

## Balloons

By GiGi

The fireworks lit the inkblot of sky over the park. It was exactly how Yayoi had hoped her day would end. Except for one little detail. It wasn't Miyabi's hand gently resting on top of hers.

The day had begun with a simple blue sky, warm little cotton balls breaking up the monotony. Perfect sky for the balloon festival. It was a simple thing for a date, but it was a fun one, and all day, too. The music, the food, the all-around lighthearted feel, and of course the massive, colorful field of balloons. Yayoi knew she stood out from most of the people who had come to see the balloons take flight, lighting up the sky as the sun set. She still didn't feel completely like herself in the morning when she looked in the mirror. But it was a small sacrifice, really, to have Miyabi glad to be with her. It was worth the little bit of compromise, she thought to herself, to feel as loved as she felt now, by someone as amazing as Miyabi, too. It was good to know that she was the reason he had that little smile on his face right now. It was amazing to know he wanted to kiss *her*, of all people. *Her!* It was like a dream sometimes. A little bit of discomfort and the reactions she had been earning recently were worth the dream.

Bands played in small stages, drawing crowds that came and went as the show ebbed and kept their interest, or lost it. It gave Yayoi plenty of opportunity to let Miyabi know how his own music blew theirs out of the water. At it wasn't cheesy or flattery or anything, because it was entirely sincere. No better sound could meet a person's ears than hearing pure music, and Miyabi could brilliantly create that.

As the sun started to set and the announcer began to list off all the balloonists and their collection of accolades, Miyabi, touched Yayoi's shoulder, lightly brushing his lips across her cheek. "Hey, you want some ice cream?"

Yayoi couldn't help but smile. Even if she didn't really want ice cream. It was from Miyabi, so it would be extra sweet, she thought with a silent giggle. "Sure," she said, returning with her own demure kiss.

Akito had been there most of the day, too. He'd been wandering around, having run into her and Miyabi a few times for his typical bursts of warming conversation. He'd come with a whole bunch of people that Yayoi recognized from here and there, probably frequenters of Orochi shows and the musical circle. And as Miyabi slipped away, Akito had wandered from his little group again, coming back to Yayoi. "Hey,

where'd Mi-chan go?" he asked, briefly glancing behind Yayoi for him. "Was he abducted?! Don't worry, Yayoi-chan, I won't let them get you, too!" Managing to keep a straight face as he posed to fight off the invisible abductors, inside he was smiling at earning a light laugh from the cute foreign girl. Even if she almost looked like a different person now, he knew she was still the same sweet, perky Yayoi-chan inside.

"He went for ice cream," Yayoi explained, then her smile grew. "Or it's the ice cream people that took him!" She feigned fear, gasping and covering her mouth with one hand, but unable to keep up the façade as long as Akito could, and suppressing her smile became impossible.

Akito's defensive posture relaxed into a playfully apathetic one. "Eh, once they realize their captive won't come quietly, he'll pop right back up here. Don't fret too much, my lady!"

"I'll try," Yayoi said, playing along. It was much easier to feel less shy around Akito. Almost like being around Miyabi-- her shyness didn't weigh down so much. It must be something in the personalities, she thought. *Even if they are nothing alike...* "You'll need to keep me strong, though! Who knows what evil ice cream vendors could do to him?" she added in a whisper, unable to completely hide her giggles.

The sound of her amusement made Akito smile. *See, even in your disguise for Miyabi, you're still bright and beautiful and happy! If Miyabi can't love that, then he's nuts.* "Hey, Yayoi-chan?" Why did his heart just collide with the inside wall of his chest?

"Yes, Akito-sama?" she replied breezily, smiling so prettily. How could she not see what Miyabi ignored about her?

"Uh, did you, uh, change your hair or something?" he said, a smile on his lips to save face, but Akito knew it was a silly observation. How else was he supposed to say, "I don't like how you're forgetting yourself just because it makes Miyabi look at you?" Instead, he asked about her hair.

Yayoi saw the lighthearted look on his face, but she had a feeling of what he was asking. She had asked herself the same thing lately. Her fingers brushed the fringe of the new dark lace skirt. That she had only bought so Miyabi would see her as more than that silly, frilly pink blossom of a girl. A slight flush reached her cheeks, and once again she felt shy. "Miyabi-sama likes this."

The comment cast a sad film over Akito's still smiling face. So it was true. She *was* forgetting herself for him. *But she's too pretty and sweet to forget herself! Miyabi, you're crazy to do that to this beautiful girl!* "But does he like this?" he started, pointing a la E.T. toward her heart, then assumed the nasal alien voice: "Right heeere."

Yayoi was now smiling sadly. He was still playing with her, but managed to hit the nail on the head too. They didn't talk very much, her and Miyabi... He just mostly gave her compliments on how she looked when they did talk. Which felt so nice, really, because no one had done that before, and it felt so good to be wanted... but Akito-sama's point was well-made. "I think it was here, actually," she replied quietly, gently nudging his extended hand from pointing to her heart and moving it to her head. Akito shifted appropriately, repeating the line, but Yayoi just felt sadder, the lead weight growing heavier in her stomach.

"Akito-sama..." Yayoi started, barely above a whisper. In the loudness of balloon starting fires in the night, bands jamming, emcees rambling, Akito had to lean in very close to hear. "He wouldn't even remember I existed if I didn't make him see me..."

"Then he's blind, because I couldn't miss you if I ever tried." Akito retorted easily, brushing away a little of her hair from her shoulder. "We can blame the ice cream men, if you want."

When the sun had completely set and the sky was filled with ink, Yayoi and Akito were sitting next to each other on the grass, looking up and watching the balloon's flame punctuate the darkness. Akito's hand gently covered hers, just as the first fireworks ignited, sprinkling the inky night with glimmers of red and gold. "It's beautiful," Yayoi declared.

"Good, then it's worthy of Yayoi-chan's presence!" Akito declared brightly. He didn't know what had happened to Miyabi-- he'd never come back. It would have been seriously scary if he saw them now, making *contact*. Normally it would feel too wrong to do that, to even think he had a chance with Miyabi's girl, but the thing was, she wasn't really his girl. His girl was who he made her to be in his head, not who Yayoi was. Plus, Yayoi knew that, too. He could see that. He could see she knew that it wasn't Yayoi that Miyabi liked. *You're worth more than that, Yayoi-chan.*

Yayoi, however, knew where Miyabi was. She had sent him a dizzying text, saying that she didn't feel well at all suddenly. Akito had been with her and insisted he drop her off at home *then and there*. She was going to take a nap; it must have been the heat. Now her phone was off. It was a small, grating pea of guilt in the pit of her stomach that churned at the thought of lying to Miyabi. But he'd kind of been lying to her, too. Making her think he liked her, when he only really liked her mask. That wasn't love. That wasn't even liking.

Love was seeing someone caught in a lie, and helping them out of it.

And that's what Akito had done for her.

Granted, it wasn't "the ultimate love to end all loves, leading to the alter" kind of thing. Goodness, she wasn't that girly... But it still showed he really cared for her. Loved her as a person, not as a mythological idea that Miyabi had made of her. Akito wouldn't care if she wore what she felt pretty in. He liked how she was, how she really was. He'd told her. No one had told her that before. And it was wonderful. It was perfection to know she was wanted for who she was, that someone sweet and good recognized and liked and enjoyed her in her simplest, realest form. Even if that someone wasn't Miyabi. And maybe if it was Akito.