Rating: Explicit
Archive Warning: Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Major Character Death, Rape/Non-Con, Underage
Category: F/M, M/M, Multi
Fandom: Jrock, D-OUT (Band), コドモドラゴン | Codomo Dragon, Royz, 己龍 | Kiryuu, Koda Kumi (Musician), BUCK-TICK
Relationship: Kouki (D-OUT)/Kana (Codomo Dragon), Mitsuki/Mahiro (Kiryu), Tomoya/Koudai (Royz), Koda Kumi/Junji (Kiryu), Yoshiki (X Japan)/Naoto (exist trace), Sugizou/Arimura Ryuutarou (Plastic Tree)
Character: Kouki (D-OUT), Kana (Codomo Dragon), Koda Kumi, Junji (己龍 | Kiryuu), Mitsuki (己龍 | Kiryuu), Mahiro (己龍 | Kiryuu), Tomoya (Royz), Koudai (Royz), Hikaru (D-OUT), Minase (D-OUT), Higuchi Yutaka (BUCK-TICK), Yagami Toll (BUCK-TICK), Chamu (Codomo Dragon), Hiyori (己龍 | Kiryuu), Satsuki (Rentrer en Soi), Original Female Character(s), Original Male Character(s), Satou Atsushi | EXILE
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Masun
by Selah

Summary

Kana's already having a hard time finding peace - with himself, with his place, with Kouki - and now the world seems bent on ruining even more of his plans. More than anything, he wishes he could just wind back the clock, go back to before the explosion. The nightmares of his past are refusing to stay buried and Kouki is anxious to do anything he can to help his soulmate heal.
I'm back a week early because reasons. :3 Mostly related to me being increasingly evil as this fic progresses. I've done horrible, horrible things to Kana. But for now, we get to meet more of Kouki's social circle, including one very blunt female alpha~ And mentions of even more characters to appear later~

The ominous last words of Kouki's grandfather wouldn't leave his thoughts, though he did his best to try to push them aside for the sake of his soulmate. He knew too well what the old man had meant: Kana was unacceptable and would be replaced by someone the alpha patriarch did approve. Some omega woman closer to Kouki's age, perhaps? No, at mid-thirties, she would be too old to give him a good family. So a trophy wife, then. Some pretty young thing in her early twenties, beautiful like Kana could never be and young enough to give Kouki as many kids as he could possibly want.

And Kana's place in this alternate future? Well Kana didn't matter, did he? Just because he was Kouki's soulmate, well, he was still just a nobody omega, a teenager at that, from a family with no power or value. As they used to say, a solution would be found. Kana would be disposed of, one way or another. If he was very lucky, he might get a little bit of money out of it, but probably not enough to take care of him for very long. Meaning he would be stuck trying to find work as an unmated omega with no prospects. It was humiliating to even think about it, but his mind wouldn't stop, obsessing over it like his tongue used to do with a loose tooth when he was just a kid.

"Kacchan, enough," Kouki murmured suddenly, strong arms and the scent of his alpha wrapping around him, pulling him in close. "You're scaring yourself to no purpose. You are my mate, no one else."

"But...."

"He can't make me take another as my mate, Kana. Even if he tried, I would refuse him first."

But they were just words and Kana knew full well how easy it was to say the right things, how much harder it was to actually do them. Kouki could say he would take the principled stand, and maybe he even would, at first. But in the end, if his grandfather was a devious enough bastard - and Kana had every reason to believe he was - Kouki would be as helpless to his alpha instincts as any other alpha male. A receptive omega pushed at Kouki at the right moment and it would all be over, all his promises made meaningless in an instant. Kana couldn't allow himself to build a future on such an unsteady foundation, not again.

A low droning caught his attention, building from somewhere outside the apartment. Kana didn't understand why he felt drawn out onto the terrace until he was actually standing beside the covered pools. Bells. Bells from he couldn't even begin to guess how many Buddhist temples, ringing out the old year ahead of the new. More temple bells than he had ever heard back home in Fukui.

"So many," he mumbled, grateful for the heavy blanket his soulmate draped over his shoulders. "How many temples are there around here?"
“I haven’t done a formal count of them or anything, but from what I remember, there’s about half a dozen within walking distance of here, in all different directions, covering most if not all of the major Buddhist sects,” Kouki said, smiling softly. “Plus a Catholic church, though they won't ring their bells until later. And a double handful of Shinto shrines of various sizes, though I think at least half of them are so small they don't even have a staff on site. We should have no trouble visiting three tomorrow, as long as you're feeling up for it.”

Kana only offered a soft, noncommittal noise, not wanting to think about tomorrow just yet. Instead he focused on listening to the steady tolling of the temple bells. Deep, sonorous droning that blended together into one single purifying, sacred tone. Closing his eyes, he leaned back against his alpha and let the sound wash over him. Perhaps the bells could chase away his fears and doubts.

By the time midnight hit, he was freezing to the bone but he also felt ... something else. The last ringing of the temple bells had been so firm in their salute to the year just being born, as if with one voice they could command the coming year to be prosperous. Perhaps they could.

And then a bright, hopeful peeling of chimes reached out across the city. Had to be the Catholic church Kouki had mentioned. This was nothing like the soulful temple bells with their low authority. These were much higher in pitch, more cheerful and celebratory. Somewhere else, the city perhaps or else one of the larger shrines was setting off fireworks. He tried to turn towards them, but the bulk of the building stood between them and the fireworks and Kana could only see a few stray strands and bright lights.

“Come inside, love,” Kouki said softly, gently drawing him back into the penthouse. “Soba and then bed for you, I think, yes?”

“Only if you’re coming with me,” he mumbled stubbornly.

“I won't leave your side, Kana, I promise,” Kouki said with a smile. Pretty words from a pretty face. Kana wanted to believe that this new year would be better. He was starting the year in the arms of the man he loved most, that had to count for something, right? They said what you did at midnight and who you were with would set the tone for your whole year. He prayed that his year ahead would be filled with the comfort of his soulmate ... and not the worry and fear that still haunted him. He wasn't going to hold his breath.

~*~*~

Kouki wasn't terribly surprised when Kana woke the next morning with the sniffles. They had spent entirely too much of the evening standing on his terrace listening to the bells and trying to catch glimpses of fireworks, he should have put a stop to it sooner. Or at least made sure his omega had been properly protected from the weather. It was an old wives’ tale that one could catch a cold simply from standing out in the elements long enough, but the folk belief had its root in observable truth. And with Kana's system still weak from the explosion and surgery....

“It's all right, I'm sure the gods will be understanding if we only visit one shrine today,” Minase said, filling their plates with mixed berry pancakes and bacon. Kouki could tell his soulmate didn't even want to do that much, but tradition could be a hard thing to ignore.

“There's one just three streets over, it probably won't even have that many visitors since it's not dedicated to one of the major kami. We're so close to the Otsuka stations here, most of my neighbors go to one of the major shrines elsewhere for New Years.”

“He knows because normally we do the same,” Minase said with a conspiratorial grin in Kana's
direction. The omega's responding smile didn't reach past the surface, though it would have been enough to fool most betas. Kouki shared a brief look with Minase, then made a mental note to talk to Mitsuki when he saw him next. Kana wasn't scheduled to meet with the surgeon again for another three weeks, but he couldn't help worrying that things weren't going well.

The walk to the shrine wasn't so bad, but he could tell Kana was having a hard time putting one foot in front of the other by the time they got back to his building. He was so focused on his own worries and his faltering omega that he didn't even notice Hikaru's scent until Minase was greeting him.

“Hikaru-kun? What brings you here?” the beta asked and Kouki felt a thread of relief at the way Kana's scent shifted, hints of genuine surprise and pleasure at seeing the omega barista again.

“They said I had to wait down here for you,” the omega said with a huff, gesturing back towards the betas at the front desk. “Anyway, happy new year, guys! Aww, Kana-kun, you look like an Eskimo! Does this mean we should rub noses to say hi~?”

“Dork,” Kana mumbled, hugging his friend tightly. “But really, what are you doing here?”

“Oh, well, Mom was worried you'd feel lonely, now that all your family is back in Fukui and you're stuck alone with this guy,” Hikaru said, jerking a thumb in Kouki's direction. “Didn't know there'd be other company, though.”

“Won't you miss being with your own family?” Kana persisted, frowning even as he shifted to lean back against Kouki again. Without even thinking about it, Kouki settled his arms around his slender omega.

“My dad's got six older brothers and sisters and he's the only one in the family to only have two kids. Trust me, I am completely okay with getting out of that madness for the day,” Hikaru said, wrinkling his nose and then laughing. “Unless you really don't want my mom's cooking?” he added with a very obviously fake frown, holding up a multi-tiered family bento box.

“Your mother's an angel,” Kouki said, at last giving in and gently urging the two omegas towards the elevator. “Do be sure to thank her for us when you go home again.”

“I dunno, what if I said I was never going home again~? I'll bet Kana-kun wouldn't mind sharing you with me~” Hikaru teased. Kouki wasn't going to fall into that trap, especially not when he could feel his soulmate's upset building up again. Damn that man, he could kill his grandfather for spoiling what little progress he'd thought he'd made with his omega. And for what? A petty need to get in the last word? Well, his grandfather could say whatever he liked, but Kouki knew what was important to him. He would do whatever was necessary to keep Kana safe and by his side.

“I've missed something,” Hikaru said softly, frowning at them.

“My grandfather sprang a surprise visit on us yesterday. While I was out,” Kouki said, tucking his arms back around Kana as they rode the elevator up to the penthouse. “He's ... very much an old traditionalist alpha patriarch.”

Hikaru's eyes widened at the implications and then he was hugging Kana tight, too.

“Let me guess, old fart says our Kana-kun isn't good enough for you because he's not from old money? Or worse, because he's not a female? Well fuck that noise. And if you're harboring any silly notions of someone making your alpha ignore the soulmate bond between the two of you, you can just forget it, Kacchan,” the omega scolded softly. Kana wasn't arguing, but Kouki couldn't
completely ignore the sour undertones in his soulmate's scent. Seeds of doubt his grandfather had planted. Kouki was torn between his promise not to mate Kana until he was twenty and the need to reassure his precious soulmate that nothing was going to come between them, not even his grandfather's plans. The knowledge that Kana wasn't well enough to go through a mating was the one thing holding him back. Instead he forced his alpha instincts to settle for carrying Kana into the apartment, settling him on the couch while Minase made fresh tea and Hikaru started unpacking the bento from his mother.

“If I have to say it a thousand times, I will, Kana love. I love you, no one else. No matter what he says or does, my grandfather isn't going to change my mind.”

The continuing silence from his soulmate said more than words. Swallowing down an irritated sigh, Kouki forced himself away from the entire subject. They had all day together as a small family. Tomorrow more of his friends would be dropping by the penthouse to wish him well, in keeping with traditions and in deference to Kana's ill health. Maybe then, after a whole day of being introduced as his soulmate, the young omega would be over this bit of brooding? He could hope so, anyway.

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Kana was just finishing his breakfast when someone arrived, surprised to see Junji on the arm of a beautiful woman. All right, physically she was on his arm, but even though Junji was a few centimeters taller, there was no mistaking that she was an alpha. Even in a baggy sweatshirt and shaggy jeans, she radiated a power that went beyond just her alpha scent. A scent that perfectly melded with and complemented Junji's own omega scent in a way that Kana found himself wondering how he could have thought Tomoya was Junji's alpha, how he hadn't noticed the missing notes sooner.

“Kacchan! Happy new year, sweetheart! Well, at least we didn't catch you still asleep,” Junji teased as he enveloped him in a warm hug. “I tried to tell her we were coming awfully early.”

“It's fine,” he mumbled, feeling embarrassed to be seen in his own grungy jeans and t-shirt, though it was no more casual than what Junji's unexpected companion was wearing. No, not companion, alpha wife, he reminded himself. That was going to take some mental adjusting on his part, definitely.

“Kacchan, allow me to introduce Junji-kun's mate, Koda Kumiko. Kumi-chan, this is my soulmate, Kobayashi Kana.”

“It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Kana-kun. Junji-san's told me so much about you,” the alpha woman said, flashing him a brilliant smile before pulling him in for a warm hug. Even though it was just a brief one, it left Kana feeling weird in his own skin. Worse, he had no idea why, a flush rushing into his cheeks.

“Oof, yup, you're definitely Kou-kun's omega,” the woman said, a teasing smile curving full lips. “It's all right, sweetheart, I promise not to do that again until after he's properly mated you~”

“Kumi!” Junji said, playfully swatting his wife. “You can't just say things like that!”

“Why not, it's just the four of here, isn't it?” she protested, a frown flickering across her face.

“Five, actually,” Minase said, stepping out of the kitchen with a tea service and nodding towards the couch. “How quickly you forget all about me, Koda-san. Shall we?”
“Okay, fine, five of us. Still, a soulmate bond that strong? It's not like Kana-kun has no idea, right?” she insisted. “So, Kana-kun, you're from Fukui, right? What do you think of Tokyo?”

“I think I haven't really gotten to see much of it,” Kana confessed, eyes dropping to his socks. Shark socks. Oh gods, she was going to think he was such a juvenile, could this meeting get any worse? And what the hell had possessed him to put on shark socks on a day when of course Kouki's friends were going to be coming to visit him? What was wrong with his brain?

“Honestly, Kouki-kun, you can't just keep him locked up in this golden tower of yours, no matter how precious he is, you greedy ass!” Kumiko protested. Kana could feel himself turning even redder, but the door chimed again before he could think of a response.

“Oi, I am still your boss, Kumi-chan, try to behave like it!” Kouki said, squeezing Kana's shoulder. “And since you two are already here, I'm guessing that's Tomoyan and Kou-chan. Now stop being so rude to Minase-kun and go sit.”

Kana wanted to go hide in the bedroom instead, but Junji caught his arm before he could do more than think about it, tugging him over to the couch. It felt a little strange to sit beside the older omega, to have his arm around him so protectively instead of Kouki's, but at least Junji was familiar. Unlike the alpha who was curling up in the flanking chair beside them.

“It's not Kou-kun's fault, you know. That Kacchan hasn't seen the city, I mean,” Junji said, murmuring thanks to Minase for the cup of tea he was given. “He was caught up in that mall bombing right before Christmas, that's why Minase-kun and Kou-kun got me involved in the first place.”

“Oh yes, of course, maa, look at me forgetting important things again. Oh, that was the Saturday before Christmas, wasn't it? Well no wonder, the hospital probably only just let you out this past weekend, right?”

“They, uh, discharged me on Christmas Day, actually,” Kana stammered, feeling her intense gaze on him. He started to rub an uneasy hand over his stomach, only to have Minase catch him and push a cup of tea into his hands instead with a soft warning noise. Stifling a sigh, he thanked him for the tea, sipping the warm liquid before he continued: “I haven't really seen much beyond the apartment. It's hard when just getting up and going to the bathroom is enough to leave me exhausted.”

“Mou, no wonder your instincts are so close to the surface right now then,” she said with a small nod, offering her own thanks to Minase. “And his, too, I'm sure. Now I'm wondering if Sacchan is even going to be allowed to come over,” Kumiko added, an almost dangerous light in her grin.

“He's an unmated alpha friend of Kou-kun's,” Junji explained in a soft undertone, or at least Kana assumed that was his intention. It didn't really explain anything to him, though. Kouki hadn't shown any reluctance to take Kana places before now, in fact he kept trying to talk Kana into going out more than he was, so if encounters with unmated alphas were supposed to be a problem now, well.... It just didn't make sense to him.

“Hey, happy new years everybody!” Tomoya's cheerful voice called out as he brought a beautiful red-headed omega around the couch to join them. “Kacchan, this is my mate, Koudai, program manager at Gallery ZERO, over in Ginza. Kou, this is Kouki-kun's soulmate, Kana.”

Kana couldn't help another surge of shame and guilt, seeing the way this omega made a plain black hoodie and dark jeans somehow look elegant. Koudai smiled politely, waiting until Tomoya had settled into one of the other overstuffed chairs before helping himself to the brunet's lap. They
were so completely cozy together, two pieces of a puzzle, perfectly matched while being quite
distinct from each other. Koudai’s artistic roots were clear in the fashionably distressed jeans, the
candy apple red hair tucked under a knit black beanie, the flashes of silver and black from jewelry
and nails. Tomoya, on the other hand, was a bit more conservative lawyer type, though casually
dressed in slacks and a button-down with blazer, no tie. And a tiny silver nose stud that had to have
a story behind it, since Kana had never noticed it before.

“We didn't get here too early, did we?” Tomoya asked with a slight frown. “You don't look so
good.”

“No, it's fine,” he mumbled, ducking his head. “I didn't sleep that well last night, that's all. I'll be
fine.”

“So stubborn,” and Kana twitched a little, though it was amusement, not approbation, he was
picking up from his soulmate.

“Well, he'd kind of have to be, to be your soulmate, Kou-kun,” Junji teased, earning a round of
chuckles from the rest of Kouki’s friends. Kana shifted uncomfortably, unhappily aware that he
was now the center of everyone's attention. And then Kouki coaxed him into leaning against him
instead of Junji and it almost helped.

“Relax, love,” Kouki murmured against the back of his ear. “No one's judging you, just be
yourself.”

Maybe, maybe not, but Kana couldn't remember ever being around this many adult alphas. Or, for
that matter, being in a room with only one beta in it. Or being one of three male omegas in a group.
A vague sense of unease crept through him as he tried to remember the proper protocols for such a
mixed group. There were rules, he was sure of it, ways an unmated omega his age was expected to
behave around a bunch of alphas, and yet his mind was a blank. What was everyone expecting
from him? Kouki said no one was judging him, but he couldn't help feeling like he was failing at
basic etiquette. Yet how was he supposed to know better when he was obviously just a sick kid
from a small town who didn't know much of anything about anything, even his own kind?

“You, young man,” Junji said, reaching over to lightly pat his knee, “still owe me a phone
number.”

“Aa, I know, sorry,” he mumbled, feeling himself going bright red again. “I need to go back to
Fukui to get my parents to replace the one I lost, since it was on their joint plan.”

“If they need a police report for the insurance, I still have copies in your file at the office,” Junji
said conversationally. “I can fax it to them, no problem. Once they file the insurance claim, they
can just ship your new handset here, since you aren't going to be cleared to travel back to Fukui for
a couple months yet.”

“I ... I won't?”

“Abdominal trauma, wasn't it?” Koudai asked and Kana managed a shy nod. “Then yeah, no. When
I had my surgery, I wasn't even allowed to walk more than three or four streets for about a month
and a half afterwards. Sitting upright in a car or train for more than an hour wasn't even an option
for ... well, it felt like forever at the time, but a couple of months, anyway. I think it was most of a
year before I was allowed back to work full time.”

Kana desperately wanted to ask Koudai what sort of surgery he'd had, but he couldn't be that rude
to a man he had only just met. He wasn't sure how well his parents were going to take the news
that he couldn't come home for so many months. And to be completely honest, a part of him wasn't all that eager to deal with it anyway. He wasn't sure how he was going to afford an all new phone for himself, especially when he didn't want to be completely reliant on Kouki. Not when he knew that his soulmate's support could (and at some point, would) be stripped from him at any time.

“Kou-kun....”

“Don't start on me again, Kumiko,” Kouki said in a low warning rumble. “You don't know the whole story.”

“Well then, why don't you enlighten me,” she countered, setting down her cup a little too loudly. “I'm bonded, not scent-blind!”

Shit. His scent. Hikaru had warned him before, told him he could pick up his anxiety like opening a book, he should have listened then, tried to be more aware, more careful. But Kana just wasn't used to thinking about what his scent was communicating to others, since most of the people he saw every day - well, before coming to Tokyo, anyway - were betas who wouldn't know the difference between fear scent and joy scent if you shoved their faces in buckets of them. He didn't even know if there was a way for him to control it, let alone how. And now his unthinking scent reactions were threatening to ruin a perfectly civil conversation. Maybe Kouki's grandfather was right, if all he could do was make trouble for his soulmate, maybe he didn't belong here.

“Kumi-chan....”

“Don't Kumi-chan me, Junji. And don't tell me you aren't feeling it, too!”

“He's a teenaged omega from a city with less than ten percent non-betas. He's been blow up, traumatized, hospitalized, and gotten into at least two serious rows with his parents in as many weeks,” Junji said pragmatically. “You think you wouldn't be scared, too, finding yourself alone in a room full of strangers twice your age, hearing you won't be able to go home for months? Won't be able to see your old friends or family for you don't even know how long? Hearing confirmation that you won't be able to sit the college entrance exams, that your whole life plan, such as it was, is going to have to be pushed back a year, maybe two, because some faceless asshole you will likely never see or have a name for decided to bomb a mall while you were trying to have a good time with a new friend? And you think you getting all pissy with his alpha is going to help him?”

“Junji! Now you -.”

“No, he's right,” Koudai said, pulling himself up from Tomoya's lap to glower across the room at Kumiko. “You haven't known Kouki-kun as long as the rest of us, but trust me, this? What you're scenting from Kana-kun? That's deeper wounds than a week or two. And you trying to pick a fight with Kouki over it in the name of protective alpha instincts is utter bullshit. And exactly the sort of thing he doesn't need!”

Kana felt like the deer caught in the proverbial headlights, unable to move, barely even able to breathe for all the accusations and defenses flying around and over his head. And then the door buzzer interrupted and Kana wasn't sure if he had actually been saved from worse or not. But for once he didn't mind being nudged towards the door. He just hoped more of Kouki's friends would turn out to be betas.

~*~*~
Kana kept trying to convince himself that he was okay, but it wasn't going well. When Sakai-sensei had come over with his partner, Kurosaki-san, he told himself he was okay with it. After all, like with Minase, the surgeon and Kouki had been friends for practically Kana's whole life. It meant a lunch with more people around than Kana was used to, but he made himself be okay with it.

He had been halfway hoping that after lunch everyone would just go home. Instead, more people kept arriving. He didn't mind Hiyori so much, but others kept coming. Kouki's lounge was now host to a couple dozen people, about equal numbers of alphas and betas, with a few omegas as well. Every time someone new had arrived, Kouki had introduced Kana as his soulmate and while it had given fuel to a little ember of hope in his chest, it had also felt ... strange. Names and faces swirled together in Kana's head until he couldn't remember who was whom anymore. No one was being obvious about it, but he still felt like something was being expected of him, something he should have been doing but wasn't.

"Come on," a soft voice said close to his ear, arms sliding under his to help push him up to his feet. "You look like you've had enough."

Kana glanced over his shoulder, frowning a little when he realized it was Koudai urging him upright. The older omega smiled beautifully and Kana felt even more awkward. Why would Koudai even care about him at all? And what did he mean, saying that Kana looked like he'd had enough? Enough of what?

Still confused, he let himself be nudged towards the hall, surprised when, as they got to it, Koudai turned back towards the room full of guests. The redhead pulled off his beanie, surveying the room a moment before tossing it across the room. Kana's eyes widened as he watched Tomoya snatch it out of the air almost without looking up. The alpha frowned at it briefly, then glanced over at them. The pair seemed to be communicating on some silent level for a moment, then Tomoya nodded, folding the beanie in half and tucking it into an inside pocket of his blazer before turning back to his conversation with someone Kana couldn't name.

"Tomoyan will let Kou-kun know in a minute, come on," the omega urged, all but tugging Kana away from the party. And for once, he didn't mind at all, though he was surprised when Koudai escorted him into the master bathroom.

"S-senpai," he stammered, not at all sure what the other omega was planning.

"Oh no, no, Koudai is fine. Or aniki, if you're going to insist," the beautiful omega said with another gentle smile. "Junji-kun is making tea and you are going to have a nice, relaxing bath."

"But my stitches...."

"Mahi-nii's got it covered. Hmm, let's see what Kou-kun has on hand," the redhead said as he started poking through cupboards. Not sure what to do with himself, Kana sat down on the shower bench and closed his eyes. He had to admit, being away from all those people was making him feel a little better. Like he could actually breathe freely.

"Oh good, you haven't started anything yet," another voice said. Even more than Koudai, Kurosaki Mahiro was the picture of a perfectly proper male omega, beautiful and delicate. Purple highlights in short black hair framed a flawless face and while the silver lip ring was a little unconventional, it suited him. He was short and slight, with a fine bone structure that would be the envy of many high fashion models, even though he himself was far too short for such work. One would never guess to look at him that he had ever been pregnant - there was none of the soft roundness Kana had been taught to expect to see in omegas who'd had children. The elegant kimono he was wearing further accent his beauty, winter blossoms cascading over silk that shifted from pale lavender to
a deep plum at the hem. And the way Kurosaki moved so easily in it ... Kana would never be that refined and graceful.

“Find everything okay then?” Koudai asked, his own long fingers twisting together and pinning up long red strands.

“They didn't have the brand you mentioned in stock, so I asked for help,” Kurosaki said, digging through his bag as he spoke. “Of course he wanted to know why I needed waterproof bandages, so I explained - very generally, mind you! - and long story short I have everything we could need for a therapeutic bath and Takamizawa-sensei says he hopes you're feeling better, Kana-kun.”

“Takamizawa-sensei?” Kana echoed, trying - and failing - to put a face to the name.

“Don't you remember him? He remembers you,” Kurosaki said, producing a whole bag full of spa items. “Older alpha pharmacist, dyes his hair ginger? Such a sweet old man, gentle but sharp as a knife and always ready with a kind word and a smile. I don't know what we're going to do if he ever retires!”

“Don't you mean when?” Koudai asked, chuckling.

“Nope. I'm in denial of his mortality. He's far too much like an angel sent from heaven!” the older omega replied, laughing easily. Kana still couldn't put a face to the man the two were discussing, though he couldn't shake the feeling that he ought to be able to remember him. Something tickled at his memory ... hadn't Hikaru said something about taking him by the good pharmacy that first day? They'd never made it, but maybe this Takamizawa was the pharmacist Hikaru had meant? Which didn't answer the question of how he could possibly know him, but....

While he had been talking, Kurosaki had tied back his kimono sleeves - and Kana was honestly impressed with how quickly the omega had done it, certain he would have still been fumbling with the cord the older man had used - and was now giving Kana a very expectant look.

“... what?”

“You were listening enough to hear me say Takamizawa-sensei,” Kurosaki said with the start of a small frown. “Surely you don't mean to take a bath still dressed?”

“But the doctor said....”

“All kinds of things, like Sensei usually does, I'm sure,” the darker haired omega said with a light laugh. “He has to say those things, hospital policy, and if you were on your own, it would be different, but with me and Hachi-Kou here, you'll be fine. Besides, he and Takamizawa-sensei agreed that a therapeutic bath will do wonders for you right now.”

“You can keep arguing with Maru if you like, Kacchan, but there really isn't much point,” Junji added, moving to set a tray with a tea service for four on the counter across from the tub. “I've found it's generally just easier to let him have his way.”

“He says as if he isn't just as stubborn when he puts his mind to things,” Koudai stage whispered, grinning again. “I think we're all a bit stubborn, ne?”

“Have to be, to put up with a world dominated by alphas who always think they know better than everyone else!” Junji said with a light laugh. “Ah, but Kacchan's never been to an omegas-only bath, right?”

“N-no,” he stammered, blushing for some reason. “I ... I haven't even been to an onsen before.”
“What? Never?” Kurosaki asked, clearly surprised by this confession. “Oh you poor thing. Right, well, as I'm sure you've noticed, Kouki-san's bath is big enough to fit three of you easily, so Hachi and Juju will be sharing with you and making sure that, if you do pass out or whatever, you don't hurt yourself.”

“W-with me?” he stammered, feeling heat rushing into his cheeks again.

“Relax,” Koudai said, offering him a small smile. “It's just a bath. I'll bet you haven't shared one since you were a kid, right? But that's actually kind of abnormal, especially in alpha/omega families.”

“It's not normal for pure beta families, either, but somehow that gets lost when betas find themselves with a surprise baby,” Kurosaki added, rolling his eyes. “Like they forget the beta gene's dominant, so of course it's totally possible for two betas to have an alpha or omega kid. Or even a run of them. Maybe it's statistically odd, but still....”

There was ... something, a feeling like he should remember something. And then it was gone. He wasn't really sure he was comfortable with this idea, but the three older omegas were all giving him such expectant looks now.... It didn't help that he had never been particularly happy with the way his body looked. As a male omega, once he had started having heats, the school nurse had pulled him aside from the other boys for his annual exam. The girls were separated in a similar way - alphas from betas and omegas - but since there had never been more than two or three male omegas in the whole school.... The school nurse had always said his exam results were satisfactory, that softness was expected of omegas, but it hadn't helped Kana's self-image. Gym classes had been even worse and Kana had quickly come to loathe them, frequently making excuses or just outright skipping them.

“Would it help if the other two turned around?” Koudai asked and somehow that made Kana blush even harder. Which didn't stop him from nodding at the suggestion. “All right. Do you need help with that sweater?”

Hot tears trickled down his cheeks, catching him by surprise, and Kana felt completely stupid for it.

“Oh sweetheart,” Koudai cooed, pulling him into a warm, gentle hug. “It's all right, you're safe here, if you need to have a good cry, then you do that, okay? No one's going to judge you.”

Even with that permission, he wanted to just lock all the pain and hurt away and not feel it anymore. Instead he felt his whole body shaking with gut-deep sobs as he clung to the redhead omega. Someone was stroking his hair, someone other than Koudai was singing softly, and at some point there was a scratching at the door. But while there was a brief waft of alpha-but-not-Kouki scent, no one else came into the room with them. And then someone was lighting candles, diffusing the scents of lavender, jasmine, and cedar wood into the air. It was the last straw, his control melting away entirely as he gave in to the pain.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I'm horrible, and yes, Takamizawa-sensei is The ALFEE's Takamiy. Because he's adorable and how could I not??
Chapter Notes

WARNING: this chapter includes a scene in which a severely underaged Kana is raped and while it's not very explicit, it is still obviously rape.

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HachiKouD is one of the real's nicknames. With both Koudai and Kouki in the same social circle, it seemed appropriate to use it to help keep track of who is whom.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Koudai frowned a little when he felt Kana go limp in his arms. A quick peek confirmed that the teenager had indeed cried himself to sleep, which was not what he had been expecting. At all. He didn't think it would last very long - or at least he hoped it wouldn't - but for the moment he wasn't quite sure what to do next.

“Bath mat?” Mahiro suggested, gesturing towards the oversized fluffy rug. “At least until we know for sure if he's going to stay asleep or not? Better than that bench.”

A nod and Koudai carefully shifted the teen onto the rug, tucking the offered pillow under his head before settling back on his heels in seiza beside him. Hands on his thighs, he frowned up at Junji.

“I know lawyer-client privilege is a thing, but what the hell, Junji-kun?”

“I honestly don't know. His father said he'd been in a car wreck three years ago that had resulted in the death of his older brother and the alpha he had been expecting to mate with since childhood, but I'm starting to think there's more we weren't told,” the lawyer said with a sharp frown. “Kobayashi-tousan had called it idol worship and puppy love, insisted Kana had gotten over the trauma years ago, but that....”

“Idiot,” Mahiro snorted, crossing his arms over his chest. “No one just 'gets over' the death of someone they love. Especially not family. Three years ago ... he couldn't have been the one driving, that had to have been either his brother or the alpha, so it can't be that he feels like he caused the accident ... can it?”

“There wasn't any guilt in him that I could pick up,” Koudai said, shaking his head. “And with the way he was clinging, if there had been even a hint of it, I would have. That was pure pain, grief and trauma. How bad was he hurt in the bombing?”

“Bad enough,” Junji said, sighing softly. “I can't tell you details without his consent. And after what he's been through, especially with his parents, I won't do that to him. He needs to feel like he has control, even if I think he'd let me tell you anyway. Fukui is nothing like Hamamatsu or Tokyo, he's never seen himself as a fully individualized, autonomous person, capable of pursuing his own interests. He grew up seeing himself purely as Atsushi's future mate, nothing more, and when that was taken away from him.... I'm starting to think he had some sort of psychological break back then that his parents weren't around to see happening, just the aftermath. It would explain ... a lot, really.”
“Taught to see himself as or actually was?” Mahiro asked sharply. When he only got confused frowns from his friends, the omega huffed and swiftly removed Kana’s shirt, pausing to frown at the scars of shrapnel wounds. Koudai sucked in a sharp breath at this visible evidence of how close the young omega had come to being paralyzed, his own fingers lightly brushing over the dressings on the deeper abdominal wounds. Only a moment and then Mahiro was rolling Kana over, pushing aside his hair. Koudai felt his breath catch in his throat, a sharp denial trying to bubble to the surface. He could taste that same disbelief in the air as shaking fingers traced the nearly vanished bite mark.

“That's a lot more than three years old,” Junji muttered. “Maru, how the hell did you...???”

“It's in his scent. An omega's scent changes after he's been bred once,” Mahiro muttered, a familiar darkness to his tone. “I hope that asshole suffered....”

“Killed instantly,” Junji said, shaking his head.

“Then I hope his soul is twisting in unimaginable torment for the next hundred eons, forcing a mating on some kid who didn't know jack shit about fuck all,” the omega growled, easing Kana back onto his back. “Kana can't have been more than fourteen when that bite happened, if he was even that old. If he hadn't met Kou-kun when he did ... that scar'll be gone completely in another year at most. How the fucking hell does his father not know? Or are his parents in on it??”

“His parents are betas, you know how betas get about ignoring what's right in front of their damn faces,” Junji said with a frustrated huff.

“No excuse,” Mahiro growled as he started pacing the bathroom. Kana whimpered as the candles failed to clear out the anger, agitation, and frustration Mahiro was pumping into the air.

“It's over now, Maru,” Koudai started, only to get interrupted by his upset friend.

“Over?! He was raped who knows how many times! That's a trauma that doesn't just end so easily!”

“You're going to wake him,” Koudai said, struggling to keep his own tone and scent calm, for Kana's sake. “He's away from those who victimized him, you know Kouki-san will do everything he can to help him heal. He's with us now. Railing against the ghosts of his past won't do any good.”

A sharp huff and Mahiro sank to the floor on Kana's other side, arms crossed over his chest as he spoke: “Fine. But we need to tell Kou-san about this. He needs to know, if he doesn't already.”

“It can wait until everyone else has gone home. He'd only get angry and agitated like you did just now, we don't need that happening in front of all those people,” Koudai replied quietly. “Now let me check his wounds and help me get him cleaned up. If he wakes up, I still want him to get some time in the bath. He needs it, mentally as well as physically.”

Mahiro huffed again but he did as Koudai asked, helping Kana out of the rest of his clothes while Junji slipped out of the room again, probably to reassure their mates that they were fine. Koudai knew his own mate was anxious, worried about him, but it would wait. A plan that went to shit not even five minutes later as Mitsuki appeared, gently pushing aside Koudai's hands to check Kana's wounds for himself. The intrusion of alpha scent so close to him was enough for Kana to jolt awake, flailing at first as he struggled to get up.

“Shh, easy sweetheart, it's just Sensei,” Koudai soothed, petting his hair. “You're fine, lay still.”
“S-sensei?” Kana stammered, blinking a few times before his eyes focused on the doctor kneeling beside him.

“You gave your aniki here a bit of a fright, but you look fine. Make sure you get a good seal on those bandages, Koudai-kun, and he should be good to soak for ... well, let's not do more than twenty-five minutes right now, okay?”

Koudai nodded, offering the surgeon a grateful smile. The bath would be good for more than just Kana. The alpha gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze and then he was gone. That was when Kana seemed to finally realize he was almost naked, panic starting to fill the air again as wild eyes darted around the room.

“Easy, sweetheart, it's okay, it's just us,” Koudai soothed, helping Kana sit up since the teenager was so determined. “Here, have a seat on the bench and I'll make sure you're bandaged up properly, then we can have that soak.”

“I ... does ... I mean, I...,” but Kana stammered himself into another silence, struggling to find the right words.

“If you want to keep the alphas out for awhile, yes, you need us to stay here with you,” Mahiro said, crouching down in front of Kana and taking both hands in his. “I know you don't have experience with it, Juju says there aren't many omegas in Fukui so how could you? But sharing a bath, it's a normal thing. Especially in family. Kouki-san is family, that means you're family, too, okay?”

The hesitation and fear were impossible to miss, though Koudai wasn't sure he understood what was behind it. And then Kana managed a shaky nod and even a small smile.

“And someone has to make sure I don't hurt myself if the hot water goes to my head?” he asked timidly.

“That, too,” he agreed with a soft chuckle. “And if Maru-chan will move out of the way....”

Mahiro shot him a quick frown, then turned back to Kana.

“Like Hachi said before, you're safe with us, okay? And if you ever want to talk about what you've been through.... I'm not saying I know what it's like, because I don't know what he did, the one you were with before Kouki, but whatever it was... it wasn't your fault, honey. And whenever you're ready? I will always be here to listen, okay?”

The scent of tears was warning enough that Mahiro was easily able to absorb the way the young omega practically flung himself at him. Koudai watched, a little surprised to see Mahiro being so ... maternal with Kana, petting his hair and murmuring soothing words of comfort. Whatever it was that had happened in Kana's past, it was obvious that he'd been holding it deep inside, keeping it all to himself for all these years. There was such an age difference between them, it would be hard to integrate him as part of their group, but they would find a way. Kana deserved nothing less.

~*~*~

Kouki leaned forward against the closed door with a heavy sigh of relief. That was the last of his more casual friends finally sent back out into the world.

“Kou-kun....”

Glancing over his shoulder, he was surprised to see all three omegas standing there, mostly
because, the way they had been acting, he hadn't thought the three of them would be willing to leave Kana alone for anything. Then again, now that the only other alphas in his apartment were Kumiko, Mitsuki, and Tomoya....

“Sleeping peacefully I take it?” he asked as he turned around, moving towards his couch. Even more surprising, the other alphas were conspicuously missing from his lounge, though he could see two of them on his terrace, smoking. He was almost afraid to ask what the three omegas had done to get Kumiko out of the way for this little chat.

“We need to talk,” Junji started, only to have Mahiro waving him aside.

“Kana-kun has a bite scar, at least four years old,” the shorter omega said, chin jutted upwards in an obvious challenge. As if he was daring Kouki to argue with him. None of the three seemed to know how to react when instead he sank onto the couch with a heavy sigh.

“Six. It's six years old.”

Kouki could hardly say he was surprised by the immediate sputtering from the three omegas as they tried to talk over each other.

“You knew about this???”

“How long have you known???”

“Why didn't you two tell me???”

Holding up his hands with a tired smile, he waited for them to stop before he spoke again: “It's not like that. I didn't 'know' so much as Chamu-kun told me one thing and Kana vehemently denied it could even be possible. Chamu-kun told me more about Atsushi after Kana's father left, Kacchan overheard us talking about it and was completely pissed off at the mere suggestion that he had been forcibly mated. Yes, I've been leaning towards believing Chamu-kun's version of events, especially after their brothers' friend Higuchi came over and corroborated Chamu-kun's version, but Kacchan still doesn't believe it. Or at least he doesn't want to believe it, I don't know, I think it might be starting to crack through.”

“A violent bond break could shatter a healthy adult omega, never mind a teenager,” Mahiro huffed, arms crossing over his chest. “What the fuck's wrong with his parents? And don't tell me that because they're betas, they didn't know what they were seeing, that's bullshit.”

“People see what they want to see, Maru, you know that,” Kouki said, shaking his head. “Hiro-kun was in the hospital for almost a week before he succumbed to his injuries, his parents were at the hospital that whole time, Kana wasn't even allowed to see him again after the accident. Plenty of time for a shattered psyche to rebuild itself with a shiny new carefree exterior.”

Mahiro growled something unintelligible before storming off to the terrace. It wasn't like Kouki didn't sympathize with his friend's frustration, but ... what was done was done. The only real option they had was to move forward.

“You know Maru's only being this way because he cares,” Koudai mumbled, frowning at the terrace.

“If it eases his mind any - and yours - I'm already making arrangements to work from home for awhile. There's no reason I have to be at the office every day ... and every reason to telecommute for awhile. And I know the age gap is going to be an issue, but if you guys could include Kacchan in things ... at least until he's well enough to find more friends his own age....”
“I’d suggest having the baby brother take him out, but might be better to start ... smaller,” Junji said with a lopsided grin. Koudai actually laughed a little at that.

“Yeah, probably, especially with Kana-kun still on medical restrictions,” Koudai agreed with a nod. “Like a movie night first? Just so he can already be somewhere where, if Puppy exhausts him, at least he can lay down easily?”

“I’ll even let Puppy pick out a string of horror movies if he wants,” Kouki offered. “Anything to help get Kacchan adjusted to life here in Tokyo.”

“Oh don’t say that too loudly or he’ll do just that and claim he’s doing you a favor,” Junji added, rolling his eyes. Kouki had a pretty good idea where that thought was headed and while he wouldn't mind ... his friend probably had a good point. Horror movie marathons could wait.

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“I have to do this, Minase, you know I do. The board won't care as long as the work gets done and between us I know we can make sure that happens.”

“You do realize I’m not actually arguing with you, right?” Minase teased, sitting back down with his refreshed coffee and a smile. “As little as it took to overwhelm him yesterday, he obviously needs you more than the office does right now. I can think of a couple people who will be relieved to know you aren't actually in the building for awhile.”

“Oh! I'm not that bad!” he protested, scowling at his friend and aide.

“No, you aren't, but you know how nervous Kihaya-san gets when she scents you around.”

“She should have more confidence in herself, she gives female alphas a bad name being so timid and uncertain all the time,” he muttered, sipping his own coffee.

“I'd pay good money to see you say that to her face.”

“Shut up,” Kouki muttered, glancing up at the scent of his omega coming out of the kitchen clutching a mug of herbal tea, something with mint and honey. Speaking of timid and uncertain....

“Hey sweetheart,” he said, reaching out to catch Kana before the other could slip past him. “Feeling any better?”

“A little,” the omega mumbled, though there was a ghost of a smile struggling to make it to his eyes. “Sorry for missing so much of the party yesterday.”

“It's fine. Worried a few, but no one questioned it too hard,” Kouki said, smiling a little at the way Kana relaxed into his arms, leaning against him as he sipped his tea. “Everyone wanted me to tell you they hope you're feeling better soon.”

“Everyone?” Kana echoed, obviously surprised.

“Of course,” he replied, frowning a little at the unexpected reaction. “Why wouldn't any of my friends not wish you well?”

“I ... I didn't mean ... I mean, I thought maybe....” Kana stammered himself into a tongue-tied whine, guilt and shame flaring through his scent like a punch to Kouki’s gut. How did he keep upsetting his omega like this? He really needed to be more mindful of the words coming out of his mouth, clearly.
“Anyone disapproving of Kou-kun having such a young soulmate isn't going to be stupid enough to say it to his face,” Minase said evenly. “But for what it's worth, Kana-kun, I don't think more than one or two of his close friends would be that closed minded. Of course, since your alpha lug-nut here insisted on introducing you as his soulmate to everyone yesterday, I fully expect that bit to be making the rounds of the gossip pages in short order. You two might want to stay in for a couple weeks, until the interest dries up a bit.”

“What was I supposed to do, introduce him as ... as what? A stray I took in off the streets??”

“I'm not saying that, you know I'm not,” Minase said, frowning at him. “I'm beta, not stupid, of course hiding the bond between you was never going to work. But this is still going to make trouble. Your grandfather isn't the only old fashioned alpha patriarch out there. Chalk it up as another reason to work from home for awhile.”

“My soulmate's identity and personal life are protected, private information. The gossip rags have nothing to go on but hearsay. They won't even have any decent pictures!”

“That's all the gossip rags ever have, hearsay. Doesn't stop them. And it doesn't stop that portion of the public that will believe anything they're told just for seeing it printed on paper or reported on television by someone in a nice suit.”

Kouki huffed an irritated sigh. And then he caught another wave of shame from his soulmate. Tightening his arms around him, he lifted Kana up into his lap and nuzzled the back of his neck.

“Stop, love. I don't care what the gossip rags will say about us. It might damage company stocks for a few days, but I'm not even entirely convinced of that. Especially if we can keep the board from doing something stupid. Which is why I invited Hayashi-dono yesterday, though I don't know if you remember meeting him or his wife. Hayashi-dono has strong influence on the board, he'll keep the others in line. If I wouldn't give you up to please my grandfather, what makes you think I'll do it to appease the board or complete strangers?”

Kana's silence was more than a little worrisome. Pulling him closer against him, Kouki nipped at the back of his neck, which at least got a shiver out of the teen. And another silent sip of tea.

“We can't just stay hidden away up here until the entertainment press finds some other shiny thing to distract them,” he said with a low sigh. “Kacchan needs a new phone, at the very least, and some more clothes.”

“I don't really...,” Kana mumbled, blushing again. “I don't have that much pocket money anyway.”

“You don't honestly believe Kou-kun is going to let you spend your own money, do you?” Minase teased, grinning widely. Kouki could feel the omega blushing even harder and couldn't help a soft chuckle.

“Anyway,” the beta continued, briefly sipping his coffee, “as far as phones go, you can order one online easily enough these days. Or if the model you want is only available in-store, I have no problem going in to pick it up for you.”

“I appreciate what you're trying to do, Minase,” Kouki said gently, “but if the gossip rags want to try making something out of my taking care of my soulmate, let them. Maybe we'll stay in this weekend, maybe we won't. Either way, we have to go out Monday so Kacchan can take care of legal business. And if I can get him into that doctor Monday, too....”

“D-doctor?” Kana stammered, panic starting to leak into his scent again.
“Yes, remember? You agreed to see one. Mitsuki made a suggestion for a local gynecologist, I just need to call the office to see about an appointment. Just a standard wellness screening, no big deal, right?”

Kana huffed and turned to curl into his chest with a low noise of distress. This was new and he wasn't quite sure what to make of it. Humming softly, he pressed a kiss to the young omega's forehead and stroked his hair. Maybe he was taking things too quickly, maybe he should put things off for another week. Except his soulmate really did need a new phone, new clothes, even a new 3DS. The sorts of little things that would make him feel grounded and less like he was trapped in Kouki's life with nothing to do on his own.

“We'll call Chamu-kun later, too,” he suggested softly. “Maybe he can pack up some more of your things, like your laptop and more clothes, and have them shipped to you here. Do you think your parents would allow that?”

“I ... I don't know. But they don't really ... they can't completely stop him, can they? It's my stuff, they can't hold it hostage to get me to do what they want ... can they?”

“We'll call and see. If they don't want to let him send it to you, well, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it, all right, love?

Kana huffed again and pressed himself even closer. If Kouki had to replace everything Kana had left behind, he would, without a second thought. But for Kana’s sake, he deeply hoped it wouldn't be necessary.

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Kana tugged at his shirt, feeling uncomfortable in his own skin. Why did it have to be so hot in this room all the time? His class always felt a bit warm to him, but today it was almost unbearable. And yet no one else seemed to notice anything different. He plucked at his shirt again, wishing he could turn the heat down already. It was nearly May! Surely they didn't need it to be turned up so high!

“Anou, sensei? Kobayashi-kun doesn't look so good, I think I should take him to the nurse.”

Kana glanced over at the girl in the seat next to him. What was her name again? Minami? Megumi? He couldn't remember. But what did she mean, he didn't look good?

The teacher's omega scent hit him suddenly as the woman came over to his desk and Kana struggled with the urge to just disappear into the floor. He didn't need to be attracting attention to himself, he already got too much of it being the only male omega in his class. She pressed a hand to his forehead, then cupped the back of his neck before frowning down at him.

“Adashi-chan, please take Kobayashi-kun to the nurse, then come right back. Kobayashi-kun, I'll let your other teachers know you won't be here for the next couple of days.”

What the hell was she talking about now? Teachers could be so weird. But the girl next to him was already agreeing and giving him strange looks, so he packed up his bag and walked with her to the school nurse.

“Sensei? Are you here, sensei?” she called out as they walked into the small office. “Sensei, Kobayashi-kun needs you.”

“Oh really? Oh, you do look a bit sick, don't you, Kobayashi-kun. All right, thank you, young lady, you may go back to class now.”
The nurse's office wasn't any cooler than the classroom or the hall had been. What was wrong with this school today anyway? Sitting down on the bed, Kana stayed quiet as the beta nurse popped a thermometer into his mouth. He had no idea what the point of that was, fidgeting as he waited for the silly device to beep.

“Hmm, only slightly elevated, but it's enough. Do you take the train to school, Kobayashi-kun?”

“N-no, I walk,” he stammered, not sure what that was supposed to mean.

“Well here, put this on,” the nurse said as he handed him a face mask. “I'm sending you home for the rest of the day, you don't need to be getting the whole school sick with whatever it is you have. If you feel the same tomorrow, just stay home.”

Kana nodded, though it made him feel dizzy, then slipped on the mask and off the bed. He didn't really want to go home, but it was better than staying here. At least at home no one would look twice if he took his shirt off.

He wasn't more than half a block from the school when a familiar shadow stretched over him. Atsushi's scent washed over him and it was like heaven. He leaned into the alpha's arm around him and sighed.

“Niisan...”

“That idiot, sending you home, alone, in the middle of the day. Well, it's all right, I'm here now,” Atsushi said, urging Kana towards his apartment instead. He didn't mind, it was closer and right then closer was better. Much better. Especially when all Kana wanted to do was get out of his irritating school uniform. It itched terrible today, especially at the collar and groin. Had it always chaffed like this or was he just extra sensitive to it today for some reason?

“Make yourself at home,” the alpha said as he headed towards what passed for his kitchen. Sounded like a good idea to him. Dropping his school bag at the end of the couch, Kana started pulling off his uniform as he headed towards Atsushi's shower. That's what he really needed, a good shower and a nice, hot soak. He didn't have any of his own clothes here, unfortunately, but maybe he could borrow a shirt from Atsushi? He smiled a little at that thought. His alpha wouldn't mind, he was sure of it.

“My Kacchan ... you've grown up so much....”

Kana shivered at the feel of Atsushi's hands on his bare skin. The alpha's hands felt so good, so right, gliding over his skin in slow caresses. Kana didn't really understand why, but he didn't care, either. A strong alpha, his alpha, wanted him, he could feel it, taste it, the coil of expectation that glowed low in his belly. So this was what it was like to be desired? A low groan leaked out of him as strong hands slid between his legs, drawing attention to the wetness gathered there. Oh god, it was his heat. His first heat had come, that's what he'd been feeling.

“That's right, my little flower,” the alpha behind him purred, fingers dipping lower. “All grown up and all mine, just like you've always been.”

Bright pain exploded at his neck at the same time as something far too big shoved its way into his unprepared body. Kana screamed and passed out.

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The scream was enough to jerk Kouki instantly awake, alpha instincts ready to eviscerate whoever was attacking his omega. But of course there was no one there, it was just the two of them. Kana
was curled into a taut ball, shaking and crying and hugging himself as tightly as he possibly could. Another nightmare then. At least this time when he reached out for his soulmate, Kana didn't shy away.

“Shh, it's all right, Kacchan, it was just another dream,” he soothed, drawing the younger man into his arms even as he told himself to relax. His mate needed him, needed comfort, and that meant calming his own instincts to fight, to destroy whatever had so upset his mate. Kana wasn't resisting him, but he did shake his head in a vigorous denial.

“He did it,” the omega mumbled, pressing himself into Kouki's chest with a choked sob. Kouki's breath caught in his throat, almost afraid to know what it was his soulmate had just seen to make those words come out of him. He forced himself to take another deep breath, to run his fingers through Kana's hair and keep himself calm. He couldn't tear out the throats of the ghosts haunting his soulmate's past, that's all that was left of them now anyway.

“He did it,” Kana repeated a little later in a dull mumble. “He raped me. In the shower. He didn't even ... he hurt me so bad I passed out. I ... I don't remember anything else.”

“I promise you, love, it will never be like that again,” he murmured, slowly rubbing up and down Kana's spine. That someone, an alpha, could behave in such a way in this day and age was almost more than he wanted to accept. Of course denial wasn't going to change the past. But Kouki would do whatever it took to make sure Kana knew how precious he was. His soulmate was a treasure and he would make sure nothing ever happened to make his omega doubt his own worth again.

Chapter End Notes

I know, I'm a horrible person. This is not the last time Kana is going to have this sort of flashback, either, which is why this is tagged with the Rape and Underage warnings, even though both things happened in the past. But the rape scenes will always be as flashbacks, so they should be easy enough to skip over if you don't want to read them (and I'll always having a warning at the start of a chapter with such a flashback in it).

And yes, the omegas are going to be around a lot more in this fic. Because Kana needs them.
Chapter Notes

In which we get a brief look into alternate family structures (that are seen as completely normal, at least in alpha and omega circles) and Kana gets a HAPPY surprise for a change. And then a ticking time bomb. But new characters! And more backstory!

Also, tamago kake gohan is a common Japanese breakfast - a raw egg cracked over and stirred into warm rice.

(additional cultural footnotes at the end)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After the nightmare and the hour or so needed to soothe his omega back to sleep, Kouki was reluctant to leave Kana's side. But his omega was sleeping quietly and besides, it was still dark outside. And, too, Kana had been the one to point out that he hadn't been doing his morning jogs in awhile. Brushing a last kiss to his sleeping omega's forehead, he slipped away and headed for the park where he was to meet Satsuki. Saturday wasn't their usual morning for shared jogs, but running with a partner always went better. Since he had missed a few weeks now, they had agreed to a shorter route; with any luck, Kana would never even notice he had been away.

“Ready to eat my dust, old man~?” Satsuki teased with a wink.

“Hey, I didn't come here for a race,” he countered, chuckling. “If that was what you wanted, you should've set this up with someone else!”

“Oh fine, I'll go easy on ya. This time,” the other alpha said, laughing. “Is Kana-kun all right?”

“Well enough that I was willing to come out here running with you, why?”

“Oh just Mizu-chan. She was so excited because she was finally allowed to come to a party with me and meet my friends. And then she finds out there's an omega almost her own age there ... only he disappears before she can corner him into becoming her new best friend. She was completely disappointed! I had to hear about it all night!”

“Oh that,” Kouki replied, smirking. “He's still recovering from his injuries, some of those wounds were pretty severe, you know.”

“Mm, four hours of surgery, wasn't it? I was a little surprised you were hosting anything that soon.”

“I wouldn't have, if not for the holiday,” he confessed. “And then Grandfather turned up uninvited and found out about Kacchan and after that I knew I had to at least have enough of a party to justify inviting Hayashi-dono so he could meet my soulmate for himself.”

“Good point. With him on your side - and you know Sugihara-sama and Kano-sama will support you as well now - you shouldn't have any real trouble. Even if the tabloids try to make something of it, and of course they will.”
“Of course, it's what they do,” he agreed with a huff. Stairs hove into view and he was as glad to let the conversation drop for a stretch. Indeed, the rest of the jog passed with only their breathing between them and his lungs were grateful for that.

~*~*~

Kana flinched at the sound of the door opening, pushing himself to get up from the couch. A deep breath gave him both Kouki's scent and that of another alpha and fear burst through him once more. But only for a moment and then Kouki was there, arms wrapping around him and holding him close. With a weak whimper, he pressed into his soulmate's chest. He didn't even care that his alpha was sweaty.

“I'm borrowing your shower, Kou-kun,” the other alpha said even as he made a hasty dash into the apartment. Kana waited for the sound of the bathroom door closing before stepping back and swatting Kouki's chest.

“Asshole! You said you wouldn't leave me!” he wailed, pressing in close again when tears threatened to choke him.

“I'm sorry, sweetheart, I didn't mean to worry you,” Kouki soothed, stroking his hair. “To be honest, I didn't think you would even be awake yet. I'm sorry.”

“Where were you?? And who was that??”

“That's my friend Satsuki, you met him the other day, remember? With his kid sister, Mizuki? Anyway, he and I usually meet up at least one morning a week to run together. Remember, you were worried I wasn't doing my morning jog anymore?”

Kana huffed but his alpha was right, he had been the one to comment on his soulmate's changed habits. Even so....

“Every time you leave me alone, something terrible happens,” he mumbled, hugging himself even tighter to Kouki's chest. “I was scared.”

“I'm so sorry, love,” the blond alpha murmured again, nuzzling Kana's hair. “But I'm home now, it's okay now, right? So ... think you can let me shower or do I need to invite you to join me so you don't have to be alone?”

Memories of pain and wet flashed behind his eyes and with a weak cry, Kana tore himself away from the alpha's arms. He only managed a few steps before he fell to the floor, curling into a ball. It was wrong, it was all wrong, how could he hurt this much?

“Kana ... Kana, baby, I'm sorry....”

Kouki's voice sounded like it was so far away and he could barely feel the hands on his arms. Why? Why was this happening? He could feel himself shaking like a leaf, freezing and burning up at the same time. He couldn't possibly be going into heat again already, could he? He wasn't supposed to have another heat until February ... unless meeting Kouki had skewed his whole cycle? But it still didn't feel right, the sour, sweaty overtones in Kouki's scent ruining any comfort he might have otherwise taken from the leathery, spicy notes that washed over him as he was lifted into strong arms. It was all wrong, memories of another scent crowding around him, warping his senses. Another scent, other hands that had been anything but gentle, and cruel, biting teeth. He whimpered again and then, mercifully, passed out cold.

~*~*~
Kouki felt like a complete fool, kicking himself as he carried his soulmate into their bedroom. How could he have been so stupid? It hadn't even been six hours since Kana had told him about Atsushi raping him in a shower, how could he have been so idiotic as to suggest they share a shower together so soon after that? Not that he had meant anything sexual by his words, of course not, but that wasn't the point. Kana whimpering again was enough to get him to glance over his shoulder, frowning and making a brief shooing motion at his friend. That Satsuki let himself be chased off so easily was worrisome, but priorities.

He lingered over Kana, stroking his hair and watching his restless sleep, but the omega didn't rouse. And Kouki wasn't sure his sweaty scent was really helping anything. Sighing heavily, he leaned down to brush a kiss to the omega's troubled brow.

“I love you, Kacchan,” he murmured before getting up from their bed. Still kicking himself, he ducked into their bathroom, rushing through a shower before changing into fresh jeans and a long-sleeved shirt. Kana had gone still when he checked on him again, and though he still worried he was making the wrong choice, he left his omega to sleep off this new fright, though he left their bedroom door cracked in case his soulmate needed him.

“So ... what was that about then?” Satsuki asked quietly, passing him a steaming mug of coffee. Kouki sighed, taking the moment needed to add cream and sugar to his taste to try gathering his thoughts. Satsuki was his friend, but Kana's past torment wasn't his to share. At the same time, it wasn't like he could just wave it away. As another alpha, Satsuki would have been able to smell the clear panic in Kana's scent. It was probably why the other had come running to his bedroom in the first place.

“I wasn't thinking and accidentally triggered a panic attack,” he said with a shake of his head. “He was already upset to wake up without me being here, bringing you back with me probably didn't help. It was a stupid mistake on my part.”

“Look, you don't have to tell me the details, but if you're saying your soulmate was raped by some asshole alpha in the past, then just change the subject.”

Kouki snorted at that, setting down his coffee cup to start rice and miso for breakfast, enough for three.

“... are you fucking kidding me? Kouki, seriously, tell me that isn't what happened to the kid,” his friend half growled, setting down his own mug.

“Mackerel or omelet?” he asked as he pulled open his fridge. “I'm out of natto, if you want any, you'll have to go down to the combini to get it yourself.”

“Kouki!”

“What do you want me to say?” he growled back at the other alpha, closing the fridge door with far more force than was necessary in his frustration and self-recrimination. “He has a right to privacy, same as anyone else. It happened a long time ago, but that's not exactly a wound that heals easily. Just ... drop it, okay?”

“Sorry, I just ... he's just a kid! I ... all right, all right,” his friend sighed, holding up his hands and then running one through still damp dark hair. “All right, this is me dropping it. And I'm fine with just tamago kake gohan, save the mackerel for when he gets up.”

Kouki nodded, though he reopened the fridge to pull out the fish anyway. He should probably rouse Kana again sooner rather than later, though maybe the smell of grilling fish would do that for
him? And maybe he was spending too much energy worrying about his soulmate. But then again, what else could he do but worry? Maybe he should start looking into a trained therapist? Except he was almost positive Kana wasn't ready to take that step, not yet. The omega would barely admit to himself what he had been through, he wasn't ready to talk about it with a complete stranger.

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Kana wasn't sure he wanted to be awake yet, but the smell of grilled fish was more than his empty stomach could stand. Wrapping himself in one of Kouki's long sweaters, he stopped cold at the sight of another alpha seated at the breakfast bar. He - or rather, the star tattooed on his neck - looked vaguely familiar, though Kana couldn't place him or even think of a name. Dark, raven black hair hung in shaggy layers to just past his shoulders and where he had tucked it behind one ear, Kana could see half a dozen piercings. He looked up and Kana felt himself caught in piercing, coal-dark eyes, gulping as he hugged himself tighter. A beat and then a warm smile broke out on previously cold features, the alpha sliding off his stool to offer a polite bow but not moving any closer.

“Kobayashi-kun, I'm sorry if my presence made things worse for you,” the alpha said, bowing again, even lower this time. Kana felt himself gaping, mouth moving without sound. Was he actually ... apologizing to him? An alpha apologizing to a lowly nothing omega? It was ... it was....

“It ... it wasn't your fault,” he stammered at last, rubbing at one reddened cheek.

“Then ... if you wouldn't mind ... my little sister would really like another chance to meet you, if you wouldn't object to some company this afternoon? We could meet for lunch and then, if she hasn't completely overwhelmed you, she could perhaps help with your shopping?”

Kana glanced uncertainly over at Kouki, but the blond alpha only smiled. They had talked about a shopping trip, but he hadn't realized anything had been settled one way or the other. After what Minase had been saying about tabloids, a part of him was almost afraid to go out with Kouki. Which was ridiculous and yet.... Soulmates or not, Kana knew he couldn't depend on this lasting. At the same time, it would be foolish not to take advantage of it while he could, right?

“I ... we can try lunch, yeah,” he said with a slight nod.

“Noon at Shibuya Station, then?” the darker alpha suggested with another warm smile. “Ah, I should get home before Mizu-chan gets into the coffee or she'll be bouncing off the walls by noon and you'll never forgive me. It was a pleasure meeting you again, Kobayashi-kun.”

Kana could only stand there, nodding mutely, as Kouki escorted the alpha to the door, belatedly realizing he didn't even have a name for the man. So much for his manners.

“Come have breakfast, love,” Kouki called out as he set another place at the breakfast bar. “And thank you for agreeing to lunch. Sacchan's sister Mizuki was apparently quite upset to have missed you at the party. I know it may be a little awkward for you, she's only fifteen, but maybe if the two of you hit it off ... it'd mean another omega friend closer to your own age at any rate.”

Kana nodded again, pulling himself up onto the bar stool with another wince. He couldn't help having mixed feelings about Mizuki being another omega teenager. On the one hand, his alpha wasn't wrong about his needing more friends in his own age group. On the other hand, three years younger meant she was probably still in junior high and they weren't going to have a whole lot in common.

“You're worried,” Kouki said softly, settling on the stool next to him with his own breakfast plates.
“Talk to me? Maybe I can help.”

“I just ... I don't know,” he sighed, poking at his fish a moment. “I haven't exactly had a lot of positive experiences with other omegas before coming here.”

“The way you and Chamu-kun talk about Fukui, I thought you two didn't even know any other omegas,” the blond said.

“There's always been a couple dozen or so omega girls in our schools. The two in our class, Mamoko and Fujisaki, have been best friends since grade school, they outed me as omega to the rest of our grade when I was thirteen. Everyone else in our class was beta and I didn't exactly socialize much at school, so it's not like ... I mean it's not like you can tell at a glance, you know? And that was the first year the school nurse had pulled me aside during annual health exams, which is how it came up. After Mamoko and Fujisaki told everyone ... everyone but Chamu-kun looked at me differently after that, like I was a freak of nature, something they didn't want around. I stopped getting picked for sports teams during gym classes and then the teasing and hazing started and I just ... stopped even going to gym class. The beta guys didn't want to share a locker room with me and obviously I couldn't be put in with the girls, either. Junior high was hell - there'd been another omega male in our grade, Mamoko sniffed him out a couple months after me, outed him to the whole school, too. Hisa got harassed even more than I did cuz he was prettier than a lot of the girls, though he always wore the boys' uniform. It got so bad his parents pulled him and sent him to a different school before the end of the year. I begged my parents to do the same, but they said they couldn't afford it, I just had to suck it up and deal with it. Well, they didn't say it like that, but....

“Anyway, I sort of ... blotted out details after that. I ... I think I remember Atsu-nii warning off some of the older boys, but I'm not sure. Maybe I just imagined it, I don't know. The girls were always worse than the guys anyway. I....”

Kana dropped his chopsticks and shuddered, remembering the pranks the girls had pulled on him over the years. The beta guys had been mean, but the girls had been downright petty and cruel. Anything and everything was fair game to them and they had picked on everything, every possible fault or flaw, real or imagined. And graduating into high school hadn't really helped, not at first anyway. Not until one of the third years, the class president, an alpha named Sayuri, had stepped in and declared him protected. Belatedly, he realized he had forgotten to send her a new year's card, in between everything else. Another phone call to make later, so he could apologize for his forgetfulness.

“I promise you, sweetheart, Mizuki-chan isn't like that. Her parents would skin her alive if they caught even a hint of her treating another omega that way, not the least of which because her mother's a male omega.”

“W-what? Really?” Kana stammered. “But I thought ... I mean, you said Mizuki-san is fifteen and ... and your friend....”

“Ah, well, no, you're right, technically they're half siblings. Sacchan is the child of their father's wife, Mizu-chan is the daughter of their father's younger soulmate. So there, you see? I won't say the age difference between us is normal or common, but it's not unheard of either. The stranger part is that you caught me still single.”

Kana's mind was still reeling at the thought of a man, presumably an alpha, being happily married and yet still having a - sexual! - relationship with his much younger soulmate. It sounded like something out of those ridiculous romance books his mother liked to read. Or those soap operas he would overhear girls gossiping about at lunch. He had never once thought those plots could have
been anything like real, and yet....

“I think you're going to find, love, that life outside of Fukui is different from what you've been brought up to expect,” his alpha said with a gentle smile. “Sacchan's family still lives in Hyogo and it's not much bigger than Fukui, but the ratio isn't quite so skewed, either - I think betas are only around 60% of the population there. Here in Tokyo it's a little higher, somewhere around 70% was the last I'd read, but that's still a lot of alphas and omegas of every age. Betas see Sacchan's family as being a little strange, yeah, but no stranger than having two soulmates - something that happens even to betas - or an alpha bonding an omega whose soulmate turns out to be another alpha entirely. Compared to that, the age difference between us is practically nothing.”

“Especially since I'm the younger one?” he said, turning the thoughts over in his head. Two soulmates? That had to be ... how could anyone even manage that? Or falling in love only to find out later you had picked the wrong person, that the universe had meant for you to be with someone else? Kana shuddered as he realized that had nearly been him. If not for the accident, would he have ever even met his soulmate? Probably, since Atsushi had been keeping their mating a secret from everyone, so he would have been told to keep going to school and nothing he and Chamu had been doing that day, other than taking a new shortcut, had been different from what they had usually done on a school day. But would meeting his soulmate have still triggered an early heat in him if he had still been mated to Atsushi? How would Kouki have reacted? How would Atsushi have reacted? Their parents?? He almost completely failed to hold back a low whimper at the spiraling questions.

And then Kouki's scent washed over him again, clean and warm and comforting, as the blond alpha held him close and pressed a sweet kiss to his lips.

“I can't say how things would have ended up between us if he had still been in the picture, love, but does it matter? He's long gone and I'm going to be here for as long as you'll have me.”

“It wouldn't have,” Kana croaked even as he scooted closer, tightly wrapping his arms around his alpha's chest. “Between Atsu-nii and our parents, there would be nothing between us, I'm sure of it. They wouldn't've allowed it.”

“Don't think on it any longer then, love,” Kouki murmured, kissing his forehead this time. “We gain nothing from fighting his ghost. Those people ... they don't control you anymore, Kacchan. It's time for you to find your own way in life.”

Another shiver and he pressed his nose into Kouki's chest, breathing in his scent. Kouki was right, this was his future now. At least for a little while, he needed to think about being a good mate to this alpha, not some ghost from the past. It was time to move on with his life.

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Kana tried to tell himself that it had only been ten minutes, that he couldn't climb into Kouki's lap in the middle of a busy subway station just because he was feeling overwhelmed by people. And yet that was exactly what he wanted to do, pressing into his side and hiding his face in his alpha's shoulder.

“... maybe this was a mistake,” Kouki mumbled. Kana tried to bite back a whimper, not wanting to give up already, but at the same time, he already felt so tired.

“Morihito Kouki-san, you horrible person!”

The young omega started at the shrill intrusion of a girl's voice. And by the scent of it, an upset
omega girl at that. Twisting around, he watched as dark eyes went wide in a face that was a little too oval for the usual kawaii omega girl trope. And then she was smacking her brother - hard! - in the chest before swiping at Kouki’s arm as well.

“I swear to all the gods, you two may be alphas, but you have no brains at all even between you!” she said before marching right up to Kana and wrapping him in a big hug that was trying to be a shield against the rest of the station. It might have even worked if not for her being a good ten centimeters shorter than him. And if her scent had been more mature. Even still, Kana felt himself smiling and returning the hug with gratitude.

“I'm fine, really,” he mumbled, trying to step back.

“And I'm really a penguin,” the girl retorted, though she did let go of him enough to step back and get a better look at him, a smile breaking out a beat later. “Ichikawa Mizuki, it's a pleasure to meet you properly at last. Come on, let's get out of here before you explode. Impplode. Something.”

Chagrined, Kana could only trail in her wake as Mizuki refused to let go of his hand, pulling him up out of the station and into the chill of an overcast winter day. A cold breeze snapped past him, changing the quality of the air almost completely. There were still too many traces of too many scents, but they weren't nearly as thick as they had been below ground and his skin didn't feel quite so much like it wanted to crawl off into a dark corner without him.

“Better?” she asked, though the glint in her eyes suggested that she already knew the answer. “I don't know about yours, but aniki hasn't been really and truly sick in, like, ten years. He forgets the body gets sensitive to everything when you're healing. We'll go somewhere quiet for lunch, I know just the place.”

With the wind in his face and the two alphas behind him, he couldn't tell what they were making of Mizuki's declarations, but there were no objections as she resumed pulling him away from the station. The noodle shop she picked out was small enough to be cozy and, being on a fourth floor, far enough away from the main flow of traffic to be half empty. The elderly couple behind the counter were both omega, stunning Kana and making him that much easier to steer into a booth at the back.

“Told you,” Kouki teased softly. “Welcome to Tokyo. Last census put us at just shy of thirteen million in just the twenty-three wards. Even at just ten percent, that's a lot of omegas.”

“But they're ... they're both omegas! And almost eighty!” Kana whispered, scooting closer to Kouki so there would be even less chance of the elderly couple overhearing his shock and possibly taking offense. Was he really that sheltered, was Fukui really that ignorant, teaching him that two omegas together was completely unforgivable?

“Doesn't miss a thing, does he?” Mizuki offered with a quiet giggle. “Obaasan and Ojiisan are soulmates who grew up together. Their parents tried to stop them, of course, but really, like parents are going to be able to stop something between soulmates. They have a whole mess of kids and grandkids now and I think even one great-grandkid. They are just so in love and practically adopt all their regulars, like aniki. I think it's sweet, don't you?

“Satsuki-kun! The usual? And for your guests?”

“Four of my usual please, Ojiisan,” the alpha replied, grinning broadly. Well, at least now Kana had a name for him, and without having to further embarrass himself by asking directly.

“Hmph! Someone's got an optimistic opinion of little brother's ability to eat,” the old granny stage-
muttered, though there was an amused twinkle in her eye. And before the lull in conversation could get too awkward, four bowls of ramen appeared at their table. Kana hated to admit it, but he wasn't sure he was going to be able to finish his, though more surprising was the addition of a second, smaller teapot.

“You,” the elderly omega woman said, fixing him with a serious look, “drink this. Good for stamina and healing. Satsuki-kun, you keep an eye on this one. Stubborn, he'll be. Won't tell you when he's too sick for more.”

“We'll all be watching out for him, obaachan, promise,” the alpha said, inclining his head respectfully. A grunt and the old woman walked away from their table, but Kana was more distracted by the tattoos on Satsuki's hand as he watched the man pouring tea for the rest of their table. He couldn't quite make out the one lurking under an armor ring, other than probably wings, and the one on the webbing between thumb and index finger was too small for him to be sure what it was ... and was that another one peeking out at his wrist?

“You know, you could just ask,” Satsuki drawled, his lips curling into an amused grin. “Yes, I have tattoos. No, I'm not going to show them to you in front of obaachan. She thinks I'm a good, upstanding citizen and I don't want to risk changing her mind. I like coming here too much to risk getting banned.”

Kana flushed hotly at the softly worded reprimand, the low chuckle from his soulmate making it even worse. He'd been staring and gotten caught.

“And before you ask the inevitable how did a tattooed hooligan like me end up being friends with your staid and straight-laced, respectable alpha here ... one, he's not as staid as he likes to pretend and two, I only had two when we met.”

“I ... I wasn't going to...,” Kana stammered and he could have sworn his cheeks were getting redder by the second.

“You would have eventually,” Satsuki said, winking. “Everyone does.”

“Ugh, aniki, stop, gods, I can't take you anywhere!” Mizuki huffed, swatting at her brother again. “Don't mind him, Kobayashi-senpai, he's just being an idiot. As usual. Maybe we should have gotten our own table?”

Kana wasn't about to admit what the thought of being separated from Kouki was doing to his guts, instead focusing on eating his lunch. Maybe it wasn't polite to just ignore her question like that, but slurping noodles was better than confessing to being afraid to be away from his alpha's side for even just a few minutes. He really hoped this shopping trip wasn't going to require him to try on anything because he didn't think he could do it.

“Relax,” Kouki whispered, “you're safe, it's going to be fine.”

Another blush raced into his cheeks and he made himself close his eyes and take a deep breath. Still, he was grateful for the way Kouki and Satsuki picked up a conversation more or less of their own. The point of meeting for lunch like this had been, he knew, for him to get to know Mizuki, possibly become friends, but for once he couldn't seem to find the words to say anything. And, all right, listening to Satsuki gossip about Tokyo's niche and underground music scenes was actually kind of interesting. Before he knew it, they had not only finished lunch but also taken long enough doing so that Obaasan was making coughing noises in their direction. Not that the shop was any more full than it had been when they came in, but they agreed that this was as good a time as any to move on to the shopping portion of this little planned outing. That he still didn't want to be on but
not as bad as when Satsuki had first suggested meeting for lunch. Maybe it was because her brother had been talking so much of the time, but Mizuki had been pretty quiet so far. Combined with the relative emptiness of the noodle shop, his nerves were feeling a lot better than they had when they had first come into the shop.

“So,” Mizuki said as they stepped out onto the street, “from what aniki was saying, sounds kinda like you need a whole wardrobe, ne?”

“N-no? W-what? No!” Kana stammered, shaking his head. “Just a few more things until Chamu-kun can get me the rest of my stuff. Honestly, it's not that big of a deal, Kouki-san kinda made it into more than it is. Twenty minutes in a department store and I'll be done.”

“And another stereotype bites the dust,” Mizuki replied with a giggle. Not getting it, Kana just blinked at her. “Teenaged omegas are supposed to only care about clothes and alphas and shopping, didn't you know?” she teased, grinning at him. “Though I guess since you've already got your alpha, you can be excused not caring as much about the rest.”

Linking an arm with his, she nodded to herself before she continued: “You're probably right about the general department store, at least for the basics, but I still think we should go into at least one of the smaller fashion-focused buildings, too. Even if you don't need to dazzle him anymore, it never hurts to shine~”

And once again, Kana found himself unable to resist Mizuki’s plans for him. He listened as she talked about various fashion trends as they started walking back towards the station. She was all for dragging him into 109Men's, but he was more hesitant. He may have lived a sheltered life, he was willing to accept that now, but not so sheltered that he didn't know Shibuya 109 was all about street fashion and high priced labels, the opposite of what he was wanting.

“We have to at least check out Diavlo and Vice Fairy, you need at least some stylish clothes! Aniki, tell him!”

“He's not a doll, Mizu-chan, you can't just put him in whatever you think would look good, he has to be comfortable wearing it,” the alpha said, shaking his head even though he was smiling and obviously amused by his sister's antics.

“I can't go into a high fashion shop in pajama pants!” Kana whined, hating the sound of his own voice just then. “Can't we go to somewhere boring and sensible like Parco or Isetan?”

“Shibuya Parco sounds like a good idea,” Satsuki agreed, taking Mizuki by the elbow and steering her in a new direction.

“But aniki...!”

“We have to pass 109Mens to get back to the station,” Kouki pointed out. “If he feels up to it, we can check it out then, okay? But only if he feels up to it!”

Mizuki was pouting at all three of them now, while Kana did his best not to get too clingy in his appreciation for Kouki’s suggested compromise. As much as he was already not feeling that keen on it, it would be easy to not feel up to it by the time they were finished buying the things his alpha insisted he needed at Parco. He might manage to feel bad about it for a few moments ... but probably not. He knew what he liked and what he liked was simple, generic things, not fast fashion that was out of style by the end of the season. Especially not at boutique prices, even if his alpha was more than happy to buy him whatever he wanted. His willingness to take advantage of Kouki didn't go that far.
Kana couldn't help a sigh of relief as he sank into Kouki's couch, grateful beyond words to be back home again. Only a couple of hours, but it felt like days, especially in his legs and stomach. All he wanted to do now was sleep forever; even the need to pee wasn't enough to get him to move another step, at least not yet.

“Does this mean I'm on my own figuring out what to do with all this?” Kouki teased, holding up armfuls of shopping bags. Kana groaned, feeling every one of those stops in his aching muscles. He should have known going out shopping with a girl would be a mistake.

Honestly, all he had wanted was a couple more pairs of loose pants and some plain t-shirts. Loungewear, since that was all he was up to doing anymore. So of course Mizuki had insisted that they needed to get him at least one pair of jeans that would be okay for him to wear with his bandages, in case he needed to go somewhere where loungewear wasn't going to be acceptable. A part of him had wanted to argue that he wasn't up for such an outing, but a larger part had been hoping that if he caved on the jeans, she might let him slide out of going into 109Mens later. In hindsight, he should have known better. Kouki had stopped her from dragging Kana through every shop in the building, limiting her to just one floor. Staffers, betas with scents filled with their disapproval of him, had offered to help and each time she had given them a dirty look and told them to buzz off before picking out things that, Kana had to admit, however reluctantly, would look good on him and fit his modest tastes.

“Just tired? Or still thinking about what that bigot said?” Kouki asked quietly as he sat down next to Kana, tucking an arm around him.

“Both, I guess,” he sighed.

“I know you know this, but ... he was an idiot. And he was wrong. Omegas aren't prizes to only be put on display in perfect condition. You aren't shaming anyone by going out while injured. And I've already filed a complaint with his manager and their corporate office.”

“W-what? Why??”

“No one has the right to speak to a customer that way, regardless of the customer's designation. An employee willing to say those things to you, in front of two alphas, no less ... who knows what worse nonsense he would have said had you gone there with only Mizu-chan or on your own.”

Huffing another sigh, he sank even more into Kouki's side. But only for a moment and then he was pulling himself upright again.

“I should call Chamu-kun,” he mumbled, reaching for a phone he didn't actually have and sighing again. “Dammit, I don't even know his number.”

“Did you really think I would let him leave without making sure I had his number first?” the blond alpha teased gently, pulling out his phone and passing it to him. Kana sat back a moment, just blinking at his soulmate in surprise, then shook his head a little and smiled.

“You think of everything, don't you?” he said, feeling just a little bit awed.

“Not everything,” Kouki said a little sadly. “But I'm doing my best to look after you, love. Call your friend, he's probably wondering why you haven't yet.”

Nodding, Kana flipped through Kouki's phone then tried to wait patiently for his best friend to actually answer. The near-panic in his friend's voice was completely unexpected.
“Chamu-kun? It's me.”

“Fucking hell, Kacchan, you just about gave me a heart attack for a second there. Everything okay?”

“Yeah, I just ... happy new year,” he said, feeling a little silly. “And okay, yeah, um, I was wondering if you could help me out with something.”

“Happy new year, dumbass, and of course, what's up?”

“Do you think you can get in and get my stuff packed and sent down here? Especially the clothes?”

“Oh that. Yuta-nii and I already did that, actually. Well, the packing up part, anyway. Your parents tried flipping out again until Yuta-nii calmly explained that they were being selfish morons. Oh, um, actually, can you put your alpha on the phone a sec?”

“Uh, yeah, hold on,” he said, frowning a little as he offered the phone back to its owner. “Chamu-kun wants to talk to you.”

At least his alpha looked as surprised and confused as Kana himself felt. Leaning into the back of the couch, he watched as Kouki got up and walked into the kitchen, wondering what that was about.

“Hnn, yeah, no, stick to what you've got, it'll be easier,” he heard Kouki saying as the alpha started making what smelled suspiciously like coffee. A little strange, but Kana wasn't about to say no to caffeine, not with as tired as he was feeling.

“You know Kacchan better than I do, pick something he'll like? I trust your judgment.”

Well that was just weird. Kana listened to a couple more wordless affirmatives and then Kouki was back, handing him the phone again with a wry grin. They were up to something, his soulmate and his best friend, he could tell, even if he didn't know what it was. Yet.

“So....”

“So yeah, got all your stuff packed up and, um, your parents closed your bank account here, I'll get you that money as soon as I can.”

“They did what?!? But...!”

“Yeah, well, I mean, you're staying with Kouki-san now, right? Like this is the real thing this time, you and him, right? So it's not like you need it. Oh and remind me to give you Yuta-nii's address and number, cuz my parents have also gone completely stupid over this whole thing now, so I'm staying with Yuta-nii and Hayato-senpai until graduation. Um, I am still okay to move down there this spring, right?”

“That's the plan, yeah, stupid,” Kana said, chuckling a little. Definitely making coffee. Definitely up to something. “How are you going to get all my stuff down here?”

“Oh don't worry about it, we've already got that figured out. Ah, hey, I gotta go, but we'll talk soon, yeah?”

“Yeah. Kouki's probably going to make me get a new phone later this week, I'll let you know the new number when I have it. I mean, unless my parents gave you a replacement for my phone.”
'No, they apparently decided that, since you're so independent now, you don't need to be on their phone plan anymore. Like I said, they're being pretty stupid. Yuta-nii really laid into them, but....'

“I ... I hope ... I mean, I still love them. I don't want this to ruin my relationship with them.”

“Worry about taking care of yourself right now, Kacchan. Yuta-nii says they'll come around eventually, just ... right now, focus on you, okay? Anyway, I gotta go for real, but soon, okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” Kana sighed, ending the call feeling worse than he had at the start. Why did his parents have to be acting this way?

“Come on, at least help me get your stuff sorted and put away?” Kouki murmured, surprising him with a kiss to the cheek. “And then maybe Italian for dinner?”

Kana nodded, uncertain how he was feeling about anything. Not for the first time, he wished he could turn back the clock, make things go back to the way they had been before coming to Tokyo. If only things could be fixed so easily.

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When the expected buzz came, Kana barely even twitched, he was so engrossed in his game. Shaking his head a little, Kouki ruffled his omega's hair fondly and went to the door. But while he had been expecting the two men standing at his door, he had not been expecting them to be carrying so little, and most of that in takeout bags.

“Please tell me there's more in the car,” he said softly, frowning.

“There's more in the car,” Higuchi echoed, mirth alight in his dark eyes. “Seriously, aniki's van is full of Kacchan's stuff, we just thought, given the time, dinner might be a little more interesting.

“Fair enough,” he said. “There should still be coffee if Kacchan hasn't drunk it all, if either of you two would be interested?” he asked, taking one of the takeout bags.

“I'll take some with dessert,” the alpha said with a nod. He looked ready to say more when he was interrupted.


“Hey angel,” Higuchi said, setting down the suitcases he had brought up and holding out his arms for a hug. Kana hesitated another moment, then practically flung himself at the other alpha, sobbing broken apologies. Kouki felt another spike of possessive jealousy, quickly shoved aside as he headed into the kitchen. Higuchi wasn't a threat, he was Kana's family and he really needed to get over these instinctive responses already.

“He looks terrible,” Chamu muttered, pulling large containers from his takeout bag. “What gives?”

“Fatigue. We were out most of the afternoon, between lunch with a friend of mine and shopping for more clothes for him. If I'd known you and Higuchi-san were going to do this....”

“This wasn't actually the plan,” Chamu replied, rubbing at the back of his neck a moment. “I mean, when Hayato-senpai and I went over to his house, it was just to ask if it would be okay to pack up a few of Kacchan's things to ship down to you here. In hindsight, maybe I should've gone by myself, but I wanted to pack up more than just what I could carry, you know?”

“I thought Hayato-kun was an old friend of yours?”
“He is! Well, I mean, we only know him because of Yuta-nii and Atsu-nii going to school together, but still, we’ve known him a long time. But he’s still an alpha and, well, Kacchan’s parents weren’t too thrilled with the idea of us going into Kana’s room. Which is when Yuta-nii got called in. We, uh, were just wanting him to calm them down, but then they started talking about coming down here and dragging Kacchan back to Fukui and forbidding him from even speaking to you anymore and.... Yeah. Yuta-nii kinda lost his temper with them. Big time. Like scared Hayato-senpai into calling in reinforcements lost his temper. We managed to get everything but Kacchan’s bedroom set out of there, but that’s probably only because Takashi-nii and Machiko-nee and Ryuichi-nii were there to help.”

“More family?” he asked, surveying the dinner that had appeared while Chamu had explained. Pasta with tomatoes and shellfish, chicken alfredo with greens and pasta, chopped salad, breadsticks, and tiramisu, all things Kouki recognized as being among Kana's favorites.

“Mm. Takashi-nii and Machiko-nee are Yuta-nii and Hayato-senpai’s older brother and sister and then Ryuichi-nii is Machiko-nee's mate. Takashi-nii helped keep things calm while the rest of us packed. And then once we had it all, well.... Hayato-senpai wanted to drive down with us, but he had work.”

The more Chamu explained, the less Kouki liked what he was hearing. What the hell was wrong with Kana’s parents? Wanting to protect a vulnerable omega son he could understand, but this went well beyond that. They were meddling in things they clearly didn't understand. At least Kana had thoughtful and strong allies beyond himself. It sounded a little bit like they just might be needed.

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Kana clung to Yutaka as he sobbed, apologies getting tangled in his throat. The alpha held him close, petting his hair.

“Hush now, angel, it's all right,” the alpha said softly, and that just made Kana cry even harder at first. And then he was being steered over to the couch and sat down, and somehow that gave him the strength to make the crying stop.

“I ... I'm so sorry, Yuta-nii,” he mumbled, leaning tiredly against him.

“For what, sweetheart?”

“You ... you were right all along. About Atsu-nii. And I ... I really thought the worst of you. You and Chamu-kun both. And you were just trying to help, just trying to give Kouki the whole picture.”

“... what happened to change your mind?” the alpha asked quietly, still stroking fingers through Kana’s hair.

“There's ... there's been nightmares,” the omega confessed, sniffing. “Flashbacks, I guess, at least in part. And one of Kouki's friends ... actually, I think ... I think at the end all three of them ... I don't know how it's possible, but it was like all three of them knew about Atsu-nii. It ... I think it happened at my first heat.”

“It's possible. Looking back at it, I'm still not sure when he did it, though the gods know I've spent the last three years trying to figure it out, but I just wasn't around you enough. And for that, I'm sorry. Hiro-kun and I ... we should've been able to protect you.”

“It ... it isn't your fault,” he stammered, blushing hard.
“Hey you two, come join us for dinner,” Kouki called out and Kana was actually a little surprised at the gentleness in his alpha's voice. Mostly because he knew Kouki still got flashes of jealousy where Yutaka was concerned. It was ... he wasn't sure quite what it was, but it gave him a warm tingly feeling thinking about it, so it wasn't really a bad thing, right? Maybe?

“So you mentioned a full van?” Kouki asked as they sat down to dinner.

“Mostly clothes, but yeah,” Yutaka said with a nod. “Clothes, laptop, TV, game consoles and games, skateboard, bike, art supplies, posters and wall scrolls ... pretty much everything but the bed, night stand, and dresser, actually.”

“We even packed up your secret porn stash~” Chamu added, grinning widely. Kana almost dropped his fork, blinking at them. Secret porn stash? What the hell was Chamu even talking about??

“I ... what? I don't...!”

“Hey there's nothing wrong with having a secret porn stash!” Chamu said, laughing. “I'm impressed, honestly. If I hadn't pulled that one drawer all the way out by mistake, I would have missed it. You should've told me~”

“... really, Chamu-kun, I have no idea what you're talking about. I don't ... I don't have anything like that.”

The realization seemed to hit everyone at once who had to be responsible: Atsushi. Just that quickly, the warm feeling turned to frozen lead in his stomach.

“... don't suppose you remember which box it is, Chamu-kun?” Kouki asked, though Kana could almost taste the resignation in his soulmate's tone and scent.

“Other than being the one marked as Kacchan's Happy Fun Time box, no,” the young beta replied with a shake of his head.

“We'll all keep an eye out for it then,” the blond alpha said, “and I'll ... take care of it.”

“W-what? No, I ... I can do it,” Kana mumbled, feeling himself turning bright red in embarrassment.

“No you won't,” his alpha insisted with a shake of his head. “I'm not triggering you like that again, not when it's so obvious how to prevent it. You have no idea what all is in that box and I doubt Chamu-kun sat there and did a detailed inventory of it.”

“Uh, yeah, no. just enough to know my boringly straight beta male ass wasn't that into it,” the teen said, looking almost apologetic. Such a frank discussion of this secret porn stash was making Kana's cheeks and ears burn even redder.

“So yes, after dinner, you can either sit on the couch or pick out a spot on our bed, Kacchan, but you're not helping carry anything or unpacking any boxes.”

“But -!”

“Doctor's orders, you're not allowed to lift anything heavier than a bowl of rice, remember?”

Pouting, Kana huffed and stabbed a forkful of salad extra hard. Kouki wasn't wrong about the doctor's orders, even if he was exaggerating a little bit, but it still felt wrong to him. Just because he
had no idea what sorts of things Atsushi would have given him....

“You don't have to pout so hard, love,” Kouki said softly, leaning over to brush a kiss to his temple. “And pouting isn't going to change my looking out for you. You might get me to give in now and again, yes, but not on something like this. I love you too much to allow it.”

The intimate moment was spoiled by a pair of soft “awws” from across the table, Kana's cheeks heating up yet again as he realized they were being watched.

“I better make sure I keep up with my dental health or you two are going to rot my teeth out completely while I'm living here,” Chamu quipped, grinning playfully. Kana blinked, then a cautious smile crossed his lips. This was such a change from how Chamu had spoken of Kouki even just a month ago, he still wasn't really used to it. Who knew getting blown up could have such a positive impact on his life?

Chapter End Notes

Cultural notes!

- Hayashi-sama and Sugihara-sama are probably obvious and Kano-sama is nicely ambiguous since both parties in that pairing use the Kano name.
- -dono is a way of denoting respect for someone of equal (high) rank to ones self. In other words, shorthand for me to indicate both Kouki and Hayashi are of high social rank, where Satsuki isn't.
- The use of Mamoko (a given name) and Fujisaki (a surname) is a bit of a mismatch. The implication is that Kana knew Mamoko a lot longer.
- While alphas of both sexes are packed off to alpha-only schools at around the age of ten, it's not uncommon for alpha females to return to their local mixed schools for high school. It is highly irregular for a male alpha to return to a mixed school before college but it does sometimes happen.
“Ah, my favorite non-corporate client~” Junji teased as he ushered them into his office. When Kouki had explained that this meeting was going to be at the lawyer's office, Kana had secretly been expecting some tiny space in an older office building, a suite with a waiting room and two offices at the most. He certainly hadn't expected the modern high-rise, the brass nameplate at the outer door, or the hallway with half a dozen different doors leading off of it. Or for Junji to be the senior partner, for that matter, complete with corner office with a stunning view of the city. Like a moth to a flame, he felt himself drawn to the floor to ceiling windows until he was almost nose to the glass.

“You'd think he'd never been in a skyscraper before,” the lawyer said in amusement. “We aren't even as high up here as Kou-kun's penthouse.”

“I know, I know,” he mumbled, rubbing at one reddening cheek, “but most of the buildings I've been in before? They didn't get any higher than five or six floors, if even that much. I'm not used to seeing the world from this angle.”

“Then you should definitely get this one to take you to Tokyo Tower some time. Just not on a major holiday - it's too popular as a romantic date site, you'd be lost in a sea of people,” the older omega said, grinning, before turning back to his desk.

“So I called your school this morning and after some faxing back and forth, we've sorted out your legal status and you're back on schedule to graduate in March. They would prefer it if you were actually at graduation, but if your health won't allow it, it won't allow it.”

“Wait, back on schedule?” Kouki asked, catching the odd phrase before Kana could ask himself.

“His parents had filed to have Kacchan's graduation put on hold, citing his injuries and inability to physically attend classes. Of course the school wasn't aware that they were no longer empowered to make such decisions, hence the faxing back and forth. The school agrees there is no reason why you shouldn't be allowed to graduate, academically speaking, especially with the end of the year being so close.”

“So just another attempt by my parents to control me,” Kana muttered, sullenly sinking into one of the chairs in front of Junji's desk. “I just wish I understood why they're even bothering. Like ... what do they think doing something like this is even going to accomplish? Going behind my back to the school, telling Chamu-kun they're going to come down here and drag me back to Fukui against my will...”

“... they said what??” Junji said, looking up sharply with a fierceness that was both startling and unexpected.
“Saturday, Chamu-kun took a friend with him to Kana's parents’ house to ask about sending Kana some more of his things. From what we were told, things got a bit out of hand. It's something else Kacchan may need your help with - officially changing his residency to Bunkyo,” Kouki explained.

“It's going to look weird, graduating from a high school in Fukui while being a registered resident of Tokyo,” the lawyer said, frowning. “I'll double check, but we should be safe not changing it until after March. Regardless, they can't just come down here and do that. That's kidnapping. And I can't say what they think they're going to accomplish with such actions, Kacchan. They certainly aren't going to undo the court order while making such threats.

“Ok, and if you can't make it back for graduation, your school will mail your papers to me here at the office, by the way. Even though your parents already have Kou-kun's address, I see no reason to be giving that information to anyone else at this point. And since you are still retaining my services as your attorney ... which reminds me, we need to discuss your medical wishes.”

“Medical wishes?” he parroted, frowning first at Junji, then at Kouki. “I'm allowed to make my own decisions now, aren't I? I mean, as far as treatment and stuff, right?”

“Yes, of course, sweetheart, I just meant in case something were to happen to hospitalize you again. As long as you're conscious, the hospital will have to listen to you, but if something more serious were to happen... I need to know what to tell them. For example, at what point do you want your parents notified?”

“I ... I don't know,” the omega confessed, sighing heavily and nervously rubbing his hands on his thighs. “I know if something happens ... if they come racing back here again, they're just going to try to take over everything and keep Kouki out of it, and that's definitely not what I want.”

“Have you thought about having a living will?” the lawyer asked.

“I ... I don't even know what that means,” he said, blushing again.

“A living will is a document that says how much doctors are allowed to do to save your life,” Kouki explained gently, sliding an arm around his shoulders from the other chair. “You don't really need to have one, most people don't, but being a responsible type, Junji-kun wants to make sure he knows how you feel about things like heroic measures or being diagnosed as being in a permanent vegetative state. You don't have to write anything down, he's just trying to be thorough.”

“I ... I don't know,” he repeated, trying not to squirm. It was such a morbid topic, he didn't really even want to think about it, though he could certainly understand why Junji was bringing it up with him. “Can't I just say I trust you and Kouki to do what's in my best interests?”

“You can,” his lawyer confirmed with a nod. “I admit, I was mostly asking in case you had particularly strong feelings about end of life care. I imagine you feel far too young to be thinking about these sorts of things, but considering what you've been through just in the last few months...”

Sighing heavily, Kana nodded. He understood Junji's reasoning, he really did, he just ... didn't like thinking about such things. About the possibility of coming close to death again so soon. He might be a legal adult, but a lot of the time he still felt like a kid. He didn't want to have to face his mortality any more than he already had.

“Don't worry about it, sweetheart,” the older omega said, smiling warmly. “What you've said is enough guidance. And I may not be legally required to, but you know I'll talk with Kouki about
anything and everything, even if you two aren't officially mated yet.”

“Thank you,” he said, a sense of relief sweeping over him. “That ... that's what I'd be worried about most - that he was being left out of the loop because we weren't technically mated yet.”

“And I promise, Juju, we'll get you a phone number for this one by the end of the week.”

“I wasn't going to mention it!” the lawyer protested, laughing as he got up from his desk again. “I know Kacchan's still in recovery. You're allowed to take whatever time you need, no matter how much I tease you, okay, hon? I know I can always reach you through this one, so it's not a rush.”

“I know,” Kana said, returning the omega's hug. “Thank you, sensei. For everything.”

“I'd say I'm just doing my job, but I'd be lying,” he replied, chuckling. “Being an omega advocate is my real passion, this corporate stuff is just what I do to keep the bills paid. And to keep my sanity.”

As much as Kana wasn't entirely sure he understood what Junji meant, he still nodded along and hugged him tight again. He was just glad to have the man on his side.

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Kana had tried not to think about what this appointment was going to mean, but sitting in the waiting room filling out a medical history report had made it a lot harder to ignore. He hated having his annual exams, but somehow this felt like it was going to be worse than usual. And the feeling was most definitely not helped by the fact that he didn't know this doctor at all. When a beta nurse called his name, he froze a moment, squeezing Kouki's hand even harder. A nudge and he got to his feet, not letting go for a moment.

“Kobayashi-kun?” she asked again, frowning at the two of them.

“That's me,” he said, nodding.

“I'm sorry but your ... escort? Can't come back with you.”

“But...,” Kana started, glancing over at his soulmate.

“It's the rules, I'm sorry.”

Kana hesitated again, suddenly wondering if maybe they shouldn't just cancel and find another, more understanding doctor. Glancing up at his alpha again, he was a little surprised to see the man taking in deep breaths of the air around him. And then the blond nodded and squeezed his hand reassuringly.

“It's all right, Kacchan. I'll be right here if you need me.”

He wasn't feeling all that reassured, but knowing he had Kouki's support made it a little easier to let go of his hand and follow the nurse out of the waiting room. She stopped him partway down the hall at a set of scales, noting down height and a weight that seemed a bit high to him before escorting him the rest of the way to an exam room that was uncompromisingly sterile, all off-white and stainless steel.

“There's a paper gown on the table, go ahead and change into that and have a seat, the doctor will be in to see you shortly.”

His nerves weren't particularly liking any of this, but he made himself take a deep breath and
change. Only to find the disposable gown was far too short for his comfort, leaving him feeling terribly exposed as he sat on the exam table, waiting for the doctor. Kana wasn't sure how long he was left to wait before the doctor finally came in, a beta at least fifteen years older than his Kouki with greying hair and a bit of a spare tire.

“Kobayashi-kun? Hello, I'm Doctor Iwasa. It says here you set up an appointment for a wellness check, but since you're a new patient, I'll need to do a bit more than that.”

“I... why?” he stammered, once again wishing Kouki could be there with him. “I... I'm not due for my annual for another four months...”

“It's not anything to be overly concerned with, Kobayashi-kun,” the beta said, gesturing dismissively even as he pulled a wheeled stool over beside the exam table. “Blood pressure, listening to your heart and lungs, reflexes, full blood panel, that sort of thing. It lets me have a better baseline for your chart. Besides, if we do it all now, you won't need to come back in four months to have it all done then, yes?”

Hard to argue with that logic. The doctor smiled again, but something about it didn't make Kana feel even the least bit better. He took a deep breath, surprised when he picked up a hint of Kouki's scent in the air. Well, the alpha was only a few rooms away. Maybe... maybe things really were just fine.

The stethoscope was cold against his skin, but he didn't complain, taking deep breaths as directed. Kouki's scent was still faint, but it was enough to reassure him that his soulmate was close. And if he could scent Kouki, that meant the alpha could scent him, as well. It wasn't much, but....

“All right, well, so far so good. I just need to find out what's keeping my nurse and we can get to the rest of this exam.”

Kana watched the man walk out of the room, completely confused. His pediatrician had never needed an assistant for Kana's previous exams. Then again, his pediatrician had never put him in a paper gown this short, either. He stayed very carefully settled on the exam table, wondering what was going to happen next. The return of the doctor with a young beta woman nurse and a cart of strange equipment didn't make him feel any better.

“All right, Kobayashi-kun,” the doctor said as he started pulling some sort of supports out of the foot of the exam table. “Lay back and put your feet in each of these. I need to do a pelvic and an ultrasound, since your surgeon noted concerns about possible scarring. It's probably going to feel a bit uncomfortable, but it certainly shouldn't hurt.”

Something in Kana started bubbling up panic, his body freezing up and refusing to move. He wasn't even sure what exactly it was the doctor was intending to do to him, but he didn't want it.

“It's all right, Kobayashi-kun. We've even warmed up the probe and speculum for you.”

He had no idea what those words meant, let alone why the two were giving him those expectant looks.

“Ah, Sensei? I don't think he's had a pelvic before,” the nurse said. “It's easy, Kobayashi-kun,” she continued, moving around the table as she explained. “You lay back on the exam table, then you put one foot here and the other here so it's easier to insert the speculum. Then there's a sort of pinching when he takes the swab. The probe's also going to feel uncomfortable, but you're with an alpha, so it won't be anything you aren't used to.”
She had been manhandling him while she was talking, getting him into the position the doctor wanted, but the more she talked, the less he liked what he was hearing. And the casual way these two just assumed he was having sex with Kouki, it was ... it was ... it was crass! He scooted back from the end of the table, pulling his legs up to his chest.

“I ... I'm not...!”

“Of course you are,” the doctor said with a dismissive noise. “Come now, stop being silly. These tests need to be done, you're wasting time. Nurse.”

“No. No, I don't....”

“You're only delaying the inevitable, young man. Now please put your feet back in the stirrups and let's get on with this, shall we?”

Shaking his head, he tried to ease off the table, only to find the nurse stopping him. Something pricked his skin and within moments he felt a bonelessness washing over him.

“Thank you, nurse. Please get him back into position,” the doctor said, no longer even bothering to speak to Kana directly. Kana tried to struggle against the weakness stealing through him, but his body didn't want to respond. This was wrong, this was completely wrong. They had no right to be treating him like this.

The feel of unfamiliar hands tugging on his boxers was enough to push the panic into a full bloom of terror. Memories flashed behind his eyes, of rough hands and helplessness and being pinned down as a dark shape hunkered over him. He tried to scream, but it caught in a gurgle in his throat. He tried to escape, but he couldn't move. Hands held his legs apart and something hard and unforgiving was being pushed into his body. Kouki. He needed Kouki. Kouki would protect him, save him. If he could just call out for his mate....

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Kouki could scent the first traces of Kana's agitation, though they weren't very strong. Well, he had been expecting that, especially since he hadn't been allowed to go back with him. Telling himself that it was normal, he forced himself to stay in his seat. But the scent was getting worse, stronger as Kana's agitation continued and grew even deeper. What were they doing back there?

The sharp, sour scent of his soulmate's panic hit him like a hammer. He was through the door and into the back halls of the clinic with no memory of even leaving his chair, ignoring the protesting betas behind him as he let his nose guide him. With a snarl, he burst into the exam room, rage coloring his vision at the realization that his omega was practically naked and drugged to the gills.

“What the fuck do you think you're doing?!” he demanded, not that he really cared what excuses these people were likely to make. “Get out. Get the fuck out right now before I fucking kill you.”

A part of him was surprised when the betas complied without arguing. The larger part was focused entirely on his omega, tugging him into a tight embrace for a moment before kissing his forehead. Kana was clearly dissociating badly, so rather than wasting time trying to get him to dress himself, Kouki hurriedly pulled the teen's clothes back on him, then scooped him up into his arms. With a heartbreaking sob, Kana shifted and pressed his face into Kouki's chest.

“Shh, it's all right, baby, I'm here now,” he murmured, kissing his hair before walking out of the exam room. The whole clinic was in a state, but Kouki ignored it.

“Excuse me, you can't just –!”
“We're leaving. You'll be hearing from my lawyer later,” he snarled, not even pausing as he walked out of the clinic and back to his car. He didn't even bother trying to put Kana in the front passenger seat, instead opening the rear so he could keep holding him. He then used the car's voice-activated system to call Junji's office. Naturally, his friend was in a meeting, the secretary routing him to Tomoya instead.

“Kouki-kun?”

“Tomoyan, I need a favor. Honestly, I need Juju, I don't think Kacchan can take another alpha being anywhere near him right now.”

“Eh? What happened??”

“I'm not sure, exactly, they wouldn't let me go into the exam room with him,” he said, steadily stroking Kana's hair in hopes that it would somehow help. “But they drugged him up pretty heavily and he panicked himself into a dissociated state. I want charges filed and I need someone to drive us back to my place.”

“Fucking hell. All right, I'll let Junji know. I think I can get him out of his current meeting and to you in ... twenty minutes? If I can't, I'll have Kou-chan meet you, though he might need a little more time to get there. Er, where are you parked anyway?”

Kouki gave his friend the garage address and his car's berth, thanking him again for his help before ending the call. He could feel the adrenaline fading now that the crisis moment had passed. With a deep breath, he drew Kana even closer, but the teen's scent was all wrong. The drugs and the omega's own terror stood like a heavy wall between them. That all too familiar itch was back, but he resolutely shoved it aside.

“It's all right, Kana-love,” he murmured, pressing another kiss to his hair. “I'm so sorry, baby. I'm sorry I keep failing you. But I'm here now, love. I won't make that same mistake again, I won't let anyone separate us again.”

No response, but at this point he couldn't say he had really been expecting one. Not sure what else he could do, he sank back into the rear bench with a low sigh and simply held his soulmate close. It wasn't much, but for the moment it was all that he had.

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Koudai gave himself a little shake, then opened the rear passenger-side door, only to be immediately assaulted by Kana's terror. Coughing, he stepped back and waved a hand in front of his face a moment. Honestly, some alphas really had no sense at all. A deep inhale and he held his breath as he leaned into the car cabin again.

“Want me to take him or...?”

With a shake of his head, Kouki handed over his keys. A nod and Koudai shut the door, rounding the car to settle behind the wheel. As soon as he had the car started, he turned the fans on to full.

“It's going to be a bit chilly, but I have to get the air cleared,” he explained, even if he didn't really think that Kana was absorbing a word of it. Whatever had happened, the young omega was locked inside his own fear and a heavy dose of sedatives, though hopefully clearing the air would help. And when this was all over, he was going to find that doctor and tear his head off. And then slap Kouki around for not just asking him for a recommendation in the first place.

Kana was restlessly asleep still when they got back to Kouki's penthouse. Watching the alpha
“I’ll handle this, you go be useful and make tea. And he'll definitely need comfort food for dinner. And if you need to call Junji-senpai again, go out onto the terrace to do it,” he scolded firmly.

Koudai kept an eye on the alpha for a moment, then took another deep breath, slipping Kana's head onto his lap as he settled on the couch. Humming softly, he carded fingers through Kana's hair and waited. He couldn't tell just from scent how heavy a dose Kana had been given, so he couldn't say how long the young omega would be knocked out, but it didn't really matter. This wasn't the first time he'd had to leave the gallery in his assistant's hands for an afternoon; Airu would be fine.

Still, he couldn't say he was terribly surprised when Kouki came and crouched down in front of the couch after a few minutes, tea set out behind him. Though it worried him a little to see the way the blond hesitated to even touch his sleeping soulmate.

“Kou-kun, have a cup of tea and try to relax,” he suggested softly. “I wouldn't expect them to have given him anything strong enough to keep him asleep for more than an hour or two, but then I wouldn't have expected him to be drugged at all, not for just a routine check. Either way, fretting isn't going to help.”

“I failed him, Hachi. Again.”

“Don't say such ridiculous things,” he muttered, frowning at the blond alpha. Some days he felt like he had known Kouki all his life. Other days he felt like he hardly knew the blond at all.

“I promised him he would always be safe with me, but what's happened since we've met?” Kouki countered, frowning. “He's had to dump an unexpected early heat. He's been blown up and hospitalized. His parents have practically disowned him because he won't bend to their will anymore. My own grandfather surprised him, scared him to death for no reason, and then all but declared that Kana would never be accepted. He's had repeated nightmares of things Atsushi may or may not have actually done to him, including at least one rape. He didn't want to go to the doctor, this was all my doing, and then the doctor assaults him! I'm ruining his life!”

“Kouki, you're being an idiot, that's what you're being,” Koudai growled quietly, wary of waking Kana. “You had no idea you would meet your soulmate that day and you're certainly not responsible for how our biologies work. The bombing was the work of an Islamist nutbag, nothing to do with you at all. How his parents have reacted to that? Also not your fault, even if his ability to defy them is rooted in his faith in you. And you're not responsible for your grandfather being a fundamentalist pig, either. You aren't responsible for any of the things you've said, other than trusting Sensei to recommend a competent doctor, and that's something any of us would have done.”

“But....”

“You aren't ruining him, Kou-kun,” he murmured, eyes dropping to the troubled expression on Kana's face. “I won't say he isn't going through a rough patch, but you aren't ruining anything.”

Impulsively, Koudai reached out for Kouki's hand, holding it over Kana's chest. The change was almost immediate, the young omega's face relaxing as the pain seemed to fade. Others could doubt the soulmate bond between these two as much as they wanted, but this was hard evidence.

“He trusts you. Even like this, he knows you'll do everything you can to make things better, to take care of him,” he said softly, glancing up at the blond alpha still crouched in front of him. “So don't you dare give up so easily.”
The scandalized expression was worth everything and Koudai couldn't hold back a small smile.

“I ... I need to make some calls. Are you...?”

“Mm, we'll be fine, you go make sure Junji-senpai has pressed charges. And then tear a strip off Sensei for making such a bad recommendation. And the next time you want a doctor for Kacchan, how about asking one of us omegas instead first, hmm?”

He tried to keep to a strict look, but the abashed way Kouki fumbled and apologized was almost too cute to resist.

“He might not have a lick of sense when it comes to these things sometimes,” he murmured to the omega still asleep on his lap, watching Kouki step out onto the terrace, “but he has a good heart. So don't you give up so easily either, little brother.”

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Bundled against the winter chill, Kouki flung himself into one of the terrace chairs as he waited for Junji's secretary to pick up again. He had a fresh cigarette lit by then and she only took the time to confirm it was him before she routed him to Tomoya's line again.

“Tomoyan....”

“Yes, yeah, I know, I'm on my way over there right now, actually. Well, as soon as I get off the phone with you. I forgot we've got one of our other big clients coming into the office today, he has to be here to deal with that, so you're stuck with me. But he already contacted the police and there should be an inspector on his way to take Kana's statement. Which is why I'm headed your way, actually. And we've filed a complaint with the national medical board. How is he, by the way? Kacchan, I mean.”

“Whatever they gave him, he's unconscious now. Hachi's stting with him.”

“Poor kid. All right, I'm done here, give me ten minutes and I'll be at your place. If the inspector gets there first ... stall him? I dunno, it probably won't be a problem, the cops don't usually move too fast for a case of an omega complaining of assault.”

“You're not making me feel any better about any of this, Tomoyan.”

“Yes, well, it is what it is, Kou-kun. As a credible witness, Kacchan's already got two strikes against him. You know how much the prosecutor's office hates handling these sorts of cases.”

Kouki huffed in annoyance, but he couldn't really argue the point. Their society had made a few strides forward in restoring omega rights, but too much of the legal system was still built on imported prejudices. And too many alpha males, the ones most likely to benefit from the oppressive system, still held too many positions crucial to getting changes made. Change would come, in time - there were too many people like Junji and Tomoya and even Kouki himself working to right the imbalance for it to persist forever - but in the meantime....

Ending the call with Tomoya, he dialed Mitsuki's number, but couldn't say he was surprised when it went straight to voicemail. He was surprised that, even with selecting the urgent message option, it still took the surgeon the rest of his cigarette to return his call.

“Kou? What's up?”

“That doctor you recommended ... what did you do, pick his name out of a hat or something??”
"Iwasa-sensei? One of the surgical nurses recommended him, actually. Why?"

“We're filing malpractice and medical assault charges against him. They wouldn't let me go back with Kacchan, so I don't know the whole context, but he drugged my omega into a stupor, setting off a massive panic attack.”

“What?! Fucking hell ... is he okay??”

“What do you think?” he snarled, lighting up a second cigarette.

“Kouki. I'm sorry, I had no idea.”

Kouki huffed again, but he had to admit that nothing in this situation was actually Mitsuki’s fault. That asshole beta was probably perfectly respectable around most of his other patients. But an omega male? Well omega males were nothing more than incubators and sex toys, why bother treating them like human beings?

“Kou, I'm sorry. I thought a doctor in Bunkyo would be easiest for you and Kacchan both, otherwise I would've sent you to Mahi's doctor in Hino.”

He was all set to go on an additional rant when a tapping at the glass caught his attention. Glancing over his shoulder, he was surprised to see a frowning Koudai gesturing for him to come inside.

“We'll talk about it later, I've got to take care of something, just... I'll call you back later,” he grumbled, hanging up and stubbing out his cigarette. Stepping back into the apartment, he was about to ask Koudai what was wrong when he caught the scent of an unfamiliar alpha, albeit not one standing inside the apartment with them.

“Police inspector,” the omega said with a frown. “I told him you would talk to him in the hall, He wasn't that keen on waiting, but it's not like he could force his way into a private residence.”

“All right, I'll handle it, just take care of Kana for me,” he said, briefly squeezing his friend's shoulder before moving past him to the front door. The alpha waiting in the hall looked to be fairly young, probably only just made inspector. If he was the junior-most member of the department, it made sense for him to have been dispatched on what his superiors probably saw as little better than a nuisance call. If that was the case, he could almost feel bad for the guy who had probably come right over thinking a prompt response would make him look better to his superiors.

“But in the interest of preserving evidence....”

The elevator chime spared them from more awkward conversation, a slightly harried-looking Tomoya stepping out of the car.

“Ah, Inspector,” the lawyer said, offering a polite bow. “Here to take Kobayashi-kun's statement?”
“Are you his lawyer then?”

“For today, yes,” Tomoya replied with a firm nod.

“Then perhaps you can explain to me why your client isn't being seen by a medical professional who could corroborate his statement that he was attacked and unlawfully drugged,” the young officer said, a frown creasing his forehead. Kouki and Tomoya exchanged a startled glance and Kouki found himself wondering if perhaps no one had bothered to tell the new inspector that the complainant was a teenaged male omega. Would he still be so eager to do everything by the book when he found out?

“Well, as you can see, I've only just gotten here myself. But if you'll give me a few minutes to confer with my client and then perhaps you could escort us to Tokyo Teishin Hospital? You did come by car, yes?”

“Well yes, but I don't know....”

“You would only be transporting myself and my client. And possibly... probably my client's elder brother. Morihito-san here will follow in his own vehicle,” Tomoya explained smoothly.

“Elder brother? That's a bit....”

“Not a lot of experience with omegas, inspector?” Tomoya said with a lopsided grin. “Trust me, there's about a snowball's chance in hell that we could separate the two right now. But let me go in and talk to them and see what the situation is, all right? Five minutes and we'll go to the hospital with you.”

Kouki had to admire the easy way his friend handled the young officer, the darker alpha slipping past him into the penthouse before the inspector could protest. He wasn't sure how much good any of this would do in the long run, of course, but for now he was willing to go along with it. Especially if there was even the chance of it helping Kana's self-esteem.

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Koudai glanced up as his soulmate walked into the apartment, relief washing through him. A brief kiss and then Tomoya was circling the couch to crouch down in front of them.

“Can you wake him?”

“Probably. Kou-kun could do it better, but....”

“The inspector wants him seen by a doctor so they can do the blood work to show how much and with what he was dosed,” his mate explained softly. “I agree it's a good idea, even if it's not likely to do any good in the long run, but Kana-kun needs to consent to it. And I already warned the inspector that you weren't going to be moved from Kana-kun's side.”

“And just which hospital did you have in mind??” he demanded, frowning at his mate.

“Tokyo Teishin, of course. I'm not a complete idiot, love,” his alpha replied with that same crooked smile that had first caught Koudai's affections. A nod and he started gently nudging the young omega still using his lap as a pillow. Kana was groggy as he tried to flail awake and Koudai stroked his hair.

“Shh, it's all right, Kacchan, Tomoyan's here to talk to you, though.”
“Dun wanna,” the teenager mumbled, half-heartedly swiping at the air.

“I know you just want to sleep it off, kiddo,” Tomoya said gently, hesitantly reaching out to brush a stray lock of hair back from the omega's face. “But it would really help to have the blood work done, before you metabolize the drugs completely. We'll take you to a safe place, Koudai will be by your side the whole time, okay?”

“Wan' Kouki,” the omega mumbled, managing a bleary look in Tomoya's direction. Koudai worried at how little reaction Kana showed to the alpha's touch; as strongly as he had reacted to Kumiko last week, he could only see it as a bad sign. But of what, he was less certain.

“Him, too, and me, the whole time the inspector is with you. You have my word. Can you walk?”

Kana struggled to get up, but his legs obviously weren't interested in obeying and the omega collapsed in on himself with a low whine.

“Shh, it's all right, Kacchan. Just hang on to me and I'll carry you, okay?”

Watching his mate with Kana, Koudai couldn't help a small smile. Somehow or another, they would make things okay again. For all of them.
The Micro-Tyrant

Chapter Notes

warning: implied non-con

... ok, it's a framing problem, really, but yes, the flashback in this chapter reads an awful lot like a rape, and while Kana thinks about the flashback after it appears in the text, he doesn't do so explicitly, so the flashback is probably the only part you'd need to skip if you feel the need. (It's fine, you can skip it, promise).

Cast List Appendix should be current for all major, recurring characters, though OCs still need faces. Kinda had other things on my plate lately. :p And yes, Hasegawa and Yamashita are the rumored surnames of Tomoya and Koud respectively. Whether it's true or not, I needed surnames, soooo.... *shrug*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kana wasn't sure how many times he had actually woken and then fallen back to sleep since being attacked in the clinic. He wasn't even sure where he was now, but he could recognize the scents of his alpha and Koudai and Tomoya and another omega he couldn't completely remember. With so many familiar scents, he had to be somewhere safe, right? Unless this was all just another dream. He wasn't sure he cared for that thought or wanted to wake enough to see if it was true or not.

"It's all right, Kobayashi-kun, I promise, you're quite safe here."

Blinking, he was surprised to see the nurse from his last hospital stay smiling at him.

"Sawa-san...."

"They asked me to come down so you'd have a familiar face to talk to you about things,” she said, offering him a bright smile. “How are you feeling?”

"Still fuzzy,” he mumbled, a little surprised when both the nurse and Koudai moved to help him the instant he started trying to sit up. Frustratingly, he wasn't sure he would have managed it without their help.

“I'm not surprised. The doctor said you got dosed enough for an alpha half again your size,” the nurse said and was that a note of disgust in her voice? “There's a police inspector waiting outside to take your statement, by the way. If you're ready, I can call him in now? Once you've spoken with him, we can talk about getting you discharged.”

“Do ... do I have to?” he asked, glancing around for Tomoya and Kouki. “Talk to the inspector, I mean.”

“It's not required, no,” the lawyer said, moving up to stand beside his own mate. “Once you sign off on it, your medical records will carry more legal weight than your personal statement anyway. But if you can give a personal statement, that might help the prosecutor feel more inclined to pursue the matter.”

He could tell from the scents in the room that no one really thought it was going to matter much
one way or the other. Well, why would it? Why should some city prosecutor care if an omega was attacked? It wasn't like he was seriously injured or force bitten or anything. Just a doctor showing a lapse in judgement with a male omega patient, big deal.

Kana was startled by Koudai taking one of his hands in both of his.

“It's up to you, sweetheart,” the omega said gently, “but telling the inspector what happened might be helpful. Not just for yourself. And we'll all be right here with you, you won't have to do it alone, no matter what the inspector says.”

A shaky inhale and Kana nodded.

“Okay. Okay, I'll talk to him.”

He couldn't have said what he had been expecting, exactly, but the young alpha that walked into his room a few moments later wasn't it. He looked very professional with his crisp uniform, white gloves tucked into his belt. He also looked quite young, younger than even Yutaka, and Kana felt his confidence waver.

“Kobayashi-kun, I'm Inspector Kawaguchi. I realize this has been a difficult day for you, but if you could give me a report of the incident, as best you can recall, it would be helpful to the investigation. With your permission, I'll record your statement and then you and your lawyer can come to the station in a day or two to sign off on the transcription.”

Kana glanced over at Tomoya, getting a small nod of reassurance from the alpha. He wasn't sure if this was standard procedure or not, but if Tomoya was okay with it, he wouldn't argue. Instead he took another deep breath and did his best to tell the inspector everything that had happened from the moment he had been separated from Kouki. Whether he was doing it right or not, the inspector didn't stop him or correct him or even interrupt him, waiting for Kana to finish before asking a few questions where he wasn't confident he was clear on the order of events. When he was satisfied, the inspector turned off his recorder.

“Thank you, Kobayashi-kun. I admit, I don't know how much good it will do, but thank you. And I'm sorry you've had to go through this. Morihito-san, Hasegawa-san, Yamashita-san.”

Kana watched the inspector leave, not sure how to interpret his parting comment. Maybe the inspector was trying to keep his expectations low so he wouldn't be disappointed when nothing was really done to the doctor? Well, joke was on him, Kana had no illusions that anything substantive was really going to come out of this. Iwasa might face a fine, but if anything more than that happened, that would be the real surprise. A slap on the wrist, a scolding to be more respectful of omega patients, maybe a negative rating on the internet, but other than that....

“Don't worry about it,” Kouki said. “Feel like you can walk yet?”

“Tired,” he mumbled. “Just wanna go.”

“Let me double check, but I'm pretty sure you're clear to be discharged now that you've spoken with the inspector,” his nurse said, squeezing his free hand briefly. He really hoped they would let him go home now. He felt like he could sleep for a hundred years he was so tired. And he was definitely sure Tomoya and Koudai had better things to do than to be stuck hanging around a hospital because of him.

“You aren't a burden, little brother,” the older omega scolded softly, an unaccountable fondness in his smile. These two had adopted him so easily, it was more than a little overwhelming.
“Family means no one gets left behind,” the redhead said with a wry grin, as if reading Kana's thoughts. “After this many years, Kou-kun is family. And now so are you, no matter what idiotic things his grandfather said to you.”

Kana couldn't bear it anymore, closing his eyes as tears trickled down his cheeks. Maybe Koudai was right, but even if he was wrong, even if this was all doomed to come crashing down around him, he would be a fool not to cling to it for as long as he could.

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“Right, where is he?”

Kana pulled himself upright at the sound of someone pushing past Kouki. Kurosaki Mahiro. His breath hitched in his chest as the tiny omega, dressed more casually this time and yet still breathtakingly beautiful and elegant, marched right over to the couch, catching Kana's chin in his hand. The older omega leaned in and took a few careful sniffs, then let him go with a snort of disgust.

“Philistines. And people wonder why, since they outnumber us so much, there aren't more betas in positions of power,” Kurosaki said with a click of his tongue. “What are you drinking? Soda? Tch, that's not going to make anything better. Water, that's what you need. Or tea. And when's the last time you ate?”

“My throat...,” he started, stumbling to a stop when the other omega waved him off.

“Right, they would have pumped your stomach at the hospital. Soup it is, then. I'll just go wrangle your alpha into being helpful for a change,” the omega said, a mischievous grin appearing briefly. “Kouki! Why aren't you making him tea and soup??!! Why are all you alphas so useless when it comes to taking care of people??”

“I dare say your mate does a better than fair enough job of it,” Kouki said as he walked into the room.

“Would that be the same idiot bonehead alpha who referred you to a beta gynecologist??” the tiny spitfire sneered. “And that one! No business being in medicine with that sort of attitude, but especially not in a position to be treating young omegas! Drugging a teenager like that! He's just lucky I'm too busy to go down there and feed him his useless ballsack personally!!”

In spite of himself, Kana found himself snickering at the omega's tirade. And at the way his own alpha was holding up his hands in an effort to appease him, backing away into the kitchen even as Kurosaki advanced on him. While he knew it wouldn't ever actually happen, it eased a tightness in his chest, imagining the other omega going after those who had hurt him.

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Mahiro glanced back over his shoulder as he paused at the kitchen threshold, allowing himself a small smile at the way Kana was giggling quietly on the couch. Good. Teenagers were generally pretty resilient, but with everything else Kana had been through already in his short life, Mahiro had been genuinely worried he might not be able to bounce back so easily. It was why he had come as soon as his ashamed mate had told him about the incident.

“Hey Hachi,” he said softly as he stepped into the kitchen, glad to see the other omega. “So if you're still here with him, what's he doing drinking Coke??”

“Because he's a caffeine addict, same as any other teenager his age, and when I asked him what he
wanted, that's what he asked for,” the redhead replied with a casual shrug. “One Coke isn't going to
hurt anything, Maru, and I've got a replacement lunch just about ready for him.”

“All right, I guess that's fair,” he agreed before turning on his heel to glower up at Kouki. “I'm
staying here tonight. And tomorrow. And maybe even the whole rest of the week if he needs it. I
know you said you were taking time from the office, but I also know you still need to work at least
a couple hours a day while you're home with him. Hachi has that big opening next week, so
obviously he can't be taking the days to stay with him.”

“Maru....”

“He needs to spend more time with omegas. All kinds of omegas. Trust me.”

“Of course I trust you, Maru,” Kouki replied, “but you don't have to do this.”

“What is it you guys are always saying to me? Ohana means family and family means no one gets
left behind?” he countered, crossing his arms over his chest. “You're my family, too, you stubborn
ox. We do what needs to be done to take care of family.”

He could tell Koudai was practically bursting with the urge to laugh, lips twitching as he made up a
tray with bowls of miso, rice, and a cup of what looked like chawanmushi. Food that would be easy
on Kana's sore throat and abused system.

“All right, all right,” Kouki said, holding up his hands again in a placating gesture. “I'm just saying ...
I can only imagine how hard this must be for you.”

“No, you can't,” Mahiro said, shaking his head. “But just because a thing is difficult, that doesn't
mean you don't do it. I'll be fine. And Kana needs the support.”

Nodding, the alpha took the meal tray from Koudai and made good his escape.

“If it gets to be too much, aniki....”

“Don't start, Hachi,” he muttered, shooting a quick glower at the younger omega.

“I'm not starting,” the other omega replied, a familiar stubbornness settling into his features, “I'm
offering. If it gets to be too hard ... Airu-kun can manage without me.”

“Taking care of Kana isn't the hard part of all this, Hachi,” he said with a shake of his head, before
a gallows grin found its way to his lips. “Well, the not being able to cook part could make it a little
hard.”

“Yeah, no, Kou-kun won't appreciate it if you two burn out his kitchen.”

“One kitchen fire was plenty for me, thanks,” he replied with a sardonic snort. “Really, Hachi, I'll
be fine. We'll be fine. You'll see.”

Koudai hummed a little, but it wasn't terribly convincing. Huffing another sigh, Mahiro checked
through the pantry to see what all else might be needed for dinner, making a mental note to stop by
Takamizawa-sensei's pharmacy while he was out to get his recommendation for a good tea. And
smiled a little at the realization that, even if the prosecutor's office declined to proceed with Kana's
case, Tokyo's omega network would find their own way of shutting down the shithead who had
dared to attack their newest little brother.

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Kana reluctantly pulled himself out of sleep when he realized the bed was empty. He was more than a little afraid to find he was alone again, until he realized he was smelling grilled fish again. And more importantly, fresh coffee. Shrugging into the fluffy bathrobe Kouki had insisted on buying for him, he shuffled out of the bedroom, stopping short again at the sight of Kurosaki perched at their breakfast bar. While Kana had managed to stay awake long enough to have dinner with everyone, Koudai had shuffled him off to bed shortly afterwards. Somehow, he had just assumed everyone had gone home after that. Or had Kurosaki come back for some reason?

“K-Kurosaki-sama,” he stammered, not quite sure what to do with himself.

“Tch, so formal. Mahiro-nii or aniki will do just fine, Kacchan,” the older omega said, smiling gently. “Kou-kun's fixing you coffee and breakfast, although this late it's more like lunch.”

“I ... did I really sleep that much?” he stammered, unnerved to glance out the glass wall at the far end of the great room and see bright daylight. What time was it anyway?

“Half past eleven,” Kouki said from inside the kitchen, setting a coffee mug on the breakfast bar at one of the empty stools. “Maru was with you while I went out this morning, so you weren't alone.”

“Between that and the drugs in your system, it's no surprise, really, that you slept so long,” the older omega agreed. “How do you feel?”

“Dirty,” he mumbled without thinking, settling at the breakfast bar and taking a cautious sip. Freshly brewed and perfectly sweetened.

“Well, I picked up more of the waterproof bandages last night, though Takamizawa-sensei says you shouldn't soak for more than twenty or thirty minutes,” Mahiro said, offering him another gentle smile. “He also mixed up a special herbal tea that he wants you to drink two cups a day to help balance your system and help you recover more quickly.”

“I thought you said he was a pharmacist, not an herbalist,” he said, frowning and sipping his coffee again.

“He's both. Takamizawa-sensei studied Traditional Chinese Medicine at an accredited school on the mainland in the late 70s, he's kept up his credentials in both for decades,” Mahiro explained. “He's a strong proponent of a combined approach, has been for years. Traditional Chinese Medicine doesn't have answers for everything, but on the other hand, Western pharmaceuticals have a habit of leaving the body out of balance. By blending the two together, he says he gets much better results for his patients.”

“And he can do that? As just a pharmacist?”

“Well obviously he can't write prescriptions for drugs or anything, but when people come in with prescriptions from their own doctors, he can suggest and offer complementary herbal treatments that won't interact negatively with what the person is being ordered to take. And he knows all the interactions and interdictions since that's his job as pharmacist, so it works out pretty well.”

Honestly, Kana was in poor position to argue, knowing very little about either types of medicine. He was still a bit skeptical about this tea he was supposed to be drinking, especially since his own experience with herbals teas was that they tended to be bitter as hell.

“He packaged it with precise instructions on how to brew it and a note not to sweeten it with cane sugar, only raw honey,” Mahiro explained. “I'll show you after brunch, then you can have a cup while you take your bath.”
Well that didn't sound so bad. And since it was pretty clear to him that he wasn't going to be given the option of saying no.... Though he did wonder how long Mahiro intended to stay with them. Surely the omega had a life of his own, something more important than doting on him. All the other omegas he had met since coming to Tokyo had proven to have more extensive lives than Kana had grown up expecting was possible for an omega. Hikaru with his full-time barista job. Junji the senior corporate law partner. Koudai the high-end gallery manager. He couldn't recall anyone telling him what it was Mahiro did when he wasn't doting on his mate, but there had to be something.

“So I was thinking,” Kouki said into the conversational lull, “today is obviously a stay at home kind of day, but maybe tomorrow we could go out and pick you up a new phone? If you're feeling up to it.”

“I ... I don't know,” he mumbled, glancing between the two older men, then frowning down at his bowl of rice. It was something that needed to get done, and he knew that, but he was still reluctant. As if, by letting Kouki buy him a new phone, he was cutting yet another tie with his parents. Even if this was one they had already severed themselves.

“There's no rush, no reason it has to be tomorrow,” Kouki said, as relaxed and cheerful as ever. “We can wait for later in the week if you want, it's no problem.”

“That ... that might be better, yeah” he said softly, poking his food with little appetite. He knew he needed to eat, he could practically feel those words hanging in the air, the worry in both his soulmate and the omega perched next to him, but actually getting his body to agree with that....

“You don't have to finish everything,” Mahiro said softly, reaching out to squeeze his shoulder gently in support. “Eat what you can, but don't force it.”

The support helped and he mumbled an assent before finishing his miso. Maybe he would finish the fish, too. Fish was supposed to be good for the body, right? And he would feel bad if it were to go to waste because of his stupid body not wanting to cooperate. Especially when he was pretty sure Kouki had bought this specifically for him. He couldn't help a small smile at that; Kouki really did go out of his way to look after him. Weird as the age difference between them still was for him sometimes, it helped that, at least so far, his soulmate really was all the best things Kana had ever dreamt of wanting in a mate. Thoughtful, caring, kind, funny, generous.... He really was the luckiest omega in the world ... if only he could be allowed to keep Kouki in his life forever.

~*~*~

Kana kept glancing up at the clock, wishing time would move faster. He could feel it coming, his next heat was early, he needed to get out of this stupid school and down to the pharmacy before it was too late. If it wasn't already.

Finally, they were released. He had never been so glad to be finished cleaning their classroom. He could feel it coming, his next heat was early, he needed to get out of this stupid school and down to the pharmacy before it was too late. If it wasn't already.

The sharp scent of a nearby alpha hit him and he whined. Not coming, it was already starting. He had to get out of here, get to the nearest pharmacy before....

“Kobayashi-kun?”

Kana swore under his breath, jamming his feet into his shoes even as he tried to pretend that he
didn't know the teacher was coming for him. He had to get away, had to get to Atsu-nii's place. His mate would take care of things, he just had to get to him.

“Kobayashi-kun, wait,” the teacher called out to him.

“Sorry, sensei,” he said, not even daring to see which teacher it was, “but I have to go.”

A hand closed on his arm, bringing with it a wave of alpha scent. Almost involuntarily, he found himself glancing back at the teacher who had caught him. Maeda-sensei, the head teacher. He was screwed.

“You've been bitten,” the woman said, eyes narrowing as she frowned down at him. Shit, shit, shit.

“Wha-what? Sensei ... I ... I really need to get home....”

“Who is it, Kobayashi-kun? Who bit you? Was it that Shimizu girl?” the head teacher continued, almost as if she hadn't even heard him.

“I don't ... sensei, I don't know what you mean,” he stammered, trying without success to pull himself free. He could feel the first inklings of panic as he watched her nostrils flair. This was exactly why he wasn't supposed to get caught going into heat around the alpha teachers. Most of the time, the soap Atsu-nii gave him was enough to mask the change in his scent, so the adults wouldn't ask awkward questions or make trouble from not understanding. But going into heat meant his scent was too strong, broadcasting that he was ready for mating to anyone with an alpha nose. Which meant it was also broadcasting that he was already claimed.

“I will find out who it is, Kobayashi-kun,” the alpha promised. “You're fourteen, there's no call for this.”

“R-really, sensei, you're wrong. I'm not ... no one's bitten me,” he lied, trying again to free himself.

“Come,” she growled, pulling him towards the faculty parking lot. Panic bubbled in his gut. What was she going to do to him? He struggled to free himself from her grip, but Maeda was too strong, her hold on him too firm as she forced him to walk with her out to what he could only assume was her car. Opening the rear cabin door, she shoved him into the vehicle, ignoring his squawk of protest and shutting the door on him even as he tried to escape. He fumbled with the door handle, but it was useless, the automatic child-safe locks had engaged.

“Sensei! What are you doing?!?”

“Taking care of your problem,” she said as she put the car into gear and pulled out of her parking slot. “You can either sit there quietly while I take you to the pharmacist, or I will pull this car over and make you be quiet.”

“W-what?! What are you saying?? You ... you can't do this! This is kidnapping! I ... I'll....”

His panic soared even higher as she pulled the car over to the side of the road. Omega instincts chittered at him that he had to escape, but she was too fast, one hand clamping down hard on the back of his neck and pushing him down face first into the back bench. Alpha scent mixed with his terror, but it was all wrong, this wasn't his alpha. And yet his body didn't care anymore, other, baser instincts turning his body pliant under the alpha that was positioned to deal with the needs of his heat.

~*~*~
When Kana had drifted into a light doze on the couch, Mahiro had quietly tucked a blanket around him and let him be, pausing their Netflix program for later. He had then poked his head into Kouki's home office to check on the alpha, exchanging a couple jokes with him before withdrawing to make tea - one of the few things in the kitchen he could safely do - and then ... and then he hadn't been quite sure what to do with himself. For a former bachelor and an injured teenaged omega who self-confessed at being useless at cleaning, the penthouse was in remarkably good shape, though Kouki had never been particularly messy anyway. The few dishes from lunch that Mahiro had put off in favor of more actively keeping Kana company only occupied him for a few minutes. With nothing else particularly needing doing, he had settled in with a book, getting lost in a bit of epic science fiction.

So he was completely unprepared for the strangled scream from the couch. He was still pulling himself out of the chair when Kouki came barreling into the room, but neither of them were prepared for the way a still mostly asleep Kana lashed out at Kouki, slurring something about wrong and no.

“Kouki, let me,” he said, pushing himself between the two soulmates. “If he's caught in another nightmare about his former mate....”

The blond alpha looked deeply upset, but he nodded and withdrew. Even with the terror scent heavy in the air, Mahiro forced himself to take a deep breath before turning and sitting next to a still panic-stricken and floundering Kana.

“Shh, Kana-kun, hush now sweetheart,” he soothed, pulling the boy into his arms, forcing him into stillness. “It's over, Kana-kun, he can't hurt you anymore, that one's gone now.”

The nightmare finally broke, Kana shuddering and clinging to Mahiro with wracking sobs. Worried, Mahiro kept petting his hair and murmuring gentle support. To his credit, while he was certain Kouki was practically beside himself with worry, the alpha stayed away, giving him time to actually calm the younger omega.

“What happened, Kana-kun?” he asked when the sobs finally stopped. “What did you see just now?”

“It ... it was just a nightmare,” the teen mumbled, shuddering again. “I don't ... I don't really remember, just ... everything was wrong.”

The teen was lying to him, Mahiro could read that much in the younger omega's scent, but he knew better than to push. He couldn't force Kana to open up to him, but maybe if he was less direct...

“Kou-kun is worried. You lashed out at him.”

“I ... I didn't hurt him, did I?” Kana stammered, blinking up at him with such watery eyes it tore at Mahiro's heart.

“No, he's fine, sweetheart, just worried. Have you been having a lot of these kinds of nightmares?”

“I ... I'm not sure,” the teen mumbled, shifting again to try to hide his face. As if he could hide his lies that easily. Then again, with betas, he probably could. “Sometimes ... sometimes when I wake up, I forget where I am. Forget when I am. Like I'm still back there and everything is wrong because....”

The words weren't said, but Mahiro didn't need to hear them to know they were there: because Kouki wasn't the alpha who had bitten him, the scent he had come to associate with his 'proper'
mate. A soft hum and Mahiro just kept petting the teenager's hair.

“I just want it to stop,” Kana mumbled at the same moment Mahiro caught a hint of blood.

“I believe you, sweetheart, but I think you've pulled open one of your stitches. Do you want me to check it out or should we let Kou-kun do it?”

Kana groaned something unintelligible against Mahiro's thigh. The older omega couldn't help a grin at that, carding fingers through dark strands.

“Come on, dearest, how about you get up and I'll go tell Kou-kun it's safe for him to dote on you again, okay?”

“... I feel so stupid,” Kana mumbled, unmoving.

“Well don't,” Mahiro admonished, tugging lightly on a lock of hair. “As upset as you were? Sensei would completely understand. I can take a look, I don't think we'll need him to come over to put you back together, though, so ... master bath?”

Another huff but Kana pushed himself up to his feet, mumbling something that sounded like agreement. Mahiro bit back a grin as he watched the teen shuffle towards the hall, getting up to follow him. When he got to the office, he barely had the door open before Kouki was practically on top of him.

“Is he okay???”

“He's headed for your bath right now, I need to take a look at his wounds, it smelled like he'd pulled open one of them, but I don't think it's anything too severe. But you and me, we're talking about these nightmares of his later.”

“... can it wait for the morning?”

“Mm, he needs you more right now anyway, but not any longer than that!”

“In the morning, I promise. Before my jog, even,” the alpha said, bowing with a sheepish look. And then the blond was hurrying past him to the master bathroom. The nightmares weren't really a surprise, but they still worried him. Mahiro made a mental note to talk to his therapist about the situation at their next session. Nothing specific, of course, but if Sakamoto-sensei could give him some practical advice, he would gladly take it.

~*~*~

Kana startled awake in the middle of the night, a little surprised to find Kouki had rolled over and wasn't holding him anymore. His immediate thought was that he had to have done something wrong, even though a little voice in the back of his head said that was ridiculous. Still, he couldn't help it, rolling over to frown at Kouki's back. Every other night ... well, okay, he couldn't remember waking up past him to the master bathroom. The nightmares weren't really a surprise, but they still worried him. Mahiro made a mental note to talk to his therapist about the situation at their next session. Nothing specific, of course, but if Sakamoto-sensei could give him some practical advice, he would gladly take it.

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Unbidden, the memory of that afternoon's flashback rose up in his mind's eye. They said new trauma could unlock older traumas, was that what was happening to him with these nightmares? Of
course he also remembered reading something saying most repressed memories were actually fake, the product of popular media and the subject's own imagination. Did that mean his memory of Maeda-sensei was just fantasy? He wanted to think so, but then he didn't know how he could be sure of anything. A month ago he would have sworn he was still a virgin, that there was no way he could be anything else. Even a week ago, if someone had tried to suggest he had been previously mated, he would have just laughed it off.

But whether the nightmares were faithful depictions of the past or not, the core of them felt real. Too real. And then there was the scar on the back of his neck, nearly faded away entirely now. He hadn't ever even noticed it before, but now ... his fingers found the small remnants of the bite mark, rubbing at them as if he could find answers that easily. Whatever else was the truth, Atsushi had definitely been responsible for that ... hadn't he? Doubt gnawed at him again. The scar was real, but what if they were all wrong about the cause? Then again, what if they were right? How much more was also true? He had woken from his afternoon nightmare before the memory - or whatever it had been - had finished, he had no idea what exactly had happened in that car. If, indeed, any of it had happened. But the worse part was knowing he had no one he could ask for the truth. Atsushi was dead and Yutaka hadn't noticed what had supposedly been happening right under his nose. And his parents were obviously no better informed, not that he could talk to them about anything right now anyway.

A bolt of lightning lit up the room, thunder cracking loudly behind it, enough to make him jump. The sudden rain pounded on the roof, rattled against the glass, and Kana scooted close to his alpha. Kouki, still asleep but somehow sensing his upset, rolled over and tucked him into his chest. Shivering, Kana nuzzled into his soulmate's chest, taking deep breaths of the alpha's scent. If only he could shake off the phantoms of other hands on his skin as easily.

Another clap of thunder, this one sounding like it was right over their heads, was enough to make him yelp. Kouki was instantly awake, arm tightening around him.

“Kacchan?”

“I ... I'm okay,” he mumbled, blushing hard. “The storm ... it startled me, that's all.”

Another flash of lightning, a peal of thunder like a freight train overhead, and he was pressing even closer to his mate's chest.

“Mm, it's a loud one tonight. But it'll pass quickly, this sort always does,” his soulmate said softly, shifting to kiss his cheek. “It's okay, you don't have to be scared, love. They sound worse than they actually are.”

“I'm not scared of the storm,” he said, nuzzling into his chest and trying not to pout.

“Then ... what, another nightmare?”

“N-- ... I don't think so? I ... I'm not sure what woke me up. I just ... I was thinking and then the storm startled me....”

“About?”

“About the past and Atsu-nii and ... and stuff,” he temporized. He couldn't tell Kouki about the afternoon's nightmare, not when he didn't have the first clue if anything about it had even been real.

“Stuff like this afternoon's nightmare?” Kouki asked, brushing another kiss to his forehead. Kana
bit back a whimper; how did the man know what was in his head so easily?

“I ... I don't know how I'm supposed to tell what's real and what isn't anymore. What if none of it's real? What if ... what if Mahiro-ani is wrong and the scar isn't from being bitten?” Kana asked, even though he feared it was a useless question.

“I suppose it's possible, but that wouldn't explain your having been pregnant,” Kouki replied, one hand casually sliding down Kana's back. “And he seemed pretty confident it was a mate bite. And I you had been bitten by Atsushi, it would explain a lot. Like why your mind broke after the accident and why you're only just now being able to remember these things.”

“But what if what I think I'm remembering is nothing but a pack of lies? They say recovered memories aren't real, you know? That the victim makes everything up.”

“Maybe that's true when the memories are being pulled out of a person, like under hypnosis or at the prompting of a therapist, but that's not what you've been experiencing, Kacchan. No one's prompting you to remember specific things or feeding ideas into your head, these memories have been coming up all on their own.”

Shivering, Kana burrowed into Kouki's chest and let the tears fall down his cheeks. He didn't want these memories, he was happier without them, but nothing he did seemed to work to keep them at bay.

“We'll get through this, Kana-love, together. Don't feel like you ever have to face any of this alone. Even if you don't think you can talk to me about it, you aren't alone.”

It was enough to break the last thread of his self-control, tears streaking down his cheeks as Kana silently sobbed into his soulmate's chest.

Chapter End Notes

Before a certain hamuhamu comes after me, the framing does suggest a certain thing but it's a lie. Dreams are tricksy bastards and while the flashback/dream has roots in a real event that happened, Maeda-sensei never did anything inappropriate. I'm an ass, but I'm not that much of an ass. :p
In which Mahiro continues to be a tiny badass, even if it's just in his own head, Hikaru comes back into the picture, and Kana has a cringe-worthy flashback. Also more talk of soulmates and how bonding works out in the real world.

To say Mahiro was not a morning person was a bit of an understatement. Kouki felt a familiar guilty stab as he sat a mug of freshly brewed coffee in front of his best friend's mate, along with a nibble of worry that Mahiro was still here and Mitsuki very obviously was not. Sure, after so many years together, separation wasn't the big thing that it was for a newly bonded pair, but it still felt strange to have one without the other.

“Oh stop it already,” the omega groused. “You worry too much, you know that? Save it for the one who needs it. Sensei and I are just fine, he knows Kana needs me more this week. And Ritsuko's completely thrilled to be having an extended sleep over with Miko.”

“When you said you were staying the whole week, I didn't think you were being serious,” he confessed.

“If Kacchan doesn't need me that long, I'll go home sooner, but I wouldn't hold my breath, were I you,” the omega countered, shrugging. “Now tell me about these nightmares.”

“They started shortly after Christmas, but I don't know much about them, he refuses to talk about them most of the time. From what little he has told me, he's starting to remember things from when he was mated to Atsushi. When the storm blew through last night and woke us both ... he confessed that he's having a hard time knowing what to believe anymore. He doesn't trust the dreams - and that seems fair, you know how dreams can be - but he doesn't really have anyone who can tell him yes, this happened, no this didn't happen. I'm not sure how Atsushi was able to keep their mating a secret from everyone, but clearly he was.”

“Unfortunately for us, with a population of mostly betas, it probably wasn't all that hard. The hardest part would have been a teenager's unpredictable heat cycle,” Mahiro said, sipping his coffee and then scrunching his nose. “How do you drink this stuff?” he grumbled as he pushed the mug away. “Anyway, he obviously didn't have Kana on any sort of birth control, it was a dangerous game he was playing. But like you and Hachi keep telling me, betas are idiots who won't see what's right in front of their faces most of the time.”

Kouki snorted, but he couldn't disagree. It still irked him, though, especially since it meant finding answers was going to be that much harder. It bothered him that for three years no one had noticed the changes in Kana. And in the three years since, no one else seemed to have noticed those changes, either, changes that Mahiro had been able to sniff out in one meeting. Then again, what more could he expect from a community so dominated by ignorant betas who, as Chamu had made all too clear to him, hadn't the first clue what life was really like for alphas and omegas?

“How often are they coming?”

“The nightmares? Not quite every night, but close to it. Too often, he gets like he did yesterday,
combative and mumbling about things being all wrong, at least until I'm able to properly wake him up completely. And then he falls apart in my arms. I just ... I feel so helpless, Maru, I don't know what to do.”

“He needs professional help, Kou-kun, you know it and I know it, but I get it. He's already so fragile and that stupid beta made things worse without even trying. And if he's not willing to talk to you about these dreams, the chances of a therapist actually getting him to talk are probably not that great. Let me give it another shot ... but not today. I think today would be better if he had some younger company. It's just too bad we can't have his school friend here to help him through all this.”

“I'm not sure how much help Chamu-kun would actually be,” Kouki sighed. “He didn't even notice what was happening to his best friend until it was already over, he might not be able to help with Kacchan's memories at all.”

“Not really the point,” Mahiro said, shaking his head. “He's familiar, someone Kana-kun feels he can trust. And that's what he needs most right now, whether Chamu has any answers or not.”

“Either way, there's not much I can do. He still has two more months before the end of classes, unless he just drops out now or something. I'd feel like an utterly irresponsible knob if I suggested something like that, though, so don't even go there.”

“I wasn't going to, thank you, but if Chamu-kun wanted to come down on the weekends, we'd help make sure it was an option for him,” Mahiro said, giving Kouki one of his more knowing looks. That ... okay, that was probably doable. It was only Wednesday now, he could easily e-mail the suggestion to Chamu and still have plenty of time to buy him a train ticket later, no pressure to decide immediately. Having the beta down on the weekends would be good for Kana and probably good for Chamu, too, if they were being honest. Especially with the way Chamu's parents were acting in all this now.

“Well go on then,” Mahiro said suddenly, making shooing motions with his hands. “Go do your stupid jogging thing. Kana-kun and I will be just fine without you for a few hours. I'll probably even try for more sleep.”

“Thanks, Maru,” he said as he got up from the breakfast bar. To his own surprise, he actually felt a little bit better about things for having talked them out with the omega. Mahiro had a good point, Kana needed more time with others his own age, especially other omegas. He would have to suggest inviting Hikaru over at breakfast - hopefully it would be one of his off days this week - and maybe even quietly suggest to Hikaru that he try introducing Kana to some of his other friends? Or would that be going too far? Something he continued to mull over as he made his laps of one of the local parks' jogging trail. He didn't want to be seen as overly pushy, of course, but at the same time he could tell that his soulmate needed help. Kana didn't have that big of a social circle and those friends he did have were back in Fukui. He was alone in a strange city, limited by his own convalescence, he needed help getting the ball rolling, so to speak. On the other hand, Kouki didn't want to push things too hard, didn't want his soulmate to feel like he was being pressured to do things.

He was chasing his own tail, thoughts retreading the same mental pathways as he ran, but he kept coming back to the same conclusions. Kana needed to be introduced to more people and he needed help finding his footing in Tokyo. It just had to be done carefully and slowly.

The store he wanted was only just opening when Kouki got to it. Grateful that his timing hadn't been wrong, he headed straight for the mobile gaming section. Kana would probably protest, but Kouki wasn't going to let that stop him. Maybe it wasn't as necessary, now that Kana had his own
laptop and game consoles, but at the same time, he could still clearly see Kana's face at the realization that his old 3DS had been destroyed. Selecting one in purple (one of Kana's preferred colors, he'd noticed), he also picked up the two Pokemon titles his soulmate had mentioned, along with a larger SD card and an eShop gift card so the omega could pick out another couple of games for himself.

He started to turn back to the apartment when something made him turn his feet towards the Starbucks where Hikaru worked. He sighed heavily when he got there and saw the barista already at work; so much for that idea. Ordering his usual, he added on a chai latte for Kana and a green tea chai latte for Mahiro, plus three apple cinnamon crunch muffins, then stepped aside to wait.

“Dear sweet goddess of mercy, get me out of here,” Hikaru whispered urgently when Kouki came over to claim his order.

“Pardon?”

“Please, I'm begging you. I've been here since 3am, I'm dying here, take me with you.”

“Um....” Kouki was too startled to even think for a moment. How was he supposed to do that? He was just a customer, it wasn't like he had any sort of special influence. Until the bombing, he and Hikaru had been little more than acquaintances, the younger man hadn't even known him by name.

“Itoh-san! Is there a problem here?”

“Boss, I have to go, it's a family emergency. You remember, I told you about my cousin and I being in that bombing together? His mate came, he needs me.”

“He's having bad flashbacks. He got violent yesterday,” Kouki said softly, though not so much that Hikaru's boss wouldn't be able to hear him. “I don't like that I had to leave him, but if it's going to be another long day of them....”

“Flashbacks you say?” the manager said, suddenly standing much closer, his voice pitched down so as not to carry. His whole demeanor had changed and Kouki couldn't help but wonder why. Apparently the question was a little too clear on his face as the beta shook his head. “Served with the SDF in Iraq before this. Civvies don't think it, but soldiers aren't the only ones who get PTSD. All right, Itoh-san, I'll clock you out myself. You take care of your friend.”

Before Hikaru could say something that might change the man's mind, Kouki thanked him for his service and his understanding. Hikaru took the hint, hurriedly trading his apron for his coat and bag.

“So ... what was that back there?” Kouki asked as they walked back towards his building.

“Because I live around here and I can actually do things like bake our breads and stuff unsupervised, guess who got called in for the morning baker shift after our usual guy got his ass fired last night,” the omega grumbled. “I hate working morning shifts, commuters are assholes. Five different alphas threatened to have me fired on the spot if I didn't get their drinks faster. And then there were the assholes who got bitchy and refused to be served by an omega ... which is pretty rich coming from a bunch of betas who would've been all over me if I'd had boobs instead of a dick. But after that I spent the rest of the morning rush in the back, but they had to call in Fujii-san because of course these pricks all wanted to file complaints with a full manager and not just an assistant manager. Thank you for helping me escape, that was actually a really smart lie. I had no idea Fujii-san was a combat veteran.”
“Neither did I, but I wasn't lying. Kacchan really is having flashbacks and he really did get violent with me yesterday, though I don't think he's been remembering the explosion. The funny thing is, I was going to suggest Kana invite you over today right up until I saw you working.”

“Wait, wait, back it up there, blondie. What the hell are you talking about??” Hikaru said, grabbing his arm and making him stop in the middle of the block.

“I think it'd be better to let him explain. I don't want these drinks getting cold.”

“Okay, fine ... wait, you didn't leave him alone, did you?”

“Did that once, won't be doing it again any time soon,” he said as he resumed their walk. “It's kind of a long story, but no, a friend of mine is staying with us right now.”

“Good, good. I don't know how late I can stay, the boss stuck me on our baker shift until he can get a new one in, though if we keep having the same problems we did this morning, then ... then I don't know. I can put up with a lot, but I draw the line at being abused like that every morning.”

“Won't your boss stand up for you? He seems like a good guy, someone who isn't going to put up with that sort of shit.”

“Even if he did - and you're probably right, he probably would - I don't want to have to deal with that kind of shit every single day, you know? I shouldn't have to, but ... no offense, blondie, but a lot of you alpha types can be real jerkwads.”

“Yeah, I'm aware of the problem,” he said with a wry grin, holding the door open as they reached his building. “It's not just alphas, either, you know.”

“No, I know, but being omega, I notice the alpha assholes more. I guess I just expect betas to be bigots and jerks at this point, so it sorta slides off my back more, but when it's an alpha ... I don't know, I just notice it more somehow.”

“There's a persistent romantic notion that we alphas should be better than that, that a good alpha should be a paragon of virtue for ... some reason. It'd be nice if not for the reality that we aren't born that way, no one is. We're just as human as anyone else.”

“Oh I don't know about that, blondie,” the omega said, eyes sliding sidelong to size him up and down. “You're pretty virtuous yourself, you know. If it wasn't for you having Kana-kun and me having my little problem....”

Kouki laughed, but he was still glad when the elevator let them out on his floor. It would never have occurred to him that Hikaru might have been harboring those sorts of thoughts about him. Whatever his virtues, Kouki was also frequently - maybe too frequently - an oblivious idiot. How many people had he hurt over the years without even meaning it? He wished he had something positive he could say, but having a soulmate that hated you for something over which you'd had no say ... Hikaru was a lot stronger than most people would ever realize.

~*~*~

Kana wasn't interested in waking up yet, but it was hard to ignore the presence of his alpha, the warmth of the hand on his arm and the way that rich scent filled his nose. Groaning, he forced himself upright, blinking a couple of times before his eyes were willing to focus on his soulmate.

“Wha- ... what time is it?” he mumbled.
“Time for breakfast. Come on, there's a Starbucks chai latte waiting for you. And a couple other surprises.”

The Starbucks would explain the trace of a familiar scent; his alpha must have gone to the one where Hikaru works. Huffing, he ignored the low chuckle coming from his soulmate as he dragged himself into their bathroom. The quick shower didn't really make him feel refreshed, but it woke him up enough to be able to dress himself unaided.

His brain needed a few moments to register the fact that he really was seeing Hikaru hunched over the breakfast bar, Mahiro on the stool next to him, petting his hair.

“Hi-hikaru-kun? Wha-what...?” he stammered, stumbling forward. In an instant, his friend was at his side, hugging him close.

“Man, what the hell? Blondie, I swear to all the gods, if I didn't know better, I'd punch you the fuck out,” the omega grumbled. “Sorry for getting you up so early, Kacchan, if you want to go back to bed, I'm fine with just going home.”

“No, you're staying,” Mahiro declared, pushing the two of them over towards the breakfast bar. “You're under orders to take care of your friend, remember? You don't want your boss finding out you only stayed for a couple minutes before running back home, do you?”

“No, but ... you wouldn't....”

Kana bit his lip at the stubborn scent practically pouring off Mahiro ... and the flabbergasted and almost appalled look on Hikaru's face when the omega realized Mahiro wasn't just tossing off an idle threat.

“What Maru wants, Maru generally gets,” Kouki said from inside the kitchen. “Might as well sit down and eat with the rest of us. You and Kacchan can decide what the two of you want to do with the day while you're at it.”

“Yeah ... yeah, talking is probably a good place to start,” Hikaru conceded as he took one of the bar stools. “You even smell sick, Kana-kun.”

“... I do?” he asked, surprised and confused.

“Hikaru-kun has a sharp nose, too, then, I take it,” Mahiro said mildly, taking the stool on Kana's other side.

“Mm. It's not any one thing, Kana-kun, just ... your scent is off. Muddled. Like there's that undercurrent of anxiety I've been getting off you since the hospital, but there's ... other stuff, too, that just ... like I said, muddy. Maybe if I didn't know you better I wouldn't put it together as meaning you weren't healthy, but....”

“I'm sorry,” he mumbled, suddenly not so sure he had the appetite to eat the muffin Kouki had put in front of him.

“... what for?” Hikaru asked, genuine surprise coming off him in a wave. “What, for being sick? For getting traumatized? Don't apologize for that sort of thing, Kana-kun. But, you know, if you ever want to talk about it. About that day or about anything else. We're friends, ne? Friends are always there for each other.”

Kana nodded, but he didn't look up from his plate. He liked Hikaru and he was glad to see him, but it felt like a setup. Like Kouki and Mahiro weren't quite sure what to do with him, so they had
enlisted the other omega in hopes that Hikaru, being closer to Kana's age, would have better luck. In what, he wasn't completely sure and a voice in the back of his head insisted he had really gone off the deep end in his paranoia, but it just felt too convenient, Hikaru being here all of a sudden.

“Wow, you are ... really on a downer right now, ain’tcha?” Hikaru said suddenly and Kana felt his cheeks flare red hot again. “Look, Kacchan, I don't know what's happened in the last week, obviously something did, but whatever. Tell me about it, don't tell me about it, it's up to you. Okay, yeah, when I bugged your alpha at the shop, I just wanted out of there before I lost my cool with a customer. I had no idea the line about you having flashbacks was anything but a line until we were halfway to here. So if this is all part of some insidious master plan ... then it's a master plan that's all about doing good for you, kiddo, okay?”

“I'm not a kid,” he grumbled, finally pulling off a bite of muffin.

“Yeah, no, ya ain't,” Hikaru agreed, scooting closer and tucking an arm around him. “Point is, whatever else is going on in your head and in your life, me being here right now? Is all because my friend is in trouble and needs me. Now if you want to tell me to fuck off and mind my own business, then fine. I won't, but if you need to say it, then go ahead.”

Kana felt his cheeks heating up again as he sipped his chai. That Hikaru could say these things so easily when they were still barely more than acquaintances....

“Friends take care of each other, Kacchan. Good friends know when to see through a bullshit no to the cry for help lying underneath. A real friend knows when to let the dogs lie and suggest a day-long Halo binge instead.”

“I don't play Halo,” Kana protested, eyes widening a little when a shopping bag was suddenly deposited in front of him.

“It's not Halo and I don't know that it's anything the two of you can use together today, but....” Kouki trailed off with a shrug and a smile that was almost too sweet for words. Kana hesitated another moment before pulling the bag into his lap, eyes going wide as he pulled out the brand new 3DS.

“Kouki....”

“Full confession: I already opened the box to swap in a bigger SD card, but other than that, it hasn't been touched,” the blond alpha said. Kana sniffled, feeling the prickle of tears at the corners of his eyes.

“You ... you didn't have to do this,” he mumbled, choking up even more when he realized the bag also held both of the new Pokemon games and a gift card for the Nintendo eShop.

“What can I say? I love spoiling you, Kacchan,” Kouki said softly, coming around the bar to wrap him in a warm hug.

“Ah! X AND Y? Jealous! I only have Y, we should totally start you on X so we can do trades!” Hikaru chirped.

“No gaming until after breakfast!” Mahiro declared. Kana couldn't help a soft laugh at that, turning in Kouki's arms to press a kiss to his soulmate's lips. The alpha was too startled to do anything at first and for a split second, Kana was afraid he had gone too far, done something wrong. And then Kouki's arms tightened around him and he returned the kiss with such a sweetness Kana could feel himself swooning and nearly falling off his seat.
“Oi! No more of that until after breakfast, too, you two!” Mahiro scolded, but Kana could hear the amusement in his voice. Maybe ... maybe later he and Kouki could have some time alone to do more of that. He hadn't realized until that moment just how much he missed kissing his boyfriend.

“Later, Kacchan,” the alpha murmured, the twinkle in his eyes suggesting he knew exactly what Kana had been thinking. He could feel his cheeks going red all over again, but when no one else said anything.... “Later” couldn't come soon enough, as far as he was concerned.

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“Kobayashi Kana!”

Kana winced, closing his math textbook and getting up from his bed. When his mom was upset, it was never anything good. Still, a part of him was kind of glad his mother came to him before he could actually leave his room. Though the look on her face right then..... Still, better here in his room, where they had something almost like privacy, unlike elsewhere in the house.

“What is this??” she demanded, holding up a bunched up sheet. It looked like one of his other sheets ... actually, it looked a hell of a lot like one of the ones he had tossed into the laundry the other day after ... oh. Oh shit. How could he possibly get himself out of this?

“Um....”

“You can't just ball things up and pretend like it didn't happen! You think that's something I want to find?!”

“It's not....”

“And the stains! I'm never going to get those stains out now, you've let them set! These sheets are ruined! Do you think your father and I are just made of money??”

“Wh-what? No, I ... of course I don't,” he mumbled. As if he didn't already feel ashamed enough.

“I ... I'm sorry, Mom, I just ... I didn't know what else to do....”

“Hiding things doesn't make things better. Ever,” she scolded sternly. “I might have been able to fix it if you'd just told me in the first place.”

“Moooooom!” He protested with a whine, cheeks flaming bright red with his embarrassment. He couldn't believe she had actually just said that!

“Oh please, I may be beta, but I'm still your mother, Kacchan,” she countered, rolling her eyes. “You think I don't know what it's like to be a teenager? Okay, my heats aren't the same as yours, exactly, but I went through the same ups and downs and erratic cycling when I was your age. I know what it feels like to have a heat catch you off guard, I know how sometimes even with the drugs, you end up with those same urges to do something, anything, to make the itch go away.”

He couldn't believe he was hearing all this from his mother, his ears so hot he was sure they were going to melt off his head at any moment. He couldn't remember ever being so embarrassed before in his life.

“Look,” she said, sighing as she sat on his bed, the soiled sheet almost forgotten, “you're growing up, transitioning from child to young man. You're curious about your body and that's fine, sweetheart. And if you have questions, your father and I are here to help, as much as we can, anyway.”
Kana really didn't know what to say to that, dropping down onto the bed next to her with a heavy sigh. It was a nice thought, maybe, but his parents were betas. How much could they really know about what it felt like to be him, to be a male omega surrounded by betas who thought he was either weird or gross or a freak?

"The next time you decide to do this," she said, picking up the sheet again and shaking it at him, "you tell me right away and I'll show you how to clean it up properly, okay? And then after that you won't have to tell me again, you'll be able to just take care of it yourself. I'll even buy some extra sets the next time I'm out shopping so it won't be an issue, okay?"

"O-okay," he stammered, walking his mother out of his room and still feeling weird about their whole conversation. Maybe he would take Atsushi up on his offer to go over to his mate's apartment any time he was feeling those urges. Having his mate help him would certainly be better than taking care of it all by himself. He could feel his body responding as memories of the last time he and Atsushi had been alone together floated behind his eyes. It wasn't always perfect, sometimes his mate would get too eager, go too fast. But when Atsushi was in the mood to take his time ... it made him so wet just thinking about it, he had to bite back a low moan, one hand rubbing over his crotch. This weekend. He was definitely going to have to think of an amazing excuse to be out all weekend, but he needed it. He needed that feeling of fullness, of completeness that only his mate could give him. Three more days and then ... he'd think of something.

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"Kana-kun? Yo, Earth to Kana-kun~"

Mahiro hadn't been paying close enough attention to the two younger omegas, distracted with texting his mate and plotting what he was going to have Kouki make them all for dinner. His nose picked it up two seconds too late.

"Hey now, Kacchan, I know Conner is hot, but he's not that amazing!"

"Hikaru!" Mahiro called out sharply, but it was too late. Kana shuddered and collapsed in on himself. Biting back another growl of frustration - if that other alpha wasn't already dead, Mahiro would have hunted him down and force-fed him his own oversized cock and balls for making Kana so afraid of his own sensuality - Mahiro nudged Hikaru aside, sitting down on the couch and pulling Kana into his arms.

"Shh, it's fine, sweetheart," Mahiro murmured, lightly rubbing Kana's back. "Was it another flashback? This one was different from yesterday, ne? What was it?"

Kana whined and shook his head, but when he tried to pull away, Mahiro tightened his arms around the younger omega. To his surprise, Kana stopped fighting immediately, slumping against him instead. That worried him more than just a little bit; while he hadn't wanted Kana to just run away so easily, it worried him that the fight had drained out of the omega so quickly.

"It's okay, sweetheart, you can talk to me about whatever it was, I won't judge, promise."

Another whine, but nothing else. Unable to completely stop a frustrated sigh, Mahiro glanced up to see Hikaru and Kouki both practically hovering over them, worry written plain on both faces. He shook his head and Kouki reached out to touch Kana's shoulder, hurt flaring in the alpha's scent when Kana flinched and tried to shy away from him. A thousand years of burning torment would still be too good for the scumbag alpha who had so damaged the precious flower in his arms and Mahiro had to firmly stomp down the rage that he could feel burning at the back of his throat.
“Mou, Kacchan,” he murmured, but before he could get any more words out, shame flooded the young omega’s scent so strongly it almost made him gag.

“Oh sweetheart,” he said softly, freeing an arm to making shooing motions at the other two, “it’s okay, you haven’t done anything wrong, there’s no need for that.” Silently, he thanked the gods when Kouki snagged Hikaru by the sleeve and tugged him out of the apartment, holding up his phone in an unspoken request for Mahiro to text him when it was safe. The sound of the front door closing was apparently all that was needed to completely undo Kana, the young omega collapsing even further and shuddering with silent sobs. Mahiro waited patiently, stroking fingers through his hair and letting him cry himself out.

“Want to talk about it?” he asked when the sobs finally stopped.

“No,” Kana mumbled, shifting and settling with his head on Mahiro’s lap.

“Trust me, sweetheart, talking will help. I promise, what you tell me, I won’t tell anyone else, not even my own mate. And it’s just the two of us here, until you’re ready for the other two to come back,” he said, brushing a stray strand of black away from Kana’s puffy eyes.

“Talking only makes it more real,” the younger omega muttered and Mahiro mourned for the bitterness in the teenager’s voice just then.

“Yes, but until you accept that what’s happening is real, you won’t really be able to process it and you definitely won’t be letting it go.”

“How am I supposed to ... to just accept this??” Kana countered, his voice cracking, the bitterness steeping ever more heavily into his scent.

“Maybe it happened the way you’re seeing it now, maybe it didn't. Doesn't really matter.”

“How can you say truth doesn't matter??” Kana interrupted, bolting upright to glare at him.

“That’s not what I said,” Mahiro snapped back. And then he forced himself to take a deep breath before continuing: “Whether the details are right doesn't matter as much as the fact that ... that person raped you. He took a child and bit him without warning or permission. Alone or in collusion with others, he twisted you around until you were nothing but a toy, a thing. That happened. You were mated, Kana, before you were old enough to have any concept of what being mated meant. You still don't understand because there’s been no one to teach you. You are not a toy or a trophy or a prize, you are a human being. Yes, an omega male, something rare and precious, but still human. Do you understand?”

“N-no, no I don’t,” Kana confessed, collapsing back into his lap. Mahiro couldn't help another soft sigh, stroking fingers through Kana’s hair. Growing up omega surrounded by betas, it was a little too clear to him that Kana hadn't been taught any of the things he should have learned about what it meant to be an omega.

“Wasn't there anyone omega in your life?” he asked softly, afraid he already knew the answer.

“The omega girls at school were prissy bitches and worse. Higuchi-kaasan was nice, but when Hayato-senpai went away for school, we didn't see her anymore. Hisa-kun and I barely spoke to each other and then he got sent to a different school and I never saw him again. So no, not really.”

“Women, especially omegas, are the foundation of a society,” Mahiro said quietly, still carding fingers through Kana’s hair. “Alpha male patriarchal bullshit has polluted so many of our societies, but those big dicks of theirs are meaningless without those of us who can bring forth life. There
was a time when a coupling like Junji-kun and Kumi-chan would have been seen as the ideal ... now it's seen as an abnormality because Kumi-chan chose a non-alpha mate.”

“I thought they were soulmates,” Kana mumbled, blinking up at him in confusion.

“Ah, that's ... soulmates is a personal, private thing most places. Meeting your soulmate is never promised, surely you were told that much? Nearly seven billion people in the world right now, you really think everyone is able to meet their soulmate every lifetime? It's a nice story we tell our children when they're younger ... and as they get older, we teach them the reality that a soulmate is precious, but not promised. Do you know how very lucky you are to have met yours?”

“Then you and Sensei...?”

“No, we are true soulmates, just like Tomoyan and Hachi, but we're the lucky ones and our love certainly isn't any better or truer than what Juju and Kumi share just because they don't have that extra bond. Juju's never even met his soulmate. Kumi met hers in grade school, but his family moved away to Europe and she lost contact. Sacchan's soulmate died when they were in high school. And you know about his parents and sister, right?”

“Y-yeah. It's still ... weird to me, that his father would do that ... that his mother is okay with it....”

“You're an omega with an older alpha, you should know how hard it is to ignore the pull of a soulmate bond. How did it feel the first time you and Kou-kun met?” Mahiro asked, biting back a small smile at the way Kana flushed a brilliant scarlet. “Exactly. Betas don't understand, they turn their noses up at our strange families. They pressure us, push to make alpha-alpha male-female pairs the ideal because they think that's the best way, then ignore us when we say different. They don't, can't understand what it's like for us. That doesn't make them right.”

They had drifted a bit away from the point Mahiro had originally been trying to make, but he was all right with that. These were also things Kana needed to hear, to understand. The sheer volume of things Kana had never known because he had never been properly exposed to them....

“So what were you remembering when you drifted out before?” he asked softly. Immediately, Kana stiffened, his scent souring with conflicted emotions, shame and fear at the top of the list. The combination didn't make a lot of sense to him, but then Mahiro knew he didn't know the whole story. Yet. “I won't tell anyone else, sweetie, I promised, remember?”

“Mom ... I ... I don't ... I don't want to talk about it,” Kana mumbled, rolling over onto his side again. It wasn't much of a hint, to be sure, but it was a starting point.

“I remember when I was ... well, a few years younger than you are now. I thought I was home alone, I didn't bother to lock my bedroom door. Mom walked in on me in the middle of pleasuring myself with a toy she didn't even know I had. We couldn't even look at each other for a few weeks after that,” Mahiro said, chuckling softly. Yet instead of helping, Kana's scent turned even more sour.

“I was supposed to still be a virgin. I was so sure I was still a virgin,” the young omega mumbled, bitterness dripping from every word. “Until all this, I didn't even ... I still don't really....”

“Don't ... masturbate?” Mahiro asked. The whine from Kana was particularly pitiful and Mahiro wondered what could possibly be even more embarrassing than ... oh. “Don't ... know how?” he asked softly, lightly resting his hand on Kana's shoulder. As hard as it was to imagine an eighteen year old omega not knowing how to do something so basic, the flare of shame made it impossible to come to any other conclusion. Oh Kana had probably figured out enough to know stroking his
own cock would, eventually, produce the desired result, sort of, but as an omega.... This new confession, piled on top of what Mahiro had been told had happened at the clinic and the memories bubbling up of the things Atsushi had likely done to him....

“Like I said before, honey, any time you want to talk, about anything, anything at all, I'll be here, okay? We can talk about anything you like. Doesn't have to be your memories, though I'm here for you if and when you're ready to talk about them. We can talk about anything. Favorite pop idols or the latest TV shows, Kou-kun's cooking, anything. We can even lock Kou-kun in his office or throw him out completely if you want to be sure no one else overhears.”

The whine from the young omega didn't exactly inspire confidence, but Mahiro accepted it as a start. He was just going to have to have another talk with Kouki later. And perhaps make a trip to a bookstore.

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“I've made things worse, haven't I?”

Kouki looked up sharply at those words, frowning at Hikaru. “What? What are you talking about?”

“You asked me to come over to spend time with him, to help him, and what do I do? I go and make things worse!”

“Hikachu, stop, you're being ridiculous,” Kouki scolded. “You haven't made anything worse. This sort of thing ... this is why I'm working from home, why Mahiro-kun's been staying with us. This happens pretty much once or twice a day right now. It's not your fault.”

“But ... I definitely didn't help anything, I know I didn't. I'm not even sure what I did wrong. What happened, anyway? I mean the flashbacks.”

Kouki took a deep breath, sighing heavily as he argued with himself. On the one hand, it really wasn't his place to say such things. On the other hand ... on the other hand, he couldn't very well expect Hikaru to help when the younger man had no idea what was going on with his friend.

“The flashbacks started a couple days after Christmas,” he started with a heavy sigh, “after Kana-kun's father came down and tried to force him to return to Fukui with him. After his father left ... Chamu-kun was trying to fill me in on more of their history. Kacchan walked in on us while Chamu-kun was explaining that Kacchan had been mated as a teenager, by Chamu-kun's older brother, Atsushi. His dead older brother.”

“... holy shit....”

“When Kacchan was fifteen, he was in a car accident with Atsushi and his own older brother, Hiro. Atsushi was killed instantly and it ... the bond break broke Kacchan, too. He had completely repressed everything to do with having been bitten, having been Atsushi's mate, only now those memories are forcing their way back up to the surface. He's not taking it well, as you saw.”

“Dammit ... Blondie, you shoulda told me about this weeks ago, back when they first started! Shit, no wonder he was so upset by your grandfather swooping in out of nowhere, spouting shit about him not being worthy. Fuck, that adds a whole other layer to your grandfather calling him trash, do you see that? Fuck....”

Kouki watched, startled, as Hikaru, still muttering curses, started pacing the empty ballroom again. And just as suddenly, the young omega stopped dead in his tracks and turned on Kouki.
“Have the two of you slept together?”

“He’s in my arms every night, but it’s just to sleep. We hadn’t done anything before the bombing, he wasn’t ready for a sexual relationship yet and since we both thought he was still a virgin..... And now, well, he hasn’t recovered enough for sex yet. Believe me, there are times when knowing that is the only thing that’s keeping me from claiming him for myself.”

“No, you definitely need to wait before mating him. Does he remember going through being mated before or....?”

“I’m not sure how clearly,” he said with a shake of his head. “He doesn’t talk about his flashbacks very much, like he's still trying to shove them down and ignore them. He remembers, or thinks he remembers, it happened the first time he went into heat, that it happened in Atsushi's apartment, and that he passed out from the pain of it almost immediately.”

“... fucking hell what a tool ... yeah, that's probably ... all the imprinting happened while he was unconscious. And then if it broke suddenly, violently ... no wonder he fell apart when that dickhead died. Shit, when you put it like that, I'm kinda amazed he didn't just turn into a gibbering idiot permanently,” Hikaru huffed, running a hand through his hair, ruffling it as he thought and then started pacing again.

“Maru thinks the pregnancy might have had something to do with that.”

“... pregnancy??? Jesus fucking Christ on a shitcracker, Blondie, how many more bombshells ya gonna drop on me???”

“Not sure I should be telling you any of this, you realize, but yes, apparently Kacchan was pregnant at the time of the crash. He didn't stay that way, he couldn't, but....”

“... if I had known about any of this...,” Hikaru muttered, stopping to glower at Kouki again.

“You would have ... what? Come over more often? Not teased him as much?”

“Yes!”

“Hikachu....”

“He’s my friend! And now you tell me he’s been going through hell and I wasn't here for him!” Hikaru growled, hands on his hips. “He must think I'm a horrible friend!”

“It's not like he's been all alone through this, you know,” he muttered, feeling perversely annoyed by the omega's attitude.

“I know, I know,” the omega muttered, deflating as abruptly as a popped balloon. “And Mahiro-san obviously has a connection with him I don't and maybe I couldn't've helped, but dammit, I haven't even been given a chance to try!”

“Well, you know now,” he replied peevishly. “And once Maru gives the green light, we can go back and you can ... do whatever it is you think you can do to help him.”

“Kou-san ... I didn't mean ... I'm sure you're doing everything you can to help....”

He nodded, not really sure what else he could say. The truth was he wasn't even sure if what he was doing was actually helping or not. Or, for that matter, what he could do to be of more help to his soulmate. It wasn't fair, it wasn't right, but it was what it was.
“Look, I'll ... do you think I should talk to Mahiro-san later? About me coming over more?”

“Oh I'm pretty sure Maru's going to want a nice long chat with both of us,” he said with a humorless laugh. “My guess is that he'd say yes, but probably a good idea to ask him anyway, just to be sure. He's more in charge of watching over Kacchan's health lately than I am even, so....”

“All right. I don't know if having me around would really help or not, but ... I want to be here for him. I mean I'll still have to work, probably six days a week if I'm doing the early morning shifts ... I'll talk to my boss about it. I don't especially enjoy having to get up in the middle of the night because I have to be at work before even the first hints of buttercrack of dawn, but if he'll give me the baker's pay and baker's hours....”

Kouki nodded in understanding, glancing down at his phone and wishing the thing would buzz already. Then again ... if the silence meant Kana was finally actually talking to someone about things, he would deal with his impatience.
After an unusually subdued dinner, particularly considering the number of people involved, Mahiro forced himself to hang back while Kouki carried Kana away from the table. With the way the afternoon had gone, he knew, at least intellectually, that the two soulmates really needed some quality time alone together. Which, of course, did nothing to still the little voice in the back of his head that was wanting to worry and fuss and dote over Kana the same as if the teen were his own child. It was ridiculous, and counterproductive to Kouki's intentions that he be seen as an equal part of their social circle, even in spite of the age difference.

“Maihiro-sama, I ... I'm really sorry for....”

Mahiro quirked an eyebrow at the younger omega, biting back a grin at the way Hikaru stammered and ducked his head. He had noticed him a couple of times at the Starbucks where the younger omega worked, but he couldn't say he had ever done more than exchanged a couple of words with him in the past. This wasn't his neighborhood, after all, he only knew it as well as he did because Mitsuki and Kouki had such a long-standing friendship and Kouki had been living here since their university days. Still, even from that little, he would not have expected this level of stammering and stumbling from him.

“Sorry for...?” he prompted when it seemed the other was at a loss.

“Kouki-san asked me here to help and all I did was make things worse,” the ginger-haired omega mumbled, head lowered in contrition. “Kouki-san explained about ... about that person,” and Mahiro had to bite back an urge to grin at the sneer of distaste in the other omega's voice, “and I want to help. Kana-kun ... Kana-kun is my friend, too.”

“Well, you can start by helping me with the dishes,” Mahiro said, resisting the urge to ruffle his hair. “Do you have any training in dealing with abuse victims?”

“Um, no,” Hikaru confessed as he started gathering up the dishes from dinner while Mahiro was running water. “But I'm willing to do whatever you think will help. I mean, I ... I can't be here all the time or anything, I've still got work, but if my boss is willing to go for it, that might get cut to thirty hours, maybe a little less, so....”

“What about your family?”

“Mom will understand. She'll probably even try sending over care packages every time I come over after I explain it to her. Not that I'd be specific or anything, just ... she hasn't even met him yet, but she did meet Chamu-kun at Christmas and kinda ... adopted them both? So I know she'll want to do whatever she can to help, too. Unless ... unless you think I should just stay here for awhile? My parents will be cool with it either way, I'm old enough to make these decisions myself, just ... well, you know expensive it is in this city. Staying with them is easier.”

Mahiro hummed a little, mulling it over as he worked. He had been the one to tell Kouki the other
day that Kana needed more companionship from omegas closer to his own age. Kana wasn't really well enough to be going out socializing just yet, but if Hikaru was willing to come and spend time with him...

“I suppose it depends on your schedule ... and how he reacts to you after this,” he said after a long moment. “Kacchan's having a hard time integrating the older memories that have started resurfacing with the newer version of himself his brain manufactured after the trauma of the accident and that asshole's sudden death. Adding the new trauma of another sexual assault on top of the old hasn't helped.”

“Wait, new assault? What new assault??” Hikaru squeaked. Mahiro glanced over his shoulder and then sighed heavily. Right, he should know better than to just assume things.

“On Monday, Kana went to see a new gynecologist, a beta asshole who has no business treating anyone, least of all omegas,” he explained quietly. “When Kacchan started to withdraw his consent to be examined, the asshole had his nurse drug Kana to the gills and proceeded with the exam anyway. Right up until Kou-kun charged the exam room and forced them to stop. I ... am pretty sure that assault has forced a lot of other memories back to the front, changed how they feel to him. Two months ago, he was completely certain he was still a virgin. And now....”

“Fucking hell,” Hikaru swore softly. Mahiro watched as the younger omega made an unsteady path to the breakfast bar to take a seat. “He must hate me.... he must think I don't care. Why the hell didn't anyone....”

“To be fair, Kou-kun's had his hands a bit full. And Hachi and I didn't know to contact you. For that, I'm sorry,” Mahiro said with a heavy sigh of his own. He needed to get Chamu's number from Kouki later, let the kid know what was going on and make sure he was coming down for the weekend. It would make for a full apartment, but he was inclined to think that was what Kana needed. Alpha-omega families tended towards the larger end of the spectrum. Certainly Kana didn't need to be alone with himself right now.

“All right ... I should probably go home tonight, but I'll make some calls. And if it's okay, I'll be back after my shift tomorrow morning?”

“That works. I'll have Kou-kun drop by your store after his morning jog, same as he did this morning, and you can let him know then when you'll be over,” Mahiro said with a nod. Depending on the details of Hikaru's schedule, sending him home at night might well be the better way to go, but they would play it by ear.

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Kana had stayed quiet through dinner, letting the others talk around him without really paying much attention. Other than a soft squeak when Kouki scooped him up, he still hadn't said anything. Then again, neither had Kouki, the alpha silently carrying him straight into their bathroom. And yet as soon as they were alone together, the alpha's confidence seemed to evaporate.

“Maybe ... maybe I should get Maru,” the blond alpha mumbled after setting him on the shower bench. Kana wanted to say it was fine, but the words caught in his throat. He wanted Kouki to stay with him, wanted his alpha to be the one taking care of him for a change, but getting the words to come out ... it seemed impossible. And still that little voice of fear at the back of his head, chirping at him that Kouki wasn't going to want him anymore, as damaged as he clearly was. Especially if he saw him undressed.

“Oi, don't you start that crap again,” Kouki whispered fiercely, startling him with a sudden kiss. He
had some idea what the alpha meant, but as much as he didn't know how to explain that it wasn't something he could control ... at the moment he really didn't care, flinging arms around his neck and kissing him back urgently. This. This was what he needed. He needed his alpha, to feel him close and real and warm and....

And just as suddenly he felt something twist in his gut and he pushed back, trying to scoot away from the trapped feeling aching in his chest. It was too much, he was trapped, the alpha's bulk between him and any escape. He could feel the walls closing in, he couldn't get away, the very air was crushing him.

“Easy, love, it's okay,” Kouki whispered, the scent of warm leather and cinnamon and Kouki wrapping around him as the alpha lifted him into his arms again. It wasn't okay, nothing was okay, but he didn't have the strength to fight. He was tired of fighting all the time, he just wanted it all to be over. He wanted to go back to being okay. He had been so happy before all of this ... even if it had all been a lie, Kana had been happy in that lie of his own innocence. He would give anything to have that back again.

“How about I get Maru to help you with the bath?” Kouki suggested when Kana was finally able to stop crying. “And then we can cuddle up in bed and block out the rest of the world for the rest of the night.”

“... or we could skip the bath tonight and go right to the cuddling?” he murmured, not quite daring to look his alpha in the eye. His breath caught in his throat for what felt like an eternity and then the soft notes of amusement hit him.

“If that's what you want, then we'll do that,” the blond alpha said, standing up from the shower bench and walking back out to their bed. Their bed. Kana shivered again at the thought, even though he and Kouki had been sharing the same bed for a little over two weeks. Perhaps because, in spite of everything, it still felt like such a strange thing, to be sharing a bed with his soulmate.

Another shiver when he was set down, but within moments Kouki was laying down beside him, pulling him in close to his chest. Kana didn't even care that it was too early for them to be going to bed, didn't care that he hadn't even changed out of what he had been wearing. Right then all that mattered was having Kouki's arms around him, Kouki's scent filling his nose as he burrowed into his strong chest. Maybe if he tried hard enough, he could erase all the negative and replace it with Kouki. He was certainly going to try.

~*~*~

Kouki held Kana close, slowly rubbing his spine until he felt the young omega drop off to sleep. Careful not to wake his soulmate, he shifted around in bed until he was sat up against the headboard, the omega curled against his hip and thigh. A few more pettings and he reached for his tablet. It was a bit early for them to be calling it a night, under normal circumstances, but then these were far from that. He knew how important sleep was while one was recovering from injuries, physical or mental. He certainly didn't begrudge his omega the extra sleep; he would just use the time to check his e-mail and then settle in with a book.

He was only partway through his e-mail when Mahiro poked his head through their door, coughing to catch his attention. The omega quirked an eyebrow in silent question, but Kouki wasn't confident he actually knew what Mahiro was asking. With a frown, he gestured for the omega to come in and, hopefully, ask the question properly.

“How asleep is he?” Mahiro asked when he was close enough to perch on the side of the bed, though he stayed standing.
“Enough for it to be restful, why?”

“We need to talk,” Mahiro said, sighing heavily as he finally sat down on the side of the bed.

“... I told Hikachu you'd be having words with each of us tonight,” he said, unable to stop himself from smiling as he watched a sour look pass over Mahiro's face.

“Yes, well, I already talked with Hikaru-kun. He's gone home for the night, by the way, but if you stop in his Starbucks in the morning, he'll let you know his schedule then.”

“... okay,” he said, setting down his iPad slowly. Another huff came out of Mahiro, eyes dropping to where Kana lay curled against Kouki's side. A beat and then one hand reached out, gently brushing fringe away from the sleeping omega's eyes. It felt a little strange to watch his friend being so parental ... until he remembered that, had his first pregnancy held, that child would only be a year or so younger than Kana was now. Perhaps not so strange after all.

“I promised him anything he told me, if he wanted me to, would be kept in strict confidence,” Mahiro said softly after a long pause. “Not that he's told me much. Or asked that I keep it from you.”

“Maru....”

“I know how hard this is on you, Kou-kun, but you can't mate him yet.”

“You're not telling me anything I didn't already know with that, Maru,” he said with a soft sigh of his own. “Between the abuse and his injuries, he's in no state for such things, I know that. Even just kissing is problematic right now, apparently.”

“Don't you dare start pouting, you tree-shaped bastard,” Mahiro growled and Kouki was taken aback by the fierceness in his friend.

“I wasn't –.”

“Good. He doesn't need you being stupid. I'd send you to a course, but you need to learn faster than they'd teach you.”

“I'm doing the best I can, Maru,” he said softly, briefly brushing a hand along Kana's side. “As much as I can, I'm letting him set the pace. I just ... don't always get it exactly right.”

“That's a problem anyone would be having,” the omega said softly, a half smirk turning his lips. “It's not like there's a twelve step program you can follow. Every case is different, because every person is different. What he needs, how much and how fast ... that's going to change, day to day. I just....”

“Slow and gentle, and always at his pace,” Kouki said softly, smiling a little as he watched his soulmate sleeping. For once, the young omega seemed completely untroubled by the unhappy dreams that haunted him even still. At least for a little while, his soulmate looked, felt like he was at peace. It was a start.

“Try to remember, he's still closer to the mindset of a virgin than ... than a sexually active omega adult. Even with the things he's starting to remember. Also, I need your phone.”

“Wait, what? Why?”

“I need Chamu-kun's contact information, knothead,” Mahiro said with a roll of his eyes. “As
Hikaru-kun pointed out to me, Chamu-kun deserves to know what's going on. And have you even confirmed that he's coming down this weekend?"

“I only just made the suggestion to him this morning, you realize,” Kouki replied mildly, though he couldn't completely contain his amusement.

“And probably without telling him the whole story,” Mahiro countered, arms crossing over his chest a moment. And then he was holding out his hand expectantly. “I'll call him on my phone, but I need his number first.”

“All right, all right, you little tyrant,” he mock-grumbled, carefully pulling away from Kana to get to his phone.

“Tyranny is the only way you alphas will listen,” his friend replied, a hint of a smirk in his tone, though his face was completely bland.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, handing over his phone with a shake of his head. “Go on, go plot your global domination somewhere else. Are you going to be up for sitting with him again in the morning?”

“You don't actually think I stay up with him while you're out, do you?” his friend replied, the fake innocence almost too strong in the air. “I need more sleep than you. And he doesn't care if I'm awake or asleep next to him, as long as he's not left alone.”

Well, he couldn't very well argue with that. He wouldn't even try.

~*~*~

Mahiro took the time to make himself a last cup of tea for the night, sighing at the realization that Kana was missing his second cup of his herbal tea by falling asleep so early. Well, there was nothing he could do about that, other than hoping Takamizawa-sensei had already taken that probability into account when writing up his dosing orders. And take better care to watch for that in the future, he supposed. Once his own tea was finished, he settled in front of the terrace windows, looking up Chamu's information before dialing the teen's number on his own phone. He was a little surprised at the prompt answer.

“Satou Chamu-san?”

“Um, who are you and how did you get this number?”

“My name is Kurosaki Mahiro, I'm a friend of Kouki-san and I've been helping with Kana-kun. I wanted to make sure you're coming down this weekend.”

“Um.... You know, he only just e-mailed me this morning about that, right?”

“I didn't realize it was such a difficult thing to decide,” Mahiro said, inwardly flinching at the coldness in his own voice. Strike one.

“Hey, I don't know who the hell you think you are, but you can stuff that shit,” the teen growled. “Unlike some people, I'm not actually made of money. I've still got school to finish and a job to work.”

The kid was right, of course. Antagonizing him wasn't going to help anything. Mahiro needed to take a different track.
“I don't suppose he told you, it's not something you want to tell someone in an e-mail, but Kana-kun's started having flashbacks. At least two of the ones he's had this week have been violent. He almost hit Kou-kun the other day.”

The sudden silence on the line was almost deafening. If not for the little white background noises of an open line, he might have thought they had been disconnected. The silence stretched long enough that Mahiro started to worry he was going to have to say something more before Chamu would start talking again.

“... I need to talk to him.”

“He's asleep right now,” he said quietly. “Look, if it's the money, we'll figure something out, but your friend needs you.”

“I don't ... I need to finish the school year....”

“I know, but you could come down for the weekends, right?”

“Gonna hafta, right? Like you said, Kacchan needs me.”

“Thank you, Satou-kun,” he said, genuinely meaning it.

“I may not be able to come down every weekend, you know. Two months is a long time and I'm not made of money.”

“Fortunately for you, I am,” he replied easily. “You can even job hunt for next term while you're here if you want.”

The snort from the other end sounded almost disdainful, but Mahiro had an idea what was really behind it. Pride could be a dangerous thing, especially in a young beta. Better to charge full steam ahead, before the teen could work up a proper protest.

“I have Kou-kun's computer, I'll set up a train ticket for you tonight,” he said before the teen could make an excuse to decline. “Again, thank you, Satou-kun, and good evening.”

Tomorrow, he would have to - carefully! - probe into the seemingly unlikely friendship between the two teenagers. And find out what it was the young beta was looking to do with his life. After all, what was the point of having connections if you couldn't use them to help your friends?

~*~*~

Waking up to Kouki gently shaking him awake was starting to feel like a pattern. Rolling over, Kana reached up with his eyes still closed and pulled his soulmate down close enough for a slow kiss.

“It's too early, come back to bed,” he mumbled when their lips parted.

“Maru might wonder what happened to us.”

“Don't care. Want more cuddles,” he mumbled, blinking sleepily up at his soulmate. Kouki's smile was just as beautiful as always. His personal golden angel, too beautiful to be real. How had he gotten so lucky as to have this man as his soulmate, to have his love?

“You really are a terrible temptation like this, love,” the alpha murmured, leaning in to brush a kiss to his forehead that left him tingling from head to toe. “But you really should get up.”
“Whatever happened to letting me do whatever I wanted?” he grumbled even as he let Kouki pull him up to his feet.

“Derailed by a certain tyrant omega by the name of Kurosaki Mahiro,” the blond replied, chuckling. “You should know he won't hesitate to march right in here and start shouting orders if he thinks I'm taking too long getting you up.”

Kana huffed again and wondered if it might not be worth it. Of course Kouki already had him up on his feet and halfway to the master bathroom, so perhaps this was the wrong time to be considering it.

“Tomorrow,” he muttered sullenly. “Tomorrow you're coming back to bed and we're staying there until noon.”

“We'll see how tomorrow goes,” Kouki said, but his tone and his scent both were enough to tell Kana not to count on it. Another huff and he nudged his alpha away from him.

“I can manage this much myself you know,” he mumbled, though it wasn't the bigger reason for why he wanted the other to let him be.

“I'm sure you can, love, but....”

“I'm fine,” Kana repeated, easing himself down on the shower bench. He probably ought to take a full shower, but if Kouki wasn't going to leave ... as silly as it was, the thought of being completely naked around Kouki felt ... inappropriate.

“So stubborn,” the alpha murmured, bending down to brush a kiss to Kana's lips. “All right, love, all right. Ten minutes? I don't think I'll be able to hold Maru back any longer than that.”

“Ten minutes,” he agreed with a nod. Definitely not taking a full shower in so little time, but it would be enough for him to make himself feel clean enough for the day. And maybe after lunch he would be able to ask Mahiro to help him with a bath without turning into a tomato in the process. Maybe not. Either way, he would have to try.

~*~*~

Hikaru would have preferred going straight to Kouki's place after his shift, but his mother had insisted he come back home first after he had explained the general situation to her last night. From the look on her face, he was completely sure of two things: one, she knew more than he'd told her and two, there would be hell to pay if he didn't come back home after his shift.

“Okaasan, okaeri!” he called out as he slipped out of his jacket and shoes.

“In here, sweetheart,” his mother called out from the kitchen. He knew already what that meant, but he still wasn't completely prepared for the amount of food he could tell she had made. Barely a quarter past eight in the morning and she already had an entire lunch made and packed. She must have gotten up and started preparing all this shortly after he'd left for his shift. His mother was either an angel or insane. Or maybe a bit of both.

“Okaasan....”

“Did Fujii-san give you the job?”

“Yeah. He said he'd actually been thinking about it all day yesterday,” he said as he watched her packing what seemed like a ridiculous number of heavy-duty food storage containers into a large
bag, “but by the time he got to my e-mail last night, he had just assumed I was already asleep and left it for this morning. He walked me through everything and I’ve got my own key now. The raise went into effect today, he's shuffling schedules now, but I'm on for four hours a morning, six days a week, starting tomorrow. I'm going to miss my regulars, but....”

“Well, maybe after Kobayashi-kun is feeling better, you can pick up the odd afternoon shift again?” she suggested.

“I don't know that I'll miss them that much,” he said, grinning.

“Well, you never know,” his mom said with a smile. “Now go pack, dear. I still need fifteen minutes for these meat buns.”

“I don't think I need to go that far,” he said with a shake of his head. “Pretty sure Kurosaki-san is going to send me back here after dinner again, considering how early I have to be up. Plus it's not like there's a huge amount of room for yet another guest.”

“Doesn't hurt to be prepared for anything, just in case,” his mother scolded, making shooing motions at him. Well, she wasn't wrong.....

By the time he got back to Kouki's building, Hikaru was feeling just a bit like a Himalayan sherpa, between his overnight bag, the bag of food from his mom, and the other bag she had pushed on him before he could get out the door. The whole walk he had been feeling the judgmental looks of others, scenting the disapproval of betas who probably thought he was some sort of homeless freak or worse. It was a relief to step past the doorman and into the warmth of Kouki's building, even if the doorman was giving him a curious look. So was the desk clerk, but maybe if he just acted natural, like it was completely normal for him to be here and he knew what he was doing? It had worked once or twice before, after all.

He was just thinking it might actually work this time, too, halfway to the elevators at the far end of the lobby, when the desk clerk called out to him.

“Excuse me, young man, but where do you think you're going?”

Worse, a hulking beta security guard was coming at him from the security office. Really guys? he thought to himself with an annoyed huff. Not wanting to make a scene if he could help it, he let his feet turn towards the front desk.

“Hi, yeah, actually, none of this is necessary. Morihito-san is expecting me,” he said, pulling out his keys. “Gave me a key and everything.”

“Let me see that,” the security thug growled, grabbing his wrist and jerking him around without warning. Hikaru bit back a yelp at the sudden pain, fingers clenching instinctively around his key ring.

“You need a card to access the penthouse level at this time of day,” the beta at the desk lied smoothly and Hikaru had to bite back a sharp retort. Oh he knew exactly what this was about, glancing sidelong at the desk clerk. Asshole wasn't even calling the penthouse to see if maybe, just maybe, the boss really was actually expecting him. Oh he was so going to get these two fired. And enjoy it.

“Look, call up to the penthouse, Morihito-san will confirm it. Itoh Hikaru, he's expecting me,” he said, trying to maintain a customer service friendly tone while steadfastly refusing to open his fist for the guard still trying to take his keys.
“No need to bother the boss over some street rat,” the security thug was saying, trying now to just bodily pick him up. Fortunately for Hikaru's dignity, as big as the beta was - and he had to be doing some form of steroids to get that big - he couldn't actually manage to pick him up with all the bags he was lugging around with him. For a wonder, the desk clerk was actually calling someone, though it occurred to him to worry that he was calling the police instead of the penthouse.

“Morihito-sama? Sorry to disturb you, sir, but there's a vagrant down here insisting you're expecting him. Shall I call the police?”

“Oi! I'm not a vagrant!” he shouted as loud as he could, hoping his voice might carry through the line. And then the security beast was twisting his arm and he yelped, turning into it before the idiot could snap his arm. “KOUKI!”

He couldn't see the desk clerk behind him any more, but Hikaru could still scent him, a vicious glee settling in his chest at the way the beta's scent went cold with dread and fear.

“Masuda-san. He's coming down, says to hold him here,” the desk clerk said to the guard who was still trying to shove Hikaru out towards the street. He bit down on his own gag reflex as the guard's sent soured with irritation and what he could only guess was a growing urge to ignore orders and throw Hikaru out into the street anyway. He tried to pull himself free, only to have his arm twisted even harder, to the point where he was certain something was going to have to give. And that something was probably going to be him.

The next two minutes felt like hours, his shoulder in complete agony, but Masuda was clearly convinced Hikaru was some sort of petty hoodlum and he wasn't letting go. When the elevator finally dinged, he could feel himself almost tearing up with gratitude at the waft of familiar alpha scent that came out of it.

“Hika? What the ... what in the name of the seven hells do you think you're doing?! Let go of Itoh-kun right now!” Kouki growled, angry strides carrying him across the lobby in an instant.

“Hikachu, are you okay?”

Once the beta let go of him, Hikaru slowly, and with exaggerated care, rotated his shoulder and rubbed at the joint, letting a bit more of his pain leak into his scent now that there was someone there who would be able to read it.

“No permanent damage, I don't think,” he said with a lopsided grin, letting one of his bags slowly drop to the floor. There was a nasty bruise forming on his wrist and he could feel where his keys had dug into his fingers, but no broken skin or bones. He could feel Kouki's eyes on him, long fingers reaching out to gently poke at his shoulder a moment, and before he could stop it, he was wincing and whimpering in pain. Cold fury swept even stronger into the blond alpha's scent and Kouki turned sharply on the security guard.

“Give me your badge and keys. Now. You're fired. Go change,” the blond snapped. The guard just stood there like a dumb lump for several seconds, a low growl starting to build in the silence. “I said give me your badge!”

“You ca—....”

“NOW!”

An irate alpha male in his prime was nothing to sniff at, especially not one that towered over a person as much as Kouki generally did. The beta was actually shaking a little as he handed over his badge, then beat a hasty retreat. And yet Kouki was clearly not done, spinning his ire onto the desk
“If you ever stand by and let Security treat a visitor like that again, authorized or not, I will have your badge, too! There is no excuse for treating a guest with such disrespect! Itoh Hikaru is my authorized guest and I will not tolerate this sort of abuse of my guest because you think you know my business better than I do. Are we clear?”

“Yes, Morihito-sama,” the clerk said with a low bow. “It won't happen again, Morihito-sama.”

“You'd do well to remember I won't tolerate discrimination against omegas in any of my employees,” Kouki growled before turning back to Hikaru, grabbing the strap of the bag he had let drop to the floor. “Come on, breakfast should be ready, if you're hungry.”

Hikaru didn't say anything, silently following the alpha into the elevator, then letting his other two bags drop before sinking back against the back of the car. The rush of adrenaline had passed and now he was feeling just a little shaky and more than a little hurt-y.

“I'm sorry you had to put up with that,” Kouki said softly, exasperation and remorse written in every line of his body.

“Yeah, well ... I did kinda look like a hobo with all this. Except cleaner.”

“No excuse,” the alpha said, shaking his head. “Noguchi-san recognized you enough to let you in the door without trouble, right? That should've been their first clue.”

“Yeah, well, betas are arrogant idiots, remember?”

Kouki snorted, but the elevator had reached the penthouse level. Without anyone using a card, Hikaru noted. He reached for his bags, only to hiss in pain as his shoulder protested.

“Go on, I've got this,” Kouki said, gently nudging him out of the elevator. It was almost annoying how readily he found himself obeying the orders of an alpha, but Kouki knew the right words, the right tone. And Hikaru's shoulder was really aching now, a dull, angry red glow under his skin. He kept the elevator door open while Kouki collected his bags, then dutifully held the door open for him again when they reached the actual apartment, where Kana was waiting, nervously shifting his weight from side to side and frowning at them.

“Hika-san? Is ... is everything okay?”

“Just assholes being assholes,” he said softly, slipping out of his shoes and jacket quickly so he could go give his friend a reassuring hug. It probably would have worked better if he hadn't winced and hissed again in the process.

“Kouki was so pissed,” Kana mumbled, glancing at the blond with an oddly wary expression as the alpha passed him with Hikaru's bags.

“Yeah, well, that'll happen when you step out of an elevator and find one of your employees trying to break one of your friends,” the blond muttered as he carried Hikaru's bags into the apartment. “Hikachu what is all this, anyway? I didn't think you were angling to move in here for the week!”

“... is that a hiking backpack?” Mahiro asked as he joined them. Giving Kana another quick squeeze, he then let go and turned around to see what the elder omega meant.

“Maybe? I don't ... oh hell, no wonder they thought I was a vagrant,” he muttered. “I honestly have no idea what's in anything but that one,” he explained, pointing to his messenger bag. “One of them
has a whole bunch of food in it, but I'm not sure which. Unless it's both of them. Mom got a little carried away this morning. She was steaming meat buns when I got home from work, but other than that I have no idea what she made. Mom's always said food is love and she definitely cooks like it.”

Even as he was trying to explain, Kouki was moving around him, steadily drawing Kana away from the genkan and towards the couch. Hikaru watched the two soulmates and felt a familiar ache in his chest. He rubbed at his sternum, though it didn't actually help, and tried to focus on helping Mahiro, but their scents, heightened with their moods, were hard to ignore.

“Well, it's all right,” the older omega said, one hand brushing against his arm to try to draw his attention. “Means lunch is already covered, right?”

“Yeah,” he said, nodding and crouching down to open one of the bags. Rubber lids stared back at him and he nodded, closing the bag and carrying it into the kitchen.

“What happened downstairs?” Mahiro asked once they were safely in the kitchen, even if the 'safety' was illusion. “Kouki-kun didn't explain anything, just stormed out of here. Then not even a minute later Kana was freaking out about feeling Kou's rage.”

“Some beta security goon took it upon himself to try to physically eject me from the building. Kouki-san fired him on the spot, but he really twisted up my arm and shoulder.”

“A hot soak will probably help with that, you can get the bath first after breakfast, if you're even hungry right now.

“Not really.” he admitted. “I've already been up for about six hours now. But if I could get a cup of coffee, I'll go for a soak now, while you guys have breakfast, and then I'll be done by the time you are?”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” the older omega agreed with a nod. “If you're getting up that early for your shifts, may have to bed you down in the office. Or send you back home.”

“Whichever you think will work better,” he said, shrugging. At the moment, all he really wanted was to get his mug of coffee and disappear into the guest bathroom. A hot soak would be good for his shoulder and the scented water would take his mind off the ache of not having someone of his own.

~*~*~

Kana almost dropped the controller as another alpha's scent suddenly hit his nose.

“Kacchan?”

“S-sorry,” he mumbled, forcing his attention back to the game he and Hikaru were playing, only to see his avatar get shot. “... ok, that was just rude,” he huffed, stabbing the button to quit instead of respawn.

“Oh come on, you were distracted, how was I supposed to resist?” his friend teased.

“See if I ever play this sort of game with you again,” he grumbled, setting down his controller and twisting around to see who had come in just then. His unease at another alpha being around - and that was something he wasn't sure he really wanted to look at too closely just then - faded somewhat when he saw his surgeon and Mahiro in a tight embrace. He had been wondering how long the two were going to stay apart, though in truth he had been expecting Mahiro to go home,
not for his mate to come and join them.

“Hey Sensei, you didn't happen to bring dinner with you, did you?” Kouki teased, bringing out a fresh mug of coffee for the shorter alpha. Mitsuki rolled his eyes and laughed.

“If you wanted me to do that, you should have asked.”

“If any of us had known sooner what we wanted for dinner, I might have,” Kouki replied and Kana was actually surprised when his alpha sat down next to him on the couch. Surprised, but pleased. And even more pleased when his alpha tucked an arm around him, a flutter in his chest as he leaned into Kouki's warmth.

“Hi, I don't think we've actually met,” Mitsuki said, walking over and offering Hikaru both a polite bow and a handshake. Kana bit back a giggle, watching Hikaru's stunned expression for a second before his friend recovered, bowing back and briefly taking the surgeon's hand. There was something odd, a momentary shift in their expressions when their hands touched, but since both of them seemed to shake it off, he let it go. Probably just static or something.

“Ah, um, Itoh Hikaru, but I was at the hospital with Kacchan. I was the other omega they brought in with him? You even came looking for me at one point for him?”

“Huh, that must be why you look familiar,” the alpha said as he sat down in one of the chairs. “Sorry, I can be a bit bad with names sometimes.”

“Well, I'm sure you were a lot more focused on Kacchan at the time,” the omega mumbled and was he actually blushing?? Kana was definitely going to have to tease him about that later.

“Oh Hi-kun, you sweet innocent child, you have no idea how far you could have milked that one,” Mahiro teased, helping himself to Mitsuki's lap. “A little wibble about being forgotten and who knows what he might have gotten you as an apology~! Hey!”

Kana couldn't hold in a giggle as Mitsuki pinched his mate, the alpha muttering about bratty omegas who tried to manipulate innocent alphas to nefarious purposes. Hikaru was definitely blushing now. And probably feeling a bit awkward, being the only single person in between two soulmated couples. Maybe ... but he couldn't think of any way of making it less awkward, especially since calling attention to the situation would just make it worse.

“Pretty sure we still have half the food my mom sent for lunch,” Hikaru mumbled, probably hoping to steer the conversations back onto safer ground.

“Or we could order pizza?” Kana suggested, turning a hopeful look up at his alpha while ignoring the amusement he could pick up rolling off the pair at the other end of the couch.

“If pizza's okay with everyone else?” Kouki asked, getting nods from the others. “Chicken bacon ranch for one and mushroom and sausage with extra cheese for the other?”

Once that was decided, Kana got up to poke through Kouki's game collection, startling a little when he was nudged by a game case to the back. Frowning, he turned, surprised to see Hikaru wiggling a case at him.

“What, you thought I wasn't paying attention to all the bickering you and Chamu-kun were doing over the MCU? Have you played this yet?”
“No,” Kana admitted, taking the hint and swapping out Xbox games.

“... are you two seriously about to start up a new game right now?” Mahiro asked them, although the amusement in his scent undermined the incredulity in his tone.

“You're not our mom, you can't tell us what to do!” Hikaru declared in badly feigned outrage, raspberriesing at the older omega. It was enough to completely spoil the mood, derailing the scolding Mahiro had no doubt intended to give them before he could even start. The elder omega instead grabbed Hikaru's controller and shoved himself between them.

“I'm taking Banner, you can be Stark, Kacchan,” Mahiro said with a satisfied nod. Kana could only sit there for a moment, startled by this sudden insertion. Three days and Mahiro hadn't shown the least interest in gaming with him and now....

“... you game?” Hikaru sputtered for him. Kana glanced at the two alphas, huffing at the knowing look passing between them. They'd been punked.

“Lego Star Wars is still the best out of this entire series, but this one isn't too bad. Drones a little in places, but other than that it's fine,” Mahiro said with a casual shrug. “You know, Bruce Banner was originally an omega, but they changed it for the new movies. Execs didn't think betas would go for an openly omega hero in a superhero movie. Like there was something unbelievable about an omega researching the possibility of making himself into an alpha.”

“Yeah, they did the same thing to Rogers,” Hikaru said. “I heard the studio got enough pressure from omega rights groups that they might be doing a retcon for the next Cap movie.”

“R-really?” Kana stammered. Maybe he ought to have been reading those comics all along after all.

“Oh yeah, there's all kinds of that sort of subversive stuff in comics and manga if you know where to look. I heard a rumor that Stan Lee argued like hell for Rogers to be an omega in the MCU but the studio didn't want to risk it. You know, the internet thinks he was secretly behind the whisper campaign that got Marvel Studio's previous exec fired.”

“They didn't fire him, the guy resigned,” Mitsuki corrected.

“Same difference,” Hikaru said, shrugging. “Point is, there's an alpha at the top of the studio now, instead of some ignorant ass beta. And the way I hear it, she's definitely got the brass balls to say fuck you to uptight betas and put things back to the way Lee-san wants them.”

“They aren't always omegas in the comics. Banner and Rogers,” Mahiro explained, almost as a quiet aside for Kana's benefit. “But the best serials seem to be the ones where they are. Ultimate really screwed the pooch making Banner and Rogers start off as betas.”

“Oh god, not this again,” Mitsuki mock groaned.

“Well they did!” Mahiro insisted sharply. “Especially since they made Romanov an omega who got turned into an alpha! It's stupid!”

“It's a set of comic books!”

“That impressionable kids are reading, looking for reflections of themselves! I know Lee-san has too much to do to be micro-managing the storylines now, especially when there's so many titles and spin-offs, but really!”

Kana couldn't help a soft giggle, listening to Mahiro and Mitsuki bickering over Marvel like that.
And yet it eased a knot in his chest he hadn't even realized was there. He still missed Chamu, but maybe finding a place for himself in Kouki's life wouldn't be as hard as he had feared. He could hope for that, at any rate.
Momentry

Chapter Notes

Hi, I'm a horrible person. Flashback in this chapter is a scene of semi-explicit spousal rape, so feel free to skip that if it's problematic for you.

Kouki hadn't really wanted to leave Kana that morning any more than he had all week, but Mahiro had practically shoved him out the door. After everything his friend had done for him, he couldn't just ignore the omega's gesture.

“We haven't done this trail in awhile, you sure you're up for it?” Satsuki teased as he met up with his friend again.

“Still not looking for a race, Sacchan,” he replied with an easy grin. “I've been building myself back up to this, in fact I did this jog yesterday morning, so I'll be fine as long as we keep to an easy pace.”

“Saa, always spoiling my fun you are,” the other alpha said in overblown disappointment, though it cleared from his expression quickly enough. “How's Kana-kun?”

“One step forward, three steps back. He deserves better, but I can't seem to be able to give it to him.”

“Yeah, that's a steaming pile of shit,” Satsuki grumbled, matching Kouki's pace easily despite his shorter legs. “After whatever bullshit he'd been through before you, he probably thinks the same thing. That he doesn't deserve you. And you're both complete idiots for it.”

“You don't understand. Every time I think we're making progress, something happens and things get worse.”

“That doesn't make you a bad alpha,” his friend countered, shaking his head. “Come on, Kou, you and I both know if you were half as shitty as you're trying to tell me you are, you wouldn't be here. You wouldn't be worrying about not being good enough because an actual shithead would have cut and run.”

“He's my soulmate, Sacchan. I'm not going to just give up and walk out on him just because things aren't going as smoothly as I'd like.”

“Which is exactly my point, ya lugnut. You can say what you want, but you're sticking with him through whatever it is and that makes you one of the good guys.”

“How's the new single selling?” he asked, not really wanting to talk about it anymore.

“Oh that was smooth,” his friend said with a roll of his eyes. “You know full fucking well I haven't released anything since last spring. And don't tell me you meant the Nokubura single because I know you don't listen to them.”

“So what you're saying is that you're overdue to release another single of your own,” Kouki teased, chuckling.
“Oh shut up and run,” Satsuki huffed with feigned irritation. “You know damn well I've been busy. Aurora has six bands signed to us now and half of them still practically need me to hold their hands any time they're doing anything that isn't putting on a live.”

“Shouldn't it be the senpai helping their kouhai?”

“They try, but Gazetto's on the road right now and both Vabel and Alvion are trying to get recording done for new singles and Nokubura still have to support their latest single with in-stores and radio appearances. Which leaves me and a very overwhelmed San-kun, who's got enough on his plate with his own new band of inexperienced bandmates.”

“Guess that's what you get for signing a bunch of newbies~” he teased, though he was trying to be supportive as well.

“Oh bite me. Do you know how hard I've had to fight everyone, including your own damn Avex, to keep Gazetto with me? I'm just glad those five are too much like me to be willing to make the sort of concessions major labels have tried to demand.”

“I told Kumi she'd be better off making a co-production offer.”

“Yeah, well, she didn't listen. They deserve a major label distribution deal, but they refuse to consider anything that means losing my management people.”

“You know....”

“Don't even say it, Kou. Aurora needs to stay at the level it's at, I don't need you pouring in funds and making us one of the majors. The visual scene needs more independents to support the younger bands, not fewer.”

“What I was going to say was I could try talking to Kumi again about co-production and distribution,” he said with a chuckle. “Maybe now that you've shut the door in her face once, she'll be more willing to listen and negotiate?”

“Well if you do, might as well mention that I've been approached by Speed Disk about a merger. Kondo-san wants out of the business and he wants Aurora to pick up their bands.”

“That's going to double your market share in the visual scene, isn't it?”

“If all the bands go along with it, yeah,” Satsuki replied, grinning almost viciously. “And Moran has already said they'll make the switch, though they haven't announced anything publically yet. We're still working out the fine details.”

‘What was that you were just saying about keeping Aurora at its current level and being overworked with just six bands?’ he said, smirking a little. Satsuki laughed as well.

“Merge two indies labels and you've still got an indies label, Kou, just one with more staff and more resources. I wouldn't be this far into the talks if I didn't know I could handle it. I'll be fine, you just worry about your own business issues~”

“All right, all right, I'll talk to Kumi next week. You're right, those five deserve more.”

Kumiko hadn't exactly appreciated his advice last time, so certain of her own instincts and experience. Her instincts and experience were what had landed her the top job at Avex in the first place, so it wasn't like he had really been able to argue the point with her. On the other hand, her experience was with mainstream pop and rock, not the visual kei scene. And she didn't know
Satsuki half as well as she thought. But maybe this time she would be more willing to listen.

~*~*~*

At the buzz in his pocket, Kouki sighed, running a hand through his hair in frustration. Working from home should have been easier than going into the office - at home there were no nervous subordinates coming to him with their problems, interrupting his focus. No, he just had Kana's scent to do that, the low ebb in his soulmate's mood offering plenty of distraction on its own. He was falling behind, it was why he had spent the whole morning holed up in his home office, and yet he had barely accomplished anything, too busy getting distracted by circular worries for Kana's general well-being.

The knock on the door was rather perfunctory, the door opening immediately after as Mahiro let himself into the room. He couldn't even really say he was surprised.

“I've already told Minase-kun there will be no talk of work during lunch, so don't you try it either,” the omega said, giving him a warning glower.

“You have my word,” Kouki said, placing a hand over his heart briefly. “The word won't even cross these lips until after lunch, I swear.”

“Good. Now come join the rest of us.”

Seeing Kana already seated at the mostly empty table, Kouki sank into the seat beside his soulmate, sliding an arm around him and drawing him in against his chest.

“What's up, sweetheart?” he murmured, brushing a kiss into his hair.

“I dunno, just feel ... off. Mahi-nii says it's probably from being cooped up in here all week, he wants us to go for a walk later, but I ... I don't know.”

“It's probably not a bad idea. There's a couple parks not too far from here.”

“But it's cold outside,” Kana grumbled. “If I wanted to sit in the cold, I could do that on your terrace!”

“Aa, but you should probably at least try to do more than sitting around my apartment all day, love,” he murmured, pressing another kiss to his temple. “There's a library about eight blocks from here, how about you try for that?”

“Library? Sound boring,” his omega grumbled, though Kouki couldn't help wondering if his soulmate wasn't just being difficult to be difficult. Testing his boundaries, so to speak.

“It's a nice library, not huge or anything, but they have a good collection of materials. And a community activities board and information about city colleges. You never know, they might have more information you could use.”

“Who might?” Hikaru asked, setting out bowls of rice and miso.

“Mejirodai Library. Since Maru wants you guys to go out somewhere, I was telling Kacchan that might be an option. Somewhere in walking distance where he can sit when you get there.”

“Oh yeah. We should get you set up as a member there, actually, Kacchan. They're part of the city public library network, so if they don't have something on site, they can ask other libraries and probably get it loaned to you that way. I did that all the time when I was in school. The public
library system has all kinds of cool stuff. Not just books, either. Magazines, audiobooks, music, movies, a couple of the bigger ones even do video game loans. And some of them you can even rent machines for the non-book media. Plus they have a couple community engagement rooms for local clubs to use. We'll go over the announcements boards, you might find an interesting club that meets there.”

He could feel a trickle of upset from his soulmate, though he couldn't figure out why. Pressing another kiss to his forehead, he sat back as Mahiro and Minase brought out more lunch plates for everyone. Were they pressuring Kana too much? He wanted his soulmate to feel safe enough to take things at his own pace, but at the same time he knew he couldn't let the teen retreat from the world the way Kana seemed to be wanting. His own life wasn't really compatible with that, for one thing. And it wasn't healthy to completely withdraw from the world anyway.

Kouki could feel Mahiro frowning at him as the omega took the seat on Kana's other side. It wasn't his fault Kana was giving off unhappy vibes - he'd been doing it all day, so why was Mahiro suddenly blaming him? Unless there was some subtle shift the omega's sharper nose was picking up that he wasn't.

“Hikachu, did you do all this?” he asked as he took in the array of plates.

“Yeah, well, someone had to and since those two can't cook,” the ginger omega said with a lopsided grin and a casual shrug. “It's not really anything that fancy or anything.”

“Well it looks wonderful, thank you, Hikaru-san,” Minase said, a genuine smile lighting up the beta's whole face. Kouki was anxious to ask his friend how things were going at the office, but he knew better than to even try. He had given his word, after all. After lunch would be soon enough.

~*~*~

Kana was grateful to be allowed to sit down once they reached the library building. Kouki was right, it wasn't very big, only two stories of a bland dun-orange brick in a very squared facade. It was the sort of building that would be easy to dismiss, to walk right past without more than a glance, if not for the lanterns and the message board out front. The tables and chairs in the front sitting area were hardly inviting, but there was a more relaxed area towards the back of the first floor, which was where Hikaru had steered them.

“Catch your breath, ne?” his friend said with a grin. “Down here is mostly the current stuff, periodicals, and audio-visual. There's a lot more upstairs, as far as actual books go. They've got a little bit of everything, since this is a residential area, with a lot of kids and young adults materials, but like I said, they're part of the interlibrary loan system, too, so....”

Kana nodded along with what Hikaru was saying, but he was having a hard time focusing. The walk had been a lot more tiring than he had expected and something in the library was needling at his subconscious.

“Here, sip this, slowly,” Mahiro said, holding out a bottle. Blinking, Kana did as he was told. Chilled green tea with citrus and something else he couldn't quite identify. But it was helping ease the knot of tension at the base of his neck. Or maybe it was the way Mahiro was slowly rubbing his shoulders.

“I know you don't believe me yet, but this was a good idea,” the older omega said softly. “You needed this.”

“Don't think I can make that walk back,” he mumbled, feeling ridiculous and pathetic.
“We aren't going back right away, you might feel differently after you've had some time to rest,” the omega behind him said softly.

“If you still feel like you can't make it back when we get ready to leave, we can always call for a lift. I'm sure Kou-kun won't mind, right?”

Kana nodded, knowing Hikaru was right, but it didn't make him feel any better. How had he gotten this weak in just a couple of weeks? And then there were the lingering scents of at least half a dozen alphas, all distant, but still foreign enough to have him feeling uneasy.

“And this is why you need to come out of the golden tower more, sweetheart,” Mahiro scolded gently, squeezing his shoulders again. “You need to get used to being around others. Yes, most of Bunkyo's population is betas, but not like you're used to, clearly.”

“I just...,” he started, but he couldn't find the words he wanted to explain what he was feeling. Mahiro was right, he wasn't used to picking up the traces of so many other alphas and omegas around him all the time. It was going to take him time to adjust, and the only way that was going to happen was if he exposed himself to more alphas and omegas in places like this. And yet....

A sudden rush of air came from the front of the library as the doors opened again, bringing with it the strong scent of an unknown alpha. Alpha and the grime of an automotive repair shop. Kana shuddered, drinking down a gulp of tea, but this time it hit his stomach like a chunk of frozen lead. Shivering again, he pulled his legs up onto the seat with him and pressed his face into his knees. Almost immediately, though, his stomach started complaining, the area around his shrapnel wounds turning angry and painful.

“Kana....”

The machine shop smell was getting stronger. A scrape of a chair against the floor and he whimpered. No, this wasn't happening, he wasn't going to get sucked into another memory - if that's even what this was - while they were out at the library. And yet the mental images were refusing to be pushed aside so easily, the memory of Atsushi's scent filling his nose. Atsushi's scent, sharp with anger and layered with that same machine grease odor because he had just come straight home from the garage in the middle of the afternoon.

“What the hell do you think you're doing, calling me at the garage like that??”

The words echoed in his head, hard and cold with anger, and he whimpered again.

“Kana ... Kana, it's not real....”

Fingers pressed into the back of his shoulders and Kana shuddered again.

“No, press here,” Mahiro scolded. Kana winced as the fingers moved, pressing against the back of his skull, along his neck. And yet it triggered something, because he could feel the memory of Atsushi's angry scent fading, being pushed aside by the way Mahiro was holding him and the fingers in his hair.

“Shh, that's right, dear, it's just a memory, it's not real. He can't hurt you anymore, not ever again.”

Another heavy shudder, a whimper, and he shifted to press his face into Mahiro's chest. Just a memory, maybe not even that. A ghost of the past.

“Hey, Kacchan, there's no parking here. Can you walk out or do I need to have Kou-kun come in to get you?”
“Don’t ask stupid questions, Hikachu, just go,” Mahiro scolded before Kana could answer. He felt bad, guilty, especially for the tremor of embarrassment in Hikaru's scent, but the other omega was gone before he could come up with any words.

“I know, I know,” Mahiro murmured, stroking his hair. “But if he's going to be part of our social circle, he's going to have to get used to me being like this. And so are you.”

Kana didn't bother arguing, just grateful to feel Kouki scooping him up into his arms. He felt ridiculous, hot shame coursing through him at the way the other patrons watched him being carried out like an invalid, and yet....

~*~*~

Kana whimpered when he heard the front door of Atsushi's apartment slam shut. Fear and worry and the heavy reek of truck grease hit him and he keened low in his throat, sinking further into the chilled bath. In an instant, the fear and worry vanished, replaced with hot anger that blasted him as his mate stormed into the room.

“What the hell do you think you're doing, calling me at the garage like that?? And for what? This???”

Atsushi grabbed his wrist and yanked him up out of the bath, sneering.

“Scaring me like that and this is all that's wrong with you? How useless are you?”

Another whimper. “I just....”

“Shut up,” his mate growled, the hand on his wrist tightening painfully as he dragged Kana out of the bathroom. Kana gasped at the way the summer heat dragged against his skin. Another tug and then he was being shoved against the couch, bent over the arm. Before he could even begin to form a question, Atsushi was on him. A scream tore itself from his throat at the abrupt penetration and then his mate was practically smothering him.

“I said shut up! You want the whole neighborhood knowing what's happening in here?” his mate snarled. Kana bit his lip, but he couldn't stop the whimpers. He hated it when his mate got like this, this wasn't why he'd called him. He had just wanted Atsushi to come home and take care of him, help him, not ... this. The hard rutting stilled the hunger, but it did nothing to actually make things better. The books always made shared heats sound like wonderful, sensual things. A time of shared pleasures, not ... this.

“Are you seriously fucking crying right now?” his mate snarled and Kana was surprised to find there were indeed tears rolling down his cheeks. A heavy hand clamped down onto the back of his neck, the other cracking hard against his ass. “Teach you to be so ungrateful after everything I've done for you!”

Pain seared through him as Atsushi held him down, striking him repeatedly on his ass, thighs, and lower back. He tried not to cry out, biting his lip so hard he could taste blood, but he couldn't stop the tears. And the more the tears fell, the more offended and angry Atsushi became, the more violently he struck him. And the more harshly he rutted him. He was certain he had to be bleeding by the time Atsushi, with a disgusted snort and a harsh shove, was done with him.

“Go wash yourself up, I'll be back.”

Whimpering, Kana crawled into their bathroom. Only when he hard the door finally slam shut again did he let himself really cry.
Kouki ached to know what had happened, but from the way Kana was shivering in his arms, he was almost afraid to ask. So he waited, settling in the back seat with his soulmate while Mahiro took the front seat next to Hikaru. Thankfully, Hikaru was licensed to drive, even though it was only a few blocks.

“It's all right, love,” he murmured, pressing a kiss into his hair. “I'm here now, it's okay, you can cry if you need to, just let it out, love.”

Silent tears rolled down his mate's cheeks, silent sobs shaking the young omega's whole body. It was all Kouki could do to hold him close and stroke his hair, murmuring soft reassurances. No one else spoke, not even when they got back to the penthouse. Kouki hesitated before deciding on the couch faced out on the terrace, sinking down onto it with a low sigh.

“Talk to me, love,” he said softly, still carding fingers through dark hair. “I want to help, but you need to talk to me.”

“It ... I don't want to,” his soulmate mumbled, pressing his face into Kouki's chest. Another sigh, stilling fingers against the pressure points at the back of Kana's neck.

“Please? You don't have to tell me details, just ... what happened?”

“I don't know, it just ... came at me,” his omega mumbled, but Kouki could smell the lie in each word.

“Kana, baby, I love you. You don't have to lie to me about these flashbacks to spare me,” he murmured. “I want to be here for you, I will always be here for you, but you have to let me in, okay?”

The way his mate flinched was far from reassuring. And then Kana whimpered and wilted even further against him. A part of him was just waiting for Mahiro to sweep in and shoo him off, but the other two omegas were keeping their distance. In fact, he wasn't sure the two hadn't left the apartment entirely. Hardly what he would have expected, especially after the way Mahiro had been fussing over Kana all week, but....

Mentally shaking himself, Kouki turned his focus back to the young omega curled up against his chest. Fear scent? Oh he was definitely going to have to put a stop to that immediately. Lifting Kana's chin, he brushed a quick kiss to his lips, then another to his forehead.

“Whatever it is, you can tell me, love. I won't get angry. Well, not with you, anyway. You're not to blame for whatever asshole things Atsushi did to you in your past, love. You were a victim.”

Kana shook his head, whimpering and burrowing in closer. Kouki was about to say something more, to make another plea for his soulmate to trust him, when a light hand landed on his shoulder and the scent of roses hit his nose. Glancing back, he was surprised to see Koudai standing behind him, a sorrowful look on his face. The redhead shook his head a little, a silent suggestion for Kouki to drop it. Sighing in defeat, he closed his eyes and nodded.

“Kacchan....”

Despite knowing he was there, Kouki was still surprised by how quickly his friend had circled the couch, dropping down to his knees in front of them. Kana was obviously even more surprised, though it only took him a moment before he practically flung himself at the redhead. A soft “ooph” and Koudai sat back against the coffee table with his lapful of sobbing teenager. Seeing the two
pricked at Kouki's alpha instincts, but he swatted aside the inner growly beast. Omegas bonding with omegas was part of the natural order and the gods knew Kana needed support beyond just himself. Still, he slipped away before his conflicted emotions could make things worse, a little surprised to find Junji in his kitchen.

“Maru?” he asked, going to the fridge for a bottle of water.

“Would you believe me if I said we were already in the neighborhood?” his friend said with a lopsided grin.

“Not for a minute,” Kouki replied, leaning back against the counter. “Is it just the two of you?”

“Tomoyan got recruited to shlep for Maru and Hikaru-kun, Kumi's downstairs,” Junji said softly. “We actually were in Bunkyo already, honest, though of course we were going to call before turning up on your doorstep expecting dinner.”

“Is that what Maru's doing then?”

“I think Hikaru-kun's nominally more in charge of the details of their little expedition, but yeah,” his friend said with a nod. “Maru's message didn't actually explain anything, so want to tell me what happened?”

“All I really know is that they went out for a walk and awhile later I got a panicked message from Hikachu saying I needed to come pick them up. I'm really worried, Juju, but I don't know what I can do.”

“We keep doing as we have been,” the lawyer replied, shrugging. “Three years of repressed memories ... trust me, Kou, that's going to take him a long time to process them all. Even after he starts talking about them, he's probably still going to keep having these flashbacks for the next few months at the least, maybe longer. All we can really do is make sure he knows he's supported and loved. And trust me, on that score you're doing everything right.”

“I just ... I feel so helpless, Juju,” he confessed, his eyes dropping down to his hands. “I know it's unreasonable, but I can't help feeling like I'm failing him somehow.”

“You alphas and your overweening egos,” the omega scoffed. “You're his soulmate and his alpha, but you're also still just human, just like the rest of us. No one, not even Kacchan, expects you to be able to single-handedly fix everything. You aren't failing him and you aren't ruining him, so cut yourself some slack, too, okay?”

Kouki startled a little, glancing up to see Junji frowning at him. Then again, maybe he shouldn't have been surprised to hear Koudai had told Junji about their conversation; those two were thick as thieves, had been since university.

“All right, all right, you can stop giving me that look,” he said, shaking his head a little. Pushing away from the counter, he glanced out over the breakfast bar, but he couldn't really tell if Koudai and Kana were still beyond the far couch or not.

“All you can do is give it time,” Junji said quietly, a hand briefly resting on his shoulder. “He loves you, that's a big part of why he's so scared, you know that, right?”

“Mm. I keep trying to reassure him, but....”

“He'll get there eventually, you'll see.”
Kouki sighed and nodded. Kana was worth waiting for, someday his mate would understand just how much.
Finally we welcome back Chamu to the fray! This chapter has some of my favorite bits thus far, particularly from Kouki.

Chamu had spent the last two hours trading text messages with Hikaru, so he wasn't surprised, was in fact very grateful to see the older omega at the train station when he got to Tokyo. He knew when the time came for him to actually move down here, he was going to have to figure all of this out for himself, but right then it felt a bit ... overly intimidating, the thought of trying to find Kouki's apartment all by himself. Hitching the strap of his bag up his shoulder again, he was momentarily startled at the way Hikaru greeted him with an enthusiastic hug.

“So I feel like I should warn you, now that it's way too late for you to back out, that Kouki-san's place is kind of full right now,” the omega said as they walked over to the next platform to catch the local train out to Otsuka. “We're going to be a bit outnumbered, you and me.”

“You're not exactly inspiring me with confidence here, senpai,” Chamu said, frowning. At least they were able to get seats. “You said something before about a really bad flashback while you guys were at the library this afternoon? Is that connected?”

“Mm. I don't know what happened, what he was seeing, I mean, but I've never been around someone panicking that hard before, I think I might have made things worse by overreacting a bit myself. But it does mean there's four couples in Kouki-san's apartment right now. Five if you put us together~” his friend said with a laugh that didn't quite reach his eyes. “And when I left to come meet you, no one was showing any signs of intending to go anywhere any time soon.”

“.... so you're saying I came down here for nothing?”

“Oh don't be stupid,” Hikaru said, rolling his eyes. “You're still Kacchan's best friend, you know. He's going to be thrilled to see you, a nice surprise to cap off a questionable day. Anyway, it's still early, so who knows, maybe after dinner everyone else'll clear out. Or, well, at least everyone besides Mahiro-san. And Koudai-san. And ... okay, actually, I'll probably be the only one going home after dinner, the place is probably going to stay full the whole weekend, but that's okay. Kacchan could really use the socializing, especially since just walking to the library was enough to tire him out.”

Chamu huffed but didn't argue. Hikaru was right, Kana needed to be making friends, something his best friend hadn't had enough of the last few years. Of course, being outed as a male omega to the whole school had probably had more than a little to do with that. None of their schoolmates had reacted in a particularly mature or appropriate way to it, even for all of them only being thirteen at the time, and he and Kana had quickly found themselves all but outcasts. Kana for being omega and Chamu for refusing to back down from supporting his best friend. But it still bothered him on some level, hearing about all these people he didn't know who were suddenly trying to take his place in Kana's life.

“... okay, like, I don't know exactly what it is you're thinking right now,” Hikaru said, an odd firmness to his tone, “but it feels a hell of a lot like you're being ridiculous. Just about every omega
I've ever met, male or female, has leaned towards the need of a wide social network. Humans are social creatures to begin with, but we omegas seem to feel it even harder than anyone else. Like we're wired to form social connections and clans. I'm not saying your parents were bad people or anything like that, I'm sure they did the best they knew how, but....

“I think that's probably one of the few things his parents managed to do somewhat right, to be honest,” he said with a sigh. “Kacchan was always encouraged to spend as much time with me and Hayato-senpai as he wanted. He was even kinda popular at school for awhile. And then that dumb bitch Fujisaki put it out to the whole school that Kacchan was an omega and ruined everything. I can't help wondering if ... I mean, I know now that he'd already been bitten by the time she did that, but the way the whole school except for me and a couple of our teachers suddenly started treating him like he was some kind of freak of nature ... it really ostracized him and he started spending more and more time with Atsu-nii cuz our classmates refused to accept him. I don't know, maybe nothing would have changed, but I can't help wondering, you know?’”

“What if, words to torture yourself with,” Hikaru said with a small nod. “You can't change the past for obsessing over what you might have done differently, you know.”

“Yeah, I know, but that doesn't mean I can just stop thinking about it, either, you know? Three years now and I still feel like such an idiot for never even noticing something was wrong. Especially when, looking back at it now, there were so many signs that things weren't right. And it kills me that no one, not one of us, noticed a damn thing until it was too late. He was my best friend and I failed him.”

“Hey, you know what they say, hindsight is 20/20. You can see what you missed at the time because now you're looking backwards at those moments with knowledge you didn't have at the time,” the omega said with a shrug. “Cut yourself some slack, ne? You were just a kid yourself when he was bitten, a beta from beta parents, without any of the supercharged senses that an alpha or omega could have used to see things, though from the sounds of it, this guy had talked Kana into using masking agents, too, or your teachers would've figured it out, a couple of them anyway. And dude, he was your brother, your aniki, like you were going to believe he was even able to do something like that. Gods know I wouldn't have in your place!”

Chamu felt himself laughing nervously at that, grateful for the distraction of having to get off the local train. Intellectually, he knew Hikaru was right, but it wasn't so easy to silence those inner voices. Six years since his friend's innocence had been ripped out of his soul, three years since he himself had been forced to face the truth. He and Yutaka had said everything they could, done everything they could to try to convince Kana's parents that he needed to be in therapy, but they wouldn't listen. And Kana ... he had suppressed everything so hard.... Chamu scratched at a phantom itch on his wrist, then shook himself. Kana needed him, needed his help to get through this. That was why he had come, not his own issues with his brother or the lurking feeling that Kana was getting ready to replace him.

A thought he repeated to himself when they were met at the genkan by someone he didn't know at all. Chamu easily had five or six centimeters on him, but this man carried himself with such presence that he came across as bigger, grander. He could easily imagine this person cowing whole rooms into doing what he wanted with just a few words.

“You must be Satou Chamu-kun,” the other man said, his voice vaguely familiar, before offering a short bow.

Chamu felt entirely too much like a misbehaved child under those eyes, fumbling to get the host gift he had brought out of his other bag. He really should have thought about this harder, planned
this better and had the gift ready to go sooner, but then he hadn't really expected anyone to be laying in wait like this, least of all someone he didn't even know.

“Maru-kun, who's at the ... oh hello.”

Chamu froze in shock as a beautiful woman literally bounced up to the man's side. She was simply radiant, tiny and more than a little familiar and yet with that same presence that made her seem ... bigger than life somehow. Hikaru was snickering beside him and then he was gently closing Chamu's mouth for him.

“Kumi-san, this is Kacchan's best friend, Satou Chamu,” the ginger-haired omega explained. “Chamu-kun, allow me to introduce Kurosaki Mahiro, whose mate I believe you met when you were here at Christmas, and Koda Kumiko of Avex Records.”

“It ... it's a pleasure to meet you both,” he stammered awkwardly, clutching his specially wrapped gift of stationary to his chest in uncertainty and suddenly wishing he had gotten an edible gift instead. Was he supposed to have remembered meeting this Kurosaki person's mate? He recognized Kumiko, of course, his cheeks heating as he remembered having the biggest crush on her in grade school. He could clearly remember seeing her face on billboards and magazine covers and thinking she was so amazingly beautiful ... and dreaming about having someone that beautiful for himself some day.

“Uh-oh, I think someone's a fan~” the woman said, a lilting laugh lighting up her whole face even more. “Kou-kun! Get your ridiculous self over here and be a good host, ya tree giant!”

“Well, if you two would stop crowding the genkan...,” the tall blond grumbled good-naturedly as he came up behind her, briefly squeezing her shoulders. Chamu could only watch, gaping, as, the very next moment, Kouki was picking up the small woman and physically setting her aside before turning back to him with a wide grin. “Ah, for me? You shouldn't have....”

“It's not much,” Chamu mumbled, bowing again before presenting the gift box.

“You really didn't have to do this,” Kouki said gently as he accepted it. “A couple months and this will be your home, too, you know.”

“Yeah, well....” Chamu trailed off with a shrug, not really looking for an argument. He was surprised to notice he was alone with Kouki. And then Kana shuffled over, wide eyed, as if he didn't entirely believe what he was seeing. “Hey Kacchan. Miss me?”

The happy squeak wasn't quite enough warning for the way the omega suddenly launched himself at him and Chamu staggered backwards under his best friend's weight.

“I think that's a yes,” Kouki said, laughing, as he held out a hand. “Here, let me at least take your bags.”

Somehow, Chamu managed to pass his two bags over to Kouki while Kana was ... was that crying? He knew his friend had been going through some difficulties, but he hadn't expected anything like this.

“Kacchan, really, it's okay. Geeze, you'd think you hadn't seen me in forever. I was just here last weekend, silly. How much could you miss me in just a week?”

That seemed to sober his friend, the omega stepping back with an abashed look.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, rubbing a hand over one reddened cheek. “I just ... it feels like it's been
longer. Are our parents still being awful?"

“Oh yeah. My parents have even gone so far as to declare that they refuse to support or even allow me to move down here after high school. I, uh, don't suppose Tokai-sensei would be willing to help me out like he did for you? I mean I know I can just walk out the door and what are they going to do about it but... I figure it'd be really awkward if the police turned up here because my parents filed a missing person's report or something.”

“Well, I guess we could ask?” Kana said, glancing back over his shoulder, probably looking for Kouki, but they were alone. “But if you sit the Todai exam and get accepted, I'm not sure there's anything they can really do? But it doesn't hurt anything to ask, just to be sure. Me being, well, me is going to be enough of a scandal for Kou, so....”

“What's wrong with you being you?” Chamu asked, frowning in upset. Ok, yes, his friend was a teenaged male omega from a no-name beta family from a rural prefecture, but why was that such a bad thing?

“Oh, have you seen me lately, Chamu? I'm an eighteen year old male omega who's already been mated and bred once, even if I don't have any kids to show for it. Not exactly an appropriate mate for the head of the Matsumoto Group. Kouki's supposed to be mated to someone like... well, someone a lot better than me.”

“Whatever happened to you two being soulmates, hmm? Last I checked, soulmates kinda trumped anything else,” Chamu countered.

“Yeah, well... it doesn't.” Kana mumbled, glancing back over his shoulder again. But instead of Kouki, another stranger had appeared. Well, Hikaru had said Kouki's apartment was pretty full of people at the moment. And since he didn't recognize this person, either, even with his cherry red hair, he could only assume he was part of the fourth couple the other omega had mentioned earlier.

“Kacchan worries over everything,” the redhead said with a soft smile. “Hi, I'm Yamashita Koudai, Hasegawa Tomoya's mate. You must be Chamu-kun, yes? I thought maybe I should just come over here and introduce myself.”

A little lightbulb went off in his head and he nodded. That must mean Tomoya and Junji were also here so just one mystery person left. But instead of asking a stupid question, he just smiled and bowed politely.

“To be honest, he's kinda always been like that,” he found himself saying, not really sure why even though it was the truth. “Always worried he was going to say or do the wrong thing. I always told him he was being silly, but he never listened. Nice to know some things don't change.”

Kana swatted his shoulder, but Chamu wasn't going to apologize for the truth.

“So it's not just the accident? That... actually makes me feel better,” the redhead omega said, laughing again. “Please, come on in, won't you? I'm sure you're tired of sitting, but there's no need to stand around here. Plus I think dinner's going to be pretty soon.”

“Oh, um, I wasn't sure so I... might have already eaten on the train?” Chamu said, suddenly afraid he had made a major blunder. Great, just what he needed, to be screwing up in front of Kouki's fancy friends. Maybe he should have tried harder to decline Kouki's invitation. Then again, Kana still needed him. Obviously, the way his best friend was clinging to his arm, like he was afraid Chamu might disappear if he let go for even a moment.
“Might have?” the older omega teased, grinning. “It's fine, Juju-senpai's making hot pot anyway, so if you're not that hungry, it'll be all right. Though I don't know too many young men your age who aren't basically walking appetites~” Koudai teased as he gently ushered them into the main room of the apartment. Chamu could sort of hear Junji and Kumi bickering in the kitchen and there was Kana's surgeon sitting on one of the couches with Mahiro, which at least explained that comment. Someone had apparently been playing Minecraft when he had arrived, he recognized the menu screen on Kouki’s giant screen, but he couldn't tell who and wasn't quite sure if he was allowed to ask about it.

And then Junji was announcing from the kitchen that someone needed to help Tomoya set up the table. Chamu let Kana tug him around to the couch faced out towards the terrace windows, well out of the way of everyone else.

“What are you doing here, anyway?” his best friend whispered. “Not that I'm mad or anything!” he hurried to add, “I just wasn't expecting you back again so soon!”

“Well that's an asshole thing to say,” Kana grumbled next to him, elbowing him hard in the ribs without actually moving away from his side. “You're still my best friend forever, dumbass. Building my own friendships with Kouki's friends doesn't change that. Nothing's going to change that, unless....”

“Has it really been that awful, being at school without me?”

“It's not like I have any other friends there, you know,” he said, sighing himself. “Everyone knows now, about you being in the bombing and having a soulmate here in Tokyo. I haven't told them any more than that, though. None of the people asking had ever really cared about you before now, so why they think I should buy that they're suddenly oh so worried about you.... Well, okay, there's Hashimoto-sensei, he always genuinely cared, so I let him know that you really are doing better here, that I've met your soulmate, too, and it's going to be okay. He still insisted I bring you some of his uncle's soba noodles ... that I should get out of my bag, crap, I almost forgot. Um ... where am I staying? Hikaru-senpai said you've already had company here, so....”

“Yeah, Mahi-nii has been here all week. I'm ... not sure what the plan is, though. I mean, Mahi-nii worries, but Hikachu always goes home after dinner and I don't think anyone else will be allowed to stay much later than that,” Kana said, though he didn't sound very confident in his own words.

“Senpai seemed to think otherwise.”

“But ... it's only a two .. Ok, three bedroom apartment.”
“Yeah, I've been here before, the master bedroom is practically obscene, I can't even begin to guess how much this place would have cost if your soulmate didn't already own the whole building. Hell, all ten of us could probably comfortably sleep out here in this room if the furniture wasn't in the way.”

“All right you two, come have dinner!” Junji called out. To Chamu's surprise, Kana actually groaned and tried to sink even lower against him. Strange reaction to being told food was ready, even for Kana. Gently nudging his best friend, he waited for the omega to actually get up before following suit. He would just have to remember to get those noodles a little later.

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The only way Kana was willing to share a bath with Kouki was if he was allowed to have on swim trunks for it. It was probably ridiculous, he had caught a whiff of incredulity from Mahiro even as he had said it, but the older omega didn't try to change his mind. Instead, Mahiro focused his energy on mock-glowering at his mate when Mitsuki insisted on checking Kana's wounds and bandages himself, as if Mahiro hadn't been helping Kana with his baths all week.

And then the pair had left the room, leaving him alone with Kouki for what felt like the first time in days, maybe weeks. It wasn't, of course, and he knew it was just his mind playing tricks on him, but still. He felt oddly nervous, unsure just what to do next.

“You're not going to get much out of this if you don't come join me, love” his soulmate teased from where he was already sitting in the steaming tub. Blushing hard, Kana shuffled over to him, letting Kouki hold his hand and help him into the hot water. The water tingled over his skin as he lowered himself into it, but he couldn't say if that was because of something Mahiro had added to the bath or if it was all in his head. Probably just in his head.

Despite weeks now of sharing Kouki's bed, this bath felt quite different. And it wasn't just the feel of bare skin against his own, though that was thoroughly distracting as well. The warmth of the bath was somehow enhancing Kouki's natural scent and he found himself wondering if it was having the same effect on his own. What unconscious messages was his soulmate reading from him right then?

“Relax, love,” the blond alpha whispered, drawing Kana into his arms, against his chest. “You can't be wound so tight all the time, Kacchan, you'll break.”

“I'm already broken,” he mumbled, the words out of his mouth before he could stop them. His cheeks flared red hot in shame. How could he have said such a thing so mindlessly? It was how he felt, true enough, but still....

“And if you fall to pieces, I'll just have to put you back together with the gold of my love for you, make you even more beautiful than you were before,” his alpha said softly, the words brushed against the skin of his neck. Kana shuddered, overwhelmed by the sincerity of his soulmate's words, the soft scent of certainty that flowed around him. That someone like Kouki could see anything of value in him to begin with, back when they'd both thought he was nothing but an innocent kid, was enough to bring tears to his eyes. But to know that his alpha still felt the same, even now, even knowing how broken, how damaged he really was ... he could barely breathe at all as the tears forced themselves free. Kouki didn't say anything else, instead holding him close and humming softly.

“I'm going to fall asleep if you keep that up,” he mumbled when he was finally able to control himself again.
“Would that be so bad?” Kouki asked, brushing a kiss to the top of his head.

“Well no, but....” Kana huffed, trying to find the words he wanted. “What about Chamu-kun? And everybody else?”

“Everybody else can take turns with the other bath,” Kouki said pragmatically.

“Then ... everyone's staying?” he asked. “Is that... is it really okay for us to just ... ignore everyone like this? We're ... we're the hosts, right? So shouldn't we be ... you know ... hosting?”

“Well, Sensei and Maru are definitely staying,” the alpha replied, brushing a kiss to his neck. “Hachi wants to and if he decides to stay, then Tomoyan will want to stay with him. And if Kumi and Juju decide they want to stay, too, there's room enough.”

Kana huffed another heavy sigh, not sure how he felt about any of this. After all, he really liked all the omegas. He wasn't so sure about their various mates, but it would be cruel to force them apart. If that was even something he could do, being only a teenaged omega himself. And it wasn't like Kouki was wrong - as Chamu had said before dinner, the amount of room in Kouki's apartment was bordering on the ridiculous.

“Don't worry so much, Kacchan, okay? If everyone wants to stay close because they're worried about you, then we'll let them, yeah? And if it gets to be too much, we'll start sending them home. Everyone will understand, no one will judge you, love.”

Sighing, Kana nodded and settled even more into Kouki's chest. His alpha was right about one thing: there was nothing to be gained for worrying about it.

~*~*~

“All right, that's it, breakfast is over. All those with an alpha cock are hereby banished from this apartment until 7pm this evening! You have five minutes to clear out or I start attacking with a mochi mallet!”

Kana could only sit there watching, equal parts shocked and awed, as the alphas, while grumbling about tiny tin-pot despots, still all left the apartment without any real serious objection. That Chamu was sitting next to him in equal bafflement only sort of helped.

“But ... but you ... and they.... What just happened?” he stammered.

“Maru. Kurosaki is old nobility and Maru's part of the main clan family, so technically he outranks all of us,” Junji explained with a soft laugh. “I suppose some would argue his alpha mate ought to outrank him, but he's got Sensei wrapped around his little finger, always has, so yeah.”

“He's also the only one of us from a truly old money main family,” Koudai added, getting up to start collecting dishes. “Tokai were close to the Fujiwara, but Junji-senpai's family line is an offshoot of the main line going back a couple hundred years, so basically commoner stock. Same with my family. We're part of Tokyo's social elite, same as Kou-kun and Mahi-nii, but not for the same reasons. Not everyone agrees that we even belong.”

“Yeah, well, those who don't like it are what we call wrong,” Mahiro growled, refilling their tea cups. “But I'm sure Kacchan and Chamu-kun aren't really that interested in social politics. Kacchan's place will be unquestioned once he and Kou-kun are fully mated. Until then ... others may whisper, but not anywhere where I might hear it. Or Hayashi-dono. Hayashi-tousan still hasn't forgiven me for running away before his youngest could claim me, but he won't break with his first-born so casually and Yoshi-tan agrees with me.”
Kana glanced sidelong at Chamu, but his best friend looked about as confused as he himself felt. He had always been told than an omega was always, always second class at best. Omegas of noble families had been kept sequestered for just this reason, confined to their family estates for their own protection, lest some lower caste alpha think to claim the omega through a forced mate bite and thereby push his way into a high standing. But this....

“I told you before, Kacchan, we omegas are the true roots of a society,” Mahiro said with a sly grin. “Mother may well have raged for days after I was first born, but after that she was determined I would bring honor to our family. She was determined to see to it that I be taught how to actually think for myself, and I was. Something that hasn't always gone the way she or Father would have preferred, even if she does adore Sensei now.”

“She taught you to think like a lord, not your fault her lessons stuck,” Junji said with a light laugh. “So, Kacchan, what do you want to do with the day?”

“Eh? Oh, um, I ... I don't really know. Chamu-kun?”

“Well, I could always make you do homework with me,” the beta said with a slow drawl. “Hashimoto-sensei actually put together all of your assignments - from all of our teachers, even - and sent them with me, so you've got all the homework for the next two months to finish as you're able. I'm not supposed to know about it - he was supposed to mail the thumb drive to Tokai-sensei - and I definitely wasn't supposed to make a copy for myself, but....”

“Not sure if that makes you an evil genius or a sneaky bastard,” Kana said, frowning a little. “I think I liked it better when I didn't have to think about schoolwork.”

“You didn't really think that they were just going to let you out of two whole months of work, did you?” Chamu countered, smirking. “Not that it really matters how well you do on any of it at this point, but heck, if I have to do it, then dammit, so do you.”

“Meanie,” Kana huffed, crossing arms over his chest. Chamu chuckled, fishing the small flash drive off his keys and sliding it across the table at him. Kana glowered at it, refusing to even touch it.

“It's not a snake, you know,” Mahiro said before picking up the drive himself. “Where's your laptop? Chamu-kun, since you obviously know what's on this, do I need to print it all off or no?”

“I haven't actually looked at everything yet,” the beta said, shrugging. “One way or the other, though, they're going to want printed versions of his answers, so....”

“So if you're going to do schoolwork together, you should get your laptop, too, then, Chamu-kun,” Mahiro said with a firm nod. “And you can stop making that face, Kacchan, you've had a whole extra week off, it won't kill you to spend the next few hours on schoolwork instead of video games. Go on, you two, get your computers and we'll start with what Kacchan's missed for being down here.”

Grimacing, Kana actually needed a moment to remember where he had put his computer. Chamu wasn't wrong, per se, he really did need to be doing the work if he wanted to graduate on time and in good standing, which he did, but that didn't make him like it any better.

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Two years old and Kana didn't understand at all.

He tried everything. His bottle, his binkie, a dozen hugs. Nothing helped. He didn't understand
why, but he knew his big brother was upset. Pushing his favorite stuffed toy into his brother's hands made him smile for a minute, but the heavy, dark smell came back only a moment later.

After awhile, he crawled into his brother's lap and just sat with him, drinking his bottle and leaning against his chest, listening to the steady if sad beat of his beloved brother's heart. He didn't understand.

~*~*~

Kana shivered and rubbed at his chest, feeling the heaviness of the memory, even though it had only lasted a moment. It was an old one, one that had been coming to him ever since Hiro's death, and he still wasn't sure how real it was.

“Kacchan?”

“I'm fine,” he mumbled, shaking his head.

“... that was a quick one,” Mahiro murmured. “A not so bad as usual one?”

“Just remembering my brother,” he said, offering the omega a wan smile. The homework was probably what had started it. He took a deep breath and tried to push it aside.

“You loved him very much,” Mahiro said softly. “Why don't you ever talk about him?

Kana's breath caught in his throat, tears suddenly burning in the corners of his eyes. No. He was supposed to be over this. Three years and six months since that night, he was supposed to be past this. He rubbed at his chest again, but it didn't ease the burning in his lungs, the roiling in his stomach.

“Kacchan?”

He shook his head, not trusting his voice not to betray him. Unexpected, the warm arms that pulled him against a chest that wasn't Mahiro's. Roses and sandalwood. Koudai.

“You have to let it out, little brother, or it'll only keep festering,” the redhead omega murmured as he hugged him close. “It's okay to cry for him.”

“Hiro-nii was always strong,” Kana croaked. “He'd want me to be strong for him.”

“Crying, mourning, isn't weakness, Kacchan,” Koudai countered, slowly rubbing his back. “You have to let yourself mourn, sweetheart, or how will he ever find peace?”

“He's right, Kacchan,” Chamu added softly. “It's time you let yourself mourn. Hiro-nii wouldn't want you to keep hiding how you feel.”

He tried to shake his head, to deny that he needed to be so pathetic, but his own body was ganging up on him, shuddering as tears leaked down his cheeks. Someone's fingers pressed against a knot of muscle in his back and something in him broke, aching sobs falling from his lips. It wasn't fair. He just wanted his brother back. He would give anything just to have his brother back....
After a weekend of the apartment being full almost to bursting with so many of Kouki's closest friends, it felt a bit odd to come back from his jog on Monday morning and not see Kumiko and Junji quietly play-bickering in his kitchen or Mitsuki nursing a mug of coffee on his couch. Even with as big as his apartment was, four unrelated alphas under the same roof had made for an interesting and at times intense weekend, and he was glad to have back a bit more breathing room. On the one hand, he had enjoyed the time with his friends. On the other hand, he rather hoped this wasn't going to become a regular event. Kouki was pretty sure Kana felt the same way, especially where Kumiko was concerned. The woman hadn't made any more idiotic comments about Kana's tendency to radiate fear, uncertainty, and self-loathing, if anything she had been particularly sweet and patient. Still, he knew his omega was uneasy, not sure which side of her was the truth.

Another smile as Kouki walked into the master bedroom to find Kana, Mahiro, and Koudai all asleep in his bed, the two older omegas curled around his soulmate like protective bookends. As quietly as possible, he got together what he needed before slipping into the master bath. He would just have a quick shower and then see about starting breakfast. Maybe. Maybe it would be better to wait on that. Who knew how long those three would decide to stay in bed - probably all morning, if he let them.

Kouki was still standing in front of his refrigerator, mulling over what he wanted to make for breakfast, when Tomoya came into the kitchen.

"... how dare you look that put together at this hour," his friend said, stifling a yawn. "Please tell me there's coffee."

"Of course, in the carafe," he said, giving him a smile. "Surprised you're still here."

"It's barely even eight in the morning, you weirdo, of course I'm still here," the other alpha huffed, helping himself to a mug of coffee. "Some of us actually need more than five hours of sleep."

"Well whose fault is that?" he teased as he started setting up the rice cooker to make enough for everyone. Even if he didn't expect the omegas to rouse for at least another hour.

"Think you and Kacchan are going to make it to the opening on Wednesday?" Tomoya asked as he settled at the breakfast bar, well out of Kouki's way.

"I don't know, probably not, but we'll see. You've seen how protective Hachi and Maru are of him," he replied with a small smile. He wanted to take Kana to the gallery at some point, definitely - the new exhibition was a selection of artworks, both paintings and sculpture, by an omega artist who was gaining renown in the modern art scene. Even if the style wasn't necessarily of interest he wanted Kana to visit the gallery just to see that his options weren't as limited by his designation as...
he seemed to think.

“Yeah, no, probably better to wait a couple days to take in the exhibition, as many media people are scheduled to be there. Saga-san’s really making waves these days, Hachi says there’s even going to be international art press there.”

“Really? That’s going to be ... something,” Kouki said, chuckling a little. An art opening might have been a good place for Kana to make his official Tokyo society debut, but he wasn’t sure his soulmate was actually up to being around so many people. Of course, realistically, it wasn’t up to him. Or necessarily Kana, either. Mahiro had already told Kouki he would take care of handling Kana’s introduction to Tokyo’s high society. And truth be told, Kouki was more than happy to leave it in the omega’s capable hands. For all his grandfather’s wealth and influence, Kouki himself wasn’t all that experienced with the ways of the social elite, especially not when compared to someone like Mahiro.

“The installation’s going to be up until mid-March, there’ll be plenty of other chances for Kana-kun to see it. And Hachi has Saga-san’s number, bet he’d be able to arrange a meeting if you asked sweetly.”

“As if I would ask him any other way,” Kouki said, laughing again. Honestly, a lunch date would probably be better all the way around. He’d have to remember to talk to Koudai about the idea when the omega came in for breakfast.

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Surrounded by warmth and comfort, Kana didn’t really want to move, but his bladder wasn’t really interested in waiting any longer. Huffing a sigh, he rolled over onto his back, blinking up at the bedroom ceiling as he tried to orient himself. He was boxed in, an omega on either side. When had that happened and why wasn’t Kouki with him?

“Morning sweetheart. Pretty sure your alpha’s the one cooking right now.”

Koudai. Turning, Kana blinked a couple of times, but no, the redhead really was there in bed with him. A tightness seized his chest and he found himself pressing close as he sobbed low in his throat. He didn't even understand why seeing the redhead was affecting him this way, but seeing him there, still at his side even after everything....

“Oh shh, there now, it's okay, little brother,” the redheaded omega murmured, hugging him close. Kana felt like an idiot, crying all the time, but he couldn’t seem to make it stop, either. And for a wonder, no one seemed to even mind that he was such an emotional wreck.

The tears were well finished with him before anyone spoke again.

“Smells like Kou-kun made bacon and pancakes this morning. Shall we get up and see for sure?” Mahiro asked softly. Kana hesitated a moment, then nodded.

“But ... I gotta go ... you know ... first,” he mumbled, blushing hotly.

“We could probably all stand a good piss and wash,” Mahiro said evenly, Kana rolling over to gape at him. “What? It's true, isn't it? Go on,” he said, sliding out of bed himself. “Take care of business. We'll take turns.”

Kana was certain his cheeks were still red with embarrassment even after he was done in the bathroom, wrapped in another borrowed sweatshirt. He had to admit, it still felt a little strange to see Koudai in old jeans and a well-worn sweater, though he managed to make even that look more
“Better? Come on, Mahi-nii will catch up in a couple minutes.”

With a shy nod, he let Koudai walk him out of the bedroom and to the breakfast bar. Even before he was settled, Kouki was bringing him coffee and kissing his cheek.

“Morning, love. Sleep well?”

“I think so? Don't really remember,” he confessed, sniffing his coffee to keep from yawning.

“I take it you're taking today off as well, Hachi?” Kouki asked, even if there wasn't much question in him.

“Already called Airu-kun, so don't fuss,” the redhead said, wagging his fingers at the tall blond. “Wednesday's going to be ridiculous enough, I'm allowed to have an extra day off ahead of time, you don't have to fuss.”

“I'm not fussing, just asking,” the blond replied, holding up his hands in surrender. “Just so long as you two know Kacchan is all mine this morning.”

Kana sat back, feeling a little stupid as he sat there blinking at his soulmate. What was that supposed to mean? The soft laugh from his alpha was enough for him to blush again even as arms stole around him and pulled him close to the tall blond's chest.

“It means anything you want, love,” Kouki whispered against his ear. “We don't have to do anything specific, just so long as it's you and me doing it together.”

He could scent the amusement in the air around him, but this was a softer scent, soothing. Kouki and Koudai were quietly laughing, but it was an amusement that was aligned with him, not directed at him. Colored with a fondness that had been distinctly absent in his interactions with almost everyone other than Chamu and Hayato before Kana had come to Tokyo. A deep breath and he felt himself nodding, though he wasn't sure to what he was agreeing. He appreciated everything Koudai and Mahiro had done for him, continued to do for him, but a part of him really just wanted to be alone with Kouki for awhile, even if all they did was watch a movie.

“But breakfast first,” his soulmate said, giving him another loving squeeze before stepping away and back into the kitchen. “Plain or blueberry pancakes, Kacchan?”

“Well, either? I don't want to be a bother.”

“It's no bother, both batters are already made,” his mate said with a slight shake of his head.

“Then ... blueberry, please,” he said, sipping his coffee.

“Blueberry it is. Hachi?”

“Plain is fine for me, thank you.”

“And you, Maru?” the alpha asked.

“Blueberry, and extra whip on them, too, thank you,” the omega replied, one hand briefly brushing against Kana's arm as he took the stool next to him. “And be sure you get extra bacon on this one's plate, he's still too skinny.”

“I'm trying my hardest,” Kana mumbled, feeling his cheeks heating up again. Mahiro chuckled, but
it was with that same warm, inclusive scent he had been getting from Kouki and Koudai earlier. Even after almost three and a half weeks with his soulmate, that inclusiveness still had an element of raw newness to it that made him feel warm all over.

“So it's been ... four and a half months now since we met? Give or take?” Kouki said casually when he finally set a plate of pancakes in front of Kana. Closing his eyes a moment, he counted the months over again in his head and then nodded.

“Yeah, sounds right.”

“I was thinking we should do something special when we get to the six month mark,” the alpha said, adding plates for Koudai and Mahiro as he spoke. “But then I realized I hadn't asked yet.”

“Asked what?” Kana asked, watching the way Kouki's eyes flicked to the two omegas flanking him briefly. His alpha shrugged and didn't say anything, sending a prickle of unease up Kana's spine. If Kouki wasn't going to ask him now, then why even bring it up? Unless he just meant that he hadn't asked if Kana even cared about a six month anniversary. Maybe that was what he meant. Girls always cared more about that sort of thing, right? It would be rude to assume, just because Kana was also a teenaged omega, that he would feel the same way, and Kouki was definitely the sort who wouldn't want to get caught making that kind of assumption so casually. Yeah, okay, maybe that was it.

“Well ... I haven't ... at least, I don't think I've ever done it before. Atsu-nii wasn't ... he wasn't really a romantic like that,” Kana mumbled, a burning twisting in his gut as a hundred different memories, all different and flavored differently, tried to command his attention at once. “I guess I don't really know anything about it,” he admitted, a trickle of shame leaking through him.

“Juju keeps saying I should take you to Tokyo Tower,” Kouki replied, reaching across the breakfast bar to gently ruffle Kana's hair. “It's kind of a cliche, but our anniversary is something that's special only to the two of us, so it wouldn't be as crowded as it gets on official holidays.”

“I think it sounds sweet,” Koudai said, offering an encouraging smile. “We'll have to go shopping for you next month, of course, little brother. Just you and me, no alphas, so we can get you something nice and have it be a surprise for your soulmate, okay?”

“I ... I dunno,” he mumbled, suddenly shy again.

“Dinner in a nice restaurant - by reservation, maybe even somewhere semi-private - a walk to take in the tower at night, very romantic, I approve,” Mahiro added with a nod. “Though ... I may have to move up Kacchan's debut, if you want to do that. Hmm....”

“I know it's coming fast, but Sagacchi's opening might be a good chance for that after all?” Koudai offered, leaning forward to glance past Kana to Mahiro. “Airu-kun can add seating so Kacchan doesn't have to stand around for the whole hour or so he'd have to be there. In fact, I have a couple arm chairs I could move into a certain alcove, Sagacchi would love it. There'd only be room for two or three people in the alcove, he could hide from the journalists with Kacchan and no one could accuse him of being rude.”

“... I thought we had decided against the opening because of all those journalists,” Kouki said, a tiny frown marring his beautiful face. Kana felt himself falling into his alpha's eyes, the shape of his face, a welcome distraction from the current conversation. Kouki was wearing his labret again, had been wearing it a lot lately, he suddenly realized. Ever since his grandfather had barged in on them, actually, now that he thought about it.
Mahiro was muttering into his phone when he finally shook off his distraction and Kana wondered just what he had missed now.

“I remember those days,” Koudai said softly, lightly ruffling his hair.

“Huh?”

“The rush of young love. I remember when I could just watch Tomoyan doing anything or nothing at all, to the point where nothing else in the world existed,” the redhead explained, grinning. Kana felt his cheeks heating up for a moment and then Koudai was giving him a sideways hug. “Oh stop. It's a good thing! And I'll let you in on a little secret.”

“... what's that?”

Koudai made a show of glancing at the other two before leaning close, practically whispering in Kana's ear. “I've caught Kou-kun doing the same exact thing.”

If he hadn't already been blushing, he definitely was now. It wasn't even like he doubted Kouki's love for him. Well, okay, there was probably always going to be that voice of doubt in the back of his head that would wonder and worry, but still. And yet even with that, the idea that there might be times when Kouki just watched him in that same sort of happy haze was just....

“Nope, it's going to have to be the opening. You two only need to be there for the first hour or so,” Mahiro declared abruptly. “If Hachi puts in that seating area, Kacchan and I can settle there, he can chat with Sagacchi a bit away from the crowds of vapid art critics, and then when Sagacchi goes to circulate the room, I can introduce Kacchan to Yoshi-tan and Nashi properly. I've already massaged Yoshi-tan, we'll have your kimono ready in time. And I'll be here to make sure you can get into it properly.”

“I'll message Airu-kun after breakfast,” Koudai said, nodding.

“... I almost miss when I was able to decide things for myself,” Kouki added, a teasing grin on his lips.

“Yeah, well, you have an omega now, you're never going to be able to decide things by yourself ever again~” Koudai replied, though he was clearly teasing the blond.

“I'm not complaining, I'm just ... well, I wasn't sure.... I mean....”

Kana had to bite his lip to keep from giggling. Watching his alpha floundering for words was almost too cute. The sight of an alpha who couldn't figure out how to say something ... it was such a departure from the stereotype of the always confident, always in charge alpha male. And he kind of loved it.

“Oh will you just spit it out already, Kou-kun! Before you choke on it,” Mahiro scolded, though Kana could smell the twitch of the other omega's amusement, too.

“I just ... I haven't ever asked Kacchan if you even know yet if your cycle is every five months or every six or if it's even fully settled yet. I mean, I'm guessing it's not a four month cycle, but....”

Kana blinked for a moment. Was he...?

“If you're not sure when your next heat is because you haven't really settled yet, that's fine, too,” Kouki rushed to add. “You're only eighteen, it can take awhile, but with you starting so early...."
Another rush of memories clamored for his attention. Of early heats and being at school and feeling the itch, the need to get away from all those judging, hateful eyes. In a rush, the scents of sweat and heavy automotive grease rushed into his nose. He tried to tell himself it wasn't real, but he could feel it. Heavy hands on his body, hands that took and took and gave only pain in return. A whine and he collapsed.

~*~*~

Kana laid on his back, squirming on his mate’s bed and trying not to whine too loudly. Atsushi had given him the heat suppressants, but he was still feeling a few pre-heat symptoms. Enough of them that he hadn't dared go home yet, instead calling his mom and asking for permission to stay at Atsu-nii’s place for dinner. She’d hesitated almost too long before saying yes, a part of him was still worried she was going to send Hiro to come pick him up. But mostly right then he wanted his symptoms to leave him alone. He felt so hot, so wet, so empty...

“You took enough, didn't you? I gave you enough, did you take everything?”

“Aa, hai, I took everything,” Kana said, practically panting as his heightened senses were flooded with awareness of Atsushi's nearness. A low mewl, his bare thighs falling open almost of their own accord, but his mate stayed only standing beside the bed, though Kana could see his hands fisted at his side. Another soft whine and he reached for him.

“Please. I need it, Atsu-nii,” he whined, hating how desperate he sounded but unable to stop himself, either.

“No you don’t,” his mate countered, a slow smirk curling his lips. “You took your medicines, you don't need it, you just want it. Whatever happened to my innocent little flower who was always so shy? Look at you, sprawled naked across my bed, begging for me to take you....”

Kana's cheeks heated, but he did nothing to try to cover himself. Atsushi dropped his shirt onto the floor and Kana groaned, licking his lips as his eyes feasted on the expanse of tanned, tattooed muscles. He really was so lucky to have a mate with such a beautiful body. His fingers traced lines of ink, his thighs parting even further to allow Atsushi to settle between them.

The first knock at the door, Kana whimpered and shook his head.

“Ignore it, Kacchan,” his mate insisted, not even slowing his steady pistoning in and out of Kana's eager body. And then the knocking became a harsh thumping, followed by an all too familiar voice.

“Dammit, Acchan, I know you’re home! Answer the damn door!”

Hiro. How could it be Hiro? And why oh why did he have to come now of all times?! Atsushi’s growl was almost feral as he pulled out, slapping Kana's thigh.

“Bath, now,” he ordered. Kana silently followed his mate into the bathroom, rinsing off quickly before sinking into the tub, watching as Atsushi quickly finished himself off and then rinsed off as well. Such a waste, but it had the desired effect, Atsushi’s cock deflating quickly.

“Satou Atsushi, you open the goddamned door right now before I fucking break it down!”

Snorting, Atsushi ruffled Kana's hair before disappearing from the bath, probably to throw on some clothes or maybe just a yukata. Another sigh and Kana rearranged himself in the tub, closing his eyes as he let the warmth sink completely into his body.

“When did you turn so noisy, Hirocchi?” he heard his mate saying.
“Where’s Kana? Why didn’t you answer the door sooner?”

“I just got out of the shower when you knocked, didn’t think you’d want me answering the door naked,” Atsushi drawled. “Love ya, but not like that, dude.”

“And Kacchan?”

“In the bath. He had to start his suppressants this afternoon, that’s why he wanted to stay here. Didn’t think trying to get him home on my bike was such a good idea while he was feeling like that. Your mom said it was fine for him to stay here, you know.”

Kana pulled his knees up to his chest as he heard two sets of footsteps approaching. He wanted to be surprised at the way his older brother practically burst into the bathroom, blinking up at his brother a moment. Fingers brushed his cheek with clear affection and Kana closed his eyes, leaning into the touch and sighing again. His brother’s worry was so obvious he could have been shouting it from across the room, but it felt good, too.

“See? He’s just fine, worrywart. Though, now that you’re here ... I was thinking pizza and wings, if you wanted to stay? Then you can take him home after?”

Kana bit the inside of his lip, torn between wanting Atsushi to himself and not wanting to say anything that would make Hiro suspicious. He hated having to keep the truth from his aniki, but the thought of losing any chance of ever being alone with his mate again ... it was too much of a risk, he couldn't take that chance.

“Kacchan?”

“I’ll be better in a little bit,” he said softly, nuzzling his brother’s hand before sitting up properly again. “It’s just... The drugs always make things uncomfortable for awhile. But we can go home after dinner, I should be okay by then, I think. Maybe.”

“We’ll take it one step at a time,” Hiro agreed, nodding and smiling. “I’ll let Kaasan know so she’ll stop worrying.”

Another nod and Kana sank lower into the tub again as the older pair left. Thank god his family was all beta - they were all willing to accept that his different reactions to the heat meds were all down to his being omega without question. He wouldn’t be able to stand it if the truth cost him Hiro’s love.

~*~*~

Kouki felt so helpless, watching as Koudai settled on a futon rolled out in his home office, Kana tucked against his chest. He knew he had caused this, somehow, he just had no idea how. Or what to do about it.

“Come on,” Mahiro murmured, coaxing him out of the room. “Hachi can handle this. I think we need to have another chat anyway.”

Huffing a little, he let himself be pulled out to the lounge, sat on one of his couches with a cup of lukewarm coffee pushed into his hands. Right, he hadn’t finished when Kana had collapsed. He wrinkled his nose, ignoring Mahiro to slip into his kitchen to refresh his coffee.

“Come back to the bar, ne? We might as well finish breakfast while we talk,” he said, taking a moment to put up Kana’s and Koudai’s plates before he sat back down with his own.
“You're worried,” Mahiro said when they were both sitting again.

“I'm sure you're going to tell me that I need to be more patient, but I just feel so helpless. Nothing's changed.”

“You're right, I am. Kouki, you're being ridiculous. Of course nothing's changed. It's barely been any time at all and that boy hasn't properly processed a single damn thing that's happened to him in the last six years. The mate bite, all of the three years of being that bastard's secret sex toy, the death of not only his mate but also his beloved brother. None of it. What has he told you of Hiro?”

“Nothing, really. We haven't talked about him specifically, though.”

“Exactly. He clings to the edges of conversations, slips sideways on talking about himself or his past as much as he can. Because when it does come up, the pain is still just as sharp because he's refused to process it for all these years. Some moron, probably his own dear father, convinced him that crying over his dead brother was a sign of weakness, so he's never even allowed himself to mourn! And that's just one of the things he's got bottled up inside him. You can't expect six years of repression to magically clear up in just a couple of weeks, you stubborn knothead!”

Kouki shifted in his seat, acutely uncomfortable under Mahiro's verbal barrage. And yet he had to admit the omega made a good point. Certainly Mahiro knew more about grief and grief counseling than any of the rest of them, other than possibly Koudai. Suddenly he was beyond grateful that his two friends were so insistent on helping his omega.

“I guess all I can do is try to be patient, right? And ask you to help me find him a good doctor.”

“Oh I already did that second bit,” Mahiro said, casting a sly grin his way. “Kujou-sensei will treat him well, but she didn't have an opening until almost the end of the month. January 27th, 2pm. On the other hand, by then he should be starting to recover his stamina a bit better.”

“You know, another alpha might take offense at you swanning in and just taking over.”

“If you were going to be offended by me, it would've happened a long time ago, Kou-chan,” Mahiro countered, grinning up at him without shame. “I had originally called to see if she was even accepting new patients. They were the ones to take it from that to setting up an appointment. And I've already added it to my own calendar, so I'll be free to go with you. Not that you're likely to need me, since Kujou-sensei will be happy to let you stay with him if it's what Kana needs. But just in case....”

Kouki nodded when Mahiro trailed off into silence. As easily as Kana's panic attacks and flashbacks were being triggered right now, it only made sense to take every precaution. Especially after the negative experience with the last gynecologist.

“Thank you, Maru,” Kouki said, reaching over to rest his hand on top of the omega's own for a moment. “For everything. I mean it.”

“We do what's needed for family, you don't have to thank me for that,” Mahiro said with a shake of his head.

“Still, I really appreciate it. I hate to think how much worse off both Kacchan and I would be right now if it wasn't for you and Hachi and everything the two of you have done for us. So ... thank you, truly.”

Mahiro huffed again, but Kouki wasn't fooled by the supposedly gruff exterior. Still, he kept silent. If his friend wanted to pretend, he wasn't going to spoil that so easily. But he also wasn't going to
let it stop him from finding proper ways to thank his friends for everything they had already done and everything he knew they were going to continue to do.

~*~*~

Kana felt himself waking by degrees, despite wanting to stay right where he had been. Not because he was still tired, but because at least in his dreams he could be reunited with his brother.

_Hiro. I miss you so much...._

His heart quaked with the pain of it, and then arms were pulling him in close against a slender chest that smelled of roses and sandalwood. Shivering, he still felt himself pressing closer even as he wished it was Kouki and not Koudai with him.

“Hiro-kun again?” Koudai asked softly, obviously surprised. “And here Mahi-nii and I were so certain it was going to have been another memory of _that_ person....”

“It ... it was both. Kind of,” Kana mumbled, really not wanting to talk about it.

“Both? I knew they were friends, but....”

“Not like that!” Kana rushed to protest, fear and shame colliding in his chest. This was high up on the list of things he didn't want to talk about with anyone, but he couldn't stand the thought of his new friends getting wrong ideas about Hiro. “I ... he didn't know. About me being Atsu-nii's mate. I hated lying to him, but I couldn't ... I couldn't tell him the truth and lose his love.”

Kana bit his lip hard as tears prickled at the corners of his eyes.

“What makes you say that, sweetheart?” the older omega asked softly, simply holding him close.

“I ... I remember it.... I ... I was old enough, but everyone still saw me as just a little kid. Th-that ... that's why Atsu-nii insisted I finish high school, b-because no one would accept that I was old enough to be his mate, even though I was!”

“Kacchan, sweetheart, you were _twelve_. Not even in ancient times was a male omega given away at his very first heat!” Koudai protested. “Especially not one raised exclusively by _betas_!”

Kana trembled, a wave of self-loathing washing over him. Looking back at it now, he could see how stupid he had been to think that way, but at the time ... at the time he had totally believed it, he could remember that now. And Atsushi had supported his belief ... while repeatedly telling him everyone else would tear him down and punish him for it.

“No, sweetheart, no,” Koudai cooed, stroking his hair. “Not stupid. And it's not your fault you didn't know any differently. Who was there to tell you? Your beta mother who even now thinks you need to be protected from the whole world? The alpha who only saw you as a possession, a self-propelled sex toy?”

Another shudder, silent tears leaking down his cheeks.

“Wh-what ... what's it ... how's it supposed to be?” he mumbled, choking on his own bitter tears.

“A mating is a promise, the alpha's promise to take care of you,” the omega said softly, stroking Kana's hair as he spoke. “Yes, it's possessive in its biological roots, a way of securing bloodlines, but just as we're more than just base animal instincts, a mating is about more than just progeny now. When an omega submits to an alpha, he says he's trusting him or her completely, totally. And
when an alpha bites, it's a vow to protect. Or at least that's what I was always told growing up. There's argument, of course, but then there's always room for different opinions on this sort of thing. Just look at the betas and their paper marriages!

Kana chuckled a little, but it sounded hollow even in his own ears.

“I knew Tomoyan was my soulmate from the first moment I met him, but we didn't even start dating until high school. As it was, he spent six months begging me to give him even that much.”

“R-really? But you said before ... I mean, you're soulmates....”

“You didn't know him back when we were in grade school, sweetheart. He may seem all cool and competent now, but back then he was kind of a wreck. Plus we first met two weeks before his parents packed him off to an alphas-only boarding school. It took him years to convince me that the link between us was worth exploring.”

Kana didn't know how to respond to that. The idea of soulmates who didn't become mates.... His mind pulled up an image of Kouki and he tried to imagine what it would be like to just be friends with the alpha. He couldn't, he loved the man too much for that.

“Every soulmate bond is different, Kacchan, because every person is different. From being around the two of you, I can say your bond to Kou-kun is a lot more intense than what I was feeling back then. More like what Sensei and Mahi-nii shared when they were your age. Not that it matters, really. Yes, there was a time when I thought Tomoyan and I would only ever be friends, but I was wrong, he showed me we could be more, and I don't regret a second of it. Tomoyan has stood beside me through so much, much more than any other alpha would have, I'm sure. After all, what's the use of an omega who can't even go into heat anymore?”

The bitterness of those last few words stuck in Kana's throat and he shifted to blink up at Koudai's frowning face. This was exactly what he had wanted to ask about since that first day and yet....

“It's been ten years now. The words still hurt, but not like they did,” the older omega said quietly, the ghost of a smile tugging at his lips. “I have my work and Tomoyan and our family of friends. It's not what I'd dreamed about as a kid, but it's enough.”

Not quite a lie, not entirely the truth either, but perhaps close enough. Could he be that sanguine if it were him? Could he make do with just being Kouki's friend when his alpha's grandfather's interference finally drove them apart? He didn't think he could, but he didn't know what other choice he would have. If he lost Kouki completely, it would destroy him, of that much he was certain. Kana envied Koudai's quiet strength. There was no way he could have handled things anywhere near as well.

Chapter End Notes

Next week I'll be taking a break from this to post something else entirely (a bit of Gensou, as it turns out). Of course if you want to support me on Patreon (pledge today to be active for all next month!), you can get the early release of the next chapter next week. ;)

I'd apologize for the slow pace of things, but that's entirely intentional. Also, dude, trauma.
Muddled

Chapter Notes

In which we set up the next round of major drama, Hayato returns as a major character, and Kana reverts to moody teenager.

Kouki was just finishing up his breakfast when the front door opened. He recognized Minase's scent the next instant and he hurried to meet his friend at the genkan. One look at his face and he knew it was going to be one of those days.

“Minase-kun? What is it?”

“I know it's early, but....”

“I just finished breakfast, but if you're hungry....”

“I'm fine, but I'll take a coffee if you're still serving?”

“Always,” Kouki said with a nod, walking his friend and assistant into the apartment. Minase smiled his greetings to Mahiro and Kana, then reached over to ruffle the younger omega's hair.

“Sorry to drop in like this, but –.”

“Ah! No, you are not saying one word about work until you've eaten,” Mahiro insisted, plopping a plate with a muffin and chunks of winter melon in front of the beta. “Work is not allowed at meals.

“I actually don't –,” Minase started, glancing down at the plate a moment.

“Eat!” Mahiro repeated and Kouki had to join his soulmate in biting back a smile at the omega's imperious attitude. Minase threw him a helpless look, but all he could do was shrug his shoulders and set a mug of fresh coffee at his place. And yet he could tell that wasn't going to be enough.

“You've known Maru as long as I have, don't look at me to rescue you from him,” he said when the pleading look continued. A heavy sigh and the beta conceded defeat, breaking off a piece of muffin. Still, he ate quickly, much more so than usual, and Kouki wasn't the least bit surprised when, as soon as he was done, Minase got up from the breakfast bar, grabbed his mug, and headed for Kouki's home office.

“So what is it that brought you over here so early?” Kouki asked, leaning back against the closed door.

“We have a problem,” Minase said, huffing and then grabbing a chair and hauling it over in front of Kouki's desk. Never a good sign. Pushing away from the door, Kouki rounded his desk.

“All right, out with it then,” he grumbled.

“I need you in the office. Aoki-san got himself arrested. Drug charges, serious ones. We aren't going to be able to just sweep this under the rug, the charges are probably already being made available to the press. I've already drafted his termination and Kinoshita-san's temporary
promotion, but you need to handle this yourself. From your actual office, not here.”

“Damn that man,” Kouki muttered, dragging a hand through his hair. “I'm never going to be able to sell off that damn company now.”

“... it does add useful diversity to the Group's portfolio.”

“And a mountain of debt from his bad management and the embezzling that had been going on right under his nose. Dammit, now that's going to come out, too. This is a disaster.”

“We'll figure it out, Kou-kun, we always do, but this is why I need you in the office today. Looks like Kacchan has good company today at least.”

Kouki huffed another frustrated noise, going through his desk to find everything he needed to shift back to working at the office. Maybe he could get everything done and be back for lunch? He snorted almost before he could finish thinking it. Yeah right. This could take all week to handle, even with Minase's help. He could just throttle that idiot, Aoki. This was exactly why he had given the man time off last year and even sent him to a discreet place for rehab! And then he went and spoiled it, getting himself arrested like this. At least this would be the end of dealing with him, but still.

Walking back into their bedroom, he was surprised to see Kana sitting on their bed, obviously waiting for him.

“Kacchan? What's wrong?”

“I think that's my line,” his omega said softly, a ghost of a smile on his lips. “Minase being here, unexpected and this early in the day ... it's bad, isn't it?”

“... yeah,” Kouki admitted, sighing as he sat down next to his soulmate. “One of the executives in a company the Group recently acquired got himself arrested, it's a great big mess, I have to go into the office to handle it personally. I'm so sorry, baby, but I have to do this, it's my responsibility, you understand, right? I'll be back in the evening, I promise, but until this gets fixed....”

“Well, I mean ... I've kinda gotten spoiled, having you home all the time. And Mahi-nii is here with me and ... and it'll be okay,” Kana said, putting on a brave face.

“I love you,” Kouki said, sliding an arm around Kana and pulling him in against his side. “I love you so much.”

“Does this mean we still have to ... to go to the opening tomorrow night?”

“Yeah, now more than before, to be honest. I'm going to have to circulate the room, but Hachi will have that place for you to sit and only deal with a few people at a time. And someone you know will be with you the whole time, I promise.”

He could feel Kana's wariness and worry, and while he could certainly understand it, he trusted Mahiro to know what he was doing. His soulmate couldn't have asked for a better sponsor.

“Guess I should let you go then, huh?” Kana mumbled, arms still firmly wrapped around Kouki's middle.

“Yeah, babe, probably a good idea,” he replied, chuckling and gently ruffling his hair. A heavy sigh from his omega and Kana reluctantly pulled away, sliding off the bed completely. He hated seeing Kana so dejected, but there wasn't much he could do about it, not yet anyway. But he would
think of something to make it up to him.

~*~*~

“I can't get this!” Kana grumbled, shoving the table away from himself in frustration.

“Can't get what, sweetheart?” Mahiro asked, looking up from his tablet.

“This!” Kana said, waving his hand at the worksheets scattered across the coffee table. Huffing again, he leaned back against the couch and scowled. Why did he even need to do all this? He wasn't smart enough for mathematics, obviously. It was useless, a bunch of meaningless numbers and letters - and why did they have to make things even worse by including nonsensical English letters in his math homework? - that he couldn't figure out and would never need to understand anyway.

Mahiro sat down on the floor next to him and picked up the top worksheet. And then wrinkled his nose.

“Oh algebra. I never was very good at it, either, and it's been years since I took it. How about we set it aside for now and then when someone who knows it better is available, you can get some help with it later?”

“Why do I even have to do this at all? It's not like they can stop me from graduating if I don't turn in all my homework at this point, it's just stupid busywork. Why do I even need to learn any of this? It's not like I'm smart enough for any of this!”

“You are to be the omega mate of one of Tokyo's social elite. Even if you decide you want to stay home to raise your children, you will need to do more than just wash dishes and do laundry and change diapers. And when the children are older, then what will you do? You are omega, community engagement is expected, in one form or another. Supporting the schools of your children, patronizing the arts, encouraging appropriate activism, such as environmental initiatives and the like.”

“Is that what you normally do then? When you aren't babysitting me?” Kana asked, feeling even more petulant than usual. He couldn't understand what was wrong with him, why he was feeling this way, behaving this way.

“It's what I'm still doing, actually,” Mahiro replied, giving him a sharp look. “I was a founding patron of Gallery ZERO, I serve in a couple school committees, I have a seat on Sugihara-kun's Project Green Earth board, and I have a lifetime patronage membership to the Tokyo Symphony Orchestra. Among other things. It's a slow season at the moment, but I have connections and I use those connections to facilitate charitable giving between those who have money to give and those organizations I feel are worthy and in need of that funding.”

The buzz of the comm system interrupted them, the two omegas sharing a confused look. They hadn't ordered any food yet and neither of them could think of another reason for someone to be buzzing them. Kana pulled his knees up to his chin, watching as Mahiro went over to the comm.

“Yes?”

“Oh, sorry, I think I hit the wrong button somehow. Sorry, sorry, please excuse me.”

Kana blinked as the comm buzzed again. That had sounded a lot like Hayato, but that was impossible. It was the middle of the day, on a Tuesday no less. How could he be here?
“This is the penthouse,” Mahiro said this time, perhaps picking up something from Kana's scent.

“Oh! It was the right button. But, um, I was looking for Morihito Kouki-san? I tried his cell, but it went straight to voicemail and last I heard Kacchan still doesn't have his own phone and I'm really sorry if I've somehow got things wrong and you have no idea what I'm talking about, oniisan.”

Nope, that was definitely Hayato, run-on sentences and all. Mahiro glanced over to Kana and he nodded, already getting up from the floor.

“Give us a minute, Kacchan'll be down shortly,” Mahiro explained into the comm. Kana was already shoving his feet into a pair of sneakers, hurrying to the elevator. Impatient as ever, he shifted from one foot to the other, waiting for the car to get up to them. By the time they got down to the lobby, a hundred different horrible scenarios had flashed through his head. And yet Hayato looked completely normal, if a little tired. If it wasn't for something terrible, then just what was the alpha doing in Tokyo all of a sudden?

“Senpai?”

“Kacchan!”

Only because he knew Hayato so well, Kana was ready for the way the redhead scooped him up into a spin-hug right there in the lobby, laughing and hugging him as if they hadn't seen each other in months, maybe even years. Silly as it was, it felt good to have someone so excited to see him again.

“What ... no, wait, come on upstairs first,” Kana said as he was finally put back on his feet.

“Got something for ya, don't let me forget. You've got a chaperone now, I see, that's probably a good thing, from what Chamu-kun's been willing to tell me.”

“What? No!” Kana protested, feeling his cheeks going red. The way Mahiro was very obviously trying not to laugh didn't help. Traitor.

“Hi, Higuchi Hayato, I've known Kacchan practically since he was a baby.”

“Kurosaki Mahiro, pleasure to meet you, Hayato-kun,” the older omega said with a small smile. “And I'm less his chaperone and more his sponsor. But what brings you to Tokyo?”

“Ah, well...,” and for the first time Kana could ever remember, the young alpha actually looked embarrassed and wasn't babbling a stream of explanations. He could hardly guess what that meant. Had someone died? Or worse? Though he couldn't imagine what could be worse. Or what could have his friend and senpai so conflicted that he couldn't even find words. And then there was the way Mahiro was giving Hayato such an expectant look.....

“... I got fired this morning,” Hayato finally admitted as they stepped out of the elevator on the penthouse level. “And I thought, well, as long as I've got the time now, I should see how you're doing for myself, you know? I wanted to come down before now, but work kept getting in the way.”

“Fired? But ... why?”

“I ... might have ... oh my god, Kacchan! Look at this place! And you're telling me all this was just his alone? Holy ... oh my god, that's a pool, isn't it? Oh man, that terrace ... that is amazing. So much space! I'll bet it looks even more amazing in the summer, when everything's green and growing and you can slip into the pool to cool off from the heat and ugh, I think I hate you a little
right now, Kacchan, I really do!”

“Hayato-senpai....”

“Hey, maybe I should come down with Chamu-kun and sit the Todai exam, too, what do you think? Okay, maybe not Todai, but I'll bet there's some great design schools in this city, right? Kaasan would probably lose it if I ran away to fashion school, but ... Tokyo! Harajuku! My people!”

“Hayato-senpai....”

“And if I'm going to school here, we could meet up between classes or something, wouldn't that be cool? I've missed you so much and Chamu-kun is such a sad-sack any time I meet up with him now, he really misses you, too, you know. I gotta remember to look up colleges with design schools when I get online later. Do you think your Kouki-san would mind if I used his wifi? Ahh, this place is so amazing, Kacchan, I'm so jealous!”

“Senpai!” Kana finally shouted, huffing and stamping his foot for emphasis. That was enough to make the alpha's eyes go wide, his mouth dropping open for a silent second before he closed it and pulled himself up straight again.

“Well you don't have to get all huffy! If you think it's a bad idea, just say so in plain words!”

“I didn't say that!” Kana protested, dropping onto a couch. “But you still haven't explained what you're doing here.”

“I told you, I got fired this morning, so I thought I'd come see you for a bit. That's gonna be okay, isn't it?” the redheaded alpha said, for the first time giving nervous looks to both Kana and Mahiro. “If it's not ... it's an open return ticket, I could probably catch a train back tonight with it, I just ... I was really worried about you and Chamu-kun got super quiet and changed the subject when I asked him how you were doing after work yesterday and I knew that was a bad sign and since you still don't have a phone, well....”

Kana felt something burn in his chest, guilt that he hadn't done more to keep in contact with his friend. With anyone, really, since the incident. It was too easy to blame his lack of phone, but as excuses went, it was a pretty weak one. Kouki had already offered to buy him a new phone, but things kept happening to keep them from actually going out together. Now that he was thinking about it, he was a little surprised neither Kouki nor Minase had just gone out and gotten him one. Probably wanting him to pick out a model for himself. A heavy sigh and he patted the couch cushion next to him.

“Sorry, senpai, I ... I'm sorry I haven't been a better friend. Forgive me?”

“You really are ridiculous sometimes, you know that?” the young alpha said, dropping onto the couch next to him and tucking an arm around him. Kana's skin tingled and instead of the comfort he had always drawn from his senpai in the past, he now felt a trickle of unease. It made no sense, he hadn't felt this way when they had been downstairs or riding up the elevator together, why was Hayato's closeness suddenly a thing?

“Hayato-kun, I think you should sit over here. How are you at algebra, by the way?”

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“Hayato-kun, I think you should sit over here. How are you at algebra, by the way?”

“Huh? Oh, um, not that great. Well I know the basics well enough, but I'd probably have to take a refresher course if I wanted to move into additional maths, why?” the alpha asked, moving from the couch to the flanking chair as he spoke. Kana had to bite back a small smile, inwardly
marveling at how easily Mahiro was able to get others to do what he wanted. It was almost magical.

“Kacchan's been trying to work on his homework, but I admit, I've never been particularly good at algebra,” Mahiro confessed, pouring tea for Hayato and Kana both with a grace of movement that left Kana feeling even weirder in his own skin for some reason. The older omega made hosting look so easy, would he ever reach that level?

“Oh, well then, yeah, I think I can help with that. You've got your textbooks here, too, right? Then yeah. I mean, I may need to spend some time with the book first, to make sure I actually remember stuff right, but after that, definitely, I can help you out. Happy to, even!”

“O-okay, well....” Kana started to move from the couch only to have Mahiro rest a hand on his leg.

“Tea first. Not like the homework's going anywhere. Or needs to be turned in before Monday.”

Kana felt himself blushing again at that reminder. That was the arrangement the teachers had settled on for him - that Chamu would turn in his assignments every Monday. It meant he was out of sync with his classmates, but since he wasn't actually there with them....

“You didn't bring much with you,” Mahiro noted. Kana startled, only just then realizing Hayato had only had a backpack, the bright bag leaning drunkenly against the couch, as if it wasn't even half full.

“Ah, well, I didn't want to just assume I could stay here very long,” the redhead admitted, rubbing the back of his neck. “I figured a day or two might be a safe enough assumption, but more than that would probably be pushing it, so I packed light. Oh! Shit, where are my manners?! I was so excited to be seeing Kacchan again....”

Another moment of surprise as Kana watched his friend hurriedly set down his tea and grab for his bag. Pulling out two wrapped packages, Hayato then bounced up to his feet, bowing deeply before offering the first to Mahiro.

“Please forgive my thoughtlessness. Thank you for allowing me to come into this home, even though I was so rude as to not even call ahead,” the alpha said, bowing again and holding out the package with both hands.

“Hayato-kun, really....”

“Please, Kurosaki-sama,” Hayato insisted, bowing even lower before extending his arms a bit more. Kana could see a smile twitching at the older omega's lips, could scent the faint flicker of amusement as Mahiro made a show of relenting and accepting the gift, even though one could argue it wasn't really his place. But Kana was even less prepared for the way Hayato fell to his knees before him, bowing even lower before presenting the second package to him.

“Forgive me for failing you all these years, Kobayashi-sama,” his senpai said and Kana felt sure his eyes were going to pop out of their sockets. An alpha never spoke this way to an omega, especially not one who was his junior!

“S-senpai!”

“This lowly worm does not deserve to be called as such,” his friend insisted, bowing even lower. Kana squirmed in his seat, this was absurd. And more than a little uncomfortable.

“Hayato-senpai, stop,” he said softly, taking the gift from his friend. He didn't understand what
could possibly be motivating his friend, but seeing Hayato lowering himself so drastically, begging for forgiveness for he didn't even know what... it wasn't right. He wanted to grab Hayato by the sleeve and pull him upright, but he knew better than to even try.

“I know nothing can repair the dishonor to our family that we, all of us, failed you so completely,” Hayato said, still bent over double. It was... not even Yutaka, who'd arguably had the best chance of any of the Higuchi family of seeing what had happened and doing something about it had apologized like this.

“This dishonor is not on you to bear, Hayato-kun,” Mahiro said quietly, one hand alighting on the alpha's shoulder, nudging him back upright. “You were but a child yourself and away at school, how could you have known?”

“But... but the family,” Hayato stammered, sitting back on his heels and frowning at them both. “The Higuchi clan, our family... we've been responsible for the welfare of omegas in Fukui prefecture for... for generations. And we failed him.”

Kana could smell it even before he saw the twitch in Mahiro's temple. Oh this was going to bad, his hand shooting out like a dart to grab Mahiro's arm.

“It's not... Niisama, I told you before, remember?” he said, urgently hoping to cut off that anger before Mahiro could say or do something they would all regret. “It was decided before I was even born that Atsu-nii would be my alpha. I don't know how it works, exactly, we didn't even know Yuta-nii until after Atsu-nii first went to school and they were dormed together. But if the clan's responsible for looking out for us, then they must have some kind of omega registry, right? It was always known that Atsu-nii would be my alpha. Senpai, tell him.”

Hayato bent himself practically to the floor again and Kana grimaced. This wasn't helping, he could still scent Mahiro's anger, brittle and sharp in the air.

“Neesama works as the prefectural registrar of alphas and omegas, but there isn't a central system, she has to go to the cities and order copies of their records herself. I... I don't know what those records hold, but he's right, it was known to us that Satou-san was intended as Kana-kun's mate by both families. This does not excuse our failure to protect him, however.”

“Senpai!”

“No, Kacchan,” Mahiro said, frozen ire dripping from each word as he rose to his feet. “The act itself lays solely on that person's shoulders, may he be punished for a thousand years for his sins, but that it was allowed to continue for three years...”

Kana didn't know what to make of the dark sound Mahiro made, fear clawing at his throat as he watched the older omega storm out onto the terrace.

“I... I think I should go,” Hayato said softly. “I'm sorry.”

“Senpai...”

“No, he's right,” Hayato said with a shake of his head. “We let Yuta-nii's friendship with Satou-san make us blind. Like you said, everyone knew the two of you were supposed to end up mated, so we didn't watch over you like we would have. Like we should have. Yuta-nii trusted him, loved him like a brother, so no one thought twice about you being alone with him. Certainly no one ever considered assigning you a chaperone. And that is our disgrace. Betrothed or not, you should have had someone checking on you regularly from the time of your first heat, to be a chaperone and
“And just what, exactly, is it supposed to gain me if you let Mahi-nii chase you off like this?!?”

Kana protested, shooting a dark glare at the man smoking on the terrace before turning back to Hayato. “Tell me, senpai. Tell me what good his anger does me right now! OR your shame!”

“K-Kana....”

“Maybe I was just a stupid little child, too full of my own overly romantic ideas of being an adult just because I'd had my first heat. Maybe I was stupid to listen to Atsu-nii, to let him persuade me into keeping it all as secret as possible. Maybe your older brothers and sisters should have noticed something sooner. But it's over. It's done. Atsu-nii's been dead for three years already. What good does it do to lay blame now??”

Hot tears dripped down Kana's cheeks and this time when Hayato pulled him into his arms, he could only feel comfort in it. Comfort and a wall of regret as bitter as the tears falling from his chin. A weak sob and he pressed even closer, fisting his hands in Hayato's shirt while the alpha rubbed his back. It wasn't entirely right, Hayato was a bright citrus and energetic sparkle to Kouki's calmer, steadier scent, but it was familiar enough to help.

“Kacchan? Oi, who the fuck are you and what the fuck have you done to Kacchan?!”

Kana scrambled to his feet, biting back a laugh at how ready Hikaru looked to physically attack Hayato if the alpha didn't give him the right answers.

“Hi-kun, it's okay,” he said, scrubbing at a wet cheek.

“Bullshit. Kurosaki-nii isn't here and you're crying again. Imma only ask you one more time, Alpha, who the fuck are you and what are you doing here??”

“Hikaru-senpai!” Kana sputtered.

“Higuchi Hayato, one of Kacchan's friends from Fukui. You have a stout heart, oniisan, I'm glad Kacchan has such friends with him now,” Hayato said, the most solemn Kana had ever heard him. Watching his senpai, still on his knees and shuffling a little to better bow low before Hikaru, was giving Kana a weird feeling all over. Or maybe it was the way Hayato was being so quiet, so ... un-Hayato-like.

“Ok, but why isn't Kurosaki-nii here?”

“Because aniki is selfish and has a temper like a wet badger and stormed out,” Kana grumbled, plopping down onto the couch with a huff.

“I heard that,” Mahiro's voice said, shame racing red through Kana's cheeks. After everything Mahiro had done for him, to be caught saying such unkind things was ... it was unforgivable. And yet instead of anger, he could only pick out amusement from the scent that wrapped around him as Mahiro sat beside him and pulled him into a gentle hug.

“Some day,” the older omega said softly, “you'll learn not to always assume the worst of everyone, na? Besides, you aren't wrong, I have a bad temper, and when I get angry I'm too likely to say things I don't necessarily mean. And I'm sorry my anger added to your upset, but it just ... a forced mating of an omega, any omega, is a stain on the community, but what you went through ... it just makes me so angry. And then to hear the guardian clan was so close....”
“Guardian clan?” Hikaru echoed and Kana watched as the other omega's eyes went wide as saucers.

“Ninety percent betas in a mostly rural prefecture, of course Fukui-ken still has an active guardian clan,” Hayato said, sitting back on his heels, though his usual smile was still absent. “Even Takashi-nii is still responsible for clan duties, even with his outside business. It's a responsibility we are born to that never stops, no matter what we do.”

Something Hayato had said earlier clicked into place and Kana felt himself frowning.

“Is that why you really came then? Family duty?”

“You were my friend long before I knew anything about our clan's duties, Kacchan,” Hayato said quietly, shaking his head. “I needed to make my apologies myself.”

“Yuta-nii didn't. Apologize for the whole clan, I mean.”

“... aniki's been watching over you since the day of the accident, Kacchan, we all have. It doesn't make anything better, I know that, but.... I needed to come and see you myself. I know nothing can make things right so easily, but....”

“I think you've tortured him enough,” Mahiro whispered into Kana's ear. Had he? Was that what he had been doing? That hadn't been his intent and he felt heat rising in his cheeks again. He still wasn't sure he understood what had happened, what crack he had fallen through or what Hayato's family had failed to do. For that matter, he wasn't sure anything they might have done could have changed things. All he knew for sure was that it was in the past and if not even his own mind could wipe out what had happened to him anymore, then nothing anyone else did or didn't do was going to do so either.

Which didn't give him the words to say to his senpai. He sat there, gnawing his lip as he watched Hayato's bowed head. It was so weird, seeing his senpai being so quiet, still. It was unnatural. But he couldn't very well say everything was fine when it was obvious that it wasn't. He glanced at Hikaru, but the omega was looking a bit glassy right then. And Mahiro was no help either, not even in his scent. Another heavy sigh and he forced himself up from the couch, walking over to Hayato and smacking him on the head.

“Knock it off, will you? It's creepy, seeing you like this,” he grumbled. “Either help me with my homework or ... or go down to Harajuku for a couple hours.”

Maybe they weren't the exactly right words, but like flipping a switch, Hayato's usual cheerful smile came back and the alpha dragged him down into another tight hug.

“So ... algebra, right? Um, sorry for letting your tea get cold, Kurosaki-sama.”

“It's just sencha,” Mahiro said with a dismissive laugh. “You two get back to work and don't worry about it. I'll let Kou-kun know you're here, we'll figure out what to do with you when he gets home.”

Kana glanced up as Mahiro walked out of the room, telling himself to relax, that the older omega was probably just leaving the room to keep from distracting them. And to remove the temptation of having Kana able to take the phone from him for a few minutes with his alpha. Sigh. Tonight would just have to be soon enough.

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Closing the office door behind him, Mahiro was just unlocking his phone when it started vibrating in his hand. It took him a moment to actually answer, chuckling as he did so.

“Hey, I was just about to call you,” he said, sitting in Kouki’s desk chair. “How's it going?”

“Don’t ask,” Kouki grumbled. “Is everything okay there?”

“Kacchan's friend Hayato turned up out of the blue, that was kind of ... a thing. It's better now, but.... Did you know Higuchi was the Fukui prefecture guardian clan?”

“They still have an active guardian clan?? Then how the hell...?”

“The same way no one else noticed. Yutaka and Atsushi were school friends, Kana was Atsushi's betrothed, Atsushi took advantage of that. And probably lied his ass off to everyone, using just enough truth to keep others from picking it up. Or else he was a complete sociopath, in which case....” Mahiro trailed off with a sigh. The more breadcrumbs he got about Kana's former mate, the more Mahiro was starting to suspect the man had been at best a moderate sociopath. It certainly explained the deceptions.

“That’s why you were going to call me?”

“To let you know Hayato-kun was here, yeah, so you didn't go all stupid when you came home. Kacchan's a little wobbly with him, the first time Hayato-kun hugged him, he was fine, but the second time he reacted sort of the way he does when Kumi-chan gets too close. He's gotten a bit better since then, but I don't know if it'll stay that way. His own emotional stability is all over the place right now.”

“So it really was him I was feeling,” Kouki said with a sigh. “Do you think he'd be up for a dinner out tonight, then?”

Mahiro mulled it over for a long moment. On the one hand, the time alone with Kana would probably be good for both the omega and his ridiculous alpha. On the other hand, he wasn't so sure it was a good idea. Especially since Kana hadn't actually had his official debut yet. If they all went out together, that would be safer, but it could also read as a bit awkward. On the other hand, he knew of a couple places that would be willing to guarantee complete privacy and that ... that might be the best option yet. In fact, one in particular would be perfect.

“Let me make a call. If Morimoto-dono's restaurant has a private room available, then yes, you can take him out. I don't know that I'd trust your privacy anywhere else, especially on such short notice.”

“... I wasn't really thinking of anything that fancy, Maru.”

“I'm sure you weren't, but his debut is tomorrow night, so until then.... Just trust me and let me make my call. I'll let you know the results when I'm done.”

“Tyrant,” Kouki huffed, but even over the phone, Mahiro could tell the man was amused rather than annoyed. At least this way he wasn't going to have to send Hikaru back out to get more ingredients to cover their unexpected dinner guest? And it would give him more time to get to know this strange alpha that had watched Kana growing up. If he could make it all come together on such short notice. Then again, Chef Morimoto owed him a few favors still. Mahiro had no problem cashing one in for Kana's sake.

~*~*~
Kana could feel his eyes threatening to pop out of his head when he realized they were walking into the side entrance of XEX and being discretely escorted to a private room on the second floor. Even though he was wearing the nicest clothes he had (and had grumbled at Mahiro the whole time for putting him in nicer than jeans), he still felt criminally under-dressed, especially next to Kouki’s formal three piece suit. Had he been wearing that this morning? Kana couldn’t clearly recall now, too caught up in the absence of the silver stud that was missing from his alpha’s lip. But then of course it was, of course his alpha couldn’t go to work, handle a major business crisis while looking like a college-aged miscreant.

“Relax, Kacchan,” Kouki said softly when they had been left alone with the customary hot towels and tea, unbuttoning his coat and vest. “Morimoto-dono will have personally guaranteed our privacy tonight, or else we wouldn’t be here.”

“This place is… I mean, I’ve heard about it on TV, but I never even dreamed I would actually be dining at a place like this. Ever,” Kana admitted, feeling himself going pink in the cheeks again.

“Do you….” Before he could even finish forming the question, the door was opening again and again Kana felt certain he was two seconds from making a complete fool of himself. Iron Chef Masaharu Morimoto. Their dinner was to be made by the most famous Japanese chef in all the world. Under the cover of the table, he pinched himself. To his horror, the chef’s lips twitched into a knowing smile and then he bowed politely.

“Good evening. Always a pleasure to see you again, Kouki-san.”

“Likewise, Chef. Welcome back to Tokyo, by the way. How was… New York this time?”

“Los Angeles and Seattle,” the famous chef said as he started preparing the steel plate at the center of the table. “Well enough, but it’s always good to return home. I haven’t had enough time here these past few years. But I said after this trip I needed at least six months here at home before I even consider another trip abroad.”

“So you’ll be here through hanami? That’s good, they say we should have an especially beautiful spring season this year.”

“Yes. You know, I’ve been away each of the last four, it’s taken a toll on my spiritual well-being. Nowhere else in the world can quite compare to spring here in Japan.”

This was not at all what he had been expecting. He had half expected a fancy meal prepared in silence by some nameless chef. Or else a series of small, fancy courses delivered already prepared so he and Kouki could be left in complete privacy. Certainly not this relaxed atmosphere, as though his alpha and the chef were old friends.

“Your friend doesn’t say much,” the chef noted and Kana felt his cheeks burning again.

“… you would think by now I would know better than to just assume, even with Maru. Especially with Maru,” Kouki said, shaking his head. “Chef, allow me to introduce my betrothed, Kobayashi Kana.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Chef-san,” Kana said, bowing as best he could in his seat and trying not to let on that this was the first time that he could recall that Kouki had used that word on him.

“Ahh, I see now why Kurosaki-kun was so concerned with your privacy,” the alpha chef said and was that a twinkle in his eye? “Please, be at ease, Kobayashi-kun. For a certainty, no one will hear
of any of this from my lips.”

Uncertain what to say, he somehow managed a small smile, grateful to see the chef turning his attention to the heated steel plate and the slicing of vegetables and meats. Kana found himself watching the chef’s knife work in fascination in spite of himself, not really paying attention to the conversation between the two alphas. Chef Morimoto made it all look so easy, the effortless way he sliced, chopped, and filleted without breaking stride either in his preparations or his conversation with Kouki. Easy to see why the man was so widely respected - he really was an artist with food.

When the chef was finished preparing their meal, he thanked them for coming, wished them well, and then left, though not before winking in Kana’s direction. At least, he thought the chef had winked at him, though he wasn't sure why. And wasn't sure he wanted to take the time right then to think about it, considering the mouth-watering selection of food in front of him. Real wagyu beef that almost melted in his mouth, perfectly prepared winter vegetables, scallops, prawns, and lightly crisped noodles, it was almost like being in food heaven. No, scratch that, not almost, it was food heaven. He couldn't imagine a more perfect dinner out.

~*~*~

Kouki glanced sidelong at his omega and had to bite back a small smile at the expression on Kana's face. Taking him out for dinner like this had definitely been the right decision. He knew Kana had been wary and even more than a little nervous when Chef Morimoto had walked into the room, but that had apparently passed, probably because it was just the two of them now.

“So ... Maru rushed us out in such a hurry I didn't even get to see Hayato-kun. What brings him to Tokyo?”

“Yeah, well, you've met senpai, you know how hard it is to get him to shut up once he starts talking,” Kana replied with a shrug. “Mahi-nii wouldn't have wanted us to be late for this dinner.”

“Good point,” he said, nodding. “Doesn't really answer my question, though.”

“Oh, well ... actually, I'm ... I'm still not sure what happened,” Kana said, a cute blush coloring his cheeks. “He said he got fired and decided to come check on me, but I'm sure there's more he's not telling me. Especially with the way he ... he apologized for his whole clan.”

“Maru mentioned something about Higuchi being guardians,” Kouki said, watching as Kana's emotions played over his face as clear as day. Hurt, frustration, shame.

“... yeah....”

The silence between them felt almost oppressive and Kouki set down his chopsticks for a moment to reach over and gently squeeze Kana's knee. The omega took a shaky breath and then straightened.

“It doesn't matter, though, right? Past is past, it doesn't change anything.”

Kouki squeezed Kana's knee again and resumed his dinner. He wasn't entirely convinced that the omega actually believed his own words, but just hearing them was a start. With enough repetition, he just might start to believe it, after all.

While Kana was distracted by the arrival of dessert, Kouki slipped a small package from his pocket and set it on the table between them. When they were alone again, he lightly nudged it against his omega's hand. Kana blinked cutely, obviously surprised to see something where there had been
nothing a few moments earlier.

“W-what…?“

“Open it.”

He had to hold back his own grin as he watched his omega carefully unwrap his gift. And tried not to laugh as Kana's eyes went wide with amazement at the brand new iPhone in his hands.

“I hope this is okay?” he said in feigned concern, hoping his soulmate was too distracted to notice the mismatch between tone and scent. “I know a new model is coming out this fall already, but since you need a phone now… It's already charged and activated, it just needs you to connect it to your own Apple account.”

“I ... I've never had an iPhone before. I don't think I even have an Apple account, my other phone was just a cheap Android-powered smartphone,” his omega stammered. “I ... I have no idea how to get any of my old information onto this.”

“... I should have asked,” he said, frowning at himself. “I didn't even think ... iPhone seems like the popular brand, I just assumed ... I'm sorry, we can get something else if you want.”

“... but you've already activated this one,” Kana said, a startled look painting itself across his face and was that panic he was getting off him?

“Finding a use for an iPhone isn't going to be a problem, Kacchan. If you'd rather have an Android so you can get your information back more easily, then we'll get you an Android.”

Kana tried to hide his tears, but Kouki could smell the salt of them. Leaning over, he brushed a kiss to his omega's forehead. Mahiro had warned him against making too many assumptions, he should have listened. Well, it was all right. Another brief kiss and then he picked up the bill booklet. To his surprise, instead of a bill, there was a brief note, written in Morimoto's strong hand.

No charge tonight, a gift to my good friend. It will be our little secret. Congratulations on your betrothal. May he bring you much joy.

Folding the note and tucking it into his pocket, Kouki closed the booklet. Their little secret.

~*~*~

Kana jerked awake, pulling his knees up to his chest as he sat up in bed. The dreams were a jumble, all he knew for sure was that he hadn't wanted to be in them any longer. Only the pain from his still-healing wounds kept him from fearing this was just another dream. Except he had been hurt in the dreams, too. Glancing over at the other side of the bed, he could just make out the shape of his alpha, still deeply asleep. A part of him wanted to scoot closer, to burrow against that chest and soak in as much of Kouki's presence as he could. Instead, he eased out of their bed, pulling on his fluffy robe and padding out into the rest of the apartment. Kouki had a long week yet ahead of him, he needed his rest undisturbed.

Stopping off in the kitchen, Kana made himself a cup of tea before picking up his new phone, finally charged and ready for use. He still felt a little guilty and he had tried his hardest to talk Kouki down on model. The HTC One he held in his hands was so much nicer than he felt he deserved, especially when there was going to be a new crop of Android-powered phones being released in just a couple of months. He would have been perfectly happy with an older Nokia, but Kouki had insisted and Kana was completely weak to that hopeful smile.
At least he didn't have to wait long to import all his old contacts and data. Not that he'd had very much of either with his old phone, as antisocial as he had generally tended to be. No, not antisocial, shunned. Chamu had been his only friend in junior high and while a couple older alpha girls had been friendly with him his first year of high school, he had only kept in touch with Sayuri after that. He had always been the freak, even before the accident that had cost him both his mate and his brother. Things had never really gotten better after that. Oh his classmates had felt sorry enough for him at first, but after a couple of months things had gone back to normal.

Truth be told, things hadn't really gotten any better now, either, had they? Here he was in a strange city, surrounded by people he only sort of knew at all. And at any moment, Kouki's grandfather could come swooping back into the picture to rip it all away from him. Kouki was his soulmate, yes, but contrary to how he had been raised, well, the evidence was clear - being soulmates wasn't enough. Pulling his knees up to his chest again, Kana buried his face into them and silently wept. It should have been him that died that night. Everything would be better now if it had just been him and not Hiro that had died.
Momentous

Chapter Notes

Finally, it's here, Kana's big night. Lots of new faces and I'm sorry I don't have the appendix updated yet, that's a project for tomorrow or Friday.

(More culture notes at the end)

Mahiro carefully smoothed the black cloth over Kana's shoulders, nodding to himself. They still had another hour before they had to leave for the gallery, but he had wanted Kana to be fully dressed far enough in advance that the teenager would have time to get used to the weight and the feel of the formal kimono and hakama.

“I feel ridiculous,” Kana muttered, flapping one arm. “This feels awfully formal for just an art opening.”

“It's not just an exhibition opening. This is your first public event as Kou-kun's betrothed, appearances matter,” Mahiro said, one hand lightly landing on one of the stark white kamon on Kana's chest. “This is Kouki's family crest, it proclaims you as belonging to him. If his grandfather tries to spirit you away in the middle of the night now, he'll have to explain himself to the rest of us. He might bluster in private after this, but in public he can either say nothing or have to admit he had not given his blessing in advance and risk losing face. For someone like that ... this is your protection now. No one will be able to say you are not worthy of Kou-kun and get away with it.”

“But....”

“Shh,” Mahiro admonished, pressing a finger to the teen's lips. “Go have your tea, Hayato-kun should have it ready for you by now.”

“I still feel ridiculous,” Kana grumbled, but it was little more than a token protest. Biting back a smile of his own, Mahiro watched as Kana shuffled out of the guest room, muttering the whole way.

“... that is one unhappy teenager.”

“He'll get over it,” Mahiro replied with a negligent wave, latching onto Mitsuki's neck and pulling him down into a hungry, if all too brief, kiss. “I see you and Kou-kun have already been busy. Did you bring my kimono?”

“Do I look like an idiot?” his alpha countered, smirking. Partly as an act of solidarity, he and Mitsuki had agreed to dress in formal kimono as well, so Kana didn't have to feel quite so singled out. The teen wasn't entirely wrong, the five kamon kimono he wore was a bit overly formal for the level of event they were attending, but for Kana's debut, it was completely necessary. Kouki and Mitsuki were already dressed in similar kimono, now it was just a matter of getting Mahiro into his own. A deep breath and he kept very still as Mitsuki helped him settle into his black tomesode, decorated with pine boughs, sprays of white and pink plum blossoms, and purple folding fans. It would put him in sharp contrast to the masculine kimono most of their party would be
wearing, but he was a mated omega with a child, he was allowed.

“Saga-kun knows all about this little show of yours, I'm assuming,” Mitsuki said as he helped Mahiro settle his obi.

“Of course. Hachi filled him in as soon as we made the plans. I expect him to show up either in formal kimono as well or one of Yoshi-tan's creations. I expect at least a dozen of us in formal kimono tonight, Kana won't have to feel quite so awkward.”

“And you'll be sitting with him all night?”

“Yes, of course, we've been over this,” he said, trying not to sigh at having to go over everything again. He knew Mitsuki knew the answers already, but that the repetition would help ease his alpha's mind and nerves.

“I just want to be sure I'll know where to find you.”

“As if you've ever had a problem with that,” Mahiro countered, chuckling. Even before they had been fully mated, Mitsuki had always been able to find him, no matter how crowded the room.

“As long as you three don't get mixed up in even more trouble than usual,” Mitsuki cautioned, though Mahiro could smell his mate's amusement.

“Who, us? Now when have we ever gotten you into trouble?”

“If you want me to make a list, we'll be here all night, love,” his alpha said, coming around to press a brief kiss to his lips. “Come on, before your charge does something to completely mess up all your hard work on him.”

A snort but Mahiro let his mate lead him out of the room. Tonight was going to be something special. Whatever else happened, he would make sure Kana was in good hands.

~*~*~

Kouki lightly pressed a hand to the small of Kana's back. The omega forced himself to take another deep breath while it was just the few of them in Koudai's office. A fan lightly tapped his wrist and he grimaced, forcing his arms back to his sides. He didn't think he had ever felt this nervous about anything in his life. Then again, he had never done anything this formal or important before in his life, either.

“Relax, Kacchan,” Kouki murmured. “I'll be with you to start and Maru will be at your side the whole time.”

“I know, I just....”

“Just be grateful the Emperor isn't here tonight,” Mahiro murmured. That was a thought Kana hadn't even considered and for a moment he thought for sure he was going to faint.

And then Koudai was opening the office door and beckoning them forward. With Kouki's hand on his elbow, he walked out with his soulmate into what felt like a thousand eyes all staring at him. Hushed whispers followed them as they walked across the gallery, pausing as Kouki directed to admire this work or that sculpture. It felt like an eternity before Kana was finally allowed to sit down on an ornate couch that stood in sharp contrast to the more modern and minimalist style of the various artworks on display. For something that looked like it was straight out of one of the fairytale castles of Europe, it was surprisingly comfortable.
“Well, we've certainly turned heads,” Mahiro said from the chair beside him. As raw and exposed as Kana still felt, he knew that much was true. Most of the people filling the gallery space were dressed in elegant but very Western styles, though he had also caught a glimpse of a pair of alpha women in hanbok. He wanted to ask about them, but they had seemingly disappeared into the crowd. Perhaps later.

“And there's Sagacchi coming this way, which is, I suppose, my cue to go be social,” Kouki said, leaning down to brush a brief kiss to Kana's forehead. “Can I get you two anything?”

“Airu-kun should be here shortly,” Mahiro said, getting up to take Kouki's place on the couch. The butterflies in Kana's stomach were threatening to make him nauseous, even with the older omega right there beside him.

“Oh sweet heavens,” a blond omega sighed as he dropped down into the chair Mahiro had just vacated. Kana felt his eyebrows threatening to fly off his face they were arched so high at such unexpected behavior. So this was the artist of the hour. Lanky and leggy with a shock of platinum blond hair artfully styled to mostly conceal the left side of his face, Saga's kimono was as outrageous as his art was minimalistic, a bright blue batik slashed with orange and black tiger-striped panels and cinched by a black leather corset. As if by pre-arranged timing (and perhaps it had been), Koudai's quiet assistant manager appeared at that precise moment with a full tea set.

“Airu-kun, you're a blessing,” the blond said, adjusting one of his elbow-length fingerless black lace gloves before accepting a cup of tea.

“So everyone keeps saying. Saga-kun, I believe you know Kurosaki-sama already, but allow me to introduce Kobayashi Kana-san.”

As if there could be any doubts about who everyone currently in their little alcove was. Still, it was a matter of protocol, even if Kana felt a bit awkward bowing while seated in his overly stiff hakama.

“Koudai-kun mentioned you had an interest in art?” Saga lilted, nodding to himself. “Always a pleasure to meet another artist, of course. So ... what do you think?”

Kana blinked stupidly, his cup held frozen halfway to his lips for a second before he felt his arms lowering it almost mechanically.

“Well, it's ... it's very ... um,” he stammered, struggling to find the right words. He glanced out at the room again, his eye caught by one of the prominent sculptures, an explosion of smoked glass shards with details he couldn't clearly see or even just recall at the moment. Dammit, he had only just walked through the exhibition, why couldn't he think of a single word to fit to it?

“It's a bit all over the place, isn't it?” Mahiro said into Kana's silence. “There doesn't seem to be a particularly coherent theme tonight.”

“Ah, but that was precisely my point,” the blond said with a wide grin, before leaning closer. “I can't wait to see how the art critics and journalists twist themselves into knots trying to create a cohesive narrative out of my chaos.”

Kana joined in the soft laughter, but he couldn't help feeling rather out of his depth. He didn't really think of himself as any sort of proper artist, most of his drawings had been illustrations to stories in his head that he could never have gotten out otherwise. This sort of modern art ... it wasn't that he disliked it, it just wasn't really the way he worked.
“I already caught one journalist waxing poetic about the rich symbolism in '9,'” Saga said with a devilish grin. “I didn't have the heart to tell him it was simply the ninth canvas from a set the dogs had done.”

“Dogs?” Kana asked.

“It was a wild idea I had late last summer. I invited several of my friends' dogs over to play with my own Chiko and at one point I let them play in washable paints and laid out a bunch of canvases. I wanted to do a showing of just those canvases, but in the end I decided against it. One or two slipped into my own work is one thing, but I decided a show of nothing but dogs at play might have been stretching my own credibility a bit much.”

Kana’s laugh startled even himself, but then Saga was laughing along with him. A moment and then a hand briefly touched his shoulder.

“Sorry to interrupt, little brother, but Boss-san said to give you this,” Airu said, handing Kana a plate of small savory appetizers. At the sight of food, Kana's stomach growled and he felt his cheeks heating, the blush getting worse for the knowing smile the beta was giving him. Thanking the man, he hesitated, not sure what to do. As hungry as he was, he wouldn't feel right if he was the only one eating.

“Slowly,” Mahiro murmured beside him, “and mind your sleeves.”

Kana forced himself to take a deep breath before selecting a small dumpling. To his relief, he saw several others in the room with similar plates and then Airu was returning with similar selections for Mahiro and Saga.

“I'm sorry for why it's necessary,” Saga said after a few moments of relatively comfortable quiet, “but I'm so glad to have this space tonight. I will never discourage an artist from doing what he loves, but these people... no offense, Maru-sama, but these people can be maddening in their airs and pretension, trying to use my art to prove that they're better than others. Some days it makes me want to scream at them all. All form with no substance.”

“Not everyone is like that. But this sort of thing does tend to bring out the worst of that in our society,” Mahiro said with a small nod.

“I know, I know. And as much as I'm enjoying pulling one over on the art press, it also makes me a bit sad to know that not one of them is likely to see what I've actually done.”

“Oh, I wouldn't be so sure of that,” Mahiro said, subtly gesturing over towards a young woman frowning thoughtfully at one of Saga's sculptures. “Be sure you make time for Wada-san before she leaves tonight. She has a better eye than most, I think.”

“... you may be right. Ah, I suppose I should go mingle some more. Chin up, Kobayashi-kun, you'll make it through just fine.”

They seemed strange parting words to Kana, but he appreciated them nonetheless. He wasn't sure how much time had passed, it already felt like an eternity even though he was sure it wasn't. Kouki and Mahiro both had told him before that they would only need to spend an hour here, but he wasn't so sure anymore. At least he wasn't in the middle of the swirl of people.

~*~*~

Kana sensed it even before the crowd of mostly betas parted ahead of a strong alpha couple. Worse, they were headed toward the very alcove where he had taken refuge. Mahiro squeezed his
knee gently and then his sponsor was standing to greet the couple.

“Yoshi-tan, it's been too long~”

“And whose fault is that, hmm?” the male alpha said, but the smile on his face was warm, almost boyish in its charm. Or perhaps it was the burnished reddish-blond hair, the air of perpetual youth. This alpha, too, was in formal black kimono, the white kamon almost glowing in sharp relief against the pitch black silk of his haori. The woman beside him, dark and small in comparison, wore a tomesode similar to Mahiro’s, black with bamboo about the hem and sparrows darting across her knees. And the same almost glowing kamon as her companion. Husband and wife, then.

“Yoshi-tan, Nashi, allowed me to re-introduce Kobayashi Kana, lately of Fukui-ken and betrothed of Morihito Kouki. I'm afraid he wasn't at all well at the New Year when you met him the last time. Kacchan, my friends Hayashi Yoshiki and Hayashi Naoto of Yoshikimono and Exist-Trace Unlimited.”

“My apologies for before. It's an honor to meet you both,” Kana murmured as he bowed politely, startled to have his deep bow cut short by the woman, Naoto, her hand briefly touching his shoulder, right where Kouki’s family mon was imprinted on the fabric. He felt himself caught up in her dark eyes, the fierceness of her alpha presence made even more so by the startling array of piercings in lips, eyebrow, and ears. These two had quite some power indeed, to buck traditions so brazenly, the silver kanzashi in her mage only further drawing the eye to the wide stripe of purple that would have otherwise framed the left side of her face.

“Any friend of Mahiro-kun's is a friend of ours,” she said with a surprisingly soft voice, a fleeting smile flickering across her face. A brief glance at the male alpha still standing before him and Kana suddenly realized these two were easily fifteen or even twenty years apart in age; Yoshiki had to be at least fifty and yet the woman now sitting beside him couldn't be more than mid-thirties. His realization was apparently written either all over his face or all over his scent (or both) as a beat later the woman tapped the side of her nose and grinned.

“Yes, you see. You definitely have our support, Kobayashi-kun. Or will you take Kouki-san's name as you have his kamon?”

“I ... I hadn't really thought about it,” he confessed, a blush racing into his cheeks as he dropped his gaze down to his hands.

“He exaggerates,” Naoto murmured and though she was soft spoken, it took no imagination on Kana's part to tell she was someone who, when she spoke, others listened. And obeyed.

“Somehow, his arthritis only appears when he's desperate for an excuse to leave!”
Kana bit back a giggle, feeling himself relax in spite of everything. As nerve-wracking as it was to be bracketed by two strong alphas he had only just met, there was something about these two.... Or maybe it was the feel of Mahiro standing behind him, the comforting hand on his shoulder. It didn't give him any great insights into what to say to either alpha, but at least he didn't feel as awkward as he would have had he been left alone with them.

“Thank you again for the kimono, Hayashi-sama,” he said when he was certain he wasn't going to ruin it by giggling. “It's beautiful craftsmanship.”

“Something so formal, it was of no trouble,” the alpha said with a slightly negligent wave of his fingers. “No one would even know it was one of mine. What did you think of Saga-kun's? A custom design, of course.”

“I've never seen anything like it,” Kana said truthfully, glancing out over the room to see if he could get another glimpse of the artist in question. “It's so....”

“It's a bit on the loud side, yes, but then so is Saga-kun,” Yoshiki said, nodding. “There are those who say the kimono is a dying art, but I rather disagree. Clothing styles only die when they refuse to change to serve the needs of the people. There will always be a place for the formal ranks - iromuji, furisode, kurotomesode and so forth - but there is also room for innovation and experimentation, don't you agree?”

“Hayato-senpai would be the better one to ask,” Kana demurred, glancing down at his hands again. “This is the first time I've worn a kimono in ... years. I'm kind of glad I'm not allowed to walk around much, to be honest. The whole time I was walking through the exhibition before, I was terrified I was going to move wrong and end up falling down on my face or something.”

“With the sustained push to modernize and Westernize, I can't say I'm surprised,” Yoshiki said with a soft laugh. “Formal kimono can feel a bit confining, even when you're used to it.”

A soft flare of warning scent was enough to bring the conversation to an abrupt halt and Kana felt guilty, knowing he was the reason for Mahiro's silent intervention. He wasn't sure why, exactly, but he also wasn't going to argue with the older omega about it.

Naoto's hand landed atop his and it was enough to pull his eyes up to her face. She shot a meaningful glance over his shoulder, then squeezed his hand and smiled.

“I won't ask, this isn't the place for it and it isn't my business. You are as much entitled to your privacy as anyone. So, you pick a topic, okay?”

“But ... why?” he blurted, his cheeks instantly flaring red hot.

“So precious,” Naoto said, laughing and brushing a strange, almost prickly kiss to his cheek. “Why not? We're at an art opening, conversation with others is the entire point, ne? Besides,” and her eyes took on a conspiratorial twinkle as she continued, “we haven't been sitting nearly long enough for Yashi's arthritis to have stopped bothering him, so I'm afraid you're rather stuck with him.”

“I'm feeling decidedly conspired against,” the alpha said and yet his frown couldn't have been more fake if he had tried. “Making fun of the old man. Just because I'm probably a good ten years older than the boy's father.... Terrible.”

“Well someone's obviously in pain if he's being a grumpy old bear again already.”

Kana's guard immediately went on high alert at the intrusion of another unknown alpha's voice. He swallowed convulsively, though the alpha wasn't looking at him at all, those hawk-like eyes
instead focused quite squarely on Yoshiki. Even in profile, he was breathtakingly handsome, as handsome as his own alpha, maybe even a little more. A different sort of handsome, of course, sharp and coldly aristocratic where his Kouki was a warm and golden vision. He wore his hair longer than most, trailing over his shoulders and colored a deep chestnut brown, darker still where it framed his face. The formal kimono and haori he wore made him seem a giant, or perhaps it was something in his scent. Either way, Kana knew with a certainty this was not someone he would have wanted to meet in a dark alley. Or anywhere else, for that matter, without his own alpha at his side.

“Sugihara-kun, your manners are slipping. Stop scaring the boy, *haafu,*” Yoshiki scolded, a cool disdain leaking into his scent like a snake. The answering rage that flared into the other alpha's scent was strong enough to tear a soft whimper from Kana's throat, fear ricocheting around his head like a super ball. Nothing good could come from such rage, he was certain of it.

And in an instant, the whole scene changed. Not only had the new alpha gone to a knee before Kana, he had taken up one of Kana's hands in both of his. Warm, weathered hands, unexpectedly callused, as from many years of hard work. There was also the scent of another omega near at hand, though Kana was too trapped in the alpha's dark gaze to search him out just then.

“Are you all right?” the alpha asked him sincere concern both on his face and flowing through his scent in gentle waves. Now that Yoshiki had used the word, Kana could see the little tells that might have gone unnoticed otherwise that suggested non-Japanese ancestors in Sugihara's family history. A frown creased the alpha's strong brows as the silence between them grew. Oh right, he'd been asked a question.

“I ... I'm fine,” he mumbled, finally breaking his gaze to duck his head. “S-so–.”

He was interrupted by the press of a finger to his lips, though his hand was still being held gently in the hands of the alpha before him. From beneath his lashes his eyes flicked from the alpha to the omega who had taken up Kana's other side.

“Don't apologize for Yoshi-kun's thoughtlessness,” the omega said softly, shaking his head. Another glance and he was surprised to see Sugihara sat back on his heels, hawk eyes studying him intently with more than a hint of disbelief. Naoto, he realized, had a hand on his arm, but when he glanced at her, her glare was aimed quite squarely at Yoshiki. Well, perhaps that was fair. Even with as friendly as these alphas seemed to be with each other, the designer had to know what using that word would do, how Sugihara would respond to the slur.

“You two go,” the omega who had to be Sugihara's mate said, waving them away. A beat of hesitation and then Yoshiki and Sugihara were both murmuring excuses and walking away from the alcove.

“Well,” Mahiro huffed, squeezing both of Kana's shoulders, “that didn't go at all as planned.”

“As if Yashi and Sugi-kun ever do anything according to someone else's plans,” Naoto said with a soft snort, her hand rubbing Kana's arm for a moment. “Are you sure you're all right, Kana-kun? My husband is brilliant, but when it comes to Sugi-kun, he's also a complete and total imbecile sometimes.”

“I ... I just need a minute,” Kana stammered, rubbing suddenly sweaty palms on the legs of his hakama. And firmly ignoring the soft tut of disapproval from the omega behind him. Naoto huffed a noise that probably meant she wasn't sure she believed his words either, but didn't say anything more on it.
“Well, that was Sugihara Yuune, though you might have heard of him by his professional name of Sugizo,” Naoto explained. “And this is his mate, Arimura Ryutaro.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Kana-kun, though of course I could wish it were under better circumstances,” the omega murmured, absently (and a bit uselessly) brushing black fringe away from his eyes.

“It would have helped if your mate had waited his turn like he was supposed to,” Mahiro grumbled not unreasonably. Arimura flashed an apologetic look at the omega behind Kana, then helped himself to the chair Yoshiki had vacated.

“As Naoto-shi said, Yo-sama and Sugi-tan make their own plans, always,” the slender omega said, shrugging his shoulders. He, too, was in kimono, something Kana was starting to suspect had been planned by Mahiro. A visual way of bolstering Kana's nerves and a public show of support for the future mate of one of their own. Unlike Mahiro and Naoto, though, Arimura's kimono was a dark green, a spray of plum blossoms reaching all the way up into the obi around his waist, and the kamon on his chest were less obvious. Kana wasn't sure if that was significant or not, perhaps it had simply been a style choice? All he really knew was that the style had always been explained to him as a women's style, not something adult men would wear. And yet.... another omega thing, perhaps?

No one was saying anything, why was no one saying anything? Oh right, he was supposed to have been thinking of a topic before Sugihara's interruption.

“I ... I'm sorry, but ... to be honest ... I don't really know ... anything,” he stammered into the near silence, feeling increasingly uncomfortable with each word that passed his lips. Bad enough for Kouki to know how ignorant he was, how childish and uninformed, but to have to reveal that shame to everyone else....

“About ... Tokyo? Well that's fair,” Arimura said, chuckling. “I'm not sure I could find Fukui on a map myself. It's been, what, three weeks, give or take? And most of that you've been in recovery, so not much chance of learning much about the city or the people living here.”

“Though I can't help wondering what Kouki-san has said to you that you're wound up this tightly,” Naoto added with a faint frown.

“N-nothing! N-not ... it's not like that!” Kana stammered in a rush. Oh god, he was going to make a complete mess of everything, Kouki's grandfather was right, he was completely wrong for his soulmate, he never should have even come to Tokyo in the first place. Squeezing his eyes shut, he told himself he wasn't going to be so weak and useless as to start crying in front of all these people.

“Kacchan?”

Without opening his eyes, Kana slumped forward, not even really surprised when Kouki's warmth folded around him. Thank the gods for Kouki, one hand curling into his soulmate's haori. Tears prickled at the corners of his eyes, but he refused to let them win. Hadn't he already displayed enough weakness to these people? He had to be strong, the mate of someone like Kouki had to be stronger than this....

“Maru? What happened??”

“Yoshi-tan made an idiot remark, Sugi-kun had the predictable reaction, it's been a bit downhill from there,” the older omega said with a heavy sigh. “I swear, I could strangle your grandfather right now.”
“His grandfather? I thought the old grouch never went further from Kobe than Kyoto?” and Kana was startled by the disdain in Naoto's tone and scent.

“He made a special exception after I told him I couldn't come to him for New Years this year,” Kouki said in a low growl, lifting Kana into his lap even as he took his place on the couch. A shaky breath and he pressed closer into the crook of Kouki's neck.

“Let me guess,” Arimura grumbled, his scent sour enough to reach Kana even with his own nose practically burrowed into his alpha's neck, to the point where he just had to sit back and peer at him in confusion. “He doesn't approve of your match because Kana-kun not only had the audacity to be born a *male* omega, but also failed to preserve his virginity for you? As if that's even a thing that matters or has value to anyone these days.”

“It's ... complicated, but basically ... yes,” the blond alpha said, steadily rubbing Kana's back. “And then had the nerve to call him trash. To my face.”

The jumble of scents, outrage and anger and something else, that suddenly assaulted him from both sides was ... not comforting, exactly, but certainly unexpected. These people didn't even know him and yet....

“Wait, is that what you meant, Kana-kun? That you don't know where you'll fit with us?” Arimura asked, a shrewd look on his youthful face. A moment in which Kana completely failed to make a single word come out of his mouth and then a snort. “You are Kouki-kun's mate, or will be when you're of age. Your history is private and irrelevant, no matter what the detractors say. You are debuted as a member of our social strata now, end of discussion.”

“Tarou-kun is oversimplifying things, as usual, but he's not wrong,” Naoto added, her hand brushing Kana's arm again briefly. “Look around you, Kana-kun, you aren't alone. Kumi-chan and Junji-sensei. Mitsuki-sensei and Mahiro-kun. Yashi and myself. Sugi-kun and Tarou-kun. And there, see, the Kanos. Yashi's younger brother. Sakurai-dono ... *is* Sakurai-dono with us, Maru, or is that a happy accident?”

“I hadn't talked to either Yasu-kun or Sakurai-dono. Or Tanaka-dono. I thought perhaps you...?”

“Not us, unless Yashi did it behind my back,” she said, shaking her head. Kana carefully dabbed at his eyes and glanced around the gallery, the part of it he could see anyway. He couldn't see everyone Naoto had mentioned, didn't even know everyone named, but the formal black haori with their bright white kamon over equally black kimono stood out in distinct contrast to the sea of Western style tuxedos and dresses. He had noticed that before, of course, but somehow it struck him again, even more this time.

“One of us,” Kouki whispered against the back of his ear. “Always.”

~*~*~

People kept giving their alcove curious looks and Kana couldn't help wondering what those people were thinking. Naoto had gone back out among the milling crowd to find her husband and chat with others for a bit, and though Kouki had been reluctant to follow her lead, he too was now back in that press of people again. Kana felt himself sagging against Mahiro and for a wonder, his sponsor was allowing it. Then again, they were alone for the moment, as even Arimura had made excuses and left them.

“Relax, Kacchan, most of these people are betas. As long as you *look* confident, they aren't going to know any different.”
“They ... they are?”

“Don't you remember your history? There were more than a few betas in amongst the shogun's daimyō, you know. Half the Taira generals were betas. And more than a few Fujiwara stewards, for that matter.”

Kana subsided with a sigh, unable to argue. He hadn't remembered that, yet another gap in his knowledge, though the more he thought about it, the more it made sense. Betas had always outnumbered alphas and omegas, even combined, it only made sense that betas would be at every level of society. All right, not at the level of the Emperor himself, but everything below that, surely.

“Excuse us, do you mind if we have a seat a moment?”

The accent as much as the twined alpha scents caught Kana's attention and he looked up, startled to see the two Korean alphas standing there, smiling sweetly. A quick glance told him his sponsor didn't know them, was trying to decide how to answer. Now was his chance to find out who they were and what had brought them such a distance to see a showing by just an omega artist.

“I-it's all right,” he stammered shyly. “I'm sorry, I don't think we've met? Kobayashi Kana.”

“Kim Hyoyeon,” said the petite blond, offering him a cheerful smile and an unexpected handshake, before turning to indicate her companion. “And this is Kim Taeyeon, my wife.”

“Your hanbok - is that right? - are lovely.”

“Yes, that's right,” the second alpha said as she gratefully sank into the chair beside Kana. “And her idea,” she added, smiling. They were both beautiful, complementing each other. Hyoyeon was in pastels, purple and green, with more pastel hair chalk in long blond hair. And Taeyeon was in cool blues with black curls framing her face. He wondered if maybe they were fashion models. They had the right look for it, certainly.

“You're pregnant!” he blurted, both hands immediately slapping over his mouth. So much for presenting himself as an educated adult.

“Also her idea,” Taeyeon said, laughing easily as she pressed a hand over her gentle baby bump, more noticeable now that she was sitting.

“Hey now, you had more than a little to do with it, too, you know,” Hyoyeon said, lightly nudging her wife. Taeyeon chuckled and waved her off, but it would have been impossible to miss her relief at not being standing anymore.

“I love art openings,” the dark alpha said with a wistful sigh, “but there's never enough seating. If there's any to be had at all, that is.”

“Koudai-kun is always willing to have seating available if he knows it's going to be needed,” Mahiro said, giving the two an appraising glance before extending his hand. “Kurosaki Mahiro. Your Japanese is quite good.”

“Mm, thank you. Well, mine is,” Taeyeon replied, a devilish light appearing in her eyes. “Hyo's gets a bit questionable. Then again, so does her Korean.”

“Oi! Woman!”

“Well it's true! We've lived here for three years now and you're still constantly asking me how to say this or that. Sometimes I think you just invent words just to mess with me!”

“Hyo's Tokyo bureau chief for Vogue Korea and I teach English and Korean at the University of Tokyo. Are you a student there?”

“Oh no, I couldn't pass the Todai exam,” Kana demurred with a shake of his head.

“That's too bad. I could use another serious student in my classes. Too many are taking English because they think they have to, but they aren't bothering to learn how to speak it properly. It gets a bit exhausting, having to teach and re-teach the same students the same things.”

“I probably wouldn't be in your class anyway,” he mumbled, ducking his head as his shyness threatened to get the better of him. Both alphas seemed awfully young for the jobs Taeyeon had said, but then again maybe that was just him being a bad judge of their ages. Or maybe there were different rules for alphas?

“Oh are you here on assignment then?” Mahiro asked the blond alpha, and though there was kindness in him that his words didn't carry, Hyoyeon snorted in offense.

“Vogue has better things to do that profile a flash in the pan artist no one will remember in six months.”

“Hyo!”

“Tae!” the blond mocked, rolling her eyes.

“I don't know why I take you places!” Taeyeon huffed, shoving her wife away from her chair.

“Tae~ You know why~”

“No, go away, I'm mad at you now.”

Kana could almost smell the silent conflict between the two women. Another snort and then Hyoyeon was moving away while Taeyeon kept a rigid back turned towards her wife. Kana bit his lip, glancing down at his hands, then sidelong at Mahiro. At least his sponsor seemed unconcerned with the little fight he had inadvertently caused. Then again, with Mahiro's personality, this probably wasn't the first time something like this had happened.

A moment longer and then Taeyeon's shoulders sagged inwards.

“I'm sorry,” Kana mumbled, mostly because it felt like the only thing he could say right then.

“No, no, it's not your fault. Hyo ... either has a very strong opinion or no opinion at all and she's not shy about sharing what she thinks. Or doesn't think,” the woman said with a heavy sigh, rubbing one arm. “I knew she wasn't that interested in coming, but....”

Taeyeon trailed off, biting her lip and giving a nervous glance at the beta who had silently stepped into their alcove. Airu again, an unspoken question hanging over his head.

“More tea, please, Airu-kun, thank you,” Mahiro said quietly. “And something more of the lady.”

“Of course,” Airu said, his soothing tenor a soft purr. “Miss? What would you like?”

“Oh no, thank you, I'm fine, honest,” she hurried to say, waving off his concern. Or trying to, at any rate. Kana bit back a smile, knowing Mahiro was not going to be put off that easily, not after
what he had seen of the man himself.

“Something with a bit of meat in it, I think, Airu-kun. And something sweet for Kacchan, if you
don't mind.”

A brief smile and the beta nodded before slipping away again. Kana wasn't really sure he needed to
be eating again, but he wasn't going to contradict his sponsor. Especially when it was already too
late.

“Really, I'm –.”

“Proper nutrition is important, especially in the middle of a pregnancy,” Mahiro interrupted, though
his tone was blandly pragmatic. “You were saying something about coming to the opening being
your idea?”

“Mm. I've walked by this gallery so many times, but we've never done an opening like this. This,”
and she waved about to indicate the whole room, “really isn't Hyo's thing. We aren't really ... this
was kind of a special thing, because I whined so much. Hyo still kind of sees herself as a small
town girl who got lucky, even though no one in their right mind would call Incheon a small town.
But until college, she was always living in the suburbs, so maybe.... She's fine with fashion events,
she covers Tokyo Fashion Week personally, even, but something like this.... Which is funny,
because I don't feel like this is any different, as far as the people here, just the reason for all being
in the same place is different. But I wanted to do something I wanted for a change and, well, I was
sort of hoping....”

Taeyeon trailed off as she glanced out at the milling crowd again. Kana followed her gaze, startled
by the hint of sadness when they saw Hyoyeon chatting and laughing with a circle of people Kana
didn't recognize. His first impression had been that these two women were very much in love, but
now he found himself starting to wonder. Then again, why get married if they weren't serious
about each other? Two alpha women together was hardly normal, at least from everything he had
been told and seen. Not that his own experiences extended far past common media narrative and
hadn't he seen enough yet to know the common narrative wasn't all that accurate? As young as they
were, to be starting a family in a foreign country, there had to be more to the story.

“Oh my great hairy aunt!” Saga declared as he flopped himself in the second armchair not unlike a
dead fish. “I really should have taken that English course more seriously. I'm almost afraid to see
how that interview is going to be written up now! Oh!”

Kana had to bite down on a giggle, watching as Saga suddenly revived to kneel before Taeyeon,
sweeping up a hand and pressing a kiss to the back of it.

“A radiant moon goddess from a distant land indeed. The pleasure is surely mine,” Saga crooned.

“Oh, my,” Taeyeon stammered, a flush in her cheeks.

“Sagacchi, this is Kim Taeyeon-sensei. If you're serious about brushing up on your English, she
happens to be a teacher of English at Todai,” Mahiro said smoothly.

“Ah, then you are truly a gift from the heavens indeed,” the artist said, giving her hand a squeeze
before moving his chair over to her other side. “Well, assuming sensei is willing to take on a
private student.”

“Ah, then you are truly a gift from the heavens indeed,” the artist said, giving her hand a squeeze
before moving his chair over to her other side. “Well, assuming sensei is willing to take on a
private student.”

“Well, I do offer tutoring sessions, but they're really intended for my students first and foremost....”

“And my heart breaks,” Saga sighed. And yet it only lasted a moment before he was perked up and
smiling again. “No, no, it’s fine, I shouldn’t put a guest on the spot like that. Thank you for
humoring me, though.”

“It’s a very ... interesting collection of work you’re showing tonight, sensei,” she said, as if wanting
to move the conversation away from herself. “But there doesn’t seem to be a show title? Was that
deliberate?”

“Ah, just when I was starting to think Wada-san was the only one to have noticed,” Saga mock-
whined, a laugh immediately following. “Quite deliberate, yes. After all, a title is a clue to a show’s
theme, is it not?”

Kana felt a knot forming under his sternum and he glanced back out at the gathered crowd. He
couldn’t see Kouki from where he was sitting, but someone or something was upsetting his alpha.
Not just upsetting. He pressed a hand to his chest at the flare of his alpha’s anger across their
soulmate bond, closing his eyes and forcing himself to take a couple deep breaths. When he looked
up, Airu and an imposing older alpha male whom Kana didn’t know had positioned themselves
across the alcove mouth, blocking them from the rest of the gallery. Mahiro patted his shoulder,
then walked over to the intimidating alpha, but he spoke too softly for Kana to hear what he said.
The only response the alpha made was a low grunt. Kouki’s anger was getting worse, twisting at
his stomach.

“Kobayashi-kun?”

Kana flinched away from the alpha woman’s touch, wincing as he realized what he had
unconsciously done. Not good, not good at all. But it was too late to take it back and it wasn’t like
he could control it anyway. Still, the way she was frowning at him....

“I’ll go-,” Saga started.

“No,” Airu interrupted, shaking his head. “Better if you stay here. Just some opinionated betas
who’ve had too much champagne, nothing more. The police are on the way.”

“Feels worse than just that,” Kana muttered, rubbing uselessly at his chest. Airu frowned a
moment, then understanding lit grey eyes and he grimaced.

“Of course,” he murmured, shaking his head a little. “But please, just ... stay here. All of you.
Please.”

Kana wasn’t going to argue, but he did wish the feeling would stop. This was even worse than
when Hikaru had been attacked. And then Mahiro was sitting beside him again, slipping an arm
around him and gently pulling him in close to his side.

“It’ll be all right, Kacchan. I can probably even guess who it was and that one has always had
more mouth than sense. Especially when it comes to omega rights. I do wish people would stop inviting
him to these things, but too much of the population still sees nothing wrong with treating us like
property instead of people as it suits them.”

“I hate it, completely,” Taeyeon said with a low huff. “Two of my brightest students are omegas.
One of them has a real gift for language, but he won’t pursue it, says he’s only in school for a
degree and a mate, that there’s no place for him other than that. I’ve tried to get him to take interest
in more, but... And the other one! One year and she was done, said that was all she needed for her
degree. At least she’s studying nursing, but still.”

“It won’t always be this way,” Mahiro muttered. Kana wanted to believe him, he did, but he wasn’t
Biting back a smile, Kouki quietly helped his exhausted omega out of his formal kimono, wrapping him in a soft nagajuban before putting him to bed. They had ended up staying at the gallery rather longer than he had originally intended, but at least Kana had been away from the real trouble. Yoshiki had already offered him an apology and he had, in turn, extended him an invitation to lunch on Friday so he could make further apology to Kana as well. And Ryuutarou and Mahiro had already made arrangements for a lunch with Sugizo and Ryuutarou for tomorrow so the alpha could make his own amends and actually meet Kana more properly.

And then there was the quiet offer from Imai-dono to consider, but that was something he absolutely didn't have the energy to be considering properly just then.

“Kouki....”

Kouki looked up, a little surprised to see Mitsuki standing in his doorway. Glancing down to be sure Kana was actually asleep, he settled the blankets around his omega more securely and then went to see what his friend wanted.

“Sorry, didn't mean to take you away from him,” Mitsuki said with an apologetic smile. “How is he?”

“Tired, but I'm sure that's no surprise,” he replied, shrugging casually. “His debut was going to be exhausting even without Uchida-san talking out his ass.”

“All right, well, I just wanted to check on you two, but if he's asleep already, it's fine. I'll see you at breakfast? Or, well, when you come in from your jog, more likely.”

“Working all weekend?”

“Oh yeah, but it's fine. Stop worrying about me and Maru, we're fine. Worry about Kana-kun.”

“You know, if you want to bring Ri-chan over.....”

“After the blast the girls had last weekend with Juju's parents? I may never see my daughter again,” the surgeon said with a laugh.

“I just meant....”

“We'll think about it,” Mitsuki said, clapping Kouki's shoulder and squeezing. “Relax, will you? Uchida-san's an asshole, everyone knows it. Plus he was drunk and everyone knows that, too. It's going to be fine.”

Kouki made the appropriate noises, but in his heart he didn't really believe it. There were too many Uchidas in the world. Drunk or not, the words were out there now. And once spoken, words had a habit of taking on a life of their own.

Chapter End Notes

as Kana himself says, the 5-kamon black kimono he and several of the other alphas
sport in this chapter are overly formal for an art opening, but Mahiro insisted. The kurotomesode Mahi and Naoto wear are also highly formal, with Ryutarou's irotomesode only one step down from them in formality. The patterns mentioned are all considered symbolic of January.

The people only mentioned (like Sakurai-dono) but not actually introduced to Kana won't be added to the appendix until they have a more substantial appearance.
Moodswings

Chapter Notes

starts out heavy, with a flashback from the night of the accident and Kana kinda
swings all over the place from there. And we finally get more of an explanation into
forced bites and reality versus perceptions.

They had gone out to dinner late, the four of them. It hadn't been easy, being out with Atsushi,
watching him flirt with their waitress in front of him, and having to act like it meant nothing to him.
After all, this was the way it always went. Even when it was just the two of them somewhere,
Atsushi would treat him like the baby brother everyone else saw him as unless they were
completely alone. His mate insisted it was necessary - and a part of him even agreed - but watching
the way he flirted with the waitress (a beta woman with huge breast implants) had left Kana
feeling unsettled.

“You don't have to look like a kicked puppy, Kacchan,” Chamu whispered as they walked behind
their older brothers. “You know he doesn't mean anything by it. You two are meant for each other,
aniki knows that. But he's still an alpha and it's not like you're old enough yet to be with him like
that.”

A part of him wanted to argue, but Atsushi insisted that they couldn't tell anyone, not even Chamu.
And this was exactly why; because even his best friend thought of him as just a child still. No one
would accept that he was a grown up now, that he was ready and able to be Atsushi's proper mate.
So he kept it secret, used the soaps his mate got him, went to school every day like everything was
the same as before their mating. But as soon as he was out of high school....

“Come on, you two, or the crepe shop is going to be closed before we even get there!”

“Isn't that on the opposite side of town?” Chamu asked, incredulous.

“So we'll drive. It'll be fine. Come on, get in already!”

Chamu was still clearly, to Kana's nose anyway, skeptical and Kana couldn't say he blamed him.
But he knew better than most how Atsushi drove and with his mate getting behind the wheel.... He
glanced down at his watch and nodded. It'd be close, they would probably be the last customers of
the night, even, but they would make it just in time. He already knew exactly which flavor he was
going to get.

The radio happily chirped a syrupy pop song while Hiro and Atsushi took turns mocking both it
and the girls singing it. Chamu complained, but no one actually moved to change the station. Kana
leaned into Chamu's side in the back seat, suddenly tired.

“Are you even going to be up for crepes, Kacchan?” his best friend teased.

“For blueberry cheesecake? Always, silly!” he said, grinning up at his friend.

And then it happened. Swearing. Wild swerving. Screeching breaks and shouts and the terrible
sound of metal striking concrete. The world was flames and Kana couldn't breathe.
With a sharp gasp, Kana flailed awake, the memory of burning still strong in his nose. His whole body ached, but something was pinning him down. And then he realized it was Kouki, his golden angel, holding him close and stroking his hair. With a broken sob, he pulled himself even closer, but the pain was still so raw it burned him all over.

“Shh, I'm here, love, it's okay.”

He wanted to argue, to tell him no, nothing was okay, but all he could do was shudder and sob and cling. And yet it was enough, Kouki humming softly as he held him. Kana could have sworn he could feel Kouki pouring his love into him, a warmth that steadily filled his chest. True or not, the visualization helped, the aches slowly seeping away and taking the heavy sobs with them, leaving him limp and exhausted.

“I think I caught a piece of it that time. It was the night of the accident, right?” Kouki murmured, still holding him.

“Y-yeah,” Kana said, sniffling. “It all happened so fast. I ... I don't ... it should have been me that died that night, not Hiro-nii.”

“Shh, don't say that, Kacchan,” Kouki said, kissing his forehead. “It was a terrible thing, but it was an accident. No one should have died that night.”

“Atsu-nii always drove on the edge,” Kana said, shaking his head. “It should've been me next to him, though. But they wouldn't ... we were all out together, baby brothers always go in the back.”

He swallowed hard against an urge to be sick. It should have been him in the front seat. If Atsu-nii hadn't insisted on keeping their mating a secret, it would have been him in the front seat. Maybe nothing else would have changed, but at least Hiro would have still been alive. His brilliant brother who'd had so much to give to the world, who had been headed for great things. The world could have used Hiro. Kana had nothing he could offer in his brother's place, he wasn't smart enough to be a lawyer or a social worker. It should have been him in the front seat that night. It wasn't fair that the world had lost Hiro over something so stupid.

“What happened?”

“I don't really ... I was half asleep in the back seat, leaning against Chamu. The memories aren't that clear, you know? There was a lot of swearing and fishtailing and then ... I don't know, it's like there's this hole in my memory,” Kana mumbled.

“That's probably from the mate bond breaking,” Kouki said softly, stroking his hair. “Especially with it snapping that violently. Your father said Atsushi was killed instantly.”

“That's probably from the mate bond breaking,” Kouki said softly, stroking his hair. “Especially with it snapping that violently. Your father said Atsushi was killed instantly.”

“I ... I guess,” Kana mumbled. “I always thought it was just.... I mean I'd ...,,” but the words wouldn't come, tears and soft sobs taking their place. Kouki's fingers carded through his hair some more and Kana pressed himself even closer. His alpha didn't say anything else, just held him and let him cry. It didn't make anything better, but he clung to that comfort all the same. It wouldn't last, it couldn't, but at least for now he still had this. At least for a little while, he had the love of an angel all to himself.

~*~*~

Kouki glanced up from his cooking at the scent of his omega coming over to the breakfast bar. He couldn't say he was terribly surprised to see his soulmate looking less than well rested. The art
opening had taken a lot out of the teenager and the broken night's sleep hadn't helped. Still, he was more than a little surprised at the sour look that crossed Kana's face when Mahiro passed him a mug of coffee. Had he missed something between the two omegas?

"Shouldn't you be at home with your daughter? I'm not a little kid, you know," Kana muttered.

"No, you're an ignorant little shit who doesn't know the first thing about how to behave in high society," Mahiro snapped back and that was genuine anger Kouki was scenting. He had definitely missed something last night.

"Oh, well, excuse me for being raised by middle-class betas, I'm sure," Kana snarled, sliding down from his bar stool. "I'm not hungry."

"You get your ass back up on that stool and eat the breakfast Kou-kun is making for you," Mahiro said, the anger flaring even more in his scent. "Being a beta-raised farm boy excuses you for now, but if you think I'm going to let you continue being so ignorant and tarnishing all of our reputations...."

"Maru," he said quietly, setting Kana's breakfast at his usual place.

"No one's thought to ask the right questions yet, but what do you think the old guard like Hayashi-sama are going to say when they find out Kana-kun is living here with you?"

"I'm not landed gentry, Maru, my grandfather is new money, remember? What difference does it make if he's not a virgin? How many teenaged boys do you know who make it through high school without having sex even once?"

"You'd be surprised. And that's not the point. Of course it's not necessary to preserve his honor, but like I'm going to give your grandfather any room to try to invalidate your bonding!"

"If Kouki bites me -.

"Not until you're twenty," Kouki interrupted. "We agreed, remember?"

"No, YOU agreed," Kana countered, anger spiking in his scent now, too. "You and my parents decided and I went along with it. And you all agreed based on me being a virgin, which I'm not, so why bother waiting now? I'm eighteen, that makes me old enough to legally have a sexual relationship with you, so tell me again why we need to wait?!!?"

"In case you've forgotten, love," Kouki said, frustrated to hear the annoyance in his own voice, "your doctor says you aren't well enough for that sort of activity. And if you think I'm going to ignore Sensei's professional advice just because you're afraid of my grandfather...."

"And this sort of ignorance is exactly why I'm still here. That and, in case you forgot, you still can't let Kou-kun help you into a bath without freezing up on him and needing him to come get me. If you weren't you, Sensei would have ordered daily check-ins from a nursing assistant. Instead, you get me," Mahiro said, crossing his arms over his chest and jutting his chin up in challenge. "Now get your ass back up on that stool and eat."

"Maru...."

"You can't cover for him and protect him forever, Kou-kun," Mahiro interrupted with a glower. "We have that lunch with Sugihara-kun and Tarou-kun today, I will not have him embarrassing all of us by acting like a petulant child and losing us Sugihara's support!!"
Kouki frowned at the two omegas. Maybe he had been reading them all wrong. Maybe the trouble wasn't something that had happened between them after all.

“Sugihara-dono goes where Hayashi-dono goes,” Kouki said quietly, picking up his own mug of coffee. “That's not about to change any time soon and Hayashi-dono both support us.”

“You really think that influence only flows in one direction between those two?” Mahiro countered, snorting. “Don't be so naive. Sugihara-kun may be Yoshi-tan's junior by age and social rank, but you know as well as I do that behind closed doors they're as equals.”

“Why is last night suddenly my fault when they were the ones in the wrong?!” Kana demanded with another petulant pout. “I'm not the idiot who called Sugihara-sama a half-breed to his face!”

“If you know what's good for you, that's the last time you'll let that word and Sugihara-kun's name cross your lips in the same sentence,” Mahiro snarled and then the tiny omega was storming out of the room, out onto Kouki's terrace.

“Well I didn't,” Kana huffed, poking at his breakfast.

“Don't tell me you don't know how derogatory it is to call someone a *haafu*, even behind his back,” Kouki said quietly, watching his soulmate's shoulders slump inwards.

“I know,” Kana sighed. “Hisa-kun ... his grandfather was ethnic Korean, so it wasn't even like he himself was half, it was his mother who was half Korean, half Japanese. But it was close enough. No one said anything to his face about it until after Fujisaki-san outed him to the school for being an omega. It's one of the reasons he got pulled. The teachers came down hard on anyone they heard calling him that, but....”

“Sugizo-san is even less than your school friend - it was his grandfather who was half German - but for some ethnopupists, any portion is enough. And no amount of love between two people is enough to make the word any less of a slur. Hayashi-dono knows that, but his temper isn't any better than Maru's. It's one of the ways the two needle each other in public, it keeps people thinking they're actually rivals instead of allies and lovers.”

“L-lovers?”

“For as long as I've known them, yes. It's one of the less well kept secrets in Tokyo's high society,” Kouki said with a nod, sipping his coffee.

“But ... Hayashi-sama's wife ... and Sugihara-sama's mate....”

“Oh Yoshiki-san is completely devoted to his wife. And Ryuutarou-kun has Sugizo-san wrapped around his little finger even worse than Maru does Sensei,” he said with a grin. “I don't claim any expertise on the details of their relationships, love, only that the two couples are quite open with each other. To the point where, when Ryuutarou-kun was pregnant with Luna-chan, the more salacious tabloids were speculating that he was pregnant with Yoshiki-san's child.”

Kana fell silent and Kouki could practically see him trying to digest this new information. It was a struggle for him, the blond could see that, and he felt another tinge of regret for his soulmate, that he had been raised in such a repressive environment. Not that such polyamory was considered common or even normal - hence the rumor-mongering - but then betas had a bad habit of labeling most of the ways alphas and omegas arranged their families as abnormal and wrong. As if the feelings of the actual people involved were less important than the optics of their arrangements.

“Do you ... would you....”
“You are all the love I need, Kacchan,” Kouki said softly, leaning across the bar to kiss his forehead. But he could tell the answer didn't completely satisfy his soulmate. Until Kana actually gave voice to a specific question, though, it was the best he could do.

“... about Mahi-nii...,” Kana started, though his omega couldn't seem to find any further words than that. Kouki sighed as he came around the breakfast bar, taking the stool next to his soulmate.

“Some would say it would be better for you to move in with him and Sensei, but ... I couldn't do that to you, to us,” he confessed softly, slipping an arm around Kana's waist. “For propriety's sake, it would be seen as inappropriate for us to be living together, alone, when we aren't yet mated. It's an old-fashioned way of looking at things, but then my grandfather is an old-fashioned alpha. And he's not alone. Those who think like him ... there are too many of them for us to just ignore them out of hand, love. Appearances are important, sometimes more important than reality. Maru stays, at least for now.”

“Hey, um, I know eavesdropping is bad, but you guys were being kinda loud and then I didn't really want to get in the middle of it. And okay, I'll admit, I don't really know much about how any of this upper caste stuff works and being an alpha I'm probably not qualified to be his chaperone either, but I am from his guardian clan, so, you know, if it would help.... I don't know, I just ... I need to be able to help, you know?”

Kana twitched in Kouki's arms, flinching away either from Hayato's stream of words or the alpha-ness of him, Kouki couldn't be sure which. His omega's reactions to alphas (other than himself) had been all over the place lately, though everyone else seemed to think it was within the bounds of normal. Between his ongoing healing, normal teenaged hormones, and all the stresses of having his life turned completely upside down, perhaps they were right.

“Senpai....”

“There should still be coffee left, help yourself,” Kouki said, nodding towards the kitchen.

“Thanks,” the red-haired alpha said, nodding and bouncing into the kitchen. Kouki had to smile at the younger alpha's energy ... and the way his own soulmate quietly groaned, as if that energy was an affront to his sensibilities. Someone was clearly having a rough morning.

“... about what I said before,” Hayato said when he finally settled with his coffee and a bowl of egg and rice.

“We can ask Maru, but I can't see where having another unmated alpha around is really going to help,” Kouki said, shaking his head. He hated to rain on the younger alpha's enthusiasm, but he had to be realistic. They weren't really in a strong position, especially if someone from the old school wanted to make a fuss. He refused to force Kana away from him, but that left him with limited options.

“What unmated alpha?” Mahiro asked and Kouki frowned at the way he felt Kana stiffening in his arms.

“Me unmated alpha,” Hayato chirped, flashing another brilliant grin. “I mean, I'm pretty sure I could get Tousan to officially make me Kana-kun's assigned guardian if you guys think it'll be helpful. Or whatever you think is best, really. I don't want to make things any harder on Kana-kun than they already are, so anything I can do to help, just say the word.”

“You're a bit young for that sort of assignment,” Mahiro said, frowning up at Hayato thoughtfully. “We'd have to bed you down in the office, but then as far as anyone knows, Kacchan's sleeping in
the guest room with me, so that would actually work out perfectly....”

“But the New Year's party....” Kana mumbled.

“First, you were obviously sick and the master bath was the logical place for you to have your soak. And you were never left alone with Kouki at any time during the party. Second, the only ones who could say with certainty that you were even in the master bedroom at any point are me, two other omegas I would trust with my life, and our mates. And we're already all in this together and not going to tell anyone anything they don't need to know about your personal life.”

“I don't understand this at all,” Kana grumbled, poking at his breakfast.

“Appearances matter, especially to people like my grandfather,” Kouki repeated softly, hugging Kana close. “As long as Mahiro appears to be acting as your chaperone....”

“I thought you said you weren't my chaperone,” Kana countered, frowning at the smaller omega. “That's what you said to Hayato-senpai, that you were my sponsor, not my chaperone.”

“No, I said less of a chaperone and more of a sponsor. You're not a virgin, Kacchan, the rules are different,” Mahiro said, his tone softening as he spoke. “A chaperone's job, in part, is to preserve the so-called purity of the omega,” he continued, rolling his eyes. “It's archaic and ridiculous, especially since Kou-kun isn't, as he said, landed gentry. He doesn't have a clan name or a clan estate to pass onto his heirs, so that part isn't as important. And when it comes to integrating you into our social world, sponsor is the more accurate term. But for the sake of crusty old alphas like Kou-kun's grandfather, I'm doing the job of both.”

“I still don't see why it matters,” Kana mumbled. “I mean, okay, I get it, I'm not well enough for a mating right now, but when I'm better ... I mean, all he has to do is bite me, right? So what if we don't follow all their rules before that? What are they going to do, kill me?”

“Don't be obtuse,” Mahiro said, rolling his eyes. “I already told you, his grandfather can't make you disappear into the night without having to explain to the rest of us now. But that doesn't mean that he can't make appeals to have your mating made secondary. Shove his nose in it hard enough and he just might try appealing to have the bite removed!”

“Wh-what? But ... but that's ... mating isn't ... when an alpha bites an omega, it's for life, everyone knows that!” Kana sputtered.

“If you're so certain of that, then tell me this: why were you keeping your mating with Atsushi a secret? After all, if no one could do anything about it, why bother, right?” Mahiro countered and Kouki winced. This was really not the best time for this and absolutely not the way he would have wanted to start this conversation, but getting Mahiro stopped was impossible now that he had gotten started.

“No one was going to accept that I wanted it,” Kana huffed, arms crossing over his chest. “The police would've taken Atsu-nii away from me, charged him with force-biting a minor. Why would I put myself through that?”

“You don't even know what 'that' is!” Mahiro shouted back, throwing his arms up in the air.

“You know so much, why don't you just tell me!” Kana snapped back.

“Guys,” Kouki started, but it was too late.

“Hayato-kun, you're his guardian now,” Mahiro interrupted. “You tell him. You tell this spoiled
child what it is your family was *supposed* to have done!"

Panic flooded the room as Hayato babbled nonsense and Kana turned to Kouki, fear dark in his eyes. Kouki forced himself to take a deep breath, then lifted his omega into his lap and kissed his forehead. And then he turned and glared at Mahiro.

“Maru, enough. You're scaring Kacchan and dammit, I have to get to work if I'm going to meet you guys for lunch. Kacchan, please, can you just trust us that you need a chaperone? For now?”

“But....”

“I promise you, I will do whatever it takes to keep you with me, no matter what my grandfather thinks or says. You will never be second best to me,” he said, pressing another kiss to his forehead. “But I really do need to go. If you guys can continue this conversation without me, fine, but if you could wait until tonight, it might be better, yeah?”

The air between the two omegas was still uneasy and Kouki was almost glad when Hikaru came bouncing in with a cheerful 'tadaima’, completely unaware of what he was interrupting.

“I'm going out,” Mahiro said abruptly, stalking off to the genkan in a huff and leaving an obviously confused Hikaru in his wake.

“... I missed something again....”

A sigh and Kouki eased Kana off his lap as he got to his feet. “Baby, I don't know what's gotten between you and Maru,” he said, leaning down to brush a brief kiss to his lips. “Whatever it is, try to mend it? We need him. You need him. If it's just him being him ... fine, then it'll pass, but if something actually happened....”

Kana shook his head, stepping in close and clinging to Kouki with a helpless whimper. It tore at his heart, prodded at his alpha instincts, and he wanted more than anything to be able to just stay home. But it wasn't an option.

“I've got to go, love,” he said softly. “But I'll see you at lunch, okay?”

Another whimper and then Kana was rushing away from him. He felt his heart breaking again, his instincts howling at him to go after his omega, to comfort him properly, but he knew he couldn't. The mess with Aoki wasn't going to go away on its own and Kana's debut hadn't actually helped. Not that he regretted it for one instant, but....

“Hikachu....”

“Mm, I'll get to the bottom of it, don't worry, Blondie. Go, deal with your work shit.”

His heart felt heavy as he left his home. He just hoped Hikaru could do what he couldn't.

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Hayato felt distinctly uncomfortable, witnessing the argument unfolding before him. And then Mahiro had tried to suck him into it and he had never been so relieved to have lost all ability to speak the Japanese language. When Kana ran from the room crying, he didn't know what to do. The alpha in him wanted to go after Kana, to comfort and protect him. The friend in him wanted Kouki to do those things. And the trainee guardian in him desperately wished one of his older brothers was there to tell him what to do.
And then it was just him and Hikaru and his fingers itched to call one of his older brothers for advice.

“Soooo...”

Hayato twitched at the way the older man elongated that one word into a dozen questions. And then he was inwardly smacking himself. This was no way for him to be acting, like some guilty kid. Sure, he was only nineteen, only just beginning to learn about his duties and responsibilities as a Higuchi clan member, but that was no excuse for acting like a total idiot.

“Look, just bottom-line it for me? Cuz Kacchan probably shouldn’t be alone right now,” Hikaru said, folding his arms over his chest, almost as if he thought this was somehow Hayato's fault. Oh god. Ok, no, he definitely had to fix that, now.

“Right ... right.... I don't know what happened between Kacchan and Kurosaki-sama, but I guess they're fighting over everything right now, which means it's something else entirely. The fact that Kacchan doesn't know anything about how upper caste matings work is just a convenient excuse, you know? But you should probably get it more from him. I'll just ... I gotta make some calls anyway?”

“Fair 'nough,” Hikaru said, nodding and then following Kana's trail into the master bedroom. Taking his coffee, Hayato moved himself to one of the lounge couches and sat down heavily. He needed to call his father, but he didn't really know where to even begin with that conversation, so he messaged his brother Yutaka instead. Whose immediate advice was to call their eldest brother instead. Hayato dithered for several minutes before finally making the call.

“Moshi moshi.”

“Aniue, it's Hayato. Have you got a few? It's ... it's kind of important, but if you're busy....”

He could hear shuffling in the background and the sounds of his brother's lathes. And then the background noise dropped to almost nothing.

“What's on your mind, little brother?”

“It's Kana-kun. I ... his chaperone wants me named as his guardian, if that's possible. I don't even know how to start that conversation with Otousan, though.”

“Chaperone? Since when does our little Kacchan have a chaperone?? I think you need to start from the beginning, baby brother.”

So he did, taking a deep breath before he started from the day Kana had first met Morihito Kouki. Takashi just let him talk, making little humming noises now and then to acknowledge that he was still listening as Hayato explained about Kouki's status among the Tokyo social elite and the grandfather who didn't approve and Kana's debut as Kouki's betrothed. And when he was done, he wasn't quite sure what to say next.

“I'll do it.”

“What?”

“I'll talk to Otousan. Kurosaki-san is probably right to suggest it, if the goal is to keep the elder Morihito-san from interfering. I'll tell Otousan the request originated with him. He's right, you're young for the job, but you're also available and already there. Send me Kurosaki-san’s contact information and I'll have the contract sent to him later today. Might even be able to post-date it to
“Thank you! Thank you, thank you, thank you,” he babbled, his relief at getting out of that conversation with their father making him a little giddy.

“You might not thank me when this is all said and done,” his brother said with a low chuckle. “I'll send Yuta down with Chamu-kun tomorrow then. And I'll be down myself... some time next week.”

“... why?”

“Would you rather have Otousan checking on you?”

Hayato rolled that thought around a moment. And then realized that surprise visits from his father would not be good for Kana's mental health right now. Just the threat of them would be bad, never mind his father actually showing up on the doorstep unannounced, expecting to be allowed to inspect their living arrangements. Expecting to see evidence that Kana was in fact living with and yet appropriately separate from Kouki.

“Oh, yeah, no, you're right. Thank you, aniue. I'll get you Kurosaki-sama's information as soon as he's back.”

Hanging up, he looked up and almost leaped out of his skin with a girlish yelp of surprise.

“What do you need my information for and who are you sending it to?” Kurosaki Mahiro said, scowling at him with arms crossed hard over his chest. For someone so small, he made for a terrifying sight just then.

“Ah! Kurosaki-sama! Aniue is going to talk to Otousan, he said he'll make the arrangements and send you the contract later today. If... if that's okay, I mean. And then Yuta-nii will be down this weekend just to confirm and pick up our family's copy of the signed contract. And aniue will be doing the random check-ins instead of Otousan. If... if all of that's all right with you, that is...”

To his surprise, Mahiro abruptly deflated and sank to the floor, rubbing his temple with one hand. Not sure what to think, Hayato bit his lip to keep from babbling even more. Maybe... if he could think how to word the question without babbling, maybe now he could find out why Mahiro and Kana were practically at each other's throats?

“Did... did something happen last night at the opening?” he asked quietly.

“You could say that,” Mahiro muttered, frowning up at him. “Give me your phone, I'll give you my contact info.”

“Ah, actually....” Unlocking his phone, Hayato started a message for Takashi, then passed the phone to Kurosaki. “You can probably write up the request better than I could. Or take the info from my phone to message him from yours? I don’t know, whichever you think would be better,” he explained, resisting the urge to slap himself when he realized he was babbling again. Well it was, apparently, what he did best. Kurosaki only nodded, the omega seeming to withdraw into himself as silence sprang up between them. As much as Hayato wanted to pursue the matter of whatever had happened at the gallery, he wasn’t going to interrupt while the other was doing something more important than his curiosity. Instead he waited, trying not to stare at Kana’s chaperone while he did so. So far, Kurosaki was exactly what he might have expected from an upper caste omega - poised, confident, commanding, and elegant. Little wonder Kana felt so out of sorts, considering his friend didn’t think of himself as any of those things. Then again, that probably just made Kurosaki the perfect person to teach him.
“You can stop staring, you know,” Kurosaki said eventually, handing Hayato his phone without looking up from his own. The embarrassment was quite strong as he took it back, stammering incoherently for a moment. And then the older man grinned up at him, pure mischief twinkling in his dark eyes.

“Formal request submitted. It's not entirely official yet, but close enough: you are Kobayashi Kana's assigned alpha guard, to stay here with me, until circumstances no longer require. You will escort Kobayashi-kun on all outings and appointments, whether he likes it or not. Kurosaki will cover a part of your weekly salary, Morihito will cover the rest. Your brother Yutaka-san will bring down more of your things with him this weekend. Takashi-san will oversee this contract in lieu of your father, due to the travel requirement. I have been assured that, despite your youth, you will act with proper discretion while out with us.”

Hayato sat back, struck just a little dumb by how quickly things had come together. This was....

“I will do my best to serve with honor,” he said humbly, bowing low.

“I'm sure you'll do fine,” Kurosaki said, but there was an underlying ... something in his scent that had Hayato worried.

“Last night didn't go well, did it,” he said quietly.

“Kacchan did fine,” Kurosaki said, shaking his head. “He's young and his stamina isn't where I would have preferred it for his debut, but circumstances got away from us. Among other things.”

Hayato bit his tongue to keep from asking more. And yet the question hung there anyway.

“I didn't get to introduce him to everyone I had wanted before that ass Uchida started shooting off his mouth and we had to leave,” the omega grumbled in response to the unspoken words. “That one's never been a fan of Kou-kun anyway, but now he thinks he has another weapon he can use against him.”

“... the fact that Morihito-sama's betrothed is so young?”

“A male omega half Kou-kun's age? Oh the betas are just eating that one up and getting each other all flaming mad about it. As if it's any of their business. As if Kou-kun publically being anything other than completely straight makes him less effective at his job. The Aoki scandal isn't helping, as far as that goes, never mind the two things have nothing to do with each other. Kacchan's ignorance is going to make things even worse.”

“Kacchan's a quick study, especially when he knows what's on the line.”

“We'll see,” Kurosaki huffed. “I'm not always the most patient teacher. And right now, I have a lot of calls to make, so if you'll excuse me....”

Hayato wanted to know more, but instead he just bowed and watched the man disappear into Kouki's home office. Sounded rather like he could stand to do some research and reading of his own.

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Hikaru wasn't too surprised to find Kana flung face down on Kouki's bed, though it worried him a bit. Then again, when it came to Kana, just about everything worried him these days. His friend was so emotionally fragile and while Hayato hadn't said so, Hikaru couldn't help thinking the problem was something that had happened at the opening. Choking off a sigh, he settled on the
edge of the bed and rested a hand on Kana's back.

“Hey Kacchan....”

His friend flinched first, then abruptly sat up and flung himself at him, clinging close as he sobbed. Still feeling more than a little lost, Hikaru did his best to offer his friend comfort, waiting patiently for Kana's tears to subside.

“What happened, Kacchan?” he asked when his friend finally slumped against him in weak sniffles.

“I ... I don't know. Mahi-nii's been angry all morning, but he won't say what I supposedly did wrong. He just ... it's not fair.”

“Did something happen at the opening last night?”

“No? Yes? I don't know?” Kana mumbled, rubbing at one cheek. “Some beta was apparently making trouble. I don't know what was said, Kou wouldn't talk about it, but we came home right after the police left. I don't know, by then I was just so tired....”

Hikaru nodded with a thoughtful hum. The not knowing on Kana's part wasn't really a surprise, but at the same time, he was pretty sure that it was making things worse.

“After a night like that, sounds like you could use a day just hanging out with me and my friends. What do you say? I know Toya-kun would be thrilled to meet you. And Ibu and Zukki. Not sure who all would be available today, but I could make some calls and –.”

“Can't today,” Kana said, shaking his head. “Mahi-nii's already got lunch plans for me.”

“That's fine, Zukki and Ryouga wouldn't be available until after lunch anyway,” Hikaru said, but the more he thought about it, the more he was noticing just how utterly worn out Kana smelled. “Actually, I've got a better idea. How about I set up something for this weekend? Saturday morning, after my shift, we can all meet up at someone's house and just sit around playing video games and eating junk food and everyone can just hang out getting to know each other, no pressure, okay?”

Hikaru could smell Kana's hesitation, he could even guess some of what was behind it, but that just made him even more certain that this was exactly what his friend needed. A day hanging around with guys closer to his own age. If he set it up for Saturday, Chamu would be available, too, so maybe they wouldn't have to bring Mahiro along with them? He liked the older omega well enough, most of the time, but he could tell that Kana needed a break from all the expectations being put on him. And this way he could be sure everyone understood that Kana was still in recovery and not to push.

“I ... I guess that would be okay,” Kana finally admitted. “Chamu-kun's invited, too, right?”

“Of course. We can even bring along Hayato-san if he's still here then. Ruiza-kun would like that, not being the only alpha in our group for a change.”

“There's an alpha in the group?”

“Why are you looking at me like that's weird? Hayato-kun's an alpha and you say you've been friends with him for most of your life,” Hikaru countered, grinning. “Toya's omega like me, Ruiza's alpha, everyone else is beta. Na-chan's the youngest, he's only twenty-one. Well, I guess now you and Chamu-kun'll be the youngest, but I'm sure it'll be fine. I swear Zukki isn't mentally any older
than fifteen some days anyway.”

He could tell that Kana was still nervous and wary, but Hikaru wasn't going to let that stop him from looking after his friend. Kana needed this, he was going to make it happen. But first, he needed to take care of some more immediate needs. Like making sure Kana could actually make it to the weekend in one piece.

“Have you had breakfast?”

“Yeah. Well ... some. I ... I wasn't really that hungry.”

“Ok, how about a bath then? If you have to go out later, might help to pamper yourself a bit first. Come on, I'll help.”

“You ... you don't have to do that,” Kana mumbled, turning redder than a tomato as he stammered.

“Maybe not, but it's not about that, silly. I want to help. That's what friends do, ne? I don't mind, you look like you could do with a good bit of pampering. And we can talk about whatever you want if it'll help. Last night or your friend Hayato or whatever you want to talk about.”

Kana huffed quietly as he rolled off the bed, but Hikaru was pretty sure he caught a hint of a smile.

“Didn't you get enough of Hayato-senpai talking about himself last night while we were gone?”

“I went home right after you guys left, actually,” he said, laughing as he followed the younger omega into the master bathroom. “So come on, tell me about the good stuff. Was the art opening really weird? Or was everybody all busy being pretentious pricks, trying to make everything into more than what it is? I've heard Saga-sensei's art can get kinda wild.”

“It was ... definitely eclectic,” Kana said, sighing again as he sat down on the shower bench. “Sensei's definitely a ... what's the word ... non-conformist? Most of last night is kind of a blur now, though. I may have to ask Koudai-nii if I can visit the gallery again some time after I'm healed so I can take it in properly.”

Hikaru made a mental note to look up the door charge later. A gallery outing would be just the sort of thing Jun would like. And another excuse to expose Kana to his friends a bit more.

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Kana took a deep breath, smiling a little when Hayato gave his hand a supportive squeeze. He still didn't really understand why his friend was suddenly his escort, but it was better than being out alone with Mahiro. His head was still filled with the babbling of his other best friend, all the reasons why an omega needed to be guarded and protected in the weeks or months between his betrothal and his mating. It all seemed very silly to him, a drawn out process made needlessly complex, especially for the modern era. But he knew better than to think there was anything to be gained from arguing with Hayato or Mahiro about it. Best he could do would be to just suck it up and put up with the nonsense. Not like it was all bad anyway, especially since it meant Hayato was staying with them now. He loved Kouki to death and he genuinely liked Hikaru and Koudai and Junji (and okay, Mahiro, too, mostly), but none of them could compare to having one of his best friends there with him. Chamu would have been better, sure, but Kana would take what he could get.

The restaurant hostess escorted them to a small private table and Kana was both relieved and surprised to see the space was empty other than Kouki. His alpha was a perfect gentleman, kissing his cheek and helping him to settle beside him at the low table. The snarky part of him wanted to
ask if it was really all right for him and Kouki to be sitting next to each other like this, but the rest of him was more interested in leaning against his alpha's side, taking strength from his closeness. Mahiro coughed when the hostess returned with more people, but another omega, Arimura, waved him off.

“Oh let them be, Mahi-kun,” Arimura said with a low chuckle. “They aren't doing anything a beta couple wouldn't be doing in public and you of all people should know what it means for an injured omega to feel his alpha's support.”

Mahiro snorted, but it was obvious to Kana's nose that it was a show, an act for the benefit of anyone hanging around their room while the door was still open. Indeed, as soon as their lunch was delivered and the door firmly closed, Mahiro's seemingly sour attitude dropped away with an audible sigh.

“Sugizo-kun, Tarou-kun, this is Higuchi Hayato-kun, Kacchan's contracted guardian.”

“... Uchida-san's bullshit really got to you, didn't it?” Arimura said, frowning. “No one who matters is going to listen to that bigot's nonsense, you know.”

“More of a ... a happy coincidence?” Kouki said with a rueful smile. “Hayato-kun had come down yesterday on his own to check up on Kacchan, since they've known each other since childhood. Uchida-san's nonsense just gave us another excuse to have one of Kana's friends from home here with him for awhile.”

“Speaking of excuses,” Sugihara started and Kana was surprised to pick up what had to be contrition in the other alpha's scent. “Kana-kun, I apologize again for subjecting you to such an awkward situation last night. I let Yoshi-kun push my buttons too easily, it was unbecoming.”

“It ... I think I would have reacted the same way if it had been me,” Kana murmured and why was he feeling embarrassed??

“No, I put myself into the situation, the fault is mine. Mahiro-kun explained why he wanted to introduce you slowly, one at a time, to the rest of us, but I thought I could ignore that, do things my own way. I'm truly sorry.”

He couldn't help a flicker of uncertainty when Sugihara bowed down to him, glancing up at Kouki and then sidelong at Mahiro for some hint of how to respond. But while they were both giving him encouraging, supportive looks, he wasn't finding any specific answers there. He just wasn't used to people apologizing to him. What was it Hikaru had said? To just be himself? He tried to imagine if it was Chamu saying such things, how he would react to that.

“It's ... I appreciate your honesty,” he mumbled, feeling his cheeks heating yet again. “Next time I'll be better prepared. Apology accepted.”

“I would like to be able to say there won't be a next time,” Sugihara said as he sat back up again, lips twitching, “but Yoshi-kun can't help himself sometimes.”

“Oh please, you both like it. The posturing, the bickering, you two thrive off of the conflict you generate. Particularly the aggressive makeup sex afterwards,” Arimura said and Kana felt himself choking on his own breath. “Oh, was I not supposed to be that blunt?”

“People don't really talk about that sort of thing in Fukui, especially not so openly,” Hayato said, patting Kana's back. “Tokyo makes Fukui feel like a small town, which I guess is fair, since it kinda is, but that means Kacchan hasn't had a lot of experience with these things. Neither have I,
really, but at least I got to hear about it a lot more when I was at school in Shiga-ken. I was the only person in my pod who was from a 'normal' alpha/omega family. If you want to call a run of six alpha kids normal."

“Six alphas? Dear lord, how did your mother manage?”

“Honestly? I have no idea. I'm the youngest and Takashi-nii, he's the eldest and he's twenty-seven years older than I am, so he was quite awhile out of the main house and working his own business by the time I was old enough to even remember anything much about him. But we were kinda always a big extended family, being the core of the guardian clan and everything, so there were always a lot of people around the main house.”

“Twenty-seven? My word,” Arimura said and Kana could tell most of their table was some variation of shocked by this. Considering Kana hadn't ever been to the main house himself, hadn't even thought about it until recently, he couldn't say he could blame them. There was a lot about Hayato's family life that he was only now starting to realize he had never even known.

“Yeah, I was kind of a surprise accident? Yuta-nii was supposed to have been the last, Hahaue wasn't really supposed to have gotten pregnant with him either, and that was seven years before I came along. But I guess she and Otousan got a bit lax, thinking she was too old to get pregnant again and then ... bam, along came me~! And she did kinda spread us out a bit, that probably helped.”

“Six alphas ...,” Sugihara murmured, shaking his head in awe. “Your father must have been full of himself after all that.”

“Actually, from what Aniue says, after Hahaue's third pregnancy came out yet another alpha, Otousan got really quiet and worried that something was wrong with him. I mean, we know it's always a fifty-fifty shot each time, alpha or omega, boy or girl, but he still felt it was weird, you know?”

“Well, it's certainly not what most would consider normal,” Sugihara agreed. “Six alphas....”

“To be fair, until me they were all four years apart, so it wasn't quite as crazy as it probably sounds at first,” Hayato said, half shrugging and obviously bemused. “Four boys, two girls, and every one of us needing to be sent to Shiga-ken for schooling because Fukui-ken doesn't have enough alphas in the whole prefecture anymore to support a high school of its own.”

“If you hadn't already said otherwise, I'd be tempted to think your father was trying to correct that problem single-handedly,” Sugihara said, a low laugh making its way around the table.

“Not to be completely rude,” Arimura said after a moment, “but aren't you a little young for this sort of work? What about school? Even just basic training?”

“Probably,” Hayato agreed with a small nod. “I started some of my training the last year of high school and I was taking the year off from formal schooling this year to figure out what I wanted to do next, but I've still been learning clan duties. But yeah, that's why I was able to come down in the first place. Well, that and I'd just gotten fired. I was actually sort of thinking I should try sitting a university exam down here when Kurosaki-sama made the request.”

“Officially, I made the request before you got fired, Hayato-kun, remember?”

“Oh, um, right. Sorry,” his friend said, turning an interesting shade of pink. “I still kind of want to sit an exam, once I decide which fashion design program I want to try getting into, but with
Kacchan not being well enough right now, it'll probably have to wait for next year.”

“Fashion design, you say?” Sugihara asked, his interest obviously piqued. “Clothing, accessories, or both?”

“Both, really. I've really gotten into street fashion, so I kind of want to be able to do everything, put together entire looks, you know? Clothes, shoes, bags, jewelry, the whole thing. Even if I decide to focus on just one or two later, I want to learn how to do it all.”

“Then you should definitely sit the exam for the Tokyo University of the Arts with this one next year,” Mahiro said, subtly indicating Kana.

“Oh, Kana-kun is looking to attend Geidai as well? It's quite the prestigious school. That's where Koudai-kun and I first met, in fact,” Ryuutarou said, grinning. “Their design school is top notch. Well, all of their departments are superior quality. There's always a lot of competition for their top graduates. Do well and you'll have your pick of employment opportunities.”

“I should probably be warning you to stay away from Hayashi-kun,” Sugihara added with a wry grin, “but as much as the man is a bear to work for or with, he does know how to get the best out of his people. And he gives back as good as they give him.”

“Oh, well, I ... I hadn't thought about it that far yet,” Hayato admitted, visibly flustered. Kana was just glad his friend was keeping everyone's focus. He wasn't really sure he liked the way Mahiro had all but decided for him where he was going to apply to school next year. Especially when a part of him still wasn't convinced that university was even the right choice for him. Not that he could say that to these people, clearly. Or really anyone else in Kouki's social circle, it seemed. How could he make any of them understand what he was feeling when he didn't understand it himself? At least he still had plenty of time to try to figure things out? Hopefully....

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Kana groaned as he pitched forward across the coffee table, wincing when the front edge bit into his stomach. Hayato pulled him back upright almost immediately, a worried look on his face.

“Did you ... no, okay. Um, but what's wrong?”

“I feel like all I do anymore is sleep, eat, and do homework!” Kana muttered, half-heartedly tossing his pen onto the coffee table next to his history textbook. “What's the point?”

“Homework is the price for being a student. They probably gave you a bit extra because you're having to do it all yourself,” Hayato said with a shrug. “But it's just a couple more months, right? And then you'll get a break for a year, have the chance to do some things you want to do instead of just the things you have to do. Well, once you're healed up enough to do the things you want, that is.”

“That reminds me ... Mahi-nii, Hika-kun –.”

“Already told me about his plan for Saturday,” Mahiro interrupted. But, to Kana's surprise, the omega was actually grinning as he spoke. “It's fine, I'm sure you and Hayato-kun will fit in with his friends better than you do with mine and Kou-kun's.”

Even without knowing exactly why, Kana felt himself flaring red in shame. Kouki's friends had been so generous and accepting of him and here he was being a selfish, whiny brat, complaining about something as trivial as having to do his homework. He really was completely terrible.
“I’m sure he didn't mean it like that, Kacchan,” Hayato whispered, and he felt his embarrassment and shame, particularly the shame, getting even worse.

“Kacchan, really,” Mahiro scolded softly. “No one ever expected that you wouldn't go out and make friends of your own, friends closer to your own age. Why do you think we want you to go to college so much? So you can meet more people in your own peer group, find your own place. You're only two months older than Sugi-kun's daughter, of course you should have your own circle of friends. Not that we aren't happy to include you, too, of course, but your life is yours. There's so much more to you than just your bond to Kouki.”

“But...,” and yet he couldn't manage to dig up the right words this time, either. A part of him recognized the sense in what Mahiro was saying, but it was hard, a thin voice struggling to be heard against a lifetime of conditioning that said his only real value was in the children he would one day give to his alpha. That his place was as a silent support, the homemaker and mothering figure, never mind that he was terrible at just about everything domestic. Eighteen years of conditioning didn't break easily.

The front door opening wasn't quite enough to disrupt Kana's feelings of shame and disgust with himself, though it made the dropping of a small paper package in front of him a bit less of a shock.

“Hikkun?”

“Takamizawa-sensei said to give that to you, that's all I know about it,” his friend said with a shrug before passing out additional packages. “For Mahiro-sama and Hayato-kun.”

Hayato looked even more surprised than Kana felt, but Mahiro simply nodded and got up with his own package, headed for the guest room, he supposed.

“What...?”

“Dunno. Don't even know how Sensei knew you were here.”

“Well, open it,” Kana coaxed. Hayato sat staring at the package a moment longer, then carefully unwrapped the brown paper. And yet the contents, even once unwrapped, were a mystery to Kana. Dried herbs, pressed cones of what was probably some kind of incense, and a small note card. Picking up the card, Hayato frowned at it a moment, head tilting to one side as he read it.

“Well?”

“He knows my name. Says the incense and teas are to help me adjust to living in Tokyo. What's in yours then?”

Glancing down at his own package with another frown, Kana opened it slowly. Instead of the tea blend he had been half expecting, his held a small container of what looked like white and dark chocolate swirl fudge and two dozen honey sticks in assorted flavors. And no note of explanation.

“Hikkun??”

“He didn't say anything, other than telling me to give them to you,” his friend said with another shrug. “Why, is there something wrong with it?”

“There's no note, no explanation,” Kana said, frowning still. “And the honey sticks aren't marked. How am I supposed to know which flavors they are?”

“Well, I can tell you these ones are peach. See, there's a little peach blossom on the barrel at one
end. And these ones are strawberry, and watermelon, and I'm pretty sure the brown is root beer, just because his chocolate honeys are opaque,” Hikaru explained, grinning.

“But ... why?”

“Why not? I was in to pick up your scrip refills, he still says he's only going to give you two weeks of your pain meds at a time right now, since you live right here and he wants to keep a close eye on how much you're taking at a time.”

“Not that much,” Kana admitted with a faint grimace. To be honest, he probably could have been using more than he had been in the past week, but he hadn't wanted to get carried away. Or worse, addicted.

“Yeah, I noticed,” Hikaru said, frowning a little bit. “I told him and he said to remind you that there's nothing wrong with easing your own suffering. I told him you weren't going to listen to me, though, so he said if you keep being so blockheaded, I should bring you down to the pharmacy with me next time.”

“I'm not being blockheaded!” Kana protested.

“Might be easier to just hand him the pill when his pain scent spikes too high,” Hayato suggested with a half shrug. “You know how betas tend to get about pain being a sign of weakness.”

“Like alphas don't play that exact same card,” Hikaru said, snorting.

“Sure we do, but he was raised by betas, their version of it is what he'd've been raised on,” Hayato agreed, chuckling a little. “I know his dad, all the stiff upper lip and doing it all for himself crap woulda come from Kobayashi-tousan. Not that his mom disagreed with any of it, per se, but she was always more likely to see Kacchan as helpless and needing protecting from everything.”

“... okay, I'll give you that one,” Hikaru conceded. “Really, Kacchan, there's nothing noble or glamorous in trying to hide how much you're hurting. Sensei prescribed you the pills for a reason, you know?”

“But....”

“Here,” Mahiro said, handing him a pill and a bottle of juice. “Take it and then lay down on the couch for a bit. You've been working hard this week, you don't have to push yourself so much.”

“But I have to get all this work done....”

“As you're able. The teachers know you're behind and they know exactly why you're behind. You'll catch up as you're able. And that means taking breaks so you don't make yourself worse. Now take it and lay down.”

As much as a part of him wanted to argue, Kana could recognize how much that inner voice sounded less like him and more like his father. Maybe it was time to admit his father was wrong and his friends were right? It was hard to even consider, but perhaps....

~*~*~

They had managed to go the whole day without talking about forced mating bites. Even after Kouki had gotten back home that evening, Mahiro hadn't brought it up again and Kana had been more than half afraid to mention it himself. Things had finally gotten better with his chaperone and he hadn't wanted to risk making them bad again, especially with as angry as the older omega had
gotten that morning over the subject. At the same time, he still wanted to know what it was that they were keeping from him.

No, that wasn't right. It wasn't that his new friends were hiding the information from him, it was that he had never been taught it in first place, something that they all seemed to consider basic knowledge. Which only made it that much harder for him to ask. So he quietly waited, settling into the bed with a low hum of contentment. At least he could still get time alone with his alpha.

“Someone's feeling good tonight,” Kouki teased as he joined him in their bed. “Good day then?”

“Well ... not terrible, I guess,” he admitted, snuggling up to the alpha. “A lot better now.”

“We may have to stop this if your friend's older brother won't look the other way, you know,” his alpha said softly, curling protective arms around him.

“But ... but I'm still injured and you're my alpha,” Kana said, wibbling a little bit. “Takashi-nii will understand that, surely, won't he?”

“You know him better than I do, love; I haven't even spoken with him directly yet. But by the old rules, this sort of thing is exactly what your Hayato-kun is supposed to be here to prevent.”

“What ... what would happen if your grandfather pushed....”

“It won't happen, love, so don't worry about it,” Kouki insisted, pressing a kiss to his forehead.

“But this morning....”

“... I was half hoping you'd forgotten about that,” Kouki murmured, running fingers through Kana's hair. If that was supposed to be a comfort, it wasn't working.

“Why? What aren't you telling me?” he asked, suddenly worried that he didn't really want to know.

“I just don't want you getting mad at your family or Hayato-kun and his family. He knows now, but I'm sure that was something he was only recently told,” Kouki said softly, still holding him close. “Forced bites still happen sometimes, even though it's been punishable by everything up to the alpha being put to death if the circumstances were judged fitted to that, for centuries. Of course that's an extreme response, rarely used in the modern era, but it is still on the books, so alphas are still taught about it. These days, most forced bites are the result of drunkenness getting the better of the alpha's judgement. In those situations, the solution depends on the specifics of the people involved. Sometimes they just live with it, sometimes the bite is made secondary for one or both partners. In extreme cases, the bite is removed.”

“Without killing? But ... how? Mating bites are for life, everyone knows that!” Kana insisted, but that same dark fear was bubbling in his gut again. At the time, he had thought his life with Atsushi was just the way things were meant to be, but looking back on it, things had very much not been right between them. He wasn't sure he could handle it if Kouki were to tell him now that he had suffered through all of that for nothing.

“I'm not part of a guardian clan, love, so I don't know the details. But yes, when an alpha is scheduled to be executed for high crimes, his or her bite is removed from any claimed omegas first, to shield them from the shock of the alpha's death. I don't know the details of the procedure, only that it requires an older alpha with specialized training. That's one of the reasons the guardian clans still exist, even if they aren't as visible as they once were.”

“But....” but he didn't really even know where to begin. So it had all been for nothing?
“Does it really matter, love?” Kouki asked softly, tilting his chin up to brush a kiss to his forehead, then another on the tip of his nose. “What's done is done, the past cannot be changed. Who was there to tell you or your beta aniki that what you had been told about forced matings wasn't the full truth? Atsushi, who had every reason to keep silent? Yutaka, who had no idea there was any reason to tell you? An alpha teacher who had no idea what was going on in your life at all?”

It wasn't like he could really argue, but at the same time, if Hiro had known about this ... if Hiro had really known about Atsushi mating him and kept silent for fear of making Kana's situation worse because he hadn't known the full truth....

“But why aren't we told about it?”

“I don't make the school rules, love, I don't know. Don't misunderstand, love, the number of forced matings like yours is quite small. Like I said, most of the time, a mate bite of dubious consent is between adults. I really can't remember the last time I heard about a teen being forced bitten, certainly not one as young as you were. It's not like you weren't told anything about mating bites, obviously, perhaps those in charge think what you were told was enough? If you were one of only a handful of omegas in your whole school ... and with bites having no effect on betas... Maybe the school district decided to leave the details up to the parents?”

“My parents never talked about it with me. Dad was always uncomfortable with ... with all of it. He just ... he didn't want to talk about anything that broke this sort of mental illusion he had that I was just the same as a beta. It ... it used to drive aniki nuts. He ... he was getting a bachelor's in social work because of me, then he was going to get a law degree so he could further advocate for omega rights.”

Pain closed his throat and Kana scooted closer as the memories rolled over him. So many times, Hiro and their father had gotten into shouting matches because their father couldn't understand why Kana wasn't more like the other beta boys. They would start yelling, he would hide up in his room, trying not to be a sissy and crying into his pillow anyway. Eventually it would stop, Hiro would come find him, dry his eyes, and take him out for ice cream. Kana came to both hate and love the arguments - he hated all the anger and yelling, but at least afterwards he got to spend time with his brother. He had cherished those moments together and now....

“Chamu-kun said something about thinking reporting his brother would just lead to more suffering on your part, I imagine your brother thought the same,” his soulmate said softly. “I meant to correct him back then, but then the conversation got derailed.”

“When the teachers mentioned it at all, it was a criminal thing. An alpha forcing a mating bite on an underaged omega - and since an underaged omega can't legally consent, all bites of minors are forced - would be arrested, tried, and then sentenced based on the severity of the case. If the omega's over sixteen, it might just be a civil fine. Aggravated bites earned the alpha jail time, but no one ever said anything about what happened to the omega. The closest I got was Mom mumbling about omegas being left to suffer, stuck waiting for the alpha to be released with no way of dealing with heats.”

“... no wonder your brother stayed silent,” Kouki huffed and Kana could scent his soulmate's impotent anger. “What kind of people ... no matter what happens, love, you will always have the right to take heat suppressants, to dump an unexpected heat, to have access to whatever method of birth control you want. In fact, Takamizawa-sensei himself would raise hell if anyone tried to stop you from having access to the medicines you need to be in control of your heats. No matter what happens or what anyone tries to tell you, if you need something and you can't get it from me, go to him and ask. Your body is yours, no one else has the right to tell you what to do with it.”
Kana felt silly for it, but the tears wouldn't stop. Burrowing into his soulmate's chest, he let them come.
Kouki enjoyed the usual Friday banter with Satsuki as they got ready to start their weekly jogging loop, but he couldn't help noticing his friend felt a little ... off. A part of him wanted to let it go, let Satsuki bring it up in his own time, but ... the alpha was his friend. He had, admittedly, been distracted with his own woes over the course of the past week, but he couldn't remember seeing anything negative about Aurora or any of his friend's contracted bands, so it was likely something more personal. Which was both an argument for waiting and one for speaking up, to show the man he cared enough to notice. It was a circular argument going nowhere, he needed to just make a decision already.

"Na, Sacchan, everything okay?"

"I could ask you the same thing," the darker alpha said, frowning sidelong at him. "You haven't said anything about Kana-kun yet this morning, is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

"Last week you kept giving me a hard time about being too hard on myself until I changed the subject," he said, shrugging. "I figured this time I'd spare you the effort?"

"Yeah, I remember," Satsuki drawled, smirking. "Doesn't mean I don't still want to know how things are going, I'm still your friend, lugnut."

"Aa, I know, I just didn't think you'd want to listen to me feeling sorry for myself because nothing's really changed," he confessed, a little abashed.

"Kou-kun, I may not be on your social level, but I'm not blind. I saw the online tabloids speculating about your betrothed."

Kouki couldn't completely contain a grimace at that. The art opening and Kana's debut were supposed to have been both a distraction from the Aoki mess and a chance for him to reassure certain people, in person, that Aoki's actions were absolutely not a reflection of his business ethics. Well, it had certainly become a distraction all right, the tabloids blowing up with all sorts of wildly speculative theories about the child omega - the male child omega - who was now betrothed to the head of the Matsumoto Group. A youngster with no family standing, who hadn't even graduated from high school yet, and yet was not a virgin. The fact that Mahiro had spent the whole opening at Kana's side had lead to some interesting spin as well, even though Kouki's friendship with the Kurosaki clan prince was hardly newsworthy, this many years after their first meeting.

"You know they do that as click-bait, you know the people who matter aren't going to believe that sort of garbage. It's nearly all fringe entertainment press anyway, how do you think I got so much of it in my inbox in the first place?" Satsuki said, stopping and grabbing Kouki's arm to stop him as well. "Hayashi-sama and Sugihara-sama actually met him right? And they're on your side, right?"
“Yeah. Had lunch with Sugizo-san and his mate yesterday and Hayashi-dono are coming over later today.”

“All right, then what can I do to help?”

“I don't know that there is anything to be done. Those vultures love a good sex scandal more than anything, so unless you've got something like that you can leak to them, I don't know of anything else that's likely to distract them right now,” he said, shaking his head. But there was a certain look in Satsuki's eyes just then, a sort of wicked cunning that felt awfully familiar.

“Oh I don't know about that. You'd be surprised the sorts of things I hear and keep under my hat. If you want ... I can make a couple calls. Kana-kun's name will be off the front pages before Sunday.”

“Sacchan....”

“Also, expect a courier at your place Monday afternoon. Gazetto's tour final is February 4th, completely sold out, but I might just have a couple tickets looking for a good home.”

“Sacchan, really....”

“Don't waste your breath arguing. I owe you for talking sense into Kuu-chan and Kana-kun deserves some good things in his life that aren't just you.”

Satsuki wasn't wrong on that point. Hopefully by then Kana's stamina would be recovered enough he could properly enjoy the concert. And by then Hayato would have more than earned the night out himself. It would be good to send the two boys out to that. Although....

“... don't suppose I could talk you into making it three tickets?” he asked

“Probably, but why?” his friend countered, giving him another sidelong frown. “I mean a concert may not be the most traditional romantic date, but I'd think anyone else would feel kind of awkward.”

“With the way the art opening went and with Hayato-kun already being down here, Maru made arrangements to hire him as Kacchan's guardian escort. If there's only two, it's fine, I can send the two of them to the concert without me, meet up with them afterwards....”

“You're taking this betrothal seriously old school,” his friend said, still frowning at him. “All right, three VIP passes, which includes backstage access both before and after the show, so get there early. Kuu-chan and Junji-sensei will probably be there, too, since they're going to announce going major at that show, but keep that under your hat, okay?”

“Thanks, Sacchan, I really appreciate this.”

“Hey, what are friends for, right? You'd do the same for me,” his friend with a shrug and a playful grin. Kouki wasn't going to argue with that.

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Even though he had known since the day before that they were coming, Kana still felt anxious and uncertain with the arrival of the two alphas. He wasn't sure if Hikaru's equal nervousness was making things better or worse.

They hadn't even made it as far as proper introductions when the front door popped open, the scent of a child just barely preceding an excited cry of “Mama!” and a little blur flinging herself at
Mahiro's knees. Laughing, the older omega scooped the child up into his arms and hugged her tight. It was enough to break some of the tension hanging in the air and Kana let out a sigh of relief.

“Sorry we're a little late, she didn't want to put on clothes,” Mitsuki said, weighted down in what seemed like a mountain of bags and things. To Kana's complete surprise, Yoshiki himself stepped in to help the doctor with everything, setting aside bags for later and finding the booster seat that would let the young child sit at the table with the adults.

“Ri-chan, can you say hi to Yashi-oji and Nashi-oba?” Mahiro asked, turning his daughter towards the two alphas. Instantly, the little girl turned shy and tried to hide against Mahiro's chest, much to the amusement of the two alphas. “No? Ok, well, what about Kouki-oji?” he tried, but she still stayed pressed into his chest.

“Well, that's one way to get her to be quiet,” Mitsuki said, laughing and settling into one of the chairs next to his daughter's booster seat. Kana watched in a sort of odd fascination as Mahiro had to coax and cajole his daughter into actually sitting in her own seat before he was able to straighten up and smooth out his shirt again.

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“Shall we try this again? Boys, allow me to introduce Hayashi Yoshiki and Hayashi Naoto, dear friends of mine for a great many years. Yoshi-tan, Nashi, you remember Kacchan, of course, but allow me to introduce Higuchi Hayato-kun, his contracted guardian, and Itoh Hikaru-kun, a friend of Kana's who's graciously agreed to help me since I can't cook worth a damn. Among other things.”

The amusement was impossible to ignore as customary greetings were exchanged. And at the first opportunity, Hikaru bolted into the kitchen, though Hayato was only slightly behind him, the two returning with lunch trays. Kana wanted to help as well, but Mahiro was already pulling him down into a chair.

“Contracted guardian, hmm? You always were one to work fast, Maru-kun, I'll grant you that,” Yoshiki said, nodding and offering a soft thanks for the lunch put in front of him.

“As much as I may have hoped for no one to make a fuss over Kacchan being Kou-kun's betrothed, I never actually believed it would go so easily. I appreciate your support in this, Yoshi-tan, truly.”

“Maru, you may not be my brother's mate, but you are still family, as far as I'm concerned. Whatever Father says about you behind closed doors, he, too, recognizes the importance of the Hayashi-Kurosaki alliance. Besides, the speculation is beyond laughable. Child prostitute indeed,” the alpha scoffed.

“... can we not talk about this?” Mitsuki asked softly, but there was a banked anger in his eyes that suggested he felt the same as Yoshiki. The confused look in the older man's eyes only lasted a moment, just long enough for Mitsuki to jerk his head in the direction of the actual child omega seated next to him.

“Of course, of course, my apologies. But shouldn't Ri-chan be in school right now?”

“Some sort of in-service day, she gets a long weekend this week,” the surgeon explained with a shake of his head. “So of course she wanted to come see Mama, right?”

The little girl blushed and tried to hide against Mahiro's side again, though she kept peeking out at everyone else, too. She really did look like a miniature Mahiro, just without the purple fringe or the piercings. Kana tried to smile at her when she glanced his way, but every time, she went right back
to hiding. At least she seemed to be doing that with everyone.

Perhaps in deference to the presence of little ears, the meal conversation meandered over the various programs that had been on TV last night, with one tangent off into textiles that left Kana baffled on how they had even gotten onto the subject. He hadn't been paying much attention to what Kouki had been watching, more interested in curling into his side and trying, with limited success, to work on his algebra homework, so he didn't have much to contribute. There were enough people around the table, though, that it was hardly a problem, the conversation easily flowing around him. Which was, to be honest, how he preferred it.

Before he knew it, an hour had passed, with both Mitsuki and Kouki making necessary excuses. He followed his alpha to the genkan, wanting, needing a few more moments of Kouki's strength.

“Just a couple more hours, then I'll swing by the station and pick up Chamu-kun and Yutaka-kun. And then I should be home all weekend, okay?”

Kana nodded, clinging to his soulmate for another long moment anyway. The soft laugh, the warm arms that wrapped around him ... he couldn't lose this, he absolutely couldn't.

He probably shouldn't have been surprised to see Hayato waiting for him when he turned around and yet....

“Swear, I'm not creepin' on ya,” Hayato said softly, reaching out to ruffle Kana's hair. “But even with them being trusted friends and this being your home ... I know optics are important. And I might as well make a habit of it now, or I might slip up later and ruin everything.”

“No, I ... I get it,” Kana said, though it wasn't entirely true. He did at least genuinely understand what Hayato was trying to do, even if he still didn't really buy into the whole argument of why it was supposedly necessary. And his friend was right, better to start making it a habit now, so he wouldn't mess it up later.

He couldn't have said why if someone had asked, but Kana was rather surprised to find Yoshiki on the floor playing with Mahiro's daughter when he and Hayato walked back into the great room, Naoto lounging on a couch and watching them over a cup of coffee. Something about the first impression the blond alpha had made, Kana would have thought the man to think playing with a child beneath his dignity. And yet there he was, on the floor sharing crayons and coloring books as if it were the most natural thing in the world. And no sign of either Mahiro or Hikaru. Crap, he was failing at hosting already and he hadn't even been trying.

“It's all right, Kana-kun,” Naoto said and he tried not to flinch at the way his own scent had probably outed his nerves yet again. “Maru-tan and Hikaru-kun are taking care of the dishes. Come have a seat? You've been awfully quiet. And your color's a little off. If we're being too much of an imposition on you, Kana-kun....”

Shit, what was the right answer? On the one hand, he felt like he had been going, going, going all week. On the other hand, his stamina wasn't going to improve if he didn't start pushing himself a little more. If he gave in and let himself be this tired after only having lunch, how was he going to make it through a whole day hanging out with Hikaru's friends?

“Well, to be fair, it's hard for him to get a word in edgewise once someone gets me started on a topic, ne, Kacchan?” Hayato said, grinning widely.

“You're going to have a hard time with the whole seen but not heard aspect, aren't you, Hayato-kun?” Mahiro teased. And then he was pressing a cup of tea into Kana's hands while
simultaneously nudging him towards the couch. “Drink your tea, Kacchan, it'll help.”

“I could do it for a formal event, but for lunch here at home? I didn't think I needed to?” Hayato said, glancing around the room, reminding Kana of a lost puppy.

“You're doing fine,” Naoto said, offering him a reassuring smile. “As you said, this is an informal lunch. And I'm guessing your relationship with Kana-kun goes beyond a formal contract.”

“Yeah, we pretty much grew up together. My brother was....”

Hayato suddenly went quiet, biting his lip hard and ducking his head. Not normal behavior for his friend, though Kana was pretty sure he knew why. A sigh and he sipped his tea; he was going to need if it he was going to explain.

“His next older brother was roommates with my older brother's best friend the first year of alpha school. Yuta-nii and Atsu-nii and Hiro-nii were close friends for ... for most of my life,” Kana explained. “Hayato-senpai and I went to the same grade school for a couple years, spent time together when we could after he started having to go to school in Shiga. And a lot more time together after he finished high school and was back in Fukui all the time.”

“Were. Something happened?”

“Atsu-nii and Hiro-nii died, th-three yea–,” Kana's voice caught, a sudden upwelling of grief choking off his words. Hayato was hugging him and yet it still felt all wrong, the tea cup slipping from his hands. Voices moved around him, but the words weren't making sense. There was a roaring in his ears and he could smell something burning and pain everywhere. Death was so close and he was being pulled away from it. He cried out, struggling weakly against the arms around him. His mate ... his mate was still in the flames. He was supposed to be there, too. He was....

~*~*~

Hikaru stood at the entry to the kitchen, feeling completely helpless as he watched Hayato and Mahiro struggling with a half-crazed Kana. A beat and then Yoshiki was scooping the little girl, Ritsuko, up into his arms and carrying her out of the apartment. Right, why didn't he think of that? And what the hell had happened anyway? He shivered, watching as Hayato finally got a solid enough grip to be able to pick Kana up and carry him away, Mahiro trailing behind in obvious worry. It wasn't until the alpha woman touched his arm that he realized he hadn't been breathing.

“Itoh-san?”

“S-sorry, did you ... sorry,” he mumbled, shaking himself.

“I don't ... are you all right?” she asked, as if changing her mind mid-sentence.

“Y-yeah, I just ... what were you guys talking about?” he asked, frowning in worry.

“How Hayato-kun and Kana-kun knew each other. Was that not an allowed topic?”

Hikaru winced as he realized Kana had to have somehow flashed back to the night of the accident, hard. No wonder he had been so upset.

“I don't ... it's not that easy. Um, you know he and I kinda share some trauma? Only he had other trauma before that, so now it's kinda.... And PTSD isn't one of those things we can't really control, you know? Sometimes he can talk about his brother and it's just a low ebb of sadness. And other times, he's back in the night of the accident. It ... it was pretty bad,” he said, mentally slapping
himself in hopes of shutting off his sudden diarrhea of the mouth. He didn't know this woman at all, it wasn't his place to be sharing Kana's secrets with her, no matter how nice she was being. And yet something about her....

“Maru had said there were things in Kana-kun's past that the tabloids would try to exploit if they could, but nothing so specific. I had no idea....”

“It's not your fault. Most of his flashbacks have been nothing like this, this is the worst I've ever seen him get,” Hikaru said, shaking his head. He couldn't, wouldn't tell her that her being here had probably made it worse, even though it was probably true. He was already picking up enough guilt from her, there was nothing to be gained by making it worse.

“What can I do to help?” she asked quietly, tucking a strand of purple behind her ear. “Did you and Maru-kun get the dishes finished?”

“Eh? Oh, I can finish that, it's no problem,” he said, taking a step back into the kitchen. It wasn't like there was anything else he could do to help Kana, after all. And yet she easily breezed past him, taking up where Mahiro had left off and Hikaru could only go back to drying what was finished, feeling sheepish and yet.... And yet how could he argue with her?

“I'd hate to be a regular cause of this,” she said after a moment. “Obviously Kana-kun is entitled to his own past, his own privacy, but if there are subjects we would be better off avoiding....”

“Ah, I'm ... I'm not really qualified to talk about this sort of thing,” he stammered, a weird feeling tingling in his spine. “I mean that's not really how PTSD works? The accident ... I don't know....”

“Sorry,” Naoto said, turning and offering him a surprisingly gentle smile. “I'm putting you on the spot, I shouldn't do that. Nature, I suppose - I prefer to get out in front of problems, cut them off before they can become problems, you know? But I suppose you're right, that isn't always an option. So how about you tell me more about yourself instead?”

“Oh I'm not anything interesting,” Hikaru said with a shake of his head, hurriedly grabbing another bowl to dry.

“Nonsense! Everyone has a story to tell, everyone's someone important to someone,” she insisted. Again that weird feeling. It had been awhile since an alpha other than his father had said anything like that to him.

“Nah, I'm really not that important. Just the morning baker at the Starbucks a block off Otsuka station. That's how me and Kacchan met, actually. Well, I wasn't our morning baker then, I was just another lowly barista. But we don't have many omegas in our age group living in Otsuka, really, and he was obviously new in town and looking a little overwhelmed, so I figure hey, what the hell. He was still in the shop when I clocked off, so I struck up a conversation. Guess it was fate, cuz Kouki-san had been one of my regulars for ages, not that I knew about the two of them until after the bombing. Up to that point he had just been another male omega who was coming to Otsuka to be with his soulmate and was looking for advice about school and the city. He's a good kid, it's not right, what the universe's done to him.”

Hikaru bit his lip, a little surprised at his own inability to stop babbling once he got started. He glanced sidelong at Naoto, but the woman was just smiling at him, her part in the dishes done. The way she looked at him, he couldn't help blushing again. She really was a severe-looking woman, with her long black hair, her funky piercings and dark makeup, the unrelieved black of her clothes that reminded him of the Harajuku goths, only less neo-Victorian and more solar-anarchist? Certainly a sharp contrast to her husband Yoshiki and his more conservative suit and tie. He
glanced back towards the great room, but there was no sign of either the alpha or Mahiro's young daughter. Should he be asking? But she was so intimidating....

“He'll be back when he's certain it's safe for Ri-chan to be here. It's not the usual job path, going from barista to baker, is it?” she asked, probably trying to coax him into telling her more. But why? He hated that voice of doubt, but now that it had started, he couldn't seem to stop it, wondering why she was bothering. Just to fill the time? Or was there something else on her agenda? Why should she even care?

And dammit, why couldn't he just have a normal interaction with a woman anymore? After all, she was married, it was ridiculous to think that there could be any sort of ulterior motive for her in her questions.

“The way the shop runs, the morning baking shift has to be someone local or else someone who can get to the shop without transit, since the shift starts at 3am. I picked up the training kind of by accident, when our afternoon baker at the time started flaking out. Then about a week ago, the morning baker quit and our shop's manager put me on mornings to fill in until he could get someone else in. Only that first morning things got a bit.... Anyway, he ended up just flat out promoting me to morning baker, six days a week, so now that's pretty much all I do. Go in, get the morning batches done, set up some dough for the afternoon guy, then come over here to help Kurosaki-sama with stuff,” he said with a shrug. It wasn't much of a life, to be sure, but it kept his days busy and his wallet full.

“So essentially working two full-time jobs? Doesn't sound like it leaves much time for a personal life.”

Hikaru shrugged again, his face getting even redder. “I wouldn't put it that way. Kana's my friend, I don't mind helping him. A bunch of us are getting together tomorrow, even!”

“Ah, I only meant an observation,” the alpha woman demurred, “not a criticism. Of course you would put the needs of your friend first.”

Hikaru tried to tell himself that she hadn't meant that as an insult, either, but he couldn't stop himself from going all spikey over it. Muttering an excuse under his breath, he hurried out of the kitchen, out of the apartment entirely. Yeah, that was more like what he was used to feeling around alphas anymore. Kicking at a stray pebble on the sidewalk, he cursed at the universe for giving him a soulmate who had managed to so completely ruin his life with just one meeting.

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Chamu had to admit, taking the train down with Yutaka had definitely been better than making the trip on his own. And since Yutaka was on official business, he'd gotten a companion upgrade that had made the trip even better. Right up until they had gotten off the train and Yutaka tried to load him up with nearly all their luggage.

“Hey! I'm not your personal sherpa, you know!”

“You aren't?” Yutaka teased with feigned innocence. A beat and then the alpha ruffled his hair. “I'll be right back.”

Chamu felt more than a little awkward standing on the platform surrounded by luggage, so it was a relief to see Yutaka hiring a luggage cart. And even more of one when he spotted Kouki waiting for them before they could cross to the local trains.
“Morihito-sama....”

“Please, Yutaka-san. Whatever formalities have been arranged on paper, my preference is for as little disruption as we can manage, yes? I know Kacchan thinks of you both as dear family, it would feel awkward for me to change that now, so please....”

“I'll be sure to let Aniue know, though he may not budge much while out in public,” Yutaka said with an easy grin. “But then he'll be here representing Otousan, so a bit different, yes?”

“I understand. Please. I was already at the office, it'll be nice to get home again. Kacchan's had ... an afternoon,” the older alpha said. Chamu felt his spine going up at that, at the unspoken confession that something more had happened to his best friend while he had been away.

“Not like that, Chamu-kun, just an unintended triggering. Oh, we have Ritsuko-chan with us this weekend, that's Sensei and Maru's daughter. And I believe Hikachu has something planned for you, Kacchan, and Hayato-kun for tomorrow, though he insists I don't need to know anything more than that since I'm not invited.”

Chamu fell into step behind the two alphas, watching Kouki. Truth was, he still didn't know the man as well as he would have liked, but his body language seemed genuinely relaxed, at ease. If something truly horrible had happened, he wouldn't have still been in the downtown area, right? At least that was what Chamu kept telling himself as he watched the blond somehow manage to fit all of their luggage into the back of his sedan.

“I do have to make two stops before we get to the apartment, but they shouldn't take too long. But if there's anything you need while we're still out...?”

“I think we're fine, ne, Chamu-kun?”

“Yeah,” he agreed, refraining from being snippy and saying that what he needed was to see for himself that his best friend was still okay. He had trusted Kouki - and his friends - to take care of Kana properly, to do a better job of it than he could have done himself, and now he was starting to wonder if that had been the right call. Maybe it would have been better to bring Kana back to Fukui with him. It wasn't like Kana would have needed to go back to his parents, he could stay with Yutaka and Hayato like he was doing. It would be tight, but they would figure it out. At least then he wouldn't have to wonder and worry if Kana was in good hands.

“I'll just be a minute,” Kouki said and Chamu was surprised to see them pulled up in front of a gleaming skyscraper. Was this where Kouki worked?

“Oi, Chamu-kun, quit stewing, will ya?”

“W-what?” he stammered, blinking at Yutaka.

“You're tying yourself up in knots over something, I can smell it. Give it a rest. Whatever happened in the last five days, working yourself up over it without even knowing what 'it' is isn't going to do anyone any good. Just that Kouki-san's too polite to call you out on it. Me, I know you better. So quit it, okay? I'm sure whatever happened, Kacchan's in the best of hands, okay?”

Chamu huffed, crossing his arms over his chest even as Yutaka reached back to ruffle his hair. Okay, maybe he was being overly grumpy about this whole thing, but then again ... he'd trusted Kouki to take care of Kana, dammit. And now here he was finding out that he -.

“Oi! I said quit!” Yutaka said, reaching back to smack him upside the head. “Seriously. I know you can't smell it, but you've spent more time with them, you've got to know Kouki-san is completely
head over heels for Kacchan. You really think he'd have left Kacchan's side even just to pick me up, even with everything riding on this contract, if Kacchan needed him that badly?"

Another huff, but Chamu couldn't really argue with Yutaka's point. Kouki and Kana were both completely besotted with each other, it was bordering on kind of disgusting sometimes ... when it wasn't making him completely jealous.

“... wait, what do you mean, everything riding on this contract? What contract??”

“The one that's the whole reason I'm here and we're bringing down so much of Haya-chan's stuff?? Did you listen to anything I told you this morning?”

“Um....” But before he could answer, the driver's side door was opening again.

“Ok, sorry about that. Last chance to request a stop, otherwise I'm picking up dinner and we're heading straight to the apartment.”

“Nope, I think dinner is definitely the right idea about now,” Yutaka said. “Chamu-kun?”

“Yeah, definitely,” he agreed, fishing out his phone. He'd just text Hikaru quickly, the omega would be in a better position to tell him what was going on at the penthouse anyway.

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Even bundled in a heavy coat, Kana felt ... exposed. And halfway to completely freezing to death. Which was, he knew, just his mind being ridiculous, since they hadn't been walking that long. Still, he was really hoping these friends of Hikaru's lived somewhere close, because he wasn't sure how much further he was going to be able to make it.

“I promise, we'll call Kouki-san when we're ready to call it a night,” Hikaru said as he ushered him into a modest apartment building. The stairs seemed to be taunting him and Kana felt himself whimpering at the sight of them.

“It's just up to the third floor, then you can rest, I promise.”

“Better idea,” Hayato said, crouching down. “Come on, climb on, I can carry ya that far.”

As much as Kana wasn't sure that was the sort of first impression he wanted to be making, it was better than having his legs give out partway up the stairs. Shoving aside a sudden memory of his brother carrying him this way, he clung tight to Hayato, pressing his face into the alpha's shoulder.

“So ... do we get to know anything else about these friends of yours before we meet them?” Hayato asked cheerfully as he started up the stairs.

“Not sure who all's going to be there. I mean, definitely Ryouga-kun and Zukky, cuz it's their apartment. And Toya-kun cuz I told him if he didn't come meet Kacchan I'd never forgive him. But other than that, I'm not completely sure.”

“I thought you'd planned this adventure?!” Hayato countered, though he was laughing even as he said it.

“I did! Sort of! Okay, more like I arranged it with Ryouga-kun and Zukky and then told Toya-kun he had to come, but it was all kind of last minute, soooo.... I mean, I know who I invited, but I can't say for sure if everyone's actually going to be there or not, so, you now....”
“Well, you could at least tell us more about our hosts than their names, surely!”

“Uwaa! Don't put me on the spot like this!!” Hikaru protested in a whine. “Um, Ryouga-kun and I met in college, he and Zukky have been renting this apartment together for awhile now. They're both betas and cousins, which is how they get around the cohabitation thing.”

Kana wanted to ask what that meant, but before he could, they had reached a third floor door and Hayato was gently setting him back on his feet. Hikaru knocked and within moments someone was throwing open the door. The beta who answered was a blond with a strong jaw and a severe resting bitch face if Kana had ever seen one, enough that he felt himself stepping closer to Hayato immediately. And yet in an instant his whole face changed as he broke into a wide grin.

“Hikkun! Damn, and here I was hoping you were the pizza boy,” the blond said as he stepped back. “Come on in. HEY TOYA! HIKKUN'S HERE WITH HIS OMEGA FRIEND!”

Kana scooted in even closer to Hayato, suddenly wondering if maybe this whole thing had been a mistake. And then Hikaru was grabbing his wrist and tugging him forward. It was either enter the apartment or fall on his face, and since he wasn't interested in making a complete fool of himself....

When he looked up, another omega was standing at the edge of the genkan, practically bouncing on the balls of his feet. He couldn't be more than twenty, except Kana's brain insisted that couldn't be right because surely this was Toya and hadn't Hikaru said someone else was the youngest? He looked so handsome, stylish and cool with a silver stud at the corner of his lip and dark brown hair that hung in asymmetrical layers around his face.

“Come on, come on, hurry up, it's cold out there! Ah! You have to be Kana-kun,” the omega said, waving them in. “Hi, I'm Toya and that's Ryouga. And the rest of you are ... Hayato-kun and Chamu-kun, right?” he continued, bobbing quick bows to each of them. “Hikkun's so mean, hoarding another omega our age all to himself!”

“I haven't been hoarding him!” the ginger omega protested, nudging past them with his armfuls of bags. “Zukky! I brought food!”

“Thank the gods!” came another voice from further into the apartment.

“Here, hold on, let me at least take your coats,” the beta behind him, Ryouga, was saying. “It's not a big space or anything, but we cleaned it up at least!”

“We? We?? Who's 'we', kimosabe?! I cleaned it up!” the disembodied voice insisted. Biting back a giggle, Kana slipped out of his coat, only to find himself hauled up into a surprisingly tight hug. He immediately went completely stiff, not at all sure what to do.

“Sorry,” Toya said, letting him go and rubbing the back of his neck. “I just ... it's just been me and Hika forever. And I love our friends, I do, but they're a bunch of betas. It's going to be so good to have another omega to commiserate with!”

“He's not going to be able to commiserate over terrible dates with you, Toya-kun, what with being promised to an alpha and all,” Hikaru called back at them. “But you're welcome to join me in being grumpy about how he landed himself an amazing alpha by accident one day!”

“Hey, isn't that kinda how he met you, Hikaru-senpai?” Hayato said, lightly nudging Kana forward into the rest of the apartment.

“Oh god, you didn't,” Toya laughed, glancing back at Hikaru. “You are such a butt, making these guys call you senpai!”
“I didn't make anybody do anything!” Hikaru protested. Now that he had taken a few more steps into the apartment, Kana could see what Ryouga had meant about it not being a big space, though the main room looked bigger than the one in Hayato and Yutaka's place, from what he remembered. It was also dominated by a couch and a big screen TV with a whole collection of consoles under it. The kitchen was actually a separate room, if only just barely, and another beta waved from inside it. He had a much more open look to him, dark chestnut brown hair that faded to an ash blond at the tips that brushed his shoulders, and a piercing at each corner of his bottom lip, with another through his left eyebrow and several more in each ear, including a gauge.

“Hi, I'm Kazuki, but mostly the guys call me Zukky. I'm sorry, I didn't catch names when you came in.”

“Well, obviously the one Toya's attached to is Kana, then this guy's Chamu and that one's Hayato.”

Kana frowned a moment at Hikaru, surprised that was all the more his friend was going to say, but before he could comment, the other beta was speaking again.

“Hayato-kun's the late addition, right?” Ryouga said, slipping past them to head for the fridge. “We've got soda, beer, juice, or water, whatcha guys want?”

“Mm, he's Kacchan's escort,” Hikaru replied, nodding. “And I'll have a water for now, unless you really are expecting pizza any minute.”

“Nah, haven't even ordered it yet,” the blond beta said with a lopsided grin. “Figured we'd wait on ordering food until we were sure who all was going to make it for lunch. Ruiza-kun already said he can't get off until 17:00.”

“He's lying, as usual,” Kazuki chimed in from the kitchen. “Well, he's not lying about when Rui-chan gets off work. Or the not ordering anything yet part, either, actually, but that's because I've been slaving away all morning making us foods~”

“You know, if you'd just said something, my mother –.”

“Would have buried us in enough food to feed an army, judging by how much she sent with you anyway,” Kazuki interrupted. “Really, guys, make yourselves at home, you don't have to stand around like a bunch of statues, promise. Ryouga's even promised not to bite anyone today!”

Kana flinched, Hayato reaching out to squeeze his shoulder at the same time Hikaru swatted Kazuki across the ass.

“Fucking hell, Zukky, don't you ever listen to me?” his friend said with a low growl. “I said no biting jokes!”

“Oh come on, betas can't even –.”

“No biting jokes!”

“You'd think, after four years of knowing Hikkun and Toya-kun we'd be better about stuff, but it's kinda ... Zukky has a bad sense of humor?” Ryouga ventured, offering Kana a bottle of melon soda. “You're welcome to hit him or whatever if he gets out of line.”

“Kacchan's not really the type to do that, but I might~” Hayato said, squeezing Kana's shoulder again in support.

“Yeah, excuse my beta ignorance,” the blond said, his voice dropping and he actually looked
surprisingly sheepish after the way he had answered the door just a moment ago, “but, um, escort?”

“Escort, bodyguard, defender of Kacchan's virtues. Basically, I go everywhere he goes to make sure no one's doing anything inappropriate,” Hayato explained, carefully nudging Kana over to the couch. “Also got a crash course in first aid and advanced wound care, since my charge is still in recovery. And I'll take a Coke if you've got it.”

“Charge? Recovery? Uh, black or red?” Ryouga asked, obviously completely confused. “Sorry, Hikkun didn't really say anything other than he wanted to get the gang together for a day of just hanging out here cuz he had a new omega friend that needed a day of just hanging out. If I'm being too nosy, just tell me to shut up, okay?” the blond said as he crossed back over to the kitchen. “Chamu-kun? Coke for you, too, or...?”

“I'll take a regular Coke, yeah,” Chamu said, halfway pulling Kana down onto the couch next to him. Hayato glanced at Kana, silently asking for his permission, but Kana wasn't entirely sure what he wanted permission for. There was too much, he could almost feel himself shutting down as he leaned heavily against his best friend.

“Aaaand he's just about down for the count for a bit,” Hayato tittered, shaking his head. “Regular Coke's fine, but yeah, while we're out? He's the boss and Boss is about to fall asleep, so ask later maybe? Cuz I can't really say much else until he's not so tired he can't give me permission.

Kana sat up a bit more at that; since when was he in charge of anything? It wasn't even his name on Hayato's contract, not like that anyway; that had been entirely between Mahiro, Kouki, and Hayato's family. Of course neither Mahiro nor Kouki were present, but still....

“It's okay,” Toya said softly and Kana blinked, surprised to see the omega crouched in front of him, squeezing one hand. “If you need a nap, we can get you set up in the bedroom, it's no problem, right guys?”

“Yeah, it's fine,” Ryouga said, coming back with the two Cokes.

“Any friend of Hikkun's and all that,” Kazuki added from the kitchen. “But maybe try eating something first? If nothing else, I know I always sleep better on a full stomach.”

Kana had his doubts, but considering they had only just gotten here, he didn't want to be so rude, either. He could tough it out, he didn't need to be napping this easily. He didn't need to make that sort of a bad impression on Hikaru's friends. A bit of food, a bit more soda, and a chance to just sit for awhile, and he'd be fine, he was sure of it.

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Hayato's lips twitched as he tried not to laugh, watching the way Kana slowly fell asleep on Chamu over the course of the movie. He waited for the end of the movie, then discreetly reached out for Kazuki's sleeve, tugging it a little to get his attention.

“You said something before about a napping space?” he asked quietly. Kazuki frowned, then glanced down the couch, understanding lighting up his whole face as he nodded.

“Yeah, just gimme a sec,” he said as he popped up from the floor. Of course that was enough to get the attention of everyone else, though no one else said anything, just smiling at each other.

“Are you going to sit with him or...?”

“An unmated alpha alone with another alpha's betrothed???” he said in feigned dismay, struggling
not to laugh. “It's a small place, I think he'll be okay, unless ... Hika-senpai?”

“Yeah, no, I'll sit with him,” Hikaru said, getting up and waving with his phone. “I gotta reassure my mom that we're fine on food anyway, apparently.”

It didn't take long for Hayato to get the sleeping Kana settled, so he wasn't surprised that nothing had really changed when he got back to the main room.

“Okay, so, like, Hikkun is a total flake, so how about you tell us how you met him?” Toya suggested, turning openly curious looks on both Hayato and Chamu.

“Kacchan, really,” Hayato said with a shrug. “Actually, I only just met him a few days ago, he threatened to deck me.”

“Yeah, that sounds like Hikkun,” Kazuki said, chuckling. “What were you doing?”

“Nothing!” Hayato protested. “I'd come down from Fukui cuz of Kacchan still being here, but senpai walked in on Kacchan being all upset and he didn't know me at all, so he assumed I'd done something and yeah....”

“Hikkun is awfully protective of his friends, especially for an omega,” Ryouga said.

“Oi! Why do you betas always assume it's weird for an omega to be protective?!” Toya protested. Ryouga looked ready to defend himself when there was a knock at the door. Everyone turned to look at the door for a second, then Ryouga got up to actually answer it.

“Oh hey, Ibu, come on in. We're just about to start grilling the new kids.”

Hayato glanced up, but he couldn't say he was surprised to see another beta joining the group of friends. Hikaru had said there was only one other omega and one alpha in the immediate group, after all.

“Guys, this is Ibuki. Ibu, these are Hayato and Chamu. Kana needed a nap, Hikkun's in with him, so you'll have to wait for later to meet him.”

“Nice to meet you both,” the new beta said with a polite bob of his head. Hayato told himself not to stare, but Ibuki had the perfect build and look for a fashion model. Ok, he might be considered a little on the short side for runway work, but that face ... it was a face made for photoshoots, especially with that jawline. Cocky and yet sweet, especially with that little smile framed in medium brown layers and blondish highlights. He could easily picture this man on the other end of a camera, strutting and posing for all he was worth.

And then Hayato was being jabbed in the ribs, hard.

“Stop staring, you perv,” Chamu hissed.

“What? I wasn't ... not like that! I was just thinking of how I'd put my clothes on him!” he stammered, glancing back at Ibuki. Shit, had he really been staring??

“... well, that's not usually what alphas like you want to do with me,” Ibuki drawled, winking and then slipping into the kitchen. Oh god, he was seriously going to die any second now.

“What?! No! No, no, I mean, maybe, but ... no! I'm a fashion design student! Or, well, I will be,” Hayato stammered, feeling himself going red as a tomato. Could this get any worse?
“Right, well... We were just about to ask Chamu-kun how he got involved with Hikkun, though it sounds like maybe we're asking the wrong guys?” Kazuki said, grinning, and for a second Hayato almost could have kissed him for the rescue.

“Well... kinda? Kacchan met him first, then I met him at the hospital. Had to spend Christmas Eve with his family,” Chamu said, shrugging a little, as if it were no big deal. Which of course only made everyone else in the room that much more focused on him.

“Hospital? Oh, right, I remember that,” Ibuki said, stepping out of the kitchen with a bottle of juice and claiming a spot on the floor. “Remember, guys, that bombing the weekend before Christmas? But Hikkun wasn't – oooohhh! That's that Kana?!! Well it's about time he brought you guys around! My cousin's such a selfish shit,” Ibuki said, laughing.

“Cousin?”

“Yeah. Well, sort of,” Ibuki said, shrugging it off. Hayato was curious, but he wouldn't push. Probably didn't really matter anyway.

“So I'm guessing the three of you grew up together?” Toya ventured, giving Hayato and Chamu both curious looks. “I mean, otherwise it's kinda unusual, for as young as you guys are....”

“More or less,” Chamu said, nodding. “First year at boarding school, my older brother was roommates with this guy's closest older brother and they basically became instant best friends. And Kacchan and I really did grow up together, since our moms had been best friends since, like, junior high school or something.”

“So then what's with Hikkun's no biting jokes rule?” Kazuki asked. Chamu immediately froze up in panic, though as far as Hayato could tell, Toya was the only one to notice, the omega reaching over and slapping his friend upside the head.

“Oi! What was that for??”

“For being stupid,” Toya said with an obvious roll of his eyes. “What does it matter why? Don't make the jokes. And don't go putting these guys on the spot like that about it.”

“But... why?” the beta persisted and he sounded so genuinely confused.... Hayato sighed, starting to get up for a fresh drink only to have Ryouga push him back down.

“Coke or something else?”

“Water's fine. And we don't make the biting jokes around omegas because it's bad taste,” Hayato said. “Come on, Tokyo can't be that different from Fukui that you don't know about forced matings.”

“There hasn't been a forced mating in... in forever,” Kazuki scoffed.

“That you know about. It's not like we put out bulletins on the nightly news when it happens, you know,” Hayato countered.

“We? What are you talking about?” the brunet asked, frowning again in renewed confusion.

“Right, we didn't do full introductions,” Hayato said, thanking Ryouga for the bottle of water passed over his shoulder. “I'm Higuchi Hayato, Kacchan's contracted guardian. Higuchi is the guardian clan for Fukui-ken.”
He could see his words having no affect on the betas, but Toya's eyes visibly widened in shock for a second.

“But he's not –,” Toya started, biting down on his own lip hard when he realized what he had been about to say.

“Yeah, I know,” Hayato replied softly, momentarily ignoring the confusion in the betas to focus on Toya. “That's one of the reasons I was hired, what with him being betrothed to Morihito Kouki-sama of the Matsumoto Group.”

“... you're fucking kidding me,” Ibuki murmured. Startled, Hayato glanced over at the beta.

“Pardon?”

“Oh come on guys, it's all over the tabloids and the internet, don't you people even read? They don't use a name, they can't, Kana's a private citizen and only eighteen anyway, but that hasn't stopped the gossip rags from calling him everything from a slut to an ex child prostitute! I'm not saying I believe any of it, mind you, Higuchi-san, I mean, they've been printing some pretty wild suggestions. Including allegations of a daughter seen at Morihito-sama's apartment.”

“... that's new,” Hayato muttered, frowning and pulling out his phone, only to see Chamu already typing away with his own. “Ri-chan only came over yesterday noon, how could they have already found out about her? It's not like she's been anywhere but the apartment since getting there. Fuck, Kurosaki-sama's gonna hit the roof.”

“Yeah, I know, why do you think I'm telling him now?” Chamu said, glancing up with a brief smile. “I'm thinking we'd be best off just staying here for ... awhile yet.”

“Bad?” Ryouga asked, frowning as well.

“Kurosaki-sama has a temper like a wet badger on his good days,” Chamu said with a half chuckle. “He's going to be completely livid about this, I'm sure. If he hasn't heard about it already.”

“Well, you guys have to stay through dinner anyway, or Ruiza-tan will murder us all in our sleep,” Ryouga said, chuckling. “But I'm still not sure I understand what the problem is?”

“The problem is Morihito-sama's upper caste, you know, one of the rich and powerful?” Ibuki said, rolling his eyes. “He's also twice this Kana's age, an alpha who was supposed to have been married already, but his fiancee ran out on him, like, two days before the wedding or something? I don't remember what I read now, doesn't matter. You've got the powerful alpha head of a major multinational corporate group suddenly betrothed to a kid omega, a male kid omega who's at the least not a virgin and may even already have a kid. Yeah, that's kind of a problem for the old traditionalists. If this isn't buried by Monday, Matsumoto Group stocks are going to tank. Either way, he's probably looking at losing either this betrothal or his job. Or both.”

“Nah, see, that's why I'm involved. Kacchan doesn't have kids, never gave birth, the tabloids are way off on that one,” Hayato said, hoping he wasn't going into things Kana wouldn't have wanted him to discuss. Of course it was a little hard for him to shut things down now, so he kept barreling ahead and hoping for the best. “Anyway, with me hired as his guardian and the family keeping an eye on him, no one's going to be able to fault the bonding. Kurosaki-sama and Hikaru-senpai are almost always with him, too, so it's not like Kacchan and Morihito-sama are ever alone together. I don't know all the local social politics, but as I understand it, some major players in the scene are already giving the match their support. This probably isn't going to stay at the top of the gossip columns for long.”
“You're right about that,” Toya said, holding up his phone. “I just got a breaking news alert, NHK is reporting the head of Sony Records Japan just got arrested for unspecified racketeering charges.”

“Holy shit, guys, Interpol just busted open an Islamist terror cell in Saitama,” Kazuki added.
“They're saying it's the same group that planned and carried out that mall bombing. You ... you don't think...”

“Could just be coincidence,” Ibuki said, but Hayato could tell no one in the room really believed that.

“... shit, you guys,” Ryouga said after a moment. “Ok, I don't care how stupid anyone thinks Hikkun's rules are, we're sticking to them. I absolutely do not ever want to be on the bad side of someone who's got these kinds of connections.”

“Ryo, come on, we don't actually know —,” Kazuki started, but it was Ibuki who cut him off.

“Do you want to take that chance? Cuz I sure as hell don't! Now, if you don't mind, Hayato-kun, I want to hear all about this fashion design student plan you have, because I really want to think about something else now, thank you, and if you really think I have modeling potential, then I am all yours.”

Hayato felt his heart skip a beat.

“Well, I don't have any of my sketchbooks with me, obviously, but I've got a few things snapped on my phone,” he said, more than happy for the change of subject. From what his nose was telling him, so was everyone else.

~*~*~

“Hiro!!”

“Hey booger,” his brother teased, accepting Kana's eager hug with a laugh, arms closing around him with an ease that made everything better.

“Did you see? Did you see? I actually made a basket! Twice!”

“I saw that. Great job, I'm so proud of you. Keep it up and you could end up good enough to go pro.”

“O-oh, I ... I don't know about that,” Kana stammered. “Omegas don't really go into pro sports ... do they?”

“Why not?” his brother challenged, ruffling his hair. “You've got some good moves on the court, Kacchan, you should definitely keep playing. You know, they're talking about opening a mixed omegas league - men and women playing coed teams. You should really think about it.”

“I don't know,” he mumbled, a shyness overcoming his joy at having his brother at his game.

“Promise me you'll at least think about it, okay?” Hiro insisted, squeezing his hand. “You're allowed to have a life of your own, Kacchan. You're more than Acchan's future mate.”

Blushing, Kana nodded. He'd think about it.

~*~*~

Kana shuddered as he jolted awake, momentarily lost. This wasn't Kouki's apartment, where...?
Hikaru's scent hit him the same time as the omega's hand landed on his skin, the memories rushing back into place. They were visiting Hikaru's friends, he must have fallen asleep in the middle of the movie they had been watching.

“Hey. Feeling better?”

“Did ... you didn't have to sit with me the whole time.... I mean, I know you've been missing your friends, too....”

“Yeah, but I know how much it disorients you to wake up alone. Anyway, they've apparently been talking fashion for the last forty minutes, so I'm fine with it.”

“I ... how long was I asleep?”

“I dunno, not more than an hour, I'd guess,” Hikaru said with a shrug. “If you're up for it, Ibucchi and Jun-kun are here now, but it's probably going to be another hour or two before Ruiza-tan gets here, so there's no rush if you just want to nap some more.

“No, that's okay, I ... I mean the whole point was for me to meet people, right?” Kana said, though he could feel his cheeks heating again anyway. Which was ridiculous. But he was so used to his social circle being just him, Chamu, and Hayato, that he wasn't sure he remembered how to behave properly in bigger groups.

“Sure, but at your own pace,” Hikaru said, shrugging.

Kana nodded, carefully sitting up and looking around the bedroom. To be honest, it reminded him a lot of his brother's old room: action movie and rock band posters vying with anime wall scrolls and a calendar for wall space while manga, books, figurines, and other fandom merchandise battled for shelf space. Looking around, he was surprised to notice the small butterfly imprint of Satsuki's label on the corners of a few posters and pin-ups. He frowned at the pin-ups, but the band name was something in English, he couldn't make sense of it.

“Hey, 'sup you two?”

Kana flinched and immediately felt stupid for it, blushing hotly. Just Toya, why was he being this nervous?

“Just taking it slow getting him up again,” Hikaru said. “You know how it is after a nap, ne? The shorter ones always hit me worse, too, like sometimes I'm not even sure what century it is anymore.”

“I'm okay,” Kana said, pulling himself up from the futon. “Sorry for falling asleep on everyone.”

“Nah, you only fell asleep on Chamu-kun and he's probably used to it by now, ne?” Toya teased, stepping in to give him a warm hug. “Relax, ne? These guys are dorks and sometimes even accidental jerks, but they're good people. Especially for being a bunch of ignorant betas~”

Kana tried to smile, but he couldn't help feeling it had come out strained. Still, he let the taller omega draw him back into the lounge, taking the space that opened up between Chamu and Hayato on the couch.

“So obviously this is Kana,” Toya was saying, still grinning. “Kana-kun, this one's Ibuki-kun and that one over there is Jun-kun.”

Kana nodded, feeling shy in the face of so many people he really didn't know. Especially Ibuki,
who looked so pretty and reminded him of the popular cliques at school. Fujisaki had been part of the popular group in their class.

“Deep breath,” Hayato's voice whispered against his ear, one arm curling around his shoulders. Kana leaned into his friend's shoulder, eyes closed, and tried to just breathe. “He's not like that,” the alpha next to him murmured in reassurance. “Come on, you know senpai wouldn't be friends with someone like that.”

Logically, he knew Hayato was right, but the fear and unease were still there, twisting in his gut.

A hand, Toya's hand, brushed against his knee a second before the omega spoke: “Are you a fan of Nokubura, too, Kana-kun?”

“Huh? Um, I don't know them? I just recognized the Aurora imprint on some of the pinups,” he admitted with yet another shy blush. “I was going to ask. They look ... interesting?”

“You know Aurora and don't know Nokubura?!” Ryouga asked, looking just a little bit scandalized. “They're like the second biggest name on the label!”

“Ignore him,” Kazuki said, grinning. “He crews for Nokubura's Tokyo shows, has for a couple years now. He tends to get a bit ridiculous about them sometimes.”

“Well, I mean Satsuki-san's butterfly is kind of...,” Kana said, shrugging when he couldn't find the right words. And also because Ryouga's jaw looked like it was about to fall off his face. “Did ... did I say something wrong?”

Ryouga managed a handful of noises that sounded sort of like words, though they weren't very coherent, before Kazuki helpfully reached over and slapped him upside the head.

“Words, Ryo-kun, try using them,” the other beta teased.

“Aurora's butterfly imprint ... Satsuki-sama hasn't ever really explained it, it just kinda ... is. He's like that, you know, very secretive, especially with the industry press,” Ryouga said suddenly, still looking a bit gobsmacked. “Fans all say it's because he's kind of like a butterfly - this beautiful thing that floats over all the shit without being touched by it. He's kinda this ... this untouchable figure in the scene, like some kind of visual kei god.”

Kana listened with a slight frown. That ... didn't really sound like the Satsuki he remembered. Like, at all? It wasn't possible they were talking about two different people ... was it?”

“Oh gods, you have, haven't you?” Ryouga said, his expression shifting into complete awe. “You've actually met him.”

“Well ... yeah. A couple times. He and Kou-kun meet up every Friday morning, sometimes he comes back for breakfast,” Kana said with a shrug, blushing a little at the sudden memory of that first time. Ryouga fell over backwards and Kazuki started laughing. A moment and then Ryouga was sitting back up again, scooting over to practically lean on Kana's knees.

“Tell me everything! What's he like? Did he even talk to you? I have to know! For science!”

“Well ... yeah. A couple times. He and Kou-kun meet up every Friday morning, sometimes he comes back for breakfast,” Kana mumbled, intensely worried he was letting Ryouga down. “He seems very ... kind. Especially for an alpha.”

That got him a little nudge from Hayato, but he knew his friend was doing it to tease him,
understood what he meant. Ryouga, on the other hand, was frowning.

“Kind? But he's always so ... aloof,” the blond beta said.

“I thought you hadn't ever met him,” Kazuki said, flicking his cousin's ear.

“I haven't!” Ryouga protested, twitching away from his cousin. “But he's come to a couple Nokubura shows and he's always been ... you know, distant. Like, the guys always help the crew with setup and sometimes tear-down, too, and Satsuki-sama ... always keeps his distance. Like a prince who thinks the work's beneath him.”

“Pretty sure that's not what he's thinking,” Kana said, frowning again as he remembered that lunch and the passionate way Satsuki had talked about the scene. Like someone deeply involved in it, not someone who held himself apart from or above it.

“Shouldn't you be happy to hear your idol isn't actually a kamidere asshole?” Jun ventured, tucking a random lock of his wildly pink hair back behind his ear.

“Well, but then why? I just ... I'm confused, I guess. If he's not really that kind of guy, then why...?”

“Who knows. More importantly, who cares? Are you going to show him some Nokubura vids or do I need to do that for you?”

“Oh right!” Ryouga said, bouncing up to grab a game controller and turn the TV back on. Kana was just glad to have the focus off of him for awhile.

~*~*~

Kouki helped Kana settle into their bed before joining him, smiling a little at the way his omega's whole body immediately relaxed as it pressed against his own. So what if Kana was half his age? It was a significant gap, to be sure, but they would hardly be the first. Others had found ways to make the age difference work, he was confident they would as well. And as much as he was glad Kana was able to be at ease with his friends, Kouki was also glad to see his omega going out and making friends of his own.

“How was it, really?” he asked softly.

“It was good,” Kana repeated, but it wasn't any more true this time than it had been the last time.

“Kacchan....”

“I fell asleep right after lunch, like an invalid, and then I almost made a total idiot of myself, like, ten different times,” his omega confessed with an unhappy sigh bordering on a whine.

“Sweetheart, you are still in recovery and I'm sure Hikachu warned his friends about that. I'm sure no one was offended.”

“I just ... I'm not used to being around so many people and not having it end badly, I guess,” Kana admitted with a sigh. “Though ... it was kinda funny, the way Ryouga-san reacted when I admitted to having met Satsuki-san. I hope I didn't ... I didn't realize his fandom reputation was so ... different from who he really is as a person.”

“Oh, do Hikachu's friends all think of him as the kamidere type, god-king of indies visual kei?” Kouki teased, laughing.
“You know about that? Why didn't you tell me!” Kana protested, swatting ineffectually at Kouki’s chest. “Gods, I feel like such an idiot.”

“I thought that was common knowledge among visual kei fans? That read on him, I mean,” Kouki replied with a shrug. “It started back when he was still just a frontman himself. The rest of the band members had these detailed profiles and then his was either half blank or filled with 'mystery' or 'secret' or some other non-answer. He was always kind of a shy guy, so of course fans took it all the wrong way and ran with it. It's worked well for him overall, so he just kinda ... goes with it.”

“I just hope I didn't spoil things....”

“By being honest with your new friends? No. You've met him, you know what he's actually like. He knows about his reputation, of course, and if you ask me, I think a part of him likes it, keeps cultivating it on purpose, but that doesn't make it truth, you know? Besides, you could shout the truth from the rooftops and many of his fans still wouldn't believe it. If this Ryouga-kun and the rest do, then good. And if they decide you were lying? Shame on them, but it won't change anything.”

Kana sighed heavily, scooting closer, and Kouki was happy to oblige him, kissing the top of his head.

“You worry too much, love. I'm sure things went fine. Chamu-kun and Hayato-kun certainly both seemed to think so.”

Another nod, but he could tell his soulmate was fast running out of steam.

“Go to sleep, love,” he said softly, rubbing along his spine. “I'm sure everything went just fine, you don't have to be so worried all the time.”

From the sigh and the shift in Kana's scent, Kouki knew that was easier said than done.

Some day, love, he silently vowed. Some day you will see. You have nothing to fear.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 15 is slated to be posted next week and then Masun will take a bit of a break while I start posting my SoK2k17 fills. And one from last year that I'd been holding back for reasons.
Chapter Notes

In which we get into things in motion besides just Kana's personal life. And finally meet the elusive Puppy. And no, I really couldn't resist a repeat of fanboying over Satsuki. XD

Kana had to admit, as much as he was feeling like a limp noodle, he felt like he was in a better place today, more so than he had in awhile. Maybe because, in spite of the things that had been said since Thursday, nothing much had really changed. Yutaka was on the floor, playing some sort of card game with Ritsuko and Mahiro and not even batting an eyelash for the way Kana was curled up on the couch with Kouki. And Hayato was in the kitchen with Hikaru, doing whatever the omega told him to do in the name of getting lunch made for everyone, either unaware or ignoring what Kana was doing. It was ... nice. Of course it made him wonder just why Hayato needed to stay with him after all, but he was trying not to think about that too much.

"You really do worry too much, love," Kouki whispered, curling arms around him and nuzzling his cheek.

"Can't help it," Kana mumbled, feeling another blush coming on. "I don't even know why, just...."

"Habit?" Kouki suggested, his voice a warm rumble under Kana's ear. He wasn't sure if it was true or not, wasn't even sure he cared. At the moment, he had more important things on his mind. Like trying to figure out why he was so tired when it wasn't even noon. He hadn't done anything yet, hadn't even been out of bed for more than four hours. And yet just the thought of moving was enough to make him tired.

"What are you worrying over now?" his alpha asked quietly, fingers carding through Kana's hair in a slow caress.

"Mm, keep doing that and you're going to put me to sleep," he mumbled, pouting.

"You say that like it's a bad thing," the blond teased, ruffling his hair a moment before finger combing it straight again.

"It's too early for me to be this tired again!"

"You should really talk with Hachi more," Mahiro offered without looking up from his cards. "He'll tell you, abdominal surgery is the worst for leaving you wiped out for weeks and months afterwards. Or Mii-tan, if you need a doctor's words to settle it for you."

"Maru's right, between Hachi's personal experience and Sensei's professional experience, I'm sure they would both agree that what you're feeling right now is completely normal," Kouki added.

"But it's been weeks since my surgery!" Kana protested.

"Mm, and you've been a lot more active this week than was probably wise," Mahiro countered, finally looking up at him with a slight frown. "You've had four outings plus a lunch in this week,
which is more than your doctor was wanting you to be doing at this stage. This week was special, but if you try keeping up this pace, he's going to be chewing off all our ears. In fact, he's probably going to have some words for us at your appointment this week anyway.”

Kana felt himself blushing again at that, even though none of the outings had really been his doing. Even if he hadn't always been very comfortable with them, he couldn't say he actually regretted anything, though. Well, a little bit of regret that the gallery opening hadn't gone better, but that wasn't actually his fault, or so everyone kept telling him. But if he was already due for his follow-up appointment with his surgeon, that meant he was also due to see his physical therapist again. He could barely remember what they had discussed at the last appointment, something about easing him into water therapy maybe?

“You'll be fine, love, it's me and Maru he'll yell at,” Kouki said, chuckling a little. “Probably mostly me. As if I can say no to Maru any better than he can.”

“I heard that,” Mahiro said, but the omega was grinning at them. “But he's right, Kacchan. You'll be fine, it's us he'll get cranky with. Same with your therapist. The hospital has pretty nice therapy facilities, too. Depending on what your therapist wants you to do, you might even be getting private sessions. Well, semi-private, anyway.”

“And in the mean time,” Chamu said, abruptly plopping on the couch next to him and practically shoving an Xbox controller at him, “you've done enough homework that you can team up with me on Lego Indy until lunch.”

That was the best news he had heard all morning.

~*~*~

Kouki smiled, giving both Kumiko and Junji a hug and a kiss as he welcomed them into his home. But he caught Kumiko's arm, holding her back for a moment.

“Come to the office a minute? We need to talk.”

“Right now?” she protested, frowning up at him. “It's Sunday night, can't it wait until tomorrow morning?”

“It could, but you wouldn't like it,” he said. A moment's hesitation and then she sighed, nodding and following him into the office. That was very obviously now being used as a second bedroom.

“... okay, what's going on?”

“Kacchan has an officially assigned guardian escort staying with us, you'll meet him at dinner, but that's not what I wanted to talk to you about. I know what you'd been doing behind Junji's back, Kumi. Does he?”

“If you're talking about what I think you're talking about, it was one business dinner, nothing more. Juju knows where I was that night. He also knows that I came home to him.”

“Then as your friend, you should know this is probably going to hit print tomorrow,” he said, waking and handing over his tablet. Kumiko frowned down at it a moment, then her face went white as a sheet, though her scent said rage more than anything else.

“This ... this picture is the only real one in the bunch. The rest are completely faked. We had dinner and a drink in the hotel bar, that's all. He walked me to the station, I took the train home, Juju and I were together the rest of the night. Hell, ask Sacchan, he's the one that set us up to have dinner
together! Jumou-san was going to refuse the deal outright, this was the only way I could get them to agree!

“All right, Kuu-chan, all right, I believe you,” he soothed, reaching out to clasp her shoulder briefly. “This is why I needed to talk to you first.”

“He's a married man! With two kids! I don't ... I wouldn't...!”

“I believe you, Kuu-chan,” he soothed, “but I needed to hear it from you. I didn't know he was married, or I never would have –.”

“Just because Juju isn't my soulmate, that doesn't make him any less precious to me. Hell, I barely even knew my soulmate, for all I know, the kid grew up to be a total douche! Who knows, who cares, but Kou-kun ... you should know me better than to think ... to think I would....”

“Kuu-chan, I'm sorry, if I had known the man was married, it never would have even crossed my mind to believe it. But I do also know how these things sometimes happen....”

“Nothing happened!”

“I believe you,” he repeated, taking her by both shoulders and giving her a gentle shake. “First thing in the morning, we'll get Legal on it. And I'll call Sacchan right now so he can get his lawyers on it, too.”

“... I knew you had enemies, Kou-kun, but I never would have expected them to sink to this,” Kumiko snarled, slapping the iPad down on his desk. “When I get my hands on that ... that....”

“No, you're going to let our lawyers handle this. And Sacchan's lawyers will take the lead. This is an attack on him and his people as much as it's an attack on us. And if anyone asks, you aren't commenting on an open suit.”

“But...!”

“No buts, Kuu-chan,” he insisted, shaking his head. “Your official stance is no comment unless and until Legal says otherwise. Someone is obviously trying to keep me and the Matsumoto Group in the public eye in a bad light right now. You are not going to do anything to help that.”

Kumiko huffed, then pulled herself free to drop down into one of the chairs facing his desk, scowling even harder than before. Well, at least she wasn't storming out of the room and dragging everyone else into this? Yet, anyway. Kouki kept an eye on her even as he dialed Satsuki's number, picking up the iPad so he could e-mail the offending article to his friend.

“Kou-kun? What's up?”

“Got a heads up on a thing that's supposed to hit press tomorrow morning, I'm forwarding you the e-mail now. I don't know who sent it or why, but you definitely need to see it.”

“... I'm really not going to like this, am I?” his friend said and Kouki could hear him moving around in the background, probably going to his computer.

“Probably not. Kuu-chan says it's completely fake, there's only one real picture and the rest are hack jobs.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” the other alpha replied with a low growl. “I know that shoot and I know exactly who to put the screws to. I'll take care of it.”
“Sacchan....”

“I am not letting my people get dragged through the mud over a complete fabrication. I know who took the originals, he's the only place those shots could have come from, and I'm going to find out why he betrayed me and you're not going to talk me out of it, Kou-kun.”

“Okay, okay, just ... don't do anything unethical?”

“Oi, I'm not Toyasu,” his friend growled. “Relax, I've got this. Give Kuu-chan a kiss for me and let her know it's going to be fine. This story never sees the light of day, you've got my word on it.”

When he hung up, Kumiko was watching him, her lips twitching, as if she were still trying to decide whether or not to laugh.

“I can never tell if that face you make is a good sign or not, Boss,” she teased, tilting her head to the side a little. “I take it Sacchan had some ... interesting words to say?”

“He says he'll take care of it, that the story'll never see the light of day. I'm not going to hold my breath on that, but if it's true....”

“We've got enough going on already, if this gets squashed before publication, I'm not going to cry about it,” she said with a nod. “Though I'm still annoyed with you for thinking I would cheat on my husband.”

“I didn't say that....”

“No, you just heavily implied it,” she countered, frowning at him again, arms crossing over her chest.

“Kuu-chan, I'm sorry, but those pictures....”

“That's no kind of excuse! You were at our wedding! You know me! I would never hurt Juju that way!”

“All right, all right,” he pleaded, holding up his hands in surrender. “I'm sorry, you're right, I should have trusted you.”

“Damn right you should have! I–.”

The knock at the door was barely any warning at all for the head that poked through it immediately after, Mahiro scowling hard at the two of them.

“Whatever you two are doing in here, knock it off. Dinner's ready and if either of you brings up work at the table, I will personally make you regret it severely later.”

“The bad thing is I fully believe he could do it, too,” Kumiko said as she got up, a smile on her lips once more.

“Oh I know he could. Which is why we don't argue with him anymore,” Kouki replied, chuckling, as he escorted Kumiko out of his office. It wasn't an auspicious start to the evening or the week, but he would remain cautiously optimistic ... for now. He didn't really think this would be over so easily, though. His enemies were gathering. This was just the first move, a warning shot across his bow. It worried him to think what more they might have planned. But now was not the time. Later tonight, after Kumiko and Junji had gone home and Kana had fallen asleep, he would quietly message his closest allies, warn them that more was coming. Forewarned was forearmed, after all.
There was a certain comfort to be had in familiar morning routines. Stepping out of the bathroom to find Mahiro had already claimed his spot in bed was enough to make Kouki smile. And then hurry into his jogging pants, tugging on a bulky sweatshirt as he moved through the apartment to the front door. A part of him was going to miss this when Kana was finally properly his and they were able to be completely alone together, without need of chaperones or guardians or anyone else. Would Kana feel the same? He knew his omega had gotten used to having others around, especially in the mornings. Would he, even after their mating, still be afraid of sleeping alone, of waking up without someone right there with him? For a fleeting moment, Kouki could understand the appeal of a harem of omegas. That lifestyle wasn't for him, Kana was all the love he needed, but if Kana were to ask it of him ... he didn't know what he would do in that situation, to be honest. Hopefully it wouldn't ever come up.

Stepping out of the elevator, he nodded a brief greeting to the overnight desk clerk, still on duty for the wee hours and looking like he was more than ready to go home himself. Thoughts of sympathy derailed completely, however, when he saw Satsuki waiting for him.

“Sacchan?”

“Yeah, I know, not our usual routine. Come on, we'll hit the trail and chat awhile.”

Worried for what this meant, Kouki nevertheless fell in step with his friend. And yet Satsuki remained oddly silent until they reached one of the local jogging trails.

“So I'm currently in the process of buying a photography studio, unless you want to take it off my hands.”

“What? Why?”

“The reason I knew those photos were fakes? I recognized several of the shots as rejects from Gazetto's tour pamphlet. Kikuchi-kun was supposed to delete them, of course, but apparently he was keeping them for his portfolio.”

“Isn't that....”

“They were his photos, I wouldn't have minded if that had been all they were used for,” Satsuki said, shrugging. “I don't know how much you've been paying attention, but two of the big genre magazines shut down completely and another two have gone to online-only this winter. It's been a bad season, all those disbandments, apparently he wasn't getting enough work. Instead of coming to me, he accepted a ridiculous sum of money for a half dozen rejected shots. He was suitably apologetic, said the amount paid was a hundred times more than the photos could have been worth and that he should have been more suspicious. But you know how people get when they're desperate, ne?”

“So you're buying his studio? That's ... awfully forgiving of you.”

“He was desperate, I understand that feeling,” Satsuki replied, shrugging. “And now his studio will be Aurora's first choice for all of our bands. Shoots for magazines, CD and DVD jackets, photobooks, store-specific bonuses, the lot. He'll have plenty of steady work going forward, especially since I'm signing the merger paperwork today. Announcement goes live tomorrow, along with the announcement of Gazetto's next album.”

“And the story?” he asked.
“Dead. Called the site's head office, told them I had the original negatives of their doctored shots and if they went live with their slander, I would sue them for every yen their children's children would ever earn. They promised the story was dead and apologized for not doing proper vetting.”

Not even twelve hours and Kouki had gone from serious concern about the future of Kumiko's position at Avex to being assured that the story was completely dead. Sometimes even he was surprised by how quickly these things could move. Now instead of having to justify keeping Kumiko in her position, he would get to be smug over her latest success. And that was something he always enjoyed. But even with the swift death of this story, his warning senses were not so easily appeased. Their warning shot had failed utterly, but he would be a fool to think his enemies wouldn't try something else. He would have to be vigilant against their next ploy.

~*~*~

Kana felt himself going red the moment he saw Satsuki sitting at the breakfast bar. But it was Monday, what was he doing here?

“Why do you always look so scandalized to be seeing me?” the darker alpha teased as he slid off the stool he had been using. “Kou-kun, what have you been telling your soulmate about me??”

“Nothing he hasn't been able to see for himself, Mister God of Indies Visual Kei,” Kouki teased and Kana felt himself going even redder. A beat and then Satsuki was practically doubled over with laughter, needing a long moment before he was able to contain himself again.

“Finally ran into that trope, hmm, Kana-kun? Ah, it's fine. People will always believe what makes them feel better about themselves first. Casting me as a villain makes it easier when the bands on my label fold because they can't work together. Easier to blame me than face that their precious favorites just might not be good enough.”

“Is it ... I mean, I guess I haven't really been that much into the fandom,” Kana mumbled, rubbing at his shoulder awkwardly. “I listen to the music I like because I like it, I don't really ... pay a lot of attention to all that online stuff. I don't really care what the bassist's favorite labels are, as long as he plays music I like.”

“You're probably better off for it,” Satsuki said with a shrug. “Don't look so worried, ne? I was bringing your tree here some good news. Breakfast was the least he could do~ Mizuki-chan's coming up next weekend, she's hoping to at least have lunch if that's possible?”

“I, um, I don't really know my schedule,” Kana confessed, looking for Mahiro. Really, he was the one who would know about that sort of thing.

“You don't have to decide right this second,” the alpha said, smiling. “Pencil it in for now and I'll ask again around Wednesday or Thursday?”

Kana nodded, still wondering where everyone else was. He could see Kouki in the kitchen, but other than that he couldn't see anyone else. Walking over to the breakfast bar, he flinched at the touch of a hand on his elbow, even though it was only Satsuki, probably trying to steady him. Shame exploded in his chest, the hand closing a little more firmly for a moment, then dropping away.

“It's okay,” the alpha said in a low undertone, too low for even Kouki to be able to overhear it. “You don't have to be ashamed. Whatever happened - and I'm not asking, it's not my business - it isn't your fault, you don't have to feel ashamed for what happened or how it's affected you.”
Kana felt the tears sliding down his cheeks before he even knew they were there, a sob catching in his throat. He didn't know how, but ... Satsuki knew. Maybe not specifics, but he knew enough. The arms that folded around him weren't quite what he was used to, wrapped in the scents of cool steel and jasmine and moonlight on open water, but there was a warmth there, too, and he could feel himself falling into it. A safety he didn't feel around Kumiko or the Hayashis or Mitsuki-sensei or even Hayato.

“... okay, why is it I keep walking in to strange alphas upsetting my Kacchan?” Hikaru demanded and Kana could just picture his friend standing there with fists on his hips, glaring at them. “Kouki! What the hell, man?!?”

“Hikachu, I don't think you've actually met my friend Sacchan before. So if Sacchan will let go of my omega long enough....”

Satsuki's scent was filled with childlike amusement and Kana had to bite back a giggle when he looked up and saw the man sticking out his tongue at Kouki. And then another one when Hikaru's eyes went wide with the realization of who it was standing there in front of him.

“Hi. Ichikawa Shigeru, but most people call me Satsuki,” the tattooed alpha said as he stepped away from Kana and offered Hikaru a handshake.

“Oh, um, Itoh Hikaru,” the omega said, bowing and shaking his hand. “Pleased to meet you, definitely. Wow, I mean, Kacchan said, but I didn't ... I mean, um, hi....”

“Maybe I should be giving him the Gazetto tickets?” Satsuki suggested, nodding in Hikaru's direction.

“You are not sending my omega on a date with someone else, you jerk,” Kouki grumbled.

“Nokubura tickets then,” Satsuki said with a nod. “Or maybe Moran?”

“Oh, I don't ... I mean, I couldn't...,” Hikaru stammered.

“I thought you weren't talking about that?” Kouki added, frowning. Kana felt lost. Were these all bands signed to Aurora then? He really needed to do more research into the label later, instead of putting it off yet again.

“Why not? The announcement goes live on our sites at midnight tonight,” the darker alpha countered with a shrug. “Moran's next show isn't until Cure's VisuFes in April anyway, they haven't even booked a recording slot for their next release yet. Besides, the internet is already making all sorts of silly assertions about what Speed Disk is up to. Not like the fandom hasn't noticed that, other than Moran at VisuFes, no other Speed Disk band has anything on the calendar.”

“Yeah, there's been a lot of rumors of disbandments coming,” Hikaru said, taking an open seat at the breakfast bar. “Especially with the big announcement counter on Moran's website. Some fans think they're getting ready to go independent, form their own label. Another faction thinks they're about to announce their last live.”

“Sounds like the fandom's in for a surprise then,” Kouki murmured, coming over to press a kiss to Kana's temple. “Eat your breakfast, sweetheart.”

“Where's Haya–.”

“Oh. My. God.”
Kana couldn't completely contain a giggle as he watched Hayato practically stumbling over himself, physically and verbally, as he came into the room.

“Satsuki-sama, oh my god, it's really, oh wow, I mean, ah! Higuchi Hayato, I'm such a huge fan, oh my god, I can't even believe it. THE Satsuki-sama, ahh! And I don't even have my phone! Wait, I have to ... oh god!”

It was so strange to see, the way Satsuki seemed almost embarrassed by the fuss Hayato was making. After all, it wasn't like the man was new to fame, having been in the visual scene, by his own admission, for over a dozen years, first as a bandman and now as a label executive and soloist. It might have been a bit of an exaggeration to label him as a Visual Kei god, but Aurora was one of the more successful of the currently active visual indies labels, as far as Kana knew. Shouldn't he, therefore, have been used to this sort of thing? Where was the kamidere side the fandom insisted was the real Satsuki? Or was that something he only did when he was out in public, up on stage?

“So that's going to be a half dozen tickets for VisuFes for you, Kou-kun?” Satsuki asked, lips twitching with poorly suppressed mirth.

“You are not gifting me tickets for all these guys,” Kouki countered, but Kana could scent his amusement, too.

“Oh fine, spoil my fun why don't you,” the alpha teased, reaching out again to lightly squeeze Kana's arm. “Mizu-chan would love to see you again, if you're feeling up to it, but you don't have to decide right away. Hell, you can put me off until Friday if you want, it's fine, okay? And if you need my help with anything, no matter what this one says, all you have to do is ask. We take care of our own.”

Kana nodded, the fiercely protective scent coming from the other alpha startling him a little. And suddenly he was wondering if maybe Satsuki hadn't been at least partly responsible for the Sony Japan story hitting when it had. After all, the man clearly had connections in the music industry and nothing pushed a scandal off the pages faster than an even bigger scandal. A company executive making a questionable choice of mate was interesting gossip for a day, but a major company executive being charged with racketeering and international conspiracy.... That was the sort of reporting that could make entire careers. Or break them.

“Wait, wait, Satsuki-sama! Please, can I get a selfie with you?!”

Kana facepalmed, second-hand embarrassment flaring through him as his friend practically ran after Satsuki with his phone in hand. As happy as he was to have Hayato staying with him, suddenly he worried the alpha was the wrong choice for bodyguard for him.

“Relax, Kacchan,” Mahiro said, appearing seemingly from nowhere to pat his knee. “At least he's doing it now and not when we're out in public?”

“About that.... Does he really have to go with Kana everywhere?” Hikaru asked suddenly.

“That's his job, yes,” Mahiro said, a slight frown creasing his forehead. “Why?”

“Well, I mean, with everything that's been going on ... Mom reminded me of it last night, there's an omegas-only onsen in Hino that Kacchan would probably like, but....”

“I know the place you mean,” Mahiro said with a nod. “They have a lounge off the front for alpha escorts, but we should probably call ahead. They get pretty busy this time of year, if we could get a reservation for one of the smaller pool rooms ... though they'll probably want a minimum party of
six for that.”

“Well, there's the three of us and I know Toya-kun would love to come along,” Hikaru said. “He's the only other omega in our group, though.”

“I'll call Hachi later. Would your friend be available for a trip tomorrow? And we could include Airu-kun's little brother to make six.”

“Tomorrow? I'll have to call him, I'm not sure what his shifts are for this week, but maybe? It'd probably have to be for mid-afternoon, but then we could do dinner? Or would that be too much?”

“No, I think a nice soak and a quiet dinner out right before his Wednesday appointments sounds like an excellent idea.”

“Do I get a say in this?” Kana asked, huffing a little at his own petulance.

“Are you actually saying you'd turn down a couple hours at an onsen and then dinner out?” Hikaru countered, grinning a little. “Don't get me wrong, Kouki-san has a nice place, but you can't spend all your time up here. I'll even cover the cost for you if that's what you're worried about.”

“What? No! You don't have to do that, I just ... I don't know....”

“I'll cover the costs,” Mahiro said, obviously intending that to be the final word on the subject. “We'll get the full package. You're meeting with your physical therapist on Wednesday, a massage tomorrow would really help with that.”

Kana huffed again, but it wasn't like he actually disagreed with what either of the omegas had said. He did need to get out more and a trip to an omegas-only onsen sounded like a perfect opportunity to be out without running the risk of being overwhelmed by too many people. So why was he still feeling so unsettled by the idea?

“Hey babe, I have to go into the office this morning to tie up a few loose ends, but I should be home in time for lunch. Maybe,” Kouki said, offering him a lopsided grin. “For what it's worth, I think the onsen trip sounds like a great idea.”

Well, that sealed the deal, didn't it? Nodding, he lingered in his soulmate's hug for as long as he could.

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Kouki told himself not to watch, but it was hard to take his eyes off his soulmate. Kana still wasn't comfortable being completely naked around him, turning an adorable shade of pink when Kouki himself had stripped down to nothing to give himself a quick wash before getting into the bathtub. Kana, on the other hand, insisted on keeping on a pair of swim shorts the whole time, his back turned on Kouki while he washed himself. It was adorable and far too endearing, how shy his omega could be. Kouki even had a fair idea why the younger man felt so uncertain, recognizing the tangle of scents that suggested Kana was ashamed of his body. Perhaps the onsen trip would help with that? Seeing other omegas with bodies that looked like his couldn't hurt, certainly.

And all right, it was adorable to watch Kana stall, even if he couldn't really understand why the omega was doing it. When he noticed the teen scrubbing his shoulder for the third time, though....

“I think you're clean, love. Come on, before the bath gets cold.”

Another blush painted itself across Kana's cheekbones as Kouki held a hand out for his soulmate.
And yet it was enough to end the stalling, the omega gingerly stepping into the tub and letting himself be pulled down into Kouki's lap.

“What's wrong, love?” he asked softly, lightly brushing fingers along bared skin. Kana sighed heavily as he settled against his chest, but whatever was going on in his omega's head, he couldn't escape the simple biological fact that skin to skin contact helped. That they were soulmates, that he was alpha to Kana's omega, only made it stronger.

“I know they're right about the onsen trip, but.... I don't really want to go. But Mahi-nii already made the reservation, so it's not like I can back out of it.”

“Kacchan, I promise, you always have the right to say no, no matter what. If you really don't want to go, I'm sure they can find someone to take your spot ... but I really think you should go.”

“But ... but it's an onsen. I ... I haven't ever been to one, but....”

“But?” he prompted gently. He had a fair notion what was really bothering his soulmate, but for Kana's sake, he needed the omega to actually say the words, so he could understand it for himself.

“That means being naked! In front of other people!” Kana sputtered, turning to try to hide against his chest. Kouki couldn't help a soft chuckle, hugging his omega close.

“Maru got a reservation for one of the smaller private pool rooms. You'll have onsen yukata to wear when you aren't in the pool itself and you'll have a towel over your groin during the massage. The staff will all be very professional, no one's going to be ogling you or anything like that. Remember, this is what they do, they're used to seeing all sorts of bodies all day long. School kids, college athletes, overweight businessmen, the elderly, and everything in between. You know Maru wouldn't take you somewhere that didn't meet his high standards.”

“But....”

“Maru and Hachi aren't even going to look at you, you know, not any more than they have before now. Hikachu and his friend Toya-kun are only attracted to women, so they aren't going to care. Puppy might peek, but he isn't going to give you a hard time about anything. That's what you're worried about, right? Being teased?”

“I'm eighteen and fat and ugly,” Kana huffed and Kouki shuddered a little at the puff of air against his skin.

“Only one of those is true,” he said softly, fingers brushing against one of Kana's scars. “Is it because of this?”

“I ... I know Sensei did his best, but....”

“They'll fade over time, you'll see. But even if they don't ... does it really matter? They're a part of your story, you know.”

“They're ugly and ... and I hate thinking about that day.”

“Why? Okay, yes, it was a terrible thing that happened then, but look at what's come out of it. You're here, with me, building a new life with me. And I doubt you and Hikachu would be as close as you are right now if it hadn't been for the bombing. You saved his life, you know.”

“I ... I really don't remember that at all. Like, I remember we were just about to eat and then ... and then I was on top of him and there was burning and screaming and it's all a haze until I was waking
up in the hospital with Sensei and wanting you there and....”

“You were on the edges of being blown up, love, no one expects you to remember that part too clearly.”

“Yeah, but ... but if it hadn't happened.... I was happy with the way things were. And ever since that day....”

Even without the words being spoken, Kouki knew what Kana was thinking. Kouki shifted to press a kiss to his omega's temple, rubbing a hand along his arm, but he didn't say anything. This was Kana's demon to battle, after all. What more could he say than what he already had, a dozen times over now?

“You're not supposed to just say nothing, you idiot!” Kana huffed, swatting his chest. Well, that was unexpected.

“What else do you want me to say, baby? Yes, it was horrible and I could wish it hadn't happened, but we can't change the past for wanting, love. We have to accept things as they are.”

Another huff, but Kana didn't argue or hit him again. He wasn't sure if that was progress or not, kissing his hair and then tucking his head under his chin. For now, though, he would take it.

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“The agreement was you'd spend at least three hours on schoolwork this morning, then you could have your phone back,” Mahiro scolded, though it was hard not to give in to that pout. “Three hours! And I'm keeping it with me so you can't sneak off with it. And no letting him borrow yours, either, Hayato-kun!”

Kana tried pouting for another few minutes before sighing melodramatically and fishing out his school books and laptop. Once Mahiro was confident the younger omega was actually studying, he slipped off to Kouki's home office, telling himself not to worry about the fact that Hikaru was running late.

“Kou-kun? Got a minute?”

“Maru? Of course, come on in. What's up?”

“When you were alone with Kacchan last night, did he say anything to you?”

“About ... the onsen trip? Yeah, but not anything unexpected for an omega who's never been to an onsen before. And I'm sure you already know he has body image issues.”

“I'd be more surprised if he didn't at his age,” Mahiro agreed with a snort, taking a seat across from Kouki's desk. “I'm sure the shrapnel scars don't help.”

“Between that and a father who apparently wanted to pretend Kana was just a slightly strange beta.... He feels fat and ugly and no, the scars don't help, but I think it's deeper than that.”

“... why are so many betas such dumbasses?” Mahiro said with a sigh. “Some days, I swear, Minase-kun is the only one I know who has any sense. I know, I know, I'm being unfair, but really.... But yes, well, then tomorrow you should probably ask his therapist about muscle training. If Kana's not happy, a little resistance training will tone up the muscles a bit more. He'll never be a musclebound beefcake, of course, but then again, I can't imagine him wanting to bulk up that much, either....”
“Are you sure taking Puppy to the onsen is such a good idea?” Kouki asked after a moment.

“Yes, absolutely. He's a little older than Hikaru-kun or Toya-kun, yes, but you and I both know he doesn't actually act his age, he never has. And at an onsen, he won't be as able to overwhelm Kana with his energy.”

“Yeah, but he's not actually the most sensitive omega....”

“I think you'd be surprised. He's always been good with others, you just haven't seen that side of him. You'll see.”

“All right, all right,” Kouki said, chuckling and holding up his hands in surrender. “I trust you, Maru, I'm sure it'll be fine. Are you all meeting here or at the onsen?”

“Toya-kun is coming here after his shift, then we'll meet Hachi and Puppy at the onsen. Hikkun can drive, but we'll need your keys~”

“You can get them after lunch, little tyrant,” Kouki teased, still chuckling. “Go on, go ... supervise someone else for awhile or something.”

“What, you don't think I could be helpful in ... what are you doing in here, anyway?”

“After last week's fiasco? This week I'm auditing every single one of the Group's companies. In depth.”

“Don't you have people for that?” he countered, frowning. Sounded to him like Kouki was inventing more work for himself for some reason and that was probably a bad sign. Of what, exactly, he wasn't sure, but still a bad sign.

“Yeah, just blindly trusting my people is how the Aoki scandal managed to get so out of hand in the first place, Maru,” the blond alpha said with a shake of his head. “This is what I do, Maru. Review corporate documents, settle disputes, audit books. Not usually this deep into it, no, but it's not out of my purview or something. I'm not inventing extra work for myself just for shits and giggles, either. Unless this is your subtle way of trying to tell me Kana needs me right now?”

“No, he needs to be focusing on his studies,” Mahiro said.

“And he wouldn't be nearly as focused with me in the room,” Kouki said, grinning. “Believe me, I've noticed, though I'm not sure he has. If I'm out there with him, he'll end up curled up against my side and not focusing on his work. If you need me, if he needs me, I'll be here.”

“Don't forget to come up for lunch,” he scolded, though he couldn't completely keep himself from smiling.

“Like you wouldn't just come charging in here after me,” Kouki countered.

“Of course I will, but I'd prefer not to need to,” Mahiro replied, faking a huff.

“Then stop distracting me so I can get back to work,” the blond teased, making a little shooing motion with one hand. Mahiro was almost tempted to call him out for it, then decided it wasn't really worth the effort.

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Kana startled at the cheerful greeting from a pair of onsen staffers, blushing hotly immediately
after. He was completely hopeless, he really was.

“Kurosaki-sama, welcome back,” one of the women said, bowing politely to the whole group. To
Kana’s surprise, both of the women staffers were actually betas, the second woman perusing their
group with a curious look. Probably looking for Hayato, he realized. But if the staff was betas, then
how did they make sure only omegas were using their facilities? Honor system, he supposed, or
maybe there were omegas elsewhere and it just happened that these two were betas?

“Kurosaki-sama mentioned an alpha escort in the reservation?”

“Yes, that's right,” the older omega said, gently nudging Hayato forward.

“This way, sir,” the second staffer said with a polite smile. Hayato gave Kana's shoulder a gentle
squeeze before he slipped past him to follow the beta off to the side lounge reserved for alphas like
him.

“If the rest of you will come with me, please,” the first woman said, bowing again before leading
the way deeper into the facility. The corridor wasn't terribly interesting, muted tans without
decoration and periodic doors without labels.

“Here we are. Please make yourselves comfortable. Attendants will be with you shortly.”

There were already two others in the room ahead of them, but before Kana could get a proper panic
built up, Koudai was hugging him and he felt his nerves relaxing once more. Right, Mahiro had
said Koudai and someone else would be meeting them here, that's probably who he was scenting.

Without missing a beat, Mahiro made the round of introductions between them all, catching Toya a
little off-guard when he was introduced by his full name and not just as Hikaru's friend. It wasn't
hard for Kana to see why Mahiro had wanted him to meet Kuina, though - the omega was several
years older than him, but with his bright purple hair and multiple facial piercings, he could have
easily passed for a high school or college student. And when he smiled, his whole face lit up with it.

Kana felt awkward changing into the onsen yukata, but as Kouki had predicted, no one had paid
him any attention, too busy changing themselves. Somehow it was Koudai who took him by the
arm and led him into the next room. This one felt more like an old fashioned ryokan room, the
walls clad in shouji panels, despite being drywall, with additional panels offering a sort of divide
between the area with the massage tables and the pool area beyond.

“Massage first,” Koudai said softly, leading him over to one of the tables. “Then a soak in the pool
for awhile. I'll be right here if you need me.”

With Koudai's help, he managed to climb up onto the table, though it wasn't as easy as he thought it
should have been. Glancing around the room, Kana was surprised when another beta woman came
right up to him, though she had a kind smile.

“This is Kacchan's first time,” Koudai explained to her. “Also, if you could be extra mindful, he's
still recovering from serious abdominal trauma.”

“Of course, sir,” the woman said with another gentle smile. “Kobayashi-sama is scheduled for a
special therapeutic treatment.”

Why did that make him feel even more nervous than he was already? Probably because he had
never had a massage before in his life, so he really wasn't sure what to expect or what to do next.
We'll start with your back, okay?” the beta woman said. “If you undo the tie, then lay on your stomach, we can get it off without any exposure.”

Okay, that much he could probably manage. Laying on his stomach felt a little uncomfortable, not helped when she only pulled the yukata partway down his back.

“Table too hard? Ah, hold on,” she said, coming back a moment later with a pillow. “Maybe that will help?”

Kana had to wiggle around a bit to get it into the right spot, but it definitely helped. Right up until he felt her hands on his skin. It was stupid, and yet something in her touch had him tensing up every muscle in his body.

“Um....”

Kana told himself to relax, that he was being stupid and this was not going to help. It didn't work. When the woman stepped away from his table, he felt even more like an idiot. How was it that everywhere he went he did nothing but make trouble for the people he loved?

“Shh, shh, deep breaths, sweetheart,” Koudai soothed, stroking fingers through Kana's hair. He could feel the protestations bubbling up in his throat, but he couldn't let them out. Bad enough his scent was probably broadcasting his discomfort to the whole room and beyond, he didn't need to add his babbling to the mix.

“Our apologies, sir! Kurosaki-sama didn't mention that Kobayashi-sama was a touch-sensitive,” a strange male omega was saying from somewhere to Kana's left.

“Tо be fair, we're still not sure he is,” Koudai said, his fingers still carding through Kana's short hair. “It's hard to chart such a thing with an omega who's still recovering from major trauma. If there isn't an alternate masseur available....”

“No, no, it'll just be a moment,” the omega hurried to say. “She'll be available in just a few moments and again, our apologies.”

Kana waited, listening to the sound of retreating footsteps with his face pressed into the table beneath him before twisting to frown at Koudai. “Touch sensitive?”

“You know how some omegas can read minute scent details that others would miss? It's like that, but with skin to skin contact. But it's impossible to tell if you have that ability or if you're just particularly sensitive because of your injuries.”

“Wouldn't my injuries make me less sensitive?”

“Not as an omega. Really, they should have assigned you a specialist from the start, with Maru telling them you were in recovery, that was stupid on their part.”

Kana sighed a little, his muscles finally unclenching as Koudai continued running fingers through his hair.

“I'm sorry,” he mumbled.

“It's not your fault, little brother,” Koudai said softly, ruffling his hair a moment. “None of this is your fault. Besides, in case you didn't notice, there are only four massage tables in here. But even if there weren't... if you needed me to hold your hand the whole time, I'd be fine with it. We do what's needed for family.”
He was blushing again, burying his face in his arms for all that it wasn't likely to do him much good.

“Oh my, you are wound up a bit, aren't you?” another woman's voice intruded. He wanted to look up and at the same time he wasn't sure he dared. At least she was an omega, though he wasn't sure anymore if that would really matter. Koudai's fingers slipped from his hair, replaced a moment later by the omega woman's touch. He tensed up again immediately, but instead of withdrawing, she pressed harder along his shoulders and up the back of his neck. She hit something and his whole body flinched.

“Hmm, yeah, it's too hard to tell if it's the injuries or natural,” the woman said, moving around him to press fingers against his temples. “Oh sweetheart.... Okay, I'm changing your session, I'll be right back. What's your favorite scent, dear?”

“Kouki,” he said without thinking, immediately turning redder than a tomato. The omega woman looked at him a moment, then laughed, a bright and cheerful, even comforting sound. She was so pretty, with fine, almost doll-like features, and curves that even the shapeless professional uniform she wore (that reminded him a little too much of hospital scrubs) couldn't really hide.

“Is he more of a dirty work with his hands type or a pristine work with his mind type?”

“The second, I guess,” he mumbled, rubbing at one cheek as if that would make the redness go away. “Warmth and safety and goodness and light, but leather and spices and.... I dunno....”

“All right. I'll be right back,” she said, still smiling. Kana felt another sigh huff out of him and he closed his eyes, forcing down another apology. Maybe someday he wouldn't be the one always making extra trouble for everyone around him.

“You're too hard on yourself, little brother,” Koudai scolded softly, only just loud enough for Kana to be able to hear him. Glancing over, he was surprised to see the older omega seated next to him, frowning at him. “This is what Rei-san does. No one's accusing you of making trouble, because you aren't. The opposite, in fact. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be taking the afternoon off right now. And if it wasn't for you, we wouldn't have had that seating section at the art opening. You know, Kim-sensei actually apologized to me for just assuming there wouldn't be seating and not thinking to ask ahead. And I'm sure you know how grateful she was to be able to sit for awhile.

“But the thing with Uchida-san....”

“Uchida-san's been a vocal critic of Kou-kun's ever since he got that job, nothing Kou-kun does is ever good enough or shuts him up for more than a couple of days,” the red-haired omega countered with a shrug. “People like that will always be a thing, Kacchan, but they aren't your responsibility. All you need to worry about is being true to yourself, being the best version of you that you know how to be.”

“I ... I don't even know what that means,” Kana confessed softly, worry and fear slinking through him once more.

“All we can really control is what we do, how we treat other people. You're a good person, Kacchan. Not everyone's going to see that, but not everyone matters. For right now, all you really need to do is focus on yourself, on taking care of yourself and getting better, okay?”

It felt awfully selfish to him, but he wasn't going to argue with Koudai. Besides, Rei was back, holding a small candle and a couple sticks of incense.
“All right, let's see what we can do about that mess in your back, shall we? And then we're going to make arrangements for you to come back again next week. In fact, I'll send you home with some paperwork for your doctors, we'll get your sessions covered as part of your therapy, okay?”

“Is that ... is that really going to be okay?”

“Make sure to give the papers to Kurosaki-san,” Koudai said, nodding. “He'll take care of it.”

Once again Kana felt like his life was out of his control. A heavy sigh and he closed his eyes. At least this time when the omega woman touched him, he didn't seize up completely? Probably related to the candle and incense she was burning beside him. Cedar wood and rain showers. It wasn't Kouki's scent at all, but somehow it still reminded him of his alpha and it helped.

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Kuina lingered in the massage area, a little surprised, with the way this pool suite was set up, that they had assigned Kana a female masseuse. Not that there was anything wrong with it, of course, and she was obviously a specialist, able to interact with Kana's aura in a way most people weren't aware enough to even consider, let alone actually do. But it was still a little odd and he could see he wasn't the only one hesitating about getting into the actual pool with her still in the suite.

“Um....”

“Hi ... Toya-san, right?” he said, smiling up at the taller omega. He felt a brief flicker of regret that this omega was so obviously - to him, anyway - only interested in alpha women; he had such a vibrant aura, Kuina would have loved to get to know him a lot more intimately than he was going to be allowed. The fact that he was pretty hot on the outside, too, didn't hurt, and he had to mentally shake himself, turning away to poke his head past the shouji into the pool area.

“You're staring awfully hard at my friend there....”

A flinch and he glanced over to see the one called Hikaru scowling at him, arms crossed over his chest. This one was a fighter, it was painted all over his aura. Someone who would do anything to protect those he called friend.

“Ahh, what? Oh, no, no, it's not like that,” he hurried to say, slipping around the rim of the pool so he could sink into the warm waters just as he had suggested to Toya. Once he was in the pool, he crossed over to another bench, though he purposefully picked one that wouldn't let him see Kana directly. It didn't completely block his awareness of the teen's aura, but at least this way he couldn't be accused of staring inappropriately.

“Then what is it like?” Hikaru challenged, though the omega relented from his stance enough to actually get into the pool too.

“I've never seen Aniki and Maru-nii being so protective of another omega who wasn't one of the
girls. I guess I'm just curious. He's obviously been through a lot and his aura is like nothing I've ever seen before.”

“Auras are new-age bullshit,” Hikaru grumbled and Kuina flinched again at the antagonism in the other omega. Neither Hikaru nor Toya were particularly open-minded and as much as he wanted to know why, he wasn't about to just come out and ask.

“Most people who claim they can read your aura are full of shit, yeah, which is one reason why I don't sell myself as a psychic. Too many people are too willing to just tell people whatever they think the customer wants to hear and never mind about the truth. And if you can't do that, then they get mad at you, like it's your fault their entire life is a mess,” he said, shrugging. “Too much stress, man, I've got better things to do with that energy.”

“It's all a crock of shit,” Toya said, sinking into the pool up to his shoulders and closing his eyes. “Auras, psychic healers, soulmates. As if. Science, people. We have science for a reason.”

“He's a bit unreasonable on the soulmates thing,” Hikaru said even as he shoved a splash of water at his friend. “Then again, I don't think he's ever actually met a mated pair, never mind his own soulmate. You'll see, Toya-kun. Mine's a total jackass, but Kurosaki-sama's soulmate is amazing. And don't even get me started on Kacchan and Kou-kun.”

“Was,” Kuina said without thinking. “One of, anyway.”

“W-What?” Hikaru stammered, suddenly frozen. Panic flared in the ginger omega's scent and aura both and Kuina kicked himself. Well, it was too late to take it back now.

“Sorry, told you, I can see auras. Can't control it any more than Maru-nii can control his scenting. You felt it though, right? It's been, hmm, sometime in the last ten days?”

“I ... are you sure?”

“Yeah,” he said, wary of making things worse. “It's ... the best I can explain it is I can see the bud where the bond's torn off, but that's not exactly right either. Definitely not a peaceful death, you have to have felt it.”

“I wasn't sure. I'm still not sure,” Hikaru said, shaking his head. “I've wanted him dead for so long, how do I know I'm not just imagining that's what it was?”

“Does it really matter?” Toya countered. “It's not like that jerk was even a part of your life.”

“No, he was just this weight spoiling every interaction I had with an alpha, other than Kou-kun and Sakai-sensei. Now what am I supposed to do? If he's actually dead now ... by the time his soul is reborn....”

“You do whatever you want, same as ever,” Toya said with a shrug. “That whole paired souls doctrine is Occidental bullshit anyway.”

Kuina toyed with one of his lip piercings, debating his options. On the one hand, Hikaru might actually like to know he had another option. On the other hand, Toya was so completely closed to the idea of soulmates - amusing for someone who had three of them waiting out in the world for him - that he was afraid it would just make things even more tense and awkward.

And then Mahiro was bringing Kana over to the pool and Kuina completely lost focus on anything but the bright-yet-muted glow in front of him. Soul-deep wounds that had been allowed to fester, still oozing wrongness all over Kana's aura ... it was enough to bring a prickle of tears to Kuina's
eyes and he had to squeeze them shut tight for a moment before the information rolling off Kana overwhelmed his senses.

“Puppy?”

“I'm okay,” he said, keeping his eyes firmly shut even as he managed to navigate the pool and draw Kana into a tight hug. A tense beat and the omega all but collapsed into him.

“Shh, it's okay,” he soothed, hugging him tighter for a moment before guiding him over to one of the submerged benches so they could sit together. Only then did he let himself open his eyes, smiling a little at the way the hurting had eased. “Some day,” he said softly, “I want to hear everything, especially about your brother, but not today.”

Kana shivered in his arms, but he wasn't pulling away from him. It was better than he had been expecting. He could feel everyone else watching him, watching them, but they weren't what was important. Settling on the bench with Kana beside him, he smiled a little at how easily Kana leaned against him.

“... that is so rude....”

Kuina twitched an eyebrow at Hikaru but the ginger omega just shook his head before nudging a floating bucket their way.

“He needs to drink that more than any of the rest of us,” Hikaru said with a shrug. The water bottle inside was already starting to sweat, it wouldn't stay cool for long.

“'m tired,” Kana protested.

“Yeah, but you have to drink lots of water after massages. Helps your body flush out the toxins purged from the muscles by the massage,” Hikaru countered. “Besides, we still have to go to dinner after this.”

Kana groaned, but he took the small bottle, sipping from it cautiously.

“Rest a bit if you need to, Kana-kun, it'll be okay. We'll take care of you.

A muted hum of agreement from the other two, though Kuina knew there was nothing muted about Hikaru's commitment to his friend. Kana was in good hands, whether he realized it or not.

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Hayato had fully expected to be bored out of his mind well before the others were finished with their onsen time, which was why he had brought his tablet and an actual book with him. Of course he had also expected to be shown a bare, empty room. Instead, the cozy lounge had a fire, a sizeable television, comfortable seating ... and another alpha who had come as escort to an omega.

He hadn't really intended to strike up a conversation, but Amano had been too curious about his relative youth to resist. This time, Hayato didn't use any names at all, not knowing about the other alpha. He was pretty sure Amano noticed, but the older alpha didn't call him out on it.

“Ah, looks like Masa-chan is done. We're here every Tuesday he's in town, and if you ever just want to talk about the job or need recommendations around town, I'll be happy to offer advice.”

“Ah, thank you, senpai,” he said, bowing politely as he accepted the other alpha's card. “I really appreciate it. Tokyo's kind of intimidating, yeah?”
“Yeah, but you'll get used to it,” the older alpha said with a grin and a wink. Sitting back down, Hayato actually looked at the card this time, running his fingers over the professional embossing. Strange. When he turned it over, his heart skipped a beat. That watermark. No ... no, it had to be coincidence, right? The butterfly was a common motif, after all, though not one he would have expected from a guy like Amano. Maybe it was a nod to his employer? He hadn't asked much, not wanting to be seen as looking for information he himself wasn't willing to give. Still, it looked an awful lot like the Aurora butterfly ... especially when he pulled up the label’s website and placed the card next to it. It was too much alike to just be coincidence, but he had no idea what he was supposed to do about it. Nothing, he supposed. It was a curious convergence, to be sure, but did it really matter?

“Higuchi-san? Your party is ready for you.”

“Ah, thank you,” he said, fumbling with his tablet and bowing awkwardly at the same time. Maybe some day he would learn how to be smooth and poised at all this escort stuff. Today was clearly not that day.

The minute he rejoined the others, his eyes went straight to Kana. He looked ... better. Tired, but better, more relaxed. Even his scent was less tense.

The restaurant where Kurosaki had made dinner reservations was a short walk from the onsen, though it was enough that everyone was happy to be inside again when they got there.

“Oh I think I'm going to have to call Tomoyan to meet us after this,” the omega Hayato assumed was Yamashita Koudai said as they were seated at a semi-private table towards the back. “It's too cold out there!”

“Such a delicate flower, Hachi,” Kurosaki teased. “Oh, I should introduce you. Hayato-kun, this is my dear friend Yamashita Koudai and his assistant's younger brother, Sugimoto Kuina. Hachi, Puppy, Higuchi Hayato, Kacchan's escort.”

“I figured as much,” the older omega said, offering Hayato a warm smile. He felt an ache in his chest at that; of course an omega as beautiful and charming as Yamashita would be mated at his age, but there was still a part of Hayato that felt disappointed at having missed his chance. Even at the same time he realized Yamashita was completely out of his league. No wonder Kana would get so flustered talking about his soulmate's friends. Hayato was going to have to make some mental adjustments of his own, before he made a complete fool of himself.

“Aren't you a bit young and unmated for escort duty?” Sugimoto asked, his head tilted to one side almost as if he were studying a fascinating new specimen.

“There aren't a lot of options for escorts in Fukui-ken,” Hayato said with a shrug. “I was available and I've known Kacchan almost our whole lives, we practically grew up together, so not really any chance of me wanting him like that, you know? He's family.”

It might not have been the smoothest delivery, but the answer was apparently good enough to satisfy the omega as he promptly dropped it. Hopefully it wasn't a question he was going to have to answer too much? Though perhaps it would be better if he didn't hold his breath on that one. He was on the young side, people were bound to be curious.

Even before dinner was finished, Hayato could tell Kana had just about reached the end of his stamina. So could the rest of their party, though everyone was careful not to say it so bluntly.

“Too bad you aren't a year older,” Hikaru teased, winking at him. “You alphas don't feel the cold
as much as us omegas, from what I've seen.”

“Oh, we probably do, we're just trained not to complain about it. Sign of weakness and all that,” he shot back, grinning. “I could loan you my coat if you wanted another layer?”

“Nah, I'll be fine, it's not actually that far, but I figure if I go fetch the car myself and bring it here, I can spare the rest of you a bit of cold. And it's easier than making everyone trudge back to the parking garage.”

Well, Hayato couldn't fault that logic. Nodding, he was just about to tuck back into his dessert when he caught a shift in Kana.

“I –.”

“There's no rush,” Yamashita interrupted, apparently having picked up the same thing. “I only just messaged Tomoyan and he said he has something for you, Kacchan, so you can't go until he gets here anyway.”

“He ... he does?”

“Don't look at me, I have no idea, that's just the message he sent me,” Koudai said, shaking his head and laughing. “It's either just some paperwork or something the school sent. Either way, if Tomoyan's delivering it, there's definitely no need for you to worry.”

Kana didn't exactly look appeased, but at least he subsided back into his seat without further comment. It was going to end up being an early night tonight, Hayato could tell. But maybe that wouldn't be such a bad thing? With two medical appointments, tomorrow was going to be another full day, for all of them.

Chapter End Notes

First, my apologies, the cast list still hasn't been updated and I'm not sure when it's going to be updated. We've reached the stupidly hot part of summer and still don't have A/C, so I'm not spending a whole lot of time day-to-day at my computer. What time I do get, priority goes to typing up newly drafted fic, then edits and generally I run out of time well before I can get to the image editing that needs doing to update the appendices. Sorry. :/

As a reminder, Masun is now going on pause while I start posting Season of Kink fills. Including a couple shorts from this verse. ;)
Despite the name, Suzuki-san is NOT Reita. In my original notes for Fatima, he was going to be, but then those five morons decided no, Gazetto was totally one of Satsuki's bands, sooo. Not Reita anymore. XD Also more Koudai, yay!

Kana felt more than awkward, sitting in a hospital waiting room with Kouki, Mahiro, and Hayato all waiting with him. His soulmate had started to offer to stay back, but of course he had cut him off before he could finish saying something so ridiculous. But it didn't make their party any less obviously unusual.

“Relax, Kacchan.” Mahiro scolded softly, reaching over to squeeze his hand. “You're not the only omega in Tokyo to have an escort, you know.”

“I ... I'm not?” he stammered, feeling silly for his own surprise. And yet...

“Nope, in fact I met an alpha at the onsen yesterday who was there on escort duty,” Hayato chimed in from the seat across from him. “Says his charge is there every Tuesday, when he's in town anyway.”

“Remind Kou-kun of that later,” Mahiro said with a slight nod. “Might be worth scheduling Kacchan's own massage appointments for the same time, if only so you can have someone to chat with while he's busy.”

Hayato turned an interesting shade of embarrassed at that suggestion, but before Kana could ask him about it, Mitsuki himself appeared to invite them into his office. It was probably just his imagination, but Kana couldn't shake the feeling like everyone was watching them, judging him.

“Now, before we start, I have to ask, for the record, so don't hit me for it, okay? Kacchan, are you sure you're okay to discuss your medical issues in front of Maru, Kou-kun, and Higuchi-kun? You don't have to, if you'd rather talk to me privately. I can't tell them anything without your permission, you have the right to decide for yourself.”

“I ... I understand,” he said, hating that little tremor in his voice. “I'm okay with them hearing it from you directly. Less chance of me messing it up that way, right?” he added, latching onto Kouki's hand.

“Yeah, I kinda figured,” his surgeon replied, grinning, “but I had to ask. Kou-kun, Higuchi-kun, have a seat over there and I'll move this screen a minute so you can have some privacy while I check you out, okay?”

He wanted to ask for Kouki to stay with him, but Kana knew he wouldn't be able to get undressed in front of his soulmate. Instead, he settled for a quick kiss and then forced himself to cross the room to the shielded exam table. And still he hesitated a moment before he was able to make himself take off his sweater and jeans, shivering a little even though the room wasn't actually that cold. The table was worse, even though it was padded, the paper crinkling each time he so much as breathed. He wasn't sure when he had last felt so self-conscious about everything down to his
breathing.

“Hey Kou-kun, there's a thermostat over by the door, bump it up a couple degrees, would ya?”

“Sure thing!”

“I apologize in advance, there's no way of warming up the gel we use for the probe, but I'll try not
to take too long one way or the other, okay?”

Kana wanted to ask what Mitsuki meant, but then he was being lightly urged to lay back on the
exam table. Another moment and then a cool gel hit his skin and he yelped. The red-haired alpha
mumbled another apology, adjusting some sort of equipment cart next to the table. Panic flooded
through Kana, memories of the last time he had been nearly naked in a doctor's office with strange
medical equipment rushing over him.

“Shh, easy, Kacchan, it's just the ultrasound machine,” Mahiro soothed, fingers brushing against
his cheek, his forehead. “See? That's the processing unit and there's the screen so we can see what
the probe sees.”

“It's okay, Kacchan, see, I have to press this wand against your abdomen so the soundwaves can
paint a picture of what's going on inside your body,” Mitsuki added, holding up the probe. “I'm
sorry, I should have explained that first, it's okay. No one's going to hurt you. Well, this might hurt
a little as I'm pressing, but if it gets too much, just tell me, okay?”

“O-okay,” he stammered, forcing himself to take a deep breath. Contrition and concern and Kouki's
love. Of course he was safe here. He winced as the probe was pressed into his stomach, but he was
determined not to cry out, no matter how much it hurt. And it definitely hurt, more than he wanted
to admit, little whimpers escaping him in spite of his resolve.

“Stubborn,” the surgeon murmured, easing up on the probe.

“I thought we'd already established that,” Mahiro added, gently carding fingers through Kana's
hair.

“Mm, well, the good news is it looks like you're healing on schedule. I'll forward my okay to your
physical therapist, but I still don't want you doing any strenuous activities, especially lifting. And
no sports. Hydrotherapy only,” Mitsuki said, using a damp cloth to clean up the gel from the
ultrasound. “All right, you can get dressed and I'll write up those orders. I'll include the scan in
your file, so when you do finally get in to see a proper gynecologist....”

“Next Monday,” Mahiro interrupted. “And don't act like you didn't already know, you, because I
told you right after I made the appointment.”

Chuckling, Mitsuki stepped back around the privacy screen. Kana needed another moment and a
few more deep breaths before he was able to make himself get up and get dressed again.

“That's one down,” Mahiro said encouragingly as he helped him down from the exam table. “One
more to go.”

“I don't want to go,” Kana mumbled.

“You want to get better, don't you?” Mahiro countered with a light frown. “Besides, Hachi's
waiting, you don't want to disappoint him, do you?”

“He ... he is?” Kana asked, startled by this revelation.
“Mm. I have to steal Maru away from you for the rest of the afternoon, I'm afraid,” Mitsuki said, looking surprisingly solemn as Kana came around the screen. “But Hachi knows more about this sort of thing than Maru anyway.”

It made sense, but Kana was still upset. Even after everything, a part of him still felt intimidated by the elegant omega sometimes. And no amount of telling himself that he was being stupid seemed to be able to get his brain to stop making comparisons that, inevitably, ended with him feeling like a disappointment.

“You worry too much about meaningless things,” Mahiro whispered as he hugged him close. “The only person you need to be like is you, and that's something you're perfectly capable of doing.”

Somehow, Kana held back the urge to whine at his sponsor. Regardless of how he felt, now was definitely neither the time nor the place to be arguing about his self-image issues. Instead, he turned and latched onto Kouki's arm, silently daring anyone to make an issue of it. No one did.

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By the time they reached the physical therapist's office, Koudai was indeed waiting for them, sharing a cup of tea with the therapist.

“Kobayashi-kun, it's good to see you. Sakai-sensei's notes already reached me, so if your alphas will be good enough to wait here, we'll get your testing started, shall we?”

Even with the silent encouragement radiating from the others, Kana couldn't help himself, clinging tightly to Kouki's arm and pressing his face into his alpha's side. He didn't want to be stuck in the past, but he didn't want this, either.

“Kacchan?”

“Dun wanna,” he mumbled again, refusing to move away from Kouki's side. He could scent the surprise and gentle confusion in the room, but he just couldn't do it.

“Maybe if you explained...,” Koudai suggested, but Kana didn't know how to explain what he was feeling. So he was more than a little surprised at Suzuki's heavy sigh.

“Right,” the beta said. “As I'm sure Sakai-sensei told you, Kobayashi-kun, you've been cleared to start physical therapy, but before we work out your schedule, I need to run some tests, to see how much the various muscle groups have weakened during your convalescence. It's all quite safe, we use resistance gauges to estimate without making you do things like lifting heavy boxes. Of course I don't have a baseline for you, but it will give us a place to start. And then we can talk about where I want to see improvement and by how much and where you want to see improvement and by how much and make a treatment plan from there, okay?”

It didn't sound so bad, so why was he still feeling this dread in the pit of his stomach?

“Sooner started, sooner finished,” Koudai said softly, fingers briefly brushing against the small of his back. “Sooner finished, sooner I can take you out for something sweet.”

He knew it was supposed to be an enticement to get him to go along with things, but there was still that fearful voice whispering wordless dread in the back of his head. It was stupid, and yet....

A sigh and then Kouki was drawing him aside from the others, turning a chair around so Kana could sit with his back to the rest of the room. Only then did he pull his arm free, crouching down in front of him.
“What is it you're afraid of, love?” the blond alpha asked, gently clasping Kana's hands in his. But he still couldn't put words to what he was feeling, misery clawing at him as he shook his head.

“Shh, hey now, it's not like that,” his alpha soothed, pulling him down into a gentle hug. “I'm trying to help, love, but I can't see what's going on in your head unless you tell me, ne?”

“I just want to go home,” Kana mumbled, leaning into Kouki's arms. “I ... I'm not ready.”

“Not ready for what?”

“I'm not ... I'm not ready to be better. I don't want to go.”

“Oh sweetheart ... no, Kacchan, no one's saying that,” Kouki said softly, pressing a kiss to his forehead. “Sensei didn't say you were healed, he said you're healing ... that you've healed enough to start the next phase of recovery. Suzuki-sensei can't change that, it's not his job. His job is to help you take the next step forwards in getting better, only your surgeon can say when you're fully recovered, and you've got weeks and months of recovery yet. Even if you didn't, I'm not letting you go anywhere. You're mine, love, your place is here, with me.”

Something in him actually relaxed a little at the conviction in Kouki's words. Whether any of what his soulmate had just said was related to what he had been feeling or not, hearing it somehow helped. A little sigh and he pressed himself closer to his alpha. He wanted to stay right where he was, but after an all too brief moment, Hayato coughed politely and Kana supposed that meant his friend was trying to warn him that they were about to cross a line. A heavy sigh and he forced himself to sit back, then get up and turn to face his therapist properly.

“What do I have to do?”

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Koudai had to bite back a small smile, watching as Kana struggled his way through Suzuki's tests. He remembered all too well feeling that same frustration himself when he had been at this stage of his own recovery. Kana hadn't wanted to go through this alone, but now that it was nearly over, he could tell the young omega was actually kind of glad Suzuki had refused to allow the alphas to join them. One thing to be weak in front of your therapist, something else entirely to be weak in front of the man you loved more than life itself.

“All right, that's it, all done,” Suzuki announced with a clap of his hands. “And I'm actually pleased with your results overall, Kobayashi-kun.”

“But ... I could barely do anything,” the young omega protested, frowning.

“Which is exactly what I was expecting. Kobayashi-kun, you've gone through a core body trauma. Most people don't appreciate how much of everything they do involves those core muscles until something happens to weaken them. For your age and designation, you're charting well within expectations for this sort of injury,” the therapist said, moving to sit beside him on the bench. “Bet you were a school athlete before all this, right? It shows, you know. It's going to be months before you're back to that level, but you're young enough, I think we can get you there. Now, I want to start you on pool exercises twice a week starting next week. Yamashita-san said you had a massage therapist wanting to see you once a week, I'd like to schedule your pool sessions around that.”

“I ... I don't...,” Kana stammered and Koudai could pick up the trace of fear in the young omega's scent. He wished he knew what was causing that fear, perhaps he would ask Kana about it later.
“How does Mondays and Thursdays sound to you?”

“How about this next Monday?” Kana squeaked and that was definitely panic now. That would never do.

“Excuse me, Suzuki-sensei,” Koudai interrupted, moving up to rest a gentle hand on Kana’s shoulder, “but we should probably take this part of the conversation back to your office. Kana-kun’s only partially in charge of his own schedule right now, especially when it comes to things requiring transportation.”

“Right, right, of course, well, let’s give you ten minutes with a TENS unit and then we can go back to the office and work out a proper schedule, all right?” the therapist said with an obviously abashed look. Getting up, he let Koudai help Kana to his feet, escorting them into a side room and directing Kana to lay down on a padded massage table.

“Have you ever had a session with a TENS unit before, Kobayashi-kun?”

“Um, no, I don't think so,” the omega said, glancing sidelong at Koudai, his nerves plainly visible as he watched an equipment cart being rolled over to his table.

“It's quite simple, really,” the beta therapist explained. “We use these little electrodes to deliver very gentle electric shocks to different muscle groups in a sort of touchless massage. Even with the massage you had yesterday, I could still read a lot of binding tension in your muscles, so we're going to use a low dose of electricity and some hot towels, see if we can't get you to loosen up a little more, okay? And I'm going to send you home with some resistance bands, Yamashita-san will be able to show you how to use them.

Koudai could feel Kana's unease, so he stepped closer again, taking his hand and gently squeezing it in support. It seemed to do the trick, the younger omega relaxing a fraction. He watched where the therapist placed the electrodes and nodded to himself; as much stress as Kana had been under lately, he wasn't surprised those were the groups that were particularly tight still. Just as he hadn't been surprised at Rei wanting to keep working on Kana as well. He had his doubts about how effective the treatments were going to be, given Kana's mental state, but it was better than doing nothing.

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As much as a part of Kana really just wanted to go home, now that he was curled up in a booth with Koudai and ice cream, he was kind of glad they hadn't yet.

“I feel like I should be jealous,” Kouki drawled, sliding into the opposite bench. Kana felt a flush in his cheeks, but he didn't move away from Koudai. He felt ... safe with the omega, even in spite of everything else going on in his own head. Safe and ... loved. Not that he didn't feel that way with Kouki, of course, but ... this was different. He couldn't even explain how it was different, it just ... was. He hadn't felt like this since the night of the accident, hadn't even realized just how much that safety and security had been missing in his life. How much he'd missed that feeling.

“Say that again and I'll pop you one myself,” Koudai half growled and Kana could almost hear the rolling of his eyes. “You keep him too isolated, Kou-kun, it's not healthy.”

“Hey now, he was just out with you guys yesterday!” Kouki protested. “And Sacchan's little sister wants to meet up with him this weekend some time. At this rate, he's going to have another week like last week, and Sensei already gave me a hard time about making sure he actually rests enough!”
Were ... were they actually fighting over him? In public?? A weird feeling nested in his chest at that thought. He didn't like the idea at all, but he wasn't sure that's what was actually happening.

“See what I mean? He's too isolated in that golden tower of yours!” Koudai insisted, huffing and carding fingers through Kana's hair.

“Hachi.... You know he needs to rest. It hasn't even been a month yet, he's already being more active than you were.”

“But not more social, which is my actual point, knothead,” Koudai countered with another huff. “I'm not saying he needs to be more active, I'm saying he needs more time with people who aren't you.”

“Maru and Hayato-kun already live with us, Hikachu is over enough that he's practically living with us....”

“Oh, well, four people, of course that should be plenty,” Koudai said, rolling his eyes again. Kana tried not to squirm, but the more these two argued, the more uncomfortable he felt.

“Look, he's doing the onsen on Tuesdays and while he gets next week off still, after that he'll have physical therapy on Mondays and Thursdays. That's as full a schedule as he can have before Sensei kicks my ass, I don't know what else you want me to do, Hachi.”

“Have Tomoyan and me over for dinner one night a week. Invite Junji-sensei and Kuu-chan over another night. Have his friends over for movie marathons on Fridays or Saturdays and one whole weekend a month. Let Puppy introduce him to the twins. Nudge Maru into inviting the Kanos over - Kacchan hasn't even met Jin-kun yet and he really ought to, soon, before that one gets his stupid self put on bed rest. Yes, having people over will be tiring, but not as tiring as going out to meet them and the socializing will be good for everyone.”

Sitting very quiet, Kana ate his ice cream with closed eyes, following the conversation with his ears and nose. Koudai was worried about him, it was the same scent his brother used to get before getting into a fight with their father. His chest ached again with memories of his brother, and then Koudai's arm was around him, hugging him close.

“It's okay, little brother,” the older omega murmured, brushing a kiss to his hair.

“If there are people over all the time, isn't that going to make it harder to hide that he's sleeping in Kouki-san's bed?” Hayato asked with a thoughtful frown.

“As long as Kacchan's been here now, his scent is all over the apartment, no one would be able to tell from that alone,” Kouki said, shaking his head. “If we're having your new friends over for a weekend, I imagine the group of you will be sacking out in the lounge anyway, so again, nothing to suggest anything improper there. Especially with you living with us. Sometimes the appearance is more important than the details.”

Kana frowned down at his empty ice cream cup, not sure he was liking what he was hearing. Not that he didn't trust Koudai, he did, completely, but it was sounding a little too much like he wasn't going to be allowed to have much time alone with his soulmate anymore. Maybe Koudai was right about him needing to socialize with others more, but he also knew for a fact that he needed his alone time with his soulmate. They got so little time actually alone with each other that wasn't filled with sleep as it was already....

“I'm not trying to take him away from you, little brother,” Koudai scolded softly, hugging him
close again. “One night a week should definitely be set aside for the two of you, even if you just sit home and watch a movie. But trust me, Kacchan, as another omega who’s been through this, you need time with other omegas, time with other friends. We’re social creatures and whether you realize it or not, your sense of community is broken right now. From what I’ve heard, it has been for a long time now, long enough that you don’t even remember what it feels like not to have that wound. It's going to take time to repair all that damage, but we’ll get there. Together.”

The tears surprised even him, wet trails that leaked down his cheeks. If he really was meant to have a wide social circle, then Koudai was right, he had been broken for so long now that he couldn’t remember what it felt like to be properly whole anymore.

“One step at a time,” Kouki agreed softly. “But not tonight. But maybe tomorrow night you and Tomoyan can join us for dinner? And this weekend, Kacchan and I can make plans for next week. Together.”

Kana nodded a little, taking a deep breath to try to calm himself. Together. As long as he had Kouki’s support, he could make it through anything.

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Kana rolled over again, but it still wasn’t any good. He had tried everything, he just couldn’t get comfortable. Something was definitely wrong with him, but he was too scared to go to his mother. She would probably scold him for waking her up in the middle of the night, tell him it was just the flu or something. He didn’t know much, but he knew this wasn’t the flu. Pulling on a pair of jeans, he slipped out of the house and into the night. Atsushi would fuss at him for sneaking out in the dead of night, but at least he would be with his mate.

The aches in his joints had migrated to his stomach, turning into a sharp, stabbing pain by the time he reached Atsushi’s apartment. Pushing the buzzer, he thumped a weak fist against the door a couple of times, grateful that Atsushi’s neighbors were all betas. As terrible as he felt, he could only imagine what an alpha or omega would be picking up from his scent, even with the masking soap.

“Kacchan? What the fuck are you ... shit, Kacchan, what is it??”

Atsushi’s voice and scent washed over him, the alpha scooping him up and carrying him inside. Kana tried to cling to him, but the pain came back, a sudden sharp stab that clawed at his guts. Atsushi was swearing now and Kana could feel a wetness between his legs that felt completely wrong. Atsushi’s bathroom swam into view for a moment, but the pain was making Kana lightheaded.

“Kacchan? Fuck, don’t you die on me! Kacchan!”

~*_~*_~

The panic in Kana’s scent was more than enough to jerk Kouki to full alertness. His omega was once again curled into a tight ball of misery in the middle of their bed. Hesitantly, Kouki reached out, but Kana shied away from him with a choked cry. Which could only mean one thing. A deep breath and he tried again, reaching out more firmly this time.

“Kacchan, it's over,” he said softly, rubbing a hand along his side. “I'm right here, baby.”

Another strangled cry and Kana was suddenly fully awake again, all but throwing himself at Kouki. He held his omega close, moving up against the headboard and pulling him up into his lap.
Kana's tears tore at his heart, but for once his alpha instincts were quiet. And then it hit him - the scent of Kana's tears was different this time. It wasn't just pain and fear, there was loss in them, too, a profound loss he normally only scented when Kana was remembering his brother. And yet the earlier panic had smelled far more like a reaction to a memory of Atsushi, not Hiro. Confused and worried, he forced himself to wait for Kana to recover enough to be able to explain on his own.

And yet by the time the tears were finished, he could tell Kana was more asleep than awake. With a deep sigh, he rearranged them on the bed, tucking his sleeping omega against his chest. In the morning. They would talk in the morning. Hopefully.
When he came back to the apartment the next morning, he was surprised to find Mahiro in the kitchen, fussing without accomplishing much. A deeper breath told him Kana was on the couch, a knot of misery. This was not good. Ignoring the need for a shower for the moment, Kouki went over to his soulmate, crouching down beside the couch and reaching out to rub his arm. In an instant, Kana was up and pressed close to him, clinging to his neck like a drowning man.

“Shh, it's all right, love, I'm here,” he whispered, lifting his omega into his arms. He hesitated a moment before sighing and settling on the couch. The loss scent was back, even deeper than last night. The front door opened and Kouki frowned, but it was Hayato, coming back from some errand or other. The young alpha nodded before slipping into the kitchen and a moment later Mahiro was bustling himself out the door. Nothing made sense, he didn't even know where to start with questions.

“Talk to me, Kacchan,” he murmured, hoping maybe that would be enough. Instead, Kana shook his head and pressed closer. This wasn't working.

“Hey, Hayato-kun,” he called out, a little surprised at the worry he saw written on the younger alpha's face when he stepped out of the kitchen.

“Um, yes?”

“I wasn't gone that long. What the hell happened?”

Guilt flared through both Kana and Hayato, which struck him as being completely bizarre, and yet.... Hayato stood there, visibly dithering, weight shifting from one foot to the other, but no words were coming out of him. And that worried Kouki even more than the odd scents.

The front door opened again, but instead of Mahiro, it was Koudai who walked in from the genkan. And the second the omega's scent hit them, Kana crumpled even more. The red-haired omega cooed something, pressing long fingers into Kana's hair and down his neck. A tense moment and then Kana was slipping away into sleep again.

“Hayato-kun, could you please take Kacchan here into the guest room? I'll be in with him in a moment,” Koudai said, getting up and wiping his hands off on his slacks.

“I can -,” Kouki started, only to have Koudai shake his head even as Hayato stepped in and scooped Kana up off his lap. Huffing, he waited for the sound of the guest room door closing before turning a frown on Koudai.

“You didn't tell us there had been a miscarriage,” Koudai said softly, moving to sit beside him on the couch.

“Yutaka-kun wasn't sure if he believed Kana had been pregnant more than the once. That Atsushi
had allowed it to happen once was hard enough to believe, as hard as that bastard had been working
to hide their mating from everyone. I didn't want to believe it,” he admitted, sighing and pushing a
hand through his hair. “I still don't want to believe it, but I don't know how we'd go about proving
it one way or the other.”

“You're not the only one in denial,” Koudai said with a sigh. “Puppy said he saw it. Them. I called
him on the way over here, he's coming, too.”

Kouki felt something in his heart break. Them. Kana had miscarried more than once. Intellectually,
he knew it wasn't that uncommon for male omegas to have trouble carrying to term, especially
during their teens and early twenties. But knowing the science of it, even in the limited form that
Kouki did, and reconciling that with the reality of Kana's experiences....

“Maru's named me Kacchan's chaperone for the day, I'm going to go take care of him now. Puppy
should be here soon, it might be a good idea to give Hikaru-kun the day off.”

Kouki nodded, not about to waste time explaining that Hikaru wasn't being paid, so it wasn't like
Kouki could just send him home. For that matter, if he even tried it, when Hikaru found out why,
the fiery omega would probably give him ten kinds of hell for it. That thought was almost enough
to make him smile.

“How about we do it together?” he suggested. Taking a deep breath, Kouki forced himself up from
the couch. Well, at least now he had some idea what had been in Kana's flashback last night.

~*~*~

When Kana woke to a bed that wasn't Kouki's, his first instinct was to panic. And then he realized
he was surrounded by the scents of Mahiro and Koudai and the tension left his body. It took him
another moment to remember the flare of utter despair he had picked up from Mahiro ... was it still
the same morning? He had no idea anymore, looking around. He was in the guest room, using
Koudai's lap as a pillow while the older omega combed fingers through his hair. With a shaky
breath, he pulled himself up to lean into Koudai's side, the omega's arms shifting to wrap around
him protectively.

“Mahi-nii....”

“Is spending the day with his mate,” Koudai said softly. “It's not your fault, little brother. You
didn't cause any of this. You're a victim as much as anyone else.”

Kana nodded, but he still felt miserable. He wasn't even sure why, only that he was positive Mahiro
was mad at him for something. And no matter what that something was, it was his fault, regardless of
what Koudai said.

“Come on,” the redhead urged with a gentle nudge. “Kou-kun's probably beside himself with worry
by now. And you need to be having breakfast anyway. Well, more like brunch at this point.”

Kana hesitated, torn between an almost instinctual need to reassure his alpha and a primal fear that
he didn't understand. He couldn't even say what it was that was causing the fear, just that he wasn't
sure he could even face Kouki right then.

“Come on,” Koudai repeated, a firmer nudge this time. “Puppy's waiting for you, too. Who knows
what trouble him and Hikaru-kun are making without us there to supervise them.”
The moment they stepped out of the guest bedroom, it hit him. The scent of another alpha, someone significantly older than his Kouki. Panic flared through him again, and then Koudai's soothing scent curled around him as the omega tucked an arm around his shoulders.

“Shh, relax, little brother. You know neither Kou-kun nor Hayato-kun would let anyone hurt you.”

Kana closed his eyes again, nodding and forcing himself to take a deep breath. It didn't really help. And when he looked up –.

“T-Takashi-ani?” he stammered, too stunned to even think for a second. The hard lines of the older alpha's face frowned at him and Kana felt raw under those intense black eyes. And then the coldness dropped away, Takashi's face relaxing into something more like a smile as he held out an arm. Kana didn't need to be asked, stumbling forward to cry into Takashi's chest. Takashi was nothing like Kouki, his scent filled with sawdust and wood lacquers and iron strength, both strange and comforting. But he was a piece of home and his childhood, a once literal giant of his youth, now only a few centimeters taller than him. And yet still with that giant's strength and safety.

“There, there now, little one,” the older alpha said in a low rumble, slowly rubbing up and down Kana's spine. “It's going to be all right now, you'll see.”

He wanted to believe that. He wanted to believe it so much it ached in his chest. But a part of him wasn't so easily convinced. Hadn't he been told that before, after all? And still things were a terrible mess. And yet he could clearly remember a childhood conviction that Takashi could make anything happen just for wanting it. Maybe....

The addition of another hand on his back was enough to remind him why they were standing in the hallway. He felt a flush hit his cheeks and he forced himself to step back. Those dark eyes were on him again, frowning, and he ducked his head.

“I take it you're Higuchi-san,” he heard Koudai saying from behind him, that hand moving up to squeeze his shoulder. “Yamashita Koudai, substitute chaperone, it's an honor to meet you, sir.”

“Substitute?” the older man repeated in something like mild surprise.

“I've been stepping in when Kurosaki-san has had other obligations,” Koudai said, squeezing Kana's shoulders again gently. “Between Kurosaki-san, Tokai-sensei, and myself, I suppose you could say we've somewhat ... adopted Kacchan here.”

“I see...,” and Kana glanced up at the odd note to Takashi's words. Had that been the wrong thing to say? Was this whole thing about to explode in their faces before it had even fully begun? He could see the older alpha's nostrils flaring a second and had to bite back a whimper. Why couldn't he ever just do things right??

“Kobayashi Kana,” Takashi rumbled and there was no way he could mistake the disapproval in his tone, “how long have you known me?”

“A-almost s-sixteen years,” he stammered, though he wasn't sure how much the first few even countered.

“And in all those years, when have you ever known me to make a snap judgement about anything, hmm?”

“N-never,” he confessed, heat rushing into his cheeks again as he ducked his head back down. One hand caught his chin, tilting it up slowly until he had no choice but to meet Takashi's gaze.
“Trust in me, Kacchan, and trust in your friends. My purpose is to see that your needs are being met and that nothing inappropriate is going on. I am not my father, I am quite happy to listen to the arrangements you and your friends have made. Now, shall we go back to the lounge before your alpha comes charging in here to try to save you from me?”

Takashi's smiles were so rare, in Kana's experiences with him anyway, but it was a genuine smile he was wearing now, one that softened the harder edges age and grief had worn into his face. With a shy nod, he moved towards the lounge, trying not to smile at the way he could see Kouki had been pacing. Hikaru and Hayato were absent, but Kuina was curled up in a corner of one couch, watching Kana with dark, soulful eyes. It was a little unnerving, though he didn't have long to think about it before Kouki was sweeping in between them, pulling him into a tight hug. Appropriate or not, Kana couldn't resist his soulmate, leaning into him and taking a deep breath. Warm spices, sun-kissed leather, and a safety he didn't feel with anyone else. Losing this would completely break him, he was certain of it.

“All right, Kacchan, you've made your point,” Takashi said, briefly touching his arm as he moved past him. Kana wasn't sure what he meant, hefting a heavy sigh before he pulled away from Kouki to take a seat on the couch. To his surprise, it was Koudai who joined him while Kouki took one of the flanking chairs and Takashi settled in another.

“So as I understand it, your parents no longer speak for you, correct?”

Kana nodded, suddenly nervous again. Should they have called Junji in for this meeting?

“These questions are something of a formality. Your parents wouldn't know to talk to us even if they were still empowered to do so,” Takashi said with a low snort. “From what Morihito-san was telling me, the point of all this is to prevent his grandfather from invalidating your mating later. The standard for these contracts is six months, but something tells me you're going to need longer than that, yes?”

“The original agreement was that I wouldn't bite him until he was twenty,” Kouki said with a nod. “But I'm not sure he's still willing to wait that long. It is, however, probably going to be another eight to twelve months before he's cleared, so it will have to be at least that long.”

“One problem at a time, right?” Takashi said with another small smile.

“Pretty much,” Kouki agreed.

“All right. Education?”

“His teachers have sent down materials and his homework for the rest of the term. Kurosaki-san oversees that with I believe some help from Hayato-kun for maths?” Kouki said, glancing over at the young alpha who had appeared from who knew where and getting a nod in response. “I believe he's nearly caught up?"

“I take it any plans for university are having to be put on hold until next year.”

“Unfortunately, yes. It's unlikely he could sit an exam this March, not that he's decided on a college yet, I don't think? Kacchan?”

“I... I hadn't really... I mean, everyone's said I won't be able to sit the exam, so I kinda... stopped thinking about it,” he admitted quietly.

“That's fine,” Takashi said, another quiet smile appearing as he patted his hand. “They're probably right, given your health status. Even if you were able to take the exam, you wouldn't be able to
Another blush hit Kana's cheeks, but he could only scent amusement in the air.

“Traditionally, this little arrangement,” Takashi continued, gesturing to include the whole penthouse, “wouldn't be allowed. Of course I've seen houses smaller than this penthouse, so we just won't tell Otousan anything he doesn't want to hear. How many and who exactly is living here?”

“Myself and Kana, obviously. Kurosaki-san has moved into the guest room, his mate Sakai-sensei comes over one night a week. Sometimes their daughter Ritsuko stays with us, she's only five and omega. Chamu-kun comes down on Fridays, goes back on Sundays, though not every week. Hayato-kun moved into the office. Itoh-kun isn't technically staying here, but he's here more than he isn't. Yamashita-kun steps in when needed, but he doesn't stay here either. And this is Sugimoto-kun's first visit in awhile. Kacchan, Chamu-kun, and Itoh-kun are listed as long-term guests so the building staff doesn't bother them. Legally speaking, we haven't changed Kacchan's residency yet, which I think means the government would view him as being homeless, but Tokai-sensei has wanted to wait until after Kacchan's graduation, rather than trying to reconcile a Fukui high school graduation with a Tokyo address.”

“As I seem to recall, Kurosaki-san used an office suite for Kacchan's mailing address on the contract. Would that be Tokai-sensei's firm then?”

“Yes. Ah, do I need to arrange a meeting with him?”

“No, I can do that for next time.”

“N-next time?” Kana stammered, another brief swell of panic rising into his chest.

“Guardian contracts are supervised with random visits every two to four weeks, to make sure everything is still going smoothly,” Takashi explained with a small smile. “Not even Haya-kun will know when I'm coming, that way I see things as they actually are, not as they've been arranged to placate me.”

As sensible as that was, the panic wasn't going away. Surprise visits meant Takashi could catch them in any of a number of unacceptable situations, it was just sheer luck that he had come while Kana had been in Mahiro's room.

“Kacchan, stop,” Takashi said firmly, taking his hand and squeezing it. “I already know you and Morihito-san share a bed. I do know a thing or two about the needs of injured omegas and I'm not blind to the strength of the soulmate bond between the two of you. Besides, Haya-kun already told me all about the first time you and Morihito-san met, which is why I volunteered to do this, while claiming it was so Otousan didn't have to travel. Otousan would understand, he knows how these things work, but he's too set in the old ways, he'd have no choice but to insist on separating the two of you. As long as you're being careful, I see no reason anyone else should need to know or care what you do here at home. There is more than enough room in this apartment, as far as anyone needs to know, you're sleeping in the guest room with your guardian placed between you and your betrothed. It's enough to satisfy traditions and it's what's going to be put in your file.”

“But....”

“Takashi said firmly, his voice going softer as he spoke. “You are our responsibility, as an omega of Fukui-ken, of course we'll do what we can to ensure your happiness.
“Now ... tell me more about this scandal situation?”

“Last week, Kacchan debuted as my betrothed,” Kouki said. “The entertainment and society pages had the predictable response, considering he's half my age and male, though we filed objections to the worst of the speculations about his previous sexual activities.”

“We being...?”

“Tokai-sensei and the Matsumoto Group's in-house legal department. Suggestions that Kacchan was some sort of child prostitute that I had *bought* for myself count as slander of both my character and his, and considering he is a private citizen....”

“I take it Tokai-sensei is being retained as Kacchan's legal counsel. Who is paying him?”

“At current, he is advocating for Kana as part of his pro bono work with the Omegas United group, particularly given Kana's current lack of resources,” Kouki said and Kana blinked. This was news to him, he had sort of been expecting for Kouki to have been covering Junji's retainer for him. Although ... Junji *had* said back at their first meeting that he did advocate pro bono as part of his civic service.

“And if I were to call Omegas United...?”

“They know all about it, yes. Kana's story as a victim of the pre-Christmas bombing is only secret insofar as the news never mentioned him by name, since he was a minor at the time of the attack. I admit, I called Tokai-sensei directly because he's my friend, but he's done all the appropriate paperwork.”

“I notice the scandal didn't stay on the top of those pages very long,” the older alpha said with a wry smirk. Kouki shrugged, but he was also smiling. Meaning they both knew, or at least thought they knew, the timing of the Sony thing had been deliberate. Kana couldn't help feeling a little unsettled, surprised when it was Koudai who rubbed his back.

“I'm just guessing, but with that smile .... Sacchan?” the red-haired omega ventured.

“I didn't ask him to do anything, if that's what you're asking,” Kouki replied with a shrug. “He offered to look into it, but I suspect people think it was Kumi-chan, considering Sony and Avex are industry rivals. Not that it really matters one way or the other.”

“Indeed it doesn't,” Takashi agreed with another nod. “Well, I'm satisfied Kacchan's needs are being adequately met so far. Just give me a few minutes to chat with Haya-kun and I'll be out of your hair.”

“Y-you ... you don't have to rush off or anything,” Kana stammered, throwing an uncertain look at his alpha.

“At least stay for lunch,” Kouki offered with a nod of his own. “It's the least we can do, after making you come all this way.”

At first, the older alpha looked like he was ready to decline. And then something like mischief twinkled in his eyes as he graciously accepted the invitation. Kana felt momentarily torn between shyness and an urge to give the man another hug. Fortunately for him, Hayato chose that moment to resurface again, almost bouncing at his brother's side as he tugged him out to the terrace. Glancing after them, Kana was surprised to see the two alphas engaged in lighting cigarettes; he hadn't thought Hayato smoked.
And then Kuina was waving a hand in front of his face.

“Hey, while those two catch up, how about you tell me all about them?” the older omega asked, flashing him an openly playful smile. “Is that really Hayato-san's brother? They don't look anything alike! He looks old enough to be my dad!”

“Yeah, no, they really are brothers. Hayato-senpai was kind of a surprise. Actually, I guess both Hayato-senpai and Yuta-nii were kind of accidents? But I can't really say too much about that, just what I've heard,” Kana said, shrugging.

“Oh I so don't even care, tell me everything!” Kuina said, laughing as he scooted closer. Kana felt his ears burning at just the suggestion, but if it gave him a break from schoolwork for awhile longer, he would take it.

~*~*~

After a social lunch and seeing the elder Higuchi off, Koudai quietly urged Kana to lay down for a nap, not the least bit surprised when Kuina volunteered himself as a cuddle buddy. Though it did leave him wondering what to do with himself and the rest of their little grouping for the few hours he expected Kana to rest.

“I guess you don't really need me,” Hikaru mumbled, the younger omega throwing a frown towards the master bedroom.

“You could join them, you know,” he said. “I'm half tempted to do that myself.”

“Nah, if I sleep now, I'll never get to sleep on time tonight,” Hikaru said, shaking his head. “But ... if you wanted.... I could set an alarm and get you guys up in ... an hour or two?”

“Are you sure you don't mind?” he asked with a sidelong glance at the younger man. He would hate to be an imposition on Hikaru's better nature, after all.

“I'm sure, honest. I'll just ... con Hayato-kun into playing Halo with me or something,” Hikaru replied, smirking. Koudai couldn't help a laugh at that, especially with the way the alpha in question was sputtering.

“Two hours then? Don't kill him too much or he won't want to play with you anymore~” he teased.

He couldn't say he was particularly surprised to see Kana was already asleep, Kuina sitting up beside him and petting his hair. The purple-haired omega looked up when Koudai stepped into the room, a small smile twitching at his lips.

“Couldn't stay away, huh? He's fine, see?” Kuina murmured. “What's the matter, aniki, don't you trust me with him?”

“Of course I do, I just ... decided a nap sounded like an excellent idea. Hikaru-kun's going to wake us in about two hours. If you aren't tired....”

“Maybe in a little bit,” Kuina said, shrugging. There was something behind that, obviously, but Koudai wasn't going to press. If Kuina wasn't volunteering the reasons yet, well, there was likely to be a good reason for that. Kuina would explain himself when he was ready.

Annoyingly, he felt like he had just barely gotten to sleep when someone was shaking his shoulder to wake him again. Huffing, he rolled over to find himself frowning up at Hikaru. Another inhale told him it was just the two of them and that was enough for him to abruptly sit upright, nearly
cracking heads with the other omega.

“Kacchan.....”

“Is fine. He got up on his own after about an hour, Kuina-senpai brought him out to the lounge, said to let you sleep the rest of the timer. And I was going to but, um, your mate is downstairs. Or maybe up here by now, it doesn't take that long.”

Koudai frowned, closing his eyes a moment and taking a deep, steadying breath. He had intended to call Tomoya later, suggest his mate come over for dinner, but he hadn't actually done it yet, so it worried him that the man had turned up on his own. Not that it was likely to be anything serious, but still.

“It's probably nothing,” he said, pulling himself up from the bed. Now if only he could make himself believe that so easily....

And yet when he walked out to the genkan, Tomoya was hanging up his coat as if it was the most natural thing in the world for him to be off work so early on a Thursday afternoon. Hands on his hips, Koudai stood at the edge of the genkan and frowned at his mate.

“All right, what the hell's happened now?”

“Why do you always assume something's gone horribly wrong?” Tomoya countered, coming up to him and wrapping him in a loving hug. “It's fine, babe, everything's fine.”

“Don't give me that,” Koudai countered, struggling to resist the pull of his soulmate's charms. “It's not even 14:00, Junji-senpai never closes the office this early, especially not on a Thursday.”

“He didn't close the office,” Tomoya said, trying again for a kiss, but Koudai leaned away from him. A sigh and Tomoya dropped his arms from around his mate's waist. “He didn't close the office, but he doesn't really need me anymore today, so I'm taking some personal time. You think I can't feel how upset you've been this morning?”

“Tomoya....”

His alpha scooped up one of his hands and raised it to his lips, kissing the back of it.

“You are my mate, my soulmate, the love of my life. Worrying about you is what I do. And if there is anything at all I can do to ease your pain, you know I will. Always. All you have to do is say the word, love.”

It was ridiculously cheesy, but no less heartfelt, and that genuine emotion was enough to melt his heart all over again. That silly little grin of his didn't hurt, either.

“How did you ever convince me to accept you as my mate?” he huffed, though he relented and let his alpha draw him back into his arms.

“Just lucky, I guess,” Tomoya said with a soft chuckle. “So am I allowed to stay or...?”

“Hmm, I don't know, an alpha, completely unrelated, visiting another alpha's betrothed in the middle of the day? Sounds a bit suspicious to me. We'll have to run it past Higuchi-kun.”

“Hey now, I've represented him as his lawyer! And I thought you had already adopted him as your little brother?”
“I’m not the one you need to convince,” Koudai teased, walking with him into the main part of the penthouse. “Ne, Higuchi-kun, is it all right if my mate visits for ... the rest of the day?”

He had to bite back a laugh at the sudden deer in the headlights look the young alpha got for a moment, obviously not expecting to be put on the spot like that. And then he seemed to be seriously considering it, head tilting downwards as he chewed on a lip ring, visibly mulling over his options.

“Well, he's outnumbered ... and he is your mate ... and it's not like he's going to be trying to get Kacchan alone, so.... So yeah, it should be all right.”

“If it helps any, I've actually acted as Kacchan's lawyer a couple times,” Tomoya said, amusement filling his scent even as he wrapped his arms around Koudai once more in another hug from behind.

“Is ... is everything okay?” Kana asked, glancing between them nervously.

“Is now,” Tomoya replied with a nod, squeezing Koudai again.

“Let me guess,” Hikaru said with a huff, “you're intending to stay for dinner now. See? This is why I shop one meal at a time: I never know how many of you are going to turn up for the next one!”

“You are more than welcome to borrow him for grocery shopping later,” Koudai said, laughing as he leaned back against his mate's strength. He wasn't sure how much he believed his mate's supposed reason for coming over, but he wasn't going to send him away now, either. True or not, he wasn't going to surrender the comfort of Tomoya's support so easily.

~*~*~

Another Friday meant another morning jog with Satsuki, things starting off with the usual teasing about Kouki's age and Satsuki's shorter legs. Another bit of comforting normality in a life that had been somewhat lacking that for the past month.

“So ... how's that omega of yours doing?” Satsuki asked after awhile.

“It’s been kind of a rough week, but ... come over for breakfast anyway? Then you can ask him yourself about meeting up with Mizu-chan. Maybe between you and Hachi, he'll actually agree to it.”

“Hachi? Something happen with Maru?”

“He had to take yesterday with his mate, Hachi's filling in for a little bit. It probably worked out for the best, really, since we also had our first surprise inspection yesterday. You know how Maru does with surprises.”

“Inspection? Oh, because of the betrothal and that contract to have Kacchan's honor protected?”

“Yeah,” he said, nodding. “The eldest Higuchi son is overseeing the contract, rather than the clan patriarch himself, supposedly because of the travel requirement. It's ... going to be interesting.”

“You're the one who used to complain about having such a boring life!” Satsuki teased, laughing easily.

“Yeah, well, I take it back! Kacchan and I could use a bit more peace and quiet, dammit.”
“Too bad the universe doesn't work that way. If it did, I wouldn't have my baby sister calling me in tears because of jerks at school,” the other alpha said with a low growl. “And I know she hasn't told Father, because it would've been all over the news, him taking out the beta assholes who only ask my sister out because they think, as an omega, she'll be some easy sex.”

“And why she told you, because you're too far away to do the same thing?”

“Probably,” Satsuki agreed. “Which didn't stop me from ordering her on the next train up here last night when she called me. As upset as she had been, Father wouldn't have needed her to tell him what had happened. He wasn't happy when I called him - after she was already here and pretending like she'd surprised me - but since she was already up here....”

“Glad to see you putting your deviousness to use for good reasons for a change.”

“Oi, you don't have to say it like that!” Satsuki protested, but there was still laughter in his tone and underlying his scent. Kouki put on his most innocent expression and his friend just laughed even harder.

Two showers and some light cooking later, they were just getting settled at the breakfast bar when an obviously sleepy Kana shuffled over to Kouki, eyes closed as he leaned against him. Not entirely normal, but not odd enough for him to be that worried about it, slipping an arm around his omega.

“Where's Hachi?” he asked softly, kissing Kana's tousled hair. But even as he asked, the red-haired omega in question walked into the kitchen, heading straight for the coffee pot.

“Is there enough for the rest of us?” the older omega asked, flashing him a teasing smile over his shoulder. “Or do I need to make more? Good morning, Sacchan.”

“Rice cooker's still mostly full and you know where everything is,” Kouki said, smiling even though Koudai's back was turned towards him. The light huff wasn't unexpected, though he had to bite back a grin at the disgruntled zombie look Hayato was sporting when he walked into the kitchen a moment later. Koudai glanced over at the young alpha, then huffed and shook his head.

“What did you do, stay up half the night playing video games?” the older omega scolded. “You better not be getting into bad habits, young man!”

“Jus' need coffee,” the teen grumbled, pouring himself a mug and then adding a questionable amount of sugar. “Didn't think Kacchan would be up this early.”

“Well, I'm kind of glad he is,” Satsuki chimed in and once again, Kouki found himself biting back a grin, watching the sudden transformation from coffee zombie to embarrassed fanboy.

“S-sa-satsuki-sama...!”

“Mizu-chan was thinking maybe you and her could meet up for dinner without us ... how did she put it ... boring old knotheads?” his friend continued, turning to address Kana directly. His omega blushed prettily again and this time Kouki couldn't help a soft chuckle, even when it earned him a weak swat from his soulmate.

“I ... I don't ... when?”

“Tonight? Or would tomorrow lunch be better?”

Kouki was actually surprised when Kana didn't immediately panic at the suggestion of something
so short notice and without him. Surprised, but also a bit relieved.

“I don't really ... I was hoping to just stay home and rest tomorrow,” Kana mumbled, still blushing cutely. “I ... I guess we could do tonight, but ... she knows I have to bring Hayato-senpai with me, right?”

“I told her, though I'm not sure how much she actually believed me. The whole betrothal thing is a bit alien to her.”

“I know a couple places here in Otsuka,” Kouki suggested. “If you want, I can probably get the three of you a semi-private table at one of them. Might make things easier?”

His soulmate was dithering again, but he wasn't refusing outright. That felt rather like progress to him.

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“Will you stop that already?” Hayato scolded softly and Kana felt yet another blush heating his cheeks as he dropped his hands back into his lap. He didn't know why he was feeling so nervous, it wasn't like he hadn't met Mizuki before this. Of course that meeting had been a bit different. Kouki wasn't here this time, he was actually going to have to talk to her himself, no old friends along to carry the conversation for them. Considering he didn't really know her at all....

“Did we really have to get here so early?” he grumbled.

“It hasn't even been five minutes yet,” his friend countered, laughing. “Relax, will ya? I thought you knew this girl?”

“I've only met her the one time and Kou-kun and Satsuki-san did most of the talking that time. I ... I'm not even sure we really have anything in common,” he confessed, sighing. “Which I guess that's probably why she wanted to meet up again without them. But she's a fifteen year old omega girl and I ... well....”

“Well, regardless, there's nothing to be gained by worrying and fussing about it now, right?” his friend said with a cheerful grin. “She can't be as bad as you think, or else Kouki-san wouldn't be letting you do this without him. And come on, she's Satsuki-sama's kid sister, how scary can she be?”

“Did you miss the part where I said she's three years younger than me?” he huffed, glancing up when the café door opened again. Still not Mizuki. Kana was more than half tempted to suggest he and Hayato go ahead and get their table just to get them away from the door. Most of the people coming through the doors were betas, as he had been somewhat expecting, but this made the third group with at least one alpha in it. And just like the previous ones, he could feel this alpha giving him an odd look. Not surprise exactly, but ... something about him was obviously abnormal and the voices in the back of his head were all too happy to start rattling off a list of possible reasons, none of them good.

“As wound up as you are, if I were her, I'd be wondering if there was something wrong, too,” Hayato whispered against the back of his ear. “Close your eyes, take a deep breath, and try to relax, okay? I've got your back, Kacchan. It's why I'm here. No matter what, I will protect you.”

What a ridiculous thing to say. Huffing, Kana closed his eyes and took a deep breath, but it didn't help. He could scent the alpha, only half a meter away at the hostess stand, and while her beta companions might have been completely clueless, her worry was plain to Kana's nose. He could
feel her eyes still watching him and it made him want to run away. He was nothing to her, why should she even care? What was she seeing when she looked at him? A helpless victim? Or something even worse?

Hayato's arm tucked around his shoulders, bringing with it the comfort of his friend's familiar citrus-y scent. With his eyes still closed, he couldn't say for sure if Hayato's gesture was having the desired effect, but at least the unknown alpha and the rest of her party were moving away, to be seated somewhere hopefully far away from the table Kouki had reserved for this meeting. A beat and he slumped against Hayato's side. Maybe this whole thing had been a mistake?

“I'm sure Mizuki-san will be here any minute now,” Hayato said, squeezing him close for a second. “And then you can order whatever you like from the menu and the biggest dessert they have. Kouki-san made sure I had money enough for us both and I'm sure some food will help. Food always helps.”

Kana huffed a sigh, in no mood to either argue or spoil Hayato's good mood. And he could scent an omega coming their way. Perhaps that was Mizuki? Whoever it was, they were still too far away for any details, not even gender, just the telltale omega notes.

“Gods, something smells absolutely amazing,” Hayato mumbled suddenly and Kana frowned up at his friend. They had been smelling the admittedly mouth-watering scents of the café's food for the last five minutes, nothing about that had changed, so why the sudden outburst? But Hayato wasn't looking at him, his eyes closed as he savored whatever it was he was smelling. Maybe it was just that his friend's hunger was finally getting the better of him? Now that he thought about it, he couldn't remember seeing the alpha eating very much at lunch earlier. Or breakfast, for that matter. Yeah, that was probably all that it was.

Even so, Hayato's behavior kept getting weirder, the hostess looking like she was getting ready to confront them about it, when the café door opened to admit Mizuki and Satsuki. Kana was just getting up to greet them when Mizuki abruptly paled and crumpled to the ground. A low whine escaped her as she clutched her abdomen. Kana knelt down beside her, his own nostrils flaring as he caught it. Heat scents. Mizuki was going into heat.

“Nooooo,” she whined, trembling. “No, no, no, no, no.”

“I'm sorry, oh god, I didn't ... I couldn't have ... I'm so–.”

Hayato's babbling was cut off abruptly when he reached for Mizuki only to have his hand slapped away by a snarling Satsuki. Kana could hardly believe what he was seeing, what he was smelling.

Hayato was Mizuki's soulmate.

Chapter End Notes

I make no apologies for that cliffhanger!

Posting early this week to give anyone who hasn't yet but might want to another chance at becoming a Patron over on my Patreon before November and the start of NaNoWriMo. I'll be spending the month furiously drafting a novel, Vampires' Three Jewels #1, Fledgling's Hope (title subject to change), so I won't be posting any more fanfic until December or possibly January, (unless a certain hamu manages to present
me with a prompt I just can't ignore). Patronage starts pretty cheaply, so if you like what I write and want to see more of it, please do consider it.

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