway through the night by a nightmare, one of the same he's seen a million times before about his friends getting hurt, his friends dying, his friends and family blaming him for everything even though he *knows* that none of them would ever say or think anything like that.

He sighs and sits up, scrubbing at his sleepy eyes with a fist. After a few moments, he becomes distantly aware of a scent lingering in the air that hadn't been there before; it smells like ozone, the crisp scent of the earth after rain, with the subtlest tinge of peaches mixed in.

Zenitsu.

Tanjirou stands and crosses to the door, sliding it open only to see Zenitsu sitting outside, his knees pulled up to his chest and fat tears rolling silently down his cheeks. He isn't making any noise, not even a snuffle, just staring blankly out at the dirt path beyond Tanjirou's property.

"Zenitsu," Tanjirou whispers. Zenitsu's shoulders tense, and he turns to look up at Tanjirou. His blank expression crumples at the sight of Tanjirou's face, his tears somehow falling faster than before.

"Tanjirou," Zenitsu sobs, abruptly throwing his arms around Tanjirou's legs and sobbing into the knees of his pants. "Tanjirou, I'm—Nezuko—she—"

Tanjirou shushes him, prying his arms away so that he can lower himself to Zenitsu's level. He pulls Zenitsu into a hug, rubbing his back as Zenitsu cries into his shoulder. "I know," he murmurs. "I know."

They sit there for a while, the only sound between them Zenitsu's quiet sobs and sniffles. Tanjirou breathes deeply, inhaling Zenitsu's unique scent. The smell of ozone had always followed Zenitsu, ever since they first met, tipping Tanjirou off to what breathing style he used. Though, Tanjirou has never known why Zenitsu smells of peaches, nor has he ever been able to figure out why the scent was so faint. Zenitsu has never mentioned anything relating to peaches, and Tanjirou has never felt the need to ask.

"We should go inside," Tanjirou murmurs, after he feels that Zenitsu has calmed down somewhat. He's still crying, but his shoulders aren't shaking as much as before. Zenitsu nods and pulls away, swiping an arm across his face to rid it of the tear tracks. Tanjirou stands, offering his hand to Zenitsu to help him up, which Zenitsu takes. He follows Tanjirou inside, his gaze trained on the ground with something distant behind his eyes. Tanjirou has seen Zenitsu cry a lot in the time he's known him, probably at least once a day since they met, but—he's only seen Zenitsu cry like this once before. It was after the battle ended, after Tanjirou woke up in the Butterfly Estate blind in one eye and one of his arms shriveled and numb.

Zenitsu was asleep at the foot of Tanjirou's bed when Tanjirou first woke up, but by the time nightfall came he was alert and awake. Everyone else had fallen asleep, surrounding Tanjirou or returning to their own homes and beds, but for some reason there had been a strange distance in Zenitsu's eyes. Tanjirou watched as Zenitsu's eyes turned glassy, the way they always did when he was about to cry.

"Zenitsu," Tanjirou had murmured, "what's wrong?"

Zenitsu stared, unblinking, at the sheets on the bed. Tanjirou reached out to take his hand, but Zenitsu didn't seem to have any autonomy over his own limbs, his hand laying limp in Tanjirou's. Just when Tanjirou was about to ask again, Zenitsu had whispered, "I killed Kaigaku."

And Tanjirou hadn't needed further explanation as Zenitsu began to cry for real, wracking sobs that he tried desperately to stifle. Tanjirou pulled him into a hug, and Zenitsu had sat there in his embrace for what seemed like hours, crying and mourning the loss of someone he'd once known, someone he'd once looked up to. Tanjirou wondered if Zenitsu had ever seen Kaigaku as his brother, as terrible as their relationship had been.

He wasn't sure which answer he preferred; on the one hand, Zenitsu deserved to have someone he could've called family. On the other, though, Zenitsu deserved a *good* family. A real one, not one that thought he was worthless because he couldn't perform certain breathing techniques.

In the present, Zenitsu follows Tanjirou over to the futon in the corner of the room, laying down beside him at Tanjirou's prompt and curling up on his side, back to the rest of the room and face positioned across from Tanjirou's. His face is flushed, his eyes red and puffy from the crying, and he's probably staining Tanjirou's futon with his tears, but Tanjirou can't bring himself to care. He wraps his good arm around Zenitsu, pulling him close to his chest, and holds him there. He buries his nose in Zenitsu's hair that smells so strongly of ozone Tanjirou might've thought he washed it with lightning.

Tanjirou doesn't allow himself to drift off to sleep until he feels Zenitsu fall asleep first, one hand curled into a fist against Tanjirou's chest and clutching his shirt between his fingers.

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Tanjirou is roused the next morning by something fidgeting against him. He blinks his eyes open, only to see that he's still wrapped around Zenitsu, who is awake and moving incessantly.

"Zenitsu?" he mumbles, stifling a yawn. He takes back his arm to rub his eyes, and watches through the drowsy haze in his mind as Zenitsu immediately scrambles away. "What's goin' on?"

"You were holding me really tight," Zenitsu says, standing up. "But I have to go to the bathroom. I'll be right back."

He flees the room then, leaving Tanjirou to continue waking up fully on his own. Tanjirou sits up with another yawn, stretching and arching his back as awareness comes back to him. Cuddling isn't all that weird between himself and Zenitsu, especially not after nearly five years of friendship. He wonders if Zenitsu is antsy than usual because of what today was supposed to be, or the events that transpired the evening before.

Which reminds him—he needs to write to Nezuko before the end of the day to establish a communication with her.

Zenitsu returns a moment later, before Tanjirou has a chance to well and truly wake up and leave his futon. The blond takes a seat beside Tanjirou again, allowing his head to fall onto Tanjirou's shoulder after a few moments.

"I was supposed to get married today," he says, his voice hollow.

Tanjirou hums. “So you were.”

“I don’t get it,” Zenitsu mutters. “Why would she—why would she say yes if she didn’t love me?”

“I don’t think she realized,” Tanjirou replies. “We’re all still trying to find our footing.”

“Yeah, but—” Zenitsu cuts himself off with a sigh. Tanjirou wishes he could offer him some semblance of comfort, but he knows that even if Nezuko didn’t love him, Zenitsu loved her more than anything. There’s nothing Tanjirou can do to ease that kind of pain.

Zenitsu runs a hand through his hair. Tanjirou can't help but notice how long it's getting; he'd decided to grow it out after the battle, opposite to Giyuu's and Nezuko's abrupt haircuts. Now, after four years, it nearly falls to the small of his back, silky smooth blond locks that he ordinarily pulls back into a ponytail. Tanjirou hadn't noticed the night before, but he supposes Zenitsu must've had it down when he showed up to Tanjirou's home.

Zenitsu notices his gaze and furrows his brows. “What are you looking at?”

“Nothing,” Tanjirou lies. “Are you hungry?”

Zenitsu shrugs.

Tanjirou frowns. “Do you want to do something?”

“Not really,” Zenitsu replies, pulling his knees up to his chest. He rests his chin on top of them, his arms wrapped tightly around himself. His gaze is trained on the floor, as if he doesn't want to look at Tanjirou. “I just want to get married.”

“I know,” Tanjirou says, unsure what else to say. Frankly, he doesn't think there's really anything he *can* say in this situation; he's never even had a girlfriend, and this is the second time someone Zenitsu loved very much ended up leaving him behind. Not that Tanjirou blames Nezuko; no, he understands that his sister did the best thing she could in this situation. It would've been worse if she'd married him anyway and ended up leaving him months or years down the road.

He just wishes Zenitsu could see it the way that Tanjiro does. He wishes Zenitsu's mind wasn't clouded by the hurt he was feeling, hell, he wishes Zenitsu wasn't feeling that hurt to begin with. He wishes there was something he could do to make this even a little bit better for his friend, for his sister, for everyone.

Zenitsu sighs again, and he looks so small sitting next to Tanjiro that Tanjiro almost thinks he's looking at that sixteen year old boy who had to kill a demonized version of the only family he had left.

"I'm sorry," Tanjiro murmurs. "I wish there was something I could do for you."

Zenitsu makes a vague, noncommittal noise in the back of his throat. Tanjiro runs his hand through his own hair, exhaling sharply and blowing errant strands of hair out of his face. He'd grown his hair out, too, but he chose to cut it off at his shoulder blades to keep it somewhat manageable.

Tanjiro shifts his weight. "Isn't there anything that could make you feel better?"

"Just stop, Tanjiro!" Zenitsu explodes. "Don't you *get it*? I don't *want* to do anything! I just want—fuck—I just wanna *sleep!*"

Tanjiro blinks. Zenitsu blinks back at him, before his face turns bright red with shame and he turns away again.

"Sorry," he mutters. It almost seems like he's going to say more, but he doesn't.

"It's okay," Tanjiro starts.

"No, it's *not*," Zenitsu retorts. His voice wobbles on the last few syllables, but Tanjiro doesn't smell the familiar tang of tears yet. "I'm taking up space in your home and in your futon and making you take care of me when she's *your* sister and I'm just—I'm nobody, really, and here I am fucking *snapping* at you. You don't deserve that."

Tanjiro is quiet for a moment, processing Zenitsu's response. "You're not nobody," he says. "Not

to me.”

Zenitsu scoffs, but offers no verbal reply.

“I mean it,” Tanjiro says, frowning. “You’re not nobody. You’re my best friend, Zenitsu. You’re my family.”

Zenitsu sucks in a sharp breath. Tanjiro thinks he smells tears, but Zenitsu doesn’t really look like he’s crying, in either of the ways Tanjiro’s become accustomed to. The statement hovers in the air between them, thick with tension and unsaid thoughts and feelings that Tanjiro could never hope to fully grasp, for several long minutes. Finally, Zenitsu whispers, “I just want to sleep.”

Tanjiro sighs. He should’ve known that would happen; in the four years they’ve known each other, Zenitsu has never made it easy to know him. Outwardly, he seems like a very open and honest person, what with his lack of shame in regards to crying and expressing his emotions, but Tanjiro has come to learn that Zenitsu keeps a lot more held in close than one may expect. He’s willing to express his feelings, yes, but not when it really counts, or when it really hurts.

“Fine,” Tanjiro says. “I won’t stop you. But I need to go into town to get some food. I’ll be back soon, okay?” He stands, watching Zenitsu for any kind of reaction.

“Okay,” Zenitsu mumbles. Tanjiro sighs again and turns to walk away to gather his money, but a hand around his wrist stops him short. He turns to look down at Zenitsu, and waits for Zenitsu to explain his actions. Zenitsu takes a deep breath, before he looks up. “While you’re out,” he starts, “can you see if they have any peaches?”

Tanjiro smiles despite himself, despite the situation. “Okay. I’ll be right back. Try to get some rest.”

“Be safe,” Zenitsu replies. Some of the tension bleeds from the atmosphere inside Tanjiro’s little house.

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Tanjiro returns a couple of hours later, laden by the basket on his shoulder that is weighed down by all of his purchases. He only bought the necessities—plus Zenitsu’s peaches, of course—but due

to his shopping schedule and tendency to only go when he *really* needed to, he often found himself purchasing a lot at once.

Zenitsu isn't in the main room of the house when Tanjiro enters and sets down the basket. The futon has been made up, looking as though Zenitsu and Tanjiro had never slept in it the night before or at all today, and Zenitsu's shoes are gone from where they'd been left outside the door. Tanjiro frowns, padding further into the house.

"Zenitsu?" he calls.

The house does not offer him a response. Worry settling in his gut, Tanjiro wanders all through the house, even to rooms Zenitsu doesn't ordinarily enter, in search of his friend. It isn't until he glances out the window to the field behind Tanjiro's house that he catches sight of a flash of yellow, the color standing out like a sore thumb against the soft green of the wild grains and overgrown grass. Tanjiro grabs his shoes and heads out to the field, not bothering to try and hide his approach; Zenitsu would hear him anyway, no matter what Tanjiro did.

Zenitsu glances at him when Tanjiro sat down next to him, but doesn't say anything.

"I'm back," Tanjiro tells him, for lack of anything else to say. "How are you?"

Zenitsu hums. He's staring up at the sky, laying on his back in the field and watching the clouds pass by overhead at a snail's pace. The reeds and stalks of plants are falling in his face, curling up due to the way he's laying on their stems, and it makes Tanjiro wonder how he isn't sneezing.

"I bought you a few peaches," Tanjiro says. "I looked for the best ones I could find, but you have a better eye for that than I do."

"Says the guy who can smell a rotting fruit before it's even really started to decay yet," Zenitsu replies. He's not grinning, but there's a sparkle of mirth in his eye that brings a smile to Tanjiro's face all the same.

"Fair enough," he concedes. "What are you doing out here?"

Zenitsu makes that noncommittal noise again. "Not much," he says. "I couldn't sleep."

Tanjirou isn't really that surprised by that; Zenitsu used to put up a big fuss about the amount of sleep he got, back when they were all traveling together fighting demons. He claimed that the job was terrible for him, that he hated working in the night because he couldn't sleep during the day. The memories make Tanjirou chuckle; Zenitsu has mellowed out so much since then, a much calmer presence to hang around, especially when Inosuke isn't nearby. And while Tanjirou isn't complaining, actually sort of likes the peace and tranquility that comes from coexisting with Zenitsu like this, sometimes he misses the loud boy he met in the middle of that dirt road so long ago.

He misses the person he used to be, too, just like he misses the people they all were.

"You think too hard," Zenitsu says, wrinkling his nose. "I can practically hear it."

"Oh really?" Tanjirou asks, nudging Zenitsu's shoulder. "What was I thinking about?"

Zenitsu rolls his eyes, but visibly considers Tanjirou's question. "Probably something dumb," he drawls. "Like how you miss the good old days of living in constant mortal peril."

Tanjirou snickers. He isn't very far off, even though he'd clearly been poking fun at Tanjirou. "Have you eaten anything yet today?"

"Mm," Zenitsu hums, tracking a particularly large cloud with his eyes. "No, not yet. I wanted to wait for you."

"You should've eaten," Tanjirou admonishes. "It's not like you knew when I'd be back."

"That's okay," Zenitsu says. He furrows his brow, focusing intently on one of the clouds far up above them. "I'm not really that hungry, anyway."

Ah, right. Somehow, Tanjirou keeps forgetting that Zenitsu isn't here just to be here. He gives himself another mental reminder to write a letter to Nezuko, likely after Zenitsu has fallen asleep to avoid upsetting his friend, and sighs, laying back on the grass beside Zenitsu.

"What are we looking at?" Tanjirou asks, leaning closer to Zenitsu. Zenitsu leans closer as well,

close enough that Tanjiro can feel Zenitsu's hair tickling his scalp. Zenitsu lifts his arm, pointing to one of the clouds passing by.

"That one looks like a cat," he says. He moves his finger, seemingly tracing the shape. Tanjiro doesn't really see it, but Zenitsu sticks his tongue out as he concentrates, and Tanjiro thinks that he doesn't need the clouds to be entertained.

"Ah, interesting," Tanjiro lies. "What else is up there?"

Zenitsu shifts to point to something on the other side of Tanjiro, his torso pressing up against Tanjiro's. There's a certain light in Zenitsu's eyes that hasn't been there for the past 24 hours, and Tanjiro makes a wish to any listening deity that it doesn't fade when the two of them remember themselves, remember their lives, remember who they are and why they're here.

He wishes that Zenitsu would stay happy, because he can't stand to see him upset.

"That one's a flower," Zenitsu declares. "Do you see it?"

Tanjiro can't look away from his face, his gentle and relaxed features. "Yeah," he breathes. "Yeah. It's pretty."

Zenitsu turns to look at him at that moment, and his entire face flushes redder than a tomato. He wails, shoving Tanjiro away by the face.

"*Tanjiro!*" he cries. "You can't just say things like that! That's embarrassing! And why were you even looking at me? You should've been looking at the clouds, since that's what we're *doing!*"

Tanjiro laughs, lowering Zenitsu's hand and sitting up. "Sorry," he says, though he doesn't mean it. "Come on, let's go get something to eat."

Zenitsu perks up, the flush already fading from his face. "Peaches?"

"Sure." Tanjiro smiles, pulling Zenitsu to his feet and leading him back to the house. "You can help me put everything else away."

Zenitsu doesn't argue, humming a soft tune under his breath. He's probably Tanjirou's only friend who can sing; Inosuke is terribly tone deaf, Giyuu doesn't bother trying so Tanjirou's never heard him, and as much as Tanjirou loves Nezuko, she doesn't really have a sense of rhythm. Kanao hums from time to time, but her tunes always sounded a little flat to Tanjirou's ears, and Tanjirou noticed that Zenitsu always seemed to twitch and fidget when Kanao was humming or singing, as if the pitchiness of her voice aggravated his sensitive hearing.

"Where do you think Nezuko went?" Zenitsu asks, halfway through putting away the contents of Tanjirou's basket. Tanjirou stiffens, not expecting the other man to ask about her this soon after their split.

"I don't know," he says. "I was going to write to her tonight and ask her about it." He pauses. "You don't think she would've stayed at home if you weren't there?"

Zenitsu shrugs. "Probably not," he says. "I don't think she'd want to be alone."

Tanjirou hums. "She'd probably feel bad, too," he adds, "about staying in your house even though she isn't your fiance anymore."

Zenitsu falls silent, a distant look washing over his face. Tanjirou has said the wrong thing, apparently, treading on the emotional landmine that Zenitsu had managed to bury over the course of the day. Tanjirou bites his lip and curses himself internally.

"Here," he says, drawing Zenitsu's attention. Looking at him, Tanjirou can see that Zenitsu's eyes have grown glassy. He hands him a peach. "We can finish later, okay?"

"Okay," Zenitsu says, taking the peach from Tanjirou. He follows Tanjirou out of the house to the spot where they'd sat yesterday evening. The sun is beginning to set, the sky painted in shades of orange and pink in a vibrant blend. Tanjirou glances at Zenitsu as they take their seats, only to see Zenitsu staring blankly out at the horizon, smoothing his thumb over the peach's fuzzy skin.

"Are you okay?" Tanjirou asks, if only to break the heavy silence. The melancholy lingering in the air is starting to weigh on him, too, and he can tell that it's affecting Zenitsu negatively. He wishes there was a way he could simply wave a hand and brush it all away, could sweep the sadness out of the atmosphere with a broom or another tool.

Zenitsu hums and says nothing. He takes a bite of his peach, wiping the juice off of his chin with the back of his sleeve.

Tanjirou sighs.

“You don’t have to keep asking,” Zenitsu says suddenly. “I don’t have an answer for you.”

Tanjirou blinks, not expecting Zenitsu to say something like that. “You...don’t?”

“No,” Zenitsu replies. Silence falls over the two of them, but it doesn’t feel quite as oppressive as it did a moment ago. Zenitsu hums, a short, single note, before he leans his head on Tanjirou’s shoulder. “This is enough.”

“What is?” Tanjirou asks.

“You,” Zenitsu replies. “This.”

Tanjirou follows his gaze out to the sunset blazing its way across the sky, and he can’t help but wish that this moment didn’t have to end. It feels peaceful to sit here and watch the sunset with Zenitsu, feels like everything he’s ever done has only to been to reach this moment, to experience this warmth in his chest and flush in his cheeks that he can’t seem to shake.

“You aren’t very good at explaining things,” Tanjirou whispers, nudging Zenitsu’s ribs just slightly with his elbow.

Zenitsu snorts. “Shut up.”

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Later that evening, when he and Zenitsu are curled up together on the futon again, Tanjirou lifts his hand and begins to fiddle with the ends of Zenitsu’s hair. Zenitsu lets out a soft noise of contentment, nuzzling closer to Tanjirou. Both of his arms are slung around Tanjirou’s waist, his head tucked underneath Tanjirou’s chin. It’s terribly intimate, in a way Tanjirou could never see himself being with Inosuke or Giyuu or really any of his other friends, but somehow it feels right.

He and Zenitsu have always been close like this, and Zenitsu seems fond of the physical affection. Even when they were still children fighting demons, Zenitsu always found a way to be touching Tanjiro, whether he was clinging to the back of Tanjiro's haori or linking their elbows or just holding hands as they walked. He used to play with Tanjiro's hair, too, when they were seated for meals or to rest. Tanjiro hadn't realized how much he missed the easy camaraderie that came with traveling with his friends, waking up next to them every morning and passing every waking moment together. He likes the peace that followed the end of the battle, but he isn't as fond of being alone.

"Can I tell you something?" Zenitsu whispers. Tanjiro jerks; he hadn't realized Zenitsu was still awake.

"Of course," Tanjiro murmurs, relaxing back into their shared embrace.

Zenitsu stares at Tanjiro's chest, as if trying to trace each and every interwoven thread with his eyes. His grip tightens infinitesimally where his fist rests against Tanjiro's chest, tugging the fabric between his fingertips. "She told me she was in love with someone else."

"Who?" Tanjiro asks, even though he knows exactly who Zenitsu's talking about.

"Nezuko," Zenitsu breathes, sounding like even speaking her name is painful. "But both of them did, now that I think about it."

Tanjiro tightens his grip on Zenitsu, tugging him a little bit closer now. Zenitsu tucks his head over Tanjiro's shoulder instead of underneath Tanjiro's chin, their chests pressed flush against each other. Zenitsu's hair falls in front of Tanjiro's face, tickling his nose, but Tanjiro doesn't dare move.

"She's in love with someone else?" Tanjiro echoes. His voice seems louder than anything in the quiet of the night, but also like it could be carried away by a soft breeze at any moment. Were they outside, were they children constantly on the move again, it might've been.

"Yeah," Zenitsu mumbles. Tanjiro isn't sure whether or not he's imagining the tremor in his friend's voice. "She said she was sorry," he starts, sniffing, "and she said she was still young and she didn't really know what love was but she definitely didn't—didn't think she loved me."

"What else did she say?" Tanjiro asks, after Zenitsu is silent for several moments.

“I asked her how she knew she didn’t love me if she didn’t know what it meant to be in love,” Zenitsu continues, tracing light patterns into Tanjirou’s back. “And she told me that she thinks she’s in love with someone else. That she doesn’t want to marry me and find out a year or two down the road that she was wrong.” He snuffles again, and Tanjirou knows he isn’t imagining the shake in his shoulders. “She said she didn’t want to hurt me.”

“I’m sorry,” Tanjirou murmurs, because he doesn’t know what else to say. He tightens his grip around Zenitsu with his good arm, clenching his fist in the fabric of Zenitsu’s shirt bunched near the small of his back.

“It’s not your fault,” Zenitsu replies, and his voice sounds hollow. Empty, like there’s no inflection behind it, no emotion within him at all.

“Doesn’t mean I can’t be sorry that it’s happened to you,” Tanjirou rebukes.

Zenitsu hums under his breath, but the note falls flat in a way it usually doesn’t. Zenitsu’s hums and songs never fall flat, Tanjirou’s never heard him so much as mumble a lyric out of tune. His heart hurts to think about how upset Zenitsu must be that he makes such an error.

“Can I tell you something?” Zenitsu asks again, his voice somehow even smaller. Tanjirou barely catches it, even in the still silence of his home.

Tanjirou squeezes Zenitsu closer. “Of course,” he repeats.

Zenitsu is quiet for several moments, before he admits, “I don’t think I loved her, either.”

This catches Tanjirou by surprise. So much so that he doesn’t know what to say, just sits with his arm around Zenitsu, his head tucked over Zenitsu’s shoulder as he stares, wide-eyed, at the dark room beyond their shared futon, their shared embrace.

Zenitsu squeezes Tanjirou around the middle to draw him out of his shocked stupor. Tanjirou stutters for a moment before he asks, “What?”

Zenitsu is silent, like he doesn’t know what he wants to say, or maybe he does, and he just doesn’t

know how. Finally, after what feels like an eternity, he says, “I think maybe I thought I was supposed to.” He pauses. Tanjiro feels him swallow. “Or maybe I wanted to, even though I didn’t. I don’t know. But the more I think about it, the more I’m away from her and the more it sinks in that we aren’t getting married—the more *relieved* I feel.”

Tanjiro opens and closes his mouth several times before he’s able to speak. He wonders what Zenitsu’s face looks like right now, wonders if there are tears streaming down his cheeks and slipping onto the futon beneath them, or if he’s wearing that unnervingly blank expression again. He wonders if Zenitsu’s eyes are present, or if he’s caught up in memories of the distant and not-so-distant past. He wonders, wonders, wonders, but he doesn’t dare move back from the embrace. As much as it is holding Zenitsu together, Tanjiro thinks it’s holding *him* together, too.

“Why?” he whispers, unable to find any other words.

Zenitsu hums again, and again it falls flat. “I don’t know. I don’t think I loved her. I think I wanted to be in love, wanted to *be loved*, and she was just—she was the only one who loved me like I wanted to be.”

“But she didn’t,” Tanjiro says.

Zenitsu buries his face in the crook of Tanjiro’s neck, and Tanjiro contemplates that perhaps he’s said the wrong thing, but he can’t feel any tears on Zenitsu’s face. “I know,” Zenitsu mutters. “I *know* she didn’t love me. Just like I know that everything I’ve been, everything I’ve done, everything I’ve felt for the last four years—it was all fake.”

“No,” Tanjiro starts, but Zenitsu cuts him off.

“I’m tired, Tanjiro,” he murmurs, his voice muffled. “As much as I didn’t want to be a Demon Slayer, as much as I wanted the war to be over—I never realized.”

“Realized what?” Tanjiro asks, and is his voice shaking?

“I didn’t want to be a Demon Slayer,” Zenitsu repeats. “I wanted the war to be over. But—now that *it is*, now that I’m *not*, I don’t know who I am without it.”

And for the first time in four years, Tanjiro doesn’t feel alone anymore. He’s spent the last four

years floundering, searching for something to do, someone to be, if he isn't a Demon Slayer avenging his family. He's spent four years reliving it all night after night, unable to close his eyes without seeing flashes of people he'll never touch again, people he'll never be able to talk to and thank and love and hold ever again, people he's lost and people he loved, people who were stolen from him by the very things he was trying to eradicate.

He'd never imagined he'd succeed, back when he was thirteen and he was carrying his only family member down a snowy mountain, tears streaming down his face even though he *knew* crying wasn't safe in winter, knew that it only led to frozen tear tracks and frostbite. He never imagined there'd come a day when he could lay down his sword, when he'd have his sister back and there'd be no reason to fight. He never dreamed that at age nineteen, he'd be down to one working arm and one working eye, spending every day and every night wondering who he was supposed to be if he wasn't a Demon Slayer.

He was a big brother, and then he was a Demon Slayer, and then he was nothing.

More than anything, Tanjiro feels like he'll never escape that war, that he is nobody without that war, because that war was what made him into who he is.

But he doesn't know how to say all of that, doesn't know how to condense it into words and sentences rather than abstract thought, flashes of memories he'll never get back and experiences he could never hope to describe.

And so he says, "Yeah, me too." And it's not enough. But this is one of those things where Tanjiro knows that no matter what he says, it'll never be enough.

Zenitsu hums, and it falls flat.

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Zenitsu is gone when Tanjiro wakes up. Tanjiro sits up, and frowns at the emptiness beside him in the futon. He glances around the room, but there's no sign of Zenitsu anywhere. Yawning, Tanjiro pushes himself to his feet and wanders through the house in search of his friend. He's nearly out of rooms to search through when the memory of yesterday afternoon dawns on him, and he pads over to look out the window into the field behind the house. Sure enough, Zenitsu is sitting out in the field, his back to the house. He appears to be working on something held in his lap, but Tanjiro can't tell what it is from this vantage point.

After a few moments of Tanjirou observing him, Zenitsu seems to feel eyes on him and he lifts his head, glancing over his shoulder at the house. He's too far away for Tanjirou to see his expression, but he lifts a hand to wave. Tanjirou returns the wave, turning away from the window to go find his shoes. He treks out to join Zenitsu in the field a moment later, sitting down beside him and gazing absently out at the horizon. Their conversation from the night before echoes on loop in his mind, but he doesn't want to bring it up. It's one of those conversations that only exist in the dark of night, when the rest of the world is asleep and it's okay to be vulnerable, it's okay because there is no more danger. Tanjirou remembers the days of being 15, trekking all over the countryside, when there was no time to be vulnerable because the demons struck at night and the sunlight was for cheerfulness.

He misses being a child and he doesn't, all at once. He misses the carefree feeling that floated through each and every day, carried by the breeze blowing in from the sea or the mountains. He misses the easy camaraderie between him and his friends, he misses sleeping next to the fire with his head on Zenitsu's chest and his legs intertwined with Inosuke's. He misses the days when Zenitsu would cling to his sleeve as they walked along, muttering his worries as the crows shrieked overhead, even misses Inosuke's constant challenges to fight.

But he's also acutely aware of the fact that he and his friends were never really children, that Demon Slayers never got to be children. He and his friends were different than most; Tanjirou was never a child because he was always a big brother, always looking out for his siblings and providing for the family, trekking up and down the mountain day in and day out just to say that he could give them a great New Year's feast. Inosuke was never a child because he never had a family, grew up surrounded by wild boars who may have raised him, yes, but at a certain point he had to learn to protect himself. And Zenitsu was never a child because he never had anybody at all, no wild boars and no parents and no siblings until he was swindled and abandoned heartbroken at the doorstep of an old Demon Slayer.

Tanjirou wonders where they'd be if his father had never died, if Inosuke's mother had never died, if Zenitsu was never orphaned. He wonders where they'd be if they didn't have to grow up too fast, if they got to be children when they were actually children, raised by loving parents and surrounded by joy and affection from the day they first opened their eyes.

Tanjirou knows he was luckier than most, to have had his father for as long as he did. He knows he was luckier than Zenitsu to have had a family at all, even if it was taken from him in the worst way possible. But still—he can't help but resent the universe for taking it from him.

And at the same time, he doesn't know if he really does, because knows that if it weren't for demons, if it weren't for everything that got the three of them to that Final Selection—he would not be sitting here in this field next to his best friend, as the morning sunlight warms their faces and the wildflowers and weeds tickle their ankles.

“You think too much,” Zenitsu says. Tanjiro glances at him, and sees that Zenitsu has been weaving wildflowers into a thin crown. He ties off the last flower, before he turns to Tanjiro and plops it unceremoniously onto Tanjiro’s head. It slips down into his eyes, but Tanjiro is quick to right it, a fond smile tugging at his lips.

“I know,” he replies. “How long have you been awake?”

Zenitsu shrugs. He picks up a wildflower from the pile he’s picked in front of him, and begins working on another one of his little crowns. “What do you think love feels like?”

Tanjiro opens his mouth to reply, but he stops himself. What *does* he think love feels like? He’s certain he’s felt it before, but he’s never really taken the time to put it into words. “I think—I think it’s a good feeling,” he starts. “I think it feels warm, like the clouds have finally shifted out of the way on a chilly morning and the sunlight hits you directly for the first time. Or like a nice cup of tea, at just the right temperature, as the warmth runs down your throat and spreads out to your whole body.”

Zenitsu’s hands still, and he turns to give Tanjiro his undivided attention, but Tanjiro is too busy talking to truly notice.

“And I think it’s an all-encompassing feeling,” Tanjiro continues. “Like suddenly your heart’s swelled too big for your body, and your smile’s so wide it hurts, but also—you never want it to stop. I think it feels like there’s no where you’d rather be, like you could be a million miles away from your house but somehow you feel—you feel home.”

Tanjiro trails off, and flushes when he realizes how much he’s just blurted. He imagines it’s a much more complicated answer than Zenitsu had been looking for, and he opens his mouth to backtrack and retract some of his statement, but Zenitsu speaks before Tanjiro has a chance.

“It feels like you’re home, huh?” Zenitsu echoes, turning his gaze back to the flowers resting innocuously in his lap. There’s a soft smile on his face, his features looking softer and gentler than Tanjiro thinks he’s ever seen him. “I think I know what that feels like.”

Tanjiro’s face heats up. His skin burns where the flower crown comes into contact, but he can’t bring himself to take it off. It’s not a bad kind of burn, in any case—it feels a little like the warmth of a too-close fire, or a cup of tea that hasn’t had a chance to cool off yet.

He turns his gaze back to watching the sun make its gradual ascent up to its peak in the sky, the clouds moving past overhead like they had the previous afternoon. He lays back, resting his hand on his stomach as he stares up at the endless blue expanse of the sky.

His heart is full, his chest tight in the best way. He's warm from head to toe, and no matter what he does, he can't seem to stifle the smile on his face. Is this love? Is he in love with his best friend, his sister's ex-fiance? He hopes not, and at the same time, it's all he wants. It would be nice to love Zenitsu, he thinks. Like coming home every time he finds himself in Zenitsu's embrace, like the sun shines only for him every time Zenitsu smiles. He imagines a life with Zenitsu, in a way he hasn't been able to since the end of the war, and he thinks that he might be able to throw away his nichirin blade if it means that he'll spend the rest of his life intertwined with Zenitsu.

He can see a person who exists without war, if only that person is standing next to Zenitsu.

Is this love? Does he want it to be?

Zenitsu lays back beside him on the overgrown grass, and reaches out to pull Tanjirou's hand down to the ground, linking their pinkies. Tanjirou grabs his hand and entangles their fingers, the gesture bringing a pretty blush to Zenitsu's cheeks.

Like coming home, Tanjirou thinks to himself. So, this is love. He thinks he likes it.

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That evening, Zenitsu assists Tanjirou in making dinner. The two of them work in harmony, practically dancing around each other as they fetch ingredients, utensils, other necessities. Every once in a while, Tanjirou imagines he can feel Zenitsu's eyes on him, but Zenitsu's never looking when Tanjirou glances over.

“So,” Tanjirou starts, halfway through chopping the vegetables. “Have you heard from Inosuke recently?”

“No,” Zenitsu replies. “He talks to you more than me, anyway.”

Tanjirou thinks he knows why that is, but he keeps quiet to avoid upsetting Zenitsu. He hums, a quiet tune he thinks he recalls hearing Zenitsu mumble at some point in the not-so-distant past.

Zenitsu joins in, murmuring the lyrics barely audible over the other ambient noises of them cooking, and for a while they pass the time just like that—singing softly, working side by side in perfect tandem. It's the kind of thing Tanjiro is careful not to linger on too long in his mind, is careful to tuck away into the treasured memories because he knows that it won't last, even though it's the kind of thing he could spend the rest of his life doing.

They don't speak again until the meal is finished cooking and served into two bowls at the table. It isn't until he's halfway done eating that Zenitsu lowers his chopsticks and glances to the side, where the window is higher than eye-level but still bathes the wall in the golden light of the sunset.

Tanjiro swallows the bite he'd been chewing, lowering his own hand to give Zenitsu his full attention. "What's on your mind?"

"I dunno," Zenitsu says. "I don't wanna go home."

"You don't have to," Tanjiro says. "You can stay for as long as you need to."

Zenitsu chuckles, a fond smile on his face. There's a strange glint in his eyes that Tanjiro can't pinpoint. "I knew you'd say that."

He falls silent, and Tanjiro watches as the smile slips off of his face, little by little. He frowns at his friend, but he doesn't know what to say to make him confide whatever it is going through his mind at the moment.

"There's a lot I haven't done," Zenitsu says, after several moments pass in silence. Tanjiro waits for him to continue, but he stays silent.

"Like what?" Tanjiro asks.

Zenitsu shrugs, his chin resting in the palm of his hand. "There's a lot I don't know how to do anymore."

Tanjiro presses his lips into a thin line. "Like what?" he repeats.

Zenitsu is quiet for so long that Tanjirou almost thinks he didn't hear him, or that he isn't going to answer. However, just as Tanjirou's about to say something else, Zenitsu speaks. "Why do you keep your sword on the wall?"

Tanjirou blinks. "What?"

"Your sword," Zenitsu repeats. "Why do you keep it up there, where it's always visible?"

Tanjirou furrows his brow. "I don't know," he starts. "I like having it there. As a reminder, of everyone I've lost and also that I'm not—I'm not in danger anymore. It reminds me that I don't *need* to carry a sword everywhere I go. That I'm safe."

"Oh," Zenitsu mumbles.

"What did you do with yours?" Tanjirou asks after a moment, because he's certain Nezuko would've told him if Zenitsu had thrown it away.

Zenitsu turns his gaze to stare down at the wooden tabletop, a strange expression on his face. "I hid it," he confesses. "I shoved it in a room I never go into and I never looked back."

"Why?" Tanjirou wonders, and he wants to reach out and touch Zenitsu, but there's a table in the way, an aching chasm between the two of them. The ease only comes at night, it seems, when they are holding each other and they are the only people in the universe. But the daytime is cluttered with shadows, shadows of the past and shadows of everything that haunts the two of them, everything that keeps them looking over their shoulders in every unknown alley, every unknown village.

Zenitsu squeezes his eyes shut, then brings his hands up to press the heels of his hands against his eyelids. "I didn't want to remember," he whispers. "I didn't want to remember everything I did with that sword. Everyone I killed." Zenitsu sucks in a shaking breath. "I didn't *want* to be a Demon Slayer. I just—I just wanted my Gramps to be proud of me. And I wanted to make it up to him, after he rescued me."

"I know," Tanjirou murmurs, at a loss for words. Zenitsu has a way of doing that to him, lately.

"I don't want to remember," Zenitsu breathes. "I just want to forget it all."

Tanjirou feels like a weight has settled over him. He's suddenly not hungry enough to finish his meal. He doesn't think Zenitsu will finish his, either. "I know."

They lapse into silence. For maybe the first time since he was fifteen years old, Tanjirou finds that the silence between the two of them is suffocating.

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Two days later, Tanjirou wakes in the middle of the night with a startling realization clearer than water in his mind: He is in love with Zenitsu.

Next to him in the futon, Zenitsu snuffles and rolls over, a peaceful expression on his face as he sleeps peacefully. Tanjirou sits up carefully so as not to jostle his companion, and slides out of the futon. He pads over to grab his shoes and finds himself wandering out to the field behind his house. It's strange; he never went out here before Zenitsu started staying with him. Before Zenitsu arrived, this field had always been just that: a field. An empty field behind his house that, while filled with overgrown weeds and wildflowers, and admittedly pretty under direct sunlight, never really interested Tanjirou. Tanjirou kept to himself within the four walls of his home, and the field never called to him the way it seemed to call out to Zenitsu.

Tanjirou sighs, inhaling deeply and allowing the cool night breeze to wash over him and envelope him like a gentle wave in the ocean. He inexplicably wishes that Zenitsu were out here with him, and the thought of the blond sends his heart racing to remind him of what exactly he came out here for, why exactly he's awake. He can't remember what he'd been dreaming about before he woke, can't remember if he was even dreaming at all, but he'd woken with that thought on his mind and a warm, comfortable feeling in his chest.

Which was odd; shouldn't the realization that he's in love with his best friend feel more urgent? More upsetting? More disheartening? Shouldn't he be crushed knowing that he's in love with his best friend, who was engaged to his sister only a week ago? This realization shouldn't feel nearly as lovely and wonderful as it does, and yet Tanjirou can't bring himself to be upset about it.

He's in love, he thinks to himself as he tips his head back to gaze up at the sky. The stars and the moon are on full display, not a cloud in sight. It almost seems like everything shines a little brighter tonight.

Tanjirou smiles, humming a short, happy note under his breath. He's in love with his best friend,

and he thinks that's supposed to scare him but it just—makes him feel whole. Hopeful again, like he has a future to look forward to instead of a past that will never let go of him.

“Tanjiro?” Zenitsu’s sleepy voice calls. Tanjiro glances over his shoulder to see Zenitsu standing in the back doorway of the house, watching him and rubbing sleep out of his eyes with a fist. Tanjiro’s heart swells with affection the longer he looks at Zenitsu, the longer he gazes at the person he’s in love with. “What’re you doing?”

“Mm,” Tanjiro starts, turning to make his way back to the house. “I was just thinking.”

Zenitsu furrows his brow. “Out here? In the middle of the night?”

“Yeah,” Tanjiro says.

“That’s dumb,” Zenitsu says. “You should be sleeping.” He pokes Tanjiro in the chest as soon as Tanjiro is within reach. “People need sleep to function, you big forehead.”

Tanjiro laughs, and it feels like a vice releases from around his lungs. It feels free, like the chains have finally unlocked, the cell door open. “I know,” he says. He hums softly. “Let’s go back to bed then, yeah?”

Zenitsu squints up at him, his eyes searching for answers to questions Tanjiro knows nothing of. Eventually, Zenitsu’s face relaxes into the smallest of smiles, and he makes an aborted motion like he wants to reach out, but decides not to. Tanjiro takes Zenitsu’s hand in his, and the blond’s eyes blow wide for less than a second before he relaxes and smiles up at Tanjiro. “Okay,” he says. “Let’s go back to bed.”

And they do, and when Tanjiro wakes, he feels better rested than he has in four years.

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Zenitsu goes out to the market to get food the next morning, bidding Tanjiro a gentle goodbye and a soft smile, promising to return soon. Tanjiro waves him off and watches him leave until he can’t even make out a speck in the distance, before he turns back to his house and sets to tidying up. It isn’t messy, by any means, but Tanjiro has always been able to find something to clean when he needed to fill time, even when he was much younger and he still lived in the mountains with his

family. He's halfway through cleaning the kitchen when there's a soft knock at the door.

Tanjirou lifts his head, frowning and wondering who it could be even as he crosses to open the door. Zenitsu would just come right in, and it hasn't been long enough for him to have gone to the market and back, anyway. Tanjirou pulls the door open, only to see Giyuu standing on the other side holding a small basket.

"Giyuu!" Tanjirou greets, brightening. He steps back to allow Giyuu room to enter. Giyuu nods to him once as he enters, handing Tanjirou the basket.

"Urokodaki sends his regards," he says. "And apologizes that he couldn't come."

"Don't worry about it," Tanjirou replies, carrying the basket over to the kitchen. Giyuu always brings some sort of food when he visits, though it's almost never the same thing twice. Last time had been a basket full of red, red berries that stained Tanjirou's fingertips for weeks. Today, it looks like apples. "Thank you for this," he says, already finding a place to put it. Giyuu takes his seat at the table, familiar with Tanjirou's busybody tendencies.

Tanjirou joins him at the table a few minutes later, this time laden with tea cups and a pot. "What brings you here today?"

"It's been a month," Giyuu points out. After the end of the war, and after both of them had recovered enough to consider themselves having settled down, Tanjirou on his own and Giyuu with Urokodaki, they developed a tradition of monthly visits, as well as written correspondence. Giyuu's been much more open since the end of the war, even more so since living with Urokodaki. Companionship is good for him it seems, as is peacetime. Tanjirou is glad to see him happier than he was.

"Has it?" Tanjirou asks, sipping his tea. "I hadn't realized."

Giyuu just hums and drinks from his own cup. They lapse into silence, comfortable silence that settles over them like a blanket. After a few minutes, Giyuu asks, "How is Nezuko?"

Tanjirou lowers his cup. "She and Zenitsu split the day before the wedding." Giyuu's eyes widen.

"What for?" he asks, frowning. "They seemed—content."

“Mm,” Tanjirou agrees, “but Nezuko said she didn’t think she really loved him.”

Giyuu furrows his brow, mulling over Tanjirou’s words for several moments. “How is Zenitsu handling it?”

“Really well,” Tanjirou replies. “To be honest, I don’t know that either of them are even that broken up about the engagement.”

Giyuu frowns deeper, but doesn’t say anything.

“I think they’re more upset about the blow their friendship will take,” Tanjirou elaborates. “A friendship that had rooted itself so deeply into their relationship is bound to suffer when the relationship fizzles out.”

Giyuu hums and takes another sip of tea. “How are you?”

“Good,” Tanjirou says honestly. He can’t suppress the smile threatening to spread across his face. “I think—I think I’m in love.”

Giyuu blinks, waiting for Tanjirou to continue.

Tanjirou sighs happily, running his fingertip along the rim of his teacup. There’s a small chip in the rim he hadn’t noticed before that catches the grooves of his fingertip. “It’s nice. Have you ever been in love before, Giyuu?”

Giyuu stares at him, an unreadable expression on his face. “Once.”

“Are you in love right now?” Tanjirou asks.

Giyuu pauses, visibly thinking about Tanjirou’s question. A beat passes in silence before Giyuu finally says, “No.” He hesitates. “Who are you in love with?”

“Zenitsu,” Tanjirou admits. “I don’t know when or how it started, but—I realized it last night.”

“You don’t seem worried,” Giyuu observes.

Tanjirou shrugs. “Why would I be?”

“You’re in love,” Giyuu states, “with your best friend. Who was in love with your sister.”

“I know,” Tanjirou replies. “And I know that this should scare me, but honestly? I’m just—happy. Hopeful. I feel so *warm*, in ways I haven’t since I was a little kid. I don’t want to be scared of this.”

“Okay,” Giyuu says.

Tanjirou blinks. “That’s it?”

Giyuu raises an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“You don’t have anything else to say to me about that?” Tanjirou asks.

Giyuu shrugs, sipping his tea. “Is there something you want me to tell you?”

Tanjirou falters. “Well—no.”

“It’s good to see you happy,” Giyuu informs him. “I don’t think you need to be scared of love if you don’t want to.”

“Oh,” Tanjirou mumbles. He turns to look down at his half-finished tea, which has likely gone lukewarm by now. “I can’t pursue this, can I?”

“Why not?” Giyuu tilts his head to the side.

“Because Zenitsu’s—” Tanjiro cuts himself off, trying to gather his thoughts again. “Because he was Nezuko’s fiance only a week ago. It’d be—wrong of me to go after him, wouldn’t it?”

“I don’t have an answer for you,” Giyuu replies. “I think that’s up to you, and Nezuko, and Zenitsu.”

Before Tanjiro has a chance to reply, the door opens and Zenitsu’s voice calls, “Tanjiro! I’m home!” He drags out the last syllable of Tanjiro’s name, and the sound brings a smile to Tanjiro’s face in spite of his worries. Giyuu smiles softly, humming a quick note.

“I should go,” he says. “Thank you for the tea. It was good to see you, Tanjiro.”

“Of course!” Tanjiro says, straightening up to walk Giyuu to the door. Giyuu nods to Zenitsu as they pass, who waves. “You should visit Nezuko soon,” Tanjiro tells Giyuu. “I think she misses you.”

“I will try to stop by,” Giyuu promises. “Have a good day, Tanjiro, Zenitsu.” And then he’s gone, the door closing behind him and leaving Tanjiro alone with Zenitsu once again. Zenitsu has already put away all of the newly purchased food by the time Tanjiro wanders into the kitchen, and has moved on to cleaning up the abandoned tea.

“How was your day?” Tanjiro asks him.

Zenitsu smiles. “Good!” he replies. “A lady at the market complimented my hair and gave me this.” He produces a small hairpin from his pocket. It looks ornate, embellished with gold and shining paint. It’s made to look like a small flower, attached to a comb. Tanjiro thinks his mother used to have a pin like that, but she never wore it after his father died.

“That was nice of her,” Tanjiro replies. He looks up from the pin, and realizes that Zenitsu has somehow gotten a lot closer in the last few moments.

Zenitsu’s smile widens. “Yeah,” he murmurs. “Hey, Tanjiro?”

“Yeah?” Tanjiro asks.

“Will you do my hair for me later?” Zenitsu replies, and Tanjirou nearly chokes on his own breath.

“You—what?” he rasps.

Zenitsu’s eyebrows pinch together in worry, but still he says, “Nezuko once told me that you used to help all your siblings do their hair, I just figured you could find a way for me to use this.”

“Oh,” Tanjirou mumbles, willing his racing heart to slow. “Okay. Sure.”

Zenitsu brightens, throwing his arms around Tanjirou to pull him in for a tight hug. “Thanks! You’re the best, Tanjirou.”

Tanjirou’s face flushes hotter than anything he’s ever felt before. It feels a little like someone has lit his face on fire.

Gently, he wraps his good arm around Zenitsu’s waist, pulling him just a little closer. “Don’t mention it.”

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It’s dark outside when Zenitsu presents the hairpin to Tanjirou again, the room illuminated by the soft light of the burning candle’s wick. His face is painted in shades of gold, his hair a deeper orange than its normally yellow blond. Tanjirou takes the pin from him with a smile, gesturing for Zenitsu to sit down in front of him. Zenitsu does as told, humming a soft tune under his breath as his fingers tap out a beat against his knees that Tanjirou doesn’t recognize. Tanjirou begins to run his fingers through Zenitsu’s hair, smoothing out any tangles he comes across.

They sit quietly like that for a while, coexisting by the candlelight with Tanjirou’s hands in Zenitsu’s hair and the small of Zenitsu’s back resting against Tanjirou’s knees. It isn’t until Tanjirou is satisfied with the state of Zenitsu’s hair that he lowers his hands and breaks the silence. “What kind of style are you hoping for?”

Zenitsu shrugs, cutting off his song. “Doesn’t matter,” he chirps. “Whatever you feel is best.”

He picks up his song again, this time mumbling the lyrics softly. Tanjirou lets the gentle melody encompass him, relaxing any remaining nerves, before he lifts his hands to Zenitsu's hair again and begins to work.

He isn't really sure what he's doing when he first begins, just starts to separate his hair into sections and twist it all together accordingly. He experiments, modeling sloppy prototypes of styles he's never attempted before, then ultimately shaking his head and trying something new. It takes a while for him to decide what he wants to do, but the idea itself hits him like a wave and his hands are moving before he can stop them.

Zenitsu is patient throughout the entire affair, just singing that same song under his breath as Tanjirou works. The atmosphere in the room is calm, peaceful. It feels like nothing can touch them inside this warm bubble they've created, like nothing bad could ever invade the four walls of Tanjirou's home, like nothing could ever hurt either of them. It feels domestic, like Tanjirou could do this every night for the rest of his life and never tire of it. Even if Zenitsu never stopped singing that same little song over and over again for the rest of their days together, Tanjirou doesn't think he would ever want to stop hearing it.

It only occurs to Tanjirou about halfway through styling Zenitsu's hair that Zenitsu is singing a love song. It sounds like a ballad, if Tanjirou remembers the definition correctly, the softest, crooning melody Tanjirou has ever heard. He wonders where Zenitsu heard it, wonders if he's sang it for other people before or if his song is for Tanjirou alone.

When Tanjirou finishes, he reaches for the hairpin and slides it into Zenitsu's hair, an extra piece of support for the blond up-do he's given his friend. It looks a little like what Tamayo used to do with her hair, a little like what Tanjirou's mother used to do.

Tanjirou settles back on his heels, his hand poised midair. He doesn't want to stop, doesn't want this moment to end. He just wants to run his fingers through Zenitsu's hair one second longer, wants to hold him for one moment more. "There," he breathes. "Finished."

Zenitsu turns to offer him a smile, his hands creeping up to feel what Tanjirou has done with his hair. He picks up the hand mirror he'd purchased from the market earlier that day, citing that everybody needs a mirror even if Tanjirou only does one thing with his hair every day, and studies his reflection. Tanjirou watches with bated breath, waiting for approval, waiting for rejection.

"Thanks," Zenitsu whispers, as if he, too, doesn't want to disturb the silence of the moment, the beauty that comes with a quiet night. "It looks beautiful."

“You do,” Tanjirou murmurs. A pretty blush rises to Zenitsu’s cheeks, as he averts his eyes.

“*Tanjirou*,” he whines. “You can’t stuff like that; it’s embarrassing.”

Tanjirou huffs out a quiet laugh, a fond smile tugging at his features. “Sorry,” he says, meaning none of it.

Zenitsu glances at him, and his pouty expression melts into a grin of his own. And then they’re just gazing at each other, loving smiles on their faces and gentle light in their eyes. Tanjirou wants to reach out, wants to hold him, wants *him*.

“Tanjirou,” Zenitsu murmurs, his hands lifted and reaching out toward Tanjirou. Tanjirou lifts his own hand and takes one of Zenitsu’s, intertwining their fingers. Zenitsu places his other hand on top, so that he’s holding Tanjirou’s hand with both of his. “Tanjirou.”

Tanjirou can’t tear his eyes away from their interlocked hands. “Yeah?”

Zenitsu takes a shaking breath. “I’m in love with you.”

“Me, too,” Tanjirou replies. Zenitsu stares at him, wide-eyed, and Tanjirou slowly lifts his head to make eye contact. They hold each other’s gaze for a beat, before suddenly Zenitsu lurches forward and throws his arms around Tanjirou’s neck, pressing a kiss to his lips and sending the both of them toppling backward onto the floor. Tanjirou’s laughing into the kiss, lifting his hand to hold Zenitsu’s waist. Zenitsu’s laughing, too, and then he pulls away slightly to look at Tanjirou, leaning over him. His hair’s come loose from the up-do slightly, hanging around and framing his face. There’s so much love and affection in his eyes Tanjirou thinks he might melt.

“You love me,” Zenitsu murmurs, his voice sounding as though it’s bursting at the seams, so full of adoration.

“I do,” Tanjirou confirms. “You love me, too.”

Zenitsu laughs, soft and gentle. “I do.” His eyes crinkle at the corners. “We sound like we’re getting married.”

Tanjirou can only smile. He leans up and kisses Zenitsu again, brushing his fingertips across Zenitsu's cheekbone as he cups the side of the blond's face. Their kiss doesn't last very long before Zenitsu collapses on top of Tanjirou, holding him close and burying his nose in the crook of Tanjirou's neck.

"I don't ever want this moment to end," he mumbles.

Tanjirou wraps his arm around Zenitsu's waist, squeezing slightly and pulling him even closer. He can't fathom how anything else in the world can exist, how there can be anywhere else in the world he's supposed to be than right here, right now, holding Zenitsu in the middle of the night, the only light to guide them that of a dying candle. He'd do anything for this, he thinks. Anything to keep this boy, anything to keep this wonderful feeling in his chest, this soaring hope and sickening adoration that sends his heart careening out of his chest.

Anything to keep this love, this wonderful, amazing, all-encompassing love.

"I know," he says. *Maybe it doesn't have to*, he doesn't say, *if only you just never let me go*.

"I love you," Zenitsu murmurs.

"I know," Tanjirou says. "I love you, too."

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Zenitsu leaves the next morning, pressing a chaste kiss to Tanjirou's cheek, his nose, his lips, before he squeezes Tanjirou's hand and promises to return soon after he gathers some of his things from the home he used to share with Nezuko.

Tanjirou watches him until he's no longer visible, and even then he lingers in the doorway of his home, a dopey grin on his face and his heart feeling lighter than it has in years. That's how Nezuko finds him when she visits that morning, and she cracks a teasing grin.

"Is the dirt road that interesting that you have to sit and stare at it?" she quips. Tanjirou shakes himself out of his thoughts and pulls his sister in for a hug.

“How are you?” he asks, leading her into the house. She follows him willingly, as he sits down against a wall and she lays down beside him, her head resting in his lap.

“Good,” she replies. “I’m staying with Kanao. Kaburamaru is a sweet snake, you know.”

Tanjirou hums, beginning to run his hand through her hair. “That’s nice.”

“I think I’m in love with her,” Nezuko confesses. “Is that okay?”

Tanjirou smiles. “I’m in love with Zenitsu. Is that okay?”

They look at each other, their eyes meeting, and it only takes a second for the both of them to begin laughing.

“I’m glad you’re happy,” Nezuko says, once she’s calmed down. Tanjirou hums, and realizes that he’s humming Zenitsu’s love song. The observation sets his stomach alight with butterflies.

“I am,” he tells her. “I really, really am.” She smiles, and he smiles, and Tanjirou has never felt so *good* before. “Are you?”

“I am,” Nezuko replies. “Truly.”

Tanjirou combs his fingers through her hair. “And to think,” he muses. “All it took to get here was a failed engagement.”

Nezuko laughs, and Tanjirou feels lighter than a cloud.

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The cool night air on his face is grounding, as Tanjirou closes his eyes and breathes deep. The air in the meadow behind his home is crisper than it is elsewhere, all of the vegetation keeping it

fresh. The weeds and wildflowers brush up against his legs, tickling his shins, but Tanjirou can't bring himself to care.

It isn't until two arms snake around his waist and a chin settles on his shoulder that he opens his eyes, glancing down to see Zenitsu curled around him.

"Come back to bed," Zenitsu whines, half-asleep. "The bed's too cold without you."

Tanjirou glances up at the stars, and he swears they shine brighter nowadays. "Okay," he replies. "Let's go back to bed."

Zenitsu takes his hand, and leads Tanjirou back into the house, humming that same old love song under his breath. Tanjirou hopes it never ends.

End Notes

my second kny fic (:

feels good and write its dedicated to these boys, they were my og ship from kny

as always, feel free to come vibe w me on tumblr at @acedabi or @fake-charliebrown

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