The red-head looks at Raoul, who arches one brow and looks back at him questioningly. “No, Katze, I don’t know. And quite frankly, I don’t see how this conversation has anything to do with—oh.” At first, the Blondie appears scandalized, but then starts laughing, leaving Katze even more puzzled. “Have I said anything wrong?”

“You thought—you thought—that I—that I don’t have—” Raoul can’t stop laughing and, very slowly, Katze starts to see what he’s misinterpreted; he smiles sheepishly. “Sorry.”
Raoul wipes tears of laughter from his eyes and regards the mongrel with interest. “After being around me for so long, why would you think my body was created anything less than perfect?”

To Katze, the sentence is like a slap – a reminder how imperfect he is. “I thought you’d said that you—oh.” Finally, the truth downs on Katze and he looks at the Blondie with shocked expression. “You do? You do remember me before I was—you know, you remember me as a brat, I mean? But how? You didn’t know me then—”

“Really?” Raoul’s eyes are still sparkling with mischief and laughter, but in a matter of seconds, they revert to being cold and scrutinizing. “How do you think Pets and Furnitures were chosen before the Great Black Market Dealer Katze came along, hmmm?” Raoul’s voice is dripping with malice and sarcasm now. Yet, his touch on mongrel’s thigh never ceases.

“There were others—”

“And you really think anything that grew in Ceres was allowed to make choices for the most important citizens of Tanagura?”

“I was—”

“And you’ve never wondered why?”

Katze shakes his head in embarrassment “No… wait, anything? Is that what you all called us—”

“We still do.”

Just a few moments ago, Katze felt like the Blondie and himself were having a decent conversation, that they were on somewhat similar planes, but now, the illusion has been broken and the reality of their relationship comes crashing back. He hangs his head.

“And why have you said us? You’re not one of them, Katze. You’ve never been.” Raoul touches Katze’s chin and lifts his face up. “Why are you so distressed? It’s the reality of life.”

“No, it’s not. It’s the reality of Jupiter.”

“And on Amoi, she’s the giver of life.”

“She’s also a destroyer of it.”

Katze feels like he can’t take this conversation anymore; not after what he’s been through so recently. He feels dizzy and queasy; he swats away Raoul’s hand and starts to get up. “I need air. Is there—” But at this moment his knees buckle and he falls painfully to the floor. Raoul stands back and watches him. “You know the way out.”

“I’m not going through that room again. There has to be other way; I don’t believe you subject yourself to what you’re subjecting everybody else to.”

“There is a way.” Blondie’s voice is amused and Katze feels like there is another piece of the puzzle he’s missing. “I was going to take you through there, but you don’t seem to be willing to accompany me anywhere.”
“I’ll follow… as long as I can walk far from you and it’s not through that room.” Katze tries to stand up and catch his balance, and once again, Raoul has to steady him by grasping his arm, and pulling him in direction of the dark corner of the library. Staying true to his word, Katze slaps the Blondie’s hand away and trails a few steps behind. They walk slowly, with Katze stumbling every few steps. “What’s happening to me, Raoul?”

Blondie doesn’t even look at him. “I guess your exhaustion has finally caught up with you. You have to remember that it doesn’t have to be anything physical to drain your strength.”

“I’m numb and weak, and you are still playing games with me. Why are you so cruel Raoul?”

“Am I? I haven’t noticed. No one has ever pointed it out to me—”

“No one would have dared.”

“Iason would.”

“He wouldn’t have noticed.” Katze shudders at the memory. “He was even more cruel than you are.”

“I haven’t noticed.” Raoul’s voice is dispassionate – almost bored. “Let’s change topic. This one is just making you think more stressful thoughts and is not conductive to—”

“Not that you care!”

“Why would you say this, Katze? I’ve left you alive, isn’t it enough of a proof of caring?”

On a rational level, Katze understands that to any Blondie this may be enough, but the human inside of him yearns for something more. He also knows that Blondies think more in categories of value than anything else, so caring may just as well be seeing the future usefulness. “Right. So, why did you leave me alive? What advantage you hope to gain?”

“Advantage? Do you think so highly of yourself, Katze? You think you can’t be replaced? That there’s no one capable of doing your job?”

“I don’t know, is there?”

“Yes.”

This simple answer freezes Katze’s blood. He knows that if he can be replaced, his removal is just a matter of time. For a longer while, he’s not able to speak and they walk in complete silence; he finally finds his voice when they stop in front of a door and Raoul puts his hands on a doorknob. “What do you want from me, Raoul?” His voice is a barely audible, shaky whisper. Raoul pushes the door open, revealing his private bedroom. “What are you willing to give me, Katze?”

The question surprises Katze. “I didn’t know that I need to give you a permission.”

“I’m not a savage.”

“No, you are not – you are much worse.”
“Explain.”

Realizing how incredibly bold he was, Katze struggles with words. “You are… not a human—”

“Is this a definition? Beasts can be savages too.” Raoul is watching Katze with intensity, which makes the mongrel squirm. Blondie’s face is becoming stormier with every passing moment.

“You know I didn’t mean anything bad, Raoul. It just… came out wrong. I didn’t—”

“You’ve meant something that you’re not willing to share. Yet, I insist.” Blondie’s insistence is more of a veiled threat and Katze realizes it quite well. “Are you going to oblige, or do I have to find a different way to convince you?”

“No need for that, Raoul.”

“Well then, shall we begin?”

Katze knows that Raoul will get what he wants one way, or another, but by obliging, he hopes he can somehow walk out of this. If only he could lie a bit. If only Raoul wasn’t so close. Almost as if he knew what’s on Katze’s mind, Raoul interrupts his thoughts. “Just don’t try to lie to me. You know how this ends.”

“What do you want to hear?”

“The truth.”

“No, no you don’t.”

“Try me.”

“And pay for it with my life? No, thank you. I have some self-preservation instinct left.” But by saying this, Katze knows that he’s just condemned himself. If not now then later, Raoul will get what he wants; there are drugs and there is fear - both equally effective in extracting information.

“Good, let’s sit down and talk.” The Blondie walks into his room, sits on the edge of the bed, and indicates the floor. Katze sighs and gracelessly plops down. You just wanted to put me in my rightful place, didn’t you, Raoul? He hates being so weak, so pliant, and so scared. Yet, when he speaks, he shows no emotions. “You, the Scientist.” Katze, hatefully, spits out every word. “You take what you want and you experiment on whomever you wish. You: the infallible Blondie of Tanagura.”

“You regard me as a Master of the fallen world, Katze?”

“No, it’s Jupiter’s realm. You, just like me, are her minion. Yet, you think you have enough power to disobey anyone; to defy your goddess. You think that you are living in the world of reason where everything is logical. Yet, the reality rears up its ugly head doesn’t it? You don’t understand it, you hate it, you’re afraid of it. And you kill what you’re scared of.”

“You speak of fear, as if I knew what it was.”

“You can instill it in others—”

“Just a cascade of biochemical reactions. Triggered responses that can be controlled.”
“Not everything is science. You can’t explain everything—”

“Yes, I can. Take you, for example. I know precisely how to make you respond to a given stimuli. Fear, passion, pity—”

“All of which you have never experienced. You can make me feel them, but they won’t be true. They won’t come from within.”

“I don’t need them to be true – just effective.”

Katze knows that they are.

“You have me all wrong, Katze.”

“Do I? I highly doubt it.”

“I didn’t understand Iason; yet, I didn’t kill him.”

“No, the opportunity did it for you.” Even Katze is shocked by those words. He never dared to think like this, but now, this is the only logical outcome of the conversation. Still, he’s just told Raoul the world is not logical. “No, no that’s not true. You would have saved him if you could, wouldn’t you, Raoul?”

“Yes. He was my… I guess you’d call him a friend.”

“I suppose so.”

The Blondie looks curiously at Katze. “I knew there was a reason why Iason made you the Black Market Dealer. You are intelligent – for your lot.”

“My lot?”

“Don’t get offended, Katze. We both know that we come from different worlds that should never mix. Yet we need each other to survive and even thrive – call it a symbiosis if you will.”

“Only one of us is thriving, though.”

“Really? Why don’t you give it a try, Katze? I could help you to rebuild yourself—or rather, I could return you to your, shall we say, natural state. Isn’t it what you’re preaching? Nature? Or you consider that unnatural? Wouldn’t it be thriving?”

“You’re perverting my words, Raoul.”

“Why else would you object? Dwellers of Ceres hate us, because we are made by Jupiter yet, they envy us. Given the opportunity, each and every one of them would take it, but not you. Do you consider yourself so much better than the rest of them? More natural?”

“No.” Katze ponders his question for a moment; his puzzlement has to show, because Raoul tilts his head and regards him with curiosity. “I don’t know how to explain it.”
“Try.” The Blondie rests his chin in the palm of his hand and falls silent.

“How can I? Symbiosis you say? In a way, maybe. You took it from me, my manhood that is, and made me into an object – that’s a rather parasitic behavior, not—”

“You’ve benefited from it, didn’t you, Katze? Or perhaps you think you could be something entirely different? Grow beyond Ceres? Become someone?”

“We’ll never know, don’t we?”

This statement makes Raoul laugh and he does it uninhibitedly. “Yes, we do know. How many have made it out of Ceres unchanged?”

Katze refuses to back down. “I don’t know and you wouldn’t tell me even if you knew.”

“Maybe.” Raoul is very serious now. “Yet, there was at least one Pet that made it. The one natural creature that brought down the most powerful Blondie.”

“Riki.”

“Yes, him.”

They both fall silent until Katze can’t take the silence. “Is this what you’re afraid of? That I will bring you down? Is this why you want to change me? To hold it over my head forever? You know my loyalties, Raoul.”

“They’ve died with Iason.”

“Or so you think.” The conversation starts to tire Katze out and he can feel another bound of headache approaching. “I need to go, Raoul. I don’t feel well.”

“Just lie down and I will get you something for the nausea.”

The red head doesn’t need much convincing and lies down. Raoul gets up from the bed and leaves the room; when he comes back, he kneels on the floor, next to Katze. “Can you lift your head?” Katze, who was starting to drift into oblivion, is jerked back from his half-comatose state. “Yes.” Yet, he’s unable to summon his strength. I guess, the day’s events are finally catching up with me. He feels surprisingly calm and unconcerned, even as he is ever more aware of Raoul’s hand gliding down his neck and dipping under the collar.

“You’re so pretty, Katze.”

“Lie.”

“Have you ever known me to tell a lie?”

“No.”

The hand disappears and Katze feels a pill being pushed into his mouth. “This should help you with dizziness. Do you need a sip of water?” The concern is uncharacteristic for the Blondie, his hand returns to caressing Katze’s neck, dipping ever lower and when the hand stops gliding down his body stop, Katze sighs in disappointment. “That felt good.”
“Did it, now?”

“Why did you stop?” There’s something unnerving in the laughter that follows his statement. “Have I said anything funny?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. What have you been thinking of, mongrel?”

This catches Katze off guard. Mongrel? Again? “Would you give it up already, Raoul?” The pill is apparently working and Katze starts to feel the first twinges of anxiety.

“Were you thinking about me perhaps?” Raoul’s tone is cold, but amused. Exasperated, Katze opens his eyes. The scene that greets him is paralyzing; Raoul in white lab coat stands with an empty syringe in his hand. Katze’s own clothes are still piled up next to the surgical table he’s laying on. A scream builds deep inside of his throat, but he chokes it back. “What have you done to me, Raoul?”

Blondie laughs again and looks at the syringe in his hand. “Marvelous. I wonder if it’s working exactly how I’d hoped it would.”

“How is it supposed to work?” Katze’s voice barely escapes his constricted throat. His chafed wrists and ankles start to scream in pain and that, finally, fully brings him back to reality. “Raoul?” Blondie cocks his head and regards Katze with interest. “How much time do you think passed?”

“I don’t know. Hours?” His head is pounding.

“Minutes.”

“Impossible!” Katze’s mind is racing now: the room, the library, Raoul’s bedroom. It has to be at least a six or seven hours.

“Nothing’s impossible when one enters the realm of human mind.”

“You want to tell me—” Katze stutters and doesn’t even try to stop the tears of fear that roll down his cheeks. Through pain and panic, he tries to formulate a coherent question. “What was it then? An alternative reality?”

Raoul reaches toward the red-head’s cheek and wipes his tears. “No, it was a dream, nothing but a dream; nightmarish, or beautiful, but just a figment of your imagination. It seems that the compound works marvelously on weak minds. What were you dreaming about?”

At these words, Katze dies a bit inside. “Nothing.”

“Then, why were you whispering my name?”

“I wasn’t—”

“—and it wasn’t in fear.”

Humiliated, Katze closes his eyes in shame. “Can you give me another shot of whatever you gave me? An overdose maybe?” His questions are met with silence, and then, when the silence seems to last eternity, he hears snapping of a glove. He tens at the touch of Raoul’s bare hand on his cheek. “Raoul?” The hand is then replaced by warm, soft lips and Katze stops caring if this is reality or not.
THE END

End Notes

Once again, I have to apologize for the long lapse between chapters! Thank you for sticking with the story until the bitter end!

Also, if you see any mistake(s), please let me know so that I can fix it.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!