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by HighLadyNyx

Summary

"I will lay you bare, Akihito. I won't allow you to hide from me."

Ace computer hacker Takaba Akihito is embroiled in a crucible of intrigue and self discovery when he becomes the focus of Japan's top crime lord Asami Ryuichi as well as a mysterious and dangerous adversary.

Or, where Akihito *Pwns it*, Asami is the master of double entendres, and naked wrestling is sometimes the only possible recourse. ADULTS ONLY.
Hello! I've been meaning to post my stories on AO3 for ages (I'm usualy on FF.net) but kept forgetting or putting it off... Someone nudged me on my latest story on the other site (*thanks Dragonstone2017!* and so I'm taking the plunge! My first outing on AO3, here we go.

A few notes:

I keep some Japanese elements – such as the Surname Firstname order. *Japanese words [have English translations].*

DON'T TRY THIS AT HOME. Seriously, folks, I know I shouldn't have to say this but I will all the same. This is strictly a work of fiction, a fantasy that exists only in my imagination. I do NOT condone any of this in real life. Though eating and drinking, perhaps, I might allow. ;-)

Constructive criticisms very welcome! Actively encouraged, in fact! What could be improved, what's boring, what you don't like... Or do like (^_^) Please let me know!

So here we go. Smoking hot, domineering bastards are my guilty pleasure. I hope you enjoy this story too!

~ Nyx ~

**EXTRA WARNING ADDDED:**
One party doesn't take No for an answer, and the other fights him though deep down actually wants it. This story is a fantasy, a guilty pleasure where you want someone to push you just a bit too hard.
If you're looking for a story with a healthy relationship where boundaries are respected and consent is absolutely full and freely given, THIS IS NOT FOR YOU.** They do get there but it's something of a journey. Heed the warning tags please, they're there because they apply.

DISCLAIMER: The Finder series and all recognisable characters belong to Yamane Ayano sensei.
Chapter 1

Saturday night, 2 am.

"Hey, hold up! We're not done yet!"

"You're not. I am. So long suckers!" the second voice taunted.

The first was completely frustrated. "I told you to wait! We still have to lock up!"

"No, you do. You're the senior one, as you remind me every bloody hour of every bloody day. You deal with it!"

Their raised voices bounced all the way up the winding stairwell from the basement and echoed around the cavernous glass foyer. Waiting for the elevator, the three suited men glanced towards the dark stairwell to see who could be making such a racket. It was entirely unprofessional, late hour or not.

"The boss told us both to finish up!"

"He meant finishing up on the release, baka [idiot], and only then 'cos you suck with the AI –"

"Hey!"

"– and you'd need me to bail your ass out if it all went tits up. I'm not going to hold your hand while you lock up just 'cos you're shit scared of the building at night."

In the foyer, there were some raised eyebrows at the colourful language.

"That's not true!"

They heard the beep of the security lock and then two sets of footsteps coming up the stairs.

"Isn't it?" The voice suddenly became theatrical and full of suspense. "It's daaaark outside. There's not a soul around. The servers are whirring away like they're run by ghosts. Don't you think it's spooooky – Oof!"

"Lay off it, Takaba! Jesus..."

The overly suspenseful voice had abruptly cut off with a grunt, but now it was taunting again. "Sure, Mitarai. I wouldn't want you to piss your pants –"

"That's it, I've had it with you!"

Laughing gleefully, Akihito legged it up the stairs two at a time, chased by a fuming Mitarai. Too busy checking over his shoulder, Akihito sprinted pell-mell around the corner into the foyer and smashed scrappily into a wall, Mitarai quickly following next to him.

There were raised voices from somewhere beside them. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I'm so sorry!"
Akihito barely heard. It wasn't a wall. Walls didn't grunt as you hit them, or instinctively catch your arms in a surprisingly strong grip as you both stumbled a step, limbs all tangled up. Walls didn't wear suits that screamed designer and affluence beyond imagination with shirts so crisp he could have cut himself on their edges. And walls most certainly didn't smell fantastic – a smooth, expensive cologne with a lingering sandalwood note, a hint of cigarettes, and an underlying scent that was powerfully male that rushed up his nostrils. It was the kind of intoxicating smell that entrenched itself deep in the psyche, inextricably linked with this memory.

Akihito peered up, and up and up since the man was considerably taller...

... To see the face of the one person he absolutely, categorically, could not meet.

Asami Ryuichi, who had been stunning in the photos but who was even more staggering in the flesh, a veritable sex god in human form if there ever was one. Out of all the things Akihito knew him to be, that was the first thought that occurred as he stared in a daze.

Asami Ryuichi, who still had his arms around Akihito, holding him up against one hell of a solid chest...

Akihito scrambled free with a jolt. Molten golden eyes, like a dragon, Akihito thought, swept over his lithe frame in blatant appraisal, raising his heart rate and temperature to an alarming degree with just the pseudo-embrace and sweeping arrogance. Akihito flushed, feeling like his casual linen and tight denim did nothing to protect him from that piercing evaluation, fully feeling the heat packed behind the gaze as they fixed on his hazel eyes with astonishing intensity.

Asami Ryuichi must never, ever know who he was. In fast rising panic, Akihito blurted out the first thing he could think of as a distraction. "Wow, you work weird hours."

"So says the pot to the kettle."

Holy cow, that voice... Akihito wilfully ignored the shiver that raced down his neck – how the hell did the man manage to sound sultry saying such mundane words? Akihito's automatic mode of self preservation had always been bluster and bravado, and he wasn't about to start mincing his words now, even straight to that sinfully gorgeous face.

"Uh-uh, that's on you, Mr CEO. 'Cos apparently so many people work weekends here, till late too, which means major system upgrades can only be done at ungodly hours like these. Lucky us."

"Takaba!" came Mitarai's horrified outcry.

Respect for your social betters was deeply ingrained in Japanese society. Speaking to his boss in such a way, or even the boss of his boss, would have been extraordinarily offensive, possibly even a disciplinary matter. Addressing the CEO like this all the way at the top of the food chain was akin to blasphemy.

"You had best start explaining yourselves if you want a chance of keeping your jobs!"

It was one of the two men with Asami that Mitarai had smashed into, a bookish type with black wireframe glasses. The other was a blond giant, built like a tank with his neck wider than his jaws and triangulating out into a huge chest. Akihito guessed the latter to be a bodyguard judging by how he hovered on the periphery, ready to jump in but taking his cue from Asami – who looked more entertained than anything if the curved lips were anything to go by, interest smouldering in his eyes...
Akihito swallowed. He had to get out of there. Pronto.

He gave a nervous laugh. "My bad! Hope your suit hasn't creased! Laters!" He gave Mitarai a cheerful wave before he scammed.

"Takaba!"

Akihito leapt over the reception turnstile, thanking his trusty trainers and the stretch in his tight jeans, and dashed out into the night. He pointedly ignored the phantom gaze he could still feel boring into his retreating back as he left Mitarai to bow and stammer terrified apologies.

Three corners down the street, Akihito sagged, his heart thudding a mile a minute. Out of sight, out of mind, he reassured himself.

Little did he know that it was too late. He'd already been caught in Asami's sights.

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- V1P3R -

I only asked for one thing. Wait. I told you. BUT YOU DID NOT WAIT. Every bit of pain. Every drop of blood. I'll make you pay. Remember me, Z4m4 M1r0. I'm coming for you.

[I like this] 6
[I dislike this] 5041
[Share] 206
[Views] 71,658

"No."

"Yes."

"No!"

"Yes!"

"This is a bad idea. Even I know it, and that's saying something."

"It'll be fine. It's just for today."

"What about the other guys?" There were six others in the IT office, they'd all been here at least two years.

"They're R&D, not support. Besides they're hard pressed for the pitch they're doing end of the week. It has to be you."

"There must be some company rule against this. Only a month into the job, remember? I still don't know how half of anything is connected."

"You'll work it out. Besides it can't be helped, you're the last man standing."

Akihito jerked the phone away from his ear as his boss succumbed to another bout of vomiting.
Gross. Akihito's girlfriend's early return last night had prevented him from joining his two colleagues on their Sunday night meal out, saving him from the nasty bout of food poisoning that had struck them both down.

Akihito's brow creased. It was unexpected for Risa-san to return last night. Her business trip had been curtailed and she was suddenly attentive and keen to spend time with him again, very much the opposite from before she'd left when she'd insisted that she needed some space. He didn't know what to make of it...

"Oh, man," Ogawa groaned, back on the line again.

Akihito took that as a cue to return the phone to his ear. "Do you even remember why you hired me in the first place? Me?"

"Takaba," came the jittery, slightly high-pitched reply.

Akihito could imagine Ogawa's balding head glancing around like a twitchy squirrel to check they weren't being overheard, more nervous about it than Akihito who was the one with the court order. 'Misdemeanor computer trespass' had been the charge – hacking, basically.

On paper it was all above board. Akihito was one of Japan's top independent white hat hackers operating under the online handle DigiH4wk. It was legitimate and occasional-when-he-was-skint work, what employers liked to call preventive vandalism which was precisely about breaking into websites and flagging what was vulnerable so they could fix it. There were big bucks to be had if one knew where to look and how. Akihito liked to target social media giants, online search engines and other high profile websites, since they were full of vulnerabilities and could cough up anything up to a year's worth of rent if he found something serious enough.

But it was his main, covert pastime that had landed him in cuffs. He was an online investigative journalist, a long-time dedicated contributor to the anti-corruption publication Spotlight. His penname Z4m4 M1r0 – leetspeak for zama miro, 'serves you right' – had stuck since his first exposé in his mid-teens on a local minister making regular payments for underage prostitutes. Z4m4 M1r0 had become increasingly difficult to catch over the years, but this time he'd been over eager in hunting after a certain politician under police investigation for influencing party policies to benefit his black market dabbling, and especially on his rumoured connections with one Asami Ryuichi.

The moment his weathered detective friend Yamazaki had told him about the businessman in whose shadows lurked rumours of underworld dealings, Asami had become Akihito's next target. His gut had done that adrenaline-charged tightening thing that gripped him like a starving dog with a juicy steak bone. If this seemingly philanthropic CEO of the international multi-billion dollar company that advertised itself benignly as a knowledge, information and events business was indeed dirty, it was Spotlight's duty to reveal him to the world and help the police in making arrests.

But after Z4m4 M1r0's numerous sojourns into the Tokyo Police Major Crimes Division's encrypted files, they were eager to snag him and the Cyber Crimes Division had mounted a costly manhunt. They'd been waiting for him the moment he stepped his electronic foot in the MCD playground sniffing for any information on Asami. The CCD had tracked down his IP and played tag with the MCD who had tracked him down in person, catching him red-handed on the cusp of infiltrating Sion's network. With so much attention on Akihito, Yama-san hadn't been able to help keep him off the books this time.

Akihito had been sentenced to 2000 hours of community service. But therein lay the irony of ironies. Ogawa, head of IT Operations for Sion Global, was struggling to clean out a particularly tricky Remote Access Trojan trying to gain root, and in desperation had turned to the CCD for assistance.
But stretched for resources from chasing the likes of Akihito, the CCD had nonetheless sensed an opportunity for restorative justice.

Ogawa, understandably, had not broadcast the fact that the skilled programmer who had filled the new 'Information Security Manager' role and was now upgrading Sion Global's cyber security system was a hacker serving a community service order for trying to hack them in the first place...

Slouching in his cramped cubicle, Akihito looked down at his casual attire. It was the concession Ogawa had reluctantly agreed upon when Akihito had stated it as the price for his help. He adamantly refused to straightjacket himself in a suit and tie every day, especially as he was only meant to be stuck to his laptop buried in the basement anyway. The other guys in the IT office was used to his appearance by now, but if he was traipsing around in the building full of ambitious business people, he was going to stand out like an alien. And a blond one at that.

"Besides, I don't think you want me waltzing around the building, do you?"

There was a pause as Ogawa seemed to remember Akihito's habitual black jeans, fashionably frayed at the knees, and the casual shirt thrown over a loud t-shirt. There was a sigh, but then the boss seemed to weigh the continued IT support as more important.

"All you have to do is cover the Helpdesk for the day," Ogawa insisted again. "Just do what Mitarai does, check it's really plugged in, tell them to turn it off and on again. And if that doesn't work, we'll be right on it first thing in the morning."

Akihito rubbed a hand over his eyes. After seeing another alarming message that morning on Spotlight's forum, he really wasn't in any mood to speak to anyone. V1P3R was entirely serious or seriously disturbed, or both. Akihito was used to rubbing important people the wrong way and receiving his fair share of abuse as well as fan mail for exposing the rich and corrupt, but there was something unsettling and persistent about this one.

"But Ogawa-san –"

"No buts, Takaba. You're already in the doghouse with that stunt you pulled on Saturday, you have some serious ground to make up."

"You heard about that, huh?" Akihito wasn't surprised that Mitarai had ratted him out.

"We've all heard about that, Takaba. Besides, you're under a contract, remember?" Ogawa never called it a court order.

"Fine! But if there's any heat about this, it's on you, Mr Bossy Boots."

"Yeah, yeah. You'll be fine. There are never any serious problems anyway, dead easy for the likes of you. Bye –"

That was the last thing Ogawa croaked before Akihito figured he was rushing to the bathroom again by the retching sound that was abruptly cut off as the line went dead.

Dead easy, his ass. Akihito spent hours rushing around like a headless chicken, dealing with a multitude of incompetent tech-related problems the likes of which he couldn't have made up if he'd tried. Niggling hardware problems, a multitude of issues about access and configurations, idiots who misplaced files or deleted files or locked themselves out of their own encrypted files trying to be
clever setting passwords when the file wasn't even confidential, and call after call after call about connection problems to meeting room projector screens.

Akihito could have put off a good number of them to the next day like Ogawa had suggested, but deep down he was simply too nice a person to make them wait. Not that he sweet-talked over any problems either. Not daunted in the least by whatever the size of their office or however fancy their job titles, he didn't beat about the bush as he told everyone straight up what the problem was and where they'd gone wrong. He was bluntly honest without being unkind, knowledgeable without being arrogant, and he bulldozed through their first impressions – and more than a few curious questions about him literally running into the CEO in the dead of night. It was the gossip of the year.

He was reaching the end of his tether. By the time he'd been covering two other people's worth of jobs for nine hours straight, with his stomach growling and gnawing at his insides in place of the lunch he'd had no time for, he was ready to call it quits for the day.

"IT," he muttered unenthusiastically as the phone rang for the gazillionth time, not even bothering to look at the caller ID.

There was a pause before a man's clipped voice requested, "Manager Ogawa please."

Half lost in emailing back on another query, Akihito mumbled absent-mindedly, "You get me today, the others are off sick. Can I help?"

There was another pause, probably at his language being so inappropriately colloquial. "Who am I speaking to?"

The condescending tone finally made Akihito turn his attention to the call. After the day he'd had, he didn't appreciate it. "This is Takaba, Takaba Akihito. I can sort out your tech issue if you can put up with me. Or if you're specifically after Ogawa-san, you'll have to try back tomorrow."

There was a pause. "I see. One second, please."

Akihito blinked as the line was suddenly filled with the generic corporate classical string music. Placing him on hold after they'd called him? Pissed off, he slammed the receiver down. He still had fifteen people waiting on supposedly top priority problems; he didn't have time to be hanging around for this schmuck!

Not thirty seconds later the phone rang again. "IT," Akihito snapped.

It was the same voice as before and it was not pleased in the least. "Takaba-san, this is Kirishima Kei, personal assistant to the CEO. There is a tech issue for you to sort out, I can sort out your tech issue if you can put up with me. Or if you're specifically after Ogawa-san, you'll have to try back tomorrow."

The line went dead, leaving Akihito staring silently at the phone.

"Ah, crap," he muttered as he legged it out the door.

Akihito shifted his laptop in his hands. Releasing an exhausted sigh, he watched the floor numbers light up as the elevator slowly dinged its way skywards, absorbing and depositing other occupants from its mirrored interior along the way. It was the first time he had stood still that whole day, and with the moment of peace, it didn't take long for thoughts of his girlfriend to encroach from the shadows where they'd been relegated in the face of mundane but numerous computer problems.
Risa-san was often on his mind these days, and not in a good way. Before she'd left a week ago, she didn't want to see him and he'd been convinced she was about to break up with him. But last night she had been very sweet, asking after his day and how his work was going, her attentiveness even chasing him into the bedroom for an hour. It was a cycle that repeated too frequently, her hot and cold and hot again reception, needing space one week and insisting they didn't spend nearly enough time together the next. It was twisting an unpleasant knot in his gut, and as much as he enjoyed her company when she seemed to be keen on their relationship, he knew it was time to end things.

"Takaba-san?"

Akihito jumped as the mental picture of Risa – beautiful Risa with her shiny hair and clever eyes and willowy figure – was abruptly replaced by that of a middle-aged man with glasses. The same guy he and Mitarai had ran into on Saturday night... The elevator was empty and the circular button for 32 was lit up above the parted doors.

"Ah yes." Akihito scrambled out before the doors closed.

The look the man gave him was decidedly unimpressed. "Do you not have more suitable attire?"

"Not for being buried in your charming basement which is where I usually kick back. I've only ventured out of the cave 'cos I'm covering multiple sicknesses today. Do you or don't you want me to deal with whatever IT problem's flummoxing you?"

The CEO's assistant levelled him a hard glare before turning and leading him down the wide corridor. Akihito's sneakers sunk into the thick dark carpet, a world away from the linoleum that usually graced his shoes down in IT. As he followed Glasses, he couldn't help his eyes straying out the floor-to-ceiling windows and the view of the city bustling like a teeming ant nest far, far below.

Turning the corner at the far end, Glasses led Akihito to what he guessed must have been his office space, but it could have easily served as a private study. Majestic cranes soared and ancient pines stretched into golden skies on the folding screens demarking his 'office'. The furniture was solid and wooden, the furnishing plush. Akihito was a man entirely comfortable in his own skin but for the first time in his life he wondered if maybe jeans didn't quite fit amongst such sumptuous surroundings.

As he stood there fidgeting, Glasses pressed a buzzer on his desk intercom.

"Yes?"

Akihito jumped at the cool baritone that came through the speaker, the blood draining from his face. Was that...?

"Takaba from IT is here, sir," Glasses said.

Akihito had thought he was just here to check a computer. Coming to the CEO's office hadn't equated in his mind to actually seeing Asami again, the man who'd triggered the whole sequence of events that led to him working for Sion Global in the first place.

No no no no no...!

"Send him in."
Chapter End Notes

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Z4m4 M1r0 was his shield. Akihito was used to being safe in his anonymity, concealed behind his cheeky alias and a whole array of cyber shields. At most he might have communicated with his targets anonymously online. He might have spotted them being led into court from afar, just a nameless face in a packed crowd jostling to see the next spectacular fall from grace thanks to Spotlight.

He never, ever, did face to face.

Panic gripped him as Glasses practically shoved him through the heavy double doors.

His focus skittered across the wide expanse of carpet and landed on a meeting table, the large sheet of oval glass nestled with twelve sleek armless armchairs. The decadence of the insanely rich, the display of such space as to dwarf the large meeting table when every bit of breathing space was at such high premium in the mega-metropolis. Not only was the office stupidly big, Akihito realised, but oddly shaped as well, the main event happening down the long arm of the L stretching to his left.

The desk was predictably massive and solid. Flanked by the impressive Tokyo backdrop, floor to ceiling on three sides, with the golden sun setting behind Mount Fuji and painting the room faintly orange, it was a stamp of prestige with a hefty dose of intimidation. But eclipsing it all was the sheer presence of the one Akihito would have given anything to avoid; the easy, devastating dominance of the man who secretly held the true reins of power over Tokyo, if not all of Japan.

Act normal.

That was the only plan Akihito could think of. To be as unremarkable as the next employee, to be easily overlooked. It was too late to do anything about his clothes, but boring, he could try. So he held his tongue and waited to be acknowledged, knowing that his tendency to blurt out whatever to whomever wasn't what good little employees did.

Asami was flicking through a thick file and still hadn't glanced up.

It was a strong jaw, with the kind of sculptured definition that artists strove for. The lips were slightly pursed, the nose straight, the golden eyes fixed hard on the report, his brow creased in concentration or maybe displeasure. Several strands of black hair had escaped the comb to brush over the lashes. Another impeccable three-piece ensemble from an expertly tailored wardrobe completed the striking image of one of the – ok, who was he kidding, the most attractive man that Akihito had ever laid eyes on.

He'd actually convinced himself that Asami couldn't possibly be as stunning or quite as larger-than-life as he seemed to recall after their whirlwind encounter in the dead of night. But even from so far
across such a ridiculously large office, he could see now that there was nothing exaggerated about his memory whatsoever.

All Akihito could think was, *Hot damn.* And he wasn't even gay. He'd be in serious trouble if he was. His attention drifted back up...

Shock jolted through him as he suddenly found himself meeting Asami's gaze – the eyes dark but the gleam golden, ensnaring Akihito in an air of barely leashed menace...

How long had Asami been watching him watching him? Caught ogling – because that's precisely what he'd been doing, no denying it – Akihito flushed, his mouth going dry.

It was the slightest curve of those lips that did it, the mouth a little softer now but unmistakably smirking at Akihito's discomfort. That, and the intense gaze that lazily raked all the way down to Akihito's favourite sneakers and back up the black jeans hugging his lean thighs and the non-iron shirt, before meeting his alarmed eyes again with an arrogant glint.

Akihito's temper flared, snapping him out of his trance. Gritting his teeth, he clawed back what little air of professional competency he could salvage. He wouldn't be looked down upon simply for the massive difference in pay checks and microscopic strands of DNA.

*Be boring.* All he had to do was fix the problem and leave. Simple.

With as cool an air as he could muster, Akihito swallowed back his angry retort and stepped forward with a polite bow instead, his face blank. "Pardon me, I am Takaba covering Tech Support today. How may I be of assistance?"

Akihito wasn't sure if that might have been surprise that briefly flickered across Asami's face before it gave way to arrogant amusement again.

Asami reclined in his leather throne. "It's good of you to come so quickly, Takaba. My equipment overheated," he waved elegant fingers at on his desk, "Why don't you take it in hand and see what you can do."

No freaking way. Asami did *not* just do that... But there was nothing in his expression to indicate he'd meant those words as anything other than face value. Maybe he really didn't and it was just that bedroom baritone that made Akihito imagine loaded meanings.

"I can take a look," he replied as evenly as he could manage, heading across the office. *Normal and boring,* he reminded himself.

The hardwood desk was absolutely huge. Stick a mattress on it and Akihito could have slept on it comfortably. It was mostly empty save for the laptop, docking station, screen, intercom, and some clearly pricey stationary that could have helped towards his rent with the 24K gold inlay. Several thick reports were piled up on one side but it was still nowhere near like the scattered mess that was Akihito's crowded cubicle.

As he came up beside the desk he encountered a problem. Asami sat there, his long legs crossed at the ankles and stretched out completely in the way, his hand still resting on the thick folder he'd been reading. The silver laptop was docked in the middle of the desk, entirely in Asami's personal space. Akihito paused and looked at Asami, who simply returned the gaze with that same amused sneer playing at the corner of his lips.

Akihito's irritation flared again. CEO or not, regardless of whatever he knew about the man, Akihito was having far too shitty a day to be humouring whatever power games Asami was playing. The
"Excuse me," he said firmly, not waiting for a response before reaching across Asami to hit the docking release button and pulling the laptop towards him to place beside his own. Asami's was sleek and visibly top of the range, whereas Akihito's was a powerhouse encased within a chunky old model.

"These things tend to slow down with age," Akihito deadpanned, pretending to be talking about Asami's laptop as he started it up. He couldn't help himself, it was in his nature and he was too annoyed to hold his tongue any longer. "But injecting a bit of artificial boost can go a long way to help keep the motors chugging away."

Asami was 35. Hardly old old, but certainly older than his 23. Akihito was sure the man wouldn't get it anyway...

"You can whip it into shape, I take it?"

Oh there was no mistaking the emphasis this time, subtle or not. Holy baloney, Akihito was trading innuendos with Asami... He cleared his throat. "What happened with this?" he asked instead, triggering system diagnostics.

"I opened a file. It crashed, overheated, and it's been stuck on that blue screen of death ever since." Asami waved at the sea of blue with the white blocky text.

"What was the file?"

"I don't know."

"Who was it from?"

Asami hesitated. "I'm not sure."

"... You're not sure?" Akihito repeated flatly. Asami might have the brains to run a multi-billion dollar company but it was plain stupid opening mysterious attachments from God knows who.

"It was forwarded to me, supposedly originally sent by... an associate," came the drawled reply, with just enough emphasis to let Akihito know that it wasn't really an associate. "Is there a problem?"

Akihito tweaked the diagnostics to include extra parameters to cover his suspicions before letting it run.

"This is why you have problems in the first place," he muttered to himself as he turned to his own laptop to check other configurations. "What's the point of upgrading infosec if people are just opening any old file anyway? No wonder Ogawa-san had to... Root?" he interrupted himself. "Why is it root? No way... General, general, ah, there it is, general executive... Disable that..."

"Why are you changing my access level?"

Jolting, Akihito froze. His fingers hovered, his back still bent over the laptop.

Asami was leaning on the desk to Akihito’s left but was looking over his right shoulder, practically draped over Akihito save for the token gap that separated them. They might not have actually been touching but Akihito could feel the warmth through his shirt at his back, the sandalwood cologne and the scent that was all Asami curling up his nose...
Akihito scurried out from under the taller man as though he'd been scorched. Fighting the uncomfortable heat that seemed to have rushed over his body and up his face, he mentally shook himself and stared defiantly back into that smirking face. "Root access gives you complete control over everything."

"So? It's my company."

Akihito wasn't backing down. "I know that, but unless you know what you're doing, you'll cock everything up and next thing you know, Sion's whole network goes pear-shaped."

A dark eyebrow rose.

Akihito always did this. He got all fired up and then blam, verbal diarrhoea. Right in the big honcho's face. Way to go, Aki.

"It's risky unless you know what you're doing," he amended with only a bit more tact. Then ruined it by adding, "which you clearly don't." He would have rolled his eyes at himself if that would have improved his mouth filter. "Just let IT know what you need doing and they'll do it for you."

Asami stepped towards him, forcing Akihito to step back. "Ogawa had no issues with my access level."

Ogawa probably didn't have the balls to say no to the CEO but Akihito wasn't about to be browbeaten into agreement. "I clearly must not be as skilled or willing as my boss is to fix problems you might introduce."

"What exactly is your job?"

Akihito couldn't tell if he was being paranoid or if Asami was hinting at something. He played it down. "Well, you know, I do admin stuff. I'm just your regular dogsbody."

Asami's eyes narrowed a fraction, but Akihito was saved when the laptop beeped. "Do you mind?"

"By all means," came the gracious reply as Asami finally gave him some breathing room, rounding back to his side of the desk again. But instead of sitting down behind it, he reclined against the edge, right beside the corner where Akihito had placed Asami's laptop.

He was still standing way too close but Akihito wasn't about to be cowed. He hunched over the machine again and studiously ignored how his face was only an arm's length away from Asami's tight ass clad in the amazing suit as he checked through the scan results and cleaned out the system and why the heck was Akihito thinking about Asami's ass? He could feel the heat rising up his neck and he grit his jaw as he focused his attention firmly back on killing the trojan that had been detected and not on the tapered fingers lazily smoothing up and down the bicep and why was Asami stroking himself and why the hell was Akihito still thinking about him? Argh! What was wrong with him?

Despite his brain's little freak-out Akihito soon managed to finish the job and restrict Asami's access from being able to do any real damage.

"All done," he confirmed as he turned the laptop back towards its owner. "I think your associate must have sent you the wrong file, it contained a trojan worm aiming to send all of Sion's folders into the public domain. Luckily our security shields forced your laptop into a system crash and offline so it hadn't been released or spread. You need to stop opening dodgy files. Contact the Helpdesk if you're not sure or get stuck." Because Akihito sure as hell was never going to see this smug,
infuriating, arrogant, beautiful man again.

Asami didn't miss the hint. Or take it. "I'll be sure to call for you personally, Takaba Akihito."

They remained there, Asami leaning on the corner of his desk not nearly far enough away, Akihito about to insist again that it was a Helpdesk job, when he belatedly registered the deep, downright erotic purr of Asami's baritone caressing his name. It clean wiped his mind, blanked any recollection of what he'd been about to say. He then realised that he was lingering with his mouth hanging open and gah, how awkward!

He huffed, snatching up his own laptop. "If that's all, have a good evening." He bowed, turned, took a step –

"There is... one more thing."

Something about that tone raised the hairs on the back of Akihito's neck.

Asami turned to grab something from a drawer of his desk, small enough to fit in his hand. Akihito teetered, still on the verge of hightailing it out of there, when Asami prowled round his desk to loom over him.

Akihito was rendered mute by the alarming change in Asami's demeanour. Merciless and lethal, his powerful aura swarmed over him. Akihito had only been sensing glimpses of it so far, he realised, as he was now faced with the potent darkness fully unsheathed.

Asami's broad shoulders suddenly seemed broader, his chest immovable, his height towering, his features hard as marble. Akihito had no trouble at all imagining this formidable man at the head of a global crime syndicate.

Mesmerised, it took a moment to see what the long fingers held aloft – an encrypted USB stick, with buttons for the pin on its side.

"I want you to unlock this for me."

Akihito's stomach plummeted. "Did you forget the pin?" he asked innocently.

"I don't have it."

"Is it yours?"

"... It's in my possession."

_Oh crap..._ Thoughts raced and tripped over each other in Akihito's mind. _Get out of here! ... Don't be such chicken shit, Aki, he's just a man. Just a man. Just a man..._

This was potentially shady business. Actually, scrap that, there was no _potential_ about it, it was blatantly criminal. And yet, what a chance to learn something straight from the horse's mouth! He'd be no use to _Spotlight_ being a coward, and he'd never forgive himself if he missed such a golden opportunity...

He battled for composure, to appear harmless. "Sure. I'll bring it back tomorrow."

"This doesn't leave my office. You'll do it now."

Akihito blinked. "Now? But..." _Now_ didn't give him time to poke around. He cleared his throat and tried to stall. "Whose is it really?"
"A... colleague who is unfortunately no longer with us. We need access to some records where they couldn't complete the handover."

Akihito’s thoughts conjured up all sorts of wild scenarios, mostly involving bodies encountering all manner of gruesome ends... He swallowed hard and turned to his laptop, accessing the employee database. "Ok, well, uh, if I can have the employee's name, I can check their account details to see if we have –"

"No name."

Akihito paused, then turned back to Asami. "No name? Is this even legal?" he blurted. If they'd even been an employee in the first place.

"It's fine," Asami dismissed vaguely. "Can you do it or not?"

He didn't know when Asami had moved closer, but Akihito was suddenly aware that he'd been backed up with the desk digging into the back of his thighs. Would he make it out of the office alive if he took a wrong step here? He was mildly panicking inside and he was sure Asami could see it.

"I –" He clamped his mouth shut as he came out with more of a squeak than a voice. He cleared his throat and tried again. "I can try, but it might take some time."

Asami tilted his head thoughtfully. "How long?"

He shrugged as his hand crept to the back of his neck, squeezing the muscle, a nervous habit. "It could be minutes, it could be hours. It might even need a chip-off which I can't do here. I won't know till I try. That's why I said I'll bring it back tomorrow."

Asami was still studying him, considering. Akihito couldn't stop fidgeting, edgy as fuck.

He almost leaped out of his skin as Asami abruptly leaned right forwards, so far that Akihito was forced backwards onto his elbows on the desk to avoid crashing heads, awkwardly bent backwards from his waist. His laptop landed beside him with a thud.

"What –?" he breathed shakily, but Asami was reaching over him for the intercom button.

"Kirishima, is there anything urgent in my schedule this evening?"

"One moment, sir," came the immediate response from Glasses.
Asami waited. By resting his hands on the desk. On either side of Akihito. Hovering over him. While Akihito was still forced backwards on his elbows. With their eyes locked.

... Huh?!

Akihito couldn't fathom what was happening. He couldn't get his head around the *position* they were in. It didn't matter that there was a clean gap between them and they weren't physically touching, the implied intimacy completely blew a fuse in his head.

But the most confusing thing of all... What on Earth was he doing getting *flustered*...? There was an unmistakable stirring –

Alarm propelled him as he shoved at Asami. "What the hell are you playing at?"

But Asami barely moved. He easily pinned Akihito back down with a large hand on his chest, and all at once there was no question at all that they'd so, *so* crossed the line.

The secretary's voice came over the intercom. "Your schedule is clear, Asami-sama. However your
dinner engagement is still an option if you wish to attend."

Asami took his hand away from Akihito's chest – leaving the imprint of his searing heat – and reached for the button. "They're still expecting me?"

"They assured me that they are completely at your service."

Asami sighed. "Fine, let them wait. I'll decide when I'm done here."

"Yes, sir."

Akihito was all mentally geared up to fight free when Asami scooped him up, slipping a strong arm under his back and righting him.

Akihito opened his mouth, but before he could let loose on his ire, Asami was steering him around his desk, the arm wrapped securely around his waist.

"Hey, stop that! What –"

Asami bundled Akihito into his own chair, pushed it in under the desk, and plonked the chunky laptop in front of the startled young man. Holding the USB stick out to Akihito, Asami waited expectantly.

Akihito looked up at Asami. He looked down at the thumb drive between them, then back at Asami again. He looked at the solid wooden desk, at the luxurious leather swivel chair that had seemed like normal size when Asami was sitting in it but now looked massive around Akihito. He looked out at the darkening Tokyo skyline, around the office, then back at Asami again. Finally registering that his mouth was hanging open, he snapped it shut and glared.

"What... are you doing?" he demanded hesitantly.

"It could take some time, can't it? So sit. And start."

Akihito didn't know how he was supposed to concentrate with Asami breathing down his neck, or do any snooping even if he did manage to get it unlocked. He tentatively went to tug the USB stick away. Asami didn't let go.

Akihito frowned, awkwardly holding one end of the flash drive while Asami still held the other end, and glanced up –

The menacing intensity was back on full whack, the golden gaze razor-sharp. Akihito was frozen for all of two seconds when Asami stretched out his other arm over the backrest.

Akihito shrank back in the oversized chair. Then he saw it.

Only revealed in the shadow of the suit jacket with the way Asami's outstretched arm parted the jacket open, against the side seam of the waistcoat, sat a holster with a glint of black.

Asami was packing.

Akihito's blood froze.

Run. He hadn't seen anything. Honestly. Would Asami buy it?
Round hazel eyes flew up to the frightening, stunning face – but Asami's expression didn't change, still coolly vicious and seeing every flash of emotion. Akihito belatedly realised that for someone like Asami, no way was this an accident.

Akihito cursed himself. He should have legged it the first moment he'd wanted to, pride be damned.

Asami's voice was a samurai sword wrapped in velvet. "You unlock this. That's all you're going to do. Understand?"

Akihito swallowed and nodded mutely, his movements jerky.

Asami let go. Akihito almost dropped the USB stick, fumbling to catch it and shakily putting it down next to his laptop. Just get this over with, he told himself. He took a fortifying breath, willing himself to concentrate.

I'm sitting at the desk at the head of Sion...

Akihito shoved that surreal thought aside and grabbed the thumb drive. He scowled at the tremor of his hands, scratching against the USB socket of his laptop.

"Need a hand plugging my flash drive into your USB port?"

Akihito stilled. That voice again? In no time at all Asami had slipped right back into loaded overtones. "At your age don't you mean your floppy drive?" he muttered as he jammed the flash drive in. Civility had flown clean out the massive windows.

Asami coughed a stifled laugh.

Pulling up a specialized access program to probe the encryption put Akihito back on more familiar territory and he felt a bit more like himself after being so rattled.

"Are you running through pin combinations?" Asami was watching closely.

Akihito spared him a wary glance as his fingers clicked away. "Not much point doing a brute force attack. It's easy enough to create an automated trial-and-error process but you'd get locked out after ten attempts."

"So...?"

"So, what?"

"How are you going to unlock it?"

Akihito frowned. The more he explained, the more he risked revealing what he could do. "I don't know yet. But what does it matter anyway, you just want to get to the data, right?"

He'd hoped that would be the end of it, but no such luck. Asami leaned on the desk, his large hand right beside the laptop. "How?"

Akihito doggedly tapped away. "These things usually have a backdoor, another authentication system in case the user misplaces the pin. Depending on where, this could take a while."

"Where, being...?" Asami prompted.

"If it's server side I'd have to –" Shit, this was such a bad idea. "It could be server side, or it could be on board which would be a lot easier."
Asami wasn't fooled or deterred. He leaned closer still. "You'd have to...?" he coaxed.

Akihito didn't know why he was having such difficulty maintaining regular breathing just because Asami was so close. He'd forgotten what he was typing too. "Look, it's really boring. Just let me get on with it, ok?"

"Tell me, Takaba." There was an edge of warning this time.

It seemed he wasn't going to let this go. Maybe it came from being so used to keeping his finger on the pulse across his sprawling business empire. Akihito glared as he turned resolutely back to feeling out the encryption and forced his brain to snap out of it, determined not to be caught in a terrified stupor again. "If they're clever they'll have set it up to allow decryption only when on the network, or over the VPN. That's a whole other set of hurdles to cross. But if we're lucky then the encryption hardware's on board and we can just mount it."

"Mount it?" Asami murmured, his voice highly suggestive. "Really, Takaba. This is fascinating."

Akihito scowled. "You're unbelievable." He was saved from a further retort that would have most likely been highly ill advised when his feeler program delivered some good news. "Huh. The key's right here after all. I'll be able to crack it wide open."

Focussed on the task, Akihito missed the amused smirk Asami gave him.

"I just need to set a breakpoint right after the decryption routine... set it to... retrieve the key..."

"You do this a lot?"

Akihito paused, turning slowly from where he'd been craned over his keyboard. "Uh..." His eyes shifted. "First time?"

It was a blatant lie. Asami scoffed but let it slide as Akihito turned his considerable hacking might to retrieving the encryption key, clutching at elusive hopes of gaining intel.

The familiar act of delving into the coding calmed him. He almost forgot about Asami hovering close, never interrupting but always watching eagle-eyed. He didn't know whether Asami could tell that this was no run-of-the-mill work that he was doing, but he just wanted to see what he could grab and get out of there.

Completely absorbed, he reached several times for something that wasn't there next to his laptop. He usually had drinks and nibbles to hand, a familiar habit to sustain himself as he dedicated hours upon hours on his investigations. He was so in the zone that he didn't notice anything unusual when a cup of tea and some dorayaki [red bean pancakes] appeared there at some point. He simply pulled a leg up onto the chair, forgetting he was wearing shoes and that this was Asami's chair, and munched and sipped away as he mumbled to himself and his fingers carried on tap-tapping away.

He even handled a Helpdesk query that pinged up as high priority, one of the execs a couple of floors down losing his rag over a new internal blog that he was meant to be updating with some key announcement. Akihito sat cross-legged, both feet up on the chair now, and handled it in his signature way – after confirming his suspicions in the records, he voice-skyped the man and told him outright that he was only stuck because he forewent the mandatory staff training held only the week before. Still skyping the exec and firing off basic instructions, he tweaked something in the decryption code that had just occurred to him. He hurriedly finished his call as he managed to get some preliminary readings back from the USB drive, glimpsing the name 'Tsubasa' as the registered owner – though he didn't know if it was a man or woman or even just an alias meaning 'wing' –
"Aha!" Akihito exclaimed. He set it to run, watching, waiting, eyes scanning... It bleeped back with a six-digit number. "Kaboom!" He fist pumped the air. "Suckerrrrrrrs! Now let's see –"

"Just your regular dogsbody, huh?" The warm, husky voice breathed in his ear.

Akihito froze. Dead stop. The world crashed back down. He'd been so absorbed that he'd forgotten where he was... Had Asami been watching all this time? The light ache in his joints told him it had been just over an hour – by now he was well versed to his protesting joints informing him how long he'd been 'in the zone'.

"Are you done?"

Akihito unfroze himself. "Uh, just a sec." He disconnected the drive and yanked it free. "Here." So much for skimming off anything useful.

As Asami straightened up and out of his space, Akihito released a shaky breath he hadn't even realised he was holding. Yep, definitely time to go. He stretched and rolled out the kinks. It wasn't unusual for him to get cramp from sitting still for long periods of time. The bottom corner of the screen told him it was nearing 8pm. He closed up his programs and pushed away from the desk, creaked out of the chair, took a step –

He came nose-to-perfect-knot of Asami's tie. There was an edge to Asami's gaze and Akihito knew what the question was without a word being spoken – he couldn't unlock the USB.

"There's a pin." Speak of the obvious... Akihito would have winced at himself had he not been so bushed. "I reset it." Well, d'uh.

For the teeniest, eentsiest moment, Akihito actually entertained the idea of holding the new pin to ransom in exchange for the identity of this so-called colleague. But Asami's eyes took on a dangerous glint as though sensing the direction of his thoughts, reminding Akihito of the other glint of black that he'd spied before, and he caved faster than a house of cards.

He blurted, "It's 987654. Just plug it into your laptop and it'll prompt you to change it. Even an idiot could do it."

Asami regarded him for another heart-shaking moment before trying the pin. Apparently satisfied with the flash of green, he pocketed the thumb drive and returned his full attention to Akihito.

Akihito wasn't aware of his breath stuttering, all he could see was Asami suddenly looming nearer and he was edging backwards but the desk was in the way and there was only so far he could lean backwards. His exhausted mind grappled with the sense of déjà vu, mustered the energy to flee –

Asami terminated any attempt to escape before it could begin. No beating about the bush this time, he swiftly closed the final space between them, trapping him against the desk with his groin pressed against Akihito's lower belly, Akihito's crotch digging into a muscular thigh.

There was a strangled whine. The abrupt, full-on contact had Akihito bypassing panic straight to overload.

A long tapered finger traced up his throat, tilting his chin up. The deep voice curled lazily about him. "I don't think there's any need to bother anyone about the insignificant little USB drive, do you?"

The barefaced warning was purred in a sensual baritone, with menace and seduction all tangled
together. Akihito's body was totally confused. He could only manage a jerky shake of his head as heat rushed north and south and everywhere in between.

Asami pressed closer, harder, their chests touching now. Akihito's stomach strained as he leaned away but that mesmerising face was oh so close and getting closer still and Akihito's shaky breath rushed between their lips and why the hell was Asami angling his head –

The electronic beep was like a bucket of ice water thrown in Akihito's face.

"Asami-sama, I apologise for the interruption. There is an urgent call for you from Europe."

Kirishima's voice over the intercom shattered Akihito's stupor. Realisation dawned, and with it horror –

Akihito shoved Asami aside with all his might and scarpered.

He couldn't have made a more undignified exit if he'd tried. He stumbled as his sneakers caught in the thick carpet, running and half falling until he caught himself on one of the black armchairs by the glass table. He took another few steps before belatedly remembering his laptop and swerved a 180, only to find that Asami was holding it out to him, amusement curving his lips. Akihito gritted his teeth, stomped over, snatched his laptop back with a glare, and bolted for the door again. But before he'd quite escaped, he caught the edge of the heavy door with his shoulder and ended up spinning around and practically falling backwards out the doorway, just in time to catch a glimpse of the bastard laughing outright as the doors closed.
"I'll investigate the shit out of you!"

Akihito ploughed headlong into the Sion Global HQ tower full of blazing determination. He'd been caught unawares the previous evening and let himself be intimidated and manhandled, but never again. He was on a warpath. Z4m4 M1r0, Spotlight, breaking news. Somehow, someday, Asami Ryuichi was going down.

His colleagues were back, still a little green but well enough to return to work. Akihito happily handed back all Helpdesk responsibilities along with on-call responsibilities for the 32nd floor. He'd never been so pleased to return to his security programming.

It was mid-morning when he headed to the vending machines for a recharge of Pocky. When he returned, Mitarai was ranting away to Ogawa.

"I've never been called! Never! It's always you, it's never been me, and now he goes when we're away for just a day?"

Mitarai found something to grumble about most days, so Akihito ignored them and headed back to his desk, breaking into the Pocky packet.

"They call me because I've been here for years, they know me," Ogawa reminded with forced patience. "What are you getting so worked up about?"

Akihito tuned them out. But his peace didn't last past the first mouthful when Ogawa's phone rang, leaving Mitarai to promptly round on Akihito.

"So what happened, Takaba? It was already late in the day but you couldn't go home? It was so urgent you had to deal with it? You couldn't leave it for me today, huh?"

"Wha' are you on abouf?" Akihito mumbled around a full mouth.

Mitarai shoved the previous day's support log under Akihito's nose, his finger jabbing at the end. Akihito stilled as he saw Asami's name on the job ticket, and his own as the attending Helpdesk staff.

"You landed us in so much shit on Saturday!" Mitarai fumed. "I could've dealt with this! It could've been my chance to fix things with Asami-sama!"

Akihito swallowed, the Pocky going down like a lump of rock.

Mitarai had no clue just how desperately Akihito wanted to delete the whole encounter. It wasn't even about what had happened – or nearly happened – but what happened after.

Akihito had intended to sort things out with Risa but he'd been too rattled and bone weary by the time he'd dragged himself home. He didn't even have the energy to argue when she picked up on him sounding like he was on death's door and insisted on coming over to cook dinner. Feeling supremely guilty, but drawing some much needed comfort from her current inclination of playing the concerned girlfriend, he fell into their old routine as they spent a quiet evening in and then the night together. It was when he'd obligingly put the fluffy pink handcuffs that she liked on her and was sheathed between her legs and she tightened beneath him, that his mind decided to launch off in a
totally alien tangent – it was an image of piercing, golden eyes accompanied by an arrogant smirk that suddenly had his balls squeezing and toppled him over the edge.

Mitarai had no clue whatsoever!

"His computer packed up and he couldn't do any work," he tried to reason, "what was I supposed to have done?"

Mitarai frowned like a child who'd been denied ice cream.

Akihito rolled his eyes. "It's not a big deal, Mitarai. His computer crashed, I rebooted it. End of."

Mitarai sighed, his aggravation easing just a bit.

That was, until Ogawa appeared beside them, looking dazed as though he didn't know how to believe what he'd been instructed. "Takaba, you're needed upstairs. The CEO has asked for you personally."

Arguing with Ogawa for someone else to go in his stead had turned out to be pointless. His boss had been given strict instructions by Asami's assistant and he wasn't budging.

Which was how Akihito found himself glaring at an equally grim-faced Kirishima as the elevator doors parted on floor 32.

"Yeah, I'm not happy about this either," Akihito snapped, striding ahead towards Asami's office before Glasses could lead the way. "So let's just get this stupid thing over with. And if he tries anything, and I mean anything, I'm laying down the law!"

"You have got to be kidding me." Akihito crossed his arms. "You called me up here for this?"

"You made it abundantly clear yesterday that I wasn't to do anything to cock everything up."

Akihito stared, unable to believe that Asami was throwing those words back at him.

Asami smirked and his tone became blatantly sensual as he held up a cable. "And I had no idea which hole to thrust this into."

Akihito spluttered. He coughed, valiantly biting back some choice names he so wanted to call Asami right then, and snatched the cable. "Give it here," he grumbled and grabbed the docking station. He wasn't bothering with any pretence at professional civility today. Asami didn't deserve it after yesterday.

Asami's mood seemed lighter today. But a lighter mood seemed to make him more playful, which made Akihito far more concerned about being groped than being shot. He couldn't decide which was worse.

He tried to steer the conversation to safer grounds. "What happened anyway? It was all fine yesterday."

Somehow, all the connecting cables and power cords had been yanked out overnight.
"There was..." Asami searched for the right description, "an unruly associate."

"Another one? You need to find better associates." Akihito narrowed his eyes. "What d'you do, hit him with them?"

Asami shrugged. "He tried. First with the screen, then when that failed, he tried to throw them all at me. One after another."

Akihito snorted. He would have loved to have seen that. He would have helped. "What did you do to make him so mad?"

Asami's eyes widened in a picture of innocence. "Me? Why, Takaba? How could I possibly piss anyone off to such a degree?"

Akihito had no problems imagining his fist slogging that infuriatingly self-satisfied face. His fuming silence must have betrayed his thoughts, for Asami smirked in that smug, knowing way of his.

Akihito carefully placed the keyboard back on the desk and not in Asami's face. "Geez, I wonder," he muttered sardonically.

It only took a second to reconnect the monitor and mouse. He hesitated before he dove under the desk with the power cables, glancing warily at Asami, but the desire to finish up this ridiculous task and get out of there was too strong.

He would've bet his right hand that Asami was staring at his ass. He could practically feel the intense gaze running over him as he struggled on his hands and knees to reattach the power cords, having to stretch to reach into the back far corner. Damn Asami and his absurdly large desk!

He backed out from under the desk and dusted himself off. "Don't even think about having any more fights in here 'cos I'm not... gonna..." He trailed off as he turned, the look on Asami's face bringing him up short.

Lust. The golden eyes were dark with it, hungry and heated, as they climbed from where Asami had indeed been staring at Akihito's ass up to the startled face.

Slowly, like a cat that got the cream, Asami's lips curved in a wicked grin. "It's like I hit F5. That's quite a refreshing view you've got there."

Akihito's eyes flashed. "Well you can refresh yourself the hell out of it and whatever freaky shit's going through your head. You stay the hell away from me, you hear?"

Akihito was perfectly prepared to smash the keyboard over that striking, conceited head if Asami raised so much as a single finger to stop him from leaving. But the tall man merely watched him go, a thoughtful smirk playing on his face.

Akihito would've loved to have taken the arrogant bastard down a peg or two. That was the only reason for the sliver of disappointment, and the adrenaline thumping through his veins.

There was no other possible explanation. None whatsoever.

Wednesday.

"No."
"Yes."

"No!"

"Yes!"

They all sighed. This again.

"No! Send Mitarai." Akihito walked away.

"Takaba!" Ogawa yelled after him.

"I said no!" Akihito even went so far as to walk out of the IT department, heading up the marbled stairs to the vending machines. He dawdled, sitting with his much-needed box of Pocky in the quiet alcove.

Akihito was in full evasion mode. Ridiculous computer problems he could deal with. But that look? It wasn't just winding him up with inappropriate words anymore. Asami all but looked ready to devour him. Akihito didn't care how hopping mad he made his boss, he was going to avoid Asami like the plague.

Akihito only headed back after he'd leisurely munched his way through the whole box of Pocky. Ogawa gave him the stink eye as he returned to his desk.

Mitarai was gone. Ignoring a pang of something he couldn't identify, Akihito resumed his programming. He couldn't quite focus, however. He kept glancing up at the doors, his eyes straying every few minutes.

Finally, twenty minutes later, Mitarai returned. He glanced briefly over to Akihito, his expression troubled, before heading back to his desk. Akihito observed closely, trying to gauge what might have happened. Mitarai had a slight frown creasing his brow as he checked through his in-tray, flicking through some post. Glancing at Akihito, who pretended to be looking at the calendar sitting on his desk, Mitarai threw his post back in the tray and slid into his chair.

Akihito kept glancing that way. Mitarai kept glancing this way. They kept his up for ten minutes before Mitarai gave a groan of irritation and marched over to Akihito.

"Is he always like that?" Mitarai demanded.

A horrible feeling squirmed in Akihito's gut, stealing his voice. So Asami had only been toying with him, as he likely did anyone else. Akihito didn't know why he was so surprised. Or so upset... Or maybe Mitarai meant the gun? Civilians couldn't carry firearms in Japan except in very few, strictly controlled, usually life-dependent circumstances. It wasn't like Yamazaki's gun that Akihito had seen so many times over the years that he barely noticed anymore, but his friend was a detective in Major Crimes. Asami with a gun was a whole other definition of badass...

Mitarai's frustrated voice cut through his mental litany. "He was so... dismissive!"

Akihito blinked. "Huh?" He had no shortage of adjectives he could have thrown at Asami but that certainly wasn't one of them.

"He completely ignored me! Well, he told me what the problem was first, then he ignored me!"

"Ignored you?"
"Yeah, he just sat at the meeting table – you know, the glass one? He was reading over a bunch of things, then his secretary came in and joined him. He didn't even look up when I left."

Akihito was having a fuzzy feeling that he couldn't identify. "Did you expect him to show you out? Be fascinated in what you were doing? Serve you drinks?" He barked a laugh – but then he stilled at his own words. Asami had always been there, watching over his shoulder, pestering him with questions. And Akihito belatedly recalled the tea and dorayaki that had materialised when he was hacking the flash drive. Had Asami brought them?

"No, but..." Mitarai sighed. "I was super polite, very courteous, bang on etiquette. I thought he'd at least thank me or something..." He was mumbling by the end, seeming to realise how daft he sounded.

"He's the CEO, Mitarai. What did you expect?"

Mitarai shrugged silently.

"What was the problem, anyway?" Akihito asked. He hadn't decided whether it was all an act or if Asami was actually an electronic stumblebum.

"He, uh, he'd accidentally flipped his screen display upside down which made him accidentally delete a bunch of files."

There was a flabbergasted pause before Akihito burst out laughing. "Did you tell him he's an idiot?"

"What? No!"

"You should have," Akihito grinned.

"Would you?" Mitarai threw back.

"Hell, yeah."

Mitarai looked at him like he'd sprouted a second head. "Yeah, right."

Akihito smiled sweetly. "You know me and my sparkling personality."

Mitarai shook his head. "You're crazy," he muttered as he returned to his desk.

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Thursday.

It was quickly becoming déjà vu. Kirishima called for him, Akihito flat out refused to go, Mitarai went in his stead. But this time he returned barely a few minutes later, irritated that he'd gone all the way up to the top floor only for the secretary to inform him that something urgent had come up and Asami-sama would call for assistance again later.

The call never came and they all forgot about it as the busy day swept them up.

Akihito stretched his arms, easing out the kinks. All in all it had been a good day, he'd cracked a bug that had been hindering things for a few days. Mitarai was leaning back in his chair with his eyes closed as his computer shut down. Grinning, Akihito grabbed an empty Pocky box...

"Hey!" Mitarai yelled as it landed on his face. He leaped from his chair and chased after Akihito, not
even needing to ask to know who'd thrown it.

"Boys," came Ogawa's rebuke. It was half hearted at best, a token nod at his job as their boss, full of habitual exasperation.

Laughing, Akihito led a merry chase. His Pocky-fuelled sugar rush made him leap over chairs and even over Ogawa's desk, earning himself a yell as he scattered a bunch of old headsets. Mitarai grabbed an industrial pack of paperclips as he followed. The R&D guys on the other side of the office didn't even look up. Akihito had only been here a month but they were already used to him and Mitarai winding each other up.

Mitarai cut in between two desks and threw himself at Akihito. He crashed them both into the wall and emptied the whole pack of five hundred paperclips over the blond head.

"Argh! Cold! Cold! Cold!" Akihito yelled as hundreds of bits of cold metal shimmied down his top. He tried to shake himself out, hopping and shaking his legs too when some of them slithered down his trousers. Mitarai was no help, too busy laughing his head off.

Until his laughter abruptly cut off, choked to silence. It took Akihito a moment to notice. When he finally followed Mitarai's frozen eyes, he could only stare in horror.

Asami's tall silhouette filled the doorway.

Impeccably dressed as always, Asami towered worlds apart from the humble cave dwellers beneath Sion HQ. He strode into the middle of the office, surveying the cluttered desks and computer equipment squeezed in every which way before turning to the two young men with an arched brow. His secretary accompanied him, looking as disapproving as ever.

Ogawa rushed forwards, bowing low. "Asami-sama, our most sincere apologies for disturbing you with all the noise!"

Of the two offenders, only Mitarai looked ashamed, hurriedly bowing along with everyone else. Akihito alone stood upright, wondering if he could make it out of the door if he ran fast enough...

"May we be of assistance in any way?" Ogawa pleaded, sure that his job was flashing before his eyes.

"There's no need for apologies, Ogawa-san," Asami waved off graciously. "I'm interrupting. I was passing and thought to collect Takaba on the way."

"Takaba?" Ogawa repeated dimly.

"There's a technical issue we need him to look over."

All eyes swivelled to Akihito. He shook his head adamantly. "No way. I was just about to head home."

"Takaba!" Ogawa exclaimed.

"That's quite alright, Ogawa-san," Asami said understandingly as he approached the startled young man. Akihito didn't buy it for a second. "You've all been working hard all day and no doubt you're tired. I don't blame Takaba for wanting to head home."
Akihito backed away but there was only the wall behind him. With everyone watching, he couldn't object when Asami dropped a hand on his shoulder, squeezing too hard for the gesture to be friendly.

Asami leaned in to murmur in Akihito's ear. "You can walk or I can drag you. Either way you're coming with me."

A chill spread through Akihito, his face going pale.

There was something about Asami that was... off. Akihito could feel it now, being this close to him, or perhaps it was the biting grip on his shoulder coupled with the hard edge of his voice. It was like Monday night all over again. With the flash drive. And the gun...

Asami spoke at normal pitch again, seeming to address Akihito but he knew it was just an act for everyone's benefit. "This can't wait. But as soon as you're done I'll have my driver give you a lift so you can get back to your evening. Would that be acceptable?"

It wasn't a question. Asami would drag him kicking and screaming if necessary, no matter whoever else might get caught up in whatever mess this was. The warning gleam in his eyes said it all.

Akihito couldn't put them at risk like that. "Fine," he ground out, shrugging off the heavy hand. "I'll just grab my stuff." He crunched his way through the scattered paperclips to gather his things at his desk and slipped the rucksack over his shoulder. His tread was heavy as he gave everyone a half-hearted wave on his way out.

"See you tomorrow," Ogawa called out, just before Asami and Kirishima's dark suits blocked Akihito from view.

It was almost seven in the evening and there was a steady stream of employees heading home. The spacious glass foyer was congested as they emerged from the basement, but nevertheless a clear circle of space remained around Asami as he strode forth, cleaving through the crowd. They were surrounded by an undulating sea of bowing heads, enough to make Akihito a little nauseous even, with many murmured greetings and expressions of gratitude or such like. It was poles apart from Akihito's usual jostling, elbowing journey home.

Instead of heading out, however, Asami lead them to the elevators. Maybe Akihito had glanced a second too long at the revolving glass doors; escape was just too tempting a prospect. Asami grabbed his shoulder as they waited, uncaring of who saw them or Akihito's attempts to shrug him off.

Akihito stewed in edgy silence as they waited, Kirishima still a step behind while on his phone. As soon as the elevator doors dinged open and released its rush of employees, Asami pushed him in and claimed the elevator car, deterring anyone else from joining them with his tall presence blocking the doorway.

In a way Akihito was glad that it just the three of them. His nervous tension practically exploded as soon as the doors closed.

"What the hell, Asami?"

Still on the phone, Kirishima threw him a shocked glance. Asami ignored him, checking a message on his own phone.

That just riled Akihito up even more. "Are you so annoyed that Mitarai's been coming instead of me
that you had to come all the way to the basement just to prove a point?"

Asami finally looked at him. "You think I came to get you because of your little sulk?" he sneered.

The darkness roiling in the golden gaze actually made Akihito take a step back. Asami was seriously pissed off. Akihito would have even described it as murderous. What the hell had happened?

Just as he was rendered uncharacteristically mute, Kirishima hung up.

Asami turned to him immediately. "Well?"

The secretary cast a look at Akihito. The meaning wasn't lost on either of them.


Kirishima hesitated for another moment before complying. "They have one of them, sir."

"Then squeeze for every drop. I want them all found."

"They're on it, sir."

With no specifics they could have just as easily been talking about lost oranges as what it actually sounded like. Akihito felt his gut squirm. It wasn't a healthy conversation to be privy to.

"And Kirishima?" Asami rumbled darkly. "Don't ever second guess me again."

"Forgive me, Asami-sama. But I cannot be negligent where it concerns matters of security." The secretary bowed low. He only straightened as Asami made a dismissive sound and let it pass.

Akihito had to hand it to Glasses, the guy had balls. He'd never have thought it of the prim and proper secretary. But then again it was most likely a prerequisite to be able to stand working for someone like Asami.

Akihito wondered if they'd rigged the elevator since they didn't stop at a single floor on the way up. The ride up was so much faster like this. Too fast. All too soon the doors opened on the top floor and this time Asami grabbed his arm, making no bones about keeping him secured.

Akihito could only hope that Asami didn't bring him all the way up here just to kill him. "Why am I here?"

There was no reply as he was dragged down the corridor and shoved into the huge office. Asami turned at the door, expectantly holding out a hand to Kirishima bringing up the rear.

"Asami-sama, forgive my reservations but are you sure about this?" The uncertainty in Kirishima's voice didn't make Akihito feel any better.

"Enough."

That single word from Asami, not even snapped or shouted, but it was loaded with finality and a warning that could only be described as dire. Kirishima finally passed a laptop case into Asami's waiting hand and bowed a swift retreat.

Asami closed the door, leaving Akihito trapped with him.
Asami strode forward, hitting some buttons on the wall which set all the blinds closing with a soft electronic whir. He steered Akihito as far as the glass table, where he slid off his jacket and cast it carelessly over one of the black armchairs before heading for his desk.

Akihito couldn't take his eyes off the gun that was now in plain sight, the holster strapped over the waistcoat. Asami dropped the laptop case from Kirishima on his desk and pulled out a near-empty decanter and a crystal tumbler from a bottom drawer. Dark amber liquid sloshed as he poured himself two fingers and knocked it back. He allowed a second to let it burn before pouring another and drinking it just as quickly. He poured a third but this time he nursed it in the crystal.

Something had happened. Of course it was potential fuel for the Spotlight fire but Akihito actually found himself so nervous that he didn't want to know what could have made Asami pissed as all hell. Akihito glanced surreptitiously at the door –

"If you run and force me to come after you, I will tie you up."

Akihito paled. "What?"

"Come here."

Akihito didn't move. He couldn't.

"Or are you going to run out that door?" Asami smirked. It wasn't a kind look.

Akihito quite liked the door option, thank you very much. The tying up? Not so much. "That depends on why you dragged me all the way up here."

Asami indicated the laptop case on his desk with his tumbler. Akihito looked at it, at Asami, at the gun snug against his ribs. Asami waited, quietly swirling the crystal.

It took Akihito another second or two to force his legs to unlock and he managed to walk over stiffly. It was a nondescript black laptop case. Possibly new. Akihito opened the zipper and flipped it open.

One look and he promptly closed his eyes. "Oh, no way..."

He'd done it this time, really done it. Stepped right up to the shit-covered fan, pressed his face against it and punched it to maximum.

It was a laptop *with holes.* Five impacted holes, their edges curving inwards, each one wide enough to fit a finger. Bullet holes. There was nothing else they could be.

Akihito dealt with firewalls and files, codes and crypto. He didn't do face to face and he most certainly didn't do bullets. Panic rising, head shaking, he backed away –

His back collided with Asami's chest, making him jump out of his skin.

"The hell?" Akihito spun around, his heart hammering. He'd have to go around –

"Last warning before I tie you up, Takaba," Asami growled impatiently.

Face ashen, Akihito frantically searched his brain. "What warning?"

"Stop trying to escape."

"Then stop scaring me!" he blurted it out before he could stop himself. His pride wasn't enamoured by the idea of admitting that Asami scared the living daylights out of him.
Asami might have been amused if his mood hadn't been so sinister. He waved towards the desk with his tumbler again. "See if you can retrieve anything. Anything at all."

"You mean this thing riddled with bullets? Because they are bullet holes, aren't they?" Akihito retorted acerbically, his fear and anger making him run his mouth. He didn't make any move to take a look. "That'd be a No. In case you hadn't noticed, it has bullets in it."

Asami's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Oh really? Then pray tell, what use are you to me?"

Akihito shrank back. "Wait, you're not going to shoot me...?"

Asami simply indicated the laptop by way of answer.

"You can't just—!"

Asami made a show of reaching for his gun, deliberately slowly. Probably—hopefully—just for show, but Akihito couldn't risk it.

"Alright! Alright!" He dropped his rucksack to the floor and turned to the damaged laptop. "Just keep your stupid gun away from me," he grumbled.

Eyeing it like it was personally offending him, Akihito tried switching it on by the power button. As expected, nothing happened. He flipped and turned it about in his hands, even peering into the holes from different angles to see the internal damage. Three of the bullets had missed vital organs, but two of them were problematic, buried in the hard drive.

"Well?" Asami was clearly impatient.

Akihito shook his head, replacing the laptop in the case. "I can't do anything about it here. If I took it home I can take it apart and see if any sections of the hard drive can still be accessed but it's a long shot at best. It looks pretty smashed up."

"This stays with me," Asami said, unsurprisingly.

"Then I can't help you."

Asami pulled out his phone and placed a call. It was answered quickly. "Any progress with Suoh?" he demanded, knocking back his drink and slamming the tumbler down on the desk.

Akihito waited, not sure what else Asami wanted him to do, but the man seemed focused on his phone conversation. "Good. Tell them to stay put. We need eyes on them around the clock, especially now."

Akihito had done what Asami wanted so he could go now, right?

"Use a three-man detail, have them on rota. Tell them to keep out of sight."

But then there was that whole tying up thing... As Asami listened to the reply from the other end, Akihito slung his bag over his shoulder again and edged towards the door. He made a token effort to catch Asami's eye so the man wouldn't think he was trying to 'escape', pointing towards the door and whispering, "I'll just get out of your hair..."

He'd only gone another two steps before Asami grabbed his arm again. Akihito didn't fight him as he was pulled towards the glass table.

"Good. Hold them in the usual place, I'll question them later myself."
Akihito stared wide eyed. Asami remained focused on the phone conversation as he none-too-gently manoeuvred Akihito into an armchair and emphasised with a warning finger. Stay. So much for escaping.

"No, Kirishima, I want them all. Find them, and relocate them. Permanently."

Asami seemed to be dishing out one dire order after another. Nothing explicit, nothing that would stand up in court, but plenty for Akihito to imagine the worst. And the fact that he was listening to it didn't bode well for his own future.

Still on the phone, Asami headed back to his desk and grabbed his briefcase. "Warn Kuroda and Matsui. I don't want the police anywhere near this."

Bloody hell, Akihito grimaced. Now that wasn't even remotely subtle.

Asami clicked the briefcase open, dropping the damaged laptop in it along with several files from the bottom drawer of his desk. "You know what's at stake. Find the accomplice." He slammed the briefcase shut. "And have the limo ready out back, we're going to plan B."

Asami hung up. Grabbing the briefcase, he advanced on Akihito. "We're leaving."

The rage clearly simmering beneath the surface had Akihito on his feet and backing up a step as the taller man approached. Asami paused to pull his jacket back on.

"Leaving? Where?" Then Akihito realised something worse. "Wait, we're leaving?"

Asami grabbed his arm again and propelled him into the corridor. Kirishima was nowhere in sight but two other guards in black suits melted out of the walls and flanked them.

"Hold on, Asami. Why am I going with you?" Akihito cursed himself. He should have legged it earlier, threats be damned. Things were only looking worse by the minute.

There was a third guard already at the elevators, holding the doors open.

Asami ignored Akihito's question, addressing the door-duty guard instead as they all rushed in. "Override to level two."

"Yes, sir." The guard turned a key at the top of the control panel as he hit floor 2 and returned the key to his pocket.

Level two had a private elevated concourse at the rear of the building reserved for the top execs, allowing them to avoid the basement parking levels. The elevator was bound to stop frequently with all the people still heading home and Akihito primed himself to make a run for it. If he caused a commotion, or legged it fast enough, or caught Asami by surprise...

But he soon realised what 'override' meant. The elevator didn't stop, not even once.

Asami caught his arm again in an iron grip as the doors parted to level two and Akihito knew he was doomed.
The sense of foreboding only grew with the passing scenery. "Where are we going?"

"Where do you think we're going?"

Akihito didn't reply, hoping and praying with every turn that they'd go in a different direction. But every second only took them closer and closer...

By the time they were two minutes away, he couldn't deny it any longer. "We're going to my place?" He couldn't hide the touch of panic that crept into his voice.

"Why are you surprised? You said you can pull it apart and access the hard drive at home."

"I said I could try. If you want whatever's on there that badly then you'd be better off finding a data recovery specialist —"

Asami shook his head firmly. "I'm not involving anyone else. You'll just have to do what you can."

"Oh, lucky me," Akihito mumbled, leaning his forehead against the cool window. "I didn't expect you to... You know, actually come to my flat..." It was surreal, the idea of Asami in his run-down apartment. He sat up. "How do you know where I live, anyway?"

"I know everything about you."

"E-everything?" Akihito stammered.

"Everything in your employee records."

"Right, employee records, yes." His relief was considerable. There was no reference to his community service sentence in his personnel file at Sion, his court records having been redacted and withheld for his safety in case of backlash from those he'd targeted as Z4m4 M1r0. Asami could not find out about Spotlight.

Akihito glanced over. "Can you at least untie this?" He held up his wrists. The moment they were in the limo Asami had bound them with his tie – a super expensive, super smooth silk tie, by the feel of it.

"Not until we're there and I know you won't try to run on me again."

"I told you, I wasn't! I only said you didn't have to trouble yourself about giving me a lift home!"

"I'd given you my last warning, Akihito. I don't make idle threats. Besides," the golden gaze
Akihito scowled as his face heated up. "Don't get any ideas, Asami. I'll help you with the laptop but that's it." Out of the corner of his eyes he saw the flash of familiar red doors. "Wait! Stop here! Stop!"

Asami gave him a curious glance. "Pull over," he ordered the driver. "Why?"

Akihito checked out the windows as they drew up at the side of the road. "It's just around the corner. I don't want anyone I know seeing me coming out of a limo."

"That's one I haven't heard before. Most people tend to show off that kind of thing."

"I'm not most people."

"So I've noticed."

The was something about Asami's tone, quiet, almost thoughtful, that caught Akihito's attention, but the chance to ask passed him by as Asami sent his men off, one to stay on guard and the other to scout ahead. As the latter disappeared around the corner past the shabby but tasty ramen shop, Akihito held up his hands and tried again.

"Seriously?"

Asami's response was a lazy, heated stare down his body.

"Ugh." Akihito gave up.

The door opened on Asami's side. "All clear, boss."

Luckily for Akihito, they didn't bump into anyone as they entered the run-down apartment block and took the elevator up to the third floor. At his door the guards repeated the earlier pattern of one staying on watch and the other checking ahead, before declaring the all clear and Asami pushed him in.

They all toed off their shoes in the genkan [front entrance] and stepped straight into Akihito's living room. There wasn't much to the place. A small TV in the corner, a low MDF table with five faded zabuton [floor cushions] around it. There was a small kitchenette off to one side and the bathroom next to it, and the bedroom was parted from the living room by a thin wall. It was a small flat to begin with, but all the tools and computer parts and stacked plastic drawers containing more of the same pushed against the walls made it even more crowded. As well as a good scattering of empty Pocky boxes...

Akihito was just glad that he never printed any of his research, a lesson he'd learned early on never to leave incriminating material lying around in case of unexpected visitors. There wasn't a hint of Spotlight anywhere.

Asami took it all in with a sweeping glance. "Balcony?" he checked, taking Akihito's rucksack off the guard who'd carried it up and setting it down by the table.

Akihito barked a laugh.

"None, sir," replied the guard.

Nope. No balcony here. Akihito was lucky just to have a window in the bedroom, offering the
concrete panorama of the neighbouring wall and the rain that fell between the buildings on wet days.

"Wait outside," Asami ordered.

"Yes, sir."

"Do they have to?" They all looked at Akihito at his outburst. "Oh, c'mon, look at them! I can't have goons loitering outside my door, my neighbours –"


They immediately bowed and headed back to the genkan. Akihito watched as they stepped back into their shoes, his expression troubled.

Asami sighed in obvious annoyance. "Sagano, wait down the hall. Nakatani, return to the limo but stay in contact."

If they were surprised at their boss' concession, they didn't show it. They left with another bow, leaving Akihito alone in his surprise and grudgingly muttering his thanks, then scowling at himself for letting the words slip out.

Asami took another look around the tired old flat, this time poking his head into the bedroom and bathroom as well. Akihito watched him scope the place out, noting such vigilance as another facet of the man embroiled in shady business. It took all of ten seconds, the place being so tiny, before Asami returned to the table.

"So...?" Akihito held up his wrists again.

Asami deposited his briefcase and came up to Akihito. He proceeded to undo the silk tie, his movements sensuously slow, stroking his fingertips against Akihito's hands and wrists far more than was necessary, his eyes locked onto Akihito's all the while.

Akihito glowered, fighting the heat on his face. "Would you get a move on?"

Asami smirked, finally tugging the tie free. Akihito yanked his hands away and put some distance between them, rubbing away the phantom whispers across his suddenly sensitive skin.

The playful air about Asami morphed to something distinctly darker as he pulled out the damaged laptop from his briefcase and set it on the table.

Akihito eyed it warily before heading to the kitchenette. He filled up the kettle and switched it on. "I don't know the protocol for being kidnapped and brought to your own home," came his muffled words as he rummaged about. "Am I supposed to offer you tea? Dinner?"

He would have offered neither but Asami's concession with the guards made him feel just the teeniest bit more lenient.

"Tea's fine." Akihito could hear the amusement in Asami's voice. "Or bourbon if you have it."

"Sure, let me just crack open my wet bar," Akihito snarked, his voice dripping with sarcasm. He held up two cans. "Cheap beer?"

Asami grimaced and shook his head.

"Didn't think so." Returning them to the fridge, he plonked two cup noodle pots on the kitchen counter. "I'm having noodles, do you want any?"
The horrified look on Asami's face said it all. Akihito couldn't help his laughter. "Yeah, welcome to how the other half live."

Asami pulled out his phone. "Do you eat sushi?"

"Do. I. Eat. Sushi?" Akihito repeated as though Asami had asked if the sun would rise again in the morning. "I can eat a banquet for ten easily with my hands tied behind my back →" He paled and hurriedly flapped his hands. "Not that I'm suggesting you do that!"

Asami smirked as he spoke into his phone. "Nakatani, go and buy sushi. Enough for ten. You have thirty minutes." He hung up without waiting for a reply.

Akihito perked up. "Is that for me too?"

"If you start on this." Asami indicated the laptop.

Akihito's face clouded over again. "I will, I will, just give me a minute." He started the green tea brewing and grabbed a well-used bundle of tools off the top of one of the stacks of plastic drawers on the way back. He couldn't help staring as Asami slipped off his jacket and draped it over his briefcase, revealing the dreaded gun again. He remained frozen as Asami grabbed a zabuton and sat down beside and slightly behind him, leaning against a stack of plastic drawers, the offending weapon right there, strapped to Asami's side closest to Akihito.

"Are you going to shoot me?" It was a quiet, haggard question.

Cool eyes drifted over him. "Why would I order sushi if I was going to shoot you?"

"I don't know. Why would you carry a gun?"

Asami didn't reply, not that Akihito expected him to. But the heavier question was why Asami didn't feel the need to keep it concealed around him. To threaten him? Or because he wasn't enough of a threat? So many polar possibilities, it wasn't a question Akihito wanted to dwell on.

It was strange to see Asami sitting on his floor, one leg stretched out, the other one bent with an arm resting on top. Asami looked just as imperious sitting on a tired old floor mat in a tired old apartment as he did anywhere else.

"I'd offer you a chair but I don't have any," Akihito said.

"It's fine," Asami dismissed. He sounded impatient. Whatever was on the laptop must have been important.

Switching on the TV for background noise like he always did, Akihito unrolled his tool kit and set to work.

It was usually straightforward pulling a laptop apart, but Akihito was extra careful of the internal damage and keeping things as intact as possible. Even when he'd unscrewed a part, sometimes it was broken into pieces and required delicate handling. There was a tray he always kept under the table and he dropped screws into it as he went, laying the parts out on the small table. Similar to when he had hacked the flash drive, Asami stayed close and observed everything. The flat filled with the low drone of the TV, occasionally punctured by the clack of a screw landing in the tray.

After a while Asami rose to pour the tea. Akihito stole furtive glances at the surprising sight of this foreboding man performing such a domestic act, and muttered his thanks as a cup was placed in a bit of clear space on the table and Asami resettled beside him. It was all weirdly... harmonious. Sure the
threat was still in the back of his mind, but usually when Akihito was working he hated anyone looking over his shoulder or even sitting too close. It completely distracted him. It was strange to find that not only did Asami's presence not bother him, he'd almost totally tuned him out.

So much so, that he jumped a little when Asami stopped him with a hand on his arm when he came across the first compacted bullet, crushed out of shape against the smashed up circuitry.

"No fingerprints."

Akihito blinked several times at the warning, a chilling reminder of the stark difference in the kinds of issues that concerned them. "What about the rest of the laptop?"

"That'll get disposed of. This is evidence."

Akihito almost asked. Almost. But then he decided he didn't want to know. He used pliers to drop the crushed bullet into a small clear resealable bag and wordlessly handed it to Asami. They shared a look – Akihito's guarded and questioning, Asami's unreadable – before he resumed disassembling the laptop.

Akihito was so absorbed that the guard's knocking totally passed him by. He only noticed that the sushi had arrived when Asami handed him a pair of disposable chopsticks and settled the large platter on the floor beside him. Despite the bizarre circumstances, he still tucked in with gusto and hummed at the serious quality of the sushi. Of course, it would be nothing but the best for the billionaire.

Three of the bullets had merely hit some wires in the laptop but the hard drive had two holes. He opened it up to find that they had gone straight through the platters holding all the data, two thirds of all the discs and the actuator arm smashed to pieces.
"That doesn't look good." Asami was close, leaning in over his shoulder.

"Yeah, it's pretty fucked up." Akihito tried to ignore how he could feel Asami's warmth by his cheek and had a mouthful of sushi instead.

"Is it all gone?"

"The data?" He chewed some more. "Well, no. I mean, you've got all the pieces here, so technically you could reassemble it again like a gigantic-pain-in-the-butt jigsaw and get a hold of the manufacturer-specific encoding and access the whole thing, but I can't do that kind of reverse engineering here."

"Can you read any of it?"

Akihito pinched the bridge of his nose, scrunching up his face. "Erm... no?" He didn't need to look to feel Asami's sharp eyes. "It's more that I don't want to," he admitted, honest to the core even in a situation like this. "A bog-standard file could take up less than a square millimeter and it'll be a
massive headache and there's no guarantee it'll even work..."

"Do what you can."

Akihito groaned, his head slumping back momentarily. But he still dragged himself to his feet and went to dig some things out of the plastic drawers from around the room. One was a home-made acrylic clean air container, with latex gloves taped to the two holes for handling whatever was inside. He also grabbed a customized platter scanner and a spare external hard drive.

Once he'd installed the scanner and shattered pieces inside the clean air box and sucked out all the dust particles, then it was a matter of mounting one fragmented piece at a time, setting the needle to scan from nanometres above the surface, and controlling from his laptop to comb and re-comb every millimetre to get any kind of reading before starting all over again with the next shard. It was meticulous and intricate and mind-numbingly repetitive work.

Asami's phone rang regularly, so much so that Akihito soon completely ignored the regular updates from his underlings and Asami dispatching orders full of insinuations. In fact, Akihito had managed to block out the sound of the phone so successfully and was so absorbed in what he was doing, that he didn't realise that his own phone had rung until he heard in that deep, smooth voice –

"This is Takaba's phone."

"What? Hey! Give that here!" Akihito hurriedly pulled his hands out of the latex gloves and launched for the phone, having to plaster himself against Asami in order to grab it out of the man's hands.

"Hello?" he answered hastily, pressing it to his ear.

"... Aki-kun?" The caller was clearly confused.

"Uh..." Akihito glanced at Asami before ducking into his bedroom, closing the door. "Risa-san," he whispered.

"Who was that?"

"Uh, just someone from work. I'm still working."

"Oh. Why are you whispering?"

"I'm just... trying not to disturb him."

"Oka-ay," Risa said, dragging out the word. "It sounds like you're busy. But I needed to talk to you about tomorrow –"

"Risa-san, I have to go. I'm working late tonight so don't come over, ok? I'll see you tomorrow."

"Aki—"

"I'm sorry, I really have to go. I'll call you tomorrow." Akihito hung up before Risa could reply, praying that she really wouldn't come over.

When he returned to the living room, Asami was nonchalantly nosing through some of his boxes, peering under the lid before moving on to the next. "Who was that?"

Akihito scowled. "None of your business." He resolutely returned to the smashed up platters to make his point. Conversation over.
In the end he hoovered his way through three-quarters of the sushi by himself. Asami only had a few bites. Akihito ate and drank as he worked, mostly focused on his task but still appreciating the sushi. He loved sushi. Adored it. He wasn't aware of the groan of appreciation he made when the negi toro [fatty tuna with spring onion] melted in his mouth, or Asami's blistering stare in return. But the older man never once interrupted Akihito as he hunched over the scan output on his laptop and frowned and muttered to himself. He'd finally found a hefty data dump only to find he couldn't access it.

"You've hashed it, have you?" he mumbled at the sketchy data he was getting. "Fine, I'll just set up a rainbow table..." He was frowning as the encryption thwarted several attempts. "...Why is it... Ooh, you added salt! As if that could stop me."

He was interrupted by a commotion outside, raised voices coming from the external walkway. Raised drunken voices. But Akihito recognised it immediately and rushed out of the door, Asami fast on his heels.

Half stumbling as he struggled to put his shoes on, Akihito came upon Asami's guard wrestling with Kou down the walkway.

"It's ok! Let him go, he's my friend!"

The guard only released the man when he saw Asami's subtle nod.

"Aki-chaaaaaan!" Kou threw himself at Akihito, falling into him, hanging onto his shoulders and swaying dangerously.

"Kou? How much have you had to drink? It's –" Akihito awkwardly checked his watch around his armful of a best friend, "not even eleven."

"The nigh' is shtill young!" Kou announced with a painful struggle to enunciate properly. "We need to go pick up some cute girls!"

"What are you talking about?"

Kou hiccupped, and his shoulders and whole body slumped. "Megu-chan dumped me..."

The words were muttered to the floor and Akihito had to lean in to hear it. "Oh." It wasn't entirely a surprise, Kou tended to flit from one girl to another. He tended to bounce back quite quickly but he always took the break-ups hard.

Just as Akihito was wondering how to cheer his friend up, Kou's head popped back up.

"So we need to pick up some giiiirls! You're done with Risa-san, right?"

For some reason, Akihito's eyes flew to the foreboding man behind them. Asami's expression was unreadable.

Akihito didn't want to be having this conversation in front of Asami, although he couldn't have explained why. He tried to steer his friend away from that subject. And away from Asami. "Come on, Kou, you can't stay here."

"But you said you'd break up with her!" Kou was stubborn when drunk.

"You're going home. I'll call you a taxi." Akihito was stubborn too, drunk or sober.

"You're not happy. Even if the sex is good –"
"Kou!" Akihito's eyes flew over his friend's head. There was something about Asami's gaze that made Akihito squirm.

"Last night! You were going to break up last night. Why didn't you break up?" Kou implored dramatically. Still clinging to Akihito's shoulders, Kou peered up at him from where his cheek was pressed to Akihito's chest, his face full of drunken distress.

Akihito scrunched up his face. He really didn't want to be saying this in front of Asami when he was the cause of it all, but Kou didn't seem to be letting this one go. "I just had a rough day at work and I didn't have the energy, ok? We'll talk about it this weekend, but let's get you home first."

"She's not right for you." They were the last words Kou said before abruptly slumping to the ground, leaving Akihito struggling with his dead weight.

"Kou? Kou!"

Asami sighed behind them. "Take him inside."

Akihito didn't realise he'd been addressing his guard until the man in the black suit scooped Kou up like he weighed nothing and headed back to his flat. Akihito didn't want to risk having Kou around Asami like this, but with him being out cold, Akihito couldn't see how there was any other choice.

"Put him on my bed!" he called after the guard before he grabbed Asami's arm, just as the taller man was turning to follow. "Don't hurt him. Please."

A dark cloud passed over Asami's face. Akihito had the nagging feeling that he'd said something to offend the dangerous man, but he had no idea what.

Asami grabbed him roughly by the scruff of his shirt and shoved him towards his flat. "That's down to you, isn't it?"

It was another three hours later when Akihito finally handed Asami the spare external hard drive.

"That's everything?"

Akihito shrugged wearily. "You'd probably get more if you took it somewhere with specialist equipment, but I've done what I can. I'm beat."

"What did you find?"

Akihito rolled out his aching shoulders. "Mostly spreadsheets. Lots of spreadsheets."

Asami carried on staring at him.

"...What?" Akihito bristled.

Asami was silent for another moment. "Any images? Or videos?"

Akihito frowned. "No... Why, were you expecting something in particular?"

Asami gave a single shake of the head and that was that. Apparently it wasn't up for discussion.

Eager to be left alone, Akihito was mightily relieved to see Asami reaching for his jacket and hiding
the holster and gun from view. It was a practiced motion, fluid and efficient. Sliding his arms into the sleeves, just the slightest snap of the arms to sit the jacket on the shoulders, straightening the collars and down the lapels. Akihito had never once thought anything remarkable of seeing something as ordinary as putting on a suit jacket, but Asami somehow pulled it off like a demonstration manual on *How To Be Effortlessly and Ridiculously Hot and Manly Doing Anything*.

Akihito put the blame squarely on his exhausted brain that he stood there staring, long enough for Asami to notice. The responding smirk snapped him right out of it, however.

He waved at all the laptop parts spread out everywhere. "I take it you don't need this put back together?"

"No, just put it all in the case. But bag up the hard drive pieces separately."

Akihito weighed up the merits of objecting to being ordered around like one of his goons and decided he just wanted Asami gone. "Do you ever say please?" he muttered as he found another bag and swept the bits of the hard drive into it, and then everything into the laptop case.

Asami took it to the door and handed it to the guard outside.

Akihito fully expected him to leave. His tired grey cells struggled to compute why the front door closed but Asami was still there. Still inside his flat. Still not gone.

The golden gaze turned, focusing entirely on him.

Akihito stared back with mounting fear. "What –?"

Asami advanced.

There was nowhere to run to. Akihito tried anyway. He managed to skitter around the low table but the room was so small that Asami simply reached over and snagged Akihito about the torso. He found himself hauled right over the table, dragged a short distance and slammed into the wall.

"What are you doing?!" Even with all of Akihito's struggling, his wrists were caught and pinned together in a harsh grip above his head. He kicked out in panic. Asami deflected the first one, the second he absorbed with his thigh with barely a grunt.

"Enough."

"Get off me!" Akihito buckled, kneeling up, hoping to catch the bastard between the legs. No such luck. He found only air, and his hair was caught in a tight fist for his efforts, yanking his head back harshly.

"You should stop before you make me hurt you," Asami warned.

Only then did it sink in how completely Asami had overpowered him, even having the latitude to avoid all the stacked-up boxes and go for the only metre of clear wall to push him against, restraining him without once striking back. It was terrifying. And exhilarating... He had no idea what a distinct bolt of *thrill* was doing anywhere near his terror, fizzling through every cell in his body.

Akihito hung there panting, glaring belligerently even with his face forced up at such a harsh angle. "Why are you doing this? I did what you wanted!"

Asami, by contrast, was entirely unruffled. "None of that happened, do you understand?" he rumbled. "There was no laptop. No bullets. No data."
Akihito tried to yank his arms free to no avail. "Yeah, I get it already. So get the hell out and leave me the hell alone!"

"Leave you the hell alone?" Asami smirked. Ruthless. Predatory. Scintillating. "Now, how can I do that when you came on to me?"

Akihito gaped in utter disbelief. "... When?!"

"You threw yourself into my arms. Don't tell me you've already forgotten?"

He took a moment to catch on. "I ran into you! Completely by accident!"

Asami's grip slid from the blond hair to the jaw. He drew closer, the heat of his torso searing Akihito through his clothes. "You were turned on."

"I was not!" Concentrating was becoming harder. There was something about being so thoroughly overpowered, at being so helpless, the arrogant gleam of gold so close... Too close... At such proximity Akihito could see the flecks of ebony in the golden irises, the pupils dilating...

"There's no use denying it, I see it all the time. It's practically a law of nature."

"It's practically...?" Akihito jerked his head free. "You're unbelievable. How the hell do you manage to carry around a head that size?"

Unfortunately freeing his jaw also freed the large hand to travel, and it trailed over his shoulder and up his exposed arm. It was just the barest of contact, making Akihito's skin crazy sensitive and his breath tremble.

The golden eyes ate it all up, uncompromising, absolute, backed by plenty of dark hunger. "You were aroused, but so determined not to be attracted to me." His hand continued up, feathering Akihito's inner arm, until he took hold, one slim wrist in each hand, keeping Akihito firmly stretched against the wall.

Akihito had never reacted like this before. Sex was usually a slow burn, driven more by plain old biology than any burning desire. Sure Risa-san was cute and fun, but this? This was a charged current sizzling down his spine, electrified by some new kink he only just seemed to be discovering about himself. All Asami had done was pin him to the wall and looked at him with that oh-so-infuriating arrogance...

Lust grabbed him by the balls and sparked a bonfire in his gut.

Golden eyes zeroed in on the hazel eyes darkening with heady confusion and fear... And heat, so much heat...

Asami's lips curved. "Oh, you're in so much trouble."

Akihito glared belligerently. "Go screw yourself."


"It's the exact opposite!"

Asami leaned in close to every tremulous breath. "How can I take it as anything but a challenge?"

A muscular thigh forced itself between Akihito's legs and pressed. A strangled shudder of breath escaped his lips and he found himself groaning involuntarily before he could choke it back.
Asami's grin was distinctly wolfish. "See?"

Akihito squeezed his eyes shut, fighting, fighting, failing. "I hate you."

The returning chuckle was entirely unexpectedly. "I'm sure you do... Akihito."

The sensuous baritone caressed his first name, entirely inappropriate, way too intimate. Akihito opened his mouth, about to protest, when Asami nipped along the shell of his ear and his breath hitched noisily instead.

A half-hearted struggle was discouraged with an extra squeeze of the slender wrists. Asami dipped his head and explored lower, brushing his lips against the smooth skin of the neck –

Akihito had no idea what was going on. None whatsoever. There was nothing erotic about his ears. They were instruments for listening and enabled his balance. End of. Except when Asami lightly scraped his teeth along the outside it suddenly seemed to create a direct bolt of fierce arousal down his spine to his groin.

He stifled any more unpredictable hitching of his breath and tried again to squirm free, which was met with the grip on his wrists tightening again, either in warning or to keep him secure or both. But then Asami's lips found a spot below his ear and there was just no holding back the embarrassing moan. The soft lips caressed his neck where the teeth had scraped, and the hot tongue lathered the goose pimples raised by a cool inhale of breath...

It was his own lusty groan that brought him back to the moment – and how he was pressing his rock-hard erection against the corded thigh –

Flooded with mortification, he tried to draw away, snatch his arms free, but Asami gave no quarter, keeping him trapped. The golden gaze was intense, mesmerising, all consuming.

"Look at you all flushed and hard," Asami provoked deliberately.

Hazel eyes flashed predictably. "Screw you." It would have been more convincing if it hadn't come out so breathy and with his pupils blown as he said it.

Asami's smirked. "Pretending you don't want it, when only now you were grinding –"

"Stop saying embarrassing things!"

The darkly amused chuckle was interrupted by the blare of Asami's phone. They both froze, jarred out of the little bubble they'd been lost in.

There as a flash of something in Asami's eyes – something darker, harder – before he transferred both of Akihito's wrists into one hand again and slid his phone out of his jacket pocket.

"Asami."

Akihito shivered. It wasn't just the name, although it was that too. It was the tone, the devastating and effortless authority that made Akihito wonder if anyone had ever come simply by Asami answering the phone.

Akihito wriggled and tugged experimentally on his wrists as the caller started talking. But Asami only restrained him all the more – by pressing his ripped body flush against Akihito. A choked rush of breath escaped Akihito at the abrupt contact, and the realisation that Asami was hard... Heat rushed up his face.
Asami's grin could have been at Akihito's reaction, or to whatever he was hearing over the phone. Either way it was mildly terrifying. "And you have them ready for me." It wasn't a question.

Akihito froze at what the bastard seemed to be suggesting. Asami's eyes glinted, knowing exactly the kind of thoughts were running amok through Akihito's mind.

Asami positively purred. "Very thoughtful of you, Suoh. Just what I would have ordered. Alert Sagano and Nakatani, I'm on my way." He hung up and slipped the phone back into his pocket. "Business calls."


"I hate to disappoint you so I'll give you a choice. You can spend the night with me, or you can come by my office tomorrow."

Akihito gaped, flushing. "Hell no!"

With his free hand Asami caught his chin, tipping his face up, crowding him. "You won't often find me so generous, you should take advantage of it."

"Your generosity is crappy," Akihito informed him matter-of-factly.

"Last chance before I choose for you. What do you say? Once I've taken care of business, shall we continue this until morning?"

Hazel eyes searched gold, seeking some reprieve, but there was none.

Asami arched a brow.

"I – I – I'll come by your office," Akihito stammered. No way would the bastard not carry through his threats.

"Will you really, or are you intending to skip out on me?"

"I said I'd go to your stupid office, didn't I? So I will! I don't go back on my word."

"Very well," Asami smirked, making Akihito think he'd just been baited hook, line and sinker. The grip on his chin suddenly tightened, the golden gleam dangerous. "Remember, Akihito, not a word."

Akihito scowled, trying to wrench his face free but to no avail. "Of course I remember. Don't mistake me for a senile old man like you."

Just the slightest curve of the lips, and in a heartbeat Asami's presence morphed from pure menace to scintillating darkness that left Akihito in thrall. How did the bastard do it?

Asami leaned closer, to all appearances going for a kiss. What the hell? Closer still, enough for his soft breath to tickle Akihito's lips. Wide hazel eyes stared in frightful anticipation...

Asami cast a meaningful glance downwards. "Think of me when you take care of that, Akihito."

With an infuriatingly smug smirk, Asami released him.

Akihito sagged against the wall at the sudden lack of support and vacuum of tension. It took precious moments to recover his voice, the outrageous suggestion and the intimate purr of his name stunning him speechless.
"Like hell I would!" he yelled, just as the front door closed behind Asami. Then, belatedly, "And there's nothing to take care of!"

Akihito's furious shout was met with only the low done of a late-night film on the TV, but he could still imagine the bastard laughing at his expense...

He sank to his knees, bracing himself with locked arms, simply waiting, waiting, as though time could magic away his flaming arousal...

Because damn it, he wasn't going to touch himself now of all times. Not while Asami's cologne and smoke and Asami-ness still coiled the air about him, not while that freakishly hot face smirked at him in his mind, all knowing and so infuriatingly arrogant, seeing every shiver and wide-eyed surprise at his own body's reactions, the sheer strength trapping him and holding him helpless and holy bananas but that delicious pressure against Asami's thigh...

"Ah, fuck," Akihito swore as he practically tore open his fly. His dripping length sprang free, angry and proud. He furiously fisted himself as he imagined long fingers wrapped about him instead, the brush of lips and scrape of teeth just below his ear –

He almost fell on his face as he came hard and fast all over the floor, splashing on his jeans, his whole frame wracked with shudders as his groan stretched and hitched...

Panting, he flopped onto his side, slowly regaining his breath. His hazy eyes drifted to the front door, then he found himself groaning for an altogether different reason. Because there was, amazingly, one thing he agreed with Asami on.

He was in trouble, alright. And a catastrophic one at that.

Kou was still snoring soundly, much to Akihito's relief. He quietly closed the bedroom door again and padded back to the living room.

Running on auto-pilot, he moseyed around tidying up, wiping up the mess on the floor, putting the leftover sushi and cups in the kitchen, bundling up his tools. He needed to put the clean air container away as well, it wasn't something he usually had lying around in his living room. Opening the acrylic lid, he lifted out the platter scanner –

He blinked as he slowly registered what he was looking at. Sitting on the bottom of the container, hidden under the scanner all this time, was a fragment. A shard like a jagged needle, from the bullet-laden hard drive...

Akihito hesitated. Of course he hesitated. But in the end what choice was there?

Besides, he probably wouldn't get any data off it anyway, right? And even if he did, it was just going to be another useless spreadsheet, right?

Right.

Shaking his head at why he was putting himself through more of the tedious headache, he set up the scanner and fragment again in the clean air box and started scanning.
Akihito recovered a file. One last file, from one last fragment.

It was a video. Even with it shot from some twenty metres away, even with the image unsteady and grainy, even with the man's back turned, there was no mistaking Asami's commanding stance, his imposing figure. Standing beside him was Kirishima in profile, and opposite was the same blond giant from their middle-of-the-night encounter.

"B-But I told you everything!" High pitched and stuttering, it was the fourth man in the middle.

On his knees, his suit tattered and filthy, desperation palpable on his bloody, bruised face. But what was chilling was that it was a face Akihito had seen two months ago on the news – Kondo Tetsuya, an influential member of the National Diet [the legislative branch of the Japanese government], who was reported to have been found at his home having taken his own life.

"Your fate was sealed the moment you agreed the deal. You know the price for betrayal." Asami, colder than Akihito had ever heard that baritone.

Akihito stared in morbid fascination, the shock of seeing Asami being involved in such a violent scene making him slow to react. Even after the way Asami had handled him just now, there was a stark difference in the how. Asami had been totally domineering but Akihito hadn't actually been hurt. The man in the video, though, had clearly been put through the wringer. The video wasn't clear enough to show who might have affected such injuries, it was impossible to make out any bruised knuckles or blood splatter.

"But you said...! You said you'd forgive me when I atoned..."

"And I will. This is your final atonement."

Without ceremony or any further warning, Asami drew his gun, aimed, fired.

The abrupt blast momentarily cut out the sound. The video image flew, showing a flash of a large deserted dockyard and stacks of cargo crates, before it hastily refocused on the men.

Kondo had frozen, a dark hole materialising dead centre of his forehead, a trickle of blood slowly trailing down from it. He was motionless for long moments before he crumpled to the ground.

"Now, you're forgiven."

Kirishima turned to take the gun from Asami when his gaze darted straight at the camera.

"Fuck!" A hiss right by the mike, impossible to distinguish gender let alone identity, before the video died.

Heart in his mouth, ice in his veins, Akihito stared horror-stricken long after his screen had gone black.

Fifteen, maybe twenty seconds. And everything had changed.

The means to bring down Asami Ryuichi was in the palm of his hands.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

With this we're all caught up with FF.net now. I'll post on both from now on. I hope you're enjoying this so far. Please let me know what you think!
\(^{_^_\wedge}_/^\)
~ Nyx ~

Friday.

"Oh, good morning, Takaba," Ogawa greeted Akihito as they arrived at the entrance of Sion Global at precisely the same time by some strange coincidence.

"Morning."

Ogawa glanced aside at him as they joined the huddle of employees shuffling through the bottleneck. "I hope you behaved yourself after you were so rude to Asami-sama last night."

Akihito blanched a bit, his expression tight. "I'm here, aren't I? He can't have been that mad."

"Well, I am. I know you have your own way of dealing with people but that was no way to address the CEO." They separated as they trundled through the revolving doors, then Ogawa waited for Akihito to come through. "What did he want you for, anyway?"

"Just more computer stuff," Akihito mumbled, his eyes anxiously flickering around them. Despite the uncomfortable line of questioning, he stuck close to his boss. "He uh... there were some files he couldn't access."

"I hope you retrieved them for him?"

Akihito choked a cough. "It's all sorted."

Ogawa didn't seem to notice that Akihito was getting paler and paler. He nodded his balding head, satisfied that they weren't going to be in trouble with the big boss that everyone was so in awe of. He rattled on about something but Akihito wasn't listening, hiding in his boss' shadow until they reached the IT office when he rushed to his desk.

Akihito had spent most of the rest of the previous night lying awake on his bedroom floor, letting Kou's snoring from the bed wash over him.

It wasn't rocket science. It was glaringly obvious that he was totally and utterly conflicted. Never once had he hesitated to drag skeletons out of the closets of the rich and powerful before, to expose them to the world and serve them their comeuppance. But here was Asami, committing murder in cold blood, and the thought of the footage going viral made Akihito feel physically sick.

Surely it couldn't simply be because the bastard was insanely hot. Or because Akihito had jacked off thinking about him because Asami had stirred him up so much. Or because there had been moments, as surreal as it was, if he was brutally honest with himself, when Akihito hadn't actually minded
Asami hovering as he worked, the pervading presence quietly and reassuringly supportive...

In the midst of all his confusion there were two certainties. Being close to Asami was making Akihito compromise himself and the very principle that drove him, his – until now – tireless pursuit of truth. Less than a week since meeting in person, Akihito was already procrastinating on one of the biggest breaking news headlines of the year. And when the story broke – because Akihito couldn't possibly sit on something this huge, he really couldn't... surely he couldn't...? – Asami would know where it came from and Akihito would be dead.

Would he be found mysteriously dead somewhere, like the four men at the docks reported on the news that morning? Apparently the former yakuza enforcers had been crushed in a freak accident, when a crane malfunction had dropped the very cargo shipping container in which they'd been trafficking underage girls right on top of them. Akihito's gut had squeezed in that way that it did sometimes, and he would have bet his bottom dollar that it was Asami's doing. It had left him even more confused, shocked by such grisly measures but unable to condemn it when so many girls had been saved from a horrific fate.

Akihito needed distance. And fast.

He spent the day working on a security patch, wound Mitarai up, and tried to be his usual blunt and cheerful and inappropriately unprofessional self. It was business as usual, everything as normal as possible, absolutely nothing to tip Asami off that there was anything out of the ordinary. Not until it was too late.

He hardly swallowed any of his lunch, too busy checking around the staff canteen, keeping an anxious eye out for any men in black suits. Back at his desk, he counted down the seconds to put his plan in motion. He was so focused on his task that he jumped when his desk phone rang.

"IT," he answered as he tried to calm his thumping heart back down.

"Aki-kun?"

He sat up straighter. "Risa-san? What are you doing calling me here?" In his shock, he hadn't checked the phone display. It was an external number.

"Oh, I'm so glad I got through to you. You were so preoccupied last night and your phone's off, I was worried."

He sighed. "It's just work, don't worry about it." Knowing he was planning to break up with her, he wished that she wouldn't be so kind. "You know how it gets sometimes."

"How are things looking today?" she asked with concern.

"It seems ok for now." He cleared his throat. "Um, look, Risa-san, there's something I want to talk to you about tonight, if we can meet up –"

"Oh, me too! It's about our anniversary, right?"

"Huh?" Akihito drew a complete blank.

Risa giggled. He could imagine her flicking her silky hair over her shoulder. "Oh, sorry! Yes, forget I said anything. But I was thinking the same, if we can celebrate... Somewhere nice, being six months and all... But it's fine! I'll be totally surprised wherever you decide. I'll just be ready for a perfectly normal evening out from 7.30." More giggling. "I'm totally in the dark! I'll see you later!"
Akihito sat there listening to the dial tone for several seconds. He could feel a headache coming on. They’d been dating for six months? He didn’t know what had brought on her recent bout of keenness, but he could hardly break up with her on their six month anniversary when she was so excited...

Akihito spent the next ten minutes trying to make dinner reservations, but all the classy places he knew she liked were fully booked so last minute. He would have carried on making calls but he knew he had to get back to work and abandon the idea when Mitarai glanced over for the second time. Maybe it was for the best.

An hour later, Mitarai went for a comfort break, which was the trigger to commence Operation Extraction. Akihito took a fortifying breath and punched the number into his desk phone before he could lose his nerve.

"Good afternoon, Takaba-san."

Even though he'd steeled himself, Akihito still froze at the voice. Kirishima, who'd stood by as Asami shot the beaten up man...

"Afternoon," Akihito choked out. "Asami wanted me to check in with him today, is he around?"

Ogawa was glaring at him at his lack of honorific, but normal was key. He'd never been one of those ass kissers flitting around Asami, he couldn't start now.

"Yes, Asami-sama mentioned it," Kirishima replied, picking up on the same and emphasising his point. "But you've left it rather late in the day now, he is out for meetings and is unavailable until 6 pm. You may −"

"Ok, fine," Akihito broke in. "Later then." He hung up.

Ogawa was looking at him curiously.

Akihito tried to keep a straight face. "So I need to head up later. Do you mind if I head home straight after?"

Luckily, Ogawa bought it. "No problem. Just don't do anything to annoy him, ok?"

"Yeah, yeah," Akihito waved off before he ducked his head back to the screen.

The setup for Operation Extraction was complete. Mitara returned, none the wiser. Akihito didn't need his aggravation and hundred questions today. He started counting down the minutes until the next phase of the plan.

His desk phone startled him again a second time. He glanced at the clock – only 4.45pm, not quite time yet.

"IT."

"This is the maître d' of the Hibiscus. May I please speak to Takaba Akihito sama."

It took a few seconds to pull his head out of his risky plan and wonder why a head waiter might be calling him. "I'm Takaba."

"Please accept my apologies for disturbing you. I understand from our sister restaurant, the East and West, that we had to disappoint you in your inquiries after dinner reservations this evening. We are
ever so sorry about this and I wondered if I might be permitted to offer you our establishment, the Hibiscus, as an alternative?"

"Uh... Sorry, just a sec." Akihito scrambled to run a search on the restaurant. "It's kind of you to call me about this," he said as he stalled for time. The Hibiscus was even more high end than the East and West, likely to be considerably out of his price bracket, usually fully booked nine months in advance.

"It's the least we can do for our valued patrons. We have a very special table for two with excellent views of Minato available at 8.30, if that might be convenient, sir?"

"Uh, yes. Yes, that would be perfect. Thank you. Goodbye."

Akihito hung up quietly. His life was over anyway. Would it be so terrible if he enjoyed an evening he couldn't afford with the girlfriend he hadn't broken up with yet? It was a melancholic thought and he almost missed it when the clock turned 5.

He hurriedly packed his things up and breezed out. "Gotta go!"

"Do a good job!" Ogawa yelled after him.

As he legged it up the stairs, he could hear Mitarai start up and Ogawa trying to calm him down. It was so much easier to let his boss handle his prickly colleague.

Akihito's nerves were all in tatters by the time he reached floor 32, but he grasped at whatever courage he could. After dropping his rucksack in the elevator doorway to block the sensor and stop it from closing, he marched down the corridor.

Kirishima looked at him like he'd lost his mind. "I told you he's in meetings until 6 –"

"Oh, he is? What a shame. Tell him I dropped by."

Akihito had given his word and so he'd come by Asami's office as promised. It wasn't his fault that Asami hadn't specified that the bastard had to be there for it to count.

Akihito was halfway back down the corridor before Kirishima recovered from his bizarre behaviour. Akihito dashed into the elevator, snatching up his bag as he went.

"Takaba!"

Akihito stood plastered against the back of the elevator car, transfixed at the glare levelled at him down the corridor as the doors closed between them. At that moment, Kirishima looked exactly as he had staring back in the grainy video.

Twenty minutes later saw Akihito barging into the office of his sentencing judge just before it closed, with an emergency petition for an immediate transfer of his community service order to another location. When he cited sexual harassment, using it to lend gravity to his request and blinking back tears that hadn't been too hard to conjure up after the emotional rollercoaster of the last twenty-four hours, the judge granted the immediate transfer. To Akihito's relief, when he'd pleaded to let the matter go as he didn't want to stir up a hornets' nest in the upper echelons of the powerful Sion Global, the judge had rather hastily agreed not to pursue a criminal investigation. The whole matter was kept under wraps in line with all of Akihito's other court records.
Operation Extraction was complete. Come Monday morning, Akihito would be long gone by the
time Asami realised it. And the crime lord's world was going to come crashing down.

Akihito had dusted the cobwebs off the one suit he owned, but it couldn't hold a candle to the more
formal three piece suits and double cuffs sported by most other diners. One of the most luxurious
restaurants in Tokyo, the entire place exuded elegance and sophistication, from the delicate floral
decorations and classy table settings to the stunning nightscape with Skytree and Tokyo Tower lit up
outside of the 270 degree view to be enjoyed from individual armchairs.

Risa was preening. Akihito couldn't begrudge her, whatever flailing emotions he was trying to mask,
his usual discomfort in such surroundings aggravated worse than usual this evening. She was all
sweet and fun, how she'd been when Akihito had first been drawn to her, and he thought that maybe
it wouldn't be such a bad way to spend what could very well be their last evening together.
Attendants took their coats, and she sashayed after the maître d' who personally showed them to their
table and explained the specials that evening. There were no prices on the menu and Risa didn't ask.
Neither did Akihito. He was going to max out all his credit cards and hope for the best.

"Do you remember when we first met?" Risa asked over their glasses of bubbly.

Akihito grinned. "How could I forget? I sometimes still wake up with nightmares of that slap."

She laughed and swatted playfully at him.

They had been queuing at Starbucks when she'd mistaken him for the one who had just groped her.
Fortunately several witnesses cleared up the fact that it was the guy who had just ran out of the shop
rather than Akihito who still stood there stunned from the sudden introduction to her palm, and she'd
bought him a coffee to apologise.

"I can't believe it's been six months. Thank goodness for that pervert, huh? Otherwise we might
never have met."

"I suppose, silver lining and all that."

Risa held her flute aloft. "Well, Aki-kun, you've outdone yourself. This place is absolutely amazing."

He forced a smile, although he wasn't quite sure how he'd managed to pull this off either.

She twirled the champagne between her fingers, leaning her chin in an elegant hand. "I know you
don't like to mention the C word until we're at least in November, but it's only two months away
now. It'll be Christmas soon. Do you know if there's a Christmas party being held at your office?"

A memory hit him. It was over that first coffee that she'd bought him, when they'd chatted benignly
about the weather and what a pleasant café it was and wasn't the ever increasing range of coffees
getting a bit excessive, when talk turned to their jobs. It was when Akihito had mentioned doing
occasional work for some big global names that she'd leaned forwards, obviously intrigued.

Over the past few months he'd often wondered why someone like her – beautiful, put together, and
obviously enjoying the finer things in life – would date a poor computer guy like him who was three
years her junior. They had a good time together and things seemed to go well enough in the bedroom
too, but he'd often been confused by her fluctuating levels of keenness. Her most recent spell of
attentiveness had begun when she learned that he was working at Sion Global and this question now,
posed so innocently over champagne in this luxurious restaurant, made his lips twist in a wry smile.
that held little humour.

"Of course, the Christmas party. At Sion. Rubbing shoulders with the rich and powerful." He gulped down half of his champagne in one go as that old knot in his gut clenched. Maybe he was just being cynical but he couldn't deny his suspicions.

Before he could say another word, a murmur rose about the entrance of the restaurant. The maître d' and several attendants and waiters all flocked forwards as fast as decorum would allow, all bobbing heads and wide smiles. Akihito glanced over –

All his laboriously laid down pretence at normality vanished in a heartbeat as Asami swept into the establishment.

The woman on Asami's arm was svelte and sinuous, so beautiful that she practically glowed. She was one of those people whose age was impossible to guess beyond middle-aged maturity. Gliding with effortless grace in a figure-hugging, floor-trailing midnight blue lace dress alongside the flawless sculpture that was Asami, the couple made everyone stop in their tracks and look twice. Or three times. Or four times... Oh, who were they kidding, everyone was staring outright and trying their damnedest not to drool.

Asami clearly knew many of the other patrons, or at least was recognised by them, as many rose to bow respectfully as he passed by. But he only returned curt nods, not stopping for conversation until he had solicitously seated his madonna at their table. Leaning down briefly to whisper in her ear, earning a breathtaking indulgent half-smile in return, he turned and made a beeline for Akihito.

Akihito sat petrified, his head an endless litany of bullet in the head – come by the office – bullet in the head – come by the office... His body locked up, he couldn't move, couldn't stand, couldn't run.

Asami didn't seem fazed. He loomed beside Akihito and gripped his trembling shoulder in a show of camaraderie. The other diners glanced over, curious and more than a little green to see who it was that had been singled out for this honour of Asami gracing their table.

"Akihito, what a small world to bump into you here."

The mocking tone, that smirk – Akihito knew then without a doubt that Asami had orchestrated the whole thing. How did he know?... Of course, Akihito had used his desk phone. He'd never felt more of an idiot. And what was with using his first name still?

Asami didn't wait for Akihito to find his tongue. He turned to Risa, oozing charm. "Forgive me for intruding on your private evening. I am Asami Ryuichi."

And there it was. The swoon. Everyone had heard of the billionaire, the powerful business tycoon, and Akihito knew the moment Risa was entirely lost to him. Not that it would have mattered in the long run, but still... She fluttered her eyelashes and angled her head coquettishly and introduced herself as Akihito's 'close friend'. So much for thanking the pervert groper. Or maybe she'd be doubly grateful now, having led to this moment when she was introduced to the all powerful – and very lethal – Asami Ryuichi.

That reminder put strength back in Akihito's limbs. However ambitious Risa was, however she might have used Akihito, she didn't deserve to be put in danger.

Akihito stood, grasped Asami's hand and squeezed the elbow in a move he'd never have dared in a million years had he not already been knocking on death's door himself and now trying to protect
"We appreciate you stopping by, Asami-sama. I do hope you enjoy your evening."

Dark dragon eyes glinted and Akihito almost lost his nerve. Almost. But the very real threat to Risa made him stronger than anyone gave him credit for and he held firm to the dismissal. He nudged away the elbow and tried to pull his hand free, but instead Asami drew him closer with it and clapped him on the shoulder with his free hand. The squeeze this time wasn't so gentle, and Akihito found himself masking a wince.

"Likewise, Akihito," Asami returned pleasantly. Then, heedless of standing in full view of the entire restaurant, Asami drew him closer still until his lips were whispering directly in Akihito's ear, his hushed words loaded with dark promise. "You're just begging to be punished for that stunt you pulled this afternoon."

Akihito's mind blanked. Fear – and that confusing, sizzling surge of heat – bolted down his spine.

Asami released him, his expression mild but his gaze flashing with anger or hunger, or perhaps both, Akihito couldn't tell. Long, elegant fingers summoned the maître d', and Asami muttered something briefly to him under his breath before sending the bowing man off again.

"Enjoy your evening," Asami nodded to them before returning to his table.

Risa was too absorbed with the newfound knowledge that Akihito was personally acquainted with the Asami Ryuichi, and on a first name basis to boot, to notice that he wasn't himself. Akihito barely tasted his food as he went through the motions of finishing the meal. Most of his energy was focused on ignoring Asami's lady friend whom Risa recognised as the internationally renowned fashion designer Oda Hazumi and not seeing how well the two seemed to know each other, communicating in that easy, non-verbal way that only came with close familiarity. He somehow evaded Risa's questions with ever mounting turmoil until she latched herself onto the idea of seeing Asami again at the supposed Christmas party that she had invited herself to. When Akihito asked for the bill, only to be informed by the maître d' that their account was being taken care of by Asami-sama, it was the final straw.

Akihito rushed Risa out of the restaurant, dragging her away before she could go and thank Asami.

"Aki, what on Earth?" Risa cried furiously, shivering in the chilly air and hurriedly pulling her coat on. He'd bundled her out too fast to let her put it on inside.

Akihito circled the modern building, pushing past the evening partygoers and the occasional men and women in their suits only just heading home from work. He marched on, he needed space, to get away, to find somewhere quiet... He found himself in the deserted alley behind the restaurant and clutched his hair and gave vent to all his turmoil of emotions as he screamed into the sky.

His ringing, anguished roar finally seemed to make Risa notice how agitated he was.

"Aki-kun?" Her voice was tentative this time. "What's wrong?"

He couldn't tell her. How could he? That would surely put that bullet in her head that he hadn't been able to stop replaying in his mind over and over again since he'd seen that shaky, grainy footage.

An ominous cloud hung over his own life, but there was something he could do for Risa, even amidst the jumbled up smells of the alley, the car fumes, just the faintest whiffs of gone-off food.

"I shouldn't have brought you to dinner tonight."
"What? Why?"

"I should have told you from the start."

A creeping sense of unease creased Risa's brow. "Told me what?"

"I'm sorry, Risa-san," Akihito shook his head. "I can't do this anymore. We –"

"Freeze!"

The shout came from behind them. Akihito whipped around despite the command, to find himself staring at a man in a balaclava and a gleaming, serrated, six-inch blade.

They raised their hands, Risa gasping.

Akihito subconsciously stepped in front of her. "Hey, man, take it easy."

"Don't move!" The knife waved perilously towards them. The man was clearly agitated but not drunk, his steps were steady as he came closer. He was only a few metres away.

"Ok!" Akihito reassured. "Ok," he repeated more quietly, "we're not moving. Just tell us what you want."

"Your money! And all your jewellery!"

"You got it. I'm just reaching for my wallet," he explained as he slowly pulled it out of his pocket and tossed it at the man's feet. "Here."

"Your necklace and rings, bitch! Hand them over!"

Nothing happened. Akihito glanced over his shoulder, only to find Risa not looking as frightened as he would have expected. Her hands were up, but she was frowning, thinking hard.

"Risa-san, what are you doing?" Akihito asked, bewildered.

"He only has a knife," she whispered. "We can outrun him."

Maybe the adrenaline was getting to her, but she wasn't anywhere near as quiet as she should have been saying something like that.

The man clearly heard, and in the blink of an eye the whole volatile situation escalated out of control. "So that's what you think, is it?"

He reached into the back of his waistband and, to their horror, swapped the knife for a gun.

Short and stunted, Akihito thought it might be a snub-nosed revolver, not that he knew anything about firearms.

Akihito's heart was trying to hammer its way out of his ribcage, and Risa finally seemed to take the man seriously too. But not in the way Akihito expected.

"This is only cheap stuff!" Risa argued with the armed man. "You've got his money, why do you need this?"
"What are you doing?" Akihito hissed in disbelief.

"I don't care! Hand them over! Now!" The mugger strode forwards and abruptly jabbed the barrel of the gun so hard into Akihito's temple that it forced his head at an angle.

Akihito's entire world zeroed down to that cold, hard jab of pressure beside his eye.

"Hand them over or he's dead!"

Akihito didn't know how long they stood there, the gun pressed to his head, the blood rushing like a torrent in his ears, his breath shallow and shaking and not enough and too much at the same time. He was getting light-headed, shadows crowding in and spots dotting his vision, when a lazy, indifferent drawl cut through it all.

"Is that you making all that racket, Akihito? You're disturbing my dinner."

Akihito never thought there would come a day when relief was his overarching reaction to hearing that velvet baritone. It was as though firm ground had suddenly been paved for his panic-addled mind to stand on, restoring some measure of rationality.

"Stay back!" Clearly recognising the bigger threat, the mugger pulled Akihito in front of him as a shield, an arm wrapped around his neck, with the gun still digging into his temple. The woolly balaclava was rough against his ear.

Akihito stared desperately at Asami's silhouette that had emerged from the back door of the restaurant. What was he doing out here? Akihito found himself about to beg, Please on the tip of his tongue. Maybe he knew on an instinctive level that Asami was his only hope here, despite what Akihito knew of him. Or perhaps because of it.

The mugger was still playing tough. "Give me your money or this one gets it," he growled.

Asami made a show of patting down his pockets. "It seems I left my wallet inside," he observed, sounding totally unconcerned. He waved a hand, jingling his watch. "But how about Rotonde de Cartier?"

"What?" the mugger gruffed.

"Cartier. You can sell it and buy several Rolexes with it."

"Fine. Drop it and walk away."

"Are you trying to devalue it? Scratches are costly." Asami leisurely descended the three steps from the doorway as he unbuckled his watch. "Here."

Even Akihito was fooled. Asami appeared entirely nonchalant standing there, sideways on to them, dangling the watch from the tips of an outstretched hand. The mugger inched forward, keeping his grip tight on Akihito until he shuffled them within reach, then snatched for the watch –

It was a blur.

Asami barreled at them, knocking the gun clear from Akihito's head and Akihito clear from the masked man, hauling him aside in the circle of strong arms. The gun went off, the bullet flying astray, as two men flew at the mugger from out of nowhere.

Akihito didn't hear the expensive watch clattering away or the thudding of fists on flesh. He didn't
hear the mugger screaming obscenities and grunting in pain, or the police sirens in the distance. His ear was ringing, his head was pounding, and all he could do was stare at the soft Italian wool crushed within his trembling, white-knuckled grasp.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Wow, thank you for such an incredible welcome to AO3! So much time, energy, love and soul goes into writing as all you fellow writers know. It makes me incredibly happy that you're enjoying this!

And also rather nervous – I don’t want to let you down! XD

Hmm, this chapter... Usually I get to a point where I'm happy to call it done and move on to the next post, but I'm struggling to decide if this is ready or not. I could probably go on editing it forever! So I'm just going to post it. I may come back to it again later when I've looked at it fresh.

So anyway, here we go, the aftermath straight off the bat after Chapter 5 and cranking up the temperature another notch. You might want to cover your screen from people reading over your shoulder. *nudge nudge wink wink* (^^)

I hope it's ok...! (I'm going to bed, too nervous to see how you'd react... Goodnight! *hides*)

~ Nyx ~

Artwork added May 2018: *~(^^)~* I feel like the luckiest fanfiction author ever! Shey, you spoil me with your amazing fanart (please don't stop!) XD I want to invent new words to describe just how thrilled I am that you drew something so incredible for my story. Thank you Shey!! <3

Shelter.

A heavy arm rested over Akihito’s shoulder, the warm hand cradling his head, the thumb lightly stroking just behind his ear. It was a hand that killed, the hand that dealt with the mugger with startling efficiency, but right then, right there, it felt like the safest place on Earth.

Still somewhat dazed, Akihito indulged in his momentary weakness. Neither made to move away.

"Oh! I was so scared!"

Risa rushed to their sides, knocking into them as she leaned on Asami. Roused from his stupor Akihito finally, reluctantly, forced himself back a step, relocating his spine somewhere amidst the hazy disorientation and standing on his own two feet.

"You saved me! What a hero, thank you! Thank you!"

Akihito stared numbly at Risa as his incredulity bloomed larger than his shock. Mere minutes ago they’d been celebrating their six month anniversary and she was already throwing herself at someone else. He didn't say anything, simply regarding her quietly as the sirens converged on them and she pressed herself against Asami’s broad shoulder.
It was over. Truly over. They hadn't even broken up yet and he was already having closure.

A part of him started gnawing with guilt, aware that he was going about it in the wrong order. But it was all eclipsed and he didn't even know what it was that he was feeling anymore the moment his eyes found Asami's unreadable gaze amongst the flashing blue and red.

The police were taking Risa's statement first. The first run-through was just for preliminary information; they would sign the typed-up statements at the precinct later on. The cops kept a cautious distance from Asami, clearly aware of who he was. It was how Akihito found himself briefly alone with the tall man, surrounded by officers combing the alley and photographing the crime scene, Asami's two men on watch out of earshot at the end of the alley.

"What a headache, huh?" Akihito laughed hollowly. "You come out for a smoke and end up with all this hassle..."

Asami drew on his cigarette, briefly lighting his features in the orange glow. "My men saw you."

Akihito stared. So Asami had come out especially, knowing there was trouble? Just as Akihito was grappling with this idea, one of the cops passed by with an evidence bag containing an expensive casualty.

He grimaced. "Sorry about your watch."

"It's just a watch." Asami sounded entirely unconcerned.

"But..." It still didn't sit right with Akihito. "I'll pay you back."

"What for? They'll return it soon enough."

"What about all that about scratches and devaluing it?"

There was a puff of exhaled smoke. "It's actually a cheap knockoff."

Akihito snorted. "Yeah, right."

There was a smirk playing on the corner of Asami's lips and Akihito couldn't decide if he was being teased or patronised.

Whatever else, Akihito couldn't deny that the bastard had helped him out. He scuffed his trainers along the ground, mumbling. "It doesn't seem to cut it, but it's all I can think of... so... thank you."

Two officers approached for Asami's statement. He went with them, briefly sifting through the blond hair as he passed.

Akihito found himself rooted to the spot, swaying under the passing heat and weight of Asami's hand, wondering when in the world such a gesture had come to feel so reassuring.

By the time they'd finished their statements and he'd found Risa again, she was already back all over Asami.
What troubled him more wasn't her behaviour, but Asami's. He seemed to be indulging her, simply standing there with his hands slung casually in his pockets, not distancing himself from her frequent touches on his arm, shoulder, back... And he'd tempered down the *I-can-kill-with-a-look* air about himself in that way that he did to just a hint of alluring danger, drawing her in even more.

Akihito scowled, irritated at himself for being irritated by it in the first place, when Risa's hand slid down the back of Asami's shoulder. Akihito saw the subtle turn, the deflection with the arm before she could feel what was concealed against Asami's side...

He was getting bothered by stupid shit when she'd just come *that close* to discovering Asami's gun. The consequences didn't bear thinking about.

He seriously needed to get his priorities in order. Despite how Risa had treated him, Akihito wasn't about to stoop to her level and put her life on the line. "Come on, I'll take you home." He tried to draw her away.

Risa practically recoiled from his touch, yanking her arm free. "I can't possibly take a taxi with the shock I've just had."

Akihito raised a brow at her. "What does a taxi have anything to do with that?"

Asami graciously swooped in, smiling easily at Risa as though such expressions were habitual on his face. "Allow me to send you home."

"No!" "How kind!"

Akihito and Risa's replies collided and they looked at each other.

"Aki-kun, don't be so rude," Risa chided sweetly.

"You can't," Akihito insisted, searching for a plausible reason. "It... It would be inconvenient!"

"Not in the least," Asami dismissed. "I have a driver, after all."

"What about your... friend?"

Asami smirked but didn't elucidate. "She's been escorted home safe and sound."

"But..." Akihito couldn't think of anything else, other than the truth. His eyes flickered down to Asami's side. When he glanced back up, the sharp, perceptive gaze filled him with dread.

It lasted only a moment, before he was helplessly watching Asami sweep Risa towards the road where the limo was idling, the guard Sagano already holding the back door.

Risa fluttered by the open door, making a show of arranging her dress while she was really enjoying the envious attention from the passersby, before sliding in.

Asami leaned an arm over the open doorway, turning back to Akihito still standing there. "Well?"

It wasn't really a question. Akihito didn't want to end up trapped in the limo but neither could he leave Risa to Asami's tender mercies. A fact of which Asami was well aware.

Glaring furiously at being outmanoeuvred, Akihito headed for the limo.

Asami stayed exactly where he was, not giving Akihito any more room as he shuffled past the taller man. Akihito even felt a brush through his hair just as he ducked in, with Asami murmuring, "See,
that wasn't so hard, was it?"

But by then Akihito was in the softly lit interior as Risa gave the driver directions to her home, and he had to swallow his biting comeback.

Akihito sat on the side along the length of the limo, trying to ignore the two chatting amicably on the back seat. Or at least, Risa was. Asami hummed and nodded, acting the perfect listener.

Akihito didn't care. He loosened the unaccustomed tie strangling him, undoing the top button. He really hated wearing suits. He tried looking through the darkened partition separating the driver, but quickly gave up when all he could make out were the shadowy outlines of two people silhouetted by oncoming headlights. He fixed his eyes squarely through the tinted windows opposite him, at the glitzy restaurants and boutiques open till late, tiny quaint noodle bars tucked alongside modern convenience stores, flashing signs lit up and down the side of buildings showcasing more shops and restaurants upstairs.

But with all this focus on the Minato nightlife, logic dictated that he shouldn't have then known every time Asami replied, or gestured something with his hand, or afforded Risa a beguiling smile that had never been directed at Akihito. Not that Akihito was bothered at all. At. All.

Risa was explaining all about the area where she lived when Asami's phone rang.

He excused himself, glancing at the caller ID. "Asami."

Risa almost spontaneously combusted. Akihito sighed, looking away, wishing she'd be more discrete.

"Why are you calling from this number?"

The caller's explanation was brief.

"That was careless of you." Asami caught his eye. "Make sure you destroy it completely – data can still be retrieved from even the smallest fragments in the right hands."

It shouldn't have mattered. It couldn't even be called praise, merely an observation of fact, and an indirect one at that. Akihito simmered, resolutely ignoring the bubbling feeling for being acknowledged and purposefully reminding himself of what he'd found following Asami's departure...

"Go ahead," Asami continued on the phone.

It was only the smallest change in his expression, more a shift in the air about him. Something about him suddenly screamed danger, the apex predator primed over a kill. Risa seemed magnetised but Akihito knew the threat to be all too real.

Asami smirked, the fearsome look of a very satisfied cat toying with a maimed mouse. "Finally. When?" He checked the time on the limo console display and his eyes gleamed, zeroing unerringly on Akihito with intent, raking him from the tips of his blond hair to his shoes. "Perfect. Just enough time for a little distraction beforehand."

Akihito blanched.

"Call me when you're close. Give Suoh the heads-up." Asami hung up and resumed his conversation with Risa as though he hadn't just undressed Akihito with his eyes. "I hear it's a pleasant neighbourhood, Matsumoto-san."
"Please, Asami-san, won't you call me Risa?"

Asami laughed lightly as Akihito still fumed. "I couldn't assume such familiarity."

"But you call Aki-kun by his first name?"

"Oh, but he and I are intimately acquainted –" Akihito almost choked – "... having worked on some special hardware projects. Isn't that right, Akihito?"

"There was no hardware involved whatsoever," Akihito threw back. "It was entirely software."

Oblivious to the undercurrent between them, Risa moved on, fixed on furthering her own acquaintance. Asami threw Akihito a dark smirk before he returned his attention to Risa, his expression serene.

Asami was never so contrived with Akihito like this. With Akihito, he was overbearing and smug and arrogant, putting Akihito through the emotional wringer, doing exactly as he pleased, like when he'd held Akihito against the wall and –

He mentally hauled his thoughts away from that incident. He wasn't aware of Asami's glinting eyes tracking his every move as he shifted in his seat.

Akihito kicked himself now for how he'd reacted, clinging to Asami like some damsel in distress just because a mugger had decided to get pushy and aggressive. With every passing minute he was feeling more like his normal self, and as he regained his senses he also remembered precisely what this man was capable of. He'd seen it for himself, after all. Asami might have saved him from the business end of a gun this time but in the footage it had been Asami behind the trigger. The lethal lump of metal, the bullet blasting, boring indiscriminately through whatever lay in its path. Akihito knew how it felt now, the barrel deathly cold, the iciness burning his temple as the jabbing pressure only intensified, the mugger's voice grating, the balaclava scratching his ear, the gun hard and solid and drilling right through his head and it could all be over in a split moment and the world was closing in all over again and all hinging on one tiny bullet that could end it all on the whim or nerves holding the trigger –

"Akihito, look at me."

He slowly registered the grip on his chin, forcing his face up.

"Look at me."
Molten gold, dark and piercing, reached through the haze, pushing back the gathering shadows. Asami was beside him on the stretch of black leather. Seeing the awareness returning, he held out a crystal tumbler.

"Drink this."

Akihito glanced at the dark amber spirit and scrunched his face up. "That's ok."

"It'll help."

It was held up to Akihito's lips and tipped anyway, forcing him to drink it to avoid it spilling everywhere.

It burned, but it was also surprisingly smooth. Probably hideously expensive. Akihito coughed but it was true, his nerves seemed to settle somewhat as he focused on the burn. And he realised that his hands were shaking. He stared at them a moment before crossing his arms, burying them under his armpits to hide them.

"It's just shock," Asami explained patiently.

Akihito barked a laugh, a bitter sound. "Like you'd know how that feels."

"Aki, what's with you? Asami-san has been so kind to us all evening, you should apologise."

For a moment Akihito had actually forgotten that Risa was still there. He looked at her, that same quiet regard he'd had back in the alley.

"You weren't going to give it to him, were you?"
There was no accusation in his tone, just tired observation, but Risa drew back as though affronted. "What are you talking about?"

"The mugger. He had a gun to my head. But you weren't going to give him your jewellery."

Risa's face was all shock and indignation, her eyes darting over to Asami just for an instant. "What a horrible thing to say! Of course I would have given him my jewellery. He was threatening both of us, I was terrified and froze up, that's all."

Akihito didn't press any further. Asami was impassive. Risa looked between the both of them, sensing censure even if it was neither voiced nor expressed.

The limo drew to a stop and the driver knocked on the partition window. "We're here, Asami-sama."

They were parked around the back of Risa's apartment building, away from the busy main road out front. She gushed her thanks, attempting to revive the cordiality she felt she'd struck up with the wealthy businessman before.

"My pleasure, Matsumoto-san," Asami said politely in parting.

Risa beamed. "I'll see you tomorrow, Aki-kun," she added as Sagano held the door open for her and she stepped out.

Actually no. He wouldn't.

All of a sudden Akihito wanted nothing more than to make that crystal clear and not a single day later. "Risa-san!" he called as he rushed out after her.

He stopped her halfway to her building in the circle of a street lamp, overshadowed by tall apartment buildings sprinkled with occasional windows of square light, the dim glow from the small wooden houses interspersed in between.

"I'm sorry to do this, in the middle of the road, just after something like that, but... I think it's best if we break up."

Risa looked taken aback. Surprised, but not upset. She was thinking again, and Akihito only now realised how calculating she was.

"You're upset, Aki. You shouldn't decide something so rashly –"

"I've been thinking it for a while now, we're not right together. I can't give you the kind of lifestyle you want. There won't be any more tomorrows, Risa-san. Not between us."

She studied him, searching for any hint of hesitation. When she found none, her expression turned sour. "Well, that's your loss. Go back to your sorry old IT job, and don't think I'll take you back if you change your mind."

He blinked, taken aback by her animosity as she spun on her heel and marched away.

How had he read her so wrong all this time? Or perhaps it stemmed from having the proverbial carrot snatched away, the tantalising prospect of becoming closer to Asami slipping out of reach. He couldn't entirely blame her for that; after all, he was personally acquainted with the effect Asami could have on someone and making them act out of character...

"You're driven," he called softly after her retreating back. "You don't let anyone put you down. I
admired that."

She paused.

"You made me laugh. Sometimes, I thought you cared."

Finally she turned, meeting his eyes.

He wasn't mad. He was too exhausted to be mad. Tired from the mugging, tired from the whole previous 24 hours. Tired of the two of them. "Was any of it real?"

She saw how he was simply waiting, not a hint of antagonism anywhere, and her thorny demeanour softened. Her expression eased to something he was more familiar with. Eventually, she answered, "You were fun."

Fun. To pass the time until something more promising came along... He huffed a small smile. It was bittersweet. "Will you be alright?" He might have meant about the mugging or the break up. Probably both.

Risa reflected for a moment before raising her chin, her gaze steady. "Of course."

At least she gave him that. He could walk away without any guilt. "Take care, Risa-san."

"Bye, Takaba-kun." They shared a last look.

He took a big breath as she disappeared through the glass doors, probably the last time he'd see her doing so. He held the breath, looking inwards as he cast his gaze up, surprised at the lightness he was feeling.

He was free. It struck him as he stood amidst the clash of quaint old houses and modern apartment blocks that could be found all over Tokyo, buffeted by the perpetual drone of traffic and the faint electronic warble of a distant pedestrian crossing, asphalt underfoot, the cloudy night sky overhead tinged with the nocturnal lights of the city. Weight rushed off his shoulders as he finally ended the relationship as he'd been meaning to do for a while now. He hadn't realised how stifling it had been, how far he'd been making an effort to please her at the expense of his own contentment.

It was Dunhill that eventually brought him back to Earth.

Asami was leaning near the back of the limo, a glowing cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth.

The tall man drew a lazy inhale, the glow intensifying the piercing gaze that rooted Akihito to the spot. Even in such a commonplace action as reclining against the vehicle, with his ankles casually crossed and his hands tucked in his pockets, there was nothing about this man that was ordinary.

Akihito had never had his head turned by another man until he'd met Asami. He was astute enough to recognize the physical attraction. There was no denying it, the desire carnal and fierce. But of course, Sod's law meant it just had to be his current – and most elusive – investigative target. It was simply impossible.

He wanted to run.

Asami clearly had different ideas. "Let's go."

Asami might have saved him from the mugger but Akihito was under no illusions how quickly the
tide could turn, especially when loaded with as many potential triggers as he was. He wasn't taking any chances.

"No thanks. I'll make my own way home."

Asami smirked. "There's only one way this is going to go and that's with your ass in the limo. Whether I go easy on you, or not, is entirely up to you."

Hazel eyes widened at the dark promise and Akihito unconsciously took a step back. It seemed Asami was right back to his overbearing ways and it was making his pulse skitter.

Annoyed with himself, he glared. "There's only one place this ass is going and that's straight home. By myself."

"Get in, Akihito."

"You can't make me. Not here, someone might see."

"Why would I have to make you? You owe me. And I always collect."

Akihito stared, stunned. Asami was holding him to the whole mugger fracas? It was still too raw, and it hurt, enough that he felt an actual pang in his chest, though he couldn't fathom why he was getting so hung up on why Asami had chosen to save him.

"I should've known," he sneered bitterly. "Someone like you would never do anything without expecting some kind of return, right?"

"Return?" A frown creased Asami's brow before he seemed to catch on to Akihito's meaning. "You mean that low life? No, not that. There's nothing owed for that." He saw the hope cutting through Akihito's gaze even if the young man was unaware of it himself. "That was hard on you, upsetting. Why would I exploit that?"

Akihito's shoulders sagged just a little.

Whatever had softened Asami's tone, understanding or a wisp of sympathy, it was short lived. His eyes glinted, uncompromising and predatory. "But you do owe me a visit. You're coming with me."

Temper flared right up again. "No! Whatever you're planning, I want no part of it."

Asami smirked, his gaze languidly sweeping down Akihito's frame. "Even if that's to strip you naked and devour you until you come screaming my name?"

Akihito was only vaguely aware of his jaw dropping as Asami grabbed him.

The moment Asami threw him into the limo, Akihito threw himself at the opposite door.

He slipped once on the handle, but his second try was solid. He yanked, the door swung –

He was hauled back, back from the open door, back from freedom. Easily keeping hold of a desperately writhing Akihito with one arm, Asami leaned over to slam the door shut as the limo sped away.

"Let me go!"
Asami secured Akihito on his lap, containing the floundering arms, letting the legs thrash out. "You should've come by today."

"But I did!"

A large hand swept up under Akihito's shirt, brushing over him and sensitizing his skin. "After checking with Kirishima to make sure I was engaged elsewhere? You didn't really think I'd allow that, did you?"

At least Asami hadn't been talking about the community service transfer. But there was no time to appreciate any relief. "You never said you – uhhg... had to be there!"

Akihito gasped as nails scraped over his nipple, making his breath shudder. Then Asami suddenly pinched hard, twisting, making him arch and gasp from the arousing pain. "Asami, stop –!"

"You can fight me all you like," Asami rumbled in his ear. "But your body's honest with what it really wants."

Asami slipped a hand under his waistband, sliding down and wrapping long fingers around his length and squeezed. Not too hard, just delicious, mind-boggling sensations robbing him of coherent thoughts and making him shudder.

"You bastard!" he swore thickly.

Asami sucked on his neck, pinched a nipple and twisted his hand over the mushroom tip all at the same time, and Akihito's head dropped back over the broad shoulder, too fired up to be able to struggle properly. He bit his lip, fighting the groans that just wanted out, but that seemed to annoy Asami. A growl, a firm grasp of his jaw, and that was all the warning Akihito had before Asami turned his head and took his lips.

Holy flaming bison bells, he'd never known a kiss like this before. Asami gave no quarter, brushing aside all resistance and imposing his will. It was Asami's taste saturating Akihito's mouth, the wet heat of Asami's tongue, inescapable and intoxicating. It amplified the underlying scent that could be nobody else, that heat, those unyielding hands forcing compliance – it was throbbingly intimate, inflammatory, overwhelming.

Akihito bucked in instinctive panic, a wild attempt to fight free, only to find himself grinding against Asami's own burgeoning hardness. And still the tight grasp on his jaw forced his mouth open, that demanding tongue dominated his, sweeping away all rational thought as his wrists were grasped firmly and he was forced to endure such an intensity of hunger as he'd never known and ached with blazing arousal.

Asami drew back, an obscene line of saliva stretching between their lips before it split. His pupils were blown almost entirely black, his molten gaze blistering as he took in Akihito's flushed face, the breaths shuddering between swollen lips, his hazel eyes shining with fearful heat.

Asami grinned wolfishly. "Well, well. Aren't you cute."

"Go to hell!"

The golden eyes turned positively wicked, his hand travelling south. "What, and put the devil out of work?"

"You already –" Akihito choked up when the large hand wrapped around his balls, gently kneading before sliding back up with intent.
Asami stroked him swiftly, watching every hitch of breath and thudding heartbeat and bunching of slender muscles, until Akihito was this close to coming –

Asami eased off at the last moment, still stirring him just enough to keep him thrumming but not nearly enough to go over. Akihito choked back a groan of disappointment, wanting to come, needing to come... He was furious with himself, even more furious with Asami.

He glowered, Asami smirked back, Akihito opened his mouth to hurl abuse, only for Asami to silence him with another demanding kiss that made him moan as the large hand slicked over his throbbing length. And while he was so distracted, Asami slipped Akihito's jacket off his trembling shoulders.

Asami brushed and tantalised and scratched and sucked and licked and grasped and pumped and squeezed as he held Akihito captive on his lap, and somewhere in amongst it all he stripped Akihito off just as he'd promised, leaving not a stitch of clothing. The drag of material was lost amidst the ceaseless caressing of skin and Akihito barely noticed.

It was only when Asami spread his knees brazenly, trailing maddening fingers along his inner thighs, that he became aware of being completely and utterly exposed.

In sudden alarm Akihito tried to curl away. But then Asami's tongue found that spot just below his ear and one hand was roaming over his heated skin and the other took his dripping length in a swift grip and he found himself battling delirium. The scorching gaze was infuriatingly self-satisfied as it took in his trembling, fevered nakedness, and a bolt of fiery arousal shot straight to his weeping erection held in Asami's expert grasp. Akihito's hands drifted uselessly over Asami's, too far gone to muster strength.

"Damn you," he swore breathily as his head fell back.

The warm chuckle wrapped around him as Asami carried on stroking him, until he was writhing against Asami's own hard arousal against his lower back and trying to pump into the large hand...

He groaned in protest when Asami eased him back from the brink yet again.

Akihito blindly reached down himself, knowing he'd only need just a few quick strokes to end the torment, but he found himself deflected, his wrists quickly wound up in smooth silk. His indignant protests were swallowed up in a blistering kiss that seared down his spine and only incited his temper even more.

"You bastard, just get it over with already!"

"What a brat, have you no manners? You have to ask nicely."

"...nnhhg!"

Again and again, Asami worked him up to a frenzy without allowing him to finish, teasing relentlessly so he could never back off far from the edge, eliciting an endless litany of profanities and abusive names interspersed between shuddering gasps.

Asami's seductive voice in his ear was equally relentless. "You really are adorable, crying and moaning like that... I can do this all night. Shall I make you shake and moan all night, Akihito? ... All you have to do is ask. Tell me what you want."

Asami kept it up for nearly a whole fricking hour while the limo weaved the streets in endless circles, until Akihito was a mindless wreck tearing up with agonising need. Until he caved.
"Nng... Fuck! Asami, please!"

Suddenly the warm body at his back disappeared, and Akihito found himself yanked halfway off the seat, his shoulders resting on the leather with his head pushed up at an angle against the seat back, giving him an unobstructed view down his flushed torso to Asami’s face...

Kneeling on the limo floor and keeping Akihito’s hips suspended with an arm wrapped under his ass, Asami took his engorged length deep into his mouth.

Akihito’s brain short circuited.

Asami’s hot mouth sucking his throbbing cock, throat muscles working around the aching tip, the sight of him on his knees and devouring him, all while those blazing, devilish, self-satisfied golden eyes locked onto him –

After being kept on the brink for an hour, it was too much. Akihito thrust desperately into Asami’s mouth, cried out his name and exploded into the heavens.
Akihito's life doesn't revolve around Asami, you know? Not completely, anyway. (^_-)

This is the first half of a humongous chapter that I split into two. Next part should be up in a couple of days. It's a change of pace but I hope you enjoy it!

~ Nyx ~

"Who knows, Akihito. We might both come next time."

Akihito seethed all the way to the police station. The infuriating bastard had still been immaculate, not a hair or thread out of place, as Akihito had stormed his dishevelled way out of the limo in the early hours chased by Asami's amused parting comment.

It was a toss-up whether he was more mortified by Asami taking him in his mouth looking like the cat that ate the cream, or by coming to as Asami conversed on the phone to find his jacket draped over his still-naked body with his head resting on Asami's lap... Or how he'd leaned against the shower stall in the hot spray when Asami had finally dropped him off home, stroking one out as smouldering golden eyes floated in his mind...

Holy crap, Asami had swallowed...

Akihito groaned, dropping his forehead onto the subway car window as his face burned up. People gave him odd looks but he couldn't care less. They had no idea what he was dealing with!

It took about an hour to finish at the precinct, what with waiting around and checking over his statement. He swung up to Major Crimes but Yama-san wasn't on duty this weekend, which was actually a relief. It would have been awkward trying to explain how Asami had come to save him from a mugging... His crotchety friend would've been furious at the paradox.

But barring the never-to-be-spoken-of-again incident the previous night, Operation Extraction was a success. Akihito had removed himself from Asami's crosshairs; their paths would never cross again.

His tread was heavy as he headed back into the underground.

"So...?" Kou and Takato stared at him expectantly.

It was Saturday lunchtime. Akihabara was heaving with people of all ages converging on the top district in Tokyo for manga, video games and computing goods. Their favourite little ramen bar was packed and they'd waited 45 minutes for three seats together. They didn't mind. With their hectic schedules they could usually only meet up once a week and they were happy catching up while they queued, bantering and ribbing each other.

Akihito had actually been expecting the third degree earlier, but his friends had waited until they'd sat down at the bar with Akihito wedged between them. The small red plastic-covered stools were placed so close together they were practically rubbing hips. As ever they were accompanied by the
din of the megaphone hawkers from neighbouring shops, part and parcel of the atmosphere of the bustling district.

Akihito watched the chef shake off all the excess water from the noodles in one experienced fling of the sieve and played dumb. "I think I'll go for the mega pork ramen."

Kou snorted. "Why am I not surprised?" He raised his eyebrows at Takato in question, who nodded back, and he ordered three.

"So." Kou leaned in even closer, as did Takato, hemming Akihito in. "What happened last night?"

Asami was the first thing that came to mind. "Wh-what do you mean?" Akihito stuttered. Then he remembered the mugging. And Risa. "Oh, right, yeah, last night. Dinner was..." Ruined by Asami... He cleared his throat. "Fine. Dinner was fine."

"How much did it all cost?" Takato pressed.

Akihito had messaged them beforehand to say he was taking Risa out to some uber-posh place for their six-month anniversary. They'd nagged him for details and he'd finally given in and told them where, it seemed they'd looked it up.

Kou leaned forwards to throw a look at Takato. "That's your first question? I want to know what happened with Risa."

"It's our two-year anniversary coming up," Takato defended. "I wanted to take Chiharu-chan somewhere special. But they don't have any prices on their menu so I can't look it up online."

Akihito came clean. "We broke up."

"You did?" They both looked at him as though trying to decide whether to offer congratulations or condolences.

Akihito frowned. "Actually that wasn't until later. First we got mugged."

"Mugged!?"

"Dude, are you ok?" Kou was peering at him from all angles, even lifting an arm.

Akihito batted him away. "I'm fine. We're both fine. Actually it was just an attempted mugging, as we were leaving. The guy didn't take anything in the end, he was distracted when someone came out of the restaurant and then some goons stopped him."

"What goons?"

"I don't know, just some goons."

"Why were there goons in Minato?" Takato asked, confused.

Akihito was finding it harder and harder to explain without actually telling them the truth, but he supposed he could just leave out Asami's name. "They were with the person who came out the restaurant."

"Oh. So you're really ok?"

"Yeah. Honestly, totally fine."
The ramen chef, a grumpy taciturn grandad with a white rolled-up bandana tied around his head, plonked three steaming bowls towering with juicy pork slices in front of them. Akihito grabbed some disposable chopsticks and passed them out.

Takato was frowning. "So you got mugged, \textit{then} you broke up with Risa-san?"

Kou split his chopsticks. "Yeah, I didn't much like her but I gotta say, that's a bit harsh, man."

Akihito poked agitatedly at his bowl, his face shadowed.

"Aki?" Takato asked, sounding more concerned now than disapproving.

Akihito's restless poking slowing down until they stopped altogether. He shook his head. "She..." He pursed his lips, not wanting to badmouth her even now.

"Dude, you can tell us. What is it?"

Akihito sighed, not seeing the bowl he was staring at. He muttered something, too low to be heard when loud electronic music suddenly blared out from next door.

"What?"

"She didn't give him her jewellery!" he snapped. "It's not why I broke up with her, you know I've been thinking about it for a while anyway, but still. The guy had a gun to my head and she wouldn't give him her jewellery. I couldn't... I couldn't keep... seeing her..." He was shaking his head, feeling that gun all over again, the cold pressure against his temple –

He was shoved out of the spiralling mental panic when he was almost knocked physically from his stool by Kou throwing his arms around him. They were levelled out by Takato knocking into them from the other side.

Akihito sat squashed in the middle, wondering what the hell was going on, aware of people glancing over at their group hug. "Uh, guys?"

His friends took a while to say anything.

"You did good, Aki," Kou eventually managed, his voice thick.

Akihito blinked. Kou never called him by his name, he must have been serious.

"I'm sorry we made you feel bad," Takato added, sounding like he was fighting tears.

Which of course just left Akihito feeling awkward. "Ok guys, I'm feeling the love and all, but my ramen's getting fat."

They laughed it off and dug into their ramen, which were indeed fat and soft from sitting in the soup for too long. But it was still delicious and comforting.

"You're sure you're ok?" Takato asked around a mouthful of pork.

Akihito nodded, leaning over the bowl as he slurped up way too much noodle in one go and ended up with it all down his chin.

"Ok, so \textit{now} can you tell me how much the meal cost?"

"Seriously!" Kou protested from the other side, calling over Akihito's bent head. "Can't you wait? I
wanna know how they broke up." His attention swung down to Akihito. "Did you just end it there or did you take her home first? I bet you still took her home, didn't you? You're too nice to have abandoned her even after that. And I bet you paid for the whole cab fare. Am I right? I'm right, aren't I?"

Akihito hesitated. It was just a momentary pause but knowing him as well as they did, his friends pounced on it straight away.

"What, you didn't?"

"So you did just leave her there?"

"No!" Akihito sounded a bit exasperated. "I didn't just leave her. I offered to take her home but she didn't want to get a taxi. This... person... who'd come out of the restaurant, they offered us a lift. Risa-san was dropped off at her place first, and then I broke up with her, and then I --"

He froze. A good liar would have just ploughed right on without hesitating. He was a terrible liar.

"Then I... went home." He tried to say it as normally as he could. He tried to ignore them, to keep eating, to keep his face straight...

"Then you went home," Kou repeated flatly.

Akihito shrugged. "Yeah, and that was that. So, long story short, I broke up with Risa-san." He stuffed his face full to stop himself from giving away any more.

Kou carried on eating but he was still watching Akihito closely, trying to work out what his friend wasn't saying.

"Happy now?" Takato threw at Kou before rounding on Akihito. "So. Finally. How much was the meal?"

Akihito swallowed, still keeping his face carefully neutral. "Sorry I can't help you, Takato. The uh... that person, they paid for our bill."

Takato's brow rose in amazement. "They paid your bill, saved you from a mugging, and gave you a lift home?" He laughed. "Wow, some person, huh? That's some luck there, even if the rest of the night bombed."

Akihito laughed tensely, hoping it didn't sound manic. "Yeah, some luck, huh?"

Kou suddenly slammed his hands down on the wooden bar, making them both jump, and pointed a finger at Akihito. "You got laid!"

This loud announcement was followed by stillness all around them, filled only with the earnest hawking of the shop assistant inviting shoppers next door.

"Kou!" Akihito hissed, yanking the pointing hand down and ducking his head, flushing at all the attention they'd suddenly gathered. "Would you cut it out?"

Kou didn't care that everyone in the ramen shop had heard him. "I'm right, aren't I? Tell me you didn't get laid."

"I didn't get laid," Akihito ground out quietly, trying to ignore the sniggering around them as the diners gradually returned to their noodles.
Kou stared at him hard for several seconds until he believed him. But he wasn't letting up. "Well something happened. What was it, just a blow job or something?"

Akihito's cheeks bloomed bright red.

"Aha!" Kou cried triumphantly. "I knew it!"

"No way!" Takato laughed. "Seriously?"

Akihito buried his face in his hands and groaned.

"You broke up with Risa then got blown straight after? You dawg, you!"

"Who made the first move?" Takato grinned.

"That's gotta be them, right? Our Aki-kun wouldn't just jump someone in their car."

Akihito wished the ground would swallow him up whole and chew him up and never spit him out. This was going from bad to worse, they had no idea how close they were hitting to the mark.

"Of course I didn't jump them. They just wouldn't take No for an answer."

"Were you forced?" Kou almost leaped forward in sudden concern, making Akihito grab his shoulder to try and quieten him down again.

"We guys have a choice too, you know," Takato said. "You can say No."

"Geez, you sound like the sex ed teacher," Akihito scoffed. And clearly that lesson hadn't stuck where Asami was concerned, if they'd even had them back when the perverted bastard was at school. He frowned, having difficulty imagining Asami as anything smaller or younger or in any way less than the overbearing, all-encompassing way he was now.

Akihito settled for a half truth. "They were just... very persistent."

Takato didn't look reassured. "So you just went along with it?"

"Was it good?"

"Kou!"

"Well, was it?"

_Fuck, yes._ Akihito couldn't be sure if he might've actually blacked out afterwards. Risa-san had been surprisingly adventurous sometimes and they'd had some pretty hot sex that had left him wobbly, but nothing that had even come close being so staggering as to turn him into a human octopine vegetable that needed to be manhandled into the recovery position...

He cursed the over-abundant blood flow to his cheeks as heat spread right across his face and even painted his ears.

Even Takato laughed this time. "Geez, Aki!"

Kou almost fell over guffawing. "That must have been one helluva mind-blowing blow job!"

Akihito buried his face in his hands again. He didn't even try to stop them, nothing short of Mount Fuji falling on their heads would stop his friends now.
"Who was it Aki?"

"They're obviously richer. Or just plain rich," Kou mused. "Do you know?"

"They paid for your meal –"

"Sugar Momma!" they cried out together.

Akihito was glad his face was still hidden, otherwise his reaction to that would have given him away even more. They'd assumed it was a woman. Akihito had only ever had girlfriends before, and since he'd been careful to avoid referring to a gender, it was a logical assumption.

He snapped his head up and glared at his friends. They grinned back.

"It's not like that, alright? It was a one-time thing only, and it's not happening again. Ever!" he insisted emphatically as he started digging into his ramen that was now way, way too squishy. His friends carried on regardless.

"Rebound girl!" Takato piped up. Akihito choked.

"Rebound lady!" Kou amended.

"Why lady?" Takato asked, slapping Akihito on the back.

"I just assumed she'd be older if she was that rich." Just as Akihito thought he'd got his breath back, Kou grinned. "Rebound Sugar Momma!"

Coughing and spluttering all over again, Akihito gave up on his ramen.

Akihito managed to get his friends off his back for a few hours that afternoon after broaching the question of staying with them for a while. When he'd mentioned someone from the neighbourhood he'd had a run-in with and wanted to stay clear of for a while, Kou remembered the suspicious man in the suit that he'd wrestled with earlier in the week. But having been three sheets to the wind, he seemed to 'remember' that he'd somehow managed to win their tussle hands down despite being shockingly inebriated, and, fortunately, he didn't recall faces or any real details.

Akihito grabbed enough stuff to stay at Kou's for a while. Of course there had still been plenty of ribbing and prying from the two of them who the mysterious Sugar Momma might be, and from Kou all through Sunday too since he was now likewise single and had nothing better to do than to lounge about with Akihito and play computer games. But Akihito knew they meant well and was glad of their support.

It was Sunday night when events seemed to catch up with him. He startled awake in the middle of the night, chased out of sleep by unknown phantoms. It took several alarming seconds to recognize Kou's living room in the colourless half-light, and a whole lot longer than that for his pulse to return to normal. Settling back down again proved elusive until his mind drifted to a certain tall presence, and it was the memory of the quiet steadiness from the alley that finally carried him back to sleep.

Monday.

"Hey, Yama-san, what a surprise," he answered cheerfully when his phone rang.

"Don't play dumb with me, kid! I saw the report about the mugging, what the hell happened?"
“Yes I’m perfectly alright, thanks,” Akihito intoned. “How kind of you to ask.”

“I know you’re alright, it said in the report. But you know what else is in the report? The fact that you were with Asami! What the hell were you thinking?”

The electronic Toryanse tune warbled overhead with the green light and Akihito joined the commuters crossing the pedestrian zebra, on the look-out for any men in black suits.

“I wasn’t with Asami, he just happened to be in the restaurant and he came out when it was all going on outside, that’s all.”

“That’s not all! How does he even know you? You promised me you’d keep your head down, you punk!”

“And I did! Or at least, I tried, ok? A lot’s happened and there was nothing I could do, so stop getting all mad at me.”

Yamazaki sighed over the phone, and his voice was still rough but it was kinder. "Look, Takaba, I'm just worried about you. You've kept your real name out of it all this time, don't go giving yourself away to Asami of all people."

Yamazaki had been assigned to the case of Akihito's first scrape with the law on his very first 'computer trespass' investigation. But since Z4m4 M1r0 had uncovered a minister involved with underage prostitutes, instead of pressing charges, the newly qualified detective had instead taught the cheeky young punk who was convinced of his invincibility and stupidly boasting his online alter ego to zealously guard his identity. It had taken the full gory horror of the graphic case of the hacker who'd been tortured and executed by the Russian Bratva after revealing their secrets for the message to sink in. Since then the two of them had an unspoken agreement on reciprocal information sharing, an arrangement that had turned out to be mutually lucrative with scoops and arrests.

"I know, and I'm being careful, so don't worry."

"Look, do me a favour and just drop this whole thing. Just let it go."

Akihito's brow rose. "You've changed your tune in a week."

"That was before I knew Asami actually knew you, that's a whole different ball game! It's too dangerous. You know what these organised crime vermin are like, they give fuck all about the law but they're religious when it comes to their own 'code'. These types take honour and debts very seriously. They never forgive traitors, and Asami's the worst of the bunch being top dog."

"Top dog?" Akihito had figured that out for himself by now but Yama-san hadn't mentioned that. He overtook a group of dawdling mothers with pushchairs and carried on along the tree-lined road, glancing up and down the street just in case. "What does that mean exactly?"

"What do you mean, what does that mean? I told you."

"No, you didn't."

"... I didn't?" The gruff voice was hesitant.

"No, you didn't! Did you misplace a few marbles over the weekend?"

"Don't get smart with me, kid. Asami rules the Tokyo underworld, and pretty much across Japan. All the yakuza families defer to him. Hell, some rumours even say he holds power over a lot of Asia.
Look, kid, just let this one go. I know I gave you his name in the first place but he knows you now. This is biting off way more than either of us can chew. I'll find you another target."

Akihito felt himself go a little pale. It was even worse than he'd thought. "'Unstoppable drug dealer' doesn't quite cut it, really, does it Yama-san? 'Cos that was what you called him, remember?"

Yamazaki sighed. "Sorry, maybe I should've made that clear."

Akihito pulled a What the hell? kind of face. "You think?"

"You know now so just move on, ok?"

Akihito stared across the road at the squat, green building where he was headed.

The mugging, and now this – what the heck was he supposed to do with the video? Murder was murder. There was no mitigating factor for taking a life in cold blood, even if Asami had saved Akihito from a sticky situation. But even that wasn't a foregone conclusion. The mugger might have just as easily walked away and left them unharmed a minute later and Asami needn't have played any part...

Even if Akihito would swear blind that any murderer had to be brought to account, he still found himself dragging his heels, keeping the damming evidence squirreled away. He felt ill just thinking about it. Maybe he'd feel more committed once he'd been away from the maddening bastard for a few days and got his head straightened out.

"I think I'll work this one a bit longer, Yama-san. If he's really as bad as that, he needs to be taken down a peg or two."

There was a noise of frustration from the other end. "Did you not listen to a word I just said?"

"He knows me, but he'll never know it's me, if you get my drift. He'll never make the connection. Worst case I can just use it as leverage. I'll be fine." Saying it was one thing, but Akihito had no idea what he'd actually do if it all went to pot and Asami came after him. He was screwed.

There was a pregnant pause. "What leverage?"

... Shit.

Akihito was so used to sharing intel with Yama-san that it had just slipped out. Nearly ten years of habit... Unseen over the phone, he scrunched his face up, pressing his fist to his forehead. Bluff bluff bluff.

"Whatever I find," he breezed. "I was there, I know their systems. I have more of a chance now."

There was an annoyed grunt from the other end. "Don't go getting my hopes up like that," Yamazaki grumbled.

"Watch your blood pressure, Yama-san," Akihito reminded. "Besides, I thought you just told me to drop it? You don't expect anything anymore, right?" he asked with cheeky innocence, hoping he sounded as he normally did.

"If you've already found something that's a whole different story."

"So you want me to stop investigating him but find something anyway? You don't ask for much, do you?" Akihito laughed. "I have to go, new job and all. Call me if you hear anything, ok?"
"Yeah, yeah," Yamazaki muttered gruffly. "And you keep your nose clean."

"Yeah, yeah," Akihito responded in kind.

It was only after he hung up that he allowed himself to relax. That had been too close. He had to be more careful or next time he might say the wrong thing to the wrong person and end up tipping Asami off with all the spies he was bound to have everywhere. Akihito had only just managed to extract himself from that web; he couldn't go messing this up.

He checked one last time along the road – he was looking *out* for anyone suspicious, he firmly told himself, not looking *for*. Safely hidden away from anything related to Sion or Asami, on the other side of the city from Shibuya, Akihito crossed the road and into his new community service placement in the leafy suburbs of Ueno.
I know, I miss Asami too! But since Akihito is without, we are too. Don't worry though, our big bad crime lord can't bow out already – we haven't even got to the good stuff yet!

I'm sorry to say I'm away for a few days so the next update will take a bit longer. But it's nearly there so hopefully I can post it by next weekend. Fingers crossed! There are so many fun things coming up... Tee hee. I'm evil to taunt you, aren't I? Mwahaha...

(＾ω＾)Ψ

Matane!
~ Nyx ~

The community outreach centre was run by beleaguered volunteers. As soon as Akihito arrived he was grabbed eagerly by a retired teacher called Maeda who managed the place. She was one of those rare people who buzzed with energy and swept up everyone around her with infectious enthusiasm. With a whirlwind tour around the centre and its various meeting rooms and facilities, with rushed introductions to the other volunteers as they passed – they were all women, Akihito noticed – he was bundled off into the hands of a quiet volunteer in a stylishly cute dress with stylistically wavy hair.

"He can do computers, get him to have a look!" Maeda rattled off before she rushed off again.

He took a moment to let the dust settle before he nodded his head to the girl he'd been left with. She looked about his age, and slightly familiar although he couldn't place why. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, I'm Takaba."

She seemed more alarmed by his sudden appearance than by Maeda's abrupt departure. She gave a nervous smile. "No need to stand on ceremony here. Hi, I'm Ai."

He grinned, more like his usual self. "In that case, hi, I'm Akihito."

She waited, a curious look on her face as though she was expecting something. He shifted the rucksack on his shoulder, wondering if there was something he was supposed to do.

She let it go after an awkward pause. "Alright then, Akihito-san who can do computers. Let's go take a look."

She showed him to a small, cluttered office with a single window overlooking the car park, and to an old relic of a computer that had him doing a double take. It had been forever since he'd last seen a boxy monitor the size and shape of his microwave.

Akihito had to hide a wince as the old machine whirred painfully to life.

"I hope you're better at this than me. Maeda-san has it fixed in her mind that all young people can 'do computers'," she made air quotes, "so she's been pushing me to look at the website but I don't have a clue! I mean, you go to it, and it doesn't work, so what are you supposed to do? I don't think computers like me but that might be because I don't like them either. It's mutual." She scrunched up her nose.
"I can take a look, Ai-san," Akihito said, finally managing to get a word in edge ways.

"Oh, yes! Please do!" She stepped aside and dropped into the rickety swivel chair. "Even at school I was hopeless with computers, the teachers used to scold me when I used to write out the IT assignments by hand. I think it's because I've always kept a diary ever since I was five but they were all written by hand. And by the way, please don't call me Ai-san, it makes me feel so old! Ai-chan is a lot cuter."

He threw her a smile. "Sorry. Ai-chan, if you're sure."

"I insist. It's what all my friends call me. Actually, everyone does really, now that I think about it. I suppose that's why it feels more like me because I've been called that for so long by so many people. Are you Akihito-kun or Aki-kun?" She tilted her head. "Or Aki-chan?"

He shrugged as the old computer whirred away, still trying to get its old motors working. "I'm not fussy. Most people tend to shout my name. You know," he said, pitching his voice high, "Akihito, why are you having noodles again? You'll fall ill if you don't eat properly." Next he pitched low. "Akihito, stop worrying your mother and get a serious job already. Or my favourite, Takaba, you punk, what the hell have you done this time?" he growled roughly, imitating Yamazaki.

Ai giggled. "Sounds lively."

He grinned. "That's one way to put it. It's mostly Takaba, or Akihito-kun. But then my best friends insist on calling me Aki-chan, so I get all sorts really. I really don't mind." It was unusual to be so informal with someone when they'd only just met, but the girl was easy to talk to and it didn't feel strange.

She was peering at him with her head tilted. "You're cute," she decided suddenly.

Akihito froze at her frankness. Was he supposed to compliment her back? She was too cutsey cute for his liking, not like a certain someone... "Uh..."

She laughed, the sound of sprinkling rain in Spring. She took pity on him and moved on. "The website crashed last week and with the big event this weekend we want to make sure it's up and running. The auction?" she prompted at his questioning glance. He shook his head. "We're holding an auction to raise funds for a new paediatric therapy centre. It's going to do everything – occupational health, mental health, special needs, speech, physio – you name it. There isn't anything like it for miles around so it's hugely important. We have pieces to auction donated by private collectors. Local artisans and craftsmen too. Oh, that all comes after the black-tie three-course luncheon. Half of the tickets were offered for sale to local business representatives, the other half went on general sale. All the tickets sold out, we're really excited! And nervous too, we've never run anything like this before..."

Her enthusiasm was clear as she chattered on.

"What a great cause."

She hummed in excitement, digging under some of the piles of folders on the small, scratchy wooden desk. "Ah, here it is," she said, pulling out a piece of paper with a web address and some passwords on it. "This is all the stuff I was given. I don't know if you can make heads or tails of it?"

The old computer had finally rolled to life but Akihito would have rather pulled his teeth out than use it. "It's ok, I can do it. But maybe we could try it on my laptop? This machine might struggle a bit with the online stuff."
"Really? You have a laptop with you?"

He never went anywhere without it. He pulled it out of his rucksack and had it up and running within seconds.

She clapped. "Wow, this is like the future!"

He couldn't help laughing. "Not really, this is the now. Computers really aren't your thing, are they?"

She shook her head, making her wavy hair bounce.

"What is your thing?" he asked, only half paying attention as he was clicking away on his laptop.

When she didn't reply straight away, he glanced at her. She was looking at him, with that same curious look she'd given him before.

"What is it?"

She shook her head again, a gentler gesture this time. She looked out of the window, her eyes far away and a small smile on her face like something had secretly pleased her. "I come here when I can, to do something for the community. I can't usually stay for the events, I'd just cause too much chaos, but it's nice to know that I helped, without people knowing."

He expected her to say more, considering how chatty she'd been until now, but she seemed introspective and quietly content. He let her be, accessing the source code and checking why the website might have crashed.

"What about you? What brings you here?"

He paused, glancing unsurely at her. "Uh..." It was the kind of question that didn't get asked in big corporations, nobody had ever questioned why he'd come to work for Sion. Volunteer-run community centres were a whole different kettle of fish. He rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, my reason isn't anything as good as yours."

She peered at him curiously.

He hadn't intended to reveal this but he didn't want to lie either. "I have a community service order from the courts."

She sat up, drawing back.

"It wasn't anything violent or anything like that," he hurried to reassure her seeing her obvious fright. He waved vaguely with his hands. "I was hacking. It was computer stuff."

"Hacking what?"

He winced. "The police... And some big company..."

She frowned. "Why?"

"I really can't say much, but long story short, I thought there was corruption, that someone was doing something illegal, and I just wanted to find out more."

She tilted her head. "So you broke the law, to find out if someone was breaking the law?"

"...When you put it like that, yeah, it's pretty dumb, huh?"
There was a pause before she suddenly laughed. He turned to her in surprise, startled to find the twinkle back in her eyes. "I like you, Akihito-kun." She laughed even more at the alarmed look on his face. "Oh, not like that. You feel like the big brother I never had, who seems naughty but actually has a heart of gold."

He looked at her like she was crazy. "A, we just met, and B, that is so cheesy."

Her laughter rang around the tiny office as they went back to fixing the website.

Maeda blew in like a tempest. "Is there not one decent soul in all of Tokyo?!"

The two of them jumped in their seats where Ai had been trying to explain, in her chatty, long-winded way, how they wanted the auction listing.

"Is one massive hall really too much to ask? I mean, it's for charity, for crying out loud!"

It turned out that a water main had burst right beside the auction venue.

With the hotel hall flooded and out of action for at least a fortnight, Maeda had already started making enquiries but she'd been stymied every time. She launched a full-scale calling frenzy by every volunteer in the centre to reach out to local venues and hotels and conference centres, not just to check availability but also to persuade them to rent to them free of charge. There were very few that were still free at such short notice for the prime weekend slot, and even fewer open to charitable giving.

"Maeda-san! Maeda-san!"

It was half an hour later when one of the long-term volunteers rushed in brandishing her phone like the sword from the stone.

"Is it...?"

Barely had Maeda started the question before Tama was bobbing her grey permed hair, smiling from ear to ear and handing the phone over. Maeda rushed out as she introduced herself, leaving a wake of flustered volunteers hanging up their own calls in the office and the small hallway beyond.

"Tama-san, can we stop calling?" Ai asked.

"Oh yes," Tama smiled, her eyes twinkling. "We're saved! It's even better than the first place!"

Ai flopped back in her chair as all the volunteers drifted back to their previous work. "Thank goodness!" Her relief was palpable. "I don't know what I would've done if it had all fallen through."

Akihito felt like an interloper on all their hard work. "You must've been working for this for a long time."

"It's –" She stopped, the joyous bubbliness from moments earlier dissipating like mist. "It means a lot."

Akihito waited, not pushing, giving her the space to talk if she wanted to. Long seconds passed. But he never found out if she would have explained any further when the quiet was interrupted by his phone ringing.

He glanced at the caller and wilted. "Sorry, I should get this."
Ai nodded, making a *go ahead* gesture.

He didn't even manage to get out a greeting before he was being deafened.

"Takaba! What the hell kind of trick do you think you're pulling?"

Akihito winced, pulling the phone away from his ear before tentatively putting it back. "Ah, hey, Ogawa-san, what's up?"

"Don't you *What's up* me, Takaba, you know what's up. You just upped and left with no warning!"

"I'm sorry it was sudden but it couldn't be helped. I'm at a new place now."

"I thought you'd stay until the end of your contract, what the hell happened?"

Akihito's mouth worked soundlessly. "It was just a last minute order from the judge on Friday." He really should have thought of an excuse.

"Does it have something to do with what happened with Asami-sama?"

Akihito almost choked, his whole body experiencing the now-familiar uncomfortable tightness. "It was just the judge's order, ok? The final release is all ready to go, you just need to run the validations then *Soteria*'s live and kicking and Sion's AI cyber shield is all set. After that it'll be the ongoing upgrades but you'll be able to handle that."

There were some unintelligible sounds from the other end. "Damn it, Takaba, we could really use you here. Mitarai's winding everyone up without you to pick on, though I would've thought he'd be more pleased now that he's Asami-sama's go-to guy."

He was? Akihito couldn't identify the gnawing feeling that developed in his gut. "Is that all I'm good for, as Mitarai's verbal punching bag?"

"That's not what I meant --"

"I'm sorry, Ogawa-san, but I have to go. Call me if you have any problems with the security release, OK? Bye."

Akihito dropped his head to the desk and groaned. He did feel bad leaving Ogawa in the lurch but no way could he have stayed.

A small hand rested on his shoulder. "You ok?"

"Sorry," Akihito mumbled to the desk.

"It's a good place to hide out here," she said quietly. "Just be sure you're not hiding from something that's better to be faced."

There was a pause before he turned his head, his eyes half covered by the curtain of his blond hair. "Seriously?"

She scrunched her nose up. "Yeah, that was lame, huh?"

"God, yes." But he laughed. He sat up with an almighty sigh. "Come on, this website isn't going to stand up by itself."

And that had been the start of it. Since then, Ai started watching him closely every time a black car
drove into the car park and Akihito craned his neck to check it wasn't a limo. Or when someone in a suit walked in and he'd double check it was just an off-the-rack number. But just as he never did, she never asked either, only expressing her concern and questions with her big brown eyes.

Ai tended to hide away from all the other women volunteers, usually quietly doing the community centre's paperwork in the office or getting the hall or meeting rooms ready for bookings. But she seemed happy to drag him around with her and Maeda, who turned out to be Ai's family friend, didn't stop her.

They ended up working together all week.

Between Ai directing him around the centre during the day and lounging about with Kou in the evenings, it certainly helped Akihito to try and take his mind off the elephant in the room.

Not that he was very successful. It didn't help that reminders kept getting thrown in his face. Like the news reports of more yakuza members found dead, caught red-handed with another cargo crate full of underage girls and boys in appalling conditions. The police were probing the possibilities of a turf war, although so far no group was under suspicion.

Asami wasn't mentioned. He never was in relation to news like this but Akihito's gut had no doubt that the bastard was involved.

Or when V1P3R had broken a week's silence with another disturbing message on Spotlight's forum.

_Didn't you like my gift? Don't worry, Z4m4 M1r0, I'll arrange another. One you won't be returning. Because I promised you, remember? Every bit of pain. Every drop of blood. I'll make you pay._

The timing was chilling. He hadn't received any item. By 'gift' they couldn't possibly mean the mugging, could they? Or was that just a coincidence? It didn't help that Akihito hadn't been able to get anywhere trying to track down who they were. Did they know Akihito's real identity? Did he need to arrange some kind of protection? Asami popped into mind, which Akihito savagely suppressed.

Night times were the hardest. It wasn't every night but several times he bolted awake in the darkness when he never used to before, and always the futility of all other attempts to return to sleep until he gave in and let himself remember that unwavering presence... Then in the morning it would begin all over again, the news reporting every day of the police unearthing more pieces of an underground trafficking ring that had been in the making, citing anonymous tip-offs. Did Akihito have it all wrong or was Asami being a right old busy bee?

"Do you want to bring a plus one?"

It took a few blinks for Akihito to pull his head out of his thoughts and remember that they were in the storage room, pulling stuff out for the children's party that afternoon. "Huh?"

Ai gave him the same patient smile she'd been giving him all week. "The auction tomorrow. Do you want to bring a plus one?"

That was when Akihito realised that he hadn't thought of Risa all week, his thoughts being predominantly occupied by a certain someone else...

He shook his head. "No, no plus one for me."

She grinned. "Good. You can keep me company then."
Maeda-san popped her head through the door. "Momo-chan, we've just had another piece for the auction! I've put it in the office."

"No problem, we'll come sort it out."

Akihito stared at Ai over the mass of deflated bouncy castle between them. She noticed his stillness, saw the startled look in his eyes that told her that he'd just twigged, then sighed, disappointment making her shoulders dip. She didn't say anything, simply gripped the trolley handle tightly.

He suddenly knew why she'd seemed familiar ever since they'd met. Momohara Ai, the idol seen on every billboard in Shibuya, on the front of so many magazines. He'd even heard about her dropping out of the limelight considerably since a stalking incident six months ago that had so nearly ended badly, that she was now restricting her public appearances to a few carefully arranged occasions always surrounded with heavy security. But here she was, mucking out with the riffraff, not bothered in the least about getting dirty even when she was dressed stylishly cute.

The curious looks she'd given him when he didn't recognise her made sense now, as well as her strange choice of words, how she didn't attend the local community events because of the chaos she would cause. He couldn't believe it had taken him five days to recognize her, having been so caught up in his own issues.

He grabbed the rest of his side of the bouncy castle. "Ready to heave ho, Ai-chan?" he asked with his usual grin. "Then you can add the new piece to the online auction listing."

She still looked hesitant, as though expecting him to treat her differently. "I might have forgotten how..."

His jaw dropped in mock outrage. "But I showed you yesterday! Gah, you're hopeless, I'll have to show you again."

She finally smiled a bit easier. He heaved up his side of the thick vinyl as she shoved the trolley under it.

"Maybe it's the teaching that's deficient," she teased.

He headed around to grab the opposite side. "My teaching is exemplary! It made perfect sense to me! I'll tell you what is a complete enigma and that's kawaii [cute] fashion," he insisted, knowing the subject would cheer her up. "What you said about knowing when it's just right or too much was plain ridiculous."

She giggled as he heaved up the other side and she shoved the trolley under the rest of the bouncy castle.

"Then I guess I'll just have to explain that to you all over again." She tilted her head thoughtfully as he came round and they both pushed the trolley out into the hall. "Maybe if you tried dressing the part, you'd understand better."

She peeled with laughter at his genuinely horrified face.

"Dude, I still can't believe you're going with Ai-chan."

"For the last time, Kou, I'm not going with her. We're just going to happen to be at the same event at the same time. She's the celeb, and I'm just the court-ordered help."
"Yeah, but you look hot, man. And leave that alone!" Kou repeated for the hundredth time as Akihito fiddled with the wing collar under the bow tie again. "It took us ages to get your tie done, don't undo it!"

Akihito almost didn't recognize his own reflection. The dinner jacket fitted well, even if it was a rental. He had to agree with his friend, he did look good. Not Asami-good, but hot in his own way. Ugh, he really had to stop thinking about Asami...

He glanced enviously at Kou lounging comfortably on the bed in shorts and t-shirt. "Maybe I should untie it, then I'll have to stay here."

"You promised her you'd go, right? So go. Don't be an ass. Anyway, I'm heading out this afternoon so you'll be all lonesome if you stayed."

"You are?" He straightened out his dinner jacket again. "Hot date?"

Kou gave him a huge grin in the mirror.

"Cool." Akihito wasn't surprised really, his cheerful friend was popular and never took long finding a date.

"Just a film and dinner, and who knows where this evening?" Kou wiggled his eyebrows.

Akihito shoved his wallet and phone in his pockets. "Don't forget I'll be asleep on the sofa, I don't want an eyeful of your fat ass again."

"Hey! You must be blind 'cos I have a beautiful ass!"

Akihito shoved his feet into the shiny dress shoes. "No, that would be my ass you were looking at!" He dodged the pillow hurled his way, laughing. "Have a good date!" he yelled behind him as she slammed the door and ran down to the street.

The taxi dropped off Akihito opposite the grand glass front entrance of the Royal Spire Hotel. As expected of a five-star establishment, the interior was luxurious, the staff were perfectly attentive, and every surface sparkled and glittered.

He was half an hour early for the drinks reception but immaculately dressed guests were already arriving. He wound his way through the hall, careful not to stand on any glittering trains, and found Maeda through the double service doors. She was still dispatching orders but looking calmer than she had the whole week.

"Akihito-kun! It's finally all coming together!" Her eyes shone, taking ten years off her crows feet and smile lines.

"You look very elegant, Maeda-san," he said, admiring her dress.

"Oh, stop," she smiled. "It's all under control so you go and find Momo-chan and enjoy yourselves. I'll shout if we need anything."

He nodded and stayed out of her way, finding a few other volunteers who had also turned up early in case they needed to help out.

Ai arrived half way into the drinks reception to much fanfare outside. Even from inside he could see the press and paparazzi surging forwards, and she was almost completely hidden from view until the
ring of security guards deposited her inside. There were a few other celebrities here who had similarly stirred the press pack outside, but perhaps it was from his knowing her that he now had the urge to slam the door on their greedy faces and give her some damn privacy. Did Asami ever deal with this kind of attention...?

Things were only a little better inside. She was greeted enthusiastically by the other attendees, the everyday men and women who had purchased tickets as well as other big names. There was one particular man that she seemed to try and distance herself from, a large man with a toupee that was too black to be natural on his otherwise salt and pepper hair, who kept spitting as he spoke. Akihito edged around the hall towards her, not wanting to intrude but letting her know he was there.

She was all sparkling smiles in her feminine rose dress for the crowds but she excused herself quickly, slipping towards him.

"Do you know anywhere quiet?" she hissed through a tight smile.

"Sure." He steered her to the side through the service doors, then out of the way of the rushing service staff through another door into an unused hall that he'd stumbled across earlier. It was half the size of the one booked for their event, already set up for a dinner that evening.

Away from prying eyes, Ai let loose a long, heavy sigh. Akihito pulled out a velvety seat and she sank into it. She didn't talk for a while and he simply sat next to her, looking around the room, giving her space.

"I still struggle sometimes."

He turned to her but didn't say anything.

She was wringing her hands. "Apparently he first saw me when I was out shopping with some friends. There was a crowd gathering and he looked over when he heard the noise. That's when he saw me. He said it was fate."

She was talking about the stalker. Akihito gently took her hands, prying them apart, holding them in his own.

She laughed hollowly, blinking back tears. "He's in jail now. But I still can't forget..."

His heart went out to her. Looking at her like this, he had an impression of cold, paralysing fear – a stark contrast to the blazing hot fear he felt with Asami. He'd never thought before that fear had a temperature.

He gently squeezed her hands. "Some things you can't. But... Memories can be like stepping stones. You can stand on it. You can stand on him. And you can stand taller because of it. You're still here, Ai-chan, you still came today. You should be proud."

She squeezed his hands back for a long time before she looked at him, more of her usual twinkle in her eye. "And you say I say cheesy stuff."

He laughed. "Too much?"

"Way too much!" she complained, smiling as she got up and pushed their chairs back in. "We should go make sure Maeda-san's not pulling her hair out."

She stopped him before they went through the door, hooking an arm through his. He looked at her about to ask, only to stop at the determined look on her face.
"Stepping stones, huh?" She smiled. A small smile, but with a depth of feeling. "Come on. Let's do this."

The three-course meal was lip-smackingly good. Ai had wrangled the table plans so that she was sitting next to Akihito, and the two of them bantered and giggled their way through the entire meal, interspersed by people visiting her and asking for autographs or selfies. She seemed to have a better handle on things now, and she sometimes shared a secret smile with him.

The tables were cleared away after the lunch by an army of unbelievably efficient attendants, and the hall was converted with a raised platform in the centre with circular rows of chairs surrounding it. There was a generous space left around the hall perimeter and guests continued to mingle with drinks.

The spitting man who was now rather inebriated kept trying to approach, even making a pass at Akihito – he'd eyed him up and down and leered, "Don't you look tasty!" – at which point they renewed their efforts to steer clear of him. Maeda had even asked about removing him, but it was only a couple of hours left for the auction and they were sure they could stay out of his path, especially seeing that he had already made a sizeable donation.

"Are you ok?" Akihito asked quietly as they skirted around, keeping the circles of chairs and central platform between them and the man.

She leaned close, whispering, "He reminds me of a pot-bellied pig!"

"Don't be cruel." He grinned. "What pig would be seen dead wearing a toupée like that?"

She burst out laughing, hurriedly smothering it behind a hand as several people glanced over.

That was when they heard a suave voice behind them, burning through Akihito with the force of a thousand volts.

"You didn't honestly believe you could escape me that easily, did you Akihito?"

"Akihito-kun?"

Ai kept looking between her friend and the man that had appeared out of nowhere behind them. He hadn't been there earlier during the luncheon, she was certain she would have remembered a face – and a body – like that.

Akihito turned slowly. Even expecting it, Asami's appearance floored him. A perfectly fitted dinner jacket and wing-collar shirt and bow tie framed his broad shoulders, long, lean legs stretched down wrapped in immaculately pressed trousers, and those narrowed, golden eyes – blatantly heated as they swept Akihito's dressed-up frame with undisguised appreciation but edged with a steely, incensed glint as they zeroed in on Akihito's wide eyes...

Asami was a stunning vision of powerful, pissed-off sex god.

Holy fucking shit.

"Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend, Akihito?"

Smooth with just a hint of rough, the deep baritone washed over him. Akihito shakily let loose the breath he hadn't realised he was holding. He didn't even question why Asami knew to find him here.
It had been a week after all, of course he'd know by now.

Akihito tried to keep his voice level. "Uh, this is Momohara Ai. Ai-chan, this is... Asami Ryuichi."

*Ryuichi.* Akihito felt the significance of it, saying it for the first time. Even in introduction it was way too intimate, and it didn't help at all that Asami's darkening gaze pierced through him...

Maeda rushed up beside them. "Asami-sama!"

Akihito cleared his throat. "And this is Maeda-san," he added, "she organised this event."

"I'm Maeda Hitomi, I'm so pleased to meet you. I can't thank you enough for allowing us the use of your beautiful hotel, Asami-sama."

Asami inclined his head politely, "You're most welcome, Maeda-san."

Maeda lightly chided the blond, "I didn't know you knew Asami-sama. Why didn't you say?"

But Akihito wasn't listening. His blood had turned to ice. Asami's hotel... The change of venue... The flooding... On. Monday. Morning...

His frozen gaze met Asami's gleaming gold.

Asami had known since Monday morning exactly where he was. He'd thought he'd gotten away. He hadn't. Not even for a few hours. The fool he'd been!

Had Asami only left him alone all week because he'd been busy? Dealing with human traffickers, possibly. But why?

And to even flood the original venue... Just how far would Asami go to get his way? To get *him*? Could it really all be to pursue *him*?

Akihito continued staring, thoughts flying a mile a minute and at complete odds with himself as he veered between horror and something that felt suspiciously like elation and back again, and then he also threw outrage into the mix for allowing himself to become so tongue-tied...

"It's so generous of you to give up your precious time to attend in person," Maeda was saying, oblivious to Akihito getting more and more riled up and Ai looking on with increasing concern. Maeda smiled good-naturedly. "Are you perhaps here to join in with the charity auction?"

"Yes! Yes he is!" Akihito blurted.

They all turned to him but he was done being a scaredy cat. He dared to meet the unnerving gaze and glare right back. If Asami wasn't going to leave him alone anyway, then he was very well going to exploit the man's deep pockets.

"He's very keen to make a sizeable donation to our worthy cause. Aren't you, Asami?"

Ai and Maeda seemed a little taken aback at his brazen demand of this important man. But then again Asami had addressed Akihito by his first name. Perhaps they were closer than the two women realised?

Akihito was too busy secretly triumphing over Asami's stony expression to notice. It only lasted a moment, however, before Asami's gaze became calculating, then downright evil.

He wiped it all clean as he turned to Maeda with a perfectly innocent mask. "Of course, that's what
Akihito had gone ashen.

"Ba-bachelor auction?" Maeda-san stammered. "Do you mean *bachelorette* auction?"

Asami gave an indulgent smile. "I mean *bachelor* auction. With so many women here, there's bound to be several interested in a harmless dinner date with a generous volunteer giving back to the community. I'm sure there'll be no objections for men to make or further an acquaintance, either. I, for one, would certainly be bidding – with the bachelor's permission, of course," he added with a mockingly serene smile at Akihito. "But regardless of the outcome, I'd be pleased to donate the proceeds for a dinner date and transportation."

To Akihito's growing dread, rather than looking disapproving, Maeda seemed to become increasingly enamoured by the idea the more Asami spoke.

"Oh, that would be wonderful! You're too kind, Asami-sama! It'll be the last auction event, then dinner straight afterwards this evening, that would be perfect. You don't mind, do you, Akihito-kun?"

She finally seemed to realise that the centre's only male helper hadn't said a word. She turned to find Akihito shell-shocked.

"Akihito-kun?" Ai touched his arm.

"Are you unwell?" Maeda-san asked, concerned over his silence. It wasn't like him. "You don't look well. Maybe you should go home. Momo-chan, can you have your car sent around?"

Akihito's stomach was floundering somewhere about his toes. He'd completely dug his own grave. If he agreed, Asami would never let himself be outbid. If he refused... Well, this week had just gone to show that escape wasn't going to be so easy. It seemed Asami was determined not to let him go just yet.

Maeda and Ai were making plans to take him home, genuinely concerned for him.

He forced a shaky smile. "It's fine, Maeda-san. I'll do it."

Maeda still looked worried.

He was sunk anyway, he might as well make sure this worthwhile cause got something out of it. "It's just dinner, right? Honestly, it's fine. Do you need help organising it?"

"Are you sure? We have plenty going on if you can't?"

Something was still holding her back – he couldn't entirely hide his underlying fear at what Asami might do to him and she could probably sense it. It didn't help that Ai was looking at him closely with the same look she'd been throwing him all week, but paired with suspicious glances at Asami now too...

He couldn't put them at risk. He grinned, trying his hardest to make it look natural. "Positive. Go for it, Maeda-san."

With one last glance at the both of them, Maeda finally acceded. "Alright, then." She pressed her hands together, at last allowing the excitement to take over. "Bachelor auction, oh the ladies are
going to love this!"

"I'll send my secretary over to make the arrangements," Asami acknowledged as she gave him a bow and hurried away. "Now I need a word with Akihito if you don't mind me stealing him away." He was already steering Akihito away by the shoulder, his hand ominously heavy.

"But the auction's about to start in a few minutes," Ai pointed out. She caught Akihito's eye as though trying to work out how worried she should be.

"I'll bring him right back," Asami reassured her over his shoulder. "Excuse us."

Akihito wanted nothing more than to smack the hand away, the contact burning through him even if it was over his jacket. He couldn't believe they were right back here, as though the past week hadn't even happened.

"I'm coming so stop manhandling me," he hissed. He shifted his shoulder, trying to be subtle in case Ai was still watching, but the grip hardened all the more, making him wince.

"You're already on thin ice," Asami clipped darkly. "Don't make it worse for yourself."

"For myself? That's hilarious, 'cos from here it looks distinctly like you making it worse for me!"

Elegantly dressed people gave them curious glances as they passed, voices low but clearly arguing. Then again they might have just been staring at Asami.

"Just keep fighting, Akihito," Asami sneered, incensed and wickedly heated all at once. "All the more reason to punish you."

Akihito stumbled.

The hand on his shoulder caught him and saved him from a face plant. Akihito wavered between fighting and buckling down and found himself unable to do either as Asami propelled him out into the foyer and up the wide sweeping stairs.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Insomnia + Asami <3 = chapter finished early!

It's a whopper too. I was enjoying the pushing and pulling between these two too much to cut it shorter! (^_^)

There are some Japanese words clustered close together that I haven’t included translations for here as I thought it might disrupt the flow. There should be enough context to know what types of things they are but if you want the translations/ explanations, please look them up.

You would have already guessed where some of this is going but hopefully there are some surprises as well. I hope you enjoy it!

~ Nyx ~

Artwork added May 2018: I have no words. (Regarding this, I mean. Obviously there are plenty of words in the story! lol) Shey's artwork is stunning. That's all I can say. I mean, just look at it. Wow. Simply Wow!!! <3<3

Of course, Sod's law being what it was, now would be when the key card would work the first time. It never did with Akihito. Or maybe Asami just had the knack.

The drone from the guests milling in the hall filled the impressive inner atrium all the way up to the glass vaulted ceiling, and it followed the pair as Akihito was all but thrown into the second-floor room by the scruff of his neck. Asami gave the door a good shove but the built-in soft close mechanism took over, and it dragged out over nervous seconds where Asami advanced, one slow step at a time, his face unreadable.

Akihito backed off, his eyes darting around what appeared to be a spacious but perfectly normal single room. "Don't you dare get any ideas, Asami. I have to be back downstairs in a minute, remember?"

Asami didn't reply, only taking another step with that same hard expression.

At long last the door clicked closed, abruptly ceasing the buzz and throwing them into unnerving quiet. But just as Akihito prepared himself to fight off whatever Asami threw at him, the tall man veered off towards a sitting area and to the mini bar.

Akihito remained frozen, still poised right in the crest of his fight or flight instincts and liable to go either way at the slightest provocation. Asami seemed oblivious as he knocked back one tiny bottle of amber liquid followed by another.

"Imagine my surprise on Monday when Kirishima called IT only to discover that you had left."

Akihito winced at the mockingly astonished tone as Asami reclined against the desk built into the wall, dangling a third bottle between his fingertips.
Akihito glanced at the door but didn't think he'd be able to open it before Asami got to him. "So you're pissed off that I got the drop on you?"

"I'll give you one chance to come clean, Akihito. What made you leave Sion in such a hurry?"

Fear washed over his face, his gaze flying to Asami's in panic. Akihito knew he'd instantly given himself away. He blinked rapidly, trying to recover, to stall, to cover... Anything but the truth...

Golden eyes narrowed, astute. Too astute.

"A better question would be why would I stay?" Akihito blurted out before Asami could speak, throwing everything he could into the performance. His life depended on it. "You – you..." He forced himself to think about the limo, those tantalising hands everywhere, exposed, hot, trembling, needing, Asami's lips wrapped around...

Blood rushed to his face and south. It was so easy to glare, embarrassment and outrage glowing in his eyes. "After what you did, why would I stay?"

Asami pinned him with a blisteringly dark stare, giving Akihito the distinct sense of his soul being laid bare and scrutinised before tipping back the third mini bottle of whisky. When he looked back, the golden gaze was leashed with cold, lethal control.

"Very well, then."

A chill spread through Akihito. That didn't sound like acceptance. That sounded like commitment, even resignation perhaps, as though what Asami was really saying was, _Then it can't be helped_.

What the hell was he planning...?

There was no time for questions. Asami strode right for him.

Akihito backpedalled but there was nowhere to go but into a wall. "What are you –" Asami raised a hand and Akihito flinched, bracing himself, but the long fingers simply tugged at his bow tie. "Hey! What are you doing?" he protested as the wavy ends flopped down. "That took me ages!"

Asami smirked. "And you still didn't get it right."

To Akihito's amazement, Asami deftly tied it back up until it nestled perfectly under his wing collars, with only one or two unnecessary brushes against his neck. It didn't dig uncomfortably into his windpipe anymore.

"Oh."

But just as Akihito thought he was done, Asami rested an elbow against the wall above his head, crowding him, sending a waft of that addictive, seductive scent up his nose. He was too busy trying to press himself back into the wall to notice the gun.

"You choose who you want to go to dinner with tonight, Akihito. I'll only bid if you ask me to."

"You must have several screws loose. You realise that'll _never_ happen?"

Asami trailed a finger up Akihito's throat, tipping his chin up, making his breath catch. "I'll take you to dinner, and take you back to your friend's." Their eyes met. Asami even knew _that_? Akihito realised how futile it had been to move out of his apartment. Asami smirked. "I won't lay a single finger on you."
Akihito was feeling increasingly claustrophobic. Or maybe Asami was just getting even closer. "Like I'd believe you," he huffed, shoving at the broad chest.

Asami grabbed his wrists and pinned them by his head. A bolt of electricity charged through Akihito despite himself.

(Fanart: 'Choose' by Shey, 2018, reproduced with kind permission.)

Asami was close, his lips only a heated breath away. "I give you my word. You can go to dinner with whoever wins the auction." He leaned closer still, their lips almost skimming, separated by atoms. "You just let me know if you want me to take the bid."

Asami was going to kiss him. Akihito could only stare, pinned to the wall, paralysed with fearful anticipation. He was being held helplessly against his will. There was nothing he could do. Asami was going to kiss him and it was going to knock his socks off and he'd have no choice but to endure Asami's demanding hunger until the bastard was satisfied...

Akihito had never seen such an infuriatingly smug smirk as the one that curved Asami's lips. Then, abruptly releasing him, Asami headed for the door.

Akihito blinked in a daze.
What the...?

Why wasn't Asami doing anything? After the whole rigmarole of flooding another hotel just to lure Akihito onto his turf, no way was he seriously just after a charity dinner. Was he was trying to lull Akihito into a false sense of security? Or maybe his aim was to keep Akihito unbalanced – if so he was doing a bloody good job!

"Aren't you coming?" Asami asked innocently from the doorway.

Akihito's mouth moved soundlessly.

What about that whole Grim Reaper vibe about why he'd left Sion? Had he imagined it? Was there no more interrogation? It was hardly like Akihito could ask, on the smallest chance that Asami had actually bought it...

Asami smirked. "Were you expecting something, Akihito?"

The bastard really knew how to push his buttons.

"Of course not," Akihito snapped as he headed out of the room.

Asami released the door before Akihito reached him, making him rush to catch it, which made him feel like he was rushing after the tall man. Akihito scowled, stomping along the open corridor, making no move to catch up with the bastard and making sure to ignore him and totally missing the stunning architecture of the marble-lined atrium reaching up twelve storeys above.

Kirishima was waiting at the top of the wide ornate staircase. Asami passed him the key card on the tips of two elegant fingers and leaned in to speak lowly to him. The golden gaze flickered back, smirking at Akihito trying – and failing – to ignore him.

Kirishima bowed him off and Asami fell into step alongside the fuming young man. But Akihito wasn't about to alter his speed just to avoid the bastard, and so they ended up descending the grand stairs together.

As they crossed the foyer, however, he noticed that some of the passing guests caught his eye or nodded or smiled. And it was definitely aimed at him, he was an arms length away from Asami and on a different eye line. Why were they looking at him? Was it about the auction?

Then a freak thought flashed across his mind.

What if nobody bid on him?

His nervousness shot up. He eyed the open double doorway of the grand hall like it was about to eat him up. Suddenly self-conscious, he didn't even realise he'd stalled until Asami brushed shoulders with him.

"There's nothing to worry about. You look good enough to eat."

Akihito was about to swear blind that he wasn't worried, when the rest of Asami's velvety murmur registered and he had to fight the heat on his face instead. He scowled.

"Perhaps you should cancel if you're scared?" Asami taunted.

"As if!" Akihito flared, glaring at Asami and striding into the hall.

Even as he marched away he knew what Asami had done. Not that he'd ever admit that he was
secretly thankful.

The auction was proceeding well, a certain raucous energy buzzing in the air even over the loudspeaker commentator and the frequent bids being called out with enthusiastic waving of number flags. A murmur rose around the circular rows of chairs as he stepped into the hall. It seemed word of the surprise final auction event had spread and they all appraised him as he entered. Feeling self-conscious, his feet almost faltered, but he kept his head high and forced a step, then another. It was easier after that.

"Going once!" the commentator was saying.

"Akihito-kun, are you alright?" Ai rushed up to him at the back of the hall.

"Going twice!"

"Of course, why wouldn't I be?" Akihito whispered back.

"Sold!"

They turned as a cheer went around the room at the sale of a wooden deer statue with amazing antlers spanning the length of his arm.

"Actually, I'm kinda nervous about the bachelor auction," Akihito admitted, steering her away from the risky topic. "I've never done that before!"

"I'm so sorry you were pressured into it."

The only person whose fault it was was was the one person who would never apologise. "Don't be, it's for a good cause. But what about you, have you bought anything?"

It turned out that she'd been hovering around worrying about him, so they went and sat down to join the auction. She insisted that he wave her number card for her as she bid. Akihito kept a wary eye out for Asami, but the man seemed to be holding court at the other end of the hall, a steady supply of the richer half of attendees taking turns to greet or supplicate or do whatever the hell they were doing. Akihito had at first suspected them all to be criminals, but then he remembered that Asami was also a very successful entrepreneur. There were plenty of eye-fluttering golddiggers too, not that it was any of Akihito's business how smoothly Asami deflected their attention...

Ai elbowed him and he hurried to wave her number, then he saw what she was bidding on.

"Really? A pig?"

She giggled. "It was made by that local sculptor over there. It's cute, isn't it?"

Maybe it was her unrestrained delight, or the vibe in the hall, but he couldn't help but join in with her fun. "Do you know anyone who could make a little toupée for it?"

She gave an unladylike snort as she tried to smother a laugh, glancing over at the creepy man from before.

They were equally gleeful when they won the bid.

But all too soon it was the final number, the bachelor auction, and the hall turned downright rowdy. He was a bundle of nerves as he stood to go.
Ai grabbed his arm. "Stepping stones," she whispered at him before nudging him forwards with an encouraging smile.

He nodded at her, walking more confidently towards the stage as the commentator announced the auction for a dinner date. Until he caught Asami's eye standing behind the back row of chairs, with Kirishima at his elbow. It was just a flicker of the gaze towards Ai but Akihito couldn't help but wonder if the man was jealous, which was an utterly ridiculous notion for a billionaire who had everything.

Akihito focused on putting one foot in front of the other and not falling on his face as he climbed up to the stage and braced himself with a big, fake smile. Maeda caught his eye from the side, her concern evident, but he gave her a look that he hoped was reassuring.

Almost fifteen women surrounded the stage with catcalls and invitations. But when he realised that they seemed to all be playing it up in the spirit of the charity event, it wasn't too bad playing along, waving and smiling at them.

The bidding started off at a fun 100 yen. Akihito laughed as the lady made some silly remark about how they were going to have the best dinner and he'd never want to let her go. It was all part of the amusement, and the women played off each other as they outbid and out-enticed each other, teasing and laughing. Akihito was surprised to find he didn't mind this so far.

They hit the 100,000 yen mark surprisingly quickly, and even 500,000Y. He looked at Asami, who stood back looking completely indifferent. Nobody else seemed to bat an eye either, these rich bastards. He could have bought a second-hand car with that.

It was still fun until this point, but then it started getting silly. A man – medium height, average looking, an ordinary businessman by all appearances – bid 530,000Y with a shy smile. The atmosphere in the hall tilted and became somewhat troubling as he and one of the ladies began to bid rather more seriously, until they reached 1,000,000Y. One million yen – for Akihito that was over six months' worth of rent!

The lady dropped out, stepping back into the circle of other women who murmured condolences, and Akihito thought that the businessman might actually win, until the big toupée guy suddenly launched in with the next bid, leering at Akihito with inebriated abandon from head to toe.

Akihito's eyes flew to Asami. Asami coolly returned his gaze, not surprised in the least. Akihito glared. The bastard had seen this happening!

He also caught Ai and Maeda's worried eyes as the bidding continued over the hushed hall, the commentator doing his best to keep the jovial tone going but everyone looking slightly disturbed by the lewd comments the drunken guy was mumbling.

They actually reached 1,500,000Y before the businessman bowed out with an apologetic smile, and Akihito thought the guy might have kept going higher than he'd originally intended in an attempt to spare Akihito from the unappealing drunk.

"One million, five hundred and ten thousand!" Ai suddenly cried, waving her number.

The bidding kicked off all over again. Akihito kept trying to catch her eye, he didn't want her spending so much on him, but she resolutely carried on.

Until the creepy guy started jumping 50K and rapidly escalated the bidding, and uncertainty set in. Akihito even stepped up to the commentator, who covered the microphone to reply to his question...
that yes, the 'gentleman' was loaded and could afford the bids he was making.

It seemed in no time at all they were at 8,000,000Y, Ai's voice shaking as she called it out. Akihito was shaking too. Their eyes met, and he knew that she'd already stretched further than she could. The rotund man belched and laughed, making another comment about how they were going to have such a great time together, his voice sickeningly suggestive. The hall was filling with the sounds of people murmuring again, disturbed by the turn of events.

Ai looked so apologetic. He shook his head to let her know that it was OK, smiling genuinely at her trying so hard to save him, even as his gut sunk with resigned surrender.

"Ten million!" announced the lecherous drunk, confident of victory, already crowing over the spoils.

Akihito's eyes slid closed. It was a horrific amount of money – it was five times his biggest ever payout for his legal white-hat hacking work, and most pay checks were only a fraction of it. How he was ever going to repay such a debt was beyond him but the thought of going anywhere near the slimy man almost made him throw up. Akihito let himself have a moment, gathering his courage, before he looked over at the tall, imposing figure standing off behind the rows of chairs.

Asami was watching him quietly.

"Going once!" the commentator called out, ringing with warning and not a bit of jollity.

Asami arched a brow in question. Akihito grit his jaw and gave the barest of nods. He received a ghost of a smirk in return.

"Going twice!"

"One hundred million yen," Asami drawled clearly over the murmuring crowd, stunning them all to deafening silence.

Akihito wondered if Asami took pity at seeing him so knocked for six.

"I told you, it's just dinner," came the baritone murmur as Asami pulled him in my the neck so they wouldn't be overheard. "You have my word."

Akihito vaguely wondered if Asami had come up on stage because he wanted to escape the people crowding around him commending him on such a sizeable donation, or because Akihito hadn't moved since Asami had announced his winning bid and the hammer had fallen. He barely heard the other volunteers' congratulations, or Tama's cheeky whisper that he'd snagged the best buy of the day. The toupée guy was lounging on the other side of the circle in a foul mood with another drink in his hand, giving them all the stink eye.

Akihito's dazed eyes drifted and found gold. Their intensity seemed to anchor him, even as they stirred bedlam within. "You bid a hundred million yen and you really only expect dinner? A dinner that you're also going to pay for?"

"Akihito-kun!"

Asami leaned right into his ear before the frantic girl could reach them. "Would you rather I bought you for something more?"

Akihito was left flushing – or rather, fuming, definitely fuming – and unable to reply as Ai rushed at him, grasping his arms. "I'm so sorry!"
Maeda wasn't far behind either, also spewing apologies.

He gave them a wan smile. "Don't worry about it, it all turned out fine, right?"

"You don't look fine." The elderly lady framed his face, peering into his eyes. "Maybe you need some rest. Perhaps you could do dinner tomorrow instead?"

"No, no," Akihito waved off, though he wasn't sure if she might have been addressing Asami. "It's just the shock of it all. It'll wear off in a minute, I'll be fine. Honestly, Maeda-san," he insisted, managing a more genuine smile as he pulled her hands away from his face, "the event was a big success! Congratulations."

"You are too sweet, dear," Maeda said. She turned to Asami looming over the boy. "We can never thank you enough for such a generous donation. But I must ask, please look after him, and send him home if he's unwell."

"Maeda-san!" Geez, she was mothering him again.

"I'll make sure he gets back safe and sound. Shall we go, Akihito?"

Akihito understood from the hand landing on his shoulder that it wasn't a question. Even with the nervous thump of his heart, he threw as normal a grin as he could, squeezing Ai's hand for a second longer before they let go.

"See you Monday!"

He could only hope that he would.

The sun was just setting when they emerged from the luxury hotel. The sight of the limo brought him up short, assailing him with memories of what had happened the last time they were there.

Asami sighed, hovering behind him, sounding somewhat impatient now. "It's just dinner, Akihito."

Akihito glared over his shoulder. "You're really not going to do anything?"

He arched a brow. "You'll need to be more specific. I'll obviously be breathing, sitting –"

"I meant perverted stuff!" Akihito blurted, then flushed as Kirishima chose that moment to materialise at Asami's elbow.

"All arrangements have been made, sir," the secretary informed his boss quietly before assuming door duties. Which involved waiting for Asami, who was waiting for Akihito. Great. Just great.

Asami smirked, and heedless of Kirishima standing right there stony faced, he drawled, "I assure you that all 'perverted stuff' are off the table, so to speak. I will take you to dinner and drop you back at your friend's, with your honour intact. Would that suffice?"

Akihito's eyes kept switching between Asami and Kirishima, unable to believe that he was saying all this stuff in front of his secretary. "You can't just... Argh!" He threw his hands up and stomped into the limo.

The limo sped along. Akihito fidgeted with his collar and his jacket and his shirt and his sleeves – pretty much everything.
"I don't know how you wear these things day in day out, it's like a straightjacket. Any chance we can swing by Kou's so I can get changed?"

Asami wordlessly reached for a bag in front of them on the long seats and tossed it at Akihito.

Peering inside, his face brightened. "My clothes!" A pair of jeans and a casual short-sleeve shirt were thrown in there with a rolled up garment bag. Then his face clouded over. "Why do you have my clothes? How do you have my clothes?"

Asami took his time lighting his cigarette. "Do you really need to ask?"

Akihito scowled. "Did Kou see you?"

"My men ensured the apartment was empty before they entered."

He made it sound so easy. "What were you looking for?"

Asami considered him as though trying to decide how much to reveal. "Just establishing where you were."

Akihito hadn't expected Asami to simply let him go but it was still unnerving to think he'd sent his men to Kou's place. At least he seemed to have instructed them to operate under the radar so his friend wouldn't worry, thank goodness for small miracles. It meant, however, that he couldn't stay there. He'd never forgive himself if he put Kou at risk.

"Can you close your eyes? Or look away? I want to get changed."

He shouldn't have bothered asking. Asami smirked and carried right on staring at him. He scowled back. "You old pervert," he mumbled as he determinedly turned his back and stared out the window.

_Better the pervert you know, isn't that how the saying went? Or something like that. He couldn't imagine what would have happened if he'd been stuck with the horrible toupée guy. He shivered just thinking about it, and not in the way Asami made him shiver..."

"You knew, didn't you?"

"Hmm?"

Akihito carried on staring out at the meandering traffic and buildings they passed. "That guy who was bidding, you knew he'd be like that."

Asami drew on his cigarette, rolling the smoke over his tongue and blowing it out before he answered. "His boy toy recently split with him, it was a reasonable assumption to make."

"I can't believe you really waited until I –" Until he'd surrendered... Not that he'd ever say that. "Until I agreed. What if I'd gone along with the sick creep just to spite you?" Akihito rounded on Asami. He laughed without humour. "But then why would you care?"

"I would have had to break him," Asami said without missing a beat.

Akihito blinked. What did that mean, anyway? The more the words sunk in, the more his imagination ran away, and the less he wanted to know.

But one thing he knew was that Asami didn't make idle threats and he was obviously dead serious, spending _a hundred million yen_... Akihito abruptly dug out his phone and did a quick search online – he paled as he looked at the numbers and groaned, dropping his head in his hands.
"Don't concern yourself, Akihito," Asami dismissed, having deduced his turmoil from the figures still showing on his phone.

"That's easy for you to say! You can buy a three-bed apartment with that! Outright! In Tokyo!"

"It's small change to me."

Akihito baulked at such a blasé attitude to what was, to him, a huge sum of money. "Why did you do it? It can't just be because I taunted you into making a donation."

Asami's gaze was sharp, boring straight into him, before he blinked and looked away. Akihito couldn't help but feel he'd missed something important.

"For good PR, of course. What else?"

Akihito huffed. "Of course, what else." Nothing, was what. Certainly not to save him from a lecherous old man. He crossed his arms and slumped in his seat, staring out the window again, wondering why he was disappointed with the answer. "'Cos you're so true to your stellar public image," he muttered, making Asami snort.

Akihito got changed in the toilets at the restaurant. He felt half bad changing into his jeans, it was such a formal ryotei [traditional high-class Japanese restaurant], but he was really uncomfortable in the suit. Plus, Asami – or Kirishima – had booked a private room anyway so he wouldn't be offending any other diners.

The idea of running away did occur to him but he never seriously entertained it. Asami had so far been true to his word and kept grabby fingers to himself, so Akihito didn't want to do anything to reflect badly on Maeda or the community centre. Asami probably knew that, which was why he hadn't even issued a warning or put a guard on him as Akihito had slipped away to the toilets. It irked him to think that Asami might think he had Akihito under his thumb. But it was one meal. Then the truce was over.

He slung the garment bag containing his hired black tie suit over his shoulder and headed back down the stone and pebble path back to the private rooms. Traditional koto [Japanese stringed instrument] music floated from somewhere. He passed the quaint little garden courtyard with the small, immaculately trimmed shrubs poking out of the moss-covered ground and dotted with impressively gnarled bonsai trees.

The ambiance was ruined somewhat by the black-suited guard around the corner. The guy hadn't been there when Akihito had left for the toilets and a quick glance revealed another located further down the path towards the exits. He'd seen some of Asami's guards before of course but with Yamasan's words echoing in his ears, it gave a whole different impression of what was possibly just the tip of a massive iceberg of Asami's influence. He couldn't help wondering how many more were scattered around that he couldn't see, and moreover, why this devil of a person had chosen to have dinner with a nobody like him...

Akihito toed off his sneakers and stepped back up into their raised room.

Asami had seated himself in front of the tokonoma [traditional decorative alcove], of course, the most important seat with his back to the hanging scroll and ikebana flower arrangement. Akihito sank down in the place set for him to his right. It irritated him to see a glass of cold oolong tea waiting there for him when Asami was guzzling something stronger, but he reminded himself that Asami had forked out a lot of money and was paying for the meal, so he held his tongue. It helped that small
bite-size appetisers had already appeared, food never failed to get him in a good mood. He tried not to eye them hungrily but he wasn't fooling Asami.

"You can start," he smirked.

"I was going to," Akihito snapped, irritated at being given permission. "Itadakimasu," he mumbled with his hands together before snatching up his chopsticks.

The food literally melted on his tongue, making his mouth water excessively with how delicious it was. He was surprised when Asami also started eating.

"What is it?" the man asked when Akihito carried on staring.

Akihito shook his head. "I was half beginning to wonder if you were some kind of whiskey vampire. I didn't realise you could eat."

"I can survive on whiskey," Golden eyes slanted across to him. "Whiskey and Akihito."

Akihito spluttered, dropping his chopsticks and thumping his chest. Fighting the heat he could feel on his cheeks was a losing battle. "What kind of stupid shit is that? I'm trying to eat here, you know."

"Mmm, yes, nibble away," Asami hummed, the lustful smirk only growing.

Those exact same eyes as when Asami had devoured him... It wasn't helping Akihito's blush any. "So this is why you wanted this dinner, is it? Are you just going to sprout innuendo through the whole meal?"

There was a polite female voice excusing herself at the door before the shoji door slid open.

The lady in the kimono demurely tidied away the empty plates and brought out baskets of tempura arranged with artful randomness and dipping sauces. Asami ordered more shochu. Akihito stuck to beer, not wanting to get drunk around Asami – the man was being suspiciously well behaved but Akihito didn't trust him not to take advantage if Akihito became legless. For that matter, he didn't trust himself drunk around Asami either.

"I hear you were responsible for the new AI-based security systems installed at Sion last week," Asami commented offhandedly as the lady bowed and withdrew.

Akihito stilled at the reminder about Sion and all the associated baggage that came with it – how he'd ended up there in the first place, why he'd left... He didn't notice the sharp golden gaze tracking every apprehensive flicker on his face.

Akihito steered his mind back to the present. He wasn't about to drop Ogawa in it, even if he was no longer working there. "Not me. I haven't been there since last Friday." He took a big bite out of a huge tempura prawn, the coatings crunching between his teeth.

"But you did all the coding."

"With Ogawa-san's steering. He was in charge of it all."

Akihito loved food. His parents used to complain with fond exasperation that he was perpetually hungry. Even with the present company, he was mostly able to ignore Asami's intense gaze and happily focus on munching away through the rest of his dish.

The lady returned with their drinks and there was an awkward moment when he wondered if they
should toast. As he hesitated with the glass halfway to his lips, Asami solved the dilemma by holding his *shochu* up in a silent *kanpai* toast before drinking, amusement curving his lips. Akihito frowned and slurped his beer.

Asami's phone rang. He spoke in between a few bites here and there, saying something about some third party breaking the terms of the contract. He slid over the rest of his tempura basket to Akihito, clearly done with it as he mentioned getting the lawyers on the case. It felt oddly intimate, finishing off Asami's dish, but the man didn't seem to notice and Akihito's hungry stomach won out in the end as he tucked in. The lady brought another dish, this time some steak in *ponzu* dressing, delicately sliced so it could be eaten with chopsticks, and Asami waved for her to keep his drinks coming as he carried on talking on the phone. Akihito eagerly tucked into the beef, it was totally yum.

Asami finally put his phone away. He didn't apologize, not that Akihito had thought he would.

"When you're both so careful to keep mentioning it was Ogawa's work, it makes me suspicious."

Akihito stopped mid-chew on his last slice of steak. It took him a moment to realise Asami still wasn't done with their earlier conversation. "Of what?" he asked after he'd finished his mouthful. "He was my boss and he was overseeing it. I'm not going to go around boasting it's all my work, am I?" He sneered. "My ego isn't as big as yours."

"So it's a matter of modesty, is it?"

Asami could make anything look sexy, even just eating normally. His lips wrapping around the meat... The chopsticks sliding out of his mouth...

Akihito mentally slapped himself. "It's a matter of honesty and not taking credit where it's not due."

"I see. So it has nothing to do with Ogawa messing up with the old security system and leaving Sion's systems prone to three malware attacks?"

How the hell did he know that?

Asami glanced at Akihito's frozen expression before he calmly returned to his food.

It was too late for denials. "Ogawa-san's made up for that now. The new cyber security system really was initiated by him, you know. You're not going to fire him, are you?"

Asami arched a brow. "And leave that other monkey in charge of IT? I hardly think so." He sounded horrified.

Despite himself Akihito snorted. "You mean Mitarai?" He'd love to see the look on that arrogant sod's face if he ever learned that Asami had referred to him as a primate. "Speaking of, did you see him at all this week?"

"Once or twice."

"Computer problems?" Akihito found himself fighting a grin. It amused him no end how such a powerful man could be a total electronic klutz.

Asami was evasive. "Perhaps."

Akihito was diverted when the lady brought sushi. It was enough to feed five and he was already half full, but he set to his favourite food with gusto. Asami simply watched, a smirk ghosting his lips at his enthusiasm.
"I told Mitarai to reinstate my root access."

"You what?" Akihito exclaimed. "He didn't, did he?"

"He didn't refuse." Before Akihito could launch off on one, Asami continued, "But I told him that you'd bulldozed over my objections and removed it in the first place."

Akihito found himself grinning. "I bet he loved that."

"Not nearly as much as when I told him your reasoning, that I would just 'cock everything up'. He almost fainted."

Akihito burst out laughing.

There was an amused gleam in Asami's eyes. "He was ever so apologetic on your behalf. I asked him if you were wrong, and he spent ten minutes denying it all while telling me the same thing in the most roundabout way possible. I suppose he thought he was being diplomatic."

Akihito was still chortling away at the picture in his mind, complete with Asami looking completely exasperated.

"Sounds like the two of you are getting on just great," he sniggered.

"Hardly. I'm considering firing the lot of them and hiring you in their place."

Akihito threw him a look. "That's not even remotely funny. Try anything stupid like that and I'll... I'll put a big steaming poo emoji on everyone's screens with your name on it!"

Asami's grin was pure shark. "Be my guest. Then I'd have to stretch you over my knee and spank you until you're crying and begging."

Asami took one look at Akihito's gaping, horrified, flaming red face, and laughed. Which just left Akihito gawking even more. Asami was laughing! At his expense, to be sure, but seriously, what the fuck? This man just didn't stop surprising him.

Notwithstanding the innuendos and some blatantly lewd remarks, Akihito was amazed to discover on balance that he'd actually managed to enjoy the meal with Asami. The coolly impassive mask that had slipped when it was just the two of them was firmly back in place as they left. Asami barely granted a nod at the chefs who had personally come out to bow them off, leaving Akihito to thank them for a truly delicious meal.

"I'm stuffed!" Akihito announced as he slumped in the limo, feeling like a contented bear stocking up ready to go into hibernation.

"I wasn't aware you had the capacity to feel full."

Akihito grinned at what might have been Asami teasing him as they pulled away from the curb. "My parents always complained I was eating them out of house and home."

"You weren't far off this evening. It was like watching a Guinness Record eating contest seeing how much you mopped up." Asami's voice still had the same almost-teasing tone.

"Hey!" Akihito complained without any real bite. "Just 'cos your stomach doesn't stretch anymore, old man. I'm still young, unlike you. There's nothing wrong with a good appetite."
"There's good appetite then there's gluttony. I almost run out of money feeding you."

Akihito snorted. "Says the one who forked out a hundred million yen." He groaned at his own reminder, dropping his head back on the soft leather seat. He stared at the ceiling as Asami lit up. "I can't pay you back, you know."

Akihito was startled by the hand that ruffled his hair.

"I told you, let it go. I don't regret it."

Akihito eyed the impeccably dressed man. Was that his way of saying he enjoyed their meal too?

A phone blared to life, the tasteless electronic bleeping of some cheesy J-pop song. Akihito scrambled for his phone as he asked, "Do you mind if...?" Asami might have no qualms about answering his phone in company without apologies but Akihito wasn't brought up like that. Asami waved for him to go ahead.

"Lo?"

"Aki-cha-a-a-a-an!"

Akihito jumped and pulled the phone away from his ear. What was it with people yelling at him down the phone? He carefully brought it back again. "Hey, Kou, I take it you had a good date?"

Kou giggled like a girl. "Du-ude, you're a psychic! How did you know?"

"You're drunk and happy," Akihito deadpanned. "It's not rocket science."

Kou giggled again and snorted like a pig in the midst of it all, which just set him off even more.

"Oh, man," Akihito breathed. He knew he'd be in the same boat if he was equally legless, but right now he had the more sober moral high ground. He could hear a lot of chatter in the background, girls giggling and boisterous men too, a lively party in full swing. "Go chill with your friends, Kou. I'll see you later."

"But Aki-chan," Kou wailed, "I got you a girl too!"

"...What?"

"I got you a date! And she's hot as hell! You have to come!"

For some reason, Akihito found himself glancing over at Asami. The man didn't seem to be paying attention, just smoking and staring indifferently out of the window, but Akihito wasn't fooled. Kou was shouting loud enough to be heard in the quiet of the limo and Akihito would have bet Asami was listening to every word.

Akihito turned away from Asami, hunching over his phone as though that afforded him any privacy. "Kou, what are you doing? You know I only just broke up with Risa-san," he reminded.

"That was last week, dude! And it's not like you're upset about it. Or do you miss the sex? You said it was good, right?"

Akihito face palmed himself. Seriously, his friend was...

"Or is it Ai-chan? Did something happen with her today?"
"Eww, no! She's like a sister."

Kou suddenly gasped with the dramatics of a drunk to whom every emotion was wildly exaggerated. "It's her, isn't it?" It was a melodramatic stage whisper.

"Her who?"

"That one! From the night you broke up with Risa-san --"

"Kou!" Akihito spluttered, sensing where this was going -- "-- the pushy one who gave you the mind-blowing blow job!"

Akihito shot an alarmed look at Asami, only to find his eyes sliding over to him in return -- the bastard was listening! Their eyes met, and Akihito blazed with embarrassment as Asami's surprise turned to the most smug, arrogant smirk ever. Akihito groaned as he turned his back again. "For pity's sake, Kou, will you shut it?" he hissed. "It's not like that. Look, just tell the girl, whoever she is, that I'm sorry but I'm not coming."

"But we're already here," Kou lamented.

Akihito narrowed his eyes. "Here where?"

"Here home. We're waiting for you!"

Fighting off Kou's attempts at matchmaking amidst an impromptu house party was the last thing Akihito wanted to deal with right now. Not quite able to meet the man's eyes, he covered the mouthpiece and asked aside, "Any chance you could drop me off at my apartment instead?"

Asami nodded and relayed the instruction to his driver.

"Kou, drink some water and chill. I'll see you when I see you."

Kou whooped, seeming to take that to mean Akihito was coming. He was still shouting but his voice became gradually more distant, merging with the hubbub of what could have been twenty other people. "Woo! My best bud is coming! Yumi-chan, you'll like him, he's like this cute blond, girls dig him and he's got this cute little tush --"

Akihito fumbled with the phone and couldn't hang up fast enough. Kou's inebriated extolling of his virtues hung in the air between them in the dark quiet, the loud voice half cutting out the mike but not nearly enough.

It was too much to hope that Asami would let 'it' slide. He had a totally wicked gleam in his eyes. "I must admit I'm surprised you told your friends about the mind-blowing --"

"I never told them anything of the sort!"

"But you did tell them someone sucked you off."

Could Akihito get any redder? "It's not like that! Kou's just... He acts oblivious a lot of the time but he can be annoyingly perceptive. He guessed some stuff and then made it out to be something it wasn't. I'll have you know, it was terrible."

"Of course. That's why your face is looking hot enough to cook my morning egg on."

Groaning, Akihito buried his face in his hands as Asami chuckled. The sound permeated through the
blond, ringing like a sonorous bell.

Akihito resolutely ignored the bastard the rest of the ride, trying not to see the amusement dancing in those golden orbs whenever their eyes met in the window reflection. He kept his ears open when Asami made a couple more phone calls but they all sounded like legitimate business stuff.

He only spoke when they neared his apartment. "Actually I need to go to the convenience store. You can drop me off just here." They were just a few minutes out. He could have easily gone later but he didn't want Asami to come all the way to his place.

"Suit yourself." Asami tapped the intercom button and instructed the driver to pull over.

Akihito hesitated awkwardly. "Uh... thanks for dinner," he mumbled. "And, well, for the whole auction thing." He suddenly flared up. "Actually no! It was your fault! You were the one who started off the whole bachelor auction madness, that was your insane idea!"

Asami arched a brow mildly. "I can't tell if you're trying to thank me or slate me."

Akihito scowled. "Both. I think. Though I suppose," he said, deflating a bit, "I did drop you in it about making a donation in the first place." But he immediately rounded on Asami again. "But I wouldn't have done that if you hadn't suddenly turned up!"

"I wouldn't have had to turn up if you hadn't run," Asami countered.

"But that was –" Man – gun – bullet – Akihito slammed his mouth shut before he could let slip about the footage. "Oh, it doesn't matter. Just... Thank you for dinner."

Asami's eyes glinted dangerously, but he merely said, "You're welcome, Akihito."

"Well, take care then. I guess. See you." Akihito grabbed his garment bag and legged it.

Akihito did drop by the convenience store in the end even though it could have waited until morning. He plodded his way back to his apartment through the dim cast of streetlamps, the new box of Pocky reassuring in his hand. He was too full to eat it now but it was for later, he knew it was going to be that kind of night.

He would pick up his stuff from Kou's in the morning, he planned in his head. Asami had tracked him down anyway so it seemed pointless to carry on inconveniencing his friend.

Why did Asami really take him out for dinner? He didn't really buy what Asami said about doing it for his public image. Sure it would look good, but if that was really the only reason, he didn't needn't have actually taken Akihito for such a nice meal, not that he could imagine Asami eating in any other kind of place. But the man had been different, almost relaxed, around Akihito. And when he finally started believing that Asami wouldn't molest him, Akihito had to admit that he'd enjoyed their dinner date.

So why was it that there was a distinct pang of disappointment? There had been no physical contact with Asami for the entirety of the dinner and the limo ride there and back, but any relief he felt was so overshadowed by discontent. So much so that he couldn't help but wonder whether he actually wanted the man to molest him. And all because Asami had shown some self-restraint and wooed him with mouth-watering food? Was he crazy or what!

Akihito gave a heavy sigh as he climbed the stairs of his apartment building. Asami was the alleged kingpin of Japan's criminal underbelly. Nothing good could come from lingering on something so
fruitless and unhealthy. Asami was his target, for crying out loud!

Akihito had been away from his flat for a week. It was somewhat stuffy. He caught a hint of Asami's smell and had to steel himself against it. The man's scent was far too invasive in his psyche, he'd have to change his clothes. Leaving his shoes haphazardly in the *genkan*, he hit the lights on and tossed the garment bag on top of one of many piles of boxes.

Dropping the Pocky on the breakfast bar as he passed, he grabbed a beer from the fridge. He hissed it open and stared at the can, his unease weighing him down.

*One hundred million yen.*

He couldn't just let it go like that, no matter how many times Asami told him it was pocket change to him, no matter how much it must be true. To Akihito it was still a lot of money. And it wasn't entirely true that he couldn't pay it back...

What was the price of an incriminating video that could serve you a life sentence? Was it worth a hundred million yen? Probably far more for someone as loaded as Asami. But was it worth Akihito's soul?

Asami was precisely the kind of corrupt evil that Akihito sought to expose. It was murder, for fuck's sake! He couldn't just brush it all under the rug for a hundred million yen and a fancy meal.

"Damn you, Asami," he hissed to his beer before he snatched it up and took a long swig, before slamming it back down again.

Maybe he should have taken Kou up on his offer. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and dialled as he strode to his bedroom, intending to get changed and go after all, but then as soon as it starting ringing he hung up and threw his phone on the bed.

"Argh!" he shouted, grabbing his head, his fingers locked amidst a spray of blond hair.

He didn't want to be with girls either. All he could see when he closed his eyes was Asami. When he jerked off in the shower it was Asami's hands he imagined running over him. It was Asami's voice that turned him on, Asami's gaze, Asami's smell, Asami's strength... Akihito stood there in the light spilling in from the living room and looked down at his slightly inflated groin.

"Traitor. What are you getting all worked up over that bastard for?"

But no way was he going to intentionally go and jerk off thinking of the man. There was nothing he could do if he started thinking about Asami in the middle of it, but he wouldn't purposefully walk into his shower with Asami on his mind.

Maybe what he needed was a new target after all. He plucked up his phone and placed another call as he took the single step to his chest of drawers. His flat was so small that everything was conveniently within reach. His bedroom was only the length of his single bed, with barely thrice the floor space.

He rummaged around in his chest of drawers for clean clothes as the call went to voice mail.

"Hey, Yama-san, it's your favourite punk. I've been thinking about what you said and I think you're right, it's time to move on. Don't get me wrong, it's still on the back burner, I'm not dropping Asami completely, but I'll let it lie for a while. So yeah, lemme know when you've got another name for me. I could do with the distraction anyway. OK. Bye."
He dropped the phone on the chest of drawers alongside the shorts and tank top for after his shower. He paused there, staring over the flat-pack furniture through the window at the dark concrete wall, hating how he was being pulled in two completely different directions. He was astute enough to realise it wasn't just about the footage and the money either. And it had all begun when he'd smacked headlong into Asami.

"Rule number one, Akihito," he reproached himself. "Never meet your target. Rule number two. Never sleep with them." His voice trailed low. "Rule number three. Don't be such a fool."

Sighing heavily, he grabbed his clothes and turned to head to the bathroom.

And jumped out of his skin, arms flailing, clothes flying, heart slamming out of its ribcage. There, reclining in the shadows against the wall less than two metres away, was Asami.

"They say a problem shared is a problem halved," drawled the cruel baritone, "but there's no saving you from this one." His eyes glinted like a demon's straight from hell. "I knew you'd show your tail sooner or later, Takaba Akihito."
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Updates may be sporadic over Christmas and New Years but bear with me, I'll be working on the next chapters when I can.

You've all seen the story tags, right? Tee hee! This is a wild one, and another beast of a chapter. I hope you enjoy reading it as much I did writing it! (⁎^3^)/~☆

Happy Holidays everyone! <3

~ Nyx ~

Artwork added June 2018: Just as I think it can't possibly get any better, Shey produces THIS, embedded below. Oh my goodness, this artwork...... Encapsulating all their desperate fervour, all the physical and emotional intensity... I'm completely blown away. You know how I adore you Shey, thank you!!! (/T-T*/)/<3<3<3

Asami was back in his usual attire but there was no sign of his jacket or waistcoat, or even the holster. Looking almost casual in his shirt and tie, hands slung in his pockets, he looked deceptively relaxed leaning against the wall but still radiating that spine-tingling aura of power and menace that was entirely Asami. In the shadows where even the light spilling in from the living room didn't seem to touch him, he was soul-shatteringly sexy and utterly terrifying.

"Asami..." It was barely a shadow of a breath.

Akihito’s legs locked up, his throat squeezed, the air was knocked from his lungs, the works. He cast back the scattered remnants of his mind, desperately trying to remember what he’d just said on Yama-san's voice mail... To himself...

"You've been busy, Akihito," Asami said conversationally. "So many secrets."

Why didn't he have a bigger flat? Akihito desperately wished he'd worked harder, saved up more, so he could have afforded a bigger place. If he had, the wall that Asami was leaning on wouldn't have been so damned close, barely more than the length of his bed away...

"There are ways to make people talk, of course." Asami pulled a box of cigarettes from his pocket and drew one out with his lips. He lit up, his eyes gleaming with a wicked zeal as he regarded Akihito plastering himself back against the chest of drawers. He only continued after he'd taken a leisurely drag. "But I do enjoy a little variety sometimes. People can be so revealing when they think they've got away with it. Especially when they think they're alone."

Akihito’s mouth might have been moving but words weren't coming.

"You're unusually quiet. Cat got your tongue?"

"...I don't have an ashtray."

Asami arched a brow. "I'm giving you a chance to come clean and that's what you come up with?"
In the pause as he drew on the cigarette, Akihito swallowed, loud enough for them both to hear. "I don't know what you expect me to say."

Asami sneered at his shaky voice. It wasn't a kind look. "Well, that's the million dollar question isn't it? Or rather, a hundred million yen, wasn't it. Why don't we try truth or dare?"

Akihito frowned. "What are you, ten?"

"Oh, I'm never too old for this game. Though in my version the question comes first and the decision second. Will they tell me the truth, or do they dare my vengeance? It's fascinating." Asami took another drag, holding it for several agonising seconds. Burning golden eyes punctured Akihito with white-hot embers wrapped in smoke. "My rules, my questions. Why. Did. You. Leave?" Slow and deliberate, each softly spoken word was delivered with a thud of doom.

Akihito stared stupidly. Huh? Of all the questions. Not who 'Yama-san' was or about targets. Why was the first demand still about his leaving Sion? Though they were all equally likely to get him killed...

"I told you!" he insisted, willing his voice to hold steady. "After what you did to me in the limo, I wasn't sticking around!"

Asami's lips slanted into a grin. The expression held no humour, just the cruel triumph of one who had caught their prey. He stubbed his cigarette out in a silver portable ashtray that he produced from his pocket, tucking it away again before undoing the button at his wrist. Akihito was mesmerised by the methodical turning and rolling of those long fingers as Asami rolled up his sleeve.

"So you chose to dare. I must admit, I was rather hoping that you would."

Panic was rapidly chasing Akihito's heels. "What? Don't just go deciding things on your own! I told you –"

"I strongly advise you not to feed me that bullshit a third time, Akihito," Asami warned, a sinister edge to his voice. He started rolling up his other sleeve. "You won't like the consequences."

But the video? Worse. Definitely worse. "I – I'm not daring anything! It's the truth!"

There was an ominous pause. "I did warn you."

Asami advanced towards him and Akihito's primitive survival instincts zapped into overdrive. He was leaping onto the bed and running haphazardly over it before his brain realised what his body was doing, circling Asami in the only possible way in such a small room. He bolted into the living room and made a beeline for the front door, managed to heave it open just enough –

It was slammed shut just as he tried to throw himself through the narrow gap, and he ended up smashing into the back of it, Asami's body trapping him.

"No! Let me go! S-someone call the police!"

"Really? You think that's going to get you anywhere? There's nobody to hear you. I already took the precaution of evacuating your neighbours – gas leak, I believe my men told them." Teeth scraped his ear, making Akihito shiver violently. "We're all alone."

Akihito heard the rustle and snap of a tie being undone and he bucked and struggled for all he was worth but it was all in vain. Asami kept him crushed to the door as he twisted first one and then the other arm up high behind Akihito's back, winding the tie with startling efficiency. His slim shoulders
were already straining but that didn't stop Akihito from pulling even harder on his arms, trying to free himself. But the tie held firm, his arms secured wrist to elbow. He yelled an unintelligible protest through gritted teeth.

"Now that you're more agreeable," Asami taunted in Akihito's ear as he hauled the younger man back towards the bedroom. Akihito tripped on the lip of the genkan but Asami yanked him upright again.

"Why are you so reluctant to tell me? Is it money you're after?" Asami challenged. "I can easily multiply what I've already paid for you today."

Akihito dragged his feet as much as he could through the living room. "I knew you were up to something, you'd never be that nice for no reason!"

"I was nice, wasn't I?" Asami mused as he kept the struggling blond moving. "Were you disappointed when I kept my word and left you alone? Were you hoping that I'd ravish you?"

"Like hell! You can take your stupid millions and shove it up your ass!"

There as a dark chuckle in Akihito's ear. "No you're not the kind to be bribed, are you? You're a rare breed, Akihito. An honest, cheeky, foul-mouthed brat just begging to be punished." His emphasis was pure sin, stirring Akihito in a way he didn't want to be stirred.

"You perverted bastard, go to hell!"

Akihito was suddenly spun around in the bedroom doorway. Asami grabbed a fistful of blond hair and yanked him close, smashing their lips together.

"Nng –!"

A hard grasp of his face made Akihito part his jaw and Asami's tongue plundered his mouth. The kiss was fierce, Akihito's tongue felt like it would tear, his lower lip sucked to the point of bringing a sting of tears to his eyes.

Asami finally released him, leaving him gasping, the heated stirring between his legs undeniable. Damn him! Akihito stared with wide, glistening eyes.

"There are very few that I'd allow to run their mouth off at me like that," Asami smirked. "But I like you feisty. You should feel privileged."

Then Asami lifted him bodily and threw him. Akihito's breath hitched, expecting to land painfully on the floor, but he landed heavily on the bed and bounced, the impact knocking the breath out of him with a grunt.

Asami was on him immediately, pinning him down with a bent knee digging into Akihito's chest, standing on the floor with the other leg. Akihito struggled but Asami put more and more weight through his knee until Akihito coughed and gave up fighting. Asami reached under the bed and pulled out a black duffel bag, smirking at Akihito's alarmed face as the younger man realised that Asami had brought it with him.

Asami dropped the bag next to Akihito's head and unzipped it, but made no move to remove the contents. "This is the only choice I will give you. Do you want to cooperate and remove your trousers without fuss, or shall I cut them off for you?"

It took a moment for that to sink in before Akihito's expression morphed into horrified disbelief.
"Neither! You're crazy! Let me go!"

More struggling was curtailed with the knee digging sharply into his chest. Asami calmly reached into the bag and took out something about 30cm long. Akihito couldn't identify it until Asami gripped the handle and drew off the sheath, revealing a wicked knife 20cm long, the deadly curve so sharp that the edge looked impossibly defined.

"You can raise your hips or I can use this."

Akihito stared for a long second before he began kicking with renewed desperation, fuelled by pure fear, heedless of the crushing pressure on his chest. "No! Let me go! Get the fuck off me!"

"They're coming off one way or another," Asami said mildly, grabbing the waistband with one hand and tugging.

Akihito's screaming was an incomprehensible garble until Asami made to cut –

"No, wait! Don't! Asami, please!"

Asami was merciless. He paused at the desperate plea, letting the younger man sweat for terrifying seconds. "Tell me."

Akihito gaped in fear and confusion.

"What do you want me to do?" Asami pressed.

Akihito still hesitated, his very real fear of the blade warring with his pride. Because this right here was about giving in. In all his previous relationships he'd always been the more dominant in the bedroom, simply by being 'the man'. Stereotypical or not, sexist or not, that was all he'd known. He'd never encountered a situation like this, or a person like this, where he was so completely and utterly dominated. His pride rebelled. Fiercely so. But then those golden eyes looked at him like that, so arrogant and commanding and sinful and sultry...

Asami's hand rested on the waistband, fingers tucked underneath and his thumb brushing circles on the quivering stomach. "Last chance, Akihito."

Akihito glanced at the knife dangling in deceptively loose fingers, and forced the words out. "...Take them off."

He wouldn't have been surprised if Asami hadn't heard, having muttered with his teeth clenched so hard that his voice was more a rush of air. But after a moment Asami resheathed the blade. "That wasn't so hard, was it? I knew you could be reasonable."

Akihito's sharp retort was cut off with a choked sound as Asami tossed the fearsome thing onto the bed next to his head. The heavy blade landed with barely a bounce. His mouth dried up dryer than the Sahara Desert.

Air whooshed into his lungs when Asami took his knee away, but any relief was short lived as Asami wasted no time in undoing the button and flies. He grabbed the jeans at the hips, his gaze narrowing in warning when Akihito didn't immediately comply.

"Akihito –"

"What are you gonna do?" Akihito hated the tremor in his voice but it was a small miracle he could speak at all. "How do I know you won't just cut me anyway?"
"Cut you?" Asami's sharp gaze pierced him, dissecting every thought and emotion, the very real fear in the hazel depths. It was icy fear, the kind that paralysed and scarred. Asami's expression softened subtly as he released the jeans and grabbed the knife, tossing it back in the duffel. A wicked curve played on his lips. "Behave. And I won't have to bring it out again."

He went for the denim again, looking at Akihito expectantly until the younger man clocked the message.

It suddenly occurred to Akihito that Asami might not actually want him genuinely terrified. A healthy amount of fearful anticipation, to be sure, and on tenterhooks with no clue why Asami was still prioritising that question or how Asami meant to go about getting answers, but not afraid for his life, not like the sick, traumatising way Ai had been with her stalker.

It was this realisation that made Akihito raise his hips, with the greatest reluctance and with his face burning, and let Asami drag off his jeans. The relaxed air about Asami from earlier was like a distant memory but there was still an undercurrent of teasing that gave him the tiniest hope that Asami might not actually torture him...

The denim landed with a thump somewhere on the floor as Asami leaned over him, tightly gripping the blond hair as he took Akihito's mouth in an abrupt kiss. Akihito flinched, bracing himself as Asami's tongue invaded between his lips, but unlike the last time this didn't hurt, it was more a languid stirring of delicious heat that made his boxers feel tighter. Still overtaken by the kiss, he heard the bag rustle and felt Asami drop something onto the bed by his leg, several somethings actually, losing count as he focused on holding back the embarrassing moans that wanted to escape into Asami's mouth until Asami finally let him go.

Asami slid his hands under the slender back to undo the silk tie. A sigh escaped Akihito's lips from a combination of relief and heat as his wrists were released. Asami sat next to him on the bed as he eased Akihito's arms out from under him, his large hands kneading the muscles along his upper arm, shoulder and neck on one side and then the other. Just as Akihito was wondering if Asami had returned to his earlier 'niceness', the man secured something around his wrist.

It took Akihito a couple of seconds to realise, too distracted by the large hands massaging him and trying to deny how good it felt. By the time he noticed that the light but snug grasp around his wrist hadn't moved away, Asami was repeating the process on his second wrist, securing the buckle with meticulous care and ensuring the cuff was snug but not too tight.

"Wh-what are you doing? What – no – stop –!"

Akihito's panicked objections were met with an evil chuckle as Asami pinned him down with a knee again and effortlessly forced one cuffed arm up high over Akihito's head. To his horror, Asami tugged a chain out from where it had been hidden under the pillow and hooked a solid clasp hanging off the chain onto the D-ring on the cuff.

"What the hell is that?"

"Hmm? What's wrong?" Asami asked innocently as he grabbed the other arm and wrestled it overhead, hooking the second cuff to the same clasp.

"You set this all up!"

"Of course I did, you have no headboard for me to tie you to." Asami rubbed large hands over Akihito's bare legs, down the tense thighs and over the knees, cupping under the calves and heels and over the toes before stroking all the way up to the top of the legs, only to repeat the sensual path...
Akihito was all flushed outrage. "That's not the point! Why are you tying me up?" His legs shifted restlessly, trying to pull out of reach but Asami was doggedly persistent, keeping his hands running over his legs.

"You stirred the hornet's nest. I gave you two chances to come clean, that's more than I usually allow. And yet, both times you fed me that bullshit excuse about leaving Sion because I sucked your dick."

Akihito spluttered, every shade of flushed agitation. "But that's –! That – That really happened..."

His attempted declaration of truth died under Asami's withering glare. There was no uncertainty in those golden orbs, only damnation.

"Of course it happened. But that's not why you left Sion. Because you'd already made your exit by that point, hadn't you?" Leaning close, Asami wrapped his hands around one trembling thigh and squeezed as he dropped the bomb. "...Because prior to that, the judge had already approved your transfer."

Akihito blanched.

The judge... Which meant the court order... Did he... he couldn't... already... know...?

Akihito's terrified face broadcasted every flicker of guilt and panic as clearly as a massive flashing neon sign.

Asami's hand was on the other thigh now. "You can understand my curiosity, can't you, Akihito? You can hardly talk about me blowing you without going as red as a tomato. So why would you go through the embarrassment of insisting to me that that was the reason? What could possibly be so much worse?"

"You... But... The judge...?"

Asami ran his hands down Akihito's leg and grasped the ankle. "It was a shame he waited until Monday to call me, otherwise we could have corrected the error over the weekend and you could have continued at Sion. He knows now to inform me of such things immediately," he said like it was a matter of course.

Was there hope? *Speaking* to the judge didn't necessarily mean he'd seen the sealed records, which meant he might not know what the sentence was for exactly... He wouldn't want Akihito to stay on at Sion if he knew, would he? But if he didn't know, why wasn't he asking?

*How much do you know?* The tight knot of fear paralysed Akihito's tongue and the question remained invoiced.

Asami calmly returned Akihito's tremulous gaze as he reached for the other ankle.

"And then it occurred to me," Asami mused, still with that chillingly light tone, "the evening before was when you retrieved data from the damaged hard disk for me. Wasn't it?"

Hairs stood on end as Akihio's blood turned to ice.

...*He has to be fishing,* was all he could think. Because not fishing meant knowing which meant Akihito was dead.
He was sure his heart would give out at any second.

So when Asami reached into the duffel bag to produce two more of those blasted clasps, *survival* was Akihito's only coherent thought and he was writhing and kicking and hauling on his wrist cuffs chained overhead to fight free.

It was all futile. No amount of kicking and bucking was able to avert Asami as the larger man used his whole body to crowd Akihito's legs in close to his torso, snapping the clasps to each leg where Akihito couldn't see but suddenly he found both legs were bent double and immobile...

Raising his head in alarm, he looked down his body and the shocking sight provoked a whimper full of fear and burning mortification.

Thick black leather cuffs were secured around his bare thighs and ankles, and solid clasps connected the D-rings on each cuff from thigh to ankle on each leg, keeping him bent at the knees. The only things left covering him were his shirt and navy boxers, and his socks bunched down out of the way of the ankle cuffs.

Bondage...! Asami had put him in bondage gear! And not the cheap fluffy kind that Risa had liked either. Jet black, solidly thick, properly padded, luxuriously maintained leather work. The serious ebony cuffs stood out in sharp contrast against his pale legs and the same again on his wrists. And somehow, it made his cock twitch in a way that the sight of the fluffy pink tat never had with his ex.

Hazel eyes full of anger and humiliation flew up to meet gold, except Asami's eyes were darker than before, pupils dilated, a hungry demon.

"Didn't I tell you, I like a little variety sometimes?"

Akihito shivered from the dark promise in the baritone purr but he shoved it aside, mustering as much bravado as he could. "You perverted bastard, let me go! Don't go dragging me into your sordid world!"

Gold flashed through Asami's darkly dilated eyes. "This is your own doing, you little brat. You invited yourself along when you lied to me, even after I warned you." He began unbuttoning Akihito's shirt, leisurely drawing his fingers down from the collar heedless of Akihito's frantic struggles to break free. It was all fruitless.

"Do you have any idea what I'm going to do to you?" Asami drawled. The buttons were undone and he slid a warm hand up beside a raised arm to grasp a tightly clenched jaw. "Do you have any idea what you're going to do?" He rubbed the cheek before drawing his hand down, brushing over the pulsing neck and under the shirt, over the collar bone, just the hint of a brush over the nipple and dragging all the way down Akihito's torso as he parted the shirt on one side. The hand slipped behind the hip and under the cheek of Akihito's ass and along the thigh, finally pushing the knee up.

A full body shiver ran through Akihito. Asami smirked, not missing a thing, and Akihito found himself battling his skin bursting into flames and the stirring between his legs.

"Don't worry," Asami reassured. "I'll make sure you enjoy this plenty."

"Stop this! You – I – I'm a guy!"

"No need to remind me," Asami chuckled as he brushed his other hand down the other side of the trembling torso, parting the shirt wide. "I'm very familiar with the taste of your cum."

Grinning at Akihito's unintelligible garble, he pushed up the other knee, creating a
vulnerable stretch between Akihito's legs.

"I'll get you for this! Get the fuck off me –"

"Tsk, tsk, tsk," Asami tutted, reaching inside the duffel bag. "What a foul mouth." What he pulled out made Akihito shrink back and start fighting all over again.

Asami grasped Akihito's chin, but Akihito yelled obscenities and yanked his face free, carrying on bucking as much as he could within his restraints. He even managed to knee Asami in the ribs but the man merely grunted and used his body weight to press the smaller body into the bed.

Asami took hold of Akihito's jaw again but it was only to turn the younger man to face him. "Open your mouth, Akihito. Or I'll shove something much bigger down your throat."

Akihito frantically searched Asami's eyes as though to decide if the man really meant what he seemed to be suggesting. "Just you try it," he snarled. "I'll bite it off."

Golden eyes flashed dangerously. "Are you willing to risk the consequences if you do? Behave. And open your mouth."

Behave. Akihito was suddenly all terror as his eyes darted to the duffel bag. He couldn't explain the sense of betrayal that shot through him at that single warning, the same Asami had used as he'd thrown the sheathed blade back in the bag. A part of him, he realised, despite all that he knew and seen, however foolishly, must have believed that Asami wouldn't actually hurt him. He'd thought that Asami had understood his genuine terror of the knife, that there was some tacit understanding of a line in the sand...

Asami read the thoughts chasing each other across Akihito's face and seemed to realise it too. His eyes softened for a second with a grunt of breath, and when he looked back at Akihito his gaze had lost some of its dangerous edge though it was still unrelenting. It was as near to regret as he would ever express.

It was enough to let Akihito know that it hadn't been intentionally done. He released a shaky breath.

"Open your mouth, Akihito."

Their eyes locked, their wills battling. Asami knew who would win, of course, but Akihito took longer to come to the same conclusion. With his breath shaking, his body shaking, hell even his defiance shaking, he reluctantly, so awkwardly, parted his lips.

Asami's usually self-pleased smirk seemed to contain a streak of approval that Akihito had never seen before, inflaming a deep blush across his cheeks that he was furious about as the black ball gag was fitted in place, forcing the jaw wide, and buckled behind the neck. Not that there was any choice to be made here. Asami would have his way whether or not Akihito wanted to play along. The gag didn't taste of rubber, was it silicone maybe? It wasn't within Akihito's usual sphere of general knowledge.

The dark golden gaze swept appreciatively over his helpless form as Akihito glowered back from between his raised arms.

"We're not quite there yet, are we, Akihito?" Asami taunted. He reached into the bag again and Akihito was already shaking his head before he'd even seen what the bastard had in store for him next.

He whined when he saw the blindfold. Asami brought it close but he didn't force it on, simply
holding it near his head and waiting. Akihito looked between Asami and the black blindfold, full of confusion and trepidation.

And still Asami waited. Akihito had the sinking suspicion that he was supposed to relent, as he had with the gag, but he didn't know how Asami could expect him to just give in like that. This was probably some kind of interrogation and he was in possession of secrets that Asami would kill for, but look where he was – summarily overpowered and bound, no doubt with a mountain of humiliating perversion in store and wanting to yell and scream but gagged with a big invasive ball that he'd stupidly allowed to be put in his mouth. His only play might be to endure whatever Asami had planned and hope he came through it in one piece. Asami was staring with lust darkening his eyes, and Akihito found his insides squirming as they never failed to do under that striking countenance.

"Close your eyes, Akihito."

Asami's voice was as gentle as Akihito had ever heard it, gentle and yet unrelenting in its demand. Would he wait there all night if Akihito didn't relent? Or just force it on anyway?

Mentally fighting every step of the way, denying that he was completely aroused, telling himself that the only reason he was doing this was because he was being helplessly forced, his eyes fluttered closed.

The leather was as soft as the cuffs. The blindfold fit snugly over his eyes and the top of his cheeks with a smooth arch cut out for his nose. The strap was passed behind his head and tightened, gentle fingers keeping his hair from getting caught, and the world was cut off from view.

The feeling of vulnerability was jarring. The lack of sight only highlighted his defencelessness and he wondered what sheer insanity had possessed him to surrender. He was strapped up in bondage gear, arms chained above his head and knees locked bent. What the fuck had he been thinking?! He should have fought harder, damn it, should have ran faster, should never have come back here –

He started as a warm hand brushed over his shin, up to the knee and back down to the cuffs, up and down again, over and over. It was strangely reassuring, as was Asami's baritone that seemed to provide a lifeline in the darkness.

"Did you know, I'd imagined this ever since you first smacked into me at Sion in the middle of the night," Asami chuckled darkly. "You were mouthy and impudent, and I knew then that I'd have you naked and bound at my mercy."

Akihito had become this man's target ever since that first whirlwind of a meeting? Akihito grumbled and shook his head. He was not aroused, damn it!

"What's that?" Asami mused. "You're not quite naked? Oh yes, how could I forget."

Asami ignored the garbled objections and slid his hands down over the ankle cuffs to pull off the socks. "And we mustn't forget these, must we?" He plucked the waistband of the boxers and pinged it against Akihito's stomach, making him jolt.

Akihito mumbled in protest, earnestly trying to wriggle his ass away even though he'd known this was coming. He couldn't let Asami see –

"Why, Akihito," came Asami's mockingly surprised voice, "are you hard already?"

Akihito could have died from embarrassment. Silent as the tomb, he turned his face away and buried
it on the inside of his arm as Asami laughed.

"You little slut. You pretend you don't want this but really, you're yearning for my touch, aren't you?"

Akihito resolutely shook his head, willing his erection away –

He gasped, startled, as his boxers were abruptly wrenched and ripped at one hip, followed quickly on the other side. The torn material was quickly tugged free from under him. With a humiliated whine he tried to cover himself with his toes, but Asami pushed his knees wide and Akihito knew that he was exposing everything. It didn't matter that Asami had already seen it all in the limo. Akihito didn't need to be able to see to know that he was turning fifty shades of pink from head to toe.

He was abruptly released. He waited unsurely, bringing his knees back together but otherwise wondering what was happening, trying to breathe evenly and wondering where Asami had gone. A while his uncertainty grew and he turned his head, straining his ears, feeling lost without a touch or sound to anchor him.

He started as a hand sifted through his hair and he subconsciously leaned into it. Asami's chuckle told him the bastard knew exactly what effect he was having, and catching himself, Akihito tried to draw back. But the hand was already brushing down his cheek, holding him still as Asami's warm lips closed on his neck.

The kiss was hot on his pulse, and Akihito moaned from the sensation magnified a hundredfold with the lack of sight. Asami's scent filled his nostrils and mind, the swirling tongue bolted heated shivers down his spine as Asami kissed and sucked along his jaw and neck. Akihito jolted with a gasp as nails scratched along his sides, clawing upwards as the hot mouth licked its way down, meeting together at his nipple where the peaking bud was sucked hard.

The sensations were overwhelming. Akihito couldn't help his back arching at the delicious arousal. When his nipple was pinched between teeth as Asami simultaneously drew breath, drawing cool air over the wet nipple, Akihito didn't recognise the lewd groan as being his own.

"You horny brat, you're already dripping and all I've done is lick you a little."

Embarrassment flushed bright across his skin and Akihito tried to turn away.

"Your body doesn't lie," Asami taunted as he continued to lick and scratch across his sides, breathing over the nipple, biting and sucking his way down to his inner thighs, playing Akihito like an instrument, making him dance in his restraints.

Akihito's skin was on fire, sensitive to every flicker of touch and blazing with a confusing flare of pain and pleasure when Asami sucked too hard, bit too deep, only to soothe with his lips or tongue or caress of fingertips. He kept trying to swallow the gasps and moans that the man was drawing from him, sounds he'd never heard himself make before and suddenly he couldn't seem to stop.

Most alarming was the pleasure pooling deep in his gut. The tension bubbled, pleasure coiling, but there wasn't nearly enough sensation to bring it to release. What was frightening was how keenly he felt the lack of any direct stimulation on his erection, building a desperate frustration that was almost as agonising as the suspended climax in the limo when Asami had kept him on the brink for a whole hour.

Seeking stimulation where he wanted it the most, his hips jerked as Asami sucked on his inner
thighs. He could almost feel the lips curving in a sadistic grin as Asami left his dripping length completely untouched.

"What's the matter?"

Akihito bit into the gag, anything to stop himself from begging.

Asami's lips were back on his neck, sucking almost painfully as he pinched both nipples, tweaking too hard, eliciting a gasp that dissolved into a groan as Asami soothed both with lips and gentle fingers.

Asami nudged his body in between Akihito's knees, the material of his shirt and trousers rustling with delicious torment across heated skin. Mindlessly, Akihito pressed his toes into the bed and raised his hips, needing friction, a touch, anything! But Asami scooted away with an ill-disguised snigger and resettled beside him.

"Tell me what you want, Akihito?"

Akihito groaned furiously, shaking his head, only making Asami chuckle.

Asami carried on kissing his neck while fingers trailed down his chest, inducing more breathy moans. Akihito's hips jerked again but Asami's arm dodged out of reach, his fingers sliding in the pre-cum pooling in his stomach but evading all Akihito's efforts to seek relief from the infuriating lack of touch.

"Anything to tell me?"

Akihito could hear the amusement in the bastard's voice and he wished he could shoot lasers out of his eyes.

"Oh, if looks could kill."

Akihito was perturbed to be so transparent. He glared even more.

Asami laughed shortly. "You really are cute. Even blindfolded and with your mouth stretched around the gag, I can still see you glowering at me. It makes me want to torture you even more."

Akihito couldn't help the fearful whine that escaped his throat. A kiss was pressed to the side of his lips.

"Don't worry," Asami reassured, "you'll enjoy this."

Akihito wasn't reassured in the least, tensing up even more.

Asami's hand slid along his thigh and under his ass until he was circling Akihito's puckered entrance with a pre-cum slicked fingertip.

A muffled scream of protest accompanied Akihito's frantic head shaking, but of course his objections were ignored. Asami languidly swirled his tongue on Akihito's neck while his finger mimicked the same actions below.

"Relax, or this will hurt," Asami warned, before he nudged the finger in with slow, persistent pressure.

Akihito sucked a breath and writhed upwards and pulled on his wrist cuffs, anything in an attempt to escape the intrusion, but a harsh pinch on his nipple had him buckling and the finger pressed in.
"You're alright, Akihito. Relax."

Akihito panted through his nose. The intrusion pressed deeper, one slow centimetre at a time, pressing deeper still until the long finger was buried to the knuckle. Asami immediately drew it out again at the same lazy speed, almost all the way out before pressing in with the same steady pressure as before.

As Asami continued, slow and almost gentle but unyielding, Akihito realised that it didn't hurt. He was more tense from the idea of anything going up there in the first place, but it didn't actually hurt. It was more the idea of Asami fingering him that sent his mind spinning.

Sensing the younger man gradually adjusting, Asami added a second finger, keeping with the same unrelenting but steady pressure.

The stretch was inescapable. It spun Akihito off axis, reality spiralling out of control. He fought to breathe behind the gag.

Asami gave him long enough to adjust so that by the time the third finger was added, the sting was minimal. He continued with the same relentless slow fucking with his fingers as he began trailing his lips and other hand over Akihito again, teasing and stirring, pinching and soothing, pleasure laced with pain laced with pleasure. It wasn't long before the blond was shifting and gasping and writhing with need. The smooth skin was flushed with a faint sheen of exertion. When Akihito gave a smothered moan, his erection proud and red and glistening, Asami tilted the angle of his fingers as he drove them upwards –

Akihito jolted and arched to the clanking of chains, a surprised groan escaping him, eyes wide behind the blindfold. The next few slides of Asami's long fingers were unhurried and unremarkable, then he angled to rub the prostate again.

Masked amidst Akihito's stuttered moans and the rattle of chains, Asami unbuckled his belt and released his own straining arousal. Still teasing with the occasional stimulation against the deep sensitive nerves in between the more mundane, lazy slide of his fingers, he grabbed the lube from the duffel bag and stroked it onto his own hardness. It had been a long time since he had ached this much. Perhaps never.

Akihito was thrumming and he knew already that he couldn't take much more of this before he lost his sanity. His whole body was aflame, and he was impossibly hard, but his cock was entirely neglected and left to throb agonisingly. That blinding pleasure from behind might have driven him to completion except for the frustrating wait in between. It was a totally different method of sexual torture to what Asami had done in the limo and it was frightening to wonder at the bastard's repertoire.

Akihito need was so great that it won out over pride. He muttered behind the gag, hoping Asami would get the hint.

"Hmm? Is it too much?" Asami teased. "Shall I slow down?"

Akihito screamed muffled obscenities and muttered even more. He was sorely tempted to headbutt the man.

Asami chuckled and brushed his free hand behind the blond head, unbuckling the gag while still languidly impaling the hungry ass with his fingers.

Akihito gasped as the ball gag was removed with a drooping trail of saliva, working his aching jaw.
"Damn you," he hissed as soon as he could say anything.

Asami angled his fingers and drove up hard, making Akihito arch and groan, lewed and loud with the gag removed, the chains rattling.

"You were saying?"

The fingers had returned to the slow, inadequate pressure again.

"You're so dead," Akihito growled, his whole body tense but fighting himself again with some renewed defiance with the removal of the gag.

Asami knew it too. "If you have nothing better to say, I'll put the gag back on."

"No! No..."

Asami scratched down his ribs, making Akihito's breath stutter. "Then what do you want? Tell me."

Akihito glared into the darkness of the blindfold, swallowing his pride in the face of his agony. "I... need more."

"More where?"

"You know where!"

"Here?" Asami teased, leaning over him and sucking hard on the neck. Akihito writhed and swallowed a moan, achingly needy.

"Or here?" Asami bit lightly into the muscle around his nipple, again the lack of direct sensation only heightening the feeling.

Akihito released a groan of frustration. "You bastard, I need to come!"

"Ah, I see," Asami purred with exaggerated satisfaction. "And how about here?"

Fingers drove up hard against the buried nerves, and suddenly it wasn't just once but again and again and again... Akihito moaned obscenely, beyond rational thought.

"Yes, there! Asami..."

Behind the blindfold Akihito didn't see the wolfish grin. But he felt the fingers withdraw. Deft fingers unclasped the leg cuffs from each other, releasing ankles from thighs. He was quickly flipped over, chest pressed into the bed and his face too until he turned it to be able to breathe, and his hips were pulled up to position him knees wide and ass up in the air – only then did he realise what he'd just agreed to.

"No, wait, Asami –!"

He jerked on the chains, throwing himself forwards in a bid to pull away, but unyielding fingers hooked around his hips and forced him back. A heavy hand pressed his head into the bed before unclasping the blindfold.

Akihito blinked rapidly as the leather slipped away and his vision flooded with the half light from the living room, a jarring feeling of suddenly having one of the main senses returned, knocking all other senses in turn as they all readjusted in his brain to re-accommodate the return of a major player.
He could see! His bed, his wall, his bare arms, his wrists cuffed with sable – the cuffs! Hazel eyes flew back over his shoulder. The sight stunned Akihito speechless.

Asami knelt behind him. Sleeves rolled up, forearms corded with muscle, the crisp shirt parted halfway down, the tantalising flash of skin stretching up to the strong column of Asami's neck, scattered strands of black hair falling loose over intense gold eyes dilated like midnight. A devilish bedroom look that was at once refined and gut-clenchingly terrifying and insanely hot as only Asami could be – fuuuuck...

Asami ran a warm hand all the way up and all the way down the curved spine, and squeezed the cheek of Akihito's ass with a downright evil smirk. "Didn't I promise that I'd have you ass up and parted for me?" A bruising grip locked onto Akihito's hips.

"Asami –?"

Akihito was choked to a rasping gasp as Asami thrust in, his length like granite wrapped in velvet, thicker and harder and deeper than three fingers. Akihito was stretched fast as Asami pressed in and in, robbing the air from his lungs, stinging his eyes.

"It's too much! Take it out...!"

Strong arms wrapped about Akihito's chest and pulled him upright, impaling him deeper, provoking a dramatic whimper and making tears spill, making his shoulders creak as his cuffed arms were suddenly lowered, pointing down to the chain wrapped around the mattress. Asami's warmth was against his back, the air was full of Asami's scent and Akihito's own pre-cum. A rough tongue licked up along the wet trail on his cheek.

"Relax for me, Akihito."

"Asami..." Akihito was begging and he didn't care.

Warm hands ran down his arms to his wrists. The clasp was unhooked from the chain but the cuffs were left secured together. Too focused on breathing through lungs choked with pain and fullness and an overwhelming intensity he couldn't understand, Akihito could put up little fight as his arms were raised over his head, hooking around behind Asami's neck, trapping Asami's head beside his own within the circle of his arms. He was stretched up against Asami and impaled, his cock angry and throbbing and dripping, Asami's clothed legs inside his own with the friction rubbing against his sensitive skin and locking his knees wide.

"Relax, Akihito. You've already got me to the hilt."

Asami was inside him.

Akihito could never have imagined the psychological impact of this, the seismic upheaval of his mental landscape. It had never been like this before. Was it because it was his first time being penetrated? Or did he really thrill in being forced, being taken, being defiled? And not just his body either. Asami didn't let him avert his eyes, to hide his shame at his impossible arousal. Asami forced him to bare everything down to his innermost feelings, invading his inner sanctum and spearing the door of his soul. Maybe it was nothing to do with him and everything to do with Asami. Maybe it was the both of them together.

Amidst his swirling desperation, he sought shelter in the only place available. He turned his head and tipped his forehead against Asami. It was twisted, seeking comfort from the one who incited the riot of sensations and caused him to seek reassurance in the first place, but it was the only solace in the
tempest. He strained against the cuffs as he curled more tightly into the larger man.

Akihito didn't see the strange expression that passed over Asami's face.

Sharp golden eyes watched, understanding Akihito's reaction for what it was even if the younger man didn't. Submission. Subconsciously done, but nevertheless it was there. Coerced way beyond his comfort zone, hissing and spitting like a cornered cat as Asami forced his lustful will upon him, but when pushed to extremes Akihito didn't shut down or break down in terror. He submitted, feeling everything as Asami intended them to be felt and handing himself over.

Wet eyes unfocused with sensory overload that Asami only wanted to intensify, heat suffusing the slender cheeks with a glow that Asami thrilled in causing – this sort of reaction wasn't for anyone else's eyes but his. It wasn't for anyone to cause but him. These tears that were so delectable on his tongue should only spill because of him and he wouldn't have thought twice about emptying his CZ75 into anyone who dared to encroach on his territory.

(Fanart: 'Submission' by Shey, 2018, reproduced with kind permission.)

It gripped Asami something fierce, this desire to claim, to consume, to unravel – not to break but to
penetrate through all the layers to this sweet submission, only to reconstruct and consume again, this too bright, too innocent, impudent spark that dared to defy him and made his blood sing.

It was with something of an exasperated twist of the mouth that Asami made the incredible decision to postpone his original agenda. If he were to extract information now that clearly terrified Akihito more than being forcefully taken, it would smother this honest burning desire that the defiant man only revealed at such extremes. Asami relented, just this once, the first time Akihito's ass tightened so gratifyingly around him, to indulge himself and enjoy Akihito purely for pleasure.

But the way the spirited brat compelled Asami to repeatedly cross his clearly delineated segregation of business and pleasure, particularly when a matter of great risk hung in the balance – it was not to be forgiven. There would be a reckoning and Takaba Akihito was damn well going to answer in full.

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A large, warm hand wrapped ever so gently around Akihito's aching erection, overwhelming him with a sudden surge of delicious, tormenting cascade of feeling. He moaned a long, drawn-out shudder, his hips twitching by themselves, desperate for more. Asami's other hand trailed a lazy, erogenous path over his sensitised skin, but otherwise the older man simply waited.


Hazel eyes, huge and dazed and saturated with arousal, locked onto blazing gold.

"Take your pleasure. Take what you want."

Akihito keened softly. He was too far gone for resistance. Desperate and shaking, his hips shifted, nudging forward into the receptive palm, a wet glide that radiated pleasure to his marrows. But pushing forwards drew out Asami's hard length from behind, and the only way to push forwards again was to push back first. And he did, pressing his hips back and sheathing Asami again as he let loose a strangled whimper, feeling like the dark lust in Asami's eyes would swallow him whole, before driving forwards into the hand again.

With every thrust forwards into Asami's hand and backwards onto Asami's thick length he could feel Asami. A dual whirlpool of desecration, never a reprieve, a crash of torment and exhilaration on both ends of the pendulum of his hips. Akihito's obscene moans filled the apartment as he doubly fucked himself on Asami, driven equally by the lust-blown gaze piercing him and the scratching and caressing of Asami's other hand, the lips on his neck.

Gradually the pain in his ass became less, until the sense of incredible fullness became intoxicating, the stretching burn heightening the pleasure in a way he'd never known before. It was thrilling and bewildering and mortifying, and he pressed his face towards Asami again, trembling and wired, seeking warmth and comfort and reassurance.

Long fingers dipped into Akihito's mouth and he sucked on them without thought, twisting his tongue over and around them as his hips thrust faster, forwards and backwards, pressure coiling in his gut. A muted groan filled his ears and the fingers in his mouth turned his head sharply, fingers replaced by demanding lips. With his arms locked around Asami's neck he drew the man in closer, the kiss messy and wet, his back arching involuntarily to feel Asami's impressive erection deeper inside, making him moan all the more.

Pleasure was escalating, tensing, mounting, and he pulled his mouth free. "I'm... I'm going to..."

Asami suddenly squeezed the base of his cock. Akihito keened, stunned and aching and floundering for release.
"Asami?"

"Not yet," was the growl in his ear as his arms were pulled up and over from around Asami's head before he was suddenly shoved forwards.

Akihito yelped, bracing himself on his elbows as Asami began to thrust, the hand still squeezing his erection as the forearm locked his hips back. The other arm came over his shoulder, the elbow braced against the crook of his neck. Asami began thrusting faster, keeping the smaller body trapped in place, angling up until Akihito suddenly gasped in surprise and his back arched, his head flying up.

"There it is," Asami smirked. And this time there was no lazy frustration in between. Powerful hips pounded into Akihito, deep and steady, driving up into that spot that made Akihito see stars and push backwards of his own to meet every thrust with moans that couldn't possibly have been his.

"Asami, let go," Akihito gasped, aching and ready to burst.

"You'll come when I tell you to," was Asami's harsh reply as he moved the arm locked over his shoulder to force Akihito's chest down to the bed.

"That's the most... ridiculous –!"

Akihito's hoarse retort was cut short. This angle only made Asami drive deeper and Akihito was a groaning mess as his body trembled on the cusp of the choked orgasm. Allowing no escape, Asami surged into him, a relentless battering ram spearing him with all-consuming pleasure deep inside and flooding his sanity with a tidal wave of sweet poison.

Akihito wormed his bound hands down, reaching for his cock, trying to free it from Asami's grasp, but Asami yanked him up and away, using his arm to lift Akihito's face just long enough to slide their arms out from underneath and pin the trembling fingers above the blond head.

Asami continued throttling Akihito's erection as he propelled faster and harder, slamming the prostate every time, escalating Akihito's climax while still holding it captive. Desperate and trembling and aching with need, Akihito's fingers twisted amongst Asami's long digits, tears spilling from his eyes, as Asami thrust faster and deeper than Akihito could take.

"Asa... mi! Please!"

"Remember this, Akihito," Asami growled. "The pain and pleasure that only I can give you."

"Asami!"

"Come, Akihito!" Asami gasped, equally undone, finally relenting his stranglehold.

Akihito saw white. Crashing heavenwards, drowning with agonising gratification, his cry breaking, his seed exploded up his chest and all over the bed covers as an overwhelming, unstoppable tidal wave of blinding pleasure surged through him from deep in his pelvis. He clenched Asami's cock painfully and pulled a throaty groan from the larger man as the muscular arm pulled the bruised hips in tight and Asami spilled deep, deep inside.

Wracked with tremors and aftershocks, thoughts scattering like dandelion puffs, his body limp and pliant, Akihito was vaguely aware of Asami holding him up long enough to yank the soiled bed covers from underneath them before rolling them both onto the sheets, still joined deep inside with strong arms locked about him, not letting go.
Akihito woke alone to the sound of the front door thudding shut.

Sex. Everything smelled of sex. His room. His bed. His skin. But seeped into him was also Asami – expensive sandalwood, Dunhill and that elusive, enticing, enthralling scent that could be nobody else...

How was it that Asami always managed to reduce him to some wanton manwhore? Akihito had fucked himself on the bastard, for crying out loud! Front and back! ... Sable and gold, velvet and steel, torment and ecstasy... Memories assailed him like fall leaves snatched up in a whirlwind and he groaned, swearing blind that the only reason for such a sound was because of the steady, relentless throb in his lower back and he was not getting hot just thinking about it all. He wasn't, damn it! He curled in on himself –

And stilled. He was clean. He knew what it felt like to fall asleep covered in his own spend, this wasn't it. What the hell, had Asami wiped him up? It was... so... personal... Akihito's face burned up and he dove into his pillow – the freaking chain under it was gone, thank fuck for small mercies – and wondered if was possible to die from embarrassment.

But he had way, way more important things to worry about than mind-blowing, out-of-this-world sex. Like the video. And his sentencing judge seemingly reporting to Asami... How much did Asami already know? Asami had barely asked any questions, hadn't even tried to pump him for answers when he was delirious with arousal as he'd been expecting. What the hell was Asami's play? It was killing him. He had to leave before the bastard could deploy whatever dastardly scheme he had cooking. Because come on, this was Asami. There was bound to be one. He had to leave now, even if the red LED numbers next to his bed read 04:06 and the night still withheld the sun's first rays over Tokyo. Not just placements but the city. Maybe even the country.

But first things first. The duvet in the corner wafting of sex and making his cock twitch had to go.

The bedroom door was closed, edged with shafts of light from the living room. He groaned upright and slid off the bed, cursing as every movement felt like someone had taken a sledgehammer up his ass, which actually wasn't far off. He grimaced with the first step, then found with the second step that the left side hurt marginally less.
"Stupid bastard," he grumbled as he hobbled along. "With your stupid perfect face and your stupid giant dick..."

He yanked the door open and squeezed his eyes shut as he was whitewashed by the bright light in the living room. He blindly headed for the bathroom where his laundry bag lived, dragging the duvet with him as he limped his usual arced path that would take him clear of the plastic drawers pushed against the wall between the bedroom and bathroom doors –

His thighs smacked solidly into something, sending his upper body and the bed covers toppling over something solid but soft, bouncing and tumbling in a heap to the floor with a surprised yelp.

He lay there winded, blinking in a daze, adjusting to the bright light. And found himself staring at a pair of legs. Suit trouser legs, to be precise. And he knew who they belonged to even before he followed the legs up to the white shirt with the two buttons undone at the top and higher still to the lips twitching with amusement and sharp golden eyes...

Asami sat on one side, where Akihito hadn't tumbled over, of a two-seater settee, a black leather upholstered number that most certainly hadn't been there the night before. Neither had the solid walnut table where Asami rested an iPad and swiped through it as though it was perfectly normal for him to be doing so in Akihito's tiny living room...

"If I knew sex was going to make you this clumsy, I would have warned you that I was bringing extra items in here."

Not only had Asami not left, but he'd brought furniture? Brain still fogged from sleep and sex, Akihito couldn't get a handle on it and it didn't even occur to him to be mad about the implication that sex made him a klutz.

"But..." He glanced numbly at the front door.

"Oh, that? My men just left, they moved the furniture in."

"Why?"

Asami became more serious, although the gleam of amusement still remained. "Why not? We still have things to discuss and we don't have to be uncomfortable discussing it."

Akihito was about to retort something when the slight flicker of Asami's eyes, and the twitch of a smile on his lips, suddenly brought a horrifying realization.

With an undignified shriek that did nothing for his pride, Akihito scrambled off the floor and stumbled around the sofa in nothing but his birthday suit, chased all the way into the bedroom by the laughter that Asami could no longer contain.

Surely, now, Akihito would die of embarrassment!

Akihito didn't look at Asami as he marched back into the living room, stomping with as much outrage as his aching back would allow. At least he had clothes on again now, some old sweatpants and a tank top. He grabbed the bed covers and resumed his earlier mission, hauling them over to the bathroom and stuffing them into his laundry bag.

He limped over to the kitchenette. "I can't believe you had furniture moved in here. Isn't that a bit excessive?"
Asami shrugged, leaning on his knee with an elbow as his other hand skimmed across the iPad.
"This is more comfortable."

"Oh, right, what was I thinking? Why put up with being uncomfortable when you're richer than God and can simply have furniture delivered at the drop of a hat?"

He poured a glass of water for himself and knocked back some painkillers. He hesitated, hating himself for it, but he couldn't help mumble – "Do you want a drink?"

Asami half smirked. "I helped myself earlier."

Akihito eyed the glass on the draining rack. "Right."

Asami clicked the iPad to sleep and reclined on the settee, stretching an arm out over the back. "Come here."

Akihito couldn't very well start packing to leave now but he fully intended to go back to sleep. He rounded the countertop to head back to his bedroom. "You should hurry up and finish what you're doing."

"Come here, Akihito."

Akihito carried on ignoring him. "And I'm not making you breakfast so you can see yourself out."

"Are you inviting me back to bed with you?"

Akihito stopped in his tracks. Fuming and scowling furiously, he turned in the bedroom doorway and limped back, wondering if he could just hover... But Asami wasn't having any of it. He tapped the sofa back with his arm stretched out over it.

"Sit."

Akihito folded his arms. "I'm fine right here."

"Sit. Or be tied up. Your choice."

Akihito gaped, shaking his head. "Would you give it a rest already? You're obsessed with tying me up! Perverted bastard..." He nonetheless lowered himself cautiously on the edge of the sofa, not doubting the bastard's threats for a moment.

"I'd originally intended to make you talk when you were begging for me to let you cum –" Akihito flushed and almost choked as Asami continued regardless – "but you made me hard with all your delicious moaning and writhing –"

"Would you stop?" Akihito's cheeks were dusted pink.

Asami might have smirked if he wasn't so set on finishing this conversation this time. "As soon as you tell me why you really left Sion."

Normal. Be normal, Akihito told himself. "Look, you want to know why I left? Because every time, it's like this. You won't leave me alone! That's why I left Sion, I was trying to get away from you."

Asami was silent, regarding him with narrowed eyes, the air about him becoming cold. Akihito fought the urge to fidget, determined to act perfectly normal...

"So that's it, is it?" Asami murmured.
Akihito returned the stare as levelly as he could.

"And," Asami continued casually, "it has nothing to do with the hard disc you looked at for me?" He calmly regarded Akihito's frozen expression. "Because it confused us, you see. One of my men weighed the pieces before disposing of it, just to be sure, and there was a deficiency that he couldn't account for. Now, I can't help but think that you might have kept a piece all this time."

No amount of mental preparation to act as normal as possible could have prepared Akihito for this bombshell. He paled, fear washing over his face, horrified hazel eyes colliding with golden dragon eyes.

But there was one thing Akihito was adamant about. "I- I didn't... try... to keep –"

Before he could finish, everything went pear shaped.

Asami's head snapped to the front door an instant before it exploded inwards and a black-clad intruder dive-rolled into the living room. Powerful legs propelled Asami over the back of the settee, grabbing and taking Akihito with him.

It was said that the first moment when you looked at a clock was when the second hand moved the slowest. Sailing backwards, in that eternal first moment, Akihito glimpsed the assailant raising what might have been a semi-automatic, crouching, taking aim. Asami's arm trailed like a comet in their wake, a gun clasped in the large hand seemingly out of nowhere, firing a single shot that reverberated through Akihito's ear drums and sent the intruder hurtling backwards. The two of them dropped –

And time finally caught up as they crash-landed. Gunfire erupted from more assailants following the first. Akihito landed heavily on his shoulder, Asami barrel-rolling more smoothly before he shoved them both flush against the back of the sofa. Asami ducked down over the blond head as bullets thudded all around them, jetting splinters of plaster and wood and plastic and computer fragments everywhere under what felt like a hundred bullets in five seconds. But then abruptly there was the briefest lull, an eerie quiet filled with clicks of reloading, and Asami surged to his feet – bang bang bang! – rapid fire, three shots. Followed by three heavy, dull thuds.

Akihito stared up mutely at Asami, the fearless sentinel against unidentified assailants. No Kevlar, no guards, just Asami with his rolled up sleeves, the corded muscles on his forearm casting shadows, and the lethal dull silver barrel of his handgun.

Where were his men? What nightmare of this crime lord had Akihito stumbled into?

Multiple pairs of boots thudded closer down the walkway outside and Akihito's fear notched up to new heights. He probably would have stayed uselessly frozen if Asami hadn't grabbed his arm and thrown him into the bedroom, slinging him behind the broad back against the wall as they took cover from the front door.

"Where are you?" Asami demanded quietly, briskly.

Akihito didn't know how Asami kept doing these things. The gun, for starters. And now a phone. Things kept appearing in the man's hands.

"Four down, more incoming –"

Akihito's unintelligible half scream cut across Asami as the window shattered and two more black-clad assailants abseiled in amidst a spray of glass.
The first fell to a bullet before he even hit the floor. Asami was on the second in an instant, slipping under a swinging arm and knocking up the firing arm that sunk a bullet into the wall above Akihito's head. The assailant was so massive that Asami looked almost small in comparison. He blocked his head, kicked out, elbowed and took a blow to the ribs before he dodged aside and pistol-whipped the guy's balaclava-covered head. The assailant spun with it, throwing more frenzied attacks in their messy close-quarter fighting.

Akihito jolted as gunshots ripped through the open doorway from the living room, six shots that sent Asami ducking away and that the beefy opponent exploited to pin him to the wall, bashing a massive fist into Asami's hold and sending Asami's gun clattering away.

Even for Akihito who'd never handled a gun in his life there was no mistaking the empty clicks that followed the gunshots, echoes of the hammer hitting an empty chamber that resounded louder than his thumping heartbeat. Reloading took no time at all and then the unseen assailant was firing from the living room again, the slugs burying into the wall by Asami's head...

Asami!

It overrode everything else. He didn't give a flying rat's ass about the crossfire. Akihito leaped across the doorway as bullets flew, tumbled into the opposite wall and slammed the door closed. They were thrown into near darkness as another bullet bolted through the thin plywood, but then the assailant in the living room stopped firing, unable to see his target.

Street lights and lights from neighbouring buildings transformed the world into shades of tinted grey. Gluing himself to the wall to keep out of the way, Akihito watched helplessly as Asami twisted away his opponent's tight grip pinning his wrist and the two of them careened into the door just as the intruder in the living room tried to open it. There was a startled yelp as the door was forcibly slammed shut again. Asami smashed the much larger opponent's beefy head into it for good measure and wrestled him in a neck lock.

Another big dark blur sailed in through the jagged window, disconnecting from black ropes in midair before he'd even landed in a light crouch that belied his weight. He took one glance at the other assailant in a tight spot and charged immediately at Akihito.

Did these fuckers never stop coming? Akihito was panicked and scrappy, aiming for soft spots – between the legs, the eyes behind the balaclava, the throat. Well he tried, at least. But the intruder easily out-maneuved him and deflected all his attempts, wrapping a thick arm around Akihito's neck from behind and dragging him aside out of line of the doorway.

The body at his back felt all wrong, bulkier and shorter than Asami, the contours and ridges in all the wrong places. It was in his choked silence that Akihito heard a heaved grunt from across his bedroom followed by a sickening crack that resonated horrifically in his skull.

Asami rose fluidly, reclaiming his gun as he dropped the limp body of the giant he'd been battling. The thick stranglehold eased just enough and Akihito could breathe easier again, but his relief died young – all of a sudden there was the all-too-familiar press of cold hard metal...

It surged like the incoming tide. The phantoms that had pestered his sleep the past week, the ghosts that had clawed at his shadow as he fled his dreams – only now they swarmed into monsters and the gun against his temple became entirely too real.

Yet again his existence teetered on the trifling squeeze of a trigger, everything boiling down to a single, indiscriminate bullet.
Akihito's soul bled. It took long harrowing moments to realize he was staring down the barrel of Asami's gun.

"Freeze! Move and he dies!" The yell right beside his ear almost deafened him.

Why the fuck was this happening all over again? Paralysed with terror, Akihito stared numbly as Asami faced down the assailant with the same cold detachment as he had all the rest.

The attacker suddenly gasped, a soft sound right beside Akihito's ear as he drew back a little. "Asami?"

Did Akihito imagine it, or was that fear that he detected in the assailant's sudden recognition?

But as Asami narrowed his arctic gaze and his gun remained locked unwaveringly at the covered head right next to Akihito's, the moment passed. The grip strengthened around Akihito's neck, making him choke again.

"Ugh –"

"Asami-sama," the assailant assured, his voice much more reserved now. "This is all a misunderstanding. It's not you –" He paused at the distinct click from the living room, the smack seating a new magazine and the loading sling shot, his eyes flickering infinitesimally to the bedroom door –

And that was that. Asami buried a bullet straight between the balaclava eye holes.

The grip eased around Akihito's neck, loosening, slipping, before falling away entirely. The body fell with a domino drum as the assailant toppled to the floor. His face bled of all colour, Akihito swayed –

Asami charged. Bullets slammed into and through the door as Asami shoved Akihito into the wall. Asami snagged another magazine from his ankle and shielded the smaller man with his own body against the wall as he reloaded over Akihito's head and dumped a few rounds of his own into the door. The recoil reverberated through the larger body into Akihito where they were pressed together.

The return fire seemed to discourage the assailants in the living room. Silence fell, screaming in the abrupt halt of gunfire. Akihito trembled, completely leaning against Asami, relying on the solid warmth to hold himself together.

Asami's gun never once wavered. "Anyone else who comes through the door is dead," he promised, cold and deadly, target locked.

There was a long pause before one of the assailants called back through the closed door.

"Identify yourself."

"You first," Asami threw back, totally fearless, his control absolute. "And state your business."

Muted debate followed. "We're after Takaba Akihito. Hand him over and you'll come to no harm."

...Wait, what? They were after him? Akihito had assumed that these men had come for the crime lord! And so had Asami, judging by the golden eyes that zeroed down on him all of a sudden. But then those piercing eyes dropped to Akihito's arm. Asami reached for it with his free hand, fingers wrapping around the upper arm and his thumb brushing across the bicep –
Akihito flinched at the sharp burn, surprised to see the dark bleeding gash as though he'd been cut. Or grazed by a bullet. Huh. Was that why it had been throbbing?

There was something in Asami's gaze, something weighted and significant that added colour to his cold lethality, before he refocused. "What's your business with Takaba?"

"That's none of your concern. All you have to do is hand him over."

"Then we're at a stalemate," Asami observed mildly as though he was used to fitting in a gunfight before breakfast every day, his attentive gaze flickering regularly to the window as well as the door. "You'll have to go through me first."

Asami's offhanded rejection prompted heated whispers in the living room.

Akihito was vaguely aware of staring. Why was Asami protecting him? Had Asami not tormented him enough, was that it? But such a lethal confrontation seemed a high price for mere carnal pleasure, unless Asami was so confident in his ability to protect himself that he didn't see much risk. Though to be fair, the guy had taken down seven men single-handedly so far while protecting Akihito's useless ass... Akihito could only stare up at that sharp jaw turned towards the door, close enough to tip his forehead against it if he leaned forwards, anchoring himself on Asami's solidity pressing him into the wall.
Suddenly there was a distant cacophony of cries and yells from the apartment and the walkway beyond.

"Incoming!"

"Behind you!"

"Hands up!"

"Hold fire!"

"Who are you!"

"Don't fire!"
"Shit, you're –"

"Stand down! Stand down you idiots! They're Asami's men!"

"What? Asami? Asami?!

Asami smirked at the horrified yell even though he still kept his weapon trained on the doorway. They listened as Asami's men took control of the rest of the apartment and relieved the assailants of their weapons.

A voice called out, "Clear, boss!"

"Roger," Asami confirmed.

Only then did he lower his gun although he kept it hanging by his side. He turned to Akihito, grasping his jaw and turning his face up, piercing deep into the questioning, mystified, speechless hazel eyes as though searching for the younger man's state of mind.

Asami took a step – and was pulled back. They both looked down to find Akihito's hands fisted white on Asami's shirt.

Asami didn't rush him. He remained still as Akihito forced his hands to let go. The younger man looked even more vulnerable then, fear rising and shimmering in the hazel eyes, robbing him of his usual spark. Asami considered him for a long moment before he caught the slender jaw again and closed his lips over Akihito's.

There was no fighting back. All defences already flayed apart, Akihito relinquished control as Asami took the kiss. But in the brief, deep, sweeping kiss, Akihito also took his measure. This was Asami.

And they were alive. They were ok.

Asami drew back to see the life beginning to spark back in the hazel eyes. He gave his signature smirk, deliberately piling on the arrogance, knowing it would wind the brat up. Akihito didn't disappoint – his brow ridged, his eyes hardening as he glared. Ruffling his hair, Asami turned and strode out of the bedroom.

He left a vacuum in his wake, the comfort of his formidable aura whooshing away from Akihito who was left standing there in confusion. Was it his imagination or was Asami trying to help him? He certainly didn't feel like such a damsel in distress anymore... Daring a lingering, nerve-wracking glance at the sea of glass, at the bodies crumbled on a bed of diamond shards, he followed after the bastard who confused the hell out of him.

His tiny apartment was a mess. Bullet holes were everywhere, peppered into the walls and floor, the plastic drawers of computing equipment smashed to bits, the new settee vomiting white stuffing and the table was a mass of wooden splinters, the floor covered in debris. Four more bodies lay in unnatural heaps on the floor between the legs of three assailants being held at gunpoint by three of Asami's men. It was beyond crowded.

One of Asami's men was a blond giant. The blond giant.

All of the assailants had closely cropped hair and wore black suits, de-masked now, clearly members of a particular type of organization. They all bowed – from the waist, head low, no skimping on the respect.

"Asami-sama," one of them greeted, the first to straighten. A jagged scar ran down his cheek and
through his lip, his cold, heartless eyes were plain creepy. He looked more than a little unhinged.

Asami barely nodded in acknowledgement. "Wakajima." No title, no honorific, and yet the man only bowed his head again.

"You killed four of our men," Wakajima noted, although he sounded more offended than upset.

"Seven, actually. But what did you expect? You dared to open fire on me, be grateful you're not all dead."

The yakuza were bowing again. Akihito glanced at Asami, wondering at the glaring power disparity. Just who the hell was this man to whom the yakuza showed deference like this?

"Our sincere apologies, Asami-sama. You have our solemn assurance that we had no knowledge of your being here."

"Who gave the kill order for Takaba?"

Wakajima hesitated.

"Who?" Asami demanded harshly. Even Akihito flinched.

"The Oyabun [head] of the Nishizuma Group, Nishizuma Kato."

And with that one revelation, Akihito's world came crashing down.

With startling clarity Akihito knew why they had come. And that Asami would find out his worst secret. As though standing on the tracks ahead of an oncoming train, he could only stare on helplessly as his saviour of moments earlier became his executioner.

The golden gaze cut across to him, seeing the recognition – and death – in Akihito's eyes, aimed not at the yakuza but at Asami.

The air turned to winter. "And what spurred your boss to send such a large kill squad after one boy?"

"Takaba is the reason the Oyabun was jailed."

"Explain." Asami's tone gave nothing away.

Wakajima gave a small bow of acknowledgement. "You may be aware that Nishizuma-sama was jailed because of a hacker who published incriminating evidence. The same hacker nearly sunk the Sato group, triggered investigations on nearly a dozen cops on the take, and tipped off the police about the two Diet members who were securing the Mugen-Gumi's Taiwan–Hong Kong route. These are only a few examples of the work of a single online investigative journalist, the blight of so many of us brothers trying to earn a living despite the persecution of the law. "Wakajima's gleeful eyes slid over to the terrified young man. "Zama Miro, more commonly known as Takaba Akihito."

Akihito was shaking softly as Asami loomed closer. Asami's mask was unreadable, his aura terrifying, mesmerising, consuming. Akihito couldn't formulate any words or plan or any reaction at all. The death sentence was already signed and sealed. He'd damned himself.

The cold barrel of the gun that had saved him earlier now trailed along Akihito's cheek. He shivered violently but could put up no resistance as the gun slid around to the back of his head, a solid, lethal hardness that drew him close into the broad chest in a pseudo embrace. Asami's own kiss of death, just for him. That familiar warmth and scent was a cruel mockery of comfort, its earlier protection
already a distant memory, now a harbinger of his execution.

Asami's breath was warm in his ear, his voice frigid with icy authority.

"You brought this on yourself, Akihito. Remember that."

It was a delayed reaction before Akihito's brain could grasp that Asami had let go. Not only that, but turned his back. And stepped away. Facing Scarface.

"You will rescind the order, Shadeigashira [Second Lieutenant] Wakajima. Takaba Akihito is under my protection."

Silence greeted Asami's decree. Wakajima's psychotic delight morphed into disbelief. Even Asami's own men paused, glancing at their boss before managing to mask their surprise.

It had taken this long for Akihito to realize that Asami wasn't about to bury a bullet in his brain. And with it came a shuddering breath.

It shattered the stillness, snapping them from their shocked stupor. Wakajima furiously tried to make his case, Asami remaining indifferent. Akihito's mind stuttered, fumbling and unable to grasp what was going on. He didn't even know why that statement had made everyone do a double take, until Wakajima's incredulous words alluded to the gravity of Asami's choice of words.

"You would go to war? Over him?"

"I would go to war to protect what's mine," Asami snarled. "I'll grant you one hour to straighten yourselves out. Fail, and I will annihilate the pitiful remnants of the Nishizuma Group, starting with you."

Mine...? Akihito stared, stupefied. War...?

Wakajima was fuming but this was Asami. He had little choice. He inclined his head in capitulation, before glaring at the silent blond.

"You might be hiding in Asami's favour now, Takaba, but your luck will run out one of these days. And then you'll be fucked right over. I promise you that."

Akihito might have been floundering getting his head around the enigma that was Asami but that was between him and Asami and nobody else. He temporarily shoved it all aside as this weasel's insults kindled his backbone back into life.

He snapped his focus on the scarred yakuza, all of a sudden determined and fierce. "Who was your source? Who told you it was me?"

Wakazaki was taken aback at this transformation in the hitherto shaking leaf but he soon frowned and glared back. "Like I'd tell you, you dumb fuck."

V1P3R. It had to be. "As I thought, you don't know. Let me guess, some anonymous tip, right?"

Akihito's lips slanted into a humourless grin. "But lemme tell you something. Ten guns against little old me armed with a laptop? Not cool, man. Reeks of desperation."

"Why you –" Wakajima flinched as Asami's giant blond guard jabbed him in the ribs. In the lull that followed, they registered sirens in the distance, approaching rapidly.

"Grab them!" Wakajima snapped to the other two yakuza, waving at the bodies.
"Leave them," Asami countermanded.

"But –"

"You can collect their bodies from the morgue." As the yakuza still hesitated, Asami challenged, "Would you prefer to contest the police, or me?"

Apparently the police was the less daunting option and the three yakuza beat a hasty retreat with a final grudging bow to Asami.

The sirens were getting nearer. Akihito finally looked at Asami, shrinking back under the arctic glare, his brief spurt of bravado vanishing like morning mist in the abrupt shift in dynamics. Asami knew. About him being Z4m4 M1r0, about the last shard from the bullet-riddled hard drive, he knew it all. Had Asami only saved him so he could deal with Akihito himself?

Asami turned to his men. "Where were you?" His irritation was obvious as he checked over his gun.

"I'm sorry, boss," Blond Tank replied. "We were ambushed."

"Casualties?"

"Only one of theirs, just knocked out." The big guard took the gun when it was handed to him.

Asami pointed to places around the flat and to the bodies. "Suoh, you took that one out first, took cover behind the settee, then two, three, four. Retreated to the bedroom. Three through the window. Shot five, cervical fracture on six, centre T-shot on seven."

"Yes, sir," Suoh acknowledged before turning to the other two, not missing a beat. "You two dealt with the ambush as it happened. Sagano, you were in lead."

The other two bowed.

"Do the transfer from six," Asami ordered.

"Yes, sir."

The big guard made fast work of checking over the gun, swapping it into his holster for one of his own which was relegated to an empty holster under his trouser leg. He checked out the different kill angles, patting dust and other debris onto his clothes and hair, ticking off the forensic boxes...

Seconds. Mere seconds to concoct a version of events where Asami hadn't fired a single shot. Akihito's eyes flickered between them, mouth slightly agape. He'd never felt so conflicted in his life as Asami committed perjury right before his eyes. But Asami had only killed the men in self-defence, saving Akihito...

"Sir."

One of the guards approached Asami with his shoes. He brushed off his socks, stepped into them and crouched to tie the laces.

"Get Akihito's as well."

"Yes, sir."

Akihito shouldn't have seen it. Any of it. Not the shooting, not the parley with the yakuza, not the set up. Not Suoh returning and placing an arm about Asami's back and holding his arm as though in
support, shifting his hold several times, even smudging blood until Asami nodded – the 'transfer', the plausible reason for Asami being covered with the big bad's DNA. Akihito had witnessed too much, he knew he'd long surpassed any margin for leniency.

Akihito could only stare transfixed as Asami advanced amidst the wailing sirens that now surrounded the apartment building.

"Are your feet alright?"

That wasn't what Akihito had expected. Tipping his head down, he stared numbly at the small splodges of blood where he stood amidst the small fragments and debris. A dull ache on his soles registered somewhere in the back of his mind, mingling with the throbbing originating from his arm.

"Here."

Akihito's shoes were pressed into his hands. He stood there uncertainly for several moments before gingerly slipping his bleeding feet into his shoes.

Long fingers sifted through his hair, a reassuring gesture until the hand abruptly fisted, forcing his head back sharply while also drawing him flush against Asami. Intimacy and warning rolled into one. A gasp rushed between Akihito's lips, the sudden jolt of fear dumping enough adrenaline in his blood to penetrate the numb haze that had been fogging his brain.

An elevator pinged somewhere in the background, almost lost amidst the police sirens.

Blistering gold captured Akihito's entire focus. "We will talk later, and you will tell me everything," came the dark promise. Asami's lips pressed warm against his ear, practically growling his warning. "Don't make me regret this."

Asami released him and stepped past. Swaying faintly, it was all Akihito could do to remain standing.

The elevator dinged again, much closer this time, multiple pairs of boots thudded in the corridor, and mayhem descended as the police charged in amongst the carnage.
Happy New Year to all! May 2018 be a year to be proud of. *\(^{^^}/*

You're all wonderful, wonderful people! All your comments and kudos have meant so much, you've helped me start the year on a high. Thank you! <3

Now for the aftermath of the shooting. It's hard to be too surprising here, and it's a slower pace than the previous high-octane chapter, but hopefully you'll enjoy it all the same. This was another of those monster chapters that I split in two - and since it's the New Year, here's a special double update just for you. (**^)

Here's part 1. Part 2 will follow in a few hours after final editing.

~ Nyx ~

Artwork added August 2018: Akihito makes his decision! I love the expressions and postures, you can really get what they're feeling! I want to say more but I can't spoil it before you read it. It's fantastic seeing the story being told through these images, thank you so much Shey! *\(^{^^}/*

Dick 1 and Dick 2.

Akihito had his own names for the two detectives. He only knew them by sight, but the way they eyed him like gum stuck on their shoes whenever they saw him dropping in on Yama-san in Major Crimes was enough to make him dislike them already. The feeling was mutual. They were bound to be more professional about these things usually but when they spotted him in the wreck of his apartment it had started with an unsympathetic, "Oh. It's you."

It was all downhill from there.

Once they established the bare bones of the case – Asami's version, of course – the police were quick to secure the crime scene while the forensic team took them all aside separately. When it came to Akihito's turn they bagged up his clothing and took swabs from everywhere – his hair, face, hands, under the fingernails, even from his nostrils.

Still on edge from the shooting, Akihito was hyperaware of everything around him. Every loud noise or sudden movement nearby sent him leaping out of his skin, and he was practically a nervous wreck by the time one of the techs brought him over to the cluster of police vans that was serving as a makeshift base of operations. Waved past one van with the blond giant and the two other bodyguards, Akihito almost wilted with relief when he climbed up into the next van to find Asami on the opposite bench. Because no matter the dangerous secrets he'd been trying to keep, something deep inside him that had nothing to do with being sensible or logical associated Asami with being safe.
Well, he was safe from everyone else, he supposed. Asami had proven that. He was only in danger from Asami himself.

He could feel Asami's gaze on him. But he couldn't bring himself to look back, nervous as hell the way everything had been left up in the air. So many questions, so many answers he didn't want to give. But that didn't stop his eyes from skittering around the tall man like a moth to a flame. How the hell did the guy still manage to look commanding in a plastic blue forensic suit? Akihito personally was doing a great impersonation of a human marshmallow.

Dick 1 was already there, tapping his pen irritatingly slowly against the notepad. "So what were you doing here... at 4 in the morning?"

Detective Sakazaki's tone was sickeningly suggestive as he stood by the open back doors of the van. He clearly knew Asami and it didn't take a genius to figure out that he was on some personal vendetta. His slicked back hair and goatee had an air of slimy used-car salesman about him, and pretty much every word that came out of the thirty-something cop followed the same flavour. So far he was doing a superb job of living up to the secret moniker Akihito had given him.

"We had a charity event and I gave Takaba a ride home." Asami's simple explanation conveniently overlooked a massive chunk of the timeline.

Not that Akihito was about to point that out. Empty handed, with every single item of possession being taken as evidence, all he had to distract himself with were the folds of his blue outfit. He'd had no time to decide whether he would – or even could – go along with Asami's fabricated version of events. But he was already in deep shit with Asami as it was. Until he'd committed either way, he wanted to avoid pissing the bastard off any further and he tried not to give anything away as Asami smoothly lied his ass off.

"Not that it's any of your business," Asami added.

Sakazaki sneered, giving the blond a leering once-over that made the hairs stand up on the back of Akihito's neck. "It's like that, is it?"

On second thoughts, maybe the name Creep suited him better.

"Knock it off, Sakazaki. It's obviously not going to be like that, is it? Is it, Asami-sama?"

That was Dick 2, although now that Akihito had seen Detective Sudoh interacting with Asami, he was considering revising the name to Lovesick. Because Sudoh was pining, there was no other word for it. Beautiful, almost effeminate Detective Sudoh with his tailored suit hugging his trim figure was more often draped over Asami than not. He exploited every excuse he could to lean close to Asami, all while casting pointed glances at Akihito.

They were both blonds, but whereas Sudoh's every movement was willowy and graceful, Akihito was currently as twitchy as a squirrel on crack. As if he needed any help demonstrating that, just then several car doors slammed at the same time, sending his whole body jolting and his heart almost ricocheting out of his chest. His head banged on the van roof as he leaped up, which promptly made him collapse back onto the bench again. And only then did he belatedly realise how much he was overreacting.

"Shit," he muttered as he dropped his head and tried to get his breathing back under control. Which he did, grabbing onto the only solid thing close to hand while the crinkling of plastic accompanied a reassuring caress up and down, up and down, unceasing over his arm...
Asami was rubbing his arm... while he clung to Asami's knee...

Akihito scrambled back with a jittery laugh. "Ah sorry, don't mind me. I'm just being stupid."

"No one's arguing with you there," Sudoh muttered under his breath. They all heard it though. Yep, that was Dick 2 alright.

Akihito's eyes flashed but Dick 1 stepped in before the two of them could start an altercation. "So what kind of charity event has the illustrious Asami-san occupied all night?" Sakazaki mused.

The 'san' honorific most commonly used between equals was a blatant slight in place of the more formal 'sama' that people tended to opt for when addressing the business mogul. Except for Akihito, of course. He frowned, suddenly wondering if Asami found him as coarse as Akihito found this detective... But surely Asami would have picked Akihito up on it if it pissed him off? He was hardly the type to hold back, after all he hadn't been shy about threatening Akihito over the encrypted thumb drive or the laptop.

"Was it... personal?" Sakazaki leered.

"With this punk? Don't be ridiculous," Sudoh scoffed.

Akihito occupied himself with watching two forensic technicians emerge from his apartment building with two black cases, probably containing more pieces of his life. Why was Sudoh working this case? It was a conflict of interest if there ever was one. But Sakazaki merely rolled his eyes and Akihito wondered if this was a regular occurrence. Maybe Asami engineered it this way somehow to bias any investigations, Akihito joked silently to himself with a thread of hysteria that might have manifested into a cackle if he wasn't running on empty.

"That has no relevance to this case," Asami replied with the same even control.

"You were involved in a shooting and it's our job to establish all the facts in the lead up and the aftermath. We'll be the judge of what's relevant."

"As I already told you, my bodyguard did the shooting. Takaba and I were merely bystanders."

"Of course." Sakazaki's brown eyes ran over Akihito like a piece of fungus under the microscope, but he continued addressing Asami. "So being merely bystanders, when the lab analyses the swabs and clothing we took from you, we'll find no trace of GSR, right?"

Asami's face was the picture of innocent puzzlement. "GSR?"

The glee that came over Sakazaki was so obvious it was practically another coating over the slimy face. "Gunshot residue. It's a little thing we like to use in forensics to prove that someone has recently fired a gun."

Paramedics had given Akihito temporary dressings on his arm and feet until he could be treated more properly at hospital. He squeezed his arm, just enough to redirect his attention and not give anything away.

"Oh, I see," Asami mused with his own theatrically affected comprehension. "In that case, then yes, of course, you will find GSR on me." There was a pregnant pause. "I was at my private gun range with several of my security detail earlier this evening. My guards and I would all have GSR on our hands."

"A private gun range!" Sudoh gushed like it was a dream come true. Akihito raised his brow at him.
That was practically a sex voice.

Sakazaki levelled a hard look at the totally unflustered businessman. "A private gun range?" he repeated flatly.

"Yes," Asami confirmed as though it was perfectly normal.

"Then presumably you also own a firearm?"

"Yes."

"Which is?"

Asami gave him a look. "A Česká zbrojovka handgun. Your forensics team has it."

"That's a rather... specific choice, isn't it?"

"It's an innovative design produced with unrivalled manufacturing processes. Are my personal preferences in firearms also relevant to the facts of the case?" The mockery in Asami's voice was subtle but it wasn't lost on any of them. Akihito and Sakazaki, at least. Sudoh was probably oblivious.

"Has it been fired recently?"

"Yes. My bodyguard, Suoh, he used it when he shot the intruders."

Akihito found a fascinating crease on his marshmallow suit.

Sakazaki levelled a hard stare. "Your bodyguard shot the intruders? With your gun? While you were next to each other? And you and your bodyguards would all have GSR on your hands?"

Even to Akihito the brazen words Asami was calmly delivering were sounding more and more ridiculous by the second. Surely Detective Dick 1 would just pop the big fat balloon printed LIAR with a big fat needle...

Sakazaki sneered without humour. "How convenient. I presume you have a licence for this firearm?"

"But of course. By special dispensation."

"But of course," Sakazaki imitated. His eyes narrowed. "And what about the gas leak evacuation, which just happened to be for Takaba's floor and the floors above and below? Another convenient coincidence?"

"Perhaps building maintenance can help you there," Asami shrugged.

Sakazaki fumed in silence. Akihito jolted when a uniformed officer rushed by speaking on his radio, but otherwise he kept his head down and avoided looking at anybody. He was being so quiet that if Yama-san could see him now the gruff detective would think him critically ill, at death's door for sure. He'd never held his tongue so well in his life.

Sudoh cleared his throat. "We should get you all back to the precinct so we can take a full signed statement. We'll need every little detail, of course. Perhaps I can take you through yours, Asami-sama."

He blinked up at Asami with a smile teasing his lips that was about as subtle as a meteor landing on a house. Akihito wanted to smack it off his beautiful face – and then scowled for thinking such a thing.
What the hell had come over him?

Luckily he was too busy being annoyed at himself to react all guilty when Sakazaki suddenly focused on him. "I'm sure you just want to get this all over and done with as soon as possible, Takaba. Why don't I escort you to the hospital? We can start on your statement at the same time."

Sakazaki's thin smile gave Akihito the creeps. He could feel the weight of Asami's gaze boring into him but he still couldn't meet those eyes that would have seen right through him.

Akihito floundered inside, still without the foggiest what he was going to do. He shuffled to the edge of the bench as he was motioned out of the van.

"It's a pity Yamazaki's not on duty," Sudoh remarked snidely with mock sympathy. "You could've cried on his shoulder. It's terrible what happened, you must be so frightened."

Was Asami making the connection with the name from the phone call he overhead before? Akihito didn't dare look over. He did, however, turn to Sudoh after a moment. "You're very pretty," Akihito commented. He smiled all sweet like. "I guess that's how you get away with being so vapid."

Asami made an odd sound that turned into a cough. Sakazaki wasn't so discrete, barking a loud laugh.

Sudoh looked from one to the other, frowning, knowing it wasn't anything complimentary but not actually knowing what the word meant. He clearly didn't want to ask but with even Asami's eyes glinting in amusement, he ground out, "What... what's that?"

Akihito hopped down from the van, quoting innocently, "Against stupidity the gods themselves contend in vain."

"What the hell's that?" Sudoh pressed angrily as a smile played on the corner of Asami's lips.

Sakazaki guffawed without grace as he led Takaba away. "He's calling you a bland idiot, you idiot."

Behind them they could hear Sudoh's furious grumbling and Asami's murmured reassurances about Takaba not knowing how capable Sudoh was at his job. That certainly wasn't the impression Akihito had had, or maybe Sudoh just turned into a useless pile of goo around Asami. Or maybe this was more manipulation on Asamii's part...

They were nearly ran over by an unmarked sedan that screeched to a halt in their path, almost giving Akihito a cardiac arrest.

Sakazaki scurried to attention and snapped a salute. "Superintendent General Matsui."

"Detective," was the gruff return from the distinguished salt-and-pepper haired man who alighted. "What happened here?"

Holy mackerel, it was the Chief of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department himself. His uniform was serious business. Hard lines marked a harder countenance. Akihito had the distinct impression that this man didn't play games like Dick 1 and Dick 2. The name rang a bell – where had he heard it before?

"Sir. There were seven intruders bearing firearms, they were targeting Takaba Akihito here. Asami Ryuichi was with him at the time and it appears that one of his bodyguards shot them all dead."

Matsui immediately picked up on Sakazaki's cynicism. "Appears?"
"The facts have yet to be established. I am taking Takaba-san to the hospital to treat minor injuries and for his statement."

"The others?"

"In those two vans there." Sakazaki indicated where several police officers watched the open doors from a short distance.

"The deceased?"

"We have yet to identify them."

"Very well. As you were. I want a full update back at the precinct."

"Yes, sir."

Sakazaki lost no time herding Akihito to a police car and into the back. As the door was slammed closed, Akihito looked back through the window to see Matsui stop by the van they'd just left, receiving salutes from every officer he passed. He said a few words to Sudoh before waving him off. As the blond detective rushed off somewhere, Matsui remained by the van, exchanging words with Asami but standing sideways on and barely looking at the crime lord, before giving courteous nod, holding it a fraction too long to simply be a nod. He moved on to direct some officers to push back the reporters and members of the public craning their necks at the police cordon.

Sakazaki slid into the driver's seat. "It'll be quick to the hospital at this time of morning, there's little traffic."

Akihito was reeling at the exchange he'd just seen. That hadn't been a first meeting. That was a meeting between two people accustomed to not drawing attention to being seen together. And that nod – the Superintendent General had been bowing to Asami...

Then Akihito remembered where he'd heard the name before. It was Asami on the phone, in his office just before he'd abducted Akihito to his own home to pull apart the bullet-riddled laptop: Warn Kuroda and Matsui. I don't want the police anywhere near this.

A chill raced up his spine. Just how far did Asami's influence reach?

Akihito glanced up as they drove past. For just a brief moment he was struck by Asami's gaze – molten gold ensnared him in the dusk light, searing with warning, encircling him with reassurance, inescapable both.

Akihito didn't want Sakazaki leaning all over him. The guy's breath stank, his aftershave was cloying and the goatee even tickled his cheek a few times as the detective crowded him over the seat. Akihito was fighting not to gag.

"I told you, it was all a–"

"All a blur," Sakazaki broke in, exasperation colouring his tone as he finished the habitual phrase. "So you've said. Many times."

Akihito didn't know how many times they'd already been over it, both at the hospital while getting the gash in his arm stitched closed and having his feet cleaned of splinters and glass, and here at the precinct. Sakazaki was determined to try and trip him up, but Akihito was saying so little that there wasn't much to trip over.
"Is Yama-san here yet?"

"I told you, his shift doesn't start till later."

It was another repetitive exchange and Sakazaki replied without even bothering to check the time. Before they could launch into another loop of what really happened with the assailants, there was a sharp rap at the door and a uniformed copper stepped in to hand the detective two manila files, one significantly thicker than the other.

Sakazaki eyeballed the top sheet inside of both with a glint of triumph. It was fleeting at most, gone in the blink of an eye, but with his defenses already cranked to max, Akihito didn't miss it. Sakazaki slammed the files down beside each other on the table, leaning back where he sat beside Akihito, the chair turned to face him, hemming him in with spread knees.

"I was hoping it wouldn't come to this. You seem like a decent kid, and I know you try and do things for the right reasons." He made a great show of sighing heavily and drooping his shoulders and tone as though in regret.

Akihito eyed him with extreme suspicion.

"I don't know what you know about Asami Ryuichi but he's a person of interest in another investigation. Another shootout." Sakazaki tapped the thicker file. "You must have heard about the three yakuza members being gunned down last week. The evidence seems to suggest they were caught trafficking children and went down in a gun battle with a rival gang, possibly a feud between two branches of a single organised crime syndicate. But there's a witness who curiously reported seeing the same men in a meeting with a Diet member, Kondo Tetsuya, just before he took supposedly took his own life. Now that's a remarkable coincidence, don't you think?"

Akihito didn't dare move. Or breathe. Was that true? It was Kondo that Asami had shot dead in the video. Why had Kondo met with the human traffickers that Akihito suspected Asami had also dealt with? What the hell was going on?

Sakazaki leaned even closer. "What's even stranger is that we also have witnesses who place an unidentified man fitting Asami's description at the scene of the shooting, actively involved in the shootout between the two gangs. Now, we all know that Asami is an upstanding citizen with no connection to organised crime, so this is just baffling. In your opinion, would you say Asami could shoot someone?"

Akihito had never had his walls up so high. "In my opinion? In my opinion, anyone can. You simply pull the trigger, right?"

Sakazaki's face twitched with the effort to suppress his temper at Akihito's continued lack of cooperation. "At a practice range, yes. But this was a frenzied shootout with bullets flying everywhere, hundreds of rounds, except this one unidentified person shot and killed three men, all kill shots, without wasting a single bullet. They were precision shots, Takaba. It was more than simply pulling the trigger." Sakazaki sighed. "If Asami is a murderer, we need to know. Anything you can tell me will help with his profiling, and help get a dangerous man off the streets."

Akihito turned slowly to look at him. "So you have no hard evidence of Asami being at this other shootout and want to pin him on tonight instead?"

The mask of brotherly concern dropped away and Sakazaki stared coldly, tired of the good cop act. Akihito would have bet his next pay check that Sudoh usually filled that role.
"If he's killed anyone, even in self defence, we need to investigate accordingly. If you lie, you'll be an accessory."

Sakazaki flicked open the thinner file and shoved it in front of Akihito, sending it spinning a little across the metal table. Akihito froze as he saw the contents. They were his court records. His sealed and redacted court records, now unsealed and unredacted...

"Wh- Where did you get these...?"

"I had a judge grant an emergency release of the records in view of the nature of the case." Sakazaki sneered. "You were running your own investigation into Asami so you must have had some suspicions already, if not hard evidence. Right? What do you know?"

Akihito stared mutely at the spread of papers in front of him.

"You're already in the middle of serving a community sentence. But if you help with our investigations, we might be able to come to some arrangement. Speak to the judge on your behalf, request for leniency in view of your cooperation. Or," Sakazaki murmured, leaning right into Akihito's personal space, "we can even have your record expunged, total pardon, if you have information that gets Asami locked up for good. A clean slate." The slimy voice dropped alluringly. It made Akihito feel sick. "What really happened tonight? Asami's not here now. You can tell me. It was Asami who killed those men, wasn't it? Not his bodyguard?"

Akihito still remained silent.

Sakazaki waited, and waited, but when a reply was still not forthcoming, he snapped right into Akihito's ear. "Asami's a murderer and you're helping him if you hide that fact. If you're an accessory to murder, it'll be jail term. Not only that, but who knows, maybe the perps in your secure new home will find out exactly who you are, and I'm sure there'll be several there who'd love to thank you personally for your help in rehoming them there. Don't you think so?"

Sakazaki let that unsavoury thought hang in the air for a minute before he was trying to tempt Akihito again, his voice sickly sweet. "All you have to do is give me something. Just say that you saw Asami kill them – hell, say they surrendered and he still killed them! Just give me something, Takaba."

Akihito sat frozen.

Asami's life, for his own. Throw Asami under the bus so Akihito wouldn't be thrown in jail and be murdered by the very people he'd helped the police lock up.... Between a rock and a hard place, if there ever was one.

Asami had saved his life, there were no two ways about it. Threatened it too, but he'd always known where he stood with Asami. Betray, and be shot. Lie, and be punished. An eye for an eye. And a man of Asami's calibre would have done it himself. But this sleazebag who was purportedly an enforcer of the law was devious and underhanded and threatening him with revenge from the dregs of society that Akihito had helped lock up. And Sakazaki didn't even seem to care if Akihito exaggerated the truth...

Wondering when he'd started using words like 'calibre' and 'Asami' in the same breath, Akihito tried to swallow but it felt like swallowing glass. He knew what he had to do, the only course of action that sat right with him. So why then did it feel like he was cast adrift with no anchor?

"Can I have some water?"
Sensing a decision made, Sakazaki leaned close, dropping his voice. "Talk to me, Takaba. You're safe here. What do you know?"

So Akihito told the truth.

"The assailants and Asami's men, they're all jumbled together in my head, I don't know who came in when and I didn't see. There were so many bullets flying around and I was scared, I had my head down. All I know is, at the end, there were seven bodies and Suoh was holding the gun. There's nothing else I can tell you."

That was the statement he gave. Akihito had taken a page out of Asami's book and there were glaring omissions in the narrative, but it was all technically true.

Sakazaki was livid. He was shouting and gesticulating wildly, spit flying out of his mouth, when the Superintendent General himself barged in and dragged the detective out.

They returned minutes later, Sakazaki blatantly still furious with Akihito, but bowing his head and muttering apologies for his behaviour. Matsui led Akihito out to the waiting room with assurances that Asami would also soon be finished. Akihito hadn't really wanted to see the daunting chief of the Met PD, knowing everything would likely get reported back to Asami, but at least with his authority he was able to sign the release of Akihito's phone, keys and wallet when asked.

Akihito didn't stick around. Repeatedly refusing offers for trauma counselling but eventually taking the folded leaflet just to shut them up, he was gone as soon as they confirmed he was free to go.

Bundles of blankets and coats softly rose and fell, the occasional leg or arm strewn about, all to the rhythmic, overlapping drone of snoring. Akihito glanced about Kou's living room and began
tiptoeing through, careful of both sleeping bodies and the abrasions on his feet.

At least the kitchen was a separate room with a door. Shutting out the slumbering overspill of Kou's all-night party, he hit the lights only to discover someone out cold in here as well. But the guy didn't even twitch, just continued snoring and drooling as Akihito stepped over him and set about making coffee. Kou had one of those instant hot water dispensers, near-boiling water on tap. Akihito grabbed a mug and shook the coffee straight in. Strong. Super black.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. Seeing the caller ID, he experienced a heaviness he wasn't used to feeling with this friend as he stirred his caffeine kick.

"Hey."

"What the hell?" came the immediate yelling from the other end as though they'd been bursting to shout at him. "It just goes from bad to worse, doesn't it? I told you to stay away from him!"

"Good morning to you too, Yama-san."

There was an unintelligible grunt. "Geez, Takaba!" There was a long pause, and an even longer sigh. "Are you ok?"

"Have you calmed down now?" Akihito added three sugars. He reckoned he deserved a bit of calorie-high oomph after the night he'd had.

"What the fuck are you asking me that for, of course I haven't calmed down! You were involved in a shooting!"

Akihito smiled tiredly at the gruff concern. He added another spoon of sugar. "Nishizuma was after Z4m4 M1r0."

There was dead silence on the other end, just the snoring in the kitchen. "...What?"

"I thought you'd know."

Yamazaki grunted. "Sudoh was being all pissy so the boss sent him off somewhere. And Sakazaki hasn't let me near his notes, he seems to hate me for some reason."

"He always hates you."

"More than usual."

"Hmm. Must be because I kept asking for you. And I completely pissed him off. So by extension, you completely pissed him off."

"Gee, thanks." Papers shuffled. "Hey, punk... You ok? I heard you weren't hurt but... you sound spaced out."

Akihito hissed as the coffee burned his tongue, blew across the steam, and took another tentative sip. "I've barely slept. People shot at me. I'm processing."

"Right..."

"And I was hurt. I had to have eight stitches. And I hurt my feet. And I have bruises..." He trailed off as he remembered that the finger-shaped marks on his hips were from before the shooting, from certain... bedroom... activities...
"You're fucking with me right? You're complaining about eight stitches and sore feet when Nishizuma was trying to pump you with lead?"

Akihito stilled at that outburst.

Even the seasoned detective seemed to regret it. "Takaba I'm sorry, I shouldn't have put it like that –"

"Asami saved my life."

Silence from the other end again, even heavier this time. There was something in Yamazaki's voice when he finally replied. "How'd you mean?"

Akihito let out a hollow laugh. He wondered if Sakazaki had tried to tap Yamazaki's phone. "He shielded me when the bullets started flying, until his guards took control." Again, no lies. Just extremely selective truth. "You'd be having this conversation with my corpse if it wasn't for Asami." That, though, was cold hard truth that didn't need any padding.

"Hey, Takaba... You know that doesn't make everything right, you know? Everything we know about him, he's still guilty."

Oh, he knew, alright. He knew all too well.

"And we still have to bring him down."

"We? What happened to you insisting that I move on to a new target?"

"That was then. This is now. If you've seen anything, and I'm not saying you have, but if you have... he doesn't leave witnesses."

Akihito thought back to the witnesses Sakazaki had mentioned, the ones who'd allegedly placed Asami at the gang shootout –

His thoughts suddenly caught up with the obvious omission he hadn't spotted before. If those witnesses were still alive, they could have testified, and Sakazaki wouldn't have needed Akihito's possibly embellished evidence from a self-defence killing. Were they still alive? What kind of mess had he gotten involved in? He leaned weakly on the counter.

The gruff voice waded in between his thoughts. "You know that leverage you mentioned before – "

Akihito froze. "I told you –"

"Yeah, yeah, I know, you didn't mean it like that. But just suppose you did... wherever you have it, just keep it safe."

Akihito slurped some more coffee instead of answering.

"Don't put it anywhere someone can steal it."

"You're worrying over nothing."

"But VIP3R –"

"There's nothing, alright?" Akihito blurted, before sighing. "Look, it doesn't matter anyway so don't sweat it, ok? The stress isn't good for your wrinkles and you already look like my grandpa."

"Takaba –"
"I have to go. Do me a solid and see if you can get anything out of Sakazaki, yeah? I need to know if Nishizuma's still after me."

"Takaba –!"

"I'll catch you later. Bye."

"Ta–"

Akihito killed the call.

He grabbed his keys out of his pocket and tossed them on the counter next to his phone. There were four keys – his apartment and mailbox, Kou's apartment, and his parents' house, dangling from a metal Daruma [round bearded red Dharma doll, often a talisman of good luck] keychain. He ran his nail under the curve of the Daruma's chin and pushed, and it popped back to reveal a small compartment underneath. Akihito shook it upside down until a miniature memory chip fell out.

The footage of Asami shooting Kondo dead – what would Yama-san and Sakazaki say if they ever learned that the evidence they so desperately sought had been in their possession, hidden right under their nose? Asami's life as he knew it was in Akihito's hands, in the memory chip lying on the kitchen counter.

The smoke alarm blared rudely through the sleepy morning. Some bolted awake and rushed about trying to flap the smoke away from the smoke detector, others stumbled about in search of water or the bathroom. Or a bucket. There were twenty people rushing or staggering about with varying levels of lucidity and coordination, and it was into this frenzy that the cops arrived. It was pandemonium.

Akihito could have done without the sight of the police charging in again. But drawn out of the kitchen by the sudden uproar, he caught Kou's eyes across the sea of flailing bodies tumbling about amongst the uniformed officers and they burst out laughing...

Until he saw Yama-san wading his way towards him through the heaving mass, followed closely by Sakazaki.

He knew why they had come. And that was the harrowing moment – not the mugging or the shootout, not anything to do with Asami, but here and now when his long-suffering mentor, someone he'd trusted and even considered a friend, had broken their unspoken but inherent understanding of confidence – that was when something died in Akihito.

It was a cold day when he thought he could understood a little of Asami's take on betrayal.

"When you're done proving yourselves wrong, you're going to put Kou's place all back together and clean up."

Akihito glared as the two detectives and three forensic technicians tore his friend's apartment apart. Of course he was furious with them, but he was also furious with himself for bringing Kou into this. He shouldn't have come here.

"Where is it, Takaba?"

"I told you, there's nothing to find!" Akihito yelled back to Dick 1 digging around in the bedroom.
Kou was sprawled out on the settee. He dropped his head back over the backrest and rolled it from side to side, looking around. "Why do I have my table there? It's all the way on the other side from the kitchen."

Akihito scrunched his face up. "Kou, I'm sorry."

"I should move my table. It's on the wrong side of the living room."

Akihito peered closely at his friend, wondering if he was losing it.

"Dude, chill," Kou laughed it off. "I needed a good clean up after the party last night anyway, it's no biggie."

"We're going to find it anyway," Yamazaki insisted from where he was pulling apart the bookcase across the room. "You might as well tell us and save your friend all this grief."

"You're the ones who're going to clean up!" Akihito yelled back. He was about to apologise to Kou again but his friend was already waving him off. Akihito sighed. "So who were they? Your new friends?" He hadn't recognised most of them before they'd been searched and sent away by the forensics guys.

Kou shrugged. "Met them at Dracaena last night. Think it started with a drinking game, or maybe it was a dare? Bah, I can't remember. They were a good laugh though, you missed all the fun."

But Akihito had barely heard beyond the first few words. "Did you say Dracaena? Club Dracaena?"

"Yeah...?" Kou looked confused.

"That's..." It was one of Asami's clubs operating under the Sion Global umbrella. "What the hell were you doing somewhere so high class?"

"Don't sound so surprised about it!"

"Says Mr tank top and trousers with half a leg missing."

"Hey! This was your fault last time you stayed, you were so trolleyed you were convinced Takato's paper cut needed a bandage! Made from my trousers!"

"Stopped the bleeding, didn't it?" Akihito grinned.

"It was a fucking paper cut! Besides, you're not dressed much better. What's up with the grey and grey?"

The smile faded. "It's all they had," Akihito said quietly. The sweatshirt and joggers were police issue spares. He hadn't had time to change before the police had gate crashed.

Kou frowned, suddenly serious as he sat up. He'd never seen his exuberant friend looking so troubled and unsure. "Aki? You ok?"

The shadows of confusion were almost tangible in the hazel eyes. "... I don't know."

Kou opened his mouth to ask more but something surged through Akihito, a prickling heat that rushed with a hundred legs up his spine and left him quaking, and he knew who was behind him even before Kou stared wide-eyed over his shoulder and Sakazaki's slimy voice sing-songed from the bedroom doorway.
"Well, well. Asami-san, I was wondering when you'd show up."

Kou stared between Akihito, the detectives and the stunning man who looked like a million dollars in his dark three-piece suit and flanked by intimidating guards. There was something of the dark side of the moon about the guy.

"I take it one of your informants at the precinct tipped you off," Yamazaki griped.

"Informants? Who would that be?" Asami asked perfectly innocently.

Akihito couldn't seem to be able to pull his eyes away. Asami wasn't letting up, clearly coming straight here once the police had released him and he'd gotten changed. Akihito was screwed. Royally. In so many ways.

Sakazaki folder his arms. "Come to check on your pet? Were you worried he'll rat you out after all?"

"You make it sound as if there's something underhanded going on. I only came to see how Takaba is holding up."

Yamazaki wasn't about to let it slide that easily. "How did you know where he was? Are you having him followed?"

Asami eyed him patronizingly. "His apartment was destroyed. This seemed a reasonable guess."

"Actually this is perfect," Sakazaki sneered. "You're right here, all ready to be arrested when we find what Takaba has found for us."

Golden eyes slid over to the young man, and although the expression seemed mild, when their eyes met Akihito felt like the intense gaze punched a hole right through him. Inside, under his cool exterior, Asami was simmering.

"And what would that be, exactly?"

Yamazaki sneered at the supposedly innocuous question. "Knowing Takaba, it'll be damning. He called it 'leverage'."

Asami didn't look at him but Akihito still felt the force of his intent like a train. It was one thing for Nishizuma's men to drop the bomb and reveal his secret online persona, but it was a whole other shit and fan to be alluding to his working with the police in front of Asami. Did he mention he was screwed?

_He doesn't leave witnesses._

With Yama-san's words echoing in his head, Akihito turned to his friend watching them all wide-eyed. "Kou, weren't you going to go look for a new bike today? You should go."

"He's staying right here."

"Yama-san –"

"He's a witness and your friend. We need to question him about what you've told him."

"I haven't told him anything!"

"We'll have to see, won't we?"
"Then talk to him later!"

"He's not cleared to go. If he tries to leave, we'll arrest him too for aiding and abetting."

Akihito stared in disbelief at the detective he'd known for so many years. "Why are you being such a dick?"

Yamazaki wasn't moved. "You're the one withholding evidence. All you have to do is produce it and there'll be no issue."

One of the forensic technicians approached with a transparent evidence bag from the kitchen.

Sakazaki held it aloft for them all to see as his face twisted. "What the hell...?"

Tiny, singed, burned out bits of what might have once been something electronic lay at the bottom of the bag.

Akihito's gaze slid involuntarily to Asami's. The taller man looked back, his face oh so carefully void of any expression. It made Akihito's gut plummet even more.

"Where did you get this?" Sakazaki asked the tech.

"From the microwave, sir."

There was a furious grunt before Yamazaki grabbed Akihito by the front of his sweats. "What the fuck did you do?"

"What are you doing? Get off me!" Akihito tried to shove him away but he couldn't loosen the grip on the jumper.

Yamazaki was all up in his face. "You destroyed it? You fucking destroyed it?"

Akihito gave a crooked grin. "And what would 'it' be? 'It' could be anything that 'accidentally' got smashed to bits and fried."

Sakazaki rounded on the alarmed tech. "Can you get anything off this?"

She spread her hands, glancing uncertainly at the other detective manhandling a civilian. "We can try, sir, but it's not likely. The microwaves would most likely have vaporised the wire traces that hold any data."

"Shit!" Sakazaki tossed the bag back to her. "Try anyway!"

Yamazaki shook Akihito by the sweatshirt. "What was it, you stupid punk? Huh? What the fuck was..."

"That's enough, don't you think?" Asami coolly twisted the detective's hand off Akihito and flicked it away, the movement appearing easy but backed by deceptive force. It was enough to drive Yamazaki back a step. "This is unprofessional."

Ironically, it was Sakazaki who was the voice of reason as he yanked Yamazaki back from blowing up at the crime lord. The giant blond bodyguard was looming way too close. And knowing Asami, he could turn this into a case of police brutality and easily get them kicked back to traffic duty.

Yamazaki shook the other detective off, regaining some self-control but still fuming at Akihito. "Asami was your target, Takaba. You don't use the word 'leverage' unless you had something
damning, and don't even think I'll let you off with your lame-ass evasion again. What was it?"

Akihito's eyes flew back and forth between Yamazaki and Asami. "What the hell, Yama-san, he's standing right here!"

"Couldn't be more perfect. Just 'fess up so we can clap him in chains."

A memory struck Akihito and he stared at Yamazaki as though he was seeing the detective for the first time. "My God, it's like with the Sato group all over again."

"Sato? What are you –" Yamazaki suddenly stopped, his mouth forming an O. "That was completely different. Sato's lieutenant deleted the files before you were able to get to them. This is you, wilfully destroying evidence!"

"But you were just as mad then! And you kept pushing me when I told you it was too risky, I nearly got caught! You don't care about me at all, do you? All you care about is getting the intel."

"Of course I care, you punk, we've been working together for nearly ten years!"

Akihito threw up his hands. "Great, why not throw that out there too? 'Cos this is what you do, right?"

"What I do what? All I've ever done is watch your back!"

"Then what the hell's with your shitty attitude?"

"You sold out!"

Shocked silence greeted Yamazaki's bellow.

Akihito was so furious it took him a while to find his voice again. "I sold out?" he breathed. He was so mad he was shaking. "I sold out? Who's the one who told Sakazaki what I said? We don't repeat what we tell each other. Ever. But now you threaten my friend and you're bringing all this shit up in front of Asami. Why don't you take a good hard look in the mirror, Yama-san. You fucking sold me out!"

Yamazaki was too lost in red to hit the brakes now. He charged full speed ahead in scathing derision. "But Asami's innocent, right? Why would it matter what we said in front of him, he wouldn't do anything to you, would he?"

Akihito was stunned to stillness, his anger swept aside by bitter, aching betrayal. This was the detective who'd watched out for him since the beginning, who'd taught him to protect his anonymity when he was still wet behind the ears, who'd tipped him off to corruption and made arrests based on Z4m4 M1r0's intel.

The shattering of their trust sounded in his ears like crystal being smashed to smithereens. His voice dropped with strain. "But you believe he could. Whatever's true or not, you believe it. You're deliberately putting my life on the line to try and force my hand. You're putting the evidence first. Just like you always have."

Yamazaki only now seemed to sense the damage he'd caused. He stepped closer, his hand half reaching out, half to reason – "Takaba, you know I didn't mean –"

Pain shadowed Akihito's face and burned his eyes. "I thought we were partners, Yama-san. Whatever I owed you for keeping me out of juvie, you've just wiped it clean. We're finished."

"But Asami's innocent, right? Why would it matter what we said in front of him, he wouldn't do anything to you, would he?"
And here's part 2 of the double New Year update! Maybe I could have condensed them down to one but I was having too much fun teasing Akihito to do so. XD

Next chapter needs some rewriting so it might take a little while (sorry!) but I'll do the best I can!

As ever, constructive criticism for improvements are gratefully received! Thanks to those who already pointed out that the story blurb was rather lame - I heartily agree and have tried revising it (actually using a line from this chapter, so maybe avoid looking at it until you've read this chapter if you haven't seen it already...). I don't know, is that better? Summaries are really hard! Comments like these are very precious and I truly appreciate them, so please keep them coming! (^^)

~ Nyx ~

Akihito wondered if the wind could blow it all away. The aching hurt, the band too tight about his chest.

"How could he?"

What an irony that the fingers that carded through his hair belonged to the very man to whom Yamazaki had accused him of selling out. But they were the only things stopping him from tailspinning into despair. Yama-san had no idea, no idea whatsoever what Akihito had gone through to reach the decision he had.

The detective had been the key guiding influence as Akihito had found his feet as Z4m4 M1r0, instilling in him the importance of anonymity and totally credible information. Fringing on the edge of the law, to be sure, if not downright stretching it, but the copper had always been adamant that Akihito's investigations never put lives in jeopardy. But now Yamazaki himself had gone and threatened Akihito and Kou, blowing up the trust they'd developed together under the radar of the law for nearly ten years.

"I trusted him."

Frequently irritated with Akihito's antics, hounding him for boring him with geeky details, but always there with gruff concern whenever something dire happened. Yama-san had been like a big brother. Or so Akihito had thought.

The morning breeze brushed at Akihito's leg, dangling off the edge of the building. They were on the concrete roof of Kou's apartment building, the rooftop split with skylights and dotted with ventilation fans, different levels connected with ladders. Akihito sat on the concrete boundary wall, one leg kicking the outside wall, the other knee pulled up with an arm resting on top of the denim. At least he'd been able to change back into his own clothes now. It was comforting to be in his own jacket again.
"He should be hung, drawn and quartered," Akihito muttered, more out of hurt rather than any real malice.

"You can use my gun," came the cool baritone from behind.

Akihito frowned and dropped his chin on his arm over his knee. "Don't tempt me."

"I can see how his betrayal would be hard for an innocent brat like you. But it's human nature. Self-interest and greed."

"Trust you to say that. But I don't believe everyone's like that. People are capable of doing the right thing, even if it's hard." He threw a look over his shoulder. "But you're the exception, of course."

Asami smirked, lighting up a cigarette. "Of course."

Letting loose a long sigh, Akihito hunkered down over his knee. "...Maybe I misunderstood."

The wind snatched at his soft words but Asami still heard him. Akihito didn't see the hard look the taller man threw him.

"By the sounds of it, it wasn't the first time. Nor will it be the last. It'll keep happening, and next time it might be with someone who will hurt you."

Akihito stilled as he suddenly realized their position. He was sitting on the edge of the ten-storey building with Asami at his back... Though the bastard hadn't thrown him off. Yet.

"... Why did you do it?"

"You'll have to be more specific."

"Why did you..." Akihito hesitated.

Asami drew on the Dunhill, rolling the smoke over his tongue before letting it free into the wind. "Chase you down? Take you out for dinner? Tie you up and fuck you?"

"No!" Akihito spluttered, his cheeks blooming pink. "Well, all that too – and by the way, that... that... this doesn't make it alright, you know!"

Asami smirked, totally unapologetic.

Akihito scowled. "But..." Why didn't you kill me when you found out I'd been investigating you? What was all that about going to war, and being 'yours'? Courage, and words, failed him. He went for a marginally safer option. "Why did you save me?"

Asami cast his gaze down over the neighbourhood. There were families about, spending their Sunday morning together. Two of his men stood guard opposite each corner of the building, several more mingled in plain clothes. His limo also sat under guard, a long black brick across the street from the forensic vans and squad cars. Suoh had clearly tightened up security.

"Why did you?"

Akihito threw a questioning glance over his shoulder.

"When you closed that door," Asami rumbled softly, a finger trailing over Akihito's upper arm. He was spot on over the stitches, even with the jacket hiding the bandages. "You put yourself in the path of bullets to stop them from shooting me."
"You saw that, huh?" Akihito's eyes skittered out over nothing, his expression clouded. "I... I don't know. It just... sort of happened."

There was a hint of a smile curving Asami's lips around the cigarette. "Then I don't know either."

"What kind of cop-out answer's that?"

The look Asami was giving him was intense. Enough to spark heat at the base of his spine... Akihito scooted off the wall and hopped back onto the rooftop, trying to edge away. But Asami didn't give him any more space and hemmed him against the half wall.

Asami's presence gained a cold, purposeful edge, making Akihito swallow hard.

"What was the evidence you destroyed?"

"Wha..." Akihito laughed nervously. "That old rubbish again? Who knows? Must've been some random memory chip –"

The stairwell door banged open. Akihito almost jumped out of his skin, his whole body spinning towards the source of the sound. He lost his balance and almost fell over the wall –

Asami grabbed his jacket and yanked him back to safety.

"Shit..." Akihito panted, his heart pounding. "Thanks..."

"Dude, you up here?" came Kou's call from the stairwell exit.

A firm grasp tilted Akihito's chin up. There was nothing gentle in Asami's features, mesmerising and unyielding. "I will lay you bare, Akihito. I won't allow you to hide from me."

Akihito quaked at the quiet declaration as Asami released him and strode over to Glasses and Blond Tank waiting on the other side of the same roof level.

"Dude!"

Akihito jolted again as Kou bounded up to him.

"They said they'll be about another hour. Hey, good thing you had some clothes here. The grey really didn't suit you, man."

With a final glance at Asami's back, Akihito shook his head clear and forced himself to focus on his friend. "Are you ok?" He wasn't convinced by the overly bright smile Kou gave him. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have brought all this crap here."

Kou turned uncharacteristically serious. "Don't sweat it, man. After something like that, I'm glad you had somewhere you could go. Are you OK?"

Akihito spread his arms. "As you can see for yourself. Who told you what happened?"

"Your detective friend."

Akihito's face shadowed over. "He's not my friend. Not anymore."

"Yeah, that was pretty messed up."

"Maybe it's for the best. We were gonna get in trouble sooner or later, right?"
Kou leaned on the half wall. "Are you gonna carry on hunting down scumbags?"

Akihito resisted the urge to look over at Asami. He could only hope they were talking quietly enough not to be overheard. "Someone has to. I have a good network of my own so I should still be able to keep my ear to the ground without Yama-san." He stopped himself with a scowl at the fond nickname from his youth. He didn't want to use it anymore. "Without Yamazaki."

Kou stuffed his hands in his pockets and bumped his friend with his shoulder. "Just promise me you'll be careful. I don't want to hear about another incident like last night."

Akihito felt bad for making his friend worry, and so would Takato when he heard about it. "I will. I promise."

The soft wind stirred around them, bring with it the smell of someone's breakfast cooking. Akihito's stomach growled in demand.

"Who is that?" Kou nodded towards the intimidating three on the other side of the roof. Asami was imposing even with his back turned.

Akihito had to steel himself before he answered, anything to do with the bastard always had him tangled up in knots. "That's Asami. He's the CEO where I used to work before, you know, Sion Global."

"The billionaire?" Kou's eyes widened. "Well, shit..." He laughed. "Poor dude, having to slum it in a dump like this. You know, I'd almost say he looks like yakuza but he's too... I don't know, classy? So he came to check you were OK, huh. He seems to be worried about you."

Akihito hoped his friend wasn't trying to imply anything. "I covered Tech Support and helped him out a few times. We've... crossed paths. Very briefly."

"Well good thing his bodyguards were there. You seem to have a thing about rich older people saving your ass."

"Uh... yeah..." Akihito cleared his throat. Little did his friend know it was only one rich older person. It was Asami who'd shot the assailant holding him at gunpoint, it was Asami's solid warmth that had pressed him into the wall, standing over him like a shield...

"So if he was your target, is he just bent or is he actually dicey?"

There was nothing he could do about Kou seeing the blow up with Yamazaki earlier but Akihito was determined to keep his friend out of this. "He saved my life, Kou. I'm not saying any more."

Kou held up his hands at Akihito's resolved tone. "Alright, alright. Say no more." He watched as his blond friend remained unusually quiet. A cheeky glint crept into his gaze. "You know you should so take up my advice from last night."

Akihito knew that tone. He was instantly wary. "What advice?"

"The one before you didn't show. You need to get laid. Even more so now!" Kou stressed as Akihito looked like he was about to argue. "Don't you know it's normal to be horny after surviving a close call with death?"

Akihito was horrified to meet the golden gaze out of the corner of Asami's eyes. "I promise you I am not horny," he stated adamantly. And quietly, hoping Kou would follow suit.
No such luck. "You just don't realise it! But it's scientifically proven. It's quite common, apparently, like a good lay is an affirmation of life!" Unfortunately for Akihito, Kou's boisterous insistence on his finding said life affirmation seemed to have no volume cap.

"Kou, seriously, stop with your matchmaking. I just broke up with Risa-san, I'm not interested in another relationship right now."

"Who said anything about a relationship? I'm talking light and fun, like your Sugar Momma!"

Hazel eyes flew across the roof and Akihito was mortified to find Asami looking squarely back at him. "Damn it, Kou!" Akihito hissed, hauling his friend further away. "Stop yelling to the whole neighbourhood! And how many times do I have to tell you? There's no one like that!"

"Hey, it's your dick, I'm not telling you how to use it. But you know, if the blow job was that mind blowing –"

"Kou –!"

"– maybe the sex will be too."

*Sable cuffs – impaling – thrusting* – Akihito's breath stuttered, his eyes flickering.

"No way, you already did it?"

Akihito really hated how perceptive his friend was sometimes.

Kou laughed, way too gleeful. And way too loud. "I was worrying about nothing! So how was it? Was it good? Were they just as pushy as when they sucked your stick?"

Akihito's whole face was burning. He could feel the piercing golden gaze without needing to look. "Oh my God, Kou, shut the fuck up!"

Kou merely grinned. "That good, huh? Even better than the blow job?"

Akihito glared, his ears burning. "Kou, best bud, I love you but if you don't shut up right this second I swear I'm gonna throw you off the goddamned roof."

Kou laughed into the wind. "You dawg, you! I'm almost envious. I gotta get me one of these smutty Sugar Mommas."

By now Asami's smirk was pure sin. Akihito buried his head in his hands and groaned. "Oh just kill me now..."

"Cool, thanks, man! *Itadakimasu!*" [Thanks before a meal]

Kou had no reservations diving straight into the *bento* [cooked packed meal] that one of Asami's men had acquired for breakfast.

Akihito took more convincing. "How much do we owe you?" he asked, still not quite meeting Asami's eyes.

Asami removed the lid off his own tray and handed it back to the guard. "Nothing. It was pittance."
"To you, maybe. To me, Takashimaya [high-end department store] bento for breakfast is extravagant."

"You could just say thank you and accept it, like your friend."

"I don't want to owe you anything."

Asami sneered as he split the chopsticks. "It's a little late for that, wouldn't you say?"

Actually, by his reckoning Akihito had cleared the books. "I don't owe you anything."

The golden eyes narrowed as Asami took in Akihito's steady gaze. "Don't you, now?" he murmured perceptively.

Perhaps too perceptive... Akihito shifted, nervous he might have revealed his hand. He cleared his throat and waved with the bento. "Well, if you insist. Thanks."

"Smells good. Where's mine?" Sakazaki asked.

"And mine?" Yamazaki echoed.

The two detectives had emerged from the kitchen where they were tidying up the mess they'd made.

"My guard must have miscounted, it's too bad." Asami didn't sound or look the least bit sorry as he bit into the karaage [crispy fried chicken] right in front of them.

Akihito dropped on to the settee next to Kou. "What he's really saying is that assholes don't deserve to be treated for breakfast."

Yamazaki perked up. They were the first words Akihito had spoken to him since he'd declared that their partnership was finished. "Yeah, I guess I was a bit of a dick –"

"I'm still not talking to you." Akihito kept his back turned as he settled the bento on his lap.

The unhappy detective stared a moment longer before giving up and returning to the kitchen.

Kou hummed in appreciation. "Man I'm starved! I missed out on dinner when Sayaka-chan took me to Dracaena. You missed a mean party."

Akihito ignored Asami glancing over at the club name from where he stood with Glasses, Blond Tank and another guard. "Who's Sayaka-chan?"

"Dude!" Kou complained. "My date! From yesterday!"

Akihito grimaced. "Ah shit, I totally forgot."

Kou slapped him good-naturedly with the back of his hand. "I'm only messing with you, you've had some heavy shit going on." He quirked a grin. "Like Ai-chan! You haven't told me about her or the charity thing yet."

The charity event... With the bachelor auction... Followed by a whole realm of things Akihito didn't want to think about... He shrugged. "It was... fine."

"Fine? Seriously? Geez, you're more chatty about your Sugar Momma."

Akihito spluttered. "I haven't said anything about that either! That's all you, putting words in my
"mouth!" He was determinedly not looking in a certain direction where a certain someone was looking at him again.

"So there's nothing going on with your older lady lover?" Kou checked.

Akihito's face burned. "No lover. Nothing. Zilch. Nada," he insisted, willing Asami to hear him. But inside he wasn't anywhere near as confident as he sounded, especially when the gaze boring into the back his skull felt like ice all of a sudden.

"Alright!" Kou bounced excitedly. "Cos Sayaka-chan's friends with Yumi-chan, you know, the one I told you about?"

Akihito could have sworn that that gaze was going from sub-zero to blistering. "Kou -"

"I could hook you up."

"I don't need you to hook me up."

"But you want me to."

"No. I don't."

"She's totally your type and I don't mean in the Risa kind of way -"

"I don't care -"

"She's your-type kind of type, like grow-old-wrinkly-bat-wings-together kind of type -"

It was all forgotten the next moment when the door slammed open and Akihito jolted badly, his whole body flinching. He recognised Takato's frantic face a moment before his friend located him and charged. Akihito only just managed to fling his bento over to Kou before they collided.

"Takato?" Akihito asked worriedly at his friend practically lying on top of him.

"Group hug!" Kou yelled.

Akihito groaned. "Oh no, don't -!" He broke off in a grunt as Kou threw himself on top of them too, grimacing as someone knocked his injured arm. He waited but his friends didn't move, and then it became way too long for just a friendly bro hug...

"Uh... guys?"

Kou flopped to the side, laughing at the muffled voice from the bottom of the pile.

Takato half sat up and punched Akihito in the chest. Hard.

"Ow! What the hell?"

"That's for scaring me!" Takato yelled. He then engulfed Akihito in another bear hug. "And that's for scaring me," he muttered into the t-shirt.

Akihito patted Takato on the back. "You told him?" he frowned at Kou over Takato's shoulder.

"Didn't feel right keeping it from him," Kou shrugged as he returned to his breakfast and stuffed his mouth again.
"I wasn't keeping it from him," Akihito objected. "I was just gonna tell him later. 'Cos I knew he'd be like this."

"Yeah well, Kou was right to tell me," Takato grumbled, flopping down onto Akihito's other side. It was snug on the sofa with the three of them. "You can't keep something like that from us. I can't believe you had a load of guys shooting at you! I mean, what the fuck? Who the hell carries guns in Japan, anyway?"

"Weird, righ'?" Kou agreed around a full mouth.

Akihito didn't think it was wise to point out that, what with Asami and his men, Yamazaki and probably Sakazaki as well, there was a higher ratio of armed people in this tiny apartment alone...

"But why are the police here?"

"They're after some nonexistent evidence or other," Akihito shrugged. "Have you eaten?"

"No, I got Kou's message and raced straight over. 'Cos seriously, you should've called us! Man, I don't know if I want to hit you again or hug you –"

"Try eating." Akihito handed him the bento box that used to be his.

"This looks great! You sure?"

"Have it," Akihito nodded.

Takato split the chopsticks and put his hands together before tucking in. "Itadakimasu."

As Kou and Takato were guzzling their breakfast, another bento tray landed on Akihito's lap. He would have recognised the suit sleeve and those long fingers anywhere.

"But –"

Akihito craned his head back but Asami silenced him with a ruffle of his hair before moving off to Blond Tank and Glasses, talking very quietly between them. Scowling, Akihito nonetheless tucked in.

There was a funny sound from beside him and he turned to find Kou looking like he was about to explode, pointing his sticks at him.

"Stop pointing with your chopsticks," Takato scolded like a mother hen, swatting them down.

Kou finally gulped down his mouthful. "Indirect kiss!"

It took a moment to catch on that Akihito had used Asami's chopsticks. Akihito's cheeks went warm.

"Shut up!" He shoved an egg roll into Kou's mouth. With Asami's chopsticks. "Same to you, with both of us. Slut."

Takato pulled an exaggerated face, laughing. "Eww!"

Kou grabbed the same sticks and shove some rice into Takato's mouth. "Indirect foursome!" Kou announced around his mouthful of egg.

They both rolled about laughing, spluttering food. Even Akihito joined in after a while when he got over his embarrassment enough to admit how ridiculous they were being.
That was until he caught Asami's simmering gaze from across the room, boring into him with the promise of something much more direct...

"Why are you still here? I told you you can go."

"Armed men tried to take out Takaba only a few hours ago. I'm not leaving him unprotected."

Yamazaki opened his mouth but shut it again quickly. He might be able to put a couple of uniforms on protection duty but that was about it. Takaba would be toast if Nishizuma tried again. Yamazaki might be hell-bent on nailing Asami but he wasn't about to put Takaba's life in jeopardy. Not again, anyway, after his royal fuck up.

"Are you done?"

They turned to find Akihito glaring at them from under his blond fringe.

"Can I talk to you?" Yamazaki tried.

"I think that's enough now," Akihito said to the other police in the flat as though he hadn't heard. The techs had done a halfway decent job of putting the place back together, shelf, cupboard and drawer things more or less stuffed back in their respective places. "You should go. And take Dick 1 and Dick 3 with you."

Yamazaki's face clouded over at his new moniker.

"I heard that!" Sakazaki warned from the kitchen.

"Well done for recognising your name!" Akihito yelled back and made to return to his friends.

Yamazaki tried again, grabbing his arm. "Takaba –"

Akihito jerked free. "Just... leave it, ok? I can't talk to you right now."

"But you'll talk to him?" Yamazaki jerked a thumb at Asami, angry at the man he knew was dirty, angry that they were airing their dirty laundry in front of the crime lord again. And angry at himself. The hazel eyes met his this time, fierce and hurt. "Asami has nothing to do with this. This is about you, and what you did. I can't even look at you without wanting to punch you."

"Then punch me!"

Akihito shook his head, letting loose an aggravated sigh. "Just go."

"I'll call you."

"Don't. Just... don't."

Akihito slunk over to the window and this time the detective let him go.

"Alright, we're clearing out," Sakazaki announced by the genkan. Yamazaki stared a moment longer at the young man before following after his colleague. Kou hopped off the settee to see them out.

Akihito was watching the forensic vans and squad cars pulling away down the street when he sensed
Asami behind him, the man's scent wrapping around him. Takato had disappeared off to the toilet and Asami's men were outside, leaving the two of them alone.

Nerves, and bile over Yama-san, sharpened his tongue. "It's all sorted with Nishizuma now, right? You gave them an hour and that was hours ago."

Asami didn't reply straight away and Akihito resisted the urge to turn around. He wasn't falling for the silent bait. He waited it out. And waited...

"They complied," Asami confirmed at length.

"Then isn't it past time you left?"

Asami stepped close enough to brush his chest against the slender back. Akihito shivered. The baritone rumbled between them. "How cold. And you were so into it last night, too."

Akihito half turned, ready to lay into the bastard with a piece of his mind, when all of a sudden Asami engulfed him from behind, a large hand forcing his face up and round as Asami's lips sealed over his and silenced him.

A moment of frozen shock smashed and scattered all around...

"Ngh!" Akihito elbowed Asami in the gut, turning as he shoved the taller man away. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Asami grabbed his wrists and pinned him back against the window. Hard. It was only when he spotted the darkness swirling in the sharp gaze that he realized how thin Asami's patience was wearing. He shrunk back but Asami didn't allow any escape.

"You can't tell? Perhaps you need more demonstration."

Asami took Akihito's lips again, forceful and ruthless and hungry and electrifying. An arm slid about his waist, drawing him flush against Asami's hard body, synapses charged and popping as Asami devoured him and squeezed him close. A knee was forced between Akihito's legs, pressing a muscular thigh against his crotch and he had to swallow back a groan at the stirring pressure. Between the hands holding him immobile at the jaw and waist, Akihito suddenly realised that his arms were free and he fisted Asami's jacket... But he had no idea anymore whether he was still pushing the bastard away or pulling him closer, as Asami forced him backwards just enough to be off balance, making him vulnerable and holding him together all at once...

Asami broke away, shamelessly sucking Akihito's tongue out of his mouth on the way. Smouldering eyes scanned Akihito's flushed face before Asami smirked. "I'll be outside," he rumbled, laced with warning. "You have two minutes before I send Suoh after you."

Asami released him and walked away, leaving Akihito to stumble a step to keep his balance, flushed and breathing heavy. Possibly aroused. Most definitely furious.

Akihito made to follow, an indignant remark on the tip of his swollen tongue, only to be brought to a dead stop by the sight of both of his friends gaping at him.

They all remained mute and frozen as Asami left.

Kou picked his jaw up from where it was trailing somewhere on the floor. "Was he just...?"

Takato nodded in a daze. "Yeah..."
With...?

Yeah...

Fuck! You don't think...

Yeah...

Kou and Takato looked at each other, then back at their furiously blushing friend.

He's the Sugar Momma?!

Awk. Ward. None of them knew quite what to say.

"You said they were pushy, but... that doesn't really cut it, does it?" Takato asked hesitantly, clearly worried.

Akihito's mouth flapped soundlessly.

But then Kou gasped dramatically, pointing at Akihito. "Dude, you totally have a boner!"

And all of a sudden Kou was laughing, doubled over and clutching his stomach.


"There's nothing for you to be happy about!" Akihito lamented, but his denial fell on deaf ears.

Tears were streaming from Kou's eyes. "No wonder..." he gasped between laughter, "you wanted me... to shut up..."

"I'm gonna kill him," Akihito swore as he stomped over to his shoes. But he had to adjust himself in his pants as he did so, only setting his friends off even more. "I'm gonna kill him!" he repeated fiercely as he slammed the door closed on them.

"Why the hell did you do that in front of my friends?"

Blond Tank was the only one of the guards who was unsurprised at Akihito's outburst. There were three others within earshot, guards forming a loose perimeter around the limo, and they were all taken aback at such a harsh tone directed at their boss.

Asami took a leisurely drag of his cigarette before tuning, his eyes sweeping over the furious blond standing there with his arms flung wide, framed by the two pillars of the entrance way. "We couldn't have your friends continuing under the misguided impression that you're available, could we?"

Akihito floundered. "What? What does that have to do with you? I am available!" He blinked as golden eyes narrowed in clear warning. "You don't mean you? ... Why?"

"Why what?"
"Why would I be with someone like you?"

"You mean a powerful, rich and irresistible bachelor?"

Akihito scowled. "Try perverted, sadistic bastard."

The guards looked at their boss to see how he’d react to such an insult but they were even more shocked when Asami only grinned. "Sadistic? That’s a new one."

"Baka, don’t say it like it's a compliment!"

"It's the truth."

"It's not good! And it's why we are not together. One of many reasons, in fact!"

"Really? After last night, you’re still in denial?"

"There's nothing to deny!" Akihito spluttered. "And don't make 'last night' sound like a thing! It wasn't a thing!"

"Dinner, sex and a bit of action. Sounds like a date to me."

Some of the guards were failing miserably at hiding their astonishment.

Akihito’s face raced through a kaleidoscope of emotions. After everything from disbelief and red hot embarrassment to confusion and rushing warmth, he finally settled on outrage. "That was not a date! That was a random mishmash of events, none of which I wanted!"

Akihito didn’t get why that comment seemed to piss Asami off when none of his previous words had.

Golden eyes flashed. "Did I do anything untoward during the dinner?"

"Well, no–"

"And didn’t I let you come when you begged?"

"Asami!" Akihito squeaked, his face turning crimson. His eyes darted to the guards, some of whom were looking equally red-faced. "Seriously, you have got to work on your social conventions!"

"And didn’t I save your ungrateful ass from the gunmen?"

The blood in Akihito's face did an abrupt 180 and fled his face. That was one thing he was grateful for.

"It's too late to back out now, Akihito," Asami said darkly. "I will have what I want."

Akihito was more than a little afraid, not that he was going to show it. His eyes lit with his own fire, his voice quiet but tenacious. "Don't treat me like some kind of toy. I'm not a possession to do as you like."

"I don't kiss toys."

Asami’s seriousness only made Akihito more nervous. What the hell was that supposed to mean?

Asami waved with his cigarette at the idling limo. "Get in. We're leaving."
One of the guards rushed forwards and opened the back door.

Akihito glared. He set his jaw. And bolted.

Suoh's arm whipped out startlingly fast for such a large man but the smaller man dodged behind the pillar and darted away. "Damn!"

They stared after the rapidly shrinking figure running helter-skelter down the road before the blond head disappeared around a corner.

"I'll give Sagano the heads up, sir," Suoh said, finally understanding why his boss had wanted the guard positioned in that direction hours ago. He tapped out a quick message on his phone. "... You knew he'd go that way."

Asami leisurely blew out his cigarette. "He usually comes here by the underground. It's his familiar route."

"I didn't think he'd run, after everything..."

Asami smirked. "He'd run, especially after everything." Defiant to the end. Especially at the end.

Suoh glimpsed the predatory gleam in his boss' eyes and almost felt sorry for the brat. Then he heard two words he'd never heard from Asami before.

"Go easy."

It took a glance to be sure of the full extent of that simple order. Suoh had worked for Asami for many years, he thought he knew all of his boss' moods, the varying shades of darkness, the degrees of ruthlessness. But when he saw the hard gaze underpinned with a gleam he'd never seen before, he knew this was like nothing they'd ever faced.

With a solemn nod that acknowledged far more than just an order, Suoh took off down the street.

It put Akihito on high alert when they didn't immediately give chase. Expecting a trap at any moment, he was super cautious, hugging the shadows, ducking behind signs and parked cars for cover.

That was how he literally stumbled across the bodyguard who'd concealed himself in the narrow gap between two buildings opposite the station. Akihito slammed into him, they started at each other for a frozen second...

Akihito backpedalled frantically and ran.

"Takaba, wait!" Sagano yelled from behind.

Something snagged Akihito's jacket but pure panic helped him break free and he sprinted pell-mell into the meandering groups of friends and families out shopping on a late Sunday morning.

Akihito caught glimpses of Sagano weaving behind him. Suoh wasn't too far behind either, the blond giant unmistakable as his feet pounded the asphalt.

Shit, they were pursuing for real. It didn't matter that Akihito knew who they were, it was terrifying. Because no way would Asami let things slide again. There'd been too many disruptions already, the
moment they caught him it was game over. Adrenaline surged in his veins and gave him an extra drive he didn't have after too little sleep and too many scares.

He criss-crossed the quiet back roads and tore down tight gaps between neighbouring walls barely wide enough for him to fit between. He tripped too many times on uneven steps and obstacles hidden around corners, and went for somewhere he could traverse more easily, across a residential car park and hurtled into another residential area.

It was quieter here. Too quiet. He didn't know the area at all, he needed cover, more people. Children's voices and music and TV noises filtered out of open windows, families going about their business. He zeroed in on the distant drone of traffic and eventually found a main road, but it was four lanes of traffic rushing both ways with a central reservation, not one to be crossed in a hurry. The bypass was lined with office buildings, largely empty on a Sunday.

In the end Akihito was caught as he teetered in indecision, his overtaxed brain unable to decide whether to duck back into the maze of houses and find a hiding spot, or risk launching himself in between the rushing cars –

A huge ham fist clapped over his mouth and an arm thicker than his thigh clamped about his torso, hefting him easily into the air. He was pulled into the shadows of two towering office buildings, out of sight of passing cars and any possible help.

With the flash of short blond hair and the size of the guy, Akihito knew instantly which guard it was. Fear fuelled his frantic resistance.

"Quit struggling and come quietly," Suoh muttered. "Boss would have my neck if I hurt you."

Go to hell! Akihito yelled muffled into the huge hand as he thrashed harder. He thought one of his kicks caught the guard in the groin but it didn't seem to make a blinding bit of difference.

Suoh sighed. "I'm sorry."

The arm about Akihito's chest shifted and a hand clapped about his neck, squeezing just around the sides. He could still breathe but pressure abruptly built up in his head from the blocked off blood circulation, his vision darkening, dots crowding, his heart thudding uselessly, pain exploding in his head, everything going darker...
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Then Asami lets him go, they go their separate ways, bye-de-bye, The End. Right? Perfect.

...*gasp* Unacceptable, you say? Oh alright then, we'll have the showdown. (^^^)

So life and baby happened (I'm an auntie! Yaaay!). 11 days must be my slowest update so far, haha XD I also blame our two characters, you know how stubborn they can be! So what we have here is a beast. No kidding, it's the longest chapter yet by a long shot. I'd even say it's too long but I couldn't split it up, it just all goes together. If nothing else it'll be an interesting exercise to see how far I can hold your attention... *hides*

~ Nyx ~

Still Sunday. Probably.

Akihito woke to the rain falling in sheets against the window. Yawning lazily, he stretched languorously through his arms and back and all the way down his legs to the tips of his to-o-oes....

He was so comfortable that it was a light buzz, happily dazed as he slowly returned to the land of the living. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept so well, with no lingering gogginess, no dog-tired yearning to fall straight back under only to be scratched awake by the claws of nightmares, just the languid ache from a long sleep, morning wood and a hungry stomach. Ravenous, actually. He rolled, snuggling into the pillow, a luxurious thing filled with bouncy feathers and smelling of strength and pure masculinity that triggered all sorts of deliciously steamy flashbacks –

Adrenaline charged on a wildebeest stampede. He flailed, tangling himself in smooth sheets with a ridiculous thread count that couldn't possibly be his as he toppled out of the bed with a panicked yelp...

This wasn't his bed, probably as wide as five of his stuck together. Nor his room, at least ten times larger than his. Not his walk-in-wardrobe with the domino of dark, expensive suits. Not the dark hardwood furniture that were most certainly not flat-pack, heavy floor-to-ceiling black-out curtains covering half the expansive wall, the luxuriously thick carpet, the pricey watch and wallet and holster and gun on the opposite bedside table...

Akihito panted as he took it all in. "Holy... fucking... fuck!"

He started terribly at the blaring of a cell phone. It was when he looked across at the closed door where the sound came from that he realized that it wasn't rain that he was hearing at all, but the shower. He stared in voiceless fear at the door as the electronic chimes rang and rang. The shower stopped and the chimes carried on ringing, until –

"Asami."

That voice. He almost combusted on the spot.
"One minute, I'll grab the file."

Horror of horrors, Akihito realized the man was coming out. Not wanting to be caught awake he dithered frantically – a stuttered step to the other closed door leading from the room – where the fuck does that go?! – walk-in wardrobe – dead-end, baka! – then in sheer panic he dove back into the bed and buried his face in the pillow and held his breath – way to go, genius, just throw yourself back in the bastard's bed, why don't you...

A door opened and closed before he heard Asami pause. Akihito almost exploded from tension as he wondered if the man would come over, but then another door opened – the one he'd originally almost gone for – and Asami's voice came muffled from the other side as he closed it behind him.

"Go ahead."

Akihito shakily gulped a much needed breath, but regretted it immediately when he was assailed by Asami's scent again. He leaped out of the bed as though he'd been burned. The ache on the soles of his feet barely registered.

"Why are you calling me about this? You already have my orders."

Asami's voice was quieter, further away. Now was the time to leg it, while he was distracted. Akihito checked down at himself and was mightily relieved that he was still in his own jeans and top, just minus shoes – which he was banking on to be by the front door, and even if they weren't he'd still leave in his socks – and jacket. Had Asami removed it ... to tuck him into bed? Into his bed? Because this was clearly Asami's lair, he could tell by the underlying scent and feel of the man permeating everything. Why the hell had Asami brought him here? Akihito had half expected to wake up in a cage. Or in chains...

His phone and other things were nowhere to be seen but that wasn't about to stop him. Akihito crept to the door, pressing his ear to it.

"No exceptions," Asami was saying. He sounded distant. "But you know that so why're you asking?"

Forcing his clammy hands to grip the handle, Akihito turned it, praying it wouldn't squeak... Of course not, this wasn't his apartment. It was Asami's place and of course everything would be well-oiled and bloody perfect.

Corridor. Left or right?

"Reject them, I have no need of such services."

Asami's voice drifted from the left so Akihito headed right. Warm lights lit his way as he made his faltering, heart-thudding progress to another open doorway.

"That's already been agreed. I'll deal with them myself."

Akihito blinked at the cavernous space. It was a living room, open plan and with a wide pass-through window into the kitchen. He eyeballed it all at about a million times larger than his own flat, the furniture sparse but clearly top quality, the style modern and male and very much no-nonsense like Asami. Even the gargantuan entertainment system dominating half the long stretch of wall was just as overbearing as its owner. It was huge. Obscene, really. Akihito might have drooled just a little bit. Though he couldn't quite picture Asami as the surround sound, home cinema type. Or maybe he used it to watch reruns of his best kills... Akihito quickly moved on, taking the eighteen – seriously, eighteen! He could only manage three in his place – long steps across the polished hardwood floor.
All the curtains were closed – was it night time?

The man's voice still came from a little ways away but he sounded annoyed. "If they can't fulfil their end of the deal they've faulted on our agreement."

Akihito poked his head out into the corridor on the other side of the living room and headed down and around the corner – the genkan! Relief flooded him. His shoes were also there, sitting neatly beside Asami's polished black leather shoes.

He flew over, stuffed his feet into his shoes, threw open the front door and barrelled through –

He stumbled as he bounced backwards... off a massive chest... in a black suit... He craned his head up to find Blond Tank staring blankly down at him.

"I'm not discussing new terms. Why are you still wasting my time?"

Akihito spun as Asami's voice came from the side – and oh holy smoking sweet goddesses... Hair and naked upper body still dripped from the shower, damp black strands skimmed golden eyes glinting with arrogant amusement, a rolled up towel hung from the strong neck, water droplets glistened on muscular shoulders and the washboard abs with just a hint of a trail leading from below the belly button disappearing under the waistband of casual slacks... Long legs... Bare feet...

The droolworthy picture was not helping Akihito's morning wood – evening wood, whatever – go down. Asami somehow looked younger without his usual immaculate get-up but also even more male if that was possible...

"Sort out your own mess. You'll pay for it in full if it compromises my business in any way."

Asami was still on the phone, leaning against the doorjam on the opposite end of the corridor. He calmly watched the younger man gawking at him, not looking surprised to find the blond standing at the genkan in his shoes.

Asami let loose an irritated sigh as he finally looked away and barked at whoever was on the phone.

"I won't tell you again, I'm not changing the deal. You have your orders already. Get to it or I'll find someone who will." He hung up on them and turned back to Akihito, his voice melting from steel to practically a purr in the blink of an eye. "So? Are you going to stand there drooling at me all night?"

Akihito only then realized that his brain had short-circuited and he was doing precisely that... "In your dreams." He spun again, intent on running, when he saw Suoh and belatedly remembered the expressionless bodyguard blocking the doorway. "Are you stuck? 'Cos you're kind of in my way there."

He could hear the smirk in Asami's voice without having to look. "That's the general the idea. He's not moving until I say you can go."

"What the hell?" Akihito rounded on Asami, and had to blink at the sight of Asami again. Shit, but the bastard was insanely hot. "Oh, for fuck's sake, put some clothes on!" Then he remembered what he was mad about. "And why have you kidnapped me?! Again!"

Asami chuckled. "Really, Akihito, that's the order you're going with?" He grabbed one end of the towel draped around his neck and started drying his hair. Akihito had to try very hard not to stare at the shifting play of muscles... It should be the eighth deadly sin for the bastard to go around with any skin showing. No, scrap that, Asami himself was the eighth deadly sin.
"You have two ways out of here," Asami informed him casually. "You can try and wrestle your way past Suoh – which, by the way, I would have to see," Asami added, barely suppressing a laugh, "or you can come and talk to me. You decide."

Asami sauntered closer, right up to the genkan until Akihito was almost pressing back against Blond Tank, and then he strolled past, smirking at Akihito's panicked – and more than a little heated – expression as he disappeared into the living room.

Akihito let loose a shaky breath. "Dickass," he muttered.

He backed off from Suoh a little. The guard really was huge. Taller and bulkier than Asami, he could have been made from a lump of marble. The guard stared back, deadpan.

"So..." Akihito tried. "Don't you feel bad at all, even a little? That you're keeping me here against my will? And it's your fault for catching me?"

"I'm just doing my job."

Akihito had half expected Blond Tank to stand there mutely like he was guarding Buckingham Palace. "What, so if he told you to –" He stopped himself. Because yes. If Asami told Suoh to jump off a skyscraper, this guy would ask which one and what the schedule was so he could attend to it in a timely manner. They'd proved that with the setup for the shootout.

"Forget it," Akihito huffed.

He considered the large guard, thinking furiously... He tried another tact. "You're a pretty big guy, huh?" Suoh didn't react. "So you know you're slower than me, right? You should just let me pass and save yourself the embarrassment of being bested by someone smaller."

"I'm not embarrassed of being bested by Asami-sama."

Akihito blinked. He didn't even pull Suoh up on being a smartass. "Asami can beat you?"

There was a reaction this time, just a small grin pulling at one corner of Suoh's mouth. "Hands down, every time. You have no chance."

Akihito gaped, embarrassed and furious. "You're a right barrel of laughs aren't you? Well what if you did a surprise attack? Would he still win?"

"Yes he would, if such were the training parameters."

"Oh lighten up! It might happen, you never know. Say, I don't know, he stole the slice of cake you'd saved for your lunch even though you'd clearly labelled it as yours?"

"Stole my cake...?"

"Yeah, that obviously doesn't happen in your world, does it? But just say he did. What if you did a surprise tackle?"

"A surprise tackle?"

"Yeah, can he get out of that one and still whip your ass?"

Blond Tank levelled him a hard look. "If you're simply procrastinating from going to speak to Asami-sama, I'll be returning to my post. Or do you plan to tackle me? If so I shall alert the boss."
Akihito glowered, knowing his answer already but hating it. Maybe he should try and have at the guard anyway. But it would only be embarrassing and somehow he didn't want to be throwing blows without direct provocation. Sure, there were implied threats aplenty and he was being kept here against his will, but it wasn't like there was a gun pointed at his head... Not yet, anyway...

"Fine," he snapped. "You can keep your precious pride intact." He toed off his shoes and stepped back onto the main floor. "What time is it, anyway?"

"It's gone eleven pm."

Akihito stilled. "Eleven? You knocked me out for a whole day? Wait – it's still Sunday right?"

Suoh nodded. "Yes, although you were only unconscious for a few minutes. You've been asleep for twelve hours now. You must have been very tired."

"Yeah, well, getting shot at when you're already severely sleep deprived thanks to a certain perverted bastard will do that to most normal people."

"Can you find Asami-sama by yourself or shall I take you to him?"

"Why do you keep trying to get rid of me? Is he going to have your neck if you stand here yapping all evening?" Akihito frowned. "Although I'm disappointed to see your head's still attached. Because I clearly remember you saying that you weren't meant to hurt me and that freaking hurt when you knocked me out, I'll have you know."

"A temporary discomfort, nothing more. No bruising, no lasting damage, no side effects. You were not hurt, as Asami-sama wished."

Akihito stared. The guard's obedience to Asami – and his physical ability to follow orders to the absolute letter – was a little scary. It was like he'd given Asami his soul...

"Good evening, Takaba-san," Suoh nodded politely before closing the door between them.

It took a while to track Asami down. Not because Akihito was lost but because he refused to heel like one of the good little guards the bastard could order around. He headed in the opposite direction from the living room, the way Asami had come. He came across two spare bedrooms containing no personal effects whatsoever, a toilet, another bathroom, and a locked door. He'd stared at that, trying the handle a good few times, before finally his growling stomach latching onto the smell of food and won out over stubborn pride. He carried on along the corridor, following his nose until he found himself looping past Asami's room and back in the living room again. The apartment was a giant, square, luxury doughnut.

Thankfully Asami had donned a bathrobe – though Akihito's blood was still flowing in inappropriate directions at seeing such a casual side to the man– and he watched with a surreal sense of disbelief as Asami stood in the kitchen serving up two dishes of curry and rice. It was like when he'd served tea before. It was so ordinary.

"You're drooling again," Asami smirked as he grabbed cutlery and took the dishes over to the table. One was a significantly more generous serving than the other.

Akihito scowled. "You're not wearing a suit. And you're cooking. It's unreal."
Predictably, Asami took the smaller portion. "Kirishima cooked."

Glasses? In an apron? No freaking way.

Asami started without waiting. He carried on eating as Akihito watched the food disappear into his mouth and the fork slid back out between his lips... Akihito gave himself a mental slap. He was hesitant to share another meal with Asami especially when he wasn't being allowed to leave, but eventually he decided that he couldn't fight his way out on an empty stomach and went and sat down. He kept a wary eye on Asami, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

The hunger hit Akihito as soon as the first mouthful hit his stomach and in no time at all he'd wolfed down the lot. It was actually delicious.

"There's more."

Halfway through chasing the last of the sauce around his plate, Akihito stilled. The tone was so carefully expressionless that it instantly rang alarm bells. Akihito slowly looked up to find Asami's eyes on him, his plate pushed aside only half finished. Akihito had been so intent on his food that he'd blocked out everything else. It wasn't unusual.

How long had Asami been watching? He was reclined in his seat, his gaze sharp and fixed unerringly on Akihito, his entire frame unnaturally still even for Asami whose bearing was usually a masterclass in refinement and calculated efficiency. Akihito was reminded of a stalking predator poised to pounce.

"Or have you finished?"

Yeah, there it was, the other shoe dropping. Fed and fattened up for the kill, what Asami had been waiting for. Akihito didn't want to be finished. Finished meant dealing with the elephant in the room – fuck that, it was a fucking giant woolly mammoth. With tusks. Huge ass tusks just waiting to run Akihito through.

But the cold, hard energy radiating from Asami chased away any remaining appetite.

Asami arched an expectant brow. No other movement, just a simple shift of expression that spoke volumes of his patience wearing dangerously thin.

Reluctantly, Akihito nodded.

Asami fluidly unfolded himself to his feet. Akihito shoved his chair back but the rear legs caught, and he flailed for a precious moment as he fought toppling backwards. By the time he'd grabbed the table and righted himself Asami had rounded the table. Akihito leaped up but before he could make it a single step a heavy hand shoved him right back down.

Asami leaned on the table, his arms trapping the smaller man, his voice soft and deadly by Akihito's ear. "I'm going to say this very clearly so there's no chance of you misunderstanding me. You're going to tell me why you left Sion, you're going to tell me what was on that last piece from that hard drive, and you're going to tell me what you've been so scared to tell me. They might all be the same thing, they might be different. You're going to tell me the truth, and you're going to tell me everything. No lies. No omissions. Full disclosure."

Akihito's eyes widened more and more with every word. They were no less scary just because Asami delivered them while wearing a thick white bathrobe and slacks. Akihito was ensnared by the threat saturating the air.
Asami let him break free as Akihito shoved and backed away. "You – you can't still be on about that? I have nothing to say to you. And it – it won't matter what you do to me, I still have nothing to tell you."

Asami smirked cruelly at the faint tremor in Akihito's voice. "I'm not going to torture you, if that's what you mean. You'll simply stay with me until you tell me everything I want to know."

Akihito shook his head with a creeping sense of dread. "Stay...?"

"This is my condo. You can go wherever you like up to the front door, do whatever you like during the day." Asami grinned wickedly. "And at night, I'll come home and you can indulge me until I'm satisfied. Completely satisfied."

"You... That's... That's a fucking sex slave!"

"If that's what you want to call yourself."

"Call...? That's... You know that's not the point!"

Asami shrugged. "We can also eat dinner. I can work, you can watch TV. Perfectly harmless."

Akihito was gobsmacked and he knew his face matched his disbelief. His mouth worked a few times before the words finally came out. "Wha... I... You... What the fuck?!"

"Or you can just tell me what I want to know."

"No!"

"Then you'll stay here."

"That's... You're..." An idea took root, hazel eyes glared fiercely. "What if I shoot you in your sleep? With your own gun? You'll be a complete laughing stock."

Asami arched a brow, amusement curving his lips. "You mean the gun that was already by the bed when you woke up and you could have grabbed and shot me with already but didn't? That gun?"

Akihito floundered. Ok, so they both knew that wasn't going to happen. "I'll trash the place or burn it down or something!"

"I wouldn't advise torching the place unless you have a death wish, but even so, the fire prevention measures here are rather advanced so you'll probably still come out alive." Then Asami sneered and Akihito just trembled. "Feel free to trash away. For everything you damage, I'll just have to dish out punishments."

There was no mistaking the evil gleam in those eyes as Asami stalked towards him, and Akihito backed away, horrified and hot all at once. He glanced towards the corridor, seriously considering taking Suoh on after all.

"You're going to stay here until you tell me what I want to know. It's as simple as that."

"You can't just keep me here! My friends, my family – they'll figure out something's wrong."

The dark gleam in Asami's eyes was unnerving. "No they won't, because you'll assure them everything is fine. And you'll be convincing, because you don't want to get them involved."

Akihito came to a dead stop, staring in helpless horror. His voice was barely a sound. "You
Asami was calm, cool, and utterly unforgiving. "It's rather straightforward, Akihito. Just tell me what I want to know."

It wasn't that simple. "Then I can go? If I tell you, you'll let me go?" Akihito couldn't read that hard mask at all.

"Then we'll renegotiate terms."

See, not so simple. He had to get out of here. Not knowing if there was another way out, Akihito rounded the dining table. "There's nothing to tell alright?" He backed through the living space, paced every step of the way by Asami, angling as best he could towards the front door from memory. "You're getting worked up over nothing."

His leg hit something and he glanced over his shoulder –

Asami was on him in an instant, catching Akihito and toppling them both onto the large settee, snaring the younger man beneath him.

"No! Let me go!"

Akihito thrashed out, genuine fear for his life making him hit out harder than he ever had at Asami, head and elbows and feet and everything. Asami easily gathered the flailing limbs until all their writhing had him pinning Akihito face down into the deep leather cushions.

Held immobile, their legs tangled and Asami very much hot and heavy on his back, it didn't take long for Akihito to still.

Asami hooked his chin over the slender shoulder. "You're trembling."

Of course he was. He was fucking terrified. He was totally up shit's creek without a paddle. But added to that was his paralysis from their bodies pressing together, his body heating up even if his mind was tangled with fear.

"Let me go," he breathed.

"Tell me, Akihito."

The crush of Asami's body was triggering a kaleidoscope of images through Akihito's mind – a hail of bullets, Asami shielding him, firing the gun, fighting the intruders, the same hands now pinning him, unrelenting, overpowering with frightening ease – but without actually hurting him, Akihito realized...

He pressed his forehead into the cool leather. He didn't know if he was just shaking or shaking his head because the moment Asami knew, then that bullet would be in his head.

"Why are you so afraid?" Asami's baritone was coaxing, almost gentle.

"What do you think?" The words slipped out, snapped in a moment of heightened fear and tension, and it was too late to take it back.

"Is it really all that bad?"

"Look, Asami, just let me go. I'll walk away and you'll never see me again... Please..."
There was a pause as Asami drew back. When he spoke again, his voice was harsh. "Begging doesn't suit you."

Annoyance flared. "You're always making me beg!"

"Not this kind."

Akihito abruptly found himself flipped onto his back, his wrists pinned before he could hit out. He shrank back at the fury in the golden eyes.

"Maybe I'll just fuck you until you tell me."

"You're crazy!" Akihito struggled, not that he expected to get anywhere but he had to try. "You said you wouldn't torture me!"

Asami laughed darkly. "You have no idea what torture is. This? I'd call this pleasurable persuasion."

"That would kill me!"

"Hardly. Though you may become addicted to me."

Akihito stared in horror. It was stupidly ridiculous, and yet... And yet! Knowing Asami, it wasn't impossible. Of course Akihito was massively terrified but a healthy portion of that stemmed from the stirring between his legs. Why the blazes was he aroused at a time like this?!

He didn't doubt Asami's intention to keep him locked up here, for God knows how long, and judging from past experiences it would no doubt involve pleasure off the scales... Did he fear his own reaction to Asami more than the threat Asami posed? Now there was a sobering thought.

Akihito couldn't hold that intense gaze and averted his eyes. He hated his weakness, he hated Asami more, but he knew he couldn't win.

He mumbled something.

"Speak up."

"I said, I'll tell you. Just let me up." The bastard may well decide to shoot him on the spot. He didn't want to die feeling aroused.

Asami eyed him for a long moment before releasing him. Akihito skittered away, rubbing his wrists. He considered the front door again. But it was impossible, not only with Suoh but with Asami only a few steps behind. Maybe if he bought himself some time and tried to fight his way out during the day when Asami was out, when he'd no doubt take Suoh with him, Akihito might have more chance with some of the other guards –

"Not a chance."

Akihito paused. "Uh... What's that?"

"You're thinking that you'd have a better chance of escaping another day."

How the hell...? Akihito felt like an idiot for being surprised. He headed into the kitchen instead.

"Akihito," Asami warned, clearly irritated. "If I can't take you at your word –"

"I'll tell you, ok! I just want a drink." He really was parched.
Asami leaned sideways against the cupboards and pointed to where the glasses were.

"You'd be thinking all sorts too if our positions were reversed," Akihito grumbled as he filled up from the tap.

"That would never happen," Asami deadpanned, arms crossed.

Akihito glowered over the rim of the glass as he drank.

"Well? Any more excuses?"

Akihito went to go past him but Asami didn't take the hint. "Can I go sit down?"

Akihito didn't move, didn't speak. His face was like stone.

Akihito swallowed. It had been a dumb-ass move to come into the kitchen. Asami blocked the only way out. Unless he dove through the pass-through window. Ok, so the reality would more likely be a clumsy scramble onto the counter top and toppling gracelessly into the living room while Asami looked on, hugely amused...

His brain was having an episode. Akihito was vaguely aware of it and tried to rein it in. He gulped down the rest of the water and slid the glass onto the counter top. Solid granite. No cheap veneer here. He could be looking at this for a long time, unless he just bit the bullet and told Asami... If he didn't, and if any of his friends or his parents started getting suspicious at his disappearance...

"It was a video," he blurted before he could lose his nerve again. Then something occurred to him. "But you knew that, didn't you? You asked. I don't know how but you knew. Though you might not have known what exactly..."

The quietest sigh stopped Akihito's runaway rambling, a tight release of wound-up irritation.

"Details, Akihito."

"I'm trying, believe it or not! It's a little freaked out in here right now," Akihito waved vaguely at his head. "I wonder whose fault that is?"

Asami simply fixed him with a look like thunder.

Akihito had a feeling that the next aimless ramble would produce a gun. He cleared his throat. "The hard drive. When I only found spreadsheets you asked about images or videos, like you knew there might have been."

It was like seeing a camera lens revolve into focus. The golden gaze sharpened with understanding.

It robbed Akihito of his voice. It was the slightest narrowing of Asami's eyes that prompted him again.

"After you left, when I was cleaning up, I found a piece that had fallen underneath. I... scanned it..."

Regret seeped out of him. If only he'd let it go, but he'd been hunting for material for Spotlight...

"There was a video. You, Glasses and Blond Tank."

Asami paused at the nicknames. "Kirishima and Suoh?"

Akihito nodded, staring at the glass. "At... At the docks..."

The temperature plunged.
After a few seconds Akihito glanced up. He immediately wished he hadn't. He'd seen it before, that look, only before it had been directed over his shoulder at the assailant holding him at gunpoint. The golden eyes were now fixed on him, utterly cold, not a shred of mercy.

Akihito was dead. He should never have told, he should have held his tongue, should have toughed it out until there was a chance to escape, maybe he could still make it to a window and with any luck they wouldn't be too high up or there'd be a fire escape or –

"Who did I kill?"

Asami was so matter of fact, offhand almost. It hinted at so much, as though it was routine, as though he already knew what kind of activity took place in such a location with the same two people.

Akihito's breath shook. "Kondo."

Asami paused, his demeanour murderous. "Tell me what was in the video. Exactly."

Akihito didn't dare not to. "It was wobbly but... Kondo was already roughed up, on his knees, and you three stood around him. You said something about betrayal, and how this was the final atonement." Akihito faltered but Asami's expression didn't waver. "You shot him in the head. Gave the gun to Glasses, and that's when he looked at the camera, and... That was it."

"Did you see my face?"

Akihito blinked. "No, your back was turned."

"It couldn't have been someone else?"

"What? No, it's you. It might be your back but it's your back. You're... pretty hard to mistake."

Asami grabbed his phone out of his bathrobe pocket and placed a call. It was answered quickly.

"Tsubasa leaked it after all. I want Uehara's dossier within 24 hours, arrange a meeting early next week. If he doesn't agree, tell him I'm ready to discuss terms. We'll trap him then." He listened briefly before his voice hardened further. "No one achieves his position being clean, Kirishima. Find his jugular."

Asami sent the phone clattering across the counter. He inhaled through his nose and held it, as though seeking Zen in that single breath.

"You're doing it again," Akihito groaned, dropping his head in his hands as he rambled. "Is it just to wind me up or do you honestly not care what you say in front of me? 'Cos now I gotta ask who Tsubasa is, 'cos that was also the name on the thumb drive you made me hack for you, you know? And wow, I really shouldn't have said that 'cos I'm not meant to know but I guess it doesn't really matter anymore. But hey, you said full disclosure, so does that mean I get extra Don't Kill Akihito points for good behaviour? And who's Uehara? And – oh my God, are you being blackmailed?! 'Cos that did not sound like you're calling the shots which is so –"

The thud of a heavy glass object and the ensuing slosh broke through Akihito's panicked verbal haemorrhage. Asami poured two fingers and knocked back the amber liquid before turning to Akihito.

"Never keep something like this from me. I will always find out, better you tell me sooner rather than later."
Akihito couldn't compute what Asami was saying. "You make it sound like there'll be a next time."

"Your point?"

"I don't know! You're not going to kill me? I'm going to see something else like this? You tell me!"

Asami regarded him for a moment before he sighed, irritation pinching his brow. "I'm asking myself the same thing. I've sank bullets into people for less." His eyes were evaluating. "Why didn't you use it? You could have leaked it online or sent it to the police."

"Ah..." Akihito opened his mouth but no words came, wracking his brain for how he could possibly explain –

"You were going to..." Asami observed, menace dripping from his softly rumbling voice and from every fluid shift of ripcord muscles as he stalked forwards a step.

Akihito shrank back, having nowhere to go. Unless he hid in the fridge. "Yeah, well, but I didn't, ok? And that was all before you saved my life! I mean, you weren't exactly helping your own cause at the beginning, were you? The dodgy as hell flash drive? And the laptop with freaking bullets in them? Not to mention you flaunting your gun in my face. I was trying to get out of the firing line, as it were –"

Asami planted himself right in front of Akihito, his eyes narrowed to slits of golden shards. "That's why you left Sion. You wanted to clear out before you went public."

The fridge was becoming quite the appealing option. "Not that it worked, you tracked me down anyway. But then all that... stuff happened, and what the hell was I supposed to do!"

"Stuff?"

"Like the dinner! I mean, who spends a hundred million yen just for dinner? With me? Ok so it was for charity and your public image and blahdy blah, but seriously? And then..."

Asami leaned his hands on the counter on either side of Akihito. "Then we had sex."

Akihito flushed, shrinking back, the edge of the granite counter top digging into his back. "No! Well, yes, that happened – and I'll remind you I did not agree to that! Even if..."

A sculptured brow arched expectantly. "Even if?"

"Even if nothing! That's not where I was going with this! It was... They... There were so many of them..." Akihito shivered, his gaze lost in another dimension as he subconsciously wrapped his arms about himself. "You saved my life. Even when you knew they were after me and not you. And then you... didn't shoot me when... when you found out I'd..."

Asami leaned closer, forcing Akihito to bend away even more with one hand behind him on the counter. "So the video?"

Akihito shrugged, his eyes shifting. "It's toast. I mean, it looks like you have the Chief of the fucking Tokyo Met in your pocket but even he wouldn't have been able to help you if something like that had gone viral. I owed you my life, I couldn't chuck you in jail after all that. So we're even now. A life for a life."

He flinched as Asami raised a hand, but the long fingers only caught his chin, upturning his face, searching every corner. "How many copies did you make?"
"Just one! And I fried it, but you saw that. And the actual piece of the original hard drive is dust. Literally. Or maybe sludge. I ground it up and scattered it in the Sumida River."

A large hand slid around his neck. Hazel eyes widened in alarm and Akihito grabbed the corded forearm even though the grip wasn't suffocating, just very much there, telling Akihito that Asami could if he wanted.

But something had shifted in Asami's gaze, darker but in a different way, a faint curve playing on his lips. Akihito didn't so much feel like he'd be skinned alive any second as consumed.

"So you're the ticking time bomb," Asami rumbled. "Whatever you promise now, you still know. You still saw. And you can still talk."

Akihito yanked harder at the solid wrist but he couldn't move his head, held immobile and bent backwards awkwardly by the single hand securing his neck. The grip was getting steadily harder and unlike Suoh, there were no orders preventing Asami from hurting him.

But more than fear, Akihito was furious at the accusation. "I'm no flake," he was vehement. "Once I give my word, I don't go back on it. And I'm telling you, I won't tell anyone."

Asami smirked darkly. "I know."

Akihito flared. "You know? What, so you're scaring the shit out of me just for kicks? Fuck you!"

Akihito tried to shove the larger man away but Asami pressed himself against Akihito, his body firm and unyielding even with the denim, bathrobe and slacks between them. His sneer was unmistakably suggestive. "If you insist."

He leaned in further, his head tilting.

"Oh my God, you asshole, that's so not what I meant!" Akihito's brain was scrabbling frantically for a distraction, a diversion, anything... "Are you posturing?"

Asami actually froze in confusion, halfway to closing in on Akihito's lips.

Akihito had just thrown that out there, a crazy random last ditch effort. He ran with it. "The chimps do it, you know. I saw this nature documentary once about this one chimp, he wasn't anywhere near as big as the other males and even looked a bit bald from run-ins with the other apes. The females wouldn't pay him any attention and he'd had enough. So he was charging around throwing rocks and branches and making a whole lot of racket – ughh –"

The hand at his neck squeezed.

Asami drew back enough to look him straight in the eye. His voice was dead. Like, I will literally kill you and it's not even worth putting any emotion into it dead.

"You did not just try to compare me to a bald chimpanzee."

Ok, now he'd pissed Asami off. Akihito could feel it in the crackling waves like electricity sparking out from the bastard. Great going, Akihito. He quickly veered off in another direction. "Or are you scared?" he croaked passed the grip on his neck.

Another ominous pause from Asami.

Akihito honestly didn't think he'd fare any better with this but at least the diversion was working.
"Don't tell me I actually threw you for a loop? You're scared I'll expose the army of skeletons you've
got knocking about in your oversized closet and they'll lock you up for so long you'll be rolling out
on a mobility scooter? Scared I'll best you?"

The golden gaze narrowed, more in disbelief than anything else. "You're giving me reasons to shoot
you?"

Right. Yeah. That was dumb as fuck. Akihito laughed nervously. "Uh... Well... I... uh..."

He saw Asami search his face, seeing the genuine trepidation making him tremble. A smirk curved
Asami's mouth, with that familiar glint of arrogance and dark amusement back in his eyes that jolted
through Akihito.

Asami drew closer again, towering over him. "Fortunately for you, we both know you can never
hope to win against me."

Asami had just given him a save. They both knew it. But this was Akihito, he wasn't just going to
roll over and bow down in gratitude. They knew that too. He rallied right back up.

"And we both knew you'd say that. So why are you strangling me? Unless you're scared, that is, and
trying to make a point."

Asami ran the pad of his thumb up along the jumping jugular and tipped up Akihito's chin, his
whisky-tinged breath brushing Akihito's lips. "Baiting me, are we? Did no one teach you not to play
with fire?"

Akihito was pushing against Asami's chest but it was half-hearted at best. "Yeah, well, sometimes it's
the right thing to do even if it's dangerous. And once I decide to do something, no one can stop me."

Asami's lips barely brushed against Akihito's. "I do enjoy your challenges, Akihito."

"That wasn't a –"

Asami's hand slid around behind Akihito's neck and drew him into the kiss.

"Mmph –!"

Even that motion alone, so overbearing and not taking no for an answer, triggered a charged bolt
down Akihito's spine. He tried to shove Asami away but the bastard was like a boulder. Asami's
tongue pressed between his lips, entwining with his own, flooding him with Asami's taste that
squeezed his balls and stirred hunger deep in his gut.

He choked down the moan that wanted to escape him, managing to release it as a huff of air instead
that Asami swallowed up and, as though knowing what it had been, swept his tongue with even
more demand. Plunging deeper, Asami forced him to accept more and the stirring heat only
intensified.

The hand at his jaw, and the arm that slipped around his waist, they held him immobile but there was
no hand forcing his jaw apart. Akihito could bite him, draw blood. But he didn't. He couldn't.
Swamped by Asami's demand, he was honest enough to recognize he was saturated by his own
torrent of fierce desire.

When Asami drew back, a knowing glint in his eyes, it was an altogether different kind of fear that
slammed into Akihito.
When had he stopped fighting? Since when did he yield to a man like Asami? Unnamed emotions welled up inside him. Akihito fought free, the skin at his neck burning from twisting in the large hand until Asami let go. He managed to dart out the kitchen but then Asami was on him again and their wrestling carried them back to the settee, most likely by Asami’s design. Soon he was pinned down with his wrists and legs trapped under Asami’s weight again no matter how hard Akihito struggled.

"Let me go, damn it!"

"What are you so afraid of?"

That almost sounded like genuine concern from Asami. Shout at him, beat him, fine, but Akihito couldn’t take that warmth just then. He lurched, desperate to get away. But Asami caught both wrists in one hand, pulling the belt off his bathrobe with his other hand. Akihito fought harder when he saw this but to no avail, Asami soon had his wrists trussed together.

He was stunned to stillness when Asami actually rolled off him. Asami sat them both up, sitting beside him, half turned his way with one leg bent up on the settee.

"Are you so afraid to give yourself to me?"

"I'm not... That's not...!" Was that what he was doing? The column of skin exposed by the parted bathrobe was completely distracting. "I'm not giving myself to you. Who the hell talks like that?!"

"Isn't that why you told Sakazaki nothing about the shooting, or about Nishizuma's men, even when he threatened to have you shivved in jail?"

Akihito really shouldn’t have been surprised that Asami knew that.

"You didn't even mention the encrypted flash drive or the laptop. You could have spun quite the tale of my coercing you under duress."

"Why would I? You'd probably have sent your own men after me!"

"And the video? If you were really hell-bent on nailing me you would have posted it online as soon as you'd left Sion, or even as soon as you'd discovered it. You had... nine days, was it, before you eventually destroyed it."

Akihito’s eyes darted nervously. "That’s... That’s because you practically gave it to me." It wasn't even a tenuous excuse. It wasn't any reason at all because no way was he admitting that the idea of releasing it had made him feel physically sick.

"Is that so? Then perhaps I should tell you all my secrets. You can't use it if I'm the one who tells you, right?"

"You baka, that's not how it works!"

Asami sneered.

It only made Akihito more furious. "I will take you down Asami, and it'll be with evidence I find by myself. I don't need handouts." Some part of him was trying to warn him about stupid life choices, of which swearing to bring down Asami to Asami’s face most definitely counted as one, but it was a tiny voice drowned out amidst his swirling turmoil.

"We both know you won't take action against me."
"Watch me," Akihito snarled.

"Right. And that's why you almost got yourself killed saving my life? So you could bring me down?"

Akihito couldn't answer that. It had happened so fast, he'd reacted on instinct...

"Give it up, Akihito. It's not going to happen." So indifferent. Matter of fact.

Akihito saw red. He couldn't fathom why he reacted so strongly, unless it was true, which was simply too terrifying to consider. His work as Z4m4 Mr0 wasn't just what he did, it was part of his identity. Rooted in his core values, strengthened by his character, his publications were his declaration that he would expose one corrupt shadow at a time and would never be suppressed or silenced.

*Give it up? Never.*

Akihito was rearing up before he could register it, intending to shove Asami aside and leg it, but with his wrists bound he ended up swinging his joined fists at Asami like he was battering a volley ball over the horizon.

Unfortunately for Akihito, Asami was far too used to combat. Dodging came instinctively, jerking aside just enough to let the fists swing past and let Akihito throw off his own balance.

Doubly unfortunate for Akihito, he wasn't the most coordinated person. His legs tangled up and he toppled with a surprised yelp, his head launching on an unmistakable collision course with the corner of the coffee table.

Or it would have been, had Asami not caught him, snagging Akihito about the waist and yanking the smaller man in front of him. But Akihito's balance was too far gone, his momentum too great. Asami tried to tug him back onto the settee but Akihito ended up dragging them both down instead, tumbling clumsily to the floor with a grunt, Asami somehow landing beneath Akihito.

Akihito lay there staring up at the ceiling in stunned surprise, wedged between the table and sofa, with Asami's arm tight about his middle.

Akihito could feel it starting. And there was no controlling it. It tickled, bubbling up as surely as a bath fart, unaffected by how he was biting the inside of his cheek in an effort to contain it, until his shaking could no longer be disguised as coughing. Lying on top of Asami, his laughter spurted like a geyser.

Asami's sigh breezed across his shoulder, a simple gesture brimming with exasperation.

Akihito only laughed harder. An edge of hysteria crept in, then took over, until all the tension seeped out on a dry sob.

Completely drained, he dropped his head back on Asami's shoulder, his eyes fixed on the featureless white ceiling. It was so pristine that it was almost like staring into fog, with no focus point.

"I want to leave." He wasn't really asking. Though he really was.

Akihito wasn't sure why they were still lying there, on the tiny patch of floor between the table and settee. It was such a bizarre place to hold a conversation that it felt like neutral territory. Not that he thought Asami would subscribe to such thoughts. Bastard was probably just enjoying feeling Akihito lying on top of him.
Long fingers came into view before going up and past, settling on his head. One or two fingers idly slipped through his hair.

"And go where? I'll only find you again."

That didn't feel as ominous as Akihito would have expected. Maybe he was just too tired to muster objections.

He finally roused himself and – barring a brief grind against Asami's groin which he swore was totally accidental as he tried to get up with his wrists bound by the thick fluffy belt – he managed to plop himself back on the settee without further incident.

Asami rolled up and crouched between his knees. He still felt hemmed in, even though he was slightly looking down at Asami from this position. Asami's presence radiated out beyond his skin, engulfing Akihito whole.

Unable to meet Asami's gaze, or look anywhere near Asami with his robe parted and with nothing concealing the planes of chiselled muscle, the eight pack, the 0%-fat strictly-skin-only crease at his abdomen with the faint trail leading down...

Hauling his eyes away, Akihito stared resolutely down at the belt from Asami's bathrobe. It was a symbol of sorts. It was all out there, all his secrets, all the reasons why the man who ruled the Japanese underworld would make him disappear. And here he was, entirely at Asami's mercy.

"I already knew, Akihito."

Akihito was so zoned out that it took a few moments for the words to register. He searched Asami's face – impassive, a little amused at his expense, underlit with his signature arrogance. "Knew what?"

"What was it again?" Asami sneered. "'Misdemeanour computer trespassing', wasn't it?"

Akihito's eyes went huge. The exact description from his court sentence! "You knew?" He did not just squeak. He refused to admit he squeaked. "Since when?"

"After you ran into me and checked me out."

Akihito spluttered. "I did not!" He so did.

"You were such a mouthy brat I had Kirishima obtain your court records. I'd heard of Zama Miro before, of course, and we'd investigated without any results. Imagine my surprise to discover not only that it was you and that you'd targeted me, but that you were serving out your sentence by overhauling Sion's cyber security. I could appreciate the irony."

Akihito was getting paler and paler as Asami spoke. "...Shit."

Asami actually laughed. "Didn't you think it strange? Why would I make you hack an encrypted flash drive if I didn't know you were a hacker?"

"Why would you if you knew? Especially with you being my target!"

"It was a calculated risk."

"Hell of a risk."

"Why do you think I sent for you that day?"
"What do you mean, sent for me? That was by coincidence, Ogawa and Mitarai had food poisoning –" His words died at the knowing glint in Asami's eyes. "No way. Oh my god, that's just seriously disturbing. You realize that, don't you? Shit... What if I'd gotten sick too?"

"You wouldn't have suffered the same affliction, of course, though you didn't attend the meal in the end which made things easier."

"Oh, great, yeah, just what I've always wanted, to make things easier for you," Akihito snarked. "So you sent for me to see what I'd do with the USB stick? Jesus. I knew I should've walked out. You were sussing me out." He frowned as his mouth ran with his thoughts. "As in, testing me? To see if I'd blog or post anything about it? What if I had?"

Asami was pointedly silent.

Akihito gaped. "You were going to shoot me?!"

Asami's eyes narrowed. "It's no worse than releasing damaging information."

"Yes it is! A thousand times worse! I can't believe you were really going to shoot me!"

"You were going to cause me substantial difficulties."

"But I didn't!"

"Neither did I."

Silence descended, brittle as frozen crystal. Akihito glowered, Asami stared back, each as obstinate as the other.

Eventually Akihito slumped back on the settee. He would have been more comfortable without the fluffy binding. He huffed, waving his arms vaguely at Asami. "Is this really necessary?"

"Not in the slightest. I simply enjoy tying you up."

It wasn't fair that Akihito was the only one blushing at that comment. "You and your perverted kinks...."

Asami chuckled. "Did you really think I went around flashing my gun and threatening just anyone at Sion? I reserved you that privilege since you knew what I was."

"How the hell should I know! I can't begin to imagine what nefarious plots go through your twisted brain."

Golden eyes glinted. "I'm sure you'll figure this one out."

There was no mistaking the heated gleam in his eyes as Asami leaned in. Akihito backpedalled, so intent on putting some distance between them that he ended up scrambling backwards over the sofa backrest. He teetered at the top with the predicament he'd placed himself in and flailed uselessly, before crashing to the floor.

His groan of pain was met with laughter. It was that warmth wrapping around Akihito again, confusing and confounding him and tying him in knots. He seriously had to leave before... before...

He somehow tripped back onto his feet and scuttled for the front door –
Long arms wrapped around him from behind. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Anywhere you're not! Clearly."

"Not until I'm satisfied."

Whatever Akihito's furious outburst might have been was interrupted by the front door bell. A shadow of irritation flashed over Asami's face, but Akihito was sorely mistaken if he thought this would be his chance to slip away. Rather than letting go of him, Asami simply hauled him along as he went over to the intercom on the wall.

Akihito thought he vaguely recognized the suited man with the shortish black hair and wireframe glasses visible on the display, though he couldn't place him.

Asami kept one arm wrapped about Akihito as he went to press the button, which was when Akihito kicked out at the wall and shoved them both back a step, making Asami grunt.

"I like it when you're feisty," came the warm rumble in Akihito's ear.

"You pervert!" Akihito elbowed him in the gut and twisted and almost got free, but Asami jerked him back hard by the arm and smacked him backwards into the wall, winding him. Asami pinned him – Akihito distinctly felt the burgeoning interest between the muscular legs – as he reached for the intercom button again.

"Get Suoh to let you in, I have my hands full."

"You can easily free your hands up!" Akihito coughed as he fought to get his breath back, still struggling against the stronger man.

"Pardon the intrusion," floated a man's voice from the genkan.

"In here," Asami called back.

"You're seriously going to manhandle me in front of your visitor?"

"I told you, I'm not finished with you."

"Yes you are! I told you everything!"

The world abruptly spun as Asami hoisted him over his shoulder. "What the hell? You stupid Neanderthal, let me down!"

"What's... going on?" The visitor's voice came from somewhere nearby, standing in the living room doorway if Akihito had to hazard a guess. Not that Akihito would know, dangling over Asami's back with his ass up in the air.

"Oh, this?" Asami asked innocently. "It's nothing."

Akihito kicked out, trying to dislodge himself. "It's not nothing! I was just leaving!"

"Behave. Unless you want me to get the cuffs out."

Akihito froze dead still.

"No?" Asami smirked. "Well that's a shame."
"Do I even want to know?" the guy asked, sounding unimpressed.

"No. I can't offer you tea today."

"It's fine, this won't take long," the visitor said. "But I do need to speak to you."

Akihito frowned at the top-down view of Asami's bathrobed ass. Was this visitor not disturbed by Asami carting a body over his shoulder?

"What is it?"

The guy hesitated.

"Kuroda, I'm hard and I was about to haul this tight piece of ass to my bed. Make it quick."

Kuroda? Akihito half tried to place the name as he also wavered between being outraged or embarrassed to all hell. Or mortifyingly aroused... Eventually it was his blush that won out, and not just from the fireman's lift. "I can't believe you just said that..." he muttered, covering his face even though the visitor had only met the seat of his pants so far. "You perverted baka..."

"Quiet, you," Asami growled, though he didn't actually seem annoyed. "Save your endearments for when I'm ploughing into you and making you cry."

Akihito's furious objection to this outlandish notion was curtailed as Asami delivered a resounding slap on the butt, making him give a started yelp instead. "Argh!"

"TMI, Ryuichi..." the visitor groaned.

Ryuichi? Why the hell was this guy calling Asami so familiarly?

"Well?" Asami prompted impatiently.

"It's about that matter you wanted me to look into."

"Which one?"

"That hacker, Takaba Akihito."

Akihito went oh so very still.

"Oh, yes?" Asami's voice honeyed with amusement. "I thought it was all cleared up."

"The hit is, yes, the bounty has been dropped though there's something I'm still looking into. But that's not why I'm here. Some disturbing rumours are doing the rounds, involving you."

"Me?"

"Some say you've already dealt with him, others say you've claimed him. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

"What do you mean, 'claim' –!" Akihito tried to wiggle off Asami's shoulder but the man stopped him with a warning squeeze of his thigh. Akihito winced. Asami wasn't messing that time.

"How peculiar," Asami drawled.

"I thought so too. But no one's been able to verify either way, seeing as he seems to have gone to
"Has he now?" Asami mused. "And what was it you're still looking into?"

"Well we've been looking into how Nishizuma got his information, the anonymous tip. Someone delivered him Takaba's court records."

"Who?" Asami's voice was suddenly sharp.

"I've got a man on it but we have no leads so far. Whoever it was..." Kuroda shook his head. "The records are sealed for the punk's protection, and redacted. But the copy Nishizuma had was complete. If they have that kind of clout, you need to be careful."

Akihito had been feeling more and more faint, and now there was a wave of nausea as well. The threats he'd dismissed as insignificant, thinking it might just be some kid holed up in his bedroom pranking online...

"Let me down," he said quietly. "Seriously, Asami. Before I throw up."

Asami was uncharacteristically gentle as he slid Akihito off his shoulder and helped him upright, keeping a steadying hand on his shoulder until the immediate urge to hurl passed. He even unwound the bathrobe belt and released his wrists.

Being the right way up fortunately helped. Akihito was soon breathing easier. His fingers itched, needing to start digging, poking, prodding, to find the real identity behind this faceless threat...

The penny dropped. "Oh, bloody hell! That's Takaba!" Kuroda swore.

That was when Akihito recognized who it was – District Prosecutor Kuroda Shinji. Akihito had most recently seen him at Nishizuma's trial, both in person from a safe distance lost in the crowds as well as giving interviews on TV.

Kuroda rounded on Asami. "You've had him here all along? This is a bad idea, Ryuichi."

"There's no need to lecture, Shinji."

"I'm telling you, he's bad news!"

The Prosecutor seemed to hate him for some reason. Akihito tried not to take it personally.

"I'll be my own judge of that," Asami said, an edge in his voice.

A thought suddenly occurred to Akihito. "Wait... If you're the Prosecutor, why are you running around doing errands for Asami?"

Kuroda gave him a long, hard look before turning to Asami. "Did you know he was arrested when he decided to target you?"

"Oh, that's low," Akihito shook his head. "Why does everyone keep trying to throw me under the bus?"

Golden eyes swept over to him. "Everyone, Akihito? Even me?"

Akihito scowled. "No, not you..." he admitted grudgingly.

"Didn't you hear me?" Kuroda urged. "You were his next target."
Asami sighed. "I know."

"You know? And all you're doing is --" Black eyes blinked as Kuroda suddenly stopped. The shadows parted, his troubled expression clearing as he came to some conclusion. "Oh, I see... Well, in that case. I'll leave you to it."

"What."

Kuroda turned at the sharp demand. But he only gave Takaba a dismissive glance, clearly not deeming the punk worthy of his time, before continuing for the door.

Akihito surprised him, and himself, when he grabbed Kuroda's arm, spinning the Prosecutor back around. "What's Asami doing?"

Kuroda made an irritated sound, shaking Akihito off. Asami was doing that expressionless thing again, his face a cold marble mask that told Akihito nothing more than that the bastard was hiding something. And gauging Akihito's reaction. And planning his next move accordingly, no doubt something despicable and devious and totally in his own favour. Actually it told Akihito quite a lot...

Kuroda's black eyes flickered over to Asami. When Asami spread a hand in a *go ahead* gesture, he eventually explained, "I was going to say he's neutralising the threat."

Akihito drew back as though he'd been burned. *Neutralising...?* He stared at Kuroda, stared at Asami. And all of a sudden there was no air for his lungs, completely sucker punched, the ground whipped out from beneath him.

What was this aching feeling? What was this *hurt*?

"Of course," Akihito said bitterly. "So that's why. All of it." He laughed. His voice sounded strange, stilted and trembling just a little. Why were those golden eyes so intense? Asami looked angry – downright flaming furious, in fact – but surely Akihito must be mistaken.

Asami advanced, his steps heavy and purposeful and ominous. "Of course that must be it. Why else? Why else would I save you from a lecherous drunk and take you out for dinner? Why else would I save you from a hit with your name on it?" He advanced further, backing Akihito in turn, his voice harsh. "Why else would I indulge myself and cross the line that I never cross of mixing business with pleasure?" Golden eyes scorched a hole right into Akihito's soul. Another step and Akihito's back hit the wall. "Why else would I dispatch valuable resources to keep you safe? Why else would I bring you to my own fucking home?"

The rare obscenity was practically a snarl. A large hand fisted in Akihito's t-shirt, hauling him close and up to his toes as Asami loomed over him.

Akihito could only grasp Asami's robe, trembling. "Asami..."

Molten eyes blazed furiously. "What else could it be except to *neutralise the threat*?"

Why was Asami so pissed off? What had Akihito done? He had no more time to think when Asami plundered his mouth, taking him in a brutal kiss. He winced, fighting against the barricade of Asami's broad chest, but there was no messag with the devil. Akihito's tongue felt like it would tear, the zing of copper blending with Asami's taste in his mouth.

By the time Asami drew back, tear tracks arced from shimmering hazel eyes. The extreme edge seemed to have eased off from Asami's fury but there was no mercy in the harsh lines of his stunning face. The hand buried in Akihito's top slid up, wrapping around the back of the slim neck. It was
high-handed and overbearing, unquestionably territorial.

"The only freedom you have in this world is in my hands, Akihito." His voice was at once hard and soft, the rumbling baritone absolute.

Any other time, Akihito would have been hurling insults and objections. But right now he couldn't understand the crushing ache consuming him. Did he want there to be something more? He felt like he was desperately hoping but without any idea as to what. There was too much happening all too fast, and he couldn't get his thoughts clear being so close to Asami.

All he could manage was a question, plaintive and raw. "What does that even mean?"

Asami smirked darkly, without humour. "A life for a life, wasn't it? Your freedom is in my hands. And it seems you hold mine."

Did he mean the footage? But Akihito had destroyed that... Akihito felt like he was being washed away in the tidal wave that was Asami, his aura forceful and overwhelming.

There was a soft thud and a click. The front door. Akihito had all but forgotten about the Prosecutor. "Was that Kuroda?"

"You're not talking about him now."

"I was only..." Akihito stuttered to a stop, his mouth all but forgotten as Asami threw off his bathrobe. Literally wrenched it off and flung it away.

"You'd better not start mentioning other men when we're having sex, Akihito. It won't turn out well for you."

But Akihito barely heard.

Hot. As. *Fuck*.

Broad, powerful shoulders, the high ledge of his pecs, the very definition of washboard abs. Not an ounce of fat, not even just muscle though there was plenty of it, but power.

There was no inconvenient towel in the way now, Akihito was awarded an unobstructed view. Asami was only half naked but the more uncomfortably tight Akihito's jeans became, the more his entire vocabulary seemed to deteriorate until it simply became *Fuuuck*.

Asami started yanking the crumpled t-shirt up Akihito's lean torso.

"Wait – Asami, wait!"

The sudden note of genuine horror gave Asami pause.

Akihito grabbed Asami's left arm, pushing and tugging insistently until Asami relented with a grunt and held it out to the side.

Akihito stared transfixed at the massive bruise covering Asami's side over the ribs. It looked like someone had lobbed tubs of dark paint at it, a canvas of angry modern art. Black and blue and purple, it spread larger than the span of his hand over the ribs, over the bulge of muscles Akihito didn't even have and curving out of view around the back.

Akihito reached with shaking fingers, the tips feathering the marred skin. He remembered that blow, the thud of the giant's elbow. It had to hurt like a bitch, maybe even broken, even if Asami betrayed
no outward sign of discomfort. It was probably a self-preservation thing. Weakness would be a death sentence in Asami's dog-eat-dog world, the strongest standing upon the crushed bodies of their enemies.

So why had the mightiest of them all cast his mantle over a scrap like Akihito?

"What did it mean?" Akihito sought the answer in the intense glow gazing back at him, wanting – needing – to understand. "Your protection – what did it mean?"

The ghost of irritation shadowed Asami's brow. The seconds ticked by from an unseen clock. Akihito was starting to think that Asami wouldn't answer when the taller man finally conceded.

"It means," – the emphasis on the present tense was heavy, accompanied by an equally heavy sigh – "more than you need to know."

It told Akihito precisely nothing, but even this was given with extreme reluctance. Asami was clearly not going to relinquish anything more on this angle.

There was something else that mattered to Akihito. He couldn't pretend that it didn't. "Why?"

Asami tipped up Akihito's chin. "You can figure that one out yourself," was Asami's unhelpful suggestion before he took Akihito's lips in a kiss that was just as demanding but without the earlier brutality.

Akihito's hands were tentative on Asami's chest without any material to hold on to, mindful of the huge-ass bruise. Asami's tongue swiped, swept, stirred his own, and Akihito might have – maybe, possibly, just a tiny bit – kissed back.

Then Asami was stripping off his slacks and Akihito's brain was fried all over again. Heedless of Akihito miraculously still being fully dressed, Asami stood there in all his naked, formidable, sizeable glory without an ounce of shame. And why the hell not? He was Adonis in the flesh.

"Someone pinch me."

Akihito wasn't aware that he'd actually muttered his dazed sentiment aloud until Asami smirked, brimming with arrogance and that amusement that often glinted in his eyes as he regarded the brat.

Akihito was pushed down to his knees. He wasn't entirely opposed to the idea as Asami caught his hair in a tight grip that sent blood coursing south and made the tight denim borderline painful. Asami wasted no time and thrust into his mouth.

Fail. Akihito heaved, the sudden motion scraping teeth against the engorged length as his throat protested violently and he pulled away coughing.

Asami hissed, though his tone was still darkly playful. "Do you want me to punish you, Akihito? I will if you use your teeth again."

"It's your fault for going so deep!"

"Then why don't you show me how it's supposed to be done?"

Akihito gaped, before realizing that maybe he shouldn't be kneeling where he was with his mouth hanging open and promptly snapped it closed. He looked between Asami's dark smirk and the erection that seemed to have grown even more... He'd walked right into that one.
"This is gonna suck."

Asami actually snorted.

Akihito winced. "Pun not intended. I..." He'd never done this before. It was going to be nothing like when Asami had blown him, the warm throat muscles working magic around Akihito's tip... He fought the blush trying to bloom across his face, not very successfully. "You'll probably regret this."

He figured that Asami would probably just choke him with it anyway, or maybe that was just his excuse. Tentatively, very unsure of himself, he reached for the sizeable length and stretched his lips around the engorged mushroom tip.

He slid forwards, feeling the contours as he took Asami as deep as he could go before he was about to gag – which wasn't even halfway. His hands fluttered until they eventually settled on the cording muscles of Asami's thighs. He slid himself back, resting just the tip in his mouth and licked around the considerable circumference, finding he had to work his tongue as far around as he could physically go to encircle Asami's considerable size. He circled several times, amazed at the smoothness. He slid forwards again, still only managing halfway before withdrawing, swirling again with his tongue. Then he did it again, and again, mystified at the unusual taste that seeped through his mouth – until realization suddenly struck him and bloomed a startling flush across his cheeks. Asami's pre-cum... His eyes drifted up along the light trail he'd spotted earlier leading to the belly button, over the ripcord muscles flexing in response to what Akihito was doing, up past the chiselled jaw...

Golden eyes blazed down at him, fingers loose amidst blond strands. Asami started shifting, smooth and slow, every glide forward carefully controlled, zeroed in on Akihito's every reaction and flicker of the eyes, gauging the exact moment before he gagged, when Asami would withdraw before commencing the same torturous invasion again. Asami was taking back control and Akihito's breathing strained, as his body heated and stirred and his own arousal throbbed. He dared to reach for the balls hanging heavy, wrapping his hand around them. He might have sniggered at the notion of having Asami by the balls, literally, had his lips not been otherwise and fully occupied. Asami's hand tightened in his hair and his hips thrust further, still the same steady, careful glide, but deeper.

Too deep. Akihito went to draw back but Asami's grip in his hair tightened and he pressed slowly further. Akihito tried to break free again, pushing against the strong thighs, but Asami didn't let up. He pressed forwards even slower now, so slowly that Akihito's gag reflex reacted with a series of little chokes rather than any giant heaves. Akihito tried to shake his head as the swollen tip nudged insistently against the back of his throat, blinking away the tears clumping his eyelashes, but Asami brushed the hand not holding him in place through his hair.

"You can do it, Akihito. Swallow me down."

Akihito tried as Asami kept pressing deeper, tried to relax around the thick intrusion descending one slow millimetre at a time and pulling small choking sounds from him. Asami held still several times as Akihito's gut threatened to upend its contents, but Asami wasn't deterred, murmuring reassurance and soon resuming his drawn-out pursuit for the bottom of Akihito's throat. Speared with eyes that burned like the fires of hell, Akihito wondered at his own aching arousal as his eyes leaked and he slowly choked.

"I knew you could put that impudent mouth of yours to good use," Asami murmured, his voice rough and warm.

Akihito had taken the whole length down to the dark nest at the root. His cheeks burned at the sight he must be presenting – his eyes damp but still lit with defiance to counter his self-consciousness,
saliva running down from the corners of his mouth, throat extended around the sizeable intrusion, noticeably hard as he was made to wait on his knees.

Golden eyes dilated almost to midnight, Asami withdrew, steady enough to allow the throat muscles to relax back down, pulling free with a messy pop.

Akihito was hauled to his feet, pressed back against the wall. He was still trying to reestablish his equilibrium, leaning there on shaking legs, when his top was dragged up over his face.

"Wait, I – mmph!"

His tee was left trapping his arms up overhead as Asami silenced him with his own mouth, working on the flies and growling when he could taste himself on Akihito's tongue. Akihito tried bringing his top back down but he could only pull it down behind Asami's head, which only pulled the man further into the kiss while the top dug across the stitches on his arm, so the only way to free his arms was to yank them out of his t-shirt.

But by then Asami had his denim and boxers halfway down his legs.

"Asami, wait!" He toppled but Asami caught him, hoisting up a knee to free the leg, leaving the jeans and boxers bunched around the other leg.

"What for?" Asami mused, shoving two long fingers between his lips.

"Nngh!"

Asami dipped his head and sunk into the slender neck, a delicious drag of teeth below Akihito's ear that had him groaning and almost collapsing at the flash of pleasure that bolted down his spine. He didn't know when he'd started sucking on Asami's fingers, lost as he was to the kisses and nips and caress along his neck and jaw.

It wasn't long before Asami withdrew his fingers, slipping his hand down between Akihito's ass cheeks and plunged the slick fingers into the puckered entrance. Akihito gasped, raising up on his toes at the sudden intrusion, eyes smarting at the burn.

"Asami, slow down!"

He almost buckled at the sharp pinch on his nipple. The aggressive, swirling torment on his neck kept him stirred almost to full mast despite having no other friction against his erection, the fingers scissored, stretching him wider, hitching his breath, flushing his skin.

"Asami..."

Asami hooked an arm behind Akihito's knee and hoisted it up, yanking off the jeans and boxers that dangled from the ankle, stretching Akihito wide as his fingers thrust deeper. Akihito dropped his head back to the wall, his coordination impaired, struggling with his precarious balance on one leg. He clutched at the muscled shoulders as Asami seemed to take his exposed neck as invitation and scraped his teeth along the thumping artery.

The fingers suddenly withdrew and Akihito juddered from the loss. Before he could process his disappointment, Asami was aligning himself –

"No, wait! Asami –!"

His cry of alarm was cut dead as Asami plunged to the hilt in one forceful thrust. Akihito gasped,
eyes flying wide, tears filling and spilling over, mouth wide and silent. When Asami didn't move further, his gasp broke free, shuddering out of him as he wrapped his arms about Asami's neck in an attempt to ease the splitting fullness, his head falling onto his arms.

"Fuck, that hurts!"

"Relax, Akihito."

Akihito could feel the subtle trembling of powerful muscles as the man forced himself to hold still.

"Bastard, I told you to slow down!"

Asami nudged against his cheek until he turned, licking up the flushed cheeks and catching the tear drops that had escaped, before capturing his lips. It was sensual and warm, Asami's tongue soothing, sparking a delicious tightness right down his spine.

"Nobody else can give you pleasure like I can," Asami murmured against his mouth.

"It fucking hurts!"

"Without darkness there's no light. Without pain there's no pleasure."

"Yes there is!"

"Pleasure like I give you, Akihito? Where you swallow your pride to beg me to let you come because that's how much I make you want it? There's only me, Akihito. At that moment when you ache for ecstasy, only I can give you the pain and pleasure to set you free."

Akihito's cheeks burned. "Who the fuck talks like that?" It wasn't the first time he'd asked that this evening. "And anyway, sex against the wall doesn't work. Trust me, I know."

Yeah, been there, done that, got the t-shirt. That had been a mutually embarrassing and – in hindsight – hilarious evening with Risa that he was never going to speak of involving the first aid box and a towel-wrapped bag of frozen veg that had to be pressed against a rather delicate place.

Something flared within the golden orbs. "Is that so?"

Alarm bells started blaring at the dangerous tone but it was already too late. Akihito didn't even have time to talk his way out of it before Asami proceeded to prove him completely and utterly mistaken.

Asami bent to loop his free arm behind Akihio's other knee... The one he was standing on...

"No no no no, Asami –!

With a totally wicked gleam, Asami easily hooked up the knee, suspending Akihito against the wall with his legs spread over Asami's arms, parting him wide, making him frantically grab onto Asami's shoulders.

"You're hurt, you shouldn't be –"

Akihito ended up gasping into Asami's mouth as the man began to move his hips, a leisurely press followed by an equally slow withdrawal, just shallow motions that didn't hurt any more than the dull ache that Akihito had realized it had become. It was mind-boggling to think that Asami had waited until he finally relaxed.

"See how you take me to the hilt. Your ass is hungry for me, sucking me in, squeezing –"
"Oh my God, would you shut up..."

To be honest Akihito had expected the bastard to just plough into him, but as Asami resumed his delectable, painful, soothing, electrifying path down his neck, Akihito realized Asami was still holding back, stirring the smaller man up again but waiting, the gratification never one sided, pacing himself until Akihito relaxed more and his breathing became heavier, still waiting, until Akihito's hips moved –

Asami deepened, angling just a little more until Akihito's back arched, his eyes flying open, unaware how he grasped the broad shoulders raising scratch marks and leaving crescent indents.

"There it is."

There was no going back then. That was when Asami took his pleasure and forced Akihito to follow, the smaller arousal slapping between them, skin slapping obscenely, pounding so deep that Akihito moaned helplessly, low and long, half surprised he wasn't smashed through the wall.

"Asami..."

Anchored onto Asami's shoulders, Akihito was slowly losing himself as he tilted his hips to take Asami deeper, burying himself in the excuse of being forced while hungrily squeezing Asami all the while.

He grabbed himself and groaned. But Asami shifted one of his legs up to the shoulder – since when could Akihito bend like that? – and freed his hand to grab Akihito's wrist, pinning it to the wall.

Akihito made a garbled noise of protest. "I need to..."

"Not yet."

Asami thrust even faster and deeper then and stars dotted Akihito's vision as pressure built deep in his pelvis, that still rather unfamiliar force that had nothing to do with his erection.

"I'm – I'm –"

It sounded desperate and needy but Akihito couldn't care at that point. Releasing his wrist, Asami grabbed the weeping length trapped between them and fisted it hard. Akihito's moans filled the room as a tidal wave surged from deep in his pelvis and his balls tightened –

"Asami!"

The dual orgasm surged through him, overwhelming and unstoppable, the climax from his nerves buried deep inside crashing together with the cum splattering their chests. But Asami was still thrusting, and he was oversensitive and it was too much, too raw, too strong, until the larger man buried deep and shuddered against him, groaning his own release as teeth caught Akihito's shoulder and sent stars spinning out across the canvas of Akihito's scattered mind.

Octopus-limbed and hazy-eyed, Akihito could only remain suspended until Asami collected himself. Even then his struggle to free himself was token at best, easily overpowered as Asami scooped him off the wall and carried him to the bedroom.

Still connected, Asami lowered Akihito onto the massive bed and pressed him into it, uncaring of the gloopy mess sticking their bodies together.
"Eww..."

Asami silenced him with a kiss, deep and hungry and demanding, his hands now available to roam and caress and pinch and scrape and feather over Akihito's oversensitive skin.

Akihito groaned. "Give it a rest already."

But Asami began to thrust again, somehow hard again, or still hard, Akihito had no idea which.

"I can't, I can't anymore –"

Still thrusting with purpose, Asami caught his jaw and drew him in, the other hand pinning one of Akihito's wrists down. "Take what I give you, Akihito. Let yourself go."

Asami was relentless. Plundering deep, he drove Akihito through and beyond the oversensitivity until Akihito was trembling, almost fearful of the sheer intensity of the storm within. Asami was unshakable in his demand.

Akihito was swept helplessly along, raised up, teetering... "A- Asami?"

Everything was burning, not just his body but the entire landscape of his mind. Asami continued to pound down all his walls, forcing all his fears and confusion to the fore, until it surged through him, carried on his thundering pulse. The emotional hurricane Asami left in his wake, all the confusing contradictions – the inescapable darkness and fierce protection, brutal fury and indulging warmth, forceful demand and self-denying reciprocation.

"Tell me, Akihito. Tell me what you need."

It was too much, more than Akihito could bear. He was aware of it this time, that moment when he gave up control. He stopped fighting, held blindly onto Asami, and let himself be drowned by such intense gratification that throbbed and resonated to the marrow.

"Asami, please..."

Submission, at last. Asami became another being entirely, unrestrained in his absolute dominance over Akihito's every move and sensation and feeling, frightening and exhilarating all at once.

Molten gold blazed into shimmering hazel. "Darkness and fire. Pain and pleasure. Subjugation and freedom. I'll give you everything, Akihito."

With the nectar of their coupling and shuddering breaths bridging the space between them, it was crushingly intimate as Asami consumed every inch Akihito gave. He burned Akihito up with such overwhelming sensations that the younger man entirely forgot anything other than Asami and what the Adonis was doing to him, until he clung to Asami and sobbed his name and hurtled through the cosmos all over again.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Sorry to keep you waiting for this! I was down with heavy flu. It wiped me out for a whole week and I was so out of it that it's taken a while to get my head back in gear. Everyday life was a bit jarring to return to, let alone two intense characters like these!

Your feedback has been amazing, I love being able to discuss this with you! Funny though how you can say opposite things on the same point – I can't win! haha (^^) I remain my own worst critic (every time I post a chapter I'm convinced it's the worst one yet...) so all your comments, kudos and bookmarks make me incredibly happy. I'll keep trying my best!

When you get there, about 2/3 of the way through the chapter, the song is 'I For You' by LUNA SEA. Lyrics translations are my own. Youtube has several versions if anyone fancies a backing track to that part of the chapter.

~ Nyx ~

Monday.

Maeda's flurry of apologies drew a blank.

"Why, what happened?" Akihito asked unsurely.

She looked at him as though he was a few screws loose. "I put you in a position where you couldn't refuse even if you wanted to."

Akihito once again came up empty. Actually that was a lie – things came to mind alright, just not what Maeda could possibly be referring to. Skin on skin... White hot, paralysing, heart-thumping, blinding pleasure...

She had to spell it out for him. "The bachelor auction? With Asami-sama?"

"Oh, right! Yes, that..." What a relief. It already felt like a lifetime ago when it was only the Saturday night just gone. Being with Asami tended to have that effect, like he'd been sucked into a world of decadence and debauchery where normal laws of time and relativity didn't apply.

"You still look peaky. I knew you weren't well."

Akihito laughed it off as lightly as he could. "I'm perfectly fine, just uh, too much of an adrenaline-high weekend." That was one way of putting it. "And it's good everything worked out with the auction. Honestly, I'm glad. There's nothing for you to be sorry for."

Ai was giving him that look again as though trying to figure out what he wasn't saying, but Maeda seemed reassured. But then, reluctantly, she dropped the bomb.

The judge had issued his community service transfer back to Sion, starting that very day.
That arrogant bastard! Akihito was this close to losing it. "Are you really sure, Maeda-san?"

The elderly lady flapped the printed form under his nose. It was the same one that Akihito had had rushed through to transfer him out of Sion, only this time it dropped him right back in the dragon's lair. Asami must be laughing his smoking hot ass off. If he wasn't fuming at Akihito's little escapade, that was...

"I don't really understand it myself. This yo-yoing is quite unusual, usually these community service orders are settled for months at a time."

"I'm sorry for all the trouble, I wish I didn't have to go."

"It's been good to have you here." The lady clapped him on the shoulders, squeezing with surprising strength. "You're a good boy, Akihito-kun. You take care of yourself."

"You too, Maeda-san. Thank you for everything."

"Don't be a stranger!" she waved as she rushed off to deal with some volunteers having a heated discussion over event plans.

Ai bumped his shoulder and a card was pressed into his hand. It had cute bunnies bouncing around a cell number.

She lacked her usual lustre, her eyes sombre. "Come back and see us, won't you?"

Akihito felt bad, knowing she was still getting over the stalker incident and could use a friend. "You know I will, Ai-chan."

He tried not to limp as he headed for the subway station.

It had actually been surprisingly easy to slip away, just a matter of timing, a touch of luck, and five seconds of embarrassing courage. Asami had stripped off right in the middle of the bedroom, smirking at Akihito's pink-cheeked gawking, and left him checking his phone – it had only been in Asami's bedside drawer all along – before heading for the shower. The beeline to the front door had fortunately revealed not Suoh, but one of the guards who'd stood by red-faced during the *Didn't I let you come when you begged* altercation outside Kou's building. So Akihito had simply walked out, sniping over his shoulder as though in mid conversation – "Like I give a shit, you perverted bastard! You're familiar with your right hand, aren't you, you only re-acquaint yourself to it *multiple times a day!*" It had worked a treat. The guard had frozen with embarrassment splashed all over his face and wouldn't even meet Akihito's eyes when he'd tried to share an eye roll. A hop, skip and a jump – and making sure his collars were up on his jacket lest anyone thought he'd been attacked by a wild animal, 'cos seriously, the bastard had gone to town and pretty much covered his entire body with evidence of their mortifying activities! – and he'd split.

He wasn't running away. There was no such thing as running from Asami. No, this was... a strategic withdrawal. Detox. His brain turned to useless mush around the man and Akihito didn't even know anymore what were his own thoughts and what Asami was making him feel. For however many hours or days Asami decided to allow him this time, he needed breathing space that wasn't saturated with Asami's addictive scent to wrestle the confusing jumble in his head to something remotely resembling order.

Akihito absent-mindedly beeped his suica card and followed the steady stream of commuters dotted with high school students through the turnstiles.

Was he just getting swept along by the tidal wave that was Asami? Or was this actually him? Not
that he'd spent all that much time thinking about it, but he'd always assumed he'd settle down at some point, hopefully with someone who understood that he was never going to hold down a 9-to-5. He wasn't bothered about having a big home, just a happy one with friends always coming and going, and their kids would run to Uncle Takato to get them out of the tight spots that Uncle Kou always got them into. There were even a couple of dozy tortoises in the picture if he thought hard enough.

He was jostled along by the people around him as they flowed down the stairs to the platform.

He knew it was stereotypical, a rose-tinted image that would have never quite matched the reality. Other than Kou always getting his kids into mischief, of course, 'cos that was a given.

But this?

At no point did his imagined future ever feature an honest-to-god crime lord, for fuck's sake, with an infuriating ego the size of his vast, illegal territory, who had his wicked way with Akihito and totally blew his socks off to the next dimension and then some.

I'll give you everything, Akihito.

What the hell amounted to everything between darkness and fire to a man like Asami? Something throbbed inside Akihito just thinking about it. But was the man even serious? It certainly felt like he was, what with saving Akihito's life and that stuff about protection, whatever it really meant. And there was all that aggressive rage too when Akihito, for just a very brief moment, had been taken in by Kuroda's disparaging comment. But Asami could attract anyone in the world that he wanted, someone cultured, of equal sophistication, not a noisy and nosy brat. So why Akihito, except as a source of passing amusement?

Shit, was he really considering this? Was he seriously entertaining the idea of a future with Asami? Akihito wasn't even aware of having ground to a dead stop in the middle of the bustling platform, morphing into a human bollard.

He'd only known the bastard a stone's throw over a fortnight, for pity's sake – and all his time investigating Asami's shady underdealings before literally running into him didn't count. Because, hello, shady underdealings?

Why was Akihito even mulling this over? He must be out of his mind.

Someone smashed into his shoulder as they rushed past. Jarred back to his surroundings, Akihito managed to stumble into the subway car just as the doors were closing.

How could there possibly be a future between them when Akihito could only be a giant pain in the ass for precisely the kind of person like Asami? Only ruin and misery awaited them down such a path. Though he supposed there was always the option of both getting busted and serving time together, where Akihito would while away the days with such contemplations like To drop or not to drop the soap...

He snorted, drawing disconcerted glances from the people packed in behind him.

In all likelihood Asami would soon tire of him and Akihito would just put this all down to a passing phase, a bit of experimentation before he settled down with a nice sweet girl, someone who saw the good in people rather than shooting them, and they'd have nice, safe, predictable, vanilla sex once a month...

His head fell onto the window with a dull thud. It was impossible. He couldn't even imagine having 'normal' sex now, where he wasn't left a total wreck, where every high wasn't a life-changing
experience, where golden eyes didn't light him up with burning, desperate desire...

Forget Asami ruining him at some indeterminate point in the future; Asami had ruined him already.

"I hate you," Akihito grumbled to the window, making people glance at him again. They probably thought he was off with the fairies in his head. Yeah, it was a riot.

Akihito focused his eyes beyond his conflicted reflection to the dark tunnel rushing past. And with it rushed the most frightening admission of all – how he wanted, so much, for it to mean something.

Akihito marched straight to the judge's office.

It was the principle of the thing. He might have agreed to the transfer back to Sion, had Asami bothered to ask. But no, respecting Akihito's wishes was clearly beyond the realms of possibility. So Akihito, in turn, was obliged to kick up a storm.

As expected, however, the judge wasn't budging.

"Who put pressure on you?" Akihito demanded, knowing the answer already.

The judge wasn't giving an inch even if he knew the whole thing was iffy. "It came from above, that's all I can say. My hands are tied, Takaba-san." And then the grey-haired judge looked at him with genuine concern, "Are you sure you're fine on your own? I heard about the incident on Saturday night, perhaps you should stay with someone for the time being?"

Of course Akihito was fine. He'd been fine since, he'd be fine now. He didn't understand why the judge was asking. Still, he got several days signed off for sympathetic leave.

He was fine all the way back to the subway station, all the way in the subterranean tin can, all the way along the well-beaten path to his apartment building. He was fine until he stared across the street up at the walkway to his front door, the blue and white crime scene tape flapping lazily in the breeze – when all of a sudden he wasn't.

They'd come to kill him. Ten armed men had come after him, only three of them had walked away. It hit him like a sledgehammer. If Asami hadn't been there, if Asami hadn't been as fast or as strong or as skilled, if Asami hadn't been as ruthless and dispatched seven of them with lethal, ruthless precision...

Knees shaking, heart pounding, barely able to breathe, Akihito staggered blindly into the nearest wall, struck by the reality of just how close he'd come to kicking the bucket. And it was only in that moment, suffocating in all the breathing space that he'd thought he'd wanted, that he realized how much Asami had insulated him from the shock and trauma of it all.

Not too long ago it would have been Yama-san that Akihito would have called, burying his fears and laughing it off while being buoyed by grumpy concern, ribbing the detective for being old and slow and demanding they finish up already so he could get back into his home.

But now there was only one name on his lips. "Asami..." Knees buckling, he slid down the wall, squeezing his eyes shut. "Fuck..."

Akihito finally made it to Kou's place two hours later.
His friend was out at work. He let himself in, he always did. Soaking in the bath here was a first though. He floated in the hot water, his injured arm dangling out of the tub to keep the dressings dry. Strangely drawing comfort from his faintly aching back, he let his mind wonder, which seemed stuck on endless cycles that always returned to golden eyes...

Emotionally drained, he barely made it to the settee before he fell onto it face first and into a dead sleep.

"Yo, dude!"

Akihito was instantly wide awake, starting so badly that he'd scrambled over the back of the settee before he knew what he was doing. He stood in the middle of the living room wild-eyed and panting as Kou looked on in shock.

"Aki?"

It was only Kou, back from work, his creased suit worn with obvious reluctance, little more than a nod at his employment status, his shirt hanging out on one side, his tie already removed somewhere.

"Shit..." The gasp bled out of Akihito as he sagged, only saved from falling by the back of the sofa and Kou who rushed over and caught him. He'd already been jumpy after the mugging. Delayed reaction after the shooting had left him a nervous wreck.

"Sorry," Akihito muttered, still with a death grip on his friend's arm. He gave a hollow laugh. "I'm a bit fucked up right now."

Kou opened his mouth, but closed it again, uncharacteristically at a loss for words. "I'm not surprised, something like that..." he said eventually. "Aki, I'm sorry. You should've called."

Akihito shook his head. "I wasn't... It's only since this morning. I was fine all yesterday."

"With Asami?"

Akihito nodded hesitantly, unsure how much he wanted to reveal just yet.

"D'you wanna talk about it?"

Akihito didn't think he could get the words out. "No. I really don't."

Kou considered him for a long while, probably wondering if it was wise to push it. "Well..." he started, and Akihito tensed, expecting a hundred probing questions... "I totally broke my dick today."

There was a pause. Then Akihito didn't know if he was laughing or crying as he let Kou blatantly distract him with a ridiculous debate on whether it was possible to get deep vein thrombosis in one's dick having to sit still for a mind-numbing 3-hour meeting wearing too-tight underpants.

They didn't even discuss Akihito staying with Kou. It was a no-brainer.

He drifted between the four narrow walls of Kou's apartment. Or at least, he did during the day, frequently glancing down at the street for a certain vehicle that didn't appear.

Akihito woke up gasping that night, bolting to his feet off the settee, expecting to be set upon by marauders with monster heads wielding machetes and shoulder-launched missiles, his dreams conjuring up warped exaggerations of his fears. Covered in cold sweat and thoughts racing, he stared...
at the front door, expecting it to burst open any moment...

Leaving Kou a text message to explain his whereabouts, Akihito snuck out to a 24-hour internet cafe just a block away. Dodgy men hunkered down behind their screens blatantly watching porn but Akihito couldn't spare the energy to care. He simply couldn't stay in the apartment at night.

Tuesday.

Was this the bastard having a dig at Akihito for leaving the condo?

Asami, with a disarmingly charming smile turned towards the supermodel on his arm, had been photographed leaving a high-class restaurant the previous evening.

But that smile wasn't real. Akihito knew that look, the one that hoodwinked most everyone else from seeing the true shadows within. Glaring at the insane hotness that effortlessly outshone all the other glamorous people on the webpage, Akihito tore his eyes away from the celebrity news page.

"So.... You and Asami-sama, huh?"

Akihito froze with the food halfway to his mouth. He'd known this was coming at some point, he supposed he should be grateful Kou had waited until he'd pulled himself together a little. "We're not..." Akihito waved his chopsticks still holding the slice of *tonkatsu* [pork cutlet in breadcrumbs], floundering for words. He came up empty and gave up, dropping his chopsticks back down. "Ugh, I don't know what we are."

"But you're together, right?"

"It's too complicated, ok? Like, super complicated. *Astronomically* complicated."

Kou leaned forward on his elbows. "So you're saying that it *could* be more than just fabulous sex?"

"Kou!" A blush crept up Akihito's cheeks. "I knew it! You *did* have fabulous sex! Takato was convinced you were just making out, maybe a bit handsy –"

Akihito groaned.

"– but I reminded him you were already sucking face right in front of us –"

"Oh my God –"

"– so why would you love birds need to disappear on us for a whole day and night if not to up the ante?"

"Ugh..." Akihito dropped his head on the table.

"I was right! Our best bud was having hot kinky sex with the hunkiest guy in all of Japan!"

Akihito was mightily glad his friend couldn't see his face right now. "I really hate you sometimes."

Kou grinned. "Grumpy much?"

"Boundaries!"
"But it's sex! We always talk about it. True, you're thin on the details and we have to poke and prod and guess it out of you, but it's never bothered you much before when you've been with a girl. Why is it any different just 'cos Asami's a smoking hot sex god?" Kou suddenly gasped, barrelling on in a conspiratorial whisper before Akihito could object to that description. "Unless he matters?"

"What's with that weird voice? He doesn't matter, he's –" Akihito could hardly spill that Asami was the nation's top crime lord. "He has the worst personality. He's controlling. And domineering. And arrogant and self-righteous and conceited. And he never listens!"

Kou sniggered messily, struggling to hold in a laugh.

Akihito grimaced. "Shit, he's turned me into a girl."

Kou stared for all of one amazingly stunned second – then he was howling with laughter, collapsing over the table and slapping it repeatedly, crying so hard he couldn't see a thing. In between his gasping hilarity he held up his hands in surrender – "Your words, not mine –!

Flushing crimson, Akihito chucked a piece of tonkatsu in Kou's face.

Of course there was really only one way to hash it out after that.

Food fight!

It was immature and cathartic and totally worth the messy clean-up. So much so, in fact, that Akihito experienced that familiar itch again, the urge to stick his nose where people didn't want his nose stuck and sniff out dark and dirty secrets.

Still damp from the awkward one-arm-up shower keeping the bandages dry, Akihito logged onto Spotlight, intending to start feeling out for a new target. He made it precisely three taps on his phone into the forum before V1P3R brought him careening violently back to earth.

Another gift returned. That's two now. I should take serious offense.

But I won't. I'll forgive you this time since you brought me a conciliatory gift. What a prize, Asami Ryuichi himself! Alone, he was untouchable. Together, you've brought him within my reach and granted me a dream I never dared to dream. To think that Z4m4 M1r0 was Asami's pet all along! I haven't laughed so hard since the two of you destroyed everything.

Master and pet, you can die together. I will skin you alive, tear you limb from limb and feed you to the rats until you've used up all your nine lives.

Every bit of pain. Every drop of blood. Thanks to you, karmic justice can now find you both.

Akihito didn't get a wink of sleep that night. The machines at the internet cafe didn't have anywhere near the processing power that he was used to, but they were better than nothing with his laptop still in evidence lock-up.

He started digging.

Tuesday night, 3 am.

Kirishima was awake in moments despite having only just closed his eyes. He didn't hear the personal alert from his cell very often, and only people who mattered had the number or email
Yo Mr Khaki (I'm going with colours, get it?) It's me. So I'm telling you this 'cos of that thing you said about not being a slacker about security stuff

Kirishima glared at the screen in the darkness of his room. Turns out it was people who mattered, and a certain meddlesome punk with no manners to speak of who was far too handy with a computer for his own good accessing contact details he had no business accessing.

Kirishima was sorely tempted to just delete the email that was already infuriating him in more ways than the number of words he'd read. But he could hardly ignore an unexpected message from the brat what with the boss' current... fixation, especially when security was mentioned. He reluctantly found his place again.

and this is one of those things. So that mess before that was actually mine but Mr Asparagus sorted for me (that's really a colour! I know, not really HIS colour but this is code so tough titties)

Kirishima broke off again. Good God, this punk... Bracing himself, he forced himself to read on.

It turns out that the creep behind it all might be angling for Mr Asparagus too. Actually it might all be a load of hooey but then again it might not. They mentioned unsavoury things about the feeding of rodents with our limbs so I figured you should tell Mr Saffron (you know, the big guy) to watch Mr Asparagus' back. Even more than usual.

Oh and don't tell Mr Asparagus you got this from me. His head's already so huge, he'll pop if he found out I helped him. [Tongue out emoji]

Mr Titanium (I get the coolest name, haha [Emoji with cool shades])

Kirishima blinked once, twice for good measure, not entirely sure what he'd just read. Sitting up straighter he read it again before rushing a call to Suoh. And of course, he promptly forwarded the message to his boss for his reference.

Wondering at himself, but supposing Takaba had earned one strike for his discretion with the names which would help in case the communiqué was intercepted, he thumbed out a short reply.

Mr Titanium,

Alert appreciated and passed onto Mr Saffron.
However security situation should already be stabilized. Forward me your source info and I will investigate.
Kindly keep any further correspondence professional and concise.

Regards, Mr Khaki

PS Aliases allow for imagining what we can't aspire to in reality.

Wednesday.

"Good morning." The two anchors bowed solemnly on the screen. "This is the news at nine.

"A new police inquiry has been launched regarding Kondo Tetsuya, the former high-ranking member of the Legislative Diet who was found dead at his home two months ago. Fresh evidence has come to light regarding alleged links to organized crime.
"Evidence unearthed by a consultant specialist, from a damaged laptop previously recovered during a police raid on yakuza holdings, revealed cash exchange trails and communication between Kondo and several of the yakuza enforcers who had been discovered dead last week at the scene where trafficked children were rescued from appalling conditions.

"Police have not ruled out further connections to the underground human trafficking ring that had been uncovered in recent days..."

Akihito stared without hearing anything more as the news moved onto other articles, caught up in the questions and thoughts suddenly whirling like a tornado in his head. But through the maelstrom there were two crystal points.

One – that was Akihito, he'd done that. He didn't even have to ask, he just knew. Damaged laptop – full of bullets, actually, and he was meant to be a 'consultant specialist' now, was he? Without any context at the time he hadn't known what he was looking at, but those spreadsheets he'd recovered had been full of names and numbers. Money trails for organized crime... For human trafficking... That Asami had then handed into the police... Fuck.

And two – doubly fuck. Because all of a sudden, Asami killing Kondo wasn't as indefensible as Akihito had believed. Because it meant that Asami had been on the trail of the human trafficking more than two months ago, and that might be what he'd meant by 'betrayal' on the video. So it wasn't enough that Akihito was already so conflicted where Asami was concerned, and now the bastard had to throw ethics into the equation as well? To kill one person, to halt unspeakable wrongs that that person was committing against children...

Akihito clutched his head, not even knowing what was right and wrong anymore.

"Why didn't you just tell me?"

Asami was in the celebrity news again, this time pictured leaving one of his exclusive clubs with some blond bombshell of a Russian heiress that Akihito had never heard of.

But it was that smile again, the one Asami had never turned on Akihito because it wasn't real. Feeling just the tiniest twinge of jealousy but nothing more, Akihito firmly clicked back onto his task.

Akihito was above such pettiness. He had bigger fish to fry and Asami would soon be eating humble pie.

Wednesday night, 11 pm.

Kirishima suppressed a sigh as his cell beeped his personal tone again. He found his threshold for forbearance a smidgen higher this time as he excused himself from his boss to check the message.

_Yo Mr Khaki-san! (You're frowning, aren't you? I can tell. But I added 'san' so you can't be mad at me. Ha!)

Kirishima's jaw ticked. Last time had concerned Asami's security, he reminded himself, and suffered himself to continue.

_That's the professional bit you wanted. And here's me trying to be concise. Mind you, I'm not a robot so I'm still going to ramble some. But you're the one who needs this so deal with it.

_So here's how I see it. Mr Asparagus is taking heat from Mr Ultramarine for having dealt with Mr
Kelly-green, but you've got nothing to even the playing field 'cos – if Mr Ultramarine is who I think he is – he's supposedly a squeaky clean goody two shoes who's never had a parking ticket or undeclared income in his life. How am I doing?

I'm hamstrung by this prehistoric machine that's meant to pass for a computer so you'll have to do the legwork. Rewind 34 years (haha Baby Asparagus – bet he was plotting to take over the world even in diapers!) You have a 28-year old Mr Ultramarine with his law career taking off, Ultramarine Senior with advanced Alzheimer's...

Kirishima scanned through Takaba's sprawling conjecture of Uehara, now the Chief of the Supreme Court, passing blame for a fatal car accident over three decades ago onto his now-deceased father who would never have even recalled the incident, bribing the first responding copper on the scene with a life-long trust fund for the now-senior detective's daughter with cerebral palsy, and utilizing him to neutralize two political rivals – as far as Takaba could determine – on trumped up charges during the course of his career.

There's no solid evidence. Find out who's funding the trust fund, and I'd suggest having a friendly chat with the copper but I mean it, keep it friendly. I'll be watching you. If I see anything more than TALKING going on I'll rain hellfire and brimstone over your asses.

But play it right and you've got the jugular that Mr Asparagus wanted.

Mr Titanium

PS In this case my alias perfectly matches reality, thank you very much. You're just sour 'cos you got Khaki.

PPS Did I mention this sure as fuck is NEVER happening again?

Kirishima had to admit a grudging acknowledgement for Takaba's nose. If the brat was right, and Kirishima's own instincts were screaming at something fishy, this could help them out of a bind.

But he sure as hell didn't answer to the brat. After placing several calls to his men to redirect their search, he handed the phone with the message open to his boss.

He was left blinking in surprise as Asami actually laughed – a soft shaking of the chest, his eyes crinkling and everything.

Perhaps the punk wasn't all bad for his boss... Kirishima decided to suspend his critical judgement of Takaba until he had further data for analysis.

Thursday.

It was the third time Akihito had visibly started as Kou had entered the room that evening.

"You know I'm not kicking you out, bro, but... Why're you here?"

"...D'you want me to go?"

"Baka, I just told you it's not that. It just feels like... I can't help wondering if you might feel better being with Asami at the moment."

Akihito sighed. "Maybe," he admitted. "But look at me, I'm a mess. I'll only piss him off hanging around him right now."
Kou looked doubtful. "You sure about that? Doesn't sound like the guy who'd save your ass twice, is all."

Actually Akihito was pretty sure Asami wouldn't mind – he'd probably find perverse pleasure in being the one to pull Akihito back together, in fact. But Akihito's reservation stemmed from his own reluctance to depend on someone who he couldn't entirely be sure wasn't just toying with him. "I need to manage this on my own."

His insistence sounded hollow, even to his own ears.

Asami clearly wasn't into eating humble pie. Not only that, this was a suckerpunch to the gut.

Akihito recognized her immediately, the companion who'd been with Asami at the Hibiscus before the mugging. The lady was grace personified, her svelte elegance radiating off the webpage right alongside Asami's devilish perfection. The photo had captured them just as she was casting him a look of half amusement, half habitual exasperation, while Asami's lips curved just a hint at the edges, his amused gaze directed down at the wine glass being lifted by elegant fingers.

Was it only obvious to Akihito because he knew Asami? This was no deceptively enchanting veneer this time. There was clearly a close familiarity, an easiness to a level that even Akihito hadn't seen.

He caught the name Oda Hazumi in the article and something about fashion before he couldn't look any more.

There had been nothing. No limo, no barging through the door, no whisking him away. No communication except for the few emails he'd exchanged with Kirishima.

... Had Asami lost interest?

Even Akihito wondered if he'd overdone it as he stared at the bottom of his fifth box of Pocky.

He grabbed the beer instead. It was totally gross after chocolate. He endured and continued drinking.

Friday.

"Uuuurgh..."

"Dude..."

"Don't talk... to me..."

A sigh. "Curtains open or shut?"

"Uurh..."

"Closed it is. Don't die on me, ok? Here, water, pain killers, bucket just in case. Toilet you'll have to manage. I'll see you later."

Saturday.

Great, so he was pitiful enough for his friends to trigger an intervention.
They dragged him protesting all the way to bowling and a film. But by the time they’d smashed the heavy balls at a load of pins and gasped and chortled and clutched at each other through a gory horror like a bunch of wusses, he had to admit he felt something more like his usual self as they tumbled out of the cinema, wrestling with each other and making ridiculous scary sound effects. They were completely juvenile and it helped dig him out of the mopy groove that he’d dug himself into. And he only looked around furtively about a dozen times too, and he was certainly not hung up at all about the fact that Asami hadn’t come after him yet. Nope, not in the least.

That night Kou threw an impromptu shindig. Because if Akihito wasn’t up for going out to party, apparently the party had to come to him. Kou usually came up with one excuse or other to throw a bash once a month, sometimes more. This time old friends mixed with new, including some of those Kou had met at Club Dracaena the previous week. He had open invites to his neighbours to allay noise complaints.

There was no getting out of it this time. Takato was also there with Chiharu so Akihito didn’t really have a legitimate excuse to be somewhere else. Twenty twenty-somethings mozied about the small apartment, drinks flowing, music in the background and laughing and joking with each other.

Akihito was content to be the third wheel with Takato and Chiharu, nursing his beer in an undisturbed corner and nodding and smiling mostly in the right places. Kou bounded from one group to another in this unusual mash up of their usual friends from their college or uni days mixed with socialites more used to frequenting sophisticated surroundings like Dracaena. But it seemed to work somehow, Kou working overtime to fill the gap that Akihito usually would have, feeding endless energy into the shifting bubbles of people and injecting them all with amiable sociable glue.

Akihito had a contented buzz going on, taking the edge off all his hodge podge of emotions that week and enough to render him happy, when Kou crashed into their small group sitting by the wall with their legs stretched out, dragging a girl with him.

"Aki-chan!" Kou completely ignored Takato and Chiharu as he leaned drunkenly into Akihito. "You'll never guess who came, it's Yumi-chan!"

Akihito tasked his sluggish brain trying to work out if he was supposed to know her. "Yumi-chan?" He found the girl thrust towards him, falling into the narrow gap between him and Takato, their thighs squeezed together, and he had a faceful of glossy brown hair that smelt of apricots before she righted herself, a faint blush on her cheeks.


"I'm so sorry!" Yumi pulled herself out from between them and went to sit on Akihito's other side, looking apologetically at Chiharu, rightly guessing she was with the other guy Yumi had just been thrown against. Chiharu smiled back, waving it off.

"Uh, I'm sorry too, but have we met before?" Akihito asked ruefully.

"Not in person, although I heard so much about you last week I feel like I almost know you already." "Oh! Right!" Akihito finally remembered Kou banging on about him meeting her last week, before everything had gone to pot... "Sorry, beer brain," he waved the can, "I'm Akihito. And these are my friends, Takato and Chiharu-san. Kou insists on first names, so..."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Yumi." She smiled easily. "Don't worry, I've already undertaken Kou-kun's induction and made the solemn pledge on 'no walls between bros'," she quoted.
They all laughed.

"Oh, that pledge!" Takato remembered.

Akihito grinned. "Yeah, first day of high school, wasn't it? He practically made our whole class swear it."

Yumi laughed too. "I can imagine, he has that effect on people." She tilted her head. "I hear you're a computer whiz? I'm kind of a techie girl myself."

Akihito perked up. "Really? What do you do?"

"Nothing too exciting. I'm a security analyst, a bit of white hat on the side."

"Oh me too!"

"D'you have a cool alias?" Takato asked, the only thing he could contribute to this topic.

Yumi scrunched up her nose. "White Rabbit?"

Akihito grinned. "Follow the white rabbit!"

"Is that like, jumping into a mind-bending artificial reality prison in super cool leathers and shades," Takato asked, "or down the rabbit hole?"

"Aren't they the same thing?" Chiharu suggested. "It's a call to the great adventure. Do you hide away and return to the same monotony, or do you dare to answer and transcend to a new you?"

"Very poetic," Takato beamed at her.

If it had just been the guys Akihito would have been ribbing his friend about being so lovestruck. As it was, he had nothing to distract him from the twinge that ran through him. It hit just a bit too close to home for comfort.

"Do you mean transcend or descend?" Yumi asked. "Wasn't it all a bit trippy for Alice?"

"Is that what you were aiming for?" Akihito teased, firmly turning his thoughts from his own issues.

Yumi laughed with him.

"I like it," Chiharu said.

"Yeah, more imaginative than 'DigiH4wk' here," Takato elbowed Akihito.

"Hey, it pays the bills, doesn't it?" Akihito argued lightly.

Yumi's jaw dropped. "You didn't just say DigiH4wk?"

"Yeah, why?"

"No way, you're Takaba Akihito?"

Takato gawked. "You know him?"

"He's blinking famous! He tracked down that botnet that ravaged Microsoft-based computers a couple of years ago!"
"I'm hardly famous," Akihito hedged. "Some hackers might have heard about me –"

"You hacked the Facebook server with an SMS text message! I mean, who'd even think of it? Every hacker in the world's heard of you!"

Akihito groaned as he remembered the mind-numbing hours that he'd invested on that one. "God, that was so boring!"

Yumi burst out laughing.

"Oh, here we go," Takato muttered to Chiharu with good-natured exasperation as the two started trying to out-bore each other with their most tedious hacks of all time.

"I think we've lost Akihito-kun," Chiharu agreed, leaning against Takato. "So what do you think of our shortlist of apartments?"

They were happy to wind off into their respective conversations. Yumi had graduated from uni earlier that year and was currently juggling several temping jobs while looking for something permanent. Somewhere between that and sharing inside tech jokes and grumbles, the impromptu karaoke inevitably started up around them with someone plugging their phone into the bluetooth speakers. It was a completely random mix of music as people jumped in with whatever idea they had for the next song but no one seemed bothered. Everyone just talked louder over it, or joined in with the out-of-tune singing if they liked a track.

Contented in his easy conversation with Yumi, where he could let go of all the anxieties that had plagued him that week, with no pressures, whether from anyone else or himself, Akihito was mostly tuning it out. Until one song.

The slow strumming of an electric guitar filled the apartment, the poignant tune floating around him without really registering at first. Kou was with two others that Akihito didn't know across the crowded living room, lamenting into beer cans with their arms slung over each other's shoulders.

"I know!" Akihito was saying to Yumi. "They're global pioneers but they're more holey than Swiss cheese. Critical bugs, back-door security exploits, buffer overflows. I can't complain though, they've paid my rent a good few times. It's almost predictable..."

\[\text{If it was only to get hurt, that the two of us met} \]
\[\text{It's too wretched} \]

"... the same thing, over and over..."

The lyrics haunted Akihito, the melancholy of the heavy reverb caught his breath.

\[\text{From the heart, I want you to know} \]
\[\text{All I really want} \]
\[\text{Is to see the real you} \]

He knew the song, the heart-rending rock ballad, the words that meant far too much right now and stopped him in his tracks.

\[\text{You still laugh clumsily} \]
\[\text{Because you still wear sadness well} \]
\[\text{If it was solely to meet you, that I was born, can we change everything?} \]

The pain, the plea – it was startling and heart-wrenching.
From the heyday of the 90s visual kei movement, LUNA SEA had been one of the megastars of the Japanese glam rock era.

People all around were belting out the chorus. Everyone except Akihito. He couldn't move.

From the heart, I want you to know,
There's too much hurt, but there's still time
From the heart, I love you
All the pain that befalls you, I want to erase for you
It's entirely
I for you

He didn't see Kou watching, his gaze way too steady and lucid for someone who was meant to be blind drunk.

Asami had dragged Akihito to hell and back, to heaven and back even. It was impossible not to feel something after all that, after everything Asami had put him through. But what? Akihito couldn't even tell if it was good or bad. And as to what Asami felt – well that was a whole Pandora's Box in itself. Was there even a possibility that they wouldn't simply destroy each other?

Still raw from the rough week, it was overwhelming.

And he'd totally blanked Yumi mid-conversation, he realized. He pulled an apologetic face.
"Sorry..."

She shook her head, smiling gently. "Do you want a refill?" she asked, pointing to the can in his hand.

He'd been staring at it like it withheld the secrets of the universe or something. He tried for a smile. It came out more like a grimace. "Yeah."

They wove their way through the happily buzzed people to the kitchen, the guitar solo tugging on his heart strings all the way.

From the heart, I want you to know
If only I could always look upon your smiling face...

Behind Yumi, Akihito firmly shut the kitchen door against the knowing smirk that floated to mind, the glint of gold that penetrated through to his soul... There were two girls and a guy already in the cramped kitchen who looked at him oddly but he ignored them and just went for the fridge, pulling out two beers.

"Odd choice of song for a party, huh?" Yumi said as he handed her one.

"I guess."

She opened the can. "I hope she knows how lucky she is."

Akihito blinked. "Huh?"

Yumi merely smiled, looking a little resigned, holding up the beer. "Cheers."

They zigzagged their way back when the small apartment was bursting at the seams with a cringe-worthy rendition of cheesy J-pop. A bunch of people had gathered around Takato and Chihiro so
Akihito cast about for a new spot. They headed over to the settee where one of the armrests was the only unoccupied space around. It was a tight fit. Akihito had to loosely sling an arm around Yumi so they could both half perch together, but everyone was pretty cosy with everyone anyway with how crowded it was in the tiny flat. Side by side, they drank and chatted away, relaxed with their buzz and in each other's company.

Of course it didn't last.

"No way! You came!" Kou's boisterous delight rang over the din.

Kou had been in and out of everyone's conversations all evening and Akihito mostly tuned him out. But not the voice that followed.

"I'm not here by invitation."

Akihito's head whipped around so fast he almost gave himself whiplash.

Kou laughed. "Pish, there aren't any invites, just word of mouth. Come in! Grab a drink! Make merry!"

Akihito's eyes were drawn to Asami's like powerful magnets snapping together.

Five days had made no difference whatsoever. But why would it? That piercing gaze, the chiselled features, his stance oozing easy, devastating authority, and all perfectly packaged in the tailored three-piece suit and finished off with a tendril of dark arrogance... Temptation hit hard.

Then those golden eyes flickered across to Yumi, to Akihito's arm wrapped around her waist, and back to him – there was a distinct edge to it, spearing Akihito with an acute sense of dread.

Asami was bound to get the wrong idea! Akihito fidgeted, tried to move his arm and shift away from Yumi without being too obvious, and ended up stumbling off the armrest. She laughed and joked about him being wobbly that he didn't quite catch, and Akihito could only stammer incoherently in response, too nervous to think clearly, slurping his beer to mask his discomfort.

Asami toed off his shoes and stepped easily over the sea of flats and heels in the genkan as though he was accustomed to frequenting impromptu get-togethers like this where no one cared how the shoes all piled up on top of each other. He was followed by Glasses who took to the task more stiffly.

From there it took Asami a while to make his way into the apartment properly, having been surrounded by a gaggle of girls pretty much instantly. Most of the girls Kou had met at Dracaena recognized the affluent owner and even those who didn't were simply attracted like moths to a flame and swarmed over.

"Isn't that the business tycoon?"

Akihito turned at Yumi's curious voice to find her glancing over towards the entrance way as well.

"What's his name? Ama..? Asa...?"

Akihito pinched the bridge of his nose. "Asami."

"Oh, that's right! Asami-sama. I wonder what he's doing in a place like this? He's meant to be rich, isn't he?"

"I guess, a little."
That was an understatement and then some. Which made any notion of the two of them together even more outlandish... Akihito glanced over to see Glasses fighting his way through the enthusiastic wall of girls to the kitchen, a hard frown dragging at his face. Akihito almost laughed.

"Is Kou-kun friends with him?"

He glugged his beer. "I uh... I did a brief stint at his company. Kou met him that way."

"You know him? How so?"

Akihito was saved from answering Yumi's surprised question when Kou smacked into him from behind, clinging to him to keep himself from falling over.

"Yo! Aki-chan, look who turned up!"

Akihito hauled his friend around to his other side away from Yumi. "Why did you invite him?" he hissed under his breath.

"I didn't! How am I meant to have contacted him?" Kou winked. "I had a feeling he might show though."

"What?! Why didn't you tell me?"

"Hey, it was just a hunch! It's not like I'm psychic." Kou became dead serious all of a sudden. "Aki, if it's that important to you, quit running already and sort it out with him."

"Sort what out with whom?"

They all spun at the cool baritone to find the man himself looming over them. Akihito blanched, his hands became clammy, his face was hot, his lungs were short of air. Asami was not healthy for him!

"N-nothing to do with you," Akihito croaked, stammering more than he'd have liked.

"Oh?"

"You need a drink!" Kou announced.

"Here, sir." Kirishima was there as if by magic, handing over a can of beer.

It was the same brand that Asami had grimaced at before at Akihito's place. And Akihito just knew that the bastard would do the same again, turn his nose up at it, flaunt their difference in class, shame him and his friends –

"Thank you, Kirishima."

They were all mesmerized as Asami took a good slug. Graceful fingers held the can aloft, the condensation wetting his fingertips as he casually tucked his other hand in his pocket.

Akihito balked. There hadn't been a twitch of distaste, not the slightest flicker. Why did Asami do that? He hated that beer. And the way the Adam's apple had worked in his throat as he'd swallowed... Akihito had to fight the furious blush trying to bloom across his face.

There was something in the intense golden gaze as they pinned him in place. "I missed you this week, Akihito..."

Akihito gaped, ready to retort as the other two glanced at him in surprise at what the billionaire was
"– you were meant to have rejoined us at Sion on Monday," Asami finished.

Akihito could practically hear the ‘Oh, that's what he meant’ ringing in Yumi’s mind. But he knew Asami’s insinuation had been anything but innocent.

"That's still under consideration."

"Is it, now?" Asami's voice was deceptively, worryingly, soft. He smiled at Yumi. "Won't you introduce me to your friend?"

Akihito looked between them, his earlier sense of dread only getting worse. "Uh, this is Yumi-chan. She's Kou's friend," he added as an afterthought, trying to play down any imagined significance. "I just met her tonight. Uh... Yumi-chan, this is Asami."

Asami turned to Akihito, the movement sharp enough to suspend any response from Yumi. "Really, Akihito? You won't even give my full name?"

This, more than anything until this point, sent Akihito's pulse thudding. He swallowed thickly before trying again. "This is Asami Ryuichi."

Asami oozed charm as he exchanged greetings with Yumi, dazzling her as he had Risa in the limo after the mugging. But Akihito was glad of it for the moment, as it gave him time to fight down the warmth suffusing his skin. It was the second time that he’d ever said the name. Both times had been in introduction but even so, there was something intensely intimate about saying Asami's given name.

He couldn't escape Kou's keen eyes. His friend simply leaned into his ear and muttered, "Dude, you've got it bad."

Akihito furiously elbowed him away.

"This is rude of me but I'll have to steal Akihito away," Asami said to Kou and Yumi. "There's an urgent matter I need to discuss with him."

Refusal was right on the tip of Akihito's tongue. But a tiny part of him didn't want to refuse at all but jump the man's insanely hot bones instead... Which left him totally flustered in one second flat and he ended up saying fuck all.

"Well, if it's urgent, you'd better steal away," Kou laughed easily, nudging Akihito towards Asami.

Akihito spun to glare at him but Kou cheerfully made a shooing motion – the traitor!

But it wasn't like he had much of a choice. Asami would get his way and he'd have no qualms being his pushy, perverted self right in front of everyone.

"It was nice to meet you, Yumi-chan," Akihito said. "Good luck with that botnet, maybe give that spam route a try. You might be able to backtrack something."

She grinned. "Thanks, yeah. I'll let you know how it goes."

"Catch you later!" Akihito tried to smile back as Asami herded him none-too-subtly out to the entrance way.

Asami motioned a farewell to his friends with the beer, handing it off to Glasses as they found their
shoes in the rabble of footwear. Akihito followed suit and only just managed to grab his jacket from the recessed cupboard in the genkan before the heavy hand at his shoulder was urging him out.

"What's the rush? I'm coming, aren't I?" Akihito glanced over his shoulder and found his own glare withering under the blistering one Asami returned. "What's with you?" His voice was noticeably less sure that time.

Asami's gaze was hard as he stared ahead, his grip on Akihito's arm harder, as Glasses followed them to the elevator where they were met by Blond Tank. The two men being stoic wasn't anything unusual but something about Asami was making Akihito weary, more than usual.

So much so that by the time they emerged from the suffocating elevator into the foyer, Akihito was ready to make a run for it.

"I'll only have you chased down again if you try and escape me, Akihito," Asami warned lowly, his grip tightening enough to make Akihito wince. "But this time, you may not find me so forgiving."

Apprehension darted down Akihito's spine at the ice cold notice. Suoh's flicker of a glance at Asami as though to gauge his mood didn't help any either.

"What the hell are you getting so worked up about? What did I do?"

A muscle ticked in Asami's jaw as he dragged Akihito over to the limo and threw him inside.

"Oomph!" Akihito rubbed his cheek and rolled to sit up as Asami slid in after him. The door slammed and the limo made a swift departure through the quiet dark streets, pushing them back in their seats.

"I let you off for a week and that's how you spend your time when I'm not around, is it?"

"What are you on about? I was just chilling with some friends!"

"Just chilling?"

A large hand whipped out and snagged his hair before Akihito could duck away, dragging him forward against the taller man. He grabbed at Asami's arm in a frantic attempt to ease the painful grip.

"Ow! What the hell?"

"Flirting and seducing is just chilling, is it?"

"... Is this about Yumi-chan?" Akihito shoved at Asami with one hand, to no avail. "There was nothing going on! We were only sitting close 'cos it was so crowded."

Asami twisted his head back, the sharp wrench on his hair making Akihito's eyes water. "She'd make a cute girlfriend for you, wouldn't she? You'd be a cute couple together."

"It's not like that! Asami, let go!"

"Clearly you're in need of a new girlfriend since breaking up with your ex."

Even his neck was aching at the angle his head was being forced. "...Please, it hurts."

Asami glared for another long moment before flinging him away.
Akihito scooted away, glaring as he massaged his scalp. "Has it occurred to you that you're just assuming I'm as loose as you are? I'm not the one who's been out with someone different every night, you know."

There was just the slightest glimmer, but that's all he needed. Akihito knew. "That was on purpose! I knew those photos wouldn't have got out if you didn't want them to!"

"And I knew you couldn't resist looking me up," Asami sneered, explaining nothing.

"Baka, they were in my face whenever I tried to look at the news," Akihito hedged. "They were practically stalking me."

There was a flare of dim orange as Asami lit up, taking a long drag as though seeking Zen through the chemical fumes.

Akihito fidgeted as they closed in on Asami's place, the nightlights rushing by. It felt like a gulf had morphed between them. It bothered him.

"There's really nothing going on with Yumi-chan, OK? She's just a friend. A new friend. We were just talking."

It was like talking to a brick wall.

"Why am I explaining it to you, anyway?" Akihito huffed.

Asami blew out smoke. "Clearly you feel you need to."

A frown creased Akihito's brow below his fringe. "No, I don't. It has nothing to do with you."

"Doesn't it?" The voice was ice cold.

Akihito opened and closed his mouth a few times, and when he finally pushed the words out they came out quieter and quieter. "It's not like... like... we're together, or anything..."

Rage ignited in those golden eyes.

Akihito shrank back. It wasn't how he'd meant to say it at all. "... Are we?"

He was barely aware of the limo drawing up in front of the luxury building, only conscious of the storm of silent fury he had provoked right in his own face. He might have cowed in silence save for his need to clear up this misunderstanding before it was too late.

"I mean, we can't! You're Asami, for fuck's sake, and I... I take down bastards like you. We'll destroy each other, it'll never work!"

"Have you understood nothing?" Asami seethed, the tremor of barely controlled rage in the quiet hiss even more frightening than if he had shouted and raved. "Have you learned nothing?"

"Learned what?"

Asami reached for him and Akihito scrambled away, but there was nowhere to go. The taller man grabbed him and yanked him close, his lips curving in a feral smirk. It wasn't a kind look. "You leave me no choice. I'll have to drill it into you. All. Over. Again."

Alarm and apprehension and a sharp twinge of lust flooded Akihito just as the door was opened. Asami slid out, dragging the blond out after him, easily overpowering Akihito's attempts to pull back.
"Asami, wait –!" Akihito grunted as he was heaved over the broad shoulder. "Bastard, let me go!"

Of course Glasses and Blond Tank wouldn't help him, but hope flared when they passed the concierge. But the elderly man merely bowed his capped head, not even looking twice at the young man being carried as he protested colourfully.

"Stubbornness will get you nowhere."

Akihito squirmed, to no avail. He couldn't dislodge himself. "I prefer to call it knowing my own mind. And I know I'm not doing this with you!"

He was thrown to the back of the elevator car, flinching as he hit the polished mirror. He immediately darted for the door but Asami shoved him back, grasping his jaw and pinning him back.

"Don't worry, Akihito. You'll be honest with me before long and begging me for release with every fibre of your being. Like you always do."

"Asami!" Akihito wailed in protest, horrified eyes flickering over to his men in the elevator car, their backs turned.

"Get over it. Soon you'll be screaming loudly enough for the whole building to hear you."

Akihito could only splutter and flail uselessly as he was hauled out of the elevator and half carried, half dragged to the condo.

"Put two men on the door. And this time make sure they're fully aware of the consequences of letting Akihito leave without my permission."

"Understood, sir," Suoh acknowledged gravely.

Did that mean...? When Akihito escaped last time...? "What did you do to that guard?"

Asami threw him a cool look. "He failed in his duty. He paid his dues."

Akihito paled. "What did you do to him?" he repeated.

Asami shoved him through the front door of the penthouse and slammed it closed. "If you're so concerned for the welfare of my men, don't run this time. But don't worry, he's still alive, and relatively unharmed. And there's no need for you to be so afraid. I'll let you out eventually."

"I'm not afraid of you!"

Asami took an abrupt step towards him and Akihito flinched back before he could stop himself.

"So I see."

Akihito glared furiously at the returning smirk. Asami stepped out of his shoes and headed into the living room, turning the lights on as he went. His voice floated out after him. "Are you going to stand there all night?"

"Let me go and I won't have to," Akihito retorted.

"Scared to come in?" Asami taunted blatantly.

"I know what you're like. I prefer to stay here."
Asami reappeared in the living room doorway. "So you are afraid."

Akihito grit his teeth, knowing full well he was only being baited. But he couldn't just cower in the genkan all night. And besides, he wasn't entirely sure that he really wanted to walk away...

He raised his chin and toed off his shoes, stepping onto the smooth wood floor. Asami smirked as he disappeared into the living room again.

Akihito stared at the empty doorway for long moments. "I'm out of my goddamned mind," he mumbled eventually as he followed.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Hmm I might have got a little carried away with the play between them here. Is this too much??

Anyway, I was pandering to these two and before I knew it, they'd claimed 5K words and snagged a chapter just for this one scene... Actually it's still dinky at 5K compared to the behemoths of the previous two chapters but I hope you don't mind too much... Their night is still young, more to come soon. (^^)

(Also an overall note: I still get the occasional comment when someone's been caught out. This story features the kind of guilty pleasure fantasy where you want someone to push you just a bit too hard. Their relationship isn't meant to be healthy or one to condone in real life. At face value Akihito's consent is at least dubious, usually pervertedly manipulated, and Asami absolutely does not respect Akihito's boundaries. You have to look deeper to see what they feel for each other. Please heed the warnings, they're there because they apply!)

~ Nyx ~

He was pumped. He was ready. The deluge of demands was on the tip of Akihito's tongue as he rounded the corner into the living room.

Why are you such an asshole?
Do you really think that's what I'm like?
Are YOU really like this?
... Who is SHE?

Then he saw Asami knocking back whiskey and there was more.

Is that a palate cleanser?
Why did you drink that beer when you hate it?
Would you do that just to not embarrass me in front of my friends?
... What am I to you?

But in the end he couldn't even start grilling. He was stymied the moment Asami removed his suit jacket and draped it over the back of a chair, Akihito's entire attention stolen by the dull grey metal holstered at his side.

Akihito's mouth went dry, his strength leaving him. All demands withered and died. Just that single reminder was all it took and in an instant he was as small again as he'd felt all week, reduced to a shadow of himself that quaked under the tyranny of nightmares. It was debilitating.

He subconsciously held his breath as Asami drew the piece, checking the lethal thing over. Asami might have been chambering or emptying it, it was all the same to Akihito. He only knew that those large hands were fluid and sure, intimately familiar with the motions.
Akihito was so caught up that he didn't notice the sharp golden eyes taking him in.

He only breathed easier again when Asami headed off towards the bedroom, returning moments later sans gun and holster. The waistcoat was shed and slung over the jacket. Akihito was still standing there like a lemon as the tall man turned to him.

Still feeling somewhat displaced, he remained glued to the spot as Asami approached, gliding right into his personal space. He wasn't yelling or fighting or kicking up a storm. He couldn't read Asami's expression as he looked up into intense gold and the man looked down. They stood like that, close but, for once, not banging heads.

Asami's gaze flickered down to Akihito's lips before he leaned down. And he was coming closer, slowly, giving Akihito plenty of time to back away, nearer still, tilting his head...

Akihito managed to muster enough of himself to draw back at the last moment, just an inch, not really evading, more a statement. *Don't think you've tamed me.*

The worst thing was that a part of him would have been perfectly happy to knuckle down and let Asami have his way with him. *That,* more than anything, scared him to death. Because Akihito, at his heart, fought his own corner. Who was he, if he couldn't even do that anymore? Was it just fleeting weakness after the trauma from the attempt on his life, leaning on the one who had saved him? Or was Asami slipping through his defences?

And why, of all people, did it have to be this crime lord? This target?

The golden gaze swept over him, reading the reluctant arousal, the unresolved conflict. Asami smirked, scant inches apart, close enough for this words to breathe over Akihito's lips. "Didn't I tell you you can't win against me?"

Akihito frowned. "Not everything is a fight, you know."

"With you? I'd say it is. And you've lost already." It was that infuriating smugness again. Asami grabbed him and propelled him towards the bedroom.

"Wh- hey- get off me!"

It was instinctive to fight when Asami was being so overbearing. Push him and of course Akihito would push back. And of course Asami barrelled through regardless.

But when they got there, instead of the bed, Asami herded him into the bathroom. Through the open door to the black-tiled wetroom Akihito spotted the bath already filling up.

Washing meant cleaning. Which would no doubt lead to other... steamy... activities...

"I don't need a bath!"

"Undress. Or I'll do it for you."

Akihito didn't know if he was horrified or aroused as Asami drew off his tie, every slide of his fingers blatantly suggestive. The expensive strip of silk disappeared carelessly into a pocket and Asami started unbuttoning his shirt.

Asami was clearly amused at his gawking. "Last chance, Akihito. Clothes off."

Akihito could hardly just obey, but this was his favourite jacket. He didn't want it to become a
casualty. He angrily pulled it off, hanging it on a hook on the wall as Asami dropped his crisp white shirt in the laundry basket.

And shit but Asami's sculptured torso was right there. Akihito had almost convinced himself that Asami couldn't have been quite as ripped as he recalled, but nope. If anything those muscles were even more defined and contoured and ripe for licking than he remembered. He could have reached out and touched the hard planes and ridges, and that bruise fading to yellow and grey blue over the ribs... From that assailant... That giant... Akihito would have had no chance –

Asami startled him before his panic could grow roots, pushing him into the steamed up wetroom.

"Hey!"

"Enough of that," Asami said as though knowing what was going through Akihito's mind. But then he smirked. "You have more important things to be doing."

"I was just..." He caught himself and shook his head. "I'm not just going to do whatever you say!"

Asami shrugged. "Suit yourself." He grabbed fistfuls of Akihito's top and tore it right down the middle.

"No! You jerk, I liked this top!"

"I warned you. Twice." Asami dragged off the torn material and reached for the button of Akihito's jeans. But just as he seemed to be in full swing of stripping Akihito, he abruptly froze. Akihito found the sharp gaze fixed on the bandage wrapped about his upper arm.

"Uh... Asami?"

Asami's eyes snapped up to his, with something intense and – it seemed to Akihito – unsettled? Or questioning maybe? But then those eyes narrowed and Asami made short work of Akihito's flies, ducking to drag his jeans and boxers down past his knees in one alarming sweep.

"Stop that you – mph!"

Asami was right in his face and kissing him, sucking hard on his lip. Akihito tried to push him away but ended up toppling himself backwards, his legs tangled in his jeans. He flailed, arms spinning...

Asami caught him, but instead of righting him he followed the movement down, sitting Akihito down on the tiled floor.

"What–? Hey! Let go!"

Yanking his arms up, Asami bound his wrists with his tie to the shower pole. Akihito glared mutinously, his cheeks flushed. He had to subtly pull his legs up because shit but he could feel his crotch stirring. Damn Asami!

Asami's gaze glinted. "That's a good pose."

"How 'bouts we try it on you instead if you like it so much."

Asami arched a brow. "Oh? And what madness makes you think you can pin me down?"

Akihito scowled. "Well you have had more practice, what with your advancing years and all."

Asami merely chuckled, grabbing at his jeans again. "In all manner of things, as I'll show you."
"You perverted bastard!" But Akihito only put up a token fight as the denim, boxers and socks were all dragged off his ankles, struggling without actually kicking at Asami. No matter Asami's high handed tactics, there was a line in the sand that neither of them seemed to be crossing. Actual bodily harm wasn't part of it.

Asami left him there as he stripped off the rest of his own clothes and Akihito discovered that trying to look away was like fighting all the forces in the universe.

"You're staring again."

Akihito blushed, scowling. "I blame you completely for parading around naked."

"You seem to like what you see," Asami sneered, glancing pointedly at Akihito's crotch.

To his embarrassment, Akihito was half erect already and they hadn't even done anything yet... He pulled his knees in, trying to hide it. Asami on the other hand had absolutely no shame. He made no move to conceal anything, not erect yet but still hanging long and heavy.

Akihito half expected to be pounced on straight away but Asami actually washed himself. He sat on the plastic stool in front of Akihito, affording a front-row view as he tipped his head back and washed his hair, rubbed himself all over with soap. The wash-off swirled around Akihito's legs and ass but he hardly noticed it considering the vista. Water and soap bubbles ran down Asami's muscled chest and abs in rivulets, clinging to every sculptured outline. Not that Asami seemed immune to his staring either. By the time the large hands slicked down to the crotch Asami was half hard, and fuck but he was just stroking and stroking and how the hell had that thing ever fit...

Akihito smothered a groan, turning his face aside.

Asami chuckled as he rinsed himself off. "Your turn."

Akihito spluttered as he found himself doused with the shower. "Stop –!" Coughing and spluttering, he shook the water out of his face. "Stop that, I have to keep my arm dry. I'll do it myself."

"Suit yourself," Asami said lightly as though he hadn't just browbeaten Akihito into it, releasing his wrists with a few deft tugs at the tie. "Get cleaned up for me."

"It's not for you, asshole."

"If you say so."

Gritting his teeth, Akihito resolutely ignored Asami who sank his perfectly toned ass into the bath, and set about his awkward washing routing keeping one elbow up.

"Need a hand?"

"Hell no."

This was ridiculous. Akihito was in Asami's bathroom, sitting on the stool Asami had just vacated, all clumsy with the shampoo and shower head and washing one-handed... All the while, the intense golden gaze tracked his every move, trailing everywhere...

There was a sigh. Asami rose from the bath amidst a cascade of water and steam, and stepped towards him.

"Oh no you don't, take your ass right back in the bath!" Akihito protested before Asami had even
reached him.

"Give it here," Asami waved off, twisting the shower head out of Akihito's hand and tipping the blond head back to finish washing his hair.

"I said I don't need a hand!"

But Asami was already rinsing out the shampoo and Akihito was left wondering what on earth was happening as he reached for the shower pole to keep the water from running into the bandages and stared up the valley between Asami's pecs to the strong jawline. The golden eyes flickered to his, and it was just too bizarre, too... coupley...

Akihito slid his eyes closed against the flush of embarrassment. "I've been managing all week, you know," he mumbled.

Asami's fingers were careful through the blond hair under the warm spray, but his tone was unsympathetic. "You wouldn't have had to if you had been here."

Hazel eyes flew open. Not because of the indifference, but because Asami had said it at all. Akihito, here? All week? That was a whole other level of crazy that Akihito couldn't get his head around. It had to be a mistake, an unintended slip of the tongue.

"Well you knew where I was, I'm sure." You could have come to get me.

"And you knew where I was." You could have come back.

Akihito gaped as Asami stuck the shower head back on the clasp on the pole. Akihito was kept – or perhaps saved – from wrestling with the startling implications of what Asami was saying when soap-slicked hands ran over his chest and back and he had to choke back a moan. "I've got it from here!"

Asami's hands relentlessly chased Akihito's squirming body, making the smaller man writhe and gasp as he stroked the stomach, flicked the nipples, kneaded the shoulders, tugged at the nipples again... "Keep your arm up. Remember you can't get the dressings wet," Asami said far too innocently as his soapy hands roamed.

"You don't have to remind m– ahaha!" Akihito broke off in a startled giggle as Asami's hands brushed up into his armpits. "Baka, where are you touching?" Oh god he just shrieked.

Asami was mouthing at his neck, making him shiver breathlessly. "Wherever I like. Wherever you want me to." His hands travelled down... Down...

"Nowhere would be good!"

And oh fuck but Asami's hands were slicking over his dick and his balls and his ass and it felt too good... Even down his crack... Down to... "Asami, stop! I said stop! I can do it myself!"

Teeth dragged at Akihito's lobes. "What an excellent suggestion," came the evil hum in his ear as Asami slid around so they were chest to chest. Or dick to dick, as it turned out, as the tips of their lengths bumped each other and Akihito's hips jerked in eye-popping shock.

"Ahh!"

Not even bothering to conceal his wicked amusement, Asami caught Akihito's hand that had been ineffectively trying to chase him off and lead it down... and back... and further down still...
"Huhh no! Just... No!" Akihito half squeaked, half gasped.

Asami guided Akihito's fingers to the puckered rosebud. "Since you insisted, you can prepare yourself for me."

"What the fucking hell, that's so not what I meant and you know it!" Akihito managed to slither his hand free, but then Asami's very large, very warm, very soapy hand grasped both their cocks together and Akihito almost fell over.

"Fuck!" Eyes bulging, clinging to Asami's plentiful muscles, Akihito groaned at the totally sublime sensation of his erection squashed and rubbing against Asami's thick length.

Asami wrapped his other arm around Akihito's waist. "Prepare yourself for me." His teeth were at Akihito's ear again. "Unless you want me to tear into you."

"You... you wouldn't..."

"Wouldn't I?"

Panting, his jaw lax at the slippery silken gliding of their arousal, Akihito trembled and glowed with mortification. "You're such an ass."

Asami's smirk was diabolical as he simply waited. Looking anywhere but back at the golden eyes practically devouring him whole, ignoring the heated bolt that made his cock twitch, Akihito hesitantly reached for his own ass.

"Stretch yourself out for me."

Akihito stuttered at the bedroom voice in his ear.

"You might want to work more fingers in there."

"You perverted – hhmn!"

Asami's hand twisted on their cocks as he stroked them, leaving Akihito gasping and his hips juddering.

"Enjoying yourself, are we?" Asami smirked. "You're leaking."

He rubbed a thumb over Akihito's glistening slit, pressing in just a little, making Akihito's knees almost buckle.

"You fucking bastard," Akihito hissed as he stretched himself out. It felt weird doing it himself. Nothing like the incredible pleasure Asami wrought.

Asami chuckled. "Patience. I will be soon enough."

"You –" Akihito groaned, uncomfortably working up to three fingers as Asami's hands roamed, caressing here, pinching there, stirring him up with soapy slickness as Akihito seared under Asami's intense gaze.

Akihito was slowly getting comfortable with the stretch when Asami abruptly joined a finger in alongside, coaxed his own fingers deeper, up against –

"Ahhhh...!"
Akihito only stayed on his feet because Asami caught him.

"There it is. We can practise that," Asami said expectantly.

Akihito was still struggling to catch his breath. "Prac – what practise? There's not going to be any practise!"

Looking far too amused, Asami drew Akihito's hand away. Grabbing the shower again he made quick work of rinsing them both off, still carefully avoiding the bandages on Akihito's upper arm.

But as he replaced the shower head, Asami grabbed the sodden, discarded tie...

Akihito was already shaking his head as Asami deftly caught his wrists. "No! Whatever you're thinking, no!"

"Time to assume the position," Asami smirked.

Akihito struggled but it was useless. In short order his wrists were bound to the shower and taps, facing the wall this time. It forced Akihito to lean forwards, he couldn't stand straight, but he realized with growing mortification that he wasn't meant to as his hips were hoisted up and his feet were kicked out...

Slap.

"Owww! What the hell!" It stung like a bitch on the wet skin, right on his right ass cheek. The sound ringing out in the wetroom was absolutely filthy and it was so humiliating and... shit, no way, why the fuck was his blood heading south?

Slap, left ass cheek this time. "Keep your hips up and spread your legs."

"Ow! What the fuck!" Akihito tried to crouch down and away, but strong hands only pulled him back up into position.


"Ow! Stop slapping me already! You perverted –"

Slap. Slap.

"– aaahh – son of a –"

Slap slap slap slap –

"Argh! Ok! Ok!" Akihito kept his legs straight, easing his feet just a bit wider. "Enough already!"

"Really Akihito?" A large hand reached down and wrapped around his aching length, the thumb swiping over the tip where it was dripping. Akihito couldn't help the full body shiver.


"You bastard!"

Slap.

"Fuck!"
"Wider, Akihito."

"I'll slip!"

"They're non-slip tiles. Feel the slight roughness? You'll be fine." *Slap.* "Wider."

Akihito shuffled wider, wide enough for Asami to comfortably fit. "Perverted fucking bastard..." he mumbled into his arm. He was humiliatingly exposed, his ass stuck out in the open, legs spread like he was *presenting* himself. But then, he supposed that was kind of the point. He was so embarrassed he could have died.

Asami touched his ass again and he flinched, but the warm hands only caressed and soothed the enflamed skin. Akihito was shivering, but he didn't know if it was from Asami's warm hands scratching and brushing over him, or his wet skin, or anticipation...

"I told you, Akihito. I'll make you be honest."

Those words did funny things to Akihito, especially with the position he was in and Asami stood at his ass. Warm hands ran down his sides and grasped the length of Akihito's eager erection, making his breath stutter. "You'll tell me what you really want before the night's over. Relax for me now."

Akihito keened as Asami drove in to the hilt, sinking his immense size in one smooth thrust. The preparation hadn't nearly been enough for Asami's thickness. Pain pricked at Akihito's eyes.

But Asami was already moving and not just a little either. Never mind that the pace was slow and steady. He withdrew to the mushroom head, pausing at the peak each time for an agonizing moment, before ramming deep, forcing the breath from Akihito's lungs. Every glide burned, every thrust made him see dotty stars.

"Wait!" Akihito croaked, clutching at the shower pole. "That hurts, damn it!"

"You'll take what I give you, Akihito." Asami took Akihito's length in hand again, matching the pace, the full breadth of strokes.

"You arrogant –" Akihito shuddered, "– ass...!"

"Ask nicely and I'll even let you come, seeing as you so enjoy being shameless."

"Now you're just – *huuhh* – making up crap!"

Asami continued rocking steadily into him. "It's precisely what you were doing, Akihito. Shamelessly flirting and seducing."

This again?! "God damn it, Asami, I told you–"

Asami twisted his fingers around the tip of Akihito's cock, cutting him off. "No use denying it after the fact. You should have come to me in the first lace, I'll let you be as shameless as you want."

"I don't – *hhmn*!"

Asami suddenly picked up pace, hips snapping hard, fist faster to match. Stretched to bursting, Akihito could only endure the relentless onslaught of building euphoria, until that delicious pressure was spiralling from deep inside, his balls drawing up –

That was when Asami eased off, just a little off the pace and power, enough to back Akihito from the edge but then keep him there.
Akihito bit back a whine, not very successfully.

"What was that?" Asami intoned with mock innocence.

"You bastard..." Akihito whimpered.

"Tell me what you want, Akihito. Ask, and it's yours."

That voice – so confident of the spoils, of Akihito laying down arms...

Akihito knew where this was headed, knew Asami would keep edging him however long it took until Akihito succumbed and was no doubt transported to some mind-blowing astral plane.

But as achingly aroused as Akihito was, he was also hopping mad. Because Asami was being a total ass, and, on top of it all, as per usual, was acting as though it was his divine right or something else equally unholy. There was only one thing for it. Because Akihito fully intended to hold out for as long as possible, even if he really, really wanted to come. Because, for a change, he wanted to make Asami succumb instead. Why should it always be Akihito reduced to incoherency and shameless begging? Let the arrogant Adonis surrender for once, let Asami come undone, let Asami lose it.

There was only one thing in Akihito's arsenal. He ran his mouth.

"Make up your fucking mind. Am I meant to beg you or score with some cute girl? 'Cos that's what you're saying, right? That I've got a shot?" There was something of a growl behind him, the grip on his hips tightening enough to bruise as Asami pounded harder. Akihito held on. It was now or never, while he still had some control left over his mental faculties. "Or maybe I should hit one of those sleazy love clubs in Kabukicho, find myself a big ol' muscley bear," – Asami abruptly slowed – "who'll pin me, spread me, wreck me..."

Asami had stopped completely, still sheathed deep. It made Akihito trail off.

Asami was silent and still behind him, the wetroom filled only with the sound of the shower spray hitting their feet.

Shit, had he pushed it too far?

Then, oh so soft, oh so dangerous – "You. Little. Minx."

Heated apprehension licked along Akihito's spine. "A-Asami...?"

A large hand slid up his tense back, a warm slow glide right from the base, along one vertebra to the next, right up to the neck.

"Has no one ever told you? Mind what you wish for, for you might receive."

"Uh oh... The shit about the bear? Fuck no..."

The slow, heart-stopping glide up his back continued into his hair, curled and tightened into a fist, and drew back, back, back... Until he was arching, uncomfortably too far.

"So you want to see how far I can lose it?"

Asami had seen right through him! The jolt of his pulse chased a flash of relief chased hot, fearful electricity that bolted to his groin. He stared horrified, meeting the golden gleam out of the corner of his eyes.
Asami's mouth was at Akihito's ear, his voice harsh. "Then I will oblige, my dear Akihito."

Keeping him arched back, Asami grasped Akihito's cock with his free hand.

Fear surged fast. "I didn't... I'm – You know I didn't mean –" Akihito's breath rushed out as Asami jerked him, his grip firm. Too firm –

"Ahhhh..." Akihito trembled as Asami drew back the foreskin, exposing the ultra-sensitive skin beneath. Akihito was rendered mute as Asami rubbed over the shiny-smooth dark skin, long full glides of the hand eased by pre-cum. Asami started rocking his hips again, tilting up at the end, hitting bull's eye every time in tandem with the merciless tugging of Akihito's rock-hard arousal.

It didn't take long. Akihito was cresting too fast, he knew Asami wasn't just going to let him come and be done. "Asami, wait..."

Releasing his hair so Akihito's head fell between his arms, Asami caressed the trembling back. "Wreck you. That's what you wanted, wasn't it?"

That was the only warning Asami gave before he grabbed the shower head and passed the hard spray over the exposed cock.

Akihito yelped, and not in a good way. "Fuck! That's too hot!" His feet scuttled but he didn't get far, what with Asami still plugged deep and the wet tie holding firm to the shower pole, biting into his wrists.

"Well we can't have that, can we," Asami said, sardonic. But he still turned the temperature down, as though, even as he punished Akihito, the kind of pain apparently mattered.

The next spray elicited an altogether different reaction in Akihito, a flash of a hundred pinpricks on the sensitive underskin that set his nerve endings alight and intensified the delirium Asami was repeatedly urging through his cock with his other hand, never once ceasing.

"Fuck!" Akihito gasped.

His whole body was aflame, burning, alternately bolted by lightening with every pass of the shower spray, then blissed out with gut-throbbing pleasure with every plunge and stroke. Akihito was moaning and moaning and he couldn't stop, buffeted by his own echoes and the obscene slapping of skin.

"It's too much!"

Asami smirked, it was downright evil. "Surely it wasn't mercy you expected when you provoked me?" He punctuated the emphasis with another too-hard blast at Akihito's aching length.

"Ghhuuuhh!" The shock of agony, awash with delirious pleasure, he felt like he was going insane.

"Pain and pleasure, Akihito. No one can give this to you as I do."

"No one else would do this to me!"

Asami's lips sucked behind Akihito's ear. "And that's as it should be."

Asami pounded deep and stroked in unison, sporadically passing the sharp spray of the shower over the oversensitive bulb, too random to predict, keeping Akihito on edge in too many ways.

But this time Asami didn't let up. Akihito cried and cried out, assaulted by a maelstrom of pleasure
and pain, agonizingly aroused. Until even the flashes of pain wasn't pain anymore but just the most intense, acute pleasure...

The orgasm was blinding. It erupted from deep in Akihito's pelvis as well as his erection, his cries echoing in their ears as he splattered his release against the tiles and his legs completely gave way.

But Asami wasn't done with him, following him down. On their knees, Asami dropped the shower and released his cock, grasping his hips as he rammed mercilessly into the tight pucker, driving through Akihito's oversensitivity against his prostate and making him see stars.

"Stop, it's too much, it's too –"

Akihito whimpered, desperate, clinging weakly to the shower pole with fingers long gone numb. But Asami gave no quarter as he chased his own release, hard and fast and pounding against the place that made stars fill Akihito's mind.

He spiralled, soared – "Asami... Asa... mi...!" – and then he was crashing, coming again, crying and shuddering with every muscle.

Only then did Asami finally lean over his back, his hips stuttering as he released painfully deep, crushing the trembling man into himself, his hoarse groan lost against the hammering pulse in Akihito's neck.

Asami's breath fluttered against the back of his neck, cooling against the damp skin.

Quaking, still twitching with the aftershocks, Akihito was boneless as Asami pulled out. He was vaguely aware of being rinsed off, the large hands extra careful with his overstimulated dick and ass, even drawing the foreskin back into place. Carried into the hot water, Akihito was too exhausted to move as he half floated sideways on Asami's lap.

It took a while for his brain to reconnect again. Awareness reassembled in pieces. His head was resting on Asami's broad shoulder. His bandaged arm was draped over Asami's musclebound limb along the lip of the bath, the dressings still miraculously dry. An impressive semi rested against his thigh.

He was just becoming self-conscious enough to start feeling awkward at their intimate proximity when a warm hand rubbed up and down his back, swirling water around them.

"Are you alright?"

Akihito peered up to find slits of gold looking down at him. Did that sound almost apologetic? Though Akihito had kinda taunted him... He ran a mental check and concluded that there was no notable damage other than obvious soreness.

He nodded. "You?" It came out scratchy.

That might have been a grunt. Asami closed his eyes, resting his head back against the tub.

And Akihito was still bobbing in Asami's lap, his side against the chest that was stunning even in rest.

"Are you like this with all your..." Akihito struggled to find the right word, "... fuck buddies?"
There was a pause marked by a shadowed frown, as though that label came as a surprise, before Asami's thumb drew lazy circles against the red marks on Akihito's wrist. "Like what?"

Like this afterwards? Are you this gentle with them too? Akihito scowled. "Like an animal."

Asami chuckled, jostling them, water slapping against the sides of the bath. "I can't imagine you having mediocre sex," Akihito muttered.

Asami's lips curved, eyes still closed. "So that was amazing, was it?"

"Baka, I never said that!" Akihito wished his hair was dry so he could hide behind it. As it was, it stuck out in all directions. "It was insane, is what it was. You almost killed me."

Asami chuckled. "Death by jizz. Now there's a way to go."


The curve deepened on the corners of Asami's mouth, those lips that were far too good at doing whatever they did when they came into contact with Akihito. It was just the pad of a finger here, a warm hand there. Asami moved lazily against him, seemingly without thought.

It was strange seeing the man so relaxed, unguarded even. Did anyone else see him like this, Akihito wondered. He ducked his head and let himself float, half buoyed by the reassuringly solid body against him. He couldn't understand what was happening to him. Was he softening against Asami?

"There really wasn't anything going on, you know," he said softly.

Asami took a deep breath, held it, and let it go on a long sigh, floating Akihito up and down with him in the water. Golden eyes opened to slits, regarding him. There was clearly some hard thinking going on, the weight of it creasing Asami's brow.

A large hand glided up to the slender column of Akihito's neck to rest there, stroking along the stuttering pulse. It was territorial, threatening and reassuring all at once, a heady combination Akihito was beginning to associate with Asami. The golden glint speared him as a thumb dragged along Akihito's jaw.

"Only you, Akihito." There was irritation and that confounding warm indulgence. Maybe even a hint of confusion, or was that wonder?

Akihito's eyes widened. Only me what? But the intensity of Asami's gaze was too much, quelling the courage to ask. It burned with a fire he couldn't understand and he wondered if Asami had any more idea than he did.

Unable to bear that gaze any longer, Akihito pushed to his feet amidst a rush of water, stepping shakily out of the bath. He was steadied by a firm hand as the dripping, gleaming Adonis followed.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

A big shoutout for nephthyslaments who pretty much rewrote my story blurb for me because I really, really can't do summaries – you nailed it, thank you!! (^^)

There was a question about the bathroom/wetroom layout. Japanese bathrooms are usually split in two – outer (dry) bathroom with sink (literal translation is 'sink room', no English equivalent!) which can also house the washing machine in smaller homes (obviously not Asami's). Door leads to the wetroom - see the manga vol.1 ch.2 p.30 after Asami rescued Akihito from Feilong the first time (not the second, or third, or... no wait, they're all friends now, right? I can't keep up haha ;D). The main wetroom floor area has taps, shower and low shelf for shampoo etc., all based around sitting height as people tend to sit on the stool that's always (always!) there for when you wash. And after you're all washed and cleaned under the shower, then there's a separate bathtub where you soak. I just realized looking at p.28 that there was no slidey vertical pole for holding the shower hook in the manga, there was just a hook higher up for holding the shower head when you want to stand, but I'm going to claim artistic license for my story and install one for Akihito to have clung so desperately to. *ahem!*

Updates might be a little slow for a while as my other half is job hunting. Which he claims takes priority over my attempts to monopolize the computer... I don't get it, do you? ;)

So there I was, still pandering to these two, and then THIS happened. Asami sort of took over and made me overhaul it all, which is why this chapter took so long even though I'd originally said 'soon'! Sorry for the wait. I'm actually not sure how you'll react. Possibly risky. Hit or miss?? :S

An e-cookie and pat on the back for anyone who actually read this whole long ramble of notes! (^^)

~ Nyx ~

Asami tossed him a towel in the outer bathroom.

Shivering in the cooler air, Akihito dried off quickly before wrapping the towel around his waist and hobbling back into the wetroom, determined to get out of there as fast as possible. But once there, he held up his torn top and soggy jeans in dismay.

"You don't need your clothes."

"I'm not leaving butt naked," Akihito insisted. The drenched clothes were plucked out of his hands and dropped in the laundry basket.

"Who said anything about you leaving?"

Akihito rounded on Asami, only to find a toothbrush held before his face, still in the packet. He
stood there eyeing it as though it was a lethal weapon. Because it meant too many things – a night-time ritual, readying for bed... But knowing Asami, if he said Akihito wasn't leaving tonight then he wasn't leaving tonight. And he couldn't not brush his teeth, last week had been gross.

Asami was smirking at him, his eyes challenging. Scowling, Akihito snatched it out of his hand.

So they stood there, side by side at the wide sink, brushing their teeth. Asami's toothpaste, Asami's bathroom, Asami's mirror filled with Asami's inhumanly stunning image. It was weirdly, flusteringly domestic.

Asami's phone on the side started ringing. He spat into the sink and answered it.

"Asami." He rinsed his mouth out as he listened, "That can wait until tomorrow." He washed off his toothbrush. "They're giving me an ultimatum?" He sounded amused. "You can give them one of my own, Kirishima. I'll put them out of business and take over their shipping lanes myself. They can deal with me or not at all."

Akihito sighed around his toothbrush, frowning at Asami's reflection. Why did the bastard insist on having these dodgy conversations in front of him? Of course it could have been perfectly legit but this was Asami, it was bound to be fishy. Asami smirked knowingly at him as he stepped out of the bathroom.

Left alone, Akihito finished with his teeth and took the time to collect himself. What was he still doing here, quietly getting ready to spend the night? It wasn't like he could go anywhere with the guards outside, but still, if he was that desperate, he could have put on his jacket and sopping wet jeans and tried anyway... Why wasn't every nerve in his body screaming at him to take off?

If he was at Kou's, by this time of night he'd already be on the verge of a freakout at the monsters his fears were convinced would come bursting through the front door. Kou had even learned to move around with a certain amount of constant noise so Akihito would always know where he was and not jump out of his skin at every little thing. The only time ghoulish assailants weren't gnawing on the fringes of his mind seemed to be when he was with Asami, the man's overwhelming presence suppressing the clamouring in his head. The whole week of severe sleep deprivation was catching up with Akihito, he was just so damned tired. Maybe just this evening, just once, it might be ok to give into temptation and let Asami be his shelter. He might even manage a bit of shuteye which would be freaking awesome. Or it might go horribly wrong with a full-blown meltdown right in Asami's face...

Akihito was moving for the living room before he knew he'd made a decision, his jacket in hand, only the towel about his waist, his wet clothes left behind in the basket.

Asami was in the kitchen with a tumbler of whiskey, still on the phone. Did the guy ever stop drinking? Dropping his jacket on the sofa, with just a fleeting glance at the opposite doorway leading to the front entrance, Akihito headed into the kitchen.

He paused at the sight of Asami wearing nothing but a towel slung around his hips. What a pair they made in their matching ensembles. Except Asami's version came with a washboard twelve-pack...

"That's his firearm," Asami was saying, to Kirishima if it was still the same phone call. "Have Matsui release it, pick it up en route tomorrow."

Akihito rolled his eyes. Asami was issuing orders for the Chief of the Tokyo Met again and not even making a token attempt at subtlety. Akihito poured himself some water and padded back to the living space. Ignoring Asami who leaned against the doorway watching him, Akihito perched on the back
of the sofa, grabbed his phone from his jacket pocket and checked his messages. There were several missed calls, mainly from Kou with drunken voicemails that were more tuneless karaoke singing than any real content, and one from Takato, checking in to make sure he was ok.

"When?"

Raising his phone high enough to see the screen over the glass as he drank the water, he texted back a quick A-ok and that he wouldn't be back tonight. He refused to think of the reaction that that little titbit would set off...

"Fine. It's almost just a formality by this stage anyway, Suoh already took precautions after Mr Titanium's tipoff."

Water spurted everywhere. The floor, the phone, even up his nose. Coughing and hacking, Akihito gaped up at Asami who looked about as tickled as if he'd just pulled off the mother of all pranks. Asami came forwards to lift the glass from Akihito's inattentive grip and put it safely aside.

"Oh, that?" Asami remarked innocently on the phone. "Just a naïve brat who's coming to realize there's nothing he can keep from me. Nothing to concern yourself with."

Suoh meant security... They were talking about V1P3R? Or did Asami know about the other email too? Nooooo no no no no...

"Come at eleven. Bring lunch as well, enough for ten. Akihito's going to be hungry."

Akihito was still frozen in slack-jawed shock as Asami hung up. He didn't even know where to begin. Somehow, even worse than the fact that he'd helped Asami in the first place, was Asami knowing that he'd helped. He just knew that Asami would be so freaking pleased with himself, his ego blown to planetary proportions...

Akihito ducked into the kitchen for paper towels. He probably would have continued hiding there if Asami hadn't been watching through the wide window in the parting wall. He returned dabbing his phone and mopped up the mess on the floor.

"I must admit, I never expected Z4m4 M1r0 to come to my aid."

See, now, Akihito's brain must have malfunctioned. Because that didn't sound like gloating. That sounded quiet. Serious. Akihito tossed the damp paper in the bin, shrugging, aiming for casualness but falling blatantly short. "I claim temporary insanity. Temporary, severe, insanity. Lunacy. Idiocy... Imbecility?"

Asami stepped close, filling Akihito's vision with an eyeful of ripcord muscles and halting his linguistic pursuit of synonyms. "I can't imagine it was anything less than one of the hardest decisions you ever made."

Fucking hell, Asami was completely, utterly, deadly serious. Akihito's immediate reaction was to laugh, a nervous, slightly hysterical sound. "Watch it, you're going to make me think one of us is dying being all sombre like that. Because that's more likely than you being grateful, god forbid."

"Perhaps I am."

Akihito didn't know what to do with Asami not trying to fuck him, or fuck with him, or fuck him over. Asami wasn't even letting him laugh it off. He wanted to curl up and disappear.

But before that, he felt his anger creeping up, a snowball gathering momentum down a mountainside.
"Why didn't you tell me about Kondo?"

Asami narrowed his gaze at him. "I'm not in the habit of discussing *business* with those not in my employ, Akihito. Besides, you'd already destroyed the footage by the time I knew for certain that you had it. It was old ground."

"To *you*, maybe. It wasn't for me. You let me carry on believing I'd let you off the hook for cold-blooded murder!"

Asami was ice. "I have no use for half-baked platitudes. If you needed to know, I would have told you."

Akihito glared, so angry his breathing was even ragged. "*If I needed to know?* You bastard! You have no idea how... No idea what..." He choked on the anguish that surged through him. Asami had no idea what it had cost him, even if it had felt like the only way to balance the books, a life for a life. He'd believed he'd sold his soul. If he'd known that Kondo was evil...!

He laughed, deprecating, furious. Disappointed, even, which was just maddening all over again. And hurting. That, perhaps, was the worst. "But what does it matter what *I* want? All that matters is the great Asami-sama and everyone else can go fuck themselves, right?"

Golden eyes flashed. "Do you truly believe that that's what I think of you?" Asami loomed closer. "Did I leave you to risk the mugger alone? Did I abandon you to Nishizuma's men?"

Akihito wasn't prepared for having all that thrown back in his face. He shrank back, his ire dissipating as though the ground had been whipped out from under him. He glanced aside for an escape route –

Asami didn't let him, bracing his arms on the sofa back on either side of Akihito, bracketing him in. "Did I?"

Akihito squeezed the phone still in his hand. "...No." Why the fuck were they having a conversation like this wearing nothing but a towel? Feeling very naked all of a sudden, he wrapped his arms around himself. "But why?" he whispered. Asami hadn't answered him last time. Was he any more inclined to explain now?

Asami regarded him for long seconds. Regardless of all the embarrassing nonsense the bastard could sprout during sex, apparently an honest question like this was still borderline taboo. Didn't Akihito deserve *some* kind of explanation after all the chaos the bastard had thrown at him? So Asami had saved his life but that didn't excuse all the other shit. And the longer Asami seemed set on skirting the question, the more adamant Akihito became not to let him.

"Why me?" he insisted, his voice stronger. He didn't back down, holding Asami's hard gaze, daring the bastard to chicken out...

That was when Asami capitulated, and it was with that self-satisfied, somewhat teasing smirk that never failed to make Akihito flare up.

"Because of that, right there." Asami crowded even closer, barely a step but his incredible musculature still radiated fluid, coiled, spellbinding power. He tipped up Akihito's chin. "You push my buttons, impudent, brazen, defiant brat that you are."

Akihito swallowed hard, trying to draw back. There wasn't much leeway, hemmed in against the back of the sofa as he was. He glared hard, fighting the heat thrumming through him 'cos damn it, the stupid towel wasn't going to hide anything! "Don't go getting any ideas, I'm only still here because
you ruined my clothes."

"Of course. And because you know it'll only be worse for you if you try to run."

A shadow passed over Akihito's face. "Why do you have to threaten me all the time?"

"I don't." Asami's eyes gleamed. "Sometimes I'm fucking you."

"Oh, geez..." Groaning, Akihito cast skywards.

The doorbell chimed. Akihito jumped, spinning towards the sound, heart in his mouth – before he belatedly realized it was just the door. Being behind closed doors this time of night really did a number on him, even if this was Asami's condo protected by guards, even if Asami was right there, even if nothing could possibly get through –

It was just for a second, maybe two. Asami gripped his shoulder, a heavy, warm squeeze like an anchor. Blinking back to the here and now he met Asami's eyes again.

Only then did Asami go to check the intercom display on the wall. "Come in." He buzzed the visitor in but then promptly headed off to the bedroom. "One second."

Akihito was wondering if he should make himself scarce when an annoyed sigh came from behind him.

"Put some clothes on, for pity's sake."

Turning, Akihito crossed his arms. "Oh, Kuroda, it's you. I'd love to be dressed too but that's easier said than done."

The prosecutor glared. "That's Kuroda-sama to you. Do you never add honorifics?"

"Only for those who deserve it."

"And you don't think being the District Prosecutor qualifies?"

Akihito grinned. "You hang with Asami. That says it all, don't you think?"

"You're here late," Asami commented as he returned wearing a bathrobe over joggers.

"You should teach the boy some manners," Kuroda muttered.

Asami smirked. "Where's the fun in that if I can't punish him?"

The other two groaned. Akihito swore the bastard did this on purpose to make them both uncomfortable. This was probably about the only thing he and Kuroda agreed on.

"We need to talk." Kuroda didn't even bother being subtle when he looked from Asami to Akihito and back again.

"Akihito, go wait for me in bed."

Akihito glared. "You can't order me around."

"Of course not," Asami replied mildly. "I threaten, remember? Get your ass into my bed or I'll tie you to it spread-eagled and fuck you raw till dawn."
Kuroda sighed, running a hand over his face.

Akihito gaped. Asami would do it too, Akihito knew. Damn it, he was not aroused...!

Glaring bloody murder, Akihito stomped off to the bedroom with as much dignity as he could muster with an aching lower back and wearing only a towel. Speaking of which...

"And ditch the towel," Asami called after his retreating back.

"Fuck you!"

Akihito was chased all the way to the bedroom by Asami's chuckle.

Once the bedroom door closed, Asami turned back to Kuroda, his features sweeping to winter, any hint of softness vanishing in the blink of an eye.

Kuroda straightened. "We have a problem," he began. "You were right. That attack – it's just the tip of the iceberg."

Akihito was awake. Even turned away and with the blond hair almost completely hidden under the covers, Asami could tell. After all, the brat had sprawled, drooled, twisted, kicked, flung and snored through 12 hours of sleep in his bed the weekend before, still somehow noisy even when asleep. It was almost impressive.

This? Far too still, far too quiet. So it was the cold shoulder. Asami's lips curved as he flicked off the main lights, leaving two upturned wall lamps on either side of the bed casting the room in half light, enough to see by without drowning out the Tokyo nightscape out of the expansive windows.

Five. He mentally started counting down as he strode for his bedside table. Four. Bathrobe discarded. Three. The gun was exactly as he'd left it. As expected, Akihito hadn't laid a finger on it. Two. He picked it up. Right hand, his dominant, avoiding even a moment of having to swap hands and not being in control of his weapon. One. Asami could have safety-checked in his sleep. Efficient and assured, he released and removed the magazine, placing it on the table, then pinched the slide between his left palm and fingers, rolled the gun to the right to aid extracting any round in the chamber, and ripped the slide to the rear.

Akihito jolted at the distinctive metallic click, spinning with wide hazel eyes darting to locate the source. Bullseye.

Asami pressed up on the slide stop lever and wracked the slide back, locking it to the rear, and checked the well and rejecter port to ensure the chamber was clear. He had plenty of live ammo in the fingerprint-locked top drawer of his bedside table as well as dotted about the condo whenever he required, but this mag was still full. Using his index finger to ensure the rounds were seated properly, he fed it into the magazine well and slammed it up. Grabbing the back of the slide, pulling and releasing it, he chambered a round. Safety on and the CZ75 was ready to slide under his pillow. It had all taken a matter of seconds.

Hazel eyes tracked nervously all the while. "Is that for my protection in case you decide to get grabby?"

Deliberately snarky but there was an uneasy undertone. Not at Asami, though. Or even at the handgun. Akihito's eyes flickered to the door.
Asami sat sideways on the bed, reclaiming the brat's attention. "Oh? Is that what you're expecting?"

"That wasn't an invitation!" Akihito wailed, drawing back as Asami leaned in.

Asami braced his arms on either side of the slender shoulders. "I can hardly let you down now, can I?"

"You're such a..." Akihito's voice trailed off, his eyes flickering uncertainly.

Asami supposed his gaze might be coming off heavy. Kuroda's news had thrown him. Death threats, and attempts, against himself were so commonplace that he took them in his stride amongst Kirishima's daily reports on the politics amongst his senior staff at Sion or the latest forecasts across his numerous investments. But he wasn't the target this time. Akihito was.

"Hey, get off me..." Akihito tried to scoot out from under him, pushing against his chest.

Asami grabbed for the slender wrists because it always made the brat squirm deliciously against him. Only to encounter sleeves –

Rearing back, Asami yanked away the covers.

"Wh- hey!" Akihito tried to protest, but it was half hearted, probably half regretting his decision as Asami's gaze darkened, and not with anger.

Asami had stilled, hunger hitting hard. The brat really only had himself to blame. "Lose the towel doesn't mean wear clothes... But I must say it's quite a turn on to see you in my clothes."

Asami's shirt, to be precise, with bare legs sticking out oh-so-alluringly from under the hem, perfectly suited for wrapping around Asami's waist...

Akihito's cheeks were flushing pink. Asami wanted to make them redder.

Akihito made a grab for the bed covers, without much luck. "It's only 'cos it was all I could find! I'm hardly going to keep digging around when it's bound to be just a matter of time before I come across some dodgy stash that's freaky or fishy or embarrassing as hell, right? But I bet you're actually wearing the only casual thing you own, aren't you?" Akihito yanked at the waistband of Asami's joggers and let it go with a snap.

Asami sneered. He supposed the brat thought he was being derisive. But wearing his shirt, of all things? It was practically a come on! Asami was sorely tempted to bury himself between those lean legs right this very moment. Alright, perhaps he'd allow two seconds to stretch out, five at most, but then he'd thrust all the way...

His voice came out rough. "I know you're hot for me but to think you'd actually try and seduce me..."

Akihito blew up indignantly, shoving at him. It was brilliant. "The hell I am! You ruined the only stuff I had with me, you asshole!"

He crowded closer, pushing more and not just physically. "You like it when I tear off your clothes, do you?"

"Huh?! Where did you get that from? Listen to what I'm saying, you bastard! Or – hey – maybe you're actually getting so old you need a hearing aid? Is that it, huh? Need me to speak up?" Akihito snarked with deliberate emphasis.
Asami couldn't contain his amusement, he could feel it curling across his lips. "Most certainly. Make sure you scream real loud so I can hear it when you come, Akihito."

Oh those eyes, so enticingly enraged, so heated –

Asami tore the shirt open, his own shirt, revealing Akihito unhindered. As was only right.

The blond spluttered, sprawled in shock. "Y-you depraved caveman! And oh my god those buttons actually fly, you honest-to-god sent them flying like some cliché porno fli–"

Asami ended up chuckling into the runaway mouth as he sealed their lips together and muffled the yelling. He coaxed Akihito's tongue into more productive pursuits, pressing the smaller body into the bed and eating up the soft sounds that Akihito was trying, and already failing, to contain.

That was more like it, bold and ballsy. Not the meek and fearful shell Akihito seemed to have withdrawn into this past week. It was plain how much he'd been struggling – haggard about the eyes, cheeks noticeably drawn even in just these few days. Asami's intention had been to permit some space – admittedly very limited and under surveillance but space all the same – before reeling Akihito in again. Not to leave him to suffer. The nightly sojourns to the internet café were looking not so much by choice but as a result of trauma.

It was long familiar to Asami by now, the siren call of his bloodlust. It stirred a fire in the cavernous darkness that might have been his soul, resonant through his veins. Akihito had suffered. And worse – Kuroda had brought confirmation that whatever lowlifes had tipped off Nishizuma's group for Akihito's hit last time were still targeting him. There could be no forgiveness. Asami would exact vengeance, but there would be no quick bullet to the head for this. No, this was going to be up close and personal, the perpetrators' bloody penance prolonged until they repented the error of their ways down to their putrid souls and rued the day they sought to take what belonged to Asami Ryuichi.

He'd probe in the morning, clearly Akihito knew more than he was letting on. But not now. Now, the brat needed distraction. Asami sucked hard at Akihito's bottom lip as he drew away, drawing a hiss. The kiss was messy and wet, depraved, just the way Akihito liked it. Even if Akihito himself didn't realize it. The younger man's eyes, blown and dark with desire, tempered only by the hesitation that Asami knew he incited, searched his gaze. Nervousness crept into Akihito's expression from the dark thoughts he must have sensed. It was involuntary how Asami's lips curved, something he found happening more and more recently. Even from the start he hadn't hidden who and what he was from Akihito, which was surprisingly refreshing even when he'd never in his life sought nor needed acknowledgement or validation from anyone. In a world where their equally obstinate but polar opposite convictions should have – and had, for a time – set them at each other's throats, a very particular set of circumstances had led them to this extraordinary place, where Asami included Akihito amongst the extremely selective circle of men with whom he could entrust a gun at his back, whether loaded or smoking. The brat had no idea of the implications.

He found that spot on the neck below the ear, the spot that made Akihito –

"Hhhhhhaa..."

There it was, the gasp and arch that squeezed Asami's groin and made him feel tight. He sucked hard against the pulse, the heartbeat that was for none to cease but Asami. Only Asami was allowed to drag this vibrant soul to hell.

Fingers were pulling sharply at his hair. He soothed the marked skin with his tongue and the tugging eased to distracted flexing, taking strands between fingers and letting go.
He let his mouth roam down, half pinning Akihito down, half drawing him up with an arm wrapped under his waist. Slender, but very much male. Lean, not curvy. Supple, not soft. Hard to the touch, but incredibly receptive once Asami had kneaded him. So invitingly, conveniently sensitive.

Asami took the small pebble of a nipple in his mouth, catching it between his teeth and giving it a tug.

"Aaaah... A-Asami, stop! A- Ffhhhhuuuu!"

Asami smirked against the flushed skin as he licked his way down the dipped centre ridge of the abdomen, shifting his body down between Akihito's lean legs. He nipped at Akihito's sensitive ribs, revelling in the half protest, half moans muffled behind a gnawed lip. The brat himself probably didn't know at this stage if he wanted to escape or press closer as Asami worked his way down to the inside thigh, nipping and soothing as his hands found his way up behind Akihito's thighs and in between...

"Aah! Aaah....!"

He fingered around the twitching hole, skimming multiple fingertips and scraping nails, giving the illusion of multiple hands. Meanwhile he sucked and licked his way inwards, closer and closer to the proud arousal with pre-cum already beading on the tip, closer still – then he bypassed it completely, not even a feather of contact against the erection, instead settling his mouth firmly against the opposite thigh.

Hips arching clean off the bed, Akihito's hands flexed against the bed and in Asami's hair. "Urgh... You bastard..."

"Hmm? What is it you want, Akihito?" Asami tugged teasingly at the puckered ass, still very much outside, building frustration.

Akihito's hands clenched. Flexed. Flew up and fist ed in the blond hair, clearly in an effort to focus elsewhere. "Pocky ice cream! Do they exist? I can't believe I've never looked into it, can you imagine? Funfuckingtastic. I should so patent – arhhhhnnnn!

A firm bite against the thigh quickly silenced such diversionary tactics and the hands were rightly back in Asami's hair.

"Nnnhh – damn it, Asami, what're you do-nnhhhh..."

Always this delicious conflict with Akihito, the obviously blazing attraction warring with level-headed caution, engendering the resistance that thrilled Asami equally in encountering it and in breaking it down.

He licked along the dip in the lean hips, glancing up at Akihito's half-lidded, unfocused eyes.

There was something when it came to this Takaba Akihito, something primal that reared up in Asami that wanted to sink his teeth into the slender neck and mark his territory, dominate kicking and screaming and lay claim to that sweet ass. It had reared its ugly head when he'd seen Akihito with his arm about that slip of a girl, even when he'd observed that it was purely platonic on Akihito's part, even knowing that he was the only one that Akihito reacted to on a visceral level. Akihito himself had provoked it in the bathroom. Let entirely free it would lock Akihito in a cage away from the world to exist purely for Asami.

He sucked and licked close to the arousal that was proud and straining and glistening, slowing as he neared the base, waiting until Akihito's hips shifted, seeking his mouth – when he pulled away and
down, sucking instead on the ball sac, hard enough to draw half of it into his warm, wet mouth.

"Haa!"

Akihito was like a rock in there. Asami sucked hard, too hard – fingers tightened in his hair and he eased off, licking gently with his tongue, letting his teeth scrape. Akihito jolted, but before he could protest Asami was shifting across to the other side and this time swirling, just enough pressure to make Akihito's hands shake against his head.

"Nnnnggg....!"

Asami might have carried on teasing a lot longer except he was getting impatient himself. It was always effortless with Akihito unlike with so many partners in the past. Asami was already fully hard and the animal inside was chomping at the bit to bury himself in that tight heat. But not yet. Akihito still had more of himself to give first, not that the brat knew that yet.

Asami peered around the dripping erection that had created glistening patches on the taut abdomen, just because he knew it would make Akihito extra embarrassed. He wasn't disappointed when those cheeks bloomed brighter as Akihito stared down his own body to meet Asami's eyes.

He calmly delivered the choice and waited expectantly to reap the reaction. "Do you want me on my knees, or pinned under you choking on your cock?"

It was priceless. Akihito's face morphed into a picture of scandalized shock that was as desperately aroused as it was horrified.

Asami found himself doing his half smile again, the one that always made Akihito glare at him like they were cosmically connected in cause and effect. Except now. Akihito was still speechless, his brain probably trying to reboot from the mistaken assumption that Asami was submitting. His smirk deepened. Oh how little Akihito understood.

"Choose. Or it's neither."

Akihito's flaming dilemma was practically written across his face, torn by the part of him that wanted to keep fighting and walk away with his pride intact, and the other that just wanted to give into the fierce craving burning him up already and let Asami make a mess of him again.

Clearly a last bit of encouragement was in order. Asami drew back enough to rest on an elbow, shrugging with feigned nonchalance as he swept a hand back through his hair that Akihito had mussed up. "Or perhaps you don't have it in you to take control."

It was blatantly obvious. They both knew what he was doing. But there was that fiery flash Asami was looking for and Akihito shoved him hard. Asami let himself be rolled onto his back as Akihito straddled his stomach.

"You're so going to regret that," Akihito declared.

Asami couldn't help the smirk that broke across his lips, satisfied and anticipating, saw the responding irritation in Akihito's scowl. Cause and effect.

"Oh, and who's going to make me?" Asami growled, pitching his voice pure bedroom. "You?"

Akihito grabbed his wrists. He didn't resist and Akihito didn't seem to know what to do with them for a moment, before pinning them overhead, hazel eyes flickering at Asami's corded arms. Asami couldn't help the shit-eating grin that split his face. Akihito only looked more enraged and burning up
even more, which was firing Asami up brilliantly. By the time Akihito smashed their lips together in a fierce kiss, Asami was laughing into the infuriated blond's mouth.

It spoiled the effect somewhat. Akihito started drawing away but Asami pulled him back by sucking hard on his lip before entwining their tongues, taking over again. Akihito started to melt, leaning in, pressing closer – before suddenly catching himself and pulling sharply free.

"You!"

"Hmm?" Asami looked back innocently.

Akihito fumed for a moment before pulling off a deliberate smirk to rival Asami's own. "Lean back and get comfortable. Because you won't be for much longer."

Asami smirked right back. "Pinned and choking it is, then."

Akihito made a funny sound in his throat as Asami jammed a pillow against the headboard. Scooting up, he lay himself back, half propped up.

Akihito gaped. "Are you serious?" There was a hint of genuine uncertainty in his eyes, as though at a loss as to what game Asami was playing at. Or at the fact that he wasn't running. Probably both.

Asami knew he couldn't completely stamp out the teasing from his voice. "Only if you think you can top me. Don't push yourself."

Akihito made a strangled sound, a furious blush rising all the way up his chest and neck and face at the word choice. After a moment of spluttering he flared up, "You arrogant ass, I'm so gonna make you eat your words! Or me, as the case may be." He shifted up until he was kneeling on one side, grabbing the free pillow to wedge under his other knee so he was astride Asami's neck, his glistening erection pointed directly at Asami's mouth. This seemed to give him pause, embarrassment momentarily paralysing him, until Asami arched a brow, not bothering to smooth out the grin playing on his mouth. With his cheeks glowing but gritting his jaw with resolve, Akihito grabbed a fistful of Asami's dark hair as though preparing to thrust into his mouth. But here, another pause, as though expecting to simply be thrown off. They both knew Asami could.

As delectable as Akihito's inner confusion was, Asami's pants were becoming uncomfortably restrictive. Wasting no more time, he grabbed Akihito's hips with both hands and yanked him forwards, sucking Akihito in fast in one fell swoop.

"Uuuuunnnhhggghhhhh!"

Akihito fell against the wall, barely catching himself in time, his throaty, honest, artless groan bolting straight to Asami's crotch. He drew Akihito back out and sucked and swirled his tongue over the engorged tip all at the same time, before drawing him in again. Again and again, he started pulling Akihito apart quickly, piling on the slick, mind-boggling sensations until Akihito started thrusting of his own accord.

Not having to move the lean hips anymore, Asami let his hands roam, squeezing the tight ass, brushing the thighs, raking up the sides under his shirt and tweaking the nipples as he continued swirling his tongue timmed with Akihito's thrusts. Shaky breaths and helpless moans escaped between parted lips as Akihito braced desperately against the wall, eyes fluttering as they alternately became mired in fevered gratification and struggled open to watch his own rock-hard arousal gliding in and out of Asami's mouth.

Asami drank it all in with his gaze blown to midnight – the stretch of the lean body above him
tantalizingly half concealed by the flapping shirt, the play of lithe muscles, the faintest sheen of sweat giving Akihito a mystical glow in the dim light as he arched before the nocturnal Tokyo backdrop. It was an intoxicating view. Asami might commission a painting. Or better yet a mural, Akihito's pure, carnal rapture splashed across his bedroom walls. The brat would be absolutely livid. That alone would be worth it to task Kirishima with finding an expendable artist – since clearly said artist would have to be disposed of after laying eyes on Akihito in such a manner...

Heated amusement must have shown in his expression for hazel eyes narrowed at him suspiciously. Akihito likely mistook it for mockery, his eyes flashing as he grabbed Asami's hair again, the grip hard but carefully not too tight.

"You said choking, right?" Akihito huffed as he started driving deeper. But even as he pinned Asami's hair and started using more of his weight to press Asami down more with every thrust, he still went slowly testing the limits, going deeper little by little, not ramming as Asami would have done. It was the kind of heart that Asami simply didn't possess. And watching the defiant man surrender to the inferno between them piece by piece while still being so damned careful only made him want to ravage Akihito all the more.

He adjusted himself, angling off his pulsing erection and trapping it under the waistband.

The movement caught Akihito's attention. He glanced backwards, irritation furrowing his brow. "Why the hell are you still wearing pants? Take them off."

The demand would have made Asami grin if Akihito wasn't still steadily thrusting away. The brat was doing it deliberately too, a brazen glint in his eye with just a hint of shy. Asami growled around Akihito's cock and sucked hard, making the hazel eyes roll back momentarily. Asami braced his feet and raised his hips just enough, revelling in the passing crush of the material as he dragged them off.

He threw them aside and then he really went to work. Grabbing Akihito's hips, he opened up his throat and pulled the oozing cock in deeper, kneading the engorged head with his throat muscles and the shaft with his tongue, swallowing down the back of his throat.

"Unnnnggghh!"

Akihito's dilated gaze accused him of having held out all this while. But Asami also had another surprise waiting. Uncaring of the mess he made on the bed, he dumped a puddle of the lube that he'd taken from under the headboard when he'd adjusted the pillow, slicked his fingers up, and plunged two fingers into Akihito's twitching rose bud.

"Hhhhnnn!" Akihito's lean frame jolted, hips pressing hard into Asami's mouth as the fingers thrust in sync.

Asami's eyes were moist. He wouldn't go as far as to call them tears but they were certainly wet. He could control the gag reflex but there was still a physiological reaction. He blinked his eyes clear but he knew Akihito saw it anyway, the way those hazel eyes stared, stunned wide.

See what I do for you? Only you, Akihito.

That seemed to be when Akihito gave in to the inevitable. He released Asami's hair to brace both hands against the wall, still thrusting to match as Asami rocked him with an arm locked about the trembling hips but otherwise letting himself go to all that Asami was giving him. Keeping the motion of his thrusting fingers deliberately light, awakening interest but not nearly enough to climax from the rear, Asami went to town making full use of his tongue and throat to blow Akihito to the heavens.
Akihito might realize now that, in the end, Akihito would always submit. But it would take time to fully understand – in submission also lay power. True, Asami’s inherent disposition to dominate the world around him and everyone and everything in it would accept nothing less, but with Akihito it was more than that. His desire to possess, to consume, to enflame and wreck, to see his name tumble from Akihito’s lips with the tears that he’d caused – it all hinged on Akihito’s true, uninhibited pleasure. It was all about Akihito. Only Akihito.

The object of his focus came with a shattered cry, forehead pressed to the cool wall and barely managing to stay upright as his whole body convulsed. Asami swallowed him down, almost disappointed that it wasn’t nearly as much as when he’d first blown Akihito in the limo. But then again, it was the third time coming this evening...

He drew it out until he was sure that Akihito was spent, then he threw the floppy man backwards. Akihito landed with his head half falling off the foot of the bed but made no attempt to move. Asami grabbed a handful of lube from the puddle on the covers, slicked himself up, then hooked up one of Akihito’s knees and lined himself up.

Akihito made a sound like a grunt, a sleeved arm flung over his face. He wasn’t fighting but it was more resignation than submission. It wasn’t what Asami was after. Bracing himself with the arm hooking Akihito’s knee up high, he used his free hand to grab the offending arm and press it into the bed. He hovered, waiting.

Hazy eyes fluttered open, focused with difficulty.

Asami still didn't move. "Didn't I promise you, I'll make you be honest?"

Those eyes widened then, with alarm and confusion both.

Exhausted, probably. Spent, definitely. Desperately needing to come, most certainly not. This was cold, hard lucidity.

"Who do you desire?"

Trembling softly, Akihito turned his head aside. Asami had ran out of hands but no matter. Deliberately gentle, he brushed his nose up the column of Akihito’s neck and up the cheek, planted a kiss against the hairline. He murmured against Akihito’s ear. "Who do you desire, Akihito?"

"What the hell are you asking all of a sudden?" Akihito muttered quietly, pained.

"Honesty, Akihito. Who do you desire?"

Akihito swallowed hard, covering his face with his free hand. His voice was barely audible. "... You know who."

Asami let him hide, mouthing along the jaw, behind the ear as he listened to Akihito's unsteady inhale. "Tell me."

Akihito’s jaw clenched before he huffed a shaky sigh, a single breath packed with confusion and conflict and anger and need. Glaring furiously, he admitted stutteringly, grudgingly, "It's you, you damn bastard. But only 'cos your body might, kinda, sorta, rock. Just a bit. But your personality, on the other hand – man, it totally fucking sucks –"

It was with something of a growl that Asami surged forwards, himself consumed by the desire to devour this brazen, vibrant soul. He took claim, kissing Akihito deep as he thrust home.
Breathing hard, Akihito floated absurdly slowly down from his dizzying high. Asami already seemed to have recovered, Akihito could hear him brushing his teeth in the bathroom.

It had been just as intense as ever but Akihito hardly had any come left. Of course Asami had pounded and stroked him to completion heedless of his objections, even if it was mind-blankingly amazing, but seriously it was the fourth time! Tasting himself in Asami's kiss had been mortifying, he recalled now. At the time he'd been distracted by the intoxicating fullness in his ass and by Asami mapping every inch of his skin with his mouth and teeth and tantalising nails and unrelenting hands, which had apparently required removing Asami's shirt off him because it restricted access. And his ass was sore – but in a weirdly good way, like the satisfying aching after exercise. Not that he would ever, ever admit that out loud.

Asami had always had a healthy libido but this evening was just crazy, like he'd been driven over the edge with jealousy over Yumi... And Akihito's goading in the shower... And his obediently lying in bed until Asami had come to mess him up again... Shit. Was Akihito really just fleeing the prospect of another terrified scram from Kou's apartment and staring at a flickering monitor trying to ignore sleazy men not-so-discretely wanking off only a few booths over? Or did he actually want to stay? It was a sobering thought.

The sound of water stopped in the bathroom and Asami returned. Akihito rolled away with some effort, every muscle and joint protesting, but Asami pulled him back. After yanking the bed covers out from under him and off the bed, Asami easily flipped him onto his back and spread his legs –

"Wha - no! You must be kidding, you can't... Oh." Akihito's initial alarm fearing Asami was after another round melted away as Asami instead wiped his front with a warm damp flannel, gentle over his aching length. Asami even cleaned between his ass, slapping away Akihito's hands when he tried to stop him.

"You don't have to do that," Akihito grumbled, his cheeks pink with embarrassment.

"I know," Asami chuckled. Then, "You're welcome." He smirked at the glare he got in return as though it was what he'd been aiming for all along.

The mess was all Asami's fault in the first place! Curled on his side, Akihito tracked with his eyes as Asami took both the flannel and covers to the bathroom, fetched clean blankets from the walk-in wardrobe and roughly spread it over the bed and Akihito. Flicking off the lights, casting them into the night glow of Tokyo, Asami slid into bed and pulled an uncharacteristically pliable Akihito over his chest.

Akihito wasn't aware of falling asleep. He only knew when he scrabbled awake, fighting hundreds of invisible hands, sticky and inescapable, dodging flying bullets that curved around the twisted bodies that clawed and dragged him down into cloying dread and wailing darkness –

Gasping, his eyes shot for the front door – only to encounter space. Wide, expansive space, the shadows far at the edges – it took several heart-thumping seconds to remember that he was in Asami's bedroom. Not his tiny rundown flat, or Kou's. The spacious condo was lit by Tokyo's glow, the night sky still dark. It was quiet, an unfamiliar kind of quiet that only came with a penthouse apartment far removed above a city that never slept.

Asami had guards, Akihito reminded himself. There were no eerie hands, just the blankets tangled around his legs. Asami was warm against his side, his breathing relaxed with sleep. And, just in case... Hardly thinking about what he was doing, he leaned over Asami, slipping his hand under the pillow, reaching with fingertips –
Cold, hard metal. Lethal. Safe.

A rush of relief rendered him weak. He sagged, lying himself against Asami's chest again, pressing his cheek to the firm plane of muscle. He wasn't alone. And the gun was within Asami's reach. That was all Akihito needed to know.

Solid and soothing, slow and steady. Blinking blearily at the chiselled curve of Asami's pectoral muscle in front of his nose, he let the double thump of Asami's heartbeat drum through him, until gradually it forced his own skittering heart to slow, marching it into sync and back to order. They rose and fell together, undulating gently with Asami's every relaxed breath, the ebb and flow of a calm vast ocean, the capacity of unleashing terrible power currently dormant in sleep.

Akihito's mind untangled gradually, not just from the web of nightmares but also from the crippling grip of recent fears. Rationality returned. He hadn't felt this okay at night all week, and all just by being next to Asami. He froze. Asami... Asami –

"You're awake," he whispered, already knowing the answer before fingers carded through his hair. Of course. No way would someone like Asami sleep through someone kicking and clawing beside him...

He wasn't sure if he was more embarrassed or grateful that Asami had let him recover in peace, sparing him from being seen vulnerable. Asami held his silence, the large hand simply sliding down to rest on his back but otherwise ignoring him to all appearances.

Akihito squirmed out from under the heavy arm and slid off the bed – and promptly ended up in a heap with a surprised yelp when his hips buckled. He lay there groaning, knowing his face was flushed. Clutching at the luxurious sheets, he managed to climb back to his feet. Asami's eyes were still closed but even in the dim glow of the city Akihito could see the unmistakable lift at the corners of that mouth.

"Don't even," he warned.

The smile widened.

Akihito hobbled across the wide expanse of thick carpet, snagging and pulling on Asami's joggers on the way. The door swung on silent hinges as he let himself out and closed it behind him.

The light from a single lamp filtered in from the living room through the wide hole in the wall. Hunkered down on the cold kitchen tiles hugging his legs, the edge of a bathrobe came into view.

Asami regarded him for a while before padding into the kitchen, leaning back against the counter.

"I half expected you to try and leave again."

It was just an observation, no accusation. His baritone was soft, matching the stillness of the night.

"And how am I meant to do that when I can barely walk?" Akihito grumbled.

Asami chuckled.

"It's not funny! You have the sex drive of a teenager – or someone very hard up. Don't tell me, no one wants to sleep with you unless you force them?"

It wasn't that Akihito had intended to pick this bone with Asami, it had just sort of spilled out. Antsy
from lingering fears at this time of night, unsettled by what was happening between them, his voice had come out bitter.

"No need to be jealous, you're a special case. I was interested and so were you, even if you pretended, and still pretend, otherwise. I usually have no shortage of eager partners."

Akihito scowled. "Why would I be jealous? Go sleep with whatever fool would want you."

"Is that the issue here? Exclusivity?"

"No! That's not even... The issue is you! You are the problem. You – you –" Akihito dropped his head back on his arms. "I hate you," he grumbled, muffled.

Asami's gaze was speculative as he crouched beside the bowed head. "I must have quite the effect on you to provoke such a strong feeling."

"Yeah, quite the negative effect."

A warm hand brushed up Akihito's spine, making him shiver and arch just a little. "Clearly," the older man observed drily.

Akihito didn't hit him away, just hugged his knees tighter. "Why're you doing this?"

Asami's hand slid up to the shoulder, gently kneaded the tight muscles. "Why am I touching you?"

Akihito still wasn't pushing the bastard away and he couldn't have said if it was because he knew he couldn't fight Asami off or if he didn't want to. "Just get whatever it is out of your system and let me go already."

Before it's too late, he silently added in the sanctum of his mind. But there was also another voice, quieter, nascent, vulnerable. Don't let me go.

"It's too late for that."

Akihito stared as Asami's words seemed to parallel his thoughts. What on earth was Asami really thinking? Maybe it was the witching hour stripping his reticence. Maybe it was his defences being left raw from the harrowing aftermath of recent events. Maybe it was all the unvoiced questions, all the answers he didn't have, everything coming to a head. It finally found voice, what he'd wanted to know all along.

"What am I to you?" It could break him, Akihito knew, this question.

Asami considered him, his gaze weighted and sharp. "I told you. There's only you."

"That doesn't tell me anything!"

"On the contrary, Akihito, it tells you everything." Asami's hand slid up to the crook of his neck, the grip as hard as his tone. "Only you have I brought to my home. Only you would I make cry my name and show me all of yourself. Only you have my personal protection. Only you."

Akihito's eyes were huge. Woah, heavy, was all he could think. 'Cos there was no denying it, Asami was freaking serious. "This is ridiculous. How can you even say that with a straight face? You've known me all of three weeks!"

"People can be acquainted for years and never truly know each other. Our circumstances are unusual, our bond forged in blood and fire. I'd say we've each taken the measure of the other better
than most.

Fucking hell, did Asami just say bond? He did, didn't he?

"There's got to be someone who's more suited to you. You could have anyone in the world."

"And who is that supposed to be?" Asami snapped, sounding unexpectedly annoyed.

"I don't know! Someone you don't have to fight all the time, who'll do as you say --"

"Who'll bore me to the grave faster than the living I have chosen?"

Akihito searched for any signs of sarcasm but Asami's irritation seemed deadly serious. "Someone richer?" he tried.

"What use is that to me? If I wanted for more money I'd make it myself."

"Spoken as only someone with too much money could say," Akihito shook his head. "But they'll at least be used to your lifestyle. Classy, sophisticated --"

"And likely to be spoilt and demanding --"

Akihito perked up – maybe if he acted spoilt and demanding too –

"And I'd find them so irritating I'd have to shoot them," Asami added. There was a glint in his eyes as though he knew exactly what Akihito was thinking.

"You baka," Akihito mumbled. But it was sobering. Akihito could have easily fallen under that bullet too. There was the dealbreaker right there. "You do remember the trifling matter about the computer trespassing? I was investigating you, remember? I was threatening your business."

"So we had an interesting start," Asami shrugged off. "But it's in the past now."

"In the past?" Akihito scrambled up off the floor, drawing back, flushing with anger. "You're assuming I'm finished? That I'm just another one of your lackeys now?!"


"Good," Akihito snapped. "Cos I might have helped you – ok I might have helped you twice, but that was only because there were extremely extenuating circumstances. I'm not letting you off the hook, Asami. The moment you cross the line again I'll expose you like the rest of them seeding corruption and believing you're above the law."

Asami's smirk was indulging. "And I look forward to battling heads with you."

"You're crazy! And don't pretend like it's nothing, we're enemies. I'm never going to do as you say."

"I'm fully aware. I expect you to fight me all the way," Asami smirked, "but we both know I'll always make you submit to me by the end."

Akihito threw up his hands. "You and your one track mind! But that's what it comes down to, isn't it? If you hadn't been so eager to get in my pants I'd already be dead. Don't try to deny it!" he insisted as Asami looked set to argue. "What if I was pot-bellied and going bald? Ogawa! What if I'd been Ogawa? I seriously doubt he'd be in your kitchen right now going commando in your pants with the mother of all aching backs!"
Asami seemed torn whether to laugh or be flaming mad. He settled for advancing instead, trapping Akihito against the counter. "Do you live your life on what ifs, Akihito? There's an endless number of things that could have transpired, but they didn't." He fist Akihito's hair, drawing him roughly forwards. "You, me, here. This is the reality, Akihito."

Akihito yelped as he was suddenly grabbed and hoisted over a broad shoulder. "Hey, put me down!"

Asami carted him out into the living room. "You should be grateful. I was about to take you right there but I'm being considerate of your mother of all aching backs."

A bolt of genuine alarm charged through Akihito. Flailing got him precisely nowhere as Asami headed for his bedroom with his cargo. "Then be considerate enough not to take me at all!" But Asami continued undeterred to his bedroom. Akihito felt like he might cry, he seriously couldn't take anymore. "Damn it, Asami, don't do this." His voice wobbled just a little.

"You're clearly still under the delusion that this is less than what it is."

"Then let's talk about it! You don't have to go all Neanderthal on me – ooffh!" He broke off with a grunt as Asami threw him on the bed. He scurried away but his ankle was caught and he was yanked back. Somewhere between struggling completely in vain and having the pants being dragged off, he ended up on his front.

Asami pinned him down by the neck, leaning close. "Are you going to quieten down or need I secure you?"

Akihito stilled at the warning, his heart thumping. He glared out of the corner of his eye. "How can this be anything more when you keep doing this?"

Asami drew away, shedding his bathrobe, casting the impressive contours of his body in accentuated shadows from the Tokyo nightscape. Akihito had to turn his head away. The sight was making his dick stir, even sore and aching as he was. He heard the slide of a drawer, the pop of a lid, the slick sound of something wet. He covered his eyes with a hand, seeking refuge in the darkness.

After a moment warm hands slid up from his ankles, up the calves, the backs of his thighs, his ass, all the way up his back. The slow, firm pressure travelled all the way back down and all the way back up again. A firm squeeze took some of the tension from his shoulders as he lay there naked, waiting for the inevitable.

"Haven't you had enough?"

Asami's weight settled over him, the whole of Asami's front pressed against the whole of his back, Asami's legs spreading his knees as wide as they could go while staying flat on the bed. There was an unmistakable nudge against his aching puckered entrance.

"Wait! Asami? But..." Asami wasn't even going to prepare him? So he might be soft from all the times earlier, but still...!

Asami's voice was warm in his ear. "Relax for me now."

"Asami..."

"Let me in, Akihito," Asami rumbled in his ear softly, coaxing.

Slow, steady, unrelenting, Asami pressed in. Akihito tried to breathe, tried to relax, trembled, tried to breathe again. It was all he could do, bearing the burn as Asami pressed mercilessly slowly and
"Just like that. Take me to the hilt."

"It hurts."

"Ride the pain, Akihito," Asami rumbled as his weight imprinted onto the slender back. "Let your tears go, knowing only I can drive you to them. Feel me, feel this, and let yourself go."

Akihito huffed into the sheets, robbed of any air to even make a snarky comment.

"Feel everything I give you."

With a last nudge Asami was fully sheathed. He remained still as Akihito panted shallowly, stroking large hands over the trembling sides and along his arms, feathering over the bandage. Teeth nipped Akihito's ear, a warm tongue distracted at his neck. Asami waited until Akihito was breathing easier, until the smaller man had stopped shaking, still waiting until the tight squeeze on his shaft had eased off being painful, before he began to move.

He pulled almost all the way out before sliding fluidly to the hilt again, steady and deep as he thrust Akihito into the bed, forcing a moan from between Akihito's parted lips, half pain, a little arousal. Skin against skin, their bodies slid against each other as Asami pressed his weight into the lithe back, rubbing Akihito's sensitive front against the covers in turn. His growing length, nipples, all his skin, it was a gentle stimulation that carried him with each drive of Asami's hips like rolling waves, each higher than the last, until the soreness became an arousing counterpoint to the rushing pleasure, until Akihito was awash with his own craving and pressing his head against Asami.

Dominating and relentless as ever, but endlessly patient, waiting for Akihito to catch up and match his need, Asami took without permission but gave back the same and more. Sandwiched between the soft bed and Asami's hard lines, pressed down by Asami's weight, Akihito felt smothered. But rather than being suffocating, it was comforting. All Asami allowed Akihito to feel was Asami and what Asami was doing to him, like a shield shutting out the world and all its threats and fears.

Turning his head, Akihito glanced out of the corner of his eye to find himself caught in a web of gold. There was still a tendril of anger there, but it was held back with that indulgence that ensured Akihito's pleasure. The dark hair was flopped over Asami's eyes, making him look younger. Softer, even. They shared a look full of desire and too much of something meaningful that made Akihito turn away uncomfortably. Asami reached for his chin, tipping Akihito's head round and back and up as he caught him in a deep, slightly off-centre kiss. Dominated, filled deeply at both ends, it bolted like lightning to his pelvis and Akihito moaned into Asami's mouth.

Never upping the pace, still steady and deep and unrelenting, Asami slid large hands over Akihito's, entwining fingers. Teeth scraped Akihito's ear.

"Who can give you such pleasure as this? Tell me, Akihito."

Akihito groaned, pressing his forehead into the sheets. "You have a bad habit of talking at the worst moments."

"Tell me," Asami demanded.

"It's not like you need an ego boost or anything. Just get this over with."

"And you have appalling manners," Asami observed as a tight fist gripped his hair and drew his head back sharply.
Golden eyes burned into Akihito. "Who can give you the pleasure you need, Akihito? Who can make you beg for release?"

Akihito grit his teeth. "You do."

"Who can keep you safe?"

Akihito's eyes widened, rocked by Asami's unrelenting thrusts. His breath huffed softly in time. "You do."

Asami's baritone was steel. "And who else? Who else can touch you? Who else can shield you?"

Akihito couldn't answer, shaken at what Asami was demanding, the serious intensity of those golden orbs not letting him go.

"Who else, Akihito?"

There was still the possibility that he was a stop-gap until Asami's interest transferred elsewhere. But smothered by Asami's weight that was just on the other side of comfortable, unable to quite draw a full breath, stunned that he seemed to be accepting Akihito exactly as he was, Z4m4 M1r0 and all, he dared to risk the chance that Asami might just mean things at face value.

"... Only you."

There was a flash of blazing gold before Asami tipped his head down and captured his lips as he drove them both to a rolling, surging climax, snapping his hips, pounding the smaller man into the bed, swallowing the desperate cries as he let the friction of the sheets finally send Akihito over the edge.

Akihito cried out, tears spilling from more than just the sheer climax, as Asami crushed him with his own guttural release.

The fingers brushing through Akihito's hair wasn't entirely unusual, but the tight grip that followed was unexpected and had the effect of zeroing his attention right out of his exhausted haze and back on Asami.

"You'll remember this, Akihito," Asami rumbled in his ear. "There is no other. Even in the light of day I won't let you forget."

Only then did Asami release him, easing out of him and shifting off the bed. Akihito's mind spun as he wondered just what it was that he had capitulated to in the heat of the moment... He was still lying there when Asami returned with a flannel. His face was clouded, he simply watched as Asami rolled him onto his back. Akihito himself hadn't had any cum left, it had been a dry orgasm, but Asami still cleaned off the lube and cum dribbling out of his ass with the same care as before. And again Asami pulled him half over his chest to sleep.

It threw him for six.

Akihito lay there staring up at his partial profile, his mind wondering, uncertainties chasing each other through his mind.

From the heart, I want you to know
All I really want
Is to see the real you

The song from Kou's party rang in his mind. Relentless in pursuit but unshakable in protecting Akihito, the sadistic darkness that wasn't hidden from him while surrounding him with confounding warmth. Maybe Asami's real self had been right before Akihito's eyes this whole time.

Was he reading it right? He couldn't help wondering if seeing him with Yumi, and his urging on finding a more 'suitable' partner, had made Asami uncertain of his own impact on Akihito's sphere of life. And somehow, even to such a powerful crime lord, this impact mattered.

Or more likely this was just the post-sex afterglow and Akihito would kick himself seven ways to hell in the morning for being taken for a fool. He should be hightailing it out of there, getting as far away from this dangerous bastard as he could. There was no way Asami meant the words he'd said, no way he could possibly have meant –

"Stop thinking," came Asami's voice in the gloom, rough with encroaching sleep.

Akihito frowned. It wasn't like he could just stop –

"You can have at me in the morning. Let it be for now." A musclebound arm settled heavy over Akihito's back.

Something about those words, letting Akihito be who he was, stubborn defiance and all, was a balm soothing the mayhem of his mind. It turned out that he could just stop.

Calmed by the weight and scent that was quickly becoming a sense of familiarity, exhaustion and post-multiple-orgasm haze dulled his thoughts. He lay there listening to Asami's strong pulse, his cheek pressed against Asami's chest. The last thing he remembered was a hand carding through his hair as he drifted off.

Golden eyes slitted open in the dark, watching the blond head of hair gently rising and falling with their every breath.
Trust

Chapter Notes

So you may have noticed that little number 25... Yep, Click is going to be 25 chapters long! Maybe you'd noticed it; maybe you hadn't. Or maybe you're wondering what all the fuss about LOL XD For those of you who've been requesting this story ad infinitum or who mourn the end of each chapter let alone the story, I wanted to explain. I've been debating with myself and toing and froing whether and when to give the total number of chapters, but in the end it always seemed to boil down to how if it was a book, whether printed or e-book, we'd always know their length and how far along we are. So now that I've split out the rest of the draft into separate chapters (this actually started off as one gargantuan document that Word even gave up spellchecking on), I've gone for it and plugged that number in. There's a chance it might change, if a chapter gets too long and I decide to split it for example, but even so it's all pretty much mapped out. But you know me, many of my chapters are epic beasts (like this one, seriously it's 15K words! argh!) so there's still so much going on. I can't wait to share it all with you. (^^)

I continue to be stunned by your reception to this story. All your support, so many of you getting involved and all our discussions – I'm more grateful than I can ever explain. Thank you so much for reading my rambling fanfic and being a bright highlight amidst all the ups and downs of life!

I had the hankering to give this chapter a title. There's no consistency to this, there might be one or two more chapters to also carry a title but that's about it. This one just jumped out at me.

I hope you'll find this monster of a chapter was worth the wait! So here we go. Trust.

~ Nyx ~

Sunday.

A mass of white. Or was it yellow? Akihito was pretty sure it was white under all the sunlight. It was an effort to blink, gummy and puffy. Cutting through his blurry vision was a swathe of grey and steel blue. He made a token effort to lift his head and see better but it was just too much effort and nothing moved.

The next thing Akihito knew he was waking up again. He squinted, the sun directly in his eyes now. He rolled away – or tried to, voicing it very much out loud as every muscle groaned.

His lower back hit him first, a persistent throbbing reawakened by his movement. His hips, his thighs, his neck, even his shoulders and arms hurt a little bit. What the hell? Had he been hit by a truck or something? Oh wait. Nope. That would be the freight train called Asami. His ass was zinging, damn it!

"Stupid idiot bastard," he grumbled into the pillow even though he was alone in the room. Yeah, you
tell him, a voice sniggered in his head. "I hope your dick falls off." Real original. "I hope your jaw hurts so much you starve all day." Though the bastard hardly ate much anyway. Apart from Akihito...

He groaned anew and tried to disappear right through the excessively comfortable mattress. What on earth had possessed him? Kneeling over Asami's face and... Like the bath hadn't been enough... Then again in the middle of the night...

Akihito's discomfort switched tracks. Last night – had Asami been serious? The things he'd said... That they'd both said...

Not only that, but Akihito had slept. For the first time all week he'd actually managed to go back to sleep, which was pretty miraculous in itself, and till late morning too judging from how high the sun was already. His head felt clearer than it had in a long time. And all just by being with Asami?

The cheery sunshine mocked his topsy turvy emotions. He turned away – and encountered a glass of water. Peering over he also saw a small blister pack of painkillers on the bedside table.

Staring at the two little pills sitting there, he sank back into the pillow, wrapped in Asami's sheets and Asami's scent, frowning because he couldn't work out if it was meant to be thoughtful or apologetic or anything at all.

It was surreal. Asami was wearing a black polo shirt and pale slacks. Droolworthy even in informal clothes, the black top lent him an air of casual menace, its short sleeves affording an enticing view of his corded arms. No fair... But then the bastard was droolworthy whatever he was wearing. Or even without a stitch on. Particularly without a stitch on...

Akihito scowled. He was not going to be deterred, especially after all the effort he'd invested into getting dressed – which had involved an embarrassing amount of rolling about as he struggled into the plain grey tee and fresh joggers that had been left for him until the painkillers kicked in and he could stand easier. Ignoring his loudly protesting stomach at the food he could smell, he slung his jacket over one shoulder and sauntered – hobbled – through the lounge and cut across to the kitchen.

He almost derailed again at the sight of Asami pulling out bowls and setting about serving up. The bastard somehow managed to make even such ordinary tasks attractive...

"Well, I'm off then."

"Good morning to you too." Asami paused, but only because he caught sight of Akihito's wardrobe adjustments. Thanks to the bastard's irritatingly perfectly long legs and manly broad shoulders, Akihito had had to tuck under the cuffs bunching around his ankles and roll the short sleeves from his elbows right up to his shoulders. A half smile played on Asami's lips as he turned back to the stove. "And here I was thinking you were going to sleep all day again."

Akihito's eyes strayed to the steaming bowl of rice. He was not asking permission. "I'm too busy to sleep the day away. So you just gotta tell your underlings not to get all excited when they see me heading out."

Akihito's eyes strayed to the steaming bowl of rice. He was not asking permission. "I'm too busy to sleep the day away. So you just gotta tell your underlings not to get all excited when they see me heading out."

"You can put those on the table."

A scowl darkened Akihito's usually bright countenance. "Are you listening to me? I'm off."

The taller man took the food out himself. "Not today."
"Yes, today!" Akihito insisted, following after him. "Right now, in fact!"

Asami headed back to the kitchen. "No need to get worked up, I'll let you out tomorrow. Today you're staying here."

Akihito was still right on his heels. "Why the hell do I have to stay here? I have things I have to do and – ow!" He yelped as Asami slapped his ass – hard – on his way back to the living room again.

"I haven't had my fill yet," Asami smirked. "You're not leaving till I do."

A very different kind of heat merged with the angry flush on Akihito's cheeks. "And that's conveniently supposed to happen on Monday morning, is it?"

"If I'm satisfied."

Akihito glowered. "How's that ever gonna happen? You're like some horny teenager on roids!"

"I'm a teenager now? What happened to old man?"

"Horny old bastard, then. On Viagra!"

Asami smirked. "Then you'd better hurry up and eat or you'll never keep up."

Akihito shook his head in disbelief. "How can you be so... so... This is my life we're talking about! It might mean fuck all to you but it's my life and it's important to me." He paused. "For that matter, why am I even standing here arguing with you?"

He spun on his heel and marched for the door. But a moment later his arm was yanked backwards.

"Akihito –"

"You can't just keep me locked up in here!" Akihito tried to jerk free, but Asami grabbed him by both arms and shoved him against the wall.

"Let me go!"

"Akihito!"

Asami might demand, insist or declare, or he might murmur in that rumbling baritone that tingled through Akihito and awakened every cell. But raise his voice? The rarity was enough to make the indignant young man freeze in his tracks.

"Do you trust me?"


Asami sighed with a brief set of stony eyes as though trying to rein in his patience. "If someone is still after you, do you trust that I would keep you safe from them?"

Akihito's confrontational air vanished in a heartbeat, frantically searching the golden glow.

"Nishizuma?"

"We don't think so."

"Then who?"
Now that Akihito was no longer trying to make a break for it, Asami's hands slid to his shoulders. "Do you trust me?" he pressed again.

Akihito tried to draw away but the wall didn't allow much retreat. The question was too heavy. He wasn't ready to answer it. "Who's after me?"

"We're still looking into it."

"We?"

"My men. Kuroda too."

"What, he doesn't count as one of your men?" Akihito tried to twist free again but Asami held firm.

"Akihito—"

Akihito laughed unevenly. "Haha, so what is it? More armed thugs roving the streets after me and that's why I have to stay locked up here? Is that what you're saying?"

"Possibly two teams."

Hazel eyes widened. "Two...?"

"And half a dozen independent hitmen."

Akihito's eyes went rounder still, his face losing all colour. His teeth were chattering. No, that wasn't it. He was shaking. He clamped his jaw together, wrapping his arms about himself.

Asami released his hold but he still loomed close. "Do you trust me?"

Funny how that tall, intimidating, oppressive presence that had felt so threatening moments ago felt like refuge all of a sudden. And before the nameless, faceless, encroaching roar of fear, it was the only outlet available to Akihito.

"Stop with that damn question already!"

"I will, as soon as you answer me."

"I can't answer something like that!"

"Are you afraid?"

"Of course I'm fucking scared, the target's still on my back and now there's a fuckton of them! So much for your protection!" It was unfair. Akihito knew it was unfair. But he couldn't stop himself.

It was like a switch had been flicked. The air suddenly crackled with Asami's ire, the mesmerizing menace almost a tangible entity coiling around them. A powerful grip at Akihito's jaw almost lifted him off the floor.

"Let there be a fuckton of them," Asami snarled, his golden gaze narrowed to death. "I'll erase every single one who comes after you and drench the Earth crimson at your feet."

Woaaah. Akihito's eyes went huge at the reminder. Whatever monsters lay in wait out there, Asami was the most terrifying of all.

Asami's gaze lacerated him to the soul and demanded nothing less than raw honesty. "Do you trust
This time, Akihito didn't dare not answer. "Alright, alright! Fine! Yes I trust you... To keep me alive!" he rushed to add, not wanting to make any sweeping declaration beyond that. "Though God knows you're the one I'm most at risk frommmph!"

Asami crashed into his mouth, locking Akihito close with an immovable arm banding about the waist as he raged a fierce storm of a kiss that sizzled all the way to Akihito's extremities, electricity on water as they collided.

Why this question? Coupled with all the heavy from last night, didn't Asami understand what it cost Akihito to answer such a question? He didn't feel ready for something so close to the heart. He tried to push the bastard away only to find the hand on his jaw sliding around behind his neck to trap him close in a territorial gesture that he adamantly refused to admit sent a warm flurry through him.

Damn Asami, as pushy as ever in taking liberties and tangling Akihito in knots as he was asking that blasted question over and over, waiting on Akihito's answer... Waiting... Because... Why? Because it mattered to Asami...?

Akihito huffed, the startled breath swallowed up as Asami held his tongue hostage in the furiously depraved kiss that felt like Asami had loosened the leash on his control.

Asami wanted his trust?

Akihito didn't know if it was that thought that left him reeling, or the taste and smell and solid, warm dominance that was all Asami that bolted straight to his groin. Asami forced his thigh between Akihito's legs, pressing up firmly against the sensitive juncture, and a groan slipped out against the demanding tongue before Akihito could stop himself.

And finally it felt like Asami's wrath had been tempered some, Asami's lips curving against his. Asami drew away just enough to drag a breath between their lips. His gaze was heavy, lidded, just as affected as Akihito was which might have been why the blond didn't feel the immediate urge to let go when he realized that his hands were fisted in the smooth black cotton of Asami's polo. Not so smooth now, scrunched and creased within his fists –

"Yes, Kirishima?"

Akihito's eyes widened comically as the secretary stepped into the living room and bowed. "Good morning, Asami-sama. The limo is ready whenever you are, sir."

Akihito flailed and leapt away, blushing furiously. "You bastard! You knew he was there!" He hadn't even heard a thing.

Asami smirked in obvious amusement at his embarrassment. "Change of plans, Kirishima. I'll be working at home today."

There was just a hint of shock. "At... home, sir?"

"Set up what you need in the study."

Glasses had already processed his surprise at this unprecedented turn of events and was impassively professional again. "Of course, sir. Would fifteen minutes be acceptable to make the necessary arrangements?"

"Take half an hour. We'll have breakfast first."
"Thank you, sir." The secretary was already pulling out his phone as he hastened back out of the condo to rearrange the whole day at his boss' whim.

"Now, can we eat?" Asami asked mockingly as he sat at the table and started on his breakfast.

Akihito still hesitated. Not because he wasn't hungry, which he was. Starving, in fact. But eating breakfast together the morning after the night before, with all the 'only you's and trust elephants stomping about too... It was way too coupley.

"You could've just told me why you wanted me to stay here in the first place, instead of being so high and mighty about it." Akihito huffed a wry laugh. "Though it must be hard for you, suddenly being lumped with someone you can't just order around and have to discuss things with like a normal human being."

Asami arched a brow. "So I should secure your permission on how to allocate my resources to save your skinny ass, should I?"

"That's not..." Akihito scowled. "I'm just saying. If you'd told me in the first place, I wouldn't have got so mad at you." He espied the golden gleam of amusement. "What?"

"What makes you think I mind you being mad and feisty?"

Embarrassed heat crept up Akihito's face. "You perverted ass!"

Asami grinned. "Sit and eat. Unless you're waiting for me to finish so you can jump my bones."

Outrage played on Akihito's face before he hunkered down onto a chair, scowling all the while. "Itadakimasu," he mumbled and started eating.

It was standard Japanese breakfast fare – rice, miso soup, salmon, some side veg. Food, as always, was the path to Akihito's heart. Within a few mouthfuls his irritation was dissipating.

"Did you cook this?"

"Kirishima made the soup. I can manage rice and fish."

"Your secretary makes you breakfast?" So it wasn't just the curry they'd had before.

"He's more than a secretary."

"Your housekeeper then?" Akihito had been joking but there was something about Asami's thoughtful pause that made him suspicious... "No way. Don't tell me he does the cleaning too?"

Asami smiled a little.

"The laundry?"

Still the same smile.

"He does?" Akihito exclaimed. "Shit, he's your maid! And here I was thinking he was your second or lieutenant or whatever your kind call it. Does he dress in a frilly apron too?" A cooking and cleaning maid was not what Akihito had envisaged of the grim-faced man.

"My kind?" Asami mused, his tone light but with just a hint of bite.

"Uh..."
Asami leaned back in his chair, finished eating already. "I wouldn't advise calling him a maid in his hearing. He can be perfectly dangerous, armed or otherwise."

"I don't doubt it." Akihito's voice came out a little high.

"My second isn't far off from his role, though he also acts as my proxy and adjutant."

"Aren't adjutants only in the military?"

"I have an army. Of sorts."

Akihito snorted. "Of course you do."

Asami smirked. "Help yourself to more," he waved towards the kitchen as he picked up his iPad.

Akihito helped himself to seconds and also brought tea over for them both. He couldn't help sneaking sideward glances as he tucked in.

"Careful," Asami murmured, his eyes still on the screen. "If you keep looking at me like that I'll take that as an invitation."

"It isn't!" Akihito denied hastily. "It's only 'cos I didn't think you liked wearing anything but a three-piece suit."

"I don't particularly like them."

Akihito did a double take. "You don't?"

Asami shrugged. "They're useful. They allow for discreet security precautions."

It took a moment for Akihito to figure out his meaning. "You could've just said it's to hide your gun. I have seen it, you know."

The grin Asami gave him was totally lascivious. "So you have."

Akihito glared, flushing red. "You have such a one track mind, it's amazing how you ever get anything done!"

"The tie is also useful for disciplining recalcitrant brats –"

"Perverted baka! You can't even have one normal conversation!"

Chuckling, Asami returned to his iPad as Akihito shoved more rice into his mouth. Asami was tapping away on some email or other. Something about him kept drawing Akihito's eye. Maybe it was the easy posture, relaxed in the chair with one long leg crossed over the other. Maybe it had something to do with his dark hair flopping over his forehead, softer than his usual slicked-back style. Or maybe it was the golden eyes, inescapable like quicksand...

Akihito was on his third helping, and caught up in an internal battle to remind himself that he was at odds with Asami and that he had to avoid the trap of this easy companionship between them, when Glasses returned, bowing to his boss as he entered.

With practised familiarity Kirishima set about clearing up after his boss' breakfast. Imagining frilly aprons, mirth bubbled under the surface but Akihito just about managed to hold it in – until he happened to catch Asami's eye and the corner of the man's lip twitched, and all his hard work went down the drain. Akihito guffawed, tried to disguise it as a cough, and ended up letting out an
undignified snort instead which just set off the giggles. Amusement danced in Asami's eyes despite his otherwise expressionless demeanour which wasn't helping any.

Blond Tank entered with bags and cases, some of them looked like documents and computer cases. Akihito blinked at him a bit. No matter how many times he saw Asami's security chief, the guy was huge.

"Here, put this in the kitchen," Kirishima said as he shoved a sizeable bag as wide as his arms at Akihito.

"Why do I have to take this?"

"I was instructed to bring you lunch. Asami-sama said you've worked up quite an appetite. I can't imagine why."

Akihito fought the blush at the remark. It was all Asami's fault anyway. "I don't need ten people's worth! This is such a waste." He lugged it into the kitchen.

When he returned, Asami and Suoh had disappeared with most of the rest of the bags.

Glasses appeared in front of him. "I believe this is yours." Kirishima tried to hand him a laptop case but Akihito immediately backed away.

"Oh no, I'm not falling for that again!"

"Take it." Asami leaned on the doorway, drinking his tea.

"No thanks. You can keep your dodgy bullet-riddled laptops all to yourself."

"Akihito."

Hazel eyes locked onto gold at the soft admonition. Asami's glance was as piercing as ever, heavy with his overbearing aura and Akihito could feel his prickly defences rising, fast approaching melting point, but just as he was about to lash out, Asami blinked and tilted his head. His authoritative air muted just a little and just like that, Akihito didn't feel so backed into a corner anymore.

Was it a coincidence or could Asami really read him that well? It was a frightening thought.

"Give it here," Akihito grumbled as he finally accepted the proffered case. He was already doomed anyway, whatever nightmare was contained in the Pandora's Box this time would make no difference –

It looked like his laptop, but the police had that and the last Akihito had heard, the forensics lab wasn't meant to be done with it for at least another week.

*That's his firearm. Have Matsui release it...*

A fragment of Asami's phone call the previous night floated into mind and he glanced at Asami. His laptop was indeed his form of firearm, the way Akihito could fight back control from V1P3R. His fingers were already itching to busy themselves on his familiar keys as he scooped up the laptop and held it close. Did Asami know what it meant to him?

He knew that he should thank Asami but found himself unable to speak, too tangled up at the thought that Asami had specifically done this for him.

"Thanks," he said quietly to Glasses instead, who nodded curtly in response. "Do you have any
Asami waved Kirishima off to fetch them from his store cupboard. Akihito glanced at the crime lord who headed off to the kitchen without a word, feeling a twinge of guilt. Coward, he rebuked himself.

Glasses returned with the toolbox and soon busied himself discussing something with Asami.

There were enough screwdrivers and wrenches and other tools of various sizes that Akihito could use. Settling down on the floor at the coffee table, it took remarkably little time for Akihito to forget about everything else.

His laptop had been in the hands of the police, he didn't trust them not to have tampered with it. He checked it over, taking it apart and inspecting every millimetre. He had built and rebuilt the machine from scratch, on multiple occasions, with multiple iterations. He knew its every wiring and circuit boards better than the back of his own hand. Twenty minutes later, he had it all disassembled and satisfied himself that every part was his original and that the hardware was clear of any bugs or tracking devices.

He was halfway through reassembling it when his phone rang with Kou's ringtone. Still focused on the laptop he grabbed his phone from his jacket and trapped it against his shoulder. "'Sup?"

That was the only thing he managed to say before Takato and Kou's voices erupted from the phone. Akihito jolted, and the phone slipped from its precarious perch and went clattering across the laptop parts.

"You're alive!"
"Yo, bro!"
"You should've called!"
"Where you at?"
"You didn't come back last night -"
"Are you still with that Asami dude?"
"– and we were worried!"
"So how was it?"
"Are you alright?"
"Was it banging?"
"Kou, you baka!"
"What? You saw him, that dude is a total hunk!"

Akihito stared at his phone as his friends yelled loud enough to hear without it being on speaker. Then he realized that all of them, Asami, Glasses and Blond Tank included who were on the opposite side of the living room, were also staring.

Smothering a groan, he practically leaped over the sofa as he rushed to dart into Asami's bedroom and close the door. "Kou you idiot!"

"What?" came the confused reply.

Akihito sighed. "You didn't actually expect a reply to any of that, did you? 'Cos that was just a shitload of garbage."

"Aki, are you ok?" It was Takato, as ever the mother hen.

"I sent you a message last night, didn't I? I'm fine."
"Good. Then we need you," Takato continued, more demanding than usual. "Come to Kou's, I need another guy's opinion.'

"Ah, that..."

He trailed off as Asami strolled in and into the bathroom, leaving the door open. What, so Akihito wasn't allowed to have a phone call in private either? Ok so maybe he wasn't all that fine...

The shaver started up.

"Hey! I told you what I'd do!" Kou was complaining.

"It was a stupid suggestion!" Takato immediately knocked down before appealing to Akihito again. "Aki, I need a guy's opinion who isn't a delinquent!" he stressed over Kou's fresh protests. "You can't ditch us just 'cos you've got a new fella. Come over."

Akihito's expression was troubled. "That's... It's tricky today."

"C'mon, Aki, just get your ass over, ok?"

Akihito dropped his head into his hand. "... Like I said, today's tricky. Ask me now."

"What's with you?"

"I'm sorry, it's... it's complicated, alright?"

"Invite them here."

His head snapped up. Asami was standing in the bathroom doorway, shaver in hand. His friends were saying something but he didn't hear them.

"Huh?"

"I'll send the limo to pick them up." Asami disappeared back into the bathroom.

Akihito froze for a second. "Takato, hold that thought," he said before hanging up and leaping into the bathroom. "What do you mean, invite them here?"

"They can help you hoover up the food Kirishima brought."

Akihito was more than a little dumbfounded as Asami calmly cleaned off his shaver.

"You're fine with my friends crashing your condo?"

"I assume you're speaking figuratively."

"We'll be rowdy and noisy."

"Aren't you always?"

"We'll need films. Or games. Or both."

"Check the entertainment system in the living room, use whatever's there. Your friends can bring what they like. Or they can buy something on the way, put it on my card. Whatever you want."

Was he for real? "We'll need booze too."
Asami smirked, knowing full well Akihito was seeing how far he could push it. "It's on me."

"But... Why?"

"It's not safe for you to leave yet but that's no reason for you not to see your friends. They just have to come here."

Akihito gnawed his lip. "Will it be.. safe for them? What if they're seen?"

"Suoh can arrange discreet pickup and arrival, they'll stay out of sight." Asami said it so easily, as though he was practised at keeping under the radar and hiding from threats. His lips curved in an expression Akihito could only call suggestive. "They can stay as long as you like though you'll probably want them to leave after dinner."

"You're such a pervert!" Akihito hissed, fighting the heat stirring in response.

"So long as we're both clear about that," Asami chuckled.

Which was how Sunday noon saw Akihito flopped in Asami's cavernous living room with his friends, Akihito and Takato lazing on the couch while Kou lay sideways on an armchair, head and legs over opposite armrests.

"Dis is da bomb!" Kou announced.

"I can't believe you still talk like that," Takato mumbled.

"Though it's kinda like a fortress out there with all the bodyguards."

It was how Akihito had learned that Asami had placed a small army in the building, and knowing the crime lord that probably also meant the neighbouring vicinity as well but just where his friends couldn't see. The three of them were mostly left undisturbed in the lounge, most of Asami's men coming and going the other way around the doughnut condo to wherever Asami had set up his home office for the day.

"That... kinda sucks... Maybe...?" Akihito said as he heard Takato's dilemma.

Takato nodded at him. "Right?"

"I don't see the problem," Kou disagreed. "If Chiharu-chan's parents want to give you a truckload of money, why ever not?"

"But it's like they're saying I'm not good enough for her. It's our place. So what if it's a bit on the small side, it's still a 2LDK. [2 bed apartment with living/diner and kitchen]

"And it's your first place together," Akihito pointed out. "You'll probably move again a few times, you'll get bigger places."

"Right?" Takato agreed again.

"But then again, what about kids?" Akihito thought, making his friend freeze in alarm.

"Kids?" Takato repeated parrot-fashion.

Kou grinned. "Yeah, do Chiharu-chan's parents want to hear the pitter patter of tiny grandchildren's feet?"
"Grandchildren?"

"If you start a family in the next couple of years, is there space?" Akihito asked more constructively.

Takato looked a bit pale. "I dunno..."

"Maybe it's not a bad thing," Akihito thought. "It might be a kick to the ego but if it's to get a bigger place for your family, it might be easier to accept the money."

Takato rubbed his face. "Ugh, I hate this. I was kinda excited about the whole moving in thing until all this happened, you know?" He glanced cheekily at Akihito. "At least you don't have to worry about it, Asami-sama's loaded."

Akihito gaped. "I can't even believe that just came out of your mouth."

"Well?" Kou leaned forwards too, propping his chin in his hand, looking way too interested for his own good. "So how serious is it?"

"It's not!"

Takato grinned. "Seems pre-tty serious to me."

"Yeah," Kou seconded, "you're spending nights and inviting us over like it's your own place."

"That's only 'cos I can't –" Akihito clamped his mouth shut. He couldn't get his friends be caught up in all his mess.

The two shared a worried look.

"Mind you, between this place and mine?" Kou drawled, flinging his arms wide. "I don't blame you, this is the high life!"

Akihito knew his friend was deliberately deflecting, probably thinking it was about all his jumpiness the week just gone. Akihito didn't elaborate and pushed his worries aside for something far more distracting.

"Hey I wanna see this new VR game you've been banging on about."

Kou whooped. "Yeah, it's bitchin'!"

Takato groaned. "Ah shit, Aki. It's a total pants fest!"

"What, skydiving, flying a helicopter, racing moon buggies? Doesn't seem that bad. Though landing on an alien planet full of fluffy bunnies did sound a bit weird."

Kou was practically bouncing on the spot. "Oh, come on, it's totally rad! When else can you play a bunch of yakuza letting their hair down? There's even a karaoke add-on."

Akihito gaped in dismay. "Y-yakuza?"

Takato nodded as Kou threw them headsets.

"Letting their hair down?"

"Nn-hn," Takato nodded again, rather accusingly. He entirely blamed Akihito for Kou now making them suffer through the game.
Akihito could only second Takato's sentiment but for reasons his friends couldn't possibly understand. "Ah shit...

The locked door that Akihito had encountered during his first nose-around turned out to be a study, bigger than Akihito's entire apartment combined. It was where he found them, Kirishima, Suoh and Kuroda - who had in fact arrived half an hour ago, took one look at the boisterous mayhem in the living room with the three young men with weird headsets wrestling through what might have been a dance routine if he squinted enough, and backed straight out. Asami's men were all looking sharp in their suits even on a Sunday, fanned out around their boss whose air of laid-back intimidation in his dark polo gave Akihito lip-smacking goose pimples all over again. The blinds were down and half slit, casting the darkly furnished room in ominous gloom punctuated by a single lamp on the desk.

Akihito blinked at the sight. "I've walked in on Don Corleone holding counsel."

Silence and blank faces met his outburst.

Akihito even affected The Voice, jutting out his jaw in impersonation. "I'm gonna make him an offer he can't refuse."

Asami arched a brow from where he was leaning against the front of the desk. That was the only reaction.

"Seriously? Nothing?" Akihito exclaimed. "What a bunch of misery guts! Well lemme help you out 'cos I'm telling you, this," he gestured to the picture at large, "is not subtle. I don't know how you've managed to fool anyone let alone the world at large that you're anything legit 'cos this is straight up Godfather. You guys," he waved at Kirishima and Suoh off to one side, "are badass, you just have this vibe," he said, shimmying his hands in the air. He looked at Kuroda with an impish grin. "You're, well, you look like the supplicant begging a favour."

"I beg your pardon?" Kuroda baulked.

He didn't actually, but Akihito couldn't resist a little dig at the prosecutor's expense.

Aha! Just there, Suoh's mouth had twitched. It was only for an instant and Akihito was lucky to catch it. He gave the stoic giant a cheeky wink.

Asami pushed off from the edge of the solid desk, advancing on the mischievous young man. "So I'm the Godfather, am I?"

Uh oh. Akihito could only hope Asami didn't take that wink out of context, he hadn't meant anything by it. Debating whether to hold ground or just call it quits and scuttle, he fudged, "But totally on downtime. You're real scruffy in that get-up."

"Ah, so that's why you haven't been able to keep your eyes off me," Asami smirked, stalking ever closer. He was practically prowling. "Not because you like me in casual clothes."

Akihito backed off. "You're imagining things! I don't like you in any clothes!" He froze, his face heating up to the tips of his ears as Asami grinned. "That came out so wrong..."

Asami caught him and proceeded to kiss the hell out of him.

"Mmph! Huhmmm!" Akihito gave up trying to shout at the bastard to stop when all the muffled shouting only made it sound worse. They were right in the doorway, preventing the others from
leaving even if they wanted to. He was not getting affected, Akihito tried to tell himself. He was not getting all hot and bothered at Asami shamelessly bending him backwards and assailing his tongue with abandon, damn it...!

Asami finally let him breathe, though he kept his arms locked about Akihito's waist.

"Bastard, you need to stop doing that in front of people!" Akihito was ranting to cover up how flustered he was. "No one wants to see it! Don't tell me you have some perverted fetish for excessive PDA or something?"

Kirishima and Suoh exchanged glances. Actually Asami wasn't a demonstrative man, or at least he never used to be. They were in uncharted waters, new and uncomfortable for them as well.

Asami, as expected, was completely unapologetic. "Just to be clear, your objection to the kiss was because I kissed you in front of other people but otherwise you're happy for me to kiss you?"

Akihito flushed scarlet as Asami deliberately repeated the blasted word over and over again. "Learn to be embarrassed!" Oh god he sounded a bit shrill. He pitched at a more manly level. "Actually don't bother, I'll give you a taste of your own medicine myself. I'll find out what already embarrasses you and embarrass the pants off you!"

Asami could barely hold in a laugh. "My pants? Really, Akihito, I can hardly wait."

Akihito couldn't believe how many times he was putting his foot in it. "You giant, perverted, pain in the – neck," he amended just in time, though Asami's smirk widened and they both knew what he'd been about to say. Akihito shoved free. "It's just a figure of speech! You. Are ridiculous. I came here to do the courteous thing and see if you wanted to join us for lunch seeing as you paid for it and all but I've changed my mind. We're gonna eat it all and you can starve to death amongst all your evil Godfathery scheming, see if I care!"

He barely made it two steps out the room before Asami caught him again. "Akihito, wait."

The serious tone gave Akihito pause before he could fire up again.

"I was about to call for you. We need to talk." Asami drew him back into the study and closed the door.

Immersed fully into the oppressive atmosphere of the study, Akihito became incredibly jumpy and tried to draw back, but Asami was still there guiding him forwards with a hand on his shoulder. It was Kirishima who handed Akihito a printed sheet of paper.

**Yo Mr Khaki (I'm going with colours, get it?)...**

Akihito groaned, knowing from just the top line it was his first email to Kirishima where he'd warned that 'Mr Asparagus' might be being targeted too. "Has everyone seen this?"

Asami turned him around and Akihito found himself gulping at the potent darkness swirling in the golden gaze.

"You're safe. I swore my protection and I will see it through. You understand that, don't you, Akihito?"

"Ok, saying something like that's only gonna make me more nervous. You have to spill now or I'm gonna imagine all sorts and I can imagine some pretty freaky shit, you know."
"There's no easy way to say this," Asami started, and Akihito suspected that the crime lord was being far more tactful than he ever usually was. "Someone is out to get you, and whatever their reasons, they're taking it very personally. Kuroda has CIs spread through various detention facilities and they're all picking up chatter about multiple hits out on you. We'll know more once the intel's been vetted."

Akihito tried to stand firm. "Multiple hits? I was kinda hoping you were just kidding this morning just to keep me here." His laugh sounded hollow. "D'you have any names?"

"Four, actually. All prominent yakuza families. You might be able to clear up if you have any history with any of them – Ozumi, Junai, Daigoku and Kitano?"

Akihito went ashen. Asami even guided him into one of the padded chairs, he looked so shaken.

"Akihito?"

"They were my targets," Akihito whispered.

Asami crouched in front of him. "All of them?"

Akihito nodded in a daze. "I've exposed them all to some capacity or other. Junai and Kitano lost a few sweat shops. But the Ozumi and Daigoku Groups – I managed to snare their heads and top lieutenants, like with the Nishizuma Group."

"And you published as Z4m4 M1r0?" Asami confirmed.

"It doesn't make sense," Akihito shook his head, suddenly leaping from the chair, pacing as his thoughts took hold. "Junai and Daigoku, yes, I exposed them in Spotlight under my alias, so it's possible V1P3R tipped them off so they'd come after me, same as Nishizuma. But Kitano and Ozumi, I only helped the cops with the evidence for securing their arrest warrants. I wasn't even named on their internal files, it was just put down to an unnamed informant. There's no way I could've been linked to them."

"Who knew about it?" Kirishima asked from the side.

"Only –" Akihito suddenly set his jaw, his gaze firm. "No. He wouldn't do that."

Asami only needed one guess, crossing his arms as he leaned against his desk. "Yamazaki?"

"It wasn't him! He's the one who lectured me about protecting my anonymity in the first place, he's a right old nag about it! I mean, I know he tried to force my hand with you, but that was only 'cos he thought he could arrest you. Ratting me out to my former targets so they'd gun me down is a whole different level of fucked up! That's just – that's too – that's..." Akihito trailed off, his arms wrapping about himself as he abruptly felt chilled to the bone. Surely it couldn't be. Even after their recent fallout, even after Yama-san wasn't Yama-san anymore but just plain old Yamazaki, it was too extreme...

Asami didn't push it. "All those families are powerful enough to have contacts in the police, it could be anyone. Get some feelers out," he ordered his men. Kirishima and Kuroda both nodded and pulled out their phones. Asami approached Akihito and ran a hand through the blond hair. "You sure know how to pick them," he disparaged with warm exasperation.

Akihito secretly drew strength from the contact, glaring out from under the too-heavy hand but not shaking it off. "Only the worst. I targeted you too, remember?"
"Past tense, Akihito? And here I was thinking you were still taking aim. How disappointing, I've tamed you already."

"Like hell you have! I'll hunt out your weaknesses and nail you when you're least expecting it!"

Asami smirked, radiating smug contentment as his hand slid to the back of Akihito's neck, squeezing reassuringly. "Do your worst, Takaba Akihito."

Akihito couldn't help but wonder if Asami had done it on purpose, rile him up in just the right way to snap him out of his shock. Asami had that knowing look on his face as he sat back against his desk again, pulling out a cigarette. Glasses dutifully held out a light.

It was one thing after another. Asami kept doing these little things that all added up to something huge and burrowed under Akihito's skin just that little bit more.

Kuroda clearly doubted Asami's sanity – and taste too, most likely – but he was loyal to a tee. "So this Viper, did you say, who tipped off Nishizuma?" he said to Akihito. "Who I presume was being referenced in this interestingly coded email from 'Mr Titanium'. Have you tried to find them?"

"No, I just thought I'd wait it out and hope they go away," Akihito snarked, flapping his hands vaguely. If Kuroda was going to ask stupid questions, he was going to get stupid answers.

Kuroda gritted his teeth. "Do you have anything on them or not?"

"Oh, you mean about how nobody in the Cyber Crimes Division or Interpol have anything on them?" – Kuroda frowned, probably disturbed at Akihito rummaging through such high security databases – "and how the sick prick can't be tracked 'cos they're using the dark web?" – Kuroda looked rather discouraged now – "Or that's what they and so many other people mistakenly believe and V1P3R's actually using Tor with Tails in its default configs and not through bridge relays and not being nearly as disciplined with opsec as they should be and leaving breadcrumbs, even if they're extremely interspersed, and so how I might be able to trace them anyway?"

Kuroda and Kirishima looked rather taken aback. They might have been just the teeniest, tiniest bit impressed. Asami smirked.

Akihito grinned. "Oh, and did I mention I'm awesome?"

Kuroda cleared his throat. "Tell me everything."

Once Akihito had finished running diagnostics and making sure the police hadn't tampered with any of his laptop's software, Kou and Takato were perfect for keeping him distracted the rest of the afternoon, lounging about playing games and drinking beer. Hours flew by, the penthouse filled with their yells and laughter and good-natured ribbing. Akihito willingly lost himself to it, desperately needing the normalcy that only his best friends could give him.

Someone tapped his head. From where he was sitting on the floor, he dropped his head back onto the sofa and glanced up to find a black credit card in his face. He followed the hand holding it up the toned arm to the black polo and the black collar with the turquoise outline, to Asami's face. Akihito's brain sizzled, short-circuiting for a moment as he stared blankly – features sculptured by Michaelangeo, just a touch of tiredness around the eyes but still piercing like a dragon, regarding Akihito with such a weight of attention that made his mouth dry and his slightly inebriated pulse dance just a bit – before Akihito blinked and his mind rebooted.

Asami smirked knowingly. "Hungry?"
Akihito grinned, the booze in his veins loosening his guard. "Famished."

"Order in dinner."

"Woohoo!" His grin widened. Asami ruffled his hair before slinking off back to his study again. Akihito wasn't aware he'd stared after Asami's ass all the way out the door until his friends started giggling.

"Aww!" Kou made goggly eyes.

"Shuddup!"

He chucked Takato's discarded jumper at Kou and Kou threw it back and Akihito leapt onto him and the wrestling match was on.

Asami made no bones about wanting to monopolize Akihito the moment he managed to get Kirishima to agree he'd done enough for the day. Akihito was stretched out over the couch, his head hanging over an armrest and watching the screen upside down and sideways on where Takato and Kou battled zombies, when Asami crouched before his upside-down face. Without any warning, he curtailed Akihito's imminent question by occupying his mouth with his own.

It was all weird upside down, the shape of the mouth different, the jaw moving the other way, the tongue sweeping directly top-to-top against each other. Even stretching his arms up and pushing Asami away – or clinging onto him, Akihito wasn't really sure what he was doing – was all inverted. He tried to pull away and Asami grabbed his wrist and drew him back, and Akihito ended up awkwardly pushing against Asami's shoulder with his free hand to not face-plant upside down on the floor. Or in Asami's crotch, which was more likely the way the bastard kept pulling his arm and deepening the kiss and fuck but he didn't know if it was the beer or the unusual position or simply Asami that pulled a moan from deep in his chest...

"Oh, man. They're at it again."

"Hmm? Who's at – argh!" Takato finally caught on to what Kou was pointing out and hurriedly looked away again.

Kou wasn't so shy, watching quizzically as Akihito frantically wriggled away from Asami and finally broke free, his face flushed. And not just from being upside down.

"I see what you mean about that pushy thing," Kou observed, his own happy beer buzz removing what little brain-to-mouth filter he had in the first place.

Asami smirked pure evil. "You don't know the half of it." Without further ado he grabbed Akihito and hauled the irate, embarrassed young man over his shoulder.

"Bastard! Let me down – ow! Will you stop slapping me! Perverted baka!"

Takato looked on in considerable concern as Kou laughed. "I'm beginning to see."

"Aki?" Takato asked.

Akihito raised his head to see his serious friend getting up, slightly wobbly, ready to leap to Akihito's defence even in his drunken state. He sighed. "Asami, let me down. Hey! I'm being serious here, just give me a minute."
He gave an undignified squeak as Asami abruptly righted him and pinned him to the wall with a hand at his jaw. The grip wasn't hard, painless but firm, no question who was in charge. Asami's broad shoulders shielded the blond from his friends' view, giving them a modicum of privacy.

"One minute?" There was an edge to Asami's voice.

Akihito frowned, peering into those intense eyes. Was it the culmination of a tough day? Or was the bastard just horny? "Just give me a few minutes to see them off, OK?"

Asami leaned in, breathing into the space between their lips. "And then what? You'll do as I say?"

Akihito replied archly, "As if. You'll have to work for it, old man."

The responding grin was pure wolf, ravenous and wicked. "Throwing down the gauntlet, are we? Challenge accepted, brat. I'll make a complete mess of you."

Akihito only had a moment to worry at what the hell he'd just unleashed in Asami when he was caught in a brief, furious kiss that left his tongue zinging and his lips tingling, his face hot and his pulse jumping. He almost fell as Asami abruptly withdrew and left, leaving Akihito letting loose a shuddery breath as Asami walked out the door.

"Hot. Damn." Kou declared.

Akihito groaned, hiding behind his hands. "Why does this always happen to me?" he whined to no one and everyone.

Kou wasn't letting up. "Looks like you're in for a wild night."

"Right, I get it," Akihito tried to agree just to shut him up.

"Rumble in the Bronx."

"Enough, alright?"

"Hubba hubba."

"Argh, shut up!"

Kou looked aside to Takato, who stood there dazed, just blinking. Although Akihito was still embarrassed he couldn't help chuckling. "Sorry, buddy. You alright there?"

"Huh?"

Kou laughed out loud. "Lemme guess, you need a pit stop at Chiharu-chan's tonight?"

"Kou!" Takato and Akihito both yelled at the same time.

Just then, one of Asami's men appeared in the doorway from the front entrance. "I'll be dropping you boys home in the limo. Where to?"

Kou grinned knowingly and Akihito shook his head. "I don't even wanna know."

Kou was still giggling as they made a quick job of tidying up the empty beer cans and food trays and gathered up their stuff.

"Later." Takato mainly avoided Akihito's eyes as he ducked his head and put his shoes on.
Kou caught his blond friend in a one-armed hug. His voice was quiet, firm and unexpectedly sober in Akihito's ear. "Aki, I'm happy for you, but you call us if you need us, ok?"

Akihito peered into Kou's earnest eyes. But really, he shouldn't have been so surprised. Kou was always observant, his mind sharp behind his cheery exterior, serious when it really mattered.

How much could his friend see? Even the part of him that Akihito had barely begun to recognize himself, something more that lay behind his instinctive fight against Asami?

He couldn't even begin to put it into words. He simply grasped Kou's shoulder, hazel eyes conflicted, grateful for the support even if it wasn't something he could ever call upon.

With another one-armed crush, his friends departed.

So much for making a complete mess of Akihito, Asami had left. Because apparently even such a powerful crime lord jumped – or sauntered with leisurely confidence in his impeccable three-piece suit, as the case may have been – when the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court who was blackmailing him over Kondo's shooting expressed readiness to come to the table over a counter threat. Akihito only had himself to blame, having been the one to shed light on Uehara (Akihito still preferred the codename Mr Ultramarine) bucking blame for a fatal car accident decades past and several accounts of falsifying evidence since. He would've sworn Asami looked particularly pleased with himself citing Mr Titanium's intel.

Akihito soaked in the bath, free from Asami embarrassing him on the pretext of helping him keep his bandaged arm dry. It was strange being in the condo without Asami, Akihito felt like an interloper. Asami, however, had been clear where he stood on the matter. If you're not here when I return, there'll be hell to pay, he'd warned in Akihito's ear as he'd left. But even without that, even without the multiple hits out on him, would Akihito still be here? He couldn't outright deny it, which in itself just made him want to run, which was sheer folly under the circumstances.

Akihito sank further into the hot water. Was it really ok, he couldn't help wondering, being here like this, taking shelter in Asami's overwhelming presence? He was fairly sure he felt something for the bastard, but how much of it amounted to something real and not just something new, or gratitude for saving his life, or even just the amazing – abso-fucking-lutely amazing – physical connection?

Amidst all the upheaval of recent weeks, he was too unsettled to decipher the bedlam tumbling within.

He'd never been so glad to be back in his own clothes again, even just a tank top and shorts, thanks to Kou bringing some of his stuff over. Feeling more like himself again, he headed out to the living room. He'd left his laptop on the dining table, there was a lot of work to do to hunt down V1P3R, faint trails to follow even if the fucker was hiding in the dark web –

He came to a screeching halt in the living room. There was a lady sitting on the sofa. The lady. The one from the restaurant. The one Asami had been photographed with during the week. Oda Hazumi, the fashion designer of international acclaim. Radiant and feminine, possibly around Asami's age, her maturity only intensified her allure and she was stunningly – heartbreakingly – beautiful.

She smiled, a vision that could have enchanted kings and felled empires. "So you're the one who's been sleeping with my Ryuichi."

Akihito couldn't entirely recall what happened after that. The world went sort of hazy and he was deaf and blind to everything but his single-minded desperation to get the fuck out of there.
Which was how Asami returned to find Sagano and Nakatani guarding his bedroom door, looking a little rumpled about the edges, with Akihito shut inside.

"Return to your posts," Asami ordered his profusely apologetic men, who bowed deeply and departed to resume their vigilance outside the front door.

"The penthouse is clear otherwise," Kirishima reported as he appeared around the corridor having circled the condo.

Asami nodded his thanks. "That'll be all for today. Suoh, stay by the front door."

"Good evening, sir." Kirishima bowed to his boss, and likewise to Oda, before leaving.

With the big guy at the genkan and leaving his guest in the living room, Asami paused in the corridor. It was with an amused smirk that he knocked on his own bedroom door. "Akihito?"

There was no reply. He gave it a few seconds before he entered.

The room was dark, lit only by the Tokyo nightscape. He located Akihito's outline in the chair on the far side of the bed, the glint of eyes unnaturally bright. Crossing his arms, Asami leaned in the doorway. "Would you prefer to join us in the living room, or shall we talk in here?"

It was a good few seconds before there was any reply. And when it came, it was a voice so thick and strained that it even tugged at what little frozen heart Asami had.

"Only you, you said." Akihito sounded broken.

"Akihito –"

"You bastard." It was barely a whisper. "You. Fucking. Bastard." Such expressions were nothing new from the brat, but never had Asami heard it so venomous, all toxic and concentrated to a hiss.

There was a blur as Akihito fled past him with a choked rush of breath. Asami let him go, following into the living room after a moment. There was no sign of Akihito, evidently having gone around the other way. Asami headed for the sideboard, removing his suit jacket and casting it over a chair along the way. "You shouldn't be here."

Oda afforded him an amused smile. "I've been hearing rumours of you taking in a pet, of course I had to come and see what you were up to."

"No! Let me go! Let me... go..." Akihito's outcries devolved into a strained choke. Suoh didn't immediately appear with his cargo, obviously giving the brat a moment.

Oda's smile widened. "But to bring him here? That was unexpected."

Asami poured himself a stiff drink, knocked it back. "It has nothing to do with you." He unbuckled the holster, winding the straps loosely around the gun and dropping it all with a loud clunk on the solid wood.

"So cold," Oda chided teasingly, not even blinking at the sight of the weapon. "Careful, Ryuichi. I might think you actually care."

Yelling erupted again from the vicinity of the front door. "Get off me, you big oaf! I mean it, I'm never going back in there! Let me go!"

Suoh appeared in the doorway, dragging Akihito who was kicking and punching for all he was
worth. Akihito quickly swiped at his eyes as he was hauled back into the living room. He couldn't let Asami see him crying. Why the fuck was he crying anyway? He was nearly as furious at himself as he was at Asami.

Suoh's grip on his arms was biting. "I apologise, Asami-sama. I may have bruised him."

Asami gave a single shake of his head to dismiss it. "Akihito, come here."

But Akihito had seen the gun on the sideboard. Asami had removed it, in plain view of the lady – Akihito couldn't have explained it, why that felt like another blow on top of everything else. "Fuck you! You lying, low life, son of a bitch, I'm not hanging around just for you to make me feel like shit!"

The woman raised a brow.

"Akihito –"

"Someone should tear you down and put up a human being. You can go to hell!"

The woman's other brow rose to meet the first.

A muscle in Asami's jaw ticked. "Is that any way to speak in front of a lady, Akihito?"

Akihito stuttered in the face of forgotten manners, his breath catching for a moment, but what he was feeling couldn't be contained. He erupted all over again. "Fuck you, Asami! You're a sorry excuse for a human being and don't deserve any common courtesy. You don't do this!" He flung an arm at the woman watching with amusement.

Asami's eyes narrowed. "Do what?"

"Though you clearly do. But I don't! This isn't how you treat women. You might have no qualms about –" He clapped his mouth shut, changing track. "You've never brought anyone else home? What a bunch of fucking lies." He blinked furiously, his voice dropping. "And I'm a complete idiot for believing you."

Asami was now the one to arch a brow. "You think I'm with her?"

Oda leaned forward, resting her chin in elegant fingers, elbow resting on perfectly toned legs shown to best advantage in her slitted dress skirt. "Now, now, Ryuichi, you should let him speak. I have questions too."

Ryuichi... Akihito was suddenly trying to leg it again, forgetting that Suoh was still holding him.

"Takaba-san, please, I'm trying not to hurt you."

Too busy blinking away tears, Akihito didn't see the bastard approach.

"Give him here," Asami told his guard who nodded apologetically. Akihito fought even harder when Asami grabbed him.

"You can go," Asami grunted to Suoh as Akihito elbowed him in the gut before he wrapped his arms around Akihito and trapped him. "Enough," he barked to the flailing man.

"How many times have I told you? You can't order me around!"

Asami pressed his lips to Akihito's ear. "Quit it, Akihito, or I'll gag you. Right here, right now."
Akihito froze. Asami waited a few seconds before he eased up one hand and grasped Akihito's chin, forcing his face around. What he saw stilled what he'd been about to say – the damp hazel eyes struck him like a blow to the gut.

He sighed, softening his voice. "Akihito, will you just listen?" He forced himself to wait, to be patient as Akihito forced himself to stillness and finally nodded. "Come sit down." Hand on the back of the neck, he steered Akihito to an armchair by the sofa.

Akihito glanced uncertainly between Asami and the lady. She smiled, tilting her head. To some it might have been a kind gesture but Akihito only looked even more wary.

"So you've been sleeping with Ryuichi."

Akihito glanced in alarm at Asami, who only looked mildly bemused.

"It's ok," she continued. "I'm not angry. Actually, how about you join us?"

Asami's head snapped to her. "What are you doing?"

"J-join...?" Akihito stuttered.

She smiled. Like a serpent, Akihito thought. "I'm curious to know what has Ryuichi so fascinated. What are your assets? Your skills? Won't you show me?"

"Wha..."

"I'll even pay you, if you like."

The longer Akihito was around this woman, the less he liked her. Who was this demoness? He almost felt sorry for Asami. Almost. He turned to Asami. "Is this what you wanted me to listen to?"

Asami was looking Oda. "Are you quite done?"

The lady ignored him, her piercing eyes locked on Akihito. "Or leave. It's up to you. Either way, I'll make it worth your while."

Asami was a closed book, his expression guarded. Waiting. Why wasn't he saying anything? Right. Akihito didn't mean anything, how could he forget?

Akihito stood. "Don't worry. You can keep your money. I'm leaving."

"A hundred million yen."

He froze. Did she know what that figure meant to him? He glanced back to Asami who was still expressionless. Akihito walked slowly back to the lady, whose smile looked triumphant. It was disturbing.

"Do you really have that much money to give away?"

"I do."

Akihito glanced at Asami, who gave a single nod after a pause. He didn't know why he was even checking with Asami, though, the lying, cheating scumbag.

He met the lady's eyes, beguiling, intimidating, and totally a turn-off. For him, anyway. Apparently Asami liked that kind of thing.
"Cheque or bank transfer?" Akihito asked.

"Oh?" Oda's smile broadened. She slipped a perfectly manicured hand into a handbag that no doubt cost more money than Akihito had ever seen and pulled out her phone. With a look at Asami – one of those that conveyed far more than any single look had any business conveying – she said, "I can transfer it right now."

"Then do it," Akihito said quietly. It was little comfort that Asami seemed unconcerned. Amused, even. Asami might know him well enough to know where he was going with this but it counted for fuck all anymore.

"I'll need your account details," Oda asked.

"Take your pick," Akihito replied. Her obvious confusion did make him smile a little, more bitter than sweet. "Cancer research. Dementia support. Mental health. Children caught up in domestic abuse. I don't give a damn."

That was clearly not the response the lady was expecting. "It's a hundred million yen, Takaba-kun. Two hundred million, if you like. I'm open to negotiation. You can spend one night with us or you can just walk away with it, whichever you prefer. Think about it."

"I don't know you, and you clearly don't know me. Maybe money's been your answer to everything so far but not this time. Find a worthy cause and let them do some good with it. But don't bother asking me again."

He almost met Asami's eyes. But he couldn't. In the end he just paused, just for a second, a silent farewell, before he headed out of the room.

Or at least, he tried. Two steps later Asami had caught him again, the heavy arm hooked around the crook of Akihito's neck.

"Satisfied now?" Asami snapped to Oda just as Akihito drew breath, forestalling the hurt, belligerent man before he could start yelling.

She shrugged an elegant shoulder. "He might be alright."

"I never asked your opinion," Asami dismissed as he easily overpowered Akihito trying to squirm away.

Oda laughed, a sound like bells and fairies. "You staked the Asami name on him and even brought him home. You were getting my opinion whether you wanted it or not."

Asami gripped Akihito by the shoulders and forced him to face him. "I can explain."

Akihito threw him a leery look. "Jesus, Asami! That's like the worst cliché ever."

To his shock, Asami smirked, but it was all dark and pissed off. Why the hell was Asami pissed off? "So it is. Do you want to hear it?"

"No."

"Akihito –"

"I swear, if you're lying to me –"

"Akihito –"
"– I will take your stupid gun –"

"– will you just listen –"

"– and shoot you myself –"

"– for once –"

"– where it'll really hurt –"

Asami silenced him with a fast, brutal kiss. Akihito flinched.

"One more word out of you and I'm bringing out the cuffs."

Akihito zipped his lips closed as a delighted chuckle sounded behind them.

"We feign involvement on occasion," Asami said with forced patience. "We've both found it useful at one time or another for discouraging unwanted attention, especially when the other party didn't take rejection well. But that's all it is. A pretence."

"You're really telling him?" Oda reclined on the sofa, crossing her arms. Neither of them paid her any attention.

"There are very few who know of this," Asami carried on as though she didn't exist. "On my staff, only Kirishima and Suoh."

Akihito's eyes widened. Last time he'd known something only the three of them had known, it was that video... He was shaking his head, trying to draw away, but Asami wouldn't let him.

"So there's a first for everything," Oda remarked almost in wonder. "Even for my dear Ryuichi."

Akihito made an odd choking sound.

Grabbing a fistful of his tank top, Asami dragged him close, his pissed-off gaze making Akihito quake. "Oh ye of little faith. Oda Hazumi is my older sister."

Akihito couldn't quite meet his eyes. He huddled in the armchair, hyper aware of Asami returning to the living room after seeing his sister out. The tall man watched him for a long moment before moving through the expansive room, heading out through the veranda doors and sliding the glass door shut behind him again. Crossing the wide decking, he leaned on the reinforced misted-glass boundary wall and lit up. Akihito still hadn't moved a muscle as Asami smoked his way through the cigarette and returned.

Closing the veranda door, Asami leaned against it, his arms crossed. Neither of them said anything for a while.

Then they both started at the same time.

"Akihito –"

"Asami, I –"

They broke off again.

Akihito was always good for a diversion. "How'd it go with the big supremo judge?"
Asami paused. "He was ready to be reasonable."

"Th-that's fantastic! Right? Great, great news!"

Asami narrowed his gaze.

Akihito laughed nervously. "So, uh, you have family, huh? Ahaha! Isn't that... Isn't that funny? Who'd have guessed..." He trailed off as Asami's eyes only became harder and darker, and Akihito caved like a house of cards, his words running a mile a minute. "Look, I'm sorry ok? I overreacted... But how was I supposed to know? I didn't find anything about any siblings when I was looking into you and the two of you are obviously close, 'cos, d'uh, you're siblings, but I didn't know that and she's – she looks – I mean, come on, she could even make someone like you fall for her! If you weren't brother and sister, that is. And boy is it still weird to think of you as someone's baby brother... And she was calling you Ry– uh, she was calling you by name and everything and what... what was I... supposed to think..."

Asami let the dust settle after Akihito ran out of steam, and released a long sigh. "I'm not angry at you," he said, his voice hard.

Akihito winced. "Of course not. You just sound it and doing your glary thing. And fuck, I called you such nasty shit, too..."

At last, a hint of warmth, just the smallest curve on one side of Asami's mouth. "It's an issue of trust, and the remission is mine. I've been too easy on you."

"Easy?!" Akihito squeaked and he didn't even care. "You call that easy? My back still hurts, you jerk!"

Those lips twitched. "I meant I've been letting this go too much at your pace."

Akihito gaped. "Yeah, that'd be a No too. A big fat No," he clarified as Asami pulled him out of the chair and started herding him across the living room. "My pace would've been a few dates maybe. Actually not even that, 'cos you're blatantly the biggest mistake ever and, for the record, I still maintain that."

"No interruptions until morning, unless it's an absolute emergency."

Akihito was confused until he noticed Asami was putting his phone away. "Uh... Wait, where are we going?" He dug in his heels but Asami dragged him into the bedroom regardless. "Oh no you're not! I'm not letting you anywhere near my ass ever again!"

"Still sore?"

"Damn straight! And sex isn't the answer to life, the universe and everything, you know!"

"No, that would be 42."

Akihito's jaw dropped as Asami pulled him around to the head of the bed. "I can't believe you got that. You've read Hitchhiker's Guide?"

"No," was the deadpan reply and Akihito couldn't even tell if Asami was having him on or not. "But this isn't about sex. It's about trust. And it goes both ways."

Asami flicked up a panel on the electricity cable cover running behind the headboard, and pushed a button concealed underneath. There was a clunk from behind them like a lock being released and
Akihito spun to find a section of the wall opposite the bed sliding open to reveal a room.

"Waaa..." He didn't need much encouraging to stumble over, peering in. "You have a secret room!"

There was a bed, smaller than in the main bedroom, minimal furniture otherwise, a glass cabinet with a collection of antique-looking guns that must have been hideously expensive on one wall, a huge TV opposite, and security monitors and communication equipment on the wall by the entrance.

"Even most of my men don't know about this," Asami told him as he removed his waistcoat and rolled up his sleeves, "so don't mention it outside of this room."

"So it's literally a secret." Once Akihito was inside he also saw a security camera in the nearby corner of the ceiling, pointed at the door.

Asami went over and physically disconnected it, pulling a wire loose and pointing the camera into the wall. "It's my last defence in case of a direct attack here." He smirked. "You're making a habit of holding the means to my destruction."

"That's some trust," Akihito croaked.

"Ah, that wasn't the kind of trust I meant. Though there is that too. I wouldn't have shown you if I didn't already trust you with my life."

While Akihito was staggering from that profound statement spoken so easily, Asami grabbed a remote controller. He closed the entryway first, blocking them off from the rest of the world, throwing them into dead, muted silence. Akihito gulped. Asami then pointed the remote at another wall, and with an innocent beep, another section opened up.

"Holy shit!" Akihito was utterly frozen at the sight.

Black leather straps, chains, cuffs, and a whole array of equipment whose purposes – and how the fuck they were meant to bring about any pleasure – was a complete enigma to him. What Asami had brought to Akihito's apartment before was only a fraction of the terrifying toys in his possession.

"Let me out of here," Akihito insisted flatly. But his feet weren't moving.

"It's entirely your decision how far this goes," Asami mused from somewhere behind him. "Whenever you want to stop, now or later, at any point, just say Red. Say the word and I'll let you out of the room. I won't stop you, I won't try to change your mind. Say Red and we stop."

"Oh my god that's a safe word. You're giving me a safe word. Why are you giving me a safe word?" Akihito couldn't get his head around it.

"Have I ever led you astray?"

Now there was plenty Akihito could say about that! He opened his mouth –

"Have I ever left you dissatisfied?"

His mouth snapped closed. Asami loomed close and caught his hair, the grip hard, forcing his head back, blazing heat right to Akihito's core.

"How far can you go? How hard can I make you come? Aren't you curious?"

Akihito tried to pull back but Asami gave no quarter. "You're not giving me any choice here! How the hell is this about trust?"
"Safeword out if that's what you want."

Akihito's lips trembled, his throat tight. The word wouldn't come. He was almost frightening himself more than Asami was.

"Entrust yourself to me, Akihito, and you in turn have my trust that you will show me what you truly desire."

Why wasn't he screaming Red and running for the hills? Trembling, not even properly fighting Asami's hold, Akihito was only just beginning to suspect he might actually be wired this way, blazing as though scorched under the desert sun.

But he was still holding out. "This has nothing to do with what happened before!"

Asami's gaze was like molten lava, burning him inside out. "Trust is everything. I told you before, and I'll tell you again. Only you, Akihito."

Asami threw him on the bed. Landing with a rush of air and rustle of sheets, Akihito could only stare transfixed, paralysed between white hot fear and crippling, overwhelming arousal, rooted to the spot as Asami headed for the terrifying wall of bondage toys and grabbed several – fuck, Akihito had no idea what.

"No, wait," Akihito breathed shakily as Asami returned. "Stop, wait –"

"Stop or wait?" Asami mused without pity as he dumped his stash on the bed and grabbed Akihito's ankle. Dragging the squirming man to the foot of the bed, he smirked, "Or carry on?"

To Akihito's horror, Asami yanked his shorts and boxers halfway down his thighs and grabbed his junk.

"Wha–! Hey! Careful!"

But Asami had already looped something like a big rubber ring under his balls and was stuffing his rapidly hardening dick into a second loop attached off the first, until the two rings sat snugly at the base of his shaft and balls.

"What the fucking hell?!"

"It's a cock ring, Akihito. It'll keep you harder for longer. It needs to be attached before you're fully erect, and you tend to become hard quickly even with no direct stimulation. I had to act fast."

Akihito's mouth flapped, his cheeks burning with mortification. He didn't know which part to object to most and ended up simmering in stupefied silence.

"Don't worry," Asami smirked. "I won't gag you so feel free to yell at me whenever you find your voice again."

"You perverted bastard! Get this thing off me!"

"But we've barely even started, Akihito," Asami told him conversationally as he dragged off Akihito's tank top. He easily overpowered Akihito's flimsy struggling and cuffed his wrists together. A strap of black leather as wide as two fingers was buckled about Akihito's chest, connected to more strapped about the shoulders, which in turn were connected to –

"Oh, hell no!" Akihito fought harder as Asami looped a leather collar around his neck, but in the end
Asami pinned him easily, keeping his hair out of the way as he buckled it in place.

Akihito could feel it. With every thumping pulse the collar shifted against his neck, with every shaking inhale the strap about his ribs constricted just a little too much to breathe freely. Like he'd been bound for Asami's pleasure, even his own dick, which was swelling, throbbing against the ring...

Asami had already gone to the wall and back again while Akihito was struggling to absorb this. His arms were lifted overhead and a short chain was connected from the cuffs to the collar, with only enough give for him to lie back with his hands above his head or tucked close to his neck. The boxers and shorts were dragged off the rest of the way and thicker cuffs, the ones Asami had used on him in his apartment, were buckled about his thighs, only this time Asami connected each of them to long chains.

"What –" Akihito choked on the question as Asami took one of the chains, hoisted it all the way up to the headboard, and locked it in place with Akihito's knee pulled high and wide.

Words failed him. Akihito could only whimper as Asami repeated the process with his other leg, until he was spread wide to Asami's lust.

He could go up, Akihito suddenly realized. He wriggled his way up on the bed, easing the pressure a little so his knees weren't forced quite so high.

Asami only looked far too pleased with this, which couldn't bode well for Akihito. "If that's the way you want to play it." He returned to the wall to fetch another chain, the shorter one.

"Wait, Asami, what are you gonna – ugh!"

Asami grabbed his hips and yanked Akihito back down so his ass was right at the foot of the bed, forcing his knees even higher this time and just as wide. Akihito felt a tug on the cock ring and he frantically lifted his head to see Asami clasping the chain to a hook that Akihito hadn't even known was attached to it.

"No wait!" Akihito gasped.

Asami pulled the chain down, slowly, surely, taut against Akihito's sensitive parts, then stretching – "Hnnnn!"

The other end of the chain was secured to a hook under the bed beyond Akihito's view. Pulled in polar directions, impossible to ease the pressure either way, Akihito trembled in the restraints.

"You're so cruel," he choked out against the collar, against the too-tight lock around his erection. It was a steady throbbing hint of pain that only made him harder. He almost wished Asami would blindfold him so he wouldn't have to see how embarrassingly hard he was being bound helpless and exposed in sable and chains, all while Asami was still fully dressed. How was this fair?

Asami must have followed the flicker of his gaze to the blindfold where it hung on the wall. "Not today, Akihito," he murmured in feigned reassurance, laying close beside him. "I want you to see everything. I want you to see yourself as I see you. Open, waiting, eager for my touch."

Akihito gave a strained whine as hands brushed along his sides. There was a kiss against his temple amidst a rush of Asami's scent.

"You have two ways out of here," Asami told him. "You can stop, or you can come. Say the
"Say..." Akihito stared in horror as it clicked. "I'm not saying your name!"

Asami nibbled at his ear. "It's just a name, like any other." He worked along the jaw. "Akihito." He hovered over Akihito's mouth. "Ryuichi." He swooped the final space between them, his tongue slipping easily between Akihito's lips. Full of demand, swallowing up Akihito's moans, Asami let his hands roam.

Akihito was gasping as Asami broke away. Asami was touching everywhere, brushing over skin that seemed so much more sensitive than usual, making him jump at every caress and try to pull his knees down, which just made the chain tug even more on his cock and balls, which just made him shudder all over again. Was it all the leather? Was it being so completely and utterly helpless to stop Asami? But not so helpless, there was the safe word...

And then Akihito realized that the true cruelty was giving him the option to back out, because he couldn't force the word out and he couldn't pretend anymore that he didn't want this. It was something of a sob that escaped him as Asami hovered close again, his nose brushing his cheek, as a slick finger slipped into his puckered ass.

He gasped, still sore from the previous night, expecting pain, but Asami was almost gentle, taking it slower than he ever had in stretching Akihito out. So much so that Akihito was soon straining against the chains and even the sharp tug against his balls to seek more, but Asami was still only using one finger, his lips and teeth tugging at a nipple.

He grumbled nonsense.

"Did you say something?" Asami mused as he worked his way along Akihito's chest, licking runes into the skin, breathing across it and raising goose pimples that he soothed with his lips.

"Stupid perverted bastard..."

Asami chuckled and finally, finally, slipped in a second finger.

Maybe it was the faint burn, or maybe it was the cock ring getting tighter, almost too tight as he ached, so hard that it was borderline painful. Akihito almost sighed with contentment, getting lost in the fierce arousal saturating every cell in his body. Something must be seriously wrong with him. Or maybe he just knew that Asami would see him through. Was this the trust that the bastard had been insisting on? Though Akihito still didn't know how this and believing in Asami's fidelity had anything to do with one another.

*Only you.*

Or maybe it did. Maybe Asami really didn't do this with anyone else. Though he must have had partners in the past to own any of this, to be so masterful at knowing how hard to push, how far to pull back, stirring Akihito expertly to the precise knife edge that Asami wanted –

At any other time he might have brushed it off, but already brought to such heightened sensitivity, the thought of Asami sharing such intimacy like this with anyone else pulled another anguished sob from Akihito.

"You're thinking again," Asami accused as he withdrew his two fingers. He sucked against Akihito's neck, firmly fixing his attention on the here and now.

Akihito said nothing, simply turning his head and seeking whatever part of Asami he could reach.
His hair, as it turned out, the dark strands soft and thick, and Akihito pressed his lips to it in mindless need for contact before Asami rose enough to kiss him properly.

Asami locked their tongues at the same time as –

"Mmhhh!"

It was bumpy, whatever it was that Asami had just pushed up his ass, thin and long. About as much as two fingers in fact, as though Asami had been preparing him for this all along.

"That feels weird!"

Asami smirked against his lips. "Try this."

"Fuck!" Akihito gasped because all of a sudden the blasted dildo was vibrating right against the hypersensitive spot whose precise coordinates Asami seemed to have mapped to memory.

Then Asami pushed it harder against that exact spot, just enough to force a wider part of the dildo past Akihito's puckered rim to lock it inside, and there was no escaping the mind-throbbing vibrations as it cycled through a long crescendo from zero to too-intense before dying off and starting all over again.

"Nnngg... Let me come..." The words were out before Akihito was aware he was speaking.

"Say my name, and your wish is my command."

Oh god, that rumbling voice... Akihito melted even more. But there was still a tiny part of him – infinitesimal, really – that held onto sanity. "I've forgotten already... your name..."

Asami chuckled against his cheek. "Then you're in for a rough night."

Akihito was lost to the toe-tingling delirium deep inside as Asami peppered his sensitized skin with insistent scrapes and caresses all over. Asami kissed his way down his trembling torso, the random bite of teeth making him jolt and the chain tug on his aching balls, shivering at the occasional brush of the jet black hair. Something brushed against his cock, the skin too sensitive, burning like a brand, and he almost leaped out of his skin, whimpering at the unforgiving tug of chains. Then it happened again and Akihito knew it was no accident.

"Ahh! It's too much!"

Then it was a whole hand grasping him and Akihito almost exploded. But Asami's hand didn't move and he was left hovering, suspended over the yawning abyss but without the impetus he needed to nudge him over.

"Asami!"

"Shhh..." Asami still held his pulsing length, distracting him with a too-hard suck on his shoulder, biting his chest, pinching the nub of his nipple. Asami held his length until Akihito eased back with dizzying sluggishness, still thrumming but no longer about to burst at the slightest stimulus.

Damp, confused eyes sought burning gold.

"It's the cock ring," Asami explained. "It makes it more intense." He was sitting sideways on, one leg hanging off the end of the bed, the other bent with the shin against Akihito's side.

Akihito heard the buzzing a moment before it made contact with his aching, angry, engorged tip.
"Haaaah!"

But that wasn't all. In Asami's other hand was some horrific looking thing with far too many cords of braided leather dangling from the thick handle to be healthy.

"What the fucking hell is that?!!" Akihito cried.

"I'm sure you can guess," Asami mused, trailing the leather cords over the backs of the exposed thighs.

Akihito shuddered, his breath shaking, instinctively trying to scramble free or push away, only to end up yanking on the collar. If that thing came anywhere near his cock, already in agony at the slightest touch...

With a casual twist of the wrist and a whisper of air, Asami flicked the straps across Akihito's ass.

"Hhnnn!"

Akihito was seeing stars. Just the hint of stinging, soothed almost immediately by the blissful buzzing against his thrumming erection, chased with a lick of leather, all while that infernal pressure vibrated deep inside from nothing to Everest and drove him steadily mad.

And then the leather tails feathered across his overstretched, over-swelled erection and balls and Akihito's eyes rolled in his head. "Ggghhhnnn!"

Somewhere amidst the torturous vacillation between ecstasy and agony, Akihito desperately sought relief. Red was nothing more than a fleeting shadow, turned to dust with little more than the air displaced by the flick of leather. Instead what he turned to was the only warm constant, straining against the restraints and rolling his side against Asami's shin. He never questioned whether Asami would respond; he always did. Warm lips kissed at Akihito's eye, tasting the tear drop that beaded there, as the delirious vibration returned to his aching length. But just as he eased into it it disappeared, his thighs flaring sharply at the bite of leather a moment later.

"Asami!"

"You're not even aware of it, are you?" Asami murmured against his neck, sucking hard, sending another bolt to Akihito's groin. "The gift you give me."

Asami alternated the blissful buzzing with the electrifying lick of leather, sometimes biting, sometimes barely there, switching at whim, unpredictable where it would land, not letting Akihito brace or prepare.

"A-Asami...!"

The chains held firm, pinning him open, burning him with wretched need, the collar and straps a constant reminder of Asami with every pulse and breath.

That abyss was looming, inescapable, as Akihito teetered over the point of no return where it seemed everything was about to change. And those piercing, blazing, ebony gold eyes were both the cause of it all and his only salvation.

Uncompromising, unrelenting, Asami himself revealed something almost vulnerable in the ferocity of his demand. "Say my name, Akihito. Entrust yourself to me, and I'll give you everything."

Akihito sobbed once, twice... And crumbled. "Ryuichi... Ryuichi!"
Gone were the toys, replaced in an instant with a searing hot mouth and long fingers spearing deep as Asami dropped to his knees by the foot of the bed. The chain pinning the cock ring fell away too and Akihito was free to writhe and twist and thrust as he drowned, not knowing which name was tumbling on every shuddering breath. Cocooned by Asami's mouth and tongue, stroked with impossible tenderness at the core where no one else had ever touched, Akihito exploded.

Trembling softly, Akihito was still weeping silently as Asami unbound him and carried him out of the secret room. Asami washed him down, especially careful where the skin was still nearly painfully sensitive, and made short work of stripping and showering himself. Then like the evening before, Asami rested the smaller man sideways on his lap in the hot bath, still careful to keep the bandage dry on Akihito's arm. Sometimes it was the warm hands, sometimes it was Asami's tongue that washed away the tears.

It felt like an age before Akihito could think somewhat straight again, before the river finally ran dry. Long fingers tipped his chin up, searching his face, checking his state of mind.

Asami was doing it again. This quiet support, giving Akihito the time to come back to himself, never rushing him or abandoning him when he was reeling and flayed open. He wondered what Asami's men would say if they could see their boss like this. Akihito ducked his head, unable to bear the intensity of that gaze.

Asami drained half the bath and topped up with more hot water. And still they sat there, with Akihito relaxed against Asami's muscular warmth, shrivelled like prunes.

Except...

"You didn't come."

Asami's cock was still swelled enough to rest over Akihito's thigh. The warm water probably wasn't helping him go down any either.

Asami shrugged, unconcerned. "It doesn't matter."

It seemed a big deal to Akihito. He couldn't shrug off the thought that, all things considered, Asami had actually been considerate of him still aching from the night before. He chewed his lip, hesitating. "Do you want me to...?"

Asami's hand glided up Akihito's back to the crook of the neck. "It wasn't about sex, Akihito. What you gave me was so much more."

And just like that Akihito was blinking hard again. Until –

"Besides, you can be especially good to me tomorrow."

Akihito reared back to find Asami's gaze gleaming with wicked promise. Flushing, Akihito smacked the ridiculously toned arm. "Perverted baka! It's too late, my offer's already expired –"

Asami smothered him with a messy kiss that stole his air as Akihito flailed and water splashed everywhere, but before long Asami's mouth hardened and the demand became fierce, enough to make Akihito wince, that edge never far away. Perhaps because Asami wasn't sated. Or perhaps it was just Asami. A large fist gripped Akihito's hair and forced him to meet his eyes.

Asami's baritone was unrelenting. "There is no other. I'll repeat it as many times as it takes until you can't escape the truth of it and it's burned into your soul."
With the golden gaze piercing to the very last inch of him, Akihito couldn't help but wonder if maybe it already was.

There were no bad dreams that night.
Control – part 1

Chapter Notes

I am totally over the moon – the lovely Shey has drawn fanart for Click! It's for Chapter 2 when Akihito first goes to Asami's office and there's all that juicy dangerous tension flowing between them. It's indescribable how touched I am that someone was inspired to draw such amazing artwork for my story... *happy sob!* It's embedded in Chapter 2, please go take a look! (^_^) (In totally Japanese style, for the umpteenth time and yet still not enough: Thank you Shey!)

Shock horror, I kept you waiting nearly 3 weeks for this one! Haha But it's not toooo bad though, considering the length... Is it? Oh, it is? My bad! XD A combination of hectic real life and losing the flow a bit had me take a mini break. Then I came back and these two decided they didn't care for my careful story planning and that the few measly paragraphs I'd originally penned weren't nearly enough to convey all that they wanted to convey in The Scene (you'll know which one!!). So this became a two parter and Click now has a chapter total of 26 instead of 25 – *face palms* Though hopefully nobody's complaining about the increase! (^_<)

This is almost like 'A day in the life of...' I hope you enjoy it! (^_^)

~ Nyx ~

Monday, too late in the morning to be professionally excusable.

Akihito was hopping mad. And horny as hell. The blame, of course, lay squarely on those maddeningly big shoulders at the other end of the stretch limo.

Asami was running off some perverted agenda, Akihito was sure of it. It had all began an hour ago as soon as Akihito had roused enough from sleep to recall the raw intimacy the night before and awkward shyness overcame him. He'd attempted to escape from the excessively comfortable bed, only to be stopped by Asami who'd rolled over him, pinned him unforgivingly by his hair and wrist and all the rest of that insanely masculine body all warm and heavy with the lingering vestiges of sleep, and sucked a giant-ass hickey on the stuttering pulse of his neck. Fighting Asami off with his one free hand was near on impossible. Bucking against him had unintentionally rubbed their morning wood together and left Akihito shuddering deliciously from head to toe, adding to the lightning bolt that had already gone charging to his crotch when Asami's lips had found that spot below his ear that never used to exist before Asami had come along. Then, just as Akihito had mentally resigned himself to the seeming inevitable and rolled his hips against Asami again, deliberately this time, Asami had pressed a chaste kiss to the corner of Akihito's mouth and left – simply rolled off Akihito and off the bed, and strolled in all his naked glory to the bathroom for his morning ablutions.

All with that oh-so-knowing, arrogant, infuriating smirk that told Akihito the bastard knew precisely what he was doing.

And Asami hadn't stopped. Not as they'd passed in the bedroom with the fleeting touches across the base of Akihito's back, not when they'd set up for breakfast with the subtle-as-fuck looming and breathing faint warm flurries across the back of Akihito's neck, not while they ate with the
accidental-his-ass! brushes of the leg under the table. Clearing up had involved dumping a startled Akihito on the kitchen counter, practically tongue fucking Akihito's mouth through his muffled objections until he'd started to melt, just a little bit, when Asami had once again pulled away and left Akihito flushed, furious, and infuriatingly frustrated.

And now, fucking hell, those eyes. There was no other way to describe it, Asami was eye fucking the hell out of him. Akihito couldn't have been more wrong when he'd thought he'd managed to put a bit of safe distance between them, even though he was as far forward as he could get in the limo short of sitting in Suoh's lap up front. The dark golden gleam pierced the length of the limo, trailing to where a scarf concealed the ridiculous hickey on Akihito's neck, zeroing in on the bob of the Adam's apple as Akihito nervously swallowed, with such singular predatory focus that Akihito couldn't help but feel the phantom scrape of teeth. Then as though Akihito wasn't dressed and Asami was likewise imagining the application of lips and tongue and fingers, as though Kirishima wasn't sitting beside him going over stock figures that neither of them were listening to, those golden eyes scorched a meandering path down Akihito's chest, raising goose pimples even through the jacket with the heat of that blistering stare, down the torso and the happy trail to where Akihito's morning wood had never completely gone away thanks to the incessant teasing.

There was a lull in Kirishima's report.

"Keep them tied up in the merger," Asami ordered, his gaze never once leaving Akihito flushed and squirming and scowling from the other end of the black leather seats. "And buy up the balance of the 55%. They've had fair warning. I'm taking control."

"Yes sir," Kirishima confirmed, taking note.

So apparently it was just Akihito who couldn't focus on anything else. "Stop that," he gritted out.

"Oh? What's that?" Asami mused innocently.

Akihito glared bloody murder and turned to stare firmly out of the opposite window, pulling a knee up to conceal the frustrating bulge in his jeans. "I was going to go hunting today," he grumbled. He sensed Asami's questioning raise of the brow without needing to look. "For V1P3R."

"You can do that at the office. Besides, it's your community service, Akihito. You should learn to pay your dues."

That drew Akihito's gaze away from the window as he gaped incredulously at Asami. "You did not just say that..." He glanced across at Kirishima maintaining his expressionless silence. "Can you believe this bastard?"

But they were already pulling up at the back of the Sion HQ tower and were swarmed upon by a dozen bodyguards. Throwing Akihito that smirk that he never failed to find maddening and maddeningly flustering, Asami slipped out as the door was opened for him.

But as Akihito climbed out after him with noticeably less grace, Asami was still standing by the door. His large hand down by his side reached back for Akihito's thigh, giving it a squeeze.

"Stay close until we know more about the hits, Akihito."

There was nothing Akihito could throw back at the quiet gravitas, leaving him stumbling after as Asami strode through the executives-dedicated entrance out the back of the second floor.

So not only was Akihito half hard and being steamrolled back to Sion, but they were late. Because apparently the term 'contractual business hours' didn't apply to the CE-fucking-O. In fact 11am was
apparently an early start for Asami, whose shady dealings lent itself better to ungodly hours.

Security had been beefed up here as well, there were noticeably more men in black suits manning doors and planted on corners in the foyer. As always, Akihito received odd looks from all the employees in their smart business attire as they passed though the foyer was thankfully not too busy at this time.

"I'm surprised you didn't force me into a suit," Akihito muttered.

"What you are wearing is never what I take exception to."

Hazel eyes darted across to catch the ghost of a smirk on Asami's otherwise flawless 'CEO' face – stop-in-your-tracks stunningness hewn in marble.

"Perverted baka," Akihito mumbled under breath, scowling through the faint pink of his cheeks. It was just loud enough for Asami to catch. It wasn't because they were in sight of other employees that he restrained himself from loudly abusing the top boss, but only because it would draw more attention to himself than he wanted.

Little did these bowing, scraping, reverent employees know that their oh-so-respected and more-than-slightly feared boss was armed. Akihito had watched Asami getting dressed that morning, casting sideways glances as the crisp shirt was buttoned up, the cuff links hooked in, and the silk tie expertly tied. The waistcoat followed, hugging the contours of Asami's impressive physique, before the holster was strapped on. Asami had made no move to conceal the weapon or change his morning routine, loading a mag and checking the gun with sure, fluid fingers, before seating it in the leather holster and concealing the whole array beneath the suit jacket. Then Asami had donned a black coat, billowing out as he swung it about his shoulders before the ends settled at knee height, a single sharp tug straightening the collars, and Akihito hadn't even realized he was openly staring until Asami had returned it, with darkness, devastating confidence and heat swirling in his hard gaze.

That was when it had struck Akihito just how relaxed Asami had been the day before, something Akihito only noticed after the air emanating from the billionaire had morphed into that familiar sheathed menace, the way Asami had approached their earlier interactions, the spellbinding aura of an apex predator that made a killing equally in board rooms and with underhanded deals alike. The whole world would fall on their knees before one such as this. The whole world, that was, with the exception of one obstinate brat who dared to glare right into the dragon's eyes and stand his ground.

"Suoh, take him to security and get his pass reassigned." A meaningful look was shared, a reminder of orders previously given.

"No need," Akihito tried to shake off. "I know the way and they know me."

"Yes, sir," Blond Tank acknowledged his boss, predictably ignoring Akihito's objections.

Asami's gaze glinted with mischief. "I'll send for you later. Be good." He sauntered off into the elevator with Glasses and two other bodyguards, knowing full well the outrage he left in his wake with both of those statements.

Seeing the guys in Security again was awkward. They had no idea why Akihito had left or that he was coming back. But it wasn't nearly as awkward as setting foot in the IT department again and finding everyone staring at him.

"Hey," he waved.

They all looked like they'd seen a ghost.
"You!" Mitarai exclaimed first. "What're you doing here?"

Ogawa blinked owlishly. "Ta-Takaba?"

Akihito sighed. "Always nice to be remembered."

Clearly nobody had bothered telling them that he was coming back. Or – perhaps more likely – Asami had deliberately suppressed the notification as some kind of twisted payback for Akihito having bailed in the first place. Because the possessive bastard always had to have the last word.

"Just – just a sec," Ogawa said, scrambling for his desk phone.

The R&D guys, curiously, looked hugely relieved. Several called out greetings, others waved. Akihito waved back and headed over to his old desk that was even messier than he'd left it. It seemed to have become a graveyard of broken IT equipment during the fortnight he'd been away.

"Are you back? Or are you trespassing?" Mitarai stood with his arms crossed over the desk.

Akihito smiled innocently. "I'm just here for the charming company, can't you tell?" He started scooting the clutter into rough clumps on the side.

Mitarai harrumphed. "If I'd known you were coming back, I would've left a shitload of stuff for you to slog through."

"You mean you have more shit than this?" Akihito waved at the mess.

"I meant work, asshole."

"Nah, it's good you didn't. I'd do it in half the time you always take and just show you up."

"At half the quality so someone else would've had to waste the same amount of time fixing it."

Had Mitarai got dumber in the time Akihito had been away? "You realize, even if that was the case, it's still the same speed as you?"

"With twice the manpower. Your loss." Mitarai sneered. "Anyway, what's with the babysitter? They don't trust you so they're watching your every move?"

Because yes, Blond Tank was towering by the door. There was no mistaking his role from his stance and alertness, not to mention the generic black suit. Akihito's arguments that having a bodyguard, especially Suoh, was going to make him stand out like an alien with three heads had fallen on deaf ears.

"Yeah, 'cos that's so much easier than just firing me," Akihito deadpanned.

Mitarai huffed. "I've been doing well here while you've been gone, you know."

"Great," Akihito snarked, not looking up.

"I've got a good rapport with Asami-sama now."

Akihito paused, looking up slowly, fighting a grin. The asswipe didn't know what Asami really thought of him. "Have you, now?"

"That's right," Mitarai rubbed in, "I've finally smoothed things over with him after your massive screw-up on our first meeting. I'm his go-to IT guy now."
Jesus, Mitarai was even puffing his chest out like a preening bird of paradise. Akihito's lips twitched. "Good for you. You must be really proud."

"Mitarai, knock it off, let him get resettled." Ogawa shooed the petulant man back to his desk. "Sorry about that, Takaba, I just had to check with HR that you're actually back. They must have forgotten to let us know, probably because you were only gone two weeks."

"Yeah, probably," Akihito agreed vaguely.

"Anyway, welcome back! Did you miss us so much you decided you couldn't stay away?"

"Don't even ask why I'm back," Akihito muttered.

Ogawa shook his head with a raise of the hands, clearly thinking it had to do with court orders. Akihito didn't correct him, nodding instead at the desk next to Mitarai's which had always been the latter's dumping ground but was now the cleanest, most empty desk in the history of Sion IT. "New start?"

"New temp to work with Mitarai. Put the request in this morning, agency should be sending someone in by this afternoon."

"Why all the effort?" Temps weren't unusual. A clean desk was.

"It's a girl," Ogawa winked. Akihito barked a laugh before he managed to suppress it to a cough, but Mitarai had already guessed at being the butt of their teasing and gave them evils. Akihito didn't care.

Ogawa steered them onto work. "Anyway I'm glad you're back. I want to run one of the security patches with you, Soteria's been throwing us for a loop."

So Akihito resumed working on the AI cyber shield he'd set up before he'd left. Ogawa had done a decent job not wrecking it while Akihito had been gone but some of the minor patches were a lot quicker to handle with detailed knowledge of the programming.

"Sorry I had to disappear on you so suddenly," he said quietly to his boss as they worked together.

Ogawa patted his shoulder. "Don't worry about it. You must've had your reasons."

Akihito was just about to go to lunch when his desk phone rang. He went to grab the receiver when he spotted the caller ID – Kirishima. His hand froze midair. Frowning, he muted the call instead and set about saving and closing various files on his laptop, sighing in relief when it let up after five rings. But then his cell phone rang; an unknown cell number. It was no coincidence. Was Glasses that desperate to get hold of him? If so, he didn't want Blond Tank being set on the task, who was so far still planted by the door maintaining an excellent impersonation of a particularly sturdy fence post...

Akihito put on a deliberately cheerful voice as he answered. "'Sup, Glasses-san?"

"Stop ignoring Kirishima and answer his call."

"Asami!" Akihito almost dropped his phone. Glancing frantically around to make sure nobody was too close, Akihito hunched over it. "How the hell do you have my number?" he hissed.

"Job perks. Now answer Kirishima's call or I'll come and get you again. Let's see, perhaps I'll cart you over my shoulder this time, or carry you bridal style –"
"Y-you baka!" Akihito dropped his voice again when people looked over. "Don't you have more important things to be doing than hassling me?"

"Not in the slightest."

"Then you're seriously overpaid!"

"Keep it brief please, Takaba-san. One meeting is quite enough for Asami-sama to drop at such short notice."

"Asami blew a meeting just to harass me?"

The disapproving line in Kirishima's brow deepened.

"You don't honestly think I have any influence over how Mr Bossy Pants lords over the world or my life, do you?" Akihito scoffed. "Dream on."

Kirishima stared grimly after the oblivious, insolent man who blew through the heavy doors. His sigh was laced with troubled resignation. "You have no idea."

"Relationships don't work if it's just one sided, you know. You have to reciprocate."

Akihito counted Asami's baffled pause at his opening remark without so much as a greeting as a minor victory. It wasn't every day he could chip a chink in that imperious armour.

The sight of the large glass conference table as Akihito had first come through the door had almost derailed him. The last time he'd seen it was when Asami, a thunder cloud only a snap of a finger away from blowing someone's brains out, had kidnapped Akihito to deal with a bullet-riddled laptop. What an age ago that felt like, back before he'd come to understand that what Asami saw in him was an entirely different kind of target. Now, as he rounded the curious L of the humongous office to the left, Akihito's irritated glare was curtailed by Asami himself. Because fuck but even in such a huge space and the imposing desk, even surrounded on three glass-walled sides by the impressive backdrop of Shinjuku and misty-peaked Mount Fuji in the distance, Asami's heavy presence was somehow larger than all of it combined, dominating everything the light touched.

Fighting the mould, Akihito raised his chin. "Your best bro's inconsolable." Asami's confusion became more pronounced and despite being prickled at being summoned like this, Akihito couldn't help a cheeky grin. "I couldn't care less if your go-to IT guy hates me but he really thought your bromance was something special, poor sod."

Asami finally caught on, and it came on a strained exhale. "Mitarai."

Asami's frustration cheered Akihito up some. "He's working his neatly ironed little socks off for you, the least you can do is keep calling on him for your computing woes."

"Why would I put up with that buffoon if you're here?"

Akihito narrowed his gaze. "If it's going to put him out of work, then maybe I shouldn't be here."

Asami leaned back in his large black leather seat, waving the bunch of papers he'd been perusing at his monitor. "Looking at this one issue isn't going to put Mitarai out of work. Besides, would you really pass up the opportunity to tell me what an idiot I am?"
Asami had him there, they both knew it. Akihito glared back at Asami's barely concealed amusement for a long intake of breath before stomping across the long, long stretch of the L-shaped room. "This would be so much quicker if your office wasn't so freaking huge and it didn't take half an hour to walk across it."

"Well you know what they say," Asami mused, eyes glinting. "The larger the office..."

Aaand they were straight back to sexual innuendos again. Akihito rolled his eyes even as he fought the warmth spreading through his gut. "The bigger the ego?"

"Amongst other things, I'm sure."

"I rest my case," Akihito sniped back. "Why's your office such a weird shape though?" he asked as he arrived, at long last, beside the massive desk. "I would've thought you'd go for impact, you know, boom, open the door and your huge-ass throne room intimidates everyone into grovelling at your feet, but like, miles away. But instead you've got a kink. In your office!" Akihito emphasized as Asami's smirk blatantly travelled further down a filthy path. "Geez..."

"Security precautions. A direct line of sight from the door into every corner of the office isn't as secure."

Akihito blinked. "Well isn't your life just a bunch of roses."

Asami didn't elaborate. "Take a look at this for me," he said instead, indicating the monitor again. "I know you can coax it back to life, it's frozen stiff."

Akihito stared. And stared. But Asami's face was totally impassive. Not that he was falling for it. Not. At. All. He pointed a warning finger. "No funny business."

"It's a computer, Akihito. What funny business could it possibly entail?" Asami asked too innocently for it to be innocent. As Akihito narrowed his eyes in blatant suspicion, Asami held up his hands before depositing the papers on the far side of the desk and rolling his chair back just as far as the stretch of his legs. "It's all yours."

Still eyeing him warily, Akihito rounded the desk, leaning on it with one hand to look at the screen. It was a spreadsheet of some financial report or other.

"It's not responding," Asami explained, before his voice deepened to that purr that thrummed right to Akihito's groin. "Or maybe it's the mouse. I've been stroking the scroller repeatedly, up and down, but the screen won't move. Perhaps I should stroke it faster?"

One hand braced on the desk, one hand on the mouse in question, Akihito dropped his head. "Oh my god you've gotten worse," he bemoaned. "How's that even possible?"

"Perhaps I'm inspired by the view."

The rough heat in Asami's baritone made Akihito spin around with a biting put-down on the tip of his tongue, only to be brought up short when he was ensnared by golden eyes positively smouldering. There was no mistaking Asami's intent.

"It's actually Freeze View," Akihito squeaked, almost tripping on his trainers as he rapidly tried to backpedal. "Just ask Glasses, he can sort it –"

"I wouldn't want to ask Kirishima about this, Akihito." Strong arms snaked about the trim waist and hauled him backwards into Asami's lap.
"Uwaa – let me go!"

"That would be a great shame when you're already here."

Hot hands slid up under Akihito's tee, making him jolt, which only made him grind his ass back into Asami's crotch. They both groaned.

"We're at work!"

Akihito felt his scarf sliding off before lips nuzzled his neck. Asami hummed in agreement. "The novelty of an office romance is making me positively giddy."

"You talk such shit, you know that?" Akihito huffed as he tried to fend off wondering hands sparking his skin aflame embarrassingly quickly. "Asami, stop! Seriously, we're in your freaking office!"

"Hmm. We should christen my desk, don't you think?"

"I don't think! You perverted ass, you were planning this all along! That's why you were –" Akihito abruptly swallowed back his words. He could hardly admit that Asami had left him hard!

"I did what? Did I leave you yearning for me?"

"Hell no!" Bastard knew it anyway.

"No?" Asami's hand up his top snaked higher, out through the neck hole and grasping Akihito's neck in a possessive hold that made Akihito's breath stutter. "Then you weren't hoping that I would wreck you this morning when we awoke together? Or in the kitchen? Or the limo? Though Kirishima might have been uncomfortable –"

"Kirishima!" Akihito exclaimed as he remembered, grasping it like a lifeline. "He said not to dawdle!"

"Then we shouldn't dawdle." In a deft move that gave Akihito no time to stop it, Asami slid his lower hand down to flick open Akihito's button and flies, slipped under the boxers and grasped the more-than-half hard arousal, at the same time as slipping two fingers into Akihito's mouth.

Akihito couldn't help the moan at the firm long stroke on his growing length, instinctively sucking on the digits in his mouth. But only for a moment. The view down the length of the office where anyone could walk in on them made him grumble muffled curses. He grabbed the armrests and pulled.

He was free! ... Or so he thought. No sooner had he managed to get his feet on the floor and stand than Asami shoved his jeans and boxers down, slipped out from under him and out of the chair, knocking away one of Akihito's arms off the armrest in the process, and toppled Akihito backwards all in a blur.

Then as Akihito flailed with a startled yelp and fell back into the seat, Asami dropped to his knees, shoved Akihito's thighs up, ducked under the jeans bunched around Akihito's shins, and devoured his length.

No more teasing, no slow burn, Asami sucked him hard and fast. He throat ed Akihito like a parched man setting upon a desert oasis, long draws deep from the base right to the pulsing tip.

"Huuuuuhhnn!"
Releasing the pale thighs, Asami yanked Akihito's ass out to the edge of the seat so he could circle fingers over the puckered rosebud. He pressed in a spit-slicked finger, soon followed by another, scissoring and stretching the back with a flaring burn as he continued the full-length draws on the front.

Akihito could have so easily closed his eyes and let himself be swept away by the wave of pain-accented pleasure. But he forced his eyes open with a struggle – and was rendered speechless. The dark head bowed over him framed by his legs and jeans was incredible, but it was what was behind Asami that really hammered it home. The enormous office sat atop all of Tokyo and Japan, captured in all the far glass walls. The ruler on his knees before the Sion throne. For Akihito.

He slid a trembling hand through the black hair and almost questioningly met the oh-so-arrogant, oh-so-satisfied gold that gleamed up at him. Why me?

Spiralling fast, he fought to maintain that gaze that unravelled all his uncertainties and held him together. "Asami... Asami –!"

Asami abruptly pulled off, squeezing tight at the base and choking off the impending climax.

"Asami!" Akihito objected in a very different tone.

Asami ducked back out from under the jeans. He pushed Akihito's bent legs apart and leaned up between them, still on his knees, and buried any further objections with a hard, toe-tingling kiss. Akihito flushed even further when he tasted his own precum mixing with Asami's taste.

"Why'd you always stop me?" Akihito groaned as Asami pulled away.

"I told you. We're christening the desk."

Akihito started to suspect – and kind of dread in a totally mortifyingly arousing way – that Asami meant it literally. "You perverted baka!" He made a token effort to pull free but it was impossible with Asami leaning over his ankles which were pretty much bound by his jeans and boxers. As if it wasn't embarrassing enough that he was feeling like a frog, he saw that the tip of his erection trailing silver lines of precum over Asami's waistcoat. "Oh my god..."

Asami didn't seem to care, smirking with lascivious mischief. "Did you know, I wanted to blow you the first time I sat you in my chair."

"When you were threatening me?!"

"When you were hacking the flash drive. It was quite a turn on."

Akihito gaped, his cheeks dusted pink. "You perverted crime lord!"

It was like those words were a magic key. It happened in that way that only Asami possessed, how he could change the very air about him in the blink of an eye. His gaze transformed to molten gold as he abruptly rose over Akihito, braced on an armrest and one knee on the chair between Akihito’s legs, caught the blond hair, and tipped the backrest halfway back with their combined weight as he bruised Akihito’s lips in a fierce kiss.

Akihito feared for a moment that he'd angered Asami, but as they drew apart with a ragged breath, he recognized the heat blazing through. "Don't tell me that's a kink?"

"I enjoy all your endearments, Akihito," Asami said roughly, "but I appear to be particularly susceptible to that one."
"You mean you didn't know? I gave you a kink?" Akihito didn't know if to be horrified or tickled.

Asami melted him inside out with the severity of his gaze, perhaps compensating for the uncharacteristic hesitancy that Akihito also glimpsed in their dark depths. "There are few who know me as I truly am. I find... I'm rather satisfied that you do."

The frank admission bowled Akihito over. It felt incredibly personal, and incredible that Asami would reveal that part of himself. It hit Akihito somewhere deep, another strike at the foundations of the defensive wall that he'd built. He found he could no longer honestly deny that Asami really seemed to have a thing for him.

But at the same time he still understood so little. What could have driven and created such a man as Asami Ryuichi? So ruthless and unforgiving, except to those few closest to him over whom he was ruthlessly and unforgivingly protective. Would Akihito ever understand?

Asami stepped away, leaning back against the edge of his desk. "Get me ready, Akihito."

"...Ready?"

"I won't be using lube. You don't want me to take you dry, that won't be nearly as enjoyable for either of us."

Hazel eyes widened. "I can't even tell if you're being serious but that's seriously mean."

Asami purred with dark conquest. "Then come and get me nice and wet."

But Akihito wasn't just hesitating for the hell of it. Just like his pun the last time, he really sucked at this. He was bound to do it wrong, no way was Asami going to enjoy it. He lowered his legs, grabbing at his jeans to pull them up –

"Leave them."

Akihito paused, his cheeks bright. Asami had seen him aroused plenty of times but maybe it was the idea of being erect from under his t-shirt, or being exposed while he'd be sucking Asami off that made him a little shy. Hesitantly, he slid off the chair to his knees.

Akihito's hands were unsteady as he slid his palms up the muscular thighs. "If you're hoping this is gonna go better than last time, you're gonna be really disappointed."

But then his uneasiness was swept aside at the ridiculous comment from above.

"I promise to beg if you get me close."

Akihito tried to glare back at Asami's bare-faced provocation but found himself snorting as the image took hold. "I'll hold you to that one of these days."

Preoccupied with the sight of Asami's belt buckle glinting under the waistcoat, Akihito was unaware of the future implied in his reply, or the responding furnace that lit in Asami's eyes.

It was the first time he was undressing Asami. Feeling rather self-conscious but spurred by the prominent bulge, he unbuckled, unbuttoned and unzipped. He hesitated a moment before he leaned forwards, mouthing at the large outline from over the tight black underwear as he took in Asami's scent, just a hint muskier here but all Asami. Akihito's cock twitched.

There was a soft breath above him. The fingers through his hair were gentle.
It was with something of a challenge lighting his face that Akihito bared his teeth and, meeting Asami's smouldering gaze, he carefully, deliberately, firmly, dug his teeth in over the heated bulge. Asami's eyes narrowed just at the corners, the sense of a smirk even if his lips didn't move. There was no hesitancy in the fingers carding through Akihito's hair, no attempt to stop him, willing to see where Akihito was going with this.

A little shaken at the demonstration of trust, Akihito carefully used his teeth to nip the waistband and pull it over and down. He used his hands to help them down but something stopped him from hauling everything down to the knees. Was it a power thing? Feeling down over Asami's lower back and the mirrored dimples there, he nudged both waistbands down just to the top of the ass and then slid his hands around to the front, nudging the pants lower but only as far as to give himself enough space to cup the balls hanging heavy. He licked up from the base by the dark nest, following the vein along the impressive length to the mushroom tip that Akihito was still amazed could fit.

Asami gave him free rein as Akihito took the impressive tip into his mouth, gradually sinking deeper and testing his gag reflex, tasting with his tongue. He kept peering up, wanting to know if Asami was enjoying any of it. No, it wasn't just wanting. Needing, perhaps. Anxious even. The strength of his desire for Asami to feel pleasure in what he was doing took him by surprise, but any discomfort at this discovery was offset by Asami hiding nothing in return. His breathing deepened and stuttered, his eyes slid closed, his head tilted back, all when Akihito knew that someone with as much control as Asami could have come without betraying a flicker on his face if that's what he wanted.

It was only when Akihito himself tried to push deeper past the immediate wall of his throat and failed several times that Asami took over. The fingers in his hair tightened and Asami pushed deeper, slow and steady but unrelenting. Akihito tried to relax his throat, his fingers clenched in Asami's pants, anchoring himself on the burning gaze that refused to release him. Unlike the first time they'd done this Asami didn't say anything, not a word, but this wasn't anything like the first time. They weren't anything like the first time. One slow millimetre at a time Asami fed himself into Akihito's throat – but far from being one sided, with every little choke, with every tear drop, Akihito held Asami's fierce gaze and gave a little of himself back. Something supercharged and wild flooded between them as Asami consumed every inch Akihito gave.

In the end there was no begging but Akihito was reassured by Asami's impatience and the plentiful taste of precum. Not long afterbottoming out and just a few experimental swallows later, with something like a growl Asami hauled Akihito up before Akihito wanted to stop, kissing the taste of himself from Akihito's tongue. He slipped fingers into Akihito's rim and quickly stretched him back out. Two fingers, three just about, before he bent Akihito over the desk, chest to the mahogany.

Akihito went to wipe away the single tear track on each cheek, but Asami stopped him, grabbing his wrists, holding them down to the desk on either side.

"Wh–"

"Spread your legs."

The husky, dangerous voice gripped Akihito with a bolt of tremulous anticipation. With just a moment's hesitation, he moved a foot out.

"Wider."

Another pause, mostly because that dark voice made Akihito shiver, he moved the other foot.

"Raise your hips."
What? "Uh I don't..?"

"Arch your back," Asami clarified roughly.

"I - I can't, I'm not a damned cat –"

Akihito's voice hitched off as Asami fisted his hair and drew his head back, making him arch to save the stinging pain in his scalp, bracing against the desk with his one freed arm. "Oww..!"

"Raise your hips."

Asami released his hair and his other arm too. Akihito sagged.

"Akihito," Asami warned darkly.

"What the hell's with you?"

It was like Asami from the secret room, fringing on Dom mode. But possibly something darker, or maybe something deeper, Akihito realized, his skin tightening with hot tension like it was suddenly two sizes too small. Briefly squeezing his eyes shut, he arched his back.

Silently, Asami spread a large hand over the base of Akihito's spine under his tee, heavy and hot on his skin. Akihito breathlessly held himself still, not daring to move as Asami slowly pushed his spread hand up the curve of his back like the rising tide. His top bunched up under his armpits but Asami kept reaching higher, eventually up through the neck of the t-shirt. His breathing became even choppier as Asami wrapped long fingers around his neck. Not suffocating but restricting just enough so that he could feel it, Asami drew him back another inch as he lined up his hips and pressed into Akihito's twitching rim.

It was tight going in. Not quite stretched enough, not quite slick enough, tears sprang to Akihito's eyes, clumping his lashes even more and spilling over already damp cheeks.

"Ahh... Hurts...!"

Asami didn't let up, relentlessly pushing through Akihito's strained panting until he'd sank his full length. Only then did he lean over Akihito's back, kissing away the tears, the hand at his neck turning into caresses. "You did well for me Akihito."

Even as Akihito focused on trying to breathe through the burning stretch, something warm wrapped around him at those words, as though Asami's pleasure was his own. At that troubling thought he mustered the energy to say, "Like you gave me any choice."

Asami didn't look up from where he was bruising bolts of fire into Akihito's neck. "You'd never submit to me if you truly didn't want to."

Submit... It was one thing knowing that that was what he'd done. But the concept was still so new to Akihito that it was disconcerting to hear it said out loud. "You made it hurt on purpose," he accused.

"I want you to feel me, Akihito, every bit of me filling you up."

"Of course I feel it, you sadistic bastard, you're hung like a freaking horse!"

With a breath of a laugh Asami abruptly pulled him back from the desk, toppling them both back into his chair with Akihito still squarely in his lap. "And you're far from adverse to it," came Asami's amused murmur.
Akihito flushed even redder to see his erection rock hard and angry, oozing at the tip. "I swear you're more sadistic in your office!"

Asami pulled off one of Akihito's trainers and freed that leg from the confines of the jeans and boxers. He splayed Akihito's legs out wide over the armrests, making Akihito's length punch out towards the humongous office. Akihito gaped, totally mortified, absurdly aroused. Why the hell was he leaking so damned much?

"Oh god..."

Asami planted his perfectly polished Italian loafers on the floor and started driving up into Akihito's tight heat. "Hide nothing from me, Akihito," he growled. "How you cry for me, how you feel every inch of me."

Akihito squeezed his eyes shut, the only thing he could do, trembling at the burn, gasping at the flare of pain. But it wasn't for long. Asami surged, powerful strokes that tilted just a little until Akihito gasped for an entirely different reason, arching at a flash of intense pleasure as Asami found the sensitive nerves. He glided more easily with every thrust, surging deep, his hands running over Akihito's chest and trailing charged currents across the flushed skin. Akihito found himself bearing down, meeting every ruthless thrust, and was rewarded by Asami's groan against his neck.

"You make me want to take everything from you, Akihito," Asami growled with a scrape of teeth along his pulse.

A comment like that should have been worrying but instead it was bizarrely touching. That was how much Asami warped his sense of reality, Akihito already trapped on event horizon, the fall to the singularity that was Asami a mathematical inevitability.

But Akihito was far too self-conscious to admit that Asami was getting to him. "If that's meant to be dirty talk, it sucks big time," he gasped through the waves of pleasure radiating from every glide of Asami's length.

"Really, Akihito?" Asami murmured with wicked amusement that made Akihito instantly regret taunting the demon even before Asami said another word. "Is that why you're so painfully hard? You could come at the slightest touch." He wrapped his large hand around Akihito's bobbing cock and glided slowly up the full length, making Akihito drop his head back on Asami's shoulder with a helpless moan. "Do you know how close I was to taking you when you hacked that flash drive? Especially knowing that that was how you'd tried to target me. I almost tied you up and fucked you right then, right here."

A shaky gasp escaped Akihito's lips and not just because of the words. Asami's baritone carried an underlying weight that was entirely too serious.

"It was either that, or confine you in a small cage and make you choke on me." Still driving deep inside, Asami's hand twisted on the upstroke, inducing the most satisfying full-body shudder.

Akihito turned his burning face away. "Ok ok, stop embarrassing me already –"

"I knew you'd look good on your knees. You're a wanton angel with your lips stretched around me, your throat full, your eyes wet –"

"Argh, stop!" Akihito flailed. "I take it back, ok? Stop making up crap!"

Asami abruptly stilled, both his hand and hips motionless. "Is that what you think this is?"
Akihito shifted self-consciously, half turning to look at him. "Uh... it's not?"

With an exasperated sigh Asami dropped his head against Akihito's neck. It was just the briefest respite, a rare break in composure, his hands draped down between Akihito's legs without holding anything in particular. After a moment it was a sardonic laugh that escaped, almost bitter, as Asami raised his head again, shaking it self-deprecatingly. His voice was dark with aggravation. "Eager and hard, even if you tried to resist me. Hungry for me to fill you up, even if you didn't know yet that that was what you wanted. And that look in your eyes, especially that... I wanted everything, it was the only reason you escaped then. You defiant, free-spirited brat, even at the summit of Sion you make me want to lose control."

Staring, breathless, speechless, Akihito trembled. What the hell was Asami doing? Admitting something like that, letting Akihito in? 'Cos fucking hell but that's what it amounted to... Right? And what he'd revealed... Control was no small matter for a man like Asami, whose every whim and decision impacted the lives of tens of thousands of people, not to mention being the difference between life and death for the man himself.

Something ached in Akihito's chest.

There was nothing Akihito could say that was deserving of such brutal honesty. Impulsively, he reached over and backwards to grasp Asami's hair and yanked him in for a fierce, chaste kiss. No tongue, only more feeling than Akihito could deal with, all condensed into the desperate press of his lips.

Asami was taken aback but not for long. He took over when Akihito started drawing back, plunging his tongue in, fierceness of an entirely different kind.

But everything and control? What the hell did Asami expect anyway, that Akihito wouldn't take it as a challenge? He knew he'd be embarrassed to all hell later but it would be hella worth it to see this formidable man come undone, right in his seat of power.

Akihito broke off the kiss. His guise was that of affected boredom, although he couldn't quite keep the impish light from his eyes. His voice was unimpressed. "So this is Mount Sion, is it? Well, I'm not convinced all this mountaineering's lived up to the hype, you know, Mr High and Mighty Crime Lord."

Oh ho ho, now he'd done it, provoked the dragon right in his lair, on every possible fucking front.

Asami's eyes gleamed. With his arm looped behind Akihito he caught the blond hair and forced Akihito's head back onto the powerful shoulder, making the smaller man arch with a sharp gasp. Akihito had to reach up to grab Asami's hold and strain his thighs against the armrests to ease the sharp tug.

"You should know, my dear Akihito," Asami murmured, ever so soft, ever so dangerous, ever so gratified, "there are things you should remember about Mount Sion." His teeth scraped the exposed neck, inducing a breathy shiver as he began rocking his hips again with purpose, gliding long and deep. "The air's very thin at this altitude. Oxygen is insufficient to sustain full lucidity. Breathing becomes difficult." He swept up Akihito's weeping length in hand, bordering on too tight.

"Hhhhaaaa...!" Akihito was gasping, his cries catching.

Asami matched his shifting hand with the roll of his hips, deep full strokes to and fro that gave no reprieve, steadily increasing in speed and saturating Akihito with fire.
"Sion has its own weather system with a higher death rate than Everest. It's absolutely cruel, absolutely heartless. Once you're trapped, it will devour you until you're completely undone."

"Ahhh...!"

Asami was relentless, driving steadily but inescapably to the peak. Akihito reached blindly for Asami, his hands fluttering like fledglings as he drowned, just the edge of sharpness making the sweet that much sweeter.

Asami released his hair, locking onto his neck instead, forcing him face to face. "And what nobody else will tell you. Even after the climb, it stays with you. You will never forget. It's imprinted in you and you'll return to it, time and again. There's no more turning away."

Asami was nothing short of brutal as he forcefully claimed Akihito's mouth and fisted fast and surged deep. Gaspine, Akihito met the golden gaze flecked with ebony and darkened to midnight, quaking as the avalanche surged and swept through him. Sat atop all of Japan, Akihito erupted in thick ribbons across Asami's desk, his shattered cries filling the vast office. A few thrusts later Asami followed, sucking hard on Akihito's neck with a guttural groan as he emblazoned himself deep inside.

Behind them in the distance, the midday sun broke through the mist clinging to the peak of Mount Fuji.

"Kirishima, I need a new chair."

"...Yes, sir."

"Make sure it's reinforced."

"..........Yes, sir."

"For vigorous activity with added weight."

"I wasn't asking, sir."

"Sorry you have to follow me around."

"It's my job, Takaba-san."

"Right. 'Cos you do whatever Asami tells you."

"That too."

"You're his Head of Security, right? I'm surprised you didn't just stick a rookie on my watch."

"Asami-sama's reputation is on the line. Of course I would personally ensure your safety."

"...His reputation?"

"Of course. He declared you under his protection. Any attack on you is an attack on Asami-sama and on his word as law. He has declared you off limits in the eyes of his associates."

"Fucking hell..."
"Rest assured, Takaba-san, no one will get to you through me. I will destroy all who try."

"That's wasn't what I – ah, never mind. Has anyone told you you're more than a little terrifying?"

"Yes. Several times."

"Shit, I don't even wanna know."

"You're perfectly safe from me."

"Oh I know that. 'Cos Asami-sama will kick your ass otherwise, right?"

"... I regret ever telling you that."

"Ha! Too late, no backsies. I'ma never gonna let you live it down."

"Backsies? Is that brat-speak for getting your ass handed to you?"

"... Oh my god you're actually hilarious. Do you ever make Asami laugh?"

"I do not make Asami-sama laugh."

"I bet you do. What about? C’mon, tell me tell me tell me... Hey, what the hell're you looking at me for? I'm not comedy fodder!"

It was surreal going straight back to work. Akihito was all weak and shaky and he was sure it was painted all over his flushed face. Plus, yes, he was just as embarrassed as he’d known he’d be. Taunting Asami like that, what the hell had he been thinking? Bastard hadn’t even lost control either, only getting that much rougher, making it hurt in the best way... Akihito blushed even brighter, and when Suoh was shadowing him too. Great. Just peachy.

Office sex – or mountain sex, argh, whatever! – was banned!

The canteen was closed by the time he got there but the staff were kind enough – intimidated by Suoh (which Akihito was way too hungry to feel bad about) – to bring an extra large meal – again 'requested' by Suoh – for him from out back where they'd already put everything away.

So now not only was he high on the afterglow but also full, which made him dozy. And slow. He wouldn't've been perfectly content as a sloth. He grabbed two cans of superstrengthened coffee (aptly named Super Black) from the vending machines and drained one of them before he'd even tottered down the stairwell to the basement. He plodded to his desk, fell into his chair, and dropped his forehead to his desk.

"And that's Takaba," came Mitarai's voice. It was distinctly nicer than usual, his typical grouchiness masked by honey. "Officially the Information Security Manager, even if he looks like that. A.k.a. Sion's glorified firewall."

"Akihito-kun?"

Akihito bolted up. "Yumi-chan?" He grinned, recognizing her even in her business skirt suit. "What're you doing here?" He rolled off the chair onto his feet with some effort and headed over to the uncommonly clean desk.

"I'm temping, the agency called me this morning."
"You're the temp!"

"Wow, aren't you sharp as a tack today," Mitarai said dryly.

"But I didn't expect to see you here," Yumi said. "I thought you said you used to work here?"

"Oh yeah, uh funny story," Akihito grimaced. "So apparently there's such a thing as a job yoyo, it's totally a thing."

Yumi laughed. "Oh yes, that. I've totally heard of it."

"Well isn't this great," Mitarai said, trying to sound cheerful. Probably wanting 'in' with the cute temp. "You two know each other."

Yumi smiled at him. "We met at a party –"

"Yep, at a party," Akihito leapt in, "just a perfectly normal party."

Yumi gave him a curious look but kept quiet about Asami turning up. Or Akihito having left with him. Akihito shifted on his feet uncomfortably. Did she suspect anything? He needed to speak to her at some point when he could find a quiet moment.

"Great. That's great." Mitarai smiled tightly. "I'd love to hear more –" he didn't sound it –"but we've gotta get back to work."

"I'm so sorry!" Yumi immediately said.

"My bad," Akihito said easily. "I'll catch you later." He grinned as Mitarai glared him off.

"Ready?"

Akihito switched coding windows as subtly as he could and carried on tapping away. He didn't think Ogawa would object to him searching for V1P3R if he explained everything that had happened but he wanted to keep it on the down low.

"Ready for what?"

"Very funny. Come on, we can't be late." Ogawa was standing by Akihito's desk with his laptop tucked under his arm. The boss had barely sat down after returning from another meeting two minutes ago.

"I know everyone seems to be enjoying using me as comedy relief these days but I actually have no idea what you're talking about."

Ogawa's mildly irritated face slowly transformed into dread, then anger exploded. "Mitarai! You didn't tell him?"

"Oh!" Mitarai exclaimed in theatrical realization from his desk. "I just remembered! Yeah. No. I forgot."

"You idiot, Mitarai! I don't care what your beef is with Takaba but this reflects badly on us all!"

Akihito pushed off from his desk. "Ogawa-san, what is it?"

Glaring at Mitarai, Ogawa undocked Akihito's laptop and shoved it into his arms as he herded
Akihito out towards the stairwell. They were followed a short distance away by Sagano and Nakatani who'd replaced Suoh after the late lunch.

Ogawa didn't seem to notice them, looking grim enough with his own thoughts. "The Sion Board wants to see Soteria."

Akihito frowned. "So?"

"Look, this isn't common knowledge," Ogawa explained quietly, "but there are rumours about restructuring – maximizing productivity and streamlining, you know, the usual. Every department's been highlighting their key projects, putting their best people and achievements forward. It might be critical but there's no guarantee they won't be trimming around the edges, in Tech Support or R&D or Infosec. They sprang it on us just after lunch that the Board wanted to be briefed on the new security release, but you weren't here and I was headed for meetings so I told Mitarai to tell you to get a presentation ready." He sighed tightly. "We need this, Takaba."

Akihito's mind had already been whirring away since Ogawa has started explaining. "I have an idea."

"You do?" Hope lit in Ogawa's eyes.

"It's a bit maverick by Sion's standards though. You won't like it."

"Well, as it stands, we're stuffed. Let's hear it."

Akihito was right. Ogawa didn't like it one bit. But there was no denying that it packed a punch and punch was exactly what they needed.

So here they were, one floor down from Asami's office in Sion's Executive Boardroom gilded with professional elegance in beige and brown and black. Tokyo had spread out in all directions until they'd had to close the blinds, the overhead lights dimmed half way so everyone could see Akihito and Ogawa's laptops projecting onto the screen up front. Seated at the bottom end of the 24-seater swanky wooden table (complete with microphones arching towards the seat occupants since the table was so freaking big), the two of them coordinated together to attempt to hack Sion's network in full view of the Board.

Pentesting – or organized hacking, as some called it – was a perfectly standard industry practice for testing security systems. Sion's new AI-based cyber shield was regularly put through its paces, during development and final testing and on an ongoing basis, but doing so in front of the 20-strong Board who were more accustomed to standard presentations, sometimes with printed handouts, was pretty out there. But once the execs had time to absorb the process, barring a few disapproving exceptions, most of them got over the shock of it and seemed to be fascinated.

It helped enormously that they – and Akihito – were more relaxed without the CEO attending.

"So how long before it becomes self aware and takes over Sion Global?" a salt and pepper haired lady asked, half joking.

Akihito grinned. "When you all realize I'm actually the Terminator T-1000 and I'm here to kill John Connor or his mother or his wife or... Bah, I can't remember. Really though, it's programmed to detect malware and hostile contact, tracking the web for activities against other networks too to develop defences before they can be targeted on Sion. Soteria learns and adapts itself based on that, but this is a long, long way off from self awareness."
"What's that?" One of the youngest members, in his late thirties if Akihito had to guess, pointed at a warning flashing on Akihito's half of the screen.

"Soteria's detected me."

"That didn't take long."

"No, she's smart." Akihito tried another string to hide in Ogawa's bulkier electronic presence.

"Or you're just not very good," chipped in a thin guy with thin lips and sharp, narrow eyes.

"You want to bet how long it'll take me to hack something of yours?" Akihito taunted back as his fingers carried on racing over his keys.

"... My home computer. Try and break in before the end of this meeting."

Akihito finished his string of code and released it before turning to Mr Thin. "Seriously?"

Mr Thin smiled thinly, smug as a bug in a rug.

"Ogawa-san?"

His boss continued focusing on his task. "By all means, carry on. Who am I to object to betting in the Boardroom?"

Akihito grinned at Mr Thin. "You're on."

He didn't even know the guy's name so he first entered search parameters with job level and physical descriptions into his own identity search program. He found the guy's name within thirty seconds, then looked him up in Sion's HR directories, found his home address, linked web activists from that address and found the IP. Discovering his PC was hibernating, he forced an external hack and woke it up. The computer was up to date with one of the mainstream firewall programs but that had never stopped Akihito before. Using one of his recent codes he bypassed it in less than a minute and brought up the desktop—a family picture. The wife was surprisingly pretty, the guy looked happy, and his two children were cute.

"Is that your PC?"

Mr Thin cleared his throat. "Wow. That's... rather scary."

The whole thing had taken less than six minutes. Someone laughed, others joined in, the ice was broken and then several of them started clapping. Akihito shifted uncomfortably. He'd never been applauded for hacking before!

"Uh, Ogawa-san, how're you doing there?"

"I don't know. I don't think I'm going to get anywhere near Sion's network, but then that is the point."

"Maybe we can call it quits now."

That was when someone piped in, "How about you try again, Takaba-san?"

Apparently his little hacking stunt had earned him the polite honorific. He'd been just 'Takaba' until now.
This provoked a clamour of calls for him to add to Ogawa's efforts. Having seen his hacking abilities first hand, they wanted to pitch him against *Soteria* some more. They stopped short of chanting *Hack, hack, hack*, but they were pretty damned close.

Akihito eventually capitulated for one last ditch effort. A few execs still looked sour about the whole thing but they held their tongues.

Most of them encouraged, egged and cheered him on...

Which was the sight that greeted Asami as he silently arrived at the Boardroom. He'd entered right by the back wall some five metres behind Akihito and Ogawa, so nobody noticed him for a while, their attention superglued to the front screen.

"I'm telling you, there's no point," Akihito insisted as he finished up another code string. "*Soteria*’s solid. She's not going to budge."

"I'm done. I'm clean out of ideas here," Ogawa said.

"So that's how good *Soteria* is? It took you six minutes to hack Ikuda-san's computer, but you can't hack Sion?"

"I'm getting diddly-squat. Right, this is the last try." Akihito fired off his last code, passed through Sion's own VPN and posing as a bog standard employee access request. It took *Soteria* only moments to detect the hidden code and then it was history, she neutralized it and updated her memory banks, learning and adapting.

"So there we have it, ladies and gentlemen. *Soteria*. Sion's new and hugely improved information security system."

Applause broke out. They turned back towards Akihito and Ogawa – and froze as their eyes landed on Asami behind. The spacious room fell to silence as though they'd been sucked into a vacuum and sound had suddenly stopped dead.

Awareness crept up the back of Akihito's neck with a hundred pinpricks. His eyes slid closed for a moment – half in resignation, half bracing – before he raised his chin and turned.

Flanked by Glasses and Blond Tank, with Sagano and Nakatani still by the back wall, Asami stood with his hands in his pockets, his posture deceptively, dangerously relaxed. His cool gaze swept the room before landing on Akihito.

Akihito admitted to being just the tiniest bit intimidated. So, of course, he raised his head higher.

"Care to explain what I'm seeing here?"

No one took the easy tone at face value. The execs glanced nervously at each other. One of them stood – the one who'd taken one look at Akihito's jeans and t-shirt at the start and had given him the stink eye ever since. Mr Sour, as Akihito had dubbed him.

But before he could speak, Asami held his hand up to silence him. "Takaba?"

The room's surprise might have been at the CEO silencing one of his top Board members or his knowing the young man from Tech by name.

Akihito was more annoyed at letting himself be intimidated than anything else. "We were presenting *Soteria* to the Board."
"I see. And you deemed the best way to do this was through attempted computer trespassing?"

The silence was deafening.

"It was a practical demonstration, a perfectly standard industry practice for testing a security system. How better to demonstrate its capabilities than to show that it's mightily difficult to break?"

"Was that your conclusion?"

Akihito exchanged a glance with Ogawa. His boss was ashen, not looking as if he was about to answer the question any time soon.

"Soteria isn't unbreakable," Akihito replied. "No system is. But we haven't managed it so far, not now, not during any of the ongoing extensive testing." He couldn't decipher the thoughts behind the intense golden eyes.

"It seems rather effective then. Would you agree, Shigura-san?"

Mr Sour froze at suddenly finding himself the target of the boss' attention. That certainly wasn't what he'd originally intended to say but he could hardly disagree. "Of course, Asami-sama."

Akihito rolled his eyes. What was with everyone kissing Asami's ass all the time?

Unfortunately Mr Sour caught the look. It provoked him into one last dig. "I was merely surprised as Takaba-san does not subscribe to the professional dress code standards required of Sion's employees."

Akihito wondered what face Mr Sour would have pulled if he learned that Asami himself had dressed him that morning – though hindered might be a more apt description – and he saw the golden eyes glinting at the same thought.

Akihito had never worn suits to work and clearly Asami didn't care. He was hardly going to change now for Mr Sourface here. "What's your issue here, exactly? Don't you like my jeans?"

"I have nothing against denim. It simply has no place at a serious place of employment. You should dress to better reflect the respect and commitment you have for your employment and responsibilities."

"Ah, so if you had to choose who to hire between two people, one with the skills to do the job but was dressed in rags, and the other with mediocre abilities but was dressed in a suit like yours, you'd go for the vain flake?"

The man looked like he might burst a blood vessel. "I wouldn't hire either. I would find someone with the right –"

"The right external appearance? So a week down the line you can find the entire corporation's network hacked by a bored high schooler because you cared more about appearances than the actual skills a potential candidate had? Well, luckily for you all, Ogawa-san had the sense to look past my street rags and hire me. Otherwise you might have fallen prey to the bitcoin hostage situation that many top companies have already fallen prey to."

Akihito's fingers flew over his keyboard, pulling up relevant news articles and data on the projector screen. "PrimaTec was hacked last week and details of sensitive trade deals were leaked. Tokyo Electronics had design blueprints for prototype infinity battery cells stolen. The Ministry of Defence had to fork out hundreds of millions to retrieve undercover agent lists. Need I go on? If the Tech
department was hung up on such shallow criteria, Sion Global would have been up shit's creek. Because all of the above hacks were also tried on our systems, only Soteria neutralized them all. So get over it. I don't comment on how your suit isn't the hottest in the room. Maybe you shouldn't comment on my wardrobe either."

Silence greeted his outburst.

Akihito inwardly groaned. Not the hottest in the room? Asami's presence always did weird things to his brain, it wasn't quite what he'd meant to say. He planned for a swift exit before he offended anyone else.

"Are there any other questions about Soteria?" he asked.

The table was quiet.

"I have one," Asami said. "Who's familiar with the AI coding?"

"There's a handful of us," Akihito hedged, remembering Ogawa's words earlier and not wanting to make anyone seem superfluous. "Everyone in Tech has their own expertise and take care of different areas of the business."

Some of the execs looked at him in surprise at his diplomacy.

Asami smirked. "Good to hear. Ogawa, Takaba, come with me." He nodded to the room in general. "Continue with the rest of the agenda."

The Board members rushed to their feet and bowed deeply as Sagano and Nakatani held the doors and Asami strode out with Kirishima. Akihito was jittery and Ogawa looked like he might faint as they followed, Suoh bringing up the rear.

Akihito couldn't hold his tongue anymore as he tripped out the elevator on the 32nd floor. "Are you mad, Asami?"

Ogawa was clearly horrified at his casual address.

"Why would I be?" Asami asked as they headed down along the long stretch of windows overlooking Shinjuku. "You only incited my Board into some boisterous hack fest."

"Penetest," Akihito corrected.

"Penetest?"

"Penetration testing."

Asami's lips quirked. "I see. So that was penetration testing."

Akihito's face heated at the rich baritone curling around the words. He'd had a good giggle at the term when he'd first come across it, but it was such an everyday thing for him that he didn't even think twice about it anymore. But of course Asami would use that voice, heedless of company.

With Ogawa there, Akihito, for once, demonstrated restraint and let it slide. "Look, it wasn't Ogawa-san's fault, ok? There was no time to prepare and the idea just sprang out of nowhere."

"I'm your manager, Takaba," Ogawa piped from the side, a little shaky but firm. "You're my responsibility and the blame falls on me for any mistakes."
Something flickered across Asami's face but he continued to march along the last stretch to his office, pulling along the rag tag group as if by invisibly strings. "I already know it was your idea, Akihito. No one else could possibly wreak such havoc on my Board who have never before been anything but completely professional."

It was so normal for Asami to call him familiarly by his first name that Akihito didn't even notice. But Ogawa's eyes popped.

"It was professional!" Akihito insisted. "It was just... unorthodox, that's all. Thinking outside the box and all. Who wants another boring old presentation with boring old slides?"

"Only back for one day and already such chaos. Whatever next?"

Kirishima opened the doors to the office and Asami swept in.

Akihito was right on his heels. "That's entirely on you," he pointed out. "You're the one who dragged me back here. I was perfectly happy in Ueno."

"Were you now? Pray tell, what happened there? I seem to recall rescuing you from a lecherous –"

"That – that was your fault! You started the whole auction debacle!"

"The auction was already in progress. You roped me into it."

"You know what I mean! Anyway, it's your fault for turning up!"

"And consequently you raised an awful lot more for the event than you would have otherwise."

Asami rested against the front of his desk, crossing his arms. "Are you saying that that was an undesirable outcome and that I shouldn't have come?"

Akihito scowled. "You're twisting my words."

"The logic seems perfectly sound to me."

"That's because you're a twisted bastard."

Asami smirked. "As you well know. Kirishima, why don't you brief them before Akihito gives his manager a heart attack."

Akihito spun, having actually forgotten about the others. The three bodyguards had disappeared at some point and Glasses wasn't new to their verbal sparring. But Ogawa was gawking at them, his eyes practically falling out of their sockets.

Asami had let him run his mouth on purpose! Akihito would have laid into Asami if that wasn't already the problem, a fact of which the bastard was perfectly aware judging by that smug look on his face. Damn him!

Kirishima remained perfectly pokerfaced as though he'd witnessed nothing. "This is shared in the strictest confidence. Sion Global is looking to expand into VR and we're exploring several prospective companies which might form a solid staging ground."

Akihito turned to Asami with some surprise. "VR as in –?"

"Virtual reality."

"Just checking. But why VR?"
"The industry has amassed 7 billion US dollars in its first three years. With numerous applications across digital markets, therapies, education and training, to name but a few, it'll continue to grow exponentially. It'll be one of Sion's next major ventures."

"Huh." To be honest, Akihito shouldn't have been surprised. Asami muddled adorably with anything digital but his business acumen was second to none. And, if he was honest, damn hot. Wait... Wait wait wait – adorable? Hot? What the fuck? Akihito hurriedly cleared his throat. "Uh, I just didn't expect you to know anything about VR."

"We don't. Which is where you come in."

"We have several proposals," Kirishima expanded, "and we need Tech input. Eyeball their submissions, sense check their technical reliability, work with business modelling associates on strengths and opportunities, weaknesses and risks. Is there anyone with the technical know-how and discretion?"

Akihito looked to Ogawa, he was the Tech boss after all.

"I'd say the programming component is right up Takaba's street. I can review physical outputs though only at a basic level, I'm no expert."

"A preliminary pass should indicate if we need anything more," Kirishima considered.

Ogawa suddenly made an odd sound in his throat as though he'd aborted what he'd been about to say, looking at Akihito. Then he seemed to be trying very hard not to look at Asami or Kirishima.

"Ogawa-san?" Akihito asked.

Ogawa collected himself with visible effort and turned to Asami. "Pardon me," he bowed, "there is something I cannot legally disclose but may impact on this. May I come back to you on the suggested contacts from Tech Division?"

Asami joined the invisible dots faster than Akihito did. "If you're referring to being legally barred from disclosing Akihito's community service sentence, I'm already aware."

Ogawa looked like he'd been thrown for a loop.

Akihito's brows shot up. "That's what you're stumbling about all of a sudden?"

"Y-you know, sir?" Ogawa was still staring at Asami.

"Wouldn't you say your concern comes a little late after you already handed him the keys to Sion's cyber security?" Asami questioned coldly, the shadows about him gathering.

Ogawa paled.

"He-y," Akihito leaped in with awkward cheerfulness. "Don't sweat it! It's all cool, right?"

Asami threw him a look.

Akihito shifted on his feet, shrinking back. "What?" he hedged.

Something glinted in Asami's eyes and Akihito realized he was actually amused despite terrorizing Ogawa. The bastard!

Asami finally let up. "You're fortunate it turned out well or this would have been a very different
"conversation. Kirishima, work with these two."

"Yes, sir," the secretary acknowledged.

Just as Ogawa slumped with relief and Akihito started planning his hasty departure, however, Asami moved in front of Ogawa.

If Ogawa had thought the CEO was frightening before, it was nothing compared to how the tall man towered over him now.

Something volatile crackled about Asami. "Let us be clear, Ogawa-san. Your responsibility for Takaba falls solely within the remit of his work as an employee of Sion. Beyond that you have no obligation regarding him whatsoever."

Ogawa goggled, stuttered, bowed. "O-of course, Asami-sama."

Fuck but Asami wasn't teasing at all this time. He wasn't being subtle in the least getting all territorial over Akihito's ass and had no qualms who knew it either.

Akihito wanted to bite Asami's head off and jump his bones all at the same time. He was never going to be able to look Ogawa in the eye again.

"When were you going to tell me about your girlfriend temping in IT?"

Akihito scowled at him. "When you stop making mountains out of molehills. Actually not even that, they're flat plains. Think Holland, no elevation whatsoever."

Asami was staring at the Shinjuku nightlife rushing past the limo windows.

"I said it before and I'll say it again," Akihito stated. "Asparagus isn't your colour."

Asami almost looked at him. Almost. Akihito knew he did. He sighed, more put out than he cared to admit. "You're the one who was banging on about trust," he grumbled quietly, flushing faintly as he recalled the secret room. It was his turn to look away. "What was the point of all that if you don't trust me?"

"Trust you to not to cheat on me?"

"Exactly!" He spun back on Asami to find the man staring intently. He caught a glimpse of the curving lips before Asami turned away to the window again. "What's with that look?" No reply, not even a glance. "What?" Still nothing. Akihito shifted closer, grabbing the man's arm. "Asami!"

Asami finally looked at him, taking Akihito aback with his quietly pleased smile. An honest-to-god smile, not a smirk. "I was reflecting on your roundabout way of telling me that you consider this a committed relationship."

Akihito gaped, a furious blush suffusing his face right to the tips of his ears. All that came out for a while was a load of stuttering until he blurted out, "But you haven't even asked me out yet!"

There was a pause before Asami laughed. And damn it but Akihito's face only felt hotter.

"Neither have you," Asami pointed out. His nearest hand reached up under Akihito's chin and drew him closer. He was most certainly back to his habitual smirk now, darkly scintillating, stealing Akihito's wide-eyed focus, the golden gaze mesmerizing. "But, for that matter, would you like me to?"
"Hell no!" Akihito broke free, scrambling away.

Asami followed, scooting across after him. "No?"

"No!" By now Akihito was plastering himself into the corner between the seat back and the door.

Asami crowded him. "I'm told I'm one of the top twenty most eligible billionaire bachelors in the world."

Akihito shoved back against the solid chest. "Only the top twenty?" he sneered. "Clearly even all the stupidly excessive zeros in your bank account weren't enough to blind them from your god-awful personality!"

Asami leaned into him more, his smirking lips hovering over Akihito's. "But how can a self-made businessman possibly compete with Russian oligarchs and Arab royalty? Perhaps my humanitarian work will tip the balance in my favour."

"Ha! The only humanitarian work you do is humanitarianizing my ass!"

There was a pregnant, motionless second – before Asami sat back with an abrupt laugh. Akihito had to laugh too after a moment.

"See what you do?" Akihito lamented. "You make me babble complete shit!"

"On the contrary, I'd say you're often accurate, such as your comment about mine being the hottest suit in the room," Asami suggested innocently.

The limo drew up outside the towering condo complex as Akihito flushed all bright again.

"I never said – Actually that wasn't about you! That was – I'd seen this photo shoot in a magazine, yeah, this totally hot dude, all gleaming muscles bunching everywhere that I just wanted to lap up," Akihito taunted. "Total sex appeal. That's what that was about."

"I see. So where does the suit come in?"

"Uh – it – uh –" Akihito could only stammer.

One of the black-suited guards held open Asami's door.

"Don't worry, Akihito," Asami reassured. "I'll give you plenty of material for all your wet dreams of me, whether as a naked pin-up or the hottest suit in the room."

Gifting an insufferably tantalizing smirk, he slid calmly out of the limo, leaving Akihito blooming with gobsmacked mortification in his wake.

Akihito was expending far too much energy trying to ignore Asami. Sat on the floor leaning back against the settee, his hunt for V1P3R was proving painstakingly slow. It would be easier if the fucker was active but they seemed to be laying low, so all he could do for now was to set traps and alarms following what few breadcrumbs he'd tracked down so far. It didn't help that Asami was sitting on the sofa next to him. Not that he was bothered that Asami might be watching over his shoulder – that had strangely never bothered him and Asami seemed occupied too with his own phone calls and emails and whatever shit he was looking at on his iPad. It was just that Akihito was extremely conscious of Asami, full stop.

At least he'd been left to shower and bathe in peace, with Asami having been held up with some call
from Hong Kong that Glasses had insisted couldn't be postponed. Akihito had already been 
ensconced on the floor with his laptop on the coffee table in front of some late night panel show by 
the time Asami finally headed off to the bathroom. The work of a billionaire crime lord sure 
consumed all hours of the day and night.

But now it was hitting midnight and Akihito wanted to sleep, and therein lay the thorny issue. Things 
had been rather tame this evening. Domestic, even. It was bizarre considering this was Asami. 
Akihito hadn't yet been dragged into bed and attacked – or attacked against any level or vertical 
surface they happened to be nearest and then dragged to bed. It wasn't like Akihito was waiting for 
it, or anticipating it with any eagerness or anything – certainly not, he told himself. But it sure made 
things awkward. Where the hell was he supposed to sleep? He really didn't want to just saunter off 
into Asami's bed...

He could see Asami's long legs out of the corner of his eyes. Turning surreptitiously brought more of 
the man into view – the casual sight of him that so few seemed to see in his dressing gown and his 
damp hair flopped over his eyes.

The chat show guests were exhausting some mundane action of a pop celebrity to banality. Akihito 
sighed. He could only try.

"When do you think you'll be finished? I'll take the sofa when you're done."

Asami smirked, his eyes not leaving the iPad. "Nice try, but you know where you're sleeping. Go on 
ahead if you like."

Akihito frowned. He'd guessed Asami would say something like that, but still...

"Or would you feel better if I went all caveman on you and carried you off?"

Akihito glowered. "No need."

"No?"

"No!" Akihito powered down his laptop with a couple of shortcut keys, stomped off to Asami's 
bedroom and slammed the door on the dark chuckle that he adamantly denied made him impatient to 
go to bed together. Nope. Not. At. All.

It was an hour later that Asami undressed in the Tokyo nightlight, his fingers fluid and certain, even 
sliding the top bit on the gun and doing whatever it was that he did to check it all over before tucking 
it under his pillow. Akihito silently watched his monochrome form move about the room, the 
confident grace of a predator evident even in shades of grey.

Was this what normalcy amounted to with a man like Asami? Work, pretty much like any other, a 
quiet evening together, pretty much like any other. Just all interspersed with flashes of a lethal 
firearm, not to mention the out-of-this-world sex whenever and wherever Asami had the inclination...

Sliding in on his side of the bed, Asami promptly draped Akihito over his chest. Akihito found 
himself bright and lucid and he realized he'd always been half unconscious after sex all the times 
Asami had done this before. This was simply going to bed, to sleep. And it was suspiciously like 
cuddling. Wavering on the brink of objecting, Akihito lay there, poised on flight as Asami inhaled 
deeply and released one great sigh.

The hard truth was that Akihito had wanted this closeness twelve hours ago after they'd embrocated 
Asami's desk with his cum, when he'd had to settle for Asami cleaning him up and redressing him –
or, more accurately, Akihito struggling to dress while Asami totally got in the way – and fighting off Asami's persistent groping and teasing all the way out the door on shaky feet because this lowly, court-ordered employee seemed to be more concerned about getting back to work than the fricking CEO.

Staring in the dim light, it took long moments for Akihito to ease back from his instinctive urge to fight, to resist anything he perceived as coercion. But when Asami did nothing further except to go to sleep, Akihito gradually relaxed, by small increments, one muscle fibre at a time, pressing his ear to the steady heartbeat.

It was after sleep finally claimed him and he relaxed completely against the broad chest supporting him that Asami's hand came to rest in his hair.
Control – part 2

Chapter Notes

A huge Thank You to the wonderful Shey for another amazing fanart! I'm thrilled to bits, it's like Click has its own art muse! It's in Chapter 4 when Akihito's working on the damaged laptop at his apartment with Asami watching beside him – please go take a look! (^_^)

I spoil these two rotten. They want, they get. I'm the monkey dutifully channelling their thoughts and feelings and ridiculous antics into words. (^_^) Or maybe I'm just spoiling myself... I have far too many naughty scenarios for them to play out!

Partly because of that, I've realized a flaw in my story planning. At the risk of sounding absurd saying this to all you wonderful folk who are reading this despite (because of!) the story tags, this is currently chapter after chapter of smut... I heard that! Who's laughing? I'm trying to be serious here! ;-P So, seriously, you know that thing about variation carrying more impact? There are no-smut chapters on the horizon but for now, seeing as (a) I've planned this relationship development amongst their daily lives, (b) these two are horny-as-hell devils, and (c) I'm having too much fun with said horniness in said daily lives to change it, you're just going to have to suck it up *ahem!* and put up with all their romping about. All 15K words of it because I seem chronically incapable of doing short chapters. Quite the torture, eh? Mwahaha! XD

Actually I'm slightly nervous it's so long you might get bored. (^_^) But too late now! Here's to hoping I can keep your attention through another monster of a chapter (maybe even the longest yet?). Control part 2, here we go. Hope you enjoy it.

~ Nyx ~

Tuesday.

Colours bled together, a blurry kaleidoscope lit with beams of gold. Dream Asami was a dreamy cocoon at Akihito's back, hot and hard and yet a perfect humanoid cushion for relaxing into, complete with a mammoth morning glory that nestled along his crack.

Fuck yes.

Akihito was pliant on his side, his top leg propped high and several fingers stretching his ass. 

Doubly fuck yes.

The definition of languorous contentment, check.

Ass satisfyingly occupied, check.

Dream Asami who was even more dreamy than the real deal, if that was even possible, check.

Fingers vanished, dematerialized, into thin air.

"Noo... Oh!" Disappointment flipped into anticipation, the work of an instant, simply at the familiar bulb-headed nudge.

Dream Asami sank in, deliciously thick and long, pressing deep with steady, relentless pressure. Lips found Akihito’s neck. It was a lost cause.

"Ohhh yeeaahhh..."

"You like me inside you, don't you?" Dream Asami's voice was a nectar of sin.

"God yes."

"Why do you like it?"

There wasn't nearly enough movement for Akihito's liking. He ground his hips back.

"Tell me, Akihito," that bedevilled voice coaxed.

"I'm full. With you. Inside." Another blissed out sigh, another wiggle. "Move, damn it."

Dream Asami obliged.

"Yeeaahhh... Just like that... Feels so hot... It hurts... Just a bit..."

"Want me to stop?"

"Fuck no... It's fucking awesome..." Dream Akihito sighed. "Gimme more."

He lay there all dopy and let Dream Asami take him, slow and unhurried, carried on the languid, blissful, cresting tide...

Akihito blinked awake. To discover he hadn't been asleep at all. Asami was wrapped around him, sheathed to the hilt, the shit-eating smirk blinding him with gold.

"That's quite the morning greeting, Akihito."

"No no no... Oh my god... No, I was asleep! I was just sleep talking!"

"Then it must be entirely true. Luckily for you, this sexy dick can give you a lot more, exactly as you want."

Expired. Dead. Akihito literally burst into flames and perished on the spot. And that was before Asami had oh-so-smugly spoon-drilled him to two Holy-fucking-baloney-my-whole-body's-melted-to-mush orgasms one after another before they'd even fallen out of bed for breakfast.

It was going to be one of those days. Akihito just knew it.

So maybe that was the reason, the worst-best morning greeting ever.

Or maybe it was because of the reality of what was happening here. Dangerously convenient. And worryingly comfortable. Regardless of the reasons or the unavoidable necessity for the current arrangement, it had struck Akihito as he'd hopped precariously into his jeans, steadied by strong
hands as Asami stepped around him in the walk-in closet to grab a tie and those long, elegant fingers
deftly tied it to the soft swish of silk. They ate together, slept together, were 'home' together – what
was that, if not co-habiting?

Maybe it was because of Asami 'accompanying' him to the hospital. Dog with a bone was more like
it – when Akihito made the mistake of revealing why he was trying to reject the limo ride to Sion that
morning, Asami was all over his ass. Akihito's obstinate rejections (because he needed a breather
damn it, being in the same room as Asami wasn't letting his complexion return to normal after that
wake-up call!) were met with equally obstinate insistence that he should just let Asami take him or he
was in danger of missing the appointment – as though it wasn't the bastard's fault that they were
wasting time arguing in the first place!

Asami hadn't let him out of his sight. Not when they sat in the community hospital waiting room on
sticky plastic-covered chairs that were as uncomfortable as they were ugly, a wide birth surrounding
their intimidating group of serious men in black suits with Akihito in their midst like a flash of wild
pineapple. Nor when the nurse removed the bandages and checked over the dissolved stitches on
Akihito's upper arm and told him that it had healed cleanly but that it would scar, all while blatantly
checking Asami out. Asami had grabbed his arm almost painfully hard, golden eyes like hellfire as
he took in the pink welt, unnaturally straight on a upward slash across the outer bicep... Carved by
the bullet that had been aimed at Asami... When Akihito had saved his life while he'd been saving
Akihito's... Then Asami had grabbed him and all Akihito could do was cling to him as Asami bent
him backwards with a beastly kiss, startled nurse be damned.

Which, as fucking embarrassing as it had been, had actually been kinda, sorta, nice... Oh, who the
feck was he kidding, he'd been left all hot and flustered and protesting mostly because Asami had
kissed him like that in a hospital, for crying out loud, but then he wasn't protesting very much at all
as Asami had bundled them back into the limo and it had all got rather heavy handed. Literally –
Akihito straddled across Asami's lap, both their swollen cocks fisted in Asami's large hand as he
devoured Akihito's neck...

Or maybe Akihito just had a limit to how much he could be chauffeured around, doors efficiently
opened for him, his battered rucksack conveniently handed to him with reverent hands. Would he
ever get used to it, he wondered, where such assistance became an expectation, where hard work
became a distant memory? It was a fearsome thought.

By the time the limo dropped them at Sion after their long morning, Akihito was biting at the bit to
make his own way and assert his independence.

He stumbled out of the limo and all but legged it to the basement, with Sagano and Nakatani
hurrying to keep pace.

Neither mentioned Asami planting the proverbial proprietary flag on Akihito's ass the day before
even though it was the first thought in both their minds. There was a brief awkward moment when
neither of them knew what to say, but then Ogawa just pushed his glasses up his nose with an
almighty sigh.

"Feel free to work any hours you want to, Takaba," he said, his voice rich with sarcasm.

Akihito quirked a lopsided grin. "Great, thanks Ogawa-san. I'll just rock up whenever then."

Ogawa rolled his eyes, turning back to his screen. "What are 'core business hours' anyway? We
should just ditch them, right?"
Akihito pulled out his laptop and started powering up. "Where is everyone?" It was only the two of them in the IT office, not counting the two bodyguards by the door.

"Lunch."

"Oh... What!" Akihito scrambled for his phone, checking the time. "No shit! It's lunchtime already!" He didn't want to have to bother the canteen staff for late lunch again. But he'd only just arrived... He dithered, hopping from one foot to the other.

Ogawa sighed. "Go, go," he waved off, knowing the young man's healthy appetite.

Akihito needed no further prompting. "Thanks, boss, you're the best!"

"Just make up the hours!" Ogawa yelled after him as the blond dashed back out not thirty seconds after he'd arrived. He watched the two bodyguards – Asami's bodyguards – ricochet off the wall before they could get settled, yanked along like silent shadows.

Left manning the Helpdesk alone again, Ogawa shook his head at the unlikely couple. It wasn't a match he'd have ever predicted in a million years, but then again, didn't they say that opposites attract? And to think, it all started when Ogawa had needed a helping hand to tackle Sion's cyber shields –

"Oh my, did I play cupid to those two?"

"Whassup?"

"... You're needed up here. Bring your laptop."

"Righty ho, Glasses-san."

"... You are aware I have a name?"

"Yeah, but nicknames are so much more special, don't you think?"

"........."

"What shocking quagmire have you landed yourself in this time?"

So in hindsight maybe it hadn't been the smartest thing to do to go barging into Asami's office running his mouth without checking if the bastard was alone. But in his defence, Asami had never had company before when he'd called Akihito up.

There were several distinctive and immediate reactions.

Four pairs of startled eyes swivelled to the door at his noisy entrance – including Mr Thin and Mr Sour from the Board meeting the previous day.

Ogawa was doing his best to disappear under the table.

Kirishima was stone. A slab of expressionless marble.

Asami smirked, reclining at the head of the glass conference table. "Good of you to join us, Takaba. We were ahead of schedule so we brought forward discussions on the VR expansion."
Such an easy posture, slightly askance in the armless armchair, Asami's arm resting wide and relaxed on the table. Casual but authoritative, very much in boss-form in front of the four execs that meant Asami was calling him Takaba.

"So it's not just me that this delightful young man speaks to like that," someone observed quietly.

Akihito tore his eyes from Asami to the speaker – it was a stuffy manager Akihito had come across when he'd been covering Helpdesk before, Akihito had chewed his ears off for having Abc123 as his password for everything.

"Isn't it interesting how genius can come in many guises?" Asami mused as Akihito approached the table.

What the hell was Asami on about? Akihito scowled, more hesitant to give the bastard a piece of his mind now that he knew they had company.

Asami knew it too, judging by the glint in his eyes. "He has the added quality of not pulling his punches. He'll always tell you the absolute truth."

Having overcome his initial surprise, Mr Thin now appeared to be hiding a smile. Some of the others exchanged glances. Mr Sour was still a sourface but the others seemed curious at the top boss' backing of this outspoken young man.

"Yeah, that must be it, I'm totally incapable of sugar coating things. By the way, Asami-sama," Akihito added innocently as he calmly took a seat, "I've always thought you're a very cheerful, easy-going CEO."

There were a few startled coughs.

Kirishima cleared his throat, interjecting before his boss could act on the gleam of amusement that was becoming altogether too familiar as of late.

"Shigura-san, if you would you start us off on the key objectives and scope of Project EverEye?"

"We're taking the train." As immovable as a blast wall. But then, barely one second and an anxious glance around later, "Can – can we take the train?"

A veiled storm darkened Asami's brow, but there was a reassuring squeeze of his shoulder that made Akihito think that it might not be directed at him.

"Suoh, maintain a discreet perimeter."

"Yes, sir," came the big guy's prompt acknowledgement as though he'd already started planning for such. He issued quiet orders into his sleeve microphone.

"Lead on," Asami said easily as though Akihito hadn't just banished them from the comfort of the limo like he had any right to.

"A-are you sure?"

"Only if you can move your legs. You look stuck."

Asami wasn't far off. Akihito's feet had grown roots. Whatever the myriad of reasons for his restlessness that morning, as they left Sion at the end of the day it all came rushing back tenfold at the sight of the limo waiting for them. Maybe it was cabin fever from being chauffeured around
"Or if you'd prefer me to carry you –"

"You baka! I don't prefer you to carry me. I – I don't need you to carry me. I can't possibly say it clearly enough. No carrying!"

"Right," Asami smirked. "No carrying."

"Good."

They watched as the limo took off without them. Akihito started off down the concourse, Asami moving in sync.

This was bizarre. Akihito had seen his fair share of the weird and wonderful but this ranked pretty high up there. Walking with Asami, down the elevated concourse from the execs' entrance, down to ground level where the riffraff like Akihito dwelled. Suoh and the other bodyguards spread out until they disappeared into the scattergram of commuters heading home, giving the illusion that they were just two ordinary people strolling along. Ordinary, except Asami still forged a path through the mishmash of people like an icebreaker. This close to Sion HQ there were plenty of employees on their way home doing a double take at the extraordinary sight of their CEO walking in their midst. It was so remarkable that most didn't even notice Akihito at his side, even with his bright blond hair and loud clothes.

It felt good to be on his feet again. Akihito led them past the first subway station, as well as the next few that they came across. They left behind the people who recognized Asami, until the second glances just came from folk in downtown Shinjuku gawking at a stunning paradigm of virile masculinity. Akihito also kept half an eye on Asami, in case the billionaire accustomed to being chauffeured around everywhere might struggle walking. But Asami easily kept pace, seeming unconcerned where they were going, making no attempt to curb Akihito's burst of wanderlust.

They passed restaurants in full flow with their evening diners and the shops open late to commuters burning the midnight oil, weaving through the streams of people. Akihito caught sight of Blond Tank's mop of light hair here and there, but the other bodyguards were lost seamlessly in the sea of dark heads.

With every striding step Akihito felt lighter, shedding the shadows of V1P3R and the hitmen and having to stay cooped up and always having bodyguards on his tail. He didn't know how Asami did it. Maybe it was something one got used to over time. But Akihito couldn't imagine not hitting the road whenever he felt like it, the freedom to do as he liked without his every move being monitored.

Akihito finally slowed down as they approached the fifth station. "Hungry?" he asked, pulling out his phone and putting it to his ear.

"Always."

Akihito glanced aside sharply at the suggestive tone. Sure enough, Asami's eyes were fixed on him. But there was only time for an eye roll as the call connected.

"Hey, Mori-Jiichan [granddad]? It's Takaba Akihito, I don't know if you remember me – Uh yeah, it sure has – No no, I'm good. I'm doing good – Yeah, for two. Tonight actually. And by tonight I mean in fifteen minutes? – Haha you're the best! Thanks! We'll see you soon." He hung up and rounded on Asami. "We're gonna go eat but no funny business. These guys are nice and you can't pull all the shit you usually pull. You gotta be on your best behaviour."
Asami looked amused. "Best behaviour it is."

"I mean it!" Akihito glared sternly, pointing a warning finger and everything.

Asami held up his hands, his lips twitching as though containing a grin. "You have my word."

Akihito shook his head as they headed into the station. "I'm so gonna regret this," he grumbled and led them over to the queues at the ticket machines. "I bet you've never taken the train before, have you?"

"I'm entirely in your hands."

Akihito flushed faintly at the rumbling purr. "That's not an answer. I'm assuming you don't own a Suica card, do you?"

Asami shook his head.

Blond Tank materialized at his elbow with a jet-black credit card in hand. "Where to?"

"Oh, put that away!" Akihito waved off. "I've got this. How many of you guys are there?"

Suoh glanced unsurely at Asami.

"My men can fend for themselves," Asami told him, sending Suoh away with a subtle jerk of his jaw. "Just get mine."

Akihito stepped up to the ticket machine when it was their turn. A few coins and buttons later he waved the small strip of magnetic card in Asami's face.

"This is called a ticket," Akihito explained with deliberate emphasis as though speaking to a young child. Or a clueless billionaire.

"Funny," Asami said dryly, plucking it out of his hand.

They joined the stream of people heading for the ticket barriers. Akihito craned his neck, peering through the light crowd around them. Suoh wasn't hard to spot, ten paces diagonally behind at five o'clock, and he also spotted Sagano and Nakatani a little ways off. He thought he recognized identical black suits here and there too. "Really, how many guards are there?"

"Don't concern yourself."

Akihito frowned. "Being vague doesn't help, you know." He beeped through with his Suica card and waited as Asami followed through the barriers, easily feeding the ticket in as though he'd done it before. It still made Akihito stare a bit seeing Asami doing such ordinary things.

Asami's vagueness made Akihito wonder just how many were forming the so-called discreet perimeter. Which made Akihito think of the hitmen roaming the streets after him... He gnawed at his lip, suddenly rethinking his urge to ditch the tinted security of the limo. "Are you sure this is safe?" he couldn't help asking.

Asami glanced at him, one sharp look that saw through all the shadows. "You're with me, Akihito. How could anyone possibly get to you?"

Akihito couldn't help snorting at such overconfidence. Asami smirked.

"Alright, Mr Superhero Wannabe," Akihito said. "Or the Anti version of it. Don't get your knickers
They followed the stream of people onto the escalator heading down, Asami one step below and half turned back. It brought their heads rather close together as though in a bubble of their own, Akihito just a little higher. Akihito told himself that it was only for safety reasons that he let Asami stand so close. It wasn’t because he was enjoying this unfamiliar angle of looking down on that stunning face, no siree.

"Imagining me in my underwear now, are we?" Asami murmured. "What a dirty mind you have."

Akihito flushed. "Oh you wear knickers, do you? Is there something you want to tell me?"

"Only following your insinuations. Don’t tell me you secretly want to dress me in lingerie, Akihito?"

A blush bloomed across Akihito’s face. Then he couldn’t shake the absolutely crazy mental image and his complexion intensified to crimson, his feet all but forgotten and Asami had to guide him off the escalator.

"You perverted baka! Does nothing embarrass you?" Akihito wailed.

Asami manoeuvred the stunned young man ahead of him, guiding Akihito along to the platform.

"Oh I'm sure I will be if you ever try to follow through with that imagery you’re entertaining."

"Like hell I would! That’s – that’s insane!" Then, a second too late: "I'm not entertaining any imagery!"

Asami’s chuckle wrapped about him, warm and indulgent. "Your face says otherwise. But having promised you all the fap material you need, it seems I'll have to work diligently to erase that particular image."

Akihito stumbled. Asami righted him.

"Fap? You can't say fap!" Akihito hissed at him, wondering if Asami did these things on purpose just to see him all riled up.

Asami arched a brow. "Of all the things to object to, it's the vocabulary? Very well, Akihito. I'll take that as carte blanche as to the rest."

Akihito’s brain packed up. His cognitive wheels weren’t helped any either when the press of commuters squished them together and Asami’s arm slid tightly about his waist.

Akihito might have squeaked.

"Don't you always anyway?" was all he could mutter as Asami scooped him onto the subway train, aware that he wasn’t protesting at all. He had to duck his head with bright cheeks as Asami’s laugh bounced and warmed through his chest.

VVVV

Akihito led them to a tiny old teishoku [set meal] restaurant a few quiet turns off the main shopping street, the building decades old and all of five paces wide. It was the kind of place only advertised through word of mouth, where they prepared only sixteen portions of the omakase menu of the old chef’s choosing for lunch and dinner. All you knew before turning up was that it was going to be totally yum. The place hadn't changed in decades, not the intricate noren [half-length doorway curtains] outside signalling they were open for business, nor the familiar creak in the wood as
Akihito slid the narrow door open.

There was no Tardis effect here, the restaurant was just as small inside as it looked from the outside. Apart from the stone floor, everything was made of old wood – the six tiny tables that looked more suited to seating one but with tiny stools on either side, the raised counter on the left where you could sit watching the chef working on the other side, the wall panelling with carved inlays. Hanging *noren* separated off the kitchen leading off to the back and around to the counter. The small place was rather crowded with all but two of the seats occupied with quietly contented diners.

"Akihito-chan!"

Akihito's hand was caught in a surprisingly tight grip by the little old lady who'd been hovering by the door.

"I almost didn't believe it when Jiichan said you were coming!"

Akihito grinned. "Hey, Mori-Baachan [grandma], you're looking well."

"And you've grown!" She reached up to pat his head and he obligingly leaned down, laughing.

"It's only been a few months and I'm pretty sure I've stopped growing by now."

"It's been six months at least. I told Jiichan I was sure you'd found a girlfriend."

"Uh... That's... There's no girlfriend." Though she wasn't wrong, actually. He'd stopped coming here around when he'd hooked up with Risa, she'd preferred more 'high class' places. This kind of unassuming, traditional restaurant was too quaint, too homely for her liking. And now here was Asami... Akihito glanced back, wondering why he hadn't even thought twice about bringing the man here. He'd somehow known that Asami wouldn't object, that he might even like it.

Baachan was all wide-eyed as she followed his gaze. "Who is this strapping young man?"

Akihito grinned. "Only young to you, Obaachan. I'm always telling him how old he is."

"You must be blind! He's a spring chicken."

Akihito erupted with laughter. "Doesn't the expression usually go, he's no spring chicken?"

Baachan swatted his arm. "Shame on you. If I was but a few years younger I'd be all over him."

"I heard that!" came a gruff old voice that was followed by its owner through the *noren* at the back, a wiry old man about the same height as Akihito wearing an apron.

"Just keeping you on your toes, my dear," Baachan winked. Jiichan shook his head but anyone could see the fondness between the two.

"Hey, Ojii-chan!"

"We missed you lad," Jiichan said with a clap on the shoulder.

"You too. I didn't mean to stay away so long. And thanks for squeezing us in. Uh, this is –" Akihito cleared his throat. He still found it awkward introducing the bastard, especially considering the last time he'd said the name... Flustered, he tore his eyes from Asami's intense gaze. "This is Asami Ryuichi."

Asami was the picture of calm civility as he bowed – *Asami, bowing!* Akihito blinked in shock – to
"It's a pleasure to meet you," Asami said politely, any hint of menace toned down to the point that he could've passed for any ordinary – if totally gorgeous – businessman.

"Oh my!" Baachan grinned. "You too, young man. Any friend of Akihito-chan is welcome here. Just call us Jiichan and Baachan."

"Alright, alright, give them some breathing space," Jiichan said as he drew Baachan back into the kitchen. "You've got your usual table," he told Akihito. "Sorry it's a bit cramped."

"Nah, it's perfect. Thanks!"

Akihito's usual table was a rickety thing tucked away in the back, but he knew just how to angle it so it balanced out on the stone floor. Asami tucked himself onto the small stool without fuss, leaning against the wall. He appeared relaxed.

"This ok?" Akihito checked, just in case.

Asami made an approving noise.

Akihito glanced at the door. "What about your men?"

"They can cover the outside. No one in here is a threat."

"No – Uh, Yeah, I didn't think of that. I was talking more about everyone's dinner. I wasn't really thinking of them when I thought to come here." Akihito frowned guiltily.

Something flickered across Asami's face at that. "They're on the clock, they'll be fine," he reassured. He nodded at Baasan who appeared behind the counter, chatting with one of the diners. "You seem fond of them."

Akihito grinned. "Yeah. I've known them since I was 15, met them soon after I moved to Tokyo for school. I was staying in a hostel when I first arrived and ugh, let's just say my neighbours were very passionate and frequent with their fights and making up." Asami threw him an amused look but Akihito just rolled his eyes. "I needed somewhere to hide away whenever they kicked off and that's when I came across this place down the road. Ojiichan and Obaachan used to let me stay here for hours, even when they were closed. I got to know them pretty well. They're like my surrogate grandparents." He dropped his voice conspiratorially. "I used to hijack the WiFi of the manga café next door."

"Such a lawbreaker, Akihito," Asami teased.

Akihito scoffed. "Says the guy who – who..." He stalled, his gaze suddenly lost.

Actually Akihito knew fuck all about Asami. Not about his first law-breaking, his first kill, how he'd risen to such power. Was he born the way he was or had something booted him down this path? How had he come to be the formidable man that he was? Akihito didn't even know about his family – or his older sister. Akihito was burning with questions, but what might be a harmless natter about families and careers with anyone else felt like a massive tumble over the cliff of no return when it came to such an enigmatic man like Asami. One small step for Akihito, one giant leap for their relationship into Personal (But isn't it already?) and Real (You still think this is a dream, Aki?) and possibly even Official (God forbid...).

Asami calmly held his conflicted gaze, not shutting him down, leaving the ball in Akihito's court as
though untroubled that he might entangle them in this Gordian knot.

Akihito hurriedly muttered his thanks as Baachan started bringing dishes over. Rice and miso soup, a mouth-watering array of meat and fish and vegetable dishes flavoured with dashi and soy and mirin and sesame. The rest of the meal mostly passed quietly, Akihito being too caught up in the comfort of food that tasted like home and the swirling chaos of his thoughts to carry conversation. He didn't see Baachan and Jiichan exchange knowing glances as they watched from behind the counter, seeing far beyond their usual habit of keeping an eye on their guests' appetites.

Akihito didn't even blink as Asami passed several plates over for him to mop up. Asami still ate more than Akihito had ever seen him eat, whether out of politeness to the old couple or because he was enjoying the food. Perhaps it was a bit of both. But of course it was only right that Akihito ribbed him about it.

"You shouldn't worry, it's perfectly natural for appetites to decrease with age."

He could just see Asami biting back an inappropriately suggestive remark about appetites because the bastard was being true to his word and actually behaving himself for once. So Akihito might have been the one to extract that promise, but it wasn't like the bastard ever played fair either. Akihito wouldn't be Akihito if he didn't seize such a rare opportunity and goad Asami just a bit.

"You know, I don't even know how you got to be so big eating so little."

Akihito's face was picture-perfect innocence as the gleam in Asami's gaze promised wicked revenge.

Remarkably, the harmless manner about the crime lord remained even as they left, Asami thanking the couple for a delicious meal, smiling softly.

Akihito raised a brow, wondering what had happened to the bastard he knew. Then Baachan embraced Asami and Akihito's second eyebrow leaped up to join the first. His confusion intensified further as Baachan then caught Akihito in a tight hug, whispering, "I'm happy for you."

"Uh...?"

Jiichan clapped him on the back as usual. "Come again soon. Both of you."

Akihito cleared his throat. "Uh, sure. Yeah. I'll be back again soon. Take care!"

The crisp night air blew away whatever weird spell had snagged him. Akihito swung out into the street lit with small shops and lanterns outside other restaurants, the distant sound of traffic punctuated by the occasional boisterous calls of drunk businessmen and party goers. He took a great big breath, looking up at the clear sky. "Man, I'm stuffed!"

"It was a good meal," Asami said as he strolled along with more decorum, lighting up a cigarette.

Akihito slowed his pace, looking askance at him. "Alright, who are you and what've you done with Asami?"

Asami cast him a questioning look.

"You're being... nice. Like, polite. And civil. You even have your own lighter like a normal person."

Asami smirked, golden eyes flashing. And with that one look the darkness gathered and the air about him crackled. "If you tell anyone, I'd have to kill you."
A mere week or two ago Akihito might have worried. Now he just rolled his eyes. "Aaand there's the mean old scumbag I know."

A passing group of girls looked at him wide-eyed as they passed.

Asami just walked quietly, his lips curved upwards at the corners as he puffed out a long cloud of smoke. "Thank you for the date, Akihito."

Akihito gaped. "That wasn't a date!"

"You took me out for dinner."

"That's just two guys having dinner!"

"You paid."

"That – that's only 'cos you've been paying for all my food recently!"

"I see, so it's one date per meal, is it? I must have Kirishima check the number of meals we've had to make sure I'm not short changed."

Akihito flushed. "What the hell are you assuming all by yourself? That's not what I said!"

"Well, however many it may be, I look forward to all our dates to come." Having had to hold back during the meal, Asami showed no restraint now with the double entendres. "Let me know what you want me to bring to the table. Hard wooden spoon? Crème fraîche? Banana in the fruit salad? Meat on the bone? Shall I squeeze your hot dog? Core your apple? Donut wear pants? Pretzel between the sheets –"

"Argh! Asami, stop! For the love of god!" Akihito whined as his face heated up even more. "You're impossible! And stop with that goddamned voice!"

"Hmm? What voice would that be, Akihito?" Asami purred, deep and rough and vibrating all the way to Akihito's toes.

Far more flustered at the thought of the aforementioned meat on the bone than Akihito would ever admit, he had to consciously force his legs to start moving again, having stalled at some point without him noticing. He stomped his way back to the subway station. "I knew I was going to regret this! Fine, if you're gonna be such a perverted ass, I'll just go off on my own next time."

Asami merely chuckled as he followed along, keeping track of Suoh and the other bodyguards moving in sync amidst the shadows and scatter of other people.

But no sooner had they arrived back at the condo and Kirishima met them outside than Akihito was reminded why he couldn't go scurrying off on his own just yet.

Asami abruptly hauled him against his side, his arm heavy across Akihito's shoulder. Suoh, Kirishima, Sagano and Nakatani surrounded them in an instant, forming a protective shield.

"What are you..." Akihito's words faded at the scuffle that erupted not ten metres behind them. Between the gaps he saw two men dropping to the concrete, no contest against the cluster of black suits that swarmed around them. One was groaning, the other motionless. A flash of a gun with a silencer caught his eye before Asami's bodyguards blocked his view, one of them crouching to go through pockets.
He wordlessly rushed over with a picture. Of Akihito. Akihito could only cling to Asami’s suit as Asami coolly handed it to Kirishima.

"Sagano, see to it that our guests enjoy our hospitality to the fullest." Ice cold, a portent of death, it was a voice Asami never directed at Akihito. "Have them ready for my visit later."

The guard bowed sharply and led off a group of men with the ‘guests' in tow.

"Shall I cancel the session, sir?" Suoh asked.

"No, there are enough men."

"I'll redistribute," Suoh nodded as he spoke into his sleeve mike. He followed, guarding the rear as Asami steered Akihito through the doors of the luxury condominium.

"Who were they?"

The shaky voice made Asami glance at the blond before replying. "Don't concern yourself. They're of no threat."

Akihito was silent as they waited for the elevator. He glanced back once more, peering between the protective circle of Kirishima, Suoh and more guards before the elevator doors parted.

"They're really after me, aren't they?" he said softly.

"Not for much longer. And even so, I'll keep you safe."

They stepped into the elevator with three other guards. Akihito pursed his lips, slumping against the polished mirror. To be after Akihito was one thing, but to have tracked him down here to Asami’s place...

"What if you use me as bait?"

Golden eyes shot across to him. Akihito had his arms wrapped about himself but his eyes were clear and steady despite being obviously shaken. Determined, even.

A crease lined Asami's brow. "There's no need for such foolishness."

"It's not foolish! If it means rooting out the remaining hitmen –"

"They'll only be replaced with more. They're only the symptoms. Unless we root out the cause, they'll keep on coming."

"But it's me they're after and I'm not doing anything! I'm just hiding out with you and your men's lives are at risk because of it! You can't expect me to be ok with that!"

He didn't see the others glance at him, taken aback.

"Is it worth getting killed for absolutely no reason?" Asami snapped, his deliberate harshness as effective as a slap in the face. He continued when he had Akihito's complete attention. "Impatience kills faster than curiosity, Akihito. Exercise control, when you should wait. Decisiveness, when you should act. It's how to survive in this world that you've thrown yourself into."

Akihito was shrinking from Asami's ferocious gaze while simultaneously seeking safe haven in their molten depths. He tried to laugh, but all he managed was a nerve-wracking, hollow sound. "I'm doomed to an early grave then, aren't I? Spontaneous abandon's more my kind of style."
There was a pause before Asami unexpectedly huffed at that, almost a laugh, the hard edge about
him easing. "Of course it is. Flying by the seat of your pants. A haphazard, careening rollercoaster
through life. How could I have possibly forgotten?" He sighed, sliding a hand over Akihito's jaw and
curling around the neck, his thumb brushing over Akihito's cheek still tainted by the shadow of fear.

Under Asami's heavy demeanour there was that hint of forbearance that made Akihito stare wide
eyed and made his pulse trip, that made him think that maybe this hard, uncompromising man
understood him after all.

"Come with me."

"Whoa...!"

A few floors down from Asami's penthouse was a dojo. A dojo. Akihito had the jarring sense of
being warped hundreds of years back into Shogunate Japan.

Maybe the size of eight badminton courts, it was hard to put a context to the space. Most of the floor
was covered with tatami mats, bordered with a metre-wide path of polished hardwood. There was an
dynamic buzz in the air, sharp commands and shouts ringing out here and there as twenty or so men
 sparred in groups of twos to fours in areas demarked with subtle arrangements of the tatami mats.
Half of one side wall was a veritable armoury, and it must have been the most organized one on the
planet with how meticulously everything was arranged into rows – sticks of every length and
thickness and some with blades on one or both ends and some linked by short chains, swords of
more shapes and sizes than he'd ever seen, daggers, nunchucks, spears, scythes, sais and... Akihito's
general knowledge run out after that for the range of stuff he was seeing. The supporting beams and
raised ceiling were dark ancient hardwood, shoji screens covered windows or alcoves, two old
scrolls of calligraphy dominated the forward wall. But by far the most stunning of all were the metre-
high, solid wooden ranma running all around the periphery walls below the ceiling – breathtaking
relief carvings of pine trees and cherry trees, mountains and cranes and even what looked like eagles
and phoentixes.

It was like something straight out of the Tokugawa period. Or – "Shit, Morpheus, you loaded a
Matrix training program, didn't you?" Akihito blurted out. "Cos who the hell else trains in suits?"

That was when Akihito realized that everyone was staring at him. Everyone. They were all standing
to attention like someone had given a command that Akihito had missed because he was too busy
gawking around the place. Had he just committed some major dojo faux pas? Great going, Aki...

But Asami merely smirked, squeezing the slender shoulder as he stepped around. Everyone seemed
to relax a bit at that.

Slipping out of his shoes in the conspicuous centre space that had been left in the neat rows of
polished shoes in the genkan, Asami stepped up onto the dojo floor and started about the perimeter.
His barely-there nod had Suoh barking a command that broke the trance, all the men bowing to the
top boss before bowing to each other and resuming their bouts.

Akihito toed off his shoes and followed. Seeing so much combat might have been a trigger for his
fluctuating trauma except the sight of so many men in black bodyguard suits trying to punch the
living daylights out of each other really did make him think Neo and Mr Smith were gonna come
crashing through the wall covered in plaster dust any second. Akihito felt safer just being with Asami
too, subconsciously or not.

"Ok, this is kinda awesome," Akihito admitted quietly behind Asami. "But what's with the suits?
Aren't they restrictive?"

"Precisely why we train this way," Asami explained, watching his men like a hawk. "Theirs are designed to allow for movement but there are still some restrictions compared to traditional gi. They need to be familiar moving in suits so as not to be hindered in real life combat."

"That makes sense." Akihito could sense the energy in the air, the men thriving on the challenge and physical exertion. "They're really going for it, huh?"

"They're all capable practitioners in their various martial disciplines. They can hone their skills here, experience different fighting styles, stay sharp."

Asami paused beside two men sparring. The shorter one feinted high, ducked under his partner's guard and delivered two sharp blows to the ribs before darting back out of reach. Akihito was impressed until the guy glanced at Asami, which was when the taller guy swept his leg out from underneath and they ended up grappling on the floor. Asami moved on without comment. Akihito wondered at this until he heard Suoh giving the distracted guy a tongue lashing behind them. Blond Tank was the Chief of Security so maybe this was his domain, even if they were all ultimately Asami's men. No doubt Asami would step in if he deemed anything unacceptable but it was more like he trusted Suoh's abilities.

Akihito parked himself on a bench and out of the way as Asami carried on.

Rather than the training, as impressive as it was, Akihito found himself watching the power dynamics between Asami and his men. Heightened tension followed Asami as clearly as ripples on a lake, but he was somewhat removed from their direct training. He made no comment, merely pausing and drifting as he pleased, but the awe that his men held him in was obvious. Blond Tank and Glasses were also intriguing. At first glance they seemed to be functioning independently, but in amongst directing the bouts and changing of sparring partners, they were also constantly keyed in on Asami's every signal. Whenever his expression tightened or his gaze hardened at certain bodyguards, they were there, mostly Suoh but Kirishima as well, picking up on the silent directions and instructing the men.

But it wasn't just the physical training, Akihito realized. The more he was around Asami, the more differences he saw in how Asami treated Suoh and Kirishima compared to the rest of the men, the different onion layers of his inner circle. Akihito didn't know if any of the other men were held in the same confidence but it was a whole different level of trust, or loyalty, or reliance or whatever it was. There were at least two men in the room who would kill and die for Asami and take their secrets to the grave.

Not only that, but Akihito was sensible enough to recognize the enormity of Asami letting him see all of this, the inner workings of his security force. How the fuck had Akihito landed in this perplexing position where he seemed to be included in that inner onion layer?

As he was drowning under the weight of such thoughts, Akihito spotted the guard he got into trouble when he'd fled Asami's condo before. Flooded with relief to see the guy alive, Akihito skirted slowly around the dojo, inching closer until the bout finished, hovering next to Blond Tank.

The big guy glanced down at him.

"Can I talk to him? Just for a sec?"

Suoh gave him a curt nod before catching the guard's eye and summoning him over with a jerk of the chin. "Takebuchi, step out," he ordered, a commanding voice without needing volume. Akihito
hadn't heard this tone from Blond Tank before, having always been tempered down around Asami. "He's all yours," he said more gently to Akihito.

Akihito blinked, suddenly feeling a great weight to his simple request as though it carried authority. "Uh... Thanks. Sorry. I won't be long." Feeling supremely awkward, he headed out to the nearest wall with the guard following.

Akihito was even more uncomfortable when the guard bowed to him, forty-five degrees from the waist, back ram-rod straight, head tucked down. Total respect.

"You don't have to do that," Akihito flapped his hands. "I just wanted to apologize. I think I landed you in a load of shit when I ran off before, and, well, I just hope you're ok."

The guard looked totally taken aback, eyes going wide, his jaw dropping. Then he dropped into an even deeper bow. "I am grateful for the concern, Takaba-sama, but please be assured no apologies are necessary."

It was Akihito's turn to gape. What the hell was with all the bowing and the super-polite language? He glanced across the dojo – to find Asami watching with unmistakable amusement. What the hell was the bastard playing at? Akihito stammered some reply and let the alarmed bodyguard return to his training.

Akihito was just wondering if he should hound Asami about it here or wait until later, when things shifted. All the men moved to form a perimeter about one sparring area in the middle of the dojo and sat formerly in *seiza* [respectful kneeled position].

Suoh stepped into the middle. He faced off three opponents. There was no suspenseful build-up, they simply bowed and engaged. Akihito hunkered down behind someone to watch.

The three were perfectly capable fighters in their own right and coordinated well to attack together, becoming one entity with six arms and legs. Or so it seemed to Akihito. But Suoh was in a league of his own. He parried nearly all punches and kicks, sidestepping and glancing off with blocks as he closed in to counter in pretty much the same breath, seemingly taking a few strategic hits to force an opening and take them down, one at a time, where they rolled off and cleared the floor, bowing before retaking their seat at the perimeter. Then another three men rose and engaged, and were likewise dealt with quickly. They kept on until Suoh bowed off two minutes later, inhaling one big breath to return to his usual stoic calm, barely breaking sweat.

Kirishima was next. Even to Akihito's untrained eye he had an entirely different style of fighting. He spent longer parrying and deflecting attacks, but when he countered it was with frightening – and perplexing – efficiency. Utilizing opportunities that Akihito couldn't even see, in a blink Kirishima would rush in close to his opponent, then seemingly just *squeeze* the shoulder or the arm or somewhere, and the guy would crumble as though his body was suddenly as useful as fish on dry land. Each would roll away and bow out, then shake or rub out whatever body part had been subjected to this mysterious touch as though the effect lingered. It was when Kirishima performed the technique on an arm, blocking a punch and sliding his hand up to the elbow to press just inside the bone and making the guy fold in half, that Akihito realized that he was going for pressure points. Fricking hell, Asami hadn't been joking when he'd said that Kirishima was dangerous, armed or not. He took a little longer than Blond Tank to dispatch each group of three men but he still made it look easy. Two minutes passed and Kirishima cleared the area.

Then Asami stepped forward and Akihito stopped breathing. The men remained sitting perfectly still but there was a tangible buzz in the air.
The men were wary when they took their turns stepping forward. Akihito could see it, even as they braced and threw themselves in their coordinated threes with everything they had at their top boss. Lightning fast, Asami's blows and parries were almost too fast to see, countering and taking the men down one after another. It looked brutal, the blocks and counterattacks solid enough to jolt the opponents, the rapid flip over the hip or the shoulder, the slam to the tatami floor. But to a man they all rolled away, clearing the floor, returning to their seats without looking too much the worse for wear.

Asami was hot. Akihito was experiencing a transformative moment of some description as he sat there gaping at Asami, in his three-piece suit, taking down a volley of his men with staggering discipline of strength and technique.

Akihito's heart was thumping just watching the lethal effectiveness of that man. Was he gay after all? But he hadn't reacted like this watching anyone else. He could appreciate Suoh's incredible strength or Kirishima's deceptively effective skill, the varied martial styles of all the men, but he didn't find them hot. Asami, on the other hand... Asami was breathtaking in his element.

But gay or bi, guys or girls, did he even care about labels? Akihito reacted to Asami. End of. His body inappropriately directing blood southwards was a clear indication that he was into Asami as far as his dick was concerned. Maybe that's all that mattered. Not that his brain could help suss it out, having unhelpfully traipsed off into la-la land with its singular vocabulary of Phwooaarr.

Maybe Asami was just so fucking hot he transcended gender.

Akihito snorted at himself.

He was still dealing with his elevated body temperature as the men dispersed back to their sparring groups with renewed vigour. Asami found him back on the bench, throwing him a knowing smirk as Akihito carefully avoided his gaze.

Asami sat deliberately too close, shoulder to shoulder, knee to knee. "Seems you enjoyed the show."

Akihito's battle with his rising heat was lost at Asami's pointed glance at his crotch. "Oh, shut up," he mumbled, pulling a knee up to hide the bulge. He didn't even try to pull Asami's leg about someone else setting him off, not wanting to send any heads rolling. "Is this normal? All the training, I mean!" he added as Asami's eyes glinted with wicked zeal.

"Several times a week. The sessions vary depending on duty rotas and other schedules."

"Do you do mock battles too?" Akihito suddenly perked up. "Hey, do you use paint ball guns? I bet you'd kick ass at paint ball!"

The men nearby carried on training despite his outburst.

"We run combat simulations but we have other venues set up especially for that," Asami told him.

"Like movie sets? Cool. Paint ball or laser?"

Asami cast him a flat look as though to say that Akihito was missing the seriousness of the training. "No paint ball."

Akihito laughed easily, drawing startled looks from several men waiting to commence their bouts. "Yeah, you're right. Those things hurt like a bitch, I can see why you'd want to steer clear."

"Yes, because that's why we don't use paint ball," Asami deadpanned.
"You said it, you big wuss," Akihito grinned. "Though I don't know. I'm sure some splashes of colour here and there would brighten up the whole doom and gloom moodiness about you."

A couple of men coughed, though it sounded suspiciously like spluttering.

Akihito would have been perfectly happy to carry on if Asami hadn't leaned right in, his lips against Akihito's ear, his words whisper soft.

"Don't mention that I carry a sidearm." Smirking at Akihito's startled face, Asami turned to watch the sparring nearby.

What the hell? So not all these men knew about it? Akihito had been right about there being different onion layers of trust going on in the ranks. Though surely they must suspect something by now, sparring the way they did and contact being inevitable? Maybe it was a plausible deniability thing.

They remained side by side on the bench watching for a while. Akihito could feel the tension rolling off the men nearby being under the boss' close scrutiny. He felt unease tugging at his conscience again, seeing them training so hard when he himself couldn't even save himself from a mugger...

"Can you teach me?"

Asami's gaze shot across at his quiet question.

"Or, I mean, can someone? If I could defend myself, even a bit..." Akihito trailed off under the weight of Asami's undivided attention, shifting self consciously. He rubbed at his neck, huffing at himself. "Yeah, you're right, I guess that was pretty daft..."

"Think you can get in one hit?" Asami challenged.

"Huh? Wha– huh?!!"

Asami dragged a startled Akihito to a vacant area by the forward wall and started showing him stances and guard positions. Which was all well and good except –

"How is this about defending myself?" Akihito demanded in an undertone as Asami's hand slid down his inner thigh to shift his leg, physically moving him into a stance with one leg in front of the other.

"Grounding and solid stance work is critical to a good defence," Asami instructed calmly.

"Can't you just show me rather than... showing me!" Akihito's voice tripped up an octave as Asami's large hands braced his abdomen and ass.

"Keep your weight on your back leg, back straight, tuck your ass in." Asami physically rotated Akihito's pelvis under, the hand at the front slipping low enough to brush against the subtle hump in Akihito's jeans.

"You can't be this hands-on with everyone?!"

"Of course not," Asami remarked, his mouth entirely too close and warm against Akihito's pink ears. "I reserve this instruction method solely for the most unmanageable of brats."

"You perverted baka!" Akihito hissed quietly. But not quietly enough. Those closest heard it, as well as Asami's chuckle. Akihito had no idea the amount of furtive glances exchanged behind them.

"Keep your hands fisted, protect your fingers." Asami grabbed Akihito's hands, each of his large
hands engulfing Akihito's as he curled them into fists. Akihito felt his face warm up as their eyes met. "Thumbs on the outside, or you'll break them when you make contact. Keep your guard up." Asami brought the fists slightly forward of his face.

Asami was endlessly patient as he led Akihito through some basic blocks, circling the blocking hand into a counter strike, elbowing if he found his opponent too close, pointing out vulnerable targets like the eyes and throat and groin, building up to using those techniques while stepping around in his stance and watching his opponent's guard and attacks.

It was overwhelming. Not just from the novelty of such movements or even from Asami's extremely physical teaching method, but because of this bewilderingly indulgent, patient, non-judgemental side that this supposedly merciless crime lord kept showing him.

The men were likewise startled when their dark and foreboding boss started mock-sparring with the young man. Lightly teasing, tapping the occasional 'hit' with a finger but so light and few and far between that it couldn't even be called pulling his punches. Giving pointers here and there ("Don't overreach. You'll throw yourself off balance," and, repeatedly, "Keep your guard up"), even praising when Akihito finally spotted a deliberate opening left for the third time and jabbed him the stomach, though that soon descended into what was a lot less wrestling and a lot more groping.

Which was followed by that carefree laughter and provocative swearing, accompanied by a low responding chuckle. Some of the men were so thoroughly distracted by this light-hearted side to their ruthless boss that they would have been slaughtered in their bouts – if their opponent hadn't likewise been gobsmacked.

Akihito knew well enough that Asami was only messing with him, deliberately provoking him to draw him out of his gloomy rut. But he couldn't deny it felt good to let the stress out, to be able to throw himself into the physical exertion knowing he couldn't hurt Asami, even if Asami did seem to be increasingly caressing and copping a feel than pretend hitting...

"Guard up," Asami told him for the hundredth time.

"Urgh..." Tired, though in a good way, Akihito swung a sloppy fist. He found himself not only deflected but in a blur he was grabbed, pivoted over Asami's hip, his legs flipped out from under him, heart in his throat –

But the expected smack down never came. Asami dropped with him and somehow what followed was one second of careful descent that had Akihito flat out on the floor with barely a bump.

Laughter bubbled up Akihito's chest as he lay there. "Awesome." He threw an arm over his eyes, the motion hitching up his tee and exposing skin.

Asami's eyes darkened. "Clear the room."

No louder than Asami's usual voice, but nevertheless it resonated, the command carrying to every corner. Akihito sat up blinking, a little bit awed as, to a man, Asami's men all bowed and marched for the doorway without question or hesitation, with Suoh and Kirishima directing the organized exodus.

"I must frustrate the hell out of you, huh? Never doing a single thing you want me to."

"We wouldn't be here if I wanted you any different, Akihito."

That tone indicated Asami meant a hell of a lot more than just physically being in the dojo. Partly skirting such a touchy issue, partly because the look in Asami's eyes was making him tingly all over
which was definitely cause to scarper, Akihito played dumb.

"Right... But uh, well, just this once, I'll make an exception," Akihito announced magnanimously as he made to stand. "I'll leave you to it."

But Asami loomed over him and backed him to the floor again, bracing himself over Akihito on one knee and the opposite hand. Even before the last of the guards had left, Asami tipped up his chin up and slanted their lips together.

"Mmph!" Akihito tried to shove free but Asami pinned one of his wrists to the mat, bearing more of his weight down to make Akihito's other arm pushing against his chest ineffectual too. Akihito wrenched his face away. "You perverted baka, you can't do that here!"

Turning his head had brought the entrance way into view, and Akihito was faced with the mortifying sight of Glasses and Blond Tank bowing out, carefully not meeting his eyes as they closed the doors.

"Now that we're alone," Asami observed with ominous delight, trailing his nose along Akihito's cheek.

"It doesn't matter! Whatever you're thinking, it's neither the time nor the place!"

"And what is it that I'm thinking?"

"Don't play dumb!"

"You mean like you are?"

"I – well – that's only 'cos I was trying to save you the indignity of being turned down!"

"How generous of you, Akihito. Then why don't you save me my dignity this way – if you can get me undressed faster than I can strip you, then I'll consider myself turned down."

Akihito flushed bright. "That doesn't even make any sense! It's completely absurd! In every way!"

"Yes I suppose you're right, it's hardly fair when I'm wearing rather more than you are." Asami abruptly reared up on his knees and wrenched off his jacket. He threw it carelessly aside as Akihito made to yell at him, but then Akihito could only lie there in wide-eyed stupefaction as Asami unbuckled and slipped off his holster, complete with the blasted gun, and tossed them in the vicinity of his jacket.

"You just – you can't just –" Akihito was still gaping like a fish. He snapped his mouth closed.

"Wow, you really don't hide that from me, do you?"

The waistcoat followed its compatriots. Asami smirked. "I still have an inherent advantage so I'll give you a head start. You can start undressing me first."

"Wha –" Akihito started backing out from between Asami's knees. "I'm not undressing you, you're being ridiculous!"

"Very well then, seeing as you insist. An even playing field it is." Asami began pulling at Akihito's clothes.

"Waa – stop that!" Akihito grabbed at them too, trying to keep them on.

"Wrong set of clothes, Akihito. You'll never have a chance like that. Unless what you're really trying to tell me is that you want me to take all sorts of liberties with you?" Asami wrestled away Akihito's
belt as he licked a lewd line up the column of Akihito's neck, making him shiver deliciously all the way down his spine.

Mortified and aroused and infuriated and flustered – and did he mention aroused? – Akihito vented a frustrated yell as he retaliated by simply yanking on Asami's shirt as hard as he could, sending the buttons flying. But Asami didn't seem to mind at all. On the contrary he was chuckling against Akihito's chaotic pulse.

"This is so fucking ridiculous," Akihito declared. "You are so fucking ridiculous!"

Abandoning the shirt, 'cos let's face it, there was no way Akihito was going to be able to get those arms of steel out of them any time soon, he switched targets. They attacked each other's pants at the same time. Akihito was trying to wriggle himself away from Asami's grabby hands as he reached for Asami's belt and button and flies and it all just turned into one gropey wrestling match as they rolled all around and over each other on the floor. It didn't help that Asami kept sneaking in a lick here, a touch there, even slipping his tongue right into Akihito's mouth at one point and squeezing his ass, making Akihito gasp and stirring him up all the more, with irritation or fire, he hadn't a clue by this point.

Asami let him scramble away but grabbed a leg in the process, effectively spinning him around so they were upside down to each other. But Akihito could work with that. He threw a leg over Asami's chest, trying to pin the bastard down as he went for the suit trousers. Asami let him haul them off, even letting him escape halfway, before Asami dragged off his jeans and boxers away in one easy swipe, leaving Akihito only in his tee.

It was as Akihito was chasing the tight black boxers halfway down Asami's thighs that Asami went for the kill shot. He grabbed the trim waist, yanked Akihito's body over him, chest to chest but the wrong way, and sucked Akihito's cock into his mouth.

"Haahhnn...!"

Akihito gasped a full body shudder at the abrupt overload of wet heat. Only then, huffing a breath, clinging to Asami's hard lines which was the only thing he could grab onto, did he realize the position they were in. Not only was he straddling Asami's face but that giant erection was also right in his face.

"You planned this all along, you perverted bastard!" he gasped as Asami gave a long, hard suck all along the length of his suddenly very hard erection.

There was no reply because, well, d'uh. But Asami didn't force the issue. He just let himself stand proud out of his boxers and left the decision to Akihito. But Asami was working magic with the swirl of his tongue and the squeeze of his throat muscles and Akihito's lucidity was quickly becoming scrambled.

"Fucking ridiculous," Akihito grumbled as he finally relented, grabbed Asami's formidable erection and licked from base to tip.

It could have turned into an unspoken competition of who could make the other come first, had it not been for Akihito's discovery that it was the most distracting thing ever to give head while receiving it from the likes of Asami. There was just no contest. Akihito couldn't maintain any rhythm or technique, couldn't even think to start slow and stir his way up. Asami reduced his entire focus to the aching, tantalizing, too-gentle, too-hard wetness engulfing his dick with sweet ecstasy, and it was with every gasp and quiver and clasp and flex that Asami provoked in him that he sucked on Asami.
In no time at all he was cresting, pushing his hips helplessly deeper into Asami's mouth. But just as Akihito was tensing up ready to fill Asami's mouth, the luscious squeezing eased off. His groan of protest around Asami's erection hitched on a sharp inhale as Asami's tongue probed the narrow entrance at the tip of his cockhead. And all he could do was brace himself against the floor and Asami's legs, his mouth uselessly moaning around Asami's velvet hardness, his body quivering under Asami's wondering hands. Asami enveloped him in heaven and pierced him on an unfamiliar knife edge radiating from the tip of his cock, stirring him faster than pleasure alone would have done.

_I need to come!_

With his shaking fingers wrapped blindly around the hard thighs, Akihito's breathy whine and desperate sucking on Asami's erection were his wordless pleas. Asami responded, storming him through a blazing orgasm that had him bucking so much he choked himself on Asami's pulsing cock.

It was a small miracle that he hadn't bitten it clean off. Asami eased him sideways onto the floor, letting him flop. Shuddering on aftershocks, struggling to catch his breath, Akihito pulled his mouth free and peeled one eye open just to check. Yep, it was still there, the stunning obelisk all glistening and proud.

He closed his eyes, all jelly-limbed and floating on bliss as Asami gave several last lazy draws before releasing Akihito's softening length.

But as Asami leaned over him, sharing Akihito's taste on Asami's tongue and reaching between his legs, Akihito pushed him back.

"Wait, Asami..." There was a different kind of hesitation in Akihito's voice. Perhaps that was why Asami actually paused, studying his face, his hand rubbing along his leg instead.

A blush bloomed all the way up Akihito's face as he squirmed free and sat up. "Can I – can – can you..." His mouth worked several more moments before he sagged, too embarrassed to say any more.

Asami's eyes glinted with gleeful amusement as he propped himself up on an elbow. "Is it some new fetish you can't tell me about?"

"No! Nothing like that! Just... uh..."

Asami smirked as he likewise sat up. "Now, what could have you so embarrassed, Akihito? Perhaps this is something we should explore."

"No! No no no, god no, no exploring necessary!" Akihito pushed back as Asami crowded him.

"Then tell me. Or I'll find as many other ways to embarrass you as possible."

"Huh?! How's that fair?"

"I'm not going for fair, I'm going for answers. I'll get it out of you even if it's by making you far more embarrassed than you would have been just telling me in the first place. What would it take, I wonder? Shall I make you narrate everything I do to you, how my every touch makes you feel, how you harden and quiver –"

"Argh, you perverted bastard! Fine! All I was gonna say was – all I was – gonna say... Uh... Um..." After waiting another moment, Asami arched a brow. "We can always revisit the secret room –"
"I want you to come in my mouth!"

The blush spread all the way up Akihito's chest to his face in the resounding silence that followed his outburst. Then Asami was laughing and Akihito turned even redder.

"You asshole!" Akihito punched his chest. "You made me say it, don't fucking laugh!"

Asami hooked Akihito close with an arm looped about his neck, toppling the smaller man into his lap as he smothered further objections with an intrusive kiss. "I'll be sure to make it up to you by coming in your mouth or on your face or wherever you like," Asami purred wickedly.

"Y-you baka!" Akihito stuttered, trying to scramble free.

Asami didn't let him go far, only enough to get one leg over on the other side before hauling Akihito back in, straddling over his lap. "Shall I leave my shirt on or do you want me naked? And where do you want me? Right here? On my knees over you? Pinned down under you?"

"Argh! How can you just say things like that?!"

"I told you, Akihito. I'll give you whatever you need for all your wet dreams."

"Oh my god!" Akihito wailed, "why do you have to make everything a gazillion times more embarrassing than it has to be?! Actually don't bother answering that. It's 'cos you're a sadistic perverted... ruffian!"

"Ruffian now, am I?" Asami grinned.

Akihito glared from where he was straddled over Asami's lap, trying his damndest to ignore their cocks rubbing against each other. "I would've gone with rascal but you're way too old for that. Practically ancient."

"Really, Akihito? And yet you're the one who can't keep up and always telling me to stop."

Akihito's mouth flapped, gobsmacked. "You – you fucking bastard, you know why that is!" he yelled, punching the infuriatingly solid chest again. Asami totally deserved it.

"So we're back to fucking bastard. But you want me to come in your mouth so I can't fulfil that for you just yet –"

"Oh for fuck's sake, just shut up and lie down!" Akihito shoved at the broad shoulders that were shaking with silent laughter, feeling like he'd expire from embarrassment if Asami kept this up.

Asami obligingly let himself be toppled backwards as Akihito half slid off to the side, one lean leg still thrown over the muscley thighs. Asami lay there looking entirely too deliciously sinful in his open shirt with an arm thrown behind his head.

"What do you want, Akihito? How does this fantasy go?"

"For the last time, it's not a fantasy!" Akihito gritted out. "Just..." His cheeks glowed. "Touch yourself."

With a wicked smirk, Asami took himself in hand. Why the hell was Akihito still the one squirming and blushing like a virgin when Asami was the one stroking himself? Asami was... stroking... Akihito's blood plummeted into his own erection as Asami held his gaze without an ounce of shame, his dark smoulder making Akihito feel like he was the one being devoured whole.
Akihito swallowed hard. Fuck, a fuse must have blown somewhere in his circuitry. Or his brain had melted. Yep that must be it, just a pile of goo, the reason his fingers reached of their own accord and trailed over the ripcord contours, the washboard abs flexing subtly, the dip in the hips, the strong thighs. Akihito's hands were unsteady as he nudged the black boxers down those legs and Asami let him slide them off. Akihito palmed along Asami's arm and rested over the large hand steadily oscillating away.

After a moment Asami let go, only to grab Akihito's hand and then resumed fisting himself with it. With Akihito's hand. *Fuck...*

A funny breathy stutter came from the back of Akihito's throat. Nothing drove home their size difference than grabbing Asami with the same hand he used on himself at the same angle. Thicker and longer, harder even, it was nothing like fisting himself. But it wasn't just that. It was Asami showing him what he wanted, using Akihito's fingers to catch the sensitive ridge of the enlarged head, far rougher than Akihito ever was on himself.

Breathing hard, Akihito drank in the view that Asami was giving him. And all because he'd asked. Something tightened in his chest, a warm flurry in his gut.

Meeting the molten gold, he chewed his lip in a moment of hesitation, but then fuck it, he leaned over and licked off the precum beading at the tip. Asami gave a rough sigh, squeezing even harder over Akihito's hand and stroking faster, and Akihito felt emboldened enough to mouth at the swollen head. Fingers carded through his hair but without any pressure, just silent encouragement.

Then Asami let go. Akihito was already moving his hand by himself, his grip as hard as Asami had it. It could have been another level in their power game, it could have been Asami seeing how far Akihito would dare take it, but Akihito was left dumbfounded. Because there were no two ways about it, Asami was giving him control.

Asami propped himself up on an elbow, watching, waiting. With his breathing slightly laboured, smouldering Akihito with a blazing gaze that would have sent the Devil himself cowering back to hell, his obvious arousal washed away any awkwardness Akihito might have felt. Holding that ferocious gaze that burned straight to his own rock-hard arousal, Akihito widened his jaw to take Asami in further until his lips caught around the ridge of the large head and he swirled his tongue as he continued fisting along the shaft.

Akihito found himself mesmerized by the involuntary flicker of Asami's eyes, the near-growl catching in that strong neck, the flexing of the ripcord abs revealed between the parted shirt. Hot fucking *damn*. Was this why Asami insisted on swallowing him down, to watch Akihito's reactions? Though Akihito doubted he himself could be anywhere near as satisfying to watch. Asami was a walking wet dream descended from Mount Olympus itself. Or Mount Sion, Akihito mused as he bobbed his head and lapped his tongue around the sizeable cockhead and stroked hard, all while the incredible power of this incredible man thrummed in his grasp and golden eyes burned his soul.

"Harder, Akihito."

Akihito's breath shuddered through his nose at the rough demand. Shit, no wonder Asami always took him so hard! He complied, grasping tighter, bobbing and stroking higher and lower in tandem, tag-teaming between his lips and his hand as he doubled the friction against that ridge.

There was a rasp in Asami's breath that Akihito recognized, a sound usually lost against his neck. He didn't quite know what made him do it – a desire to draw this out longer, maybe, or make it more intense as it always seemed to get when Asami did this to him. He was sure there was a bit of revenge in there somewhere too for precisely that. But when he knew that Asami was close, Akihito
eased off.

He received a gleaming glare in return, a melting pot of challenge and lust and warning.

"Well, this is interesting," came Asami's soft murmur, and Akihito couldn't tell if it sounded more dangerous or amused.

But Asami hadn't taken the ball back from Akihito's court yet. So he ran with it, half from not knowing when he'd be in the driving seat again, half ensnared in Asami's spell. What was it the bastard was always saying? He gnawed at his lip, heat creeping up his cheeks, but threw caution to the wind and pitched his voice as commanding as he could – which wasn't much, but give him a break, he'd never done this before.

"Tell me what you want, Asami."

Dragon eyes zeroed in on him, astonished, scintillated, focusing like great telescopic lenses –

Courage fled. *Whoosh.* Leaving dust in the wake of its hasty departure and everything. Akihito folded, turning away, walls slamming up. "Oh my god, what the hell did I just –!"

Asami gathered him back in his arms with a look that could only be described as rapacious. "You never cease to amaze me, my dear Akihito."

"I didn't just say that! Forget I said... Oh fucking hell..."

Of course Asami wouldn't let it go, trapping the struggling man in his lap, overpowering him with words. "I want you to eat me up like you've never tasted anything better. I want your lips around me, your tongue tasting me, you're hands full of me. I want to soak you in my spend until my scent drips from your pores. I want you to beg me to stop and beg me for more and tell me everything you want from me. I want you bared to me, body and soul. I've told you before, Akihito. From you, I want everything."

Where was a meteorite to smite Akihito down when he needed one?

"You – you –" he stammered, his face beet-red. "You ridiculous bastard, does nothing embarrass you?"

Asami smirked. "And that. I want that."

Akihito gaped. "Me shouting abuse at you?"

"You. As you are."

Akihito died for the second time that day. He was plain gone, blindsided by this impossibly tender side to Asami that by all rights shouldn't have existed. Akihito couldn't even dismiss or deny or debunk it either, because while Asami's words might be demanding Akihito to bare his soul, it was Asami himself who was doing so in the process.

A hundred shades of crimson and Akihito was still getting redder. "You," he ground out firmly, riding on the vehemence of his mortification, "are too much." His rushed press of lips to Asami's stole any bite from his words.

An idea took hold and Akihito scrambled to his feet, but hesitated again as courage wavered in fits and bursts. He was sure Asami wouldn't put up with anything he didn't want to, but Akihito didn't really know where Asami's line lay. Especially if the line might fluctuate – 'cos arrogant bastard or
not, Asami could be a rather generous bastard when he chose to be. And this was clearly turning out to be one of those days.

But Asami was still waiting on whatever Akihito wanted, the mighty erection still shameless and eager, and something had to be done either way. So Akihito grabbed all the courage he could with a sharp inhale and grabbed his own navy cotton boxers where they had been flung away.

He stepped close and straddled the strong legs as he kneeled over Asami. Even if he was sure that his complexion rather resembled the levels of mortification from that morning, he kept an eye out for any sign of aversion as he slowly, carefully, brought his boxers up to Asami's mouth and pushed them in with two fingers. Intense voracity gleamed in the golden gaze as Asami parted his lips and accepted it, bowling Akihito over.

Akihito wasn't sure what he'd expected. Maybe for Asami to chuck it aside and claim enough was enough. After all, Akihito had been wearing his underpants all day, they must smell of him... It wasn't that Akihito was looking to push this particular boat out, to dominate or top or anything like that. But with Asami letting him have this extraordinary control, the urge to explore it took hold like a compulsion and wouldn't let go. Asami always tended to have this effect on him, awakening feelings in him that he didn't even know was possible.

But now that they were here, he found himself frozen without any idea what to do.

With an arched brow of imperious amusement, Asami ate at the trembling fingers and took more of the cotton into his own mouth.

"Fuck...!"

Akihito wasn't conscious of his gasped profanity but it sure as hell couldn't be Asami seeing as he had Akihito's underpants wedged between his teeth.

"You're fucking ridiculous..." Soft with amazement, it sounded more like he was saying You're fucking incredible. He couldn't help but kiss the corner of Asami's mouth, landing on lips and cotton, and Akihito groaned. Asami's gaze was burning almost too hot to meet, it melted his insides to instant mush.

While he still had some modicum of rationality left, Akihito slid aside so he could lean over and kiss his way down the strong column of Asami's neck and down the broad chest, swelling himself at the soft breath of pleasure that he incited. He worked his mouth down the bumps of the stomach that would have been perfect as that pin-up they'd joked about, and then he was at Asami's length and he grabbed it and eagerly sucked it back in his mouth.

It was even fuller than before, if that was possible, engorged until the velvet skin was stretched so much it looked painful. The flex of the abs and all those ridiculously defined muscles were a sight to behold as Akihito shifted his hand and swirled his tongue, the taste of pre-cum stronger now as he hollowed his cheeks and sucked. His moan was more vibration than sound, and it was answered by the strained rush of breath from above. Casting his eyes up overloaded Akihito's brain – his navy boxers dangled from between tight lips, golden eyes blazing like suns in a flushed face. Asami, ever glacially composed Asami, was flushed. The sculptured cheeks tinted pink, a light sheen all over.

Such a domineering bastard, and yet the control he gave Akihito... Not just this, it was one thing after another. No one else had ever done so much for him, demonstrated so much trust, given him so much of themselves. Akihito's eyes were moist and it had nothing to do with the monster dick poking at his throat. He wondered if Asami could see that as long fingers came to settle in his hair and their eyes met with something that was distinctly warm even amidst all the heat.
Akihito didn't let up this time, pulling hard along the thick shaft, catching his lip against the ridge of
the impressive erection, sucking as deep as he could.

Asami's fingers tightened in the blond hair, pressing further, faster. One, two, threefouriiiiive – that
was the only warning before Asami's eyes slid shut, his brow creasing and his mouth parting on a
shaky exhale, his abs pulled rigid, his hand heavy as he held Akihito's head still and shot into
Akihito's mouth. Rich and intoxicating, more potent than any aphrodisiac, more heady than Pocky
which was just about the biggest deal ever in Akihito's books but holy flaming monkeys, Akihito
was this close to coming himself as he watched Asami lost in that stunning moment of ecstasy.
Akihito swallowed, there was just too much cum not to, but that motion only seemed to release
another gush of Asami's rich taste and Akihito couldn't help moaning against the tightening in his
own groin.

Akihito made sure Asami was finished and sucked carefully off from root to tip before sitting back,
his face flushed and breathing hard. "Holy cow!" he gasped. He was never going to forget that
image for as long as he lived.

But there was no chance to get his breath back. Asami fell back to the floor, throwing the boxers
aside, hauling Akihito down over him for a hard kiss that became even harder at the taste of himself
on Akihito's tongue.

Eyes blazed like hellfire. "I grant you the gift of my cum and you liken it to a sacred bovine?"

Akihito trembled inside. Who wouldn't, in the face of such blatant, ferocious hunger? But never one
to cower, he threw back an impish grin. "Would you have preferred sacred excrement?"

If he wasn't mistaken, Asami only looked all the more amused as he attacked Akihito's lips again
with a rumble in his chest.

Akihito was rather more shaken than he let on. Because he understood more now, the enormity of a
man like Asami giving him those precious moments of control. And moreover, he was only
beginning to realize, that's how it always was with Asami. Control was always to be given. Asami,
giving him control. Akihito, giving Asami control – even if he had to be manhandled into giving it.
But Asami never just took it.

Hot hands ran up his chest, pushing up his tee and dragging it off.

Perhaps Akihito had been foolish in Asami's office the day before, trying to needle Asami into losing
control. It was with a bewildered gasp into Asami's mouth that Akihito suddenly recognized that, not
only had he been naïve, but it wasn't at all what he wanted. Rough and hungry, sure. That made for
awesome sex. But Akihito revelled in this part of Asami that could read him like a book, even stir
and tease him to insanity, make him unravel far more completely than anyone else had ever come
close to and always, always, bring him back together.

He thrilled in Asami's dominance.

He'd questioned it before. He'd wondered. But he'd never known. It dawning on him now with earth-
shattering force, leaving him shaken and unsure.

He wanted to run. Run for the hills, flee Asami's grasp, away from the very person who'd flipped his
life on its head and left him uncertain of his own sense of identity.

But there was another option. The dichotomy that Asami always invoked in him, the polar urges to
run from and run to. The very cause of his insecurities could also be the key to pulling him back
It took him long moments to realize he was staring into Asami’s eyes, the piercing gaze searching his. He instinctively ducked away, twisting, turning, pulling away with enough resistance that Asami let him go.

He stumbled to his feet, backing away a couple of steps, his breathing unsteady. Asami remained sitting there with an arm cast over his bent knee, his piercing gaze searching the maelstrom of emotions flashing across Akihito’s face. Asami, by contrast, was the picture of calm. The eye of the storm.

_I need this_, Akihito thought. _Don't you dare let me down, Asami. Not now._

It was a stupid demand when he couldn't even put it into words. But he was too choked up to speak. Hinging everything on his silent prayer, Akihito turned and ran.

Such stunned confusion, the disorientation – the brat didn't even have any inkling how easily Asami could read it all. The wide eyes that flickered, searching Asami's gaze, the faint tremble of his parted lips, the tight cheeks flushed on the surface but pale underneath. A crucial difference, not the bone-deep glow of arousal.

Clearly Akihito had just come to some seismic realization. The way Akihito was looking at him, Asami would have guessed it was what Asami had known all along, the effect they had on each other, each the answer to the other's fierce instincts. Either that, or Akihito was second-guessing his decision to destroy the damning footage that could have destroyed Asami. It was too late for that though.

It still amazed Asami how oblivious the brat could be when it came to himself. Put him with anyone else and Akihito could have them spilling their life story in no time with his disarming cheek and bright deposition. But he was blind as a bat when it came to himself and how far down the rabbit hole he'd already fallen.

Asami had to fight the smirk trying to curl across his lips at those hazel eyes shining like beacons. Such desperate hope. Even knowing full well the darkness lurking within, Akihito not only needed him, but wanted him.

Asami knew what would happen before it happened. The tensing of slender muscles, the fractional bracing of the feet. But he waited, unable to help himself from basking in that incredible need pouring out to him from this vibrant spark, feeding his dark emptiness. To think that a man like Takaba Akihito would look upon Asami like this... He'd seen the same question mirrored in Akihito, the wonder that those hazel eyes couldn't conceal. But in Asami it took the shape of a rather different animal. Didn't Akihito realize what Asami would do for him? Everything, he'd promised. Everything, that was, except to let go, should those bright eyes one day turn from him. Asami didn't know whether he'd have the strength for that. That might be the day he caged this wild spirit and smothered his soul.

But right now, Akihito was turning from him, not to leave but to incite, so Asami could hold him in the palm of his open hand and set him free.

Asami caught him before he'd even gone five paces. But Akihito was kicking and squirming and soon ran free again. And again Asami caught him. A brief tussle and then off again.
Akihito yelled in frustration by the third time. Asami was toying with him. "Let me go!"

He managed – or was allowed – six paces this time before Asami's arms locked about him again. "I'll always catch you, Akihito." The baritone rumbled, loaded with consequence.

Even as a rush of incredible relief flooded through him, Akihito writhed and twisted, bolting free with a jab with his elbow. There was a grunt behind him, and for a moment he spun back, worried he'd actually hurt the bastard. But Asami smirked right back, as though delighting in his concern. Akihito flared with indignation, but with just a hint of a smile twitching on his lips because damn it but yes, this – or, more precisely, Asami coming after him and silencing his uncertainties – was what he'd wanted but the whole thing was a little bit ridiculous. Asami in his open shirt, missing most of the buttons, and Akihito stark naked except for his socks, playing some perverted tag game... Ok, it was more than a little. It was way ridiculous.

Akihito backed off, not taking his eyes off the Adonis. "There must be some dojo rule against naked wrestling."

"Why would there be? Intense physical activity, exploration of the human form, dedicated paired training – it's perfect."

It was as Akihito snorted at this that Asami pounced, tackling him to the floor. Akihito flinched, expecting a hard landing, but he found himself buffeted against Asami's chest as Asami somehow crashed to the floor first with Akihito on top. Asami rolled over him, caught his wrists, lowering most of himself over Akihito to pin him down.

It was all too much. Akihito started laughing.

"I've left you wanting," Asami smirked as their erections glided against each other, neither of them soft. "How remiss of me."

Akihito let out a breathy sigh. "Don't sweat it. I know at your age you need more recovery time."

Asami narrowed his amused gaze at him. "Let's see who needs more recovery time, shall we?"

Akihito struggled, giving it a good show even if he wasn't really trying to flee. Asami's hold was hard, inescapable, but never painful.

"Don't force yourself," Akihito intoned with mock sympathy. "Not good for the health, you know. I mean, you were already panting into my boxers there, you don't want your heart giving out."

Akihito stared wide eyed at his own outrageous taunt before he was spluttering with laughter that couldn't be contained.

Asami's eyes blazed like firestorms as he growled with mock outrage, "You audacious brat. That's funny, is it?" His smirk promised heaven and hell – mostly hell – as he locked an arm about Akihito's waist and sat them both up, pulling a wriggling Akihito astride his lap. He shoved three fingers into Akihito's mouth as Akihito laughed and licked and sputtered around them. "It won't be my heart giving out, I can promise you that."

Withdrawing his fingers, he reached back for Akihito's ass as he twisted a handful of the blond hair, forcing Akihito's head back to arch the lean stomach forward against Asami.

"You shouldn't make promises you can't keep," Akihito huffed, his voice strained at this angle, his hands scrabbling against the powerful shoulders.
Asami's breath whispered over Akihito's jagged pulse, teeth scraping rough and hot as his fingers below circled the ring of muscle. "Indeed. A man should hold true to his word and see it through. Rigorously—" he pushed one finger in, drew it out, "vigorously—" two fingers this time, pressing all the way in, "to the fucking end." Three fingers delved in right to the knuckle.

"Oh god...!" Akihito's breath froze, tears pricking his eyes. Too much, too fast, the burning stretch whirled amidst the lightning bolt being sucked into his neck, the sharp tug of his hair. He clung harder to Asami's shoulders. "A-Asami...!

"I'll smother you until the only option left to you is to submit, until there's no possible way to fight or run anymore. That's what you want, isn't it?"

Akihito stared tremulously. "I never said..." How on earth could Asami know that?

Asami withdrew his fingers, lining up his ample erection. "I'll give you everything, Akihito, until I'm all that's left of your world. Nothing else matters."

He sheathed deep and consumed Akihito's keening cry in a bruising kiss, claiming the deepest caverns body and mind. Akihito put on a show of struggling, even as he welcomed Asami overpowering him and dissolving him to desperate pleas and shattered cries, his body on fire with sweet poison blazing through his veins. And when there was finally no choice left but to give himself over, it was with surging relief that Asami hadn't let him down, safe in the unshakable knowledge that Asami would see him through.

Asami engulfed him with a sweeping kiss and words that gave no quarter, as significant as the soaring cranes overhead. "I hold your freedom in my hands. But have you already forgotten, Akihito? The one who holds mine, is you."

Understanding dawned as the sun that had broken through the mists over Mount Fuji. Asami returned as much of himself as Akihito gave in his act of surrender. Far from one-sided, far from making him weak or a lesser man. It was with a heart-torn sob that Akihito realized that it was ok to let go. With Asami, it was ok.

His shaking hands cupped the stunning face that looked to him to understand, to catch up. "Asami..."
He crushed their lips together, all the feelings he couldn't put into words concentrated in that one touch. Drawing back, his mouth quirked lopsided. "What were you saying about making my heart give out?"

Asami was indeed a man of his word and he rigorously, vigorously fucked Akihito to earth-shattering, tear-stained oblivion. But more importantly, he was there to pull Akihito back together again.

The door finally, finally opened. Kirishima looked up from his work as Asami strolled past, carrying a snoring figure bundled up in his suit jacket up to the penthouse. His careful handling of his cargo was in sharp contrast with the ice in his voice.

"Have the limo ready in ten. Suoh will stay with Akihito."

"Yes, sir."
Asami Ryuichi – part 1

Chapter Notes

So it wasn't writer's block. It just turned out to be over-enthusiastic plot bunnies for another Asami/Akihito arc that wouldn't let me focus on this story until I'd typed a load out. Downside, this was delayed, but on the plus side there might be a different one-shot or short story coming at some point. No promises though, I'm trying to keep focused on Click!

I have pretentiously entitled this 'Asami Ryuichi', resulting from my own quest for insight into this enigmatic man. Perhaps there's something to be said for maintaining the air of mystery but I'm going for it anyway! ;P tee hee. (I just hope it's not what the manga's going to cover with the next chapter due out in 2 days! XD)

Because my chronically long chapters seem to be getting longer still (partly because I changed my mind and decided to properly write out a scene I'd only alluded to in my first draft and so now we include a character I said I wouldn't include at the start!), so hey ho we have another split into two. Easier to handle, though they're still around 9K each! I promise I'll stop talking about chapter lengths at some point... (^-^)

WARNING FOR TORTURE: I've added the Torture tag to this story. I don't think it's too hideous, but it's all relative and subjective so please proceed with caution if it's something you know you struggle with.

So here we go, Asami Ryuichi part 1. I hope it's ok! Part 2 will follow in a day or two, just needs a bit more editing.

~ Nyx ~

Tuesday, dead of night.

"Have they talked?"

"Not yet, sir."

An Arctic tempest, the fires of hell not far below. Asami smiled, if it could be called that. It promised only judgement and death. "Good."

Perhaps Sagano might have stirred some pity for their guests except for one fact. They'd come after Takaba.

It had taken Sagano a bit of time to see it, that young man's quality. An uncommon sincerity when it came to people, selfless to the extreme, the most unassuming person Sagano had ever met. A rare gem in the rough who laughed off his bumpy edges and required no polishing. Asami must have seen it from the start.

Then there was Suoh's absence. In the vicinity but not overseeing 'guest accommodations', charged instead with protection duty. The significance wasn't lost on any of the inner cadre of Asami's sworn
men. Change was in the air.

Pity received no welcome tonight, only honour-bound inevitability. Passing the outer guard, Sagano followed Asami and Kirishima back down the concrete stairs to the soundproofed steel doors. Down to hell.

Akihito's taste still lingered – his skin, his saliva, his semen. It was enough to stay Asami from lighting up as was his wont. Instead he savoured the intoxicating flavour on his tongue, keeping the brat close, fuelling the reservoir of darkness. The only drawback was that he lacked a convenient cigarette to extinguish on one of their filthy faces in greeting.

Barefoot and stripped from the waist up, the two 'guests' were secured to metal chairs, arms bound behind, the chairs placed side by side and four paces apart. Lash marks already striped their torsos, numerous tiny abrasions dribbling blood courtesy of the cat o' nine, each tail tipped with sharp metal. The guards had now withdrawn a step behind each of the guests. Underground, they were buffered from the worst of the cold night on the cusp of winter, but there was no heating in the bare concrete bunker. The guests were shivering.

This wasn't the night for a lengthy interview. Thoroughness would have to come with speed tonight. Suoh had clearly deduced that too, Asami knew, simply from the men's legs being left untied. A break from protocol, it wasn't something Sagano would have done without Suoh's direct order. A psychological play, a premeditated oversight. Sometimes it was the simplest things that made all the difference. Asami wondered if either of the hitmen were skilled enough to exploit it.

Asami took it all in with one sweeping glance as he stepped into the large bunker.

Recognition was instant. So was the fear that swept over the house guests.

"Asami! I – I knew it was only a matter of time before you showed your face, you sewage scum!" the one on the left yelled.

Asami took his measure in all of a second – a burly skinhead, muscles developed more in the gym than through real-life application, the bluster exaggerated, too much whites of the eyes, sweating despite the cold. More bark than bite. This one, Asami would break.

The one on the right wasn't so good at masking his dread, something rattling with every breath – or so it was meant to appear. He was of slighter build but Asami's practised eye noted the lean toughness about him that hinted at a spine, a deceptive strength. Playing up vulnerabilities, making opponents underestimate him. Not just tougher, but smarter too. This one was going to be a harder nut to crack.

Asami already had an initial marker on them, a little conversation would give him the rest. He ignored them for a moment, however.

"Was it your decision to keep them together?" he asked Sagano, half turning away to look over the metal table over on the side. Showcased was a fine array of knives and other paraphernalia for the deadly arts. Standard fare really, Asami didn't need to look to know what was there. Rather his purpose was at his back. He kept track out of his peripheral vision and as expected, movement resumed from the smarter guest on the right, a subtle shift of the shoulders as he struggled with his bound arms behind the chair back. Asami hid a smile.

"I confirmed with the Chief, sir."

Sagano's first time seeing to their 'guests', he had taken no chances and rightly so. Company was a
fickle impetus in these situations. It could just as easily expedite proceedings as toughen up the
subjects and make everything drag, though of course both cases had their purposes. Controlling the
outcome required a skilled interrogator, one who could fine tune proceedings to manipulate the
subjects’ temperament and bonds and drivers to suit best purpose. Sagano may have been inclined to
separate them but Suoh would have known to leave Asami to have at them as he wished.

"Good call," Asami confirmed. Sagano bowed briefly.

"You think we're just gonna shit ourselves and talk if you ignore us? You stupid dumbass!"

Asami sneered. Crapmouth was going to sing like a lark in more ways than one. Asami would permit
only one person to run their mouth off at him, the same one Asami was being kept from because
these ill-mannered rats had seen fit to interrupt their private evening. The same one who must also be
rubbing off on him if he was starting to give monikers like the brat did.

Pokerface was still silent, shaking just a little, staring and barely blinking. He was good. Asami was
better.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he said conversationally. "I see my men have seen to your comfort. Are
you nicely warmed up? We'll skip the introductions, shall we. No need for anything so tedious when
we all know who we are."

Crapmouth stilled at that.

"I applaud you for withholding your names but really, it was all a wasted effort. Come now, did you
think I'd be ignorant of which professionals are operating on my soil?" Asami smiled as Crapmouth
tried to glare. "Now the other questions put to you, that's a different matter. I will have your answers
and I should warn you, if you're not forthcoming, things may start becoming a touch uncomfortable."

"Why should we talk?" Crapmouth spat. "You'll just kill us as soon as we tell you anything
anyway!"

Asami held back on his dam of fury with some effort. Not yet. "Of course you'll die here," he told
them with zero sympathy. "Your lives were forfeit the moment you went after Takaba. Your remains
will be found burned or electrified through or perhaps melted with acid. Only a DNA test will
identify you. The only matter you need concern yourselves with is whether you'd prefer to be alive
or dead when we arrange that."

Pokerface's face was pure fear. It was a good mask. But the unseen cogs were still turning.

Crapmouth wasn't looking so boisterous now. His nostrils flared as he fought for oxygen. "J-just to
teach us a lesson? So you're just a petty shitbag, just like everyone else." His attempted ridicule was
laughable.

"What use are lessons for the dead, Noguchi-san? No, you'll act as my messengers to the world, to
demonstrate the consequences of touching what belongs to me."

Crapmouth appeared to be frantically scrabbling for an out.

"Tell me who posted the bounty on Takaba." Asami smiled thinly. "Or are you so reluctant to leave
my hospitality you'd rather withhold answers?"

"Your hospitality's fucking lame," Crapmouth tried to hiss fearlessly. He failed. "Come back to my
place and I'll show you real hospitality."
Asami's smile broadened. It was a chilling sight. "See, now we're making progress. Like for like is only fair, after all. Seeing as you paid us a visit, tell me, who is back home in Nagano, Noguchi-san?" He cast a token glance at Pokerface. "Or abroad, Ichiji-san?"

There was a break in the rhythm of Pokerface's breathing. Just a fraction of a second of perfect stillness, blending into the frightened rattling again almost before Asami could register it. But even as he conversed with Crapmouth, it was Pokerface that Asami was tracking unerringly, the more challenging target.

Crapmouth scoffed. "Home? That's not like for like. But who am I to judge if this shitty concrete decor is actually your notion of home. To each their own."

The guard behind Pokerface finally noticed the prisoner's furtive actions. He was about to step in but Asami curtailed any preventive measures with a sharp look and a question that didn't need to be directed at him.

"Remind me, Genji?"

The guard remained on the spot, registering the unspoken order. Pokerface ceased his subtle motions.

"Where did we encounter our guests?" Asami asked.

"At your home, sir," Genji supplied.

Pokerface was still shivering, masking things he'd rather keep hidden, expertly done.

Crapmouth threw a mocking laugh. "By all means, visit my home. I've a whiny bitch who'll spread her legs for anyone with a nice face. Maybe you'd like a turn."

Asami stilled. The temperature about him plunged sub-zero.

Crapmouth didn't notice. "Her mouth isn't half bad either. Only way to shut her up is to keep it busy another way, if you get my drift."

"You'd use your woman to buy your life?" Asami whispered. If Crapmouth had had any chance at mercy before, he'd blown it now. "Sounds like your home is hardly the hospitality to boast of."

He shrugged off his coat. Kirishima caught it fluidly and draped it out of the way over one of the metal chairs by the door.

"I meant my dungeon, fucktard." Crapmouth grinned maniacally, his eyes over-bright with terror as they tracked Asami's movements, the tremor in his voice audible now. "I'd cane you till you fainted from blood loss. I bet you'd be beautiful all naked and strung up and screaming."

Asami almost laughed. The psychology was well documented. Having already tried bribery and failed, the pathetic shit was now deliberately inciting Asami's temper in an attempt to earn a quick bullet instead of a death worse than death itself. Asami's reputation in the underworld wasn't for nought, after all.

The guard behind Crapmouth flared, tensing as though to step in, but Asami waved him down. He calmly removed his suit jacket, which was taken by an equally calm Kirishima.

"Surely it's difficult to scream when you're unconscious from blood loss?" Asami puzzled as though the question warranted due consideration. Kirishima handed him a pair of gloves. Leisurely sliding them on, Asami stepped over the grilled drain cover in the middle of the floor and sauntered over to
Crapmouth, who seemed incapable of deciding whether to stare at Asami’s face or the hands encased in black leather or the gun holstered against the waistcoat. "How can you scream when your world is already black from pain? When you're not aware that your wounds won't close, and your blood drips and drips and drips?" Putting his back to Pokerface, Asami trailed his gloved fingers through the thin rivulets of blood across Crapmouth's chest. "When every heartbeat –" Asami trailed a fingertip along a jagged tear – "kills you –" he dug his finger in – "that bit more?"

Crapmouth looked like he was about to crap himself. It was amazing how quickly that false bluster could crumble.

That was when Pokerface leaped.

Hope. It was a strange creature. Powerful enough, that it took root in an instant and gripped you in fevered anticipation if you allowed it in. But so easily crushed, plunging you into the worst despair just as fast.

It flared in Crapmouth's face as he saw Pokerface free of his bindings over Asami's shoulder. Kirishima, having long anticipated his boss's intent, was already holding out a hand to stand down the guards. Asami reared about, his head whipping around to sight his target, his hand shooting out to seize Pokerface's neck before the bloody arm could snake around Asami's neck. Asami drove through the momentum from his turn and smashed his palm up into the windpipe. Pokerface doubled over his neck with a sickly throttling sound, whiplashing forwards with his head and body still sailing towards Asami for another moment longer, before inertia registered the abrupt change of direction and Asami swung him around and smashed him to the floor.

Hope flared and killed, in two seconds flat. Crapmouth emitted a choked gasp as though he'd been the one with his throat bashed in. Perfect.

Pokerface wheezed, his throat muscles spasming, his windpipe seizing up, choking off air. His limbs flapped like a beached squid, death imminent. There was a streak of anxiety in Pokerface's wide eyes, but what was notable was the relief instead of fear.

Asami confirmed his initial markers. Crapmouth would break easily, with a little more application on the right pressure points. Pokerface was made of sterner stuff and he'd require different incentive to relinquish the information Asami wanted in the limited time he had. Not only that, but he was clearly also running another agenda.

"I applaud the effort, Ichiji-san," Asami said sincerely.

Still pinning Pokerface down, he held out his free hand over his shoulder. Kirishima handed him a length of clear plastic, the hollow outer tube of a ballpoint pen, with holes at both ends. Kirishima crouched on the other side, wearing gloves of his own. He wedged the handle of a 7-inch knife between the back of Pokerface's teeth to keep them wide. Asami forced the jaw up to straighten the throat, and jammed the tube down the windpipe with anatomical precision.

Air whooshed into the lungs with a rasping hiss.

Snagging the knife free, Asami stepped back. Two guards grabbed the gasping man and tossed him back in the chair.

Sagano grabbed coils of rope from the table, throwing one to Genji to secure Pokerface while he went to secure Crapmouth's legs. Crapmouth started kicking out, frantic with desperation. Asami stepped across with the knife and dug the razor-sharp point against Crapmouth's crotch.
"I have no desire to see your puny dick but if you don't hold still, I'll slice it off and feed it to you."

White as a ghost, Crapmouth held still as Sagano lashed his lower legs to the chair legs. Beating would have accomplished the same result but Crapmouth's greater weakness was psychological and Asami utilized it to the full.

"A-Asami-sama, listen, please! I already told your men, I honestly don't know anything!" Crapmouth was starting to live up to his name. "I never had any contact with the sponsor!"

Finished with the legs, Sagano tightened the bindings on Crapmouth's arms. Kirishima was monitoring Pokerface, making sure he was still breathing, checking his throat muscles had relaxed enough before removing the tube.

Asami trailed a gloved finger along the flat of the blade. "Then how did you come by the job?"

"It's an open market! Everyone knows about the bounty!"

"Just as everyone knows that Takaba Akihito is under my personal protection?"

In Crapmouth's terrified silence, Asami's cellphone rang. Waving Sagano over to Pokerface, Kirishima went over to his boss' jacket, removing his gloves on the way.

Asami raised a sceptical brow at Crapmouth. "You pursued this job, knowing you would incite my vengeance, without a guarantor for the payment? I can't imagine the incredible faith you must have in this sponsor to cough up when they won't even give you their name, Noguchi-san," Asami mocked. "Or perhaps you're just incredibly stupid?" His voice went ice soft. "Or perhaps, just perhaps, you're lying to me?"

It wouldn't take much longer. The sweat beading on the shaven head, the unhealthy pallor. Crapmouth was cracking.

Kirishima stepped up beside him. "Sir." He was holding out the phone, the call already connected.

Asami glanced at it. The caller ID further splintered the dam holding back his fury. There could only be two reasons for the call, neither of them good.

Rage lit Asami's features as he turned back to Crapmouth. "Hold this."

He flicked the knife airborne, caught the handle blade down, and slammed it into Crapmouth's thigh with a well-timed savage twist to tear muscle fibre and grind the blade against the femur.

"Yes, Suoh?" He missed the response what with all the screaming. "One second," he said as Genji stuffed a filthy rag into the noisy mouth and tied it off with a length of rope around the head. "Go ahead," Asami said when things were muted to a more tolerable level.

"He's awake, sir," Suoh said quietly.

Not ideal but preferable to an attack which was the alternative. Turning his back to the guests, Asami took directionless steps away. "When?"

"A few minutes ago. I... heard him, sir."
Nightmare again. It wasn't surprising considering the attempted strike earlier that evening but Akihito had been free of them for a few days.

Asami gripped the phone tighter. "Is he still...?"

"He's quiet now, sir, but he hasn't left the bedroom so I couldn't say any further," Suoh supplied, still in an undertone as though trying not to be overheard. "He was distressed for two minutes that I could hear. Considering the cause, I believed my sudden entry to the bedroom would be detrimental rather than helpful and so I did not offer assistance."

The report, clipped and to the point, didn't fool Asami any. Suoh had been worried. Asami wouldn't soon forget the way Akihito had scrabbled awake in terror. Feeling for Asami, climbing over Asami to check that the gun was still under the pillow but leaving it there, as though all he needed to know was that Asami was there and could get to the gun to reassure himself that he was safe.

Behind him, Crapmouth was sweating, stinking, and bleeding. Not nearly enough for Asami's liking.

"Stay in the living room. Send him a text message, tell him you're there and that all is secure."

"Yes, sir." Suoh still lingered.

"What else?" Asami prompted, the rising pressure behind his control making him short.

"... He was calling for you, sir, before he woke."

"Asami!"

Akihito's voice rang in his ear as clear as day. Then the unexpected happened. It hit Asami like a bullet, and an unfamiliar one at that. I should have been there.

Decisions were calculations. Weighing pros and cons, analysing and anticipating tangled spaghetti jumbles of consequences to the next world and then some, planning for every conceivable outcome and human variable, setting contingencies. Calculations on top of calculations. Adverse results were simply to be dealt with, lessons to be drawn and henceforth applied. Rarely were they wrong. But this? Suoh could have ran this interrogation, except Asami's own need for vengeance had blinkered him to handling it personally. He'd adjusted insofar as to ensure Akihito's safety but he'd overlooked the need for reassurance, for proximity. This was no mere adverse outcome, Asami fully considered it an error in judgement. A rarity in itself, but the unpleasant weight that twisted in his gut was a complete novelty. Was this what they called regret? All he knew for certain was that he wanted to redo the moment he'd left a slumbering Akihito in his bed with death already on his mind.

"Tell him I'll be back within the hour," Asami all but snarled. Kirishima was there to catch the phone when he threw it, silently handing him his gloves back.

Asami wore death like a shroud as he turned back to his 'guests'. They were staring at him, one terrified and in pain, the other wheezing but still with an iron will not easily broken. Darkness emanated from Asami like visible tendrils.

"Unfortunately for you, we're on the clock now. You're going to tell me everything you know about who ordered the hit on Takaba Akihito."

As predicted, it didn't take long for Crapmouth to break.

Asami waved for Genji to remove the gag. "Did you know, Takaba is having nightmares because of
you? Not that he'd appreciate my telling you," he said as he strolled over.

He drew out the knife from Crapmouth's leg, turning the blade cruelly, renewing the screams echoing around the concrete walls.

He waited until Crapmouth subsided into blubbering sobs. "Like for like, didn't we say? I'll show you your nightmares, Noguchi-san. But to do that, you need to close your eyes."

Crapmouth stared with terror-white eyes.

Asami held up the knife. "Allow me to help."

Crapmouth struggled uselessly in his binds, straining all the more as the knife came closer. Asami touched the sharp tip to the skin beneath the right eye –

"Broker!" Crapmouth yelled.

Asami pulled the knife back. Just an inch. Still very much in line of sight.

"I went through a broker! Worked with them for years, they've always come through so I didn't ask any questions. I don't know who the actual sponsor is, I swear! I fucking swear! Please, please, I don't know who the sponsor is..." His continued begging was lost amidst more sobbing.

Asami flicked the knife, enough to refocus Crapmouth's attention.

"Name?" Asami demanded.

"Two Shot! That's all I got, I swear! Could be a man or woman, we've never spoken..."

But Asami had already tuned out the senseless babbling. He'd turned to Pokerface, his certainty absolute.

"It seems we have something of importance to discuss, Ichiji-san," Asami said, radiating dark smugness, "or should I say, Two Shot?"

"Is this an unprofessional break in your rules, Ichiji-san? Or do I warrant an exception? Since when do you personally involve yourself in the deals you arrange?"

Pokerface still maintained his mask, the fearful confusion. He tried to speak which lead to a load of coughing instead.

"Get him some water," Asami said over his shoulder.

Sagano produced a metal cup from somewhere and helped Pokerface drink.

"Please!" Crapmouth wailed. "Please, I told you everything I know! You have to let –"

"Don't fret," Asami interrupted. "You'll feel the full weight of retribution soon enough." He signalled with a tilt of his head.

Kirishima was already there. A squeeze on a particular spot on the man's shoulder and Crapmouth's eyes rolled back, out cold.

"Better?" Asami asked Pokerface with fake sympathy after he'd drank.
"I don't know... what you're talking about..." Pokerface rasped slowly.

That settled it. Just the subtest waver of the gaze, a flicker in the otherwise flawless mask. In actuality Asami had only been acting on years of conjecture and a list of a dozen possible identities of the one who operated by the alias Two Shot, but Pokerface didn't need to know that.

Asami considered his approach. He took his time heading over to the exit and dragging a chair back. He plonked it down in front of Pokerface and sat down.

"I'm going to be forthcoming with you. It's a shame, really. You have integrity, inner strength. Under different circumstances I might have tried to convince you to come and work for me. But you went after someone under my protection. That's not something I can pardon – not in my eyes, not in the eyes of the world." Asami tilted his head. "But you already knew that, didn't you?"

Some of the feigned veneer of weakness was receding. Pokerface made a cautious nod.

"Two Shot, the crack-shot information broker operating mainly out of Shanghai, who took out a twelve-strong Triad cell that went rogue – expending only two shots, if the stories are to be believed, thus earning you the name. Now involved in this hit guaranteed to earn death. And then missing the shot."

Pokerface's face was entirely blank now.

"I can only surmise your intention was never to kill Takaba. Which means you meant to be caught, and you meant to die, but without it appearing to be by choice. The question is why."

Pokerface was pokerfaced, only his hoarse breathing betraying any strain.

"But alas," Asami went on, "I need to get back to Takaba, which means I don't have the time to break a man of your talents, which means I need to convince you to talk another way. I'm not an unnecessarily cruel man, Ichiji-san," he leaned on his elbows, his voice dropping, "but you know perfectly well I will stop at nothing to protect what's mine. You're going to tell me who sponsored the hit for Takaba. Or you'll force me to send for your family."

The poker mask fell away. Ichiji was perfectly aware there were no empty threats here. "I... have no family," he rasped.

Without taking his eyes off Pokerface, Asami half turned over his shoulder.

Kirishima obliged, pulling out a file from his case by the door. "Banqiaozen, Tianjin, China. Female, 41, girl, 16."

There was no surprise that Asami had that information. Ichiji studied Asami for a long time, weighing options. He wasn't left with many, lashed bleeding to the metal chair as he was. "Leave them out of this."

"Then talk."

Ichiji's eyes slid closed. "You threaten. They threaten. What would you do?"

Asami leaned back in the chair. "I see." His mind rapidly joined the dots that were half-forming before him. "Is that why you needed an unwitting executioner?"

Even with years upon years of practised masquerade, Ichiji's pain was clear. His face was grey, his laboured voice barely audible. "Once a year. For fifteen years. I've been allowed to see them once a
year. And all the while, they might be killed any second if I step out of line. That's no life for them."

"Who threatens you?"

Ichiji said nothing.

"Your patron?"

Ichiji hesitated, then nodded.

"Anyone I can deal with?"


Asami sighed. He already knew where this was all leading. But he had to be certain. "Tell me who it is, and short of putting mine or my business in jeopardy, I'll do what I can to protect your family."

"How do I know I can trust you?"

"Have you ever known of me to break my word?" Asami leaned close. "Because I promise you this. If you don't speak now, I will paint you with the blood of your family. Do you believe that?"

Ichiji's face was a convoluted mix of rage and pain and resignation and determination. "... You'll protect them? My wife and daughter?"

"As far as I am able, I give you my word. Who ordered the hit on Takaba, Ichiji-san?"

Ichiji released a wheezing breath. "Whoever originated the bounty, they're keeping themselves well hidden. But I can tell you who instructed me to broker the hit. My patron, Liu Fei Long."

Akihito was only two steps away when something stopped him. Asami loomed as still and silent as the tomb, his shadow tainted with death.

Akihito stood there just inside the bedroom doorway. Not running away. Quite the opposite. Needing to touch, to assure himself physically that Asami was still in one piece. Because an hour might have passed since he woke up but his mind was still haunted by bloody carnage. Because this time, it hadn't been Akihito who'd been gunned down in his dream.

"Five minutes," Asami murmured.

He slipped past, carefully not touching, leaving the tang of copper sharp in Akihito's nose.

Akihito was a motionless bundle in the bed when Asami emerged from the bathroom in his sleep joggers, his hair damp. Hazel eyes tracked him across the room as Asami approached and checked the gun, installing it under his pillow.

Sliding into the bed, Asami turned to regard the uncharacteristically still form watching him. He didn't push Akihito, wondering if the brat would pull away. There was a world of difference between knowing what Asami did and knowing he'd just been doing it.

Neither said anything for a while.

"Did you get any leads?" Akihito could see the pensive, cautious way Asami was watching him.

"Yes."
Akihito waited. "But?"

Asami stared at the featureless ceiling, put out. "It's bothersome."

"As in, a misdirection? A trap?"

"Not in that way. Oh, I wouldn't be surprised that he is involved, but not with any seriousness. He'd only be looking to cause mischief, inconvenience me for his amusement. He's not V1P3R."

"Some mischief," Akihito scoffed. "Who is it?"

There was a long, long pause. "A acquaintance," Asami said heavily.

It was impressive how two words could imply so much history. "Wow. That's quite the step up from 'associate'."

Asami glanced at him again. "Come here."

Akihito frowned, burrowing deeper into the pillow. "I am here."

"Come here," Asami repeated.

"You come here."

Smirking at the childish comeback, Asami did exactly that. He loomed over Akihito, pushing the smaller man flat on his back with his shoulder as he shifted them chest to chest.

Akihito opened his mouth, held his breath, then he huffed it on a grumpy exhale that fluttered through Asami's hair flopped over his brow. "I walked right into that."

Shadows lingered on Akihito's face, the harrowing vestiges keeping him awake. Asami lowered his head into the crook of Akihito's neck but then remained there, just breathing softly.

He was there for so long, not moving, that Akihito's hands fluttered unsurely around him. "Asami?"

"Are you alright?"

Akihito stilled at the question against his neck, sensing the apology. But there was nothing to apologize for, Asami was keeping him alive and investigating the hitmen after all. What was he apologizing about?

Akihito dared to tighten his arms around the broad ribs, mostly healed from that awful bruising. "I am now." He meant it, too.

Asami breathed against his neck for a while longer before he rolled back, pulling Akihito with him over his chest.

Cushioned by Asami's warmth and scent, Akihito managed to get back to sleep.

Wednesday.

Akihito entirely blamed Asami for not being able to look at the ties without feeling a warm flutter. Sitting cross-legged on the bed, he plucked up one of the small boxes. "Off somewhere?" He clicked it open. A pair of cufflinks glinted up at him. Jet black onyx.

"I'll be out of town tonight," Asami said, emerging from the walk-in wardrobe. He dropped a metal case on the bed alongside everything else. Opening it, he checked the two guns within, the cartridges and a spare holster...

Akihito watched with growing alarm. "Oh I know, it's Pacific Crime Lords Anonymous right?"

Asami smirked. "Are you suggesting I need to be cured of Crime Lordism?"

"That's not even a word," Akihito mumbled, fiddling with the box of cufflinks.

Asami grabbed a black carry-all case from the wardrobe and started piling everything in. The ties ended up at the bottom.

Akihito half smiled. "Sure you don't need Glasses to pack for you?"

"I can manage my own packing, Akihito."

Akihito could only make a noncommittal sound. He was feeling more and more jittery by the second. Suddenly Asami was in front of him, long fingers running through his hair.

"I'll be back first thing tomorrow."

Akihito frowned, ducking his head. "You don't need to rush on my account." He tossed the box into the carry-all.

Asami ignored the prickly defensiveness. "I wouldn't go at all," he explained, "except this acquaintance can be... sensitive. He may take exception if I tell him to back off over a phone call, and he wields enough power to be potentially dangerous if he decides to get serious. I need to clear this up before it becomes an issue."

"Slap on the wrist?"

"Something like that. Suoh will stay with you, you won't be alone."

That only worried Akihito more. "What about you?"

Asami blinked, taken aback by Akihito's open agitation. "Why, are you worried for me?" he tried to tease.

Akihito couldn't rise to the bait. He was too rattled, his nightmare still too fresh. "If the guy's that dangerous –"

"Hey," Asami murmured, sliding a hand along Akihito's jaw. "I've made this trip a dozen times before. We have an understanding. If I see him in person, there won't be a problem."

Was that true or was Asami just reassuring him? Akihito was still searching Asami's face, chasing for answers, when Kirishima walked in.

"Good morning, sir, Takaba-san." Glasses strode towards the walk-in closet, only to do a double take at the full bag on the bed. His jaw dropped a little bit. "You're... packed, sir?"

The tension spilled over and Akihito collapsed into helpless laughter.
Asami paused beside Suoh in passing. For just a few seconds he dropped all formality, no distinction of rank, just the underlying closeness developed over long years fighting through thick and thin together. This was no order to a subordinate. It was entirely personal.

"Kazumi," Asami started quietly, then hesitated again. His gaze was fixed on the far side of the living room where Akihito laughed at some joke, or perhaps it was simply at Kirishima's blank-as-stone expression. The brat was a burst of sunshine that Asami couldn't turn away from.

Suoh understood. With the rarest, smallest smile, he gripped Asami's shoulder. "With my life, Ryuichi," he swore.

"I bet you usually do all his packing, don't you?"

"Asami-sama is perfectly capable of doing his own packing," Kirishima hedged, his eyes fixed on a message on his phone.

"Right," Akihito grinned. "You might wanna check though, unless he's going for the bed-slept look. He threw in his shoes on top of his shirts on top of his ties."

Kirishima cleared his throat. "They've been rearranged."

Akihito chortled as Glasses valiantly maintained a straight face. "They have, have they?"

Kirishima clearly found his messages more worth his time and made to walk away.

"Uh, hey, wait! You're going with him, right?"

The serious tone made Kirishima look at him. "Yes?"

Akihito gnawed on his lip, glancing over where Asami seemed to be having some tête-à-tête with Blond Tank, Suoh's hand on Asami's shoulder. "You'll... keep him out of trouble, right? I mean, he says it'll be safe and all but he also said this acquaintance or whoever it is can be dangerous and he's not gonna have the big guy with him and I wasn't sure if he really meant it'll be ok or if he just didn't want me to worry or --"

"Takaba-san?" Kirishima cut in, not unkindly.

Akihito clamped down on his rambling. "... Yeah?"

Kirishima was watching him with a strange look on his face, as though seeing something that surprised him. "I have his back. I always do."

Akihito tried to smile. "Yeah. I know."

It had to be the one in a million occurrence when Akihito was actually relieved that Asami was filthy rich. 'Cos normal rich would've meant being stuck with the limo. But filthy rich meant choices and Akihito could go for the most unassuming vehicle to hand – which was still a sleek black luxury sedan that screamed loaded – and shady, to be honest – but at least it wasn't the limo. 'Cos seriously! Fat chance was Akihito going to ride in that by himself! It was so laughable it wasn't even funny.

Akihito said as much. He knew Blond Tank was still laughing at him, in that silent, stoic way of his.

Akihito would've hopped on the train again but Suoh refused to let him out in the open. The two hitmen apprehended outside last night had elevated the risk factor. The elevator down from the
condo deposited them on a secure underground parking level. The sedan had bullet-proof windows and doors. Akihito got with the program and let himself be bundled into the vehicle, then out underground again at Sion HQ.

The morning rushed by in its usual chaotic frenzy. Mitarai stirred up crap and got into an elastic band slingshot battle with Akihito that got pretty hairy with a stapler at one point. Ogawa only half attempted to quieten them down. Akihito worked on security patches and met with the EverEye project team to put a proposal on VR education tuition under the microscope which left him with an excited buzz.

He geeked out with Yumi during lunch which was pretty cool. It felt good to laugh, swapping stories about the craziest accidental hacking discoveries they'd made. He was pretty sure he'd buried this particular hatchet with Asami but just in case, he sat diagonally opposite her to avoid any accidental touching. The barnacle called Mitarai was still adhered to her and he sat with them looking like he was sucking on lemons. Yumi was kinder than Akihito was, explaining some of the context to Mitarai when she wasn't too busy laughing, but Akihito deliberately kept to hacking lingo ("Best ever? Gotta be the oCTF final at DEF CON last year! Binary exploit to subvert the C program, clinched the top five out of a thou. Pwned it!). He unashamedly delighted in Mitarai's grouch.

Sagano and Nakatani only needed one reminder that sometimes it was perfectly ok – necessary, in fact! – to be two doors away ("You are not going to stand there listening to me tinkle!") but otherwise Akihito was starting to get used to their quiet shadows.

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It was always the thick waft of roasted duck and oyster sauce that hit him first, the fish guts and chicken innards, the rich concoction of various organic foodstuffs mixing with traffic fumes all as integral here as the humid air of the South China Sea. Asami knew some who swore to the olfactory assault as proof of life thriving and untameable under changing sovereigins. All he knew was that it wasn't Japan. Even as he remained alert to his surroundings, there was a stray thought in the back of his mind – Akihito would have ribbed him about an old dog set in his ways...

In Asami's opinion they were situated too close to the state-of-the-art skyscrapers of Central across the bay for privacy, with its packed street stalls and tight wedge of apartment blocks and houses in between, backed by the lush green vegetation of the mountains. But this was where Feilong wanted to operate. The privately owned airfield, while officially contracted by the military, was controlled by Baishe.

Asami ducked out of the doorway of his private jet and paused at the top of the boarding stairs. A gleaming limo awaited him, escorted by two SUVs both front and behind. The asphalt stretched out to the back of the military base, fighter jets and chinooks on the far side, quick-marching squads of military personnel in camouflage.

Asami descended with Kirishima. Yoh waited with two others in between Asami's men lining the path. Everyone in black, everyone sombre. Akihito would've cracked some ridiculous remark to break them out of funeral mode – Asami suppressed a smirk and any further thought of the brat. Distractions like that could get him killed.

"You shouldn't have," Yoh remarked, drawling apathetically. A pause, before he cleared his throat. "Is Feilong-sama's greeting." He bowed, hands pointed respectfully inwards on his thighs. "Welcome to Hong Kong, Asami-sama."

As he straightened, his right hand moved first, just fractionally ahead of his left hand before they both moved back to his sides. All clear.
"Yoh," Asami simply nodded.

"Allow me to escort you to accommodations or entertainment until Feilong-sama is available."

Asami studied his deadpan face. "Indisposed again?"

"Regretfully. Feilong-sama will welcome you at his convenience."

Asami strode ahead to the limo, everyone leaping to follow. "You can tell him he has until 2 before I encourage his convenience by dunking him in ice."

The imposing convoy pulled away.

The pilot taxied the private jet to the allocated hangar. At the nearest point to an auxiliary airfield checkpoint, six men in nondescript business suits descended from beside the rear wheel carriage and dashed for the exit barriers. A quick check through security and they disappeared into the thick of Hong Kong.

They split off into groups of two and four and headed off in different directions.

By mid-afternoon Akihito had rambled off some apology to Ogawa and was on his way back to the condo. Asami was off to god-knows-where to get some of the heat off Akihito's back. It was impossible to just sit tight. Snakes left trails, slithering tended to do that. And they also happened to be prey when they encountered talons and Akihito had talons aplenty. This H4wk was so gonna have V1P3R for breakfast!

Determined to leave no stone unturned, Akihito rechecked all his previous searches from the beginning. It was nobody else's business if he helped himself to Spotlight's traffic logs. He wrote mini-programs for trailing V1P3R's forum posts through jacked IP addresses and zombie proxy reroutes, chasing breadcrumbs, crumbs of breadcrumbs really, painstakingly narrowing down to a handful of backdoor shell exploits. He widened the net with the signature specifics, which churned up a barrage more vague patterns that he meticulously demolished one code, one software, one reroute at a time. Fortunately for Akihito the sick fuck didn't seem to know about bridge relays which would've made them impossible to pursue through the dark web. But unfortunately the dots were still too few and far between and tossed in with a bunch of dead-end leads. V1P3R was also laying low so there were no fresh trails to follow. Akihito couldn't make a positive ID yet. Drawing all the constellations in the night sky would've been a walk in the park next to this.

But he wasn't empty handed. He had signature markers and he had reroute patterns, coding languages and third party programs used. There was more than one way to catch a snake.

Feilong always leaned towards the theatrical. Silk robes billowed, long hair swirled as he gestured his arms wide. "Welcome."

"Finally lucid?"

Through the ornate carved red doors the establishment was just as opulent as Asami had expected, seeped with incense. Typical Baishe. Or perhaps typical of this head of Baishe.

"I'm always lucid," Feilong said in his lyrical voice, carrying only a faint accent. "Although my outward expression of it may vary."
"Is that what you call being stoned these days?"

"And what do you call your whiskey haze?"

Their tones carried no real bite. Neither took offence.

"I wish you'd given me more notice," Feilong sighed. "I'm most ashamed at this paltry welcome. To what do I owe the honour of a personal visit from the great Asami Ryuichi himself?"

"You already know," Asami said coolly as they settled on silk-embroidered recliners.

He appeared perfectly at ease but Feilong was the real master at this particular art. He lounged back against the ornate roll supports looking every inch the alluring, deadly beauty that he was. Asami could never be quite sure whether Feilong did this deliberately or if seduction was hardcoded into his DNA.

"I couldn't even begin to guess."

"Then I'll break the news," Asami offered mildly. "I heard that the Japanese police came across an information broker from Shanghai, in the company of a freelance contractor."

Feilong smiled. "Oh? Sounds fascinating."

"The police were certainly intrigued, according to the reports. It's not everyday that they respond to a tip-off concerning an infamous underground figure and stumble across bodies scorched beyond recognition."

"Bodies?" Eyes as sharp as a shark, Feilong absorbed, recalculated, replotted. "How unfortunate. Anyone we know?"

"Just an independent hitman. Oh, and someone who operated under the alias Two Shot, I believe."

"Really?" Feilong drawled.

"He seems to have had some last words."

"Did he now?" That half amused, half sneering smile never left Feilong's face.

Asami smirked back. "Something about the last job he brokered, for some figure in Hong Kong overreaching for something in Japan he had no place trifling with. Or so the rumour goes."

"I knew this was going to be interesting."

Asami pinned Feilong with a look that left no room for ambiguity. "Such risky business. It could start a war."

"War? Risky indeed." Feilong met his gaze straight on, two powerhouses of the Asian underworld sizing each other up. "It's also an overreaction considering the circumstances. Hypothetically speaking, of course."

"And what circumstances might those be? Hypothetically?"

"Perhaps this figure in Hong Kong was merely feeling out the..." Feilong waved vaguely with a willowy grace, "extent of intent?"

"By infringing on property already claimed?"
"It's not always easy to tell how serious a certain Japanese party is. Provocation is sometimes the clearest determinant."

"Even if said Japanese party had explicitly declared his protection?"

"It's a dangerous thing, to declare protection. Placing such importance on someone is liable to make them more of a target. Enough to tempt certain figures in Hong Kong to play mischief when a bounty happens to land in his lap, for example."

"Is that what it was?"

"Hypothetically," Feilong emphasized.

Asami's thin smile held no warmth. "Hypothetically."

"Perhaps this Japanese figure shouldn't have declared protection in the first place."

"Perhaps the target was already fixed and protection was the only way to stave execution."

"I see." Feilong tilted his head, the cascade of his hair shifting over his shoulders. "Well it was certainly enlightening. Enough to drive this Japanese party to hurdle headlong onto foreign turf to threaten war. It's almost as if they've taken leave of their senses."

Asami smirked. "It certainly appears that way, doesn't it?" He remained unfazed as Feilong's gaze became increasingly suspicious. And with it, all pretence at hypothetical speaking faded away.

"What have you done?"

Asami let the Baishe leader sweat while he seemingly considered his reply. "How is Tao doing these days?" he asked coolly.

Feilong didn't move. "What. Have. You. Done?" He was a hair-trigger away from blowing up at Asami.

"Nothing at all. Why would you assume that I have?" Asami banked his fury, arranged his face into perfect calm. "It's not as if you're going after anything of mine. Are you?"

The air froze solid as they bore holes into each other with their eyes alone. The slightest wrong move and the whole restaurant would have disintegrated into a warzone.

It was Feilong who eventually wet-blanketed the volatile tension, just a hint of a smile delivered on a huff, before he eased himself back onto the cushions. He gestured a summons over his shoulder without looking.

Yoh was there in moments from the other side of the room.

"Call everything off Goldilocks," Feilong ordered.

Yoh nodded acknowledgement and withdrew, placing a call. It was short and followed by another. Which was followed by a third.

"So touchy," Feilong disparaged as though his reaction had been any milder. "I should've known when you didn't have your pet giant with you. He's with the boy, I take it?"

Asami arched a brow. "Goldilocks?"
"He's blond, isn't he?" Feilong muttered. He looked over as Yoh hung up and put his phone away, nodding confirmation. "Well?" Feilong prompted.

One glance from Asami and Kirishima made the corresponding call, pulling their four men back from Feilong's residence.

"What a lot of fuss," Feilong grumbled, pulling himself out of the seat. "I'd be tempted to go on the offensive while you're squarely on my turf but this is just too pitiful. You're wrapping the ball and chain around your own neck." He loped over to the bar and poured himself a strong one. "Asami Ryuichi, who'd have guessed? All I have to do is sit back and watch you implode." He drained the plum wine before pausing thoughtfully. "Or is he really as enticing as the surveillance photos I saw? There was a particularly touching one of the two of you on what looked to be a date."

Asami's gaze narrowed with a dangerous glint.

Feilong tilted his beautiful head. "Perhaps I should meet him."

Asami was perfectly tempted to shoot him on the spot. "Go anywhere near Takaba and I'll bury you in the ashes of Baishe."

Feilong's eyes widened. "My, my. You are serious." He chuckled as Asami's glare darkened even further. "Message received. He will be as safe from me as Tao is from you. Do we have a deal?"

Asami had no intention of actually harming Tao, at most taking him away for a short while if Feilong was reluctant to be reasonable, but he didn't have to know that. "Who's posting the bounty?"

"I can give you a name but nothing else. V1P3R. That's with a one and a three because apparently they're too cool for vowels."

"It's leetspeak."

"Pardon?"

This was Akihito's domain. Asami wasn't about to get into all that with Feilong. "I want everything you know."

"You have it. All I have is a name. Look I'm already bored of this, there's no reason for me to hold anything back – even if I should, seeing as you robbed me of one of my best information brokers."

"You shouldn't have involved yourself in my business, the blame is entirely yours. In fact I should be the one demanding recompense for your violating terms of protection."

Feilong raised his hands placatingly at the accusation. "No need to evoke any tedious codes. I had one anonymous email from someone calling themselves V1P3R but my men couldn't trace anything back. If I was to tell you anything else, it's that they're very competent at covering their tracks. That's really everything."

"And Two Shot?"

"What about Two Shot?"

"You'll leave his family in peace?"

Feilong regarded him narrowly as Asami revealed his hand. For Asami to even know about the threat was proof that Two Shot had had an underlying agenda. The head of Baishe bristled, knowing
full well that there was little merit in insisting on reprisals against a dead man that nobody knew that he'd sworn, knowing that Asami had played the card this way knowing precisely that.

"Fine." Feilong's voice was hard. "Do we have a deal?"

Asami inclined his head graciously as though he hadn't just manoeuvred the Baishe leader into this very corner. "If you insist. We have a deal."

It was always this way with Feilong, dancing around each other with wary respect, exchanging currencies of threats and counter threats and tightrope walking the delicate balance in between. More than business rivals, but not quite enemies, not quite friends either.

Feilong brought over two glasses of plum wine for them to seal the deal. They knocked them back together. It was a particularly dry variety, Asami noted. Feilong knew his dislike of sweet drinks.

"This is far too entertaining. We should go into business," Feilong said, his voice lilting lightly again as he settled back amongst the cushions.

"I have no need for opiates in Japan," Asami dismissed coolly.

"You're far too uptight," Feilong smirked.

"Unlike you, you mean?" Asami spared him a glance. "You give a glowing endorsement of your own product. Half of Japan would grind to a halt."

"All the better for Hong Kong," Feilong chuckled. "Mores the pity that I can't persuade you. But well, now that business is done, shall we call for entertainment? Oh calm down," he waved, "not that kind. Artisans, they're called. Harmless music and dancing, nothing to infringe on your conscience regarding your boy toy." He gave a sidelong glance. "I will meet him one of these days, Asami."

"When the sun rises in the West, Feilong."

Akihito was alone that evening, save for Blond Tank guarding the genkan. The big guy had appeared late in the afternoon, replacing Sagano and Nakatani.

Fighting an unsettling sense of disquiet, Akihito drifted by the front entrance on the pretext of getting the big guy a drink. Suoh politely declined. Akihito's anxiety wasn't about the door though, not exactly. True, he was mindful of it, and there was a lingering uneasiness, but logically he knew that Suoh and the guards had it covered and no one was going to come bursting in. Rather his thoughts converged elsewhere. Was Asami ok? Where was he? What was he doing? Was he engaged in a shootout somewhere? Did he have enough guards with him? He had Glasses with him but was he safe without Blond Tank?

Akihito offered snacks the second time. Suoh declined again.

Akihito steered clear of Kou and Takato, wanting to avoid probing questions. He dug out the card with the bouncing bunnies and called Ai-chan. Her excitement to hear from him made him smile even before she started nattering about society events she'd attended and how she was starting to get out more again. They carefully skirted anything heavy, but it was heartening to have a kindred spirit in her. Both battling demons, both trying to stay strong.

The third time around the donut condo Akihito asked straight out, "Is Asami ok?"

Suoh disclosed no details whatsoever but he was full of reassurances that Asami-sama was safe and
Akihito sorely needed a distraction before he started climbing the walls. With his hunt there was little else left to do. Akihito would know the moment V1P3R so much as scratched his digital nose but until then, he could only sit and wait.

So naturally, being alone, it was the perfect opportunity to read up on a certain activity that a significant someone clearly had a great interest in but of which Akihito had little understanding. He typed in his first online search: bondage.

Which was why he 100 percent blamed Asami for his rosy cheeks when Suoh appeared in the doorway half an hour later asking if he was up for a visitor. Never mind the awkwardness of receiving a guest in Asami's condo as though he belonged there. With impressions of a dizzying array of cuffs and restraints fresh in his mind, and feeling warm in too many ways from his newfound understanding of aftercare and how Asami had been doing it all along, Akihito distinctly felt like he'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

Oda Hazumi tilted her head, her smile beautiful and knowing. "Did I interrupt something?"
Asami Ryuichi – part 2

Chapter Notes

It made me laugh how so many of you are suspicious of Hazumi (^_^) She's not all soft and cuddly but let's see if she can redeem herself all the same.

I hope you're starting to see what Asami is made of – or my humble take on it, anyway! Always a bit risky unmasking such a major character but *big breath* here we go, part 2. We've been building up to this alongside Akihito. I hope it resonates with you...

~ Nyx ~

Twelve hours earlier.

"My, aren't we living on the edge now. Wasn't it you who told me it raised suspicions to meet more than once a month?"

Asami could hear the laughter in her voice. "Technically we won't be meeting if I'm not there. I'm out of town tonight."

"Oh, even better. Two dinner dates already this month and now I'm dropping by your place when you're not there? The gossip magazines will have a field day. Whatever will they dream up about us? Is the Big Question imminent for Asami Ryuichi?"

"They'll never know you were there."

"I'm pretty sure someone will catch on to you purchasing an engagement ring."

"What on earth, Hazumi," Asami ground out, glaring out the limo window as they sped towards a private airport. Kirishima, to all appearances, seemed to be fully immersed on his laptop.

"Alright, alright." There was a pause. "We can go shopping together for a ring after you've proposed."

"Hazumi!"

There was a laugh like pealing bells. "This is far too easy."

"Hazumi, I'm serious –"

"Oh, hush, Ryuichi, you're always serious. Don't worry," she finally reassured. "I'll be discrete. No one will see me. But you want me to come by specifically to see Takaba-kun? After last time he might be more comfortable if you're there. It wasn't the easiest introduction for him."

"Whose fault was that?" Asami snapped.

"You can't blame me for looking out for you. You're a million times worse, you know." Her voice was warmly teasing.

Asami’s aggravation shifted into something harder, something darker. "Some things will never
"I know," she said quietly, conveying understanding and sadness and fondness in the space of two words.

The limo and the two blacked-out SUVs carrying his men were running along the boundary fencing of the private airfield. "Just speak to him, will you? But don't terrorize him."

"Would I ever?" she exclaimed with mock shock.

"I mean it. Just consider it an opportunity to get to know him."

"Sure you wouldn't prefer to wait until you're back?"

"I'm asking precisely because I can't be there tonight. He needs a distraction."

"From what?"

Akihito wouldn't want her to know he was suffering from nightmares. Asami smirked. "From how much he's missing me."

Oda scoffed, very unladylike. "Why can't I imagine him ever saying that?"

The convoy pulled up to the guarded gates of the airfield. Asami watched his men clearing access.

"So what bedtime stories does Takaba-kun like?"

Asami's gaze narrowed. "Don't be absurd, he's not that young."

"No? But I thought he was... How old is he again?"

"Twenty-three."

Oda gasped overdramatically. "You cradle snatcher!"

Asami wasn't about to justify his choices to his sister. "Are you quite done?"

"Done?" Oda repeated, bursting with glee and ammunition. "Thirty-five and having a serious partner for the first time? Someone you trust when you don't trust anybody? Someone you're bending all your self-imposed rules for? Someone you're more willing to risk me revealing all your dirty secrets to than leave alone because there's clearly something going on that you're not telling me?" She laughed. "My dear Ryuichi, I haven't even started. Takaba-kun and I are going to have so much fun without you."

Alt + F4 killed the browser on all things subspace – luckily mostly text and no damning pictures, but still! – as Akihito leapt to his feet. He knew his cheeks looked as warm as they felt.

"I was, uh, setting a snake trap."

Standing there feeling way underdressed in his tank top and a pair of Asami's joggers that he'd snagged wasn't helping any. Great. Just great...

Oda glided into the spacious living room, her body swaying like a willow with every flowing step. "On your laptop?" she asked, her teasing amusement reminding him so much of Asami it was scary.
"Uh, yeah. I'm probably over thinking it and I'm sure it's unnecessarily complicated, but I'm trying to cover all bases." It wasn't a lie. His elapine hunting just happened to be a lot earlier. He rubbed at the back of his neck. "Can I get you some tea? I mean, Asami's not here and you probably came to see him 'cos, well, you know, and anyway I'm guessing Blond Tank already told you Asami's not here but you're welcome to stay though, obviously, 'cos I'm hardly gonna kick you out of his place so I could get you some tea? or something? and shit I really should stop talking now..."

He noticed Suoh glance over. Shit, did he just use the nickname in front of the big guy? It was his rotten luck that Asami's condo was too high up from the ground for any chance of him being swallowed up and saved from all his embarrassment. Was there another way to die politely before he put his foot in it more with either of them?

She was gracious enough not to laugh but Akihito wouldn't have blamed her at all if she had. "I'll have some tea," she smiled.

"Right, tea coming right up. Uh, just make yourself at home. Or something." He dithered awkwardly as Oda's smile broadened, before slamming closed and grabbing his laptop and hurrying towards the kitchen to hide his red face.

Suoh followed, looking very much like he was fighting to keep a straight face.

Akihito grimaced, shoving his laptop aside. "Was that as bad as I think it was?" he whispered.

"Worse."

Akihito groaned. "I forgot how funny you were. Kick the blathering idiot when he's down, why don't you."

Suoh apologetically cleared his throat. Or maybe he was just covering up a laugh. "Perhaps she'll find it endearing."

"Endearing? That's the best you can come up with?"

Suoh made a faint shrug. "Asami-sama certainly does."

Akihito blinked. And flushed even brighter. "I'm not going to stand here arguing with you about how charming or otherwise my social ineptitude is." He determinedly set about making tea. He could do that right at least. He hoped.

"Would you like me to stay?"

Akihito glanced at him. "For security or moral support?"

Suoh's lips twitched. "There are no security issues."

"Great, so I need help, do I? No thanks. I've got this."

Blond Tank opened his mouth –

"And don't ask me if I'm sure," Akihito cut in. "I'm sure."

The big bodyguard paused, closed his mouth. He gave a brief bow with his head. "Good luck," he threw over his shoulder as he withdrew back to the genkan.

"Oh, ha ha," Akihito grumbled.
It's just tea, he told himself. It didn't matter that it was Asami's place and he was making tea for Asami's sister as though Akihito lived here or something... It's just tea. Just a cup of tea...

He managed to bring tea and snacks without tripping over which he considered quite an achievement. She was perched on the large settee like something the ancient Greeks would have eternalized as a statue for worship. He set everything on the coffee table in front of her and retreated to an armchair. Too late he realized they were in the same seats as their disastrous introduction.

"Thank you, Takaba-kun."

Akihito muttered some response that was more sounds than words. He glanced at her but looked away again just as quickly. She was as entrancing as a fey queen with magic both powerful and dangerous. She emanated the same brand of intensity as Asami. It must have been something in their blood, elevating them above mere mortals, functioning perfectly well in society but – Akihito suddenly baulked. Officially, Asami was a legitimate businessman. Oda had her own internationally successful fashion label. Did she also meddle on the side like Asami?

Akihito decided he didn't want to know. But that didn't mean he didn't automatically think of how Asami had removed his gun in front of her. Was she armed too...?

He almost jumped when she started speaking.

"I caused you a lot of confusion when I dropped in unannounced on Sunday. It wasn't my intention to upset you."

"That's – that's ok," he said, even if he was convinced that she totally had meant to throw the cat amongst the pigeons.

"I hope you were able to smooth things over after?"

The secret room – cock ring – chained – toys and over sensitive and barely-there whipping and coming blindingly hard and drowning in gold – Akihito was glowing, it was impossible not to with the sudden recollections flashing through his mind. He took a steadying breath. But there was something condescending twining with the concern in her tone which made him hold his chin higher.

"Yup, it's all good. Asami wasn't mad, it was just a misunderstanding."

"I'm so glad."

I bet you are, he thought snidely, then immediately regretted it. He didn't know why he was bristling so much. Did he feel under threat? Or maybe him and Asami? What Akihito was feeling for Asami – or at least, what he realized he felt – was so new that he didn't yet have the confidence to shout it from the rooftops or in her face, but that didn't mean he was ready to give it up.

But he was going about this all wrong, he realized. He'd been stumbling about with stilted words not knowing how to speak to her, what with her being Asami's family which felt pretty huge. But this wasn't like Akihito. He was brash and loud and it never seemed to bother Asami before, so he slouched back more comfortably and spoke more like his normal self.

"Must be pants coming all this way to find Asami isn't here."

If anything, this seemed to amuse her more. "Actually I came to see you. Ryuichi thought it might be a good chance for us to get to know each other."

"He did?" Akihito didn't notice her tracking his every expression, too busy caught up on why Asami might arrange the visit. "You spoke to him, right? Is he –" He stopped shy of asking if Asami was
OK, in case it worried her. "When did you speak to him?"

"This morning, before he left."

Akihito wilted a little. "Oh."

"Don't worry. He'll be back before you know it and you can show him how much you missed him."

"Like hell! I'm not – I'm not missing him!" How could she say things like that about her own brother?

"He was convinced otherwise."

"Of course he would be," Akihito grumbled, "he's got an ego the size of Jupiter I'm surprised he hasn't thrown the Earth out of orbit."

She laughed. "You're a breath of fresh air, Takaba-kun."

"If you say so. But probably more of a typhoon than a breath, I'm pretty sure he thinks I've thrown his perfectly ordered life into disarray."

"Maybe so. But he would've never allowed you to if it wasn't what he wanted," Oda said, and they both wondered at that. Matching his posture, she shifted back more easily against the sofa back. She made no attempt to be subtle about where she was going next. "What do you do, Takaba-kun?"

He laughed, only a little nervously. "Wow, here we go. Do you want my résumé too?" he joked.

"I'm in IT. Programming, white hat hacking, that sort of thing."

"White hat?"

"The legal kind," he explained, "also called ethical hacking. People pay you to find holes in their systems so they can patch it up before the non-legal kind can exploit it and land them in the doghouse."

"How did you meet?"

Akihito froze – colliding in the dead of night when Asami was surely not returning from any legitimate business – forced to hack a dodgy-as-hell USB stick – bagging the bullets from the laptop – blown in the limo...

"You know I know what Ryuichi does," she reassured, her voice like silk. "You can tell me."

Except, he couldn't. He didn't know where she fell in all of Asami's onion layers of secrecy. He answered without saying much of anything. "It's a bit of a convoluted story. I was investigating, uh, something, it's not important, but anyway someone hired me at Sion, and we sort of, uh, crashed into each other. And then I was covering IT Helpdesk."

"Only too well. I'm sure you had no problems telling him precisely what he was doing wrong. After all, you're not shy with words, are you?"

Akihito blushed faintly. "Yeah, well, someone needs to keep him on the level."

She tilted her head curiously. "That certainly must be a convoluted story to go from you investigating him to him trusting you."
"Why would you think he trusts me?" Then Akihito's eyes widened. "I never said I was investigating him."

"You just did." She smiled. "It seems you're into more than just programming and harmless hacking, doesn't it?"

Akihito's first instinct had been right. This woman was just as dangerous as Asami.

"And of course he trusts you," she continued as though he wasn't staring at her with a little fear. "There aren't many places Ryuichi can let his guard down but you're here, in his home, without him." She tilted his head. "Have you seen The Room?"

He heard the capital letters in her emphasis. He stammered, eyes wide and with a bright bloom flushing across his face.

She laughed. "I see. Well that says it all, really. So, why does he trust you?" Her eyes were piercing, evaluating. They reminded him of Asami to an alarming degree.

"Beats me," he shrugged, looking anywhere but at her.

"You must have done something," she pressed, her gaze turning him inside out. "Or not done something."

He concentrated on being nonchalant, trying to conjure up some of Asami's cool, indifferent, impermeable mask...

"So that's it. You found something on him and didn't use it."

This was getting into very dangerous territory where Akihito didn't want to go. No fricking way was he about to mention the video. "I never said that."

"You didn't have to." She leaned her dainty chin on her elegant hand. "But it has to be more than that. He wouldn't trust a sellout."

Akihito's expression hardened. "I'm no sellout."

"No, I don't suppose you are," she murmured thoughtfully.

He didn't want reminders of Yamazaki. He brushed them off in the best way he knew how, by talking. "It's probably more to do with a sticky situation I managed to get caught up in. He, uh and his men, they saved my life and we sort of helped each other out through that."

"I see."

Wondering what she saw exactly, he ducked behind his tea.

"So how did you become lovers?"

Tea spurted everywhere. "Excuse me!" He dashed into the kitchen and returned with paper towels. "If I had any doubt before about you two being related, I don't anymore," he muttered as he mopped up the table. "You've both done that to me now."

She chuckled. "It was far too tempting, I couldn't resist."

He stopped short of calling her evil. Asami, he would have done in a heartbeat. But she probably guessed the sentiment anyway, what with how her expression gleamed with amusement.
"Who made the first move, was it you or him?"

"He did, of course." He laughed it off. "I'm irresistible."

Her gaze was like laser beams. "Did he force you?"

He gaped. He couldn't answer that. Kind of no, but actually really kind of yes. But he'd never say that to Asami's sister. Akihito told the complete truth, or a truth anyway, even if his face burned as he tried to smile. "If you're worried, don't be. He's given me a safeword. I've never used it, but if I did, I know he'd respect it."

Oda was still watching him and he scratched the back of his neck again. "Sorry. Awkward. I'm sure you don't want to hear about your brother's sex life."

She waved an elegant hand. "It doesn't bother us talking about it, actually. Probably because we didn't really live together when we were little."

"You didn't?"

"He didn't tell you?"

He shook his head.

"About his childhood? About the Asami name?"

He shook his head to each one.

"Aren't you curious?"

"Fuck yes!" He blushed as she smiled. "Sorry. Yeah, I am. About everything. But I haven't had the chance to ask yet. Though –" he paused, glancing at her unsurely, "if he were to tell me, would it bother you?"

"He's already told you who I am, it's all part and parcel. Why don't I tell you now?"

That offer alone made Akihito more comfortable than he had been during this whole bizarre conversation or interview or whatever this was. He shook his head. "No! No thanks. I mean, it's enough to know that you wouldn't mind. But I'd rather hear it from Asami if you don't mind. It feels like..." He frowned, his gaze inwards. "It feels like I'm going behind his back otherwise."

Everything offered on a platter and he was turning it down – if Akihito hadn't known it before, he certainly did now. He couldn't act against Asami.

He pushed the thought aside as Oda shifted on the sofa, crossing her legs the other way. She was wearing a knowing smile that he had no idea how to interpret.

"So you like to investigate on the side," she probed. "How long have you been doing that?"

Akihito's expression tightened. Asami's sister or not, he had no obligation to be a doormat and let her rummage around every area of his life. Especially not this. "Oh, it's been so on and off it's hard to tell." He smiled innocently. "I hear you're a renowned fashion designer. Have you been in the business long?"

The emphasis was subtle. It was complete guesswork on his part whether she was involved in any illicit business, and if not he could simply and harmlessly be referring to her fashion label. But he was willing to gamble. If she was half as sharp as he thought she was, she'd read his meaning loud
and clear. *Back off.*

She clearly did. Her eyes gleamed like diamonds, her laugh rang like ringing chimes. She seemed positively delighted. "You know, I think you might be alright, Akihito-kun."

Gorging on a late-night *katsudon* dinner [breaded pork chops on rice] was the perfect remedy after Oda's visit. Which had ended on a good note but still, it wasn't like dancing through a field of daisies.

Much later still, Akihito was considering a coin toss to decide whether to sleep in Asami's bed or a spare room or on the sofa when his phone buzzed.

**Dorayaki King  Coming out tomorro night?**

An impromptu contest several years back had led to their messaging names. There had been seven of them guzzling *dorayaki* [red bean pancakes], Kou had wiped the floor with a whopping 28. It was Takato's fault for sourcing such an absurd quantity of dorayaki in the first place when he'd accidentally ordered 10 crates of the confectionary instead of 10 boxes when looking after inventory for his dad's convenience store. Their alcohol-fuelled, hindsight-lacking logic had considered it an inspired solution to hiding the evidence of his cock up.

Akihito's name was a consolation prize after he'd come a close second at 26.

**Sushi God B-)  Probably can't**
**Sushi God B-)  But soon I hope**

**Dorayaki King  Can we come over?**

**Sushi God B-)  Best not, creeps spotted outside**

**Dorayaki King  Wtf they still after u????**

Ah. Akihito had forgotten he hadn't mentioned that to his friends.

**Sushi God B-)  Losers**
**Sushi God B-)  Asami's sorting it out**

**Dorayaki King  Oooh ur knight in shining armour**
**Dorayaki King  Just move in already**

**Sushi God B-)  Not that again!!!**

**Dorayaki King  But he's smoooooking :).**

The flare of jealousy was surprising and fierce, even if he knew it was only a bit of buffoonery on Kou's part.

**Sushi God B-)  Oi hands off >:-||**

**Dorayaki King  See? :P still saying ur not together?**

**Sushi God B-)  Baka I've only known him a month. No one moves in together after a month**

There was a pause before Kou replied.
Dorayaki King  He's dealing with ARMED HITMEN for u. Cos THATS normal after a month

Akihito had known that, of course, but when put so plainly... It made him wonder the other side of the coin. What was *he* doing for Asami? Not a whole lot, was what. The disparity was glaring.

Dorayaki King  Ur clearly an item. Get over it

What did Akihito bring to this relationship? He'd never had any issues with low self esteem before, but Asami was just so remarkable that it made Akihito question his own worth. Not that he’d ever been made to feel lacking in any way. On the contrary, Asami’s focus was so singular sometimes that it felt like Asami thought rather too much of him.

Then there was that teeny tiny little detail of Asami being the kingpin of the Japanese underworld who came home smelling of blood...

Sushi God B-)  In what universe does it work?

It was a sincere question. Not that his friend could understand the extent of it. Another pause from Kou, even longer this time.

Dorayaki King  You're a free spirit Aki. Maybe you need someone like Asami to ground you

Akihito stared at the screen. Bloody hell, his friend was serious. But there were greater issues here, none of which he could talk about. Money would have to serve as a metaphor.

Sushi God B-)  He's an effing billionaire

Dorayaki King  So? U saying he's that shallow? Or u?

They both knew he wasn't but that wasn't the point. What Asami did...

Sushi God B-)  Different values. Different life choices
Sushi God B-)  Remember Venn diagrams? No overlap!

Dorayaki King  Does he care u can barely afford rent
Dorayaki King  Does he know?

This wasn't helping.

Sushi God B-)  He doesn't give a flying monkey

Dorayaki King  [Pictures of monkeys and wings]

Sushi God B-)  Glad I didn't say a rat's ass

Dorayaki King  Or flying shit

Spew  *U wake me up in the middle of the night for flying shit and rat ass??!*

Akihito barked a laugh, imagining all the messages pinging up. Takato hadn't fared so well in the dorayaki eating contest, though it was likely the liberal alcohol consumption rather than the dorayaki that had done it. Either way he was stuck with the unfortunate nickname.
This is too deep for u sleeping beauty, go back to sleep
Aki sounds like ur perfect for each other. U don't care about money
At all
I've never known anyone who cares less about it
People WANT to pay u and u turn them down
OK I get it already!

So it doesn't matter. He's prob had enough of golddiggers. U'll make it work
Would they? Akihito had no answers.

Hey do u like him?
Akihito stared at the white of his screen, something a little frightening tugging at his mind. He couldn't deny the pull, even now feeling the absence like he was missing that domineering arrogance or something similarly insane...

He couldn't reply. But his silence was answer enough for Kou.

He sure seems into u too. Dude what else matters?

Akihito stared silently out at the Tokyo nightscape. The fact that this specific angle was becoming so familiar was daunting. And yet there was comfort in that familiarity.

Contradictions again, just like always when it came to Asami. Colliding in the first place because of the very issue that divided them. Thrown along this same path now, ironically, by Asami's penchant for lawbreaking affording him the ability to protect Akihito from the backlash of chasing such activities down. Then just as Akihito had thought they'd connected, had a breakthrough, Asami came home reeking of blood.

Akihito reckoned he was allowed to feel bummed out at a time like this. Because there were no two ways about it, he was totally compromised when it came to the top crime lord of Japan. It sat like oil and water with everything Akihito stood for. He wasn't Z4m4 M1r0 just for the fun of it, it was a real fire that burned in him, to hold to account the rich and powerful who wielded their elevated social status like a gigantic middle finger to the law and took matters into their own hands. And yet when he’d smelled the blood on Asami, what had made him recoil wasn’t knowing that Asami had likely just been torturing and killing someone, but rather the part of himself that was actually grateful for Asami dealing with the hitmen who'd come after him.

No matter how he tried to focus on something else, his every other thought was about Asami. Was he ok? Where was he? What was he doing? Was he in danger? Was he safe without Blond Tank?

"I bear a message from Ichiji-san."

The woman was a veteran of receiving intimidating messengers. She stood tall with her sixteen-year-old daughter beside her. Both dressed in clean but tired attire, the long tee and trousers were perfectly shapeless and functional for menial labour. The harsh floodlights weren't kind to the shadows on their faces. She didn't look directly at Asami, or either of the two men he’d sent to escort her and the girl from their ramshackle home.

"I've heard that before," she said crisply. No nonsense without being rude. Toeing a fine line not to
Asami smirked. He could respect her mettle. "He wanted you to know, he wouldn't have minded the orchid."

The woman's composure visibly cracked. She reached blindly for the girl's hand, grasped tightly. "I wouldn't have minded the sakura," she whispered. She sucked in a bracing breath, held firm. "Is he alive?"

Asami regarded her for a moment before giving a single shake of his head. She was motionless, her face hard.

"It was his last wish for you and your daughter to live free. There will be no retaliation from Baishe, but it would still be prudent to relocate and stay off their radar."

She shared a look with her daughter, then finally looked him straight in the eye. "Why would you help us?"

She was wary. Perhaps she understood that Asami was somehow involved with or even responsible for Ichiji's death.

"I gave him my word," Asami said simply. He gave no further explanations, no excuses either. "My men will escort the two of you wherever you wish to go. They'll set you up with the means to see you through six months as you resettle and find your feet. You'll be safe. And free."

She seemed to struggle taking that in. She searched for any sign of deceit, found none. At last, her expression softened. She blinked hard. "Thank you."

With a single nod, Asami climbed the stairs and disappeared into his jet.

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_A world of dark._

_Cold._

_Phantoms lurking._

_Blood freezing, crushing and suffocating._

_Ice cold fingers, clawing into soft flesh, impossible to escape. Dozens on him – but hundreds on Asami. The scream that wasn't loud enough no matter how much Akihito tried, reaching a desperate distance that forever grew._

_Not fingers. Morphing into guns of liquid metal. Fluid. Deadly._

_Melting against his temple, drilling through his skull, lancing Asami's heart, those golden eyes glazing –_

It took Akihito several heart-thundering moments to remember where he was. The darkness was unfamiliar in one of Asami's spare rooms, the bulky shadows adopting sinister shapes of their own. Dank with cold sweat, Akihito was already on his feet braced for invisible intruders when he came to.

So much for proving that he could cope.

The sheets bunched up here and there. There was no other bedding on the spare bed. It had saved
him from getting tangled up but left him cold to the bone. Or that might have been due to the absence of a certain someone...

Akihito marched out into the living room, hitting on all the lights on the way.

"Takaba-san? Everything alright?" Calm, relaxed, quiet but not stealthily so. Suoh somehow managed not to scare Akihito to death as he called over from the front entrance.

Akihito poked his head around the corner. "Hey, you're still here." He cleared his scratchy throat. "Don't you need to sleep?"

"I'm on the night shift. I rested during the day." Sharp eyes took in the lingering sheen of sweat on the brow, the haggard appearance.

"Oh. Then d'you wanna come sit down? Uh... can I get you anything to drink? Tea?"

Suoh gave him an almost-smile. "Thank you but I need to keep on my rounds. Multiple teams and checkpoints to monitor. Is there anything I can do for you?"

Akihito shook his head, wondering if Blond Tank was trying to reassure him telling him things like that.

"Goodnight," Suoh said as he quietly left again.

The digital bloodhounds were primed. There wasn't much more Akihito could do until V1P3R sprang one of his traps but Akihito double checked for any signs of activity anyway. The Spotlight forum, any suspicious communication with previous contacts, signature markers cropping up anywhere –

He jumped as his phone rang. He stared at the display with some surprise. And considerable relief, more than he cared to admit.

"Shouldn't you be asleep?" Akihito retorted by way of greeting. The words were out before it occurred to him that the same applied to him. "Unless it's not the middle of the night where you are. 'Cos 'out of town' can mean anything, you know, and I still have no idea where you are. Should I say good morning?"

"I just finished a business meeting," came Asami's amused reply.

That voice, cool and deep and oh-so-arrogant, the one that Akihito knew so well he could hear the smirk in it. He gripped the phone tighter, pressed it harder against his ear as he snorted. "Yeah, like that explains anything."

He could hear a muted din from the other end, a fragmented jumble of voices and music and traffic, too indistinct to identify any one sound as though Asami was in a closed room separated from the noise.

"Where are you?" Asami asked.

"I asked you first."

"Did you? I must have missed that in amongst all your rambling. Where are you?" Asami repeated.

Akihito squinted. "Have you lost your marbles? You know exactly where I am. You've got your men all over my ass and I'll bet you already have their detailed report by now. Including a blow-by-
blow account of how I piss.

"I know how you piss."

A spasm took over Akihito's face. "I'm hanging up."

Asami chuckled. "Are you in my bed?"

"No."

"Take my bed."

"You're not even here. I'm not using your bed."

"You'll sleep better."

Akihito frowned. "Have you been talking to Blond Tank?"

There was a pause. "He mentioned seeing you on his last round."

Great. Suoh had probably guessed at the nightmare. Again. "I'm dealing with it," Akihito insisted quietly. "It's fine."

Another pause. "You've had a very traumatic experience, Akihito. It's natural to be affected as you are—"

"Asami!" Why suddenly now? They'd never broached this face to face, it was too thorny an issue. This was skirting dangerously close to a meaningful conversation. Akihito was all for avoidance. "Just leave it, ok?"

"There's no shame in—"

"Fucking hell, seriously! What's gotten into you?" Akihito exclaimed hotly. "Why don't we talk about you if you're so insistent on it. How are you sleeping? Do you have nightmares of faceless shadows trapping you and drilling a gun into your head and killing you and there's nothing you can do to stop it? You were there too!"

Akihito covered his face with his hand, shaking. It wasn't fair. He waited for some sarcastic remark...

None came. Still he waited and still Asami didn't say anything.

"You were there too," Akihito repeated, quiet, unsure. "Why are you so ok?" And I'm not?

Asami's reply was likewise quiet. "This isn't new for me." There was a pause. "Actually I'm surprised you're not any more of a wreck."

"Gee, thanks."

"Most people would be in therapy by now."

"I'm not most people."

"I know." There was an unwavering assurance in those two simple words, almost like quiet pride. Akihito blinked. And then Asami had to go ruin it. "Why else do you think I'm screwing you fifty ways to sundown?"
Akihito groaned, even as he relaxed at the more familiar territory. "You and your one track mind! I should write a piece about that in Spotlight, expose you for the perverted bastard you are and how you're actually ruled by your dick."

"Be my guest," Asami purred. "I'll supply you with ample first-hand evidence."

Akihito gaped, flushing red.

"Sleep in my bed, Akihito. Else I'll send one of the guards in to tie you to it."

Akihito scowled. "I'm surprised you'd let anyone touch me like that."

"Interesting which part of that you objected to."

"Wait! I'm objecting to all of it!"

"But you're quite right," Asami continued fluidly over his protests. "If they did I would have to...fire them."

Akihito sighed. "There you go with your threats again."

"It seemed like you needed an excuse."

Akihito couldn't argue with that.

"Get your ass to my bed."

Akihito didn't reply.

"Hmm, which of my guards is the most dispensable...?" Asami pondered.

"Ok, ok! I'm going! Quit threatening your men already!" He angrily punched the keys to shut down his laptop.

"If you insist."

Akihito could hear the smirk in the rumbling baritone. He flat out denied it calmed his frazzled nerves. "Bastard."

"Brat."

Akihito snorted.

"Get back to sleep. I'll be back tomorrow."

"Makes no difference to me," Akihito muttered, hiding his relief.

Asami chuckled, seeing right through him.

Akihito gnawed his lip. "Uh, Asami?"

"Hmm?"

Akihito hesitated another few seconds, letting his defensiveness subside. "...Thanks."

There was a hum of acknowledgement, as if to say Of course. "Goodnight, Akihito." The warm baritone wrapped around him.
"... Goodnight."

There was a pause, where he could imagine the smirk and intense gaze, before the line clicked dead.

Akihito sat there for long moments, feeling something indescribable squeezing his chest. Because there could only be one purpose for the phone call. It was all for Akihito.

He padded over to Asami's bedroom. The shadows were familiar here, the dark corners not so threatening. Comforting, even, allowing him to hide. He slid into the wide bed, Asami's scent permeating around him. Better. But it could be better still. Another moment's hesitation and then he grabbed Asami's pillow, hugged it into his face, inhaled a big lungful, and let the tension go.

Thursday, 7.34 am.
"Break it off."

"Asammmphh–?" Akihito's startled question was swallowed up by Asami's hungry mouth.

"... Or that's what I would say if I thought for a second that you would."
"He belongs with me."
"Goodness me, you're growling. That wasn't a voice, Ryuichi."

Akihito had been very busy snoozing through his alarms when the sound of the front door had cut through. He'd barely had time to shove Asami's pillow back where it belonged, plump it up and smooth it over a bit, and take two stumbling steps from the bed, when Asami strode through the bedroom doorway.

The kiss drove Akihito backwards into the nearest hard surface. Asami caught his wrists and pinned them to the wall. Akihito jerked with a yelp when a certain part of the male anatomy that was way too eager to say hello in the mornings jabbed uncomfortably. Asami chuckled and adjusted so the morning glory was nestled flush between them. His hands, warm and strong, dragged roughly down from Akihito's wrists pinned overhead, along the forearms and upper arms, thumbing the pink scar on the outer bicep, over the shoulders. He enveloped Akihito's jaws, drank in the sight of Akihito a little out of breath already and staring wide-eyed up at him – startled but curious, a little on edge but eager, oh so eager – then resumed his very serious pursuit of stealing all the air from Akihito's lungs.

Ok. So this was happening. Akihito was up for that.

Somehow their grabbing and heated tasting of each other led them across the room.

"Trying to bribe him off was foolish, wasn't it? Whatever's happened between you, he has your back."
"I know."

"Do you? Do you really? It wasn't just that he told me nothing about whatever business you got him involved in and had to skirt around. It's not even that he refused to find out more about you through me, even though I offered and he's curious 'as fuck', as he put it." She paused pointedly. "I asked how you became lovers. He didn't lie but he was careful what he said. What on earth did you do?"
Akihito toppled with a startled squeak. Asami followed him onto the bed. But then after lowering himself over Akihito, slowly relaxing pretty much his whole weight onto the smaller man, Asami pressed his face into Akihito's neck. And stayed there.

Asami seemed to like it there, Akihito was beginning to notice. The warm breath tickled his skin prickling with sensitivity, his body raring to go. Sheesh. It was only the night before last when Asami had made him come and come in the dojo until he'd literally lost consciousness, surely he couldn't be having sex withdrawal or something!

Asami simply remained there, just pressing Akihito into the bed.

"He... was interested."

Hazumi was silent.

"Deep down. He just needed some convincing that it was alright to be interested."

There was a long pause. "For crying out loud!"

It seemed Asami wasn't into speaking right now. He was just lying there, still fully dressed, coat included. Had something happened? Had it gone well with his 'acquaintance'? Or totally shit?

Or maybe Asami had fallen asleep.

"Miss me?" Akihito tried.

Asami huffed in amusement.

Still awake then.

"He protected your honour, Ryuichi!"

Asami said nothing.

"That kid is gold."

"I know."

"You don't deserve him."

"I know."

An alarm blared from somewhere beside them. Asami tensed as Akihito fumbled for his phone.

"Ah, hang on, lemme just get that."

Akihito managed to snag it with his fingertips from where he'd last tossed it on the bed. He switched off all five alarms.

Asami relaxed again like a dead weight.

He smelled like Asami, as well as a faint blend of other alien smells of food and people and places
that came with travelling.

Was that a faint whiff of jasmine? Maybe incense?

Hazumi's ire dissipated slowly. She didn't have to say what was on her mind for him to understand. "Or maybe you do, brother," she said softly after a long while.

"Is this middle-aged sentimentality setting in? I doubt he'd think so."

"Talk to him. He may surprise you. He's certainly surprised me."

"He tends to do that."

"Are you alright?" Akihito asked. The same question Asami had put to him only the day before. The same softness born of concern.

Asami raised himself enough to look at Akihito. It was a familiar intensity that made everything inside Akihito stutter, but he didn't shy from it. Asami made an acknowledging sound in the back of his throat. That was about it.

Akihito squirmed under the weight of that undivided regard. "'Cos you're being a little weird. Ok, maybe a lot weird, but let's start with a little and work our way up. You know, try a few words, see where that goes."

Asami trailed a finger through the blond hair. He still said nothing, his face a study of concentration.

"Hurry up and get all the tiresome details out of the way so I can tell him all the good stuff. You know, like how you tried to drown me when you were fifteen." Her voice was smiling.

"By all means, mock the poor drowning younger brother for trying to climb out of the pool, why don't you, when it was your brilliant idea to shove me in knowing full well I hadn't learned to swim yet. Because that's fair."

"Since when do you subscribe to fair? I need a co-conspirator against your devious ways and Akihito-kun is perfect. He won't put up with you stepping out of line."

"As if you can't hold your own," Asami muttered.

"And don't you forget it," she retorted. Then she became entirely serious. "You treat him right from now on, Ryuichi. If you hurt him, I will castrate you."

"Ouch."

"Take heed if you don't want to live out your days as a eunuch."

"I'm rethinking Akihito's loyalty if he's turned you against me already."

Hazumi laughed. "He's brilliant. I believe you've found your match, brother."

Asami rolled off him and off the bed, disappearing into the walk-in wardrobe. Akihito lay there another moment before sitting up. He shuffled to the edge –
"Don't move."

Akihito paused at the order that floated out from the big closet. Typical Asami. Akihito grinned. "You want me to pee here?"

There was a grumble of something unintelligible. "Go."

Akihito sniggered and hopped off.

When he came back – with his teeth brushed too 'cos morning breath was gross, end of, even if Asami didn't seem to care – Asami was propped up with his pillow against the headboard. He was in his suit trousers and shirt, the top two buttons undone, sleeves loose without cufflinks and pushed up. His legs were stretched out and crossed at the ankles, an unlit cigarette hung from his mouth. His eyes were closed.

"Tired?"

"Mmm."

Akihito rocked on his heels. "D'you want any coffee? Breakfast? Peace and quiet so you can sleep?"

"Just you," Asami said around the cigarette, his eyes still closed. "Come here."

Akihito rolled his eyes but didn't have the heart to refuse when Asami looked so exhausted. Akihito was also strangely warmed that Asami was letting him see it, not putting on a front with him.

"Here I was thinking I'd get to work on time for once," Akihito said as he crossed the thick carpet. "But seeing as you're talking and making great progress and all, I suppose I can spare a few minutes."

Asami plucked the unlit cigarette from his lips, dropped it on the bedside table without looking. "You can spare a lot longer than that. We're not working this morning."

Akihito stopped short of the bed. "Is this your way of saying there are more bullets with my name on it out there?"

"Nothing like that. We're just staying in."

"I can't not go to work."

"You can. Need me to shut down Sion?"

"No I don't need you to shut down Sion, geez! How ridiculous are you?" Akihito flopped down on the bed beside Asami, his head about level with Asami's chest. "Fine. No work, for a while anyway. I'll just tell Ogawa-san to take up my tardiness with you, shall I?"

Asami smirked, but the expression was short lived. His eyes opened to slits as he regarded Akihito slightly further down from him.

Splendid. Asami was back to his silent staring.

"Did something happen when you were gone?" Akihito prodded. Asami opened his mouth but Akihito beat him to it. "Yeah yeah, gotta be more specific, I know." He rolled his eyes as Asami smirked. "But you know what I mean." Barely had he sensed the negative than he exclaimed, "Is this about your sister? You know a heads up would've gone down a treat. I had no time to get my shit together or even get dressed."
"You were naked?" Asami said with mock amazement.

Akihito slapped him with the back of his hand. "No I wasn't naked, you baka! I was wearing this." He waved at himself. "But I had no idea what to say to her! I probably offended her. She thought I was horrible, right?"

"She didn't."

"You spoke to her?"

"On the way here. She thinks you're too good for me."

Akihito sniggered. "Damn straight. If you weren't such a pushy bastard this ass would be way outa your league, mister. But urgh," he slumped back on the pillow, "you gotta give me a chance here, warn me next time. She's so suave and –" he gestured vaguely – "sophisticated. I can't talk to people like that."

"You talk to me just fine. In fact I can't get you to shut up." There was a grin tugging at Asami's mouth.

Akihito stuck his tongue out at him. "You've only yourself to blame. You obscure any hint of refinement with your freakishly big ego. Who knows what horrors are hidden under all that elephantine big-headedness?"

Any bite from his words were marshmallow-ified as he flopped over Asami's stomach, chin resting on the backs of his hands. Warmth seeped through the crisp white shirt.

Asami's eyes slid closed again. A large hand trailed up Akihito's back, played at the nape of his neck. Something was definitely on Asami's mind. Or maybe he was just really tired. But he didn't seem inclined to be left alone to sleep either.

"Your parents must have been beautiful," Akihito rambled on. "I mean, your sister's like... you know, a goddess. A very intimidating goddess." He quirked a lopsided grin, shrugging one shoulder from where he was comfortably draped over Asami's abs. "And you're not half bad to look at either, when you're not being an insufferable bastard. Not that your ego needs inflating any."

Asami's amused smirk was short lived, something hard glinting through his gaze as he stared over Akihito's head. He stared so hard that Akihito almost turned to see if someone was there, when Asami spoke.

"She's my half sister. Related through our biological father."

That carried so many connotations in itself. Akihito, for once, held his tongue.

"He was an ugly piece of shit," Asami added.

Akihito couldn't help snorting.

Asami's upturned lips carried no warmth. "For him it was very much a case of the best genes skipping a generation. His mother was said to have been a true beauty. Turned the head of the Emperor himself, or so they said. She had an exceptional mind. If cancer hadn't taken her early, she might have prevented some of what happened."

Asami's fingers weaved without attention through Akihito's hair. "My biological parents were both of the Shinjui-Kan, a prominent Yakuza group at the time."
Akihito had an awful sinking feeling. He'd heard of the Shinjui-Kan, they'd been wiped out in a bloody turf war twenty, nearly thirty years ago.

"They met when they were both in disgrace. My... mother, for want of a better term, was the only daughter of the old Oyabun [top boss], she'd had a messy and very public fling with some up and coming pop idol who was eventually paid off. Father was a lieutenant who risked too much and messed up one job too many. They needed to garner favour and their scheme was to provide a much desired male heir to the Oyabun. Theirs was a marriage of cold calculation between two power-hungry, self-obsessed people."

Asami's eyes slid down to Akihito. "Here's where you say you now see where I inherited those charming qualities."

Akihito was wide-eyed at the animosity carried in the words mother and father. No one should have to carry such burden. "I wouldn't joke about something like this."

"Why would it be a joke?" Asami said carelessly. "As much as I despise them, I can't deny the likeness." His gaze drifted back out into nothing. "They tried for several years but there was no child. I'm told it wasn't a good marriage to begin with but the lack of issue only strained matters further. Father took on a mistress," he took a breath, his demeanour hardening – "she was the widow of a low-ranked enforcer who'd been so in debt that she couldn't leave the group. Hazumi was born. A child, even a girl, was a good distraction for a while. The Oyabun doted on her, father was back in favour. But my parents didn't stop trying and five years later, I came along." His voice grew cold. "A male, blood-related heir to the Oyabun, the future absolute leader of the clan – Hazumi and her mother didn't stand a chance. They were shunted out to a hut down at the end of the garden and were made to do all the housework in the main house. Their lives changed overnight.

"My upbringing was different to Hazumi's from the beginning. I was schooled and trained to take over the group. There was no lenience for errors. No excuse for childishness. They stamped that all out early on."

Asami carded soothingly through the blond hair. Akihito hadn't realized he was leaning up on his elbows, clutching at Asami's shirt. He eased his grip by didn't let go.

"The Shinjui-Kan had always been ambitious but they renewed their drive to expand their territory. Perhaps the Oyabun was spurred by having a new successor, but the top lieutenants were simply greedy, vying for position as the clan reordered. They were all rash and stupid. They took on other groups, several at a time, without covering their backs, with too many alliances that were shaky at best. Some clashes they won, some they lost. Ground was gained, ground was lost. They pissed off a lot of people.

"It all came to a head when the Oyabun engaged in a full scale war with the powerful Ishihara Group and lost. I was 8, Hazumi was 13, when half of the Shinjui-Kan were taken out in one day. The Ishihara lieutenants rounded up all the survivors and took us to a big derelict building, which was fairly standard as takeover executions go.

"But they gave us each a choice," Asami said, chillingly unemotional. "They lined us up on our knees, pointed a gun at each of us in turn, and told us to choose one life to be spared. My father chose himself. My mother chose herself." He rubbed at Akihito's hands that had clamped over his arm. "When they asked the Mistress, she chose the children, Hazumi and me." Here, at last, some sign of feeling. "She insisted we weren't responsible for our parents' actions. But the lieutenants forced her to choose just one, or we'd both be shot. She chose me." He was silent for a while, weighed with memories long buried. When he spoke again he was much quieter. "I chose Hazumi. I still remember the look on her face. The prized child that she hated, for all that I stood for and all that
she and her mother had suffered because of it. I'd chosen her. I don't think she could believe it.”

Asami resumed impassively again. "Hazumi chose her mother. Everyone else made their choices too. Some chose to save themselves, some chose others. Once we'd all spoken, we were told that the survivors would be drafted into service. The Ishihara Group had no place for those lacking the potential to put the good of the whole before self-serving greed, they said, and they executed everyone who'd chosen themselves. Including my parents."

It was one horrifying thing after another. Akihito huddled down against Asami. He wasn't sure which of them needed the contact more.

"With my parents dead, the Mistress adopted me. I remember fighting a lot with both of them when I first moved in and then suddenly things being ok, but not much about how we went from one to the other. Hazumi told me most of this later. It took a year before they realized that it all stemmed from that day. Hazumi was angry because her mother had chosen another child to save. I was angry because I'd been saved by someone else's mother. It turned out that her mother had chosen me because she knew that I would then choose to save Hazumi. Because I always had. Whenever father became drunk and judged discipline to be in order, I used to act up. All I remember is that I hated seeing him beating her and it was easier taking the beatings myself. Hazumi used to think I was stupid for suddenly starting to trail dirt into the house or leaving my books on the floor for him to trip over, just as he started on one of his moods. As she grew older she saw it differently. So our warzone became a home and we became a family. Her mother... became mine, in a way that my biological mother had never been." He paused dead for a second before continuing, his voice flat. "In the meantime I worked as a runner, an errand boy, whatever the Ishihara wanted whenever I wasn't at school. But that only lasted until Hazumi was 17."

The storm of dark fury was potent even after all this time. "The Ishihara Group traded in people, and Hazumi was stunning. You can do the maths. It was raining that night. There were twelve seconds between lightning and thunder. We'd just finished dinner, udon noodles it was. I had the red chopsticks just because I knew Hazumi wanted them and I managed to grab them first. We still fought in little ways, as siblings do."

Akihito could still picture the pattern of splintered plastic and computer fragments, covered in splodges of blood where he'd walked over them in bare feet. Was it always the weird insignificant details that stayed with you?

"There were five men. Mother did everything she could to try and stop them. They killed her for it. She was used goods, they said," Asami snarled, "she wouldn't sell for much. I managed to get close enough to one of them to take his gun and I shot them. All five of them." He sneered. "They were so surprised, so angry. I'd been working diligently for them for four years without a word of protest. But they'd mistaken compliance for loyalty. Fools, the lot of them. How could a 12-year-old be using them to further his own knowledge and skill? It never even occurred to them."

He was all steel. "Mother's maiden name was Asami. After she was murdered I took on the name, with Hazumi's blessing, to raise it to greatness. She was deserving of far better than life had given her. I vowed to myself, and to Hazumi, that we would never be so weak and helpless again."

"My intention wasn't to destroy the Ishihara. That wasn't nearly enough. I accelerated through school and my degrees. I established Sion. As soon as I could afford it, I hired protection for Hazumi and she didn't have to dress as a scruffy boy anymore to avoid attracting attention." He smirked at the memory. "All the while, I built on what I'd learned with the Shinjui-Kan and the Ishihara Group. They were useful for that, at least. I trained and armed myself. I grew my network, above and below ground. I armed myself with information on deals and trade routes, alliances and enemies open and
covert, where the bodies were buried and who'd put them there, who was sleeping with whom when they shouldn't be, who was clever and dangerous, who was stupid enough to be dangerous in their own ways, and how to tell the difference. I bought up shares and bought off people, enough to control key businesses for the main Yakuza groups. When I made my first legal billion, I subjugated them all. They could kneel to me and flourish, or refuse and be wiped out. By the time I decimated three Groups, they got the message.

His focus swung to Akihito. "This is who I am, Akihito. I've been a killer since I was a child."

Akihito found himself sitting up frozen. His breath shuddered out before he gasped another. "That wasn't your fault!" His voice cracked.

"I've killed many since and I will kill many more. Those are on me. I'll go to whatever lengths I deem necessary to protect what's mine and I make no apologies for it. This insufferable bastard will never change."

"Oh my god..." All that had made this man so ruthless and yet so human, who despised cowardice and weakness, who, despite all that he did, understood the value of human life – Akihito's shaking hands were reaching of their own accord.

Asami came forwards. "Hey," he soothed, brushing the backs of his fingers against Akihito's cheek. They came away wet.

Something was breaking inside Akihito. Whisper soft, with the significance of a thousand cranes, he could only manage one word. The only one that mattered. The one that said it all. "Ryuichi...!"

Golden eyes pierced to his soul, something nameless and intense filling that striking face. "Only you, Akihito."

And damned if that didn't sound like an oath, heartrendingly vehement, heartbreakingly vulnerable.

Asami engulfed him in his arms and in a kiss. And as Asami covered him and filled every inch of him, demanding and hungry and urgent and needing, Akihito gave all of himself. He held nothing back.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

New artwork!! \(^{=^=}=)/*

Happy dance!* Hop back to Chapters 6 and 9 for Asami&Akihito art, you have to check them out! I'm mesmerized every time I look, I end up staring and staring... (*^_^*) They're amazing!! I'm absolutely loving all the art, thank you Shey!!! <3<3<3

I'm really happy that you liked my take on Asami! Phew haha XD Thank you for all the feels and even tears, I'm super touched that you were moved by his story!

So where do we go after that emotional rollercoaster? Onto the next, of course! ... Or, that's what I want to say as though I have a clue what I'm talking about. I actually want to go back to the drawing board at this point, I'm still in two minds about this next part. But that could just be the part of me that wants to turn this into a Disney-esque happily-ever-after number already... *dreamy dreamy...* Anyhows. Enough procrastinating – though most of that was writing later chapters so it's all good investment! ;) I'm going to go with the comet trail I cast from the start and just see what you think, because A leads to B leads to C and I really don't want to miss out on C! What's life without reaching for the stars? Or something like that! XD

Moreover, what's a story without cliffhangers? Or two? Or three or four or – how many has it been now? ;o) Well I guess that answers my wondering whether to give you a heads up about it, I almost dropped it on you out of the blue!

So here we go. Which camp were you in? ;P

~ Nyx ~

Friday, because in the end they never made it to Sion the previous day.

"Come up."

An expectant pause, then, "Yes, sirrrrr."

The pause was mirrored right back. "Is that all? No snarky objections about how you don't take orders from me?"

"Right back atchya. No pervy growlytones? 'Cos isn't that why you're calling me yourself, so you can do your rumbly thing about coming or riding the elevator shaft or –"

"Now there's an idea –"

"No."

"It was your –"

"No."
"You suggested –"

"No!"

"Killjoy."

Akihito's jaw dropped in a huff, although his mouth curled just a little. "I have plenty of joy, I'll have you know. An abundance of it. So much, in fact, it's turned my hair blond. Yeah, take that. I just happen to not be a perverted old man like you." He could be frank, within reason, alone in the vending machine alcove, within reason. Sagano and Nakatani waited just outside pretending to be part of the marble masonry. "I, unlike some, can actually last a car journey without kicking the secretary out and keep my hands to myself!"

So Akihito might have only managed a flimsy and rather breathy and entirely brief protest when Asami had started kissing him and his neck and the large hands were running over his chest and lower, oh sweet Jesus lower... Akihito cleared his throat. It was the principle of the thing! Plus it was already the second time that morning!

The first? He wasn't thinking about it. Nope. Not thinking. About the shower. At all...

"Since when do you have a secretary?" Asami puzzled.

Akihito stuck out his tongue but the effect was lost over the phone.

"I can think of better uses for that tongue, Akihito," Asami smirked.

Akihito's gaping was entirely serious this time. "You didn't even see that!" he cried, his eyes darting around to see if the bastard might be watching through a security camera or something.

"I know you well enough. Now get up here."

"I don't have time for –"

"Akihito," Asami broke in, horribly serious all of a sudden. "We need to talk. Come up."

Well, there went his joy. "Alright, alright, I'm coming," Akihito muttered. Grabbing the Pocky out of the machine, he headed for the elevators.

The noodle bar had ten swivel stools along the subway tunnel. It was easy to mask his approach what with everyone sitting with their backs to the concourse and with the lunchtime surge of people. Akihito plonked his folded arms down on the bar next to his intended target, perfectly timed with the slurp of noodles.

"Wassup, Mr Two-Faced Back Stabber."

Maybe Asami and his sister were onto something. There was something rather satisfying seeing the spurt of shock, though he would've preferred water next time. Watching noodles flying everywhere was kinda gross. He also felt a little sorry for the hardworking noodle bar owner who eyed them with an almighty frown.

"Takaba?" Yamazaki coughed out, surprise and guilt warring on his face.

Akihito's brow dragged down. That gruff voice had been a familiar staple for ten years. The stress lines had gained years of depth in the space of just two weeks. Or maybe the florescent lighting of the underground just made the detective look unnaturally older.
"Got a minute?"

"Uh –" Yamazaki glanced at his half full bowl.

"You're fucking kidding me," Akihito snapped, pushing off from the bar. "After the shit you pulled? I'm not asking, you dick." Hands stuffed in his jacket pockets, he stormed away.

"Takaba! Wait!"

The shop owner and others sitting at the bar and even a few passersby stared as the older man rushed to follow, his rumpled suit and mac flapping.

"Hold up!" The detective fell into step as they climbed the stairs to the exit. "I was only going to ask if I could get you lunch.

"After you were happy to believe you were putting me in danger? Fat chance."

Yamazaki pulled a frustrated face. "You know that's not what it was."

"Wasn't it? So I only imagined you trying to put me in the shithouse with Asami 'cos you cared more about locking him up than what happened to me? Is that what you're saying?"

"Nothing would've happened to you! We would've arrested Asami, like we'd been aiming for all along. I thought we were working together!"

Akihito stalled at the top of the stairs. "Don't fucking make me laugh, that had nothing to do with working together!" He peeled away around the corner and crossed the road. "I still haven't forgiven you. I wouldn't be talking to you right now if I didn't have to."

"Have to?"

They stopped in a narrow street behind a car. A black car. A gleaming black limo, in fact. Three men in black suits melted out of shadows and doorways, circling them. Another two men who'd been following them all along from the station brought up the rear, closing them off.

"What the hell is this?" Yamazaki demanded, spinning all around, feet braced defensively.

"You're giving me a minute, is what it is," Akihito told him coolly. "It's the least you can do for me. Get in." He rounded the limo and one of the men stepped forward to open the back door for him. He slid in without a backward glance.

"I suggest doing as he says," said the blond giant who'd followed them from the subway.

The circle of men closed in a step, then another.

Yamazaki glared at them all. "I'm a police officer with Tokyo PD Major Crimes. You should think carefully before you do anything stupid."

"Stupid how?" the giant asked. "Takaba-san extended you an invitation to talk. Perfectly harmless and perfectly within your rights to refuse, of course."

Yamazaki scoffed.

"If you have no wish to mend bridges, that is," the giant added.

Yamazaki simmered, clenching his jaw. He stood his ground for another few seconds before he
relented, stepping around to the open door, eyeing them suspiciously all the while. He carefully
ducked in, his eyes landing on a pair of perfectly polished black shoes, one leg crossed over the
other.

"Pick a seat," came Akihito's voice.

The detective followed the shoes up to scowl at the shady businessman sitting beside Akihito.
Yamazaki edged onto the long seat running the length of the limo. The giant folded himself in beside
Yamazaki – close on his gun side, as though knowing he was armed. Opposite was a smaller man in
wire-framed glasses.

The two on the back seat formed an odd picture, one in a pristine three-piece suit, the other in jeans
and casual jacket. It had fallen open to reveal a t-shirt saying 'let me drop everything and work on
your problem'. They sat with their shoulders touching, comfortable with the contact.

Their obvious closeness rankled, making Yamazaki's tongue sharp. "So you're his lap dog now, are
you? Congratulations."

"Fuck you," Akihito threw back. "I do what I like. I don't take orders from anyone."

Asami smirked. "What he said."

The detective looked between them, hiding his surprise at the billionaire's tolerance, even
amusement, at the punk's typical brashness.

"Well, I'm here. What do you want?" Yamazaki groused.

Akihito narrowed his eyes at his one-time friend and came right out with it. "Do you want me dead?"

He might have been amused at how taken aback the detective was if he wasn't still smarting so badly
from Yamazaki's betrayal before.

"No! Geez, what the hell? Dead? You know I don't. What the heck is going on?"

"Well, see, people are trying to kill me, which you can see is a bit of a problem, can't you? There's a
whole bunch of things I'm not gonna tell you 'cos you'll just go rabbiting off to Dick 1 and Dick 2
like last time and I don't trust you anymore –"

"Hey, that's not what hap–!"

"Can it," Akihito snapped. "I don't wanna hear it. What I do wanna hear about are the cases against
Kitano and Ozumi, do you remember them?"

Yamazaki nodded unsurely, throwing a wary look at Asami and his two men as though expecting
them to get all trigger happy. "Yeah, we brought down the Oyabun of the Ozumi group and was it
four? five? of his top men. Closed several of Kitano's sweat shops."

"Then maybe you'll also remember that I wasn't named on any of the case files or evidence trail for
the arrest warrants, remember that too?"

The detective glanced at Asami again. "I can't disclose classified –"

"No! Fucking hell no, you're not gonna pull that one!" Akihito exploded. "Asami is the only reason
I'm still alive and you don't know shit, so you can damn well swallow your beef with him and
disclose any fucking classified case details we need so no one ends up with a fucking bullet in their
Yamazaki was looking increasingly unsettled. "Yeah," he said hesitantly, then again, more surely, "yeah, of course I remember. We specifically kept your name out of it 'cos both those groups had a reputation for getting nasty. We didn't even use your usual alias." He looked again at the others, but whatever signs of surprise he was expecting, he got none.

"Did anyone work with you on it? Officially or on the down low, anyone who might've picked up my name?"

"No. I just gave you a code like any other CI. There were no names anywhere, not even in my own notes."

Akihito glanced at Asami, who gave him the slightest of nods without taking his eyes off the detective. Akihito's face darkened. "Then I gotta ask, who d'you rat me out to?"

Yamazaki stared hard. "What?"

"You heard me. The Kitano and Ozumi Groups both sent hitmen out for me, apparently for unpaid dues that can only be repaid with my life."

"How the hell would you know that?" His pointed look at Asami said he knew where the intel came from.

"That's privileged information," Akihito retorted, "and I'm not telling you, I don't trust you anymore. Especially now. 'Cos they got my name from somewhere, and it's looking more and more like that somewhere was you."

"Now wait a moment," Yamazaki fumed with heated denial. "That's like soliciting the hit myself! I wouldn't do that, you punk!"

Akihito couldn't help drawing a parallel with when the detective had tried to force his hand in front of Asami. He sat back, crossing his arms. "Wouldn't you?"

"Good god, you don't actually think it was me?" Yamazaki exclaimed.

Asami interceded for the first time. "Could anyone have figured it out? Overheard you in conversation? A room layout that might have meant they were standing closer than you realized, or any ventilation shafts nearby that might have carried sound? Anywhere outside?"

Yamazaki was shaking his head to each one. "No. I – I don't think so. We were always careful."

"Anywhere his name was linked to the code you used? Anyone have access to your CI list?" Asami suggested.

"I never put Takaba's code or name on it. I didn't need to."

Something about Asami sharpened. "So he was missing?"

The detective nodded carefully.

"Any other CIs you omitted?"

A shake this time.

"So anyone who knew you or how you worked would have known that the one and only missing CI
code would belong to the one that you worked so closely with that you didn't need to include him on that list?"

Yamazaki froze. And paled. Went rather white, in fact.

"Do share," Asami prompted acerbically.

The weathered detective was staring at Akihito like he knew he'd fucked up. "I – I let someone see the list. Maybe a week ago? But it was just the one time. There was an informant we both used but he couldn't track them down, he wanted to double check the last known address. He – he asked if it was the complete list. He asked twice."

Akihito couldn't speak.

"Who?" Asami demanded.

"But it might not be –"

"Who?"

"Sudoh."

"What?" A burst of breath, more air than sound. But then Akihito found his voice. "Dick 2?" he exclaimed, loud and disbelieving. "You told Dick 2?!"

"I didn't tell him! I kept you off the list precisely because I was trying to keep you out of it! But – it's just –" Yamazaki shook his head. "Shit, Takaba! You know I'd never intend for anything like this to happen! I'll straighten it all out. I'll get to the bottom of whatever he's –"

"You've done quite enough, don't you think?" Asami interrupted, as cold and immovable as a glacier. "We'll handle this. You'll carry on with whatever your schedule is, work on your cases as usual, annoy whoever it is that you usually annoy, and leave this alone. Are you able to do that, at least?"

Yamazaki nodded slowly as if in a daze. "Shit... Takaba, I – I never meant –" He searched for words, something, anything that could make this ok. But how could there be? The fact that it wasn't intentional was hardly justification for getting a load of crazy-ass fuckers thirsting for Takaba's blood. The last two weeks had given him a lot of time to reflect and he was painfully aware of what he'd done, ten years of partnership destroyed in one moment of blinkered carelessness. And now this...

Akihito hated the weathered detective for looking so haggard and old, 'cos it made Akihito feel more sad than anything else. It would've been so much easier to just be angry. "Well at least it wasn't on purpose this time," he muttered. He felt so tired. He wanted to hibernate in Asami's bed and not emerge until this was all over. "You should go now."

Yamazaki paused, nodded. He started shifting to the door, but turned back one last time. "I'm sorry, Takaba."

"... Bye, Yama-san."

Yamazaki found himself bundled out by the blond giant. He stood alone in the empty street as the limo sped away.

Kirishima rolled down the privacy screen as they pulled away. Kuroda turned around up front where
he'd been listening in, beside Sagano at the wheel.

Asami's gaze was so intense Akihito wondered if he could roast s'mores in it.

"Sudoh Shuu," reverberated the gathering storm clouds. Asami's sharp mind assessed and weighed and condemned.

But the hand on Akihito's thigh was warm, the thumb circling gently as Akihito let them take care of it. He felt like he'd drained all his energy reserves dealing with Yamazaki.

Suoh kicked them off. "Is he an outlier or knowingly involved?"

"More likely puppet than puppeteer," Asami replied, not that that would garner any more mercy.

They held their tongue until he rolled back the thunder, contained until he deemed it time to let loose.

"So," Asami considered aloud, "V1P3R investigates Akihito, sees an opportunity through Sudoh, directly or via Yamazaki, and gathers names of those with a personal agenda against Akihito."

"That fits," Kuroda seconded. "V1P3R's intel would have come through Sudoh and through Z4m4 M1r0's articles in Spotlight."

"But how did V1P3R connect Takaba as Z4m4 M1r0?" Kirishima pointed out.

"Sudoh could have provided that too," Asami considered quietly, already mapping out possibilities. He prompted the Prosecutor for an update. "You have eyes on them all?"

"As much as we can," Kuroda reported. "Solitary inside for the Ozumi and Daigoku heads, surveillance outside for a lot of the major players across all four groups. The prison wardens are containing as much communication as they can, external lines are being monitored."

"Be ready to move some muscle into protective custody," Asami ordered. "I don't care who, anyone convenient from two of those groups. Have them ready on intercept when I meet with Sudoh. We'll drop Akihito off at Sion first, I don't want him anywhere close when we draw a line under this."

Kuroda looked up sharply at Asami spelling things out so clearly in front of the brat. But Kirishima and Suoh simply nodded acknowledgement and started knocking remarks back and forth to coordinate as they always did.

"I'm on Matsui –"

"I have locales –"

"– we can draw Sudoh out alone with a tip-off –"

"– three venues currently secured, I'll update with dispatch teams –"

"– Matsui has plausible deniability –"

"– just need nearest the intersection point. Kuroda?"

The Prosecutor looked between them all, at the two openly strategizing in front of Takaba and Asami's total lack of concern over it, spared a moment to take in this extraordinary development, and got with the picture. "I'm on it. Protective custody and transfer routes."

Kuroda was dropped off on a quiet road several minutes later. Kirishima moved up front with
Sagano. Suoh remained in the back but adopted the selectively deaf and blind routine that the bodyguards were becoming extremely proficient at.

It was almost like being alone with Asami. Akihito fidgeted, feeling that funny shyness again. It had come on bit by bit the previous day. Things somehow felt different between them. New different. Better different. But at the same time like nothing had changed.

Akihito cleared his throat, staring out the windows. "That sucked." He relaxed a little against Asami as he leaned back.

"We're getting close," Asami said.

"Yeah." Akihito nodded. He hoped. "But it still sucked."

"You handled it well."

Akihito snorted. "Having a human lie detector to hand was handy."

Asami rubbed Akihito's thigh. "Is that all I'm good for?" Teasing but gently, knowing Akihito was rattled.

"Your limo makes a handy mobile interrogation room."

"Doubly handy."

Akihito murmured something but trailed off quickly. He took a breath. "What're you going to do to Sudoh?"

Flint entered Asami's gaze. "He'll answer to me."

"Which means what?"

Asami regarded him. "Precisely that. His... infatuation with me has been useful till now and I've exploited it to suit my own ends, but he's far overstepped the mark if he's put you in danger. He will answer for what he's done."

This convoluted muddle again... How was this meant to be ok with Akihito? Knowing what was coming, premeditated, and against a detective at that... But Asami would have no forgiveness for anyone who endangered those close to him, Akihito understood that now. What was more, Akihito had no desire to change him.

"Just... be careful, alright?"

Would he know, he wondered, if he was being swallowed up in Asami's darkness? Because as Asami looped an arm around him and hauled him close, it didn't feel like darkness. It felt like sanctuary.

Asami?

Sudoh did a double take, backtracking to the street he'd just passed. But by then, all he saw was the flap of coat tails disappearing around the next corner.

Black coat tails.

Sudoh hurried down the street. He rounded the corner shop and caught a glimpse of someone's back
disappearing around the next turn. But even with the late setting sun in his eyes it was a very distinctive back. That stature could be nobody else.

Pleased, he rushed after Asami – but then someone ahead of him took the same turn, ducking into doorways, hiding his face under a hoodie.

Sudoh broke into a run.

He caught up with them in an alley, Asami looking bored at the tiny knife being waved in his face.

"Hey!" Sudoh knew the wannabe mugger – it was the CI who'd just called him, in fact. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" He strode between them, shoving the scrawny guy back.

His CI took one last look at them and legged it.

"Are you alright, Asami-sama? Are you hurt?" Sudoh patted over Asami's shoulders and arms. "What happened?"

Asami not-so-subtly stepped out of reach, his eyes narrowed fractionally. They cleared in recognition. "Detective Sudoh? What are you doing here?"

"I thought I saw you and –"

"You were following me?" Asami asked sharply.

Sudoh laughed nervously. "Nothing so creepy. I'm here on business actually, I was meant to be meeting someone. But uh, it looks like he didn't show." He cleared his throat. "This isn't your usual neck of the woods, Asami-sama."

Asami's face twitched in annoyance. "I was carjacked."

"Carjacked? Your limo?" Awfully concerned, Sudoh pulled out his notepad, only to be waved away.

"There's no need to get him into that kind of trouble."

"Him?" Sudoh thought he was terribly clever. "You mean Takaba?"

Asami paused, his discomfort clear. "I appreciate the assistance. Have a good day, Detective." He started turning away.

"Wait! Ah, Asami-sama, just a second." Sudoh's face – clearly a man but with attractive lines – arranged into concern and care. "I'd like to help, if something's troubling you. Off the record if you prefer."

Asami appeared to consider the offer seriously for a moment before he shook his head. "I'm sure he'll leave me in peace now. A car is a small price to pay." He took a step away again.

"Is he causing difficulties? I don't like to see you troubled, Asami-sama."

As Asami still hesitated, Sudoh placed a supportive hand on his arm. Always so strong, firm with muscle. Sudoh wished he could touch it every day. What a chance this was. But it was about to walk away. He leapt on the opportunity – not looking a gifthorse in the mouth and all that.

"I might know people who can help, who can give you more... surety."
Asami eyed him hard. "I don't need to go to such extremes." His dismissal was cold, but the dangerous undercurrent shivered deliciously through Sudoh. Asami took another step away.

Sudoh rushed headlong to stop him. "I didn't explain myself properly, Asami-sama. There are ways to incentivize a person, with harmless pressure or encouragement..." He let it hang, the proverbial carrot.

"Pressure?"

Sudoh worried at his lip, letting his tongue dart out. Nothing explicit, just a glimpse. Would Asami bite? "Name-dropping a few particular names would do it, people Takaba has ticked off in the wrong way, who'd return the favour tenfold if they knew his real identity. You only need reassure him that you would keep his name safe in exchange for his leaving you in peace."

"Takaba doesn't know anyone like that."

"They're dangerous people."

"Dangerous? Is that what you call the rabble he associates with?" Looking thoroughly unimpressed, Asami turned away.

"Yakuza," Sudoh added hurriedly.

Asami paused. "You must have the wrong person. Takaba Akihito doesn't associate with yakuza."

"Not in that way. He's helped throw a lot of them in jail and he wasn't always on the right side of the law doing it. He has a record."

Asami shook his head, started to walk away, his steps purposeful. "Now I know you're pulling my leg. I had him investigated, there's no record."

"They're redacted!" Sudoh insisted, hurrying after. "His records are kept under wraps by law because of the people he acted against. Nothing would have turned up with an ordinary background check."

Asami had stopped, watching him hard. Then, with a quick glance around, he stepped closer, dropping his voice. "You know this for a fact?"

Sudoh saw something glinted in Asami's gaze – was he impressed, perhaps? Sudoh smiled, letting his eyes shine. "I've seen it myself, the complete records. I can be very resourceful."

"Indeed." Asami scanned around them again. They were still very much alone. "What kind of names?"

Crunch time. Sudoh hesitated, knowing there was no turning back from this.

Asami didn't rush him. He pulled out a box of cigarettes from his pocket and drew one out with his lips. Sudoh immediately stepped in with a lighter. Purposefully not extending his arms, he revelled in the closeness as Asami tipped his head to light up.

"I can't imagine what kind of names could help me against Takaba," Asami said softly. They were still only inches apart. Neither stepped away.

"Try Daigoku," Sudoh told him, equally quiet, sharing in this special confidence. "And Nishizuma."

"Nishizuma?" Asami inhaled, exhaled aside. "The men were from the Nishizuma Group, that time at
Takaba's apartment. "Golden eyes glittered at Sudoh, so close, that enthralling focus. "You've been helping me all this time, haven't you Sudoh-san?" Not Detective Sudoh, but Sudoh-san. Speaking man to man, real acknowledgement after all these years.

Sudoh was barely blinking. "I'll always watch your back, Asami-sama. That worthless punk, I've always disliked him. I knew he'd be up to no good as soon as one of my colleagues gave him your name and true enough, he tried to meddle in your affairs. My friends in Cyber Crimes were only too happy to receive the tip-off, they'd been after him for a while. But then he ended up at Sion and got his claws into you... You deserve to be free, to be with someone more worthy."

"You got him arrested," Asami remarked under his breath. Sudoh tried to place the tone of voice – was it a touch of wonder? It seemed a bit off for that. But then Asami's next question trumped any other worries. "Someone worthy? Are you suggesting yourself?"

Bathed in the last flare of the sun before it bid farewell for the day, Asami's gaze glittered. Sudoh could barely take breath. "If you wish it. I'll be whatever you want me to be, Asami-sama. I would do anything for you."

Asami looked beyond Sudoh. Softly, that Sudoh had to lean in to hear, he murmured, "And if I want Takaba gone?"

Shadows clouded that brilliant gaze, clouds of turmoil. This great man would never look so troubled again, not if Sudoh had anything to say about it. "I know someone. Actually I don't know who it is," he amended regretfully, but was quick to reassure, "but I know they're very interested in taking Takaba out of the picture. It's only a matter of time."

"Soon?"

"I wish I could be more specific but I'm not privy to the details. With my position, I haven't been actively involved."

Asami took a long drag and exhaled it over Sudoh's head. And with that he seemed to come to a decision. "This way," he said, leading down the alley and around the corner.

"Where are we going?" Sudoh tried to contain his excitement. He'd made great inroads, he just knew it –

Around the corner was a limo. The one that was meant to have been carjacked. With that giant of a bodyguard waiting beside it. There were also two prisoner transport vans, the white paint standing out in sharp relief behind the limo.

"What is this?" Sudoh demanded. He took a step back but was prevented by more guards appearing behind him. "Asami-sama?"

"Yes, remind me, Suoh?" Asami prompted. "How does this go again?"

The big guard signalled his men who went to open up the vans. "There was a mole in Major Crimes working with the yakuza, who arranged for certain prisoners to break free during transportation. But he miscalculated and mixed two opposing sides together."

The men began guiding out prisoners who were clearly under the influence of some drug, the way they stumbled and blinked, not really with it. The sun finally sunk below the horizon, dipping them in shadows, the temperature dropping noticeably.

"They engaged in a shootout that tragically took all lives," the bodyguard continued as handcuffs
were removed and guns were placed in the prisoners' hands.

Under the roaring rush of horror, Sudoh met Asami's eyes. The golden gaze was livid, practically bleeding red as Asami finally unleashed his wrath.

"Takaba Akihito is under my protection, Detective. An attack against him is an attack against me."

"But – Takaba! He's nothing! He has no manners or refinement, not even a proper job –"

"You believe these are the qualities that matter to me? How about having someone killed to serve one's own lust, how do you believe I rate that particular depth of self-interest?"

Sudoh blinked, seeming to realize how wrong he'd been all along. "You don't know what Takaba's done! He was investigating you –"

"On the contrary, I know everything. Hasn't it occurred to you, Detective, there must be a reason that I protect him? I will not relinquish him to anyone. Not to V1P3R, not to any number of hitmen, and certainly not to the likes of you."

Asami took hold of the nearest thug's hand, gun and all, pointed it at Sudoh, and shot him messily – with calculated precision. The first shattered a knee cap, provoking an anguished cry. Sudoh collapsed onto his knees, generating yet another howl. The second bullet sank into the shoulder, three more into the torso. The thug simply stood there, swaying and blinking blearily and barely registering anything.

Sudoh coughed, choked up blood, and crumbled.

Asami stood over him. "You said you would do anything for me, Detective. Well, now you can die."

Losing grip with reality, Sudoh's bloody lips broke into a smile, his eyes glazing over. "With my –" he coughed, more blood gushing out – "last breath – set you – free –"

More blood and he choked, and choked –

"What do you mean?" Asami dropped close, grabbing his hair. "Sudoh!"

But consciousness bled out and Sudoh was gone, blank eyes staring into the sky.

Asami stormed for the limo. "Back to Sion. Now!"

"You have your orders, finish up here," Suoh instructed his men as he ran after his boss.

No sooner had they peeled out of the alley – slowing just enough to avoid leaving tire burns as they rejoined the main road and racked up speed again – than Suoh received an update through his ear com.

"Sir... Sion's under attack."

Wailing from low and sliding high, over and over, the emergency siren blared through Sion HQ. They all jumped, looking uncertainly at each other. Not the usual fire alarm, they had no idea what this was. They'd never heard it before.

"This is an emergency evacuation. Make your way calmly and quickly to the nearest emergency evacuation point. This is an emergency evacuation..."
The disembodied voice came over a sound system no one had known existed. The Tech guys all glance at each other, then at Ogawa, who looked at the bodyguards by the door. Sagano and Nakatani were already coming towards Akihito to form a closer defence. Yumi threw a questioning look, which Akihito returned with a shrug and shake of the head.

"Let's get going then," Ogawa said, injecting some brevity, and confidence, despite being as unsure as everyone else.

They all climbed the stairs to the foyer to find it packed with people.

"What do you mean, you don't know?" Sagano was muttering into his wrist mike with quiet urgency. "Find out who pulled the alarm."

The foyer was packed with the whole building trying to leave at once. They shuffled into the congregation of staff bottlenecking through the revolving doors. Someone opened the side doors and the traffic jam eased just a little.

But a scream rent the air, shrieking and full of terror. It was somewhere at the front of the doors. Another joined in, then a third –

The thudding blast of a semi-automatic ripped the air. Bolting in panic, people ran helter skelter, not knowing where they were going, where was safe, their screams and yells adding to the cacophony of the sirens.

This was Tokyo. There was no frigging way that Akihito had managed to stumble into yet another gun fight by coincidence. They were after him.

The guards were of like mind. Sagano caught his arm and drew him towards the wall, pushing his head down. Nakatani scoped out for the attackers from behind, his slightly taller height giving him a better view over the panicked rush of heads.

"Secure room," Sagano yelled at Akihito, pushing him towards the stairwell. "Closest one's on B1."

A rush of people collided into them.

"Keep going!" Nakatani shouted over the mass of heads as they got separated. He pushed through to try and catch up.

But the gunshots kept up, sharp echoes from multiple places in the foyer and impossible to pinpoint their origins, and people kept coming, everyone frantically shoving for exits. The approach to the stairwell became a dangerous crush of desperation. Sagano kept a tight grip on Akihito's arm, then around his waist in a bid to keep Akihito close. Other guards found them and formed a perimeter around Akihito, and their tight group shuffled through against the onslaught of panicked people. But then another rush of people surged in their terrified frenzy, breaking through and scattering their little group.

Akihito lost sight of the guards in the pandemonium. If it had been Blond Tank he would have spotted the giant in the crowd, but he couldn't see the others.

"Takaba!" he heard.

"Sagano! Nakatani!"

"Takaba!"
He craned to see as he was pushed to and fro by the heaving mass of terrified people.

Someone grabbed his arm. He jumped, yanking his arm free, only to find it was Ogawa.

"We have to get out of here!"

Ogawa grabbed his arm again and started pulling him towards the back of the building. But Akihito suddenly didn't know who to trust. All he knew was that hitman were here for him again, and Ogawa was insistent on steering him in a particular direction...

He yanked himself free. Ogawa turned to him in surprise, shocked at the suspicion and fear shadowing the usually cheerful face.

"What're you doing? There's no time!"

Akihito was shaking his head, backing away.

"Come on!" Ogawa reached for him again –

Akihito threw himself in the opposite direction. He squeezed and elbowed and shoved his way through the throng of panicked employees, sometimes being washed along in the flow, sometimes wedging his way through, ducking as a gun went off seemingly only metres away.

"Takaba?" Ogawa was still trying to follow.

As Akihito frantically looked around for an escape from him as well as the gunfire, someone else bumped into him from the side.

"Takaba!"

It was Mitarai and Yumi, clinging to each other. He grabbed onto them, the only way to stay together in the heaving mass of desperation.

"They're shooting!" Yumi shouted, shrill with panic. "At the front! They've got guns!"

"Come on," Mitarai yelled, and continued drawing her towards the stairwell. "We can get out through the parking levels."

B1, Sagano had said. Maybe if Akihito made his way there, Sagano or Nakatani would find him or he'd bump into some other guards. He helped push them towards the stairs, keeping Yumi between him and Mitarai to buffer her from the worst of the blows as everyone knocked into everyone else.

The crush was worst at the single doorway to the stairs, squeezing, pushing, mashed to half their size – then they were through, bursting out onto the landing and then hurrying down the crowded stairwell.

It was quieter here, the sirens and gunfire muted, no one screaming, just the drumming of dozens of pairs of shoes on the linoleum-covered stairs.

"Akihito-kun?" came Yumi's voice from a little further ahead.

He spotted her worried face peering back at him. "Coming!" he called back.

Mitarai and Yumi pushed out through the doors on B1 where most people seemed to be headed. Akihito followed along the landing –
He was grabbed from behind, dragged roughly back through a service door that was opened just enough to let him through.

"The fuck –?"

A heavy blow to the side of his skull – pain bolted though his head and down his back. He cried out, stunned, as his vision flooded with sticky darkness, tunnelling on the slit of light closing off as the service door swung closed...

It was the still, silent reactions that worried them the most. The fury that much more potent, that could only be calmed by utter carnage.

In this instance, the guards deemed it entirely warranted.

"I offer my most humble and sincere apology. There is no excuse."

Sagano delivered the formal phrase with utmost gravity, and it would have been repeated by Nakatani and the six other guards all bowing from the waist if Asami hadn't waved dismissal.

"We'll deal with this later. The first priority is to find Akihito."

"I've lost contact with three teams," Suoh reported. "Their posted locations might give us the outbound trajectory."

"Or way in," Asami reasoned. "Casualties?"

"Three confirmed dead. Two heading to hospital, one injured but continuing the search. Two unknown."

"Contact Ishida. I want SATCOM access on standby."

Kirishima nodded and retreated to a far corner to place a call.

Ogawa's already startled expression became even more stunned. From military satellite communications it was only a quick deduction to Ishida, the Defence Minister.

Cigarette smoke curled around Asami as he turned to the Tech head, standing close, the sharp golden gaze boring through Ogawa's head. "Ogawa-san, time is short so I'll be brief. Takaba has been taken. Are you involved?"

Ogawa's eyes widened further. Almost in a daze, he shook his head slowly.

"I thought not," Asami acceded. "Assist my men in every possible capacity to help find him. Try and think of everything and anything that might help, legal or otherwise. There'll be no ramifications. Do you understand?"

"I – I think so. But shouldn't the police –"

"Takaba's life is in danger, we don't have time for legalities and red tape. Will you do whatever it takes to get him back or should I find someone else?"

Ogawa blinked at the man looming over him, the real concern betrayed in his harsh demeanour. If this powerful man was so concerned... Ogawa's brow set in decision. He nodded. "I'll do it."
"Akihito."

"Wh – why're you in here?"

"I've been meaning to ask, why was my pillow warm when I returned home yesterday?"

"Uh..."

"And smelling of you?"

"Whaaa... What pillow?"

"The one you were evidently sleeping with when I was away. Were you holding it close, imagining it was me?"

"O-of course not!"

"No, I don't suppose it was hard enough, was it?"

"Stop with that – haaa! Get off! This is not the time! Besides you just got dressed for work!"

"Then peel it off me. My clothes are all wet, I need assistance."

"Assist yourself, you baka. It's your fault for groping me when I'm trying to shower."

"Trying's about right. You missed a spot. Right here –"

"Ahh! Where do you think you're touchinmmmhhhhgg!"

"You can't tell? Need me to touch you some more?"

"Aaahhh.... You.... hnnn..."

"And how about here?"

".... Gaaahhh... You... This is all your fault... Get over here. And take these off. You can do it yourself, you're the one who got them all wet."

"Mmm want a show, do you? Who's the pervy one now?"

"Baka, that's not what I – argh, fine. Give me a show then. I'll sit right here and you can strip for me. Ha! How d'you like that?"

"Perfect. That's it, Akihito, keep your eyes on me. See every inch of me. You want to lick me, don't you? All down my chest..."

"..."

"How about down here?"

"Jesus Christ, you're ridiculous..."

"Ridiculously hot, you mean."

"Ridiculously big headed."

"Big elsewhere too."
"I rest my case."

"Sure you don't want a piece of this? Right here? I'm ... sure it would... feel so much better... if you..."

"........ Oh for fuck's sake, gimme that."

"Gimme? Is that any way to speak about –"

"Stop talking, you ridiculous, ridiculous bastard, and just lemme – mmmhpph – mmmm –"

"How did they get in?"

Asami paced the meeting room he'd commandeered, glancing frequently at Ogawa working on his laptop.

"Looks like an inside job, sir," Suoh replied. "They used a service entrance. Perimeter security footage show the gunmen heading straight there so they knew someone would leave it unlocked for them. But internal footage has been wiped so we need to pull up the backups, they're not immediately –"

"Ah, sir? Sirs?" Ogawa was half turned towards them though his eyes were still focused on his screen. "I was just starting to back-track the gunmen's route and found this."

It was a CCTV view of the corridor leading off from the service entrance. They saw the back of a person in maintenance personnel uniform and cap, it could have been any number of employees, male or female.

"I uh, borrowed access to the security archives. They deleted the surface file but we still had this, since you upped protocols to hourly backups. This is the same door –"

Ogawa's voice trailed off as the unknown person checked up and down the corridor. But the camera was directly behind them, obscuring their face. Retrieving things from their pocket, the person removed the cover of the card reader and replaced the computer chip inside. It took barely a minute. They pushed the door ajar, checking it opened freely, before pulling it closed again.

"They disabled the electronic lock," Ogawa muttered. The two tall men were ominously silent as they watched.

The person checked along the corridor again and replaced the lid. They tested their own security pass, checking the card reader still beeped green for the standard five seconds before deactivating. Unless someone tried opening the door without using their card, they wouldn't have known any different.

That was when the person turned, facing the camera directly as they walked back down the corridor.

"Oh my God..." Ogawa gasped.

Someone was hammering his head. Everything ached, his muscles, his bones. Vision was a blurry mess. Hazy. Sound jarred him in fractured waves, distorted and distant.

"... a hundred kilos..."

"... narrow margin..."
"... plenty..."
"... more ..."
"... these rats, idiot..."
"... but the whole..."
"... up to here..."
"... you're done?"

"Yeah, here. Put it back in there."

There was a clang of tools.

Akihito screwed his eyes shut, curling into a ball – only he couldn't. He was lying on his side, his wrists tied behind his back. Not like how Asami did it, with a silk tie or padded leather. It felt like they'd used zip ties. Thin hard plastic bit into flesh, grating on bone. It forced him lucid.

"You still going with this? Everything else is a go."

"We can't have everyone painting him like a saint in his obituary, can we? You're always so impatient."

"I've been patient for months, haven't I?"

Now that his head was starting to clear, Akihito could hear them better. There were two voices. He could hear – what was that, water? And something hard, hollow, knocking haphazardly and gently against each other.

"Barely. You wanted me to blow the fucker's brains out."

"Yeah, but I've played nice all this time."

"You're a real hero."

That water – slapping, but not like in a bath tub. Actually he could smell the sea. Were they on a beach? But it didn't smell that fresh, mixed with diesel and other manufactured smells. The rough concrete he was lying on carried its own stink too. Or was that plaster? Fume central, ugh.

"Yes I am, as a matter of fact. It was nauseating. Bleurgh!"

"Don't you dare hurl on me."

"Like you would've been any different. You've already given him a good wallop, must've been satisfying."

A horrifying chill swept through Akihito that had nothing to do with the cold. He knew that voice. There was no mistaking it.

"More than you can imagine."

"I thought you'd killed him. All that blood. I'd have been seriously pissed off with you if you had."

Akihito knew who V1P3R was. How could he have been so blind?!
He thought he'd remained still but something must have given him away.

"Oh look, sleeping beauty's come around."

Footsteps preceded the familiar face. It wasn't a smile he knew too well, though. They didn't usually smile at him. Especially not like this, gloating and vicious.

"Hey, Takaba. Nice of you to join us."

Akihito swallowed bile. "Mitarai."

"Well?"

"Not yet, sir. I'm sorry."

"But you found Akihito's phone," Asami ground out. Not that that had helped, discarded in one of Sion's service elevators.

"Because it was on. Mitarai's phone is switched off, I can't track it. I'm sure Takaba could think of something, but... Well actually, there might be someone who can."

"Then bring them in!"

"There's just one issue. Inoue Yumi, she's been temping with us on the Helpdesk and she's a white hat hacker too. But she --" Ogawa stared at a folder full of doc files. "It looks like she's been gathering information on Takaba -- his routine through the day, different kinds of hacks he's talked about and how he did it, a load of things. It's like she's been keeping tabs on him."

"You have her location?"

"Right here. I pinged her cell, she's with this group of employees here." Ogawa pointed at the blueprint he'd pulled up, at one of the meeting rooms being used by emergency services to process witnesses.

Asami gave Suoh a look. The big guard slipped out the room.

Ogawa swallowed. He prayed he'd never end up on the sharp end of this man's wrath.

The employees were being interviewed only one floor down and it wasn't long before the guard returned.

"Ogawa-san?" Yumi saw her boss first. Then, "A-Asami-sama?"

Asami took her by the arm and pushed her none-too-gently into a swivel chair. He leaned over her, his hands on the armrests.

"Where is Akihito?"

Eyes huge, she stared in obvious alarm. "Akihito-kun? I -- I don't know."

Asami stared for a long moment. "When did you last see him?"

"In the foyer, when the -- the people started shooting. No wait, after that, he was there when we headed down to the parking levels. But we got separated."
"So you don't know where he is?"

"No." She was pale. "Is he ok? Has something happened?"

Asami's gaze remained hard. "There are people trying to kill Akihito —" her face dropped in horror — "Those gunmen were after him and now he's missing. I can only assume they have him. Are you working with them?"

"No. What? No!"

"Then why were you tracking him?" Asami finally released the chair and stood back, indicating the screen with all her files.

"Tracking? But I wasn't tra – oh those? They're just – I'm writing a feature on him."

"A feature?"

"He's DigiH4wk. He's a celebrity in the hacking world. But no one knows much about him, he doesn't hog the limelight or give interviews but... he's brilliant, in so many ways. I just wanted to do an article on him. I just... I admire him..."

She trailed off as Asami's gaze burned into her.

Ogawa stared too as though she was mad. "Does Takaba know?" he asked.

"No," she squirmed. "I was going to speak to him after I'd written it, to make sure he was ok with it. I wasn't going to publish it if he wasn't! It wouldn't be anything invasive, just about how he likes Pocky, and the funny things we've talked about —"

"Can you locate a phone that's switched off?" Asami cut in.

Yumi was caught with her mouth open mid-sentence, but a lightbulb lit. "Akihito-kun said something once, about remote program controls and how a scarily high proportion was possible, I'm sure he mentioned location tracking. Even if the phone's off, depending on the ware it can still pull juice from the battery and send a signal. Unless the battery's actually been physically disconnected, that is, but that's harder with smartphones these days so —"

Asami pushed her chair in front of Ogawa's laptop, who hurriedly pushed away to make room.

"Do it. Now."

"Of course. I've got his number —"

"No. Find Mitarai."

"Mitarai?" She blanched at the murderous look Asami gave her. "Oh no..." She didn't waste time with useless questions, quickly starting to tap away on the keys to find the software she needed. "I'll find him, sir, I promise. I'll find him. Oh god, Akihito-kun, please be alright..."

Akihito struggled to a sitting position, about all he could manage with his wrists bound tightly behind him. His head swayed alarmingly, not that he let on. "You're V1P3R?"

Mitarai grinned, gleeful but cold. Hateful. "In the flesh. You never guessed it, did you Takaba? Or should I say, Z4m4 M1r0."
"You?"

"I know, right? The idiot who can supposedly only handle the most basic computing stuff and the dumbest of the bunch. Surprise!"

Akihito pulled his legs in and crossed them for balance. The world was seriously pitching. "You're V1P3R?"

Mitarai rolled his eyes. "So we've just established. Did we knock a screw loose?"

Akihito was mostly buying time as he slowly focused through his wavering vision and nausea. But he could hear Mitarai getting annoyed and at a time like this he'd score cheap points wherever he could, thank you very much. "But... you?"

Mitarai's amusement was diminishing fast, Takaba's continued disbelief starting to grate. "It's not that surprising. The dumb act was precisely that, an act. I take it as a compliment that my guise was so convincing."

"Is that what you say to your friend here to save face," Akihito scoffed, "so he doesn't figure out you're just a script kiddie?"

The so-called friend laughed from behind. "Good one."

"You don't even know what that is!" Mitarai complained.

"Don't need to, your face says it all. He really winds you up, doesn't he? Almost worth keeping him around just for that."

There was something familiar about the second voice too. Akihito turned as if to look back at him, taking the chance to scope out the area under the dotted pools of lamp posts. They were at the end of a long, narrow, bare stretch of concrete, only about twenty metres wide. Hemmed in by a wall of cargo crates on one side, a straight edge dropping off into darkness on the other, lapping with the sound of water. Far off, the street lamps gave glimpses of prefab outbuildings, more cargo crates, even the shadow of a shipping behemoth. The only things close by was a metal fold-out table, a briefcase on top, what looked like some walkie talkies but with way more buttons and cables that dangled out of sight behind some black cases beside the table.

They were at the docks? The place felt dimly familiar though Akihito couldn't recall visiting any industrial docks before. He couldn't turn enough to see the guy behind him.

"Idiot," Mitarai was grumbling, "as if you'd pass up the chance to see Takaba dead."

"Woah," Akihito tried to reason. "That's a bit extreme, isn't it?"

Mitarai's whole demeanour changed. "Extreme? Extreme?! How the fuck can you sit there and say that, you fucking murderer!"

Akihito shook his head and immediately regretted it. He blinked slowly as the world swayed again. "Yeah, I gotta break it to you, I've no fucking idea what you're talking about."

Mitarai glared.

Akihito glared blearily back.

The stalemate might have dragged on, except for the heavy, cold hands that gripped Akihito's
shoulders from behind.

"Then why don't we enlighten you," slithered an eerie voice. It was plain wrong, a clashing mix of pleasant and homicidal. "Because your luck has run out, just like I promised you."

Akihito glanced to the side and caught the dead eyes, the jagged scar running all the way down the cheek and through the lip...

"You...!" There was no mistaking the yakuza Akihito had traded insults with amidst the wreckage of his apartment shot to pieces. But he was quick to mask his fear. He wasn't going to give them the satisfaction. "Uh, who're you again?"

Lifeless eyes stared back. "It's Wakajima. Maybe you forgot the name but bet you can't forget this ugly mutt, can you?"

Akihito steered clear of that in case the guy was sensitive about it. "What're you doing teaming up with a loser like Mitarai?"

"Come on," Mitarai goaded, "you must have better insults than that. You should use them while you still can."

Scarface came and crouched in front of Akihito. The guy was clearly off his rocker, his eyes vacant of sanity. "Family's a funny thing. It ties you to people you have nothing in common with, until something happens and you end up with the same agenda." A rough hand clenched Akihito's jaw, digging in painfully, forcing his chin up. "The face that beguiled Asami. Or maybe that was your ass? Filthy homos, the both of you. His heart's as black as the Devil. You? You're not as innocent as you appear either. Hiding behind your computer, sowing death and destruction. Two peas in a pod."

"What the fuck are you both on about?" Akihito jerked backwards, trying to free his face from the painful grip.

But Scarface followed him. Akihito landed backwards with a rush of air propelled from his lungs, the yakuza kneeing him in the chest, their combined weight crushing his bound hands into the ground. He couldn't breathe –

Suddenly there was a glint of metal floating before his face – five inches of gleaming razor-sharp horror... Akihito froze up.

"Who appointed you judge and jury?" Scarface asked, his voice creepily calm while his eyes were shot white with insanity. The knife dropped from view, then the point was pricking up under Akihito's chin. "So righteous in your ivory tower, casting oppression and misery in your wake – what gives you the right?"

Mitara placed a cautioning – and cautious – hand on Wakajima's shoulder. "Aniki..." [Big brother or unrelated organizational senior] "Not yet."

The knife withdrew, the weight lifted off his chest. Akihito gasped for air, rolling onto his side. He kept a wary lookout from the corner of his eye.

"The hell?" Akihito swore as he gradually caught his breath. "Is he your brother or is he, like, 'your brother'?"

This was so bizarre. They didn't look anything alike. Was Mitarai actually yakuza?

Scarface swung the knife between two fingers, staring unblinkingly at Akihito. Mitarai, on the other
hand, was twisting with rage, ugly and festering.

"It's time you faced the consequences of your actions," Mitarai snarled. "You and Asami both."

Cold seeped through Akihito, and it had nothing to do with the temperature dropping. "What does Asami have anything to do with this?"

"Too much," Scarface said.

"You almost threw a spanner in the works," Mitarai told him. "I got a job at Sion, spent months trying to get close to him. I was going to fuck up Sion's systems and finances using Asami's own account because that would've been great, wouldn't it? But you turned up out of the blue and somehow convinced him it was a good idea to downgrade his root access! Then you left, but just as I had my foot in the door with him, you came waltzing back!" He spluttered a mocking laugh. "Not that any of that matters now. Aniki actually thought I'd mess it up but Asami never saw through me."

"Didn't you say he ignored you most of the time?" Akihito taunted right back. "Rather than not seeing through you, isn't it that Asami never looked at you?"

Scarface laughed.

"That's not it!" Mitarai argued hotly. "We talked! We did talk! Yeah, laugh it up. You'll both pay soon enough."

"For the last time, what the hell are we meant to have done?!!"

"You really have no idea, do you? You're a murderer and you're completely ignorant."

Akihito huffed an infuriated breath. "You're talking in circles, baka. You still haven't told me who I'm meant to have killed."

"My sister!" Mitarai shouted.

"My wife," Wakajima said at the same time. Then he dropped the name that rang far too many bells. "Tsubasa."

The name on the encrypted USB drive Asami had got him to hack into... What the fuck was going on?

Scarface's eyes were lit, unhinged, as he smiled with too much pleasure. "It's time to pay your dues."

"She would've been free!" Mitarai insisted. "She and Aniki both. They were going to leave. I mean, no one leaves the yakuza, it's just not done. It's a way of life – all the codes and values drenched in tradition, the strict familial hierarchy, the honour – the goddamned honour. You give your life to it. But she met Aniki when she was dancing at – heh, that's none of your business. Anyway they managed to negotiate a way out with the cops. Witness protection, new identities, new life, the works. The deal was done, they finally had what they needed to get out. They were gonna testify against the Oyabun. Because that's what Asami wanted. Did you know that? They made a deal with the cops, and Asami dictated the terms to bring down Nishizuma. It's hilarious, right?"

"Wait, hang on – was she yakuza already or did she get trapped 'cos she married into it?" Akihito tried to figure out.

"They loved each other," Mitarai snapped.
Akihito couldn't help his dubious look at Wakajima. Love? This heartless creep? Though look how little he'd understood Asami, maybe there was a lot more to Scarface too. But why was Mitarai doing all the talking? And so defensive too, clearly Akihito had hit a nerve. Something wasn't adding up but it was hard making heads or tails of it through all the cotton clouds in his brain.

Scarface didn't linger. "Asami wanted to bring down the Nishizuma Group, because the Oyabun was dealing with Kondo Tetsuya. He was in the news again recently, you might have seen it."

"He was trafficking people," Akihito muttered.

"Very good," Scarface smiled disturbingly. "Kondo was shifting people, instead of legalizing a new shipping route for Asami through the south to Hong Kong. And because Nishizuma was dealing with Kondo, Nishizuma had to go. I suppose it was part of Asami's grand scheme to bring down the whole human trafficking ring."

Akihito didn't follow. "And that's a bad thing?"

"That's not it!" Mitarai spat. "The whole thing kicked off because they tried to testify against Asami at first. Knowing all the moles Asami has in the police, Tsubasa took it all the way to the top, to Superintendent General Matsui himself."

_Uh oh..._

"It turns out that the Chief of the Tokyo Met himself is in Asami's pocket!"

Wakajima was watching Akihito closely. "But you knew that."

"Oh, was I meant to be surprised? I must've been busy dealing with this fucking concussion you gave me." Yep, Akihito would play up this angle if it helped. He wasn't about to confirm anything for these fuckers.

Mitarai didn't care whether Akihito knew or not, he was too far gone on his roll. "You know what Matsui told her? Asami 'regulates' the yakuza. Yeah, that's right, that's what Matsui said. Asami's been mediating between them and keeping Japan free of the blood baths of old. Everyone knows he profits from narcotics and arms trafficking, but apparently that's ok. Because he keeps the hard stuff out of Japan. Because he stamps down on human trafficking. His business donates millions every year to political campaigns, charity fundraisers and humanitarian relief efforts. He bankrolls small start-up companies and climate control initiatives. And apparently all that makes him the kind of criminal who's _good_ for Japan, who gets to decide what deals should be made, rather than the kind who should be prosecuted!"

Furious, Mitarai paced to and fro, his chest heaving. "There was so much chatter, Spotlight was gearing up for your next big scoop. I sent you hundreds of messages, remember them?"

"Yeah. Yeah I do." Akihito didn't mention that he'd thought it was some nut job – he came across a fair few – and he'd just deleted them all...

"I told you to wait, if you wanted to do the right thing. But did you listen? Of course not, you're Z4m4 M1r0, you do as you fucking like and to hell to everyone else, right?"

Akihito had yelled something similar to Asami, once. Was he just as belligerent and unreasonable? Yes, he supposed. No wonder Asami had set him straight. Nothing was ever that simple.

"One day," Mitarai hissed. "One. Fucking. Day..." There was nothing masked now, all his hatred naked in his glare. "A fucking punk called Z4m4 M1r0 posted everything on Nishizuma the day..."
before they were going to testify. One fucking day!"

Mitarai was too angry to speak.

"Asami declared the deal void," Wakajima told him, brittle. "A load of us were arrested along with the Oyabun, including Tsubasa. There were witnesses, they might've been real but with Asami, who knows. Some of them testified saying they'd seen Tsubasa when we'd been recruiting clients for protection. She was looking at years, when she was only doing what she had to do." He ran his finger along the blade, drawing a bead of ruby. "Do you know what the Oyabun would have done to her if she hadn't? He would have had her beaten up instead. It would have been her bones broken. Her face smashed in. She had no choice."

"Promised everything, only for it all to be taken away the day before," Mitarai hissed. "You have no idea what that can do to a person! It crushed her. It completely destroyed her." He was shaking, his voice choking up. "She tied the prison jumpsuit around her neck, slit her wrists and hung herself from the bars of her cell."

Akihito couldn't breathe. "... What?"

"You drove her to suicide!" Mitarai screamed.

The world was toing and froing, side to side. Or was Akihito shaking his head?

Swamped with horror, it took a while to notice that Scarface was taking one step, and another, and another, towards him. Akihito scrambled to his feet and backed slowly away. Scarface was sliding the knife from end to end in his hands, down to the hilt, flipping it and drawing it to the tip before flipping it again, over and over.

"I'm sorry about Tsubasa," Akihito said. "I really am. But you're blaming me because the two of you didn't get out of the life fast enough and it turned out this way?"

"I told you to wait!" Mitarai shouted.

"Exactly! That's all you said!" Akihito yelled back. "You never said any of this! How am I supposed to have known?"

"That's exactly my point!" Mitarai threw back. "You don't know! You never do! You sniff out a dodgy tidbit and you're after it like a dog with a bone, with no care how it affects anyone else!"

"But..." Akihito looked between them. "All I do is tell the truth. How can that... How can that..."

How could that be a bad thing?

There was an electronic beep from Mitarai's pocket. He pulled out a phone, it didn't look like his usual one. An app flashed and Mitarai sent Scarface a meaningful look.

"Already? Sooner than expected," Scarface glanced at Mitarai accusingly, "but no matter. You can handle it, can't you?"

"'Course," Mitarai insisted loftily, and sent Akihito the most horribly triumphant look.

"What," Akihito demanded.

"Judgement time," Scarface announced. "The esteemed Asami-sama has arrived."

Akihito scrambled back but the yakuza caught him by the neck, pulling painfully.
"No!" Akihito kicked out, threw his head, kicked again, but Scarface only tightened his grip.

"You should be grateful," Wakajima grinned maniacally. It was hideous. "You can enjoy this together instead of alone. We were waiting, you see. I needed you to reel in the big fish."

"We," Mitarai broke in. "You mean we needed."

"'Course," Scarface appeased, mirroring Mitarai earlier.

Mitarai seemed satisfied but Akihito didn't buy it for a second. Scarface was using Mitarai? Or did it even matter –

Without any warning, Scarface stabbed the knife, the sharp blade slipping between Akihito's ribs to the hilt.

Blanching, mouth agape in a silent scream –

Scarface smiled. "Every bit of pain. Every drop of blood. As promised, Z4m4 M1r0."
Argh! I know, I hear you... But this isn't angst for angst's sake (what a mouthful). Have faith in me, that's all I can say for now. (Eek, hope I can live up to that...!) (σ_σ)

This is a 'short' one. The 6k words kind of short. People are complicated, motives are never just black and white, and the merry-go-round is topsy turvy. That's life, and I've tried to reflect some of that here. We'll see!

My other half claims there's no point in a cliffhanger if you're warned about it... So, absolutely *ahem!* no warning here *ahem!!* (>_<)

Hold onto your seats now...

~ Nyx ~

The lonely silhouette, backlit by the perimeter floodlights. Tall. Steadfast. Resolute. This wasn't a man who'd come to walk away empty-handed.

Mitarai approached the fence alone. There was movement in the darkness, no doubt the bodyguards milling around. He drew up on the other side of the security gate, not by choice but because of Asami's gaze.

Maybe Takaba had a point. Had Asami ever really looked at him before? Certainly not like this, dissecting his soul, with the weight of dominion. How could Takaba stand it? Mitarai would have faltered if he wasn't driven by something so painful.

He reached for the gate release. As the mesh gate slid open, two bodyguards separated from the shadows, guns drawn, quickly but carefully rushing in and securing the immediate area. Mitarai recognized the pair who'd recently taken to following Takaba around when it wasn't the big giant. He obligingly held his arms out as one of them approached and frisked him. The guard stood back and nodded to Asami.

"Thank you for accepting our invitation, Asami-sama," Mitarai nodded, the polite address a mockery considering what had brought them here.

"Pissing me off like this carries heavy consequences," Asami murmured, his voice cool and aloof in spite of the words. He still managed to look dangerous with one hand slung casually in his pocket.

"Are you sure it's worth it, Mitarai?"

Mitarai smiled faintly. "I'm touched you remember my name. You always gave the impression I was just part of the furniture."

"You were never that reliable."

Irritation flickered on Mitarai's face but it soon smoothed over. "Shall we go," he suggested instead. His smile broadened to something nasty. "Before we run out of time."
The dried blood, Akihito's head and neck caked down one side, the arm locked about his neck from behind, the man with the scar –

Asami didn't know what he registered first. He stormed forwards, his gun locking on with inhuman precision down the length of the dock.

"Uh uh uhh," warned Scarface. "That's far enough."

Wakajima, Nishizuma's Shateigashira [second lieutenant]. Asami's mind leapt a mile a minute – the original hit disguised as a bounty, the myriad of interconnecting arms linking him with Wakajima and Mitarai and Akihito –

Even from thirty metres away Akihito wasn't in a good way. That blood was actually the least of Asami's concerns, even if dark and rich. Surface head wounds could bleed disproportionately to start with and often looked worse than they were. More worrying was the sheen of sweat, pallor underneath. Hazel eyes drifted to meet his, glazed with pain even with the rush of obvious anxiety for Asami and his men too. Sound carried by the water, the laboured wheeze of every breath. A sound that Asami knew all too well. One that made his blood run cold in a way that he hadn't experienced in a long time... His eyes darted down to Wakajima's fist – held at Akihito's side, half obscured behind Akihito's arm, the curious angle –

There was a knife buried in Akihito's ribs.

Asami saw red. He very nearly lost it. Eyes narrowed, his breath sharp, he clamped down brutally on his fury, a savagery that simmered barely one degree off boiling.

"This is your doing, Asami-sama," Wakajima informed him. "You forced me to take precautions after you single-handedly took out seven of our men last time. You know what this is, don't you? But let me explain it for your bully boys in case they aren't as intimately acquainted with the human anatomy as you are. If anyone shoots me, I take this knife with me and rupture the internal thoracic artery. Takaba's going to drown in his own blood or bleed out. Either way he'll only have a couple of minutes, three tops, and we're twenty minutes from the nearest hospital. I think we all get the picture."

Asami's silence reverberated like thunder.

"You steaming pile of worthless gobshite..." Hoarse and pained and exhausted, but there was nothing wrong with Akihito's vocabulary or the will to deliver them.

"See what I mean?" Mitarai had clearly been sniping about this particularly charming trait.

Scarface spared him a sneer before returning his attention to Asami. "The place is rigged with motion sensors, seeing as we're a little short-handed. I had to send everyone else into Sion. So don't try and sneak your men in around us unless you want this sweet talker to bleed out."

Scarface was a lot more talkative now than he had been earlier. Was Mitarai just intimidated by Asami, Akihito wondered, or were they actually running Scarface's agenda now?

As Asami was attempting to boil Wakajima's insides with his glare, Suoh appeared at his side. "Just the two of them," he reported quietly.

He guarded Asami's flank, Nakatani covered the other side while holding onto Mitarai, with Sagano slightly behind Nakatani. It was a loose formation, open to either expand outwards or draw in tight around their boss.
"Nice of Suoh-san to join us, but where's Kirishima-san?" Scarface clearly knew how Asami operated.

"Taking care of other business."

"You expect me to believe you came here without your right-hand man? Or left-hand man, whichever?"

"I run a large business. It doesn't stop for some vermin throwing a hissy fit."

Wakajima grinned, his scar stretching. "If you say so. But in a way I hope he's calling in the cavalry. The more the merrier."

Asami finally lowered his gun, although his grip never loosened. "You've gone to a lot of trouble to get my attention," he drawled with deceptive coolness. "Your loyalty to your boss is commendable, if ill-advised."

"This has nothing to do with the Oyabun."

"Then?"

"My wife," Scarface said in that same creepily easy voice. "Wakajima Tsubasa."

"My sister," Mitarai growled from the side.

Asami inclined his head as though he hadn't already made the connection. "Ah."

"I see the name rings a bell," Scarface said pleasantly, "we can get right to it then. You can keep your guns. I'll enjoy watching you itching to use them but not being able to. Like when I cut Takaba's zip ties -- he grinned at the pale face beside his own -- "your arms were free but you couldn't do anything about the knife in your side, could you?"

A muscle in Akihito's jaw twitched. It hadn't been a picnic, the blaze of pain of every movement forcing him to simply stand there while Scarface had gone to clear the table.

Asami advanced a step but he was halted again by Wakajima's warning. "Careful, Asami-sama. My hand might slip, if you make me jumpy. Now, tell your men to let Mitarai go. We have work to do."

Asami didn't immediately react. The seconds ticked by until the yakuza gave the slightest tug on the knife...

Akihito twitched unnaturally, his haggard intake of breath grating through the air.

Mitarai masked a wince. Sure he wanted Takaba dead but he didn't have the stomach for this kind of thing. He expected Asami to relent straight away – but instead the imposing man locked eyes with Takaba, the golden gaze piercing with nameless demand. Incredibly, through the fog of pain, Takaba somehow responded. The hazel eyes focused back on Asami in return, a spark lighting through the glassy haze, finding strength through their ethereal connection.

"How are you holding up, Akihito?" Asami asked with all the monotony of asking after his day.

Takaba's mouth curled in a tight, lop-sided grin. "What, this? Walk in the park."

Asami smirked. Only then did he give a subtle jut of his jaw. Nakatani released his arm.

Mitarai didn't get them at all. Not Takaba who wasn't crying and begging for his life, not Asami who
refused to let him. It was a whole other level of connection or hardness – perhaps foolhardiness –
than he could grasp. Despite all their planning, Mitarai couldn't help wonder if Aniki might have
underestimated. Asami was bound to have a few tricks up his sleeves...

Mitarai stepped away, glancing cautiously at Asami until he was sure he wasn't going to be stopped.
He hurried down the dock and past Aniki and Takaba, going over to the table to dig into his bag. He
could only follow the plan.

Mitarai pulled out his laptop and set it up.

Wakajima sneered. "I couldn't think how the esteemed Asami-sama could make reparations, until I
realized you'd been showing me all along. Because in all our dealings, you revealed what you value
most. What you hold most precious. Your greatest weakness." His smile was sickly. "Silence."

"Silence?" Asami intoned flatly.

"You operate beyond the reach of the law but that's only made possible by public ignorance. So we
just need to put you somewhere even Chief Matsui couldn't protect you, and you'll be the architect of
your own downfall."

Akihito saw what Mitarai pulled out of his bag next and dizziness struck. His horror-stricken eyes
flew to Asami.

Mitarai fixed the HD long-range camera to the corner of his laptop. He plugged in the USB, clicked
a few keys... And nodded to Wakajima.

The scar stretched with the smile. "We're streaming live. Asami Ryuichi, you will confess your
crimes. All of Japan, and the world, will see you for the evil that you are. Let the trial commence."

For long seconds, Akihito's wheezing was the only sound on the still night air. Asami's gaze bore
into him, hard and unreadable.

"Confess and he lives," Scarface spelled out. "Or tell me to fuck off and I pull the knife."

"How 'bout I tell you to fuck off?" Akihito countered, his voice strained with pain but no less bold
for it.

"If you like," Scarface shrugged. "Makes no difference to me what happens to you. Though I must
say I'm enjoying this start. Asami with a sidearm – the world is seeing the real man for the first time."

Asami pulled out his cigarettes and lit up without letting go of his gun. He inhaled a long, long drag,
burning orange at the tip. He tasted the smoke for so long that Akihito was convinced he must be
tongue-shaping smoke animals or implements of torture or something, before it was released on a
thin exhale.

"You're threatening to bleed him out," Asami pointed out darkly. "You can't expect anything I say
now to hold up in court."

"Once the public sees you for what you are, it's all over – your reputation and social standing will be
destroyed, they'll demand criminal investigations into your dealings. And you know what they say."
Scarface grinned. "The higher the climb, the greater the fall, and there are few higher than Asami
Ryuichi."

Would Asami do it? No matter all of his proclamations, no matter all that had transpired and grown
between them, it had only been a month. Would he really lay it all on the line for Akihito?

Swimming with pain, his vision wavering in and out of focus, but by far the worst was being unable to do anything as Scarface threatened to destroy Asami piece by piece. Akihito wasn’t a violent person by any stretch of the imagination but the horrible, maddening, infuriating sense of helplessness made him want to yank the fricking knife out himself and deck the yakuza. Was this anything like what Asami was feeling? Or maybe it was worse for Asami, a magnificent image of lethal menace from the tips of his slicked back hair to the lengths of his tailored suit and the barrel of his gun and flanked by his men, but stuck too far away along the dock and hamstrung from leaping in with their usual aplomb. How Asami must hate this, forced to inaction, especially knowing what Akihito knew about him now.

Asami exhaled a puff of white. "Business dictates I let him die."

"Is that your decision?" Scarface confirmed with mocking politeness.

It was relief that made Akihito smile. He met Asami’s eyes. If only they’d had more time together, he could’ve kept the bastard on his toes, given him some grey hairs... His relief was shadowed with longing. Both were slowly but surely being drowned out with pain.

Asami saw it all. "But this isn't business. What would you have me say?"

...Wait, what?

Scarface smiled as Akihito panicked.

"What the hell?" Akihito cried hoarsely. "Asami, don’t –!" He broke off in a harsh groan as the knife was twisted the smallest increment.

"Quiet, you," Scarface hissed.

Asami’s face was a striking mask of granite. His men, too, jerked as though on invisible strings, having to resist their instincts prodding, urging, screaming at them to do something already. Akihito panted through the pain, being held up by the arm slung around his neck, propping him back against the yakuza.

"It doesn’t work that way," Scarface told Asami. "You’ll have to come up with your confession yourself, I’m not putting any words in your mouth."

"No?" Asami snapped. "I'd argue this whole enterprise is about putting words in my mouth."

"Whenever you're ready, Asami-sama," Scarface sing-songed. "And make it convincing. Little details make all the difference, you know."

The chill wind whistled between the cargo containers. Mitarai kept his eye firmly on the webcam image, holding his breath.

Akihito was shaking his head, his eyes yelling Don't you dare –!

Asami's lips curved with a dark smirk. "A year ago, a woman came to me. She'd applied with the Tokyo Met for witness protection in exchange for evidence against a prominent yakuza Oyabun, but she'd been rejected. She knew how things worked, she said. She wanted me to give the green light and asked what it would take."

Mitarai blinked, opened his mouth, closed it again.
"I told her to drop her husband from the application. He was involved in too many cases of brutality and death in the past for the police to look kindly on his case. She denied it fiercely, argued, and left. She returned a month later with her eyes opened and an apology."

Mitarai glanced at Wakajima, and back at Asami. "Wh- Who was this?"

"She told me she couldn't leave her husband, but she continued to petition the police. The negotiations went on for months, repeatedly sticking on the fact that her husband needed to be included in the witness protection deal. It was a pity. If not for that, she could have been living safe and anonymous in some unknown place now."

Mitarai was pale, shaking his head. "Who are you talking about?"

"My contacts in the police filled me in," Asami continued, still not answering him. "There was enough for me to confirm suspicions I already had – the Oyabun had made a deal with the Diet member Kondo Tetsuya, to establish a human trafficking route linking Kyushu and Okinawa to the rest of East Asia. Unlike the police I don't require warrants. I acted against Kondo."

Asami paused. Akihito's heart thudded hard enough to almost distract from the horrible burning in his side. Even Scarface seemed to be holding his breath.

But then Asami veered away. "The woman caught it on video. Until now I'd assumed she'd tried to leak the video to the authorities but it was actually you, wasn't it, Wakajima?"

Mitarai's horrified face turned to Scarface, who stared emotionlessly back at Asami.

"Because she was smarter than that," Asami said. "She brought it to me instead, in exchange for safeguarding her brother. She swore that it would go with her to the grave if nothing happened to him. Always, her brother was her primary concern."

Mitarai made a strange noise.

Asami drew irritably on his cigarette. Exhaling sharply, he tossed the stub underfoot and ground it beneath his polished Italian loafer. He directed Mitarai a fierce look. The meaning was lost on him, but not on Akihito. "She was single-minded in protecting her sibling, and who knows, perhaps I had a moment of compassion. I decided to grant mercy."

"No..." Mitarai was white as a ghost. "She – she –"

"Yes," Asami confirmed. "Your sister, Tsubasa."

Mitarai sagged to the ground with a strangled wail.

Scarface was starting to lose patience. "I'm failing to see a confession in any of –"

"You used her, didn't you?" Asami's focus swung to him. "I'd hazard a guess that you were just after a new identity, so you could start afresh, all your records and pending investigations wiped clean. But now you're back to square one and stuck here, you're using Mitarai to make amends with Nishizuma. Mitarai couldn't have pulled this all off by himself. Perhaps he wouldn't have even tried, without you twisting his grief."

"Dream up whatever wild nonsense you want," Scarface denied peevishly, making Akihito think Asami probably wasn't far off the mark. "There's nothing to twist, we're avenging Tsubasa. It just happens to serve a bigger purpose along the way."
Mitarai mumbled something from where he huddled on the ground. It was too quiet for any of them to pick up.

"I'm doing this for Japan," Scarface said, "exposing you, both of you, to allow free and fair enterprise. All yakuza would be interested to learn that Takaba Akihito here is Z4m4 M1r0, who's been getting one Oyabun after another locked up. And you, Asami-sama – the world at large has no idea who you really are, do they? You're not only neck-deep in organized crime, you control the Japanese underworld. But you stifle the full potential of the yakuza. You suppress markets, ban lucrative opportunities –"

"You could've set her free..." Mitarai muttered, louder this time. He glared up at Asami, lost in his torment, not even following what was going on around him. "You could've set her free!"

"Mitarai –" Scarface began.

"Why didn't you?" Mitarai carried on, not hearing him. "Was it revenge? Because you were losing out on the deal with Kondo and Nishizuma and –"

"I don't profit from human trafficking," Asami snapped coldly, shooting that down straight away. He had no problems in the shift in topic and went with it. "You're overlooking the fact that once the evidence was in the open, there were no grounds for her deal with the police. There was nothing for me to decide." But the accusatory glare swung to Akihito at that, not where Asami wanted it to go. He made sure to regain Mitarai's attention. "Tsubasa understood that. She came to see me one last time, did you know that?"

Mitarai half shook his head.

"She said it wasn't mean to be, that it was a sign. They weren't meant to escape into anonymity, they had to face the music for all they'd done in the past. The Spotlight publication gave the big headlines on the Oyabun and several lieutenants, but she had copies of communication and money trails from inside the organization incriminating many others. She promised to hand it all over if her brother would be kept safe."

Mitarai was too upset to respond.

"I even gave you a job when you later applied at Sion," Asami added, full of scorn. Mostly directed at himself.

"This is all very touching," Wakajima snapped at him, "but you still haven't given us anything. We need something juicy if you want me to let Takaba go."

"I would have thought a murder disguised as suicide was plenty juicy," Asami responded coolly.

Mitarai's head snapped up. Akihito even jumped a little in surprise and hissed at the flare in his side. Scarface's arm tightened around his neck.

"What?" Mitarai breathed.

"Who was it, Wakajima? Who really killed your wife?"

"She. Killed. Herself." Scarface was trembling with emotion, the first Akihito had picked up from the creepster.

Asami applied more pressure. "You mean, she got herself killed?" And still more pressure. "Didn't the Oyabun catch wind of her planning to burn the whole group? Didn't he go after the evidence and
Something snapped. "She smuggled it out!" Scarface screamed, jarring Akihito, provoking a sharp
gasp.

"I received the flash drive," Asami said tightly.

Shit, that USB stick? "No way..." Akihito rasped.

Mitarai dragged himself unsteadily to his feet. "But you said – you said –"

"This doesn't change anything," Scarface barked at him. "All that hope destroyed, it broke her. She
refused to listen! If she'd just handed it over, the Oyabun would've let her be and she'd still be alive!"

Scarface wasn't upset, Akihito realized. He was angry. At Tsubasa. Because she'd refused him the
means to buy back forgiveness from the Oyabun he'd been perfectly content to betray. Tsubasa had
used an encrypted flash drive not to hide it from Asami, but from Nishizuma, and her own husband
too...

"I didn't tell you because it was already so hard on you, you didn't need the distraction," Scarface
said to Mitarai, gentling his voice this time until he almost sounded like he cared, and that was just
plain disturbing. Akihito could see the months, maybe years, of manipulations that would have
brought Mitarai to this point, distorting and poisoning his grief. "Asami could have approved the deal
months earlier, Takaba could have waited on his article. They're both guilty of leading to Tsubasa's
breakdown, to her death."

"That's so fucked up!" Akihito hissed, but he couldn't reach Mitarai.

Entrenched in Wakajima's conditioning and the deformed point of view he'd been fed when hurting
and susceptible, Mitarai looked totally bewildered despite having the facts to hand for the first time.

Akihito's own head was reeling. He had no idea all this had been going on when he'd blithely
published on Spotlight, that he'd been indirectly connected to Asami all that time. And Mitarai had
gone about it in a totally cack-handed and hideous way, but Akihito couldn't help but feel sorry for
the grieving dumbass. But just how far that sympathy went, he couldn't have said just then. He was
in too much pain to know that.

Mitarai stared in a confused daze at Asami, the one who'd finally told him the truth, the one he was
supposed to blame. Aniki didn't have it wrong, did he...?

"You're very clever, Asami-sama," Scarface said, his voice hard. "You almost turned my brother
against me."

"I'm only telling it as it is. Have you ever told him the truth, Wakajima?"

"Truth is only a matter of perspective. And you're twisting things. If I'm not careful you'll talk your
way out of this altogether so let me be absolutely clear."

He jerked the knife, forcing an agonized cry before Akihito managed to choke it down.

In that split second as Asami's hand trembled on the gun still hanging by his side, Mitarai saw the
cracks in Asami's harsh exterior – the man was pissed off. Mad-enough-to-burn-down-hell-itself kind
of pissed off. So much so, it made Mitarai pause despite his own inner chaos. Especially with his
earlier righteous anger having fled, with confusion rocking the foundations of his revenge, his earlier
unease crept back.
Scarface leaned his head against Takaba's temple damp with cold sweat. "If the next words out of your mouth isn't a confession worthy of a life sentence, I'm pulling this knife."

Akihito tried to shake his head. But with the fresh pain, the shivering, he could only manage an uncoordinated twitch. Asami's semblance of control eroded further.

Akihito, along with Suoh and the other men, could only stand by and watch as Asami plundered headlong into his own destruction.

"I told you I acted against Kondo. I tortured him for a full confession and shot him between the eyes. It was right there where you're standing, as a matter of fact, but you knew that. I transported his body to his home and arranged his death to look like suicide, but the police would have found a curious shortage of blood at the scene considering he was meant to have shot himself there. Is that enough for you," Asami mocked darkly, "or do you want more? Details of illegal arms deals, perhaps? Manipulating politicians? Unlawful imprisonment? Assassinations?"

Stunned silence rang in their ears.

What. The. Fuck? As in, seriously, what the fuck?! Akihito would have been yelling if he wasn't so aghast. Couldn't Asami have gone with something less... guilty-ish? Or just fibbed something? Asami could've sworn blind that it was Colonel Mustard in the Library with the Candlestick and made the most hardened sceptic believe it...

The angle was reversed, but the dockyard, the glimpse of cargo crates as the camera had flown, in Tsubasa's hand, startled by the gunshot – no wonder the place was familiar.

Mitarai couldn't believe it. Asami had actually done it? Confessed to torture and murder, for Takaba? He glanced at Aniki – who was beaming with near perverse pleasure as he stared at Asami.

"Tell me we got that," Scarface breathed.

Mitarai took a few seconds to realize the quiet question was directed at him. He stumbled back to the table. The tiny green light was still on on the webcam – although he didn't experience anything like the rush of triumph he'd anticipated for so long. He couldn't decipher what he was feeling. Mostly a whole jumble of confusion. "Uh, yeah. We got it."

"You have what you wanted," Asami said, his tone clipped with suppressed ferocity. "Hand Akihito over."

"How many views?" Scarface pressed eagerly.

Still half in shock, Mitarai fumbled. "Hold on." He scrolled to the view counter. And froze. "Uh..." He glanced nervously at Wakajima, and hit Refresh.

Asami was getting impatient. "Release him."

He wasn't the only one. "How many?" Scarface demanded.

"Just a sec." Mitarai stared at the reloaded page. He couldn't understand why it still read the same as before.

"Mitarai?" Scarface snapped.

Horrified was an understatement. All of a sudden, it wasn't Asami that Mitarai was afraid of but his
brother-in-law. "It's – it's zero."

"Zero? You're fucking with me, right? Did you at least get it on video?" Wakajima's voice was dangerous.

"Of course. But –"

"Then get it out there! Social media, live streaming sites, I don't know, anywhere you can think of!"

Mitarai swallowed, shaking his head. "It already is. It... It's linked with all the major social networking giants, I even alerted the top TV networks. It should be viral."

Akihito's weakened laughter suddenly wheezed about them. "Oh man." He flinched at the movement, but his grin didn't fade.

Not until Scarface pressed the knife in deeper. Hazel eyes rolled back, his legs buckling –

Asami had his gun trained on Wakajima in a split moment, Suoh and his men not a fraction later.

"Think carefully," Wakajima warned. "He's still alive, but he won't be if you shoot me." He waited long enough to check that a bullet in the brain wasn't imminent before he shifted down the arm about Takaba's neck, enough to slap the clammy cheek.

"Hey. Hey!"

Akihito stirred. Blinking slowly, it took long seconds to refocus. He was staring down the barrel of Asami's gun – no, it was offset by the smallest angle, pointed at the crazy creep behind him. It was the same view as when Asami had saved him back in his apartment, one of many. Asami had just come through for him again. Asami never, never let him down. Man, Asami was the best.

Some part of Akihito was aware that his thoughts were getting a bit loopy. He wasn't level-headed enough to care.

Someone was slapping his face, jarring his already clattery head. "Ge'off," he rasped, turning away.

"What the fuck did you do?" Scarface demanded.

That jogged Akihito's memory. And the grin returned. "Oh... Yeah. Funny story," he said weakly. "Soteria, she has..." He coughed.

"Soteria did this?" Mitarai asked in confusion. At Scarface's questioning look he explained, "It's Sion's AI cyber shield that Takaba created. But what would she have anything to do with –"


"Hey!"

Akihito's voice was shaky, they all had to strain their ears to hear him. "I call her... Artemis."

Mitarai paled. Nobody else seemed to understand the significance.

"What?" Scarface grumbled. "What is that?"

"They're Greek," Mitarai said quietly. "Soteria, the goddess of safety and preservation from harm. But Artemis, she was the goddess of the hunt."
"And chastity. Don't forget. Containment, get it?" Akihito's grin was somewhat delirious. "I cloned Soteria, switched focus. Artemis hunts activities... V1P3R or Asami or me... Analysis of intent, switch to... parallel Wi-Fi, mimicry. I wasn't sure... it would actually work –" He coughed again. It sounded wet.

Wakajima shook his head. "What the fuck is he on about?"

Mitarai looked almost as white as Akihito. He'd been spot on before, to an extent. They'd underestimated, but not Asami. It was Takaba.

"Mitarai!" Scarface snapped.

Mitarai swallowed. "I don't know for sure but I'm guessing... My guess is Artemis has jacked our feed, contained it somehow and simulated it in a controlled environment. We're not live. This hasn't gone anywhere. I can't even be sure if we have a video..." Not only the technical fluency to program such an AI hunter so quickly, but to have already been close enough to V1P3R's identity to pull it off... He was staring at the pale blond in horrified awe. "Bloody hell..."

Asami's eyes flew to Akihito, who returned a shaky smile. Just a ghost of his usual cheeky defiance, the wattage insufficient.

Suoh let loose a quiet breath.

Scarface was showing frighteningly little emotion. He stared at Mitarai, the expected rage lacking, his eyes blank. "Then there's little else for it."

"Wakajima," Asami snarled, stepping forwards, "let him go." But he was held back by the warning look he received in return. Asami simmered, his jaw tight, furious that he couldn't leap into action, couldn't empty his gun and let his hands fly and sort this all out. Not while Wakajima still gripped that knife.

"Mitarai, go," Scarface said.

"But... They're still armed," Mitarai said quietly.

"We talked about this. Go, get started," Scarface ordered. "I'm right behind you."

Mitarai nodded, then looked at Akihito. Really looked, eye to eye. He almost looked sorry... Then he was off, heading towards the end of the dock and presumably climbing down a ladder.

That look, as though there was no helping it anymore –

Akihito's mind kicked into whirlwind flight, shifting through the bits and pieces picked up by his concussed brain, an impossible jigsaw puzzle of a clear blue sky. Find the corners, find the edges –

– a hundred kilos – narrow margin – plenty – Margins? More than Akihito's 60 kilos, but less than two men –

– but the whole – up to here – Where he was standing? Something nearby?

– We can't have everyone painting him like a saint in his obituary, can we? – Well it wasn't Akihito that anyone was going to paint as a saint, that was for sure –

The ground covered in fresh plaster, the weird walkie talkies that weren't walkie talkies, the wires, Mitarai's finality...
Abstract fragments, useless until Akihito's sixth sense grabbed them, his gut instincts that could piece together tenuous links and dream up outrageous theories...

Scarface meant to kill them the moment he stepped off the pier, probably the moment he let Akihito go. And to kill a man like Asami it could only mean one thing.

Akihito's brain froze – disconnected, clocked out, flapped – but only for a moment. An utterly insane idea took hold and he found himself remarkably calm about it all. Maybe he was losing it already. He was definitely woozy. Maybe he knew that the knife was a game-changer.

Or maybe it was because only one thing mattered now, the man barely holding himself in check some twenty metres away. But it wasn't Asami that he spoke to.

"Suoh-san, remember that time Asami stole your cake?"

"Reminiscing?" Scarface taunted in his ear. "Enjoy your farewells."

Blond Tank was frowning. "Stole my –?"

Akihito's eyes flickered, ever so slightly, then back at the big bodyguard.

Comprehension swept Suoh's face. "I'd saved it for lunch," he muttered, conveying to Akihito alone that he understood.

Still tuned into to Asami's signals but, incredibly, the guard's gaze remained fixed on Akihito, taking the young man's lead. Blond Tank – Suoh – trusted Akihito to have his boss' best interests at heart, even without knowing why, even as Akihito rapped on death's door dancing on a knife point. It was nothing short of monumental.

Akihito gave a relieved shadow of a smile, feeling bad for the rush of thoughts he could see behind Blond Tank's eyes, frantically calculating how to save them both.

He couldn't.

"Hand him over, Wakajima," Asami growled.

A powerboat engine rumbled to life somewhere nearby and underneath. That hollow, irregular knocking Akihito had heard, the escape plan.

Scarface drew Akihito back towards the edge of the dock. Sweating with pain, Akihito had to clench his jaw to stop himself from crying out. Asami and his men matched pace for pace, edging closer.

Suoh signalled behind his thigh. Sagano and Nakatani readied themselves.

"Stay back," Scarface warned.

The timelessness of instant moments. Akihito drank in the sight – dracontine gold – commanding and incensed, piercing from that stunning face – the complex, formidable man who'd crashed into his life and unexpectedly shown him what it meant to mean something to someone... What an incredible sight to send him to eternal sleep.

Asami's eyes blazed with suspicion and warning. Don't you dare –!

The same look Akihito had given him earlier, and equally as ineffective. Akihito thought of his parents and he thought of his friends, especially the two as brothers in all but blood. But mostly he thought of this incandescent man, who cared more about saving Akihito than himself.
I have to let you go.

Akihito threw the most impish grin he could muster. "Don't be too much of a bastard."

He knew he must be hallucinating now, because that looked like fear in Asami's eyes, which was impossible.

"Akihito –"

Scarface finally stepped away, half a step that meant they weren't back to chest. He still held the scruff of Akihito's top and the knife, using him as a human shield, the fucking coward, but there was space between them, just a few inches. It was all Akihito needed.

A mink's last fart, went the Japanese proverb. The last resort, the final defence.

What was it Asami had shown him? Akihito set his feet, had to scrap the stance and tightening his core right now, but he could fucking well make a fist. Going with his non-stabbed side - 'cos fuck knew where the whatchamacallit artery was and the stabby side hurt like a godalmighty bitch - he caught Blond Tank's eyes... and spun backwards with his arm hooked up and smashed a reverse elbow bullseye into Wakajima's unsuspecting face.

Knife dragged through soft tissue, he screamed, Scarface screamed, so much screaming everywhere, but Scarface had let go to clutch at his broken nose and Akihito was already giving every ounce he had left, more determined than he'd ever been his entirely life - Asami! - as he pitched through the blanketing agony and leaped - toppled - for the dark water.

Airborne – falling – he could see Blond Tank already moving –

"Go!" Suoh thundered –

"No –!" Scarface garbled, stumbled for the edge –

Sagano and Nakatani jumped –

"AKIHITO –!"

Suoh tackled Asami off the dock as the C4 detonated along the entire length of the pier. At 8000 metres per second the violent shockwave hurtled shattered concrete and concussive air and flames across the dockyard.

The world caught fire.
Stop! Before you read any further, hit Chapter Index at the top and skip back to Chapters 10 and 11. Scroll until you see the NEW ARTWORK, you won't regret it, I promise! They're amazing!! Oh and you may want to hide your screens on 10... Shey, you're incredible!!! I don't think I've said that enough :D <3

This chapter was never meant to take this long. 3 weeks and a day? Shock horror! (^_~) But little one going to hospital comes first any day – thankfully all better now, phew! Then real life kept throwing speed bumps at me and I also discovered that it's easier to write about things blowing up than picking up the pieces afterwards... I don't know what that says about me, haha XD Or does anyone else find the same?

This must be the most 'stationary' thing I've ever written. But this is where we are and I'm indulging myself exploring this and things move without moving. That probably makes no sense ;P I'm also hoping this isn't going to be a let-down after the last chapter because that was intense and maybe I should have mellowed that down a bit... XD Ah well. I can only do what I can and hope you enjoy this...!

~ Nyx ~

Ice –

Over under around through inside in in in –

Not ice, water! Freezing cold water – *Fuck!* – water, so cold –

*Asami* –

Can't breathe

*Ryu*

Fire! Lava, scourging his veins. It must have been real, burning his side, ignited, branding to the bone.

Akihito screamed awake, his voice shredded.

"Hold him!"

"Finish already!"
"It has to be in short bursts, otherwise it'll kill healthy tissue –"

The firebrand cleaved through him again. Hell incarnate, lightning bolt manifesting inside him, he couldn't scream anymore –

It dropped off as abruptly as it had come, dulling to a thumping ache that was mute in comparison.

"That should do it for now, sir."

"Where's that chopper!"

Asami –

"Two minutes out."

"Make it sooner."

Asami –!

"Yes, sir."

"Atha..." It killed to speak, his throat like sandpaper. There was something between his teeth.

"Easy, Akihito."

Oh that baritone, soothing as only when speaking to Akihito. A horrible whimper escaped him as he turned, blindly seeking that warmth, that scent –

Smoke? Damp? Mostly damp. The smell was wrong. Akihito twisted anew, seeking –

"I'm here," came that baritone, urgent, insistent. "I'm here, Akihito."

Asami. It was enough to ease Akihito back down again, half turning to the warmth behind and around.

Gentle fingers eased out whatever had been wedged between his jaws, soothed over his head. He tried opening his eyes. It took a few tries, his eyelids needed to be unglued.

Golden lance –

Akihito sighed. More a hoarse puff, he could only manage shallow pants, each breath grating like nails on a chalkboard. He had no idea what being skinned alive and boiled through and put back in his skin would feel like but he imagined it was something like this.

"...we dead?"

Asami stared down where Akihito was half lying in his arms. "No. Though you tried your best."

Akihito frowned, tried to shake his head, his shaking lips unable to form the words.

The harsh lines of Asami's face softened. "I know," he said quietly, his hands smoothing down the sides of Akihito's face again. Maybe brushing his hair away. "I know."

There was a smear of dirt or soot across Asami's temple, brushed there by hurried fingers. His hair was wet. His shirt too, clinging half see-through in ways Akihito wanted to appreciate, but his attention annoyingly kept getting pulled away by the blinding glare of pain. Asami moved something
away that had been resting on Akihito's chest – the leather holster. Had that been in his mouth? He refocused with effort, his eyes twitching haphazardly. Overall the man didn't seem the worse for wear but Akihito had to be sure...

"– you alright?" he croaked.

Asami's face flickered – something like pain, harsh, intangible but far from insubstantial. There was a moment where he fought for composure – wow, what the fuck? Was Akihito hallucinating again? – and his gaze became fierce, so different to the gentle hands around Akihito's face.

"Of course," Asami told him, with self-assured arrogance.

Akihito grinned in response. At least he thought he did. There was that pained look in Asami's eyes again. But he had to ask, "– you – wet?"

"Don't worry about that now."

Not to be put off, Akihito rolled his head where it rested on Asami's arm.

Emergency vehicles, uniforms, black suits. Another dock. The black sky glowing orange from fires still burning. Suoh and Sagano and Nakatani – all three were wet. Suoh's suit was also singed along one side but all that aside he looked as fresh as a daisy.

Sensing the movement, the big guy caught his eye over Asami's shoulder.

Akihito managed a shaky smile. "Cake – thank fuck..."

"Hard to forget." Blond Tank returned the smallest smile. Akihito would take it, it was a lot for the stoic bodyguard.

"What's with the blasted cake?" Asami demanded.

Akihito snickered. But it dissolved into a pained moan, leaving him gasping for air that wouldn't come. That blasted fire was back, melting his flesh, eating up all the oxygen. His eyes slid closed.

"Akihito? Stay with me, Akihito. Open your eyes. Come on, damn it, you need to stay awake –"

Asami was speaking, demanding, ordering, but his voice was fading. Or maybe Akihito was fading. But it was ok. Because Asami was ok. He could let go.

And then Asami's baritone was drowned out by the thumping of chopper blades.

Darkness, blissful oblivion, so close – but a blast of agony dragged Akihito away. He cried out, desperate not to hurt anymore. Why was Asami gathering him up? Why couldn't he leave Akihito alone? But then he glimpsed Asami's jaw. Carved of diamond. Harder than he'd ever seen it. Fury. Despair. ...What?

"– sami...?"

"If you leave me now, Akihito, I swear I will punish you like there's no tomorrow," Asami growled at him, and Akihito would have so laughed if he was capable of it.

"Geez..." he rasped, a faint uplift lingering on his mouth. *Ridiculous bastard.*

Asami returned an almost smirk. He made a beeline for the chopper. "You know what to do," he ordered aside to someone.
"The clinic is ready, sir."

It had started as vested interests, all those years ago when the then-unknown patient had provided the equivalent of a day's wages for the entire surgical team in exchange for treating him on the quiet. From the moment she had met him, staggering into her private clinic on his own two feet as he bled beyond what would have levelled anyone else, Dr. Fujimoto had known that Asami Ryuichi was no ordinary man.

It had paid off to concede the extremely private patient his privacy. Not three days into his recovery he'd contracted an additional medical team to be on standby 24/7 for whenever he required, but released them to assist elsewhere in the clinic when he had no need of them. For a small clinic on the brink of bankruptcy it had been a godsend.

He was joined first by the big blond special-forces type, and then the one with the glasses. Still together to this day, over a decade on, the two men remained Asami's closest confidants through the rocketing of his standing in the business world. Frequencing the clinic together, they formed such a close-knit unit that the nurses had dubbed them the Big Three, the beating heart of what had become a well-oiled, intimidating workforce orbiting one of the richest and most influential men in Japan.

Over the years he had funded upgrades in provisions and medical equipment, and even expanded the clinic with an entire new wing. New clients mysteriously started flooding in, and within a few years the place had been revived into a bustling medical centre regularly expanding with new wards and services.

Meanwhile, curious events were being reported on the news. Truce being called out of the blue between yakuza groups who had been at war for generations. Business deals struck between factions that had long been at loggerheads. Not just in Tokyo but all across the country, even in other yakuza strongholds like Kobe and Osaka. And with the drop in gang warfare and spilled blood, so too did Asami's impromptu visits to the clinic. When whispers started up of a mysterious new figurehead in the underworld, it had dawned on Fujimoto. Through the mapping of Asami's injuries, she'd had a unique front-row seat all along to the biggest transformation to hit the Japanese criminal landscape in decades.

It had become a conscious choice. Fujimoto would rather deal with one shady businessman and his men who were suspiciously prone to violent injuries, than the influx of casualties and fatalities with every surge in tension and gang war that they used to see earlier in her career. It was no business of hers if the timing of Asami's injuries coincided closely with events reported on the news.

By now Fujimoto thought she was familiar with the type of men in Asami's employ, even the law enforcement officers whom the staff pretended not to notice sneaking in to visit him on occasion. So when they'd received a familiar, but less frequent as of late, alert from Kirishima to prep for emergency surgery, the bare facts and figures of the patient's medical details hadn't prepared her for someone quite like Takaba Akihito. She hadn't expected Asami to rush in alongside the stretcher, soaked from head to toe and uncaring of the blood drenching his shirt. Or for Asami to stay all through the gruelling surgery, as his men came and went and his clothes and the blood dried in his shape and he paced grooves into the waiting room floor.

But mostly, she hadn't expected the both of them.

Crying. Moaning. This was the pits. What in blazes were they doing? A cry clanged in his ears, raked his throat like nails.
Detached voices stirred nearby, unfeeling hands adding to the burning of his flesh.

That cry again, drumming his ears, hurting his throat. Hurting. Everything hurting.

Numbing. From his hand. Spreading. Numb arm and shoulders, numb chest, numb everything.

A scent. Anchor amidst the sterile sting. Breathing became easier. Air. Air was good.

---

Water! So much. Nothing but. He couldn't breathe! Lungs burning, in desperate need of air, but all he could see was the fire, fire on water –

Hands. Large hands. Cold in the water, but those hands, he'd know them anywhere. He sobbed, and water flooded him, and choking gurgling they were rushing up and up – but the fire –!

"Asami!"

Keening, too loud, ringing, scouring his throat. Voices, surprised, buffeted him. He was looking, reaching, screaming the only word he could think of, but the answer wasn't what he sought. Voices all around, gentle, but it was of no comfort. Not right. Pushing him towards darkness. He fought back, clawing at awareness, shouting his single word, thrashing –

Noises, disturbance, clamouring. A call of authority, silencing the din – at last! That voice! Already calming the turbulence, a shield from the army of spears piercing him. He moved, shifting everything, uncaring of his tearing flesh and ruptured body, repeating his word over and over, needing, seeking, reaching...

It was there, the only scent that could reach his soul, the warmth that soothed the raging fires. Engulfing him in security.

The voice sounded only for him, all others melting away.

He stopped fighting and let darkness drown him.

---

Fujimoto quickly recognized that her patient's demons would be the worst saboteurs to his recovery. Plagued by nightmares, unseen foes chased him awake when he should have still been sedated.

Takaba flitted in and out of consciousness, whimpering in pain, flailing against unseen hands, always with one name carried on his cries, torn from his already hoarse throat.

"Asami!"

And the man was there, catching the hands that grasped blindly, murmuring reassurances. Or Asami's own adaptation, anyway.

"You can't be letting something as pathetic as this get you down." Or "Really, Akihito? Giving up already? How dreadfully dull." Or this particularly sweet one: "If this was your big getaway plan, you have another think coming."

Fujimoto would have been concerned if not for Takaba's obvious reassurance. No matter the choice of words, Asami's voice calmed him. The patient's pulse was steadier, his blood pressure lower. And Asami's bedside manners were in stark contrast to his words, gentle fingers brushing through the blond hair, never minding how it stuck to the pale, sweaty forehead. Not to mention how he'd barely left Takaba's side.
There was one incident that clinched it for her. Takaba flailed awake, screaming, eyes wide but unseeing, clearly still trapped in the throes of nightmares, yelling Asami's name. She wasn't sure if he was meant to be the enemy or saviour until Asami's leaping to the boy's side resulted in sobs of relief and refusing to let go.

In the end Asami manoeuvred himself down alongside, onto the edge of the bed that had been reclined up to alleviate weight off the chest cavity. He shifted them until he had Takaba in the arch of his arm with the blond head resting on his shoulder, summarily ignoring the doctor staring a little flustered at the display. Delirious and barely conscious, Takaba had muttered objections at being so crowded, even calling him "Perverted bastard," to which Asami only chuckled and called him "Troublesome brat" in return, after which both had promptly fallen asleep, apparently assured that all was well with the world.

Why reinvent the wheel? It was just one more area where Fujimoto chose to turn a blind eye to clinic policy where Asami was concerned. Besides, it wasn't like he didn't own half the place.

Asami was a predator guarding his catch. Eagle-eyed, he monitored her from under slitted lids as she checked on Takaba's vitals every hour, and likewise when she handed over to the night duty nurse. Nurse Kobayashi was clearly shocked to see the two sharing the bed, not only against clinic regulations but at finding the smoking hot billionaire that so many nurses always flirted with holding another man with such tender care.

Fujimoto shrugged. "Think of it as a natural remedy in place of chemical sedatives," she whispered.

"Sedatives?"

"Nightmares. Takaba-san was extremely agitated. Asami-sama managed to calm him."

"I... see..."

"Not a word to anybody, Kobayashi-san."

"I wouldn't dream of it, Fujimoto-sensei." The nurse gave into a quiet smile as she shut the door, giving them privacy from the nurses' station.

The reassuring beeping of life. A distant PA call. The occasional thumping of pendulum doors.

It took a while for awareness to return, registering the world piece by piece.

A half light glowed over the bed. A heart monitor beeped steadily, keeping vigil alongside IV drips. Chrome bed frame, crisp white sheets. Bare shoulders and arms.

Akihito's mind was a field of cotton. His body was sluggish, everything numb. Actually that wasn't true – one side of his torso was throbbing, a background hum. Everything else was numb.

Asami was asleep. Barely inches away. Half turned towards Akihito, his black hair sweeping down towards the pillow.

What a sight for sore eyes. Almost inhumanly striking, the emanation of the compelling force within, made only more dear to Akihito by the fatigue weighing the great man even in rest. Features so familiar, the familiarity itself filling Akihito with a powerful surge of longing, one he couldn't make sense of when Asami was right beside him. He ached to ease the pinch from that strong brow, relax that sculptured jaw.
Akihito was too weak to do anything but twitch the muscles in his arm. But it was enough to wake Asami. His eyes flew open – and widened at seeing Akihito awake.

Akihito was caught in that intense gaze as he stared back. He was still cataloguing everything, how he was breathing by himself, lying on an inclined hospital bed, Asami's shoulder acting as his pillow. He found himself hazy on some of the details but he had no difficulty with the knife and bomb. Those were etched in crystal in his mind.

They were alive. Touching. Looking at each other. It seemed incredible.

Akihito tried his voice. "... Hi."

A little hoarse, but workable.

A large hand came into view, cupped his jaw. Flat along its length, the thumb brushed along his cheek.

But then everything about Asami tightened – his brow, his jaw, his lips, and Akihito had a glimpse of those piercing eyes closing tightly as Asami pressed his lips against the blond crown.

Asami didn't move for a while.

"Two days?!"

Akihito's exclamation was a rough hiss. His throat scratched and he feared a coughing fit, but Asami brought a plastic cup to his lips. The water was nectar, a balm in the desert.

Putting it aside, Asami reached for a remote overhead. "I'll call the doctor –"

"Wait! Uh –" Akihito's eyes shifted under Asami's gaze. "I'm alright so... just leave it a few minutes, ok?" Truth was he didn't want to move. Not that he really could anyway, but he wanted to stay like this, just the two of them.

Asami settled back down, though he couldn't have been comfortable balanced on the edge like that. Why was the bed bent up diagonally?

"Is this your room?" Akihito asked. Because he was stalling. And because this was way bigger than most normal hospital rooms. Three doors led off somewhere, there was a big table with four chairs and a sofa on the other side of the room too. And none of that sterile pastel green. With everything sleek and modern and monochrome, there was a luxury hotel room vibe about the place, only with a bunch of medical gizmos and machines and surplus of eye-level plug sockets.

"One of them. I have a suite here."

"Here being?"

"A private medical clinic."

"People don't usually own rooms in medical clinics."

"I'm a special client."

Akihito snorted softly, and took a moment to endure the resulting pang in his side. "I bet you are. Must be why visiting hours don't apply to you. 'Cos that looks like the sun's setting."
The windows stretched the entirety of the wall behind Asami. The sunset was impossible to miss. Though apparently Akihito had already missed one since all the whoop-de-do at the docks.

Asami smirked. "I'm hardly a visitor when the patient was begging me to stay with him."

Hazel eyes widened. "That wasn't a dream?"

"You refused to let me go. The only way to keep you sedated was in my arms."

"Oh god..." Akihito could feel the flush rising up his face. Surely his blood had more important things to be doing, like healing? "Well, pardon me for keeping you from more important business," he grumbled hoarsely, covering up his embarrassment.

All humour leched from Asami's face. The hand wrapped around Akihito rubbed at his arm, the pressure firm. "You were in a bad way. I had no intention of being anywhere else."

"Oh..." was all Akihito could say. And damn it but his face was only getting warmer at that. But more pressing was Asami's hard, troubled look. "Are you alright?"

Asami's gaze refocused from where they'd been lost in dark places. "This again," he muttered. "I'm fine."

"Sure?" Akihito's throat was sore but he pushed through the words. "You don't seem fine."

Asami replied, but his answer didn't immediately feel like an answer. "Suoh was wearing a wire but Wakajima had signal jammers in place. It took a while to get through on the SATCOM and by the time –"

"You own a satellite?!" Akihito butted in hoarsely.

Asami took a beat to answer the abrupt question. "No. I borrowed access."

Akihito looked like a kid in a candy store. "Man, I gotta tap that." But then he caught sight of Asami's face again. "Sorry. You were saying about SATCOM?"

Asami regathered after a pause. "By the time Kirishima managed to reconnect to Suoh's wire, he'd missed the extent of... what was happening with you. He had the coast guard, fire fighters, divers, paramedics and backup standing by, but..."

All this uncharacteristic hesitation was starting to freak Akihito out. "What aren't you saying?"

"The knife was knocked out," Asami explained, clipped but otherwise carefully expressionless. "Could have been the blast or the water. But there weren't enough clotting agents on the scene. You were bleeding out. We had to cauterize your wound."

"We?"

"Kirishima. There wasn't time to administer pain meds –"

"The strap!" Akihito rasped. It made sense now why it had been between his teeth. "Your holster."

Asami nodded. The clouds remained heavy. Had it really been that bad? Sure, Akihito remembered the horrible pain – the worst thing ever, in fact, worse than the knife tearing – but still...

"What if he hadn't?"
"You'd be dead," Asami said flatly.

Akihito would have shrugged if he could. "Then 's all good, right?"

The shadow didn't lift.

"...Right?"

The thunder suddenly broke. "What the hell were you thinking!"

Akihito blinked. "Wh-what?"

"You should have waited! Moving – what were you thinking? You had a knife. In. Your. Lung!"

Asami looked like he wanted to storm around the room but Akihito's head was on his arm.

Akihito had no idea what defensive, inflammatory retort he might have thrown back, if he'd spoken just then. He was never given the chance.

Asami looked away. "Damn it, Akihito," he hissed.

That was when Akihito saw it. All the pent up worries and rage and frustration, a tempest Asami hadn't been able to vent.

That, more than anything else, got to Akihito. What Asami must have felt, seeing Akihito like that, unable to do anything –

"I'm sorry..." A hot lump welled up unbidden. Akihito's eyes blurred. "I'm sorry –"

All of a sudden Asami's arms were surrounding him and Akihito managed to turn his head into the strong chest. His side throbbed but it didn't matter because Asami had him and there was nowhere else he wanted to be.

A long sigh ruffled his hair.

"We were all shielded in the water when the dock blew," Asami said quietly. "We didn't even get a scratch."

Akihito supposed this just burned Asami even more. He was clueless what he could do to convince Asami he didn't have to feel guilty for anything. All he could do was stare at the Adamis's apple in front of his nose and do what came naturally. Might as well put his foot in it, right? You never know, it might help.

"So I know you're all pissed off at me and all, but you gotta admit I pulled it off like you showed me, right? Spin and boom, bye-bye nose. I'm calling it the fart."

"...The fart?"

There was a pause. Akihito tried to contain it. He really did. But in the end the laughter bubbled up and out and he was left half grinning, half grimacing like a madman. He grabbed at Asami's hand to stop him as the man went for the remote again. It was good to move, even with the dunking of pain that came with it.

"'m good," Akihito insisted. "But man, you said fart. You're killing me here."

Asami's look was sharp. Akihito laced their fingers together, apologetic. Or maybe that was just the excuse. "Bad choice of words. But shit, I should've recorded it. That would've been my ringtone."
"Your phone wouldn't have survived past the first ring."

Akihito snorted softly. "Yeah, I bet." He was still looking at their intertwined fingers.

Asami had to prompt him again. "Well? Are you going to tell me or just leave me in suspense?"

"It's gonna be my signature move," Akihito explained. "A mink's last fart. I think it's a good name."

Ah, that old adage. Asami's chuckle ruffled the blond hair. "You would."

Akihito snickered, shooting another pang through his ribs.

Asami didn't miss it, of course. He refused to be deterred again. "Time for the doctor, you little minx." He grabbed the remote and thumbed the call button.

Akihito didn't stop him this time, exhaustion and pain overcoming him. "I said mink, not minx," he pointed out. He missed the warmth of Asami's fingers.

"And I said minx."

Akihito rolled his eyes, but he couldn't argue as Asami wove their fingers together again. His thumb traced circles into Akihito's palm, diverting yet more blood to his cheeks. Yep, Asami was gonna be the death of him alright.

"Anyway, more importantly, what was with the cake?"

Akihito's lips curved. "Plotting. Me and Blond Tank."

Asami arched a questioning brow.

"We're gonna trounce you in the dojo one of these days," Akihito grinned up at him. "You're going down."

Nowhere near the million wattage of his usual smiles, but a smile was a smile and it wasn't dead.

Asami smirked right back. "Bring it on."

Asami took his leisurely time untangling himself from Akihito and off the bed, despite Akihito's embarrassed hissing to hurry the fuck up. But apparently this only amused the good doctor more who busied herself shuffling paperwork with an ill-concealed smile until they were 'presentable'.

The doctor was an unusually tall woman in her early fifties, her grey hair neatly pulled back into a bun. "It's very good to see you awake, Takaba-san. I'm Dr. Fujimoto, Director of Trauma and Surgical Critical Care. How are you feeling?"

"Hi. Yeah, I'm good," Akihito nodded. "Good."

"Any discomfort or pain?"

"I'm mostly numb. I'm ok." How very reassuring.

"I need to check vitals and dressings, if I may?"

Asami made to step away, but then turned back. "I'm going to get washed. I won't be long." He waited, then added, "There are guards right outside and throughout the facility. You're safe."
Akihito nodded, wondering why Asami was standing there explaining himself. Asami rubbed at his fingers, soothing. His fingers... Akihito was still holding onto Asami's hand. He hurriedly let go. Bereft, he itched for contact.

Asami paused, considering him for a moment. He suddenly smirked, that infuriating arrogance on full whack. "Don't worry, I'll towel you down later," he said, then swooped down and planted a smacker right on the lips.

"Mph –!"

Asami pulled back before Akihito could shoved at him – or try to and hurt himself.

"Baka, go shower already! You stink!"

Asami smirked, ruffling his hair before striding out. Akihito glared after him, even as he warmed inside. That kind of PDA – entirely for show, to rile him up, to put the spark back in his eyes. All just to make him stronger when he was being so timid...

Fujimoto hid a smile as she set about checking her patient over. It was fascinating seeing them interacting with Takaba conscious now. Asami clearly knew how to push the young man's buttons and she would wager it went both ways.

"So tell me, how are you really?" she asked.

Akihito gnawed at his lip as she took his blood pressure. "Don't tell Asami, ok? He's just gonna get all worried and gloomy. It hurts in my side when I laugh or try to move."

"Laughing already?" Fujimoto smiled. "I understood you just woke up."

"Don't you know Asami? Textbook barrel of laughs."

The doctor coughed in surprised laughter. "How could I forget? Now, how would you rate the pain on a scale of one to ten?"

"Urgh I hate these questions. What, so stubbing your toe is a two? Or three or four if it's really bad, you know, like on a freezing cold day. I would've put getting stabbed and then that slicing at ten, but then there was all that cauterizing or I dunno, whatever they were doing when I woke up was like a fifteen. Or maybe twenty. So this is about four or six, maybe seven, and a half, depending on how much I laugh or move. Does that answer your question?"

Fujimoto was staring. "Perfectly," she smiled. She stuck a thermometer with a disposable plastic tip in his armpit and held his arm in against his side. "We had several close calls to begin with but you've made remarkable progress. I will check but that sounds normal at this stage. The cauterization that you mentioned, after they drained your left lung of the sea water, you were still bleeding heavily into it." She removed the thermometer, jotted things down in the patient notes. "Considering the limited resources available, it was remarkable that Kirishima-san managed to save your life."

"I – I know."

She shone lights into his eyes, ears, and a wooden stick down his throat, and jotted more things down. She gently tipped his head aside to check where Scarface had bashed his head.

"Any discomfort here?"

"No, can't feel anything there actually."
"That would be the morphine. Let me know if you do feel any discomfort or pain, but aside from some surface bruising the scans didn't reveal any deeper injury." She scribbled some more. "The police have been asking to take your statement. Do you think you'll be up to it this evening?"

"Uh..." Physically or for getting his story lined up with Asami? he wondered. He had no idea what to say, because he couldn't exactly say what Scarface had really been after.

"Shall I recommend that they wait another 24 hours to make sure you can string more than a few words together?" She winked.

Yeah, even injured he had no trouble babbling. He started laughing, and winced. "That'd be great."

"Let me have a look at that."

She started at the dressings plastered to the side of his torso. Akihito couldn't really see, not being able to sit up, so he glanced around the room as he waited. He was drawn to the table on the other side of the large room, strewn with files. Had Asami been working here or something?

"It's all looking fine, Takaba-san. I'll send for more painkillers for you to make you more comfortable but your wounds are closing up well, stitches are clean. We'll change the dressings again tomorrow. Give it another 48 hours and you'll be able to try getting up. I'll let you know when."

"Really? That would be awesome but I don't think I can lift a finger at the moment."

"A bit of food, a bit of normal sleep, and you'll start feeling a lot stronger. The sooner you can start on easy, moderate walks, the faster you'll recover. But moderation is the key for now, there's no rush. We'll leave the catheter in until you can get to the bathroom by yourself."

Akihito's eyes flew down, aghast. "Catheter?!!"

"It's one of the most commonly performed procedures, for operations or in unconscious patients. Nothing to be embarrassed about," she reassured.

"Still..." There was a tube in his dick...

"Asami-sama commented you would react this way."

"Asami saw?" he wailed.

She cleared her throat. "He offered to insert the catheter tube for us, but clinic policy didn't allow that I'm afraid."

He looked utterly mortified.

"I might as well say this now while we're here. I have to caution you not to engage in any strenuous activity, anything that makes you too out of breath or requires too much movement, for six to eight weeks, and you'll need to gradually ease back into things with physio and rehab."

"Eight weeks! That's two months! Ok, ok, I'll try not to run any marathons or anything like that."

She stared hard at him. "That's good, but I was referring more to sexual activities."

Comprehension dawned. The hazel eyes darted everywhere but at her.

"I only point this out since Asami-sama was extremely detailed in his questioning of what activities might be feasible and when, penetrative sex or otherwise. I have assured him that it all comes down
to you. Listen to your body, if anything is uncomfortable or painful, stop."

But painful? With Asami? That was the best kind –

She saw his cheeks bloom pink before he hid them behind a hand with an almighty groan.

Confident he’d got the message, she started putting her notes away. "We had a lot of chances to talk, he’s rarely left your side."

Akihito scrunched up his face, still blushing crimson. "Yeah, I got that feeling."

She smiled kindly. "Now for the fun part. What would you like for dinner?"

Two short, sharp, quiet raps. Glasses’ knock was like the man himself, no nonsense, nothing superfluous.

Kirishima had taken five steps towards the table before he noticed he was being watched from the bed. He blinked, twice in quick succession, probably as close to a double take as he might ever get.

Akihito waved fingers without lifting his hand from the sheets. "Hey. How you doing?"

Kirishima glanced at his boss leaning against the window – taking in the casual stance with one foot crossed and hands in pockets but not fooled by it for a moment – before continuing on to the table.

"No change here," Glasses replied. "How are you?"

Akihito went to shrug, masking a wince as he belatedly remembered he couldn't do that yet. "Yeah, I'm good."

"Good to hear," Glasses said as he placed a handful of folders on the table. "I'll collect signatures in the morning, Asami-sama."

Asami returned a barely-there nod.

Akihito thought that that might be the full extent of sympathy from the expressionless man, but Glasses took a detour of several steps towards the bed.

"I hope you're not in too much discomfort. I wish you a swift recovery." Stilted, but the fact that he'd said anything at all spoke volumes.

"Th-thanks," Akihito said, surprised.

Glasses nodded to him and bowed to Asami before heading back out.

"Uh, Kirishima-san?"

Using his actual name? Not only that but with 'san' too? Akihito was sure the man stumbled. It was more than a dead stop.

Glasses turned slowly, and seemed to be taken aback at Akihito’s serious expression. No wonder, it was rare for Akihito to look at him without mischief or aggravation.

"I hear it got all kinda hairy before and it can't have been easy, but... You saved my life. I'm glad you were there and, you know, did what you did. Thank you."
Was this what surprise looked like on Glasses? He stared without moving or saying anything for several beats. Then his stony face became stonier than usual, or perhaps just heavier. Akihito didn't know him well enough to identify it. But the single nod of the head was firm with meaning, sincere. Akihito felt a little lighter for it.

"Thank you, Takaba-san. I'm glad it worked out."

Two rings. "Everything ok?"

"Yes, no flags. He's awake."

A pause. "Takaba's awake?"

"He seems alert and cognitively sound. Time will tell."

The pause was longer this time. Quietly sharing. Because Kirishima was starting to understand the giant soft spot that the big giant seemed to have developed for the punk.

"And the boss?" came the expected question.

Kirishima didn't hesitate. "He'll want to visit the guest soon."

Suoh's voice was rich with anticipation. "We're ready and waiting."

"Where were we?" Akihito asked as the door closed behind Glasses.

"You were waxing lyrical about your dinner."

"Oh yeah! It was nothing like normal hospital food. Do you have your own chef or something? I wish I'd been able to finish it."

"Your body is healing. It's natural to tire easily." Because yes, Asami had returned to find Akihito had actually fallen asleep mid-meal.

"Is that the voice of experience I hear? Actually, how many times have you been injured?"

Asami shrugged. "Once or twice."

"Once or twice my ass," Akihito muttered. But something made him shy away from asking any more. "Anyway. It's not that, I'd already finished before I fell asleep. It was embarrassing how little I could eat!"

"Eating little is embarrassing?"

"Yeah, don't you think?" Akihito threw a deliberate grin. "It's a sign of advancing years, you know. Equipment starts failing, stomach loses elasticity."

The look in Asami's eyes told him he'd be in so much trouble for that if he wasn't laid up. "So the opposite of that is the sign of youth, is it?"

Shit. This was Asami, which meant it was a trap. "You're doing that voice again," Akihito said cagily.

"What voice is that?" Asami asked innocently. "I'm merely pointing out the basic necessity of
theories requiring proof. We'll see how youthful you are when you're fit and well again. *Equipment* and *elasticity*, wasn't it?" The gleam was unmistakable.

"I knew it!" Akihito burst out, going so far as to point an accusing finger but ended up flinching at the stab of pain that seemed to go right through his torso. "Fuck," he gasped, sagging back into the pillows. It was too much to try to hide.

There were fingers at his lips, pressing insistently. Akihito parted his mouth to find two pills pushed onto his tongue. A cup followed and he drank it down.

"You should have taken them earlier." Asami's voice was soft and hard at the same time. But Akihito opened his eyes to find nothing soft in the man's expression.

"I didn't need them earlier."

"You did." "I didn't."

"Do you really think I haven't noticed?" Asami replaced the cup on the bedside table, his movements careful as though requiring a substantial amount of control. "All the times you pretend that your side isn't killing you?"

Asami's gaze burned. So much rage – but it wasn't like when Asami had suddenly erupted at him when he'd woken up. *That* had been driven more by worry. *This* was out for blood. An eye for an eye. At the very least.

"Where --" Akihito's jaw continued to shift but something choked his voice. He glared unseeing at the heat-pressed sheets, frustrated by his own cowardice.

But Asami picked up on it all the same. "The police is reporting that Wakajima perished in the blast."

The breath froze in Akihito's throat. He looked up slowly.

"They haven't found any remains, most likely washed away when the dock was submerged in the bay."

Akihito was searching Asami's face. Was he saying what Akihito thought he was saying? He was, wasn't he?

Slow with purpose, heavy with meaning, Asami ensnared Akihito in his gaze. "He won't – *ever* – come after you again."

Oh god, he was. Akihito was full of such a jumble of relief and guilt and dread and even crude triumph that he couldn't decipher it all. "Is that, like, now? Or... in a bit?"

Asami smiled, but it wasn't any normal smile. It was the kind of expression that he didn't show the press, the darkness within that so few alive had witnessed. The dragon at this man' soul.

"Soon." The back of Asami's fingers traced the slender jaw. "Or not so soon. Karma is a bitch, after all."

Akihito really shouldn't be feeling so relaxed at this. But if he hadn't known it before, he certainly did now. He'd tried to blow himself up to save Asami, for fuck's sake. If that didn't tell Akihito that he'd long passed the point of no return, he didn't know what would.
"Will you tell me when... it's done?"

"If that's what you want."

Akihito fidgeted with the sheets folded back over his torso. "What about Mitarai?"

Irritation flickered across Asami's face. "What about him?"

Interesting how the reaction differed. "Is he alive? Dead? Or what do the 'police think'?' His tone conveyed air quotes.

Asami regarded him closely. "He's missing."

"Missing?"

"Perhaps the police will track him down. Perhaps they won't. Who knows."

Oh.

Oh! Akihito blinked. It was a choice? His choice? It seemed Asami wasn't on quite the same personal vendetta with Mitarai as he was with Scarface. Did Asami still sympathize with Mitarai because of his sister? Maybe, but it probably pissed him off too.

"Uh... well, maybe... Maybe they'll find him. If they find him, they'd try him according to the law, right?"

Asami sighed heavily. "How did I know you'd say that?"

Was that another reason why Asami wasn't stringing Mitarai up in the same way? He didn't know what to make of Asami making such allowances for him.

"Don't get me wrong." Akihito said quietly, "he's a fucking idiot and he totally fucked up. But, just the why, you know? It's not like Scarface, who was creepy and greedy and he sure as fuck wasn't doing any of that for Tsubasa. And did I mention creepy?"

Akihito shivered, which made him flinch, which made Asami's gaze burn that particular shade of fierce again, which made Akihito cast about for something to temper the tempest...

He was done with this topic anyway. Time to shift gears. Akihito made a point of making his head comfortable on the pillow, releasing a contented sigh that bordered on a moan.

"So where're you sleeping tonight?" he deadpanned. "Sofa?"

Restless, mumbling, the words unfathomable. The blond head was tossed aside, chased by a grating groan, tailing off into a whimper.

"Where... Where –"

A huge gasp, dredging for oxygen where there wasn't any, arms flung out, fingers outstretched, reaching, reaching –

"Asami!" Hazel eyes flew wide, unseeing, frantically searching where no eye could see. "Asami!"

"Akihito!"
Akihito froze, focusing, stunned to find himself face to face with the man beside him in bed. Bewildered and lost, his eyes pored over every centimetre of Asami's face. A trembling hand landed on Asami's arm, grasping, squeezing up and up until he reached the shoulder, neck, face, feeling along like a blind man clawing his way out of a hellhole.

"Asami?" A breath, such fervent hope –

It made something ache in Asami's chest. "I'm right here, Akihito."

The crumbling house of cards. Relief leeched the last of the strength from Akihito and he wilted. He was beyond caring where he landed, but the broad shoulders and strong arms caught him.

He was a lifeless ragdoll for a long while, slowly gathering himself. Asami didn't rush him, his warm hand roving an aimless path along Akihito's arm and shoulder and uninjured side. For a man who marched the world to whatever beat of his own drum, he sure could display an inordinate amount of patience at times where Akihito was concerned. Specifically when he was the most vulnerable.

When Akihito spoke again his voice was more like his own, if a little subdued. "You must be sick of this. I know I am."

Asami's hand didn't let up its dawdling repetition along Akihito's skin. "Do you think I would I still be here if I was?"

Akihito was glad his cheek was pressed against Asami's shoulder, his face hidden. He made no attempt to move, something about the nocturnal quiet letting him draw on the considerable comfort that Asami provided.

"Everyone has their moments," came the quiet baritone, a soft admission into the darkened room. "It's alright not to be alright sometimes."

Akihito's head was carried by the easy rise and fall of Asami's chest. "Bet that doesn't apply to you though, right?"

"It does."

"Bullshit."

A huff of a smirk. "Admittedly not often, and it tends to be in rather more... aggressive ways."

Akihito couldn't help snorting. "Yeah, I bet."

They lay there staring into the dark, one too afraid to close his eyes again, the other waiting.

"What was the dream, Akihito?"

Akihito had already been rather still, especially for him, but he now became as motionless as a statue, his face stricken. There was no answer. As Asami started to wonder if he'd stopped breathing, he said, "Suoh had me flat on my back with a gun in my face the first time we met."

Akihito's stillness morphed into something else entirely. "Huh?!"

Asami held his tongue and waited. He could imagine the brat scrambling up, all eager and tenacious as he poked and prodded for every last detail in his usual colourful way, if he'd been able. As it was, Akihito was currently reduced to elbowing against Asami's side.

"You can't just drop a titbit like that and clam up. What's the juice?"
"Actually... Perhaps forget I said anything –"

"Oh, come on!"

"Really? Well, maybe another time."

"Don't be an ass! Tell me!"

"Hmm, far too stimulating for you right now, I think."

Akihito snorted at the suggestive rumble. "Bastard, you know I'm pissing down a tube here, nothing's getting stimulated."

Asami's chest shook softly, a soundless chuckle. His meandering hand drifted lower along Akihito's hip. His baritone likewise drifted further into the bedroom, caressing with his words. "Are you sure about that, Akihito?"

Asami could almost feel the heat of the blush against his shoulder.

"What the – stop with that voice!" Akihito stammered. "You're unbelievable. Doc said no action, remember?"

"For several months."

"That's right, and don't you forget it. I'm off limits so you're gonna have to learn to keep your grabby hands to yourself and –" Akihito abruptly stopped dead. Even his body seemed to freeze up all over again, before he was curling in on himself.

Or at least, that sentiment was clear from the small increment that Akihito drew away. Asami could practically see the dotted line that that sharp but sometimes random mind had connected.

"Do you intend to tell me what just came to mind?" he demanded, more sharply than he'd intended.

Akihito barely masked a wince. "I don't know what y–" He was stopped by the sudden hold on his jaw, forcing him to look up at Asami. There was a flicker of pain but Asami wasn't going to let this slide.

"What have I told you all along?"

Akihito sought frantically, a touch of genuine alarm rising when he couldn't pinpoint one thing in particular.

Did the brat really think Asami would seek gratification elsewhere? Did Akihito think so little of him? Or perhaps it was that stubborn denial, or not daring to hope, or from being shaken after recent events...

Asami sighed, his harsh gaze easing. "Only you, Akihito."

He let Akihito relax against his shoulder again. Perhaps Akihito just needed time for Asami to prove himself. Or perhaps it was all of those –

"So are you gonna tell me how Suoh handed you your ass or what?"

Asami found his lips curving. "Very well, seeing as you're pissing down a tube, I suppose I could relieve you."
"Balls, you did not just make a joke about that!"

Asami thumbed the lower lip and defused the outburst to a stammer. "It was as I started my takeover. He was guarding the Oyabun I was after which naturally put us at odds. I went in, he stopped me."

"Not just stopped you. You said he floored you."

"Yes, well, he was faster than me back then. It took a few minutes."

"And he stuck a gun in your face."

"Yes."

"So you're still alive because...?"

"I invited him to come work for me instead."

Akihito paused, and scoffed. "Course you did."

"I went in because Suoh was my real objective."

"But you said you were after the Oyabun."

"I was. But Suoh was why I targeted that group when I did, he was in their employ."

Akihito drew back to look at him. "Wow, you never do anything without reasons upon reasons, huh? Does he know?"

Asami smirked. "I told him as he cocked the gun."

Akihito snorted. "As good a time as any. But he wouldn't flip that easily, would he?"

"No. And I would have retracted my offer if he had, though I was confident that he wouldn't. We'd made enough noise with our altercation that there were soon more guards, and they took me to see the Oyabun." Asami caught Akihito blinking slowly. "It's a long story, not really relevant. Do you want to rest?"

Akihito's eyes flew wide. "I'm not tired."

Too quick, too tight. Asami's sharp gaze flickered over the younger man who was carefully not looking at him.

"Very well," he said softly, his fingers soothing through the blond hair. "I told the Oyabun that he was finished unless he released Suoh from his employ. They were amused at first, seeing as they had me beat, but I'd set up three rival families against the Oyabun and he wouldn't have known how to stop them."

Akihito went to sit up, having forgotten that he couldn't, and slumped against Asami again with a grunt. But not to be deterred, he tipped his head up. "They had you beat?"

Asami paused, becoming cautious at the eager tone. "Yes...?"

"Were you tied up? Handcuffed?"

Asami's lips twitched. "Really, Akihito? Where's your mind at?"
"I – I'm just saying! I can't imagine it, is all."

Asami's hand trailed down the slim arm, his voice dropping to a husky caress. "I can assure you the circumstances were entirely different –" his skimming fingertips raised goose bumps along Akihito's wrist – "to activities you take pleasure in."

"Me?!” Akihito yelped, snatching his arm back and rubbing away the crazy sensitivity. "Don't go putting that on me, you perverted bastard, that's all you!"

"You're the one with your mind in the gutter. Next thing I know you'll be saying you want to tie me up. Do you see me in the room, Akihito?” he purred throatily. "Bound at your mercy?"

A furious blush overtook Akihito's face and he could only manage a stuttering, incoherent garble. Asami's chest shook again at that.

"You're such an ass," Akihito grumbled.

"Am I? I'm merely recalling how deliciously tormented you looked as I –"

"Aaargh!" Akihito flung an arm but he couldn't reach to clap his hand over Asami's mouth. "Not another word, oh my god how could you say something like that jesusfuckingchrist!"

"That good, was it?" Asami was thoroughly amused at his expense.

"Suoh!" Akihito yelped. "Blond Tank. Big guy. You got him fired and snapped him up and the rest, as they say, is history. Good story. Very good."

Asami chuckled, finally taking pity. He let Akihito move them back on track. "It wasn't quite as easy as that. He distrusted me at first for forcibly terminating his employ, but there was a reason I'd been watching him for a while. It wasn't just his physical and strategic abilities but he also had a code I could respect."

"Honour among thieves," Akihito said, knowing Asami was full to the gills with it.

"Indeed. He came around once he saw what I was setting out to do. He's been with me ever since, come hell or high water. I can count on one hand the number of people I trust implicitly and he's one of them."

"Wow. No wonder you two are tight. Glasses too, right?"

Asami spoke low and soft, a soothing drone. "Kirishima, I had to wait two more years for. Officially he was serving as a business advisor to a large clan but he was really the brains of their operation. He'd sworn his allegiance and he wouldn't be easily swayed, and I had no wish to act against them considering the position he held. So I waited. In the end they practically served him up on a silver platter. The Oyabun had bred like a rabbit and his every offspring was dumber than the last. One of the younger sons got trigger happy and tangled himself up in a blood feud with a powerful rival. The Oyabun served Kirishima up as a scapegoat, and that, as they say, was history. Suoh and I prevented his forced seppuku [antiquated honour suicide by knifing one's own guts] and the three of us brought both groups to heel."

"The start of a beautiful friendship," Akihito mumbled, calmed enough by Asami's voice to let himself be drowsy. "What about Kuroda?"

"I've known him since childhood. He was a 'brother' in the Shinjui-kan, a son of one of the lieutenants. Somehow we've ended up stuck together."
"Osananajimi [childhood friend]," Akihito murmured, his eyes closing, his head heavy on Asami's shoulder. "Was it your idea for him to practice law?"

Unknown to Akihito, Asami's gaze sharpened above his head. "Perhaps," he said at length. "Though of course, now that I've told you that, I'm going to have to kill you."

"Well I'll probably nod off any second now so here's your chance --" Akihito broke off for the noisiest, most melodramatic yawn Asami had ever seen. "Man, I'm beat."

Asami's gaze unerringly tracked Akihito's total lack of concern over his threat. "Hazumi, Shinji, Suoh, Kirishima. I can count them on one hand." With his arm around Akihito, Asami brushed over the smooth skin. "I used up the last finger when you came along."

Already three-quarters asleep from exhaustion, Akihito's mumbling had zero brain-to-mouth filter. "I've lotsa hands, for lotsa things. But my special hand, I only count my parents and Kou and Takato." Another yawn, even longer this time. It took an age to wind off. The blond head shuffled against Asami's shoulder. "'n' you."

Asami returned to find his secretary rooted to the foot of the bed. Kirishima's gaze was fixed on the slumbering form, a hard frown etched in the lines of his face. He looked for all the world as though he grappled with a very considerable burden.

Closing the door, Asami headed over to the table, intending to work until Kirishima was done with whatever soul-searching he was doing. Or until Asami himself felt unable to stay away, to verify with his own hands that that pulse was still beating. The cardio machine could be malfunctioning, beeping on loop, or it might be picking up on someone else's heartbeat somehow –

"I didn't see it."

Almost too low for inflection, but knowing Kirishima as well as he did, Asami could hear the strain in the quiet disclosure.

"What drew you to him. His will. His fighting spirit." Kirishima's head shook slowly. "That spirit..."

Asami found himself beside his second at the end of the bed.

Standing side by side, Kirishima continued staring at Akihito. "You knew all along."

Breathing steadily, just slightly too fast and strained to be that of easy slumber. The edge of the sterile dressings peeked out from under the sheets pulled up under Akihito's shoulders.

Asami's eyes were drawn to the streak of pink on the upper bicep. The scar looked so insignificant now, compared to everything else, but it held great meaning for him.

"Unarmed. Untrained. Scared shitless. But running on instinct he saved my life." Asami would have rolled his eyes if it wasn't such an Akihito thing to do. "By running through the crossfire."

Asami stared so hard at the shallow rise and fall of the chest that he almost convinced himself that he was imagining it.

"He's an impulsive, impudent brat," he murmured, "but there's never been a truer arrow."

Akihito didn't have a single self-centred bone in his body. Not like Asami, who'd watched him wavering on death's threshold and shamelessly monopolized him, unable to stand the thought of
sharing what could have well been his last moments.

Asami sighed. "Make the call."

The secretary bowed, first to the man he lived to serve, then lower, longer, in silent apology, to Takaba.

Kirishima withdrew, a new sapling sprouting beside the giant sequoia rooted at his soul. Because he could see it as clear as day now.

The North Star in Asami's night.

Asami drifted alongside the bed, one measured step after another. His fingertips trailed across the sheets. Over the crest of Akihito's toes, the ridge of the shin, the bump of the knee.

It wasn't just that bullet. Over and over, Akihito had his back. The video, the underhanded detectives, the blackmail.

Along the thigh, the dip of the hip.

Even with his own sister, not to mention Artemis – typical of Akihito's own brand of ingenuity, really, hidden behind the carefree boisterousness. Then on top of it all...

Featherlight, from over the sheets Asami traced the swathe of bandages, the subtle bumps of neatly overlapping layers.

Hell and damnation. The storm was agitating again, rupturing the heavens and gouging the Earth, clamouring against the image on the docks that he knew would never fade. He knew because he hadn't forgotten since he was 12 years old. That same, unspeakable drop of dead weight.

He closed his eyes, letting the memories come, letting them fade. But the sensation still lingered, the untried imprint of hard metal, heavy in his younger hand. The recoil, five times, that had reverberated to the soles of his bare feet.

But this time the gun was his own and he'd barely registered its weight, as familiar as an extension of his hand. And, crucially, there had been no recoil. Because this time it was Akihito who had seen them through. Of all the reckless, outrageous, cockamamie things the brat could have done, it was probably the only thing that had saved all their lives.

Asami's fingers spread up and out, his hand flattening against Akihito's chest. A soft rise, then drop, laboured but breathing. Higher still and he pressed just enough on either side of the windpipe. The pulse steady, a little quickened as expected when recuperating like this. His fingertips trailed up, loosely framing the face.

Akihito sighed but otherwise didn't stir.

The only one Asami had ever found himself wanting to confide in. The one who, beneath any outward protests, had taken to Asami, in spite of the size of his bank account and his position in the world, not because of it. Because this fiery brat not only looked beyond what most everyone else saw, but understood, accepted, the man he was.

Asami's fierce gaze drank in the sleeping face, his voice a soft, ardent rumble. "There is no more escape for you, Takaba Akihito. I will drag you with me to the darkest ends of the abyss."
He closed his lips over Akihito's, sealing his promise.

Monday.

"Holy shit!"

"What the fuck happened to you?!"

"Bro..."

Akihito grinned tightly. "You should see the other guy."

His friends approached the bed, dazed.

"I wanna hug you but you look like you might fall apart. Can I hug you?"

"No, I'm good."

"You sure you don't need –"

"Kou, for real. I'm good. Pick a chair." Akihito waved at the other side of the room with a finger.

"What the hell happened?" Takato asked again.

"Uh, they didn't tell you?" Akihito asked.

"They just said you were in hospital. But we totally knew something was up."

"We kept messaging you and you replied saying I'm indisposed."

Akihito's brows crept up. "I did?"

"We knew it wasn't you. Who the fuck talks like that, anyway?"

"So what happened!" Takato repeated.

"I can't tell you yet," Akihito said lamely. "It's uh... a police thing." He needed to get his story straight with Asami, was what.

"At least tell us it doesn't have anything to do with that huge explosion at the docks that's been all over the news all weekend." Kou had been joking but then he saw the look on Akihito's face. "It is! Shit! Fuck! Oh my god, what the fuck happened?!"

Akihito groaned, scrubbing at his face. "You gotta stop doing that. I'll tell you when I can, I just can't right now. But I'm alright, ok?"

"You're lying in bed, you, and you're saying you're alright?"

"I will be," Akihito amended. "So don't worry."

"How can we not? You look like Frankenstein!"

"Gee, thanks. There goes my dream modelling career. Anyway, help me take my mind off." He turned pointedly to Takato. "Have you found an apartment?"

Takato had, actually, but he'd barely started describing it before Kou was fidgeting like mad, bursting
with news. He rolled his eyes. "Egh, go on, you idiot."

Akihito shared an amused look with him. "Lemme guess, new girlfriend?"

Kou's face split with a dreamy grin. "I've found me an older lady."

Akihito didn't know whether to be amused or worried. "What?"

Takato just rolled his eyes and went to grab two chairs.

"It's obviously working for you so I thought I'd try it," Kou told him earnestly.

"W-what?"

Kou practically glowed through his skin. "My goddess."

"Again, what?"

Takato pushed a chair at Kou before dragging the second one round to the other side of the bed. "He was totally ridiculous."

Akihito turned to him. "You met her?"

"No but I saw him just after he did. Honestly I only left him alone for ten minutes and apparently this 'goddess' asked him out. He was a goner. Even worse than you with Asami-sama –"

"– hey! –"

"– all starry-eyed and tongue-tied, it was ridiculous."

"I've never met anyone like her."

"Yeah, yeah, how many times have we heard that before?"

"I really mean it this time! She's the one."

"Oh no," Akihito and Takato both groaned.

"She's so hot."

"Oh man –"

"And classy."

"You were right –"

"And mature."

"Totally ridiculous –"

Kou sighed dreamily. "Hazumi-san."

Akihito spluttered. "What did you say?"

"Even her name's perfect."

"Did you say Hazumi-san? What's her surname?"
"Surname? I dunno."

"How can you not know! Who goes onto first names first!"

"Chill, dude. We were making conversation, not running through a list of personal data."

Hazumi was a popular name. It could be anyone. Anyone else. But Akihito couldn't help but be slightly, slightly genuinely, horrified. Because if it wasn't... "Oh, you are so screwed."

Kou was way out of his depth. And that wasn't even factoring in how Asami might react... Could it really be her? The odds were near to impossible, weren't they? Fuck, he needed a distraction from the distraction.

"Why aren't you at work anyway?" Akihito tried instead. "It's Monday, isn't it?"

"I booked compassionate leave," Takato said.

"Isn't that for bereavement? I'm still here, you know."

"I just walked out," Kou said. "I didn't even say anything to my boss."

"Baka," Takato snorted.

"But..." Kou stared at Akihito, his voice going small like he hadn't been rhapsodizing his new lady love just moments earlier. "I heard our Aki-chan's in hospital and I just..."

He looked so lost. Takato swallowed. Suddenly they both tipped towards the bed and grabbed Akihito's hand nearest to them.

"Guys..." Akihito mumbled. "Hey, I'm ok." He squeezed back, fingers tangled on both sides.

There were two sharp raps at the door before Kirishima came in. He nodded to the three men, heading over to the large table without commenting on their looking like they were in the middle of a séance.

Clearing his throat, Takato sat back. Kou let out a blustery sigh and dropped his chin on his folded arms on the bed.

Glasses seemed to be settling down to work on his tablet and phone.

"Where's Asami?" Akihito asked.

"He's indisposed."

The three friends stared at Glasses – and someone started sniggering, and before they knew it they were all laughing. Not just haha-that-was-a-good-one laughing, but proper balling-eyes, can't-even-breathe laughing. Glasses threw them an unimpressed look which only made things worse. Kou almost fell off his chair.

"I'm sorry," Akihito spluttered, clutching his side, grimacing but still in stitches. "It's not even funny but... Kou's totally whipped and... I dunno, why am I laughing?"

Glasses just shook his head and turned back to his work. Too busy wiping his eyes, Akihito didn't see the faintest smile that almost, almost, broke through the stony expression.
"Ransom."

"What about influencing some critical make-or-break deal? Or an elaborate corporate takeover where they needed IT access or something?"

Asami's face indicated he had no idea what Akihito was on about. "That's not how business takeovers work."

"I don't know, do I. That's your thing. Oh I know, how about corporate espionage?"

"It was for ransom." Asami had repeated it several times now.

He was sitting sideways on the bed, one leg bent up, the other on the floor. After his friends had left, Akihito had awoken to find Asami speaking quietly with Glasses. It seemed the secretary had been here all while Akihito had slept and waited for Asami before heading off.

"But why?"

"Why not?"

"It's boring."

"Being kidnapped for ransom is boring?"

"Yes! Money is boring. Our cover story needs more va-va-voom."

Asami arched a brow.

"Swagger? Flourish? Zing?"

"My men must have failed to inform me all this time that zing is a critical requirement of cover stories," Asami said dryly. "Besides, I already told the police."

Akihito pouted. "Damn it. I was so looking forward to something cooler to brag about," he griped, even though they both knew he wouldn't have. "But hey, why would they kidnap me if it was your money they were after?"

Asami levelled him a flat look.

Akihito's eyes widened with the flush rushing up his cheeks. "You went public with... that? This? Uh... us?"

Asami's gaze gleamed. "It's us now, is it?" he mused, making Akihito stammer and blush harder. "I only told the detectives and they're under Matsui's orders to keep it confidential." Asami smirked. "But it wouldn't bother me if we went public about... us."

"I – I wasn't suggesting anything, baka!" Akihito flustered, "I was only asking. Strictly fact finding." He squirmed against the pillows, looking everywhere but back at that heated gaze. He played with the edge of Asami's suit jacket. "Fine. Ransom it is. But it better have been some stupidly big figure with an eye-boggling load of zeros. This ass ain't cheap, you know."

"I'm well aware. I've never known anyone so exhausting."

Akihito stuck his tongue out at him. "Don't blame me for your waning stamina, old man."

Asami smirked, his finger brushing aside a stray strand of blond hair. "Well I can't let you down with
lack of stamina now, can I? I'll be sure to apply myself as soon as you've recovered –"

"Hey, wait a minute –!"


There were three knocks at the door. Measured and even, unfamiliar. Akihito was going to push Asami away and expected, as usual, to get nowhere. Except Asami himself swiftly pulled back. All five steps to the window. What the hell? He had no qualms sleeping alongside Akihito in front of Dr. Fujimoto and the night nurse and even some of his men, he'd never had an issue with all the embarrassing PDA until now. It actually made Akihito nervous. Who the hell could make Asami want to be so careful?

"Akihito? Akihito!"

Akihito's head snapped at the voice he knew so well, sure he must be hearing things. He gaped in shock at the last two people in the world that he expected to see rushing through the door.

"Mum?! Dad?!!"
Chapter Notes

So much for 27, it's going to be 29 now!

This one's been tough. I hit a wall, I had no words, I had too many words, I was distracted with some later scenes (*ahem!*), these two(!), all the rest of it hitting me in one go, typical chronic over-writing and ending up with a totally unwieldy 30k+ words... The list goes on.

Long story short, what were previously the last two chapters have each been split in two, so Click is going to be 29 chapters! I'm pretty sure that's it now, but I'm calling author's privilege. No promises because I've clearly called it wrong since I first announced it was going to be 25 chapters and kept inching it up! *D'oh!* They won't all be jumbo chapters but this gives me wiggle room at least.

Confession time. 1 – I actually can't remember if we ever saw Akihito's parents in canon... If we have, they don't appear here! I've made them up. This is how I picture Akihito's family who nurtured him into the character we know and love.

2 – You know when you say a word too many times and it loses all meaning? This chapter has become a bit like that, maybe because it's been such a battle and I've been going over it so many times I have no idea if it's ready. But I need to draw a line under this because I'll never be able to move on otherwise so I'm just going to post it. So I'm really sorry if it's terrible. Don't be surprised if parts are revised later! (Has anyone else experienced something like this? How did you get through it? I'd love to hear from fellow writers! Even to tell me it happens to everyone and I'm just being a wimp! XD Honestly, fire away! haha)

Finally, just a note that I'm going with the English convention of saying 'Mum and Dad' rather than the Japanese order of 'Dad and Mum'. It just sounds odd otherwise in English.

Part 2 in a week or two hopefully! (Barring another wall... Hopefully not!)

~ Nyx ~

Best prank ever. Had to be. An optical illusion, a hologram, some kick-ass next-gen VR concept where there was no need for a headset...

Except his mum's hands on his face had that dryness they always did going into winter. And there was a waft of the same cheap aftershave his dad had used since forever; a.k.a. ever since an 8-year-old Akihito had forked out all the money he'd earned fixing a neighbour's computer and was chuffed to bits with the birthday present he'd chosen all by himself.

They were speaking to him – or, specifically, his mum was – but he didn't really hear, his rabbit-in-headlights gaze finding Asami. The man was leaning against the window, as casual as you like, on the phone. On the phone. Mid-conversation and all, to all appearances, when Akihito was still
blooming exactly like Asami had been about to kiss him only five seconds earlier. In what universe was that fair?

"Sweetie, come on, speak to me. It's your mother. Do you remember?" She peered into his eyes, pushing up his eyelids.

"Cut it out, Mum!" Akihito flapped her away. "I was just surprised to see you, is all."

"You were surprised? We were woken up at the crack of dawn by a stranger calling us to say you're out of intensive care now, how do you think that felt?"

"Better than if they'd said I was still in intensive care?"

"Don't get smart with me, young man. We've been on the train for hours and we've been worried sick and we haven't had any breakfast or lunch so don't try me."

"Ah, you're hangry. Makes sense now."

"Of course I'm bloody hangry so stop being so lazy and come here and greet your poor mother properly."

"I'm lying in a hospital bed fresh out of intensive care, how exactly am I being lazy?"

"I don't know, do I, you're too busy being a smart mouth to tell me what's wrong."

"You haven't let me get a word in edgeways!"

"You're doing plenty of yapping from where I'm standing."

"Yeah, well, I'm not the only one," Akihito grumbled. He caught Asami subtly turning away, his mouth twitching, his shoulders shaking – "Oi, stop that! It's not funny!"

Asami gave his best innocently surprised face. The phone had disappeared at some point.

Dad was used to waiting until the other two let off steam. It was also a good indicator that there was nothing urgently wrong.

He was far more effectual with his words. Figured, he used to be a journalist. "How are you?" Three words, job done.

Akihito quietened down. "I'm ok. I can't move much yet but I'll be ok."

"Oh, sweetie –" His mum rushed close but then hovered, reaching out, pulling her hands back, fluttering, not knowing where she could touch.

Akihito caught her hands, squeezing. "I'll be alright, Mum." He cleared his throat. "Thanks to Asami."

Yep. He was going to do it. It was like a band-aid, right? Just rip it off.

His parents turned to the window, to the other person in the room, all tall and broad and lean and immaculately dressed and looking insanely perfect and oh-so-ridiculously droolworthy...

Ay caramba. Akihito bought himself a precious few seconds by introducing his parents first.

"These are my parents, Takaba Sana and Tatsuhiro. Mum, Dad, this is Asami, uh, Asami Ryuichi,
"He's... uh... uhhhh..."

His? Could he even say that? His what? Boyfriend? Fricking hell that didn't belong in the same sentence as Asami. Lover? He nearly had a meltdown. Friends with the biggest (ahem!) benefits? Unofficial roommate who tended to sleep in the same bed most of the time? A possible significant someone Akihito might have a thing for, and hey, surprise, he might be gay or bi or maybe he's actually Asami-oriented he hadn't actually worked it out but he wasn't really bothered?

Just as Akihito almost called him 'the guy who owns a dojo, how awesome is that?' just to fill the awkward-ass pause that had stretched to infinity already, Asami stepped forward, all fluid and suave, his considerable aura tempered down until he emitted about as much menace as a two-day-old puppy. Perfectly nice, like when he'd met Akihito's surrogate grandparents on their date dinner out that Akihito happened to pay for.

"Asami Ryuichi," he bowed. "I met your son at Sion."

His parents bowed back. "Pleasure to meet you."

"I hope you can forgive the late notice about your son being injured," Asami apologized without apologizing. "Events overtook us all rather quickly and with the doctors making sure he pulled through, it didn't occur to have the call placed until he was out of danger."

"Goodness me, please," Sana said, her expression all wide and open and shocked. "I'm just glad you both pulled through. Are you alright?" For just a moment, in the space of a single blink, Akihito thought Asami looked taken aback. "I appreciate the concern but I'm perfectly fine. Unfortunately it was Akihito who took the brunt of it."

He gave a half smile. "I'm sure you want to catch up. I have business to attend to so please excuse me."

He gave a small bow to them again before passing the bed, heading for the door.

Akihito went to speak, but 'How long you gonna be?' lodged in his throat. Asami had only just returned and he was off again, when until that morning he'd been such a constant ever since Akihito had regained consciousness. Sudden unease about Asami's absence clashed with being acutely aware of his parents being in the same room and he had no idea how to deal. It was all too sudden.

But Asami caught his foot, a press of warmth through the sheets that made breathing just a little easier. "Sagano and Nakatani will be outside," he murmured, "and you have the call button."

Akihito nodded, frowning at himself. "Later then." It might have sounded like a throwaway sayonara [farewell] but there was an underlying question...

Asami confirmed it with a nod.

Akihito tried not to watch Asami leave, as his mum fussed and fired off a million questions.

His dad was quiet, watching more closely than Akihito realized.

"– My personal failure and what it cost you will stay with me for the rest of my life. There is no apology that is adequate. I will forever endeavour to make amends for my severe shortcomings –"

"S-Sagano-san?" It was Akihito's rather horrified voice that cut through the bodyguard's monologue. "Jesus, I can't even see you. Come on, you gotta get up."
Akihito had only asked his parents to 'holler at one of the guys outside' because he had a question. How that had led so quickly to Sagano prostrate on his knees beside the bed was beyond him, but the moment the bodyguard had set eyes on Akihito he'd dived to the floor faster than a hammer striking an anvil. And he still hadn't resurfaced.

"Sagano-san, please..." Akihito sounded like he was going to cry.

That might have been the only thing that made Sagano finally, slowly, return to his feet. He looked like Akihito had died or something...

Akihito knew the precise moment that was making Sagano act like this. "You were trying to get me to safety. There wasn't anything you could've done against a stampeding hoard of panicking people. No one blames you for anything, least of all me. You know that, right?"

Sagano was staring at the floor, endlessly replaying that moment he'd let go of Akihito in the Sion foyer, chasing magical variations of preventing Akihito's abduction. *What if, what if, what if—*

Akihito would have never foreseen the day he'd paraphrase Asami of all people. "You could lose your life in what-ifs, Sagano-san. Asami told me that once. What matters is the here and now. And here and now, I'm right here. A bit of a glitch, that's all this is." He grinned encouragingly. "I'll be right as rain in no time and we'll all look back and be totally in awe of my awesome badassery, right?"

It was a long while before Sagano looked up. But he did eventually.

"Ok?" Akihito checked.

"...Ok," Sagano said, still with a great deal of uncertainty.

"Ok," Akihito nodded back. No doubt it would be a long time before Sagano let go of his guilt but Akihito would pester and nag and cajole and irritate the man until he did.

He cleared his throat. "So I was actually going to ask if you know if the police are coming later?" *Hint hint – what the fuck am I meant to say?*

"I'm not sure. I will make enquiries, Takaba-sama. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Yeah, can you stop with the 'sama'? It makes me all nervous, like I'm supposed to be standing straighter or be older or something."

Sagano bowed. "I apologize, it wasn't my intention to make you uncomfortable."

"You don't have to bow..." Akihito whined.

Sagano bowed again, even deeper. "Apologies again. Excuse me, I will enquire regarding the police." He bowed again at the door.

Akihito groaned as the door closed behind him. "He seriously needs to chillax..."

"Was he the one you spoke to?" Dad was speaking to Mum, even if he was still watching Akihito. They both were, actually, a bit shocked at the exchange.

Mum shook her head. "I think the name was Kirishima."

"Nah, that was Sagano just now. Kirishima's the one in the glasses."
"Who's Kirishima-san?" Mum asked.

"Asami's secretary." Easiest to leave it at that.

"Who's Sagano-san?" Dad asked.

"Uh... Asami's bodyguard. One of." Akihito was just starting to realize how this looked.

"So all those other men we saw in the same black suits...?"

Akihito pulled a face. "Also Asami's bodyguards?"

Mum was practically squinting at him. "Who exactly is this Asami-san?"

Great question. Akihito wanted the answer to that too. Being no closer to unravelling his conundrum than he'd been a few minutes earlier, he came out with, "He owns Sion."

Then he wished he hadn't. Though it was bound to happen sooner or later.

Her eyes went saucer-shaped. "Don't tell me he's the Asami Ryuichi? The business tycoon? The billionaire? Goodness me! I thought I recognized the name, why didn't he say he was the CEO?"

His dad went the other way, his brow descending along with him sinking into silence.

"How on earth do you know someone like Asami-sama?" Mum asked.

Akihito sighed. There it was, the inevitable 'sama'. More respectful, in some respects. But also more distant, from another point of view.

"I think I just realized why he didn't tell you," he pondered aloud. "Can you just call him Asami-san?" He sniggered at the sound of it off his tongue. Asami was just Asami to him.

"We can't do that, he's one of the richest men in Japan! However did you meet him? Is that why you're in this private hospital? Is he paying for this? Because I know you can't afford that on your health insurance. Or did you do another big bug-testing job? What on earth happened? Oh, my poor boy—"

His mum grabbed his head and planted multiple kisses on his forehead and cheeks.

Akihito pulled a face but endured it, knowing how worried she was. "Is this what I'm like?" he lamented at his dad. He knew he took after his mother and they could both talk till the cows came home, but this was worse than usual. Even more like Akihito if that was possible.

His dad was looking at him strangely. "Is Asami-sama paying for your medical bills here, Akihito?"

Uh oh. The serious voice had made an appearance. Akihito felt a bolt of unease. "I think so."

His father kept looking at him.

Akihito fidgeted. "Yeah." It hadn't even occurred to him to ask.

"You still haven't told us why you're in a hospital in the first place," his mum pressed. "What happened?"

Akihito was getting nervous about the way his father was looking at him. Like he knew. And wasn't impressed. How much had his dad picked up before poor health had forced him out of journalism in
the big city? That was about ten years ago, as Asami was solidifying his world domination. Shit. The last thing Akihito wanted was his parents hating Asami.

There was one thing he could make absolutely clear. "I'm here because some sick psycho creep tried to kill me and Asami saved my life. I'd be dead if it wasn't for him."

"Akihito...!" his mum gasped, and he felt a bit guilty for his bluntness. Well at least he hadn't mentioned the hitmen, and the earlier shooting too, and the mugging before that...

She embraced his head again. "What on earth's been happening here? You said you were doing well in Tokyo." Sniffling, tears slipped from her eyes.

What she said next made his heart plummet in a way he'd never expected.

"Aki... Come home."

Creaking chains. Rasping breath. Clattering teeth.

It only took Asami one glance to gauge levels of fatigue, pain, tolerance, lassitude, consciousness...

The man dangled naked and limp from his wrists, head hanging low. Dried red riverbeds ran from the gnawed skin under the steel manacles, along the arms and torso and down the legs. Scratched, grimy feet trailed in a watery pool of blood. No doubt the floor had been washed down at some point, more for the comfort of the host than the guest. Asami could still detect the toll of the last few days in the cold air, the distinct metallic tang, the sharpness of bodily excretions.

"I can be creative waking you up if that's what you're after," he said flatly.

There was a hacking snicker, the chains jangling. The man found his feet, setting them slowly, creaking to stand rather than just hanging from his wrists.

Scarface looked up, the scar pulling in a hideous grin. "Thank you for visiting me, Asami-sama. It gives me a real sense of achievement."

Asami very nearly rolled his eyes. "Your aspirations are pitiful. No wonder you amounted to so little."

He headed for the only chair in the bunker, a hard metal thing beside the usual tool table. He draped his coat over the back of it and took the seat, slipping out of his suit jacket but leaving it draped over his shoulders. It was chilly, after all.

"You can't hide it," Scarface taunted. "For you to do all this, I really got to you, didn't I?"

Asami made a rotating sign with his finger. Suoh came forwards, roughly grabbing one of Wakajima's shoulders and swinging him in a slow circle. Bloody feet scrambled on the slippery floor as Scarface grunted. The chains creaked from where they were bolted to the ceiling.

There was a dagger hilt sticking out from between the ribs, but not much else.

"Were you holding back?" Asami asked lightly.

"I only need one knife wound to fill the bunker with noise, sir," Suoh replied.

The big guard resumed his position off to the side. Calm, easy, feet planted, he could have just as easily been guarding Asami's office door as having spent the last three days attending to their latest
houseguest's nerve endings through that single stab.

"But are you satisfied? I gave you free rein so long as he was still alive and coherent."

Suoh smiled faintly. "I will be. When you're done."

Asami smirked back. "Tape it," he ordered. "We wouldn't want to risk the knife slipping out before we're done, would we?"

It was just a flicker. The discomfort, before Wakajima shrugged with just his face. His shoulders weren't moving any time soon. "Makes no difference to me."

Asami ignored him. "Any sleep?"

Suoh shook his head as he headed back to their guest with the gaffer tape. "The new drug has been effective in keeping him awake, though there appears to be side-effects. He becomes extremely agitated whenever he's dosed up. He mentioned something about burning."

Scarface's eyes twitched to more syringes laid out neatly on the table.

Asami smiled thinly. "We should test it further then to catalogue the effects of long-term exposure."

"That seems prudent, sir," Suoh agreed solemnly.

"What, so it's drugs, sleep deprivation and stabbing me a bit, is it?" Scarface spat. "That all you got?"

"Don't fret, Wakajima-san. My agenda is quite simple." Asami started rolling up his sleeves. Neat, precise, controlled, the inner demon tightly leashed. "Did you know Akihito has nightmares? He can't say your name. He can't move without being in pain."

Wakajima laughed, even as he flinched at the scrape of the knife against a rib bone.

"It's good that that pleases you," Asami said, dangerously soft. He removed his watch – Rotonde de Cartier, complete with scratches as he'd worn it since the mugging – and left it on the table for safekeeping. "Because I'm going to grant you the same favour. I'll let you feel everything Akihito feels."

He reached into his inside jacket pocket and drew out a long thin object wrapped in a handkerchief. He unfolded it, one peel of the material at a time... To reveal another knife.

"Is that what you think?" Asami's eyes keenly followed the sharp curve of the blade. "Akihito never liked knives to begin with, but you had to go and use one on him. So it's only fair that I use the same instrument, isn't it?"

Scarface sneered. "Torture me all you like, I'm used to it. You can see my face, can't you? They almost took my eye and they got nothing from me. Your man didn't get anything from me either, and neither will you."

"Do you remember all the places you touched? Were you even paying attention? I certainly was. Temple. Cheek. Around the neck. The whole of the back, from the neck to the feet." No matter his soft voice, an unearthly fire burned in Asami's gaze. "Do you think you'll learn the meaning of
regret, Wakajima-san, when you lose all the places you touched?"

Scarface went ashen. It was just starting to sink in what Asami was planning. "I– I'd be dead long before all that," he stammered.

"That's why we're going to take our time," Asami explained with mocking kindness. "We'll keep you fed and watered to keep your heart ticking along, drugged to keep you conscious. You won't perish prematurely, I assure you."

"But – but –" Wakajima was getting desperate now. "He was wearing clothes! I didn't even touch his back!"

"Do you think he didn't feel you as you held onto him?" Asami snarled. "As you made him bleed? As though any of that was your due?"

He let it simmer, took a breath, reeled himself back. With reinforced calm he pocketed the starched white cloth, leaving the knife in his hands. "Akihito is strong. Soon all this will be nothing more than a forgotten memory. He'll live, he'll thrive, he'll be brilliant. But you?" Asami rose, like a spectre of death, looming closer. "I will be the only thing left to you. I will be your worst nightmare. My name alone will bring you terror. And who will mourn you? Who will remember you?" His lips thinned in a cold smile. "Not a soul."

He shrugged off his jacket. It was caught fluidly by Suoh.

Asami scratched the blade tip along the silvery scar on the blanched face. And smiled. "Shall we begin?"

---

*Say nothing.*

Which was all well and good and simple, except for Dick 1 being a complete and utter dick.

"So what absurd tale are you going to spin for me this time?" Sakazaki sneered nastily. "Or was it all a blur again?"

"Yeah, it kinda is," Akihito shrugged. "You know, things blew up in my face and all. I think I'm still in shock."

"That was three days ago, you punk. Shock doesn't last that long."

"Wow you can give a professional opinion? That's amazing! 'Cos I personally couldn't even have a stab at medically assessing myself. Ugh, I hate puns..."

A muscle twitched under the manicured beard-line of Sakazaki's jaw. "Let's have it, whatever bull—" he glanced at the mother and reworded – "nonsense you've agreed on with Asami."

"You shouldn't cast aspersions without proof, Sakazaki," Yamazaki warned.

Akihito glanced at the other detective. There had been something about Yamazaki since they'd arrived. Subdued perhaps. Quietly serious.

Yamazaki ignored Dick 1's glare and turned to Akihito. "We just need a statement then we can leave you in peace."

"Uh..." Akihito fidgeted as his parents and both detectives stared expectantly. How was he supposed to *say nothing*, exactly? With a load of very substantial waffle, as it turned out.
"Ok, yeah, it was, I mean, everything was going, you know? It was all happening, who knows what was going on. People were everywhere, everyone going everywhere, we were trying to go too but with everyone going everywhere we couldn't really go, then it's like this bash and all of a sudden I'm there and it's all going crazy! Real crazy. Yeah..." He twist-chewed his lips as everyone stared.

And stared.

"What the fuck?" Sakazaki said flatly.

Takaba senior threw the detective a sharp glare but it went unnoticed.

"Seriously?" Sakazaki snapped, veins popping on his temple. His slimy disdain was gone, it was just pure rage. "That's all you got? That's even less than last time! If you're going with this garbage at least feed me the same garbage as Asami!"

"How the hell am I supposed to know what he's told you?"

"Oh that's a good one. Need a cue? You were kidnapped, remember? Go on, you can say it: they wanted Asami's money for ransom."

Akihito's mum gasped softly, her hand flying to cover her mouth to hear this, and Akihito silently cursed the detective.

But all at the same time Kirishima was striding in, Yamazaki sucked a sharp inhale loud enough to hear, his dad's shocked gaze flew to the detective.

"Is this your accustomed method of taking statements from victims of major crime, Detective Sakazaki?" Glasses asked with perfect calm. "Because that sounded like you were coaching the witness."

Dick 1 froze. He took stock of the others all staring. He glanced at the camera on the mini-tripod, the red light blinking innocently from where it sat on the pull-out table over the foot of the bed.

"No – ah no, I was... I was confirming his statement."

Akihito could practically see the verbal backpedal. He didn't get it but it seemed a big deal to the others, including Dick 1.

"I don't recall Takaba saying anything about a kidnapping," Yamazaki muttered.

Kirishima spelled it out. "You were feeding him lines to say, Detective. It seems you've made him an unreliable witness. He can no longer give evidence."

Hang on a second, was this what Glasses had been aiming for when he'd told Akihito to say nothing? It sure saved him from committing perjury.

"No..." Sakazaki shook his head, looking for backup from Yamazaki. He got none.

"I have no choice but to lodge an official complaint on your conduct with the Public Safety Commission," Kirishima informed him.

Sakazaki stood up so fast the chair fell over. "This is all bull! He was stalling on purpose!"

"Bull, you say?" Akihito arched his brows. "I was unconscious then woke up with a mammoth concussion. I don't know what kind of superhero you expect me to be to know the blow-by-blow account of what was going on through all that." If his parents weren't there he would have been more
inventive with his language.

Sakazaki sought someone to back him up but he was stonewalled by the hostile, glaring faces. He jabbed a furious finger at Akihito lying in bed. "You're in so far over your head it's gonna bite you in the ass. Just like Sudoh. You know what happened to him. I know you know. I'll be dancing on your gravestone soon, you fucking punk, you'll sink right along with this stinking sinking rat ship! A load of fucking bull!"

He stormed out, slamming the door.

Frozen silence ruled. But only for a second.

Glasses didn't look phased in the least.

Yamazaki was looking carefully neutral. "Interview terminated," he announced, reeling off times and dates and change in attendees before turning off the camera.

His parents were furious. "We'll be making an official complaint too," his dad insisted to Akihito.

His mum nodded adamantly. "You can count on it. You were kidnapped —" her voice cracked —"for money, and to treat you like that..."

Suddenly there was a cold knot of worry. Would they blame Asami for the kidnapping, even indirectly...?

"It was Z4m4 M1r0," Akihito blurted before he could think. He looked between them, Yamazaki too. "It wasn't Asami they were after. It was Z4m4 M1r0."

Ok so Scarface had been after Asami as well, but Z4m4 M1r0 had been the target from the outset. It wasn't Asami's fault, was all he could think. He was only alive because of Asami.

"Oh, sweetie...!" Mum looked like she was about to break down. "No... No...! I told you it was too dangerous, I told you..."

His dad's eyes dropped closed, as though he'd always known this day was coming.

Dad had known about Z4m4 M1r0 since Yama-san had first arrested him. Mum had only found out when he'd been arrested again this year and she hadn't come to terms with what he'd been doing all these years. Perhaps she never would.

This was big. Yamazaki was aware of that, more than the punk himself. Someone of Asami's standing, getting mixed up in a violent case like this with a hacker investigator who'd brought down yakuza heads? The dockyard explosions had already been headline news all weekend, this would be the cherry on top of the icing with extra candles thrown in. If the press got wind of it, so would the yakuza, and Akihito was finished. Asami was his only hope.

Yamazaki understood Takaba enough to know that he was only saying it to shield Asami from blame. The young man wouldn't see the further consequences, he simply wasn't wired for self-preservation.

Takaba might not realize it but Yamazaki knew what he was being given. A second chance. No way was he going to fuck up a second time.

"I didn't hear that," the weathered detective told them all, with a meaningful glance at Kirishima for good measure. For Takaba's sake, he'd keep it quiet. "And I'll keep an ear out. There might be an
advantage to being partnered with that jerk after all."

Akihito just looked confused. But Kirishima gave the detective a single nod. Yamazaki left in search
of his partner.

His mum was squeezing Akihito's hand. But it wasn't the hand Akihito wanted. He felt the absence
of a very specific kind of warmth along his entire side as acutely as the injury. Since when had he
come to depend on that bastard so much? The bastard who kept saving him time and again, who'd
stayed with him through the worst of the twisted nightmares...

His parents were discussing complaints and formal procedures with Glasses. He rolled away from
them with an effort and curled into the pillow.

Asami's scent still lingered.

Sana stared in wordless plea at her husband. It broke her heart to see her son so clearly traumatized.
The injury was also taking an obvious toll; Akihito was clearly exhausted when he'd asked them to
leave.

Tatsuhiro turned to the so-called secretary, whom he suspected was so much more. "Is that why
there's such high security around our son? The yakuza were really after him?"

It wasn't just the two men on the door. There were more pairs of bodyguards dotted along the
corridor and at the nurse's station, and they'd passed them all through the medical clinic too when
they'd arrived.

Kirishima inclined his head. "The immediate threat has passed but Asami-sama is taking no
chances."

"Why would he do this for Akihito?"

Kirishima paused. "Asami-sama cares a great deal for your son's welfare. Beyond that, I cannot say."

The two men exchanged a look, heavy with questions and meaning.

"Call me," Kirishima said simply to Sagano and Nakatani guarding the door, who bowed back,
before turning to the parents again. "There is a comfortable waiting room just along here, if you'd
allow me to show you. Would you care for refreshments? Early dinner perhaps?"

Asami returned later just as Kirishima was trying to stop Sana and Tatsuhiro from leaving.

"I already took the liberty of arranging a comfortable suite for you at the Royal Spire," Kirishima
was saying to them. "It's just a 10-minute walk from here."

They turned as Asami swept down the corridor, his coat tails flapping in his wake. The two guards
behind him slipped away as he approached.

"Good evening," Asami greeted, inclining his head. In the space of that single gesture he transformed
into the easy air they'd felt before, if a little rushed.

The couple nodded back. "We were just heading out to arrange accommodations," Tatsuhiro said.

"There's no need," Asami insisted, "Kirishima has everything arranged at the Spire. Shall I send the
limo for you?"
"Goodness, no!" Sana objected, making Asami hide a smile at the family resemblance. "I mean, thank you, but no. We couldn't possibly impose on you so much. You really didn't need to go to so much trouble or expense."

"I assure you it was neither, as I own the hotel." They only looked mildly surprised. Asami continued lowly, "Besides it's the least I can do after getting your son involved in such unpleasant business, so please. It would allay my own burden to a degree if you could accept."

The couple looked at each other, hesitating.

It was enough for Asami. "Excuse me." He started towards Akihito's room.

"He didn't want us there," Sana blurted.

Hand on the handle, Asami paused to decipher the tone. Warning or accusation? Forewarning that he might not be welcome was very different to asking why he would be welcome if they weren't.

This wasn't someone he could just brush off. This was Akihito's mother. He considered his words. "We experienced something very difficult together. Perhaps he feels a connection..." His voice dipped, introspective. "Perhaps that's easier right now." He stilled, his own words striking a chord. It was troubling.

"Good evening." He disappeared into the room.

The Takaba couple were still watching the door after it closed, wondering what they'd just seen.

It was Tatsuhiro who suddenly asked, "Was Asami-sama saying it was his fault? But didn't Akihito say it was him they were after?"

"They seem to feel responsible for each other," was all Kirishima could say.

Asami said nothing as he entered. He knew Akihito was awake. Coat and suit jacket over the chair, gun and holster in the bedside drawer, waistcoat and tie over the jacket. Shoes off. Wordlessly he squeezed into bed and arranged his arm and shoulder under the smaller man, the sheets over them both.

Akihito pressed his nose towards Asami, took a deep breath –

"You showered again."

"Hmm."

"All ok?"

"Hmm."

Akihito didn't ask anything more. He didn't need to.

He was soon asleep.

Tuesday

Dr. Fujimoto pulled back the sheets. "Ready?"
"I was ready hours ago but someone wouldn't leave. I'm sick of staring at the same walls all the time."

"Why did Asami-sama need to leave first?" Mum asked.

He wasn't talking about catheters and dicks with his parents, thank you very much. "It's a surprise," he said instead. "I'm gonna be up by the time he's back."

They'd had an awkward breakfast together when his parents had arrived to find Asami already (still) there, working at the table, in a fresh set of clothes. His mum seemed genuinely puzzled to see him there, though Akihito was sure that his dad suspected something. Akihito had still said nothing about it. How the hell was he meant to, anyway? He'd never considered how to 'come out' to his parents before 'cos it had never been an issue until Asami had barged into his life. It had never occurred to him that he was anything but as straight as one of those laser beams you could project onto the moon.

But first things first. Aiming for a smooth motion in one go as the doctor had told him, he grabbed the handrail and rolled to the side and dropped his feet off the bed and tipped himself to sit upright – "Fuck...!"

Clearly his parents were concerned enough not to pick him up on his language. His mum rushed forwards –

"No!" He could only gasp sharply, breathing to bear the pain. For some reason Asami's soft rumbling to Relax, you're alright Akihito sounded in his mind, which was so the wrong time and place and he found himself half snickering as his face contorted. "This sucks..." Which just set off even more grimacing giggles 'cos his mind was still in totally inappropriate places.

His mum was still hovering. "Akihito?"

"I'm alright. I can do it."

After the initial rush of agony, it ebbed away to a background throb that he could tolerate. He gingerly eased himself onto his legs, sliding his feet into the slippers, his ass off the bed. He steadied himself on the handrail for a moment before letting go.

Slower than a tortoise with a Zimmer frame but so what? He was standing on his own two feet.

He looked up, his face bright with the biggest grin they'd seen in a long while. "Woohoo!"

Two minutes later – because it took that long just to traverse the big room – "Holy sh–moly!"

They'd given him an undercut on one side where Scarface had bashed him, revealing an ugly mosaic of black and blue that wouldn't have even passed for modern art. The bathroom lighting wasn't helping his ghastly complexion any. The unhealthy pallor and bags sinking his eyes must have been even worse a day ago.

"I'm so not digging this look."

"The bruising will be gone in a couple of weeks," Fujimoto's reflection reassured. "Your hair will grow back."

"I know," he said. "It looks worse than it is, right?"

"To an extent. But the internal damage was substantial. You need time to heal."
Akihito started his wobbly, shuffling way back to the bed. "Asami said that too."

She was a persistent shadow at his elbow, close by in case he fell, monitoring his movement, holding the catheter drainage bag. Splendid. "Then he must be right."

"Oh no, not another groupie who worships the ground he walks on and can't think for themselves!" Akihito joked.

Fujimoto grinned. This young man was a breath of fresh air.

His mum was doing her brave smile. "You're doing really well, sweetie."

His dad watched quietly, nodding encouragingly when Akihito caught his eye.

Finally at his destination, Akihito eased back onto the edge of the bed. Fujimoto hooked the wee bag back on the side of the bed – the only one pulling a face was Akihito – and then she herded his parents out, saying she needed to check dressings and they needed privacy.

But as she closed the door, she suggested, "Why don't we see about removing that catheter before Asami-sama comes back?"

He grimaced. "I really want to, but I also don't."

"Don't worry, I've seen it all before. Yours too."

"That doesn't make me feel any better, you know!"

She laughed. "At least you didn't get an erection when I was inserting it. That happens surprisingly frequently."

Humming innocently, she left to fetch sterile gloves, surgical drapes, disinfectant, cotton swabs, all in a disposable tray... It was good to see some colour back in the young man's cheeks, she was pleased to note when she came back.

Fortunately for Akihito, when it came to removing the damn thing Fujimoto was completely professional about it, and the catheter was out with minimum fuss and discomfort – and luckily no embarrassing boner – with still no sign of Asami.

That was when it happened. His parents returned from their wander around the clinic with a newspaper.

The docks, no problem. Explosions, fine too, though probably because he deliberately skipped away from it. What slammed him like a fist to the chest was the barrage of incidents involving the Nishizuma Group. The Oyabun and the top lieutenants had been shivved in a prison riot in what police were calling a targeted attack. And dozens, dozens, many of the top advisors and muscle and regional heads of gangs and lawyers and accountants, had fallen to a catalogue of supposedly natural causes and unfortunate accidents – heart attacks, drug overdoses, an electrical fire, vehicle or other road accidents, a collapsed building –

"Akihito?" His mum saw his face. She immediately thought he was looking at the sequence images of the entire length of the dock exploding into an inferno, taken from across the bay. "Oh sweetheart, I'm so sorry, I shouldn't have brought that in here –"

Akihito snatched it back, crumpling the paper. He'd lost his place – where was he – where was he –
there! Wakajima. The only top lieutenant missing from the body count, still missing, presumed dead in the explosion.

A systemic wipe-out. That's what the police were calling it. An entire Yakuza group eradicated, the likes of which hadn't been seen since the Shinjui-Kan was obliterated nearly three decades past. Speculations were rife about a takeover, or a new player in town, or an unprecedented crack down for some unpardonable transgression... The only ones spared were minors and their parents.

It wasn't like he didn't know what Asami did. He even understood why. He was also acutely aware of the hypocrisy of knowing – or at least knowing enough to be able to imagine – what might be happening with Scarface with so little qualm it was practically negligible. But this? *All of this?* Because of what had happened at the docks? ...Because of *Akihito*?

"Oh god..."

The millstone was too heavy around his neck. He couldn't bear its weight.

Akihito felt the eyes on him.

He blinked, bleary, finding himself staring at the windows. It was quiet.

He glanced at the tables and settee. Nope. He finally turned his head towards the rest of the room. His parents were gone.

Asami leaned against the closed door, hands in pockets. His face was blank. No amusement, no arrogance, no maddening smugness.

Akihito's stomach squirmed to his feet.

Asami knew. He knew Asami knew. His parents must have told him about the newspaper, but unlike them Asami would know what was really eating away at him.

Akihito scowled. "Were you hiding it from me?"

Asami considered. "Delaying, perhaps."

"'Cos you knew I wouldn't approve?"

Asami's gaze narrowed. "Since when do I require your approval on how I handle my associates?"

"Wow. You're in a pissy mood."

That had stung. Maybe true, but it stung all the same. Or maybe it was just the way Asami said it. It was beyond frigid. Like sub-zero.

"I knew you'd react like this," Asami told him – why did it sound like a rebuke? – "and that it would be easier with some distance. When you had recovered some."

"Is that right?" Akihito grabbed the rail, swung his legs off the bed as he swung himself to a sitting position. He grit his jaw, bore the flare of his aching side until it ebbed to a background throb. "I'd say I've recovered some. And hey, newsflash asshole, still sucks."

Asami absorbed all this without a flicker of expression. But then again he was doing his brick-wall thing. Akihito could have started breakdancing on his head and a trilobite fossil would have been more impressed.
"I guess you weren't kidding when you said you have your moments, huh?"

"Is that what you think this is?" Asami said coolly.

"Isn't it? I'd say it qualifies. But it's beyond aggressive, you know. Out of control."

That provoked a sneer, about as warm and bright as the six sun-less months of Antarctic winter. "On the contrary. It's perfectly controlled. Meticulously planned. Exactly as I conduct all my business."

"Revenge is business?" Akihito asked in disbelief.

"Reckoning is business. Nishizuma was diversifying into human trafficking but he knew I'd never permit it. He was the one who sourced the explosives for Wakajima, in the hopes of taking me out. I do not tolerate mutiny."

"But the whole group?" Akihito exclaimed. "Everyone?!"

It was just the slightest angle. Asami's head tilted, dangerous, a warning. "Every one?"

"Ok, not every one, not families with underage kids. I saw that. But near enough."

"Everyone would have included closing down Ozumi and Kitano too, and Daigoku and Junai," Asami said to the growing horror on Akihito's face. "Targeting you was a direct attack against me and as such I'm owed restitution. But I granted mercy, a suspended sentence. Many would agree I have been extremely generous. Those groups have a chance to reflect on Nishizuma's fate that could have befallen them and prove their penance."

"I – I can't be responsible for this..."

"Why would you be. This is my world to direct and control."

"How can I not feel responsible, you're doing this 'cos they came after me!"

"Motives are rarely so clear cut," Asami declared, stalking towards the bed. "Multiple factors play into every decision. I destroyed the Nishizuma group because theirs was a coordinated insurgence against my word as law. What if I let them go unpunished? Nishizuma would open up Japan to human trafficking. Where one leads, others will follow, and in no time at all the black market would once again run riot with little regulation or control. The clans would battle for supremacy, throwing the country into the gang wars and infighting of old. It would be anarchy. Japan will be stained with the blood of innocents caught in the crossfire."

"But I also destroyed the Nishizuma group because it's the only way to remove the crosshairs from Z4m4 M1r0. Too many people know who you are now. They found you once, they'll find you again, and if it's not one group it'll be another. The law alone wouldn't deter them. Even if a few of them receive life sentences, they'd deem it worth the sacrifice to protect their livelihoods, their clan's way of life. Perhaps next time they would target your family, your friends, to get to you. Perhaps next time they'll succeed. Only the threat of complete obliteration will remove any question of targeting you again."

Why? Why did those authoritative words have to make perfect sense? Akihito could only wonder how far down Asami's blackness he'd already lost himself.

Asami's hand ran through the blond hair. "And I'm doing this because there can be absolutely zero doubt in their minds –" he fist and drew the hair back, forcefully, carefully, tilted Akihito's face up – "I consider this entirely personal." His other hand pressed over Akihito's temple, slid down to his
Asami had taken the fight right out of him, left him in thrall. Akihito could only sit there staring, pliant in Asami's firm hold.

Resolute and absolute, Asami's gaze and his dark baritone both. "Your every breath. Your every drop of blood. Only I can take it all from you. If anyone dares touch what belongs to me, they will know my vengeance."

Akihito drew back a little – or he tried, in any case. Asami didn't let him go far.

There was a warning bite in Akihito's voice. "Ok so I know you're one hell of a possessive bastard and this is how you roll when you get all territorial and shit, but let's just get one thing clear. That better have been rhetorical or metaphorical or whatever 'cos, straight up, nuh-uh. I'll have you know I like my breathing and blood exactly as it is."

"As do I. And the fact remains, I'll have every last inch of you."

"Fact?" Akihito spluttered. "It's a fact now, is it? Fucking hell, you're fucking messing with me..."

"What's there to joke about?" There was no warmth in Asami's sneer. "Just who do you think it is that you belong to?" Harsh. Deliberately so.

Akihito's temper flared. "What the fuck, Asami? Why're you being such a gigantic dick?!" He tried to twist out of Asami's grasp, his side burned for his efforts, but of course Asami didn't release him. "Let me go, damn it!"

"It's far too late to be backing out now, my dear Akihito," Asami rumbled darkly.

"You are such an arrogant, bull-headed – mmph!"

Asami silenced him with a hard kiss.

Always the same three knocks, the same measured timing. Akihito was beginning to recognize the signal.

Asami immediately broke off the kiss, holding Akihito long enough to check he was stable sitting up, before releasing him and stepping back from the bed. Not a second later Sagano opened the door to let his dad in.

"Am I interrupting?" his dad asked, seeing the two glaring daggers at each other.

"Excuse me, I was just leaving." Asami nodded curtly as he swept out.

"Yeah, great, run away, why don't you!" Akihito yelled after him, still flushed and a little breathy from the fierce kiss.

"Sure, of course," Tatsuhiro said in surprise as he stepped out of the way, his surprised look swinging from one to the other.

"I suppose it saves me trying to storm out on you!" Akihito carried on. "'Cos that's not gonna happen any time soon, is it! Argh!" He flung his hands, about all he could do. "He does my head in!"

As he considered if it was worth the effort of (very carefully) throwing himself down in a huff, his
dad closed the door.

The older Takaba watched him quietly. "You always did jump heart and soul into the things that mattered to you."

Akihito was fuming too much to hear. He'd gone from starting to think he agreed with the bastard to being totally infuriated in the blink of an eye, so fast he was almost dizzy.

He knew Asami was possessive but that had been a whole other level of fucked up. Was that really what lay at that bastard's heart? Objectifying him, to own and use and ruin and discard as Asami saw fit? He started wondering if it had all been an act – protecting him 'cos it was easy for Asami, holding Akihito through his nightmares just to make him drop his guard...?

No. It wasn't. The incredible depth to which Asami had shared of himself, how he'd risked *everything* at the docks to try and save Akihito – there was no faking that. And Asami's voice... Akihito could still hear his name, raw with such emotion that made his chest squeeze even now, in that moment when they'd thought he was tumbling to his death.

Asami cared, in whatever capacity such a man was capable. Akihito was sure of it. He let out a turbulent sigh. Maybe it was just the ruthless face of Asami the crime lord, at the forefront what with dealing with the Nishizuma group and Scarface. Which meant what? That Asami wasn't himself? Or that this actually was his true self?

Akihito groaned. He was only going in circles like the endlessly rotating loading wheel of a computer jammed up with system updates and badly needing a defrag. And his dad was sitting by the window, simply looking out at the courtyard down below.

"Uh, hey, Dad," Akihito mumbled.

His dad turned and smiled easily as though Akihito hadn't just yelled after Asami and then disappeared into his thoughts.

"Where's Mum?"

"She's picking up some sushi. Hungry?"

"Asami-sama will return after dinner."

Akihito folded his arms. "Tell him he's only welcome if he's grovelling in apology for being a gigantic ass."

Glasses looked at him for a moment, his face blank. Probably surprised. "I will... pass on the message."

"Thank you," Akihito said politely, because he had no cause to be mad with Glasses.

Asami returned. There was no grovelling.

Fujimoto knocked briskly and entered the private room to find them at loggerheads, arms crossed and glaring at each other, a stalemate if she ever saw one. She had to mentally shake her head. These two...

"Fujimoto-sensei, can you please tell this obstinate buffoon that I am my own person and don't need
him to monitor my every move and he should observe the clinic's visiting hours and get his ass out of here?"

"I can choose to spend the night here if I wish, Akihito. You have no bearing on my decision."

"I do if it's my bed you're choosing to impose yourself on. There isn't enough room."

"You'll find it's technically my bed you're lying in −"

"You know what I mean! But fine!" Akihito threw back the covers. "If you're so precious about it, take your damn bed!" He pulled a face as he rolled onto his side and sat up. "I'll find myself somewhere else to sleep!"

"Don't be absurd, you're still recovering."

"Then leave me alone and let me recover!"

Fujimoto cleared her throat none too subtly, injecting herself firmly before her patient became more agitated. "I need to change the bandages so you'll need to take a break from this discussion until later." She wasn't asking. "Asami-sama, if you have any business to take care of, now would be a good time. You may return in an hour."

Asami levelled her a hard look. It was unnerving but she held her ground. Her first priority was her patient, regardless of who was paying the bills.

Eventually he cast a last glare at Akihito. "I'll be back later."

"Don't bother!" Akihito yelled after him. "You should turn him away when he comes back," he muttered to the doctor as the door closed. "If he comes back."

He carefully slid off the bed, needing to let off steam, not used to being so cooped up unless he was immersed in his coding or investigations, adding to his irritability.

She was still there when he returned from the bathroom. "I heard from the nurses you've cut down on your painkillers. Doesn't it hurt still?"

"It's bearable but yeah. A bit. Sometimes a lot. I sneezed earlier, man that hurt like a b– uh, a lot."

She smiled at his toning down his language for her. "Good."

"Good?"

"It means your nerves are healthy. If you weren't in pain I'd be worried."

"Oh." He drifted over to the window, looking down at the courtyard. He remained silent and still, both of which were unnatural to this patient, Fujimoto had learned by now.

She followed leisurely, providing company but giving him space. She followed his gaze down.

Two children were kicking a ball around. Not old enough to be very coordinated yet, they missed as often as they sent it pinging unpredictably. They carried on happily... until the ball landed in a flower pot, squashing the yellow flowers. The kids grabbed the ball, their little heads turning this way and that... then fled the scene of the crime, presumably back to their parents out of sight from this angle.

Lost in his own thoughts, the troubled look didn't once budge from Akihito's face.
She was watching him thoughtfully. "Keep up with your physio and breathing exercises as we showed you, and by around New Years you should barely feel any discomfort," she told him gently. "But in many ways, the wounds that you can't see are the last to heal. The mental scars can last the longest and have the greatest impact."

The clouds thickened. Was he going to be plagued by more nightmares? Jumping at shadows and needing Asami close just to get through the day?

"Asami-sama told me of the ordeal you went through recently. Only in so far as to the recently healed wound on your arm," she hastened to add as his eyes flew to hers. "He told me of the physical injury but was extremely brief on the details." She kept her tone kind, but matter-of-fact. "But you already struggled with several nightmares under my watch –"

"I'm dealing with it," he muttered as he made an about turn – very slowly – and ambled back to the bed. Damn the oversized room and his stupid injuries.

"I'm sure you are. Everything I've seen of you tells me that you're a fighter. But even the strongest of us needs a helping hand sometimes."

"If you're going to bug me about counselling, I swear I'll discharge myself from the clinic right now." 'Cos what could he say, anyway, that wouldn't be betraying Asami? It was out of the question.

She smiled. "I figured you'd say that. Which is why I wasn't going to mention it." She helped ease him back onto the bed and stretch his legs out. "There would be little benefit in it if you're that averse. But there is someone who could help."

"You're talking about Asami, aren't you?" Akihito hid a wince as he shifted to straighten out his slacks. "I'm not going to go all mushy and cry on his shoulder, you know." Though he might be game for some snotty revenge on the pristine suit with the way Asami was behaving.

"It's not a weakness to want to be close to somebody. The desire for companionship is human nature. But you're not the only one who needs the support." She was so serious it made him anxious. "You didn't see Asami-sama when you were first brought in. He refused to leave your side."

Akihito's brow pinched. He wrapped his fingers behind his neck, hanging his elbows. "Yeah, you mentioned that."

"I'm not sure that I really explained," she said, surprising him with her insistence. "I'm truly sorry to tell you like this but I think it's important for both of you that you know. Asami-sama was wet, and he was covered in your blood. But he refused to leave the waiting room to change in case he missed an update about your condition. It was six hours later when you came out of surgery that Kirishima-san managed to persuade him to get cleaned up, because otherwise he wouldn't have been allowed into the ICU to be with you. Then he might as well have been glued to your bedside. Every time you were agitated or woke up, every time you so much as twitched, he was right there. When I say he refused to leave your side, I mean, he refused to leave your side."

Akihito was staring, a tight lump wedged in his throat.

"It's clear to anyone that you mean a great deal to him. To see somebody you care about, in the condition that you were in, so close to dying, even to a man like Asami-sama it would leave a mark. He needs you right now as much as you need him, whether he realizes it or not. So let him help you, and you don't have to tell him – actually I'd advise that you don't – but think of it as helping him too."
Akihito didn't know if he was shocked or guilty or still mad. Was all this why Asami was being so insufferable, more than usual? But what he'd said... Did this make that ok? He found himself in muddy waters, unsure.

But there was also a silly giddy voice in his head that latched onto proof of how serous Asami was about the two of them, and he was also awash with a fair amount of relief.

"Ugh..."

She patted his shoulder. "I know. Japanese men and their emotions, I might as well be talking about aliens coming for tea. Come on, let's change the dressings."

Akihito was awake when Asami returned. It was 51 or 52 minutes past midnight, he knew because he'd been religiously checking the time on his phone. But he lay there, feigning sleep, as the soft tread approached the bed and Asami stood watching him in the dim gloom. Asami would know he was awake but he kept his eyes closed anyway.

They stayed like that, both of them waiting – for a look, for a touch – but too stubborn to bend.

After what felt like several minutes Asami turned and started walking away.

Something pulled at Akihito. A need, a frantic worry, a sudden notion that something would change if Asami walked away now, that a wall would come up between them and solidify overnight and it would be near impossible to breach –

"Asami..."

The tall man paused. He only half turned.

The mental wall was still materializing, the picture a future-Asami appearing through super-reinforced glass, forever a little distant... Unfounded imagery or not, it frightened Akihito more than anything.

"Since you came all this way..."

He winced. It wasn't how he'd wanted to say it at all.

He couldn't guess what was going through Asami's mind as he remained there, still half-poised to leave. But then he turned a little more, just enough to catch Akihito's eye.

He didn't know what Asami saw. As for himself he couldn't read Asami at all, it was like staring at a slab of cold, black granite.

Another pause, then Asami headed for the door.

Akihito could only stare helplessly as Asami opened the door, took a step outside –

"I won't be needing the limo again tonight. Have Kirishima meet me here in the morning."

"Yes, sir," confirmed the guard.

Closing the door, Asami walked back over. "You have quite the look on your face," he observed as he shed his outer clothes. They all ended up over or under the chair beside the bed.

Akihito said nothing as the holster, gun and watch went in the bedside table. He was still silent as
Asami slid in beside him, as the larger man gently slotted them together. Akihito let Asami's warm arms surround him.

Asami's breathing relaxed and deepened. His heartbeat pulsed reassuringly under Akihito's ear.

"You came back."

Asami inhaled, exhaled. "You called me back."

Akihito frowned at a crease in Asami's shirt. "I thought you were going to leave."

"I intended to."

Akihito's gut sank.

Until Asami added, "But only until morning."

That was more comforting than Akihito would admit aloud. Not only that but Asami's warmth, his solidity, his scent – it all calmed him. But Akihito knew sleep wouldn't come just yet. There was something he had to know, something he had to ask while it burned in him. If not now, he might never find the courage again.

"Would you ever kill me?"

There was no immediate reply. Would Asami answer? Akihito wondered. Or worse perhaps, would he believe the answer? The question hung in the air, a quiet tension –

Until Asami's chest started shaking.

Akihito drew back. "What...? Are you laughing? You're seriously laughing at me? What the hell, it was a serious question!"

A warm hand soothed along his arm, reassuring even as the smirk never left Asami's face. "Trust you to ask me such a thing, Akihito. Not many would. Or could."

Akihito threw him a look. "And that's meant to be funny how?"

"Merely the irony of you being the one to ask."

"Are we on different planets right now 'cos I have no idea what you're on about."

Asami shifted, mindful of Akihito's injuries as he slid free and let the smaller man back down on the pillow. Braced on an elbow, he said nothing for a while, simply staring down at Akihito, his gaze golden and mesmerizing.

His voice was a rumbling declaration. "I would see you outlive me if it's the last thing I do. How could I take your life?"

Stunned. Swaying in astonishment. Akihito was actually speechless for a moment. There wasn't even anywhere to hide 'cos the bed was too small for two and Asami was staring down at him intensely enough to spark a small fire.

"You could've just told me that earlier, you know," Akihito mumbled at length, 'cos he didn't have the first clue how he was supposed to respond to something like that. "You were being such an insufferable dick I almost didn't let you come back."
Long fingers carded though his hair, finding purchase with the lightest pressure, tantalizing with the shadow of Asami's usual MO. It was just enough to produce the softest gasp from Akihito.

Asami smirked. "You should know by now, Akihito. You couldn't get rid of me if you tried."

Akihito rolled his eyes, his lips tugging into a grin. "Selfish bastard," he muttered as Asami buried him in a kiss that left him with no doubt as to where they stood.
Art time! Jump back to Chapter 12 – Akihito goes head to head with Sakazaki and makes a stand! I'm absolutely loving seeing the story through your artwork Shey, thank youuu!!! 😊❤️❤️

So this is all fluff and nonsense. And this. And that. And whatnot... Actually looooooads of things happen, all 15K words of it!

I need to flag for possible triggers here, as one lovely reader also reminded me! There is mention of trauma peppered throughout this chapter, so please consider and proceed with caution if you know you need to be careful with this.

And what's a story without one last cliffhanger? Oh wait, I wasn't warning you about them, was I? *Ahem!* I'm just going to suffix this with the same thing I said before... Trust me, ok? (^_^)

I hope you enjoy this!

~ Nyx ~

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Wednesday.

"It's not working."

"It's working fine, sir."

"It's stuck. See here, that doesn't move."

"Those are the header rows. They tell you what you're looking at in each column."

"I know what a header row is, Kirishima. What I don't get is why you have rows 1, 2, 52. Where's everything in between?"

"...You might recall, sir, you were quite specific that you didn't need to see the earlier projections again. So you just have the topline budget and the revised forecasts."

"Then why is everything disappearing behind column C?"

Akihito snorted, grinning. He couldn't help it. He'd been awake a while now, watching the two men squabbling over Asami's laptop at the table. But there was a mischievous gleam in Asami's eyes as
he asked the same thing over and over, as Kirishima's patience wore thinner and thinner...

"It's Freeze View. Just like the last three times he explained it."

"Why look, the expert is awake," Asami said drolly. "Since you know so much, why don't you tell Kirishima to stop freezing the view in his spreadsheets."

Kirishima's hard-as-stone expression became harder.

"Freeze View, not freezing the view," Akihito grinned. "There's nothing to say. It's just you being temperamental and complaining about Glasses doing what you told him to two minutes ago, the poor guy."

"Perhaps you could explain the concept in a more pleasing manner, Takaba-san," Glasses said curtly, gathering his things. "If you'll excuse me, sir, I'll leave the report with you. I have some urgent matters to attend to."

Asami waved him off. Glasses bowed and left. He wasn't stomping but it was close.

Akihito was still grinning at Asami. "I saw that."

"Hmm? What's that?" Asami strolled over to the bed.

"You were totally winding him up."

Asami had no remorse. "Yes, well, the financial data was dry. I had to amuse myself somehow."

Akihito laughed, but the sharp tug across his ribs made him pull a face, clutching his side and curling in on his injury. Mornings were always the worst, stiff from sleep, pain relief having worn off. The rough night he'd had didn't help either, elbowing and kicking in his half-unconscious frenzy to reach Asami without realizing the man was already pressed against him.

Three knocks announced his parents' arrival. They were let in by the bodyguard to find Asami rubbing Akihito's back, painkillers in his other hand. Akihito couldn't muster the strength to lift his forehead from the smooth wool of Asami's waistcoat, having only just found a position where his ribs weren't screaming at him. The warmth of Asami's hand was a balm seeping through his back.

"Oh, sweetie... Here, I can do it."

Akihito finally looked up as his mum rushed to his side, taking the blister pack from Asami, pouring some water.

It wasn't just a need, though there was that too. Akihito had a rush of wrongness as Asami silently stepped aside, his face carefully blank. Asami was still by the bedside table but effectively sidelined as his mum took over. But from her point of view, she was his mother, Asami just an acquaintance. Why shouldn't she?

Two pills were pressed into Akihito's hand and he swallowed them, slowly, numbly. The water went down like sand.

His dad was quietly watching them all. "Morning," he nodded to the tall man.

Asami nodded politely back. "I was about to send for breakfast. Have you eaten?"

"Not yet. Thank you."
"I'll cook all your favourite meals when you come home," Mum promised, plumping up the pillow. Asami abruptly stilled as she babbled on. "I've been doing a lot of watercolour recently and your room's turned into something of a studio but I'll put it all back together. It'll be like you've never been away."

Akihito's dad was watching Akihito, who was watching Asami, who was carefully looking at none of them.

Akihito's mouth opened, moved, but he couldn't shape the words.

Asami still had that awful forced quiet about him. "I'll have your breakfast sent up." His voice was precisely empty.

No...

Asami nodded in parting –

No no no...

He turned away, still refusing to meet Akihito's eyes –

NO!

Akihito grabbed at Asami's jacket and hauled the man closer – ok so it was a feeble tug and Asami caught him as he half fell off the bed but it was the thought that counted – and he yanked the taller man down by the lapel and smashed their lips together.

Time stood still.

O-o-kay, so that just happened...

Maybe he should've thought it through. Talked it over, broken the news more gently. But then again Akihito had never been so tactful. He had that scary, exhilarating rush like sledging down a snowy hillside way too fast and knowing full well it could hurt but not being able to give a damn right then 'cos it was totally worth it. His face was blooming and yes this was going to be embarrassing as hell and he had no idea how his parents would react, but this was him. It was out there now and he could've never guessed what a relief that would be.

Akihito broke the kiss first – 'cos Asami seemed to have no inclination to – and blurted to his startled parents, "Actually I'm gonna stay with Asami." But then his eyes shot back to Asami. "Uh, can I?"

Asami was holding in a laugh. Barely. "I suppose I can put up with you."

There was a glint in Asami's gaze that made Akihito suspect the man was actually rather quite pleased that he'd finally come clean.

"You put up with me? You're the one with the insufferably smug ego, you're gonna be testing my patience to the limits."

Asami carefully righted him on the bed, keeping an arm about him. "Says the noisy, messy brat eating me out of house and home."

"Yeah, well, who else's gonna put that big-ass fridge to proper use? It's wasted sitting there all blingbling and empty. That hideous fancy schmancy Belvedere you keep in the freezer doesn't count, you know. You never drink it anyway."
"Because that stuff is lethal."

"All the more reason I should hang around and make sure you don't touch it."

Akihito knew he was just putting off the inevitable. But he couldn't drag it out any longer when his mum's face fell. She started crying. Crying.

His heart sunk. "What on earth, Mum? It's not that bad..."

"Oh sweetheart," his mum sobbed, her hands framing his face.

Asami stepped back again, giving her room. But it was different this time. He was looming, a protective shadow. Akihito's parents or not, Asami would step in if they reacted badly. While more and more people were coming out of the closet and were nothing but happy to have done so, it also wasn't unheard of for someone to be disowned or cast out of their families for being gay.

"I'm sorry," she sniffed, "I'm so sorry. I should have seen it, had some inkling..."

"Wait, what? "Seen... it? Seen what?"

"It must have been so hard, hiding who you are, I'm so sorry sweetheart. You can tell us anything, you know that. Your father and I love you. We will always love you, no matter what."

Oh boy. It wasn't what he'd thought at all. "Mum... It's ok. Even I didn't know until recently. Very recently. How are you meant to have known?"

"I'm your mother, Akihito. Of course I should have known my son is gay! I kept asking you about girls and --"

Akihito coughed. "Actually I might not be. As in, I might be bi. Or... I dunno. I used to like girls. And it's not like I've been thinking that I like guys or anything like that. It's just Asami that I like."

Shit. Did he just say that? His face had already been getting warmer and warmer with every stuttering word. He didn't need any help from the blazing gaze Asami sent his way for his face to burn every shade of pink.

Her arms wrapped carefully but tightly around his shoulders and he got a mouthful of her short hair. He puffed it out.

"Are you happy with him?" she whispered in his ear.

He caught Asami's eye... and nodded silently.

"And he's good to you?"

"Yeah. Yeah he is."

She squeezed him closer. "Then that's all that matters."

Over her shoulder Akihito caught his dad's eye. He still hadn't said anything. What did he know already? The uncertainty gnawed at Akihito – but then his dad gave the smallest nod, with a press of the mouth that couldn't quite be called a smile. But for a man whose every word, every expression, carried its full weight, there were no such things as empty gestures. They'd need to talk but they were ok. It was a load off Akihito's shoulders.

His mum pulled back, wiping away tears, her face a glittering smile. She turned to the tall
businessman and Akihito had the sudden urge to snicker. 'Cos damn, if that wasn't Asami looking nervous, all tight and braced for judgement, he didn't know what was.

But she just went right ahead and hugged the man.

Akihito found there was no holding back that snicker, even biting his lip. Asami's look of surprise was priceless.

Hugging wasn't the done thing in Japan. Family, sure. Close friends, sometimes but often not even then. Someone you barely knew, no matter the relationship with a family member? Horror of horrors. Unless you were Takaba Sana and had just realized the significance of her son standing by this person in front of his parents in the most unambiguous way.

"Thank you," she said somewhere into the suit jacket, her voice thick. "Thank you for taking such good care of Akihito."

All of a sudden, all of Akihito's amusement fled because Asami was fighting for control. It was just a flash – pain, guilt, roaring darkness – before brutal control slammed a lid on it all, shored until a more suitable time to be let loose.

"It feels like I haven't done enough," Asami said.

But it was no false modesty. Akihito believed he meant every word. Akihito ached to think what he must be feeling. Fujimoto was totally right. Asami was healing too.

Sana finally released the tall man, standing back and looking between them. "Now if anyone gives either of you boys a hard time for being together, you just send them right on to me and they'll have hell to pay."

"Mum..." Akihito mumbled, because she could be a total lioness and it was kinda embarrassing but also really cool that she had their backs. Though the idea of Asami sending anyone to his mum to sort out... He snorted helplessly.

She beamed up with a smile that had something of Akihito in it. "We need to do introductions again. We're very, very happy to meet you, Asami-sama."

Akihito was grinning. "Yeah, Asami-sama, this is my mum."

His mum frowned. "You're right, it's much too formal. Ryuichi-san, then?" she asked, making Akihito splutter – "if I may call you that?"

Smirking at Akihito's flaming embarrassment, Asami inclined his head graciously. "Of course. I would like that."

Akihito groaned, tipping sideways, falling – this was going to hurt but he was totally dying here. But Asami was there, deft hands catching his neck and back and gently laying him down.

His mum watched with sparkling eyes.

"Oh you are such a dear, Ryuichi-san," she gushed, and that was it. Akihito was officially finished.

Takaba Tatsuhiro sought out Asami late that evening. The guard gave the customary three knocks and three seconds before letting him in.

The lights were half dimmed. Akihito was in bed. Asami was at the table going over reports with
Kirishima under the light of a single desk lamp, angled to keep the glare from the bed.

"I thought I might find you here," Tatsuhiro said quietly. "Can we talk?"

"Of course." Asami stood politely as he glanced at Kirishima.

Requests on Asami's time were frequent and after so many years together they had the coded looks down to a tee. Be accommodating, if Asami considered gains to be had. Drag your heels or That ship has sailed, depending on how much he wanted to make them sweat. Or if he was feeling particularly sadistic and wanted to make them piss their pants, This bullet has your name on it.

Kirishima didn't need the silent instruction in this particular case. "There's nothing urgent," he confirmed, quickly putting the reports aside.

"We'll pick up in the morning."

"Goodnight, sir." Kirishima left with a bow.

The two men were left staring at each other. Akihito's soft snores filled the room, reassuring to them both.

Asami waited. He wasn't standing at attention as such, what with his hands relaxed in his pockets, but he left it up to the older Takaba whichever way he wanted to take this.

Tatsuhiro was perfectly aware that only his relation as Akihito's father granted him this concession of sizing Asami up. How many would this formidable man wait for like this? Not many at all, he would wager. Akihito, for one.

He finally broke eye contact, approaching the bed. "Is he asleep?"

Asami followed. They both stood at the foot of the bed, looking down at Akihito with his mouth agape, arms flung up and down, one leg hanging out.

Asami couldn't help the fond smirk. It was almost second nature now, subconsciously tracking Akihito shifting about beside him as they slept. "Out like a light. He was very tired, more than usual." He knew what he was suggesting, being aware of something like that.

"He didn't sleep today," Tatsuhiro said. "He was preoccupied, either evading his mother's enthusiastic questions or too wound up wondering what I was thinking."

Akihito murmured in his sleep, turning his head, pulling his arms in. They were both watching but Asami's eyes were keener. He knew the pattern and didn't take his eyes off for a second.

Tatsuhiro took an intake of breath, set with purpose, and Asami knew it was coming – a toss-up between age and gender, in his estimation...

"There's an age difference."

There it was. "Does it bother you?"

"You're in different phases of your lives. You're... well established. Akihito, in many respects, is still finding his feet. He's still young."

"He knows his mind," Asami defended. "He knows what he believes in and stands for." Even as Asami had come and muddied the waters, Akihito still knew where the line was. He hadn't lost sight of himself.
Tatsuhiro grunted. "That he does."

Akihito's brow furrowed, his expression drawing tight. Asami was on the balls of his feet, on the verge of heading around the bed.

Tatsuhiro wasn't so well versed with the signs. "Akihito might be reckless with little care for his own safety, but he's not stupid or a pushover. We raised him better than to be drawn in by a fat wallet or a handsome face delivering a few clever lines." That was accompanied by a pointed glance and Asami gave a huff of amusement. "He wouldn't be with you if he didn't see something in you. Having said that, he has a good heart. Too good perhaps," Tatsuhiro turned fully towards him. "I need to know you're not taking advantage or hoodwinking him."

"That's not a question I can answer," Asami pointed out, still watching Akihito. "Whatever I say could just be some clever lines."

"True."

There was a soft gasp from the bed. Akihito turned again, the motion sharper, provoking a whimper as his face scrunched up. Hands scratched at the sheets, shaking.

His obvious agitation was shocking for Tatsuhiro. His son was usually a heavy sleeper, snoring even through fire alarms. Bad dreams were a thing of childhood monsters coming to steal sweets. But before he could even think to do anything, Asami was already there. Fingers brushed through the blond hair, palm against the contorted face.

"I'm here, Akihito," Asami rumbled, with a tenderness Tatsuhiro had never expected of such a man. "You're alright."

Remarkably, Akihito leaned onto the hand, sighing, visibly relaxing even in sleep, every line smoothing out. Asami watched him, shadows lining his countenance.

Tatsuhiro fully expected to be refused but he said anyway, "Please forward me the medical bill when Akihito is discharged."

Asami stayed there, his hand trapped under Akihito's cheek. He didn't seem to mind. "I have it covered."

"I need to reimburse you."

"There's no need."

"He's my son."

"He's --" Asami bit his tongue. Rephased. It was practically a snarl. "He was hurt because I was targeted. It's the least I can do."

"You blame yourself?" Tatsuhiro asked, surprised at the harsh self-reprimand. He glanced at Akihito but there was no reaction.

*Amongst others* -- "Yes."

"It sounded quite different from what Akihito said."

Akihito moved again but this time it was a natural shift in his sleep, arms slinging out, his top half turning contrary to his legs, face upturned. His breath caught for a moment, his body adjusting to his
injury in the new position, before his snores kicked up like a burbling Harley.

Asami's hand, freed from beneath Akihito's face, flexed at his side. "... I didn't do enough."

"Do you love him?"

Asami was surprised enough by the abrupt question to tear his eyes from Akihito, to find the older Takaba watching him intently. Asami had expected more grilling on their different spheres of life, or the realities of being in a same-sex relationship in a country where true acceptance came in as many shades and qualities as used cars. But love? It threw him. Perhaps that was the intention.

It was Asami who looked away first. "If I understood what that was, perhaps I could answer."

Tatsuhiro had been after honesty and he got it. He didn't really need an answer anyway.

"Does he love you?" Tatsuhiro asked next, just to see what Asami would say.

Asami replied with an amused twist of the mouth. "I wouldn't presume to answer for him, I'd never hear the end of it."

Tatsuhiro couldn't help his wry smile in return. "That's Akihito alright."

Asami paused with uncharacteristic awkwardness, before turning to him. "I know I am the last sort you'd envisaged your son to involve himself with. We're both headstrong and stubborn, and we will fight and we'll have our ups and downs. But I will take care of him in the best way I know how. I will always respect him. I will never betray him. Everything I have is his. And I will do everything in my power to protect him, his life and everything that makes him Akihito, to my dying breath. You have my word."

Tatsuhiro stared back, not saying anything for a long while. Delivered with such gravitas that was rare to see in this day and age – Asami was asking permission, without asking. It was typical of Asami Ryuichi, he supposed.

Tatsuhiro didn't reply directly. "No doubt you already know – I used to be a journalist in Tokyo, until I had to leave the profession due to complications with my health. I've heard... some interesting rumours in my time."

Asami was silent.

"I'll only ask one thing. Does Akihito know?"

Asami regarded him for a long moment. "He knows everything," he said at length, confirming everything, confirming nothing. "He was investigating me, before we met at Sion."

"Ah," Tatsuhiro said as though that explained everything. "I suppose he did inherit my incessant curiosity if there's any hint that someone's hiding something they shouldn't be." He sighed. "But he has his mother's eternal optimism. He's not jaded enough to accept that everything is relative. There's no such thing as a lesser evil; wrong is wrong and should be opposed every step of the way. But somehow, in his world of black and white and right and wrong, he found you." It was sadness and pride both that deepened his voice. "He knows nothing of self-preservation, as you must have seen by now. He's always been that way. He finds trouble, or trouble finds him, and he believes it his moral duty to cross swords and sort it out. That's why I worried whether he could ever settle down. Whoever he's with, whether he means to or not, he'll drag them with him into the thick of it." He tilted his head, considering. "I suppose, if it's you, you could handle it better than most."
Asami smirked faintly. "Perhaps."

"But you also attract attention and not the good kind. Would he be in more danger, being with you, or more protected?"

It was rhetorical. Tatsuhiro didn't expect a reply and Asami didn't give one. He'd already said his piece.

No one could foresee the future. There were no guarantees. But there was sheer will and determination, which these two had by the bucket-load, not to mention the way they came alive around each other. Even Asami, though he was far more subtle. Tatsuhiro had seen it with his own eyes.

"My wife and I... Our son means the world to us. Obviously it's not the best circumstances right now but even so, Akihito is happy. We can see that." He looked the taller man in the eye, reminding Asami of the same obstinate strength at Akihito's core. "It's Akihito's choice, so I'm not going to stand between you. But know this, Asami Ryuichi. I know what your word is worth. If you break it, if you harm Akihito or let him come to harm, I will come at you with everything I have. I still have a lot of contacts, in the press, in the courts, in the streets. However extensive your network, I can still kick up a shitstorm and make life exceedingly difficult for you."

Asami inclined his head in acknowledgement. "I would expect nothing less of Akihito's father."

"Good." But then the sternness softened, as did the voice. "And I hope your future is brighter for having Akihito in it, Ryuichi."

Asami froze. Tongue-tied, for perhaps the first time in his life, he could only bow.

Thursday.

"What's with you?"

"Hmm?"

"You're... What the hell, are you in a good mood?"

There seemed to be a permanent uplift curving Asami's mouth as he wiped around Akihito's shoulder with the damp washcloth. "Perhaps I'm just enjoying this."

"I'm not an idiot. What are you up to? You're planning something, aren't you?" Akihito had to fight down a blush as Asami linked their fingers – totally unnecessarily, in his opinion! – to hold his arm out and wipe it down from shoulder to wrist. "Why're you doing this anyway?"

"Don't you want a wash?" Asami repeated on the underside of the arm.

"No, why are you doing this?"

"You prefer the nurses touching you, is that it?"

"Don't deliberately mistake me, baka, that's not what I said!" Akihito finished on a squeak as Asami washed his armpit.

"I'll be cleaning your dick soon, you want them handling that too?"

This was crazy. Akihito was just standing there by the bed for what he'd learned was called a bed
bath, though he could stand now so he was sure he could wash some parts of himself normally even if he had to keep his side dry. But Asami insisted otherwise and Akihito was aflush and his pulse was all astutter like he was revving on a clogged throttle.

"I can clean my own junk!"

"Here you go then." Squeezing the washcloth in the disposable basin, Asami slapped it into his hand and waited expectantly.

"Y-you don't have to watch!"

"Of course I do. Who else is going to check you've reached everywhere?"

"Nobody is who! I can clean myself!"

"Go ahead."

Clearly the bastard wasn't going anywhere. With the washcloth slowly dripping in one hand, Akihito went to grab the clinic trousers with the other...

He looked down. Which was hard enough. He wasn't going to be able to remove them let alone reach down or bend in any direction...

"Ok fine!" Akihito grumbled ungraciously. "You can help."

"Can I, now?" Asami smirked.

"No funny business! Doctor's orders, remember?"

But large hands were already smoothing over his hips, drawing the cotton pants down – and down, and down, making full contact with his thighs, the outside of his knees, down his shins as Asami sank down at his feet. Asami steadied him by one hip and then the other as Akihito stepped out of the scrubs, leaving him without a stitch on. The way back up was just as torturously slow, as Asami rose slowly, the large hands dragging up his skin again, until they came to rest on Akihito's hips.

Not once did Asami's gaze leave his skin. Never mind that Asami had seen it all before, the intensity of his gaze was making Akihito blush like nobody had ever set eyes on him before. But it wasn't just heat in Asami's eyes, there was something else too. Like a wound that was still raw.

Oh so tender, as though handling the most precious glass, a muscled arm wrapped about Akihito's waist, a hand tipped up his jaw. But there was nothing gentle about the kiss as Asami took his mouth, deep and uncompromising. Asami's tongue, the other side of too demanding, too rough, the hand about his jaw sliding half around his neck, the grip tightening... Forgotten, the washcloth landed with a splat on the floor.

Fuck, he'd missed this. Akihito simply stood in the secure hold as Asami's tongue wrapped about his own and the woollen suit brushed against his naked skin and oh wow he was naked when Asami was still in his three-piece suit but he didn't have enough grey cells spare to care.

They were both feeling the effects of it when Asami drew back, just enough to let them breathe, foreheads tipped together. Asami made a low sound, a guttural growl of suppressed frustration, and Akihito couldn't help sniggering.

"You wouldn't be laughing if you knew the thoughts I'm entertaining, Akihito," Asami warned, which only made Akihito grin wider.
"Oh? I think I can guess. What was it you said before – fifty ways to sundown, wasn't it?"

"Lie down on the bed before I bend you over it, you little minx."

"You can't do that, baka. Feeble invalid here, remember? Why do I need to lie down anyway?" Akihito asked as Asami manhandled him – gently – onto the bed.

The top sheets had been pushed aside, with waterproof protectors laid down to keep the bed dry. They even came with that horrid crinkling sound.

"Ugh, incontinence mats. This is so not sexy," Akihito disparaged as Asami helped lower him down.

"It's quite an improvement on the last two times."

Akihito's face fell. "The last two...?"

"Who do you think has been washing you all this time?"

Asami chuckled at the look on Akihito's face as he grabbed another washcloth from the disposable water bowl. He hooked Akihito's knee up in a practised motion, planted the foot, pushed the knee wide –

Akihito garbled something that might as well have been Sanskrit, hiding his flaming face with an arm as Asami wiped over his cock and balls. With methodical precision. *Twice.* And of course his dick was going to twitch and Asami would do that smirk... And then he wiped further back –

"Oh my god, Asami, you don't have to be so – so –" 'Cos that had been right down his crack, not missing even a millimetre. "You don't literally have to wipe my ass!"

"It's not the first time."

"Wha – you –"

"You've never been quite so vocal about it before," Asami mused, "though I suppose you were usually sexed out, weren't you?"

"Argh, you baka perv! Why is this my life?" Akihito bemoaned.

Asami used another washcloth to finish washing his legs and feet, even between the toes and Akihito could've sworn the bastard was tickling him on purpose. Finally done, Asami tugged out the bed protectors and took away the washing stuff. Akihito wasted no time yanking the sheets over his lower half. He was going to be in the obituaries after all. Cause of death? Embarrassment levels reaching toxicity. It was going to be a new thing. Scientists would be all over it and his beautifully clean ass in the name of research.

"You're the worst," he declared when Asami returned.

Smirking, Asami stole another kiss as though picking up where they'd left off. Akihito found it was brilliant that he was able to breathe easier now 'cos otherwise he would've had no chance with Asami stealing his air, filling his mind, warming him through...

Asami drew back, his gaze blazing. He took a breath, visibly controlling himself – and then abruptly he coughed a laugh, breaking into the most insufferable smirk ever, smug as punch.

"What?" Akihito demanded.
"Need a hand?"

Akihito frowned. Then his eyes flew wide, and down – "Argh!" He was fucking tenting! He scrambled at the sheets, drawing his knees up somehow – it still hurt but no way was he going to just lie there with a totem pole, especially when Dr. Fujimoto chose that moment to knock briefly and poke her head around the door.

"All done?"

She took one look at the red-faced – and clearly naked – Akihito wrestling the sheets into a bunched-up mess in his lap and swearing like a sailor and Asami silent-laughing too hard to be able to reply...

She cleared her throat, making no attempt to hide her smile. "I'll come back." And promptly disappeared again.

"That was all your fault!" Akihito wailed. "She probably thinks I'm some hormonal delinquent now!"

Asami was still smirking like a Cheshire Cat. "Or a virile young man helplessly attracted to his partner."

Akihito opened his mouth to automatically argue, but then... Empty. Blank. Nada.

Partner. Asami had said partner. This was fucking real. They were real. Of course they were, but this was huge. Asami had given them a word when they hadn't had one before. An identifier. A designated category that could be filled by nobody else. Partner! Holy jumbo Pocky sticks...

Asami arched a brow, amused at Akihito's flabbergasted silence. He stroked down Akihito's arm, picking up the hand. He kissed the palm, before closing his hand against it and leaning into Akihito's face. "You're not the only one," he murmured over Akihito's lips before kissing him again, pressing the back of Akihito's hand against his own hardening crotch.

There were all sorts of fizzles and tingles charging every which way and Akihito tilted his face up to kiss back harder. He turned his hand to better cup Asami's growing hardness, the softness giving way. It must be uncomfortable in there, the sizeable equipment all crushed in the underwear under Akihito's palm...

Akihito managed a grin, despite his own dick poking at the bundle of sheets. "You're totally wrong, you know. Virile young man? You're way past it, old man. And helplessly attracted? Ha! Speak for yourself."

Rather noticeably, there was no objection to the word partner. Akihito still had those silly giddy flip-flops going on inside.

Asami's smirk turned downright evil. "Oh? I'm wrong, am I? It seems only fair to explore it then."

His eyes gleamed. "Remember, red isn't the only traffic light colour. There's also green and amber and a whole realm of possibilities in between."

A frown furrowed Akihito's face. "Why're you talking to me about –"

Comprehension smacked the hazel eyes wide and set his cheeks burning. With a garbled splutter, Akihito yanked the sheets right over his head to hide his glowing face.

Asami's hand wrapped around Akihito's tight grip on the sheets, the thumb brushing along Akihito's knuckles. "The moment I can spread you out and tie you up, I look forward to proving just how
virile I am and how helplessly attracted you are, my dear Akihito," came the rumbling promise.

Asami chuckled at Akihito's groan as though knowing full well the red-hot temptation blazing through Akihito's gut.

Friday.

Akihito didn't have to ask. Just as his fingers were beginning to itch, Glasses turned up with his laptop.

He found it in the news. Mitarai had been discovered in one of the outbuildings at the dockyard, disoriented and a little dehydrated but otherwise well. He'd been arrested on the spot. His charges included damaging property with intent to endanger life, conspiracy to commit kidnapping, conspiracy to commit grievous bodily harm, and double attempted first-degree murder.

Akihito stared at his newspaper picture for a long time.

Saturday.

"You gotta gimme some good news," came the miserable grump.

"Woah, someone's feeling better."

"Not enough apparently. They just told me I'm going to be here another week! I'm already climbing the walls as it is!"

"Dude, you're still laid up. Take it easy for once."

"I can walk," Akihito grumbled. "Maybe at a snail's pace but I can walk. But they're refusing to discharge me until everything's closed up on the outside. Something to do with avoiding infections."

Kou somehow managed to slump sideways in a chair with no arms, half leaning on the bed. "Yeah, you're gonna have to tough it out. This ain't no community hospital where they would've given you the boot already 'cos they're desperate for bed space."

"Ugh..."

"Crazy, huh?" Kou rolled his eyes. "All this ritzy private clinic business where they actually take care of you."

"Oh, shut up..."

Kou grinned as his friend picked at the sheets. He looked up as the door opened. "Hey, Asami-sama, what's the rumpus?"

"A noisy disturbance? That would be you," Asami deadpanned, striding to the bed.

Kou spluttered with laughter. Ignoring him, Asami tipped up his friend's disgruntled face and kissed him right there. Kou was chortling in hysterics at his friend's red-faced swearing when Akihito's parents followed Asami in.

"Hey Sana-san, Takaba-san," Kou tried to greet Akihito's parents through his laughter.

"Kou-kun! How are you? We didn't know you'd be coming by."
It suddenly sank in. Kou bolted upright, doing a double take. Aki's folks were here. So was Asami. In the same room. At the same time.

"It's alright," Akihito mumbled, embarrassed but actually, deep deep deep down, pleased. "They know."

"Ohhh, thank god," Kou sagged. "I don't know how I could've kept a lid on that. Though you two would've so given it away, what with you always, you know –" He made a blatant, repeated gesture with his fingers vaguely fitting together, pulling a silly kissy face –

"Kou!"

A pillow smacked into his laughing face.

It was after dinner – which had, surprisingly, worked with the odd miscellany of people – that Akihito found a moment to speak to Kou alone. Asami was walking his parents out to the elevators, this could be as good a chance as he might get.

"What happened with your date? You know, The One?"

"Oh. Yeah. We met last night, actually." Kou was perched back against the bed. Looking out at the stars through the window, he half smiled, half shrugged. "It wasn't meant to be."

"Oh. I'm... sorry?" Akihito was trying to manoeuvre around the noisy Thank fuck! ringing in his head to get a handle on Kou's reaction.

"Nah, don't be. It wasn't like you guys, you just sort of clicked, right?"

"Uh..." There was so much more to it than that, Akihito didn't know where to start.

"I've decided to be chill about it. I'm still young. I'm just gonna get on with my life and someone will come along when I least expect it."

"Was this a date or a life course?"

"My lips are sealed."

Akihito gave him a what-the-hell look. "What, now? Now you build a gateway for your big mouth? Typical... Well at least tell me her surname."

"The hell's your obsession with that?"

"Just tell me and it won't be an issue."

"Can't tell me what I don't know."

"You're useless. Ok, fine. What does she do?"

"Huh?"

"Job? Career?"

Kou shrugged. "No idea."

Akihito just looked at him. "Seriously, what the hell did you talk about?"
Kou's face split in a helpless smile...

The night before.

"Wow. You're... Wow. You're every bit as stunning as I remember. Actually more, because you're wearing jeans and those heels and you're like... wow." Kou laughed, scratching his head. "Man, that was not smooth."

Hazumi's eyes sparkled. "I like a man who speaks his mind."

"That's one way of putting it. People usually call it a busted brain–mouth filter. Really, I just blurt out whatever."

"Or you're honest. Lack of artifice."

Kou grinned, a little shyly which was so not like him. "Aces. Not a minute in and you've already established I'm a good guy. You're super smart, lady."

She smiled, and winked, which pilfered all the oxygen. Two passing men stumbled into each other doing a double take.

"Shall we go in before you cause a pile-up?" Kou suggested.

Her easy laugh chimed sweeter than the bells on the door as they entered...

"A garden?" Kou asked, looking around.

Vibrant green filled the high-brow izakaya [Japanese pub]. Strategic fountains of tall grasses and draping tropical leaves gave privacy to the pockets of seating that could be glimpsed here and there, tucked away off a winding stone path. The warm cedar benches and tables matched the high awning overhead, lit with soft lights from Tudor street lamps. It was like no izakaya Kou had ever been to.

He almost walked into a waiter who emerged from behind a tree. It was Hazumi who requested a table for two and told Kou that he could eat and drink anything he wanted.

"My treat," she offered.

"This is weird," Kou said when they'd ordered. "That's usually my line." He shifted on his seat. The wood was super polished and super smooth. He felt like he could just glide right off onto the floor like a human slug. "Actually this is all a bit surreal."

She tilted her head. "First date with an older lady?"

Kou's eyes were drawn to the slender column of her neck. "Yeah." His eyes snapped up. "I don't mean old. Because you're not old. Just older. But only a little." He grinned sheepishly. "Did I tell you, I excel at putting my foot in it. Yep, got that down pat."

She was smiling with her eyes, those beautiful eyes. "Who said anything about old? I only said older."

Kou was blinking at her. "Why do I get the feeling you did that on purpose?"

She chuckled. "I have to admit, I wasn't sure you'd accept my invitation."

"So long as we're sharing, I'm surprised you asked in the first place."
"I was curious," she shrugged, an elegant shift of her shoulders. "Someone I know is involved with a younger man. About your age, actually."

"Oh, me too! As in, my best bro. He's with someone older."

"Oh?" She asked innocently. "Is it a big age difference?"

"Quite a bit. More than you and me." Kou was entirely serious, not even looking like it was a fake compliment.

"Is that so? They're older than me, are they?" Hazumi's eyes twinkled. "Does it bother you?"

"Why would it? He's happy. He's too embarrassed to admit it but that's just what he's like."

"Sounds like a good fit. Are they alike?"

Kou laughed. "God, no! Actually I don't know the person he's with very well but they seem as different as they come. And my friend's just a regular guy, and by that I mean he's like me. We know what time they mark down prices at the convenience store every day and which cheap beer you should steer clear of even if you're dying of thirst 'cos it's straight up like pi-- er, not very nice."

"Like piss?" Hazumi chuckled, not bothered in the least.

Kou snorted. "Exactly. But the one he's with – let's just say if they ever set foot in a convenience store they'd probably get mobbed."

"Why, is it someone famous? Anyone I might have heard of?"

It was the perfect chance to name drop. Kou just shrugged, rather tight-lipped for someone with supposedly no self-editing mechanism. "Probably not. But hey, enough about them. Come on, let me get one round at least." Not subtle at all but hey ho.

A succession of strong shochu [distilled alcoholic beverage] mixes and a scrumptious range of multiple small dishes later, Kou was perfectly tempted to be that human slug. He'd found a comfortable position sideways, propped up against the table so he wouldn't slide off onto the floor.

"It's what they say. Opposites attract." Somehow, they'd returned to talking about their friends again. Kou had a brilliant thought. "I've got it!" He waved an arm with the wild inexactness of the halfway slaughtered. "Yin and Yang! That's it! They're like that. But more ragged. Raggedy. Raggedly edges, but if one of them's wild on something then the other's hella chill. They complete each other. Com-ple-ment each other," he articulated with effort. His tongue felt uncoordinated. He stared at his shochu. "I'm a genius drunk. And even more of a motor mouth. Go figure."

"I don't mind," Hazumi smiled and it near wiped his mind. "We can talk about your friends. How about a refill? Maybe another one will make you truly wise." An elegant fingertip trailed down the shochu glass, forming a blunt line through the condensation.

"Are you trying to get me drunk, Hazumi-san?" he grinned.

She laughed easily. "Why would I do that?"

"Because you like me talking?"

Something glimmered in her eyes. "Maybe I like your voice."

"Yours is better," Kou told her earnestly, taking another glug. "But you seem awfully interested in
my friend. Should I be jealous?"

Hazumi didn't bat an eye. "I suppose I'm curious about another relationship with an age difference."

"Oh, right, your friends. Why, aren't they happy?"

"They're a good match," she said. "But he's a private person. Opening up to another can create... vulnerabilities, through his partner."

"Or new friends!" Kou bounced. "That's always good."

"Or it's an opening for busybodies to burrow."

"Not if they watch out for each other," Kou insisted with drunken solemnity.

"Even if they encounter censure and opposition and it's more heat than they can bear?"

"What? Why?"

"Because they're a gay couple."

"Oh. Oh! Snap! So's my friend! But hey, that sucks. That's more reason to stick together though, you know. And they need to find new friends if they're taking heat for being gay. That's just not cool."

"So your friend's not facing issues like that?" Hazumi asked, eyeing him closely.

"Not from me. Actually I don't know how many people he's told. Even me and another friend only found out by accident and the three of us are thick as thieves. But whatever anyone says, we won't let anyone give him a hard time. He doesn't deserve that shit."

"Is he hiding it? Is he embarrassed?"

Kou grinned. "Not like that. He just gets shy when he digs it. And he really digs this guy, if you get my drift."

"Does he now?" she asked with her lips curving.

"He's always been drawn to the strong type but..." Kou shrugged. "He's a good guy. The best. It's about time he met someone who treats him right."

"Good for him," she said softly, enticingly. "What did you say they were called?"

"You wouldn't've heard of them," Kou said, flapping a hand vacantly. He didn't know how sharply she was watching him as he dodged the question once again. "But they just seem right for each other, you know? My bro isn't interested in superficial stuff like money or social standing, he's just himself and –"

Kou froze. He stared at nothing as though he was experiencing some sort of epiphany.

"This isn't going to work," he suddenly blurted.

She tilted her head in question.

"It just hit me..." He stared at her, half awed, half lost. "I can't be me with you. And you won't be you."
Hazumi leaned forwards, resting her chin on an elegant hand. He felt physically drawn in as though under a spell.

"There's no need to try and impress me," she assured him. "You can be yourself."

"But you're the worst −" Kou flushed. "I didn't mean it like that!" He hurried to explain as she burst into laughter. "I mean, you don't seem real."

She was still laughing.

Kou scrunched up his face. "See? Putting my foot in it. Excellently done." He shook his head. "I mean," he said carefully, "you're so unbelievably stunning, I feel like I'm dreaming. I think I'd idolize you. I don't think it would be healthy. I'm sorry."

That mesmerizing, heart-stuttering amusement hadn't left Hazumi's face. "Don't be. It's very astute of you. And I told you, I like a man who's honest."

"Or maybe I'm saying any random crap 'cos it kinda feels like you're playing with me."

Hazumi's smile was a cupid's arrow.

"Y-yep," Kou stammered. "Pedestal. Right up there."

"What a pity. I like you, Kou-kun. Though I suppose that's all the more reason not to subject you to scrutiny by my tyrant of a brother. That might just be too cruel."

Kou became hardline. Human slug was gone. No way was he going to leave this celestial lady to struggle alone in hot water. "Are you in trouble?"

Surprise swept across her features, before transforming into radiance. "You're delightful, Kou-kun. I promise you I don't need rescuing, but I almost wish I did just so you can rescue me. Oh dear, I really like you."

Kou still had that determined look going on. "So... you're ok?"

"I'm ok," she reassured, smiling softly. "Very ok." She slid an elegant hand across the table, trailing a fingertip over his hand like silk. Her eyes glimmered like the orbs of an angel. Or maybe a demoness. Her voice was a siren call. "Just for you, Kou-kun. You can call me if you're up for threading the needle..."

Kou stared, mouth dry, blood thumping. Ok, stop. That just meant weaving, right? Maybe she was into sewing –

"Afternoon delight..." she went on, her voice definitely dropping into the husky register. "Bedroom rodeo..."  

Kou groaned, hunching over himself. His head thumped onto the table to the sound of her laughter like peeling bells.

Dinner was good in the end. There was no pressure, no expectations, just two people from very different walks of life enjoying each other's company. They parted amicably.

"Whatever you're looking for, I hope you find it, Hazumi-san," he said.

Hazumi actually looked surprised. Then pleased. "And you. I know you'll make someone very happy one day."
"Thanks," Kou grinned. He went to walk away –

"Kou-kun?"

Eyes like Aphrodite smouldered. "I mean it. Call me."

All willowy hips and alluring smile, she was a smoking vision as she turned and glided away. Kou barely noticed the white limo she disappeared into, or remembered his dazed, stumbling journey home.

Kou just sighed, all dazed and goofy like. "I don't kiss and tell."

Akihito stared. "What the fuck. You're always telling me shit, I can never get you to shut up!"

"Not this time. It's between me and the most beautiful goddess to grace this Earth." He gave into another dreamy sigh.

"Oh man, you're hopeless." Akihito made an unintelligible noise and slumped back on the bed. Maybe he'd never know. Maybe it was for the best. He rolled his head to look over. "Sure you're ok?" he asked quietly.

"Why wouldn't I be? We might, you know, still meet up." Kou waggled his eyebrows.

"Argh! Forget I asked! Don't tell me anything! Ever!"

Sunday.

Ogawa and Yumi dropped by. Akihito had mixed feelings about seeing them. Of course, on the one hand they'd helped find him, but he couldn't help wonder how much Asami had schizzed out on them...

But that all faded away when Yumi saw him and burst into tears. She gave the biggest pout at Akihito's attempt to cheer her up ("Who died?"). Apparently his flippancy was inappropriate, even if she was kind of smiling again.

Crime scene forensic analysis, restoration work, in and out apace. Sion's glass and marble foyer was once again pristine, there was no hint anywhere of events that had transpired. But there was no dampening the rumour wildfire – the gunmen and dockyard explosion, reported as attempts on Asami's life, and Mitarai's arrest in connection with it all. Takaba who was supposedly off with the flu became a hot topic too when gossip spread from somewhere about an abduction. In the absence of any official explanation it caught everyone's imagination and every theory under the sun abound – he was at the wrong place at the wrong time, it was a targeted attack for a way into Sion's systems, maybe it was a ruse and he was secretly in league with the gunmen, or it had something to do with that run-in in the middle of the night before...

The IT basement had never been so popular. The stairwell was often congested. Helpdesk calls were up over 500% with employees keen for an opportunity to pry. Akihito was pleased to hear Yumi was being considered as a permanent replacement for Mitarai, with other temps being interviewed to assist with the temporary hike in support requests. Ogawa had increased vetting procedures after Yumi turned out to be a DigiH4wk fan, which Akihito found hilarious, especially in view of his own ironic position at Sion. Until Yumi asked about her article.

"Why on earth would anyone want to read about DigiH4wk? I have the most boring, mundane life
"You're saying that after the week you've had?"

"You can't put that in there!"

"Ok, ok, but confectionary preference? Where you stand on recycling old computer parts? Your love life?"

"Eeee you can't write about that either!"

They were arguing enthusiastically about file naming conventions, which was mostly the two of them trying to wise up Ogawa about the underscore being a lazy hyphen from when early programmers did everything in capitals, when Asami strolled in. Yumi and Ogawa leaped up from their chairs and bowed, but Asami just waved them off with an easy "Don't mind me." He settled to work at the table with his tablet while Yumi gawked and Ogawa froze awkwardly. Until Akihito poked at Ogawa's belly and casually threw out there, "So you're a lazy programmer, Ogawa-san. What else don't I know?" which kicked off the lively debate all over again.

Asami stayed the whole of the remaining hour they were there. It was Asami who picked up on Akihito getting tired. He came up to the bed, running a hand along Akihito's jaw. "Are you alright?"

Akihito was momentarily speechless at the soft rumble and fond caress, as were the other two.

"Water?" Asami offered.

Akihito nodded, blinking owlishly. The jug was empty so Asami left to refill it.

They were silent as the door closed. Then Yumi made an oh! sound, casting her eyes up, grinning. "I'm such a dolt."

"Well, I didn't want to say..."

She back-swatted his arm. "I get it now. The song." She couldn't stop grinning. And blushing a little.

The song? The – oh, the song...! Akihito flushed. His face burned even more as Asami returned and helped him drink despite his insistence that he could manage.

Yumi and Ogawa hastily bid their farewells with promises to keep him updated.

"I can see right through you, you know," Akihito told him when they were gone.

"Hmm?"

"You're not gonna be such a dick as to say I can't see her 'cos you know she's just a friend and you want to show me you trust me and all, but you're making it damn clear I'm off limits."

"But was it?"

"Huh?"

The smirk was unmistakable. "Was it damn clear? I'm thinking now that I could have been clearer." Asami took a sip of water –

"What the blasted hell are you phhmmmmnnngg–!"
– and fed it directly into Akihito's mouth.

Akihito spluttered and flailed. They both ended up sprinkled. Which of course needed mopping up. Which was more like groping. Repeatedly. Everywhere. Only for Asami to declare that Akihito was still far too wet and required a complete change of clothes. Which of course Asami had to help with.

Akihito dumped the rest of the cup of water over Asami's head. Because revenge was best served... wet, water dripping off strands of jet black hair now flopped over Asami's mock-outraged brow...

They were still attacking each other's clothes – with seemingly forceful but actually careful groping on Asami's part and helpless hysterics from Akihito – when Kirishima entered. Wisely, he backed straight out again.

Always the fire, roaring through icy waters –

"I'm here, Akihito." Asami's was the rumble that calmed the flames, as inescapably adamant as the arms about Akihito, crushingly warm. "I'm here."

And he was, every day for the next week that Akihito was still confined to the clinic. Wherever Asami strode off to after breakfast each morning, he was never gone for more than a few hours at a time and always back by nightfall, without fail. He took to reappearing unannounced, quite the ravishing rabbit out of a hat in a suit. There were 10-minute pitstops, checking in and bothering Akihito about pain meds, or he'd be mid-phone call and smirking at Akihito pulling faces at the one-sided conversation. ("But of course it's a free country. Would they prefer to deal or be buried?") It wasn't unusual to drop in for lunch either.

("Here, I'll help you."

"I can feed myself."

"You shouldn't tax yourself."

"It's eating, it's not exactly weightlifting."

"Chopsticks or direct?"

"What do you mean dir– oh, hell no! I'm not eating from your mouth – get back! Chopsticks! I choose chopsticks!"

"So you'd like me to feed you? Very well."

"Don't say that like I asked you, baka!")

With Akihito still requiring a lot of sleep during the day, his parents took the opportunity of being in Tokyo to catch up with old friends and acquaintances. Akihito also appreciated not being around them all the time and encouraged them to head out. But they were usually back by evening to join Akihito for dinner, and Asami too, who made it back in time to eat with them half the time.

As the days rolled on, Akihito was relieved to see that his father's initial reserve around Asami seemed to give way to quiet acceptance. But his mother only became more and more besotted with the polite, put-together, sensible, mature businessman who was so attentive to her son. Which was a terrible state of affairs. The absolute worst.

("Welcome back, Ryuichi-san."
"... have to stop calling him that..."

"You're mumbling again, sweetie. Ok, we'll be off then."

"Already? What about dinner?"

"We'll be back. Is half an hour enough?"

"Enough? For what?"

"Don't be silly, sweetie. Ryuichi-san does your baths, doesn't he?"

"He – wh – what –"

"Or would the two of you like longer, Ryuichi-san?"

"Mu-um!")

It was all over. In years to come Akihito would remember it as the time when Blond Tank was introduced to his parents.

Asami was late that night. Akihito and his parents were sitting around the leftovers after dinner. They were taken aback by the big blond bodyguard who followed Asami in, but for different reasons. His parents just found the intimidating giant alarming. Akihito, however, found himself back at the docks.

He hadn't seen Blond Tank since that night. Twelve days disappeared in the blink of an eye and all he could see was Asami and Suoh and Sagano and Natakani, all suited and armed and looking like Reservoir Dogs, but remarkably Akihito was one of them and death was right around the corner and he couldn't bear the thought of any of them being anything but exactly as they were –

Akihito was sure he'd meant for a perfectly manly wrist-grab and shoulder-bump. But he still wasn't very mobile, and in his haste he stumbled from the chair, toppling straight into the big guy. Suoh caught him, ending up with one arm over and the other under Akihito's.

It was just a touch on Suoh's shoulder as Asami headed for the chair by the window, but it was enough to reassure the big guy. He tentatively returned the unexpected and rather awkward embrace.

Akihito was mumbling. "– Almost – almost didn't –"

"Takaba-san?"

"– almost didn't make it –" Akihito looked up. "I saw – I saw – you were burned. You were – you almost –"

Suoh's face, with all its understated shades and tints and hues, flickered through a myriad of expressions before landing on simply too much. "I'm ok, Takaba-san, it was just my clothes. I wasn't injured. None of us were, thanks to you."

Akihito snorted. "Actually it's thanks to you. 'Cos you were actually listening to all my crazy rambling way back when. Go figure." He found his feet and nudged with his shoulder. Suoh let himself be bumped back. He might have been smiling.

"This is Blond Tank," Akihito said to his parents. "You might have guessed 'cos, well, look at him."
Blond Tank bowed to his parents as they pushed to their feet. "Suoh Kazumi."

Sana's face lit up. "Suoh-san! Akihito's told us so much, we feel like we know you already though I wasn't expecting you to be quite so tall! Thank you for everything you've done for our son."

Suoh looked a little alarmed. Probably wondering how much there was to say about him.

Tatsuhiro seconded the sentiment. He understood more what it actually meant when Akihito had said that the bodyguard had protected him.

His mum offered dinner, since Akihito's appetite wasn't quite back to the usual enormity yet and they'd bought too much. Suoh was trying to politely decline when he could get a word in amidst Sana's rambling.

Akihito was looking at Asami. Quiet, staring out the windows, there was something about him this evening. Not just preoccupied, it was more than that.

Akihito ambled to his side.

He was struck by the intensity as the golden gaze found him. Asami's aura was tempered down around Akihito's parents but the darkness was far too close to the surface to mask his gaze.

"Are you alright?" Akihito asked quietly.

Asami's gaze held him captive, refused to let him look away. "It's done."

*It's done.*

Two words. Such simple words, but the Earth disappeared from beneath Akihito's feet. "Scarface...?" he whispered.

Asami gave the faintest of nods.

*Suoh!* That's why Suoh was here. Because he wasn't... someplace else.

This wasn't life behind bars which didn't actually mean life but more likely twenty years followed by parole, hanging over Akihito all those years as he wondered when Scarface would come for him again. Because a lunatic like Scarface? No way would he forgive and forget. Whatever Asami's own reasoning or desire for revenge, the one to gain the most here was Akihito. He had closure. Most likely by the very hand that came up to cradle his face.

"Hey," came Asami's soft rumble.

It was over. *Over.* Akihito folded in on Asami. Asami caught him, lowering him onto his lap.

"Akihito?" came Mum's voice from behind.

"He's ok," Asami said quietly. "I just gave him some news. Everything's ok."

Akihito gladly hid in those strong arms, away from the world, just for a moment. The large hand soothed up and down his back. The solid warmth of Asami's chest comforted him, Asami's freshly showered scent anchored him.

Akihito barely heard the others leaving. He knew when Asami's posture changed, relaxing in the way that he only did when alone with Akihito.
Akihito finally lifted his face. Z4m4 M1r0 should have been railing against taking matters into their own hands. But as he looked straight into Asami's eyes, all he could whisper was, "Thank you."

Dr. Fujimoto announced that the surface wound had closed up and it was safe for Akihito to wash normally. The caveat was that he had to avoid pressure on the area and any risk of slipping. The internal tissue and muscles would take several more weeks to heal and any knocks or sudden movements could still cause significant damage.

Asami, of course, took it upon himself to give Akihito the first proper wash. Asami's suite of rooms at the clinic included a small hydrotherapy pool – basically an oversized bath – with a separate shower. Asami undressed them both and with the dressings also now removed, it was the first time Akihito could take a proper look.

It was a pink welt with stitches. Fujimoto had told them that it would eventually fade to a hairline scar, barely noticeable. The knife had cut cleanly, unlike the bullet which had carved along the skin of his arm.

Asami was right behind him but made no move to take advantage of their nakedness, just holding him steady. Akihito could see him in the mirror, the unnaturally blank expression as the sharp gaze took in the train tracks on his side.

Akihito rested his head against the strong line of Asami's jaw, catching the man's attention in the reflection. He smiled lightly, running a finger along the scar on his arm. "I think we like this one. Don't we?"

He'd caught the older man thumbing it on more than one occasion. Asami did it again now, his hand warm as it wrapped around Akihito's bicep from behind. One corner of his mouth lifted just a little. "I suppose we do."

Akihito wasn't allowed to lift a finger. Asami helped him across the tiled floor. Seated him on a stool. Washed him meticulously. As if that wasn't embarrassingly intimate enough, Akihito's dick had a mind of its own and decided to perk up. Me me me! Asami being naked with him wasn't helping any, all that skin, the taut muscles...

Incredibly, it seemed Asami was going to abide by the doctor's orders and do nothing about it, save giving it a quick wash and smirking at Akihito's red-faced squirming. But it turned out he was rather glad that Asami was there as he faced the pool-bath.

"You don't have to," Asami said, his arms wrapping around from behind.

"Like hell I don't." In typical fashion he faced it head on. If he held on to Asami a little too tightly as he was lowered into the water, neither of them mentioned it. But at least there was the silver lining of killing his hard-on.

But once he was in, the water was warm and he found it was nothing like his plunge into Tokyo Bay. Instead he was thinking of all the baths with Asami... Sitting on the low seat at the shallow end, he found himself letting the anxiety go, one strand at a time. He was good.

Asami showered himself. All perfectly normal. Washing his hair, soaping himself down, rinsing off. Akihito was trying his damndest not to look because the sight was wreaking havoc with his
attention-seeking dick that hadn't seen any action in too long. He was still a 'virile young man', after all. He snorted quietly, his hands trailing through the water, his eyes half closed... when he realized Asami was still rinsing himself off. Still... rinsing...

He glanced over – and his brain crashed. Asami was gloriously naked in the shower spray, rivulets of water running down ridges of muscle, one hand braced against the tiles, unashamedly jacking off as his eyes gleamed at Akihito.

Bloody flipping fucking Nora...

Akihito's jaw was lost completely forgotten. Asami's lips curled at the corners, a scintillating smirk as he fisted faster. Fucking hell, the bastard had no shame whatsoever! And why would he, when he looked like that? Fuuuck...

Akihito couldn't tear his eyes away. Not when Asami's breathing stuttered or when his eyelids fluttered, not when his chin dipped. Certainly not when he let himself go, muscles glistening and rippling, releasing against the tiles with a familiar deep groan that Akihito couldn't help but wish he could feel against his own neck.

Then it was Akihito who was groaning and squeezing his eyes shut because his boner was back with a vengeance and there was nothing he could do about it.

There was a touch on his arm. He opened his eyes to find Asami crouching by the tub. He looked more serious than Akihito had expected. Not arrogantly teasing, not smugly amused. Just... intense.

"Let me," Asami demanded.

Akihito's heart thumped. What...? He searched the golden gaze, the mesmerizing face, needing a second, two seconds, five, to punch through the reflexive flurry of questions.

He nodded.

Asami leaned over, slanting their lips together. A brief kiss, his tongue sweeping heavy over Akihito's. Akihito was settled by the familiar dominance. He sighed into the kiss.

"Stay relaxed for me," Asami said against his lips. "I've got you."

Asami wrapped his arms around the slender form and drew him forwards and upwards, slowly enough that Akihito could remember to let his legs drift out. With his head resting against the curved lip of the pool, supported by Asami's arms under his waist and ass, he floated along the surface. With his still-hard dick standing straight and exposed out of the water.

Self-consciousness tinged his cheeks. "Uh what–"

But then without any warning Asami's mouth closed around it and it was hot and wet and slick and oh fucking hell what the hell had he been worrying about?

Asami's lips glided from base to tip and Akihito's blissed-out moan echoed between the tiles. The heated tongue swirled around the sensitive tip before the hot mouth sank all the way down again and Asami set a steady pattern that had Akihito climbing steady and fast. He'd been rather frustrated these nearly two weeks even as he recovered from a serious injury, what with Asami's constant handsiness and all the kissing, not to mention that! It didn't take long for the pressure to coil in his gut, for his balls to squeeze...

Akihito didn't quite know what he'd expected, but it wasn't for Asami to just let him come, sucking
him gently through it. Or maybe he should have, still recuperating as he was. It was easy and it was effortless and it was perfectly nice... and no fricking way enough. Not anymore. A few breaths and he’d recovered.

He was completely with it as Asami glided him back down, before joining him in the water and drawing him onto Asami’s lap in his usual way.

Akihito caught the twitch of Asami’s lips. "What?" he demanded, more than a little put out.

Asami’s lips curved more.

"What?"

Asami met his eyes – and swallowed.

Akihito’s face bloomed. Asami’s laugh chased Akihito’s earlier moans around the tiles.

Akihito slapped his chest, splashing water everywhere. "You are such a gigantic perv!"

"You look so miffed too," Asami chuckled as he finally stopped laughing. He leered in his familiar way. "You want more, don’t you? No need to worry, Akihito. As soon as you're all healed up, I'll have you screaming under me."

Akihito squeaked something indecipherable, coughed, tried again. "If there's anything I'm worried about, it's that right there!"

"So you say, but you're already getting hard again in anticipation." Asami ran a loose grip along Akihito’s semi and Akihito was gasping and the plausibility that he was still softening was rapidly shrinking, unlike said organ.

"That's only 'cos the water's too warm! I need to get out!"

"Whatever you wish," Asami smirked.

"Whatever I wish, my ass." Akihito grumbled as Asami helped him out, pressed close to make sure he didn't slip, all tantalizing skin and unforgivably gorgeous.

"As soon as you're all recovered," Asami purred against his red ear, "we'll both take great pleasure in that particular wish."

Akihito was 'home' the next day.

He pottered around but doing nothing was simply incompatible with his DNA.

After another week, three weeks after he almost died, Akihito was back to work.

Soteria kept connections secure. Akihito could set up his own remote VPN access and Sion was fully equipped with video conferencing facilities for connecting its global offices. He could work on Soteria enhancements and Project EverEye consultations from the condo pretty much as easily as he could at the office.

Asami worked from his home office for the first several days too, blatantly keeping an eye. Eventually it was Akihito who shooed him off to work, because the CEO should show his face at his own company. He even sat Asami down on the bed and did his tie up for him, which was a
schoolboy mess and Asami very nearly didn't leave after all – demonstrating the 'correct' way on Akihito lead to inappropriate ideas and he had to play the Injured Invalid card just to stop Asami from tying him up with it, the perverted bastard! Some things never changed.

When Asami returned that evening Akihito was signing off the all clear on Soteria's vulnerability scan and only half paying attention.

"Okaeri," [welcome home] he said on auto-pilot, fingers tap-tapping away.

Asami jolted dead in his tracks. The movement was sharp enough, so out of place with his usual powerful fluidity, that Akihito looked up from his laptop.

It was a face he'd never seen on Asami before. Like the face of an old ghost that was a deeply ingrained part of him. But there was something brighter too, wavering against the shadow in stark contrast. Bittersweet didn't begin to describe it.

Shouldn't Akihito have said that? It was just a bog-standard greeting bandied about by a hundred million people across Japan every day. There was no great connotation attached to it. He even said it at Kou's or Takato's if he was already there when they came home. But Asami? When was the last time someone had welcomed him home – oh no... It couldn't be as far back as that, could it...? Should he take it back?

But it was a quietly contented smirk that crept across Asami's face as he gave the routine response. "Tadaima." ['I'm home']

The ordinary greeting became commonplace. But there was nothing ordinary about it for either of them. Because somewhere along the way, home wasn't 'home' anymore but it had become home.

The EverEye concept was firming up. Akihito dropped back into proceedings as they were confirming a shortlist of six proposals to kick-start the new Sion venture, and he was surprised to find that most of the other project leads, including Mr Thin, seemed glad to have him back.

Mr Sour still gave him plenty of stick. "Why don't you know that?" came the sharp remark when they were digging into a technical particular and Akihito just shrugged blankly.

"I never pretended to know everything. Try Satou-san down in Engineering."

"Who?"

"Doc-man!" Akihito was surrounded by vacant faces. "You know, the one with the colour-coordinated tie and socks? Used to be a doctor in the army? His mother had early onset arthritis and he was looking into assistive technologies. Or wait, is that more robotics than VR?"

"How would you know that?"

"I dunno, you talk to people, you hear things."

"You do?"

"Don't you?"

As winter took hold and temperatures dropped, Akihito was losing patience having to be careful or needing help doing the most mundane everyday things. He couldn't have Asami aiding him forever,
even if Asami seemed perfectly content being hands-on.

Hurrying to get back to normal as fast as possible, Akihito faithfully kept up with his physio and breathing exercises, trying to take things easy even if he was itching to climb out of his skin from surplus energy. Asami kept things low-key in the bedroom department as well, just taking the edge off with quick hand jobs or swallowing Akihito down (including that one incident when he spread Akihito out on the kitchen table and 'feasted' on him, provoking a gasping, colourful monologue about what did – or didn’t, in this case! – constitute a nutritious breakfast!). But actually it didn’t take the edge off. Made it worse, in fact, as the weeks went on. Combined with not being able to bound around with his usual energy, Akihito had never known such frustration.

Asami was indifferent about Kou and Takato hanging out at the condo most weekends. Akihito discovered his own onion layers, 'cos while he never hesitated inviting his two best buddies over, he drew the line with other friends. He was learning that trusting a friend was a whole world of difference to trusting a friend concerning Asami.

Akihito once burst through the front door, rambling away – "Tadaima! Asami, you gotta tell your men to chill! They almost took out some tourists just 'cos they asked me for directions –" to find his parents on the couch in the sitting room. After that he was careful to check first before running his mouth. His parents stopped by every few weeks, and with every visit, his mum became that much more besotted – which was mortifying – but his dad seemed more reassured – which almost made up for his mum's behaviour. Only almost, because there was no recovering from that time his mum turned up with baby photos. Seriously!

Asami didn't seem to mind the increased traffic at his condo even though it had been such a fiercely protected sanctum before. Akihito mentioned it once. Asami, typical Asami, easily shrugged it off. "They're a part of you." He was smirking at the flush that spread over Akihito's face, knowing Akihito was stupidly touched by such a simple thing.

Akihito worked slowly through the little things. Initially shying away from crowds, it took a while before he could take the underground again. He slowly got used to his constant companions, Sagano and Nakatani or any of the eight other bodyguards who seemed to have been assigned to his permanent watch. That he knew of, anyway. Knowing Suoh there were probably others that Akihito never even spotted on 'discreet perimeter' duty.

The nightmares became fewer and farther in between. But if Asami was away at night he always called Akihito at unsociable hours. As though he could tell when Akihito was feeling anything less than his usual boisterous self, and how much was needed to snap him out of it, Asami's conversation starters could vary from indiscreet to frankly outrageous.

("What are you wearing?"

"You've never sent me a nude selfie. I enjoy a good trade."

"I was thinking of you in the shower earlier."

"You seemed to enjoy me using your hands to bring us both off."

"Did you know, your lips are a lighter shade than your –" Akihito hadn't let him finish that particular sentence!)

There were better days and there were worse days, but as the weeks passed, there were longer stretches of time where Akihito didn't think about his side or any of what had happened.
And before he knew it, two months had passed.

"What're you doing for New Year's?"

The question was met with an indifferent turn of the newspaper. "What I always do, have an evening to myself. I assume you're getting trashed with your friends?"

A harmless question for most, but Akihito had been caught unawares. Who were Asami's friends? People you kicked back with, had a laugh and relaxed with, who told you things you needed to hear even if you didn't want to, who fought your corner no matter what? Blond Tank and Glasses ticked some of those boxes but they didn't laugh together, drink together, chill together. That was Akihito. Except maybe the drinking 'cos Akihito was three sheets to the wind before Asami came anywhere near the limits of his alcohol tolerance. But shit, was he Asami's buddy as well as partner and lover...?

Akihito shrugged, aiming for casual. "Nah. I reckon it's just you and me this year."

Asami hadn't said anything, just hummed vaguely and continued reading. But there was a curve playing on his lips.

New Year's Eve Eve.

It was the biggest bash of the year at Kou's. He'd managed to rope in several neighbouring apartments too so the revelry spilled out across half the floor of the building. The quickest way to find anyone was by shoe-spotting – even stone-blind shitfaced, Japanese people took their shoes off in the genkan. It must have been one of the half rungs of the DNA double helix or something.

Akihito found Kou's shoes a couple of doors down, the man himself sitting astride the back of the sofa amidst a group of friends Akihito mostly recognized. Kou and Yoshida were gesturing wildly, it wasn't clear which of them were meant to be telling what story.

Akihito mostly stuck to the walls. He still got twitchy with people standing behind him, besides which he didn't want to risk bumping into anyone either with so many sloshed people around. His ribs mostly didn't bother him anymore but it still hurt knocking directly into it – like when he'd backed into a bookcase. He couldn't entirely blame that on Asami either, Akihito was pretty sure he'd been doing more pulling than Asami was pushing seeing as Asami was still treating him like glass...

"Dude! My favourite!"

Akihito suddenly found Kou hanging off his shoulders. "Hey, man," he yelled back over the music, patting Kou's back.

"Another favourite?" Yoshida laughed as he came up. "How many's that now?"

"Yo-chan!" Akihito reached around the Kou-shaped barnacle and their 'secret' handshake came naturally – shake hands, switch to grab the thumbs, slide out to link fingertips, fist bump straight, top and bottom, slap palms, slap the back, finger wiggle, drawing back slow motion with fingers wide.

They both laughed. "It's been too long," Akihito said.

"I know, what, six months now? Eight?" Yoshida asked. "You've been a bit of a hermit, bro."

Akihito was saved from having to try and explain that by Kou's drunken outrage. "What the hell? You've got a handshake? How come you've got a handshake?"
"You and Takato both pulled out of our trip to the onsen, remember?" Akihito pointed out.

"Yeah, it was stupidly romantic with just the two of us and the cherry blossoms, of course we came up with a manly handshake," Yoshida said.

Kou let out a grumble of frustration. "That's 'cos my work cancelled my leave at the last minute! Fine. You and me, Aki-chan. We need a handshake. A better one. And none of that —" he copied the slow-mo open-finger pullback — "clichéd shit."

"I think he's jealous," Akihito grinned.

Yoshida laughed, slapping Kou on the back — and just sort of stopped. "Uh... Do we have a gatecrasher or is that guy with someone?"

Akihito sighed, not even having to look. He'd known this would happen but Asami, as usual, hadn't listened.

Kou giggled — clearly already at the giggling levels of drunkenness. "That's Aki-chan's bodyguard." He waved at the big guy over by the door. "Hey, Suoh-san."

"Bodyguard?!" Yoshida yelped. "Why d'you need a bodyguard? How do you have a bodyguard?"

Kou, surprisingly, held his tongue at this point. He tipped his head, a little exaggerated what with being lagered up, but he still waited to see how far Akihito wanted to reveal. Or not.

Akihito's pulse kicked up a notch. He glanced around before heading off, weaving around clumps of people over to an emptier corner — probably due to it being furthest from the kitchen and drinks.

It wasn't anything to do with V1P3R anymore. Akihito just hadn't told any other friends about his partner (his brain still got buzzy with that word), because it was easier to keep Asami's name out of it. The man was too wealthy and famous for his own good. Not to mention the gender issue.

But Yoshida, maybe Yoshida he could tell. Or would he take it funny, what with the onsen trip and all? Only one way to find out.

They all dropped onto the zabuton [floor cushion]. Kou flopped like a beached merman.

"He's one of Asami's guys," Akihito started.

Kou grinned, having his marker now. "Yep. One of Asami-sama's," he seconded helpfully.

It wasn't helpful. "Asami-sama? Who's Asami-sama?" Yoshida was taken aback by Kou, of all people, using the higher level honorific.

"Aki's new flame," Takato said, dropping into their conversation as he arrived. There was a round of 'Hey's and waves.

"New flame? Man, I'm so outa the loop," Yoshida shook his head. "Ok, but Asami-sama?"

"Yep," Kou nodded enthusiastically. "Rocks in bed too."

"Kou!" But Akihito wasn't the only one who blushed.
"In bed?" Yoshida practically whispered.

"Yeah," Kou carried on heedless of Akihito's frantic hand-flapping for him to stop. "According to our dear Aki-chan, he's never had it better."

"I've never said anything of the sort!"

"You don't have to. It's true, right?"

Akihito's cheeks deepened in colour. They all laughed while he groaned – but not necessarily for the reason they were thinking.

He and Asami hadn't done much of anything for two months. He was hard up, he could admit that. He could only hope Suoh was far enough and the music loud enough not to hear them, otherwise Asami would no doubt hear about it and draw all the right conclusions... Akihito knew that Asami hadn't lost interest, what with the way Asami looked at him sometimes, burning with hunger. So he couldn't figure out why the bastard was holding back.

On second thoughts, maybe it wouldn't be such a bad thing if Asami caught on, if it meant Asami would just throw him down and have his way with him already...

"She here tonight?" Yoshida asked, looking around.

"Uh..." Akihito reeled back his runaway thoughts. "No. Uh, actually..."

Kou was quiet again. Takato too.

Akihito could brush it all away if he wanted... He dug out his phone and ran a quick online search. He shoved it into his friend's hand. "Here."

Yoshida started reading aloud. "Asami Ryuichi is the founder and Chief Executive Officer of Sion Global plc, one of the world's leading knowledge, information and events businesses. He has featured twice in the top 35 innovators in the world by the age of 35 listed by..." His voice trailed off as he looked up. "... You mean him?"

Akihito chewed his lip. And nodded.

"But he's a dude."

"No shit, Sherlock," Akihito rolled his eyes. But deep down he was nervous.

Yoshida gasped as the penny dropped, doing the whole wide-eyed, finger pointing thing. "He's a dude!"

"Man, that was painful," Kou rolled over until he was half lying on Akihito's legs.

"Get your big ass off me," Akihito complained without bite, shuffling his legs. Kou sat up, leaning on the wall next to Akihito, bumping his shoulder. Akihito nudged too and they elbowed back and forth a few times. But he was glad of the support and Kou knew it too.

"Your new flame's a dude!" Yoshida repeated.

"Yeah, that's old news already, get over it," Takato told him.

"Wow. You're really with this hot billionaire, huh," Yoshida noted, his voice awed as he flicked back to the stock photo.
"Yeah, he's totally hot, right?" Kou bounced on the spot.

"Uh..." Yoshida actually blushed. "Ok, so that slipped out..."

They all burst out laughing, even Akihito 'cos he knew then that they'd be ok.

"So you get a bodyguard 'cos he's Asami Ryuichi." Yoshida sent him a smile. "That's quite something to stand beside someone like him. I'm not surprised it's you, Aki."

Akihito blinked, his smile becoming forced when the comment unexpectedly touching a nerve. "Uh... Thanks. I guess."

"Yeah, so take a leaf out of our relationship guru's book here and man up!" Takato said.

"Ugh," Yoshida groaned, slumping. "But her parents hate me."

"What's this?" Kou perked up.

It turned out that Yoshida and his high school sweetheart had been making out in the park by her apartment building when one of her relatives happened to walk by and she'd stood up just as he dropped his hand and he ended up grabbing her in a totally indecent place...

Outwardly Akihito laughed and drank with his friends and mucked about with Kou coming up with the most ridiculous, long-winded handshake routine, but inside he was a right hullabaloo.

Akihito was spontaneous and adventurous. He was curious and open-minded. He was confident in himself and independent. Or at least, he used to be. Was that still him? There were moments when he wasn't sure anymore. Z4m4 M1r0 too, another facet of himself, had gone into hibernation. Or was six feet under. He simply couldn't investigate or publish with the same wild abandon as he used to, not after Tsubasa. What was left, then? Who was he now?

Maybe that was why Yoshida's comment had struck so deep. If he didn't even know himself anymore, what qualified him to stand at Asami's side? Could Akihito really be that man?

He leaned his head against the cool glass. He barely registered the Shinjuku nightlife rushing past the tinted limo window.

Akihito hadn't even been by himself since... He had to cast his mind back, it had been so long. The night of the dojo probably. But even then he hadn't truly been alone. His nightmare had worried Blond Tank enough that the big guy had sent text messages to say all was secure and he was guarding just outside.

Was it by design? Akihito was always followed by Asami's men now, a bare minimum of two. Asami was there most nights, or if he was away, he always put in a call and there was a whole bunch of bodyguards nearby. Even at the hospital Akihito had rarely been left unattended. If it wasn't Asami then it was Kou or Takato or his parents or Glasses or Sagano. Nothing happened by chance around Asami, Akihito knew that by now.

A month ago the police had finally released his apartment from after the shootout. He hadn't even given it much thought, he'd just let it go and continued to live with Asami. He wanted to live with Asami. He did. But that made it even less likely for him to be alone. And for some reason, it felt important.

Maybe he was being too harsh beating himself up about it, he was only just regaining his full
mobility after all. But everything that had happened to him, having his life targeted not just once but over and over, it was enormous. Meeting Asami too, even without all the other furore going on, had transformed his life in a way that he needed to process.

Asami had always been there for Akihito. Through all the dangerous and crazy, with the mugging when they hardly knew each other, when he was a basket-case with his worst nightmares, even when Asami's whole life had been on the line, Asami was always there. How much was he using Asami as a crutch to get by? Asami seemed to take it all in stride but Akihito himself couldn't accept being such a burden.

It all swirled in a big mass of uncertainty. But there was one question that crystallized it for him. Asami would always save Akihito, even at the cost of his own life and livelihood. Who could save Asami from himself?

A daunting resolve settled in his gut. There was something he had to do. So simple in some ways, but where he was right now it felt like a mountain to climb. He could do it. For Asami, he could.

They were coming up to the luxury condo building. "Is there a back entrance to this place?"

Suoh glanced at him, sitting next to him in the passenger seat. Akihito refused to sit in the back without Asami.

"I just... I don't want anyone seeing me coming out of a limo," Akihito said.

"They've probably seen you before."

"I don't want to be mistaken for some rich snob."

"I'm sure you're safe from that," Blond Tank said innocently, though he was already turning into the underground parking levels rather than just at the front.

Akihito stuck his tongue out at him.

"There are two maintenance elevators that would take us up to the penthouse," Suoh said.

"Cool. And... thanks for coming with me tonight. Sorry you had to stick around so long."

Blond Tank sighed with mock weariness as though he'd minded. "It was arduous having to watch all the drunken antics. It's a good thing I'm being well compensated."

"Haha," Akihito said sarcastically. "Well I'm not even halfway legless so I hope Asami's not paying you for Unconscious Drunk duty."

"Would anyone know the difference if I just knocked you out?" Suoh asked, poker-faced with his usual imposing stoicism.

"Oi!" Laughing, Akihito punched him. And yelped.

Blond Tank pretended to wince, rubbing his shoulder as though he'd even felt anything.

"Yeah, take that, you and your stupid mountain muscles," Akihito grinned as he shook out his numb hand.

The next day.
Asami left a snoring Akihito in bed. He had an irritating loose end to see to while it was still an irritation, before it developed into a problem. It didn't take much to convince the snivelling toad to toe the line. Why were all his ‘associates’ so spineless these days? Although if they were all as ballsy as Akihito, Asami mused, he might be in trouble.

He was back by late morning. No doubt Akihito would still be sleeping off his hangover. Diligently maintaining their posts outside the front door, the guards assigned to Takaba bowed as he entered.

Something made Asami pause.

Several pairs of trainers lay haphazardly in the genkan. Yesterday's hoodie was still discarded over the sofa, tangled with a headphone cable. Tools and boxes of computer parts that seemed to gravitate around Akihito were scattered here and there amongst snacks in gaudy packaging. Everything was as it should be. But this wasn't how the condo should feel with Akihito in it, even asleep. Too still. Cold.

Suoh had likewise stopped in his tracks, registering the same anomaly.

Asami strode for the master bedroom. He emerged seconds later. "Where's Akihito?"

Suoh moved swiftly through the condo, circling the interior. He ended up back at the living room empty-handed.

Asami was a still, silent form, standing at the pass-through window to the kitchen. The wide lip of the window counter where Akihito usually dumped his laptop and wallet and phone and keys was empty. As was the spot on the floor under it where the well-worn rucksack usually slouched.

Asami's voice was a cut-throat whisper to raze the world for his single-minded purpose. "Find him."

Chapter End Notes

17 Aug: I was expecting to update this weekend but it's going to be another week now. There was a family incident and I was suddenly away for a week. Booked the flight one night and the next day I was on a 6000-mile flight. Family who rally in crisis is amazing. My head wasn't in the right place for writing while I was away but I'm home again and back online now. Barring any further hiccups the next chapter should be ready 25/26 Aug. Bear with me!

~ Nyx ~
Everything

Chapter Notes

I've gone and done it. Too much? I feel like I've asked that before. (■‿■) Ah well, too late to take it back now! As ever I worry if I've missed the mark, characterization, content, these two...! I want to hide... (#^_^#) ⊳

There seem to be a hundred and one wild and exciting theories about Akihito, but it's actually rather simple. A few have hit the nail on the head but I'm slightly worried I'm going to disappoint some of you... (⁎˃˂⁎) Though hopefully not! I also originally wanted to time this post with the right time of year, but I suspect I wouldn't be very popular if I waited that long! Lol.

I can't believe we've really arrived at the penultimate chapter... odable. But there's still one more chapter to go! An epilogue, but you know me, it'll be a hefty one. There's a lot going on with my family at the moment so I have to warn you that it'll probably take a month...

**Heed the story tags please!!** I'll throw in NSFW too. Hide your screens. Don't read with other people around unless you've got your poker faces at the ready. *wink wink wink*

Get the picture? (^_^)☆

(Oh, and for disclaimer purposes, the brand mentioned is real! No joke. You'll see when you get there.)

I hope you enjoy reading this half as much as I enjoyed writing it! Here goes. Everything.

~ Nyx ~

It raced across Akihito's back like a thousand tiny pin pricks. Stifling the air with command and power, so thick it was tangible, that presence. It permeated even amongst the growing scatter of people, as leather soles crunched the compacted gravel path, as the shift in the air carried the bitterness of Dunhill.

Bathed in the low setting sun, sat atop the metal mooring, Akihito's breath fluttered. "Asami..."

Six hours earlier.

It was the same stained concrete exterior, the dusty air conditioning vents, the grimy windows. The apartment building hadn't changed, other than one section smack bang in the middle of the third floor where someone had slapped in a new wall. Evidently some of the bullets had gone that far.

Akihito knew where the landlady kept the spare master key. He coaxed it out from behind the rain pipe, brushed off the street dust. Checking that there was no new name on the letterbox yet, he let himself in.
Akihito had never seen the apartment so new. Or empty. New veneer flooring, new plastering, new economy furniture. And nothing personal to speak of, with the place not rented out again yet. The landlady was probably holding out for higher rent, citing the refurb.

A first, in many ways. The first place he'd called his place, living without flatmates. The first place his parents had never helped out with rent. The first place he'd brought a girl home. But not Risa, he'd known not to bring Risa somewhere so rundown. Then there was Asami...

It was convoluted, thinking back on that time now. So much fear. Fear of Asami, the secrets he’d tried so hard to keep, believing Asami would kill him for them. But then one blink (and a whole lot of Argh! in between...), and all hell had broken loose and Asami had been the only thing standing between being alive and being a memory.

The sex – had been more than sex. It had far transcended the physical. Bound and crying, feeling like it was more than he could take, but looking back on it now it was more from the mind-blanking intensity he’d never experienced before. He hadn't physically been hurt. Of course being taken for the first time was a major biggie, but it was also Asami being... well, Asami. There was nothing small or mediocre about the man, in any shape or form or addictive presence or masterful handling of Akihito's body and psyche. Asami had been reading him even then, what he responded to, what he genuinely recoiled from, adjusting every step of the way and completely blowing him away. It was a right mixed bag – yes, he'd been drawn to Asami from the start, to be brutally honest, but the fact remained that he hadn't consented. Then again his objections were grounded in what he'd believed Asami to be, when it turned out that he hadn’t known Asami at all. It wasn't ok, but it had turned out ok. What the fuck was he supposed to do with that?

There was no bed in the bedroom. But there was the wall. Oh so slowly, momentous as though he was about to trigger some unstoppable sequence to criticality instead of the simple act that it was, he placed his palm on the cold surface. Never mind the fresh lick of white paint, he could still vividly recall the faint yellowing of age, the wall where Asami had pressed into him and shielded him from death. From bullets. From gunmen. From the arm locked about his neck.

What if Asami hadn't been here? What if –

Akihito squelched down on such thoughts. He wouldn't lose himself in a downward spiral.

You, me. Here. This is the reality, Akihito.

No what ifs. Only what was. They’d each given a bit of themselves to the other that night – yes, Asami too – and they’d both walked out alive. All small pieces of significance. All a part of Akihito now. And he was stronger for it. Stronger than the fear.

Akihito closed the front door and walked away.

Street vendors were putting up stalls, deliverymen with their heavy duty white gloves rushed by with L-shaped luggage trolleys and boxes. Lights and lanterns were going up all around the giant parkland. Preparations were in full flow for the hatsumode [first shrine visit of the year] that evening, readying for thousands of people to descend on the local temple to usher in the New Year with the gargantuan bell booming 108 times. In another area of the park an A-list band and multiple support acts were lined up for the makeshift stage. Fireworks were set to light up the Bay.

Akihito was an island. In the midst of the hive of busy people with purpose, he sat motionless and alone at the water's edge. He was pretty sure these moorings were just decorative antiques, dotted along the built-up path around the parkland. There were no boats tied to any of them around this little
corner of Tokyo Bay. Akihito's particular lump of metal was shaped like a wide toadstool, wide enough that he could sit cross-legged if he balanced right. He could almost imagine he was meditating on a mountain top in Shangri La.

Except he was looking at the charred ruins of the burned-out dockyard across the water. The area was still fenced and cordoned off and he hadn't been able to get in. So he sat here and stared across the water reflecting silver in the midday Winter sun, at the dock crumbling into it, surrounded by orange safety meshing, the charred skeletons of outbuildings in jagged relief against the singed cargo crates.

It had taken a long time just to bring himself to look at the destruction. It was every bit as unpleasant as he'd thought it would be. Asami had been in that water, as had Suoh and Sagano and Nakatani. Akihito had been there too, though that was almost an afterthought. It was where Asami had so nearly been ruined, because Akihito had been weighed, measured... and found wanted.

He stirred at the buzzing in his pocket. There had been a few now. He'd blocked himself so he couldn't be found – not yet – but every time Asami called, there'd be a different message.

I know you said 'emergencies only' but I just needed a moment, ok? I closed up the hidden exit behind me again so it's all secure. And don't blame Blond Tank, it's my fault for asking about a back way, it was just coincidence that the elevators happened to lead from the door you showed me, that's all. And... I'm ok. I just need to think some things over. I'll be back later ok?

I'm still here. I've set Artemis to track my signal and you'll hear from her if anything happens to me, which it won't, so you can stop looming at me through the phone, ok? Go back to your evil finger pyramid tapping.

I have to do this. Don't you have any more fascinating reports from Glasses to read?

Ok, I need to think, ok? Just give me a bit more time, Asami. We're good so just try and chill. I'm not recording any more messages.

Are you worrying? In your gloomy glowery way? Time to turn that misery mouth upside down into a smile! There it is…

How many of these do I need to do? Ok. Last one. Really this time. I'll call, ok? Or I'll be back. As in, I'll be back anyway but I might call as well. You know what I mean. (Ugh... How do you record over on these things...?)

– *beep* –

He knew Asami wasn't going to be best pleased being kept away like this but Akihito needed time to grab the bull by the horns and face this. As much as Asami helped and distracted, that was also why Akihito found himself here.

No more distractions. No more telling himself he was totally over it all when it still reared its ugly head when he least expected it, and he still couldn't look this in the eye and tell it to fuck the hell off. So that's what he was doing, sitting here and staring across the bay. He looked each fear in the face, acknowledged it, understood it, let it pass. And onto the next.

It was some hours later that he reached for his phone.

"You're smoking."
Wisps of white curled around him. Asami hadn't smoked since *that night*, Akihito realized incredibly. At least not that he could tell. Was it for his lungs?

Asami didn't comment. Standing at Akihito's back, he burned through the cigarette. He wasn't pressed against Akihito but it was close, close enough for their jackets to brush with every inhale. Close enough for Akihito to feel the aura like the nudge of opposing magnets.


Akihito scrunched his face. "I figured." He knew he'd have to speak to the big guy later. Apologize. He picked at his laces. "But... that's not what we need to talk about, is it? We've put it off all this time and I don't – we need to talk, but I don't know..."

"Jump straight in, by all means," Asami snapped, surprisingly bitter. "Where should we start? How you spurn me or how I failed you?"

"You – what... What?!" Akihito shook his head, totally confused. Limbs flapping, one leg dangling, he half turned around on the mooring. He almost fell off at the face of doom looming over him. "Way to hit me outa the blue, Asami." Akihito shuffled all the way around. Asami didn't budge and Akihito had to pull one foot up to take it over, his knees on either side of Asami so he could look at the tall man properly. "Don't tell me this is why you've been weird? Fucking hell, if only I'd known..."

"Weird?"

"Reserved," Akihito clarified. "Holding back. Not being grabby at every unsuitable opportunity. And I've seen that look you get sometimes when you're cleaning your gun, like you're seeing a ghost. And want to kill it all over again. Like I said, weird. But, seriously, you couldn't be more wrong. I'm actually gobsmacked how far off the mark you are 'cos you're – uh, I wouldn't say *always* right but you're *usually* a lot more spot on. I'm only here facing my demons, or something like that. You know – new year, new start, goodbye nightmares. All that good stuff."

Akihito couldn't quite meet his eyes. Glancing around, that was when he noticed that the park was busier and noisier now, friends and couples and families gathering, some eating *takoyaki* and *taiyaki*. There were some women and girls wearing beautiful *kimono*. A couple of men too, in more sombre hues. Music boomed somewhere far off. The wide semicircle of bodyguards facing outwards had cleared the immediate vicinity but that also drew more curious glances. There were people further along the built-up water's edge taking pictures of the ruined docks. It was a tourist attraction now, was it?

"You're too distracting," Akihito dared to admit 'cos they clearly had some colossal crossing of lines going on. "I end up relying on you too much. That's why I had to strike out on my own, just for a day. I left messages 'cos I knew you'd worry but I would've been back this evening. I mean, we can't miss the New Year fireworks, can we? Geez, where on earth did you get spurning or failing from?"

The chiselled jaw was so tense Akihito imagined Asami's teeth must have been hurting.

"I didn't protect you," Asami hissed. "I swore. But you were–" He broke himself off, snapped his head aside, his jaw closed even tighter.

Akihito drew back because he suddenly saw it like a wounded lion was snarling in his face. Fuck, Asami... Asami was *hurting*. Such harsh self-recrimination. And to think he'd carried that all this time, and winding himself up about it all day when Akihito had snuck off...
Akihito didn't know how he could ache more now than he did at the docks.

He snagged the black coat, a subtle gesture down by his knees where his hands were because they were in full view of everyone. He tugged but he might as well have been reaching for a boulder. Asami remained rooted.

"I'm only here now 'cos of you," Akihito insisted with quiet conviction. But if anything, Asami's expression only darkened. "I remember. You probably think I don't but I do. Flashes. Bits and pieces. I keep dreaming about it. I know you're the one who pulled me out of the water."

"After you were hurt," Asami rebutted.

Frustration flashed through Akihito at Asami's obstinacy and he practically growled, even as he dropped his voice. "Remember all those people taking a shot at me? Not to mention you confessed to murder to the whole world for my sake! I mean, who does that!"

"You shouldn't read so much into it," Asami dismissed coolly. "Wakajima was a raving psychotic one blade away from taking your life. It wouldn't have been admissible."

"And you shouldn't belittle it so much!" Akihito threw right back, fierce in defending what he knew Asami had done for him. "That raving psychotic was right about one thing, it would've raised serious question marks. Enough to hit future investigations. Maybe even reopen old cases. Chief Matsui can't stem the entire nation's police force, you know. You would've been up shit's creek. You know it too. But you still did it."

Eyes just a smidgen wide, Asami seemed taken aback at Akihito's vehemence.

One of Akihito's legs swung against the mooring. "This really wasn't 'cos of anything you did, ok? I was reclaiming my mojo. No more moping around. 'Cos I haven't told you or thanked you or anything but... I'm stronger with you. And not just that night either. It's always like that."

"You make that sound like a problem."

"It's not. It's just no use when I'm not with you, is it? And don't say you won't let me out of your sight then or anything else equally ridiculous," Akihito added before Asami could suggest precisely that. Akihito caught the guilty amusement – "You were going to! Geez..."

Rolling his eyes, Akihito half turned his back, bending a leg up, still balancing on the mooring. He took in the crumbling docks. The water was darker now. More like that night.

"I had to know I could do it. To come here. To look at that place again and be alright." The hazel gaze hardened across the water, the determination unshakable. "'Cos I can't freeze up if anything happens again. I can't be all useless and needing you and your band of merry men to save my sorry ass every time and put you all at more risk. I won't."

Something warm, something hard, battled in Asami's dark eyes.

Akihito didn't see it, still staring out at the ruins. "Last time was pot luck. Next time they might be smarter and work in an air-gapped system or it might not have anything to do with computers at all, then I'm stuffed. And it's not like you're ever gonna just say, 'Hell, it's too dangerous, have at him'. I know you'll have my back. And that's why it was such a big deal that I came here, on my own 'cos I..." His eyes shifted, suddenly hesitant. "I wasn't sure that I could. And I didn't..." He became quieter and quieter. "I didn't want you to see how weak I was. To see me as less."

Asami made an odd sound in his throat. "Is that what you think?"
What was with that voice, was he offended? It was enough to make Akihito look up. No, not offended. Angry thunder clouds crackled down at him.

Should he give the man some space? "What the hell's got you all fired up now?"

"You," Asami snapped. "You didn't wait around and hope for the best. There was one way that everyone else would have come out of that alive and you threw yourself at Death to take it. That took far bigger balls than most men possess, Akihito. I would never see you as less."

"...I plead temporary insanity," Akihito deflected, not knowing how to handle such a forceful ratification. But he wasn't done. Now that they were finally talking about this, here of all places, he couldn't seem to stop talking. "Do you know what I dream about?" he blurted. "It's not Scarface or the knife or the bombs going off. It's you. I see you, saving me, and dying for it." He sucked in a breath, killed the wobble on his voice. He was overly harsh to compensate. "I have to get over this. I have to be stronger. 'Cos I'm not gonna let you be killed on my account."

Asami stepped closer, closing the final few fingers of space between them. "Do you know what I see when I close my eyes?" he murmured.

The sudden softness of his voice silenced the clamouring in Akihito's head, ensnared his attention. A finger trailed up his throat, tipped up his chin, made him look up.

Asami's gaze was naked. Shimmering with untold emotions. *Fear.* "You."

That single word, that look, it hit Akihito like a bullet. "I'm your biggest weakness." Blood drained from his face as his runaway thoughts leapt in a horrifying direction. "I'm your Achilles' heel. You'd be stronger without me. Safer –"

"I don't live to be safe, Akihito," Asami cut in, not letting that idea take hold. "I live in a world of my design, exactly as I would have it, until I die. Even if that's tomorrow. If you wanted safe, you chose the wrong man."

What with thoughts from the apartment fresh from that morning, Akihito couldn't help his arched look at that. "I didn't exactly choose you though, did I? Not at first."

Asami regarded him, his expression closed. "Do you resent me?"

"Oh boy, we're really hashing out all sorts today, huh. I don't know. Maybe I did? I really don't know." Akihito shrugged lightly, his lips twitching. "But with everything you've done? I think you've paid your dues now."

Asami smirked faintly. "Have I now."

But that heaviness was still there, and soon Akihito's mouth was tugging down again. His question refused to be stifled. Or maybe it was a plea. Or worse, a suggestion that was entirely too heartbreaking. "I don't want to keep putting you in danger 'cos you're protecting me."

Asami's hands dragged heavy around the tight denim of Akihito's thighs, his expression full of dark shadows. "I swore that I would never be powerless again."

"If I leave –"

A rare streak of self-preservation stopped him in his tracks. That gleam in Asami's gaze – another word and Akihito knew he would've been pulverized. He snapped his mouth shut.
"Threats on my life and business are commonplace. A bullet meant for you wouldn't be the first I've taken, in any sense of the word, but it would be the first I wouldn't begrudge. I do, however, need to install additional measures."

Akihito's eyes grew. "What more could you do?" He couldn't bear anyone else to be killed because of him.

Asami saw right through him. "No more deaths. There are other ways."

"You've done enough, Asami. You don't have to do anymore."

Asami's baritone roughened. "It's not a choice. I protect what's mine. Have you already forgotten?"

His large hand slid around Akihito's neck, fingers wrapping just enough to feel Akihito's pulse trip. "We're bonded, you and I. Forged in fire and blood. I hold your freedom and you hold mine. In all things. It's everything, Akihito. For you, for me."

In their little bubble of calm at the water's edge, stunned silence fell over them. Akihito was trying to find a way, any way, of seeing that as anything but the confession it sounded like. Fucking hell...

Shyness blooming, he could only deflect with awkward levity. "Th-there you go again with your overblown declarations. You know, most people just say 'I love you' or something conventional like that."

"I was asked about that." Asami's hand slid into the blond hair.

"Huh?" Akihito had expected sarcasm, derision, maybe amusement. But not this serious look on Asami's face. "My parents?" he asked in horror.

Asami's expression shifted. More specifically...

"My mum?"

Another shift, prompting. Or...

"Not my dad! Oh hell, that's a gazillion times worse! I bet you think he's all sensible and serious but he plays the worst pranks when you least expect it. Literally nothing, and then boom, Armageddon. He was probably stirring the cooking pot and seeing what boiled over. Don't pay him any mind."

"Too late. It's been irritating me ever since. The headache is unmerited for three words so susceptible to abuse."

Akihito fought a smile at Asami's grumpy face. It wasn't cute. It wasn't. "Aren't you overthinking it a tad? It's what it is."

"Is it? I've lost count the number of times I've heard it from opportunists and social climbers."

Something ugly tried to rear its head but Akihito forced it aside.

"Different again to families," Asami went on. "Friends. Bros," he said like he was down with the lingo or whatevs. Akihito snorted. "They all carry their own meanings, different intents. I make it a rule not to engage in such ambiguous mix-ups."

Akihito grinned. "I'm pretty sure that's what they call psychoanalyzing a horse."

"No. This is. Because a spirit like you is too brilliant to be contained or defined by rules. Because if it means that you are the Achilles' heel I would kill and die for, if it means I would sooner drag you
with me to hell than to let you walk away... If it means," Asami practically snarled, "I would rather
carve out my own heart and see it beat in your hands than to let that cold grey of death come over
you again..." The golden gaze blazed, the baritone rumbled. "If it's means only you... then I'll gladly
say it. I love you, Akihito."

........ What...

... the...

... fuck......?

Akihito's brain exploded.

Melted. Disintegrated. It wasn't working. Asami just... He just...

There was a weird stuttering sound... Wait, was that Akihito? He closed his mouth, opened it, but his
mind was blank – Antarctic plains, deep space vacuum, tumbleweed –

But before he could relearn how to communicate and form some semblance of language, Asami was
kissing him right there in the open, a hand sliding behind his head and trapping him and overbearing
tongue and all, all the strangers doing a double take at the sight be damned.

The kiss was fast and hard. Asami seemed endlessly amused by Akihito's shellshocked face. "Very
eloquent, Akihito. You can get in the limo and consider an appropriate response." He lightly hoisted
the dazed man off the mooring.

"You... ridiculous... bastard..." Akihito whispered shakily, stumbling along on legs he couldn't feel
as Asami steered him away.

They naturally coordinated together now. Setting the table and serving dinner. Moving around each
other tidying up. Showering in turn and slotting together in the tub. Asami still stubbornly persisted
with hauling Akihito into his lap – whether to keep Akihito from slipping when he was still injured
or because there wasn't enough room in the tub (which there blatantly was), there was always one
excuse or another. Akihito blamed the hot water for his bright cheeks and for making his dick swell
that he couldn't hide and that made Asami smirk in that smugly, maddeningly amused way of his.
But that wasn't why Akihito was squirming today. Because every time he stared at that face chiselled
by Michelangelo, quite literally breathtaking, his breath was gone and the words wouldn't come.

Asami wasn't saying much. It was far too quiet, what with Akihito not babbling away either. He kept
sneaking glances at that superior mask, all cool and indifferent and haughty and master of the
universe, and he couldn't help but notice it was too cool, too indifferent. Akihito wasn't blind. Asami
was bothered. Which bothered Akihito. It was bothersome.

Asami was on the couch. He'd been reading something on his tablet for a while now as Akihito
fidgeted around in the kitchen.

He was hiding. He was scuttling around with nervous energy and that bottom drawer in the fridge
hadn't been cleaned for as long as he'd been living here and it obviously couldn't wait. He started
emptying out the veg.
"What on earth are you doing?"

Akihito yelped and banged his head on a shelf in the fridge before he sat back on his heels. "Did you know, these things should be cleaned at least every three months? You can get all sorts of food poisoning from poor hygiene. Leave it and leave it and next think you know, you've got the shits and the porcelain bowl is your new best buddy..."

He trailed off as Asami's imperious brow climbed his forehead.

Asami was leaning in the doorway. His bathrobe was parted at the front, revealing insane abs and black lounge pants, with the snug black boxers Akihito had bought him for Christmas peeking out. The grey on the black waistband gave it away. Made by a brand called Joules that had a men's underwear range called... Yep, you guessed it. Crown Joules.

Asami's eyes adopted an amused glint as Akihito's eyes travelled. "And this needs doing on New Year's Eve, does it?"

"D'uh, it's Japanese custom. Clean out the old and greet the New Year with a clean home and clean frame of mind."

"Whatever makes you happy."

Asami grabbed a crystal tumbler and raised it in question. Akihito shook his head. Asami headed back out and to the sideboard, pouring himself a super generous slosh before settling back on the couch.

Akihito just stood there. Clean frame of mind? More like as restless as a squirrel stocking up for Winter. Because Asami had to darned well go and drop the L-bomb, didn't he? An appropriate response, Asami had said. What in the blazes could be an appropriate response to the big bad crime lord baring his soul and sharing his feelings?

Even two hours to midnight on New Year's Eve, business didn't stop.

"I saw," Asami was saying on the phone. "I tire of his excuses. Give him another chance to deliver then you can suffer a bout of carelessness and mislay his invite for the Meet." He listened to the reply. "Yes it would, wouldn't it?" he said without sympathy. "If he doesn't want to be a sitting duck, I'd suggest he get his ass in gear." Asami hung up and returned to his tablet.

Asami did that sometimes, sounding rather like Akihito. Were they rubbing off on each other? Or maybe it was Asami's new way of winding Glasses up when he found things dull. Akihito was still standing there in limbo. He was there long enough for the fridge to start beeping in protest that it had been left open. The whiskey was long gone.

Veg went back. Fridge door closed. Akihito's bare feet carried him across the thick carpet. He stood behind the couch, staring at Asami's dark, still-damp hair. It was soft when dry, he'd discovered, when Asami hadn't slicked it back. He fidgeted with the waist tie of his slacks. His habitual sleepwear now was his tank top and Asami's trousers. Soon after he'd left the medical clinic there were suddenly a lot more of Asami's lounge pants lounging around so they were easy to nab. Yes, they wore matching trousers to bed. It was almost cute. What wasn't so cute was how Akihito had to roll them up at the ends 'cos there was no elastic around the ankles and Asami's legs were manly and long and muscley...

Akihito's gaze was flitting around like a nervous jackrabbit when he caught the returning stare reflected on the blank TV.
Carefully neutral, Asami's eyes revealed nothing. Akihito's mouth went dry.

*You knowingly set off a bomb, for fuck's sake. You're stalling at this?*

Akihito squared his shoulders...

And fell forwards, his arms hugging around Asami's neck from behind, his face buried in there somewhere too.

Asami tipped his head a little against Akihito's but otherwise he just waited.

"You busy?" Akihito mumbled.

Asami clicked off the tablet and pulled out his phone. The call was brief. "No interruptions." Phone and tablet were put it aside. "I just finished, as it so happens."

Akihito snorted. Had Asami only been pretending to be busy? He didn't know. He didn't care. He grabbed Asami's hand and pulled, drawing the tall man up and alongside the couch. He pulled him across the living room and into the bedroom. Marching along determined not to stop, Akihito went right up to the headboard, flicked up the hidden switch cover and jammed the button.

Akihito didn't dare look at Asami as the door to the Secret Room slid open. He marched them across the bedroom floor and finally he dropped Asami's hand. Standing in the middle of the Secret Room, Akihito turned to him.

Asami waited, folding his arms, leaning against the doorframe with an unreadable expression.

Akihito chewed his lip, fidgeted with his waist tie. *You can find a few seconds of courage, can't you Aki?* He had to do this right, even if he was about as smooth as a learner driver who couldn't make heads or tails of the gas pedal.

"I realized something today. I thought I was losing myself, but... actually it's ok to change. Life changes, things change, I change. It's ok. I'm still me. Just a bit weathered. Maybe a bit wiser." His gaze lifted. "And... not so alone. I –" Akihito stalled. He rallied. "You promised me everything and... well..." He closed his eyes, scrunched them for a moment – *A few seconds, Aki! –* and raised his eyes. "Well, this is *my* everything. I – I don't mean sex. Well actually that too, 'cos it's been *way too long* since we've actually, you know, had sex, but –" Since when did Akihito whine over a dry spell like it was some major catastrophe! Gordon fucking Bennet, couldn't he just be serious for a minute here? He cleared his throat. "Well actually that too, 'cos it's been *way too long* since we've actually, you know, had sex, but –" Since when did Akihito whine over a dry spell like it was some major catastrophe! Gordon fucking Bennet, couldn't he just be serious for a minute here? He cleared his throat. "But it's not just about sex. You said that to me before too, but I get it now. So... well, this is me. Freely given. What I am. What I – I feel – that is, uh –" Far, far, beyond his comfort zone, Akihito's eyes shifted all around again. "I might... as in... I'm pretty sure, I think, that... Actually you know what? It's totally fucking unfair 'cos you went and said it and now I *have* to say it 'cos if I *don't* say it I'm just gonna be thinking about it *all the time* like seriously an actual elephant has already moved into my head and it's stomping around with its big ass stomping feet so I'm putting it on record that I'm saying all this in protest and... argh! I suck."

The first arched brow of amusement somewhere along the lines had been joined by the second. Asami was infuriatingly calm, when Akihito was so wound up. He scowled in a serious grump.

Asami tilted his head, a familiar gleam of teasing in his piercing gaze. "That's an awful lot of bush beating for three words that weren't even in there. And you lost me – is it freely given or in protest?"

"Shut up. I have my own ways of doing things."

"That you do," Asami smirked.
"Fine. You want three words? I'll give you three words. Try this on for size: I'm yours, Ryuichi."
Akihito's mouth opened again to carry on yabbering away, but then he belatedly realized that what
he'd said was just as intimate as the actual three words he'd been trying to say.

Asami froze – watching him, reaction suspended, not leaping to conclusions –

Colour rose up Akihito's face like roses in Spring bloom. But he didn't take the words back or laugh
them off. In fact... "I'm yours, Ryuichi," he said again, quieter, steadier, surer. He didn't say it
because was ranting but because he meant it.

A dragon. It was an honest to fuck dragon that came alight in Asami, the golden fire that suspended
them in time and there were only the two of them with all their desire and focus and purpose between
them.

It was a faint smirk that lit Asami's face, an expression of something deep showing more through the
subtle shift in his cheeks and eyes than anything else. "I suppose it'll do for now."

When had Asami approached? Long fingers slid into the blond hair, gentle, caressing... then
tightening, fistng until Akihito's head was pulled back, further still, until his throat was exposed and
he was just the slightest bit off balance.

Akihito didn't fight him at all, putting himself entirely at Asami's mercy.

Submission.

It hit him, the freedom of letting go, handing himself over with absolute confidence that Asami had
him. Asami's teeth closed at the side of his neck over his stuttering pulse point, biting, harder, an ache
growing then blooming, until it became pain, his eyes smarting, before it eased off just short of it
becoming unbearable. Lips sucked hard against Akihito's neck, bolting lightning down his whole
length, making his knees shake. Actually his entire body was trembling, whether from adrenaline or
anticipation or arousal or perhaps something entirely deeper.

Asami soothed the bruised neck with a gentle kiss. He nuzzled Akihito's jaw, nosed along his cheek,
before drawing back enough to look at Akihito.

Adorned with Asami's mark. Flushed, tremulous, pupils dark, waiting.

"Have you really recovered?"
Akihito blinked himself back. It was like his brain had floated off somewhere. "Huh?"

"Internal tissues take much longer to heal and you might not notice."

"Doc gave the all clear at the last check up." Akihito threw a grin, mostly challenge, a little shy.
"You were saying all that stuff about traffic lights and all. Was that just all talk and no bite?" His lips	witched at that. "Oh, I know! You actually have a secret and active interest in roadgeeking, don't
you?"

Akihito could feel Asami's burning gaze like fingers over his face.


The shiver darted all the way up Akihito's spine and up into his hair. He took a second to steady his
breathing. It sure as fuck wasn't happening by itself. "What makes you think I don't want you to?"
His cheeks coloured but his gaze was sure.
It was hypnotizing, seeing the dark lust dilating through those piercing eyes, the flecks of ebony in the golden irises. Asami still had a fistful of his hair, the pad of the thumb circling behind his ear.

"Do you trust me?"

Akihito's eyes widened. He remembered the first time Asami had asked him that, when the early sprouts of trust was as prickly and defensive and small as a hedgehog. It was a lifetime ago. Now, his grin came back easily. "I dunno. If we're having the best sushi in the universe, would you give me the last piece?"

"Every time." Dead serious, not missing a beat. Fucking hell, Asami wasn't even letting him laugh it off.

A little shakily, Akihito said, "Then how could I say no?"

Asami's lip twitched with a smirk not quite suppressed. "Is that all it takes? If only I'd known."

"Don't tell anyone," Akihito mock-whispered.

He swallowed as Asami towered over him, staring down into his face. "You're trembling. Are you nervous?"

"We're in here and you ask if I trust you, of course I'm fucking nervous."

"Door's open."

Akihito tugged free, Asami let him go. Akihito cast about and then made a beeline for the bed as he spotted the remote. Grabbing it, he beeped the door shut.

Asami's expression was dark satisfaction and lust. "Are you particularly attached to your clothes?"

Hazel eyes widened. "Aside from the fact that I'm wearing them? I guess not. These are yours though," Akihito said, tugging at the pants leg.

Asami took the remote off him and pressed another button, revealing the wall of hardcore black leather and chains. Just like that. No ceremony or grand reveal or anything.

"I'm never gonna get used to that," Akihito mumbled as Asami headed over to it.

When Asami came back he handed Akihito something. Twenty, maybe thirty strips of leather the length of his arm, drooping out of a stiff handle created by what looked to be the same leather bound neatly together.

A shaky breath fluttered from Akihito. "This is...?"

"A flogger."

Akihito was nodding numbly for a while before he could reply. "Of course it is." Nervousness made him deflect with sarcasm. "You want me to flog you?"

Asami walked around him. "Do you want to flog me?" He pressed against Akihito's back – "Or would you rather –" and purred in his ear – "I took care of you?"

Akihito's skin tightened. "That shouldn't sound so hot..." he mumbled.

Asami's smirk was all arrogance as he loped off for the toy wall again.
"But... uh... why do you want to flog me?"

Asami returned with two cuffs, unbuckling one and opening it up. They were the same as Akihito had worn before, the soft leather, solid black, serious business. Asami just let Akihito stare at them, process... and hold out a hand. Silently, Asami secured the cuff around the slender wrist.

Akihito had worn it before but this felt entirely different. Was it because he wasn't fighting this time, not even half-heartedly? Asami held out the other cuff. Akihito swapped the flogger in his hands and held out the other wrist to be cuffed.

Only then did Asami cup the side of his head, fingers tightening through the blond hair. "I'll give you what you need, Akihito. I'll clear your mind. Make you think only of me."

"By beating me?" Akihito said sceptically, pitched a little high.

"You'll see. Trust me, and let go."

Quietly, just trying to breathe and somehow keep calm against his pounding heart, Akihito held tightly to the leather flogger and watched as Asami headed for the bed, reaching under it.

He pulled out a bench. About a metre long and half as wide. Leather seat about knee height, maybe a bit higher, all black, solid legs. Asami dragged it clear into the middle of the floor, to an exact placement that only he understood, parallel with the width of the bed. He shrugged off his bathrobe as he returned to the bed and flung the fluffy white cotton onto the covers.

He turned, and Akihito stopped breathing. Broad shoulders, powerfully defined musculature, the proud stance, dark slacks with bare feet, the face that would have knocked Zeus off his throne, and that molten gaze –

"Fucking hell..."

It was the uplift at one corner of Asami's mouth that made Akihito realize he'd said that aloud.

"Come here."

It wasn't defiance that made Akihito so slow to react. His body just didn't seem to be functioning too well. He stumbled around the bench – he gave it a second glance 'cos seriously, what?

Asami held out his hand. Akihito stared at it stupidly for a moment before he caught on, and put the flogger in the expectant hand. He'd forgotten he was holding it. As he handed it over, he caught sight of the black cuff on his wrist. Shit, they were really doing this...

Asami draped the flogger over the bed so all the strips of leather were running the same way. He stepped towards the bench, patted the leather.

"Kneel up."

Asami guided Akihito by the hips as he kneeled up onto the bench facing the bed. It was padded, cushioning his knees. Asami kept him steady with a hand on a hip as he reached for the remote again. And pointed it up. And pressed a button.

A hole opened up in the ceiling, and a ring lowered through it.

"Oh shit..." Akihito breathed.

There must have been some technical word for it but to him it was just a ring. A fucking solid one.
On a solid metal stick that came down over his head. Solid enough to... "Fuck."

Asami pulled out a double-ended metal clasp from his pocket. He connected one end to one cuff, raised the arm to pass the clasp through the ring, and raised the other arm too to connect the other end to the other cuff. The thick metal ring was cold as Akihito wrapped his fingers around it, the only solid thing to hold on to. Another beep of the remote and then the stick was disappearing back up into the ceiling, taking the ring with it and the cuffs too, raising Akihito's arms up and up –

Another click of the remote and Asami stopped the ring as Akihito's wrists were held high overhead, just a little forward. There was only a little give left in his arms. Already having to fight to stop the trembling and runaway breathing, Akihito stared at Asami.

Asami soothed a hand over Akihito's jaw, a squeeze behind the neck, a moment of reassurance before heading to the wall behind him again. When Asami came back this time he stood directly in front of Akihito. He was holding a knife.

It sat in Asami's palm, hilt out, the 20cm curved blade pointing up the forearm. The same one he'd brought to Akihito's apartment, if he'd had to hazard a guess. Akihito was uneasy around knives, had always been queasy at the thought of slicing flesh. More so now.

Asami would know that. Was it deliberate? Another fear to face in his day of facing fears? Akihito stared at the evil looking thing and pushed his brain to be rational. Asami had a knife. Asami had a knife.

It was his complete confidence in Asami that steadied him.

Asami waited until the hazel eyes fixed onto him – calm, if a little rigid – before bringing the knife closer. Deftly spinning it in one hand from reverse to forward grip, with the lethal blade millimetres from the skin, Akihito cut off the tank top. Focusing on Asami, Akihito didn't flinch. Didn't move. Didn't breathe. He held perfectly still as the slacks likewise fell to the blade, the material tugged out from under his knees, and the boxers were sliced off too.

There was a brief brush of lips against his temple. "Well done."

Akihito drooped, leaning into the contact.

Asami allowed him a moment before stepping back. He flicked the knife airborne, caught it by the end of the hilt, and threw it back-hand. Akihito craned his head back to see it embedded dead centre in the top frame of the toy wall.


Asami smirked. And lightly back-slapped the inside thigh. "Knees wide."

Mentally floundering at the abrupt shift in focus, Akihito opened his mouth – but froze at Asami's brow raised in challenge as though to say, Yes?

Yes, what had he been about to say? He wasn't fighting here, Akihito had to remind himself. He wanted to do this. It was just his nature to push back if he was pushed. He shut his mouth again. Feeling the flush rising further up his cheeks, he shuffled his knees out.

"Wider."

"They are," he grumbled. It was also his nature that he couldn't stay quiet for long. But he still shifted them wider.
Another slap, harder this time, on the other inside thigh. Hard enough to sting. It did funny things to the adrenaline charging around Akihito's veins.

"Wide as you can, Akihito."

"I'm gonna pull a muscle..." Akihito mumbled 'cos he was feeling more and more self-conscious which made him lippy. With just a moment of gathering himself, he shuffled his knees out until he felt the stretch in his groin, even his ass cheeks parting. And there went the last of the give in his arms, at a full stretch overhead. Did Asami actually know how wide his legs could go and so how much leeway to leave his arms? Shit, it was dizzying. Akihito was leaning a little forwards onto the ring, but that was probably deliberate as well. He resisted moving his knees forward.

And then Asami blatantly gave him a once-over – an extremely detailed, lingering appraisal of a once-over that had colour rising up the wealth of exposed skin.

Akihito was naked. Bound and naked. Everything was dangling. Until he wasn't dangling so much... Sure, it was this position, stretched out and up and completely exposed, and the doses of adrenaline, and this Room, and Asami being so insanely hot and dominating – he shivered just a little, fuck, this man... – and the fact that Akihito hadn't come in that earth-moving, bone-melting way that Asami could make him feel in what might as well have been a lifetime as far as his dick was concerned! Everything conspired to send his blood surging south. But it was what was in front of him that fuelled the bonfire of his arousal the most, the raw, possessive hunger that lit the molten gaze devouring the sight Akihito presented. Asami made no attempt to conceal it.

Then the older man was close, his forehead tipped against Akihito's. There was a tortured groan. Or it might have been a growl.

"What you do to me, Akihito..."

No wonder Akihito was practically at full mast without a single touch. Asami didn't make him feel smaller or lesser for his submission. He felt desired. Cherished. *Loved.* It was nothing short of insane that *Asami* made him feel like that.

...Or was it? Shouldn't Akihito stop being surprised at this by now?

Akihito quirked a lopsided grin. "I'm pretty sure it's what you're doing to me, you perverted crime lord."

It was definitely a growl this time as nails scraped up his abdomen and his chest and the hand closed for a moment around his throat.

The strangle grip eased just in time to let out the gasp carried up by Akihito's whole body shudder. Even his dick trembled. "Fuck..."

"Mmm someone's eager. You look like you might shoot if I gave you a single lick."

"Shut up," Akihito glowed. But he was still grinning.

"Don't worry, your cock will see plenty of action."

Akihito stifled a groan. Poorly.

"Don't go anywhere," Asami smirked, disappearing away behind him.

"I'll try not to," Akihito deadpanned.
Asami returned with a blindfold.

"Ohhh... It's one of those days, is it?" Akihito tried to be light about it but there was an undercurrent in his voice. The last time he'd worn a blindfold... was the first time.

Asami just held it up by his head and waited. Akihito met the intense gaze – searching, anchoring... And closed his eyes.

The blindfold encased him in soft leather, encased him in darkness. It made his skin more sensitive, he could feel the press of leather around his wrists, the stretch in his body, the air over his sensitive groin, the leather warming under his knees. There wasn't much sound either, just his feathery breathing, the rustle of Asami's slacks.

And he could feel hands. Asami didn't break contact. Large hands soothed over his heated skin.

"Don't fight this, Akihito," came the soft, firm baritone. "Let go, and I will show you. You already know how you respond to me." Fingertips feathered up the inside thighs, making Akihito twitch. "I can show you how pain –" Asami grasped the balls and base of the erection and pulled –

"Hhnnttt!"

"– becomes pleasure."

Akihito's hands were squeezing tight on the ring. "You already are," he admitted into the darkness.

"Very good." Asami sounded pleased. He eased his grip and Akihito's tight tension dropped with it.

Asami trailed his nose in the blond hair, whispered right into the shell of his ear. "Tell me the safeword."

Behind the blindfold, hazel eyes widened. Akihito closed them again when eyelashes crushed against leather. He shook his head.

"Not to stop," Asami reassured. "I need to know you can say it, if you need to."

Heat prickled through Akihito at the implication. He worked his mouth – "Red," he whispered. It was actually harder than he thought it would be. The vulnerable position, the darkness making every sensation more intense, the safeword – his breathing was coming hard, his heart trying to race out of his ribcage.

"Shhh..." Large warm hands soothed over his back, kneaded his shoulders, squeezing and rubbing the muscles. His arms and back received the same treatment, firm, gentle pressure, easing the tension from the muscles.

Akihito was relaxing until Asami's hands reached his ass and squeezed there too, just a bit too hard.

"Hey," he grumbled, but only 'cos he could feel Asami was teasing. There was a chuckle.

The hands left him for a moment, then returned again. One hand. One hand was soothing over Akihito's back. Then came the trailing of leather. Multiple trails over his back, brushing here, flicking there. Over his shoulder, close to his face, enough that he could smell the leather. Flicking over his back again.

His breath fluttered with every jolt and twitch of his muscles.

"I'll erase everything else, Akihito," Asami rumbled from close behind. "Think only of me."
Akihito's world was the leather secure on his wrists, the stretch in his body, Asami's voice.

Then came the first thud, the snap filling his ears. He jolted, tensing, and it kept coming, and he couldn't work it out until his brain could decipher the unfamiliar signals. Not continuous but repetitive, rapid dull thudding strokes around the middle of his back over and over, each one sounding with a snap.

And then the thudding eased off, lightening up until they stopped completely. It had only been a few seconds but his back was still alive with it. But it wasn't pain as such. More an ache, a flare of warmth.

"Relax, Akihito."

He was breathing too hard. He eased his white-knuckle grip on the ring, easing his weight back into the wrist cuffs.

Asami nuzzled his hair. "Colour?"

Akihito's brain was flipping around doing cartwheels and it took a moment to twig. Thinking back, he couldn't be sure if it had actually hurt or if it was more the surprise of it. "Uh... green?" Was that what Asami was after?

There was a brief press of lips to his ear. "Remember, let go."

Akihito gasped as the flogging started up again. Harder this time, but the pain – if it was pain – was more from the repetition than each contact of leather. No singular point, but areas of brightness as the flogger met the centre of his back again and again. Circles? Figure of eight? It wasn't pain like Scarface's knife had been. That had been an excruciating point of agony, off to the side –

A hard snap of leather forced a cry from him. The sudden sting carried through the strokes that followed, the dull thudding never once ceasing or breaking rhythm.

Maybe he'd been getting complacent. Getting used to it. He was all tense now, his fingers aching. Holding onto the ring too tight again.

*Let go.* He tried.

When the harsh snap came again next, he jolted, but the whoosh of breath left on air without voice. The sting was different this way too. It merged with the ache gathering at his back, a counterpoint that made the dull flat thud of the leather strips more a light drumming, the ache not enough to make him cry out, but persistent enough to keep tugging him back from dark thoughts.

The flogger lightened off and stopped again. His laboured breathing was loud without the rhythmic snap of leather.

Asami's skin at his sensitive back made Akihito shudder. He jerked as something touched his stomach, but it was just Asami's arm that had wrapped around him. The hand slid upwards, trailing over his stomach, making his muscles dance at the scrape of nails, the brush against his nipples. The flat of a thumb brushed his cheek.

"Colour?"

"Green." Instant this time. Akihito leaned against the nuzzle in his hair. The hand brushed back down his front. Wrapped around his dick. He gasped. He hadn't realized he was still hard, rock hard in fact, the familiar ache seesawing with the bright ache at his back. Asami gave a single firm stroke
from root to tip, drawing a strained whine. He nipped at Akihito's ear before pulling away again.

It went longer this time, the repetitive thud of multiple strands of leather, the crack in his ears. And as Asami continued, Akihito got used to the rhythm. He managed to relax into the wrist cuffs, stopped bracing himself. At first, the occasional sharp sting that Asami threw in stood out against the steady drumming. But gradually the rhythm took over, weirdly calming. Hypnotic almost. It was blanking his mind. No worries, no fears. And then the sharp, hard crack of the flogger became brighter, blooming his body alive with it.

The dull pain growing across his back became a canvas for the bright flares of sensation and pleasure-pain that were too few and far between. He started to yearn for it, moaning at every sharp sting of leather, seeking its ever unpredictable appearance, the rush of endorphins. But when he started seeking it, it didn't come.

"Asami..."

But there was only the dull rhythm of gentle strokes.

He gave up waiting. Asami would do what Asami would do. He let go, trusting, just feeling what he was given.

That was when he was rewarded. He cried out at the hard sting as the flogger connected hard, but it was a good cry, and he rode it as Asami wanted him to, mingling with the dull soothing thuds that followed without missing a beat.

After that he just went with it. The fabric of the dull aching, the bright flares of pleasure-pain, they all served to go hand in hand with the growing throbbing in his groin. The bright warmth at his back only heightened the heady cocktail filling his veins. Oxygen and aching desire and Asami drenched his cells.

Akihito didn't know when the flogger had eased off. He registered hands on his face, removing the blindfold, brushing away tears.


Akihito didn't know what he'd done to merit it. He blinked into golden eyes, piercing and steady. "Ryuichi..." That was Akihito's whole plane of existence.

Hands raised his jaw, parted his lips. Asami took a kiss, deep and tinged with whiskey. Akihito reached for it, his tongue chasing Asami's taste.

He whined when Asami pulled away. Large hands soothed around his side Asami circled the bench, moving behind him. Akihito dropped his head, eyes closed, hanging by his wrists. Asami's hands feathered down his ribs. Kneaded his ass. Rubbed over his bent legs. Back up to his ass, squeezing, pulling, stretching apart.

Yes! Akihito needed, so much. To be filled. He yearned for it, to be driven until it took over everything –

The wet brush right over the tight ring of muscle made Akihito's eyes pop, his mouth agape. A shuddery moan sounded at the rush of feeling down there.

What the f–?!

Another brush, as wet and warm as the first. Circling the sensitive skin, nerve endings erupting with
more sensation than he could have ever imagined, bolting right through his dick and his gut and to his head and every finger and toe.

He could feel Asami's nose. In the crack of his ass. Asami's cheeks. On the cheeks of his ass.

He whined, trembling, wired, blown. "You – you – can't –"

He'd just showered earlier and he was clean, but still! Words were hard to muster, and Asami's tongue was insistent, jabbing now against the tight ring of muscle. Pressing inside.

Akihito was straining against the cuffs, his legs twitching but Asami held him firm. Straining... but the direction was backwards, his hips pressing keenly while his mind fumbled with the notion of Asami rimming him. Fuck. Just... fuck.

Bliss radiated out from him so intense that he could picture his asshole had turned into a rosebud and it was Spring and he was in full bloom. 'Cos fuck but Asami's tongue...

"Ahhhhhhhh......"

His moans went on forever. His brain was too buzzed out to notice. He could feel every lick and tease and swirl, and then a finger nudged in, smooth with spit, and a gasping whine filled his ears. The digit just eased in and out for a while, and then pushed deeper, the tongue swishing over the ring as the finger tilted at a particular angle – Akihito shuddered on a cry, bone-deep pleasure radiating out like calm waves of the ocean, gentle but unstoppable. A second finger pressed in, joined the first in stroking and stimulating the secret nucleus inside, the wet tongue laving at the sensitive skin wrapped around the fingers. Fingertips were brushing up his inside thighs, scraping the perineum – but never quite touching his scrotum. Akihito was losing control of his body, his breathing, his moans. Something was coiling deep inside and his hips stuttered, uncoordinated, lost to the gentle onslaught. It was growing, snowballing, a cascade of undulating pleasure. The fingers gently, relentlessly massaged his sensitized prostate and he was so almost there –

Then all at once the tongue swirled across to where the fingers disappeared and pressed in alongside, and the other hand brushed oh so lightly over the glow of his back –

It surged over, rolling through his back passage and radiating out from deep in his pelvis. He'd never come like this before, wave after gentle wave of bliss, his whole body tingling and quivering, hanging by the cuffs and held in Asami's hands. It went on and on, not the kind that peaked and crashed, but suspended on a plateau of bone melting pleasure turning him into goo.

He was a moaning, needy mess by the time Asami climbed back to his feet. Akihito had the sweetest ache everywhere. His back was warm. And he was hard. Rock solid, bone hard. Throbbing. He gaped down at his erection still going strong. He hadn't come? But he had. He felt like he was still riding the pleasure wave, in fact. Precum trailed an unbroken line from his frantic erection to the bench.

Asami chuckled close against his back. "Anal orgasm. I'm not letting you shoot your load yet," he remarked as though he could so easily fine-tune the level and duration of Akihito's arousal. A finger trailed up his cock and Akihito's whole body jerked, ready to erupt on a hair trigger. Another touch... Just one more touch...

"Look at you," Asami purred. "I suppose I did promise to wreck you."

Akihito could only stare, needing, lost, overwhelmed. "Please... please..."

"Shhhh. You're alright." The large hands were heavenly on his aching shoulders and arms as Asami
kneaded life back into them and carefully unclasped the cuffs, catching him before he could fall. His legs, too, Asami rubbed blood back into them and helped him back to the floor.

Asami ran his hands down Akihito’s arms – and guided them behind Akihito’s back, where he snapped the cuffs together.

"Colour?"

Akihito couldn’t form the words. He just nodded. Asami’s hands caught his jaw, forced his face up.

"Concentrate, Akihito. What’s your colour?" Asami’s voice was firm, his gaze equally so.

Responding to the command, Akihito somehow mustered a scant few brain cells. "G-green. Oh fuck, green..." It came out scratchy.

Asami guided Akihito to sit on the edge of the bed. Crouching beside him, a large hand rubbed his thighs. Up and down. Up and down......

Akihito blinked.

"You with me?" Asami asked.

Blinking some more, focusing a little better, Akihito nodded. Had he been dreaming? How long had he been sitting here?

Asami searched his gaze for a moment longer. "Alright. Wait here. And don't you dare touch your dick."

Akihito scowled after Asami as he strode for the door. "Damn it. I was gonna lick it and everything."

Asami jolted to a halt in the doorway. He turned back to find the blond looking far too cheeky. And flushed and hard and oh so fuckable.

He marched out with Akihito’s laugh warming his back.

Left alone, Akihito took an almighty breath. Shit, that had been intense. He stared at his angry, glistening boner. Who’d have known, he was into flogging. Well, Asami for one. And what he’d done with his tongue...! Flushing, Akihito tugged on the cuffs. They held fast behind his back. Mild self-consciousness reared its head but the way things were going so far? Green green green, baby.

Asami returned with a glass of water. It tasted like nectar.

Thirst quenched, Akihito wasted no time in pointing out the obvious. "A little eager yourself, aren't you?"

The black slacks had disappeared. Crown Joules was being stretched.

Asami smirked without an ounce of shame. "More than a little. I'm young and virile, remember?"

Akihito snorted helplessly.

Asami stood him up, guided him onto his knees and backwards to the middle of the bed, his back to the headboard. Asami grabbed a bottle from the bedside drawer and parked himself behind him.

Akihito was looking over his shoulder, expectant. But Asami just leaned against the headboard, one
leg bent up, the other hanging off the bed, doing nothing about the tip of his erection pushing free from under the waistband.

"Spread your knees, Akihito," he ordered softly, his eyes dark.

Akihito didn't move but inside his heart started thumping and his body tightened and he felt several degrees warmer. Asami didn't press any further. He gave time for Akihito's instinctive baulking to swell, clamour, then pass. After what felt like an age of hesitation, Akihito rocked and shuffled his knees wide. Not as wide as he'd done on the bench because there wasn't as much grip on the covers, but it was close.

He could feel air. Asami was behind him. His face warmed. But he was silent, his brain starting to submerge into that weird floaty haze again from before, when he could only think of Asami and need.

Something cold dribbled onto his hands and down the crack of his ass, making him jolt with surprise.

"Stretch yourself out for me."

Akihito took an unsteady breath, a twinge of awkwardness pulling him from back from that haze.

Asami caught his foot, sliding a hand up his calf. "I've warmed you up but you'll hurt if you don't stretch out some more. Use your fingers. Get yourself ready for me. You can do it, Akihito."

In the end, the self-consciousness became a background scratch that only heightened his arousal. A steadying breath, and Akihito reached down. His wrists were already cuffed behind him. He just needed to find his ass, and he breathed softly at the sensation he was creating himself. He pressed a finger in. Asami's hands were warm over his thighs, his hips.

"Add another finger, Akihito."

It was still a stretch even with Asami having warmed him up.

"You need to push deeper than that."

Akihito pushed to the second knuckle, then the third.

"Another finger."

Asami sounded strained. Akihito glanced over his shoulder to be hit with the golden lust like it had physically hit him in the face.

"Go on, Akihito. Get yourself ready so you can take me."

Fuck... Yes... Please... Akihito added a third finger, sliding in and out, more eager now, deeper with every push. He was breathing with it, his fingers jabbing faster. It felt good. But it wasn't deep enough.

"Asami..."

"What should you be calling me?" The reminder was sharp.

"Ryuichi," Akihito amended instantly, something inside of him whining at the reprimand.

"Better." A warm hand soothed over his heated back, making him tremble with the wash of
sensation. It still sent waves cascading through him.

"Ryuichi... I... I need..."

Something pressed in alongside his own fingers, another finger, not his own. Longer. With a better reach. There was a stroke in a particular spot inside and his body jolted like he'd been electrified.

"Hhhhhmnnn..." Akihito sighed.

That! That was what he needed! He waited, waited – but Asami didn't do it again. Akihito even moved his own fingers, but he couldn't reach that point inside that Asami could.

"I need... more..."

The bed shifted. And then Asami was kneeling up behind him, brushing against his back. "More what?"

Akihito just quaked and waited.

But Asami was merciless. "Tell me, Akihito. Be precise. What do you need?"

Akihito tilted his head, seeking. Asami was there. Pressing his forehead to Asami, Akihito hid in the proximity.

"I need you... Inside..."

There was another deliberate stroke against the point inside. He cried out, he shook, he pressed against Asami again.

"Is it my fingers you want?" Asami asked, feigning ignorance.

Akihito knew what Asami was doing, even half lost to delirium as he was. "Bastard... I want –" He squeezed his eyes shut... And let himself spill. "I want you to fuck me. Hard. Until you make me come like crazy. I want you to come inside me. I want to hear you, to feel you... to feel it for days. I want you to rock my world, Ryuichi. Like you always do. I want... you. I want you."

There was a frozen pause.

Then Asami's arm snaked up his chest, the hand grasping his neck and drawing him back against Asami's hard torso, the finger of the other hand still planted up his ass finding his prostate and pressing.

"Hhnnn!"

"Oh I'll rock your world and then some, my dear Akihito," Asami rumbled, practically purring. "I'll make you come harder than I've ever made you come, than you've ever imagined you could. Are you prepared for it?"

Akihito shuddered. "Fuck, please, yes..."

With a chuckle and a nip against his ear, Asami's hands left him.

Akihito was left swaying as the bed shifted again. Asami shucked his boxers, and with a squirt of lube he slicked up his eye-popping erection. There was a bead of precum glistening on the tip before it was eaten up in the large hand.
Asami jumped back onto the bed, and with a bit of shuffling and manhandling Akihito was back on his knees right where he’d been but now straddling Asami’s crotch as the man lay down under him.

"Take me in," Asami said.

Akihito was meant to do this? He could take it as slow as he wanted, adjust, ease down... But he didn't want to. "I... want to feel it. Make me feel it, Ryuichi."

There was no reply, just something that rumbled like a growl as Asami took aim and drove up, hard hands drawing down Akihito's hips. Air rushed from Akihito's lungs with a cry, his eyes flying wide at the sudden stretch, the burn, moisture prickling. He gasped, his body as tight as a bow string – And then he laughed. "Fuck that feels good."

"Ride me, Akihito."

"Ahh... You're gonna have to gimme a sec..." Because Akihito's insides all needed to migrate out of the way. Plus there was already pressure inside that was making him dizzy.

Akihito started to rock. His legs were already tired from the bench but the hunger drove him on. His hands were cuffed behind but Asami held him steady. He rocked and stirred himself up, he drew up to press back down and made them both groan. Asami's strong hands locked about his hips and helped drive them both, but his thighs were fatigued, quaking.

"I can't... I need more... Please..."

Asami sat up, squashing Akihito's hands against tight lower abdominals for a second. Asami pulled his legs under so he was kneeling, with Akihito kneeling wide astride his legs. He unclipped the cuffs, releasing Akihito's wrists so he could press close to the sensitive back.

Arms locked about Akihito's chest as powerful thrusts drove repeatedly against the most sensitive part inside him and drove him higher to that pinnacle. His legs had long melted, his brain wasn't far behind. Yes yes yes... That satisfying ache, it was coiling in his gut. Close. So close... He reached for his dick – but Asami knocked his hands away.

Akihito whimpered.

"No hands. You can come from your prostate. You're going to come hard, and for a long time. Just feel me inside."

Still submerged in need, Akihito turned and bumped his head against Asami. He reached over and grabbed Asami's head – but the man pulled back before he could close in.

"Kiss me," Akihito breathed.

"You know where my mouth's been."

Akihito moaned, even more turned on if that was possible. It was lewd and filthy and the fact that Asami was worrying about that for him was insanely cute. "Fuck that, kiss me," Akihito demanded more roughly.

Asami didn't need telling twice. He plundered, his tongue and his sizeable erection both, deep and full and fucking hell, that rhythmic pounding... Akihito was soaring, soaring – and his every muscle and tendon tensed and trembled –
It was the sudden squeeze on his nipples that tipped him over into the point of no return. His balls clenched –

And stayed there even as Akihito spilled over. His cum gushed forth but Akihito was still caught in that moment, the start of an orgasm, the crash of rapture but without the ensuing release of all that coiled pressure. He was coming, and coming, and coming...

Asami threw Akihito forwards onto his chest, ass up, still pounding into him. Akihito cried out, too stimulated, coming too hard, seemingly without end.

"Ryu – Nnnngggghhhhh!"

"Let go, Akihito," Asami said, rough with strain. "Just let go."

Asami was still thrusting into him and his ass was starting to protest, and Akihito was crying at the over-sensation, but the repeated bumping against the nerves inside filled his vision with stars.

"Ggghhhhaaa....!"

Akihito cried out anew as a large hand grasped his throbbing cock and stroked fast. He had no idea if he was still coming, when the wave was surging up again and leaving him suspended... But that edge was more elusive the second time – or still the first? – fuck he didn't know – until nails scratched down his reddened back.

With an anguished, surprised cry, Akihito's pelvis reared up and his balls jerked and he pitched into another release, rocketing, soaring, Asami's hand stroking him through it, and still stroking, coaxing out his orgasm until it hurt, until Asami's driving hips stuttered and rammed deeper and the taller man draped over his back, his guttural groan lost amidst Akihito's hair.

Buoyant, sated to the marrow, and every muscle like jelly, Akihito came to in the tub.

A momentary flicker of uncertainty – more curiosity than any worry – passed by too when he noted he was ensconced on Asami's lap. He snuck a glance at the strong column of Asami's neck, the sculptured features of that stunning face – Asami actually had quite long eyelashes, he noticed, currently resting closed against the high cheekbones.

Akihito relaxed again, assured in the knowledge that he was safe. The warmth was heavenly, all his satisfying aches luxuriating in it. There was something creamy about the water. An ointment maybe? For his back? It was soothing, whatever it was, as Asami's hand lazily scooped and drizzled it over his back.

Safe. In every sense of the word. Physically, sure. Aftercare, always. And the biggest of all – emotionally? Letting Asami in, making himself vulnerable, having the trust and confidence to let Asami see his real self without any masks or pretences? He knew the answer there too. And he wasn't alone. Asami had long gone and bared his soul.

In the end it was simple. Echoey in the bathroom, quietly resonant with what was between them. "...I love you."

The warm hand glided up his back, a finger sliding around to trace his jaw. Eyes still closed, Asami smirked. But it was more a real smile than teasing. " Took you long enough."

Akihito stuck out his tongue – yeah, real mature – and ducked his head into Asami's neck. The large hand was still soothing along his back, scooping up a handful of warmth and gliding up to the neck,
back down through the water to the top of his ass, repeating over and over.

Akihito pressed a shy kiss over the slow, steady pulse at Asami’s neck. He paused, an idea flickering in his eyes, his mouth curving with mischief. He kissed again. A few seconds then another kiss. And another. Until he was just kissing... And sucking... He sucked hard, even setting his teeth a bit, but he didn't know how much it would hurt and didn't bite very hard at all –

A hand suddenly squeezed around his half-hard cock. Akihito jumped, his jaw clamping in his surprise, before he jerked back.

"Baka, you made me bite you!"

"You should have told me you wanted to mark me. You can bite me anywhere you want," Asami grinned.

"Your dick then?"

The smug smirk didn't once waver. "I have no objections to you swallowing me down whenever and wherever you want." Asami's lips were nipping over Akihito's jaw, around towards his neck. "You can be sure I'll return the favour tenfold."

And then Asami was sucking hard on Akihito's neck, digging in teeth, making Akihito flail.

"You bastard, it's not a competition!" Akihito gasped.

Asami was about to reply, when he suddenly looked at the door. Then back at Akihito, and the young man could see the lightbulb clear as day. Before Akihito could ask, Asami lifted him up bridal style amidst a cascade of water and carried him out of the tub.

"What the hell?"

Asami went right out of the wetroom, passed the sinks, and out into the bedroom. It was dark, lit only by the city's nightscape.

"Asami? What the foomph--" Akihito broke off with a grunt as he was thrown on the bed, tumbling a bit with the momentum.

He gaped as Asami grabbed the bottle of lube and squirted a generous handful.

"Oh, you're fucking kidding me!" Akihito scrambled away, but he was wet and the covers stuck and Asami was on him in seconds.

"Haven't you had enough?" Akihito deplored.

"Tired already?"

"Yes. Definitely yes. I'm gonna be asleep in two minutes flat, I swear."

Two fingers pressed in and Akihito could only clutch onto Asami's arms at the burn.

"Shit..."

"Sore?"

"Whaddya think!"
"I'll be gentle."

"You're hung like a fucking beast, gentle doesn't even come into it."

Asami soothed his lips and tongue against Akihito's neck. "Let me in, Akihito."

"I'm seriously gonna fall asleep on you. Don't say I didn't warn you."

"But we can't miss the New Year fireworks now, can we?" Asami smirked.

"This is so not what I meant..." Akihito dropped his head back, it hung off the side of the bed. He didn't try to move. He was staring upside down at the windows. He consciously relaxed down there... and he found it significantly easier. Asami waited for him to ease up before adding a third finger. Slow and careful. Then a fourth. Gentle. Enough that Akihito found himself swallowing back a moan because, oh fuck it, it felt good. Even with the burn. Especially with the burn.

"Ready for more?" Asami said knowingly.

"Oh, just get on with it," Akihito pretended to grouch, not completely able to smother his grin.

Asami withdrew his fingers and started rolling him over.

But Akihito resisted, pushing back flat again. "Here's fine."

"It'll rub on your back."

There it was again, the little considerations, the actions that spoke louder than words. No wonder the man had snuck well and truly behind Akihito's walls.

"Did you break skin?" he asked.

Asami looked insulted.

Akihito grinned. "See? It's fine. Besides, maybe I want to feel it." He jutted his jaw to counteract the shy. "And it also means I can do this." He hooked his legs around Asami and drew the man closer. He delighted in the momentary surprise that widened the dark eyes.

"Sure your legs aren't too tired? You were shaking earlier."

The blush was bright and strong. "I'm young, remember. I bounce right back."

"You can bounce right back on me all you want, Akihito."

"You pervy baka..." Akihito mumbled as he flushed even more.

"But perhaps we should work on your stamina. You keep blanking out on me—"

"Bastard! That's 'cos you keep aahhhnn —"

Asami chose that moment to push the engorged head of his erection past Akihito's entrance. But just that. He didn't sink any deeper.

"You were saying?" Asami mused innocently. But his gaze was intense.

Way too intense. "You're such a horny bastard," Akihito mumbled from somewhere behind his arm
as he hid.

"Only with you," came the baritone and Akihito couldn't be sure that Asami was really joking.

Asami pulled the arm aside, pinned it to the bed. Akihito brought up his other arm but that was confiscated too. Both were pinned above his head. He turned aside.

"Don't hide from me," came the rumbling demand. "Don't hide anything."

With a shaky breath Akihito dared to lift his face, his eyes fluttering open.

Asami took his time lowering himself into Akihito, sheathing so slowly into Akihito's depths that they could both feel every millimetre of the glide.

Not only deeply entwined, but being watched so closely, not being able to hide any of his breathy anticipation, the flicker of muted pain as he gave into the sizeable – and welcome – intrusion, the bone-deep pleasure of being filled... Seeing the heat reflected right back... It was achingly intimate. Spiritual, even. No words were needed when their emotions were naked in their eyes.

Akihito tugged on his arms. Maybe Asami saw the intent, for he let go. Akihito wrapped them about Asami and tentatively initiated a kiss, his tongue swiping at Asami's lips, seeking its counterpart.

Akihito flushed at the warmth he could see glinting in Asami gaze. But he didn't shy off. He just pulled his legs in tighter and Asami responded, rolling his hips, and self-consciousness was forgotten. Soon Akihito's head dropped back and he gave himself over to the rocking between them, to the surging deep inside that carried him high.

Asami stilled, making Akihito look up. Asami was watching him with quietly contented, possessive focus.

Fireworks exploded over the city, flashing brilliantly through the bedroom.

Asami smirked. "Happy New Year, you sleepy brat."

Akihito blinked into those golden eyes, a little stunned. His brain ran a mile a minute, but it always returned here. To this man.

Akihito returned a lopsided grin. "Happy New Year, you horny bastard."

Akihito's memories of the fireworks were somewhat hazy that year, an upside-down blur through euphoric tears.
Epilogue: The Beginning – part 1

Chapter Notes

I can't believe we're at the Epilogue...... BUT! And it's a big But. The best But. I indulged and just let myself write freely... which, naturally, ended up long! So this is a whopping 15k words, and we also have a bonus chapter 30! Woohoo! I'm posting them together.

I've always wanted to do the ultimate cliché and call the last chapter 'The Beginning', happily it's fitting here. And since I've gone totally goo-goo over these two over the course of this story, this is total mush, as you'll see. There are a couple of dark snippets here and there, just to flag, but I'd say it's 99.9% mush. It's sickeningly sweet and I'll warn you for cavities but I make no apologies whatsoever. Have it. (~ ^ 3 ^ ~)

Here's Part 1. See you in a few minutes for Part 2.

~ Nyx~

One year later.

Too fast to dodge. Too heavy to parry. And on top of that was the heckling. What kind of self-respecting dojo permitted heckling?

It seemed like only seconds since Doi had picked himself up that his legs were again swept out from under him and he had another solid encounter with the *tatami*. And yet again came the delighted taunt.

"Ouhhhh! Even *I* saw that one coming! You gotta mix it up more, bud. Blond Tank's handing you your ass! On a platter! With garnish!"

A muscle ticked in Doi's jaw. 'Blond Tank'? Silent and nimble, he rolled to his feet again. Faced the giant again. Set his guard again.

There was an easy laugh from the sidelines. "You're gonna feint high and go low again, aren't you? Trying to use his height against him? I know he's a big guy but c'mon, you've done that a gazillion times already and how many times has it worked? You know he can move like nobody's business."

A tendon twitched under Doi's eye. He barely ducked aside from a mallet of a fist in time, glancing heavily along his block. There was a glimpse of blond hair off to the side as he whipped back around. What was with that? The Chief of Security currently putting him through his paces was also blond, though his was trimmed with military precision.

"You can say it, you know. Am I annoying? I'm annoying, aren't I? Hey, Blond Tank, I think this guy's too pissed off to concentrate."

Who was he? Doi spared a flicker of a glance at the young man on the hardwood path around the outer edge of the dojo. He seemed out of place, and not just because he wasn't wearing the regulation suit. Jeans and a tank top was all Doi saw before he was flipped, legs up and shoulders back, and he was down again.
He landed hard on his back. Air whooshed out and didn't return.

He rolled to the side, gasping for air that his lungs couldn't take. He'd instinctively hunched to foetal. But before his training could kick in and he could straighten himself out, that flop of blond hair approached and hauled at his arm.

"Upsy-daisy," came the annoyingly cheerful voice. "Kneel up. C'mon, I can't lift you. Blond Tank could but I don't think he's too impressed with you right now. C'mon, newbie, kneel up."

Newbie? From this disrespectful windbag? It burned, even more than letting himself be winded like an amateur and not the 3rd Dan Black Belt that he was. Scowling, knowing he could have sorted himself out, Doi gathered his legs underneath him into *seiza*. He grunted as his shoulders were yanked back and a knee was jammed into his spine, forcing his chest to stretch out. And with it, his lungs found room to expand again, and merciful air returned.

"There we go. Still in one piece?"

Doi glared at the inappropriate grin as the young man let go and peered into his face. But he bit his tongue, it should be Suoh-sama curbing the man's inappropriate attitude.

Suoh glared down from his impressive height. "It counts for jack shit if you're unbeaten in your home dojo. If you can't keep a cool head, you're done for."

Doi bowed his head. "There are too many distractions here for focused quiet, sir."

The young man pushed to his feet, losing all his cheer all of a sudden. "Really? That's your excuse?" The smile had dropped off that bright face, red-hot seething taking its place. "What're you gonna do? There's a hit out on Asami but you're gonna tell them to come back another time 'cos you're *distracted*?" He sucked in a sharp breath, boiling over. "It's not just Asami either. You gotta have each others' backs too. These are real lives, real threats. Fucking deal with it before you let something happen you can't take back."

The young man stormed off, quick strides that spoke of real anger. All around them, the suited men mostly avoided eye contact – not with the young man, but with Doi.

An awful feeling was creeping up on Doi that he'd read the situation all wrong – that young man, his standing amongst all these serious men...

"Final test failed, Doi-san." Suoh's voice was as much ice as the other man's had been fire. "You still have a lot to prove if you want to join the elite guard. Assessments under controlled conditions only indicate a baseline standard. The real test is how well you adapt to your surroundings, not only maintaining focus but utilizing external factors to advantage. I'll leave you on probationary review for now but you'd best heed Takaba-sama's words. And fast."

Doi glanced in the direction the young man had stormed off. *Takaba-sama?*

Suoh gave several hand signals over his shoulder without looking. "Two-on-one, five bouts back-to-back, best of three rounds each. They won't hold back. Keep your head or you'll be beaten to a pulp." He walked away without another look.

There was a rush of men and Doi found himself in the middle of eight suited men marking the sparring area. A ninth and tenth stepped forward.

All around the dojo, traditional except for the unusual spaciousness, dozens of men were training, dedicated concentration punctuated by the rustle of their suits, the slap of break-falling, the grunt and
yell of exertion. Familiar sounds. Familiar energy. Doi propelled his mind into familiar focus.

They bowed, raised guard positions and set their stances, when they heard –

"Sup, bitches."

Doi failed to block the fist to the jaw.

"You still steamed up about last time? I creamed you fair and square!"

"It was forty-five seconds."

"Exactamondo! Them's the rules – I stay on my feet for forty-five seconds, it's my win."

"Why don't we make it a minute from now on. Unless, of course, you want to take it slow, Takaba-sama?"

"Don't Takaba-sama me, I know you're just winding me up... And it's totally working!" A laugh. "Bring it on, a minute it is. Nakatani, can you do the honours? Me and Sagano gotta da~a~ance."

Any period of quiet was short-lived. Takaba kept up the constant barrage with a couple of guards several groups over. They were still at it half an hour later when Doi tried to walk and not limp off. None of the other men seemed affected by the small tornado of cheerful disturbance, taking it all in stride without a flicker of irritation. Indeed they seemed more amused than anything. Doi admired their fortitude. He kept getting distracted by the outlandish exclamations that kept flying over, and while he'd escape most of the bruising what with years of conditioning, he'd still taken too many hits he would have ordinarily dealt with. His jaw felt a bit loose, his ribs ached and his limbs were like dead weights.

"That thingamajib was cool!"

"Which thingamajib was that, sir?"

"That spinny leap to the side and Boo!-I'm-behind-you thingamajib! How d'you do it?"

The two guards started walking him through a block, side step, hook and throw manoeuvre. On Takaba's part it was accompanied by frequent laughter, mostly directed at his own clumsy mess-up of the sequence. Who trained like this? But even as the guards remarked amidst a lot of good-natured cracks that he was about as coordinated as a newborn foal, they never once lost their underlying respectfulness.

Doi had read this wrong, alright. There were far bigger dynamics at play here than he could have guessed at.

Then the Master arrived.

They all stood to attention, bowing in unison as Asami stepped into the dojo. All except that young blond. No one else seemed to consider it odd as Takaba continued standing there, scowling. Everyone returned to their bouts but the guards with Takaba were noticeably more subdued now.

Doi had only met Asami once before, in his last interview when he'd been left swimming with nervous sweat as every last detail of his private life and beliefs and values had been scrutinized before he was approved for Assessment. Coming from the larger group of Asami's security organization, only the cream of the crop was put forward for close protection duty. Joining this top cadre of bodyguards required passing an exhaustive Assessment – and although nobody had said as
much, Doi couldn't help but feel that a nod from Takaba might actually be a de facto criteria.

Asami strolled around the dojo, pausing here and there – such fluidity of movement, noticeable even in something as simple as standing and walking. Pausing beside Suoh, they conversed quietly. Doi was stealing a breather until he was sent back into the fray, but he tried to look smart by the wall as Asami's cool gaze swept over him. He only remembered to breathe again as the sharp focus moved on, studying the other men as the Security Chief filled him in.

Asami's next stop was by Takaba's group who turned and bowed.

At least, the suited men did. Akihito alone stood tall, hands on hips. "I told you not to come!"

Dói was startled into a cough.

"Did you? I don't recall."

Dói blinked. Was that... teasing?

"Bullshit, I said I was gonna come train with the guys before whatever hush-hush skulduggery you're dragging me to tonight."

"Is that what you meant. Well don't stop on my account. Carry on."

"How can they carry on, you know what you're like whenever there's any contact involved, all evil laserbeam glare and everything! And hey, surprise, it's sparring so what do you think's gonna happen!"

"Oh, you want contact sparring, do you?"

"Baka, stop putting words in my mouth!" There was a beat of silence when Asami raised a brow, something glinting in his dark gaze. Takaba flushed beet red before he hissed. "Don't even go there!"

"Well, seeing as I'm here..." came the innocent response.

"Ugh, fine. Seeing as they're not gonna train properly with me now anyway, you big disruptive bastard. Later, guys." Takaba and the two guards bowed to each other before the blond headed off to another area further towards the corner, with Asami following.

The men's faces were mildly amused all the while. Dói, on the other hand, was staring stupidly. What just happened...?

Asami and Takaba were circling each other. They were further away now but Dói could still hear what he supposed was meant to be trash talk.

"I'm gonna run so many circles round you, you're gonna spin like a spinning top."

"I suppose that may be a good tactic for you, make your opponent dizzy."

"Mock away while you still can. I've got some new tricks you don't know about."

"Aside from tripping yourself over, you mean?"

"Hey! That was only the one time! And anyway it's all about the element of surprise."

Asami chuckled. "That it certainly was. You dropped out of my hold by falling over. I've never seen anything so... creative."
"Yeah, yeah, laugh it up. You just wait and see, I'll get you with that one of these days and you can worship my awesomeness from where you're flat on your ass."

Asami's gaze could have lit a small fire, his reply soft and intense. "Anytime. I'm already holding my breath."

Takaba blinked several times, clearing his throat. "Perfect. Yeah, you just keep on holding that breath 'cos you're gonna need it in a second. You ready?"

"Doesn't warning me rather ruin the surp--umph--" Asami broke off with a soft grunt as Takaba charged full pelt and drove his shoulder through Asami's stomach and hauled under both knees. On a lesser man Takaba would have had enough momentum and the right leverage to flip his opponent onto his back. Asami, however, was quick to drop his weight, ground his feet, absorb the impact, and deflect Takaba's momentum aside. But Takaba didn't go tumbling off along the tatami. Asami arrested the spin with a deft hand, letting Takaba lean almost horizontally against him, one leg flailing in the air, until nudging him upright again.

Takaba just gave him a look, both impressed and dismayed, as though thinking, *Not only did that fail spectacularly but you also had time to keep me on my feet? *Gah, more practice needed!"

"Actually it was good, the placement, angle, timing."

"Not good enough."

Asami smirked. "Not against me."

Takaba rolled his eyes, though he was smiling again. "You arrogant ass."

They started sparring. Takaba's grin quickly faded, his face a study in concentration. He moved surprisingly well, better than what Doi would have expected having seen him getting tangled up in the new throw earlier. He didn't have a large variety of techniques but what he knew were developing well – good stances and footwork, balance sometimes off but the way his face scrunched up said he knew that. He had good connection and timing with his arms and legs and core, the beginnings of generating power beyond the limitations of physical strength. Hits and blocks were fast and direct, nothing flashy or surplus which would only slow him down and betray his intent. Not training for long, Doi would wager, but obviously under expert tuition.

Asami, on the other hand, was masterful. Even while obviously holding back, his ability was far superior to anyone in the room, reflexes lightning fast, expert control of every shift in balance and movement – not only his own but Takaba's as well. When he deflected or knocked the smaller man off balance, or if Takaba knocked himself off balance, Asami steered him back round again, always in absolute control and careful of the force he exerted. There was no surplus tension, everything just fluid and easy and the very definition of why martial arts was called an art form.

Doi was confused about the occasional swats against Takaba's elbow sticking out too wide or back when leaning forwards, until he realized that Takaba corrected himself each time. Neither mentioned it, the communication nonverbal, reading and understanding each other without even having to think about it – that was when it dawned on Doi that Takaba was being trained by Asami-sama himself...

Doi only got as far as his jaw dropping when a suited chest blocked his view. He looked up into Suoh's unimpressed face. Still fumbling with the implications of what he'd seen, Doi rushed to join some men who were just re-grouping into new bouts.

Takaba never stopped talking for long. "Gah, I almost had you then!"
And Asami always teased back. "Yes you almost... made me try."

"Oh, haha. You just keep talking like that, you smug bastard. Give it another year and I'll make you
tap out, you'll see!"

Asami rushed in. There was a yelp and a flail of slender limbs before the young blond was down, but
the slap of breakfalling was greatly muted as though someone had cushioned his fall.

A carefree laughter rang through the dojo. Distracted once again, Doi earned a heavy kick to the
thigh before he managed to leap aside.

"Sweet!" came the bright voice. "I gotta learn me that. Think it'll work on you?"

"You're a hundred years too early to be pushing me down, Akihito."

"Yeah, 'cos you're that old," the young man taunted right back. There was a strained grunt and then
he was sitting atop Asami, pinning him down.

DOi only managed to block a back fist coming for his temple in the nick of time. It was close enough
that he felt it on his hairs.

"There, is that better?" the young man crooned. "You should take it easy, old man, you don't want to
put your back out."

"Oh? So that's what you were after? You should have said."

In no time at all Asami flipped them over, lying over Takaba – lying, not pinning, there was too
much body-length contact for it to be a legitimate pinning manoeuvre.

"I wasn't – Cut it out!" Takaba hissed. "Asami!"

The scales dropped, well and truly, from Doi's eyes. He stood there in numb stupefaction as an
elbow caught his already tender jaw and a solid kick in the chest drove him clear out of his bout. But
fortunately for him, all training was aborted anyway. Even before Suoh signalled a halt to the session
with a code 8 evacuation, everyone had started bowing to training partners and heading for the
doors.

"Sheesh... Your men are gonna get all lazy and slow if you keep interrupting their practice! Don't tell
me you were secretly worried that today's the day I finally floor you in front of everyone with that
scissor kickmmmpphh –"

DOi stumbled out through the dojo doors.

He just stood there taking it in – the men bowing and exiting the dojo, the respectful discretion
demonstrated in the way they kept their eyes averted until the doors closed, the pink-tinged
forbearance of the two guards (the two Takaba had been training with) remaining on duty a short
distance down the hall as well as the sometimes sympathetic, sometimes gleeful slaps on the back
they received from the others heading off early for their next shifts.

Dedicated but with a camaraderie, not only duty but purpose. A sense of unity.

It had been a long time since a personal protection job had been more than a job, but if this, here, was
what it meant to be accepted into this elite rank – Doi wanted in.

He turned to find himself staring at Suoh's formidable chest, close enough to feel cross-eyed. He
looked up.

The look on the Security Chief's face wasn't one that Doi was ever going to mess with. "You'll only be warned this once. You don't touch Takaba-sama unless it's for his protection. And you would do well to remember that the confidentiality agreement you signed also applies regarding Takaba-sama, and it applies for life. Do you hear me?"

Doi couldn't bow fast enough. He had a lot of ground to make up, he knew, and he found himself more resolved than he'd felt in a long time.

The first three days of the new year, typically spent with families. As in, families. Not "families" with great big air quotes the size of mammoth tusks.

It was all perfectly, almost painfully, civil during the first introductions. No surprise there, with Asami radiating paralytic levels of authority and Arctic ruthlessness. It was when the Evil Overlord left Akihito's side to take a brief phone call that the gloves came off and he could see what was really lurking behind the sham smiles.

"I never expected to ever have the pleasure," greeted someone who could have passed for a perfectly ordinary business exec if they'd crossed in the street. There were a bunch of them in their forties to sixties, swaggering around in power suits.

It was unsubtle on Akihito's kind of epicness. Just 'cos odds were he should've been ashes in the wind by now, did they expect him to cower? He locked eyes and, perfectly politely, chucked the shit right back.

"Why, are you retiring or something? Are the stresses of working life too much for you to handle? I can speak to Asami for you if you're too daunted to do it yourself."

He smiled sweetly at the murderous glare that followed.

There'd never been an issue with Akihito bouncing business functions before. It was the first time Asami had put his foot down. Akihito heard the big fat capital M whenever Glasses mentioned the Meet in his boss' schedule, every time Blond Tank went over security details and endless iterations and contingencies, and he was wary as fuck. He vaguely recalled mention of it the previous year but he'd been kicking around with his friends then and Asami hadn't so much as twitched a regal eyebrow. But this year? "Your attendance is mandatory," was how Glasses had put it. Akihito was laughing... until Asami killed it with his filthy smirk. "You can attend of your own volition or I can handcuff you to me. Shall I decide, if you have no preference?"

The perverted bastard had actually kept a pair of cuffs on him all the while as he'd dragged Akihito grumbling and swearing to his personal tailor – who turned out to be Oda Hazumi. Go figure.

"Can you build Kevlar into his suits?" Akihito had blurted at her. He'd been answered by her exquisite, unearthly laugh.

Which was how Akihito had come to be in a suit, though sans shirt and noose, thank fuck for small mercies. He was wearing a dark long-sleeve tee, Hazumi had somehow managed to make it work under a sharp grey-blue suit. "I totally rock this!" he'd declared with some surprise. It didn't suit him, no. That pun was just too terrible.

There were fifteen guests, five couples accompanied by one aid each.

Not all of them looked traditionally formal or like ordinary businessmen. It was impossible to miss
the flaming yakuza. The clichéd colourful oversized collars over pale suits and buzz cuts kinda gave them away. Akihito even spotted the odd pinkie shorter than was natural, smooth gnarled nubs from past 'apologies'. Ink leaped to life across the chest and neck exposed by half open shirts, works of art of stunning intricacy and colour.

Asami owned the place, a swanky business conferencing mansion nestled amongst mountains to the East of Tokyo. Suoh's men had scanned and frisked for weapons and all the serving staff were Asami's men in waiter uniforms so security was super tight, but it was still little comfort. Akihito would've preferred to streak naked through the place than to have walked in steered by Asami's hand on his back. Ok maybe not quite naked, but it was pretty fucking close. All because of the teeny tiny matter of the guests. Not that anyone had bothered to clue him in until Asami's men were sweeping open the double doors to let them in, of course. But the five couples weren't just yakuza. They were the Oyabun and ane-san ['older sister', address for the Oyabun's wife] of the five most powerful Yakuza "families" in the country.

And that large hand on his back told them all they needed to know about Akihito's position in the room. He might as well have worn a huge-ass crown on his head laden with jewels. Fabulous.

Akihito had tried to throw Asami the stink-eye 'cos seriously, would it have hurt to give him a bit of a heads-up here? There hadn't been time to give any lip let alone take it in. Every person in the room would have known about the previous bounty on Z4m4 M1r0, which meant they knew that Akihito was the one who'd landed the heads of the Daigoku and Junai clans behind bars, amongst various other equally 'traitorous' things from their point of view. They might be rivals but they were still compatriots cut of the same cloth. So it wasn't like Akihito was totally shitting himself here. Not at all. Right.

Not that Akihito was ever, in a million years, gonna give these mooks the satisfaction of seeing him all freaked out. Which explained his signature brashness. His usual bright spark was honed by fire and there was a pissed-off edge to him as he exchanged barbed greetings.

"It will be interesting having somebody new joining us ladies." That was one of the four women donning serious kimono, formal occasion black with traditional symbolism swishing brightly along the front. "Or will you be attending social functions with our husbands?"

The fifth woman in the room wore a pant suit, with killer outlines and killer heels and killer lips. She looked like a serial killer who'd stepped straight out of Kill Bill. "Don't mind her, of course a man can't join the ladies. Unless you fulfil the wifely role for Asami-sama?" she smiled. If a shark baring razor-sharp teeth could be considered to be smiling, that was.

Fine, she wanted to play? Akihito threw his own bitch smile. "Ah, that old chestnut, who really wears the trousers in the relationship? What about you? Can your man step up or do you find yourself naturally taking over?"

Serial Killer Lady regarded him anew as though trying to decide whether he really intended to insult both her and her husband, the Oyabun, in the same breath.

Asami glided beside him again, blanketing them all back in stilted civility. Akihito worried for a moment that he might have ruffled some big feathers and created a bit of a headache for Asami to handle –

But it literally only lasted a moment. Because that was when he happened to meet Asami's eyes. Gleaming with laughter. Asami was practically pissing himself laughing inside! Akihito could read it clear as day, no matter how smooth the rest of his face might have been.
Akihito mentally floundered as it dawned on him. It had all been deliberate. Throwing him in amongst the pack of wolves or snakes or whatever it was the yakuza resembled, without warning, then leaving him alone. Suoh had been close at his back but that was only for physical back-up. Asami had wanted Akihito to be spurred into temper and obstinately standing his ground like a porcupine.

Annoyed and upset and riled that Asami had contrived it like this, he very nearly punched the bastard. He would have, if it didn't occur to him in the same breath that maybe Asami had known it was the best way to arm him. 'Cos for Akihito, Pissy Edge was his best weapon in this pit of black mambas. Pissy Edge was also edgey enough to keep him awake through the torturously banal conversation that followed about a new hobby in flower arranging that one of the ladies was having some existential crisis over whether to continue with or not...

Clearly business was off the table which sucked any hint of fun out of this "family" get-together. Either that, or they were having him on. Or maybe, just maybe, the top yakuza of the country were genuinely this mind-numbingly dull.

What a riot.

He didn't realize it could get worse until it did. The double doors opened and four suited men marched in and to the sides, to flank a – man? Yes, definitely a man, even with hair like that cascading like black silk all around his tailored Western suit accentuating his slim waist, his bewitching face somehow condescending and sultry at the same time.

All the yakuza in the room looked like they were itching for weapons they didn't have.

Dark eyes, all haughty and sensual and indifferent and hateful and seriously who the fuck was this guy? – swept the assembly, found Akihito, and stuck.

How totally bitchin'.

The gaze crawled up and down Akihito's length.


Drama Queen, as Akihito had already dubbed him, was blocked from view by a broad shoulder. Asami had stepped in front of him. It might have been one step but the gesture wasn't lost on any of them.

"Feilong," Asami drawled into the tense silence. "I didn't think you'd make it."

Feilong? Akihito wracked his brain. The name rang a bell.

Asami made no further move to go and greet the newcomer and Drama Queen was forced to make that concessionary step further into the room. He not only came forwards but slightly off to the side, coming back into Akihito's line of sight.

"How could I refuse, when the great Asami Ryuichi himself was so desirous of my company?"

The sarcastically melodious voice perfectly suited Drama Queen, though Akihito hadn't expected the faint accent. A foreigner? Chinese at a guess.

Drama Queen casually took in the suspicious faces all around. "Or do you just need my assistance in getting your dogs to heel?"
One of the yakuza aides jerked forwards but was held back by his Oyabun. Two of Feilong's men mirrored the threatening move, but were likewise signalled to stand down by the man on Feilong's right.

Asami merely smirked. "The way you model your brainless lackeys in Hong Kong? I'll pass."

Feilong waved an elegant brushoff. "I told you. It's just a matter of outward expression."

Akihito was trying his damndest not to react. Because as Z4m4 M1r0 he knew of most of the major players in Asia and Feilong and Hong Kong only meant one man.

Feilong turned to him. "Look at this pretty little thing."

Akihito's brow darkened. The fuck?

"So the sun finally rises in the West, Asami," Feilong sneered. "The way you were hiding him from me, I was beginning to think you feared I'd steal him from you."

"You do come up with the most amusing nonsense," Asami smirked, but his tone had bite. His hand was at Akihito's back again, both possessive and steadying. "My partner, Takaba Akihito." He glanced down at Akihito, gauging how close Akihito was to losing his rag. "Akihito, this is Liu Feilong."

Leader of Baishe or not, the fucker deserved payback. Akihito gave a cheery wave and feigned complete ignorance. "Hey, whassup. You one of Asami's flunkies?"

Pride was such an easy punch bag. Some of the yakuza sniggered.

Asami coughed. Like that fooled anybody.

"Care for a drink before dinner?" he offered smoothly. On the pretence of summoning Sagano who was acting as a waiter, he led Akihito away across to the open bar before the two could start a cat fight.

––

It was when the takoyaki [fried octopus dough balls which are a million times yummier than they sound!] came that it hit him. They'd had gourmet sushi, except it was two courses of it, which just wasn't done. They'd also had rounds of gyudon [beef on rice], yakisoba [stir-fried noodles] and okonomiyaki [savoury pancake with whatever meat or seafood of choice]. It was all cheap and cheerful fare, even if they'd been done the fanciest way in the history of Japanese street food. But no matter how much the dishes were dressed up, they were still comfort food of the commoners.

No way – Asami had arranged for all of Akihito's favourite foods! He watched these self-important mobsters trying not to pull weird faces at the highly unusual menu choice and offend their host, the haughty head of Baishe trying to delicately eat a takoyaki – which was plain impossible 'cos you just had to shove the whole ball in your mouth and just go with it with your cheeks bulging and getting sauce and mayo on your lips – and Akihito could barely hold his shit together.

He refused to look at Asami. He couldn't, 'cos he could feel those eyes gleaming with amusement and that would've been the last straw.

But then there were Pocky sticks sticking out of the ice cream and Feilong was tilting his head at it as though he had no idea what to make of it... Akihito lost it, dissolving into stitches.
"Hello, Goldilocks." Feilong managed to sound seductive and condescending and utterly indifferent all at the same time as he slipped into the empty seat beside Akihito.

"Hey, Drama Queen," Akihito greeted back without missing a beat. He saw Feilong's eyes narrow but really, what was the guy gonna do? Argue and prove how appropriate the moniker was?

As the shift in the air caught up with Feilong's arrival, Akihito had a whiff of incense and jasmine. He had the weirdest throwback to over a year ago – being crushed into the bed, Asami's face pressed to his neck, and learning all about the man named Asami Ryuichi. Was this the 'acquaintance' who could be sensitive and potentially dangerous for Asami?

Blond Tank had stepped close behind them, Akihito noticed, and not bothering to be subtle about it either. Asami was off holding court on the far side of the hall with several of the Oyabun, with Glasses at his elbow. Asami's gaze found him and checked Suoh's position, before returning to those milling around him with after-dinner drinks. Someone next to him was on the phone – and looking like he might faint.

Akihito had meant to keep himself out of the way here but people seemed to be taking it as an opportunity to steal a quiet word out of Asami's earshot. Serial Killer Lady had just been over too for more verbal sparring, and Akihito had been a bit put out until he'd realized that she was actually enjoying their barbed exchange. It wasn't too bad after that and they'd both been grinning when she'd left.

"Do you always have such poor manners in the company of your partner's associates?" Feilong sniped.

"I don't know," Akihito replied. His tone implied he really meant *I don't care*. "Who are his associates?"

The answer wasn't one that anyone should be putting voice to. Akihito had effectively shut him up.

Feilong's lips curved. "I can see the appeal." There was something in his voice. Part bedroom, part *I'm carrying a gun and all I need is a target*. What was in his eyes was worse. Akihito's skin crawled. "You're amusing."

*And you're a creep.* Akihito bit it back but judging by Feilong's sneer, the Baishe leader could guess at the none-too-flattering sentiment anyway.

"Careful," Akihito said lightly. "Asami might take exception if you find me too amusing."

"He does tend to be territorial, doesn't he?" Feilong mused like it was a common occurrence.

As if that bothered Akihito any. It went both ways anyway. But two could play this game and it was so easy to needle this man. "Oh? He owns you as well?"

Akihito could have so juiced it but he stopped there, not pushing *too* much, just in case. The guy was sensitive after all. He almost sniggered.

Feilong's expression hardened. He leaned in, but went no further; Suoh was close. "Your days are numbered. He's entranced with you for now but men like him, they go through toys like you until you're broken and spent and you'll be good for nothing but the whorehouse. If you're fortunate you'll be a mindless junkie without a care what ugly pig owns you or fucks you so long as you get your next hit."

Akihito drew back as though physically struck. Two men both running powerful crime syndicates,
but how different could they be?

Was Feilong just testing or trying to drive a wedge? What Akihito and Asami had shared together, nothing and nobody could shake them now. It was pitiable, really, Akihito tried to tell himself, 'cos his guess was Feilong didn't have the first clue what that was like. But it was hard mustering much pity after such vitriol.

"Wow. I've met some pricks in my time but you're a fucking cactus."

Feilong's gaze hardened but Akihito had had enough of being a doormat. Besides, Suoh was bristling as though he wanted to leap in too, preferably fist first.

Akihito pushed to his feet. "I'd agree with you, but then I'd be just as monumentally, embarrassingly wrong as you are." He sauntered off without once looking back.

Feilong stared. It was one insolent thing after another, even though Goldilocks must have known who he was! But he could hardly go chasing after the scamp... As much as it galled him, he had to concede this round. Feilong arranged his face and limbs into casual disinterest.

He thought he'd been successful until he happened to catch Asami's eye. Even across the large room the arrogant smirk was unmistakable.

But it was underpinned by warning. Even for the Baishe there was a line that Asami wouldn't tolerate being crossed.

There was one Oyabun who still wasn't with the program.

There hadn't been any objections voiced but Asami didn't need words to know what was going through the man's head. It was one glance too many, the cold calculation of grisly ends and worse. Asami would know; he'd practically reinvented that look.

So the Oyabun received a phone call, buzzing in the man's pocket. Asami deliberately paused mid-sentence to draw the attention of all the Oyabun and aides gathered loosely around him.

"Don't let me keep you from any important calls," Asami drawled.

The Oyabun rushed to silence the call, grabbing the phone from his inside pocket. "I'm sure it's not urgent. I can take it later."

"Really, don't mind us. Go ahead."

Permission from Asami was as good as an order. The Oyabun moved with slow wariness as he answered and brought the phone to his ear –

A blood-curdling scream cut through the mike, so loud it screeched like speaker feedback. Everyone around them could hear it.

The Oyabun blanched, shocked to paralysis, the phone glued to his ear.

Seeing Feilong moving in on Akihito, Asami's gaze swept over them – Akihito was wary but not unduly concerned, Suoh less than a step away. Asami returned most of his attention to the shaken stillness around him.

The torn screaming carried on, and on, the stuff of nightmares, until it fell on a sob, dying to blubbering.
"Please! Please... I'll do it... I'll do it..." Broken and hoarse, between snivelling, rasping sobs. "I – I'm Shateigashira... former Shateigashira... Wakakajima... of the Nishizuma group... I – I beg... to pay... for all the wrong... I caused... Asami-sama... and Takaba-sama... Please... Please! Kill me already! Please! Please..."

The recording ended, throwing them into screaming silence.

The Oyabun knew Wakajima – used to know Wakajima. Cold, heartless, immune-to-torture Wakajima, the scar carved down half of his face worn as proof. At least, it used to be.

Feilong was leaning towards Akihito, clearly irritated, biting out words. Suoh inched closer but didn't intervene. Asami kept half an eye.

The Oyabun was shaking.

"Hmm? Anything important?" Asami mused.

"... Wr-wrong number," the man stammered. "It wasn't... for me..."

"Wasn't it?" Asami met his eyes dead on. "Good to know there are no missteps."

"No, Asami-sama. Certainly not."

There were no more calculating looks towards Akihito.

Who, incidentally, was now heading for the bar. Clearly words had been exchanged that bothered him, pushing him to subconsciously reinstate normalcy by bugging Suoh – "You're actually a total lightweight, aren't you? That's why I've never seen you drink, right?" – accompanied by a lot of shouldering. And the way Suoh broke from professional detachment, still keeping watch but coddling Akihito enough to very subtly, very lightly, elbow back, provoking a stumble and a laugh and renewed jostling – Suoh had also taken offence. Really, those two were like siblings sometimes, roughhousing in their own ways but without a doubt whose corner they fought when it came down to it.

The fact that Suoh hadn't signalled Asami meant it had been dealt with – most likely by Akihito, judging by how Feilong was desperately trying to pretend that he wasn't, as Akihito would have put it, on the verge of throwing a diva bitch fit.

It was what kept Asami on the right side of amused. For now. He would know the specifics later and would determine then if he was owed any reparation by the Baishe.

Asami's closing toast was simple and strikingly, frighteningly clear.

"I trust you found the evening as enjoyable as I have," he began.

Akihito snorted, hiding it poorly behind his fist.

"We begin this year with new prospects, new connections, following a year of adjustment after the Nishizuma group closed down."

Akihito blinked. Right, sure, throw that out there just like that, why don't you...

"More personally, my partner and I appreciate the cordial welcome you have extended him."

Ok, now Akihito was trying not to look at anyone.
"In many ways we have the hallmarks of a new era. The alliances between us are stronger than ever. Just as we have always enjoyed mutual generosity in times of good fortune, I know I can likewise count on your commitment, as we, as a group, all of us, carry the burdens of any hardships together. We do not act against each other. Neither do we turn a blind eye, for that is as good as a breach of trust. Good fortune or bad, our fate is of our own making. May we never again suffer the tragedy that befell the Nishizuma group."

Asami raised his glass. "Here's to the New Year and our health and prosperity."

Chairs scraped and clothing rustled as everyone rose to their feet. Akihito, the last to scramble up and crashing through the deafening silence as he almost knocked his chair over and Suoh had to right it for him, felt like the last to catch on.

This was why. Why Asami had considered it a smashing idea chucking Akihito into the shoal of piranhas. Because apparently an implied threat wasn't enough and it had to be official. Asami had effectively mobilized the Japanese Yakuza as Akihito's protection. And it didn't come as any surprise to the Baishe, if the exasperated-amused-aroused-indifferent-stilldefinitelyamused sneer on Feilong's face was anything to go by.

Wow. Shit. Shit.

They were all alternately bowing to each and every other person and drinking to the toast, Akihito registered vaguely, but mostly all he saw was... a... wink...?! Fucking hell, that was an honest-to-god wink that Asami gave him, dark eyes gleaming and fuck but Akihito could have so swooned right there. Fucking hell.

"I can't believe you made Feilong eat takoyaki!" Akihito laughed.

He looped out wide across the gravel driveway towards the limo parked further down. Multiple shadows moved alongside them, the guards ever vigilant.

"But I'm still mad at you. I'm never letting you drag me off anywhere without telling me what's going down, just so you know. 'Cos this was not cool. Capiche?" Akihito was determinedly ignoring the toast at the end where Asami pretty much Dark-Lorded over the East Asian underworld 'cos in no right mind should Akihito have been thinking that it was hot as hell.

"You handled it well. As I knew you would."

The amused pride warmed through Akihito. He scowled against it. "That's not the point. If you wanted me to insult all those hoity-toity bigwigs so much, you could've just told me that. I would've done so much better if I'd been geared up for it." He darkened. "Especially with that Feilong." His voice shifted as though every phrase was a different conversation. "If you're gonna try and be a smartass you have to be smart first, otherwise you're just an ass... You're mistaking me for someone who gives a shit... I'm busy, can I ignore you some other time?" Akihito grumped, "Yeah, it's all flowing now. Great."

Asami smirked darkly. "It's probably just as well it was toned down some. He may have taken exception with you in full stride."

"Cos he's sensitive, right?" Akihito's voice went into alternate mode again. "Someday you'll go far, and I hope you stay there." He slumped. "Ugh, stupid Drama Queen..."

"You're talking a lot about Feilong."
Akihito missed the careful blankness of Asami's remark. "He was annoying. You know what he's like. He's all, Ooh, look at me, I have supernatural hair and I can't decide if I want to kill you or fuck you so I'm just gonna make up crap like you're headed for junkie oblivion at the whorehouse." His voice was shaking by the end. He took a steady breath. "I mean, I'm probably exaggerating. But he was still annoying."

They were approaching the limo. Asami hadn't said anything, which Akihito would have expected after blurting something like that. He glanced over – Asami's eyes were burning black and Akihito finally caught on.

"Uh..." His pulse thumped hot.

His ass had barely touched down when Asami was on him. The tongue hot and demanding, pushing him by the mouth across the leather seat, hands working fast on his clothes.

"Asami –!" Akihito half objected, half serious.

His suit jacket was yanked back regardless, trapping his elbows back.

"Phhhwait!"

Someone slammed the limo door shut, thankfully. Asami yanked open his button and flies.

"Asami!" That one was a bit shrill. Up front, either Glasses or Blond Tank hurried to raise the privacy screen as the limo drove away from the mansion. "Goddamnit, slow down!"

"You really expect me to wait another moment?"

Akihito was divested of his trousers and underwear. "Just hang on a second –!"

"After a comment like that?"

"Are you mad or just hornyyyyyhhnnn...!"

Without any warning Asami's head was between Akihito's legs and the mouth was hot and wet on his dick, not quite a semi yet. Taking advantage of his floppiness, Asami swirled his tongue round and round and round as he sucked and sucked...

"Nnnnnnhggg...!" Akihito found himself spreading his knees, pushing eagerly with his hips.

Asami wouldn't let up and in no time at all Akihito was fully erect, the arousal grabbing him fast and fierce.

Asami was driving him to completion with no sign of letting up but that wasn't any guarantee.

"If you don't... let me come..." Akihito was panting and writhing – "fuck..." But he was damn well going to get the words out. "I won't... let you... touch me... for a week!"

Asami didn't let up. In fact a finger slid into his ass.

"Oh guuuhhh..."

Where the hell did Asami get lube from? His fingers were slick and smooth and thicker – two fingers already. His mouth continued relentless. Three fingers – it burned as Akihito's muscle twitched and tensed against the too-fast intrusion. A deliberate groan sent vibrations along Akihito's hardness and then he was deeper, deeper down the throat and Asami was swallowing, hot fucking damn, and long
fingers found the walnut core inside and Asami was stroking and swallowing and stroking and
pressed –

Akihito erupted, a sudden burst that crested through, sucked down Asami's throat. He was still
twitching in the descent when the jacket was yanked off his arms and his arms were freed and he
was gathered into Asami's lap –

"Hhhaaannggg...!"

From zero to coming and impaled, in two minutes flat.

Asami was too big and Akihito wasn't prepared enough and he was still spasming in the aftershocks
and the entry stung, but he was full with Asami. After the showdown with Yakuza heads and Feilong
too, it was almost a relief. Akihito thought he could understand the urgency that drove the crime lord,
forcing all other thoughts aside.

He just breathed for a while as Asami held still, letting him adjust.

"You're such a fricking animal."

Akihito was amazed he could form the words because Asami's teeth were nipping along his ear and
down his neck and all the charged bolts were seriously disrupting brain function.

"You love it really," Asami purred throatily and it went straight to Akihito's erection that was still
going strong.

"Oh, I dunno," Akihito considered, hiding a grin, "you might have to persuade me some more. But
it's cool, we can just sit here and talk if you don't have the energy."

Not that Akihito needed to provoke the horny, jealous bastard any but he knew how Asami got
when he challenged like that aaaand... yep, there was the flash of the eyes, the smirk like the devil,
the promise of heavenly agony and all the sweet desperate pleas to get there.

Much, much later in bed, Akihito was tumbling blissfully from post-sex haze to sleep, when he
snapped awake.

"They were in the limo...!"

Asami's naked, muscley chest started shaking with silent laughter and Akihito didn't know whether
to hide his flaming face against it or punch it.

He went with both.

It turned out that there was a reason for Mr Sour being sour. Aside from natural personality, that was.

"Which brings us here," Mr Sour summarized, after a whole spiel on leading a multidisciplinary team
of developers, engineers, effects technicians, and graphic and sound designers, through every stage
from planning, implementation, testing, release and ongoing operational monitoring, and consulting
with psychologists, academics and medical professionals... "The Board has approved your
appointment. We'd like to offer you a new position in EverEye World, as the Head of Software
Engineering."

Akihito was pretty sure someone had hit Pause on his face.
Sion Global's new VR venture, with hundreds of millions already secured in funding on top of Sion's deep pockets, and it was going to have to be huge with that level of investment, and the Head of Software Engineering would be in the driving seat, and they wanted Akihito...?

So this was why Asami had been so smug that morning. Especially so. More than usual.

"Did – What did –" There was no polite way of asking Did Asami put you up to this? Akihito cleared his throat and tried another angle. "Who made the recommendation, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I did," Mr Thin and Mr Sour both answered at the same time. They exchanged a glance.

"We both did," Mr Thin said. "We interviewed a lot of promising candidates but we saw you in action during the consultation period. You impressed us with your candour, and not only your endless creative ideas and technical grasp, but also your insight with people, your sense of their skills and how to drive to their strengths."

"Surprisingly so," Mr Sour agreed reluctantly. "You were our top recommendation to the Board."

Akihito quirked a smile. "Surprisingly?"

Mr Sour was unapologetic. "Your age was a concern to some members of the Board, as well as, er, your dress code, but we see no grounds to say that anyone older or wearing a suit would be a better choice." He cleared his throat, avoiding eye contact as Akihito grinned at the irony considering their first encounter in the Boardroom. "You're innovative. You have gumption. But you also have a complete lack of business acumen so you'll be reporting to me. We'll agree on development strategy together, striking the right balance between risk and return, then it'll be up to you and your team to deliver."

Akihito was serious all of a sudden, because he could do that too when it mattered. "But it's not all just stone-cold profit, is it? 'Cos if that's all it is, I'm out. Sion has a social and ethical responsibility to communities, not just locally but further afield. The clue's in the name, isn't it? Sion Global. Applications in things like healthcare and education might not be the biggest money makers but it has huge implications in supporting the planet's population growth and ageing demographic. Spin it as PR if you have to but surely we're big enough to cater for more than just spinning money."

The two serious men found themselves staring hard. They knew of Takaba's brilliant mind but it was a rare glimpse into the heart hidden in this young man – who today was wearing a top saying 'Sorry I'm late I didn't want to come'.

Mr Thin collected his thoughts first, and turned to his colleague.

Mr Sour was unreadable. Until he said, "You're prepared to back your case to the Sion Board with detailed proposals, I take it?"

Akihito grinned. Because that wasn't a No, which from Mr Sourface was a glowing endorsement. Finally, after over a year working together, Akihito was starting to get a handle on this guy. "Whatever you want, Shigura-san."

"Don't put this on me. It's entirely on your head."

Which was Mr Sour-speak for I'm backing you and the credit's all yours. "I'm touched. All those times you were poking holes you were actually testing me."

"Poking holes? I just like to be sure that whoever I'm speaking to is sure about what they're speaking
"And despite my 'complete lack of business acumen' and how much I wind you up, you still want to work with me? You flatter me, Shigura-san."

Mr Sour shook his head and got to his feet. "I may need to rethink this after all."

Akihito smiled wider. "Oh but think of all the paperwork and headache and hassle going back to the Board and all."

"It's almost worth it just to be rid of this insanity," Mr Sour mumbled as he left the room.

Akihito turned to Mr Thin. "Think I've won him over?"

Mr Thin was biting back a smile. "I think you'd best take the contract before he changes his mind. Read through it, sign them both, and return one to HR."

"Yes, sir," Akihito saluted.

"Asami-sama seemed keen to set up the new EverEye HQ on the 30th floor –"

"No! Impossible. Absolutely impossible."

Mr Thin gave him a look. "– but I suggested, in view of the reinforced structure and space and ventilation needed for industrial servers and for future collaboration with other industries such as robotics and all that that would entail, a purpose-built facility might perhaps serve better."

"Oh. And?"

"He agreed."

"Thank fuck. Uh, I mean, phew." Two floors down from Asami's office was never going to work, Akihito already had a hard time (ahem!) what with Asami's predilection for calling him up...

Akihito perked up. "I've got some ideas! We can go futuristic with a revolving walkway into a massive bullpen –"

"Oh, here we go –"

"– and it's all gotta be white 'cos future stuff is always white for some reason, and we also need one of those useless holograms of the globe with a load of text that's always moving but actually shows nothing but it looks cool, right? And –"

"And there is such a thing as a budget and a Board of Directors who holds the purse strings and a contract you still need to sign."

"Right. I just hope it doesn't say I have to wear a suit."

Mr Thin smiled. "Shigura-san himself had HR add a clause to allow you whatever dress code of your choice."

"He did?"

"He knows a dealbreaker when he sees one."

Akihito grinned. "Sweet."
And so there he went, upon completion of his court-ordered community service for misdemeanour computer trespassing where he'd targeted Sion and Asami, to full-time employment. Working... (indirectly)... for... Asami...

Akihito's head thumped down – on his new (temporary!) desk fitted out with multiple 4k monitors and top spec machines on the 30th floor of the Sion HQ tower which was where the 'Board' (a.k.a. Asami!) had ordered EverEye HQ to reside until their own design facility was built...

"Shit. I did not think this through..."

It always took a few seconds for Akihito to bring himself to open these emails. As usual they jumped right in without any attempt at a greeting.

Did you know they've got me working on fixing these ancient lumps of plastic and metal they pretend are computers? Like I didn't have my fill of the Helpdesk when I was at Sion. But it was that or laundry duty. Whatever will I do with so much excitement.

There had been a bunch of these now, short snarky snippets here and there. Supervised messages from inside. Glimpses of a colourless life.

Akihito blinked as another message came in barely minutes after the first. That was new. There had only been one at a time before, usually weeks apart.

I look like a tool in my jumpsuit. You'd love it. Come laugh at my expense some time.

Another first. There had never been any mention about a visit before. It was usually all just passive-aggressive bitching about this and that and rotas and the therapist. There were never any questions about Akihito but he'd long supposed that sending any emails at all was a way of reaching out.

But a visit? Fuck that. No way.

Almost half an hour later, a third email came in.

Sorry for all the shit, Takaba.

Akihito stared. And stared some more. Read it several times to be sure.

He sighed long and heavy, because he was already trying to think where to get hold of some teenage romance books 'cos Mitarai would probably hate them the most and Akihito had a feeling he was probably going to end up visiting a tool in a jumpsuit before too long.

"Waitwaitwait – lemme get this straight. You, want me, to help you. To help you. As in, you –"

"Yes, I get it already! You never saw this day coming, you never thought I'd be humble enough to ask for help, blah blah. I get it. Can we just grow up please?"

Akihito narrowed his eyes, his head tilting. "No, you don't get it. You threatened to have me shivved. You said you were gonna dance on my grave. You've been out to get me from the start and tried to use me to get to Asami. Why the fuck would I help you?"

Sakazaki glared. "I've been demoted all the way to re-training at the bottom of the ladder thanks to you!"

"Nuh-uh, you seriously don't get it at all 'cos what I just said? All of it? That's on you, you
Sakazaki pinched his brow. "Look, I just need... I need something, alright? They won't let me re-qualify unless I can prove myself."

"And you thought a big bust courtesy of the guy you threatened to throw in jail and have killed would do the trick?" Akihito laughed, shaking his head. "That's a good one." He waved in parting. "Have fun with that re-training. Looks like you'll be enjoying it for a long, long time."

He slammed the meeting room door behind him and the smile fell off his face. He stomped down the corridor, ducked into an office, and just breathed for a few seconds. Pacing, pacing some more, he let the anger out.

Eventually he dropped into a tired old chair, the cracked leather catching on his jeans. With a blustery sigh, he turned to Yamazaki watching him from behind the cluttered desk.

"So I've got my answer. Here's how it's gonna be. Show me the official warrant and I'm your man. Even if some sleazebag thinks they've destroyed evidence, I might still be able to dig something up so give me a holler. But everything's gotta be on the books. I won't be responsible for another Tsubasa. Even indirectly," he added, waylaying the detective before he could point out the same argument again. "I'm keeping my record clean."

That was a must, being close to Asami. At least officially. Yamazaki would know that too.

"That's more than I could've hoped for. I appreciate it, kiddo."

"If it's something for Dick 1, though, see if you can find someone else. I mean, I wouldn't obstruct an investigation, but I'd rather not help that jackass if I can."

"I was going to anyway."

"Yeah." Akihito heaved another sigh. He glanced around the teetering piles of case files, the cabinets lined with more of the same and folders and several sealed boxes, cluttered all around. A smidgeon of green hiding behind a book caught his eye – a cactus the size of his fist, more thorns than flesh. It didn't seem to have grown much in five years but it was still there.

"What a shit hole. I thought you only moved in here last week, Chief Inspector?"

"Shut up, punk. Not everyone gets a swanky high-rise office, you know."

Akihito grinned. "Wait till you see my state-of-the-art design lab next year." He swung back onto his feet. "I'll get you another plant. As, uh, an office-warming present."

"Don't bother. I'd just end up killing it."

"The last one's doing ok. We could maybe branch out to an air plant this time." Halfway out the door, Akihito lingered, gripping the doorframe. "Give Dick 1 hell, Yama-san."

There was a pause behind him. Olive branch and tentative trust, second chances – so many things implied in the simple request and the familiar moniker. Akihito knew none of them would be lost on the seasoned detective.

Neither cared that Yamazaki's grin was rather inappropriate for his senior position. "Oh, you can count on that, don't you worry."
They drove for nearly two hours. Half an hour in, they'd ditched the limo, transferring to a nondescript blue sedan in an empty tunnel.

"Yeah, 'cos this isn't shady at all," Akihito had said flatly. "Where are we going?"

Asami continued to be stubbornly uninformative. "You'll see," was all he'd said as a guard had quickly driven off with the limo as though they hadn't just switched vehicles.

Another hour and they hopped into a white car on a deserted mountain road. Then it was just the two of them and Glasses and Bond Tank, and from the outside they looked no different to the next car out there.

"So you remember how I said I wasn't gonna let you drag me off to god knows where without telling me what it's about? Or has your memory totally slipped? That was only last month, you know."

It wasn't even the suspicious-as-hell switching of cars that was giving Akihito the heebie-jeebies. It was Asami. He wasn't smirking or eyeing Akihito up like the finest dish or threatening people on the phone, which for Asami amounted to weirdness of the the-world-is-ending end of the scale. He'd spent most of the succession of car journeys quietly staring out the window.

Still watching the ramrod straight barks of the Japanese red cedar rushing by, Asami just gave the same reply. "You'll see."

Clearly Akihito needed to poke harder. Much harder. With a jousting lance, 'cos why not. "Which is what? A nice patch in the middle of nowhere where you give me a shovel and a bullet?"

Finally, result. Asami threw him an unimpressed look.

Akihito rolled his eyes. *Dumbass.* "Like you need to go to such elaborate lengths to make me disappear," he said. No, he wasn't crazy joking about this kind of thing. Asami wouldn't hurt him and Akihito knew that. Or maybe that was its own brand of insanity. So sue him, he was happy.

Asami wanted to roll his eyes too, Akihito just knew it.

"Where are we going?" he repeated for the hundredth time. At least it wasn't *Are we there yet?* on endless repeat – though if Asami kept this up for much longer he could well find himself on the receiving end of that incessantly charming irritation.

The car drew to a stop.

"Here." Asami opened the door himself before Glasses could get there and stepped out.

Blond Tank got Akihito's door because he was still sitting there. He hadn't expected that.

"Sorry, thanks," he mumbled and almost tripped as he rushed to follow. Asami was disappearing along the roughly beaten path through the majestic trees and up the mountain.

"Wow."

Breaking through the abrupt boundary of the towering red-cedar forest, Akihito stumbled upon the valley rolling away from them. Nestled between steep mountains, a small brook wove with the path, meandering between the swathe of bare cherry trees. There was an old teahouse tucked aside halfway down, and further down he could see the edge of a stone *torii* [Japanese gate] half disappearing back into the forest. Birds fluttered here and there but otherwise there wasn't another
soul in sight.

It was already stunning on the tail end of Winter. It would be something else in the Spring with the entire valley filled with cherry blossoms.

Akihito jammed his hands in his jacket pocket, exposed to the cold wind without the trees around him but enjoying the view too much to move away. He inhaled a big lungful. And another. The air was crisp with Winter and the purity that only came with being so deep in the mountains.

He finally glanced around and found Asami a little ways off to the side, sitting on a stone bench overlooking the valley. Blond Tank and Glasses had made themselves scarce.

"Ok, I'll let you off this time," Akihito said as he went over and plonked himself down alongside. They were more sheltered here and it felt a couple of degrees warmer just being out of the wind. He nudged shoulders. "This is pretty awesome."

Quiet answered him.

Akihito chewed his lip. "You ok?"

Still not saying a word, Asami reached inside his jacket... and pulled out a box. A small cube of a box. He lifted the top half that formed the lid and held it, open, on his leg.

Asami let him gape at it for a full minute. Because it took that long to remember how to speak.

"That's –" Akihito rasped...

A brushed silver band, trimmed with gleaming jet black edges was what it was. It was... It was...

"Titanium."

Akihito mentally tripped, and burst into breathless laughter.

A ring. A ring. Masculine without being bulky. But still, a fricking ring! And titanium? The meaning wasn't lost on him. He thought he glimpsed something glinting on the inside.

"For you, Akihito, I'll go down on my knee anytime." There was a smirk playing at Asami's lips.

Akihito glowed. At a time like this?!

But the playfulness disappeared as Asami did just that. Taking the ring, looming large and sliding down on bended knee, with all the grace of a jungle cat, ensnaring Akihito with a fire that would never relinquish him.

"The greatest strength, the greatest weakness, all that we need and desire – it's everything. There will never be another as what we have." Asami's hand closed over Akihito's, warm and resolute while Akihito's trembled. "We were bound from the beginning, you and I. We will always be bound. I have never wanted anyone, as I want you. Or anything, as I want us." The ring was the promise, a tangible eternity. "Be mine Akihito, for however many lifetimes as may be."

"Oh fuck..." Akihito croaked, his throat tight. "Yes. I mean yes! Fuck – can we do that again?"

But Asami was coughing on a choked laugh and sliding the band onto Akihito's ring finger, nudging passed the knuckle, and Akihito was being crushed in steel arms, and he soon forgot about fumbling his reply.
Still on his knee, Asami pressed his face to Akihito's neck. Then came the quietest word in the history of all words, caressed on less than a hint of a breath, the whisper of salvation.

"Akihito."

Reverent, fearful, worshipful, it sounded so much more like I love you.

Akihito blinked furiously 'cos damn, it was too much... He tried to look at Asami, his arms tight about the strong neck, wanting to be closer, closer, but wanting to drown in those pools of gold.

"Only you, Ryuichi."

Akihito would never forget Asami's face in that instant, all his emotions flayed bare, before they crashed in a kiss so fierce that it hurt.

Much like how they'd met. Kou had thought they'd 'just sort of clicked' but that wasn't it at all. They hadn't so much clicked as collided and burst into brilliant fireworks, lighting the loneliest corners of their souls.

Gazing out over the valley, there was a different sort of quiet about Asami now. Contented. Had he actually been nervous before? Akihito swallowed the urge to tease and played with the ring.

Matt titanium. Trimmed with black titanium, Asami had told him.

It made sense now, all the undercurrent at the Meet. The whole set-up had been designed to further ensure Akihito's safety for when they were officially tied. A memory floated into mind – the ruined dockyards across the bay, Akihito not even being allowed to entertain the thought that Asami would be stronger without him – 'No more deaths. There are other ways.' How long had Asami been planning this?

Akihito slipped the ring down, keeping it around the tip of his finger still. He didn't want to take it off, feeling like it might break the connection somehow. So it might be silly but it wasn't every day that he got engaged. Engaged! He could've sworn a part of his brain was still melted mush...

Huh? A diamond? He peered around his finger – there was a single diamond embedded flush on the inside of the ring, hidden from the world but glinting at its heart. Perhaps Asami saw Akihito in that. But the one Akihito saw was Asami.

There were cursive letters A and R engraved on either side of the diamond too. He ducked his head to hide the small smile he couldn't fight, pushing the ring on again.

"Don't you get a ring?" Akihito pulled a face at his own question. "D'uh, says the person who hasn't got you one. I'll get you one. Uh – I mean, if you'd wear one, that is. Would you wear a ring?"

Asami chuckled at his babbling. "Do you want me to wear one?"

"'Course. Why not?"

"Everyone will know."

"...Oh..." It was like a flashbulb going off. The public, numerous business partners, not-so-legal associates, anyone and everyone would be curious as all hell the moment they learned that one of the – if not the – top billionaire bachelor in Japan was tying the knot. And the fact that it was a same-sex relationship would only fuel the gossipmongers further.
But in the same token, everyone would know. Akihito still got plenty shy and embarrassed about all sorts of things that Asami took an inordinate amount of devilish pleasure in teasing him about, but Akihito wasn't embarrassed about the two of them. He was sensible enough to know that he probably couldn't grasp the full implications just yet, but –

"Let them. We'll handle it, right?" Akihito's grin was confident until a thought occurred to him. "Unless... you don't want everyone to know?"

Asami's reply was to produce a second box.

Akihito opened it to find another ring. "You so did want to wear a ring!" It was Akihito who took it out this time, a relieved laugh bubbling out from him.

It was a bigger size but otherwise no thicker or wider, the mate to his own – a jet black band running in the middle where Akihito's was brushed silver, trimmed with matt silver where Akihito's was black. There was even the same diamond inside, bookended elegantly with A and R.

It felt... right. It was them.

And absolutely impossible to miss that they were matching. "You might as well have stuck a great big sign over our heads saying Property Of Each Other."

"Rings are less cumbersome," Asami deadpanned. "Besides, why wouldn't I? YOLO, wouldn't you say?"

There was a frozen moment before Akihito spluttered, "YOLO? Did you seriously just say YOLO? You're about fifty years too old to be saying YOLO... And you're not mean to say it... Do you even know what it means?"

"You only... live once."

The subtle pause, the emphasis – "Holy baloney, love? That's what you meant, right? You weren't even gonna say live! Oh my god, if anyone found out how cheesy you were at heart, you'd never live it down!" His eyes grew round. "The big cheese!" He doubled over with renewed laughter.

Asami smirked. He held up his hand, turning it front to back to front to back. "If you liked it then you should have put a ring on it –"

"Argh! Stop! Too much!"

It took a while before Akihito could scramble back from where he'd almost fallen off the bench, wiping his eyes. It was probably a lot to do with all the supercharged elation as well, it was all too much to contain. "Don't tell me you've been catching up on pop culture or something?"

"Only the classics."

"You're killing me..."

Asami just smirked.

The second ring had warmed in Akihito's hand by now. His laughter ebbed away as he stared at it. He could feel the weight of it, not just the physical ring, but all that it signified – his own claim on Asami for all the world to see.

Hazel eyes lit with determination and mischief and a spark of nerves as Akihito went down on one
knee. "What? You can't just put it on," he defended at the surprised look. "You need to accept it properly, which means I need to propose too. Even if you're the one who brought me here... and bought the ring..."

Asami huffed a soft laugh.

Akihito raised the ring with a flourish. And promptly stalled. "Uh..." Maybe he'd been too optimistic. He didn't have a speech. He didn't do speeches. He was more of a rambler, blurting out whatever and –

"Just say whatever comes to mind," Asami suggested as though he could hear the internal monologue. He looked amused already.

"But –"

"Honestly."

"Honestly? That would be, you're arrogant and overbearing and your ego knows no bounds and you always just do whatever the hell you want and..." Akihito cut off, holding his breath for another moment longer before letting it bleed out into the wind. Quiet, earnest, he searched the steady gold. "And you let me in. ...And I don't want to be anywhere else. Will you marry me?"

Akihito grimaced, his face hot, but Asami's eyes were doing that intense blazing thing. "See? You did just fine," he murmured, his voice deep and warm as he brushed Akihito's right cheek. "Now what was it again – fuck, yes, yes, fuck –"

"Oh, shut up," Akihito laughed, grabbing the hand off his face on his way back to his feet and nudging the ring onto the ring finger. "At least I asked you to marry me. You just went all rumbly with your *Be mine, grrrr.*"

"I can propose again if you like. Akihito, will you always take me in your most sacred place –"

"Aaaargh!" Red to his ears, Akihito slapped his hand over Asami's mouth. "That is *not* a proposal! *Nyaah!*" He yelped as Asami licked his palm. Snatching his hand back only revealed a shit-eating smirk as Asami tumbled him into his lap. Sitting sideways, Akihito wiped his hand on Asami's jacket in revenge. And again. And again – ah, who was he kidding, he just slapped it on there and gave a bit of a nudge but left his hand there. "Just remember it goes both ways. You're mine too and don't you forget it."

"Haven't you realized yet, Akihito?" Asami tipped up his chin. "You had me at... *Wow you work weird hours.*"

Then Asami was trying to kiss him but mostly missing because Akihito was laughing too much.

Asami gave up with mock exasperation. "Hopeless brat."

"Movie references too?" Akihito said as he tried to catch his breath. "For real?"

Asami grabbed him and set him on his feet.

"Aww, don't be like that." Akihito might have pouted just the littlest bit.

Asami smacked his butt.

"Y-oww!"
"Come on," Asami said, setting off into the valley. "There's someone you need to meet."

Akihito glanced around as he rubbed his ass. "What, here?" He rushed after Asami again, very much feeling the ring on his finger as he skidded down the compacted gravel path. "Can you even walk in those shoes?"

Down beyond the old teahouse, the torii [Japanese gate] led into the towering trees to ishidoro [stone lanterns] and statues, which in turn led to a grave fit for a feudal lord.

A stone border marked the impressive stone monument, solid slabs rising up with a sphere balanced in there too and the ornate pagoda-shaped crown. Everything was made of grey granite, watched over by the ancient red-cedar, shielded from the world, a resting place of utmost peace.

Akihito turned aside at the odd repetitive creaking sound. Asami was pumping the handle of an old-fashioned well. Water spurted from the spout after a while and he filled two buckets sitting by the well. Akihito met him half way, taking one of them as they carried them and the bamboo ladles over to the grave.

They worked quietly together. This was far more elaborate and private than the tightly clustered graveyards commonly dotted around the country, but the process of cleaning, pulling weeds, and washing the stone down was the same. Someone, probably Glasses or Blond Tank, had already brought bundles of cuttings from the evergreen sakaki tree, considered sacred, and placed them ready for arranging at the base of the grave. Incense and matches were in a waterproof box in a nearby stone lantern. Asami took three sticks, lit and extinguished them, and set them in the stone incense holder. The wind stole away the scented smoke.

Akihito hung back as Asami stood in front of the grave.

"Come here, Akihito."

"Uh..." It felt like he was intruding on a private moment. Because this wasn't the biological mother. This was the one who'd become Asami's mother, the one that mattered.

"I brought you here, you're not intruding. Now, come here."

Was he that obvious? Akihito edged forwards and found himself hauled right alongside.

Asami was silent a while. At length he glanced at Akihito, then back at the monument. "Mother, I want you to meet Akihito..." A frown creased his brow as he looked down.

Akihito hesitated, but as clouds gathered in Asami's gaze, he reached for the large hand. Just a finger, just a touch... Asami grabbed his whole hand, interweaving their fingers. Asami's thumb found Akihito's ring and started twisting it round, part absent-minded, part focus.

"It's been 24 years now, the same age as he is."

Akihito blinked.

"If he hadn't already been born when you were killed, I might have thought you'd sent him to me, fated to be together." Asami smiled faintly. "But when it comes to Akihito it wouldn't have mattered. Destined or not, I was going to have him."

Akihito's eye-roll would have found voice – loudly – if they hadn't been standing where they were.
"You didn't always approve of what I did, but against the world you always had my back, even if I was in the wrong, even if you were mad at me afterwards. You understood me. You accepted me as I was. Akihito is the same." Asami's gaze lifted, unwavering. "Remarkable as it is, even after everything, he still stands with me and takes me as I am. I'd lay waste to the Earth to keep him, and keep him safe. There's no walking away, for either of us. For all that he'll call me a domineering bastard, and he's not wrong, the one who was lost from the beginning is me."

Asami squeezed the hand frozen in his.

"When you adopted me you made me promise two things. The first was easy, I have always looked out for Hazumi. You knew I would even if you hadn't asked. But the second – to let myself find my own happiness... I laughed at you then, but you understood far more than I did. That's been harder. Impossible really, until now. I can finally fulfil that promise." Still looking at the grave, his mind was light-years away. "You would have liked him, Mother."

Asami took a breath, refocused on the present. "I won't be coming on your anniversary for a while. Routines are dangerous and I can't risk it. Not anymore. I know you'll understand."

Releasing Akihito's hand, Asami knelt to the ground, sitting back on his heels. Hands pressed together, he bowed his head in prayer.

When he stood, his face was at peace. "Until next time, Mother."

Was it a tear that Asami had brushed away?

Akihito vaguely remembered leaning into that large hand. "Can I have a minute?"

Which was how Akihito came to be standing here alone.

"Uh... Hello, I guess. I don't make a habit of talking to graves so I'm not really sure what I'm doing..." He rubbed at the back of his neck, not knowing how to start. He swiped his palm across where it still felt wet in the corner of his eye. "It feels like I've been crying a lot lately," he said awkwardly, but then he remembered what a large portion of those tears had been about and blushed furiously.

"I so hope you can't see into my thoughts 'cos... well..." He cleared his throat. "Anyway, moving swiftly on. I, uh, I just... I wanted to say I think I understand. Asami told me about... lots of things, and I think I see what you knew, in that warehouse, when you chose him as the one to save. He's kinda like a fortress, isn't he? He keeps nearly everyone out, but he lets in just a few, and for them he's got a great big roaring furnace that keeps us warm and safe and... He said it was remarkable I was still with him, but it isn't really. It isn't at all. No one's done what he's done for me... What I'm trying to say is that I know he has a heart. Sometimes I think he doesn't think he does, and he can be ridiculously arrogant and smug and big-headed and stubborn and all, but he does. And I wanted to promise that I'll do everything I can to keep it safe. I..."

Blushing crimson, Akihito stared at his feet. "I've fallen for him so hard it's terrifying. And I know no one lives forever, and he..." He scrunched up his face, shook it off. "Yeah, let's not go there. What'll happen will happen. But every day we have is a day we wouldn't have had if you hadn't been there for him all those years ago. So thank you. And... it's kinda hard to ask permission when, uh, you're not exactly here, but... well... can you entrust him to me? Do we have your permission?"

He chewed his lip. "I guess I have to take signs from the universe for your answer. Maybe the 24 years is a sign?"
The wind shifted, wrapping him in the scent of incense.

"Or maybe that," he said, smiling a little, feeling the peace of the mountain and the grave.

Akihito knelt and put his hands together. His prayer was short but heartfelt.

At the crest of the valley, Ryuichi displayed no surprise as Hazumi stopped beside him. They were supposedly watching the spectacular view but it was the blond head in the distance that they were both following, as Akihito spoke to their mother.

Asami said casually, "We're getting married."

"Good for you."

Asami turned to regard her. He didn't fill the silence, waiting for her to explain her tone, petulant almost.

Eventually, she said, "My only brother is doing the inconceivable of getting hitched but there's an excellent reason why he didn't consult me on the choice of ring, I'm sure."

Of course she'd spotted him wearing the ring. Asami managed not to smirk. She would have eviscerated him for it. "Are you sulking?"

"At my age? It's hardly appropriate." But she really was. She blew through her lips. "Well, let me see it, then."

He made no move to show her but allowed her to lift his hand.

She peered at it. "That's not platinum."

He did smirk this time. "It's titanium." His amusement broadened at her horrified face. "You wouldn't understand."

Her sharp eyes and mind drew their own conclusions. "It's like that, is it?" she remarked, though her edges had softened. She turned the ring this way and that before letting go. "So you're the dark surrounded by his light. He has the counterpart, I take it?" She gave a dramatic sigh. "Well, if you're so loved up that you even have your own couple jokes, who am I to say anything untoward. You have my blessing, my dear Ryuichi."

He looked at her strangely. "That's it? No third degree? You realize he'll be taking the Asami name."

"Does he realize that yet?" she teased. "He'll wear it well."

"You're very relaxed about this."

A cryptic smile crept across her face. "You can tell a lot from one's friends."

"... What?"

Hazumi's laugh was a sprinkling of fairy dust. "Oh, even I can keep some secrets, no matter how closely you keep watch." She leaned on his shoulder and kissed his cheek. "I'm sure you'll enjoy all the perks of married life." With a wink she glided away, weaving her way down the path.

"...What friend?!"
Akihito was huffing slightly from marching back up the hill. He looked up, his nose pink from the cold, wearing that look of dazed alarm as he always did after encountering Hazumi.

"Your sister, I just passed her at the teahouse. She, uh... congratulated us."

Asami hummed noncommittally, something sharp in his gaze as he studied Akihito.

Akihito's eyes flickered as he tried to think what Asami was getting at. He came up blank. "What?"

After a moment Asami shook his head. He traced Akihito's cheek, addicted to the flush that his touch never failed to induce. His smugness must have shown, for Akihito jutted his jaw, tipping his head in a *Yeah, so what?* kind of expression. Always cheeky, always challenging.

Asami looked forward to the next reaction. "Ready to go see your parents?"

Akihito's face flipped through the equivalent of panicked gymnastics.

Asami let the laugh break free.

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**Sushi God B-)** So u guys are coming to my *yuinou*, right?

There went the cat, well and truly sauntering out the bag, seemingly all nonchalant as though Akihito's heart wasn't trying to thump out of his chest.

_Yuinou_. The engagement ceremony that made an engagement an engagement. Every engaged couple had one. Social status usually dictated what they could get away with – for a billionaire businessman moonlighting as Japan's top crime lord, expectations would be sky high for a lavish event with every damned acquaintance under the sun. But Akihito was banking on Asami not giving a damn about that if he decided otherwise, hopefully that 'otherwise' being what Akihito could stomach – just a small dinner with immediate family. Which would be his parents, and Akihito's best buds too 'cos they were *basically* family, as well as Glasses and Blond Tank, Akihito had decided already, 'cos they were *practically* family, and Mori Baachan and Jiichan had to come 'cos his surrogate grandparents had pretty much unofficially adopted Asami too. He started thinking about Sagano and Nakatani as well who'd morphed into part of Akihito's shadow but then he wasn't sure where the personal/professional line lay... So just some good food, and exchange of rings 'cos there really was no getting away from that – or re-exchange of rings, seeing as they were already wearing them. What about Hazumi? Would she come? Could she even? Maybe she could just 'happen' to bump into them, without revealing her relation to Asami – but oh shit oh shit oh shit what if it was really her that Kou had hooked up with –

_Dorayaki King_  **WTF!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!**

_Spew_  **WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA**

_Dorayaki King_  dafuuuuuuuuuuuuq

_Spew_  **UR GETTING MARRIEEEEED?!!!**

_Dorayaki King_  **THIS**
_Dorayaki King_  **IS**
_Dorayaki King_  **SO**
_Dorayaki King_  **FUCKING**
_Dorayaki King_  **AWESOMEEEE**
Dorayaki King !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
Dorayaki King [pink heart] [pink heart] [pink heart] [pink heart] [pink heart]

Spew Can't believe u got there before me!

Dorayaki King I knew
Dorayaki King I totally knew
Dorayaki King Aki-chan's in luuuurrrrrrvvvee
Dorayaki King [two men kissing with pink heart] [two men kissing with pink heart] [two men kissing with pink heart] [two men kissing with pink heart] [two men kissing with pink heart] [two men kissing with pink heart] [two men kissing with pink heart] [two men kissing with pink heart] [two men kissing with pink heart]

"Oh man..." Biting his lip did nothing to stop the grin. Akihito buried his glowing face into Asami's pillow as his phone continued to flash and bleep long into the night.
Part 2 of the double update and now we really are at the end!

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Such mixed emotions coming to the end of this, so sad not to be writing these two anymore and yet I can't wish it was any different because of how amazing you've been! *Thank you* to everyone who read this (some of you multiple times!) and for all your comments and chats full of elation and tears and frustration and jumbled screaming and laughter. The way you've given such detailed, thoughtful feedback – you know how much your words have meant to me! It's always been a bright point in my day to be connected to you through this. *Thank you* to Yamane-sensei for letting us borrow her inspiring characters and play in her playground. *Thank you* to Shey too for stunning, emotive artwork to accompany the story!

I have a few projects in the works next, both my own material as well as at least three more Asami/Akihito plot bunnies bouncing about – it's as if my brain's just been waiting to finish Click to let loose! I even have story titles for them already... (■□■) I'll probably be interspersing original and fan fiction writing so I should be back in this fandom again at some point!

So here's the last 'mini' (at least, it is for me, at just 7k words! LOL) *omake* to see us off, and I'm throwing in the *explicit content!* flag one last time too – you know the drill. I hope you enjoy it!

*Arigato* for coming with me for this ride, I'm over the moon to have shared it with you!

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☆*・*(^O^)/・*☆
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~ Nyx ~

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Another year later.

"Do you remember when we –"

"I try not to."

"But don't you ever think about –"

"No."

"I bet you do." Akihito elbow-nudged the balding man walking beside him. "Come on, Ogawa-san, when's the last time you had so much fun in the Boardroom?"

"Funny. I seem to recall it more as *You, me, outside*. Asami-sama was not pleased." There was a deep furrow on Ogawa's brow.
"Are you nervous? Don't sweat it, this is gonna be great."

"Why am I not reassured..."

Akihito grinned. "So why're you here again? You didn't have to come."

"It's my duty," Ogawa said loftily. "I'm the IT liaison for EverEye World."

"Yeah but all the camera feeds are set up already. You just wanna see the new gizmo."

"Yes, mainly that," Ogawa admitted.

Akihito snorted as they entered the Boardroom, drawing all eyes at his rude entrance.

Twenty Board members were already there, as well as Asami and Glasses and Blond Tank. There were some smiles and nods, from many familiar execs who'd witnessed the pentesting before and were anticipating another memorable experience. Thankfully they were over the *Let's-all-gawk-at-the-CEO's-husband!* phase and didn't bat an eye at seeing the two in the same room. But there were some new faces too. He caught the pointed glances, flicking between the matching rings on his and Asami's hands.

Akihito sighed. "Smashing."

They could all see each other but not as they'd been just moments ago. They'd all transformed into elves, dwarves and hobbits. Enough natural features remained visible to identify everyone but they were embellished with pointy ears and hairy feet, strapped with armour of leather and iron, wielding bows and axes and swords whenever they moved their hands. They were still sitting around a huge table but it was a solid stone thing now, intricately carved, chipped with use.

The Boardroom itself was a mountain plateau. The sky was open and clear, the grass green and lush underfoot, surrounded by sheer rocky cliffs dropping down on all sides, the walls replaced by stunning views across endless plains.

Some were suspended in silent awe. Others were laughing because it was astonishing and they were bewailing their hairy hands and feet when their colleagues sported rugged stubble, and stiff upper lips melted into easy smiles whenever Takaba took over the Boardroom.

Mr Sour had already taken care of the 'business' side of things, loading them up on the facts and figures and roadmap of short-, medium- and long-term forecasts and psych analyses into VR exposure and more commercial specifics than Akihito could sit still for. Akihito was closing with a live demo, first letting them ooh and aah over the experimental headsets that looked more like skiing goggles you could see through, the lightly tinted transparent screen wrapping around the eyes. Ok, so no one in the room was prone to oohing and aahing as such, but Akihito saw their surprise that these weren't the big boxy VR headsets they knew about.

And then he'd transported them to Middle-earth and blown their minds.

One of the few women in the room, someone Akihito had never met before, a beautiful elf, turned her cool, condescending eyes to him – her expression, not the VR's.

"How does this work, Asami-sama?" Ice Elf Lady asked him.

Stocky dwarf Akihito blurted a laugh before he clamped his bearded mouth shut.
Well, that was interesting. Amusement wasn't his usual reaction to hearing his married name. It was usually more of a mini internal freak-out with his heart chasing its own shadow in crazy circles. Though maybe that had more to do with the way Asami tended to murmur it into Akihito's ear while sheathed deep... *Ahem*

"Care to answer that, Asami?" Akihito turned to the tall man at the head of the table – and couldn't help but snicker at the sight of the Big Three.

The opportunity to tease them had just been too good to pass up. There was Saruman, imperiously stern with his robes and hair and beard all flowing and white, with his big magic staff, accompanied on one side by a grumpy spectacled hobbit, and a formidable Uruk-hai marked with the White Hand of Saruman on the other – but with the ugliness toned down 'cos that would've just been nasty.

Saruman arched a brow. His gaze glinted and Akihito didn't need to be a mind-reader to know what filthy avenue Asami's thoughts were travelling...

Akihito turned back to the exec. "He's Asami," he reminded, hiking his thumb at Saruman. "I'm Takaba."

Because he'd kept his... ugh, maiden name, for want of a better word, just at Sion. He wanted to get by on his own merits, not by bandying around the hefty name.

"It's OLED technology," he explained to their mountain summit, "pixels that light themselves, delivered to you in 4k Ultra HD.

"This is EverEye World. Not just Virtual Reality, not just Augmented Reality, but about people. The world you create can be real or imaginary or a smorgasbord of both, entirely virtual or superimposed on the world around you. It doesn't matter if you're here or a million miles away, you can bring people together in the same place.

"Picture Sion's next exhibitions – conferences and trade shows across multiple industries, big film conventions. We're raising the bar way up there. No more props and cardboard cut-outs. The entire venue is going to be The World, and every attendee can be any character they want. They can live it.

"But it's not just events and entertainment. Applications are as diverse as all the specialist skills in this building – training tools for high-risk jobs, simulated field training, healthcare, therapy, education, overlay information when out and about, sciences, object manipulation – the scope is literally huge. We just gotta make up our minds where we want to take it next."

"Shigura-san mentioned six to twelve months to adaptive application?" asked another hobbit eagerly further down the stone table.

"Yeah, give or take. The prototype headsets are still too heavy, you really feel it after half an hour. They need to be more like normal shades you can just sling on. And the projection coding's still glitchy. Like when I tried to turn Asami into the Eye of Sauron 'cos he should be the ultimate Dark Lord, right? But the lines kept bleeding and he kept getting eyelashes like camels..." His lips twitched. "Anyway. I had to settle for Saruman instead.

"Don't worry," he assured Asami, "Saruman's still an evil bastard who terrorizes the world from his giant tower. You're not missing out."

Those elves and dwarves new to the dynamics between them looked scandalized. The others were trying with varying degrees of success not to look (too) amused.

Akihito shrugged. "Besides, this way you can be happy holding your magical staff." He grinned to
himself at his naughty little pun. Not that anyone else would get it, he was sure. And it wasn't like Asami would know about LOTR anyway, right? Right.

Wrong. "I would have been much more satisfied taking my magical staff into Helm's Deep."

Akihito froze. Colour rose up his face. Oh no please no no way...

Asami's eyes gleamed. "But the giant tower is fine. After all, we know how to drive out the White Wizard, don't we?"

Akihito spluttered. Coughed. Thumped his chest. Went absolutely crimson. They were in front of the whole Sion Board for crying out loud!

Most of the table just looked confused. Ogawa dwarf and Mr Thin elf, though, had turned an unhealthy shade of beetroot. The spectacled hobbit and Uruk-hai were doing their damnedest to pretend they weren't there.

Ice Elf Lady tilted her head. "The White Wizard?"

Dying, right there. Some others like Mr Sour were obviously catching on too, the way their eyes widened comically and they turned brilliantly bright shades.

"Aaand that's the end of the demo," Akihito choked out. He smashed some keys on the AR/VR control panel. Their screens flickered, Middle-earth faded away...

Mountains soared behind. The conference table ran along the lip of a huge dam, shoring up the vast reservoir. They were all in black combat gear, overlooking a deep ravine.

"Goldeneye!" someone recognized.

"Good spot," Akihito nodded, his voice still a little squeaky. "Your exit, if you dare – jump like James Bond. Step up to the platform there and you'll get your bungee cords. Or you can just take your headsets off now and walk out the door like a normal person and have a laugh at the others doing a tiny little jump on the floor and screaming their heads off. But try it if you can 'cos it's awesome, I promise you. Headsets in the boxes by the doors when you get there please. Give us a shout if you have any questions. That's all, folks!"

There was an outburst of applause, leaving Akihito smiling awkwardly and ducking his head.

People started gathering and talking, looking at each other, at their polished wooden conference table situated on the dam. Some approached the ledge, peering down into the ravine.

"I knew this was coming but it's still unnerving," Mr Sour muttered as he stepped onto the platform, waited as bungee cords materialised, and 'jumped'. The image of him whooshed and disappeared into the ravine. There were gasps – it was darned realistic to those wearing headsets.

"Shigura-san?" someone asked.

"I'm alive," came Mr Sour's dry reply from right in front of them. They couldn't see him, however.

People were speculating about the graphics, some more braved the 'jump' (there were some rather unmanly squawks, some laughs), and others experimented with taking the headset off and on, comparing what they were seeing.

Asami came up alongside Akihito, too close to be professional. The combat gear didn't suit Asami,
Akihito thought. The bastard breezed through gunfights in his three-piece suit without getting a single crinkle; he didn't need combat gear.

Asami rumbled under breath, "Give me a sword next time. I'll reforge it in your furnace."

The flush was back with a vengeance. "Oh geez, you were just bursting, weren't you?" Akihito hissed back. "I should've known the Lord of the Rings would be included in your crash course on popular culture!"

Asami was standing so close Akihito could feel his warmth. A few people glanced over and kept their distance. Akihito made no move to step away.

"The things I do to keep up with at least half of your rambling. It's become quite the hobbit."

"Oh my god..."

Asami pressed his mouth to Akihito's ear. "I want your Ring."

Boom, crash, flames. "... What the hell kind of material have you been looking at?!"

They had furious sex by the front door – sometimes against the door, the poor guards on the other side – when Asami returned from business trips and he couldn't – wouldn't – hold off another step.

They had straightforward sex ranging from hard to rough, and they had kinky sex, not always contained in the Secret Room, as they gradually explored more and more toys in Asami's arsenal.

They had lazy sex in bed on Sunday mornings when Akihito would only be half protesting that they were missing brunch or lunch or whatever the next meal was... until he'd end up telling Asami to take full responsibility for depriving him of sustenance and make him forget his rumbling stomach.

They had steamy shower sex when Asami would make Akihito hold impossible still. Let me move! – You don't want to slip – What the hell happened to these being non-slip tiles?! – Don't. Move. An inch – Then move faster, damn it! – You demanded to slow things down – That was then! You're in now! Stop being so fucking glacial and... – And fuck you? What a filthy mouth you have – Fffff... – Why, you're trembling, Akihito. Don't tell me you can come like... this... – Unnggghhhhh....!

Mostly Asami would pin the blond down or corral him, but sometimes he liked to tease for days on end with a touch here, a rub there, a flash of skin here and there and everywhere. They'd both be pent up and frustrated but it was worth it just to see Akihito say hell with it and drag Asami into the bedroom.

There were plenty of times when weren't having sex. Asami would rule his vast empire from the table or the settee or in his study, and Akihito would flomp down beside him, nattering about this or that, or mumbling to himself over some coding project that he always had on the go at home unrelated to EverEye. Hours would go by, both of them comfortable doing their thing in each other's company.

Asami would usually be done – or make the executive decision that he was due some downtime – before Akihito and distract him – Stop it... – It's just a shoulder rub, Akihito – Nothing's just a shoulder rub with you, you pervy bastaaahhhhhhh – or simply jump him which led to furious sex.

Actually they had a lot of angry sex – For the last time, I don't want a pay rise! or Why did I only hear about you getting attacked on the fucking news?! Which naturally led to a lot of make-up sex – I promise I'll let you give me a thorough checking over in future. With your tongue.
Then there were the times when Akihito wore Asami's shirt.

Asami had been called out at 3am. It had been building up for weeks, this deal going south. He was back 2 hours later having brought the whole issue to an abrupt and very final end.

He could appreciate ambition and drive, but he had no patience for idiocy and blind greed. Bully-boy tactics might have worked on lesser prey but they were never going to pass muster with the big boys. The whole thing had been a phenomenal waste of time, leaving a lucrative opportunity to expand into the European market on the rocks.

... Unless Asami could take control of the idiot's supply chain. His first impulse was to go in heavy but he was aware his blood was up. He wasn't in the most insightful frame of mind, he could overlook or close opportunities on himself. But he couldn't tarry too much either; he knew a certain Russian party with an eye on the same prospects. Too capable to crush or bring into Asami's fold, too dangerous to ignore, always that irritating thorn in his side...

It was dark in the condo when he returned. He paused from where he'd resisted the urge to slam the front door, picking up on Akihito tapping away on his laptop. It was a distinctive sound, the tone and pitch of the keys particular to that chunky laptop alone, as well as the intermittent louder smack of the space bar.

But the tapping was different to usual. Not so fluid. Irregular gaps. Distracted.

Closing the door silently, Asami tracked the sound down. The living room was lit by the city's night lights filling the glass veranda doors, the curtains wide open. Akihito was on the couch, his face lit by the glow of his laptop, chewing his lip over some coding.

Sharp and starched. That was Asami's collar. Akihito was on the couch, awaiting his return, wearing his shirt.

Heat punched Asami's gut, dark tendrils curling through him.

But just in case, he double checked. He strode forth on silent feet right up to the unsuspecting young man, yanked the blond head back by the hair and plunged his tongue in a fierce kiss. No warning, no warm up, just straight in there.

Spluttering, arms flailing, Akihito garbled nonsense into their joined mouths until Asami let him break free. "Mmmmphhhhey! I'm working here!"

"At 5 in the morning?"

"I... happened to be awake..."

Asami simply huffed a breath of sardonic amusement. No, the brat had been waiting for him. Wearing his shirt. Asami's voice rumbled with dark heat and warning. "When I come back, I expect you to be naked."

He smirked at the outraged indignation he left in his wake. A lot of noise but no real bite. Akihito was playing his part to perfection.

In the bedroom, he removed his jacket and all four guns, the ankle holsters and the double shoulder holsters. Really, what had the knucklehead been thinking? That bringing a dozen extra men would intimidate Asami into shaking hands on a loss? As though he, Suoh and Kirishima hadn't put down far worse. Numskull.
Flinging his waistcoat with his jacket, he returned to the living room.

Akihito froze where he'd plonked himself back at his laptop. Fully clothed.

Asami kept his face impassive. "Disobeying me, are we?" he said softly.

Asami saw the shiver course through the slender back, even as Akihito bravely jutted his jaw. "Cos you're being ridiculous. You can't just say be naked and expect me to be naked, you know, at the drop of a... pants."

The grin wasn't entirely smothered even with the overload of petulance. Asami headed for the sideboard. Grabbing some cubes from the ice bucket, he poured himself a generous slosh of whiskey.

Leaning back on the sideboard, crossing one ankle over the other, he clinked the ice around the crystal tumbler. "Come here."

Akihito pushed to his feet. And took a step away, hitching his thumb towards the bedroom. "Uh, actually, I'm pretty beat. I'm just gonna –"

"Five, was it? Just about," Asami mused. Confusion flashed across Akihito's face. Really, the brat could hide nothing. The sleeves had been rolled up above the elbows, revealing arms that Asami wanted to pull on as he buried himself deep. He smirked with dark amusement. "You were hurting after five. How do you think six would feel? Or seven? How many times do you think you can come in a row?"

Akihito had caught on half way through, freezing up, apprehensive and shockingly turned on in equal measures.

"Come here," Asami ordered again, "unless you want to find out."

Akihito was actually tempted. He considered disobeying for all of three seconds, his breath fluttering, pupils dilating – but then the hazel eyes flickered towards Asami, searching the dark gaze, gauging... before letting himself succumb. Slamming the laptop closed, he walked over.

It was all about the shirt.

Akihito stopped a foot away.

"Closer."

Akihito shuffled closer, his bare toes to Asami's socked feet.

Asami let his voice drop deeper. "Cross your wrists behind you."

Hazel eyes widened. Asami could see the cogs turning as Akihito considered, for just a second, whether to make Asami work for it, how much to lock horns, but then a telltale glimmer lit through those naked eyes. Teasing and enticing it was, then. Hunger was already swirling through Asami.

With his chin lifted and cheeks bright, Akihito slowly took his arms behind him and crossed his wrists. Asami could see that, the way the shoulders pulled back that much further than if Akihito had just put his hands together.

"Come closer."

Akihito hesitated. It was all in the psychology. Of course he could step to the side to come closer, but
already in the mindset of teasing Asami to distraction, Akihito would know that straddling would achieve that better. But then he'd have to part his legs, which was a very specific tipping point in the balance, no matter how many times Asami had put him there.

Asami simply waited. He knew which way Akihito would go. Akihito narrowed his eyes, knowing it too, but his spirit insisted on that last space of defiance... before he eventually edged his feet on either side, his knees on the outside of Asami's.

Asami took his leisurely time studying the face in front of him – the flicker of vulnerability of holding himself in the submissive position, but the innate confidence and desire to see it through because Akihito was pulling as much as Asami was pushing. And those eyes, all challenge – have you got what it takes to subdue me? I'm quite the handful. It was always this game of control between them, offering and withholding and demanding and giving. Was it any wonder that Asami had claimed him? More, was it any wonder that Asami had let Akihito claim him in return?

"Where's my welcome home, Akihito?"

Two rapid blinks, dragging his mind out of the gutter. "Uh... Okaeri."

"Tadaima. But it's a bit late, isn't it?"

Akihito shrugged. "I would've said it earlier if you hadn't practically broken my neck and tongue-fucked me."

Asami found himself smirking. "Well you can welcome me home now. Kiss me."

Because Akihito was wearing his shirt and it was all about a whole other kind of submission, which meant Asami wasn't going to take. He was going to make Akihito give.

Akihito had two choices. Three, counting moving his hands, but Akihito wouldn't do that. He could just try and straddle higher up Asami's legs, which would be awkward with the height difference, or –

Asami hummed, a subvocal purr, as Akihito draped himself over Asami, pressing their hardening arousal against each other, face upturned, wrists still dutifully crossed behind. Akihito wasn't tall enough to close the last distance; Asami tipped his head down to let Akihito initiate the kiss.

The press of the lips still held that shade of hesitation, that shyness even now that made Asami's blood surge. Holding back a groan, he had to grip the sideboard harder on either side of himself, the tumbler still just about hanging from his fingertips, to stop from hauling the smaller man onto himself and finding the sweet, tight depths already. But the groan slipped free when a wet tongue flicked along his lip. And still he held himself receptive, making Akihito work, to pursue Asami's tongue, pushing up on his toes and pressing their bodies even closer to try and deepen the kiss.

Demanded and received, without a single restraint save for his voice and what Akihito relinquished. This wasn't total submission floating in subspace, though that had its firm place between them and Akihito was beautiful in his absolute trust and surrender. No, this was about the shirt. Submission, but only so far as Akihito decided to relinquish and how far Asami could make him give it, and only with his signature cheek, the flash of challenge still in the hazel eyes. After recolouring the canvas of their flesh so thoroughly with the seeds of their union, Asami still found it so easy, so hungry, with Akihito. This spirited man ignited the darkness inside Asami, the unquenchable desire to claim every last inch and breath and droplet of blood and corner of the soul as his.

Akihito pulled back, his lips quirking. "Okaeri," he murmured against Asami's mouth.
Asami pushed off the sideboard, the movement enough to right the smaller man back to his feet. Asami advanced, giving Akihito no alternative but to back away in turn. The back of Akihito's thighs hit the settee backrest, his hand reaching out to catch himself. Asami took one last step, towering over the blond, only a millimetre between them.

"Go to the veranda doors."

That blinking again, thinking, at the unexpected demand. "Uh –"

Asami simply narrowed his eyes.

Akihito must have seen the potent arousal, the blood simmering close to the surface, how far Asami would push tonight if he had to. The hazel eyes widened before Akihito slipped aside and rounded the couch to head for the veranda doors.

Asami rounded the couch too but he sank down onto the seat. Nursing the Bourbon, he inebriated himself on the sight of Akihito standing there backlit by moonlight and nightscape. Asami's white shirt shone bright.

"Undress for me," he rumbled.

Self-consciousness tinted through Akihito's cheeks as he glanced behind, worried if someone might be able to see, even in the darkness and across the spacious veranda and with the next tall skyscraper some distance away.

As though Asami would let anyone else see Akihito like that.

Even after Asami had seen and tasted every inch of him, Akihito hadn't quite shed his innate shyness. Perhaps he never would. It was delicious. The territorial animal in Asami headbutted its way to the fore, and alongside the darkness that had been straining at the leash even before Akihito had worn his shirt, it was quite the beast that Akihito was provoking tonight.

Not that Akihito was innocent in this. Not. At. All. He chewed one side of his lower lip in a deliberately coquettish gesture, tipping his chin down and glancing up at Asami through fluttering eyelashes, as his fingers went to the first button of the shirt.

Asami arched a brow.

Akihito guffawed. "Well, whaddya expect? Sitting there demanding *Undress for me* like you're some crime boss with a boy toy." His voice didn't go deep enough for the impersonation, and he also sounded too amused to pull it off.

"No. Just a crime boss who wants to feast his eyes on his husband. Undress for me, Akihito."

All amusement had fled. "You just say that with a straight face, huh?" Akihito said quietly.

He released each button in turn and it was entirely subconscious this time as he chewed his lip. He went to slip the shirt off –

"Leave it on," Asami stopped him thickly.

Akihito paused, then went for his lounge pants. Asami's lounge pants. They were already bunched around his ankles and they bunched up more as Akihito dropped them. He kicked them off.

Asami groaned, dropping his head back. Because Akihito was wearing Asami's boxers too. Which
made Asami's own boxers – as in, the ones currently on his own person – even tighter.

When he looked back, Akihito was grinning. And still in those black boxers. Akihito wiggled his slender hips to shimmy out of the boxers and kicked them off too.

Eyes gleaming, sucking in a breath, Asami gorged himself on the sight. *His* shirt hung off Akihito's shoulders, the sleeves bunched around his elbows, the front parted to reveal the flat chest and stomach and the arousal more than half-mast. Under the shirt were legs that belonged best wrapped around Asami. Akihito didn't try to hide himself, staring back too, a little breathless, a little wide-eyed, feeling Asami's gaze warm him through. Akihito was edged silver with the moonlight striking him from behind.

"Invite me."

It came out rough. Asami watched those expressive eyes widen further, flitting between embarrassment and blazing desire.

"How hard do you want me to take you, Akihito?"

Akihito hesitated. But Asami could see him gathering his courage like hauling at individual strands and pulling them close. So he waited, knowing Akihito acting on his own desires was worth waiting for.

With a gulp loud enough to hear, and a brief squeeze of his eyes and an inaudible mutter to himself, Akihito turned his back. Bracing one hand on the glass, with the ring glinting on the fourth finger, he stretched his legs out wide and reached behind him with his other hand...

Asami's breath stuck.

Akihito looked over his shoulder, his cheeks blushing to the bone, as he hooked a finger into his puckered hole and *tugged*. "You wanted my Ring, right? I... prepared myself for you."

"..."

Asami's brain actually went blank for a second, he thought. The little minx... *His*...

Akihito started sliding his finger free –

"Leave it in," Asami all but growled.

Akihito froze. "Huh?"

"Leave your finger right where it is. If you take it out before I tell you, it'll be eight times you'll be coming in a row."

The threat was dire enough to leave Akihito suspended on blazing embarrassment and a bucket load of lust. He obediently left the finger buried in his ass. It fuelled Asami like a drug.

Asami he reached for the lube. Bottles and tubes were scattered throughout the condo by now, always to hand in his desk, every spare bedroom, in the *genkan* shoe cupboard, the kitchen cupboard, down the side of the couch. Several in the limo. And his office.

His every move was deliberate and controlled because it was all he could do not to brutally claim the offering, march over and haul Akihito onto his hardness, aching and more than ready... But not yet. No matter the preparation – he had a flash of Akihito *preparing* and enjoying himself as Asami and
his men had plugged a dozen greedy idiots full of bullets and groaned... But no matter how much Asami's blood was on fire, he had a hard limit about tearing Akihito. He wouldn't ram in without being sure Akihito could take it.

Draining the tumbler and tossing it carelessly aside, he rose, and prowled forward, as Akihito would have put it. The brat had told him about that once, the time he'd led a merry pursuit about the condo and provoked Asami into chasing him down, taunting and laughing gleefully all the while until Asami had finally forced submission.

Akihito challenged and fought back, he provoked and submitted, responding to Asami's moods and desires. There were still times when Asami was caught unawares that Akihito could read him so well. Like this shirt tonight. But this was the man that Asami had married. The one who knew how to stoke the darkness within him. Stoke... and sate.

"Where were you," Asami rumbled softly as he started sliding off his tie, "when you prepared for me?" He left the thin end in the knot so that there was still a loop and pulled it over his head.

"Uh... I was – uh, right there on the couch actually."

Something rumbled in Asami's chest. "How many fingers?"

He reached under Akihito and drew the loop around the hard arousal to the music of Akihito's fluttery breath. It was still loose, barely tight enough to hold, only just brushing the skin all around.

"Th-three..."

Asami draped the ends over the erection as well. Feather-light brushes, with little pressure. It would drive Akihito wild.

"Don't drop it," Asami warned.

Akihito breathed harder.

Asami stepped back. "Look up," he said as he started at his shirt buttons.

Akihito looked up, straight up into the veranda door, and quickly looked away again with a groan.

He was reflected brilliantly in the glass, lit by moonlight, the sky still dark beyond.

"How did you open yourself up?" Asami threw off his shirt. "Was it slow and gentle? Or did you fuck yourself with your fingers?" His trousers followed the shirt across the room. "Show me, Akihito. Move your finger inside you."

The flush was suffused all across Akihito's body now, but caught between self-consciousness and arousal, he dared to arch his back just a little, met the blazing gaze in the glass, and slid his finger nearly all the way out, slid it back in again.

"I can't – I can't reach like you can..."

There was a twinkle in Akihito's eyes, a curve teasing his lips. Asami's own gaze slitted as he smirked back, sucking in a breath, letting it out on a breathy chuckle. The way Akihito deliberately provoked, when he was intimately acquainted with the ferocious hunger that resided in Asami – "You're playing with fire, my dear Akihito."

Asami enjoyed the view as he finished pulling off the rest of his clothes, sighing at the significant
relief of releasing himself from the uncomfortable confines of his underwear. It wasn't often that he was nude while Akihito was clothed, but he supposed that his shirt draped on Akihito didn't count. It only enhanced the tantalizing view half covering Akihito's ass, the finger dipping inside...

Asami made quick work of lubing himself up.

He trailed the tip of his hardness against Akihito, circling the entrance where it was already a little puffy from arousal and Akihito's earlier prep – Asami was going to have to install cameras if Akihito was going to be doing that alone – and along the finger. Akihito's back arched, pushing back.

"Relax, Akihito." Asami had pitched his demand low, with a bite, and he saw the thump of Akihito's pulse. Always so responsive.

He nudged his hard length along the palm side of Akihito's finger, pushing the nail out against the ring of muscle, and pressed the head in. Small nudging thrusts, letting the muscle stretch out, slow, making Akihito feel himself extend. Akihito was panting, likely burning, but the tight round ass was still arched up, eager.

"One of these days," Asami rumbled as he kept nudging in and in, wider and wider, to the widest point. The preparation was enough, he could feel it around his engorged head, constricting hard but with enough give. "I'm using a toy on you when I'm inside. Do you think you can take two cocks, Akihito?"

There was a telling shiver and that was when Asami plunged deep the rest of the way.

"Ngghhhhh!"

The way Asami had driven in, his balls had ended up cupped in Akihito's hand. But even with the underlying tremor from the greater stretch, Akihito dutifully kept his finger inside, pressed along Asami's rock-hard length. Asami ran his hands under the shirt cast in moonlight, brushing along the slender back. Akihito shivered again, the tight ring relaxing a fraction. Asami kept soothing and caressing, occasionally pinching or scraping harder, brushing in counterpoint, as Akihito relaxed by increments.

Asami gorged on the sight in the glass reflection – Akihito was oozing.

"Shit..." Akihito muttered, eyes closed.

"That good?"

"Hurts..."

"And yet you're dripping."

Akihito groaned.

"Squeeze," Asami demanded.

Akihito's uncertainty was broadcast in every line of his body, the slight turn of the head, his stillness.

"Hold onto me," Asami said. "Squeeze me inside."

Akihito obeyed. And then moaned at the strain, the undulating waves of sensation.

Asami growled low. "Keep squeezing until I say." He rolled his hips, savouring the tight embrace.
Akihito whimpered. But it was Akihito. He rallied, even as he trembled. "But you're so biiig..."

The overdone porno voice made Asami chuckle. "I'm big for you," he purred back, making Akihito snort.

How much did he want? How much could he take tonight?

"Harder," Asami urged.

With a shaky breath, Akihito tightened more. More precum drooled to the floor.

Asami ran a reassuring hand along the spine, riding his shirt up, and felt Akihito melt. Akihito's ass was tiring, Asami could feel the telltale tremor, but obediently still squeezing.

Such a gift. Asami had never been more grateful for anything or anyone in his life.

"Ease up," Asami told him.

Akihito still held on for another second, two, before relaxing. Because he might be submitting but he was still stubborn.

Asami smirked. "Look at me."

Akihito reluctantly raised his eyes, pinpointed on Asami in the glass.

"Keep your eyes on me, Akihito. Move your ass, make me come."

Akihito started moving, as much of his own volition as Asami's demand, rocking back and forth, just small increments to start with as he adjusted. Asami could read and feel every sensation through the play of light in Akihito's eyes – the delicious strain of fullness and feeling Asami's balls nestled in his palm when he rocked back, the hunger to be filled again when he'd rocked forwards. The tie swaying on his erection was too maddeningly light and nowhere near enough. Akihito in turn was watching the arousal creasing Asami's brow, how the golden gaze struggled to remain open, and it drove him to go faster, harder, with Asami's hands hot and hungry along his skin.

"Ryu..."

That was something else Asami had noticed. He used to think that it was when Akihito was really losing it that he shortened Asami's name. But it was happening with surprising regularity. Most times they did it, in fact.

His dear husband was using a nickname.

No one had ever given him one before. No one else had called him that. And never would, he'd long decided.

"Please, Ryu..."

Such a breathless sound, as though he was all the air Akihito needed to live. And then Akihito squeezed, his finger crooking along the slick hardness and fingertips brushing Asami's balls –

Asami almost pitched without warning into orgasm, only clawing it back in the nick of time. If Akihito knew the effect he had on Asami, he'd never live it down.

But there was a smile dancing on the corners of Akihito's mouth, the dusk sky brightening but with still enough reflection to see by.
"I thought I told you to make me come," Asami mock growled.

"You almost did," Akihito said. Yes, he knew alright. "It's only you and your stupid cum control." He blushed at his own words.

"Is it, now?" Asami said lowly. "Take out your finger. Both hands on the glass."

Anticipation swirled through Akihito before he could bring himself to move. Wincing a little, he pulled his finger free and put up both hands.

Asami could seat himself completely now, pressing firmly into that last inch. Grasping Akihito's hips, he drew almost fully out and rammed back deep again. The first thrust almost took Akihito off his feet. The second was enough to send Akihito to his elbows and forehead to the glass.

Asami started up a steady driving rhythm, wrapping an arm around Akihito's chest, bracing against the glass himself, to not crush the smaller man, to pull Akihito closer into himself, it was all the same. He surged powerful and deep, more with every driving thrust, both pressed to the glass fogging with Akihito's panting breaths, rocking his hips on the end –

"Ggggnnnnngghhhh..." Akihito was barely standing, shaking and taking what Asami gave, giving what Asami took.

That was more like it. Nuzzling Akihito's head thrown back on his shoulder, Asami murmured against the flushed ear. "See how we're locked together, how deep you take me, how you drag at me inside. Just like that, never let me go. Because you'll always be mine, my Asami Akihito."

Akihito shuddered through his entirety, as though Asami was reaching someplace even deeper than he already was.

"Ryu... Ryu..." Knowing Asami would hold him, Akihito's ringed hand came off the glass and reached over, grabbing Asami's hair and pulling him in for a messy, needy, sideways kiss.

It was the roar of the apex predator inside Asami, the beast that triumphed. But far more than simple carnal conquest, it was the satisfaction at Akihito's soul-deep fulfilment. It surged through Asami's darkness brighter than the sun that broke the horizon.

Clarity flashed through the back of Asami's mind – the Europe issue, influence and angles and openings he hadn't considered – but they were a background scratch to attend to later. Nothing could turn him from the man in his arms bathed in the golden beams of dawn. Akihito's hair shone like a halo.

But before he could comment, his words were stolen right out of his mouth.

"You're glowing," Akihito breathed into the heated space between them.

Asami smirked with deliberate arrogance. "Because I'm looking at you."

Akihito gasped through his laughter as Asami chased their release, thrusting home.

"Ridiculous... corny... baka... Nnnhh... Fuck that's good..." Akihito held him tighter, with his arms and deep at his core. "Ryu... Fill me up, paint me inside, mark me yours –"

Asami readily came apart.

Akihito was grinning. Smug. Way too smug, hazel eyes bright from more than the morning sun.
Asami’s eyes narrowed.

Akihito just grinned wider, almost splitting his face in two. "You came. Before me. Before me!" He whooped the loudest, most obnoxious whoop ever – which promptly turned into a yelp as Asami pulled out and tossed him over the broad shoulder.

"Clearly I need to redress your lack of satisfaction. How many times would make it even, would you say?"

"T-times? How many... No no no! None! Let's go with none!"

"None is hardly a fair exchange for one. It can't be helped, I'll decide for you –"

"Ok one! One's good!"

"One? Very well, if you insist. I'll give you one... one entire day of pleasing each other. Doesn't that sound good?"

"Wh– th– you're crazy! You're gonna kill me! Wait – why're you going that way?!
Kirishima was attempting to smoke out an elusive contact when a message pinged up in a little used personal inbox. Only a very select few had the contact email – plus one notable other who'd availed himself of it without so much as a by your leave.

*Hey Mr Khaki-san! ;P*

That was no surprise. However the A–D voting buttons that came with the message was unexpected. Kirishima knew the value of investing the time and effort to read these emails now, but he still had to mentally fortify himself.

*So I heard from our friend Artemis who tells me that she's stalking some Russian fop, I'm calling him Mr Magenta Amaranth (which makes him pink pink! ha!). So Mr Magenta thinks he's hacked into Mr Asparagus' uh... let's call it Risky Toys Factory Records. But he's actually kicking around in the back-end of Nowhere Town with an exit to Nowhere Ville simulated by our lovely goddess Artemis.

This might be a good time to tell you I've been busy... I've evolved Artemis into a full-fledged cyber super-guardian! Not just search, contain and mimic, though she can still do that and a whole lot better than before. But she can infiltrate and target now too, which means dispensing our own form of justice. Which means options!

*Quiz time!*

Do you want to A – Tap into Mr Magenta's security surveillance feed and watch clandestine meetings? Artemis is offended by him wearing fuck all right now though so you might wanna avert your eyes. Or distribute the video widely. Your choice. But we're not crude are we? No sir. We can superimpose a colourful flying elephant in a strategic place. He's bound to appreciate us protecting his modest modesty, right? [Angel emoji]

Or B – Nose around his hard drive a bit. Or maybe a lot. Actually Artemis already started a download dump 'cos she's a compulsive data hoover, she tells me there's some seriously juicy shit in there. I'm convinced she's a bit of a bitch at heart. Maybe she takes after her creator... Ha. [Winking emoji]

Or C – Mr Magenta needs to learn to leave Mr Asparagus the fuck alone. I don't mean business, I'm
not touching that with a barge pole. I'm talking risk to his person. Mr Titanium’s got his back and
this kinda shit ain't gonna fly no more.

Every day, Artemis is going to hunt Mr Magenta down, and no matter what computer or phone or
tablet he tries to sneak off to, he's gonna be on digital lockdown until he gives the password of our
choosing. Out loud. She'll connect to the mike, verify voice recognition, set a minimum decibel
reading to pass. He just has to start every single day by yelling "Asami rules!" (or whatever we want
to make him shout, "My dick is puny!"? or even a hearty song!) then he can go his merry way. Until
the next day when it all happens again. For however long until we decide he's learned his lesson. I
know, hardcore, right? [Tongue out emoji] Artemis can't MAKE him, of course, but he'd be locked
out of all phones and anything computer-like until he does. How long before he caves, do you think?
And if he goes apeshit and tries to come back at us, well that's what option D's for.

So D – Do all three. Surveillance, leverage, sentence, in a nutshell.

You know the one you want to go for. Go for it Mr Khaki-san. Go on. Do it. Do it!

Oh and see you later – you and Mr Saffron are still coming for dinner right? Failure is not an
option. I know the sprinkler system ruined it last time but you can totally blame Mr Asparagus for
that!! Him and aprons, I don't get the fascination. Just keep him away until dinner's all ready and
Mr Saffron won't have to come charging in again. [Monkey hiding face]

Laters!

Mr Titanium [Cool shades emoji]

... Kirishima took a moment to breathe. Interacting with the young man was always like being
thrown through a hurricane. Twice. And he wasn’t sure he’d ever quite get used to what the
unassuming tech genius was capable of. Or his... 'nascent' cooking skills. Asami never seemed to
have any complaints, however, so it certainly wasn't Kirishima's place to comment. Not that that ever
stopped Suoh from finding some way of teasing about it.

Kirishima scrolled back up to the voting buttons. He knew the one he wanted to choose, to the point
of considering whether he could 'accidently' make the selection before forwarding the message to his
boss... And if a twitch of a grin broke through his cast-iron demeanour at picturing Mikhail Arbatov's
apoplectic rage over his daily yelling, it was a secret he'd take to the grave.

Asami Ryuichi and Akihito together? The world wasn't going to know what had hit it.

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