Divining Infinity
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### Divining Infinity

by Green_Destiny

**Summary**

Sometimes the universe can be a passive and improbable place, but it may also unleash the most unexpected of gifts. Asami's world as he knows it is set adrift by a fateful encounter with a strange and fascinating young man.

**Warning:** This story contains explicit artwork.

### Notes

This is an illustrated fic. It's the first time I've done anything like this before, in fact it's the first time I've written anything seriously - as serious as an idea gets. Nervousness = Yes. I spent about a year and a half writing this in total secret. The plot seed I had in my head grew and grew and now I feel the responsibility of nurturing what has now grown beyond my expectation. It's ambitious and I know I'm mad for doing it but I'm having a whale of a time with it and my brain doesn't seem to want to stop.

Your words and thoughts are more than welcome. Please enjoy!

My immeasurable thanks goes to the fabulous Eprime for her glorious red pen, the encouragement, support and for listening to my ramblings and insecurities with the kindest of
hearts. You're a treasure <3
Exhaling the Fire

“Take a deep breath in—”

Asami can’t remember the last time he visited the doctor’s surgery, and longer still, since he’s felt the cold head of a stethoscope pressing against his chest.

“—and breathe out.”

This pain is getting to him.

Japan’s climate doesn't compare to the cold, dry mountain ranges around Lake Geneva. The high altitude air is thin and starved of oxygen but Asami wouldn’t usually feel weak just from sitting on the veranda of his hotel, with a cognac and a Cuban cigar, celebrating the closure of his Central European business tour with the mesmerising peaks of the Alps.

Since he’s been away, the international markets were shaken up. There were problems in Japan. He knew things must be going into the dust because he found a letter on his desk from the Ministry of Finance upon his return to the office. An economic state of emergency to stop Japan from committing suicide, in as many words — thinly veiled and very thinly worded lest it give any impression that Japan ever owned up to its problems. Rumours arrived on the back of Asami’s multi-trillion yen land-grab success in Europe, and the ministry must’ve been all ears.

They consider him a superpower now — on par with Premiers and lawmakers and even the elusive secret service. “The Midas of East Asia” has been passed around in various circles — he doesn’t care for decadent, superfluous names, only that his responsibilities have grown greater than the borders of Sion. The prospect of yet another business buyout has Asami drastically thinning out his competition. It isn’t any wonder that businesses are steering themselves into the shit at the thought of competing against the giant Sion Corporation.

Government coercion has been (for lack of a better word) affectionate, with more absolute immunity bestowed upon him than he could ever be deserving of, you’d think Asami single handedly saved the Earth from going the way of the dinosaurs. But in any real challenge, Asami’s Saviour Complex has always been a very nonexistent thing.

Entertaining them couldn’t be considered the best thing he’s done in a good, long business year. They’re shambolic to the very last of them. Fat, cajoling cabinet ministers rubbing shoulders like they’re going to drink and smoke themselves out of fiscal degradation, and Asami’s finding he’s more frequently out of cigarettes and staring into the bottom of an empty whiskey glass.

He visits the surgery out of hours, away from media speculation that the great Asami Ryuichi visiting a doctor means it’s the end of it all. He’d postponed the visit until after his European trip and it’s probably more than overdue.

“Take a deep breath one more time,” his doctor says, and he breathes in long and deep, overextending his lungs and coughing out nasty, barbing pain from within his chest. The dull pain grabs his whole body and he hacks repeatedly.

The doctor lowers his stethoscope from his ears and wheels his chair back to his notes, looking at them scrupulously before asking, “How long did you say you’ve had this cough and restriction in your chest?”

“Since the beginning of this year,” Asami says, rebuttoning the front of his shirt.
The doctor gives a plaintive frown while he jots notes down onto paper. “We’re in mid-April now, that’s a long time to go without getting it checked out.”

“I was away for the beginning of the year, on business.”

The doctor sighs and peers over his half-moon glasses at him, expecting to receive such an answer. “That’s not an excuse.”

His physician, Kaneda-sensei, is one of those old men your parents told you to respect without question growing up. He’s old, as old as Asami’s father would have been by now, perhaps even older, and that's why he feels a certain fondness towards this man, who’s so unimpressed by position, wealth, and status that it makes Asami offhandedly think of him. He’s being scolded for not taking better care of himself, but more so, in a less direct manner, because he hasn’t been to see this man in over a year.

“This has a lot to do with your smoking,” Kaneda adds, “You know, patches don’t seem so bad when it has the potential of extending your life by twenty years, because that’s what you’ll be losing.”

“I’m well aware of that fact.”

“And it doesn’t make you stop?”

Sighing in this man’s face would be disgracefully impolite but it’s not the first time his smoking habits have been brought up in question. “A man must do what he can to get through the trials a single day brings.”

“I’m sure he must,” Kaneda answers wryly. He reaches into his desk drawer and files through the bundles of health leaflets he’s never given out because paper will never tell you to your face what a doctor can in worrisomely brutal honesty. Instead he picks out the medical photographs and fans them out on the desk. Asami looks at them, impassively.

“I’m guessing you’re familiar with these photographs, of what thirty a day can do to your organs.”

“My insides are like a modern day Francis Bacon portrait — but it’s been my dream since childhood, Sensei.”

Kaneda finds himself chuckling. “You’re very jovial about it. But this,” he points to the black, tar ridden lungs in the photographs, “This is a window into your own chest. I’m going to request an immediate chest X-ray and a full blood test. Until the next time I see you, Nicotine patches should stave off your cravings, and I’ll prescribe medication for the mucus buildup.”

“Thank you, sensei.” Asami stands up to leave but Kaneda’s voice stops him short of the door.

The older man removes his glasses and places them on the desk, one less barrier between them. “Asami-san, I’m speaking to you from one man to another. We are the best at abusing our own bodies, but please do not neglect your health. This hospital that you built from the ground up is important to many. As are you.”

“It won’t crumble if I’m gone.” Asami says, and offers a last gracious nod before turning to the door. “Good day, Sensei.”
As soon as he’s outside of the hospital he puts a cigarette between his lips, lighting it in one swift motion. All the talk about health and malformed organs and all he could think about was how badly he wanted to light one up.

Kirishima stands attentive by his side. “Where to, sir?”

With a moment to exhale and think, Asami turns to Kirishima with a small, sardonic smile. “Let’s pay our good friend Kinjo-san a visit. I’d say it’s more than overdue, am I right?”

“Yes sir. I’ll bring the car around.”

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Kinjo Takumi is a cretin of a man.

Of all the unfortunate things to have passed through the axle of Sion Corporation in Asami’s months of absence, none have come close to vexing him more than this man. This disease, Kinjo Takumi, is the former shipment coordinator of one of Asami’s mid-Asian routes.

His concrete block apartment is on the slightly poorer side of Shinjuku, on the underbelly of the bright city lights, a place Asami rarely visits of his own accord, least of all for this piece of gutless vermin.

The broken light box flickers with a static pulse at the end of the narrow dingy corridor, not nearly enough space for the five large men, but they walk as one collective shadow. Kinjo’s apartment is
the last on the left, with the metal Ichthus symbol above the door that’s hard to miss. Asami glances up at it before one of his men raps at the door.

Within seconds, the door narrowly opens and an eye peers through the small slit, the chain from the other side bolting it to the wall, and a small frightened man shrivels from the other side. A nerve shatters in one of the bodyguards when Kinjo piddles with the lock for too long and they barge through, snapping the chain. The lanky man stumbles back from the force, in shock and surprise. “A—Asami-sama! I didn’t……w—what brings you —”

The air takes leave when Asami and his men step into the apartment, tiny and dirty and absolutely made for Kinjo. When Asami takes a step forward, Kinjo backtracks about five, knocking himself on the rubbish strewn coffee table. He has a sickliness about him that makes the bile rise in Asami’s throat. A cancerous, repulsively thin man, Kinjo’s balding head and discoloured broken teeth emphasise the nervous wreck that he is. The overwhelming stink from the man is wretched, but Asami is unperturbed, he’s not here to make this quick visit a pleasant one.

“Can you read a calendar, Kinjo?” Asami says in relative calm.

Kinjo’s bald head bobs, “Y—yes sir.”

“What day is it today?”

“April…..f—fourteenth.”

“Are you aware that the first of the month has passed by two weeks?”

He scurries like an ape gone wild onto his feet. “P—P—Please, if y—you let me explain—”

Asami only moves to take a cigarette out of his pocket but Kinjo flinches for his life, a nerve that’s just popped somewhere in his tiny head, and his whole body swivels back to avoid even the hint of violence in Asami’s brutal glare.

“That’s what I’m waiting to hear, Kinjo. Now, we’re all busy men with things to do, so spit it out, I haven’t got all day.”

Kinjo stumbles back and holds his hands up in defence and stammers like he’s taken a bolt to the brain. “E—Everything was according to s—schedule…the date when they would sh—ship to port….but Asami-sama, t—t—they shot him! The guy…he —”

Asami’s about to light his cigarette but he pauses and places it back into the packet. “Who was shot?”

“M—Matsuda! T—they came out of nowhere, and they — he was shot!”

“Kinjo,” Asami cuts him off and it sends Kinjo’s nerves affray. It’s amazing how a single word can make the blood crystallise in your veins. “If anything came up short of what is expected, I would know about it.”

“N—N—No! You don’t understand. This was—”

“If anyone was shot, I would most certainly know about it.” With a flick of a finger, Asami gives the order. “Hold him down.”

Like a black swarm, his men slam Kinjo down over the coffee table, face down with his arms out in front of him as the pleas fly. His breath is hard to deal with, like a thousand year old decaying sulphurous slime, it reeks to high heaven. The very sight of him offends Asami.
“Tell me, who is the one responsible for all of this?”

“Asami-sama, I….I don’t…please…”

“I’ll tell you,” Asami says and comes close enough that he can smell the fear emanating from Kinjo’s rotten self. “You are. It’s you who is responsible for my shipments reaching the docks and for everything to be accounted for, in and out of the country. Was this not made clear to you?”

“Yes...but they...they wouldn’t—”

Asami's form looms over him as he continues, “See, now you’re forgetting our little agreement. The agreement that we made when you stole what was mine. Do you remember?”

Kinjo squeals something akin to a dying animal when it all comes back to him and nods a pitiful, “Yes.”

“You must know, there are things I detest in men — weak men, that I try to avoid crossing unfortunate paths with, but you’re inevitably everywhere. So when I look at you, and I see that weakness drip from you, enough to fill a sea of your kind, I want to eradicate you, so I never have to happen upon this unfortunate situation again. So it is in your best interest that you do not lie to me.”

Kinjo garbles in tongues, and it sounds unhuman, gurgling on his own blood as he’s bitten his tongue from the jungle snarl in Asami’s voice. He cowers on the table, or tries to while being held down, and Asami’s still prowling around him, waiting for his answer. “Well?”

“I—I....w—was told that it w—would be delayed, s—so I—”

“So you what?”

“Asami-sama, they were willing to...n—n—negotia—te....for h—half the amount.”

“Negotiate for half,” Asami repeats with the serenest of smiles. “Do you think I conduct business so favourably that I would, firstly, negotiate with terrorists, and secondly, settle for only half the appointed goods? All of it is mine, not half. Half is as good to me as nothing at all. When I demand something, I demand one hundred percent of it, or don’t waste my time.”

“It—it was the only—”

“It sounds like you don’t have the answer I’m looking for. Just like you didn’t have the answers back then.”

No. No one seemed to know how hundreds of kilograms of unrefined opiates were compromised along the route from Afghanistan to China. Or how heroin was slowly being pilfered from stocks in dwindling amounts before it reached the port in Japan. Pharmaceutical manufacturers are surprisingly hostile when the stock is slightly less than promised, and the shipment coordinator himself hasn’t the slightest clue as to how this all happened. But then again, no one did tell Kinjo that heroin was one hell of a drug.

“I took care of your little friends selling my marked goods on the street for a pittance of their worth,” Asami informs him. “Because of them, and because of you, tell me again why I have to tell the hospitals that their drugs aren’t getting to them this month?”

“...P—Please — ”

“How many people will be refused treatment? How many will suffer?”
Asami flicks up his palm and silently requests for the object one of his men has concealed on their person. He opens the metallic tool, gracefully exposing the blade of the butterfly knife. "Tell me, Kinjo, have you heard of Five-Fingered Goro?"

The name rings alarm bells in Kinjo’s head. A name that lives in infamy, that of Saeki Goro, whose hands have five fingers between the two of them. He immediately cowers and squeals at the knowledge of the question.

The whimpering is pathetic and it makes Asami want to grind his heel into the back of his bald, sweaty head. "Spread his hands."

“No! N—No! P—Please...God...no...”

When Asami looks at the way he struggles, he remembers that Kinjo was once a stable man, honest and responsible, an image of professionalism. Asami also remembers that Kinjo had a loving family once. He’d met them on one occasion. In Kinjo’s words, the three glowing ‘Gifts from God’. It’s interesting to note that despite his rather less than wholesome existence, Kinjo still remains a devout and God-fearing Christian.

“Kinjo, what does your god think about people like you?” He looks at the sharpened point of the blade as he says it.

“I—I...I don’t —”

“What says your god to the wretched people who are so misfortunate to look like you?”

It takes more than a moment or two for the cretin’s half a brain to grind into gear. Asami holds the knife in a reverse grip and raises it high, and Kinjo’s struggling and screaming a sickly, "Oh please, God no...!", as Asami slams the knife into the wooden table, lodging it between Kinjo’s middle and fourth finger. The accuracy isn’t short of frightening. Kinjo starts crying then, and his spittle goes everywhere.

There’s a small pause in the air that Asami knows is a moment of clarity for Kinjo. This time, his heel does come down onto Kinjo’s head, pressing his skull down like he’s trying to snuff him out altogether. The distaste he finds in himself to be touching a part of Kinjo’s rotten self with something as beautiful as the sole of his hand-made Italian leather shoe reminds him that vulgarity and beauty coexist in this world, and can collide, whether one wishes for it or not.
“Do you fear your god, Kinjo?"

“I—It….it hurts!”

“Do you?”

“Y—Yes...!”

His heel still on the vile neck, Asami moves to dislodge the blade from the table and scrapes the side of it along Kinjo’s bald, sweating scalp to his ear, across his cheek to his nose, because really, there isn’t a single part Asami doesn’t want to sever permanently from his rotten body, slowly and painfully. “What is it that makes you fear?”

“P—please...God...merciful God!”

Asami presses the flat of the knife harder. “Answer me.”

Eventually, Kinjo screams and it’s all sweet music to Asami. “W—wrath! I fear wrath.”

“Yes. You fear his wrath because, deep down, you know that you’re a bad man, and it’s a wonder you’re still walking free knowing the things you’ve done. Would that be a fair judgement?”

Yelps, sobs, and another pitiful confirmation forms from his fear infected mouth.

Asami sets his foot back down onto the floor and closes the knife, handing it back to his bodyguard. “The very thought of you appals me, but yet I must look at you, begging like a stray runaway to his master for forgiveness. What would your loved ones think of you? To know you stole from the hand that feeds you and chose to poison yours and the veins of others instead of being a father, a husband. A soul worthy of this life.”
He nudges the bruised, needle-scarred skin of the man’s arms with the side of his foot. “One day the blood will curdle in your veins once and for all. Would your family forgive the sight of you?”

Kinjo sobs at the thought of his family.

“If you wish to know, they're safe. Right now as we speak, they’re enjoying a cruelty-free life far away from this location. They've been given new names, new identities, allowed to make a fresh start.”

“S—s—safe…?”

“You'll never find them, and you’ll never be a danger to them.”

“...God…”

Anger threatens to surface at hearing that word. “They’re safe because I put them there. Not your god. Me. The same way that I can place you in hell at any moment of my desire, in any manner of ways your small brain wouldn’t begin to contemplate. If you’ve so imagined the visions of hell itself, they would be a paradise in comparison.”

Asami raises himself up, cobra-like and lethal. “So tell me again, what it is that makes you fear?”

“Y—You, Asami-sama! It’s you!”

“But your god is a kind and merciful one who forgives, does he not?”

“H—he does.”

“How will he forgive you?”

“By…b—becoming...g—good...”

“And who is it that stands before you now?”

“You—you do, Asami-sama.”

“Your crime was towards me before it was to god. So your repentance shall be towards me before it is to be given to him. How will your repentance be made?”

“By honouring m—my word, Asami—s—sama.”

“So you understand then. And I’ll hold you to your word, Kinjo Takumi.” He turns to his guards, motioning with his hand. “Release him.”

Kinjo gasps and drops down onto the floor in front of Asami with his forehead bowing to the floor, inches away from Asami’s feet and pressing his mouth to kiss the face of each shoe. “F—forgive me, Asami-sama! Forgive my insult to you! I beg you, forgive me!”

Asami observes with displeasure but he doesn’t stop him, finding an odd satisfaction to hearing his taint-ridden mouth spilling reverence like a burning insult to his own faith. “Do this deed to my satisfaction, and see it...considered. There’s surveillance placed all around this apartment and a twenty-four-seven watch team. Do not attempt to run away. Do not attempt to hide. Do not attempt to kill yourself. Do not fail, or you’ll wish that your god had the power to save you from me. Am I understood?”

“Yes, Asami-sama! It will be done! It will be done.”
“Good. You have ten days from today. I’ll arrange a new suit to be delivered to you, and cleaners to clear up this filth. If you ever intend on doing any business for me, I won’t have you looking like the living dead. If you cannot close this deal with adequacy, they might as well start calling you ‘Five-Fingered Kinjo’. And who knows what else you may lose after that.”

“Oh, thank you, Asami-sama! Thank you! Thank you for putting your faith in me.”

Asami and his men take leave of the apartment in the wake of Kinjo’s quiet sobs.

Freshness returns to them once again in the abundance of cool night air, and they can finally breathe again. Suoh brings the car around to retrieve them from the sordid backstreet — the quicker they can vacate this place, the better.

Once they're in the car, Asami reads the silence off the back of Kirishima’s head. It’s a minute splinter in bamboo (if there’s ever a comparison) to his assistant’s mannerly poise, but he cannot let it go unanswered from the very man he trusts with his life.

“What is it, Kirishima?”

“Asami-sama, forgive me, but I don’t think Kinjo will make good on the deal. He seems rather unstable.”

Asami chuckles. “Oh, he will make good, and he knows he will.”

“Would it not be wise to cut him loose from your bond? He’s already proved untrustworthy.”

“Not just yet. It’s amazing, Kirishima, to observe a man who fears death as much as he does, and a man who fears me more than the retribution of God himself. That fear will drive a man to his purpose. You’ll see, in due time. Mastering someone else’s fate is to do ‘God’s’ work all for himself, an irony I particularly favour.” He stares out at the moving traffic before calling to the driver.

“Suoh, take me back to Sion. I still have some things to take care of.”

“Yes, boss.”

The skyline of the Sion Corp headquarters gives a much needed change of scenery. Sion is a monument of Shinjuku, the highest point in the sky, affording a view of the mouth of Tokyo Bay to the left and the snowy cap of Mount Fuji to the right — and at the center of it is Asami’s empire, perfectly situated at the heart of this sleepless city.

He has contracts that need signatures, figures that need looking over, and more meetings than he has hours in the day to postpone. Earlier, his personal chef prepared a meal for him and sent it up with a card, thanking him for the surprise bonus he’d received this month. With his culinary attentiveness and a new baby on the way, Asami does well to look after his employ, and they reward him with stuffed lobster tail, seared and cooked to perfection.

Appetites aside, Kirishima is supposed to have dropped the minutes of the recent group meeting onto his desk, an absence he’s noticed ever since they returned to Sion. He’s about to buzz him in his
office when the man in question shows up in his office, breathing laboured and full of urgency, and Asami knows that all is not sound.

“Asami-sama, we’ve received reports that someone has been sighted on the roof of Club Babylonia.”

Asami processes the frantic panic of his assistant and of the second guard bounding in after him that has him rising from his seat. “Is this for certain?”

Nomura heaves with a steadying breath. “Here, sir, see it for yourself.” He hands over the binoculars and Asami gives a questioning pause before taking it. “Has security been alerted?”

“Of course, sir, men have been dispatched as we speak, but it’ll take them at least three and a half minutes to get through security checks right to the top tower.”

Asami stands at the window and adjusts the dials of the binoculars to focus on Club Babylonia a short distance away from Sion. He scans the building and for a second he thinks he sees a shadowy figure on the roof, standing still then quickly moving, but he can’t be sure. He switches to night vision and the silhouette is no longer there, instead he watches as his security team storms the rooftop like little wasps in a hive, aggressively seeking their target.

“Could it be a suicide?” Nomura suggests, and there’s a pregnant pause of concern on both their faces as Kirishima talks through his earpiece to request a ground team to check the vicinity for a body.

Asami returns to his seat and places the binoculars on the table, addressing this situation with a level head. “If it does turn out to be suicide, that would indeed be a problem, except security is complex. It wouldn’t be easy for anyone to get up there without authorised access, and a person drunk or thinking irrationally, even less so.”

“Another spy then, perhaps?” Kirishima offers, and Asami leans into his seat, contemplating the possibility.

“A problem of equal magnitude. We haven’t had one of those in a while but they always prove entertaining for our defense team.”

Kirishima ducks his head when an alert reaches his earpiece. “Asami-sama, word just in from the security team, the roof and the ground vicinity are completely clear. It’s regrettable to say, they found nothing.”

Asami reclines back into his seat. If he’s to assume on all accounts that there has indeed been a breach in security, it’ll certainly raise problems for his company. Surveillance would have picked up a sighting long before anyone could manage it halfway up the building. Fingerprint scanners from then on would have stopped them outright, leading way for their imminent capture. The boldness of this would-be intruder leads him to exercise extreme caution on the matter. “Have security sweep the area for signs of tampering or traps. Report to me with anything suspicious. And bring me all the security tapes from the last twenty four hours. I would have a look through them myself.”

“Yes, sir!” Kirishima and Nomura bow in unison and head out of the office.

✣

Asami watches the four-split security camera footage on his laptop. Club Babylonia is one of a handful of non-elite clubs around Tokyo, attracting the young and the hopeful, the surly riff raff that stalk Tokyo’s midnight in droves of false adulthood and nonconformity, and with it, it’s the club that brings in the most trouble.
He mentally navigates the floorplan in his head, and which cameras provide which rooms. The doormen shuffle about in Camera 08, false ID checks catching yet another potential troublemaker from entering the establishment. Everything seems to be in order.

He scans the footage, flipping back and forth between all eight cameras in the main section of the club. The dark, metallic chic is a far cry from the sublime decor of Sion. The dark vision cameras make everything look bizarre, carnivorous, movements disjointed in the strobe lights and bodies crushing together with the urgency to touch and be touched. A swarm of arms and thumping of bodies pack the dance floor, and wherever he looks there are more of them. They all look damn suspicious, Asami thinks, but that’s just him.

He rubs the unrest from his eyes and sighs because there are thirty more floors of this. He wants to be thorough, but it’s a tall order even for him at this late hour. He fast forwards into the footage — Camera 74-01 and 74-02 is what he’s most interested in. They point right at the stairwell of the upper lobby, before the main security checkpoint leading to the upper level offices and roof. You wouldn’t be able to get through it without a pass card and a fingerprint, and even then, there are guards locked and comfortably ready to escort any such false checks off the premises. He rolls the footage on a little further, still searching for the would-be infiltrator. He scrolls through another three hours of film but not a shred of a soul appears in front of those doors that aren’t his well-familiar security men.

It’s so perplexing that Asami ejects the SSD and checks that the dates and times are correct on the label, but nothing is amiss, just Asami’s patience. He buzzes for Kirishima, and he comes bounding in.

“Sir?”

“Who was the one to make the initial report?”

“Hayate and Yamada, sir. They were at the Corp offices when they saw it.”

“Bring them to me. I want to speak to them personally.”

Kirishima bows and exits the office, phone immediately on his ear and not five minutes later, Hayate and Yamada are standing before Asami in his office.

He leans forward in his seat and steeples his hands on the desk, eyes shifting between the two men, vetting their expressions. They have a rattled look about them judging from their unconscious fidgeting. He knows they’ve seen something, and Asami will have answers from both of them.

“Gentlemen, I want you to tell me exactly what you saw.”

His slim body weaves frantically between the busy street crowds. For a city that never sleeps, Shinjuku is ridiculous as much as it is insomniac. He darts out of the way of human traffic, occasionally looking back to see if any burly suits are following him, but he can hardly tell face from face, feet from feet.

He never anticipated he would be seen. In the dark of night, who could’ve seen him from way up there? He loses himself to his thoughts for a moment and careens into a rowdy group, and they shove him bodily out of the way like he’s a deadweight. He nearly collides with a moving car, and the horn blares. He’s about ready to pass out from the claustrophobia, and his heart rises and rises and feels
about to fall from his mouth. He can hardly breathe for the simple chance he might collapse from the effort.

He slips into a thin side street that’s seedy with drunks, and he realises just what a bad move it is when a woman, a harlot, sidles right beside him against the brick wall and starts her slurry, drunken talk.

“Hey sugar, you feeling alright?” she says. Her hair is a riot of red and yellow and her perfume is as overwhelming as the stench of alcohol and cinnamon gum in her breath. Panic resurfaces again when she doesn’t leave, popping her chewing gum bubble in his face and leaning in to touch the front of his crotch and whisper a drunken drawl in his ear, “Want me to make you feel better? We can go somewhere quiet.”

He gasps and staggers away from her, past the man vomiting his guts all over himself and the group of girls giggling as they crouch and pee together next to a dumpster. He sprints away, arms and legs and mind heavy. If he stays in this place any longer he’ll go mad.

He tips his head up, filling his eyes with the purity of moonlight and tries to breathe the life back into himself...

“Please, anywhere but here.”

Asami relishes the hot water cascading down his back. He’s shattered after today and a steaming hot shower does plenty to soothe his knotted muscles. He leans his hands against the tile wall and lets the spray beat down onto the back of his neck. Hours of waiting has left him drained, physically and mentally, from what can only be described as a hoax or a world gone wrong.

When he’s out, he slips into his bathrobe and pours himself a helping of bourbon, drinking it by the tall window of his penthouse. He swishes the taste of calm in his mouth, soaking right to the back of his throat before swallowing. His thoughts disrupt the usual routine of the night, compelling him to the vast blackness of the city, scanning his eyes over every rooftop and every tower ascending into the sky. And above all else, he’s hoping...
"You'll be back, won't you?"
Grass and cherry blossom petals stick to his shoes as he walks through a quiet Yoyogi Park at sundown. The smell of rain still lingers in the air and after last night, it’s a cleansing sense of awareness.

He was spooked into hiding out at the hospital after those suited men gave chase, a poor decision in hindsight. In his fitful panic and careless direction, the one place he hates more than life itself became his most needed shelter. He found a place in the lower bowels of the hospital, where it was quiet and the staff were few and far between and the stench of blood didn’t linger too strongly. There, in the shadows, he slept.

So as he’s making his way across the park, taking generous breaths with every step, he swings a look back at the cityline behind him, at the building that stands above the rest, shoulder to shoulder with the sky. It’s probably the only reason why he stays in Tokyo for more than a few days at a time, otherwise he can’t stand the place.

He considers going via the bay this time, while the wharfs are deserted and the light scarce towards the mouth of the ocean. Maybe he’ll wait it out until nightfall and get a head start from Rainbow Bridge, climb the long, steep cables and look down from the horizontal towers four hundred feet in the air while vehicles stream past underneath him. Just thinking about it makes the hairs on the nape of his neck stand on end. God, he absolutely loves that bridge.

It’s easy to overthink these things sometimes, and it doesn’t always come in a conscious decision — it’s when he passes through the crowded metro and squeezes into one of the carriages that he sees the opportunity over the river, taking the form of two giant cranes jutting skyward. It forces him off at the next stop and he sneaks into the unguarded construction site compound, abandoned for the night.

It’s mostly metal, rubble and machinery, the bare bones of buildings-to-be, and sand — tonnes of it. He stands before the naked skeleton of the partially built structure, metal scaffolding on the outside and not a lot reinforcing them but a few bolts, beams and gravity. He easily scales up the first few unbuilt floors and onto the wooden walkway, hearing the precarious creek of a hundred builders working on it each day, and now it’s only him sidling along its beams.

He climbs to the topmost of the unbuilt floors and looks down, about seventy feet up by his judgement, give or take. Not bad, he thinks, but the crane constructed on top of this building is the most desirable thing he’s seen in months (apart from Sion itself) that’s a freestanding climbing tower for one all the way up to the skies — tall, narrow and so incredibly high. He climbs up it from the outside, challenging himself to scale the diagonal rungs until he’s aching and exhilarated, add to that a view that would cave the mental stability of even the bravest of men, and it’s as if all his birthdays’ have come at once.

“Oh my,” he laughs, standing on top of the crane’s catwalk with a sniper’s view of the entire city. He spreads his arms out and catches the wind on his tongue and encapsulated in that small, cold taste is every dream he’s been having that keeps him returning to this city.

Set in his sights only a few miles across the city is the bright blinking beacon of his destination, beating life into concrete and glass. Tonight’s gentle winds make his trajectory an easy point A to point B straight across the sky, and he’s glad he doesn’t have to do it in the rain. He takes off his jacket and tank top and stuffs them into his backpack, leaving him in only his skin to brace the night air. After a steadying breath, a pair of long, white feathered wings materialise from his shoulder blades and stretch out far away from his body. He doesn’t allow himself to indulge in the wonderful
He stands on the edge of the crane, balancing on the balls of his feel, limber and ready. On nights like this he would make a spectacle out of his take-off, but a backheel into a somersault off the edge would have to suffice. He lifts off in a high arc, soaring high above the city beneath him, arms spread and curtailing his joy in favour of speed, but it's no less thrilling.

He makes it in less time than he thought, a little heavy with the landing which he attributes to his enthusiasm, and the view — the view is utterly breathtaking. He had every expectation that the view from here would be incredible, his heart races more than during flight when he was racing against the crosswinds. His wings retract back into his body and he stares out at the landscape in his plainly human silhouette.

Taking a look around, the roof is interesting — it has rows and rows of solar panels lining three sides of it, and in the middle is a generator (most likely), attached to the central building with a heavily secured door. Above it is a spectacular spire, a lance-like lightning rod descending from the heavens to impale the structure right in two. He’ll climb up to the top of that lightning rod one of these days too.

But first things first. He curls up beneath one of the raised solar panels, shielding him from the sky-high bluster and huddles in on himself next to a grating that luckily radiates warm air and none of that foul, recycled smelling gas. And he notes, while he’s putting on his top and jacket and zipping it right up to his nose, that despite the amount of machinery up here, it’s pretty quiet, he might finally be able to catch a night’s rest.

It hasn’t been ten minutes when he hears the faintest sound of footsteps on concrete reverberating
from the inside of the building. He remains concealed and his ears peeled with no way of knowing if they’re coming for him or if it’s the chatter of thousands of metal components, he hasn’t the time to think or act when about twenty feet storm the roof, dispersing around the area and narrowing his escape.

He covers his mouth and remains tightly bound, knees to chest, making himself as tiny as possible and wishing he had the power to shrink himself into a dove and fly far away from here.

“We know you’re here, intruder! You’ve been spotted. You have nowhere to run. Give yourself up or the consequences will be severe!”

“Oh no.” Panic grips him and he bites his lips to suppress the tiniest sounds waiting to spill his location. There weren’t this many yesterday, it was easier to slip past and drop off the edge of the roof without anyone noticing. Now he has about a dozen of them right beside him, trapping him on all sides. And these aren’t the penguin boys — they’re kitted out, booted up with gear on their chest and weapons making a quick skirmish look like a full military operation. He considers for a small, panicked moment that he could probably take them all if he’s quick, if he’s stupid and quick, and maybe he’ll be able to get over the ledge without them putting a bullet in his back.

“Over there!”

Shit, he’s been spotted. He shudders a breath, chanting *Fight or die. Fight or die. Fight or die.*

Fuck it.

He rolls out from under the solar panel and straight into the path of three men rushing to tackle him down. One of the men gets an immediate elbow in the jaw and the others hear it crack and slacken from shock with grimaces on their faces. He wrestles out of their grip, but not until the rest of them surround him and kneel him in the stomach so he falls to his knees.

They grab a fistful of his hair, tugging back hard and holding a wet rag to his face, covering his nose and mouth with pungent chemicals. He recognises the smell immediately and clams up, closing his mouth and nasal passage for as long as he can until his body screams for air. They tug his hair painfully so he’s made to breathe from force, but he fiercely resists, giving the surrounding men a beam of defiance, even as his vision starts to blur and he drops backwards.

He guesses none of them were expecting him to still be able to fight his way out of their bonds, presuming him half brain dead from the length of chloroform exposure corroding his grey matter, but he manages to free himself to kick one of them in the shin, fracturing it, and another one right in the mouth and blood sprays everywhere.

“You little fucker. Get him!” he hears, and soon ten of them are on him, peddling with animalistic grunts and frantic mouths to earpieces calling for backup. He hasn’t time to feel smug that he tore through six guys in a catatonic brain freeze. He sprints straight for the edge of the roof but he goes down again, hard, slamming into concrete and he doesn’t know how. He felt a pain shoot up his back for a mere fraction of a heartbeat and then — nothing. He can’t move, can’t feel any of his limbs — he can’t feel *anything*.

“He’s down! We’ve got him!”

His vision spirals wildly and everything is drawn out into a time-stretch — they must have shot him with a tranquilizer, he thinks, because he’s about to pass out any minute but he needs to hold it together for a few seconds longer to find out what they’re going to do to him, where they’re going to take him. He has a clear view of the roof’s ledge only a few steps away from him. He could have
been off it and winging it out of here, instead his clouded mind thinks back to the basement last night and the blood and chemical stench of preserved death.

They stand around his limp body, ten guns pointed at his head, and he’d laugh if he could because this is just the most special kind of fucked up shit these guys get off on, blowing brains into concrete, except they could have done it by now if they wanted to, all ten of them. They’ve incapacitated him cold from head to toe, whirling so senseless that he couldn’t tell you which way up the world is supposed to be or what colour because they’re wildly interchanging, seizure inducing shapes defying sensory law — but he can hear everything perfectly, from the tiny nervous rattle of their fingers on their triggers, to the guy that’s breathing down his neck to check his pulse or body search him. Maybe they can all pat themselves on the back for how many of them it took to bring down an unarmed man. Fuckers.

“His eyes are still open, chief.”

“He should’ve been knocked out cold, but it doesn’t matter. As long as he’s out enough so we can get him to the boss.”

As he thought, they’re keeping him alive. His vertigo inverts horribly when he’s suddenly lifted over one of the men’s shoulders, dangling like hunted game. The blood rushes to his head and he feels motion sickness like never felt before. He has to right it somehow, someway. It takes every effort and all power to direct his reflexive nerves to his toes and fingers to get them to wake up. He manages to blink and his vision simplifies the chaotic vibrancy with every successional blink, it’s a start at least, and that’s when he notices that they’re now inside the building.

Down the corridor, he feels heat gradually returning to his fingertips and the severed head feeling easing off, leaving him inebriated but still functional. His movements are miniscule — they could bump him off any second if he so much as coughs to clear his airway while he’s like this, but tiny scrapes of his fingertips against this big guys back tells him his feeling has returned. Quickly, he grabs the combat knife from the sheath on the man’s hip and plunges it straight into his back, sending the gorilla hardman screaming in pain and dropping him on the floor.

He dashes past all of them, through their howls of desperation to the nearest door but is intercepted by a colossal body blocking him shy of the threshold, bleach-blonde and impenetrable. He’s grabbed by the neck and pushed awkwardly against the wall with his arms secured behind his back, almost twisting out of their sockets. He thrusts a back heel into the guys shin but he’s slammed over into the adjacent wall, gasping at the impact on his eye socket. He staggers, then his muscles spontaneously give out from underneath him and his world falls to blackness.

Asami rarely has to use the interrogation suite in the lower belly of Sion Corp., but then again, Sion isn’t known for having security breaches that warrant its use. Asami can’t remember the last time he’s had to deal with an intruder personally. He didn’t expect much from the description his men gave, but he was expecting something or someone a little more substantial than the young man slouched forward in his chair across the table from him.

“He put up a considerable fight, at first not even the chloroform worked. Security hadn’t anticipated the failure of the anesthetic dart either,” Kirishima informs his boss. They’re both observing his strapped and hunched over body as they would an odd interstellar visitor.
“What eventually knocked him out?”

“He finally succumbed to Suoh-san’s pressure point technique.”

“Good grief.” Even Asami raises his eyebrows at that. “Were you able to administer the micro-tracker successfully?”

“Yes, sir. It’s injected into his right shoulder.”

"Good.” That's all he wanted to hear. “Let’s see what he has to say for himself. Wake him up.”

Suoh places the smelling salt under the boy’s nose and the strong ammonia shocks him into consciousness fraught with fresh and tangible fear. He seizes up immediately when the pounding in his head hits him and the barbarous artificial light floods his vision. Six unfamiliar men loom like an ever increasing stranglehold of pain, all while staring into the devouring golden eyes opposite him and he snaps against the restraints, realising where he is.

If not for the abject horror in the boy’s eyes, he’s a rather casual looking boy. Asami gives him a once over — he would guess him to be eighteen, nineteen, twenty at most. His hair is an innocently sweet colour of creamed honey. He has a lean build, boyish face, but by far his strangest feature are his highly luminous blue irises that are anything but Japanese. A dark red smear colours his left cheek, the beginnings of a bruise starting to appear where his men must have struck him after putting up a fight.

Asami reaches into his inner pocket for a cigarette and Kirishima is already there with the lighter. After a long, savouring drag, he begins with his first, simple question. “What is your name?”

The boy looks but doesn’t answer. His expression schooled and unreadable from the time it’s taken for Asami to tip the cigarette ash into the ashtray and focus on him again.
“What is your name?” Asami repeats in the same manner, and that’s when one of the security guards steps forward. “Sir, we scanned the PASMO ID we found in his backpack,” he says, and hands over the information. Asami exhales the smoke through his nose and reads it out loud.

“Nagata Tatsuya, thirty-eight, Kanto residence.” His eyes scroll up to look discerningly at the boy. “Outward appearances can often be deceiving, but I would hazard to say you’re not thirty-eight years old, are you?”

The question is met with more silence. Asami can see right through the boy’s bravado by the way the restraint belts rattle against the metal back of the chair, and his big blue eyes dart about the room to find answers, or lies, disentangling thoughts of how he’s going to escape this place, and Asami is just waiting for him to try. “You know, this silent treatment is only cute for so long, boy.”

A guard loses it and comes forward, striking the boy across the face with the back of his hand so hard that the heavy metal chair rocks on its legs. “Answer the boss, you dirty punk!”

His hand raises to strike him again when Asami stops him dead with just a look. “Takeshima — You forget yourself. I won’t have you do so again.”

Takeshima bends over double in firm apology. “Forgive my insolence, Asami-sama.”

Asami smooths his attentions back to the matter at hand, throwing the stolen ID on the table. “Takeshima makes a fair point — if you attempt to lie to me, it won’t be taken lightly.”

The boy turns away, spitting a mouthful of blood on the floor before turning back to Asami with a nuance of calm. “T...Takaba.”

“Takaba what?”
“...Akihito.”

“So, Takaba Akihito, tell me what your business was on the roof of Sion, and on the roof of Club Babylon the night before?”

The boy remains tightly lipped. There’s a very long silence wherein Takaba looks at all five of the guards one by one, and at the two tall men on either side of their boss, especially the bleach-blonde one who had him in the corridor, nearly broke his bones, the bastard. The interjection of “Who sent you?” parries his long kept stare.

“No-one.” The boy says, unnerved, unmoving.

“Are you a spy?”

“No.”

“Then what are your reasons for being up there?”

Another broad breadth of silence. Again, the boy doesn’t speak a word. If Asami ever loses his patience, he doesn’t show it. He gestures with the cigarette between his fingers, two of them pointing directly at the boy. “Is there an answer that your brain cares to pass through your lips? Because I can confidently guarantee that I can make it happen.”

When he’s given all but a little crooked smile, he turns to his men with the most measured of tones and whispers intelligibly so Takaba can’t lip read when he says, “Untie him and hold him down on the table.”

Takaba growls as they grab him and throw him down onto the metal table with a sharp whack. It takes four men, two on each side to secure him, his arms spread wide, palms face down, about to be dissected for all of Asami’s pleasure.

“Talk.”

“Get your hands off of me! I didn’t do anything up there!”

His discomfort is palpable, even face down and smothered by bodyguards, not enough room to breathe and not enough room to speak. Asami can't help but hold admiration for the boy so resolutely pining for the end. He gently places his cigarette into the ashtray and comes about the table to face Takaba directly. “For all I know, you could have planted a bomb. You’re not the first to have tried.”

“I didn’t, I swear!”

“There have been men in your position who have had the gall to make threats to my business, to my men, to myself, and compromised the security of thousands that I hold in this building. But I believe you are not like any of them. Do you know why that is?”

Takaba turns to look at the sharp eyes materialising every single fear he dared to quash when he knew they weren't going to kill him on the roof.

“I’ve seen you.” The man says, and Takaba’s eyes go wide, he wants to tear out his throat and scream. He couldn’t possibly have —

“So I’m going to ask you again, now that you know this fact, what your purpose was for being on the rooftops of both my buildings?” He reaches down and threads a hand through the boy’s hair, feeling the soft strands underneath his palm, and how maddening it must be for the boy to be
experiencing gentleness when pain is so close to shattering him. “I could do this with you all night and it wouldn’t be a disappointment on my part, Takaba.”

Takaba turns his head to look him in the eye again, hot and seething. “Are you gonna torture me? Go on then. Go ahead and do it! Get all your bastards to do it.”

“I could, Takaba, believe me I could. It’s not my preferred way of extracting information, and I’m reserved to act on my better judgement in gaining facts and seeking the truth, because that is the type of man I am. Don’t get me wrong, Takaba, I would torture you ’til your very last breath — it would be wonderful, actually, to hear your screams and you’d say anything, anything to make it stop.” He pats the boy on his cheek, mock-soothing the little wildcat snarl. “Therein lies the problem.”

A whimper follows as Asami trails his hand down the length of Takaba’s arm, squeezing harshly at the wrist, intentionally unhinging the addicting sounds of Takaba’s despair beating in shallow breaths. He turns the wrist upwards to see noticeable lines of scarred flesh barely a few days fresh marring his pale skin. He finds it very interesting.

“Are you suicidal, Takaba?” he asks calmly, leaning in closer to study the boy unraveling in great ribbons of fear, his slim, open neckline damp with sweat and his jugular throbbing with a rapid pulse. But most of all, it fulfills him a great deal to see such an innocent looking boy so ravaged. Takaba snaps forward to make a go for him and Asami throws his head back and laughs. He hasn’t been enthralled like this in years.

“You seem willing to die. Is that why you’re making this easy for yourself? Easy for me? Wanting me to torture you to death so your little secret will forever remain with you. You know I can’t do that.” Asami goes back to his seat, taking his cigarette from the ashtray with equal measures of elegance and savage beauty, documenting the soured scowl on the boy’s face with great satisfaction. “Tie him again.”

His guards buckle the belt straps against his arms and secure him back in the chair. He doesn’t thrash, he wouldn’t give the guards the joy of hitting him again.

“Now then,” Asami continues, “I hope you have a better understanding now of where I’m headed with this conversation.”

Takaba sharpens a look and grits through his teeth, “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“I want you to tell me the truth. It’s that simple. What in the world are you?”

Takaba drops his head and his shoulders hunch, laughing one last bitter defiance. “Fuck you. Fuck all of you.”

“My, you are fiery. Maybe you can show some of that fire to my men who’ll be taking good care of you from now on.” Asami stubs his cigarette in the ashtray and stands, buttoning the front of his suit jacket, calm and collected. “Gentlemen, take him away.”

He steps away and allows for his men to come forward, ready to engulf the boy like a perilous black wave. Three of them haul him from his restraints and forcefully suppress him when he fights back. He looks deceivingly strong even with both hands cuffed behind him, his limbs beginning to flail when he’s put in a constricting hold.

“No! Let go of me! You bastards, get off me!”

Asami takes the venom and savours it; a knife lashing on his tongue, beautiful and succinct. And there is no little ire in Asami’s voice as he nods to his men and gives the final order. “Get him out of
Takaba panics and struggles again, grabbing at the arms around his body, “No! Get off me!” He lashes out as they take him into the corridor and down, and Takaba is screaming. It feels like his last mile, all ready to end. He kicks back with his legs and manages to catch the shins of the guard, but the hold only tightens until he feels it crippling him. He uses everything he has to break the hold, taking swipes and stabs with the heel of his foot, lifting his legs high up and putting an insane amount of force into his legs and driving them into the kneecaps of the burly suit behind him. The connect is perfect and he hears a horrific crack and then a scream when he’s suddenly dropped. The man collapses in a roar of pain, holding his broken kneecaps and then suddenly four men are on his tail.

He bolts through the double doors and up the flight of stairs. His overdriven adrenaline allows him to climb twelve flights before his lungs fight with exhaustion. When he thinks he’s bought himself some time, he crouches beneath the shadow of the stairwell and pulls apart the chain of the handcuffs so he can at least move freely. He hears footsteps from the far doors and before he knows it, another group of bastards burst in, not surprising that they’ve found him because there’re cameras everywhere. If his frantic footsteps don’t give him away, his mouth sure does, his lungs are a breathing target for capture. Takaba doesn’t think, just continues upwards, relying on instinct and the acid in his muscles to fight through the pain to the upper levels of the building.

When one set of doors are locked, he climbs another flight, and another, until he's throwing his body at the next double doors he sees, breaking them open by force because he needs to get out of here. He takes a left turn down an open, bare corridor and there's yet more men that've found him.

It’s bad, he’s cornered from every side and it leaves him no choice. He has to race fifteen men to get to the window on the far end of the corridor. He’s confident he’s faster and his stamina will last, he’s outnumbered but they’ll never catch him. Never again. All of them are shouting at him but their voices phase out like white noise. He grabs a nearby heavy vase and fires it at the window, shattering the glass on contact and the cold draft whips in, shards of glass flying everywhere. They’re calling for him to stop but he’s rife with adrenaline and so so close — he dives out of the window and twists in midair, his wings ripping his shirt as they spread and catch the air, making his escape into the dark night.

Asami’s already heading out of the building with a three man flank to the underground car park. He’d been watching the events through the portable security module on Kirishima’s surface tablet, this ultraviolent creature making a meal out of his men.

“Have you ever seen anything like that, Kirishima?”

He sounds so intoxicated with delight it frightens Kirishima. “Never in my life, sir.”

“Wherever he is, I need to find him. Is the GPS logging system set up?”

“Of course, sir, ready when you are.”

“Excellent.” He’s already logging onto the GPS system before Kirishima opens the door of the BMW for him. The little red dot bleeps as it moves away from their position, and Asami’s eyes alight.
Bitter cold slices against his sweat-pale face as he howls into the night air, delivering anguish to rival the winds buffeting his body. The closer he gets to the shore, the further the city is lost behind him. In this cruel twist of fate he screams at his own foolishness.

His arms lay by his sides and his wings shoulder much of the blustering winds, shuddering ice cold and jaw-clenching. With his last ounce of energy he propels himself into the wind, and he fears the worse when his wings become heavy. His stamina is depleting rapidly and soon he won't be able to stay elevated for long. He flies towards the edge of the land and hopes he can at least make it there, if all else fails, his body won't break if he falls into the sea. The wind whips and his wings catch the tailwind as he’s pulled into its current, spinning, dizzying, plummeting.

Then he hits the water.

The little red dot takes them down the highway of southwestern Tokyo. A tunnel momentarily blocks the signal, but it rights itself when they emerge, only now the arrow is pointing straight south. When they hit the motorway, Suoh doesn’t need to be told twice the floor it.

"This boy is outrageous," remarks Asami with a joyous smirk, "Potentially exposing himself to fifteen million people, but at least he has enough mind to get out of the city."

Kirishima nods back to his boss, eyes never leaving the tablet in front of him. “It’s amazing he made it so far so quickly."

Asami concentrates on the red pointer which has now become synonymous with the boy. “Where
are you taking me, Takaba Akihito?” he says to himself. Suddenly his chest constricts, and he starts to cough.

Kirishima turns to his boss. “Are you uncomfortable, sir?”

Asami shakes his head once he clears his throat and replies, “No. As you were.”

“Yes, sir.”

After twenty minutes the GPS tracker halts. Kirishima notices it on his device too. “He seems to be in an off-road location.”

Asami nods and touches the tablet to realign their positions. “Yes. West, Sagami Bay — can you see it?”

“I can, we’re heading there now,” he confirms with a nod and taps in to find a suitable course that doesn’t drive them directly into the sea.

“Get there as fast as you can.”

He wakes up with a gasp.

The first conscious breath Takaba takes into his lungs feels like he’s swallowing razor blades and it sends him into a world of agony. Short, shallow gasps are all it takes for him to fully appreciate the bruising on his ribcage, the remnants of the coppery taste at the back of his throat — his own blood — and the pounding pressure in his temples. His mind is a disorientated mess.

A firm hand comes down on his shoulder and he immediately recoils from it. “Calm down,” says the voice, but it sounds distant, he doesn’t even register it the first time around because he’s busy planting the dream into his head that he’s alive, safe and well.

That is, until he follows the arm up to the face and it shocks him into the present. Only illuminated by a desk lamp, Takaba can see him perfectly, the face that brings on an ingrained fear as of the last twenty-four hours, and he spits, “You.”

Asami pushes the boy back down onto the bed with ease. “Save your breath. You almost drowned.” The remark is void of hostility, and Takaba allows his body to press into the bed, though his back screams with pain.

“Where am I?”

“At my penthouse,” Asami replies and turns his back to Takaba to get something off the desk.

“Penthouse?”

“Yes. My home,” he says outright. “Here, take these, it’ll help with the pain.” He places a glass of water and painkillers on the bedside table next to him, but Takaba gives him a souring look that despite the hopelessness about the boy, he finds endearing. “Or you can prefer not to take them, it’s your choice.”

Takaba shoves the pills into his mouth and knocks back the water in two large gulps, soon regretting
it when they scrape his throat all the way down and he starts to cough.

“Easy there.”

“Why?” Takaba rasps, wiping his mouth.

“Why, what?” Asami returns.

“Why did you save me? Why did you bring me here?”

Asami just looks, concentrating on him and nothing else. “You know good and well why I had to bring you here.”

It’s the way he says it that creates a myriad of feelings within Takaba’s head — helplessness, surety, regret, salvation.

“I can assure you of your safety. I can protect you.”

“Really? Takaba scoffs, “Not torture me like you and your men were about to do to me?”

“You have to understand something about me, about how I operate. For the faint heart it seems cruel, but it’s an absolutely necessity that I give no quarter to those seeking to do harm to my business. I’ve been crossed many times, and for the thousands that I oversee in any one of my establishments, I do it for the good of their safety. Do you understand this?”

Takaba gives a weak nod.

“That was never the intention with you, however. I had given strict orders for my men not to harm you,” he touches the bruise on Takaba’s cheek, and rues the marred smooth skin, “But my men told me you were a hard one to catch. Now I know why.”

Takaba flinches at the touch and whips the hand away, exasperated, “Why didn’t you just let me go?”

“Because I didn’t want to,” Asami answers.

Takaba feels his anger rise. “Because you didn’t want to?”

“Because I couldn’t,” Asami states, holding the moment in a tight pause.

“I don’t need help from you,” Akihito dismisses afterwards.

“No, you don’t, but soon you won’t have the choice to decide whether you need my help or not. Tell me you won’t need my help when you do something so reckless that it aids your capture, which will happen, because that’s what happens when Japan gets a hold of exotic little things like you. You’ll be buckled up to your neck with your pretend best friend on one side, and his assistant on the other, cutting chunks off your body and serving you like sashimi to the biggest, fattest corporate mouth. You’re a walking medical experiment, Takaba, I wouldn’t think you so beside yourself to realise that — ”

“Stop.” The rhetoric immobilises him in horror. “You think I don’t know?” He rolls and turns away from the scorn, almost breathless when his ribs start to give pain. He’s coming to realise just how much the man’s proximity violates his nerves to shreds — a voice that wraps around his throat and tightens ever so slightly with each passing moment. He curls fetally and closes his eyes to it all.

“Then you’ll stay here, won’t you?”
Takaba swallows the knife down. He's not left with much choice. “Yes.”

Asami motions with nothing more than an acknowledging nod and turns the desk lamp off before leaving the bedroom.

He walks to the main room where his men remain locked in a quiet vigil. They all stand to attention and Kirishima is the first to break the silence. “How is he?”

“He’s exhausted, but he’ll be fine.” He gestures for everyone to sit and takes a solo seat on the opposite sofa, lighting up a much needed cigarette. “Shall we discuss the protocols?”

“Yes, sir.”

He lets the nicotine hit his blood stream before continuing. “There’s to be a security team stationed here on a twenty-four hour basis. He’s not to leave the penthouse at any time, for any reason. The windows are bulletproofed and should hold off from him trying to break them — in any case, they will be double locked to prevent him from escaping through them. Is everything understood?”

“Yes sir.”

“I’ll call you to your posts in the morning.”

“If I may make a suggestion,” Kirishima adds.

“Of course,” Asami says smoothly, after exhaling the smoke.

“I appreciate the delicate nature of Takaba-kun’s...condition. May I suggest we leave the tracker in him a while longer?”

“Yes. It’ll say in him for as long as it has to.”

Asami lets out an audible sigh and rubs his thumb over the furls his eyebrows make when he thinks about the last forty eight hours and then condenses them into about five seconds. “He’s a complete anomaly. I’ve never seen anything like him. I thought things like that only existed in mythology.”

Kirishima nods in agreement. “It’s very strange. Outward appearance suggests a perfectly ordinary young man.”

One of the guards shakes his head. “The guy’s a monster! How could he break Tsujimura’s kneecaps like that? And on the roof, ten armed men couldn’t stop him!”

“What the hell is he? He’s insane,” says another.

Asami gives pause to his men. “Gentleman, word of this ends the second you step outside of this apartment. You are to take what you saw tonight and bury it deep within you. You’ll speak of this to no-one, ever. Not to your wives, not to your friends, not to each other — no-one. Your discretion is of the utmost importance. Have I made myself clear?”

“Yes, Asami-sama.”

“Good. All of you have done well, you’re dismissed for tonight. Kirishima, I’ll have you stay a moment, there’s something I need to show you.”

“Certainly, sir.”

Asami rises and they enter his home office. Asami leaves his cigarette to smoulder in the ashtray on
his desk and turns to the large carved mahogany and glass cabinet on the far wall. With a simple bit of applied pressure, the panel at the bottom juts out and Asami safely removes it. Kirishima looks on with curious anticipation.

“We need to find out what we can about Takaba Akihito, if he is who he really says he is. Anything is of value to us at this point. It’s clear that he doesn’t like to talk and getting him to talk by other means is out of the question now that we know what he’s capable of. Do you happen to still be in acquaintance with Morita?”

It surprises Kirishima to hear the mention of an old colleague, a man talented in scouring for people-data of Asami’s rivals. “We have an amicable relationship, yes.”

“Good.” Asami pulls out a bulky looking silver carry case and sets it on the desk. “I still have access to his database. Call it an indebtedment when he left the company.”

He opens it to reveal a knackered old laptop, heavily remodeled, and a small steel box with connective cable veins hanging like it’s in need of a life support boost. “It’s not the most beautiful thing, but it gets the job done.”

It takes a moment for Kirishima to realise just what his boss is showing him and what its purpose is to be used for, his voice almost fails him. What Asami has there is the most illegal contraption this side of Japan, and it is a thing of sheer beauty.

“That’s the Federal Systems Database, isn’t it?”

“Correct, but it’s a proxy system, to be exact. And I’m very grateful for it being just that. Morita wrote the system and made it untraceable to any spy or watch there is out there.”

The realisation makes Kirishima’s hands tremble, and he taps his glasses up the bridge of his nose to hide it. “It’s incredible that you even possess the proxy.” He’s in awe of his boss and his highly illicit gadgetry. It’s a station up from the usual system he uses for background checks. This one contains footprint data of every single person in Japan, essentially — every passport stamp, bank transaction, school transfer, overdue rent, job promotion, criminal record, divorce, birth, death — no one would be able to make a move without Asami knowing about it.

“It’s secure as a fort,” Asami says, stroking the outer case with near affection. He lowers the lid and snaps the catches closed, tugging them to make sure they’re secure, then slides it over the desk along with a strip of paper.

“Morita will show you how to use it, his current whereabouts I’ve written down for you. Destroy it once you memorise the location. Use it to find out what you can about Takaba — his family history, schools, hospital records, jobs. I want to know everything.” He allows Kirishima to take the case, and he cradles it like a day-old newborn, fragile and invaluable.

“She’s old, so be careful as you go.”

“Will do, sir.”

“And Kirishima.” Asami stops the man short of the door. “You’re aware of what we have on our hands. Can I hold you to complete confidence concerning Takaba?”

“Of course, Asami-sama. It goes without saying.” He inclines his head to his boss and bids a final good night before leaving the office.

When Asami is left to himself, he pours himself half a glass of whiskey, neat, to burn away the
strains of the day. He owes it to himself for bringing such an invaluable prize back in one safe piece. When they pulled the boy out of the murky waters, for a moment he was sure he was...

He knocks the thought back with a generous mouthful, but the satisfaction quickly disappears when his coughs return and it spoils the enjoyment of the nectarous, wood smoked liquid. The too dry whiskey irritates his throat, and when he coughs again he has to set it aside. “Damnit.”

He drinks the cough medicine his doctor prescribed instead. It tastes so bad that the health effects are easy to believe. His face sours and he gets another cough out to clear his throat, thinking it’s probably best to get some rest.

The silence traps him between his room and Takaba’s, between his own footsteps and the mighty wall of silence left by a few thoughtful steps towards his room. He stops shy of it to stand outside Takaba’s door, listening in for any signs of life from the boy, anything to let him know he’s still alive and breathing in there. There’s never any comfort in silence.

That night when he needs sleep the most, he wastes it on idle dreams.
When Asami wakes up, it’s to a blaring, sunlit room. He’s remembering now that he forgot to draw the curtains in last night’s drained stupor and a confluence of yesterday’s events floods his memory. But as if the force of a billion suns in his retinas isn’t shocking enough, a long shadow extends into his room and a slim figure stands on the other side of his balcony door, looking out at the world.

*Takaba.*

His alertness ripens to a full on instinctive jolt as he puts on his night robe and throws open the balcony doors. “Takaba, what are you doing?” he calls, his voice fierce and sleep-fractured.

“Ahh. Good morning.”

The way Akihito turns and says it with a relaxed smile makes Asami’s breath catch. He never expected to receive such an entirely polite gesture so openly from the boy, much less see him rise out of bed so soon.

“My room has the balcony view,” Akihito goes on to say, and gestures towards the door. “The key was still in the lock.”

But Asami’s eyes spark with warning and Akihito quickly raises his hands up in front of him, knowing the overstep that look implies. “I—I’m not going to escape, or I would’ve done it already.”
Asami remains firm and continues to observe Akihito as he turns around and switches his attention back to the city below.

“Tokyo looks so different from up here, don’t you think? It’s peaceful.” Akihito says, sounding wistful.

“Is that how you see it?”

“Well, it doesn’t feel like it from down there, that’s for sure. There’s hardly any air to breathe.”

Akihito stares down onto a microcosm of an unstoppable city, through dense, concrete structures, illuminated neon signs and TV screens, great diagonal crossings ferrying people across gridlocked mid-day traffic, all travelling so desperately towards destination, and it reminds him why he rarely travels through Shinjuku on foot. He turns to look back at Asami, whobeckons him inside.

“Come inside, we need to talk.”

Akihito follows him through the apartment into the kitchen and perches himself onto the counter barstool while Asami prepares something. For Akihito, it’s more than surreal having both hope and helplessness fleshed out in one single man. The power he exudes is unquestionable, immaculate. He’s tall and well-muscled, movements scripted with elegance and his jet black hair hangs above his penetrating eyes that are molten, like fire. He feels consumed just being in his presence.

“How are you feeling?” Asami asks him, setting the filled kettle on the stove.

“Pretty decent, the bed was super comfortable. I almost didn’t want to get out of it.”

“Do your wounds give you pain?”

Akihito shrugs. “A little.”

Asami leans back against the counter and crosses his arms, still completely focused on him. “You never did tell me why my men found you on the roof of my clubs.” He tries not to make it sound like he’s interrogating, honestly, he’s restless and underslept and hasn’t the energy to make himself hold intimidation.

The boy, nevertheless, stutters out, “S—Sion’s amazing! Do you know it’s one of the tallest buildings in Tokyo?”

“I do know,” Asami replies.

“Babylonia too. And what’re the chances of both of them being yours, heh.”

Asami reads the nervous flit in him, and follows with a less pressurising question. “Do tall buildings attract you?”

“Um...yeah, you could say that. I slept on top of Tokyo Tower the night before last. But it was kind of a bad idea, it gets really cold up there.”

“Is that where you sleep every night, on top of buildings?” Asami asks because he notices something of note when Akihito lowers his head, cheeks red, and chooses to fiddle with his hands rather than answer. “Are you homeless, Takaba?”

“I kind of have an apartment...”

“Kind of,” Asami repeats.
“Yeah. It’s in a really shitty area, I hate it there.”

“So you sleep on top of skyscrapers, where it’s no safer.”

Asami places the steaming hot tea mug in front of Akihito and he accepts it with a quiet smile.

“So what are you, like, Yakuza or something?”

Asami sighs, replying flatly, “No.”

“Look, I really don’t have any hidden agendas with any of your clubs. I wouldn’t do anything to harm your reputation.”

“As it happens, I can believe you, and your assurance is greatly appreciated.” Asami takes a seat beside him on the bar stool, giving him a cold, dissecting look before continuing. “That still doesn’t change the fact of what you are.”

“Of what I am?” Akihito questions, as though he’s oblivious to the man’s darker than dark assertions.

“Of what you are.” Asami echoes. “Let’s talk about you for a moment, shall we? How has someone like yourself managed to find a foothold in this world? And your wings —”

Akihito throws it back at him, as if the words burn. “What about my wings?”

“You have wings, Takaba, a bewilderment in itself. I’m striving to understand how something like that is even conceivable.” He watches Akihito shrivel uncomfortably in the contorted sort of way a cat does when it’s annoyed at seeing its own reflection.

“I’ve always been this way, for as long as I’ve known.”

“And how did you come to be like this?”

“I—I don’t know.” Akihito looks down when he says it, his small voice trying to lose itself in the ambience of the space, and his pounding heart leaping around in his chest.

“You don’t know, or you don’t want to tell?”

“I told you, I don’t know.”

Asami sips his tea and ventures no further. Akihito only sits for a few more seconds before rising, giving him the proverbial finger all the way to his room and taking the care to slam the door as hard as possible, just in case there was any possibility that Asami didn’t ‘get it’. He lets out a sigh and considers the long day he has ahead of him.

Akihito punches his pillow and actually contemplates a plan of escape. If he’s going to be sliced and diced by this man, he’d rather leave a solid reminder of where exactly he draws the line on everything pertaining to his goddamn body. He checks the windows and finds them firmly locked shut. There’s the balcony door in Asami’s room but he’s probably locked that too and taken the key. He paces up and down the length of his room, thinking. The little that he knows of the man makes him question the integrity of his ‘protection’. Last night he was close to being severely harmed under his orders, and now this morning, he was all for moving heaven and earth to keep him safe.

The man they call ‘Asami-sama’. Akihito scratches his head and finds a lot wrong in that. He can’t
work out if he’s been dealt the worst possible fate that’s slow-marching him towards his doom, or if he’s won everything by being under the refuge of Asami’s heel. His head whirlwinds at the thought and the dreadful headache returns, striking all the good that he felt when he woke up this morning and forgot all about the pain. Maybe if he closes his eyes it’ll all go away. Maybe this really is just a continuation of an unending bad dream.

A little over an hour later he wakes up face down on the bed and wonders how he managed to drift off after running it through his head that he would stay awake to think of an escape plan. He punches his pillow again in frustration.

He rises out of bed and opens the door and there are two men in dark suits and shades standing either side of him, a shock he shouldn’t have met with a sleepy head.

“What the hell’s going on?” he blasts.

They’re rigid and dressed black from head to toe, they don’t even look at him when addressing. “It’s Asami-sama’s orders that we stand guard.”

“For what? I told him that I wasn’t going to do anything! What’s the big deal?”

The guards regard him for a moment behind their matte black lenses and turn to each other, completely stone-faced, and Akihito wonders which of them possesses the shared brain cell. “We adhere to Asami-sama’s orders. That is all.”

“Where is he now?”

“At work.”

Akihito scoffs at that. "Yeah right."

He pads barefoot into the living room and spots another guard at the far end of the room like a living plague, eyeing him bluntly as he throws himself onto the plush white sofa and looks up at the gigantic black and white painting on the far wall that you couldn’t miss if you were standing on the other side of Tokyo — all strange, crooked faces and distorted shapes, like a fucked up dream.

He pulls his feet up to sit cross legged, taking in the impressive decor of the room. None of this was apparent to him last night when he woke up in darkness, in an unfamiliar room, in an unfamiliar bed. The bedroom itself was immaculate, if slightly sparse, but the comfort more than made up for it. That, and Akihito figures Asami doesn’t get many guests. The interior design flows together like one entire room, open and clean lines and crisp white tones.

“So, what kind of work does Asami do?” Akihito calls out to one of the guards, who seems pissed off at him that he can talk.

“He’s a businessman.”

“What kind of businessman?”

“He owns several social establishments.”

“Like what?”


“Hmm.” Akihito thinks with a wry curiosity. “Is that the only thing he does?” he goes on to ask, but
doesn’t get a reply, of course. Trying to get a conversation out of one of these guys seems like the most labour intensive thing in the world.

“Is it alright if I use the kitchen?”

“Asami-sama allows you free use of the house, except for his office and master bedroom.”

“Nice.” At least Asami can’t begrudge him for eating all his food.

Asami lifts the vial out of the rack and inspects the colourless liquid with a keen eye. He shakes it a few times and the liquid inside hardly moves but coats the sides of the vial in a thick, slow moving film.

The lab technicians have known for some time to expect Asami’s visit, but never the date and time. Their all white, sterile bubble gets a visit from time to time by private contractors from a covert arm of the Sion Corporation. They’re instructed to keep their eyes down and their hands busy and nothing and no one is allowed to leave until they do. Needless to say, it’s overwhelming to have the man himself attentively inspecting their year-long project over their shoulders with an almost schoolboy enthusiasm.

They regard him with equal measures of fear and respect. Many he’s employed straight out of universities, and he pours support and guidance into their continued education into this particular extended branch of science. For future graduates struggling with the jobs market, crippling debts, and austerity, Sion Corp. creates the attraction for a safe grab, and because Japan will always need this breadth of research only he has the money to provide, whether they’d like to admit it or not.

The technicians are often reticent of what they’re working on in the lab, and always for whom they’re making it, but they all know it comes under the instruction of Asami’s multi-faceted company and under his absolute authority — pharmaceuticals, experimental drugs, military drugs for counter-terrorism — products that are strictly off the public radar, and requires that all the new blood’s in the lab get a handling of these.

"This is what has been produced so far, sir," the lab technician says.

Asami’s settled on the stool in their consulting room, with four of his bodyguards standing on the other side of a three inch thick window barrier. Two young lab workers open the metal case of experimental truth serums on the table in front of him. They hand Asami a pair of protective gloves and he takes one of the colourless vials out of the case to look at it more closely.

“It looks rather innocuous for such a powerful drug,” Asami comments. He tips the vial so the liquid rushes towards the sealed end and the two technicians look tense as if it’s all about the flow out.

“What I’m holding in my hand, how complete is it?”

One of the technicians gives his glasses a nervous push before speaking. “It’s currently at seventy-five percent, sir. It’s as advanced as we’ve ever had it, and showing very promising results for development.”

“Seventy-five percent,” Asami says to himself. "Perhaps if it was ninety-five percent, I’d be inclined to agree with you.” Asami tips the vial again and the liquid swashes back and both the technicians physically shiver. Though, Asami is smiling a little — a teasing, testing little smile. He’s really rather
impressed with the work they’ve done, but an encouraging push to improve never hurt any scientific breakthrough.

“I—It needs a lot of proofing, sir,” the other technician says. “It’s probable that we can make eighty-five in a matter of weeks.”

“It’s ‘probable’ or it’s ‘certain’?” Asami asks with a knife-edged grit to his voice. It makes the technicians realign their confidence rather quickly.

“Certain, Asami-sama,” they both nod.

Asami concentrates on them for a moment then places the vial back into the case. “And the test subject I sent you, how well did he fare?”

An uncomfortable silence falls, or maybe that fragment of fear they all share for Asami’s hardened brand of business acumen makes itself known through their body language. They’re well aware that Asami puts all men who cross him to some good use one way or another, and willing test subjects are always in short supply.

“W—We’ve only tested a similar sister-drug on him.”

“The sister-drug.” Asami repeats, picking up the orange tinged, much more revolting looking vial. “Do you mean this one?”

“Yes, sir.” They hand over a surface tablet and as they’re explaining, Asami reviews footage of the trial with his very sombre but abiding test subject strapped on the medical table, monitors beeping
away and the serum being injected intravenously into his arm.

“It’s synthesised from sodium thiopental, slight increased potency but works in a similar way, with a more hypnotic effect. When small doses are injected multiple times over minute intervals, the subject can remain in a state of catatonic truth for as long as their brain can take. There’s enough for twenty uses in that vial.”

After less than five minutes, the test subject’s head slumps to the side and he vomits onto the floor before eventually passing out. When the video cuts out, he hands the tablet back to the technicians with a concealed satisfaction.

"As you can see, getting the balance just right is a delicate process. But these trials were very positive. We’re confident that results will be reached within the next few months.”

“So you’ve human-tested the sister-drug on him, but not this serum, I presume?” Asami asks, holding up the clear vial again.

The technicians look nervously at each other before answering, very carefully, “That’s correct, sir.”

Asami’s expression turns sharp. “Why not?”

“W—We weren’t sure that we had clearance to use the test subject for the full strength drug, sir.”

“Did your supervisors tell you that?” Asami chuckles, and the two youngsters don’t know whether to laugh along with him or be truly frightened. Things can get a little too serene in the lab sometimes, monotonous and clinically perfect, and Asami’s dark, indulgent laugh scrapes the disinfected surface.

“You do know why I sent him to you, don’t you, gentlemen?” he asks, and the two lab workers nod before they can even recall memory of their hapless test subject being offloaded from the boot of Asami’s limo.

“Good. Then I expect you to use him to your full advantage. A sister-drug is no use to me if it has lesser potential and has to be administered at minute intervals. That’s not a concise enough drug.”

Asami closes the lid of the case and removes the latex gloves, dropping them on top of the metallic case. His eyes shift from one to the other before engaging them with a little friendly advice.

"Gentlemen, in future, I don’t want you to tell me what you think I want to hear. I expect you to make advancements, not fill quota with percentages that look good on paper but mean nothing in actuality, just to please me. A project completed but half-baked is of no use to me, I hope you realise this. I’ll allocate you extra funding, not because you require it, but because I don't want you to continue tiptoeing around the edges of possibility. Do you understand what I'm saying, gentlemen?’”

In a subtle, almost unreadable way, it’s warm and reassuring, cruel in kindness. They have absolutely everything to learn and very little to complain about in their current position. Asami straightens up in his seat with a solicitous smile that the boys bow keenly to. “Yes, Asami-sama!”

He rises from his seat and turns on his heels. “If there's anything else you require for your research to help with your advancements, now’s the time to say it.” It might be another month or two or six until they see him again, and he doesn't want this crucial project to hit an idle stretch because they haven't the mouths to speak. And he's about to leave the room and return to his men when the boys eventually call to him.

“We could perhaps use another test subject or two,” they answer, sounding like two cubs that’ve risen up into hungry pack wolves at the sound of their own request, to Asami, their deliverer, smiling with a matching, prideful gleam.
“Not a problem. Fine work, gentlemen. I’ll let you get back to your work stations.”

In the car, Asami puts a cigarette between his lips and for a passing moment before he lights it, Akihito pulls at his thoughts. That boy, tightlipped and full of secrets and edging no further to answering the mysteries about himself. If Asami’s honest, truth serum would be the perfect tool to pry him open. Maybe one hit and five minutes is all he’d need to get him to talk.

He clicks the lid of his lighter open with his thumb and the thought eventually fades, burning, as he touches the flame to the end of his cigarette.

A mere fleeting thought almost got the better of him.

He laughs to himself. It’s completely out of the question.

✣

Back at Sion, he streams through a list of scheduled meetings, the final meeting being with his financial advisers. The end of a financial year is cumbersome, chaotic for some, and his growing empire is piling on the misery for others, proven by the figures. An unhealthy divide, but for him? Another stupendous year, set to carry on.

They’re quick-footing it through the sleek corridors of Sion's business offices, Asami a little more than a step in front as his anticipation drives him towards full focus. “Kirishima. Report.”

His assistant reads from his PDA. “The meeting with Sanjyo Group has been rescheduled, as per your request, for two weeks from today. They gladly obliged. All figures are up to date with Accounts and they request your approval.”

“You have it on my desk tomorrow morning.”

“You of course, Sir.”

“Anything else?”

“Plumbers were called earlier today to Club Iblis because of a problem with the mains water works. The problem was fixed at 5.08PM. That is all.”

“Good work.”

They take the express elevator down to the underground garage, and Asami waits until all personnel are in the car before he continues, his voice considerably less business-like.

“How's Takaba Akihito?”

“There have been no reported problems from the security team. They mention that he’s keeping in good spirits and hasn’t caused any trouble.”

“I’m glad to hear it. How are things regarding his background check?”

“Sources are still being scanned. With the only ID’s he was carrying proven to be fakes, we’re having to do some extra legwork. We’ll hopefully have the information within the next few days. With respect sir, she’s a thorough but slow machine.”

Asami allows himself a chuckle. “That she is.”

✣
The men stationed outside of his penthouse door bow deeply as he approaches them. Kirishima and the others have been allowed an evening’s grace, and Asami dismisses these men also, for periodic respite. They’re all overworked and underslept, and too many brains faltering under stress concerns him more than his own hunger pangs. He carries a double portion of sushi and smoked unagi his chefs prepared for him, wondering if the boy’s eaten at all today.

An unsettling quiet greets him as he enters the penthouse. One guard stationed in the living room bows to him immediately. “Welcome back, Asami-sama.”

“Where is he?”

In that moment, Akihito emerges from the hallway into the living room, and with the meekest of voices welcomes him home. He doesn’t know what he’s done to look this sorry for himself, but he’ll take it as nothing of great concern if his guards are still standing.

“Gentlemen, you are dismissed for today.”

As they leave, Asami takes off his suit jacket and loosens his tie before turning to Akihito, asking, “Have you eaten at all?”

“I had something earlier.”

“Are you hungry now?”

He places the bag of prepared food on the dining table and retrieves two plates and chopsticks from the kitchen, making the idea of Akihito slinking back to his room a little uncomfortable.

“Actually, I think I’m just gonna go to my —”

“Sit with me.”

It’s quite clearly not a request, as Asami pulls out the chair for him before taking a seat opposite, and it has Akihito turning on his heel to comply without complaint. As the boxes of scrumptious foods open, Akihito can’t deny the delicious smell stirring him. He’s fooling himself if he doesn’t want this.

“Eat. Help yourself,” Asami indicates, and picks the first morsel of food from the box, dipping it into its dipping sauce and putting it straight into his mouth. Akihito picks out a strip of unagi and takes a careful first bite.

“I apologise for not being upfront with you sooner about the security arrangement, but it was a necessary provision for your own safety,” Asami says.

“Don’t sweat it,” Akihito scoffs. “They just gave me a scare in the morning, is all, y’know, three big men in your face.” He pops another unagi piece into his mouth, and the anger is just gonna have to wait because he’s never tasted anything so beautiful in his life. It even ebbs him into the mood for small talk. “Your bodyguards said you own a lot of clubs.”

“I own several in and around Tokyo, yes.”

“Anywhere else?”

“My business extends across the whole of Japan and East Asia, and, as of recently, Central Europe.”

“Shit, no way. So you’re a real deal millionaire. Your apartment is off the hook.”

Asami laughs to himself because it’s been years since he was an actual ‘millionaire’. “It's not bad,” he
admits.

“But your apartment is so amazingly decorated. If this was my place, I wouldn’t be able to shut up about it.”

“The previous owner left it how it was when I moved in. I didn’t need to do much with the place. Everything that you see on the walls, however, is mine, especially that. It’s an original.” He points to the painting of Picasso’s ‘Guernica’ that almost spans the entire one side of the living room wall, the painting that Akihito was ripping the piss out of earlier for being so ugly.

“An original huh? Cool. So you like art? How much is it worth?”

“Back then, about eight and a half billion yen. I couldn’t tell you what it’s worth now. It’s probably priceless.”

Akihito’s mouth opens agape. That’s more zeroes than he’s ever had to think about in his life. “It must be hard, having so much money,” he quips with a grin.

“One man’s misery is another man’s fortune.”

“Yeah, don’t I know it. But, with all of this wealth, you must have made some enemies too.”

“I rarely think about that. They’re of no consequence to me.”

In an unguarded moment, Asami finds himself looking at Akihito, at the bruise that should have swelled on his cheek by now, but there’s only smooth, clear skin. The blue of Akihito’s eyes peek through his hair and catches his lingering look, blushing slightly. He really is very cute, in his boyish awkwardness and strong urge for survival. Asami probably likes the latter in him more.

“What?” Akihito says and snaps his chopsticks at him like a shark’s mouth closing, and Asami’s finds he’s warming to him more and more with each second. But he still has questions.

“How is it that we picked you out of the sea freezing and nearly dead yesterday and today you’re walking around as if it never happened?”

“I don’t know! I feel fine. Really.”

Asami stares blatantly at him, unconcerned with the shudder it sends down the boy’s spine.

“Don’t look at me like that. I said I’m fine. I had my temperature taken too. I’m fine.”

“And what of your family?” Asami then asks.

Akihito doesn’t know how he steers so conversationally into it, but it irritates him. “What about them?”

“Do you have any?”

“You’re asking me that now if I have a family?”

“Yes, I’m asking you,” Asami says evenly.

Akihito’s jaw tightens, raising a clenched fist as if to slam it onto the table but lets it fall limply back down. “I don’t need anyone. I can take care of myself.”

“Like last night,” Asami points out.
“You tried to torture me. Excuse me for trying to escape and landing in the fucking sea.”

“When my men pulled you out, you were blue.”

“I’m alive!” Akihito forces, “Shouldn’t that be enough?”

He all but inhales a few more mouthfuls of sushi under the placid, single note of silence, the heaviness in the air suffocating.

“Look, sorry, I...I’m gonna go take a shower. Thanks for the food.” He pushes his plate forward and abruptly leaves the table with Asami’s golden eyes tracking him all the way out of the room.

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“That man!” Akihito gripes when he whips his t-shirt off over his head and throws it across the bathroom. He looks down to see the bandages around his chest and rips them off too. He can see from the reflection in the mirror that almost all of his bruises have completely healed and touching them brings no pain. If he’s honest, his body feels like new again, but this is entirely normal to him, this elevated level of healing. As much as he hates to admit it, he was lucky that Asami came when he did. A moment longer in those icy waters and he may have ceased to heal altogether. The man must be getting a sense of how crooked the blueprints of nature designed him to be. He’s seen the looks.

He takes himself into the shower and turns on the hot water, letting it sluice away the anger and whatever it is that Asami makes him feel. He’s had a very solitary day to think out Asami’s motives and if he’s putting himself directly in danger if the man’s means of protection are for darker intent. He doesn’t even have a clear way of knowing but it still eats away at him. And anyway, Asami seems to hold claim over his moral superiority, his superior everything. Fucksake, that man.

It annoys him that he should somehow be grateful to Asami for all of this, infuriated by how tactile his invasions are. And he thinks all of this while he bathes in Asami’s shower, uses his bath towels, eats his food and sleeps in his bed, that this was never his choice. This did not happen of his choosing. It just is.

Man supposes, Asami disposes.

When he’s out of the shower, he opens his wardrobe to find it stocked with fresh clothes all in his size. Throughout the whole day while marching around in the modest drawstring shorts and t-shirt he woke up in, he didn’t think to look if there was something else to wear. He doesn’t know why, he didn’t think the man was so kindly accommodating like that, but it’s slowly starting to dawn on him that this is exactly how Asami operates, always ten steps ahead of the game and never what you expect him to be.

He finds him later smoking on the balcony. He’s taken off his tie and vest, and even in just a shirt and dress trousers he looks coolly handsome against the motley neon backdrop of the city. Akihito feels a hesitation before he approaches. “Sorry about before.”

Asami gives him a short glance, then turns his eyes back to the midnight skyline and to his cigarette, uttering, “Don’t worry about it.”

Akihito doesn’t move, instead watches as the smoke curls from Asami’s mouth like the ghost of his soul escaping. Asami gives him another nonchalant reply, “Go in or you’ll catch a cold.”

“Can you come inside for a moment? I need some help with my bandages.”
Asami expels the smoke sharply and stubs his cigarette out into the soil of a plant pot, and turns to see the boy freshly showered and damp, holding the medical gauze. Wordlessly, he follows Akihito to his room.

He sits behind him on the bed and applies the medical ointment onto his back first. In this light, the bruises are hardly visible, but Akihito wriggles uncomfortably nonetheless.

Small droplets of water drip from the strands at the nape of Akihito’s neck down the indent of his spine, and Asami feels almost entranced as it descends down the river of his back, to pool at his finger he deliberately places in its path to stop it. He presses his fingertip gently into the wetness and Akihito’s skin gooses up with a shiver. Asami feels something stir in him then, when he sees the two small slits on either side of the boy’s shoulder blades.

He’s been wanting to know where these wings came from, how they sprout from such a lean and otherwise human body, but they’re there without a shadow of a doubt, and these little slits are proof that they exist inside this unassuming body.

When Asami’s hand doesn’t stop touching, Akihito feels a panic rise because this is the most intimacy he’s felt between the two of them. He tries to quell the sudden heat and breathlessness when he feels both of the man’s hands flat against his shoulder blades descending slowly, as if searching. “Asami—”

“Hold still,” is all Asami says before stretching the gauze tightly around Akihito’s chest, pulling it securely. This time the pain is real. The bandages pull tight and compress the bruised tissue underneath.
It might have been the pungent smell of the ointment or something, but as soon as it's done, Asami is overcome with a painful cough that startles Akihito into turning around, clear with concern. “Are you ok?”

“I’m fine,” Asami manages between coughs. Just when he thinks he has it under control, another cough takes him.

Akihito looks worriedly at him when he moves from the bed holding his chest. It's a horrible sound. “Are you sure?” he enquires nervously, “You sound pretty bad.”

Asami rejects his touch as Akihito extends his hand and steps out of the way. The coughs knock all the wind out of him and his throat scrapes as he tries to carry his words. “It’s late. Get some rest…”

“O—Okay,” Akihito concedes, and in the moment it takes for him to put his top back on, Asami’s no longer there.
Akihito is feeling odd about this current interim in his life. The days have grown longer and the unfamiliarity of being ‘locked’ in a city he otherwise would have breezed through within a day grinds him into a despondent, bed-ridden recluse. Sometimes it takes him hours just to get out of bed, and hours to do anything of any useful sort. Maybe Asami thinks that his being here is counterproductive to his relentless routine and impeccable time management and that’s why he stays longer at the office, so he doesn’t have to deal with a backlash when he comes home. His barely-there presence hasn’t been an improvement or a decline in hospitality, and Akihito doesn’t even mind that, it’s the adjustment that’s been cruel, and he’s not sure he’s managing to deal with it very well. That is, until now.

The elaborate envelope appeared on the coffee table again this morning.

It was in the middle of a guard changeover when Akihito saw a man in a smart blue jacket and collar pin hand-deliver the red envelope to one of the guards at the door. That was nearly a week ago.

Akihito sits staring at the patterned gold and red emblazoned envelope as he tucks into his sugary cereal. He eyes it while he crunches, determining it far too flashy and over the top to be anything mundane. Akihito’s never claimed to have seen one as such, but the envelope and design looks important, almost regal, and Asami, if anything, is more regal than common man.

He raises the topic when Asami returns home that afternoon (earlier than usual), as he’s sitting in the living room with a scotch and a newspaper and Akihito slides the envelope over the coffee table inconspicuously, the red shocking against the pale slab of marble. It catches the corner of Asami’s eye instantly.

“I’ve already seen it,” he says, attention still on his newspaper.

“What does it say?” Akihito inquires.

“It’s an invitation to a charity dinner and auction event.”

“Are you going to go?”

“It would be rude of me not to. The host is an old friend.”

Akihito slips the card out of the envelope and starts to read it aloud. “‘Distinguished guests, you are hereby invited to the ‘Vital Fight Cancer Research’ Charity Auction, hosted by its chairman, Sasabe Keizo...’ — This chairman guy is your friend?”

Asami answers with a clipped but affirming, “Yes.”

“Oh, and it’s tonight. Can I come too?”

He feels the opportunity to ask, or he may never hope to escape the same four walls and ceiling he’s been confined to for the last two weeks. The Playstation 4 and stack of Blue-rays were, admittedly, wonderful for about the first three days, but what Asami probably doesn’t realise about him is that he never passed the time on the couch being spoon-fed packaged entertainment. He doesn’t need to make it any clearer to him that this amount of seclusion is unhealthy.

But Asami’s eyes shift from the newspaper to him as if Akihito’s uttered the absolute impossible, and replies, “No. You’ll stay here.”
“Why?”

“You’re not invited.” Asami says, simply, licking the corner of his thumb and turning the page of his newspaper.

“Nice try. It says ‘plus associates’ here.” Akihito points to the small-print.

“That doesn’t apply to you.”

He bristles at the all too casual way Asami cuts into him and he flings the invitation back onto the table, a split second away from gifting Asami with a nice forehead paper cut but thinks better of it. He deflates into his seat and drags his feet up onto the table, crossing his arms. It’s childish and he knows it, but he doesn’t give a shit. Playing captive in Asami’s apartment isn’t what he thought Asami’s protection entailed.

He scowls and Asami shoots him a solidly morose look of scorn over the rim of his glass as he sips. Akihito’s ready to give him the finger just for breathing wrong in his direction, and it’s a farce that the table hasn’t been flipped already, Akihito doesn’t trust himself not to do it when Asami quirks his lips up and smirks, enjoying every minute of this, the bastard.

“Takaba —”

“Before you say anything more — Fuck you.” He makes a show of getting up and storming away, but Asami’s grip on his arm is ironclad and reels him back.

“Don’t do that,” Asami says. He’s getting a little tired of Akihito’s constant ‘shoot and leave’ tirade.

“Why shouldn’t I!? This is house arrest! You keep me here under lock and key like a criminal. Why do I have to be treated like this? I’m not your damn prisoner. Let me go!” Akihito barks, shaking his arm out of the grip.

“You wouldn’t last fifteen minutes in prison.” Asami laces it with his amusement, his mouth razor sharp.

“Oh, go fuck yourself.” Akihito tries to leave again but Asami intercepts him with a grip on his bicep and clear intent in his voice that washes what's left of the bite still left on Akihito’s tongue.

“It’s prevention, from the possibility of you being foolish.”

Akihito grits through clenched teeth, “I told you I wasn’t going to escape.”

“This isn’t a question of you escaping. This is a question of what I can do within my power to protect you.”

Protect — the word Asami weaves in and out of his ears like a psychological weapon. He’s heard it so many times now that it’s permanently lodged into the back of his mind, when he wakes and when he sleeps, the reassurance that he’s in a cage and apparently it’s for his own good. Conceited prick. Akihito’s voice flares and he waves his other arm, violently animated. “Protect me from what, huh? Tell me.”

Asami doesn’t bat an eyelid when the arm comes flying towards him. He dismisses most of the anger at an arm’s length, letting the boy’s outrage run its course.

Akihito tries to swipe him but Asami is unrelenting. “Protect me from what, Asami? Protect me from what?”
“Everything.”

Akihito stops and looks straight into Asami’s eyes, deadly serious like it’s their first meeting over the metal table all over again. It’s a frightful suppression balmed by a single word.

“I’ve done everything in my capacity to keep you safe and respect your wishes, so at the very least, I will exercise these precautions. Even if it’s so that one day, if I find you’ve slipped through my fingers, I can tell myself that I didn’t let you go without a fight.”

He doesn’t expect that, nor does he expect his anger and resolution to drip from him as quickly as it came. Akihito doesn’t know a lot of things about Asami but when he does honesty, he can’t stand how much it floors him. He wants to believe it, God, he wants to believe that Asami can make the world right for him, but he hasn’t the smallest indication of the great mountain of thoughts that lie behind the mind of a man like Asami Ryuichi.

“Many influential people will be attending this event, as well as the press looking for anything to sell to their papers. If you draw attention to yourself, even so much as reveal the tiniest hint of your true self to them, this will all fall apart, for you and for me, and there’ll be no coming back from it. It’ll be over. Do you understand?”

“I’m in full control of myself Asami, fucking hell, what do you think I am?” But there’s something fierce in Asami’s eyes, a deluge of hostility, storming that Akihito averts his eyes from.

“Very well. For this night, I will indulge you and let you come with us — no dramatics, no straying, no arguments. You will behave yourself.” His grip loosens on Akihito’s arm and he glances down at his watch. “I’ll need to call my tailor to see if he has a suit matching your requirements. I can’t have you looking like a street kid at this event. We don’t have much time so I’m going to take the measurements myself. Wait here.”

Asami disappears into his office and comes back with a measuring tape. He stands toe to toe with Akihito and levels his shoulders to look straight at him.

“Stand straight, arms by your sides, head pointed forward. No moving unless I tell you to.”

Akihito nods and Asami walks around him, taking the first measurement from the nape of his neck down past his buttocks and jots the inches onto paper. He repositions Akihito slightly and takes the tape from shoulder to elbow, and elbow to wrist. Akihito keeps a nervous twitch at bay when Asami returns to his back again, pressing the tape across from one shoulder to the centre of his spinal column and the same on the other side. The indentation of Asami’s fingers into his back raise the fine hairs on his neck and arms, reminding Akihito of the closeness that time, of having Asami’s hands on his naked back and threading across the tell-tale exit points of his wings.

Asami catches him looking around and scolds him. “Head forward.”

Akihito rights himself, snorting, “Sorry.”

Asami can understand Akihito’s apprehension of the tedious but very necessary measuring process. He’ll squirm and make little remarks under his breath because he’s never felt the pleasure of a perfectly designed, hand-crafted suit before. So he’s measuring every inch of him meticulously, doubly, and envisaging seam for seam the beautiful suit that will encase this body.

“Arms out,” he says, and stands in front of Akihito to feed the tape around his midriff, encircling both arms around his slim body. He gets to within an inch of Akihito’s face and the trailing tips of his hair brush against his face as he pulls away, as well as the ghost of a comforting scent rising to
capture him. He looks at Akihito and he’s smiling at him, as if he knows exactly what this smell is doing to him. Cheeky brat.

“Can I put my arms down now, Asami-san?” the boy chides with a charm offensive and Asami schools him with a lingering look that’s expressionless but so utterly conquering.

“Legs apart,” he says, and Akihito’s smile falters.

He drops to one knee to take the inside leg measurement and the smile swiftly falls from Akihito’s face. He measures it wrong on purpose the first time, then corrects himself by sliding the end of the tape higher up the crease of Akihito’s crotch — a faint whine tells him he definitely has it right this time. When he stands up, the boy’s cheeks are filled with colour.

“I’ll pass these measurements on to my tailor and have him transport you a suit. He should have your size.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that,” he reaffirms. “Go and get cleaned up for when it arrives. We’ll be leaving before eight.”

✣

After a cleansing respite of a shower and a drink, Asami raps gently at Akihito’s door, waiting for an answer before entering. Akihito’s slender bodyline is hunched over by the upright mirror with his hands in his hair, mussing with the strands. Solid black leads up to a crisp white shirt, and the indiscreet, pale blonde boy is everything he’d expected to be tonight. It only gets better the closer he gets, the fabric one long caress over Akihito’s young, tight skin. He’d inspected the dinner suit when it arrived and his specifications for a silk black pinstripe waistcoat to go underneath the jacket elevates the tight lines of Akihito’s figure as he knew it would.

Akihito purposely obscures his vision because he can smell the aroma of Asami’s cologne and it feels unbearably close. “I’ve never worn anything like this before,” he says in an effort to break the silence.

Their eyes meet in the mirror, with a simple nod from Asami giving small but necessary assurance to Akihito’s confidence. He’s a perfectly tailored counterpart to Asami, after all. Asami stands back and allows Akihito ample fidgeting time. It’s the least he can do when the choice of threads finally appease his retinas. “How does it feel?”

“Ok, I guess,” Akihito replies, nervously flattening his undressed collar.

“It’s a black tie event,” Asami mentions, and walks over to the dresser to take the loose bowtie. He moves to stand behind Akihito, lifting his shirt collar up and draping the bowtie around his neck, his breath close enough that it catches the shell of Akihito’s ear. “Now, watch my hands.” He takes the two ends of material through complicated twists until the flat ribbon forms a classic bow.

Akihito fingers it afterwards, the shape unfamiliar against his neck. “Thanks a lot.”

Asami calmly steps away, and in doing so treats Akihito to a view of his own evening outfit, except Asami carries it with the kind of finesse that could only be achieved by the man himself. His hair is slicked back without a single strand out of place, and he looks impermeable, hard and refined to glorious, sharp perfection.

Akihito doesn’t realise he’s all but drinking in the sight of him until Asami’s silken deep laugh breaks
“As good as you do, I hope,” Asami finishes with a delicate, modest lilt but it feels lethal when the man cocks his hip and smirks in the hungry and enigmatic way that he does, inviting the devil and all to lick the soles of his shoes and enjoy every minute of it. As much as he begrudges the thought, the man has an allure like no other, and it drives Akihito crazy.

Asami uses the moment to produce a small box from his jacket pocket and hand it over. “I’m gifting these to you.”

Akihito opens it to find two circular platinum and black cufflinks with a letter ‘A’ in Latin script reflecting on the black pearlescent surface. A for Asami, he thinks to himself, it’s got to be, and not just a coincidence. He’s happy to accept them though, because they’re stunning in their own right. “I don’t know what to say. Thank you.”

Asami only smirks and turns towards the door. “I’ll be waiting for you outside. The limo will be here soon.”

Akihito didn’t think that the limo ride would leave him with cold shivers. The space between them is small and stifling. He wipes his hands down his thighs and stares out of the tinted windows, watching the dripping wet street moving past outside.

Asami’s kept himself away from the boy’s ultimately attractive demeanor but not the entirety of his thoughts. The space is filled with notes of guaiac wood and blood orange, the fragrance Akihito’s wearing is one of his own and that, admittedly, does things to him.

He cures the silence when he pops two lozenges in his mouth and starts, offhandedly, “‘Plus associates’ isn’t what you think it means. The night is about wealth and exuberance, the more cash, the merrier. This event is aimed for glamour and profit after all, even if it is for a good cause.”

“So even you admit that. You rich folk are all the same, cuddling up with your money. You probably can’t even relate to poor people’s struggles.” Akihito says, wry.

“I’m relating to you just fine,” Asami returns, in an all too rosy sneer.

The boy turns to the window again without saying anything, and Asami knows Akihito’s not intentionally brandishing his neckline at him.

No retaliation, Asami notes, pleasantly surprised. If he says anything now it would only set the boy further on edge. The last thing he needs is for Akihito to release the contents of his anxiety on the floor of his limousine. He flicks the lozenges around in his mouth and settles on watching the boy’s reflection from his window, averting his nervousness with outside distractions.

“What’s wrong, Takaba?”

Akihito’s eyes fly wide, and he consciously stops fidgeting. “Nothing.”

“You look uncomfortable.” Asami leans back into the leather and regards him with a jaunty smile. "You make fun of this event but it’s you who made it exceptionally clear to me that you wanted to come." He chuckles when he hears Akihito grumble under his breath.
He reaches into the limo’s cooler to pour a nice, clear shot of white whiskey into a glass and hands it to the skittish boy. “Here, drink this.”

Akihito eyes it with suspicion. “What is it?”

“A little liquid courage.”

He downs it with no further questions.

They pull up on the driveway of the Mori & Matsushima Banqueting House in uptown Ginza — ritzy even in the pouring rain. They step out under the shelter of umbrellas and to cordial greetings. Kirishima and the rest of the men join them from the other car, swelling their entourage.

“Good Evening, Asami-sama. Our warmest welcomes.”

Their party is led into the opulent lobby of tall windows, silk printed drapes and varnished cherry woods, everything polished and accented with gold, setting an immediate grandiose scene. Mixed in with the furor of western contemporary are beautiful kimono girls, carbon copies of one another dressed in identical colourful kimonos and standing on either side of the foyer, ushering guests into the grand entry hall. A kimono girl greets Asami by name, her wide red smile radiating hospitality.

“It’s a pleasure to have you with us tonight, Asami-sama. This way, gentlemen.” Her okobo clap against the solid marble floor as she shuffles in her heavy dress into the main hall, and Akihito whistles when he enters.

If the lobby was indulgent, the main hall is ridiculous. Marble carved pillars and fifteen foot drop crystal chandeliers hang from the ceiling. Akihito draws his head up to see the incredibly ornate hand-painted ceiling, contradicting the bold and flat lines of the interior architecture, but altogether a feast for the eyes. The large round tables have gold and red embroidered throw over cloths with giant futuristic ikebana structures in the centre of them, while a performing string octet fills the space with the sounds of Rachmaninoff and Schubert. ‘Excess’ is rightfully the word of the evening.

A quick look around reveals all kinds of important people filling the grand hall. Compared to them, Asami stands as a man without equals, tall and elegant, striding with confident composure and without fuss amongst the self-serving highflyers. His most trusted men flank him on each side, and you’d think he was an eight foot tall titan unmatched, turning the heads of everyone he passes, and Akihito, living vicariously in his shadow.

“Ahh, Mr Asami! What a pleasure!” says a foreign voice behind them, a plump, older gentleman who looks like he’s stepped right out of the aristocratic dynasty — monocle and a cane and all the traditional trimmings — approaches them. Asami immediately recognises him and answers back in perfect English, or what Akihito perceives it to be to his Japanese ears.

“Mr Lowell. Please, the pleasure is mine.”

Despite the language barrier, Akihito senses the warm familiarity between the two men as they shake hands and converse in foreign tongue.

“You’re looking as sharp as I remember,” the Englishman enthuses. He smiles so much that his eyes disappear under his cheeks and he becomes almost a caricature of himself.

“How has your stay in Japan been?” Asami asks.

“Very well indeed! Japan is a carousel of all sorts! As a matter of fact, I’m staying at one of your hotels by the bay.”
“Thank you for your patronage. I trust there haven’t been any problems. For you, I would see to them personally.”

“Quite the contrary. They treat us like kings! If anything, I should be indebted to you for creating such a storming establishment.”

It’s one thing to experience the way money sings in this place, Akihito’s also coming to learn that Asami’s abundant talent for foreign languages is an unforgivable attraction. He can’t tell where a word ends and a new one begins, but the homogeneous flow of sound is fascinating in its own lulling appeal. He’s just watching Asami’s mouth and how effortlessly his lips shape the words before they fall out in a sweet baritone of nonsense, the way the words no longer have any meaning and it’s the purity of sound alone. He surprises even himself with how captivated he is by it. It gets better, though, when Asami says something that makes the Englishman laugh heartily. He has no way of knowing if it’s Asami’s humour or if the old man’s the type that laughs at anything, but he’s amused by it, charmed, really.

“And who is this fine young man with you?”

The focus suddenly turns on him and the blood rushes to his face at being caught on the end of Asami’s effervescent stare, even more so when Asami rests a hand on his shoulder and eases him into the conversation. Prick, when did he get so friendly?

“His name is Akihito Takaba. He’s a very...talented associate of mine,” Asami says in English, then switches effortlessly back to Japanese, “Takaba, this is Victor Lowell-san, he’s a former business client of mine from England. Say hello.”

All Akihito can manage is a flustered bow and a, “Pleased to meet you,” in mother tongue.

“He’s charming!” chirps the Englishman. “A new protege?”

“You could say that.”

“I’m sure he’ll excel with your guidance, Mr Asami.” He taps a firm hand on Asami’s shoulder, and tips his head up to speak something into his ear. If Akihito isn’t already feeling self-conscious, this really doesn’t help, but he can’t very well hear, let alone understand them anyway. Mr Lowell pulls away, his big lips turning up into a toothy grin, and Asami’s smiles, too polite to be genuine, but scary all the same. These cryptic bastards.

“Mr Takaba, I’m very glad to have made your acquaintance tonight. To you both, enjoy the rest of the evening. Please excuse me.”

Asami’s forced smile drops as soon as the old man disappears out of earshot, and Akihito doesn’t know why but he’s laughing and asking, “What did he say to you?”

Asami only sighs. “Nevermind.”

Akihito laughs again, and it’s a wonder that he feels a slipstream of calm flow through him at Asami’s expense. Asami sharpens his eyes on him and Akihito immediately swallows down his wide grin, snorting like a kid.

“The whiskey’s taking effect I take it. You seem in lighter spirits.”

“Or maybe you’re just funny, Mister Asami.”

“Brat,” Asami admonishes.
They accept champagne from a nymph-like server girl dusted with gold makeup around her neck and shoulders, who looks like it took her a lifetime to build the courage to come over and offer them drinks. She walks away with softened knees and a slightly flwn look which Akihito can wholeheartedly sympathise with. Asami has that effect on people. He's only noticing now that Asami's bodyguards have left them in favour of blending more evenly with the guests, and it's only the two of them, clinking glasses in the phantasm of the evening. It seems wherever they go there are acknowledging salutes, starstruck ladies, dramatic little starlets fawning. For a man of few words, Asami attracts the attentions of many.

“Hej, Asami! Ett nöje att se dig igen, min vän!”

The unmistakable Nordic accent leaves Asami just shy of a groan as he wonders, of all the people in the world, why he had to be here too.

“Likewise, Kasper,” he offers politely, and when he’s fully turned, the attractive Swede sways with an arrogant, easy swagger towards them, an equally attractive beauty perching on his arm like an expensive accessory, plastic and chewing on diamonds.

“Last time I was in Japan you got me drunk and took me to the horses. You're a bad influence on me.”

Asami grins at him, “As I recall, it was quite a good night, as far as winnings went.”

“You’re not a straight arrow, my friend, no matter how much your reputation precedes you.”

“If it makes you happier believing that, by all means do.”
The rapport is bitingly playful between them from what Akihito can gauge from body language alone. The foreigner rises, but Asami gives little away, as is his usual assured self. Akihito feels uneasy when the woman looks him up and down, as if sizing him up, and does the same to Asami while he’s engaging with Kaspar and not paying any mind to her pouting. There’s a lecherousness there that Akihito would like to see redirected away from Asami’s more intimate assets. It must have shown in his expression because now she leans heavily on her blonde consort, attention seeking.

“Ahh, let me introduce you, this is—”

“Liliyana Valentinova,” she completes in a heavy accent and extends a graceful hand straight towards Asami. What she expects and what Asami is prepared to give are, in all certainties, worlds apart, nevertheless, Asami is gracious enough to bow and place a small kiss on the back of her gloved hand, but it’s an entirely cold gesture.

The Swede winks. “She’s a gem isn’t she? She’s Bulgarian, but I found her in France. She doesn’t speak much English, but she’s err...great, if you know what I mean.”

Asami wouldn’t care to entertain the thought of that, a matter of taste clearly skipping by his Swedish friend. Instead he delivers a soft nudge to Akihito’s side and switches the focus to his own delightful, far more attractive companion. “Let me introduce you to—”

The Swede takes Akihito’s hand enthusiastically before Asami has a chance to complete his introduction and shakes it, intent on invading all of his personal space. “Wow, are those the real colour of your eyes?”

Akihito smiles awkwardly and whispers desperately to Asami, “What’s he saying?”

“He seems besotted with your eyes.”

Kasper pulls back, laughing, “Ahh, sorry, I don’t mean to pry. In Sweden blue eyes are so commonplace, but I’ve never seen a Japanese person with blue eyes before. It’s so strange. You must have rare genes.”

Akihito does the smile and nod without any saving grace from Asami who’s too busy lasering a hole into his friend’s head with the power of his glare alone, while Kasper’s lady-friend exercises the art of making his skin crawl when the attention isn’t on her.

“Da~hling, we get champagne, yes?”

“See, a woman after my own heart. We should meet up again some time, Asami. Bring your blue-eyed friend too. Adjö!” Kasper tosses a wave over his shoulder and swans away towards awaiting alcohol.

“Who’s that guy?” Akihito grumbles.

“That’s Kasper Eklund. It’s a long story with him, but he inherited his father’s overseas business when he passed away. He’s a fantastic drinking partner, but not good for much else.” Asami hadn’t planned on leaning in as he said it, the arrival of that magnetic, tender scent drawing him in without a fraction of conscious awareness, but the moments already passed and too good to waste when he pulls back and notices the bloom in Akihito’s cheeks. “You’re blushing,” he says, turning the situation into a sly advantage.

“Shut up, no I’m not. It was that woman, she kept looking at me funny. God, why are rich people such creeps? She kept looking at you like she wanted you to...”
Asami’s eyebrow lifts, intrigued. “Like she wanted me to what?”

Akihito wants to shoot himself. “N—Nothing. Forget I said anything.”

Asami smirks. It’s never short of amusing. “How scary is that sentence to finish, Takaba?”

Ghastly, from the way it sounds in his head, milling around that, yeah, to say she kept looking like she wanted Asami to murder her with his cock would be an understatement.

“What did you just say?”

The unchecked surprise in Asami’s voice has him backtracking several moments in his head to that split second malfunction between his brain to mouth filter. Oh holy fucking hell...he’s so unredeemably tragic in every possible way.

“Now that is a bold statement, Takaba. Does her infatuation with me bother you in some way?”

“Wha—Of course not! Just shut up.”

Asami doesn’t, though, he just keeps going, chuckling, “Maybe she’s imagining you in her would-be place.”

Shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up. “You’re a damn pervert!”

“Who’s the one talking about murderous male appendages?”

“It was so obvious she was though,” Akihito pouts, turning his head around to spot her laughing raucously with the Swede, and his clutch on his glass unconsciously tightens.

“Perhaps the champagne has loosened your tongue far more than it has your nerves.”

"You need better friends," Akihito lambasts.

“And you know what I need, do you?”

“— Konbanwa, Asami-san.”

Boy, is Akihito glad to hear the familiar sound of Japanese preventing his heel from colliding with Asami’s shin. A short greying man bows to them. “I hope you gentlemen are enjoying the evening.”

“Tajima-san, Konbanwa.”

“I thought it was you. I had to come over and greet you. How have you been keeping?”

“Fine, thank you. You look well.”

“I’m looking after myself now that I’m retired. It doesn’t get easier once you get old. Oh, I believe we haven’t met before.”

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Takaba Akihito.”

“Tajima Keisuke. Are you a colleague?”

“N—no no! I’m—”

“He’ll soon be the newest blood of Sion Corporation,” Asami interjects and Akihito’s mouth goes agape.
“Is that so? Wonderful news! I told you giving the youngsters a chance would benefit your business. Take it from me, Takaba-kun, once you get old, no one listens to you anymore. Young people are the future, after all.”

“I—I’ll do my best to make Asami-sama proud.” Akihito’s positively seething with himself for how quickly and easily the honorific slips from his mouth and how pleased it seems to make Asami, his bland look showing contentment of sorts. Akihito’s deep bow hides any developing personal anguish.

“That’s the spirit. You’ll do well, Takaba-kun.”

It’s educational though, for Asami to drop back and observe Akihito conversing with a complete stranger. He has no doubt that Akihito’s eyes are wide open to the opportunities of the evening, perhaps a little unaware that his own guard drops. Asami focuses in on that — Akihito’s nuances; the way he touches his nose when he’s nervous, sometimes a stroke on the bridge, sometimes a thumb flicking across the tip. The way he blinks rapidly when listening to a question and then bites his lips when he’s nervous how to answer in case he says the wrong thing and then smiles widely, uninhibitedly, for no particular reason like he’s a threat to nothing and no one. He thinks how many men have dishonoured themselves in front of him for not tending to emotional weaknesses, and yet someone as unguarded as Takaba, whose stream of emotion is a constant and entertaining delight, still leaves room for a thousand unanswered questions. Tonight is perhaps solid proof of how incongruous the boy is in his life, and of just how much he absolutely needs it.

He godspeeds the conversation when he sees that Akihito might be on the verge of having a panic attack from being asked too many questions he doesn’t know the answers to, and steers them into a quiet corner for Akihito’s nerves to return to their rightful working order.

“God, that was awkward.”

“You seem to deal better with foreigners,” Asami jests through a completely straight face.

“You’re so goddamn funny, y’know that?”

“Don’t be so glum. Everyone’s taken a shine to you.”

“Because I’m with you, you mean. Everyone thinks you’re fantastic.”

“It’s perfectly natural to feel that way.”

And a quintessential bastard. “Do you never cease being so full of yourself?”

“Maybe you could call me “Asami-sama” again. I liked that.”

“A mistake. First and last time. Get over it.”

Akihito tips back the last of his champagne and places it onto a server’s tray as it passes by. He probably owes a lot to alcohol tonight. “So how many people do you know here?”

“Enough to make you nervous.”

“Are you some kind of celebrity at these parties?”

Asami smirks at the indignation he detects. “I’m not pointless enough to be a celebrity. I’ve had acquaintances with some of them once upon a time. In my line of business I meet many people, from many parts of the world. Occasions like this lead us to brush shoulders again, as old friends would.”
“Like that old English guy?” Akihito hasn’t failed to notice a lot of guests are foreigners.

“He’s been a long time patron of Sion, and one of my more esteemed associates, even if he is a little...inappropriate. Familiarities are what keep men concurrent with the business world.”

“Hmmm, so, tonight is more about business than charity.”

“In your tiny little world, Takaba, tonight is about us and no-one.”

A tinny chime sounds and everyone makes their way to the tables. Their table is somewhere in the outer middle, not too far from the stage but far enough that they’re obscured from intrusive contact. Asami lights up as soon as they’re all situated and Akihito waves the smoke out of his face. “Isn’t there no smoking in here?”

“Not in this room, no,” Asami says, breathing smoke into the side of Akihito’s head, with the anticipation of a lovely scowl he undoubtedly gets.

The servers start bringing out the starters and entrées, a combination of Eastern and Western cuisines, wrapped parcels, finely sliced meats, bite-size vegetables and herb-encrusted fish. Akihito has two sets of cutlery he doesn’t know what to do with. He knows he’s rough around the edges, but he might have the same scepticism towards two sets of chopsticks if they were placed side by side.

“Outside in,” Asami offers, and it’s almost subliminal. Akihito grabs the outermost fork and picks up a piece of seared squid that’s buttery and melt-in-your-mouth good.

After dinner, the kimono girls fan out from the sides, navigating through tables with cigarette boxes and other social confectionary. Akihito politely declines the smokes but pops an after dinner mint chocolate into his mouth, cleansing his palette. Asami lights up another cigarette and reclines as he takes the first draw and blows a spout of smoke above his head, the first drag almost as satisfying as the five figure meal they just had.

“Are you enjoying the evening so far, Takaba?”

“Yeah, it’s...definitely a lot to take in, and interesting to finally see what your world is like aside from captivity.”

“My work is fluid enough that I take trips regularly in and out of the country and I don’t always have to work from my office. At these events I see old friends, new acquaintances, and then I sometimes see certain faces that remind me why I never do business with them.”

“Are any of them here now?” Akihito asks, looking around.

“Some of them are, yes. And they'd do best to avoid me.”

“Why avoid?”

“Sometimes people will do anything to gain a higher status on the back of your shoulders. If there’s anything I care for more than honesty, it’s trust.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“One shouldn’t shake my hand and then send a mole in through the backdoor when I’m not looking.”

“They were spying on Sion?”
“They attempted to, they should have known better. I had measures put in place long ago in the event of deliberate spy activity.”

“So, what happened to them?”

Asami points him a darkened look. “You came very close to finding out.”

An arctic chill runs up Akihito’s spine.

“I’ve had spies trying to infiltrate my business more times than you can imagine. It gets tiresome after a while.” He lets the rich smoke filter out through his lips, regarding Akihito’s pallid expression through the veil of white, then leans in closer, “That’s why when you inadvertently managed to slip into Sion, I had to make doubly sure you weren’t one of them.”

“I’m still not. Don’t you believe me?”

“When you show your emotions so easily, you reveal the truth to me quicker than I could pluck it from you by any other means.”

And as Akihito is left to toil in self-consciousness, darkness dowses them mid-conversation and a spot of light shines on the podium platform on the stage, where the host proceeds with an introduction and the start of the auction.

Rare, valuable, beautiful and unusual items — costumes, art pieces, jewelry, historical antiques — things Akihito has never seen before come and go on the stage. Two giant LCD screens on each side show close ups and explanations of items, with their auction price in ever increasing increments until someone nets the prize. A historical Japanese vase and Kamakura period tea set were the first to be won by a lady who Asami points out is a fashion designer from Gifu. An original art piece, Faberge eggs, and historic books are also successfully bought, and several million yen already raised within the first quarter or so of items. Host Sasabe does a job of introducing each item in his entertaining Osaka-ben before the colourfully clad assistants take care of attracting buyers.

Akihito notes that Asami’s bidding tab hasn’t left the table yet. Akihito looks at him now and again when there’s a changeover of lots and every time he’s kissing the cigarette to his lips and puffing out rings of smoke that look like little round martian ships in the candescence of the stage lights.

“You’re not bidding on anything,” even when the art pieces pass by.

“I’ll bid when I see something I like.”

Four items later the auction picks up when a certain someone is mentioned.

"Our next lot has kindly been donated by my good friend Asami Ryuichi-san.”

An elegant feminine voice on the tannoy begins the lot’s description, first in Japanese, then in English and French respectively — “A 1908 vintage case of Chateau de Jardins Cognac in a Cherry-wood Moulineaux gilded case. And Spanish cedar ‘Elie Bleu’ Medailles Cigar Humidor with a set of thirty of the finest Cuban cigars.”

“Well, what more is there left for me to say? They don’t make them like they used to. I hope you'll agree with me, ladies and gentlemen, that it's an exquisite lot. We'll start the bidding at a hundred thousand yen.”

“That’s quite a mark-up. This’ll be an interesting auction,” Asami shares with the table, and they join in with his laugh when the bids swarm in instantly.
Akihito stares enthralled watching the money rise and rise on the huge screen. “Wow, your items are really hot. They won’t stop bidding.”

“And can you believe I didn’t spend a single yen on those?”

“So everything would have been profit if it hadn’t been for charity.”

“I’ll make a bet with you right now, Takaba, the value of the winning bid is yours if Kasper wins this lot.”

“What? Are you serious? But he’s not even in it.”

Asami sits back with confidence, and breathes. “Just watch.”

Five hands drop to three, and when the bid reaches nearly five times the starting value, it’s a two horse race between two elder guests who bid furiously against each other. Akihito can’t look away, doesn’t know whether to feel assured or nervous at this bet and what it’s supposed to prove. Asami on the other hand focuses on Akihito for a long while, engaging the boy thoroughly in midst of the bidding frenzy, and all he knows of the balance is from the way Akihito draws in his breath a little bit each time the total rises.

“Four hundred and thirty thousand Yen — ”

Akihito’s eyes go wide and flit to him in quiet amazement. He’s fascinated with the honesty of excitement in the boy’s reactions, warming himself that he has nothing to lose and absolutely everything to gain from the risk of his very, very impulsive insight. Although, the biggest fascination of all is if that jolly drunken Swede enters the equation and renders them the victor.

Host Sasabe suddenly turns and directs his attention to the opposite end of the room to where the current bidding war is happening. Akihito leans up from his chair to see more clearly.

“Five hundred and fifty-five thousand Yen. We have a new bidder on the far table —”

It’s the exact moment that Asami’s smirk turns to pure honey.

“Sold! For six hundred and fifty thousand Yen to bidder Number 209, our Swedish friend, Eklund-san. Thank you!”

Akihito’s in disbelief. “How the hell did you — ?”

Asami’s already handing him a filled glass of champagne with a smirk. “Congratulations, Takaba-san.”

“You are unbelievable,” he laughs incredulously. “How did you know?”

“Important lesson, Takaba, it always pays to know your friends,” and Asami raises his glass in a mock salute to his favourite Swedish carouser. Just the subtlety in that comment and the all-encompassing aura of Asami leaves Akihito mystified. Maybe he’s misread the man all along, and for whatever dark and deep-rooted desires that underpin him, his pure fascination with the human condition and his frightening certitude for ‘knowing thy neighbour’ gains some ground with him.

Midway through the auction, the host announces the intermission entertainment as well as dessert, and exits off the platform. The lights dim to almost complete darkness and a spotlight beams down onto the centre of the stage where a Geisha is posing statuesque in a white and gold kimono, and the Kanzashi hair pins she wears glitters gold all over her head. How she managed to appear there
without revealing her presence is a mystery.

Akihito smiles in enjoyment when flakes of falling faux snow speckle the dark stage all around her and the Shamisen and Flute melody starts, bringing her performance to life.

Asami scoffs at the uninspiring routine of dancing Geisha’s yet again providing the apple of their entertainment. He downs a finger of whiskey when she starts singing and fills it right up again.

Dessert comes round in the form of a beautifully whipped almond and pistachio mousse tart adorned with edible sakura that’s not so much sitting but floating on the plate. Akihito spins the plate around in awe and spots the glass-like spun sugar lattice that props the whole thing up. “How do they even do that?”

He sees Asami pushing the plate away like it’s been sprinkled with the plague and reaches for more ice and whiskey instead.

“Aren’t you going to eat that?” Akihito asks.

Asami looks at him disgruntled. “I don’t like sweet things.”

He sniggers that the impermeable man is stirred so easily by the cute little confection. “Not even when it looks this pretty?” He spins the plate as he says it, to heighten its attractiveness, or something.

“Especially when it looks that pretty.”

“Your loss,” Akihito shrugs, as he digs the spoon into the tart and breaks the sugar-laced structure with a satisfying crunch.

Asami leaves his cigarette to smolder in the ashtray and rises from his seat, signalling discreetly to his men. “I need to make a phone call. Stay here.” Akihito looks up to see two of Asami’s men already on his immediate guard as they follow him out of the grand hall.

As it turns out, the performing Geisha was modelling a part of the next lot. The overcrowd of hairpieces that sat so heavily on her head are separately modelled by the kimono girls for the beginning of the second half of auctions. Akihito couldn’t give a hoot about any bidding wars however, as he’s happily devouring his dessert as well as Asami’s and appears to be the only person on the table doing so.

Asami returns shortly after with a slightly rinsed appearance. Akihito feels a cold wetness seep from Asami’s suit jacket as he brushes past him. “You’re all wet.”

Asami gives him a short, sideways glance for stating the obvious. “I had to step outside. There’s a no smoking policy in the halls and foyer, unfortunately.”

“Even when it’s pouring with rain outside?”

Asami replies, matter-of-factly that, “A little rain never did anyone any harm.”

“You could get sick that way.”

Asami likes the prickly way Akihito says it, as though he’s gonna get up and teach him a lesson, and takes satisfaction when the younger man physically bristles when he says, “Are you concerned for me, Takaba?”
“As if I would be! A grown man like you should know better. Who even cares if you catch a cold?”

“You, apparently,” Asami chuckles. He delights in it immeasurably, in abusing the tightly wound coil of Akihito’s being. It’s very tempting to stray too close to his nerve, so close to tipping him over the edge in a room full of people. He leans in close to whisper into Akihito’s ear, “You’re very cute, Akihito,” and feels the immediate sharp edge of Akihito’s elbow jabbing into his ribs.

“You’re annoying, has anyone ever told you that?”

“No. Please, tell me more,” Asami grins, reclining back into his seat.

Akihito’s reply is to pick up the bidding tab and raise it high. Asami only looks on, intrigued. “What are you doing?”

Akihito ignores him and raises the tab again when his current bid is toppled. Asami laughs gratuitously and doesn’t make an attempt to stop him, so he does it again, and again, and again, until he’s just procured Asami a Nogaku mask collection and historical Oshiguma for one million, eight-hundred and ninety thousand yen. What the hell is he going to do with those?

“Congratulations, Asami-san,” Akihito quips and drops the voting tab on the table. “Don’t look at me like that. It’s all in the name of charity. Don’t be so stingy.”

He’s being terribly obnoxious and Asami wouldn’t linger to put a bullet through someone for that kind of insolence, but he has nothing but admiration for the boy’s cast iron guts to go with that smart mouth. “I rescind you the previous winnings of the bet,” Asami declares, his voice dreadfully tame for how he really feels.

“Sure thing. I’m happy this cost more anyway.” Akihito retorts as he throws back the remainder of red wine, and no sooner is Asami’s mouth against his ear, and calling him out of his seat.

“Get up and come with me. Don’t make a scene or you’ll be sorry.”

Asami leads him out of the hall and through the dimly lit corridors, a hand constantly on his upper arm forcing him forward.

“Where the hell are we going?”

“Get in there,” Asami all but shoves him into an empty coatroom and locks the door behind him. Akihito doesn’t even have a moment to recover from the protest when Asami’s predatory form corners him, and Akihito erupts.
“What the hell is wrong with you!?” He tries to shove Asami away but the man’s got a body like hardened steel and an all-consuming glare that’s drilling him. He averts his eyes, but Asami place a hand under his chin and makes him look.

“I told you you could come on the condition that you behaved yourself.”

“Well, I behave real good when you don’t have your hands on me,” he seethes.

Something in Asami makes his eyes light up like a bulb. “Oh, do you now?”

Akihito has a mind to punch the perverted grin off his face. “Yeah. So why don’t you...ah, wha — ?” He pushes against Asami’s breast and feels the hard edge of...something. His face blanches when he boldly reaches inside the suit jacket and touches the cool metal handle of a gun. Two guns. Asami’s guns. Asami and guns in the same sentence spells fear like nothing he’s ever known and he forces himself away until there’s a whole room of space between them. “W—Why are you carrying guns?”

“I always carry protection,” is Asami’s smart-ass response and Akihito feels like dropkicking him if he wasn’t petrified.

His voice wavers. “No way, this is serious for you to be carrying guns. Why?”

Akihito’s body can’t decide whether it’s trying for a panic attack or if his alcohol addled brain is beaten to submission when choice doesn’t come into it anymore.

“You wouldn’t have found them if you hadn't been feeling me up,” Asami replies, in retaliation to Akihito’s earlier comments.

“Bastard, you’re the damn pervert here, not me!”
“If I were you, I wouldn’t be so quick to start throwing stones from your lovely glass house over there, Akihito.”

“Argh, you’re infuriating!”

Asami silences him when he takes one of the pistols out of its holster and looks at it for a moment, completely benign to the killing machine in his hand, then holds it out for Akihito to take. “Hold it in your hands.”

“No way! I don’t wanna touch that thing.”

“The safety is on. It won’t fire. Take it.”

Akihito concludes that he’s drunk when he reaches to take the gun from Asami’s hand. It’s a brand new thing Akihito’s experiencing, being confined to a small room with a gun and a man he can’t say he completely trusts. He could say he’s experiencing a lot of new things at the hands of Asami, who is far and away the most dangerous and reprehensible man he’s ever met. But nothing quite hits home like feeling the metal weight of a pistol with his bare hands.

“Now point it at me. Do it,” Asami say from the other side of the room and it’s suddenly very serious. Akihito pales. He raises the pistol, rattling nervously in the cradle of both hands. Asami on the other hand couldn’t be more calm staring down the barrel of a gun.

“Good boy.” He walks slowly in a dead straight line towards the line of fire, his eyes never straying from Akihito. “Are you scared?”

Akihito nods.

“Good. You should be.” He stops when the barrel indents his chest. “That’s the fear that drives a man — to kill or be killed.” He lifts the gun out of the younger man’s hands and slips it back into the holster under his jacket, a cigarette appearing upon withdrawal, casual, like none of this ever happened. He lights it and takes a perch on one of the tables, and regards the physical relief in the boy. “You've got a good stance for someone who hasn't fired a gun before.”

“You would know,” Akihito shoots back and slouches against the opposite wall, wiping his sweaty palms on his trousers. “They’ll throw you out if they catch you.”

“Are you going to tell on me? I brought you here to cool off some steam.”

Akihito folds his arms and looks the other way. Smoke soon fills the tiny room and that isn’t the only reason why he can't breathe. After a while the silence becomes unbearable.

“Why do you carry guns around? You’re not the police, and you say you’re not Yakuza, so what are you?”

“I could ask you the very same question of you, but I know you don’t like that,” Asami says with dry edge.

“I’m the one asking you, because you’re the one with the guns!”

Asami answers calmly after a long exhale. “I carry them for my protection, as I’ve told you.”

“How dangerous must your job be for you to carry firearms?”

“That’s something you shouldn’t worry about,” Asami replies, his voice settled into seriousness.
“Are people trying to kill you?” When the answer meets silence Akihito’s guts twist from the inside. “Then...are you the one—”

Asami stops him before he can complete the sentence. “No, I’m not.”

“Then, the only other reason I can think of is that you’re deranged in some way.”

“You’re entitled to think what you like,” Asami says, and carries on enjoying his cigarette while Akihito simmers in silence. “I’ll make you a trade, seeing as you’re such a good judge of character,” he snarks. He reaches into his jacket to produce the red Dunhill packet and a silver lighter and shows them to Akihito. “You can take these off of me.”

A split second of trepidation courses through Akihito when he’s expecting the gun again. “Why would I want that?”

“It’s called a trade for a reason. Take them.”

“And what’s in it for me?” he asks, giving the ‘honourable’ trade an incredulous frown.

“I won’t get to smoke in your presence.”

This must be a joke, Akihito thinks. Asami must do these things for laughs — all that work and no play turning him into a whimsical sort of bastard. And Akihito’s still drunk because he reaches out to take the packet and lighter from his hands and puts it in his pocket. “Hurry up and finish your damn cigarette so we can get out of here. It stinks.”

Upon their return, Asami can already sense something is wrong when Kirishima doesn’t wait for him to get back to the table to pull him aside. It’s the sense of urgency in his actions that makes Akihito nervous, because otherwise, Kirishima is as cool-handed as they come. He and Asami talk hushedly away from the party, in waves of hand gestures that Akihito doesn’t know how to interpret except that it’s probably not a good thing. He’s watching them from afar and trying to judge the tension that’s written all over Asami’s face, even as he schools himself and comes back to their table. “We’re going to have to cut this evening short. My men will take you back to the penthouse.”

Some of Asami’s men leave ahead of him, big oafs moving at an alarming speed.

“Wait, what’s going on?”

“My presence is needed elsewhere.”

“Elsewhere? What for?”

“I have to take care of something.”

“So you’re just gonna up and leave right now?”

“In essence, yes. Now move.” He’s already lifting Akihito out of his seat and escorting him out. “Hatori will drive you in the limo, I’ll be taking the other car. Go with him and don’t ask any questions.”

“Why? Can’t I even ask him what the hell’s going on?”

Asami withers him a look of warning and Akihito throws his arms up in defeat. “Alright, alright!” So much for not making a scene.

They part ways in the underground car park when Akihito gets shoved into the back of the limo by
two of the bodyguards. Akihito sees the back of Asami enter the BMW through the rear tinted window, and no sooner do they disembark. Hatori gives it a moment before starting the engine and drives them away, all the questions Akihito wants to ask dissipating into a cloud of smoke.

When they arrive at the apartment complex, Hatori escorts Akihito to the top floor and leaves it to the guards stationed there to keep him safe. Everything about the car journey to the ride up the elevator, to waiting for the goon to open the front door is awkward. He stands there watching his fat hand fiddle with the lock and wonders if Asami will ever trust him enough to cut him his own key. Bastards, the whole lot of them.

Both guards follow him in, of course. Akihito’s long decided that personal privacy is a topic Asami knows absolutely naught about and it’s a waste of a breath to bring it up. He downs the brandy directly from the decanter when he sees it on in the living room, like an amber jewel in its crystal cut container. It burns all the way down and quickly appeases his temper when he knows this is Asami’s prized expensive liquor he’s gulping down like water.

He glowers at both of the roving guards before going to his room and kicking the door closed with a clamorous boom. He slides a chair over and wedges it underneath the handle for good measure.

He leaves the lights off, and the blinds cut horizontal incisions of moonlight across the room. He throws his suit jacket and shirt off before sitting to remove his socks and trousers, then slips off his underwear and as he’s shimmying backwards along the bed, he throws out his wings and collapses into the cloud-soft duvet. He can tell he’s lost a good few feathers from the velocity of their release, but pays little mind to it when the whirlwind of the night winds down to a gentle pulsing breeze as he flaps his wings against the cotton-silk bedspread. He wipes his hands over his face and smells the remnants of metal on them, the killing tool still managing to imprint itself onto him, still imprint Asami onto him. The more he thinks about it, Asami and the gun are very much one and the same.

And with that realisation, he reaches for his suit jacket and feels for the packet of Dunhill’s and lighter he’d been gifted. He takes one and holds it between his lips, lighting up just as Asami would, and inhales. His throat burns and his wings quiver at the instant rush of nicotine. It’s intoxicating, and it stays with him long after the cigarettes gone, the potency of that man remaining as strong as ever.
“It was withdrawn at the last minute, sir. They gave no other explanation except to meet at the appointed location.”

Suoh floors the car along the Tokyo highway and Asami and Kirishima check their guns in the back seat.

“There’s one thing about smugglers and their precocious cargo go-getting is that they don’t possess the same hierarchy of standards that Asami is accustomed to when going forward with any transaction, and it’s often open to unpredictable interpretation. They’re a resourceful lot, Asami’’ll give them that.

“They would know not to be so foolish, Asami-sama.”

“I hope for their sakes they do.”

Asami holsters both of his guns and Kirishima hands him an extra magazine. “We don’t know how many of them there are, but it’s best to be prepared. To my knowledge, Jiang Group took out some of Sakai’s men after a near crisis deal made them a few heads shorter and rather unpopular.”

“Probably because of the same predicament we’re in now,” Asami says, pocketing the magazine.

“In retaliation, Sakai played dual host with one of our former traders who were embarking on a deal with Jiang at the docks and it escalated into a blood bath fairly quickly — three groups caught in a fray, to which Jiang ran like a dog with its tail between its legs all the way back across the East China Sea. The thing I pitied most were all the trade goods that were destroyed. What a waste.”

“All because of a man gone stark raving mad.”

Asami feels for his cigarettes and when he remembers giving them to Akihito, Kirishima is there with a fresh packet and a lighter, like a cache secretly loaded into his assistant’s pockets with all that he needs. Marvelous.

“Jiang,” Asami says, with a bitter fondness, taking a cigarette out of the packet. “I seem to always be plagued by those problematic Chinese. I hear their leader has a mouth full of gold teeth now.”

“Brass, actually,” Kirishima informs him. “A dentist was paid handsomely from means unknown for the…privilege of such an undertaking.”

“Too good for a man who defecates from the same place he speaks.”

As the two men laugh ominously in the back, Suoh tilts up to look into his rear view mirror. “Looks like the others have caught up with us, boss.”

“Good.” Asami flicks his lighter and enjoys a final cigarette before they reach the docks.
There are black suits waiting for them outside the dock warehouses when they pull up. Asami’s men get out first, forming protection around their boss in the event of being blindsided, should Sakai’s men be brave enough to launch an attack. Asami glances at the three grunts stationed outside the warehouse and spots one of them who is tiny, scrawny, couldn’t be more than sixteen and still wet behind the ears, Asami can’t imagine why he’d send himself to work for a piece of the devil’s backbone, but here he is anyway, bowing with the other two knuckleheads in the drizzling rain.

“Thank you for coming, Asami-sama,” one of them says, “Kazama-sama is waiting for you. This way, please.”

Kirishima casts a questioning look to his boss, saying exactly what Asami’s thinking. “Kazama?”

It’s not the man they came to see, but his underling, Kazama, bent over on his hands and knees and touching his forehead to the floor when Asami and his men step into the warehouse office. Asami looks at him with mild distaste.

“On behalf of Sakai-sama, I most sincerely apologise for this unexpected change, Asami-sama. Thank you for agreeing to this meeting.”

Asami skips the pleasantries, cutting straight to it. “Where’s your boss, Kazama?”

“He is indisposed due to circumstances that are unfortunately out of his control. He regrets that he cannot be here in person. He hopes it won’t affect the terms of the exchange.”

Asami takes a wandering glance over at the group standing behind Kazama, probably less than half the total headcount that should be here, but what they lack in numbers and decorum they make up for in psychopathy — every one of them ugly, uneven, time on the black waters making them beady eyed and battle-scarred, ready to die for the big man behind the scene. Chaos is par for the course for smugglers, but not for Asami, he doesn’t skirt around this sort of shit for nothing. “That yet remains to be seen. I don’t care for your excuses, all I care for is that you have what I came here for.”

Kazama rises to his feet but keeps his head down, shying from Asami’s doggone mood. “We do, Asami-sama. My men will now open the crate. Please.” He gestures towards the large wooden crate that’s completely sealed from the outside. Kazama’s men pry the lid of it open with crowbars and Asami looks on, expectant to see what’s left of his family’s history thought lost for generations brought back to him.

Two black lacquered boxes are lifted out of the crate and placed gently on the large table. They’re held together by old Japanese padlocks that could be relics themselves. Kazama hands the key to Asami but Suoh forestalls him and takes it instead, placing it into the lock and twisting, determining that there are no hidden traps devised to be set off upon opening. Asami doesn’t move until all the padlocks are off and he peers inside the larger box of the two, unwrapping the heavy brocade fabric to reveal the beautifully preserved Onna-bugeisha armor.

“It’s a most surprising acquisition, Asami-sama, and for it to be this well kept. And the other item, the most beautiful thing we’ve ever obtained on our shores,” Kazama says in nothing but admiration, but his voice is all but forgotten when Asami's absorbed in fascination that an armor as old as this has managed to stand the test of time, retaining all of the intricacies emboldened in the pattern design of the bodice and helm.
Asami unwraps the item in the second box and carefully lifts out the gold and steel gilded katana, its blade and sheath engraved with their historic family sigil, no longer of use today but a pinnacle of honour and duty at the time of their military service for the Japanese Empire centuries ago. He unsheathes it and inspects the craftsmanship of the blade, the marbled graining of seven layers of folded steel sharpened to a sickeningly fine edge. Even the jade tassels remain secured at the hilt, splatterings of centuries old blood soaked into the threads. He sheaths it and places it back into the box, satisfied.

“You said there was a tsurugi counterpart. Where is it?”

Kazama frowns and feels the heavy burden of his words. “Regretfully, broken, sir.”

The men lift another smaller box onto the table. The remains of the shattered ‘Captive Ghost Sword’ rest inside, its name is felicitous for what was a once a turgid, killing blade, its hilt now separated from the fragmented metal blade, forever tarnished.

Asami grazes his fingers along the discoloured, disembodied blade. "How does forged steel shatter like this?"

“I unfortunately can’t answer that, sir.”

“It was rhetorical, Kazama.”

“My apologies, Asami-sama.”

Asami steps away from the items and turns towards Kazama, his six-foot-two frame dwarfing Kazama’s short stature. “We agreed to an open trade, no set price, just an old fashioned luck of the deal. The auction was set in both of our favours, and we could have both walked away very happy.
men.”

“Due to the pressures of the boss’ circumstance, he advised not to risk an open auction, and out of respect to you, sir, he wanted to complete the transaction, above all else, in secret. I hope this arrangement suffices.”

It’s probably written in some sort of smugglers code that they can’t break a deal once it’s reached this stage, even if things have gone belly up and their boss is sitting in a cell for however long it takes to clean up Japan’s ports. Kazama’s mouth doesn’t have to tell Asami anything more than what his body language is already telling him, with obvious overstatement that this deal is probably the last thing they’ll do before they’re raided by the police and shown the concrete wall ‘til the end of time, and just how conveniently Asami came prepared for it.

“Do you pay lip service to your boss, Kazama?”

“Asami-sama, I — ”

"He couldn't tell me this himself, hm?"

When Kazama’s lips rattle for something to say, Asami takes a step closer and Kazama judders under the pressure of Asami’s close quarter stare. He looks disconcertingly and it nearly breaks Kazama. "Unless he’s being detained somewhere, isn't he, Kazama?"

“S—sir...I...I'm afraid I can’t answer— ”

“You don’t have to. It's written all over your face. Your boss, Sakai Jouji, I’ve known for many years, but you, Kazama, I’ve known for much less. I see his areas of reach are still bar none, but his manner has and always will be that of a dirty and untrustworthy old man. That’s why I proposed to do it my way at the auction house, where I could ensure the honour of our agreement stayed intact. It’s a shame that he has things that belong to me and I have to seek doing business with the likes of him, but as it turns out, he needs me more than I need him. He should be owing his life to me that I haven’t already wiped him off the map.”

Kazama sinks into a deep bow, spluttering a nervous, haphazard gesture of apology.

“It doesn’t matter now seeing as the items brought forth are all the reason I’m here. And as the terms of the deal has changed, I too will readjust my end of the bargain.”

Asami reaches into his inner pocket and Kazama’s men cock their guns in defense, expecting him to pull out a gun, but instead he pulls out a black velvet pouch and tips a small amount of its contents into his palm — four carat D-Grade clarity diamonds — beautiful, untraceable currency. Both sides have their guns pointed at each other while Asami walks completely undeterred towards Kazama and drops the diamonds into his trembling hand.

“For your troubles,” Asami quips with a jagged smile. "Make a nice ring for your wife, hm?”

Asami’s men gather his goods and waste no more time taking leave of this crooked warehouse.

It’s hours before Asami arrives back at the penthouse, to Akihito sitting on the floor next to the window, his temple against the glass and staring out into the night, moonlight illuminating on his face — he’s meditative, trance-like.

Asami puts his keys on the table and the sound alerts Akihito to him, his bright eyes focused, big and blue and so obviously starved of sleep. “You’ve been awake all this time,” Asami says, not intending
to pose it as a question when it’s been a familiar occurrence for quite a few nights.

“I couldn’t sleep,” is Akihito’s blank, scripted response.

“Last night you couldn’t sleep either,” Asami points out, catching the subtle surprise on Akihito’s face with the knowledge of his nightly risings, as if he’s discovered a well hidden secret.

Akihito’s mouth twists with discomfort then settles into a contemptuous smile. “Checking up on me now?”

Asami doesn’t offer a spoken answer, instead he moves with the grace of a panther melting against darkness and stands by the floor to ceiling window, staring out at the Tokyo metropolis. Akihito keeps his eyes trained on him, wary of how the hours have strained Asami past his usual excellence. “You’re not going to bed?”

“I’ll stay up for a while longer,” Asami replies, serenely.

“So, did you kill anyone tonight?” Akihito asks after the loaded silence provokes him, but Asami doesn’t turn his head nor rise to it, simply answering, “No.”

“You and your bears beat them up instead? Cut off some fingers?”

Asami’s eyes flick to him and it’s the sudden dangerous transition that gives Akihito that chill of wasted triumph. There doesn’t need to be words for how borderline destructive it is, burning through his ravaged self-confidence.

“Is it wrong of me to think you’re not this wholesome business man everyone sees you as?”

“What gives you that impression?” Asami replies blandly.

“The fact that you carry guns. And tonight, you suddenly leaving like that to ‘take care of something’ sounds shady as fuck to me.”

Asami lets out a small chuff, being that he left his guns with Suoh before returning home to alleviate the anguish it’d caused the boy earlier. “That concern isn’t yours to be burdened with.”

Akihito’s face falls. “Am I your concern as well? Do I fall into that category?”

Asami darts him another look of irritation and Akihito turns away from it, reflexively bringing his knees closer to his chest, closing in on himself like illuminated misery, and for the first time, Asami’s felt him to be truly, startlingly angelic, but as coy as a razor blade.

“What is it, Takaba?” he asks sternly.

Akihito dismisses him. It’s really far easier than clambering into his mind and offloading each one of his grievances one at a time.

“There’s obviously something disturbing you, so why don’t you just say it.”

“I don’t — ” He’s momentarily caught between words when Asami moves to sit with him by the window, his long legs within touching distance of his, and Akihito curses the man for not letting this go, much less lowering his lofty self down to his level. He clenches his jaw and with the tiniest of voices murmurs, “Are you going to sell me?” sounding horrendously and daft and painful in the presence of Asami’s unyielding attention.

Asami would’ve laughed at the ridiculousness of that question if it didn’t tear the boy so much by
saying it. “Is that what you think I am, of all things, a trafficker?”

“I...I don’t know what you are. You could be a Namahage in a suit for all I know.”

“I’ve been many things in my life, but that hasn’t been one of them.” Amusement falls short as Asami’s smile darkens with his tone, allowing his words to fully sink into the ravine Akihito’s decidedly sunk himself to. “Any trafficker wouldn’t have waited this long to sell you. I hope you’ll keep that in mind.”

And while Akihito visibly numbs all over, Asami continues on, expanding the tension. “I’ve already told you what would happen if you fell into the wrong hands. And that’s why you remain here, to keep such a thing from happening, and until we can come to some ground on how we’re going to proceed with this arrangement.”

“Am I supposed to be grateful that I forfeit my freedom for it?”

“Then what would you have in exchange?”

Asami slingshots it back at him and it slaps Akihito across the face out of nowhere. An unsaid sentence falters on his lips, the usual kind of inept response that he’s suddenly grateful for in this instance because how can there ever be a finite answer to that?

“Tell me what it is you want,” Asami says again, coaxing him with the silk of his deep, soothing voice.

“...Nothing,” Akihito eventually mumbles out, diminutive in every sense.

Asami watches the boy deflate into his paranoid mood like he’s going to suffocate in it for good. “You torture yourself with your own imagination.”

“And your conscience is so clear.”

“Crystal clear,” Asami offers with confidence, but knows it’s a hard comfort for Akihito’s current descent into self-pity.
He watches as Akihito’s sullen eyes turn back to the window, for whatever fascination it holds — staying fixed on a cloud or a fly-by aeroplane — Asami’s more taken by the illuminations reflecting against the curvature of his corneas, and the bouncing of holographic colours against the pale blue of his irises. Asami’s own curiosity spurs the question.

“How did your eyes come to be that colour?”

Akihito lowers his lashes, as if subconsciously hiding them. “I honestly don’t know.”

“Did one of your parents have blue eyes?”

“I’ve never known.” It probably came out sharper than he intended, but the malice in it is only self inflicted because Asami laughs quietly to himself, taking it as an endearment.

“It bothers you,” he then says, and Akihito swats back.

“What bothers me?”

“When I ask you questions.”

“Not as much as it bothers you, not knowing everything.”

“I’ve never claimed such a thing. What I know and what you think I know are two different things.”

And that’s exactly why he’ll keep asking, keep asking the questions that’ll eventually get the boy to talk. Because he wants to know everything, until the very moment it consumes him, he’ll still want more. What he ought to know is somehow completely nonsensical after all the uproar and enigma Akihito’s brought to him, like a flash fire burning through his mind. Akihito’s no more of a maze than a straight line on a curved path, the destination insignificant to the final prize at the end of it.
His focus turns back to the sky, the first signs of dawn light leaking through the heavy clouds, gold slicing through the grey line of the horizon. It’s no wonder the boy sees life as a pale shade from behind the glass of the penthouse. He’s finding the depth of longing in those eyes softening him, softened by the intrigue.

“Tell me what it feels like, to soar,” Asami says, and Akihito lifts his eyes to him, wide and weighted with the unexpectedness of something he’s never had to share with another human being before. But he thinks about it, all the time, in fact.

“It’s like dying and being resurrected somewhere far beyond this place,” he answers.

“Have you ever flown above the clouds?”

Akihito shakes his head. “Never. I wish I could. I’ve flown over Mount Haku, Mount Shiomi, Mount Fuji — that’s the closest I’ve ever come to touching the clouds. It’s like nothing I’ve ever felt. And that volcano that erupted in Indonesia, I saw it with my own eyes. To feel the Earth’s power like that, I...I couldn’t describe it to you.”

“Try, for someone without the privilege of witnessing such a spectacle.”

“It’s like being part of something primal, the beginning of something — something other than what we know, something that’s waking up from ancient sleep. And the heat. Makes you wonder what the beginning of life must have been like.”

Asami notes the subtle changes in Akihito’s expressions as he says it, his cold, distant stare warming and his smile, small as it is, gently radiating into the real thing. It’s the change in his tone of voice when he’s overflowing, when his sentences run on to the next without completion, when he uses his hands to describe the sun and the moon and the entire universe as if he’s showing Asami a page from his mind’s eye. Freely. Akihito talks about life and being in such an uncomplicated way that Asami thinks it’s the most romantic thing he’ll ever hear from another person.

“I think you’ve led an interesting life,” Asami says afterwards, “And aspects of it has left me to wonder.”

“That I have no place in this world?”

“And yet you grace us by being here.”

“That’s—”

“If not here then where would you have been?”

“Somewhere else. Somewhere...I don’t know. Just somewhere.” Somewhere, anywhere, it’s never mattered to him.

“You put yourself exactly where you wanted to be, and now you’ve reached a point and you can’t turn back, you can only move forward. And what’s more is that I’m tied to that thread of fate so gently fixed to your axis, whether you wished for it or not.”

The boy scoffs, thinking back to that small concrete room where his fate all but swallowed, chewed, and spat him out ripe for Asami’s picking. “It’s all because of you,” he grinds out with an unsteady laugh.

“No. It’s because of you.” Asami puts, much more positively.
“Because I’m a fool,” Akihito spits.

"Perhaps, if you’d fallen into the hands of another. But you didn’t. Be thankful that you didn’t."

Asami meets the solemnness with a measure of calm contemplation. A few more empty moments pass between them, Akihito anticipating if Asami’s going to offer him any more food for thought that’ll curdle his stomach for days, but he doesn’t. He just sits there, like he’s doing, and waits for the dawn to climb over the city, trying to find an epiphany.

Then when Asami finally gets up, Akihito glances up to him, searching, his brows furrowed. “I never expected any of this.”

“Neither did I,” Asami replies, it’s an honesty he feels he owes Akihito after all that’s happened between them. “It doesn’t change the fact that this is your reality, and mine has forever been altered by it. I hold your freedom, for now, but know that it is not forfeit.” He turns back to the skyline as it fills everything around them with warm, dawning light shrouding the city in gold. “At the very least, you get to watch the rising sun from atop my sky tower.”

He’s right, Akihito thinks. It’s breathtaking every time he sees it, stretching out into forever — the way he’s always known the sky to be. And as they watch the brand new sunrise together, there’s a sense of continuity between two forces of nature, working together.

“Takaba. One day, you’ll have everything you’ve ever wanted and more, and it will be yours forever. But the honour will always be mine for having met you.”

Beyond the thrumming of his own heart, Akihito leaves everything else to dissolve until there’s only him, the dawn and his own small smile reflected back at him.
Water from the Moon

Chapter Notes

I’m sorry for the wait. Shortly after my last chapter I had a medical emergency with my cat and then a few personal ones. Please let Asami’s domestic and culinary prowess be my apology of sorts ♥.

Bittersweet hot chocolate makes Akihito a touch more mellow first thing in the morning. He’s sitting at the kitchen counter eating fresh strawberries and sipping his drink while Asami beats eggs into an omelette for tamagoyaki with a cigarette hanging from his mouth.

Asami cooks from scratch on Sundays — always — and he does it with fiery efficiency. He occasionally pours shots from his decanter of rum and dashes some into the pan to flambé the strawberries Akihito’s slowly working his way through. The alcohol ignites a raucous, spectacular pink flame.

If he’s honest, Akihito doesn’t know what Asami’s cooking but the delicious wafting smells swirl his appetite. He doesn’t even care if there’s cigarette ash mixed in with it because the black silk of Asami’s night robe slips open slightly and so conveniently when he flips the pan that Akihito can’t miss the ripple of rock hard abs underneath. He bites down onto a plump strawberry and the juice
fills his mouth.

It’s cataclysmic.

“I’m dying to know what that tastes like,” he says, mouth moving completely independently from his thirsty eyes.

Asami chuckles. “It’s almost done.” He lifts the tamagoyaki onto the chopping board and slices them up. He fills two rice bowls and places everything on a tray with the rest of the ensemble — miso soup, spring vegetables, steamed salmon, and caramelised strawberries on the side, just for Akihito.

“Breakfast is served,” Asami says with a straight face, although it’s full of goodwill in the morning.

Akihito grins delightedly at the mouth watering array and cheers, “Itadakimasu!” He can’t stop humming as he munches, like he hasn’t eaten in days and every mouthful just melts in a way all of his favourite food does. It may also be the lightheadedness affecting him. He points to Asami’s coffee cup with his chopsticks. “Why do you drink so early in the morning?”

“I enjoy it,” he replies, “And sometimes it’s necessary.”

“Really,” Akihito nods, disbelieving. “Is that why you poured whiskey in my cup?”

“It’s Irish Cream,” Asami offers, as if to make it better. “Do you not like it?”

“No, it’s delicious, but what’s wrong with regular milk?”

“We ran out,” Asami answers, with straight honesty. It brings on a loud laugh from Akihito.

“The mighty Asami, forgetting to do his weekly shopping, and here I thought you only ate razor blades for breakfast.”

Despite the jab, Asami continues like there’s nothing out of the ordinary in substituting alcohol for milk, or the greater good it does to quell the boy from nights of sleeplessness and dark thoughts that carry on for days on end. To hear him laugh makes it a purpose well served. “Just eat your food, brat.” After a few more bites, he continues. “There’s going to be a change tomorrow in regards to your supervision. I’m reducing it.”

Akihito stops chewing and looks up with bold surprise. “Really?”

“Yes. Only one guard is to stay within the penthouse. Two will still remain outside.”

“After all this time, you still think I’ll make a run for it?”

“One guard, Takaba. Heed my words as you will.”

“Alright, alright!”

After breakfast, Akihito prattles about with a noticeable spring in his step and Asami plans on ruining the remainder of his weekend with an unscheduled trip to Sion. He knew that at some point during his weekend he would regret switching his phone off. Leaving his phone off is his idea of total, uninhibited relaxation. The reality of that, however, is a much more dangerous one.

Murphy’s Law says that all manner of things go to shit when Asami disconnects his phone from the world. That’s why he groans when he sees the startling stack of new emails, and the titles of those emails not boding well for a day of hard earned respite. Of all the likelihood of knife attacks happening in any of his establishments totalling near to none, Asami starts to worry. He’ll tell you
good and well that police involvement is bad for any business, and he’ll tell you in the same breath that fights can and do happen at any club, but not at Śiva — the club catering exclusively to his adoring female crowd.

He considers his actions in the shower and while he’s dressing into his business suit, running lines in his head of what he’s going to tell the manager when he sees her and what explanation those piss poor security lackeys have for themselves. He slips his phone into his pocket and instead of calling for his driver, he picks up his own car keys.

He meets Akihito in the hallway as the boy’s walking to his room and shows surprise at seeing him in his suit.

“I thought it was your day off. Where are you going?”

He thought of not telling Akihito, but he’ll probably find out one way or another, from the press reports or by wheedling it from one of the guards for bored kicks. He decides to tell him. “There’s been an incident at one of my clubs. I have to see to it.”

“Oh. Is everything ok?”

“I’ll find out soon enough. I’ll be back soon.”

Sure enough, the papers are stacked high on his desk when he walks into his office. His first line of response is to pour himself a stiff drink and let the undiluted scotch cauterise the gnarling pain in his throat. He sighs long when he picks up the first document from the pile and reads it top to bottom, slapping it back onto the desk in favour of calming himself with a cigarette. The police report is damning. A double stabbing in the early hours involving two parties — both women, both hospitalised and critical, fortunately not dead (or unfortunately, depending on perspective). Five others have minor injuries and some bystanders were treated for shock. He pinches the bridge of his nose and tries to will away the rising tension of his reputation smearing into the gutter at the hands of these psychotic women. This is the last thing he wants to be dealing with.

A gentle knock at the door pulls him to where Kirishima is standing with a file nestled under an arm, looking annoyingly compassionate at him, the cheerful greeting of, “Good morning, Asami-sama,” further adding to the headache trying to bore its way through his skull.

“Ah, you’re here too,” Asami says, modulating the moody tone into something with a little more welcome. He isn’t angry with Kirishima after all.

“I received the memo,” his assistant says, closing the door behind him. “The seniors aren’t here, it’s just a small handful of us, and yourself.”

Asami’s laughs, uttering dryly, “Isn’t that a pity.” He tries to maintain that at least some of his staff members use their days off as intended.

“How do you want me to go over the report, sir?”

“No, I’ve just read it. It’s unbelievable that something like this would happen at Śiva.”

“Apparently it all started over a disagreement the two ladies had over a man, if I’m to take the witness’ report as fact. Security did their best to contain the situation to avoid any more casualties. As of now, report on the injured parties is that they’re now stable. Although, the police will want to speak to you.”
“I thought as much,” Asami sighs.

“Women are quite scary, sir.”

“Indeed they are,” Asami says, chuckling, otherwise he’d be a page turn away from launching his glass over at the far wall, and even a calm sentiment from Kirishima wouldn’t be able to stop him. He clutches his hand on the glass tightly as he takes another look at the mountain of papers and shifts them to one side of his desk. “I’ll deal with all of this tomorrow. I need to call Śiva’s manager and speak with her about what happened.”

“Of course, Asami-sama,” Kirishima nods, but remains standing in front of his boss’ desk, silent but expectant.

“Is there anything else, Kirishima?”

“There is, sir. May I?”

“Certainly. Have a seat.”

“I was going to wait until Monday to formally bring this up, but seeing as we’re both here,” Kirishima withdraws the manila folder from under his arm and sets it on the desk in front of him, almost precious of the content held within it. “It’s regarding Takaba-kun’s database file. We’ve completed an extensive search.”

Asami looks at the folder and leans forward with interest. “What are your findings?”

“There were some difficulties we faced, as we’d expected. After sifting through the human database for hundreds of hours we found something that was...odd. According to the findings, there has never been any sort of collected data pertaining to a ‘Takaba Akihito’. Facial recognition, fingerprints, everything apart from his name has yielded an empty result. It’s as if he never existed.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“There was a delay in extracting information because we thought there was something wrong with the system. We retraced our steps many times, checked the algorithms, Morita-san made sure of it. We searched for newborns as early as last week, just to make sure the data was lined up to date, and it was. There are simply no descriptives, family ties, housing, school or hospital records matching his name.”

Asami lays his cigarette in the ashtray, unknowing how to address this. “So we’re dealing with a ghost then. He seems to have gotten very far in Japan under a false name, as any juvenile could, but he’s not a criminal, he wouldn’t be able to keep it up for long without being caught.”

“We did consider that to have been the case, however,” he pulls out a certain document and slides it across the desk, remaining detached and clinical as he tries to explain the shocking implications of the information it contains. “It’s not until we expanded the search into the deceased database that we managed to unearth something of...well, of note. There’s no easy way to say this.”

"Just say it," Asami insists.

"Death records matched one result, and only one result pertaining to his — Takaba-kun’s derivatives.”

Asami takes the paper and a steadying breath before he reads it to himself, then falls back into his seat, tipping all of the scotch down his throat, the burn receding into a sublime ache of a directionless
and incomprehensible emotion that no amount of preparation could have prevented.

*Takaba Akihito. Aged 3 months. Date of death — May 5 198X. Cause of death — Blood loss due to unknown causes.*

"I have the original autopsy report. Words have been scored out, changed, sentences re-written, I presume because the cause of death was difficult to determine," Kirishima adds, then stops when Asami hands the glass tumbler to him with tension locked in his jaw and a grip that could crush a man’s throat. Kirishima duly takes the glass away from him. “Should I stop, sir?”

“No. Continue. What about the mother?”

“We traced parentage to a ‘Ms Takaba Megumi’, Born 1932 in Agano, Niigata Prefecture. She was a neonatal Sister at Saitama Red Cross Hospital before she retired to Hokkaido in September 1990. Saitama Red Cross is also listed as the place of the child’s death on the death certificate. It’s not clear if she's the biological mother or the guardian as there's no birth certificate, no court documents of legal custody, just this death certificate. It’s strong to suggest that due to her age, she couldn't have been the birth mother, but we can’t say for sure. Adoption is also very likely, but without any official means of clarification, it’s disputable. Unfortunately she passed away in January 2003, but is survived by three daughters. I took the liberty of providing you with their profiles and contact details should they be of any help.”

Asami fully reads the paperwork on Takaba Megumi and the details that connect her to an infant Akihito, keeping assumptions to the back of his mind until he can fathom a grasp on this. “She could have been the only link in this very short chain.”

“It would seem so, yet, there are still many unanswered questions as to the whereabouts of Takaba’s biological parents. Nothing has been found so far.”

Asami nods in agreement. He gathers all the paperwork on his desk in one neat pile. “I’ll keep these, I need to look into all of this further.”

“Of course, Asami-sama. Also—” Kirishima produces a key from the folder and places it on the desk. “There’s still a matter of Takaba-kun’s roomkey.”

“Did you locate his place of residence?”

“Yes. Finding it wasn’t as hard as we anticipated. As it turns out not many homes use the electronic key system. We had our men crack the serial in half an hour and traced the address. It’s definitely an apartment key. We matched the serial to a ‘Shinzou Apartments’, just on the outskirts of Tokyo.”

“A visit there should prove interesting.”

"Indeed."

Asami takes the key and slips it into his inside pocket and reclines back into his chair, taking in the view of Tokyo under a grey, rupturing cloud. “A death certificate,” he says to himself, relenting to the whitewash sweeping in his mind on a mythological scale. “What are your thoughts on reincarnation, Kirishima?”

“It seems illogical to me, but I cannot disprove it. I’m afraid I have nothing more to offer on the matter but my...confusion and astonishment.”

“He’s an anomaly,” Asami puts, “There are no explanations for his existence or what makes him the way he is. He has no family and no traceable history. At this point speculations are the only thing we
have. But then again, there's something clearly wrong with the world’s natural order for someone to have become what Takaba is, which then begs the question — is he even of this world?”

Kirishima slowly pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “It’s fair to suggest that. I’m as confounded by this as you are, sir, I can’t explain it nor can I offer suitable opinion. After scoping for all this information, I’ve obtained something that isn’t suppose to be, and yet Takaba-kun clearly is. Unless what I’ve uncovered is a lie and I’ve made a terrible error. Asami-sama, I—”

“You did as I asked you, Kirishima,” Asami says, stalling the unwarranted need for apology. “Thank you for your valuable research. I’ll relay my personal thanks to Morita, I knew I could count on you both. Let’s leave it at that for today.”

Kirishima bows forward in his seat, getting up and turning to bow again at the door before leaving.

Asami’s left on his own to absorb the breadth of research with cold disbelief. He reads it to himself again and again, over the death certificate and the profile of Takaba Megumi, thoroughly. The black and white photo shows a modest lady, unremarkable in appearance, though, from that alone she bears little resemblance to Akihito even if she were the birth mother. It’s a slim probability, but not impossible with the lengths women go to these days to have a baby. But there’s an obvious connection here and Asami can’t see it, or he simply doesn’t understand it.

He places her profile and Takaba Akihito’s death certificate side by side and scans through the details line by line, word for word. It could mean everything and nothing, there’s no way to be sure of anything when you’re passing the entire ocean through the eye of a needle and hoping for the best outcome. But ultimately, the thought of this being Takaba’s only documentation of his existence serves more to disturb him more than to reassure. It looks as shocking on paper as it does in Asami’s mind when he tries to contemplate the slow, painful death of a newborn baby, doomed from the minute it left the womb.

He skims the pages to find the profile of the eldest of Takaba Megumi’s daughters, Takaba Setsuko. She looks a lot like her mother, pretty yet unremarkable, forty years old, separated with one child, department store worker, lives at the mother’s address. His conscience is pushing him to contact her. He wants something conclusive, not a web of unknown.

He picks up the receiver of the telephone to make the call but his hand stops midair, the dialing tone humming a quiet drone as he deliberates if this is an action or a reaction — a reaction to Akihito. He places the receiver back down with a slam and rises out of his seat, ample frustration running through him as he wheezes the air out of his lungs when he feels the discomfort building. The grey cloud has migrated across to the bay of Tokyo, like the spreading form of his irritation travelling further afield.

This is not how it should be.

He buzzes for Kirishima in his office and the door promptly opens. “Yes, Asami-sama?”

“Call Hayakawa-sensei. Tell him I’ll be training with him this afternoon.”

“Right away, sir.”

When his assistant has left the room, Asami picks up the receiver and this time he dials for home.
Akihito scuffs his sneakers on the gravel where he and Kirishima are stood in the open car park. Smoke bellows out of a chimney in a nearby industrial estate across from where they’re parked, tinging the air with a dry, unpleasant miasma. There’s the duffle bag at Kirishima’s feet that he’s been wondering about ever since Asami told him to pack clothes in it over the phone. If not for that, the whole run-down vicinity raises Akihito’s apprehensions.

“Can’t we wait in the car?”

Kirishima glances down at his watch. “Asami-sama will be here any moment now.”

And as if the devil himself caught wind of their conversation, a black Mercedes M-Class drives in and stations perfectly parallel in the space next to them. Akihito tries to catch a glimpse of Asami through the tinted windows but he’s surprised when he gets out of the driver’s seat instead of a chauffeur.

Kirishima meets his boss as he steps out of the car and Akihito watches them make the exchange of the duffle bag. The conversation is capped off with Kirishima’s appreciative bow and him getting back into the BMW, tyres crunching into the gravel as the wheels spin and he drives straight out of the car park, leaving Asami standing there, perfect in the waning dust.

“Come. You’re joining me for today,” he says.

“What the hell are we doing here?” Akihito yells, “Where’s glasses-guy going?” motioning towards the gathering dust cloud hovering in the air.

“He’s been dismissed. It’s his day off,” Asami’s replies, already walking towards the brick and steel building, leaving Akihito dashing to catch up with him.

“What is this place?” Akihito cranes his neck to look up at the crusted over facade of the building.

“You’ll soon see. He's expecting us.”

Akihito snaps to him with surprise. “Who is?”

Asami punches the security number into the keypad and the handle releases to let them in. Inside smells like rusted metal and dampness that’s altogether too unsanitary to inhale for very long. Green and white paint chips litter the sides of the walls as they go up the stairs, three concrete flights until they’ve cleared the hovel-like ground level and enter the wooden doors of the gym. Akihito does a double take at the sign outside the door. “Kickboxing?”

“Precisely,” Asami answers.

Their arrival is a minimal distraction to those training in the open fighting gym. A small personal space owned by a man Asami once looked up to as a mentor when he was still a boy on the heels of manhood, hardening to a fine edge. He's had a whole year to miss this man, his former coach, Hayakawa Yuujirou, and he can imagine the man is even more eager to see him.

There’s a bout going on in the ring, two youngsters, one wearing red shorts and the other navy blue, both seemingly matched in stature and technique. They duck and score punches, but the margin of error is too wide for Blue, as Red takes advantage of an opening and smacks a cross from the left that leaves Blue momentarily stunned.

Asami stands and watches them, arms crossed with an air of appreciation, a merry little smile on his face that Akihito swears is a once in a lifetime thing that shouldn’t be appropriate when one of them up there is getting a face full of fist, but makes sense when it sates Asami’s lust for violence. Their
entrance, however silent, comes to be noticed by the one they came to see, and coach calls time on the
two youngsters in the ring.

“Asami-kun!” The old man steps off the canvas and smiles as he reaches them, Asami taking the first
initiative with a respectful bow that takes Akihito by surprise. “It’s been a while, Hayakawa-sensei.”

“I was so surprised to get your call, I haven’t seen you here for a long while. It’s good of you to
show up once in a while, you slacker!”

“My right hook is getting a little rusty,” Asami says, rotating his wrist.

“Well, I’ll have it fixed for you,” Hayakawa smiles.

Akihito observes their familiarity, Hayakawa must be someone Asami holds in great trust because
no-one would be breathing after calling Asami a slacker. Still, Asami bows and schools his smile.
Hayakawa stands a good head shorter than him, a lightweight bomber jacket over his shirt and
around a thick neck. He looks like those movie yakuza types with tattoos all over. Akihito notices
them colourfully wrapped around both his forearms.

“I’d like you to train someone today,” Asami says, and with that expectant look that does everything
to put him on edge, Akihito is eased into their conversation. “This is Takaba Akihito. Takaba, this is
Hayakawa Yuujirou, my former kickboxing coach.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Akihito bows.

“Let me have a look at you,” Hayakawa holds Akihito firm at the shoulders, ascertaining his figure
with his keen eye, “You look like a Lightweight class. Have you kickboxed before, kid?”

Akihito shakes his head. “No.”

Hayakawa pats both hands on his shoulders. “That’s fine. You gotta start somewhere. First and
foremost, you’ll need to be kitted and have your hands wrapped.”

“Hands wrapped?” Akihito asks, immediately turning to Asami.

“Follow me.”

Asami drops the duffel bag onto the changing room bench and lays out their clothes. Akihito’s still
getting over the fact that Asami was a fighter in his younger years. “I didn’t know you kickboxed.”

Asami gives him a sideways glance. “That’s one more thing you know about me.”

“Yeah, it is,” he snorts and starts to undress a little way away from Asami.

“I stopped competing a long time ago, but I still like to train to keep in shape. I hardly get a chance to
these days.”

“So why now? And why me?”

“Everyone who’s within my circle needs to be able to take care of themselves. The basics of combat
and to protect oneself. That’s what you’ll be learning here. I’d have Suoh teach you the
fundamentals, but I know you don’t like him very much.”

He’s right about the hefty grudge Akihito holds for that bleach blond mountain gorilla. Is this
Asami’s way of being courteous to him? Who would’ve thought it. But maybe it shatters his soft and
cushy dignity a little when he sees Asami slip off his necktie, leaving Akihito nearly floored by the
action. “Wait, are you training as well!?”

Asami lifts an intrigued eyebrow. “Why, does that surprise you?” He goes on to unbutton his shirt, leaving Akihito temporarily sledgehammered when it falls off his shoulders to expose his taut, sculptured body, skin, muscle and bone tight at every angle. The insecurities come rolling back in waves again because even down to his underwear, Asami still looks like he could kill you at a moment’s grace.

“It’s...I guess I’ve never seen you out of your business suit. N-not that I’ve been thinking about that or anything!” Akihito withers and turns away, promptly diverting his train of thought careening towards an Asami-shaped black hole.

“I used to do this regularly. It's good for unwinding,” Asami adds, with amused undertone.

“Is this unwinding to you?”

“Trust me, we both need this.”

The next time Akihito turns around, he feels as if he’s looking at what might have been Asami ten years ago — his slicked hair is ruffled out and he’s dressed in loose-fitting satiny black contact trousers and a tank top, protective instep guards around his feet. He looks like a Pro Fighter. For a man who makes wearing suits look like a martial art, Asami looks incredible this way too.

“If you’re done staring, I’ll wrap your hands.”

Damn him.

There’s nothing cool about watching your hand shake while the most dangerous man in Tokyo kneels before you, passing cloth tape through your trembling fingers. He must have done this a hundred times before, taking his time for precision on something so practiced it makes Akihito appreciate the simple artistry of overlapping cloth.

“Before you wear gloves, you have to wrap your hands. This protects them,” Asami says, in a voice that’s level, focused, a fighter's voice. His fingers indent in his palm, but it’s careful and unrushed, hell, it's even relaxing.

Akihito turns his palm upwards, splaying his fingers as Asami moves onto the other hand, just like the previous, wrapping continuously around through the fingers up to the wrist. Asami's look lingers there, on the pale, unassuming wrist that was slashed horizontal with cuts and scabbing pink flesh from a traumatic wound. Only now it's clear with healthy veins perfectly intact, not even a scar to bear memory of it. He covers it over with tape.

“Now do mine,” he says when it’s done, rising to sit next to Akihito on the bench.

“I don’t think I can do it like you did,” Akihito says.

Turning up his palm, Asami replies smoothly, “I’ll show you.” He takes Akihito's hand in his own and guides him. “Start here and wrap it over. Then through the fingers. Pull it tight. It’s got to be tight.”

Still, the boy’s hands tremble as if life and death are riding on the tightness of the wrap. Asami’s hands are large and powerful and the damage they could do — he sees the gun shoot in his mind. “Is it ok?”

Asami nods his approval. “Very good. Now do the same on the other hand.”
Hayakawa is waiting for them when they return, his smile beaming with delight when he sees them both in their training gear. “Excellent. Now you both look ready to fight. You’ll both need a warm up, Takaba-kun, Asami-kun will take you through some exercises. Don’t complain if he’s too hard on you, it’s for your own good.”

It baffles sense how different Asami is under a dojo roof. It’s hard to forget the presence of a man so prideful and immeasurable as Asami to follow anyone's orders but his own, and damn, the way he commands his body on the mat, stretched out on the floor with his legs straddled, hands on each ankle and upper body flat against the mat, this man who could probably smoke a whole forest in a single day bends supine as if his body doesn’t know that fact.

Akihito does a similar stretch on the floor and when Asami stands, Akihito can only see his feet as he approaches.

“I’ll help you stretch your shoulders,” Asami says from behind him, taking his arms back while he’s still seated and pulling them, surprised by how far he can bend them without Akihito making a sound. “You’re very supple. That’s good.”

Akihito shoots a smile over his shoulder, “So are you. I thought you hadn’t done this for a while?”

“One doesn’t achieve a body like this by sitting around dreaming about it. Bend forward.” He pushes Akihito down onto the mat until his chest and shoulders are lying flat on it, and holds it there. This wouldn’t even be considered a stretch to Akihito, he’s mimicking the effortlessness that Asami showed just now, but he goes further in way of pulling himself forward into a frontways split.
Akihito hears a chuff from behind him and Asami goes back to his training mat, pulling his thighs up to stretch his quads.

“You don’t need my help at all,” he says.

“Hehe, if you don’t feel the stretch then you need to take it further. Re-set your limits.”

Asami scoffs. “Big talk from a little sportsmen.”

“Hey! I can do the stuff you’re doing in my sleep if I wanted to.” Akihito lies on his forearms and lifts his legs over his head in a scorpion-like stretch, touching his toes to his head. “Piece of cake.”

“I don’t doubt that,” Asami chuckles, “Maybe that’s why you wake up hot and bothered every morning. Or am I reading it all wrong?”

Akihito slides his legs back down into a Sphinx pose and forgets Asami ever said anything.

The colour in Akihito's cheeks says it all, though. Asami smirks and walks straight past him, mussing his fingers in his blonde hair. “Come. Let’s begin.”

Akihito is entrusted to Hayakawa while Asami is over at the punching bag, relieving his stress to a crushing degree.

“To start with, we’ll be training with bare fists. I want to see how you hit. This is just to get you used to the basics, so go light.” Hayakawa motions slowly with his fists, taking Akihito through the steps for clenching and applying force. Akihito bounces in the stance, feet apart and nimble and he feels ready now that he’s learnt the art of forming a fist.

“Okay,” Hayakawa holds the punching pads out in front of him, “Now show me what you can do.”

The first punch that's delivered knocks his arm right back, a look of shock enters Hayakawa's face. He’s trained boys like Akihito many times, similar build and height, but there wasn’t a single indication in the boy to expect a punch as powerful as that. He shakes out his arm and holds the mitts up once more. “Again, but not so hard this time.”
The metaphorical light bulb dings in Akihito’s head when he realises that his strength release doesn’t manifest in the same way here. So his next hit is intentionally more lax but still manages to knock his coach’s hand considerably. “Try to relax a bit more kid,” Hayakawa urges, “Easy,” he repeats with every punch until every one of Akihito’s contacts are a feather’s touch (to him).

“Not bad. Now let’s try a kick.”

Asami slams a fist into the heavy boxing bag and then another in quick succession, pummelling the vestigial stress of the day into sand-filled leather. His glances go over to where Hayakawa is training Akihito, seeing the boy’s form every bit the model of athleticism and swift power he first saw at Sion. He pounds the bag again repeatedly, his arms feeling the strain and his shoulders tightening, another look sees Akihito’s extended leg kick into the mitts. He shuts his eyes and licks the sweat from his upper lip in a way that unwinds him more than the acidic burn in his biceps. Through chronic sleep deprivation, illness, and a sudden contempt of women, he’s never felt this much uncontrollable tension that he’s willing to part in any way possible that doesn’t involve killing or torture. His lungs begin to ache, impeding his next hit but a chesty cough relieves it. He rests his head on the punchbag to catch his breath and watches Akihito, then batters the punching bag with high-kicks, trying to take his mind off of him.

“Good! You’re a fast learner.”

Hayakawa speeds through their training, impressed with the boy’s speed and power. If anything, he wants to see how far he can take him before fatigue sets in. He wouldn’t usually do this with a beginner, but there’s something about Akihito that extends beyond talent, and he thinks the boy knows it by the way he blasts kicks with powerful ease even before Hayakawa has time to move his mitts to meet them. “You running on some kind of battery acid, kid?”

There’s genuine fluster in Akihito’s face and his eyebrows furrow. “Huh?”
On appearances alone, Hayakawa’s still trying to work out how he’s Japanese with blue eyes, but he’s never usually overly critical of appearance, just as long as they can fight. He’s trained some of the best of the best from nothing and even they weren’t this heavy hitting. “Are you sure you’ve never kickboxed before?”

Akihito shakes his head. “Never.”

Hayakawa shows a little scepticism but accepts it and continues. “Alright. Next, we’ll do some combination punches with gloves.”

It’s been about an hour and Asami’s in the ring, delivering sinking low kicks to the side of his opponent Satou’s padded shins. He lays heavy punches with ferocity and sometimes deliberate knock-back. Satou isn’t like his sensei, he’s taller, well built with equal measures of bulk and muscle on his frame. He looks like he can take the hits and Asami doesn’t dream of holding back.

Akihito bounds towards the ring when he sees Asami deliver the crushing punches in spectacular form and nearly loses it when Asami smashes a knee into the side of Satou’s ribs. He spectates in fascination and his heart races with every huge hit. The tireless strength in those punches make a mockery of his opponent, then Satou’s finally knocked down onto the canvas and Akihito feels pride for some reason. Proud for Asami, proud for witnessing him like this, he’s not quite sure. Asami flicks a glance his way, noticing Akihito’s bright eyes concentrating on him between the ropes. “Sensei,” he calls out to his coach, “Allow me to train with Takaba for a while.”

Hayakawa gives him the thumbs up. He could use the breather. "He's all yours."

Akihito doesn’t waste a second in joining him on the canvas. Asami drops his gloves and trades them for Satou’s punching pads, slotting them onto his fingers and testing a glare through his sweat strewn strands. “Show me what you’ve learnt.”

He can measure Akihito’s excitement from the “come at me” up-tip of his chin, his enthusiasm an infectious spring from foot to foot, blue eyes wide at maximum focus. He readies his stance and squares his gloves and Asami loves the way it looks on him, a lamb turned wolf in a matter of moments, dirty smile and all.

“Now, hit me,” he commands.

The explosive first punch to his left glove comes seemingly out of nowhere and it stings like a super heavyweight. His mind in momentary disarray can’t calculate where Akihito and a punch like that could exist together. Straight away, a second delivery comes and he’s ready with his right glove to cushion the forceful blow. The boy’s expression is perfectly unreadable, but his eyes are fierce and wonderfully so. Asami’s nerves tingle with anticipation.
Three individual jabs become a quick succession of three consecutive punches and a low kick to cap it off, all aiming for Asami’s right side, but he intentionally shifts to avoid another bout of hits. The next thing he knows, Akihito’s heel is in front of his face and he has to snap his body backwards to avoid it, but Akihito keeps his leg extended and flicks out another kick, catching the side of his cheek. An impressive little catch.

For his size, Asami is surprisingly fleet footed, Akihito thinks. His shoulders sheen and the muscles pronounce themselves in beautiful definition, an easy distraction. Akihito rocks another punch on purpose just so he can see the muscles flex and absorb the hit again and again and again. It seems nothing can come close to knocking Asami off his mighty perch so he goes harder, faster, until the very core of his being hurts. Akihito will admit it’s a treat to see the man so unbridled like this, sharp and predatory and making everything ache inside of him.

The intense exchange is thwarted when Hayakawa calls ‘time-out’ from the other side of the ropes. Both Asami and Akihito drop their arms and sensei hands them towels. “Beautiful display, both of you. Takaba-kun shows a startling form, what do you think, Asami-kun?”

Asami pulls the mitts off his hands, letting the fight diffuse slowly through his body. “I agree,” he utters, evidence of the boy’s tremendous adrenaline soaked hits still throbbing in his arms, burning right through. The little shit. But he wants to do it all over again.

A while later, Hayakawa pulls Asami aside to have a word with him in his office.

It’s a lot smaller than Asami remembers, a small cavity that could’ve been dug with hands and shovel within the grounds of the gym itself, barely enough space to breathe let alone sit. Hayakawa takes a seat behind the small desk and Asami sits opposite him.

“It’s been nearly a year,” Hayakawa starts, smiling sincerely at his former student. Asami returns the
gesture more subtly. “It has.”

“I presume all is well. You look in fine form.”

“I’ve had better days,” Asami returns.

“Is this not one of them?”

“Recent unforeseen events have interrupted them somewhat.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I’ve never believed your feathers to be so easily ruffled, in any circumstance.”

“Only when it concerns the well-being of my business.”

“Ah, yes. Sion. The tower that keeps rising higher and higher. Whereas this blasted place,” he knocks his knuckles on the plaster wall within touching distance of his desk, “keeps getting smaller and smaller.”

“I noticed,” Asami says.

“They tried to shut us down. The damp was eating the brick to the foundations, said it was a health hazard. This was the best we could do, for now. At least we can still train.”

Asami clasps his hands together, feeling mild nostalgia pass through his mind. “I would hate to see this place go.”

“You know that they couldn’t tear us down. We’d beat the shits before they got the chance.”

Hayakawa leans back in his chair and steers the conversation to his new protege. “Your boy, Takaba, he’s an interesting one.”

“How do you gauge him?”

“I’m going to be frank with you, I don’t know where you found him, but he’s a rarity we don’t often see here. I’ve never seen anything like him. For someone that slim, he punches like a powerhouse. His strength and speed is exceptional.”

“I was slightly taken aback by his power, yes.” Asami’s wrists still feel the brunt of it.

“I mean, if you look at him, he looks athletic and healthy, not intimidating like some of the other guys, but his power seems to come out of nowhere like an explosion. And we’re not talking about a fluke here, he delivers it on every hit, every time. I’ve never in all my years experienced something like that, and that’s the makings of a great fighter. He’s a marvel.”

Asami lets all of the talk sink in before concluding his tamed response. “That isn’t the reason why I wanted you to train him.”

“Of course, I understand, but he’s unbelievable, that amount of potential in that kid. I’ve coached for thirty years and no-one, and I mean no-one has come close to what that young man has. Even you were a tough nut to crack at his age. He would be an asset to any coach.”

“Takaba is the type that enjoys the adrenaline, but he’s not here to become your new star fighter. I want to instill order and self-preservation in him. He doesn’t seem to understand those two things.”

Hayakawa laughs. “You dangle fresh talent in front of my face only to snatch it away from me. You’re a cruel man. I suppose I see him in the way I saw you, back then.”
“Things aren’t how they used to be,” Asami tells him.

“Some days I wish that they were. It only gets harder as you get older.” Hayakawa moves things around on the table, milling around in his own thoughts about the past. “I think about her a lot you know, in quiet moments. She always said how proud she was of you. I only wish she was still with us.”

“I don’t,” Asami says, matter-of-factly. “I wouldn’t have her suffering another day.” Coming here always does stoke up memories of the past he’d rather not remember.

Hayakawa drops his head for overstepping. “My apologies, to have brought something like this up.”

“None required,” Asami says, and rises out of his seat, offering a gracious bow to his former teacher, despite feeling a rawness burgeon inside him. “I’m grateful for your assistance with Takaba’s training.”

Hayakawa steps around the desk and returns the bow. “Please leave him with me, Asami-kun.”

Asami bows to him again before leaving the office.

✦

In the car, Akihito fingers his freshly damp locks sticking to his forehead. He can already feel the muscle fibres and tendons in his arms repairing themselves, the thrum of heat entering up through his shoulders and down his torso. He gets a tingle in his shoulder blades every time he happens a glance at Asami in the driver’s seat, back in his business suit and a cigarette between his lips. Though, not much is said between them, Asami concentrates on the road, occasionally tapping the ash out of the window, looking to be in deep thought. Akihito endures the heavy silence for more than half of the journey before plucking the courage to say something.

“Today was really fun. I think I’m getting the hang of it,” he says and punches the air with a jab of his fist.

“He’s just breaking you in gently. Soft kid.”

“Hey! He didn’t make it easy for me, y’know.”

Asami lets out a chuckle. “Coach was impressed with your capabilities.”

“He was? Hayakawa-sensei’s cool. I thought he’d be all strict. I saw those tattoos on his arm and thought he might have been in a gang. But he’s a good teacher. I think I’ll learn a lot.”

“Good, you’ll be training with him for a few more sessions. One of my bodyguards will accompany you.”

“Why them?”

Asami detects the disappointment and can't resist smirking. “When I’m not working, I’ll come and watch.”

“Bastard, that’s not what I meant,” Akihito mumbles under his breath. “Hayakawa-sensei told me about your past victories, that you were a double champion of the Japan and All-Asia tournaments.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“Still, it’s amazing, to have achieved something like that.”
While Akihito keeps up his fascination with Asami’s past glories, Asami’s thoughts revolve around one subject alone. He’s taken to analysing and processing everything Hayakawa said to him and how it reflects on the little enigma sitting next to him. He’s not sure if the boy’s oblivious to his capabilities not, but he’s certainly not hiding it or using it to its full potential, deliberately or otherwise, and it makes him think about where the boy’s limits lie, with eager anticipation of exploring them.

He pulls into the underground car park of his apartment building and turns off the engine, sitting for a few seconds in complete silence with Akihito party to his contemplation.

"Takaba," he says and Akihito looks at him.

Even in the darkness of the underground car park, Akihito’s eyes pierce bright blue, his pupils dilated and perfectly focused, inflections of innocence and the inexplicable at the centre of them. Asami’s stared into eyes like this before, hopeful and pleading before the light faded from them forever, but never has he felt cleansed from staring into the eyes of another. Emotions are as deadly as a bullet in his world, a blow dealt twice as quickly from a loose nerve. And yet, Akihito knows nothing of his world, and he doesn’t dream about that bullet reaching him. Akihito hasn’t been forged by the fear of the bullet, but by the fear of something else entirely. Something he can't begin to imagine.

"Asami?"

He pulls away, averting his eyes. “Takaba, I want you to know something. I don't want you to feel that you can't tell me anything. I want you to trust that I can do everything I can for you. I want you to trust me, can you do that?"

A smile falters on Akihito’s lips and he wonders why Asami’s bringing this all of a sudden. His eyes cast downwards. “I do trust — “

“Takaba Akihito." Asami draws the sharp intonation that demands that Akihito be forthright with him. No insecurities. No games. He wants the implicitness to be real. He needs it to be real. “Trust in me.”

When Akihito looks at him for the second time, his eyes are clear and unwavering.

“I trust you, Asami Ryuichi.”
Introspection

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Their ordinary Toyota sedan crawls to a slow halt on a side road overlooking the rear of Shinzou Apartments. Suoh parked them under a broken street lamp, the overhanging darkness working in their favour to conceal them from view. Not that there’s much to look at beyond the dilapidated exterior of the buildings around here, and its unsavory folk.

Suoh kills the engine and Asami glances down at his watch, noting 10:38pm. It’s just the two of them, looking from the inside out at the expanse of urban darkness. They’re away at a distance but still close enough to be able to observe two lowly thugs escorting a man around the side of the building and slugging him to the ground. They watch silently, unmoved as the man takes a beating from the two bottom-feeders and Asami suddenly recalls what Akihito said about hating the area in which he lives. He tilts his head to his blond bodyguard. “Wait here. Call me if there’s any trouble.”

“Understood, boss.”

He leaves Suoh in the car and goes around to the front of the complex, avoiding any unfortunate entanglement with the thugs at the back beating the man half to death. Shinzou’s lodgings are those small shoebox apartments clustered together on the outskirts of town, separated from the subtle suburbs by a dirty canal and a near-by train line, in a way, segregating white collar from inner city grease.

He makes his way up the metal staircase to the upper level and stands outside of door number twelve, the number on Akihito’s key. Asami scans the key fob over the reader and hears the resounding click of Pandora’s little box opening for him. He turns the key in the lock and checks around his shoulder before entering and closes the door behind him.

He hadn’t formed any expectation of Akihito’s life prior to their meeting apart from the very rare indications dropped during conversation, though, one thing’s for certain, he didn’t see an idyllic lifestyle for someone with such a skewed opinion of the world. So, as Asami enters, removing his shoes and leaving them by the doorway, he switches on the lights and his anticipation meets a small, thoroughly lived in room.

It’s simple, isn’t dirty, but things have been noticeably used. The futon in the middle of the room is slept in and slightly strewn on the floor next to a crumpled t-shirt, the type of printed tee he’d imagine Akihito would wear. A cheap, sun scorched pair of curtains dress the only window of the room, cracked around the edges of drab, off-white wall, letting in a faint draft. The bin is full with wrappers and instant food packets. A bowl and a spoon on the coffee table contain the leftovers of a meal half eaten and drying in the stagnant air — presumably the last thing Akihito ate here. The kitchenette in the corner has a few washed items by the sink, the fridge and every cupboard is packed with more than enough food for one. There’s no proper furniture, only a low table and a single wooden chair over in the far corner. No TV, radio or other electronic devices, nothing plugged into the mains electricity apart from a microwave and a small portable heater beside the futon.

He walks through to the darkened alcove of the bathroom and switches the light on. There are clothes hanging on towel racks, left to dry and slightly creased from being left there and never put away. Antibacterial soap and a hairbrush are by the sink, a toothbrush in a glass and shampoo in the shower — simple amenities one would expect from an uncomplicated life. Had it been anyone else, Asami would call it a sad existence, but for Akihito, it’s not as sad as it is lonesome.
He observes but doesn’t touch. He’s careful where he steps, guiding his feet and maneuvering his body to avoid disturbing the atmospheric dust that’s settled within the precious state of isolation, preserving this abandoned snapshot of Akihito’s once life, and Asami’s right in the middle of it, interloping quietly.

At least that’s what Asami has to tell himself as he’s slipping on his leather gloves, because really, he wants to touch *everything*, knowing Akihito’s lived and breathed and slept in this place opens a world of curiosity. It’s the things he can’t see, the personal items hidden in cupboards, drawers, or at the back of the wardrobe — some of them lay empty while others are filled with only minimal amounts of clothing, extra sheets, an unopened first-aid kit, a fire blanket. He rifles at the back of the wardrobe and his eyes fall to something on the floor wrapped in white, fraying linen. It’s small but whatever it is, it’s very heavy.

He unwraps the linen and finds four stacked rings of thick, solid black metal with holes just big enough to put a slender hand through. They weigh a great deal heavier than they look and each one takes an effort to lift, even for Asami’s strength. Small engraved patterns are on each of them, easy to miss against the dense black metal but he holds one to the light and sees the ornate, deliberate pattern on each ring. He can’t tell if they’re ancient or futuristic, aside from them being ostentatious, they’re completely bizarre. What are these things, and what are they to Akihito? He’s not going to take them back to the penthouse, that’s for sure. He takes a picture of them with his phone and places them back in the wardrobe in the same arrangement as he found them.

And while he’s been here tracing for clues, he’s being hit constantly with that beguiling scent he knows only to be Akihito’s, enveloping his senses from every angle. He doesn’t understand what it is about it that makes him want to abandon everything just so he can bask in it.

It makes him bend down to retrieve a corner of the futon to smell it, knowing Akihito’s slept in it and his mysterious scent is all over it. It’s a smell that could be outdoors or indoors, organic or not from this world — freshly washed cotton, beaten wool, a maple forest, milk — a thing twenty thousand words couldn’t hope to describe or come close to in comparison, not even when he buries his head in the pillow and loses himself to something unknown. He only wishes to know why he’s so crippled by even the faintest hint of it in the air, or when Akihito walks innocently between rooms and it lingers, like a subtle, beautiful poison.

He disengages himself for a moment to lie on his back within the comforts of the futon, staring at the ceiling, picturing Akihito here and what he might have been doing — if he splays his wings and zones out, like Asami’s doing right now, languorously idling in whatever thoughts or dreams he has. He wonders if the boy dreams at all, or if he sleeps with both eyes open because he has demons that taint his unconscious mind. He wonders if Akihito weeps to things that are otherwise unimaginable to him.
He wonders what pleasures have been felt here, if he’s taken women, men, or both to his bed, if they too have been seduced by his scent. He wonders if he’s been taken or is yet untouched, and how he would look stretched out and naked on a bed, with his wings spread open, waiting for the proverbial tide to wash him over the edge. He thinks about that supple, athletic body and the ways it defies everything that he knows, and it pressing into the bedsheets as he moves. He wonders if Akihito feels like no other.

It’s probably a perfect coincidence that while he’s heavily indulging in that thought, his hand finds a single feather on the cover as the only serving proof that Akihito ever existed here, in the middle of his outstretched palm is a small, delicate part of Akihito. He takes it between his fingers and touches its softness against his lips, holding it up to the light and watching as the fibres teeter in the atmosphere, bringing him the most unwarranted source of comfort. He closes his eyes and the rareness of serenity that’s been denying him for days — weeks — ebbs through him.

Everything changed the night they pulled Akihito’s unconscious body out of the water, the image still plain as day in his mind — bruised from a thousand wounds and his blue lips without a breath between them. And yet, standing in his bedroom not a few hours later, bathed in the glory of the day, smiling whilst the sun crested on his back — Akihito was healed, just like that.

As if his fate hasn’t already fucked him in all the ways known to man since his conception, the universe has also seen fit to deliver this rare boy to him from the most divine or unholiest of places he doesn’t yet have knowledge of, to cohabit a life where he lives and Akihito merely exists. He hadn’t fully grasped how he was going to deal with Akihito, the method or his actions, and for the first time in as long as he can remember, he feels a sense of guilt.

Guilt, he thinks to himself. Guilt hasn’t taught itself to cloud Asami’s conscience for a very long
time. It’s nothing more than a distraction, an obtrusive, bitter taste that interferes and does more harm than good. But there’s an undeniable heaviness there when he’s seen how fast Akihito’s hardiness can crumble, those empty spaces between the looks and the petty jabs, or how he’s seen Akihito slip away from his bed, only to waste the hours staring longingly into the night sky as if calculating its infinity.

Akihito’s strangeness, the mysticism of whatever it is that carried Akihito’s angelic existence into this bastardised world is beyond Asami’s capable imaginings. Trying to redefine the world has never left him feeling so uncomfortable, so vile. So instead, he meditates to Akihito’s essence, and redefines his world for maybe another half hour, and dreams of building himself a better one.

When he gets up, he takes a moment to make sure the room is back the way it was and erase any trace of him ever being here. Looking down at his watch — it’s 11.29pm. He takes one last absorbing look of the room before closing the door and returning to the car.

“You told me you hated the city.”

Asami swirls the ice cubes and bourbon in his glass and takes the occasional sip, intent on watching Akihito make a feast of the sushi from across the coffee table, but more importantly, what he can ascertain from the small drop in his guard.

“I do,” Akihito answers with a full mouth.

“So why did you end up here?”

Akihito swallows and plucks himself another piece of sushi from the platter, answering Asami in his own sweet time. “The architecture is completely different. I can jump the gap from one building to another, hang from cranes, walk up the cables of a suspension bridge with all the cars going past underneath me. I can stand for hours on the edge of a skyscraper just looking down at the world and know that no one can see what I see.”

“But why do you do it?”

“To get closer to the sky, mostly. And because I can’t jump between mountains.”

"Jumping between mountains, huh."

The glass makes an audible chink as Asami places it on the table and exchanges it for the cigarette that’s been smoldering in the ashtray. He leans back into the sofa, never taking his eyes off of the fond smile that appears on the boy. “You’ve jumped a building, so then what?”

Akihito stops chewing and lays down his chopsticks, thinking seriously for a second. Goose pimples rise on his arms and there’s a bracing pause, and Asami wonders what thoughts are running through Akihito’s mind to cause such a reaction.

“It’s breathtaking,” he begins, “That rush that you feel. It overwhelms me so much that I can’t stop doing it. There’s no philosophy to it other than it’s pure, unrestricted enjoyment. And I love every minute of it.” Akihito’s eyes stare straight at him as he says it, full of boldness and with the kind of honesty Asami’s come to appreciate in these rare instances when the boy opens up to him. He’s more frequent and open about it now. Sometimes the anecdote will drop by itself without Asami having to
ask, but he asks because Akihito doesn’t usually blush like this of his own accord, in the same way
he doesn’t usually spill with this much sexual undertone.

Asami looks away for a moment towards the panoramic window and blows out a stream of smoke.
“There’s a word for that, you know,” he says thoughtfully, and expels another stream as he turns
back to Akihito, seeing interest float in those azure blue eyes. “Acrophilia.”

“I didn’t know there was a name for it,” Akihito says, shrugging.

“You’d be surprised just how many have names, and for what.”

The small, shuddering breath Akihito releases is delicious to witness, this aloofness he knows is only
a pretense. “It’s just as well that you’re up here in my penthouse. Who knows, if I’d have had a
bungalow or basement, I might have had to watch you slowly descend into madness.”

Akihito finally lifts the lid of the tension that’s been slowly simmering between them up until now.
“Is kidnap and torture how you usually get people to bend to your every wish?”

“Only when I’m in a good mood.”

“And when you’re not? What do you do, pull out your gun and tickle them with it?”

Asami’s cunning brow lifts. “Don’t think I’m so removed from the idea, Takaba.”

Akihito places the last maki roll into his mouth and chews on it with his head down to hide the heat
he feels in his cheeks. “Thanks for the sushi by the way,” he mutters afterwards.

“You’re welcome. I apologise that it’s late and the fridge isn’t well stocked.”

“The other day, you said there was an incident at one of your clubs. Did you sort it out?”

“The situation is being handled. Just the highly intoxicated forgetting themselves and taking it out on
each other.”

“Ahh. Sounds messy.”

“It’s not when you employ the right people. I’d still prefer to not have to deal with it. I’d much rather
spend my time on more rewarding pleasures, such as interrogating you.”

He makes it sound like a joke but Akihito knows good and well it’s not. Just as the heat dissipates, it
rises again, and he knows Asami will do just that, as if the memories of their first meeting aren’t still
a thorn in his mind, with Asami dissecting him like prey. “How about you don’t,” he dismisses,
pushing the empty box of sushi away from him, in what is hopefully a metaphor Asami can
understand.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” is his reply, letting the trails of smoke slowly filter out from his lips. "You
fascinate me beyond reason."

It’s more ominous than anything he could ever say with words, quiet aggression free-flowing in a
translucent channel of smoke. Akihito defuses whatever comeback he has on the integrity in that
stare stunning him into silence. He finds it near impossible to read a man like Asami, behind all the
smoke and mirrors and dangerous elegance.

“Of all the hundred and twenty million people in Japan and the billions in this world, a boy with
wings miraculously falls into my hands, and you’re asking me not to be fascinated with that? Are
you aware of yourself, of what you are to someone like me? Answer me this, truthfully, how many others have seen or know about you?"

"I...I can't say for sure."

"You haven’t been too careful, from what I’ve seen, and it’s concerning."

"I’ve been around, but I’m not stupid enough to crack open my wings in public, if that’s what you want to hear."

Asami chuffs at the boy’s bite. “A hard comfort.” He laughs sardonic as he knocks back the rest of his drink. “They depict your kind in folklore and myths, immortalise you in paintings, erect great statues of you, even worship you. And here you are, the real thing. So blissfully unaware.”

“I don’t know what you think I am.”

Asami’s eyes sharpen on him. “Anyone would say you’re an angel.”


Asami tracks the subtle changes in his expression, picking up on something interesting. “You sound as if you’ve never heard of the word, or the thought of it repulses you.”

Akihito looks at him as if he’s daft. “Because that’s not what I am.”

Asami, genuinely intrigued by what he’s hearing, presses him. “So you’re not, as they say, a being of the divine?”

It’s met with Akihito’s wild laughter hacking through the rove of questions. “Divine? So you think I’m divine now?”

“I don’t know what you are, Takaba, that’s why I’m asking. What are you?” Asami returns, irritated that his tolerance is coming close to being tested. He feels as if he’s spent an age trying to come to some solid ground on this, yet Akihito sits there vocally destitute for a long while before uttering the same redundant reply.

"I don't know."

"You don't know a lot of things."

"I'm saying — I don't know. I can't tell you I'm something when I'm not."

"You've lived your whole life not knowing what you are? That's some existence."

Akihito throws his arms into the air. “Does it really matter!? If I cut off my wings, I’d be just like you, so why does it matter?”

Asami narrows his eyes at the boldness of that statement. “I’d never want you to be like me.”

“We wouldn’t be having this conversation then. I wouldn’t even be here. Your men would have finished me off and my body would’ve washed up on a shore somewhere by now, probably found by some local kids playing in a ditch.”

“Perhaps you’d be right, but the fact remains that you are not. Imagine where you could have ended up, who could have taken advantage of you, who would have sold you to the world. Imagine far enough until you can taste the reality of it. Then tell me the premium grade sushi you just devoured
isn’t of a far sweeter taste.”

Akihito’s sigh sounds more pathetic than he wanted it to be. “I know what you’re trying to say.”

“So, you understand then?”

“That I’m eating expensive seafood and not river slime?”

Akihito’s agitation is making him more smart-mouthed than usual, and as Asami reaches the end of his cigarette he already feels the need for another one. “Are there others like you?”

“Who knows?” Akihito throws out flippantly as he watches Asami irritably crush his cigarette into the crystal ashtray. "I might be the only one."

“Then you’re a rare breed indeed. And I’m guessing there’s good reason why you’re concealing so much, however precious it must be to you. But you must know that it only makes me want to pry it from you that much more.”

“If you’re going to blackmail me, just do it.”

“You think so little of me.”

“You think almighty of yourself.”

“Judging me by your standards, Mr. Pity Party?”

“Asshole. I didn’t choose to be here. I’m here because you put me here.”

“Is that a complaint I’m hearing? Remind me of where you are and what you’ve just eaten again, where you sleep every night, and where you’d rather be?”

“Out. There. I’m in a cage here, Asami, and I don’t like it.”

Asami looks infuriatingly serene. “Why?”

“I’m tired of living like this. I’m tired of what’s going to happen to me if I carry on like this. All I do is what you tell me to do. I’m trapped inside, and I can’t sleep, I can’t think, I can’t...”

“You can’t what, Takaba?”

“I hate what you’re doing to me, like you’re slowly breaking me. These same walls. Shadowed and chaperoned like some stupid kid. I haven’t flown in weeks, Asami...I...” His words become an inarticulate choke as he tries to define what being in a sunken cube feels like. "Look, maybe you don’t give a shit about me, I don’t care, but I need to fly.”

“I told you, your freedom is not forfeit.”

“But for how long?”

“Until I know you’re not a risk to yourself.”

“I’m not some sort of loose cannon, Asami. I’ve done alright for myself so far!”

“Then the front door is unlocked.” Asami raises an extended thumb behind him. “You’re free to walk right out of it, I won’t stop you.”
The fight completely leaves Akihito when Asami gets up from his seat and exits the room, returning a few seconds later with the same passive aggression. “I’ve instructed the guard not to challenge you on your departure.”

Akihito withers him a look.

“Are you having second thoughts now, Takaba? You sounded so indignant before, and now the choice is handed to you, you’re having doubts.”

The flat of Akihito’s palms slams on the table and he abruptly stands, clasping fists shaking by his side, seething, “Damnit, Asami! I never wanted this!”

“Then what do you want, Takaba? Tell me plainly because I’m starting to lose my patience.”

Akihito hangs his head in a bitterly shameful moment of weakness and descends back down to the floor. Asami has every right to be angry at him — goddamn it, he’s every bit angry with himself, with his indecisive, non-coordinating thoughts. His freedom is a means to his end. It means to never stay in one place for too long, to never outstay a welcome for a minute longer than he’s rightful to take, or to where his impatience will take him next. Domestication, habitation is a thing unknown to him, and to think Akihito’s spent more time in Asami’s penthouse than anywhere else on the planet. It was bound to go wrong at some point.

Asami sighs before seating himself once again, mildly obliging the boy’s discord with a more reserved tone. “Is this how it is to be between us? Forever fighting and deflecting each other.”

“This is how it is because you made it that way.”

“My terms were clear from the very start, and they haven’t changed.”

"Maybe you should tie a chain around my neck as well, so you can keep me here forever as your little freak of nature.”

Asami leans forward and considers a reality that may not be so far from the truth, and why he’s taking every measure to keep Akihito refuged in his penthouse. “Do you have any inclination of what you could do to the world if they knew what you were? Imagine if someone were to expose you to the entire world as you are, the world as we know it will never be the same again.

“Everyone will foam over your existence. The devout, non-believers, even those who considered themselves indifferent will be driven into a frenzy. They will argue, catastrophically. One side will say you’re the divine descendant doing god’s bidding, a harbinger of great or unfortunate events. The other will say you were a perverse experiment scientists cooked up in a lab somewhere. It won't matter who’s right or who’s wrong, all that would matter is that there's you. It all begins and ends with you.

“Many will embrace you, openly. To many you'll be a savior, the closest thing we have to a living, breathing god. Many will reject the very notion of you, because you go against the fabric of our nature and society and there are billions of us and one of you, and we're not often welcoming of things we don't understand.

“Others will question cosmogony and life itself, as I’ve found myself doing. Religions would have more validity and power than ever before to cripple humanity with their ancient dogma. They would have cause to reap chaos in the name of their god, in the name of you. Violence on a scale we couldn’t even begin to imagine. And while they wage their so-called holy wars, you’ll be hunted by every government and scientific research body, with a bounty on your head more valuable than all
the currency and riches that has ever existed on this Earth. It’ll only be a matter of time before they catch you. And they will catch you, Akihito, oh they will, and that day will be your end.

“They’ll let you explain yourself, for days, weeks, maybe months, until they’ve lulled you into their security and obtained every single detail they need to know about you. Perhaps they’ll find out things even you didn’t know about yourself, with their extensive methods.

“‘Takaba Akihito’ will be replaced with a number. That’s what you’ll be referred to from then on, although, not to your face. They’ll watch you from behind glass, set you tasks to do and you’ll perform them for their giant scientific circus. They’ll hurt you and tell you it’s standard procedure. They’ll feed you strange things, bring you to the brink of starvation, drug you until your body convulses helplessly because your physical limits are paramount to them over your well-being. They’ll examine you in your most intimate regions to see if you have the capabilities to make new life, and you’ll be forced to breed, either through natural means or artificially. They’ll have you do it as many times as they want to make more of you, just in case they destroy you in their care. It may be a span of several years that they’ll keep you locked inside this great scientific circus.

“And then when they’ve explored your outside, they’ll go deeper, inside, to see if your heart beats the same way as ours. They’ll make you stay awake when the circular saw cuts into your skull in order to reach your brain. You’ll hurt for weeks from the exploratory surgeries and the massive needles they’ll stick into you to extract cells from your bones and fluid from your spinal cord.

“Your precious wings will undergo tests — that’s what they’re most interested in, after all. Amputating them will reveal if they’re imperative to your survival. They’ll pluck and analyze each feather, and they’ll never be a part of you again. And when they’ve obtained every single bit of information, as far as their research will take them, a final lethal cocktail will send you into an eternal, wakeless sleep.

“From then your being will be dissected and chemically frozen. You may stay ‘intact’, for a little while, until other nations vie for your body parts for their own research, and then every nation who so desired you will finally have a piece of you. After all, business is business.”

Akihito can taste blood in his mouth from where he's unconsciously bitten his tongue from receiving one devastating crush after another. He hasn’t been without the thoughts of cruelty, in the basements and back rooms of public buildings, wondering what would befall him if he were found and made to bear everything about himself. It doesn’t compare to Asami’s extreme and explicit jugular-for-jugular insight, and he can only hope the man can’t pick up the way his skin feels like it’s crawling with leeches. Laughing is the only way he can fool himself, or he might well swallow his tongue. “That’s a little over dramatic, don't you think?”

“Is that why you’re trembling? It’s alright, I would be too, if I were in your position.”

“Why are you telling me all this? Do you think I don’t know already?”

“I don’t know, do you? There are things they’d do to you that neither you nor I would be able to imagine. It would be a revelation.”

“So I have to ‘disappear’ to never risk being discovered? Live life under your thumb?”

“Lie low, make smarter choices. Yes. What I offer is that you won’t have to do it alone, and I for one am not out to get you.”

“I liked my life before you. Nothing was as complicated as you’re making it now.”
“But now you’ve complicated my life because I know what you are. You’re completely oblivious to the power of your existence. And along with that power, there’s no doubt in my mind that you’ll be made to suffer for it, for one second of stupidity. Is that what you want?”

“You know it’s not.”

“So, you understand your position then.”

Begrudgingly, Akihito nods. “Yes.”

“Then we’re in agreement with each other, that when I say I will protect, I cannot do so if you’re out of my reach?”

“...Yes.”

“Good.” Asami rises from the sofa and regards the boy one last time. “I’m giving you tonight to make your decision. And if I wake in the morning to find you gone, take yourself somewhere far, far away and never show yourself to me again. Have I made myself clear?”

Akihito swallows thickly and doesn’t say a word. He can’t. Instead he watches Asami turn and leave him with nothing but the bitterness of his own ultimatum.

✣

Asami undoes his shirt buttons with haste, tugging them until they snap and roll across the bedroom floor. He’s agitated. Akihito gave him no quarter and he hasn’t any regret of adding real context to a dismal future that Akihito faces if his luck meets a shortfall. Akihito may live life from one giant leap to the next but he won’t be able to do anything if the whole world becomes a hunting ground.

As he sits on the bed he can already see from the reflection in the window that Akihito has followed him into his room. He doesn’t acknowledge his presence, forcing Akihito to break his silence or leave the way he came.

“What will become of me if I stay here?” Akihito asks, quiet and meek, “What will become of us?”

Asami removes his watch and places it on the nightstand, processing the small shade of intimacy in that sentence. “I wasn’t aware that there was an ‘us’.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Do I?”

“You’re right. You’re right about a lot of things. Shit, I don’t even know where you end or where you begin, but I know I don’t want it to be like this, us to keep fighting.”

With a long, heavy sigh, Asami reaches into his pocket for his cigarettes and flips the lid of the packet only to find it empty. He tosses the packet away and sighs again. “I’ve said all that I have to say. Go to your room.”

“I know. And I won’t forget any of it so easily. I might find it a bit harder to sleep tonight, but it’s honestly no worse than I’ve had to deal with.” Akihito crosses the threshold with gentle barefooted steps. Asami tracks him from the reflection in the window, Akihito drawing ever so slightly closer to him, crossing over into his personal space.

“Your chest is hurting you, I can tell.” Akihito’s close enough now that his legs are touching the side
of the bed and facing the broadness of Asami’s back tapering in a stressed slouch that shouldn’t exist in his mannerly repertoire. “You talk to me about suffering, but aren’t you suffering yourself?”

“You make it a habit of not listening to people, Takaba.”

“So do you,” Akihito returns. “You do as you please, and answer to no-one.” He places one knee on the bed followed by the other. The mattress dips as he approaches, light and agile on his hands and knees and all the while Asami’s tracking his reflection, hyper-aware of every dip and pull of the duvet. He doesn’t move a muscle, even when the boy’s arms wrap around his shoulders and he feels him lean in, pressing himself against his back, whispering.

“We’re more alike than you think.”

“You’re playing a very dangerous game,” Asami growls in warning.

“I’m in danger with or without you so what’s the difference? Maybe I’m addicted to it and maybe that’s why I seek it. I can’t help myself.”

In less than a second, Akihito is thrown down onto his back with Asami’s body over him, arms and legs pinned under his weight. Akihito can feel the adrenaline making this easier for him not to cave helplessly to that angry gleam in Asami’s eyes, to keep himself defiant when the man disarms him with only the growl of his name. Their lips are so close that he can taste liquor and smoke and sin in the air between them, only a sigh or a selfish reflex away from taking them. It’d be as simple as that.
But Asami pulls back and looks at him for a hard few seconds, just looking, looking into him, and
goodness knows even that look could cause Akihito to ache to death inside.

Asami gets off the bed and stands by the window, staring through the blanket darkness, like he’s out-
staring something murderous on the other side of it. The seconds strum as minutes for Akihito before
Asami eventually speaks. "Get out. Leave me."

“Asami...“

“I won't say it again."

Akihito, scorched with futility, silently leaves the room.

Chapter End Notes

That ending...I know, I know... Don't kill me yet!
Akihito wakes up to a sickness he hasn’t felt in years, the strong taste of blood that’s overwhelming him. Only seconds awake, and he’s having to conquer his body’s rejection of the taste. He swallows down the horrid, metallic saliva, and the motion strips his throat, with more of it flowing out. He holds his hand up to his mouth and groans at the raw pain he feels inside, his tongue, ravaged by teeth, drips blood from the tip as though nothing will staunch the flow of it. With this comes the stark realisation that at some point during the night, he slipped out of his astral body.

It shocks him out of bed with a feeling rife with dread. He paces frantically, repeating, “No that can't be,” to himself in a crazed litany and nervously touching himself, reaffirming that all limbs, including his head and neck, are still firmly attached to himself. He checks his hands and arms for wounds and lacerations, on his legs, the backs of his thighs and calves — all without a scratch.

He quietly slips across the hall into the bathroom and stands before the large mirror, relieved that despite the blood, everything still looks the way it should — head, neck, and limbs — all intact. His eyes, although slightly tired, aren’t bloodshot, and his lips, although dry, aren’t lacerated. A bold whip of his body sends his wings free and without pain. He examines each one carefully and enough times to know they too are unaffected.

“It was only my tongue,” Akihito says to his mirror image, blood and saliva running down his chin. He spits out a mouthful of fresh red blood, and it escapes in a spiral down the plughole.
“Damnit.”

His body is the worst at betraying him sometimes.

Getting to the kitchen is easy when the two entranceways meet in the same domestic space. He sweeps barefoot in total silence — facing a guard right now is best avoided. The only thing on his mind is that he needs to eat.

Akihito doesn’t know how Asami manages to cook the kind of meals he does when his fridge is this void of ingredients. Asami has the luxury of having his own private chef preparing his haute cuisine meals at work, but Akihito’s stomach, even at the very worst of times, doesn’t run on air. Even the bare essentials are scarcely scant. He snaps a cucumber in half and crunches down on it, it’s not much but it soothes the burning at least. Spotting a jar that on closer inspection nearly burns the caverns of his nostrils, he shakes the pickled ginger sting out of his head and shuts it back in the fridge. No eggs, no milk, butter but no bread, nothing. He should kill that man.

“Takaba-kun—”

Startled, he turns around, not expecting to see the guard standing at the doorway, watching him raid the fridge like a raving lunatic. Akihito doesn’t know if he’s met him before or if this is the first time, but regardless, he tries to answer in his best neutral tone. “Oh, it’s you.”

“Is something the matter?”

“No, it’s just...it somehow slipped my mind that security was being reorganised.”
“It’s Asami-sama’s orders.”

“Yeah, I know,” Akihito says before turning his back, trying to find something to do and make it look casual. “I’m making coffee. You want one?”

“No, thank you.”

He presses all the buttons on the stainless steel gadget to somehow get it to brew the strongest, blackest coffee it can. Then as he’s waiting for the water to boil he considers that it’s probably not the best thing for his tongue right now, but at least he can hide his mouth behind the cup.

“So hey, what’s your name? You know mine.”

Giving a brief pause, as though considering this as a breach of his own personal security, the guard eventually answers, “Touya.”

“Touya-san. I need a favour. Can you get me some food?”

“Food?”

“Yeah. Asami likes to leave his fridge empty. Get a whole bunch for me — Sushi, McDonald’s, anything, I don’t care.”

“You know the deal, Takaba-kun. I’m instructed not to leave the penthouse.”

“Oh come on, sticking strict to Asami’s stupid rules? He’s not even here and I’m starving. If you’re quick, he’ll never know—”

“Takaba-kun,” Touya forestalls him with a raise of his voice, then gentles, “Let’s get one thing straight here, no matter where you are or what you do, Asami-sama always knows. There’s no getting away from that fact.” As he turns to the doorway, he looks back to the boy with a withering glance. Either way, Asami will cut his balls off if he lets the poor kid starve. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thank you, Touya-san.”

Asami’s morning, like most, would have fared better without the company of the Shinjuku police department in his office and their endless questions. Asami doesn’t pretend to know the minds of spurned and angry women, only that they produce the most uncomfortable of headaches.

The morning has been a haze. Between each question, Asami can barely concentrate on the what’s and the who’s, where he was at the time of the incident and who he should be punishing for the inconvenience. He’s aware it probably looks bad for his image so he lets Kirishima handle the finer details and discrepancies to the police while he cascades through reports, pretending to absorb them but really, he’s thinking about Akihito.

“We know that you’re busy men, Asami-san, Kirishima-san. That will be all for today. Thank you for your co-operation. We’ll be in touch.”

“Thank you, officers. One of my men will see you out.” Asami stands and bows before they’re escorted out of the building then growls his displeasure as the door closes on their backs.
“That could have been a lot worse,” Kirishima’s says, already delivering his boss a generous glass of whiskey into his waiting hands.

“Pour one for yourself as well,” Asami says to him.

“Appreciated, but I would keep a clear head. There’s still a matter of the Nobelium Group meeting to conclude. They’re a stubborn crowd.”

Asami berates himself for forgetting the importance of the meeting with his investors. “Right you are then.” Focusing back to the police report in front of him, his expression darkens. “If we lose one of those women, we’ll have a manslaughter charge on our hands. The club will forever be tarnished with that.”

“Rest assured, Asami-sama. The police remain convinced it will sustain very little impact on your reputation.”

He drains the glass and holds it up to Kirishima for another. “After what the government is having me do, I don’t pay them for their humour, that’s for sure.”

“Of course not. Everything is being taken care of with the greatest of discretion.”

Asami sighs and tips back a second helping of whiskey. “Have the police and forensics finished their sweep of Śiva?”

“Yes. The majority of the damage amounted from liquid damage, blood, and broken glass. There was a broken table and a slashed seat. Woodwork damage was minimal. The upholsterers and cleaners have been called to fix the damage. We’re covered for all the costs, as well as legalities.”

“Thank the powers that be for insurance.”

“They’ll be happy to hear from you, Sir.”

“I’m sure they will be.”

Śiva’s temporary closure will certainly make a dent in profits, but Asami’s thinking in the long term that Śiva’s popularity will suffer because of this incident. Bolstering security will be top priority once re-opening is underway. Perhaps have a few plain-clothes security men pose as hosts.

He spins his chair and balances the glass on his knee, spinning a droplet around the rim as he looks out on the morning city vista, stirring his senses to thoughts of this morning.

The hairs on the nape of his neck stand on end when he recalls the visions he was sure were dreams within dreams, hallucinations in the backwaters of his mind or something entirely arcane that only the enlightened can relate to it. He’s felt the whole psychological spectrum of late pass through a meat grinder and churn into nothing but unintelligible artifacts.

He doesn’t even know how to make it tangible for himself to understand, let alone make sense of something as bizarre as the completely obscure visions that drove him from sleep to full consciousness, but never having awakened. There was an absolute realness there, a sense of intricacy and elegance that dreaming never willingly offers, a sensation lost in the ethersphere, something between an apparition and a thief, stealing his very mind and soul from him. Otherwise he wouldn’t be admitting to himself that for those strange moments, his body didn’t belong to him anymore.

The ordeal of awaking with cardiac intensity and a diamond-hard erection between his legs almost delivered him straight to the floor when his body lacked the strictness to hold himself upright. A few
hard tugs in the shower, and he’s coming like a teenager discovering himself for the first time, drained and sinking into a violated hole somewhere his mind has created as of the last six hours, to help him cope or to ruin him, he hasn’t a clue. But he knows the person who does.

“—Asami-sama.”

He swivels back around to see Kirishima with the heavy meeting notes tucked under his arm, bowing to him in front of his desk. “Permission to handle this meeting?”

He supposes his assistant has more than a sixth sense about these things.

“I’d appreciate it, Kirishima.”

Akihito had barricaded himself in his room while waiting for his food, lying on an underdressed bed, and his head under an undressed pillow. His pillow and parts of his sheets were so overly saturated with blood that it’s probably never going to come out. He stripped them and kicked them into the corner of his room for Asami’s help to deal with.

About forty-five therapeutic minutes later, there’s a knock at his door.

“I’ve got your food, kid. Open up.”

He slides off his bed and opens the door just wide enough to take the plastic bags from Touya’s hands, his softly spoken gratitude barely reaching him.

All civilised elegance ends there when he sits back on the bed and tears the wrappers with his teeth to get to the meat buns and convenience store snacks. Each bite burns on his tongue, but after a few more he finds it bearable, each morsel acting with his body to heal his ravaged tongue.

He hates the gorging process, really, along with its lethargic and nauseating after effects, but it’s a necessary process. He hates it more when it hurts him every time he opens his mouth, with his blood mixing in with his food and making it revolting to swallow down. It’s a good thing Asami isn’t here to see him like this, or he’d think he was an inglorious glutton to go with the rest of his attributes. But he should have had food in the house to begin with, and that probably makes Akihito a fool for relying on a man who barely lives in his own home.

With a full stomach and packaging everywhere, he falls back onto the bed and sleeps for the remainder of the healing process.

Two hours or so later when he wakes up, he’s quite clearly not on his own bed anymore. He’s in someone else’s—shit, this is Asami’s room. How on earth did he end up here?

He sits up and wipes the sweat from his forehead and another bead slides down the side of his face. One by one, he’s listing why nothing in his life makes sense right now, adding why he’s somehow here in Asami’s super kingsize bed and not his own bed, and why it’s a ridiculously long list.

Walking about the room he kneads his shoulders while counting to ten as he inhales slowly in and out. He rotates his neck and hears his spine click, flexing his fingers and running them about in his hair, scraping his scalp with blunt nails. None of this makes any sense at all. The whole penthouse is baking, but the air conditioning in this place has been on all morning, on its own sophisticated timer,
yet his clothes are sticking to him, and the ice-dried air sticks to the back of his throat, creating an itch that nothing can scratch.

He collapses back onto Asami’s bed, face down with his arms and legs spread, beating himself up on the softest sheets he’s ever felt. The whole of last night and this morning has been a testament of just how out of sync he is, and how no intervention, besides a miracle, is going to fix this.

He takes a mouthful of the sheet and sucks it between his teeth, twisting his hands in and amongst them and pulling them to himself. His tongue no longer bleeds when he puts his mouth into Asami’s luxurious pillow and bites down, tugging it with his teeth. And breathing. Breathing in the man’s scent left on the sheets night after night — Asami’s shampoo, cologne, tobacco and masculine scent — it’s a heady mix that yields something in him.

It’s crazy, he thinks, how desire turns him into such an animal, how nights of it can turn him rabid, with only the blood to remind him of that darkness when he eventually awakens into a world of agony. He remembers it only as a distant memory now, of the time when all the fears he ever possessed were born of the darkness, bleeding from the cursed and festering womb of the netherworld, the stench of blood haunting his senses in every manifestation it might appear.

He lets out another sigh and all the hairs on his body stand on end. His wings spread wide and expand beyond the edges of the large bed, and his hand touches himself inside his thin cotton sleeping pants, doing all this in Asami’s bed, because fuck him, he doesn’t have to answer to him, and there doesn’t need to be any explanations.

He twists and turns, making a mess of himself, smearing his hands through Asami’s luxury bed covers, drowning in a penthouse view of the sky. He can’t believe how long it’s been since he's
flown, and how he’s let himself become like this. He tilts his head back and shudders with another orgasm, staring out into the blinding midday sky and wanting to smother himself with it.

Touya tips a cigarette out of the packet and slips it behind his ear. He walks between rooms quiet but attentive to any motions of the boy who hasn’t ventured out of his room for the better part of an hour since he got his food. It becomes tedious surveying an apartment this elegant without anyone living in it. He would have thought the boy would at least provide some entertainment.

In the front entrance hallway, he opens the door to his colleagues standing by outside the apartment, turgid and statuesque. He steps out but leaves the door ajar just enough to see the space between it, should the boy ever decide to come out.

He takes the cigarette from his ear and places it to his lips, holding it there while he looks for his lighter.

“So, do you know anything about this kid? Why has Asami called for us?” he asks his colleagues.

“I’ve got no damn idea,” replies Sugawara, relaxing his stance upon conversation. “Isn’t he just some regular kid?”

“That’s what I thought. What’s so special about him that he needs us?” asks Akagi, the other guard.

“Your guess is as good as mine. He must hold great deal of importance to the boss. That, or he’s keeping him as a hostage,” Sugawara snorts, rubbing the coarse stubble across his chin.

“This one? Nah. He looks harmless enough. My sister has these real pain in the ass kids. You couldn’t control them even if they were straitjacketed and hung upside down, the little shits.”

They break into a short laugh. “Still, don’t let your guard down, he might do a runner when your back is turned. And there’s no telling what the boss would do.”

“I wouldn’t count on it. He hasn’t come out of his room at all.”

“Hey, it’s the quiet ones you should watch out for the most.”

“Yeah, yeah. One of you cover for me, will ya? I need a cigarette.” He pats his colleague on the shoulder and leaves via the elevator. Sugawara reluctantly enters the apartment to take over his watch, leaving Akagi to guard the door.

He hasn’t seen the boy in the flesh. He remembers his photo though, he had the look of a delinquent, light shade of his hair, probably dyed like every other one of tomorrow’s generation destined to steer Japan into the shit, but it’s the eyes he can’t forget, the very strange pale blue, offsetting features of typical Japanese heritage. A distant, offshore relative of Asami, perhaps, but he doubts it. A half-breed? Could be. Or someone with a hereditary quirk. Who knows.

He does a quick lap of the house covering all rooms, storage and utilities, familiarising himself with the surrounding of this beautiful, cold space. He’s about to sit himself down in the living room when he’s startled by a heavy noise coming from one of the bedrooms. “Fucking Touya, why doesn’t this shit happen when he’s on guard.”
He checks the nearby rooms, all of which are as empty as the rest of the house, finally coming to the boss’s bedroom where a gust of wind blows in from the wide open balcony door.

"Shit!"

Suicide is his first thought, flinging himself over the balcony ledge to look down for a body, but thankfully there’s nothing on the street below him. Sugawara takes a moment to regain himself. This job isn’t worth the torpedo spike in his blood pressure.

He returns to the front door and seethes to his colleague. “Get that lazy shit Touya up here now! The fucking boy is — ”

“What happened!?"

Akagi follows Sugawara to the master bedroom. “I heard a noise and I came to this room to find the balcony wide open with no sign of him anywhere. Fuck! Asami-sama will slice our necks if we failed to keep watch over the kid! I could kill that son of a bitch Touya.”

“Calm down, he must be here somewhere.” They storm through the penthouse one more time, revisiting all the rooms, one by one, twice, three times, and when the two of them meet in the master bedroom having found nothing, they begin to panic. This could all well be their last day on earth.

“He’s not fucking here!”

“Shit! What do we do?”

Sugawara’s weary look casts a shadow at his colleague, “If anyone’s gonna answer to the boss, it’s Touya.” And he’s about ready to stab him as the man himself enters into the chaos with the calmest of complexions.

“What’s going on—?”

Sugawara grabs the lapels of his colleague’s suit and shoves him against the wall. “You stupid fuck! What’ve you been doing all this time!? Because of you the boys gone! He’s not here!”

Touya shoves him back with a forearm. “I was gone for a smoke! I told you to keep watch!”

“YOU should have been here!”

“My eyes were on his door all the time, he didn’t step a foot outside!”

“So he walks through the fucking walls now!? He came into this room! Look at it! You leave for a second and the whole world spills its shit onto my shoulders.”

“Don’t blame this all on me you prick. I kept my watch.”

“I’m not the one who let him out of my sight!! Fuck! Do you know what he’ll do to us!? Do you know what Asami Ryuichi is capable of!??”

Akagi tries to be the voice of reason. “We’ll get to know it if all we do is stand around shouting. So we look for him, or we inform the boss—”

“You will inform him,” Sugawara points to Touya. “Takaba was your responsibility.”

“You bastards. He was all of our responsibility. And the boss will see it that way when he punishes us.”
Finally numb enough, Asami peels through Sion's quarterly financial dossier. Despite recent events separating him from an almost flawless first quarter, he congratulates himself on his recent investments finally taking flight. The UAE property acquisitions net him his first foothold in an Arab nation, and the stalling of negotiations by his spineless competitors who set out to sabotage him has only created a stronger bond. Still, it’s some semblance of recovery from his recent losses. He also looks over general expenditure and staff wages and considers them before penciling in several bonuses in the margin, thinking of no better time to give Kirishima and Suoh a raise.

His phone vibrates in his breast pocket and a quick glance at the caller brings on mixed feelings. He pauses a moment before answering. “Yes?”

“Sir, we’ve encountered a slight problem.”

The voice on the other side is withholding something, he can tell. Asami doesn’t answer, but waits.

“Takaba is nowhere to be found in the penthouse, sir”

Asami’s jaw tenses up and he holds the phone to his shoulder while he starts up the GPS logging system on his surface tablet. “Explain to me how this happened.”

“I…er, we honestly don’t know, sir. Takaba didn't leave his room for over an hour. Then there was a noise in the master bedroom and the balcony door was open upon entering. I thought the worst had happened and he jumped, sir, but it doesn't appear so.”

“I'm looking at his GPS co-ordinates right now. It's showing he's still in the penthouse.”

“But…that…I don’t know how that could be. All floors and surrounding area were checked — ”

“There’s a small GPS tracker imbedded under his skin. He’s still there. Where haven't you looked?”

“The perimeters have been checked multiple times, sir. Where else could he be?”

“The roof.”

“The roof? How would we be able to reach there?”

“On the balcony side, to your far left, there’s a service ladder underneath a metal cover. Climb it to reach the roof area. Do it and call me when you find him. If he’s there, do not attempt to engage him. Let him come down on his own.”

“Yes sir.”

Asami hangs up, and sure enough within a few minutes, he gets the call.

“We’ve found him, sir. He's uh…”

The line goes quiet as Touya is hesitant on the other end.

“He’s what?” Asami inquires with a clear edge to his tone.

“He's err…he’s masturbating, sir.”
Asami’s laugh is short but indulgent and he doesn’t spare the guard’s embarrassment with the amount of satisfaction currently whetting his tongue. “Don’t confront him. Leave him to it. I’ll deal with him when I get home,” then, with the briefest of pauses, adds, “And don’t speak of this to him. You saw nothing and you know nothing. Understood?”

“Y-yes, sir.”

He hangs up and reclines back in his chair, smirking to himself. Takaba is as wonderfully black and white as he hoped he would be, falling so easily into his hand.

Akihito’s sitting by the large window when Asami returns later that evening. His glassy expression shifts for a moment in quiet acknowledgement, then turns back to the window, muttering a welcome when he hears Asami approaching. Asami’s gaze travel from the boy to the wild orange and purple sky of dusk — Akihito rearranged furniture to get this precise view, and as he sits languidly with his knees pulled up to his chest, docile and captivated by the colours of the fading sun, Asami places a gentle hand on his head. “Good day?”

It’s oddly affectionate, and Akihito finds himself leaning into it, relaxing, nodding, “Mmm.”

The leave he granted the guards this afternoon was obviously well received by Takaba. He’s not flipping him off with a hot retort as soon as he walks through the door, or saying something about the guards being perverts, following him into the bathroom, or watching him as he sleeps, silly lies Akihito creates throughout the day, or to perhaps induce a reaction in him.

He takes off his tie as he makes his way to his bedroom and the first thing he does is touch the handle of the balcony door, feeling it give way and opening, the key still remaining in the lock, as per the morning. He left it there last night, purposefully, to test the boy’s conviction. He knows Akihito comes into his room on a frequent basis, rifling through his personals as if looking for something — something that would open this door.

He goes back into the living room and calls to Takaba. “Join me on the balcony for a moment.”

He smokes over the rail with Akihito a few feet away from him, leaning down to look at the city, avoiding the smoke.

“I’m finally understanding something about you,” Asami begins, taking the cigarette away from his lips and letting the wind take the ash.

“And what’s that?” Akihito asks, speaking down to the city.

“That you can never change the true nature of a person.”

Akihito pulls his head up and looks at him quizzically. “What do you mean by that?”

“The guards told me what you did today.”

“Oh...” Akihito shrivels in on himself with a groan. Now would be a fantastic time to die.

“It’s their duty to tell me. I hope you understand this.”

“Right...” Akihito laughs uncomfortably. “I didn’t know where my head was.”
“Firmly rooted,” Asami says with a chuckle. “But, I suppose, I’m referring to what you didn’t do,” he adds, observing the noticeable anxiety in the boy, “You could have made your escape. I’m curious as to why you didn’t.”

A numb sickness builds up in the pit of Akihito’s stomach. The undertone, the cold realisation that he did exactly as Asami had planned for him to do, in a carefully constructed and coercive push, and he fell right for it.

“The key was in the lock,” Asami continues, “I left it there for you. Why didn’t you escape?”

Akihito only notices at the very last second that Asami’s trapped him against the railing, no readable emotion in the man’s eyes as he’s made to look up at them.

“The chains were loose enough for you to escape, yet you chose to remain bound,” he says, his voice close enough to trigger an unknown fear in Akihito with very little preparation for him to deflect it. His push against Asami’s body is a bare reflex rather than a deliberate attempt to get past. That’s when both of Asami’s arms clamp around the balcony ledge, caging him against the rail.

“I want you to be honest with me.”

“Asami, please—”

“You honesty, Takaba, is all I ask.”

It’s a plea, Akihito thinks. Asami never asks for a damn thing from anything or anyone but it’s a plea, plain as day, and Akihito realises in himself that maybe he was searching for this all along, the hand that would inevitably bind him to the Earth.

“There was something this morning, something that I’ve never experienced before and is unknown to me. I want to know what it was. And don’t spin me another, “I don’t know,” because I know you do.”

“I don’t!”

“You do. You know something, Takaba, you know what it was because I felt your influence. I don’t hallucinate nor do I create such dreams like that of my own volition. You know one way or another what was responsible for making it what it was.”

Perhaps it’s this admission that recreates the blood of the morning on his tongue, the taste of gun rust and smoke that breaks open the nostalgia of soul travelling, something Akihito swore to never do again for as long as he lived — and be damned, if he ever did it to this man.

“I can’t even begin to tell you,” Akihito says, wavering on a dangerous precipice.

“Make me understand, Takaba. I’m not asking.”

The moment is an eternal wait between breaths. Asami’s hands are at his shoulders, occupying his personal space and personal psychology with subtle calculation, a delicate weapon as always.

“Your obstinance infuriates me. I’ve gotten rid of men for less, and here I’m trying to mine blood from a stone. This is not enough, Takaba.”

He grips Asami’s waistcoat jacket and hides his head in his arms, feeling his nerves give over to the darkness of that deep, disarming voice. “I know that,” Akihito says, taking in heavy, stabling breaths. “I know.”
“You're not a very peaceful being, are you? You come into my life like a storm, rip roaring your way through Sion, causing chaos in your wake, breaking my men, breaking into my mind—"

“I didn’t want this to happen!” Akihito snaps up with panic, shaking his head from side to side. “I didn’t want it to happen to you, not you. I’m sorry!”

“If only you’d struck me into a coma so I’d never have to wake from it.”

And there — the moment of personal salvation for Akihito as a gasp pierces through him and he leans up to kiss Asami with a craving embrace. It’s a kiss full of brutal and beautiful clarity, the clutch of his soul seeping through his fingers whilst he slept and roaming through this man, phasing through him, and yet, kissing Asami in his body is like kissing no one else.
Asami touches their foreheads together when they part and cups his cheeks, licking at the pink lips moist with desire. "Tell me you want to be free of this prison. Tell me you want to be free of me."

"I always want to be free, but not from you."

And they kiss again, this time with Asami nudging them into the bedroom. He’s met with a soft moan when Akihito hits the foot of the bed and tumbles, dipping into the softness he remembers fondly from the morning, where he bit the threads of the sheets to sate his passion. Now he bites Asami’s lips, wanting him to make real those sensations. They fumble with their clothes, and Asami growls at him, a real, honest-to-god sound ripping from his throat as Akihito pauses to get his top off over his head, stilling any advancement Asami makes.

"Don’t close your eyes," Akihito says before kneeling in the center of the bed with his arms by his sides and Asami’s patience a knife edge laced in honey. He tips his head back and waits for his internal psyche to align and when it does, his wings expand to their fullest size in a long, glorious arcing white.
The motion has him gasping when Asami recaptures him before he falls to the bed, kissing every part of his face.

In Asami’s wide-eyed astonishment, his self-control is turning into catastrophe. He can’t stop himself from kissing Akihito everywhere, on his neck, on his cheeks, on his lips as they peel a soft gasp from the slightest touch. He’s mesmerised by the sight of wings, shattering logic and reason and letting the pieces fall onto the holes of twisted humanity and all the things he never knew of the world. He feels Akihito’s wings extending from his shoulder blades into wondrously large full plumes eclipsing the entire bed, softer than anything he’s ever felt, yet foreign all the same. That organic, indescribable smell enveloping him like a corona of strange comfort, he sinks his face into the feathers to breathe in lungfuls of the wonderfully intoxicating scent.

“Can you feel this?” he asks, his voice broken and ecstatic, and Akihito purrs happily, murmuring an equally ecstatic, “I can feel everything.”

The truth, however, between happiness and vulnerability, is that he’s dying in Asami’s arms at his every touch, everything hyper real and hyper sensual. He takes advantage of the moment to slip Asami’s shirt off his shoulders and run his hands over his muscled chest, kissing his shoulder and his collarbone, his neck, curling a tongue to lick his earlobe — searching and learning — learning what speechlessness looks like on a man like Asami.

Akihito whispers indiscernible nothings to him, presses kisses along his jaw and runs his hands through his sleek dark locks, unraveling the neatness between his fingers and drawing his face up to look at him. God, it’s so perfectly clear to him now how gorgeous this man is. He touches the planes of his face with delicate, tracing fingers and is overwhelmed that Asami is letting him do this. Then, in the heat of it, Asami pushes him down onto the bed, stealing everything from him with another
hungry kiss.

As they part, their foreheads are pressed together so that Akihito can feel as well as hear the promise in his voice, he tells him, “If you managed to escape, know that I would devote every waking second to having you returned to me.”

“Is that a promise?” Akihito says, envisaging an ambush of this sort and igniting with a blush.

“Test me, Akihito, and—”

Akihito throws his head back in laughter and Asami silences him, or rather, makes him scream with a bite to his nipple.

Akihito can only whimper at the hot look Asami gives him setting his whole world on fire, and their hardnesses rub through their clothes, his body erupting with shivers at the very real prospect of this man, with the most furiously hard erection and a diabolical smirk fucking him to within an inch of his life. He doesn’t want Asami to stop, God, he never wants to imagine what it would do to himself if they stopped right now, but it takes a different kind of fearlessness for the furor of Asami’s arousal not to leave him a quivering, limbless mess. “D...don’t—”

He’s completely defenseless, but Asami drinks in the sight of his fear anyway, he’s never imagined a more perfect body than Akihito’s toned, curving back arching up into his touch. And that's all he gives before he descends with his lips down Akihito’s midriff, sucking, intent on leaving marks and ridding him of these clothes as quickly as humanly possible.

“Are you nervous?” he asks, yielding, and Akihito, honest to himself, nods, “Yes.” He’s nervous, but at the same time it’s all he wants. To be touched. To be felt. He’ll take it any which way Asami wants, as long as he doesn’t dare stop.

Asami pulls Akihito’s thighs apart and starts his slow trail, his mouth planting kisses up Akihito’s inner thigh to where his cock drips with anticipation. Akihito makes the most beautiful sounds, he thinks, when he’s raking his fingers up his pale thighs and his skin gooses all over. Only a second’s distraction is enough to stop Asami when Akihito’s wings visibly vibrate, as strange as it is, unduly captivating. Akihito smiles, and Asami answers by licking the soft skin along Akihito’s hip whilst touching him. Oh, Akihito rocks with him, scrunching handfuls of the sheets, retaliating against the pleasure until Asami closes his mouth on him and rids him of his self-control, one wicked suck at a time.

Asami pulls Akihito’s hair again, tugging and sifting through his strands and pulling when he imagines Akihito’s pleasure to be unbearable, but he endures it, the pain being the only thing stopping him from becoming undone, and his mouth plies him with every sensation he’s ever needed to feel.

“Aah...Asami, I—I can’t...”

Asami raises his head on the sweet cusp of Akihito’s orgasm to finish him off with his hand while he sits up and watches, still trying to determine if this strange and wonderful creature is real or a figment of his imagination, and he’s here with his hands roaming over him, his hand wringing out the wet sounds of Akihito’s pleasure.

Shivers thrum through Akihito’s entire body when he comes, when Asami’s kissing him, hot and unabating and fighting against the ecstasy of billions and billions of tiny bolts of energy coursing through him.
He’s overflowing.

“Ahh...touch them,” he pleads, looking at his wings then back to Asami, who doesn’t need the extra encouragement to caress his hands through them and receive an instantaneous flow of energy with a gentle, sweeping heat.

“What is this?”

"Life energy,” Akihito struggles to say, “Too much of it. It's flowing into you now."

Yes, Asami can feel it transferring in minuscule waves from his palm through muscle, nerve, and bone to the innermost vestibules of his body. He goes from being lightheaded to gradually warming inside as an unknown heat flourishes in his chest, tantalising, immobilising, utterly bizarre.

Akihito tips his head to place a gentle, seeking kiss on the man’s cheek, and Asami’s awestruck expression changes. He rolls off to lie down facing Akihito, holding him, nose to nose, lips to lips, looking. He can do nothing but look as the control on his body begins to slip.

He’s like a drug, Asami thinks. This only confirms what he’s been telling himself. He’s seen drugs that work like this before, that feel like the growing pains of every newborn, ones that throw everything into disarray, fuck you up, unforgiving to higher brain functioning and keep you awake for days, that make you cry out for months and rewire your brain so that day and night become one fading apocalypse of time. Good God. But nothing feels like this. No pill or needle could ever feel like this — good like this. Exquisite like Akihito’s hands on him, extracting his very soul and everything else with it as he clasps unashamedly around his cock.

And Akihito’s intent on looking straight into his eyes as he does it, his pupils almost fully blown and massive. Up close like this intensifies Akihito hundred-fold, the more he looks the more the strata of Akihito’s irises contract, fibres a millionth of a breadth in length pulsing to his own internal rhythm. Blue becomes the center of his everything and to an unfathomable darkness he can trace in them, subliminally present.

“Aki...hito...”

“Asami?” Akihito whispers back, furrowing his expression when the man’s usually crisp voice falters.

“H—How could you...do this to me?” Asami’s voice gravers out his words without a modicum of glory, but Akihito pushes himself forward to kiss him, watching his mouth struggle around his words is something terribly intimate, so unthinkably rare that Akihito can’t bear to hear it.

How could you make me fall into your oblivion.

They lie together in a trance-like daze for long afterwards. Akihito’s wings have receded back into himself and he lies with his damp back against the bedsheets, staring a hole into nothingness. An ocean of time passes before he turns to face Asami, wondering if the man’s fallen asleep or into unconsciousness, but he’s wide awake, his eyes fixed on the ceiling.

Akihito slowly extends a hand to touch him, only to startle when Asami grabs it and pins him to the bed in a single, rapid movement. It shouldn’t surprise him, having granted Asami this feast of life energy, but the man moves like a predator with the deadliest intent, eyes full of clarity and fuller veracity. This is the Asami he’s familiar with, this predator instinct. He swallows thickly looking at him, face draining, expecting something to knock him back, but Asami places his head on his chest and wraps his arms around him, squeezing so tight as though he’s trying to fully absorb Akihito into
himself in the most peaceful way possible.

Eventually, the hours coax them both into to sleep, life energy hurtling through their veins.

Chapter End Notes

It's very very hot today, in more ways than one ...oh oh oh 8D
Irresistible Heat

Chapter Notes

I'll preface this chapter by saying this is very very NSFW. Hide yo' pets, hide yo' wife. Everything is pretty damn explicit and worth every second of your time, I promise ;). (Drawing all this porn in such a short space of time was hard, but I gave it my all ♥ You don’t realise it until you do it, but my already supreme respect for Yamane-sensei has shot up a million-fold. Porn is some srs beans.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Akihito locks himself in the bathroom and melts down onto the floor, his mind and body completely giving over to everything that’s happened tonight. He expelled an unimaginable amount of energy, enough to keep Asami dosed in a coma-like sleep for the next twelve hours at least. Beyond that, he doesn’t know what to do with himself.

Some of it is spent on the floor in a half-panicked, half-dazed state, where everything floats and nothing comes within touching distance of the ground. Then comes delirium, all emotions running amok and he can't keep still, his erratic heart races, pumping a three-against-two rhythm in his chest until his excitement soars ferociously. Tears seep from his eyes, not of sadness, but of unpained, perpetual bliss.

“Oh God, Asami…”

He agonises just thinking about the man and the insane joy it’s bringing to him to imagine all of last night while his senses are hyper-keen and fresh. He paces around the bathroom and the air whispers every touch they shared against his naked body, Asami’s seed still sticking to him, so very real and so ready to throw him over the emotional precipice.

He stands under the burning hot shower for ages until he’s pruning all over and otherwise melting around the essence of Asami’s shower scents. Afterwards, he slips into Asami’s large, ultra-soft bathrobe and cocoons himself in the delicate comfort on the heated floor of the bathroom, holding the sleeves up to his face and sniffing.

In bed, Asami is face down, not having stirred a wink for hours. Akihito lies next to him and moves the dark stray strands away from his face to peer at his close-to-comatose state, seeing beyond the flesh and the bone through to the darkest soul to have ever consumed him, lying in the innocence of sleep. Watching Asami like this carries the same ecstasy as gazing at the world from a thousand feet in the air. He could spend hours combing his fingers through Asami’s hair while dreams flit behind his eyelids.

Maybe he understands now why Asami’s powerful fascination affects him so deeply when he’s reaching down to touch the magnificent planes of his rising and falling back, and all he wants to do is map the entirety of Asami’s body with kisses until his lips know everything there is to know about him — to touch and to taste and to share this mutually lucid fascination.

He walks through the black silence of the penthouse and appreciates it for what it is — the soundless crash, the mile-high fall from madness back to reality. He’s never had the chance to before, with the guards haunting his every pass, but the most beautiful thing about it, he thinks, is its resonance being
able to amplify a heartbeat to make it sound symphonic, his nerves firing, shrilling song-like in his ears. He rests his forehead against the window because it’s cold and his body is an inferno of all sorts. He doesn’t take himself to Asami’s bed afterwards, instead, choosing to fetal curl on the sofa until the aching anticipation stops.

And then it’s morning, and the daily routine starts all over again. Another new guard lets himself into the penthouse and occupies the room where Akihito is sitting, eating a handful of grapes, thinking of some glib remark to say to the guard’s perfectly polite morning greeting, choosing to say instead that Asami is still sleeping, that he might be ill, in fact, just to get him to leave, but the guard still remains, staining Akihito’s perfect morning. He cools his irritation with fantasies, of Asami’s tongue wetting his nipples and feeding him these grapes mouth to mouth.

At some point the guard’s stance changes into a stiff vertical snap that surprises Akihito. He turns around to see Asami standing in the living room doorway, freshly awake and completely breathtaking.

The guard probably didn’t expect to see his boss in a wakeful state, ever, shock apparent on his face. He bows deeply. “Good morning, Asami-sa—”

“Leave us.”

“S—Sir?”

“All sentries are suspended until further notice. You are dismissed.”

The intimidating abrasion in Asami’s voice has the guard leaving without any questions, and Akihito waits for the door to click shut before he’s bounding across the room and into Asami’s arms, kissing him hungry, fierce, doing away with gentleness for pure greed, owing to the fact that twelve hours is a long time for Akihito to go without needing this, to imagine heat and not being able to touch the hot, hard muscles of Asami’s torso and run his hands through his hair.

“You sent them away,” he says, biting his swollen lips to regain some sense, but only inflaming the need to reconnect.

“They won’t be necessary, because for the next few days, you won’t have a single hope of walking out of this apartment.”

Days? Akihito likes to think this is Asami’s errant way of making a promise with a delicious implicitness that excites him, and he likes it, just like the strong hands kneading into his buttocks and pulling him closer into what is inevitably the prelude to his doom. “That confident, huh?”

Asami answers by parting the bathrobe and trailing his hands up Akihito’s abdomen, sending a surge of molten heat straight through him. “Most definitely.”

Akihito gasps when he’s picked up and taken back to the bedroom. His legs grip around Asami’s waist, elevating his already monumental desire when he feels the hardness beneath Asami’s trousers jut against his nude front. He’s thrown onto the bed and the bathrobe falls open, fully exposing him, then Asami takes one look at him, at the hopeless, flushed grin he has on his face, and says, “Or do you prefer an audience for what I’m about to do to you?” with enough sexual intensity to wake you up from death.

Akihito wants to say he doesn’t care, but Asami’s standing at the foot of the bed, leisurely sliding the rest of his clothes off and being so terribly handsome that he’s quite willing to let the whole damn world watch as this man does whatever he wants with him. Akihito raises himself on his elbows and
opens his legs, making that fact abundantly clear.

All it takes is for Asami to crawl over and start kissing him for his wings to completely let loose. They knock a few things off the side tables, rattle the expensive lampshades off their petite bases and smash as they hit the floor, and Asami’s utterly enthralled laugh vibrates against their lips. That kind of reaction will never not please him.

Akihito pulls him closer so they can grind together, his voice peppered with “Oh’s” and indistinct words when neck kisses reduce him to single syllables. Asami helps him along with another roll of his hips and the words trickle right out, barely a whisper against the shell of his ear. “Just you...I just want you.” Another deep laugh lets loose against his neck and when Asami looks down at him, his eyes are large and dark like he’s never seen. Infinitely black and unfathomable.

Asami extends over to his side table drawer and pulls out a tube of lube to start preparing Akihito. He’s pliant and inviting and mewling under his touch, visibly trembling from the tips of his wings to the curl of his toes into the bedsheets. Akihito reaches down to clasp around Asami’s hand while two fingers work him open and the temptation is there to push Akihito’s slim fingers in with his, in some kind of indecent matrimony until they both can’t stand it any longer, but the need to take this boy is overwhelmingly stronger, and the slide into Akihito’s heat for the first time overwhelms all of his faculties. Akihito cries out at his size, the same as all those before him would, but his lustful sounds of encouragement let Asami know that he can take it, and he does, all of it.

He takes him for the first time with Akihito’s legs flung over his shoulders and his hips not even touching the bed. He can read everything in the inflections of Akihito’s clear blue eyes that makes the chemistry of their union instant and explosive. After all, there’s sex, and then there’s sex with an angel. That makes all the world of difference. For whatever reason Akihito denies it to himself, or whatever he feels is his rightful designation, if the whole of holy whatever denotes him to be divine and worshipful, then Asami can find no fault in God or man’s renderings of such a beautiful creature.

Akihito yells and scrunches his fingers into the bed when Asami fucks him in any and every which way. Asami is so generously endowed that every single thrust rocks against his prostate and he’s left holding onto whatever he can, screaming at the top of his voice for it not to stop.

His head drops off the edge of the bed and Asami holds him firmly by the thighs, giving him the most stunning pleasure he’s ever felt. That is until Asami rolls them over so Akihito can take his cock deep inside him, rolling his hips with hot enthusiasm and raking hard welts into Asami’s chest with his fingernails. He flaps his wings once, twice, while squeezing the pleasure out of Asami’s cock and with a ruinous little smirk, coaxes Asami to completion inside him.
Asami rolls them over again and leans down to kiss Akihito’s open, gasping mouth and hears him whisper, “Don’t close your eyes,” against his cheek. He searches the boy’s face for why he’s so emphatic about the course of one’s gaze at the height of their passion, and with a light nudge against his shoulder, Akihito laughs and gets back on top of him again, rocking his arousal back to life. Ever the enigma.

Four hours into it and he may as well concede that Akihito is the greatest gift the universe has ever given him. He wants to do him in every position so he can taste this devastatingly honest body from all angles. Somewhere in the midst of their tangling and sweat-slicked limbs, they end up on the floor on the rug with Akihito sideways and Asami lavishing kisses and bites to the leg propped on his shoulder, feasting on fire and sweet shivering moans that has Akihito pulling clumps of fibres out of Asami’s expensive rug. Pinning his arms down only makes him feistier, Akihito’s thighs squeezing around his waist and threatening to cut off his air supply, but he comes harder when it takes all of Asami’s strength to subdue him, to curb his passionate destruction.
They remain for a brief moment on the ruined rug afterwards. Akihito’s merely catching his breath but Asami’s physically overwhelmed and overstimulated just from laying there with Akihito’s efficacious elixir circulating around his bloodstream, making everything indicative of a fantastic, wondrous drug high. He’s experienced so many orgasms now that he can taste sounds and hear in colours, and all his sensory disfigurement is about as fucked up and amazing as the shades of blue, fluorescent reds and purples breaking against his temples to go with the buttery mango he’s tasting in his mouth. Akihito’s laughing next to him, that’s how he knows it, his soft pink and orange muttering are stirring him continuously. He’s staring, dazed and talking about everything and nothing, and it’s like an aphrodisiac all of its own.

“Mmm...Asami,” Akihito purrs as he sidles up against him, placing a row of kisses down the side of his face and looking at him in abundant curiosity. A hand glides down his chest, innocent and aimless, but it has its own way of making Asami’s breath escape in a gasp. The boy looks up at him, with the veneer of innocence that’s far away from the colourful and diligent way he’s been taking his cock for the last few hours, matching his stamina thrust for thrust as if it’s his conquest to provoke him into exhaustion.

“Your stamina is incredible, for an old man,” Akihito says, calmly testing his provocation with an infectious smirk.

“It’s possible, when my bed partner is of equal talents to appreciate it.” Asami pulls him into his arms to ravage the little devious smirk with biting kisses. “But don’t think for a second that I’m going to let the ‘old man’ slide.”

He picks Akihito up and takes him over to the window where he has him screaming the whole psychedelic spectrum in alternate bursts of cursing and alluring encouragement as he fucks him up
against the glass with all of Tokyo as their backdrop. Even after hours he’s well and truly overflowing with life energy, but Akihito needs it never to stop when for all his reservations and subtleties, Asami fucks like the world’s going to end tomorrow — intense, explicit, non-verbal and uncomplicated, and it’s entirely perfect, how each gorgeous thrust knows all its own pleasure.

“How bad do I have to be to get you to do it like this outside on the roof of the building? Ahhh...Asami...”

Asami doesn’t say anything but fucks him flush against the window, devouring him, filling him, his golden eyes pinning him, no retreat from this insanity.

Akihito melts against his hard chest when he pulls out. Akihito makes a noise at the separation, tumbling back when feet touch the floor and steadying himself against the pane. These endorphins are punishing, and having to gaze at Asami’s perfection as he swings the balcony door open and says, “After you,” with that luscious, heady sensuality surrounding his sinful, kiss-swollen lips, he’s well and truly sunken into this man’s abyss. Encircling his arms around Asami’s neck, he kisses him, slow and appreciative. “Thank you.”

In one big leap, Akihito’s already on the roof and laughing down at Asami who has to use the ladder to get up. His bright, playful laughter nullifies any of Asami’s grievance for having to climb up completely naked. Akihito’s throwing his arms and wings to the sky, saluting the sun with the incredible beam of his smile, spinning in circles until he’s dizzy and tumbling to the ground in fits of laughter.

“I think I’m dreaming,” Akihito says, as Asami’s tall shadow casts over him. Being in the fresh, warm air begins to swell his excitement, yet the view of Asami from this angle is equally stimulating to his senses.

“I see,” Asami folds his arms to his chest, keeping still as the boy attempts to flatter him with the playful foot running up his calf. “Is it better than reality?”

The boy grins a widening, giddy smile. “I may need some heavy convincing.”

“Then allow me to show you a reality you can’t mistake for anything else.”

Akihito’s hands dip into the foamy water and it laps against the sides of the giant bath with his motion. He leans back and his knees steep above the water in island mounds next to Asami’s, who’s on the opposite side of the bath, watching him closely.

It’s been a full twenty-four hour day for them, from the minute Asami woke up until now, but their perception or devotion to time is somewhat lacking. They vaguely remember the dusk setting into night, for as long as it took Asami to find Akihito hidden amongst the shadows. Asami, outstanding in the field of catching prey, could spot one a mile away when it laughed as distinctly as Akihito, that and his great white wings were a certified giveaway. He bolted around the penthouse with every chance he got, the slippery little prey that he was, cornered and pressured into throwing Asami’s expensive household ornaments at him to fend off being tied to the bed kinbaku-style and ravished. Oh, but did he love getting caught.

They spent the remainder of the night in complete darkness, with Asami demonstrating why his mouth alone is a reach-for-the-heavens thing to behold. And then, when they both reeled from
exhaustion, Asami lay back and watched in amazement as Akihito metamorphosised his wings back into himself, disappearing as if they were never there, needing a cigarette timeout just to let it sink in.

It’s fascinating, he thinks, how quickly his world has changed because of this one boy, who probably looks on at life as a journey into forever, nothing to lose, nothing to make of it. And every small meandering thought that clouds him, every thought that doubts his existence as a universally crooked mistake, makes Asami fierce with wanting him, so that there’d always be something he should live for. Akihito’s blue eyes peek from under his eyelashes to look at him and it’s a reminder, how such a strange and beautiful anomaly can be the crux of your entire life.

It’s all they’ve been doing, from the moment they found each other, is carrying on that long crescendo into the next high. Akihito stares at him and Asami stares right back, and they could be all for jumping the bones off each other right now, but they’re vacant. Apart from being in the same bath together, they aren’t even touching, and it’s taken a conscious effort to keep the waterway of separation between them. Earlier, Asami had begun to explain the modes of Tantra and tantric sex to him, and he was surprised to hear that Akihito already knew about it. Of course, who could be more woven into the fabric of divine pleasures than Akihito.

Asami hasn’t felt the buzz of life energy leave him yet, and he imagines the same goes for Akihito’s machine-like regeneration of it, keeping him dosed constantly. He’s flushed and gorgeous and every now and again he tips his head back and his nipples peak above the foamy water, and Asami never knew he was salivating until Akihito starts to touch them, not having been so bold as to deliberately touch any part of himself, but he’s doing it now, baiting Asami to halt their tantra and take him for all he’s worth.

“What are you thinking about?” Asami asks him.

Akihito’s train of thought ends right about then. He opens his eyes to see Asami’s sharp eyes honed on him, interest piquing. He hasn’t been doing a whole lot of thinking, if he’s honest. Wanting, yes, a lot of wanting, a whole lot of wanting. “I’m not thinking of anything in particular,” he says, and brings his leg up to look at it, circling his foot in the air. “What are you thinking about?”

“I’m thinking if all angels are virgins,” Asami smirks.

Akihito narrows his eyes. “Why do you say that?”

“I can tell,” Asami answers, smooth and unmistakably wolfish.

If it wasn’t for that smug laughter, Akihito would have expressed offence, and possibly violence, whether he’s a virgin or not, Asami couldn’t possibly know.
He scoots over to Asami's side of the bath. “Have you defiled many virgins in your time to know, Asami Ryuichi?”

“I haven’t kept a count.”

He would say that, Akihito laughs. He lounges against Asami's body and Asami runs the tips of his fingers up and down his shoulder and he quivers, utterly drenched.

“And what does it matter,” Asami goes on to say, as he's guiding Akihito’s hand underneath the water to make him touch himself, insistent on feeling his full erection and circling his balls with his own hand, roughly squeezing a harsh, almost painful pleasure, but it’s the kind of pleasure that's the personification of 'Asami', precisely this. “You’re all mine.” He tips Akihito’s chin and holds the glassy gaze before taking his wet, overly red lips in a searing kiss.

“Ahh...Asami...I — nnghh…” Oh. He's babbling, how can Asami be so cruel to not touch him for an hour then make him undo himself like this. “You’re so persistent. I haven't said anything about being yours.”

“That’s because it’s not for you to say, but for you to accept that it is what it is,” Asami says, sinfully dark, teasing the perfect little nubs of Akihito's nipples.

“S— Says who?”

Akihito has to endure as Asami eagerly explores him with licks, bites, kisses and touches and puts importance into deliberately taking his sweet time to leave Akihito mad with impatience and never answering any of his questions. Asami is as infuriatingly manipulative as he is addictive and so, so
“We did it all day... ngh... all night... ahh, all morning...”

“And?” Asami says, not stopping. “It’s a thing to behold, this life energy of yours, and what it does to a man. I haven’t rested in more than a day and I’m more wide awake than I’ve ever been in my life. An experience guided by your hand, Akihito. You only have yourself to blame.” He squeezes the boys cock and Akihito rocks gently with it, mumbling as he melts around Asami’s sinfully dark laughter.

“You’re... you’re unbelievable... ahh...” Unbelievable, to go with everything about Asami — demanding, dirty, unbearable, incredible.

“It is a thing beyond believing,” Asami purrs and showers him with hungry, lip bruising kisses, swallowing need and Akihito’s adorable sounds all the way down. Asami’s thumb presses into the slit of his cock and Akihito bubbles over with intensity, his hands holding onto him tightly, blunt nails digging into his skin, crying with laughter and tears in his eyes. A few more strokes and Akihito is well and truly done for.

He’s like putty afterwards, boneless and sinking down into the water, blowing bubbles when it reaches his mouth. He’s such a kid, Asami laughs and tousles his disheveled hair.

Akihito emerges from the water and they lounge back in each other’s arms, Asami’s steady heartbeat against his back relaxing him, his much larger hands covering over his, threading their fingers together, playing, squeezing and holding them in a loose bind.

He lifts both of Akihito’s arms out of the water and holds them, palms turned up and rubbing his thumbs over the pale, healthy wrists, feeling for the scars that have long since gone. Resistance comes immediately but Asami keeps them firm within his clasp. “There were once scars here — suicide cuts. And now they’re gone. For someone as reckless as you, your whole body remains unscathed. Is it a coincidence, or is it not, that with your life energy you can effectively heal yourself from anything?”

Akihito nods. There isn’t a use denying it when Asami should have noticed his rate of healing over time — bruises, cuts and scrapes gone in a blink of an eye, fractures and internal wounds that would have otherwise taken months to heal taking a mere few hours. His slit wrists were no exception.

“Explain to me why you felt you needed to do this to yourself?”

Akihito detects a sound concern in Asami’s voice, perhaps it’s his disapproval at him harming himself so frivolously. Asami won’t let go of his wrists so he curls them inwards, cradling both sets of arms into his chest. “It was an experiment.”

“How many times?”

“Thirty-six times.”

“Why?”
“Because I can’t get broken like most people. I just can’t.”

Akihito’s grim, serene honesty wrenches a deeply imbedded disturbance inside Asami. He knows the intimacy of violence, of self-destruction, but this disturbs him more than he safely conceal. Sympathy for the invincible, maybe. He thinks it ironic that he’s more affected by this than divesting paedophiles of their skin. “What if the trauma was worse?” Asami then asks.

“Serious wounds take a lot of life energy to heal, but I won’t be able to heal effectively if my life energy is fully drained. I’ll black out then — Ahh!” He winces when one of Asami’s kisses becomes an intense, vampiric suck, determined to suck the blood right through his skin.

“Well look at that,” Asami says, smiling as the deep scarlet love mark fades right before his eyes. “It disappears in an instant.”

“Because that was nothing.” Akihito chuckles, but yelps in surprise when Asami raises his arm to his mouth and puts it between his teeth.

“And if I decide to take a bite out of this arm?”

“Do it, and see what happens.”

As tempting as it is, Asami was never taken to cannibalism, even in the form of an angelic delicacy that looks and smells this delicious. Instead, he draws a slow line down Akihito’s shoulder with the tip of his finger. “What if your arm severed from here?”

“If it’s reattached, it’ll fuse right back into place. No one would ever know.”

“Impressive,” Asami concludes. “I dare say I’m morbidly curious.” Successive wrist cutting, leaping from buildings, dismemberment, cheating the ghost — that’s a considerable power.

He recalls it taking a whole team of his men to hold Akihito down, the effects of sedatives rendering ineffective against him, any sort of chemical inhibitor purged from his system within seconds. He has the strength of men three times his size, and he can hit harder than all of them combined. He’s the sharpest, most deadliest weapon concealed in soft, quivering, innocent skin.

"Are you as cerebral as you are physically gifted? I could do with a number cruncher in the office."

"You mean, can I do complicated mathematics in my head, on the spot? Sorry to disappoint. Can I control your mind and make you do things? I dunno..."

Now that’s surprising. "You’re telepathic?"

Akihito shakes his head slowly from side to side and shrugs. "I was only joking when I said that. I can’t do that either, although it’d be cool.”

“You said you’d black out if your life energy depletes. What is your preventative?”

“I eat. It’s all still energy when it comes down to it, and if I make sure I have enough to eat, it won’t happen.”

“Something as simple as eating restores your life energy?”

“It’s simple but vital. We all need to eat to live right?”

Asami ponders that for a moment, having not eaten for a whole twenty-four hour period and feeling no consciousness toward hunger whatsoever. “I wanted to ask you about that.”
Akihito chuckles. “You’re not the only one finding out new things about themselves.”

“Meaning?”

“Let’s just say, if a bomb exploded on me right now, I wouldn’t even get a scratch.”

“Your subtlety is cute, but you don’t need to be.”

“I don’t? You want me to say that I think it’s because we had sex for nearly twenty-four hours straight and that I’ve amassed so much life energy that it’s eating itself inside of me, to the point of complete regeneration.” He turns around to face Asami, splaying his wet hands to rest on his heart, looking straight into his eyes. “And the same thing is happening to you right now. In a way, it’s feeding you. I’m feeding you.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, it’s exactly so.”

Asami pulls him in closer, Akihito’s hot, flushed, nourishing body to sit in his lap. “That’s good for you then, Akihito, because from this day forth, you’ll never have to eat again, and you’ll never have to fear getting fat or losing your figure.”

Akihito thumps his shoulder with his fist. “You pervert. I like eating.”

“What in particular do you like to eat?”

“I like everything. Everything except liver. It tastes like blood.” The boy goes on to recite a whole menu of things that has Asami chuckling at the simplicity of his tastes. “...and, y’know when it’s really hot outside and all you wanna do is sit in front of a fan and eat ice cream, and when mnhhm —”

Asami’s heard enough about ice-cream and chocolate dream cakes to make his own grown mind keel. He stops Akihito’s chatterings and Akihito’s brain happily misfires around the slow, prolonged kisses like Asami’s trying to taste him through his words. Asami’s lips are so soft, seemingly unreal against the rest of his hard, defined edges and Akihito kisses and sucks on them, running the tip of his tongue against them, nipping it with his teeth to tease out that searingly sinister tongue — god, that tongue — he doesn’t care what it does to him, he’s done with subtleties, this continued drive into carnal insanity is all he wants. “Asami...please...”

“Tell me what you want,” Asami says, in what Akihito knows from experience is meant to spur him into enlightening every one of his maddening desires in graphic detail. The man appreciates the language of sex as much as the physicality of it, and Akihito knows from his own burning clarity that Asami can enjoy fucking him to completion with his excellent vocabulary and nothing more, one of Asami’s very favourite ways to absolutely ruin him.

Akihito pushes himself to the edge of the bath and pulls Asami with him, elbows on the edge and kneeling up, knees slightly spread and presenting himself, ready and delicious for Asami.

“Tell me what you want me to do, Akihito,” Asami says once more, dark and unbelievably sexual as he embraces him from behind, running his hands up the back of Akihito’s thighs and raking his nails against his soft skin, red welts turning white immediately.

“I want you,” Akihito moans, driven desperate and pleading and trying to convey all thoughts through the power of his stare alone. Asami’s so close to him, his focus scorching, dead on. Infernal bastard.
“Be more specific,” he purrs, “I want to give it to you.” He admires Akihito’s wings as they unfurl on the tail end of his words and flick out to their full width, a few stray feathers landing in the soapy bath.

“Your tongue,” Akihito answers, finally. He hears Asami chortle behind him.

“My tongue?” Asami repeats it in his infuriatingly lustful baritone and goes back to dropping lines of kisses down the side of his neck.

“Mnn...yes...your goddamn tongue.”

“My goddamn tongue doing what?”

He feels like saying in the fewest possible words that he wants it like before, when he was face down on the bed, knees spread and ass facing up. They’d just fucked but he was ready for it again, so ready for Asami but he descended on him with his self-satisfied smirk to tongue his dripping, freshly fucked hole for a long, hot minute, and —

“It was longer than a minute.”

Akihito mumbles something into his arms, red-faced, and Asami is enjoying having this blissful, clumsy Akihito at his whim, the most gorgeous sound falling from the boy’s lips as he gently squeezes his cheeks and spreads them. He follows up with a small, swirling lick pressing intimately into him. It crosses the line from hellishly embarrassing to more, more, don’t stop, rather quickly. That curvaceous, supple muscle and its red hot creativity slanting in and taking whatever it wants and leaving Akihito a mess of hot shivers. Every time he convinces himself that he hates this smug, perverse man, he’ll do this to him and make it a furious obsession he can’t begin to contemplate living without.

“You know I don’t like sweet things, Akihito, but I’d douse you in honey and lick this part of you all day long, do you hear me?”

Fuck, this isn’t fair anymore. Akihito’s about to go crazy and Asami’s talking about relinquishing his hatred for sugar on his ass. It’s not fair.
“You are utter perfection,” is all Asami can think to say when Akihito looks over his shoulder at him with a watery, helpless expression, saying, “Promise?” like he fought with heaven and hell to say it. There’s nothing left but to envelop the boy in his arms and bury himself inside him. Akihito probably doesn’t realise how much the thought of living on nothing but sex and life energy inflames him to no end, he nearly loses it to the tireless roll of Akihito’s hips fucking himself deeper onto his cock, turning to look at him and mouthing his name against his ear, whispering that it only needs to be him to complete the perfection.

The water is long cold before they decide to get out. They wrap themselves up in thick bathrobes and dry off in the bedroom, which is a less than welcoming aftermath. They stand and look at the once luxurious, put-together room in a state of post-modern disarray. Akihito sniggers and Asami feels his craving for nicotine already kicking in.

“I can’t call my cleaner for this,” he says, jauntily eyeing the body smears and other intriguing gifts left imprinted on the window pane.

Akihito laughs, retrieving their clothes up off the floor. “No, you definitely can’t.”

Asami takes the suit jacket from the pile, pulling out the cigarette packet and lighter from his inner pocket and lighting one up. Akihito can pinpoint the exact moment the nicotine hits Asami’s blood stream when he closes his eyes and draws his head back and smokes the stick almost to the filter on his first puff. Asami notices and offhandedly offers the cigarette to him. Akihito declines it but thinks the gesture is kind of cute, Asami-cute, if there is such a thing. “Is that your idea of a post-sex cigarette?”

Asami shrugs and puts it back to his lips. “Suit yourself.” He disrobes and throws his bathrobe onto
the bed, casually sauntering to the window and it’s really a wonder how you wouldn’t want this man when he strides around his penthouse fully naked, beautiful and in complete, complicit harmony with all the stars in all the heavens. Even if you were blind, you would know to want him from his rapture alone. Akihito strips off his own bathrobe and marches over to pluck the cigarette right from Asami’s lips and put it between his own. The look Asami gives him is priceless.

“Such a brat,” he chides.

Akihito grins and wiggles the stick between his teeth. “I realised you were being kind of sweet with your offer.”

Asami just scoffs and takes another cigarette from the packet, placing it between his lips and coming around to cup the sides of Akihito’s head. He touches the smouldering end of Akihito’s cigarette to his own and begins kindling it to life, smirking afterwards with all the glory and arrogance and genuine satisfaction that leaves Akihito jelly-legged with wanting him. All this sex must have dulled his brain cells because there’s something about this relaxed and carefree Asami that’s so unspeakably attractive to him, naked and human and full of good will, it makes his turbulent occupation nonsensical in comparison. Which reminds him.

“You’ve missed a whole day of work. Aren’t you a bad boss.”

“I already told Kirishima to handle things in my absence. He’s more than capable.”

“Did you lie and tell him you had the flu? Or a dead leg?” Akihito snorts.

“Do you mean, did I lie about us sleeping together? I have cameras installed all over the penthouse. He has the live feed wired straight to his office, I’m almost certain he knows exactly what I’ve been up to.”

Somewhere inside of him, a part of Akihito’s soul dies. “What the fuck did you just say?”

Oh, how well his tease mauls the boy. “You never learn, do you?” He pulls the withered boy into his arms and leans down to kiss his unruly mop.

Akihito slaps him hard on the chest. “You’re the worst!”

“While I’m the boss, Akihito, I’ll do whatever I want. And that includes having you all to myself.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah…stupid dick,” he mutters and pushes Asami away. “Please tell me you don’t actually have cameras…”

“Honestly, I rather regret that I don’t.”

They stand side by side at the window and smoke, looking out onto the rolling Tokyo horizon with both sun and moon still in the sky, and deem it the most beautiful day they’ve ever woken up to together.
Chapter End Notes

*Lights up a cigarette...*( ¬_¬)ノ¬ *
Chapter Notes

Sorry that I couldn't update sooner. I've been writing more of the story!

Again, this chapter has some NSFW illustrations ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“C’mon Asami, stop this.”

It’ll be a miracle if one day Akihito can walk free from this bed without being usurped and devoured by this intoxicated beast. The insanity of it has made him more creative, but it’s pure life energy that’s made Asami sharp, strong, and unforgivably insatiable.

Asami was strong before but he’s a solid mountain of strength now, and Akihito has that once-in-a-lifetime realisation that he may have finally met his match. He should really hate it, but gods, does he love to be manhandled by this man, to be effortlessly picked up and tossed around any which way, to find that brand new combination of location and position they haven’t explored yet, and even that’s becoming a challenge. He’s been trying to beat some sense into the man whenever possible, to little success, because if anything, it makes Asami more aroused if you smack him around a bit. And it doesn’t stop there.

Asami wouldn’t be Asami if he didn’t take the pleasure to exploit all your weaknesses in one go. Akihito’s ‘play dead’ scenario has fast become Asami’s new favourite game, with all its infinite possibilities of revival with nipple clamps and eccentric toys that are lusciously shocking to Akihito’s oversensitive system.

They’ve stayed relatively confined to their passions which means they haven’t eaten at all for nearly a week. For Akihito, it’s no strange thing, but for Asami, it most certainly would be. In the odd moments of respite, Akihito takes small, careful glances at Asami’s body and catalogues the changes so abundant in his increased muscle definition and skin brimming with health. Asami catches him looking at his tightened abdominals and flicks him a come hither finger, and Akihito knows his own advantageous commodity is becoming his worst undoing.

“C’mon, this is silly,” Akihito moans when he’s pinned down and coerced into another tireless session. His hips are lifted and his legs spread and Asami slides all the way into his relaxed opening. Akihito throws his head back and cries out, gripping tightly onto the headboard when Asami starts thrusting, he’s had six days of this and it wouldn’t work if Asami wasn’t so unbelievably good at everything. Akihito’s feigned not wanting it, a purely knee-jerk reaction to his passion-soaked delusion, but here he is, spread open and begging for it again and again. Oh, does he want this badly.

“Asami, you gotta go into work some time,” he moans, taking Asami’s punishing thrusts in swift succession.

“And miss hearing you scream for me?”

“Kirishima must be missing his family by now... ahh! D—Don’t you feel bad? Ahhn!!”
“He’s not my concern right now, nor should he be yours.”

And then he’s lifted up into Asami’s lap, the weight of his own body forcing himself down onto Asami’s thick cock and making all of his thrusts breathtaking. Asami rises on his knees and lifts him up, and cradles him in that position, Akihito’s legs wrapped around his waist and wings fluttering, fully losing his mind.

He’s lowered back down into Asami’s lap, and he grips his shoulders when Asami takes his cock into his palm and fists it, and Asami kisses him, hot and intimate. Akihito’s wings flit and he scrapes his fingers down Asami’s back, marring lines of blood into his skin until he’s babbling and coming all over their chests. “You’re an insufferable man,” he whimpers and collapses back onto the bed, wings shocked back into himself, thoroughly exhausted.

Asami crashes out next to him, on top of his arm that conducts a hell of a lot of energy through skin contact. Akihito can’t even lie and say he’s too sore to fuck some more because he’ll be healed before he finishes the sentence, then all it’d take would be a look from Asami, a witty passing comment, or a single touch to send everything careening into a sex driven void for another few days.

“I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to go in today,” Asami says after a long silence.

Akihito’s so stunned he thinks he might have heard him wrong. “What, really?”

“Don’t sound so surprised.”
Asami’s offended and it’s adorable. Akihito rolls over onto his belly and props himself up on an elbow, grinning. “I’m not, honest. It’s just, everyone probably missed you so much and they’re so happy to have you back that they’ll throw you a big party.”

Asami looks at him and scoffs. “I don’t sanction such things.”

“I bet you’d like it though, everyone throwing a big surprise for their Asami-sama ~. Just think, you’ll get to do boss type things again, like getting everyone to do your paperwork and firing people.”

Asami lies placid and lets Akihito keep talking. He’s circling around the thought of how best to ease in his absence to his trusted assistants, granted that he’s the boss and he doesn’t divulge his personal affairs to his employees, but soon it’ll be no secret that he’s entered into a very intimate relationship with this mysterious person he swore adamantly to protect.

“...And I’ll make you breakfast while you take a shower.”

Akihito’s been talking continuously but that clinches it for him. He needs to get back to normality. But first —

“Stop—Let me go! Bastard, haven’t you had enough already?”

“Join me in the shower,” Asami purrs.

Akihito shoves him in the shoulder. “Gosh, this addiction is fucking us both up. I miss eating actual physical food. Don’t you miss food? I miss food. I’m gonna make us some breakfast, and I don’t care if you eat it at the table, in bed, on your back or standing on your bloody head, you’re going to eat it! Or I’ll...”

“Or you’ll what, Akihito?”

Another shove yields Asami’s grip but he’s sent tumbling off the bed from his own spitfiring momentum. He glowers up at Asami’s riveted smirk. “Bastard.”

“You’re going to make me breakfast looking like that, hm?” referring to gravity leaving a very embarrassing mess between Akihito’s legs.

Akihito gives him the finger and leaves the room, or else he’ll succeed in beating this man to a senseless pulp and there’ll be nothing left for later.

A generous stack of toast, sunny side up eggs, tomatoes and a steaming mug of coffee are waiting for Asami in the kitchen when he’s out of the shower. Akihito’s hunched over in his night robe, diligently cutting up fruit and dropping them into the bottom of a snifter glass Asami usually uses for drinking brandy. He dollops yoghurt on the top to make it a parfait, like the ones he’s seen displayed in shop windows. Asami’s somewhat surprised to see Akihito so placated and preparing breakfast for him, including all the unnecessary embellishments like sliced veggies arranged in a smiley face.

“Breakfast is ready. Sorry it’s not what you’re used to, I hope this will make up for it.” Akihito moves the fruit glass to the table and sets it beside their plates.

Asami eyes it suspiciously, despite being overly colourful and sweet, he has to admit it does look attractive. He pulls up a chair and sits down. “It’s fine.”
Introducing food to his system after five days is a strange comfort. Asami never felt the pang of hunger but as soon as he swallows down the first mouthful, he’s ravenous. Akihito sits quietly satisfied as Asami devours his food with the same ardent dedication he did with his body not so long ago. He hides his broadening smile behind his coffee cup, Asami’s so pleasingly human sometimes. He may think he can binge on life energy and fuck for eternity, but his body will still crave the nourishment of a good, hearty meal. “Don’t you feel better now?” Akihito says at the sound of the plate being scraped clean.

Asami dabs his mouth with a napkin and looks almost surprised with himself. “Yes. Thank you for the meal.”

The hot water must have mellowed him out because he takes his plate to the sink and doesn’t say anything else, nothing about the smiley faces or the flowers drawn in ketchup. “Aren’t you forgetting something?” Akihito calls, motioning towards the parfait sitting untouched on the table.

Asami fixes him a look like they haven’t been over this a thousand times already. “You know I don’t like sweet things.”

“It’s fruit. Don’t you ever eat fruit?”

Asami opens the tap and the sound of gushing water drowns out everything.

"After I went through all that trouble," Akihito mutters and picks up the glass to tip it in the bin from a great height, though Asami must have seen him from the corner of his eye because the glass is lifted from his hand before he has the chance.

Asami stands imposing with the colourful fruit cocktail and danger sparking in his eyes. "Yes, you went through all that trouble, it shouldn't be wasted." He scoops out a finger of yoghurt and smears it across Akihito’s lips.

Dumbstruck, Akihito, never anticipated in a million lifetimes that Asami could do childish. He gets another smear of yoghurt for it and that pisses him right off. He elbows away another smear but Asami’s ever tactile ways pins him to the counter and a hand slides inside his night robe. He wants to cry when Asami tweaks his nipple and fears he’s relapsed back into his hedonistic haze. “No no no. Come on Asami, you were doing so well.”

"Didn't you say you missed eating? Here, eat some more, I insist." Asami force feeds the fruit pieces into Akihito’s mouth until his cheeks fill out with pineapples and strawberries, with yoghurt smears all over his arms and legs. Asami licks the juice running down Akihito’s neck and can’t help but nip into his soft, flushed skin. “Now, allow me to finish eating my breakfast, hm?”

It’s the great losing battle. Akihito nearly chokes to death on fruit pieces and Asami uses the most opportune moment to molest him. “Twisting my words. Devious bastard.”

“I take what I’m given, and use it to great effect.” Asami smiles and pulls the tie of Akihito’s robe to run his fingers between his legs.

“Asami, don’t. I’m all dirty.”

“You’re going to get even dirtier so what’s the difference?”

“But you’ve just showered.”

Asami kisses the pout and more than makes up for the grief he's received. “So I’ll shower again, this time, with you.”
Asami pushes the Windsor knot up to his neck and flattens down the collar. He fastens his vest buttons and runs a hand over the sleeves of his shirt, eliminating creases and kinks before checking the uniformity of his cufflinks against the silver wristwatch on his arm. Twenty-four minutes past one, it reads. He’s focused on his reflection in the full length mirror before putting on his suit jacket and buttoning it up to the breast. It feels good to be in a suit again. He’d notified his driver, who was rife with happiness at his phone call, to come and pick him up. And then there’s the small matter of Akihito, who’s receded into his old bedroom and moping for reasons unclear to him.

He stops outside Akihito’s bedroom to watch him take his frustrations out doing hundreds of press ups in only his boxer briefs. It’s hard not to admire a boy so easily wound up and so oblivious to the fact that his shyness is more erotic than any other quality made to arouse the senses. Asami leans against the doorframe and watches appreciatively the athleticism of such an impressive body and that perfect, round ass rising and falling in those tight fitting black briefs, so full of concentration that Asami has the pleasure of being entertained for a good few uninterrupted minutes before he’s noticed.

Akihito fires a heated look over his shoulder. “What the hell are you looking at?”

“Nothing much,” Asami smirks, eyes trained on a bead of sweat rolling down the bridge of the boy’s nose. He’s stunningly delicious.

Akihito scoffs and carries on, despite knowing he has Asami’s undivided attention. “Can’t stop looking at ‘nothing much’, huh?”

“That’s right.” Asami says pleasingly.

Akihito stops again and looks at him. “Are you done?”

“My driver won’t be here for another,” he checks his watch, “Fifteen minutes.”

Akihito laughs and shakes his head. “This is the beginning of the end for you, old man.”

That may well be, he’s certainly positive that Akihito’s already well into that journey.

Everything is in smooth operation on his arrival at Sion. He’s greeted warmly by everyone he passes, they make it as if he’s recovered from some great encumbrance and his return is a thing of adulation. He doesn’t know what they’ve been told or what Kirishima has informed them (he only offered the barest of explanations on the phone to those closest to him) but everyone is delighted that he’s back.

He finds Kirishima laying files on his desk when he walks into his office. A quick glance around the room tells him it’s been cleaned while he’s been away, the smell of wood polish evident in the air. Kirishima stops what he’s doing and greets him with a deep bow. “Welcome back, Asami-sama.”

“Thank you, Kirishima. I trust there weren’t any problems during my absence.”

“No more than the usual. I’ve taken care of all the meetings and bookings, and I’ve looked over the financials for this early quarter. Everything is as it should be, sir.”
“That’s very reassuring to hear. I knew I could count on you, Kirishima.”

“It is a duty I would gladly fulfill for you every time, Asami-sama. Is there anything I can get for you?”

“Close the door for a moment,” he says, already over at the drinks cabinet and pouring two small whiskies on ice. He waits for the door to close before continuing. “I have a need to take a small impromptu weekend away.”

Kirishima gladly accepts the offered glass and takes the first measured sip he’s had in days.

“Certainly, sir. What will you be requiring?”

“Mainly, your company. And preparations made for my private jet. I wish to take Takaba to my private island where he’ll have the freedom to fly without the constraints and dangers of being on the mainland. He’s been too long holed up in the penthouse and I want to at least give this to him. And to allow you and Suoh a long weekend of respite.”

Kirishima considers the very generous offer. “Does he know of your plans, sir?”

“He doesn’t. He says he doesn’t like surprises, but this I’m sure he will. He’s been a little prickly around the edges recently. I hope to smooth him over with this.”

Kirishima offers a small smile at his boss’s tact and hands the empty glass back to him. “I’ll have the arrangements made by this afternoon.”

Asami nods with approval. “Excellent. See that my helicopter and jet are readied for a Thursday evening take off. I think I’ll take the most scenic route to the airfield. Now, see yourself to your office, and the gift I’ve left for you.”

The brimming admiration Kirishima’s has for his boss is immeasurable. “Thank you very much, Asami-sama.”

Asami smirks fondly as he watches the man bow repeatedly all the way to the door.

“Where are we going?”

Akihito watches with folded arms as Asami sorts between rows of clothes in his walk-in wardrobe. He’s enlightening to the knowledge that there are hidden alcoves within the walls of Asami’s penthouse that articulate themselves at the flick of a switch yet still keep in perfect contingency with the rest of the room when not in use. This walk-in wardrobe ‘trap door’ is probably one of many rooms concealed about the penthouse.

“It’s a surprise,” Asami flatly replies, and Akihito feels none the more inclined to follow his vague request of “pack your bag”.

“I don’t like your surprises. I don’t think your definition shares the same meaning.” He eyes Asami incredulously as he disappears back into the wardrobe. He’s making mental notes of every article of clothing going into the leather travel bag on their bed, all inconspicuously casual, and whether or not he should be alarmed that they came from Asami’s cave of secrets.
Asami withers him a look that disdainfully asks him to stop this for the nth time.

Akihito throws his arms up. “Well, what do I need to pack?”

“One usually packs clothes, Akihito.”

“Look, I’m not trying to be difficult, I just wanna know what I’m packing for.”

“You’re packing clothes for a surprise trip away, if I told you more it would break the surprise, and you may not have any need for them at all if you keep this up.”

“Well fuck it! Let’s just travel light and leave out the suitcase altogether.” It’s perhaps not the brightest choice of words given Asami’s lethal expression.

“Do you think before the words fall out of your mouth, Akihito?”

That, in effect, gets him packing. He pulls out a few t-shirts, shorts and jeans. He suspects the climate won’t be too dissimilar to Japan’s current spring heat and leaves out the warmer garments, quipping, “Why, I say all this stuff just to make you happy, Asami-san. Didn’t you know?”

“I’d be twice as happy if you did what I’ve asked of you, because goodness knows there are any number of exquisite ways I could wipe that sulk off your face.”

Akihito throws more t-shirts into the bag. “Prick.”

✦

Asami has his driver pick them up at the penthouse with a slightly miffed and disheveled Akihito in tow. He sits submissively on one side of the limo while Asami makes a phone call on the other, smoking between exchanges of flawlessly flowing English that lulls Akihito back and forth between complex hate and lovesick adoration hanging off every one of Asami’s foreign words. He doesn’t stop talking until their car pulls up outside of the Sion Corp offices.

Asami strides through the lobby of the Group offices, uniformed men and women bowing at him at every turn, waves of patrons part way at his presence and doors open for him without request. They take the elevator and navigate the labyrinth of staircases up to the roof where they greet Suoh waiting with a stationed helicopter.

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“Everything has been readied, sir.”

Asami nods. “Good.” He switches his attention to see the excitement brimming in Akihito’s face and walks him towards the awaiting helicopter. “Come on.”

The floodlights are blinding as they approach the platform and there’s a temptation for Akihito to stand on the edge of the roof and peer over at the darkened city below, but Asami hooks him under the elbow and pulls him back towards the helicopter. “Not this time.”

“Why do we need a helicopter?”

“For us aerially challenged, this is the only way to go.”

As he’s being strapped in, Akihito sees Suoh climbing into the cockpit, headset and flight gear donned. “Wait, your bodyguard’s gonna fly this thing!”?

“Suoh was in the military before I hired him,” Asami points out, though he has to shout it over the thunderous whir of the propellers gradually ascending them into the air.
The helicopter flight is a mere whistle-stop to take them over the bay to Asami’s private airfield in Kisarazu. They disembark the helicopter and greet an awaiting Kirishima on the runway, rolls of aeronautical charts under his arm.

“She’s ready when you are, sir.” Kirishima bows, attesting that all components of Asami’s private jet have been checked for their departure. The runways lights reflect against the platinum Rolex watch on his wrist, the gift that Asami gave him.

“—This is unreal!” comes Akihito’s fervent voice as he bounds onto the jet, marveling at the lavish leather interiors and dark glossy wood panelling. His eyes sweep from one end of the jet to the other, pointing out as if Asami’s forever been oblivious to the flat screen tv and the minibar in his own private jet.

“Get yourself seated. We’ll be taking off shortly.”

Asami remains outside with Kirishima for a moment and Akihito literally cartwheels from one end of the jet to the other, it’s that spatially tempting. He crouches to look in the minibar and it’s stocked with Asami-style liquor and oddly enough, orange juice. “Not even Coke,” he grumbles. Akihito relaxes into his seat up front when Asami returns, suit jacket draped over his arm and his shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He looks perfect this way.

“Take-off will be in five minutes. Time to buckle up.” Asami slips into the seat parallel to Akihito and places an unlit cigarette between his lips.

“Should you be smoking on a plane?”

Asami doesn’t answer him until he’s lit the end and savoured his first nicotine-enriched puff. “My jet, my rules.”

“Of course,” Akihito snorts. How could he forget? “So how long is the flight?”

“Approximately two and a half hours if we don’t encounter any bad weather.” Right then the engine kicks in and Suoh’s voice comes through on the loudspeaker.

“We’re all set to go, Asami-sama.”

They gather speed and accelerate down the runway, Asami smoking throughout take-off and Akihito won’t ever admit aloud that he finds some calm in his ritualistic habit every time his nerves threaten to fray. The plane tilts backwards and the g-force presses all his internal organs back into the seat, it’s an uncomfortable exhilaration, but incomparable to the stunning view.

When the jet levels out, Asami gets out of his seat and walks down the aisle as if he commands the very gravity itself. Akihito hears the pop of a cork and Asami’s returning with two champagne flutes, the foam perfectly resting and not a drop of overspill. Perfect bastard.

“For the journey,” he says, and Akihito doesn’t even have to say a word as the glass is placed in his hand. He unbuckles himself but remains in his seat, absorbing the disbursement of colours in the stratosphere, where the universe converges with this tiny planetary pebble. The horizon lights up like a ring of fire against the dark backdrop of sky, and there’s nothing but valleys of clouds and dark sea underneath them for miles, completely blowing his mind.

“You always said you wanted to fly above the clouds.”

Akihito turns on a heartbeat to see Asami standing beside his seat, an arm leaning on the backrest of his seat and peering out of the same oval window and then back to him in one languid blink.
“It’s amazing,” Akihito says, “How high up are we?”

“About thirty-five thousand feet. We can go higher, if you like.” Asami notices the boy’s tension on the armrests, the leather contorting under his palms he no doubt has the strength to rip if he tried. He thinks of those bright little sparks of acrophilia endorphins swimming around in his bloodstream right about now, taking sheer effort and will to calm it, hell, Akihito may even overdose on it and that would be something.

“God, how do you do it?” Akihito murmurs. Asami hears it as a faint pass of air through the boy’s lips not vibrant enough to reach his ears and he has to lip read to understand.

“What do you mean?”

“Y—You do a lot of business so…you probably fly all the time…this high up…for hours.”

Akihito twists in his seat, agitated and Asami doesn’t have to look beyond the redness of his ears and the colour in his cheeks to know that at thirty-five thousand feet, Akihito’s lust must be surging. He leans in close so that his lips are just millimeters away from the boy’s ear, imagining all of the facets of thought that are galvanising Akihito’s desires into a red hot heat. “What are you thinking about, Akihito?”

It startles the boy, the delicious catch in his breath and the noticeably frayed expression, his bold and honest eyes darting everywhere, anywhere but at Asami’s luminous stare. He can’t help the shiver that runs through him every time he corners Akihito like this, and he flies off and does something unexpected and altogether interesting. But this is the genuine joy of it all, right here.

“N—Nothing…!” Akihito laughs and shoots up out of his seat. He laughs it off, desperately trying to retain his irrationally diminishing willpower. If it’s not Asami’s predator proximity then it’s thirty-five thousand feet doing a circular tune in his head that’s marvelously wrecking him. He steps backwards until he hits the flat panel wall that leads into the cockpit and babbles nervously. “Can I see the cockpit? I still can’t believe your bodyguards can fly a plane.” He blinks, and within that comforting span of a millisecond, Asami’s on him — an ambling stride of long limbs closing him against the flat panel door and pushing him up to take his lips, hard, crushing, biting teeth battling the need to thoroughly realign the boy’s conflict of interest.

Akihito shoves Asami away, and he’s surprised in himself because he stands and looks wide-eyed at him before he’s bounding over again, grabbing to reconnect. “This is crazy,” he mouths around Asami’s searing lips, tugging at them with his teeth and oh, Asami slides a half bent knee between his legs and it’s like he’s created heaven right there.

Asami pushes him back against the panelling and sinks his teeth into his supple neck, running a deep, hot purr right next to his ear. “That depends on what you’re referring to as ‘crazy’.”

He doesn’t know if Asami expects an answer or if it’s his life’s purpose to make him madder than he already is with just the nip of his teeth, and there are days when his body can stand this adrenaline rush and the quivering knees, but fucking hell, today is not one of them. “Ahh...Asami, I don’t know what to do. All I know is that I don’t fully trust myself right now, and if you don’t stop I’m gonna climb you like a tree and...God, Asami, this is killing me.”

Suddenly he’s bundled onto Asami’s shoulder and taken through to the back of the jet, struggling and kicking, but Asami’s still so strong that he can maneuver the complex door locks single-handedly with no extra effort. He flips the boy onto the jet’s private double bed and Akihito whips his top off and his wings dart out the second Asami’s on him, crushing their lips together. God, he could come in his jeans just thinking about the wild strength coursing through the man’s body right
now, enough to bite him in two, yet he chooses tiny, teasing nips that are oh so infuriatingly good.

“To see the honesty of your desire consume you so unapologetically is pitiful,” Asami starts, and tilts Akihito’s chin so the boy can look as well as hear the words he’s about to say. “I could break you with how much I want you right now, Akihito. I’d break you and watch you heal right in front of me with my cock still deep inside you and you gripping it so tightly, begging for me to do it again and again.”

“ Fucking hell, Asami—”

“—And I’m holding myself back tremendously from the temptation seizing me right now, because I could hurt you, Akihito, and there’d be no coming back from it. Do you understand this?”

Fuck, Akihito loses his goddamn mind when Asami speaks like this and expects mental cohesion or quiet compliance in return. The gold around Asami’s pupils are almost completely black, lust and promise filling the center of it along with each naked finger wrapping around his cock and pulling every last drop from him, a promise that’s stitched into the very fabric of this man’s being. He bucks his hips and pulls at Asami’s shoulders, scrunching a handful of hair at the base of his head and sealing their mouths together. Just when Asami’s about to realise his promise, Akihito rolls him onto his back and sits with his legs either side of him, his wings forward facing and intimidating.

“Stupid fool,” he says with a sweetened intone, and sharp, grinning teeth. “I’ll break you before you can break me.”

Akihito awakes to a room baking with sunlight. It hurts to look at it, shielding his eyes he notes the unfamiliar bed and a room he doesn’t recognise. A flutter from the net curtains carry a warm breeze through the room and the sounds of birds and rustling trees and clean sea air sobers his disorientation.

“What is this place?”

Sitting upright, he notices the other side of the bed is unslept in. He’s clean too, it seems, and although somewhat happy, he has no recollection of doing it himself. Their luggage bag is in plain view on the floor and he pulls on a pair of shorts and t-shirt before stepping out onto the veranda, staring wide-eyed and open-mouthed at the incredible scene, like some kind of distant paradise. Greenery, palms and wildlife, bushes as tall as trees and flowers that look and smell like they could be edible, and grass — he hasn’t felt grass under his feet for months and he’s ecstatic from the smell of chlorophyll invading his lungs.

He doesn’t know where they are, but he should find Asami and have him explain why they can’t live here permanently.

The beach house is a beautiful all-white space, giant windows arching in concentric patterns, columns and white woods — not like the rust-coloured soot that covers every corner of Tokyo. He’s baffled by this interior. It has no doors per-se, but each room flows perfectly into the next in an indeterminate, meandering maze. There’s a bedroom downstairs but there are three more upstairs, as well as a kitchen, lounge, study, and a gym. Every room dressed and draped and out and out stunning.

He follows the familiar tobacco smell to the upper balconies and finds Asami sitting and conversing with Kirishima and Suoh, a relaxed sensibility shared by the three of them, dressed down and sipping
tea while Asami smokes. Kirishima is in his line of sight and notices him first, a nod of a wordless greeting, followed by Suoh and then Asami, who’s acknowledgement is more of a raking glance from head to toe. “Good morning,” he says, polite in voice only.

“Morning,” Akihito greets back, terse. “What is this place?”

Kirishima and Suoh retreat back into the house and Asami gestures for Akihito to take a seat at the table. “We’re at my estate on my private island.”

Akihito double-takes. “Your island? You have your own island?”

“It’s mine, yes,” he says, as if Akihito’s question is asinine. “We’re on a small Pacific island about a thousand miles from the Japanese mainland or the nearest Izu island. Above us is restricted airspace, only aircrafts chartered by myself and my company can fly within this area. You could say that I own everything that you see before you, including the sky.”

It’s times like this that Akihito thinks Asami operates on a completely different level from everyone else when he can be so blasé about owning an island. “Well, that’s definitely something to brag about huh. But why are we here?”

Asami looks casually at him, expelling ribbons of smoke into the air whilst waiting for the penny to drop for Akihito. “Haven’t you worked it out yet?”

“Worked what out?”

“Look around you. This is your freedom. Your freedom to fly.”
Akihito’s mouth goes dry, eyes wide and searching for doubt. “You came all this way just for me?”

“I had every intention of bringing you here when the time was right and you were no longer wracked with doubts.”

“I...I don’t know what to say, Asami, I...this island is incredible. I never expected you to bring me somewhere like this. Ever.”

“The name of this island is the Southern Bird Island — a name duly appropriate now that you’re here, don’t you think?” He puts out his cigarette in his cold tea and stands. “Come. Let me show you around.”

Akihito’s acquainted with the exquisite vastness of the estate, the gardens and the private pool. Colourful trailing jasmines and rhododendrons along the walls cover nearly a third of the house, overpowering the air with strong, sweet scents.

“I have a team of gardeners who come twice a month to maintain the grounds,” Asami points out, just as Akihito’s wondering how the bushes kept their ornate shapes and just about everywhere looks finely tooth combed.

“The island was once a naval bay used throughout the First and Second World Wars. It had a broadcasting transmitter at the centre which I had pulled down and replaced with a satellite transmitter. Sovereignty also switched back and forth between American and Japanese many times before it was transferred permanently and reinstated as a part of Japan some forty years ago.”

Hearing Asami talk about the island and its history is fascinating but Akihito has only one real question. “How did it come to be yours?”

Asami continues to walk through the garden, always leading two, three steps in front of Akihito, and leads them into a wooded bamboo grove. It’s not until they’re sheltered under the lush green foliage that he answers Akihito’s question. “The Prime Minister and his cabinet at the time owed me a debt of gratitude.”

They cross a small brook and pass a weathered stone shrine into another wooded grove, the boy following blindly wherever Asami takes him, taking in the sights and smells and the exotic chirping of tropical birds. Akihito looks up to see them sitting in and amongst fruit trees, their branches heavy with fruit.

“Can you eat those?” he says, pointing up at them.

“You can. The island is so remote from the mainland and abundant in sunshine all year round that it provides the perfect conditions for self-sustenance.” He reaches for a branch and pulls off a gigantic white peach and drops it into Akihito’s palms. “You’ll never see peaches this big anywhere else in the world.”

Akihito’s hands give slightly to the weight and enormity of it. He’s had wild peaches that have only ever been the size of a small plum, and either hideously sharp or too bland. But he’s never seen one so impressive. “Is this real?”

“Bite it, and see for yourself.”

Akihito goes for it and a gush of juice from its sweet flesh flows into his mouth and down his chin. It’s messy and Asami’s probably loving watching him struggle to eat it all, but it’s the best peach he’s
Asami rips a ripe apple from another tree and crunches into it, continuing their walk through the grove.

The makeshift dirt path gradually turns to sand and Akihito can hear the shore and smell the pungent sea air before they exit the clearing. “Ah! The ocean!” he calls with delight and bolts to the shoreline to wet his feet in the warm, pacific waters.

He kicks and splashes and Asami finds it enough just watching from a distance, the water restoring happiness to him. Akihito waves him over, and Asami paces towards him, trousers rolled up to his knees and bare footed, the fine white sand imprinting under his feet. He stands just shy of the shoreline until Akihito’s soaking hand pulls him into the ebb and the water crashes against his shins.

Akihito laughs and splashes. “Don’t just stand there lookin’ all serious!”

By now Asami’s dripping from head to toe. With one sizable swipe, he sends water crashing onto Akihito’s back, the recoil of the boy’s arching back a satisfying reaction, Akihito gets him in the face and Asami soaks him with both hands until Akihito loses his footing and stumbles into the water, roaring and flitting with laughter that lights up that part of Asami he thought he’d recanted forever.

“You got me good,” Akihito chuckles, sniggering at the translucent white shirt sticking to every taut plane of Asami’s torso. “Looks like I didn’t do too badly either.”

Asami just scoffs and offers him a hand. “Not bad at all.”

He wrings the water out of his t-shirt and appraises that Asami’s not mad at him for getting him soaked or logging his expensive wristwatch with salt water. Asami unclips it and tosses it onto the shore, bringing a hand up to run it through his wet hair, and Akihito’s salivating at the rivulets running over his neck line when he tips his head back to catch the sun on his face. Akihito chuckles under his breath, and Asami makes a grab for him but he slips past, running back to the shore.

“I wanna show you what I can do, Asami. Watch me.”

“Akihito steps back, creating an arena of space between them. He drops his wet t-shirt on the sand and fans out his wings, the aching of their disuse subsiding and wondrous, age-old satisfaction returning to him as he opens them out further until they’re huge and whipping up a sandstorm with a fraction of a flutter. He gives Asami one last, grinning glance before bending his knees and vaulting into the blue.

His eyes shoot open, and he’s soaring amongst vastness. Everything is tiny — a tiny Asami looking up at him from the beach, his tall stature the size of a pinhead from up here, the huge white estate and all its sculpted gardens, the runway, big structures looking miniature, and wow, the island’s unusually triangular shaped. Ain't that something?

His heart flies into his mouth every time he swoops and dives or catches a tailwind that scoops him up into a gyrating spin and launches him high into the air. He’s dazzled by the crystalline waters, reflections clearer than crystal as he plunges inches from it to convene with his own reflection rippling across its surface. He wets the tip of his wings as he carves through the water, his searing breeze gusting jet streams through the water. The invigoration of having wind through his wings and ripe air in his lungs — sweet mother of the distant heavens, it feels incredible.
On the ground Asami feels almost as enamoured as the boy must be for himself, soaring and whooping at the top of his voice through the air. He stands and watches for a time, enraptured by this inexplicable, gorgeous creature twisting and tumbling through the skies, his eyes hurt from the brightness but he can’t miss it for a second as Akihito disappears into the mouth of the sun, exhilarated, laughing. To someone like Akihito, this is all he’s ever had, all he’ll ever want, and all he’ll ever dream about. Who is he to take it away from him?
Though, it's odd. Akihito’s whoops fall silent and his arms and legs kick out wildly when he flies too high and an updraft flings him out of the sky, screaming as he plummets to earth. Asami starts sprinting to him, an urgent, unforeseen panic he’s never felt before rising fast and sure. The unforgiving sand impedes his speed while Akihito hurtles at an ever blistering pace straight down. Maybe it’s the well of life energy he has stored inside himself that accelerates every visceral reaction in his body so he can capture Akihito before his bones shatter on the sand —

“...”

“....ami!”

He hears Akihito’s distressed voice as if from a distance, and a warm body cradled in his arms.

“Asami! Asami, are you alright? Asami!!”

He coughs. Shit, there’s sand everywhere —

“Asami! Thank god you’re alright!”

Akihito’s hands stroke his cheek, cleaning the sand from his face, his blue eyes bestrewn with worry, but smiling. “You caught me, Asami. I can’t believe you did that. You crazy bastard.”

He tries to say something but his airways narrowed to a gravelly pass like he’s swallowed the whole of the mid-pacific into his lungs and it’s churning all sorts of hell inside him. He hacks with raucous coughs.

“Don’t talk,” Akihito laughs, rubbing gentle circles into his back, “You’ve got sand in your mouth.”
He spits out a wad of it but he won’t feel happy until he’s washed all of the grit out once and for all. Then he sees Akihito’s relieved smile, limbs and head still attached and he forgets about the sandpit in his mouth for a small Akihito-filled moment. He’s barely realising what that smile and that face mean to him when fear etched into every pore of his body for those dwindling seconds. And he knows that fear to be a lie when he remembers Akihito telling him that his body was near unbreakable, yet still, the dread of imagining blood and brains scattered on the ground compelled him to save the boy from that unlikely harm. An impulse driven from madness is what it was, his madness for the boy.

“You were falling,” he says, hoarse, wiping his mouth and realising it’s the most obvious braindead response.

Akihito laughs as he helps him up. “I got a little carried away and the wind blew me right out of the sky. Are you hurt?”

Asami shakes his head. “I’m fine. Just...sand.”

“Yeah, it gets everywhere,” Akihito chuckles, brushing off flecks of sand from Asami’s hair and clothes, then leans his forehead onto Asami’s broad chest and wraps his quivering arms around him, revealing his emotions after this earth shattering experience. “I can’t believe you, Asami, I…why did you do that? You’re insane...” He leans up and places a small kiss to the side of Asami’s mouth and doesn’t mind the few spots of sand on his lips. “Thank you.”

Asami returns the kiss on the crown of his windswept hair, his staggered breathing calming into a whisper. “Don’t mention it.”

He wants to say something more, scold Akihito’s utter lack of all sense and preservation for all the good it would do him, have him scream to let him go so that Asami never has to endure the dismemberment of his heart every time Akihito comes close to breaking in front of him. He’ll never be the same again otherwise.

“I’m going to go back and take a shower,” he says, kissing Akihito’s forehead and whispering an almost heartbreaking sentiment. “I’ve kept you away from this for too long. You’re free here, Akihito.”

He turns on his heels to leave the beach and a sunken, anti-climactic feeling fills Akihito ever diminishing the further Asami moves away from him. But he’ll be damned if he’s happy with this. He stamps his foot and widens his wings and catches up to him, flying directly over his head and planting his feet firmly into the sand in front of him.

“I won’t have that, Asami!” He shoves Asami right in the chest. “I won’t have you telling me what you think I want then walk away from me like that!”

Asami holds his ground from the solid blows but Akihito’s evident distress leaves him in astonishment. He tries to staunch each blow by veering Akihito’s arms away but Akihito gets him twice as hard, and plows on.

“We’re going to go back to that house together,” he declares, accenting blows of his hands against Asami’s chest until he’s finally got him backpedaling, “And we’re both going to take a shower, and then I’m going to suck your cock. Do you hear me?” He lands one more shove onto the man’s chest but Asami catches him this time, and in his fury, Akihito grabs his shirt and smashes their lips together.
The shower is a quick, unceremonial preparation, a cooling cleanse of soaring tempers. Akihito dumps their wet clothes on the shower floor after deciding it wasn’t a necessary thing to undress before they got in. It doesn’t matter though, when Asami’s this deliciously reciprocating and pressing him up against the tiled wall, giving him one, two, three bites to his neck, all refreshingly sharp with the intention of marking. Akihito retaliates by grabbing him by his balls and keeping them in his palm until Asami turns those agonising bites into long, agonising kisses.

They’re so hard that they’re not even going to entertain the idea of foreplay right now, instead, Akihito’s going to throw a leg over Asami’s hip and insist on everything good in the world that they fuck this way before either one of them bursts.

He pushes Asami onto the bed afterwards and climbs on top of him. He’d retracted his wings before the shower but he fans them open again, grinning, running his fingers along the muscular inside of Asami’s thigh and gripping his shaft which fills his whole hand. He pumps it a few times and it’s obscene how much he wants it in his mouth, and unnerving that Asami hasn’t said a word to him but he’s tracking every single flex of movement with his eyes. He’s intimidating even when benignly laying back amongst the pillows and waiting for Akihito’s promise, but guiltless in just how incredible he looks doing nothing and absolutely, complicitly, giving Akihito total control.

Akihito cranes his neck and takes the first lick around the base, sliding his tongue up and over and closing his mouth over the head, enthusiastically circling. He remembers Asami doing this to him in explicit, note-for-note detail. He finds that spot that made his back curl then — *ah, right there* — and Asami lets out the first delicious sound in a rolling, deep purr that goes straight through him. Akihito’s eyes follow up his tensing abs, the entirety of Asami’s body taut and moisture pooling in the creases of his abs from the shower and drawing Akihito to the honest truth that there isn’t a single area of Asami’s body he doesn’t want to lick and suck dry.

Asami perhaps has to commend Akihito for being a fast learner and not making this an agonising reflection into his own self-restraint. He’s hot and focused, very eager to please and he’s happy indulge the boy for whatever reason other than it seems he needs this. He can’t help but watch with insane satisfaction as his angel swallows him to the back of his throat and milks him, and it’s ludicrous how much he’s enjoying it, how much they’re both enjoying having the other at the cornerstone of mercy. Akihito lifts his eyes up to look at him, highly glossed and hooded, and Asami will say it again and again how deeply enthralled it makes him to debauch this beautiful being of purported purity and reverence over and over. Akihito sucks him down again and it’s a middle finger up to God or the Devil or whoever made Akihito this passionately abiding. For Asami, it doesn’t get any better than that.

He grabs at Akihito when he starts to feel he might be getting a bit *too* good and flips him onto his back. Akihito, surprised by the sudden uprooting, gives a luscious, rosy lipped grin when Asami leans down to mutter a praising, “Good boy,” against his lips before kissing them. Akihito rakes his hands up and down his back and threads them through his damp hair, and Asami goes the other way, running his hands over Akihito’s nipples and down his body to grip his tight ass.

“He, good boy,” Akihito moans, made breathless by the torment of having his entrance teased and nothing more. “I don’t want foreplay, just fuck me.”

Asami notes the obstinacy and starts pushing the head of his cock in, and Akihito feels it splitting him open like the very first time. Asami snaps his hips forward and the rush burns, low and deep. He wants Asami to do it like this all the time.
Asami leans forward and traps Akihito’s body under him, holding him there and trying to discern this wayward agitation. “What’s gotten into you?”

Akihito shakes through the small jabbing thrusts that infuriate his prostate and just about every other part of him. His fingernails scrape over Asami’s back and pull sharply on his hair, facing off against that hot molten stare. “I just need you inside me,” he declares, enunciating every syllable as if it’s going to compel Asami into action any faster.

Asami’s eyes flash fire as he feels the boy’s legs tighten around his waist and his wings flit impatiently, mewling demands of “Harder, fuck me more,” and snapping his wings against the bed. He takes hold of both of Akihito’s legs and pulls them wide, it awes him just how attracted he is to this debased, beautiful body. Loose feathers fall around them and Asami drives up into him, thrust after punishing thrust.

“Ahh, yes...Asami! — ah!” Akihito grabs onto the bed as if for dear life and trembles uncontrollably, but it’s exactly how he wants it. No mercy given. He reaches down to touch his cock and its sensitivity is overwhelming. The shock of having every one of Asami’s thrusts assaulting him has him whining, screaming, begging — Akihito’s never begged for a single thing in his life, but he’ll beg for Asami’s cock like it’s the last goddamn thing he’ll ever have, erupting inside him, wrecking him, and...Oh great heavens. His back arches off the bed and he cries as he comes but grips Asami’s shoulders tightly, shouting for him not to stop.

Asami doesn’t express in profanities but fucking hell, he's watching Akihito drenching himself in multiple orgasms having no idea that he could do that. And he’s not nearly done with him. He flips Akihito over and grabs hold of his hips to sink back in, Akihito’s perfect round ass rising up seductively to take his cock over and over again. The boy’s wings flutter rhythmically in time with
his thrusts and he leans down to card his hand through the boy’s hair and turn his head so he can kiss the sweet, yearning sighs.

“Are there yet more surprises to be unearthed from this body of yours, Akihito?” he says, and the answering moans are a surging litany of his name, over and over into another multitude of climaxes, screaming that he wants to be ravished. Asami doesn’t stop until the last quakes of his release fill Akihito, and he slumps into the downy softness of his boy’s wings, his eyes falling closed and mind drifting once again into his oblivion.

Chapter End Notes

'Southern Bird Island', or Minami Tori-shima is a real-life island in the Pacific. The coordinates for it are 24°17'12"N 153°58'50"E


to the Mouth of the Sun (Part Two)

Chapter Notes

Certain historical events written in this chapter are completely fictional and have no bearing to anything that actually happened in real life. A great deal of artistic license has been applied.

Artwork in this chapter is also NSFW :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Akihito wakes up hours later sluiced in darkness.

He blinks repeatedly and his eyes adjust to the darkness, focused in discerning every outline of his surroundings with faultless clarity as if it were daylight. The space next to him is empty and cold, and his naked cleanliness feels very much like the morning repeating itself. He slips on the black silk robe hanging behind the door, not wanting to give Asami the impression that he’s the soppy, pining type that likes to wander around the house in their lover’s shirts, but he prefers not to give him the satisfaction of going around in the nude either.

The distant sea hums in through the open windows as he walks through the interjoining rooms, sound and atmosphere murmuring an oceanic ghost tune. Small luminances catch on the polished surfaces through the slants of curtains that are tall, twelve foot drops from ceiling to floor.

It’s instinctual for Akihito to be vigilant for danger in the dead of night that he’s yet to settle into a complete mode of safety. Most of his travelling is done under the cover of darkness, an advantage that comes with a disadvantage of drunken, violent night crawlers. Too many have made the mistake of accosting him in dark alleys, under the impression that he can’t see the knife tucked under their sleeve when they ask him for directions or a light, something passable for the ordinary before they maim him for his wallet. They don’t expect the broken nose, or the snapped wrist, or that knife to be lodged somewhere where it’ll permanently impact the choices they make from that day forth. He laughs when he thinks about it. It all feels like a different life now.

So he explores a little — a well-acquired curiosity he has for Asami’s home and his belongings. There’s still so much he doesn’t know about Asami that may be answerable in personal objects, or behind a secret door like he has in his bedroom back at the penthouse. The homeliness of this place is a particular interest, it’s unlike the hard leather angular complexities of his Tokyo home. Soft linens, beach woods and expanses of colour and certain sentimentalities that otherwise wouldn’t be found in Asami’s home are dotted about each room — potted plants, a rocking chair, little knick-knacks and brick-a-bracks — they have to leave the day after tomorrow and that’s not nearly enough time to fully appreciate any of this. Asami’s world is a lot like that — one fleeting, mouthwatering moment after another.

Akihito moves and the light catches on the glass of a photo frame sitting next to a flower vase on the sideboard. He picks it up and examines a beautiful older lady in a plum and white kimono, sitting, surrounded by flowers and smiling. He can’t be sure who it is, but the tempestuous beating of his heart tells him this person may be Asami’s mother.

A breeze whips in and startles him. He follows the tobacco smell it carries down the hallway and
finds Asami sitting shirtless on the balcony with a cigarette, soaking in the moonlight.

“Asami,” he says gently, announcing his presence as he steps out onto the balcony.

Asami turns to him in a look of mild, pleasant surprise. “I didn’t want to wake you. I needed a smoke.”

Akihito moves a little closer, and asks, “Have you slept at all?”

“Very briefly. Your wonderdust is a fantastic stimulant,” the man smirks, tapping his cigarette against the ashtray. “Are you feeling better now?”

Akihito plays nervously with the ties of his robe. “Yeah. I...I guess I was overwhelmed. Everything about yesterday overwhelmed me.”

Asami blows out a cloud of smoke and chuffs. “I bet.”

Akihito flicks him on the shoulder for the smug retort and Asami puts a coveting arm around his waist to reel in his impudent little angel.

“You’re wearing my night robe,” he says, prying the front of it open and running a hand over the boy’s warm skin. Akihito’s abdomen tenses under his touch. “It looks better on you than I could have imagined.”

“Our clothes got wet in the sho—hey, what are you doing?” Akihito wriggles and pushes against Asami’s shoulders as the man’s lips tickle along his midriff, but soon gives in to it, only to have Asami swipe his tongue into his belly button. “Stop that.”

Asami, unperturbed, does it again even when Akihito smacks him on his back. He grips him more firmly. “Let me,” he whispers, and falls into the addicting trance of the boy’s scent as he nestles his head into his smooth flesh. Akihito yields to him, running his fingers through his black strands and feels the tranquilising catharsis of every knot and strain leaving him, just like that. He runs his nails through Asami’s scalp and down his neck, scraping gently at his shoulder blades and up the line of his spine, touching for the simplicity of gentle intimacy that Akihito sometimes wants but rarely ever gets when Asami can turn him wild and wanting with just a look. The man’s skin gooses under his touch, the type of response that arouses Akihito to no end. “Maybe we should go inside. Aren’t you cold out here without a shirt on?”

“I don’t feel it,” Asami utters.

No, Akihito supposes he doesn’t, not with all that life energy inside him keeping his blood warm. And Akihito grows warmer by the second having Asami fiddling with the front of his robe and opening it fully to run his lips along his sensitive lower abdominals. “Stop it you damn pervert, are you still not satisfied?”

Asami teases a line down his delicate inner thigh, just to make a point that the question needn’t require an answer.

“Can you be serious for once?” Akihito growls.

“I’m always serious.”

Akihito wants this moment to ask Asami about the woman in the photograph. He wants to know why a man who’s so powerful and influential in the inner workings of the country is so heavy with mystery. He's at the apex of his prime, his personnel sees that he never has to lift a finger, and it’s an
almost god-like sensibility to be that untouchable. And then he looks down to see the man push his head into him like a cat who wants his ears scratched and it melts his soul. He wants to know more about this man, the story of the boy who came to rule all of Japan.

“What’s your family like, Asami?”

Asami looks up at him, a cold suspicion falling over his features. “Why are you asking me this now?”

Akihito falters. “I—I don’t know. Curiosity, I suppose. You don’t have to say anything if you don’t want to.” The pregnant silence unnerves him, but Asami acquiesces, bringing him down onto his lap and opens the conversation.

“My father, Asami Ryuhei, was a high court judge. And my mother, Asami Yumi, was a counsellor at the same courthouse as my father. I’m their only child.”

Akihito swallows the knot in his throat. “They’ve passed away?”

“My father was murdered when I was a child, and my mother died almost four years ago from bone cancer.”

Akihito feels his own shard of curiosity strike him in the heart. He could never have imagined something like this.

“One day, father was presiding over a case at the courthouse. A gun had been smuggled in by a clerk and a psychopath in the visitors gallery shot him dead right there in the courtroom before turning the gun on himself. There was no stopping it. The motive had to do with the sentencing he judged on another case. This was an orchestrated kill.”

Asami’s composure is unwavering, the anger stripped away and only the stings of melancholy clings to his voice, but is nonetheless heartbreaking. Akihito doesn’t pretend to have the words. “Asami...I—I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. All those involved are either dead or rotting in jail for the rest of their lives. The court accepted responsibility and Mother received enough financial apology to never work another day in her life. But she did, of course. It’s the only way she knew how to cope with the loss of my father.”

Asami takes his half smoked cigarette out of the ashtray and brings it to his lips for another drag before continuing. His account is deeply personal but his focus somehow miles away, and probably needs to be.

“We lived on the coast of Shizuoka in a house by the sea. My family had that house for over a hundred years and I was due to inherit it, but after father’s murder and concerns of safety, it was sold and mother and I moved to Tokyo. It never felt the same for a long time. She struggled, but her strength was undeniable. From her smile, you’d never know that she was suffering with deep depression. But she resented that she couldn’t be a father as well as a mother to me, that’s when Hayakawa-sensei became my mentor of sorts, and how I took up kickboxing. He had a wife and family of his own, but I could tell he was in love with my mother. He wanted her to be happy, even if that meant beating her only son to shit.”

Asami chuckles with a bitter fondness, but Akihito can only sit with a heavy heart and stay silent through Asami’s agonising catalogue of horrors. Asami is being completely open with him, and the rarity of this moment is probably the most intimate they’ve ever been.

“The thing you should know about my family’s ancestry is that the men were civil workers and
landmen, but it was the women who engaged in war. My great great great grandmother, Asami Isako, daughter of a merchant and a mother to two sons, was a general in the samurai battalion, along with her five sisters who were all high-ranking samurai along with her. They fought to be accepted among men to fight and they achieved great respect. Mother came from a long line of warriors, and although she wielded no sword, she had their courage running through her veins. She’d been stabbed right through the heart by life’s katana, but she still kept on going, only to be diagnosed with early stage bone cancer some six years ago. She had the best doctors in Japan. I even donated my stem cells towards her treatment multiple times, but the cancer was aggressive, it advanced quickly and soon my stem cells had no effect. The cancer was crippling and I couldn’t do anything for her. I’d bring her to this island so she could recuperate after her treatments. There’s a peace here that you can’t find anywhere in Tokyo, she’d say, and it’d be where she’d spend the last weeks of her life, by the sea, like our home back in Shizuoka. As was her wish.

Akihito hunches over and a single tear rolls down his cheek, his blood running ice cold on realising that the woman in the photograph, with her beautiful, happy smile was so laden with pain. He’s anguish and numb and his heavy heart weighs his falling tears to know that the cruelty of fate forged this powerful and astonishing man before him. All he can do is wrap his arms around him and nose through the strands of his hair and hold him, maybe for his own consoling comfort but there are no words he can offer that would undo what has already been done. He tightens his arms around Asami and kisses his forehead, wanting pain to never befall him ever again.

Asami lifts the boy’s chin and holds the gaze for a moment until Akihito blinks and the tears free-fall through his lashes. “Are these tears for me, Akihito?”

Akihito wipes his tears with the sleeve of his gown. “If...if only I could heal you here,” he stutters, placing his palm in the middle of Asami’s chest.

“Don’t.” Asami whispers fretfully, “It’ll only dull what I can never forget and make it empty.”

“It hurts to hear what you’ve been through.”

“I’m no more deserving or undeserving of my fate than you are of yours. I loved my parents dearly and that will never change. I can only continue to be my father’s son and the man I told my mother I would be.”

“And are you that man?”

Asami takes Akihito’s hand and kisses his tear streaked palm, tasting the salty affections of those tears. “Perhaps now I am.”

Akihito kisses him, long and heartfelt, melting into his solemn embrace until the tears run its course.

That night, Asami's slumber turns into a twisting, wide-eyed vigil over the sleeping boy. He’s at a loss for feeling awake next to Akihito’s coma-like deep sleep. His fledgling understanding of something so enthusiastically roaming around his system is also what keeps him awake most nights. All he has to do is watch Akihito’s deep sleep to know he’s still learning how to deal with it. He doesn’t know if life energy is absorbed through proximity or if it’s at low emittance during sleep, or how long it takes to lose its potency and if it ever leaves the body altogether. There’s never been enough timely intermission for Asami to figure that out. He puts on his night robe and leaves the sleep to those who probably deserve it more.

He told himself that he wouldn’t look at his phone for the duration of his trip but old habits ultimately die hard and he’s filing through his emails, rereading and deleting old ones and checking for any that he might have missed. He checks up on the news and stock markets and finds nothing of note, but it
gives him something to do for about ten minutes.

He brews himself a strong coffee and takes a walk around the grounds in the low striding moonlight. He hasn’t been here in a while so his cursory glances are more for the purposes of refinement of weather-worn blemishes to the surrounding structures than anything, taking mental notes of them to tell his caretaker when he gets back to the mainland. And then, as he’s looking back at the house from a fair distance, he’s flummoxed how he’s able to see the hairline cracks in the white concrete wall from all the way from the other side of the garden. He blinks repeatedly and his eyes sharpen in razor fine acuity. Another strange effect courtesy of Akihito’s wonderdust.

He sits beneath the canopy of wisteria and breathes in the heady floral scent that brings him back to the last days he and his mother shared on the island. It’s an event he’s repressed for nearly four years since the day, pushed back into the hollows of his memories, at her adamant request.

“Ryuichi,” she calls to him, in a failing, croaky voice that’s a dim shadow of its former exuberance. In her favourite place underneath the blue and purple wisteria, she’s smiling at him, patting the seat next to her with her good hand. “Come and sit with me for a little bit.”

He walks over to her, her smile ever widening the closer he approaches and sits down next to her. She takes his hand into her lap and places a single jasmine into his palm before closing it into a fist and enclosing her smaller hands around it.

“How are you feeling?” he says, eyeing the cast on her right arm slipping out from under the sleeves of her yukata.
She smiles and gently pats his hand. “Better, now that you’re here.”

“Can I do anything to ease your pain?” he offers, but she shakes her head.

“I’ve had enough of drugs and painkillers for one day. Looking at my glorious garden and having you here with me is the best medicine. Ah, to think this place was a dusty mudpit once upon a time.”

It’s a credit to her, really, that each venture to this island, be it with a broken foot or a fractured elbow or a bandaged arm, she could still enjoy the garden she so tirelessly dug into a place of paradise.

“You got rid of the roses. They were my favourite.”

“I didn’t know you had an interest in flowers, Ryuichi.”

“They’re beautiful.”

“They are aren’t they? But they have thorns, you see. I like flowers that can’t hurt you. But if you like them I’ll plant some for you, next time.”

“The gardeners can take care of it. You shouldn’t think about doing anything laborious while your arm is in a cast.”

She looks at it and laughs. “I suppose not.” She rests her head on his shoulder and closes her eyes, sighing in a deep breath of scented air. “Ah, my beloved son, I love you more and more each day. Your father would have wept to see the man you are today. I shall tell him all about you when I see him again.” She sighs long, remembering the nightmare of the day her whole world changed.

“When your father was taken from us, I thought that would be the end of me. A wife without her husband is a good for nothing woman, they used to say. Without him, I was destined to fail you. But that’s old, meaningless talk from a distant past. I tried my hardest to do my very best for you, and I was terrified that one day you’d follow your heart to wherever it leads you and I’d be lonely again. How selfish of me, because you are your father’s son, and as his spirit is free, so too is yours. I would have no cause to be alone. Like the Meoto Iwa, you’re both tied to me, no matter what.”

“Mother—” his voice wavers with heaviness but she cups him by the cheeks and stills him, the smoothing motion of her fingers not matching the determination in her expression.

“Promise me something, Ryuichi.”

“Anything.”

“Promise me you won’t be sad when that day comes. Promise me that you’ll carry on no matter what life throws at you, that you’ll continue on as you always have, with pride and purpose. I’m an old, tired body, but yours is young and full of strength. Find someone special, fall in love, and be happy.” She lifts up his fist and shakes it triumphantly. “And crush all those that stand in your way!”

He looks into her large, spirited eyes and shakes an affirming, gracious nod. “Don’t worry, mother, I will.”

“Now,” she says, uncurling his fist and removing the jasmine from it, “Wherever you go, you’ll always have the scent of jasmine with you.”
He looks down at the bruised jasmine flower sitting inside his palm and holds it to his nose. It’s a truly wonderful smell. He likens it to Akihito's scent but for a completely different reason. He takes the fabric of his sleeve up to his nose and smells the faint scent of the boy still lingering upon it and it’s like the meeting of minds, between Akihito and his mother. He imagines how she would have received Akihito had she been alive to meet him. She would adore the bones off him, as someone who shares her love for nature and desserts, she’d never be able to withstand his charm without squeezing him half to death while force feeding him pear tarts and ohagi until he pops.

He laughs for getting ahead of himself. It wouldn’t do to feel wistful about something that will never happen. He gulps down the rest of his coffee and proposes to work off his surplus of energy before his mind reels beyond the unthinkable.

Akihito awakens to an empty bed for the third time in his short stay.

He’s getting used to it now, not having an arm draped over him and securing him to a hard, rippling chest. He takes full advantage of the free space to spread his arms and legs wide and flit about happily in the soft cotton sheets. Sunlight beats on his back and the gentle sea breeze rolls in from the open balcony door that feels especially good this morning. His wings unfurl on their own, like a flower leaning towards the sun to soak up its rays. He nuzzles into the pillows on Asami’s side of the bed and it's not until his eyes meet the golden ones on the other side of the room that his morning truly starts.

“Wha—! Asami!”

He’s sitting in the armchair next to the open french doors, a scotch resting on the side table and a surface tablet in his hand, dressed smartly in his clean cut designer polo and trousers and says with a creamy smooth smile, “Don’t stop on my account.”

“Why are you over there?”

“And not ensconced in your presence, hm?” Asami soothes.

He’s cruel but his voice is too ludicrously smooth for Akihito to be getting worked up over it the very second he wakes up. He answers playfully, he can blame it on his sleep-fused brain giving as good as he gets. “You don’t know what you’re missing.”

“Don’t I?” Asami replies, already out of his chair and crawling onto the bed to kiss his sleepy lips and run his fingers through his tousled bed hair.

“Why are you drinking this early anyway?” Akihito murmurs, wiping the sleep from his eyes.

“Early for you maybe. I’ve been up for more than eight hours.”

Akihito furrows his eyebrows. “You couldn’t sleep?”

“You have a lot to answer for that.”

“Haaa? What have I done now?”

“Perhaps you can tell me why I haven’t been able to sleep a wink since we landed on this island.”
“Umm...” Akihito makes himself think. Sure, he could probably narrow down more than a few reasons, all beginning and ending with the man himself, but if Asami’s expecting an intelligent, well-informed explanation, he might have to settle for a gurgling, yawning response as Akihito fights away his deep sleep psychosis. “So...what were you doing all this time?”

“Watching you hibernate,” Asami says, kissing his neck.

“Oi, pervert, leave me to sleep.” The retort mellows into a groaning murmur of utter listless pleasure.

“My energy levels are starting to feel infinite. Even after three, four hours of exercise, I can feel no strain or fatigue in my muscles.” Asami says softly next to Akihito’s ear, and slowly salves his kisses down to his mouth, kissing in gentle pulses. The boy is still drowsy and soft around the edges, easily manipulable to his bidding.

Akihito lets thoughts of Asami’s hard, muscular body shifting metal wash right through to the extensions of his mind before answering in his sleep-cracked voice, giving him the clinical up and down. “You’re probably crashing. I’ve never had the chance to see it before.”

Asami settles back and takes a second to process that piece of information. Akihito describes it like a drug, because by comparison it’s probably the closest to what it is. “And that means what exactly?” he asks.

“You must know that too much of a good thing is bad for you, right?”

“I don’t know. Must I?”

Akihito holds him by the arms and presses his fingers into his wrists. “Does this hurt?”

“No.”

He reaches back and squeezes Asami by the ankle, pushing a knuckle into the ball of his foot. “What about here?”

“Is it meant to hurt?”

Akihito’s hand smacks down onto Asami’s back and he straddles his lower back, tenderness discarded for his next task. His wings widen and he puts both palms flat on Asami’s back, beginning at the shoulder blades and venturing slowly down into the centre of his back, explaining as he does it. “You’ve been high on life energy for too long and your body’s having trouble channeling it. The first place you feel it is your outer extremities — your hands, feet and head — as the energy has nowhere to go. I’ll absorb some of it so stay still.”
Just as Asami’s about to fully enjoy the labours of Akihito’s nude massage, he’s reminded with another slap on his back that this is strictly for health purposes. However, Asami will always extol the benefits of a post-workout massage. Akihito’s hands lower until they’re pressing firmly against his tailbone and heat the area severely enough that the man hisses at the unexpected hike in temperature. “This is...a little painful,” he grits.

“That’s because a large amount of energy seems to have gathered around your crotch,” Akihito explains gleefully. “Trust me, it would hurt a lot more if you weren’t lying ass up.”

Asami’s whole body shakes with a deep, purring laugh into the pillow and leans around to peer at Akihito over his shoulder. “You truly are an angel of gracious compassion, Akihito.”

Akihito sneers sarcastically then shoves him back down onto the bed. “Be quiet and stop moving.”

He’s not at all surprised by how much energy has been amassed by Asami’s loins, there’s going to be two nice scalding handprints on his backside if he continues this for any longer, along this very fine line between good deed and punishment. He can be every bit as sadistic as Asami if he wants to be, with two handprints only the tip of the iceberg, and a whole long, burning slide down. He tugs the belted waistband of Asami’s trousers. “I need you to take these off.”

“You’re very demanding of me.” Asami unzips them and slips his hand under himself to undo the belt buckle and roll down his fly. He’s unabated even when Akihito reaches round to grab him through the material of his briefs in a confining hold, a forwardness that excites him.

“This is the reason why you’re in this mess in the first place.” Akihito squeezes his crotch like he wants to squeeze the goddamn life out of it for being the best and the most treacherous thing he’s ever felt in his life, and Asami has the audacity to say, "Are you flirting with me?" in the kind of purr that could make him wet for days. Akihito can only commandeer his strength to pull Asami’s trousers the rest of the way down and place both hands on each hardened steel buttock. “Just lie still so I can finish this.”

Akihito’s body feels like it’s taking a battering, he’s sweating and his pulse is racing but his wings are thriving on the feast of energy flowing into them. Old feathers shed and new ones grow immediately in their place until he’s acquired an entirely new plume of feathers in one satisfying sitting. A dry climax shakes him and his hands finally go numb. His limit has been reached.

“At are you done?” Asami calls over his shoulder.

The boy rubs the feeling back into his hands. “I—I think so. How do you feel?”

Asami shrugs. “No different.”

The man sits up and puts himself back together like it was all a breeze and Akihito didn’t just dry orgasm for him to act so nonchalant about it. He watches Asami buckle his belt and his hands are shaking, a single bead of sweat runs down his neck and Akihito grins. “Are you sure?”

Their eyes meet for a second before Asami flashes forward and pushes him down onto his back, his immaculate strength holding him firmly. He growls and flicks a derisive smirk before sinking a devouring kiss onto Akihito’s lips.
Between licks and nips and battling tongues, Akihito considers the madness of what a perfect response this is to the dizzying, literal soul expunging that’s passed through Asami right now. Somewhere in between taking his clothes off and the very first healing touch should’ve sent the bastard into a comatose sleep for at least a few hours to recoup from energy burns and an invasion of psyche — but no, Asami is high again, high as a fucking kite and Akihito can hardly breathe.

“You still have a lot of strength left in you,” Akihito warily points out, because fuck this man for being no less potent even after he’s had the life energy physically sucked out of him.

Asami flicks his tongue against Akihito’s lips and along his jawline, and in a low, breathy chuckle, says, “You sound surprised.”

“You’ve defied every expectation, nothing surprises me anymore,” Akihito admits. He scours his nails up Asami’s back to pull on his hair and turn him so he can suck that tongue again. He purrs when identifying the smoky scotch taste around the edges of the man’s lips. “You’re probably still drunk.”

“On the contrary, I’m wonderfully sober,” Asami returns.

Asami kisses down his newly spruced wings, nosing into downy baby feathers and riding high off their scent. Akihito’s delighted with his new coat of feathers, and he knows Asami likes them too because he can’t stop touching them. He runs his fingers through them until Akihito’s quivering back arches up with a moan so deliciously lewd that a lesser man would have come at the very sound of him, purring and babbling with his hips rising off the bed because even the friction against fabric must be too harsh a sensation.
“Perhaps I'm not the one who's drunk, am I, Akihito?”

Akihito can only tremble and gasp, “Ahh... touch my wings.”

And when Asami does, the curve of his ass meets Asami’s touch, only an inch away from his twitching entrance and the temptation is there to want it to open him up, one luscious finger at a time and make him plead in sweet, shivering cries.

“Does it feel good, Akihito?”

“Mmmmmnnn...”

Asami’s voice roughens with amusement. "Is that the only place you feel good? How did it feel absorbing the life energy from me? Greedy little angel."

“Ah...nngh, Asami—“

When Akihito looks too bowled over, Asami pulls him into his lap, his hands wrapped around him and revisiting his lips with a constant crave of hard, licking bites. Akihito cries out and pushes back into him like he’s been aching decades for it, legs spread over Asami’s knees and giving every single one of the man’s touches a unanimous, unspoken “Yes.”

Asami leans over to retrieve the lube on the nightstand and squeezes a generous amount on his fingers before sliding them into him. Akihito moans and Asami nibbles around the skin of his neck, kissing his ear and pretending to be immune to the tiny gasps, the soft wings flitting against his skin and Akihito’s eagerness wetting his fingers from his hard, untouched cock while he pries a third finger into him. Akihito drops his head back onto his shoulder and howls when Asami assaults his prostate.

“You take my breath away like this, Akihito, do you know that?” He positions Akihito on all fours, knees and elbows to the bed and the sweetness of his boy turning his head to watch him undo his belt buckle and zip and pull out his throbbing hard erection has him considering the mastery of his own forceful desire a delicate blink away from shattering. With both hands cupping the sides of Akihito’s hips, he pulls his ass back onto his cock with enough snap that Akihito audibly loses his breath. It's a heady, beautiful sound, with a moan twice as long and twice as loud tearing his vocal chords raw.

He gently parts Akihito’s wings so he can watch the goose pimpls rise on his sweating skin, with each hard thrust jutting him forward and wrenching his name, Asami, Asami, Asami, screaming with the ecstasy of pleasure. He pulls the smaller body up to his chest and wraps his arms around him, touching him, feeling him quiver right through to his wings and crying out as the faintest brush against them drives him hungrily back onto his cock.
“You should see yourself, Akihito, what a lusty, shameless sight you are. One day I'll know everything about you, everything that makes this mysterious body tick, because you know deep down we crave the same things, the answers to all the same questions. And like that long, unending question, I will find those answers at the very bottom of you, because all of you belongs to me, Akihito. All of you.”

“Ahh...t—then...all of you belongs to me as well, Asami. Before anyone else, you belong to me. I'll destroy the whole world if they try to take you from me.”

Asami’s eyes flash fire as Akihito fists his hair to take his lips as if it’s their vow, having Akihito reflexively clenching him from behind and crushing him, driving pure pleasure out of him to fill his hungry body is the most honest vow they’ll ever have.

They fall forward onto the bed when they come, groaning. Akihito’s so exhausted and he’s only just woken up, but Asami looms over him, turning him over and with a swift readiness spreads his legs and pushes inside him again, deep and toe-curling. He looks up at Asami’s handsome face, and then at the muscular shoulders tapering down into strong arms and a stronger chest, his abs that bulge with every thrust — Akihito feels his head loll back. While Asami’s kissing him he reaches around to grab for his buttocks and pull him closer, letting that euphoria drenched smile touch the shell of his ear and whisper to him that his arrogance will get the better of him one day, or his money will dry up and he’ll have nothing, or that he’s stupid for ever having captured him in the first place, just to feel the spark of contentious desire bring Asami towards utter completion.

They wind down gracefully this time — Asami kissing his neck and running his fingers up and down his back in gentle motions. Akihito lies on top, a leg swung over and knitting comfortable in the space between Asami’s legs and his wings furl in on themselves, returning back into his body.
There are worse things in the world, he thinks, than a man who can never settle for just once. He could easily spend a thousand hours like this, except they have to leave tomorrow, and maybe he’s crazy but he wants to experience all this island has to offer than spend the entire duration in bed. “If this is my last full day on the island, I want to at least see more of it before we have to go back home,” he mutters against Asami’s chest.

“You could probably fly from one end of the island to the other in a few minutes.”

Akihito lifts his head to shoot him an uncompromising stare. “That’s not the point. This island is incredible and we could be doing so many other things.”

“There is something I could show you. something you’d never find on your own.”

That instantly piques Akihito’s interest.

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The undergrowth of brambles scratch against Akihito’s legs as he follows Asami and his men deep into the heart of the island. While the surrounding gardens are impeccably landscaped, the travel between them and the subtropical rainforest is a journey into unknown territory. Thick, unkempt vegetation, knee high coarse grass and eerie creature sounds provide a lasting discomfort.

“This way.” Suoh points in the compass’ direction and steers them into an abrupt low dip in the ground that’s cleared of trees and about fifty meters across. He walks down into the middle of the concave dip and kicks the loose dirt with his feet until blackened rusted metal appears through the debris.

Akihito looks on, highly curious. “What is that?”

Asami says nothing as both of his men twist the circular locks to precise points and lift the metal hatch open. Dust and debris fly up and as it’s settling, he turns to Akihito’s widened eyes. “Follow me.”

The worn concrete steps lead down into darkness, Suoh and Kirishima guide the way with torches while Akihito's perfect vision can see all the way down. The smell of dampness and seawater is especially strong, he remembers what Asami told him about this island’s naval history but it’s hard to imagine what else it could be used for in this day and age. Kirishima hits a switch and there’s a short static delay before the lights flicker on and reveal the dingy concrete space Akihito could see in his dark vision.

It looks ransacked, all that’s left are bits of rusted machinery, too broken or too worthless to take. The door at the end of the room takes them through a corridor and down another set of stairs and as they descend deeper it becomes harder to ignore the drop in temperature and the metallic groans expanding and contracting. They must surely be below sea level now.

“What is this place?” Akihito asks, his voice echoing for several seconds down the chasm of the stair shaft.

“I told you I would show you more than what's above ground. Something many thought had been destroyed for years.”

At the bottom, they come to a heavily armored door, rusted over by time. Suoh, the more muscular of
Asami’s guards, twists the circular pressure lock to let them through into another dark grey room, stark coldness and hazardous signs everywhere make the overwhelmingly sharp smell that much more like death. Akihito feels as if the air is curdling in his mouth as he breathes.

“This was the main control room for Japan’s World War II submarines,” Asami says. “They carried armored warheads from the mainland to this island where they were awaiting deployment.”

Akihito stares around at the dust covered machinery and scrap metal strewn across the concrete room. “No way. There are submarines here?”

“Not anymore. There were, until a decade ago. Weapons, missiles, technology and about thirty thousand tonnes of steel were salvaged from them, but not all of it was taken back.”

Asami has Akihito follow him, with Suoh and Kirishima leading ahead into the innermost room of the underground hub. Panels and metal gratings, the innards of this abandoned place are clogged with grime and utmost secrecy. The door looks like it had an electronic locking system once, but not anymore. Asami manually unbolts all the nuts on the door's access panel to insert a unique shaped key into the lock.

Inside the small, bare room, blackened lead metal as dense as can be encase them all around. Suoh and Kirishima point their torches at the back part of the wall and they heave open a sliding panel to reveal a narrow view hole. Asami stands looking and Akihito has to tiptoe to see.

“These are what’s left of Japan’s atomic bombs,” Asami reveals.

In that very second, Akihito can feel the moment his heart stops. “Oh my god. W—Why are they here? Are we in danger?”

“They’ve had their nuclear cores extracted so they pose no threat. These are all that’s left of them.”

“I’ve never seen a bomb before.”

“They’re horrendous, are they not? Only a tiny percentage of their payloads would be enough to blow a hole in the Earth. And here they are, sitting underneath my island.” There's no pride in Asami’s voice as he says it.

“But...but why are they still here? Shouldn’t they take them away? Shouldn't they be destroyed?”

“Understand, Akihito, that each one of these is a war crime. Constructed in secret and intended to be used. The world was led to believe that Japan’s nuclear program was a failure, a thing far from truth. They were simply waiting for the opportunity. If these bombs were ever seen to be taken back to the mainland, the whole world would be up in arms. The fact that this island now belongs to me and I have the burden of knowledge, it’s an involvement I’d rather not put myself through.”

“During that time, nuclear weapons like these were only tested in theory. Field testing them would have come at an incomprehensible cost to the lives many as well as the surrounding ecosystem,” Kirishima adds.

“One could never have imagined their true devastation until America dropped their bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima and observed its mass cruelty from the other side of the globe, one nation watching while it tried to obliterate another. “Cruel bombs,” was what Emperor Hirohito called these. Cruelty in its rawest, most powerful form.”

“Cruel...” Akihito withers at the thought of it.
“To think how ready we are to destroy one another that we build monstrous things like this. Japan doesn’t want these to be in their museums or their history books. It’s a shame on our nation that we would have had all of this destruction at our disposal, and two were all it took to realise how very wrong we were. How many do you see here, Akihito?”

Akihito mentally counts up the shells and swallows. “T—Ten.”

“Ten,” Asami repeats. “I don’t think I need to put that number into perspective for you. It’s better that they remain in an ocean grave forever than see the light of day again.”

"A—Asami," Akihito mutters. His heart begins palpitating, beating erratic and immediately his eyes cloud over as if he’s going blind and regaining his sight from one moment to the next. He reaches for Asami’s shirt in a feeble grip, unaware that he’s swaying, ready to topple. "Asami...c—can we go back? I don’t...feel so good—"

Asami turns to see the boy’s ghost white form, one eye darkened indigo against the others pale blue and rocking unstable from side to side. His eyes roll back into his head and confusion and alarm propels Asami to catch him before he hits the floor.

"Akihito!"

Chapter End Notes

Cliffhanger for Christmas \o/! Happy Holidays everyone!!

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Some notes:
1) A little bit about the ‘Meoto Iwa’, it’s an imagery I’ve thought of to represent Asami’s mother ever since I first conceived of her character - the strength and stability of a rock and connected to her loved ones with an unbreakable bond, even when constantly battered by the elements.

2) The atomic bombs are completely made up and there’s no evidence documented to indicated that Japan ever had them in WWII. It’s purely fictional for the purposes of this story.
“He’s awake, Asami-sama.”

He turns to Kirishima from the balcony, his assistant’s poise pacifying the unsettledness within him. He puts out his cigarette and goes back into the bedroom to see Akihito sitting up in bed, colour returned to his face and his eyes pale blue and round, as they should be.

“Asami,” Akihito says, with a little woebegone smile tugging at the sides of his lips.

“Akihito,” he replies and sits on the bed next to him, stroking a gentle hand against his warm cheek. It’s the only comfort he’s had in the last four hours. “How do you feel?”

“Better,” Akihito says, managing a small smile.

“What happened to you?”

Akihito hesitates a moment before answering. “I—I don’t know. I felt my head go funny, and my vision started to darken.” He closes his eyes and rubs a hand over his face. “I don’t know what happened after that.”

“You collapsed,” Asami informs him. “We brought you back to the house.”

Suoh enters the room with a cup of ginseng tea and sets it on the bedside table. Akihito looks at the bodyguard with silent acknowledgement and then back to Asami’s concerned expression. “I feel much better now.” He takes the cup by the rim and blows on it, sipping through most of the room’s heavy silence, and Asami’s unshakable stare.

“Has this ever happened to you before?” Asami asks.

“I wouldn’t know even if it did.” Akihito places the cup back down and tries to displace Asami’s quiet concern with a little more effort this time. “I’m alright, really.”

“Suoh, Kirishima, I would speak with Akihito alone.” He waits for both of his men to leave before turning back to the boy, and the calm slips from Akihito’s face when he processes Asami’s darkening expression.

“What really happened back there?”

“I told you, I don’t—”

“Don’t start this with me, Akihito. You do know.”
Akihito looks down from Asami’s piercing eyes, finding the grievance underpinning every one of Asami’s words unbearable. “Asami, don’t. Please.”

“Things are happening to you and there are no explanations for them.”

Akihito coils in on himself, souring, knowing there’s a slow building rage underneath Asami’s calculated calm that’s a moment away from unleashing. “These things are nothing, ok? Nothing. I don’t need you pitying me, Asami, not you.”

“Then don’t give me reason to,” is Asami’s strict reply, and it's then that Akihito erupts.

“How will you make it better, huh!? Will you kiss it and make it go away? It’s not up to you, Asami. I don’t know what happened any more than you do, but you look at me as though you need to fix whatever it is that’s broken in me and I don’t want it. Any of it. You of all people should know that things are never what they seem on the surface, and you and your men were ready to put a bullet between my eyes before you found the one thing about me that made it worth saving the bullet. So I don’t fucking need you to make me feel that way again.”

The outburst almost renders Asami speechless, but Akihito steamrolls on, eyes brimming with the threat of tears and prevailing anger.

“You were what I dreaded the most that night when you captured me at Sion. You were everything I dreaded in this world made real. And now? Now I’d go mad if I couldn’t have you. Things are never the way you think they are, Asami. We are the proof. You’re the fucking king of East Asia and I’m a freak who never belonged here in the first place. What the hell are we doing with each other?”

Akihito’s unsteady laughter filters into the background and looks as if he might crack, and Asami can hardly begin to break the edge off his tension. He pulls Akihito to gather him to his senses. “Are you trying to play games with me? Are you so daring to give me the cold shoulder when I can tell just from looking at you that something has disturbed you deeply, and of all the precious moments in a day, you choose now to question my concern? You’re a fool, Akihito.”

“I know, I am a fool.” Akihito laughs, and it’s the only tangible truth. Asami lifts his chin and his sunken eyes to look into molten gold.

“I’m not going to sit and watch the slow death of the joy I saw in you yesterday because you’re churning your internalised pain. I’m not going to do that, Akihito, I won’t.”

Akihito pries open Asami’s grip and flicks it aside. “You say it like it’s such an easy thing to have to revisit what I’ve tried so hard to bury and forget.”

“It’ll bury you all the same, if you let it.”

“Even you couldn't imagine the things I’ve done...what I had to do to survive, you’d never look at me in the same way again. I’ve destroyed that part of me so I can continue to live. So please don't make me say it, Asami, please don’t—”

“—You must forget who you’re talking to,” comes the stinging derision. It takes a lot in Asami to not meet Akihito with equal blows but he seethes in a callous, close proximity glare. “Do you think I care what you’ve done? We’ve all committed things we never thought we were capable of. We all try to be good people and do as the world tells us to, but that’s exactly why my soul drips with red, because the world can turn on you in a second and hate every part of you. This world does not smile upon us. It owes us nothing and we owe it the same, and if you knew this, which I know deep down you do, you would never concede to it.”
Akihito’s hands shake as he reaches for Asami’s shirt collar in angry desperation but Asami intercepts him, strongly clasping around each wrist and watching Akihito plead with him, begging him, keening like he wants to disappear into the atmosphere if it means to never have to face his demons.

“Please, Asami, anything but this.” He’s half growling, half tearful and straining at his own aggression, and all Asami can do is wither him an ailing look and bring him to his chest to stroke and kiss the top of his golden head. He really doesn’t know what use words would be to balm Akihito’s fear, but he can only do this and hope it delivers some semblance of peace to him. Akihito curls his arms around his body and buries his head deeper into his chest, wishing he could cocoon himself inside his warmth.

“Didn’t you once talk about severing limbs as if it were nothing, and now you quake at the thought of painful words? Are you scared of how I’ll receive them?” Asami says quietly.

The blonde scrunches his hands in his shirt and shakes his head from side to side. “Some things are unhealable, even for me.”

Asami sighs into the unruly mop and smooths it through his fingers, ceding to defeat. “Fine, if it bothers you that much.” He wonders what he’s going to do with a boy whose damned to be a prisoner of his own secrets. From here on, he can only reassure him, as he’s done from the start, that no harm will ever come to him.

Akihito eventually pulls away and looks at him, a mellowed, somewhat awkward smile ghosting over his face and he kisses him with a meek peck to the lips as if testing his affections. Asami has to remind him that nothing’s changed between them as he pulls the worried boy in to kiss him again, making it as unmistakable as fact. Akihito’s eyes flicker shut and he smiles, just as Akihito would do after waging a storm of words and then lulling at a moment’s kiss.

And Akihito smiles, solemnness still etching his brow as he pulls back. He takes off his t-shirt and fully uncurls his wings before shifting into Asami’s lap. “We really are worlds apart, you and I,” he starts, meeting Asami's kiss with a fevered moan, “But we walk the same dark side of it. And now I’ve found you and your darkness is all I want.” He tugs his fingers through Asami’s hair, arching when Asami takes a feel of both wings and pulls him in tightly. “Whatever you do and wherever you are, you make me forget how much I can't escape that darkness. The thing I hate the most becoming a salvation. Maybe you’re the only one who could ever possibly do that to me, and be perfect, just for me. You’ll never know how grateful I am to you.”

He’s starting to sound like himself again, Asami thinks, his unpracticed, honest desires resurfacing in that cheeky grin like butter wouldn’t melt, and he’s willing to indulge him when he feels an unmistakable need pressing into his lap. “Maybe I do know,” he smirks.

“No, you don’t,” Akihito assures him, “And it’ll never be enough. Just know that I mean it.” He pulls the hem of Asami’s top up over his head and grips his shoulders, kissing him again and again, those strong, determined hands run along his back and brushing against his wings, delivering ecstasy.

“Is this the shape of that gratitude?” Asami asks, and Akihito’s already working his shorts down over his legs and climbing back into Asami’s lap, making very bold, very direct decisions for the both of them as he rolls the zip of Asami’s trousers down to touch him there, actions bold with initiative. Asami tilts Akihito’s chin to look at him, and there’s a glint in his boy’s eyes, a flame blue at its heart that Asami revels in.
Akihito lowers himself down, trembling as the first waves of extreme pleasure hits him and his wings flit with excitement. “You took this from me,” he moans, “Now I don’t want anyone else to take it but you.” His gasp rips right from his throat when he sinks all the way down and Asami’s hands knead into his buttocks, pulling him closer. “I don’t want anyone else to ever touch me like this. I only want you,” Akihito manages a few words then mewls when Asami hits him with intense heat, he throws his head back and cries out, because Asami’s cock is just that good and his core screams.

“Your nightmares insist on sharing a part of you, Akihito, but I will erase them, because all of you belongs to me.”

“Erase them, Asami. Everything.” His head drops onto Asami’s shoulder and he runs his nails over his tall back, scoring jagged red lines of fresh blood that heal immediately and to his utmost pleasure.

Asami brings their lips crushing together again and the responsive, gorgeous body lifts and rocks and sees that his eyes are focused on nothing else but his supple, yearning body. “I’ll never share you. Not with your fears, not with your past. Nothing. Do you hear me? You belong to me as I see you right now. All of you belongs to me.”

“Ahh...Asami!” Akihito cries and Asami’s hands go down to his thighs to grip them from the underneath so tight it makes his vocals cords split, but settles in an instant when hungry kisses drag along his neck to his parted, panting lips and the thrusts drive into him with all the wealth of strength he’ll continue to ply Asami with if it means the man’s infallible sex-drive will always be this goddamn incredible. He’ll concede to darkness if it means to drown into the very depths of Asami’s oblivion — deep, dangerous and so gorgeously soothing.

He inclines his body and Asami lets him drop back onto the bed with lips hotly pressing into his chest, sucking him, tasting him, wanting to be fully undone by them. He reaches to take Asami’s hands and wraps them around his cock, both their hands working at wrenching those last powerful
thrusts from Asami and leaving him utterly breathless, climaxing to a long, heartfelt scream and Asami’s hot, wet heat drenching him.

The hot afternoon sun streams in through their window, and Akihito’s wings sway with an easy flutter, fanning their heated bodies. Asami like this is what it is to know desire disarmed and declawed — sedentary — sharing a selfish union with a force of nature quietened to the synapse hum of life energy. Asami hasn’t said a word to him in a while, but every now and again his fingers draw along his back — small, idle flicks that paint everything he wants to say with near perfect articulation.

Hours ago he managed to single-handedly steer the man from calamitous high energy overexposure, and here he’s craving it more than ever whilst Asami’s laying serene. Akihito almost wishes he had the early reluctance he once did for the man’s blistering arousal to keep the addiction at bay, but for all his fierce denial, there’s a universe in league with the man resetting its parameters exclusively to his watch.

He looks up at Asami and he stares back with suspicion still edging his handsome expression. Akihito cups the sides of his face and strokes his cheeks, lifting himself to look into his golden eyes before dropping gentle kisses onto each eyelid, and Asami softens to it, if only for a fraction of a heartbeat, but it’s more than enough to feel the emotion soak through. He feels Asami’s arms tighten around his waist and Akihito presses an ear to his hard chest, heart afloat in his mouth as the deep, continuous rhythm of Asami’s life thrums along his veins.

And for all this time, Asami lies still and contemplates the daddy of all dilemmas. He's approached Akihito with caution ever since he revealed himself to be more than the flesh and blood of a troubled youth. He’s been bruised and hunted and lived in fear for most of his existence and Asami contemplates that cycle of that existence — if Akihito’s been trawling the earth for millennia or if he’s been born again, slotting himself between lives that he’s neither chosen nor aspired to remain in, death being a liquid path into a new beginning — a fresh start.

Man has the bliss of nothingness after death — one flat, unconscious plain of nothingness that is the same for all. Everything equal in nothingness. Asami wonders if that’s not quite the same for Akihito. Akihito’s alleged death certificate has always sat near the foreground of his mind. He toils with the thought that there’s something Akihito’s seen on the other side that keeps him clinging fiercely to life, and Asami is right to be disturbed by it.

Akihito doesn’t speak solemnly about death. He doesn’t divine when it’s his time with any level of rational certainty. He viciously fears it, more than anything, not for its finality but perhaps for its continuity. He’s seen the fight in his boy, his intense, unconquerable desire to survive, and that’s why he thinks Akihito may not have started anew but has continued to live with the shadow of a previous incarnation haunting him, the thorn of a hundred past existences and as many deaths forever embedded into the core of his being he can’t ever hope to remove, and it’s something unimaginable, even for Asami to contemplate.

His palms start to sweat and he clenches them between around Akihito body, trying to rid himself of that underlying dread. When the boy stirs on top of him, he nudges the side of his soft, golden head with his nose and Akihito scoots up higher to kiss him and he responds by leaning into it, tasting an urgency there that sits heavily in his heart. “I never want to see you like that again, Akihito, do you understand?” he goes on to say, his voice tinged with an arduous ache.

“I’m sorry,” Akihito whispers and looks at him with a sullen frown, brushing the damp stray strands from Asami’s face. He’s so heartbreakingly handsome that it hurts to see him look anything other than infallible.
“Don’t apologise,” Asami returns, kissing him again, and Akihito’s wings flutter in contentment.

“I’m sorry,” Akihito says again and laughs with it, providing the opportunity for Asami to flip him onto his back and ravish his lips. He rakes his hands down Asami’s back and with a little reciprocating greed cups Asami’s firm glutes in his hands and hears a wisp of a curse Asami never makes but he wants to hear again and again.

"Disobedient brat," Asami declares. He has a mind to chain Akihito to this bed and never let him leave, but the little devil shoots up from the bed, feet plunging into the soft mattress and hops out of his reach. There at the balcony window, beaming with his face full of sunlight, Akihito looks back at him with a smile he thought he’d never see again, and dives straight out of it, his elated laugh reaching into the bedroom as Asami shakes his head with a smile.

Asami opens the door to his mother’s bedroom for the first time in many months. He keeps it locked and forbids even the caretakers inside for any reason. All of her personal belongings are kept in their original places exactly how she left them, and all but her medical equipment remain. Even the bed sheets still linger with a faint scent of her. He wipes the surfaces with a dust cloth, cleaning each individual ornament and placing them back in their precise positions, a ritual he performs every time he comes to the island, carefully protecting what’s left of her memory.

Akihito must have seen the photograph of her in the living room that prompted his curiosity. It’s no concealment on his part, after all, the grim details of his father’s murder was public knowledge for a long time afterwards, much to his mother’s agony. But he prefers to keep her privacy at close proximity, out of respect for all her suffering undeserving of an audience.

He kneels before the wooden cabinet and opens the doors to the smiling face of her photograph. Precious stones are arranged in a circular pattern and on either side of it is a white porcelain chrysanthemum and an incense burner with fresh, unlit incense sticks. He takes out the lighter from his pocket and lights the sticks, smoky tendrils of hyacinth permeate through the air. He places his hands together and closes his eyes in quiet contemplation.

Asami’s seen enough in his years to know there are no real gods in this world — no higher powers guiding the fates of all humanity and earthly events. Yet he somehow doesn’t fault others for finding comfort in addressing the heavens to take care of their loved ones, even if he’s unmoved by it himself. Mankind’s constant search for the divine is a mystical, beautiful delusion that has nothing to do with him. The nonintervention, as he sees it, keeps him humble, to not expect more than what he can perceive with his own senses.

He begins to think back to his early days with his parents and his childhood home back in Shizuoka, recanting the times spent and their nurturing words and loving smiles. And then their uprooting — their move to Tokyo — of his mother’s howls for days on end when his father was ripped from her embrace and the life they had to endure without him. Of his student days and first times — his first taste of a cigarette, his first touch of a girl’s soft breast, his first bare-knuckle fistfight and the taste of blood swelling in him when he stared into the broken face of one who dared to brand his mother a whore raped by a demon that resulted in his birth. The sheer emphatic satisfaction of having them beg for his mercy all while thinking for the very first time in his life, he truly wanted to kill another human being. And then his mother’s cries as she chastised him and kissed him on the forehead, and the barrage of tears he’d been withholding for a lifetime and a half finally broke his emotional banks.
He thinks of that life up until now like a blur — all the hardships and success, all the money, all the blood, all the sex — everything he’s built himself up to be. He remembers the handful of money his mother gave to him before he set off for university and the empire he built out of it, and the savings that he inherited after her death used in the only way he knew would be a tribute to her, so that other lives may be saved when hers could not.

And lastly, he thinks of Akihito.

Akihito doesn’t believe in the Gods either. He doesn’t know of complex mathematics, physics or the revelry of the divine. He’s content with his own life being a mystery and that’s what Asami finds so beautiful about his whole being. He sees fragments of Akihito in everything, a kind of distant immortality that the boy may always have been here and only now has Asami felt fully awake to his presence.

Perhaps now is the most appropriate time to try and make sense of him — the anomaly he’s been searching for all along — the one that straddles all of those enduring quandaries about life, rational thought and piety that big men sit around and talk about and throws it all into disarray, the conventions of mysticism smashed and blown wide open, mysticism being a boy who drank the very darkness from his soul and licked his lips for more.

He’s childlike and extreme, complicated and sensual and the most outrageous thing he’s ever been in the presence of. His heart is an explosion of roaring currents firing off a multitude of emotions. He re-creates the universe every time he wakes up and destroys it before he goes back to sleep, and has the need for chaos and tranquility all in one unanimous package making you appreciate how wonderful a single being can be with all its flaws and open wounds, so one-of-a-kind and his, utterly and completely. A flawed, tortured, destructive little angel who couldn’t be more perfect.

A few years ago Asami lost the only person left who remained closest to him, now he feels as if he’s gained everything back tenfold. He’ll protect him fiercer than any power in Akihito’s realm or beyond that would want to take him away from him, because goodness knows there’s enough fire inside of him to conquer all of hell if they dare try. However much they’d need Akihito, he’d need him infinitely more. He’d never feel more happy to be doomed by his own desires for this one boy.

When the incense has all burnt out, he closes the cabinet and leaves the room, locking it behind him. He finds Kirishima and Suoh busy in the kitchen preparing a meal. Kirishima looks up from his task and bows to his boss. “Asami-sama. How is Takaba-kun's condition?”

“A lot better it seems, he took off out of the window not so long ago.”

“A good thing, I suspect.”

Asami sees the array of oysters, mussels, tiger king prawns, squid, barracuda, blue mackerel and pacific cod laid out on the kitchen counter, Suoh’s filleting a large, pink salmon while Kirishima chops the vegetables plucked fresh from the garden. “You’re preparing a great deal.”

“Suoh-san and I went out early to do a spot of fishing. We’re blessed on this island to have the ocean’s bounty all to ourselves. I thought hot pot would be the most suitable and delicious way to cook all the ingredients. It’s not the right season for it, but after Takaba-kun’s sudden collapse, I thought a comforting dish would bring strength back to him. And to you, Asami-sama.”

Asami approves. “A sentiment I can embrace. Well thought, Kirishima.”

“Please don’t mention it, sir,” his aide smiles.
“We should enjoy this meal outdoors under the pavilion, being our last evening meal on the island, let's make it an occasion,” Asami suggests.

“Absolutely,” Kirishima replies, and Suoh nods silently in agreement.

“I'll prepare the fire pit, then.” He grabs a box of matches from the drawer and lighter fuel and heads outside.

Akihito snaps his wings and glides through the air, cutting the breeze and letting it carry him along the shores of the island. He loves spiraling up to a great height and diving straight into the ocean, and then with the full force of his wings he thrusts out from the water back into the sky.

He takes himself into the grove and eats the peaches, plums and nectarines off their heavy branches, sweet juices dripping and sticking to him as he tries to manage handfuls of fruit at the same time. He licks his fingers and tastes nectar and salt and Asami’s unique touch that hasn’t been washed away by the ocean. He rips another peach off the tree and bites into it, ravenous with greed at its addicting sweetness. He knows it’s because he’s still healing that he can’t stop eating them in their multitude.

Stipplings of sunshine filter through the trees as he tips his head back and feels the warmth of it on his naked skin. He never thought he’d be so grateful to feel it again. It was a lapse somewhere in the deep field of his mind responsible for triggering a past memory he thought he'd buried inside himself for an eternity. He felt his vision darken and his body dropping through an endless blackness of infinity, where he awoke from despair to his whole world in Asami’s eyes, then passed a reviving morsel of life energy into him with a single touch he thought he’d never feel again, wishing and hoping he wouldn’t have to endure an eternity without it.

He swallows thickly, his dry mouth closing off its passage, and he feels like purging everything he’s just eaten over the dread of that horrible place. He can never let Asami know of it, for what it would do to himself to tell him, he would sooner rip out his own tongue than say it.

He brushes himself off and leaps up through the branches, spiraling until he’s a hundred metres up and swooping to gather speed. In the distance, a cloud of smoke filters through the trees near the grounds of the estate and the arriving smell of burning sends him zooming towards it, the sea wind beating him as he hurtles with his wings flat against his body and heart clenching at the thought of a fire ripping through Asami’s home.

And he spots the fire — a small bundling mound smouldering away in a stone pit. Asami emerges through the clearing with more wood piled into his arm and a machete in the other. He throws the logs into the pit and fans the flames with a wooden fan, a large funnel chimney taking the smoke up and out from the roof of the pavilion.

Akihito settles in a tree adamantly watching his man at work. He's caught between observing at a distance and craving at close range Asami's gravitational allure, the flickering heatwave only heightens the man's intensity as he tempers the fire into sizzling embers. Akihito wipes the sweat from his brow — it's hot and yet his skin gooses up at the very sight of Asami, he imagines him chopping down a small forest with just the ferocity of life energy burning inside of him, making him sweat, his muscles work, and making Akihito want to feast on him like this. As he predicts, the image breaks his resolve.
Carefully, he drops down from the tree, sifting the air through his wings to silence his fall. With one swipe he could put the flames right out and ruin all of Asami’s labours, and more importantly, put an end to his leering appetite. Asami hasn’t noticed him yet behind the tangle of bushes and thick palms. He wants to stay hidden and keep watching him, just for a little while longer.

“Oi.”

Akihito snaps still when Asami’s sharp voice fly to his direction.

“Are you going to stand there and watch me all day?”

He slaps his hands over his mouth to stop the impatient sounds escaping from it. He listens out but there’s nothing but silence and his own heartbeat ringing in his ears. One quivering wing beats against the lush green backdrop as his discretion fails entirely and he’s giving himself away on purpose, waiting for Asami to come and find him with his naked leg poking out from the side of the palm being his own meager offer of encouragement, but it's certainly enough. He lingers in anticipation for Asami to approach, and he does, Asami zeroing on him and touching his naked, windswept skin, and Akihito’s slender arms come up to hook around his neck and pull him in for a kiss. Asami maps the taste of the ocean and sweetness on his lips, letting him know exactly where he’s been. “Been busy, hm?”

Akihito immediately pushes his hands underneath Asami’s shirt and utters, “Pretty much,” with a perpetual grin highlighting his glowing features. He’s flown all over the island with not so much as a healthy, tender twinge running up his back and along his wings, but it’s evolved into an unshakeable hunger. “You’re so hot when you’re hard at work,” he says and opens the front of Asami's shirt to trace his abs and chest with eager fingers.

“And you, walking around without any clothes on would turn any man away from his work.” He pushes Akihito back against the tree and they fall into an embrace of deep, searching kisses, a leg automatically coming up to lock around Asami’s waist and Asami's fingers run up his thigh with liquid dexterity. “So ravenous after your little expedition? My men will be out soon with preparations for dinner.”

But Akihito’s mind has already keeled in spectacular fashion and he purrs blissfully with excruciating want. “They can watch for all I care.” And that’s when Asami spins him around and pushes him up against the tree with his body braced firmly behind him, hands roaming and his voice hot against his ear.

“This shameless body of yours has no qualms about making a spectacle for my men, but I do. Your pleasure is reserved for me and me alone.”

Asami’s voice is dark and penetrating, thoroughly complementing the rough bark scratching against his chest and Asami’s equally rough fingers pressing into him, scraping their way up his sides and firmly poising on each globe of his ass, positioning him, exciting him, and pressing his full arousal up against him — so deliciously close.
“Haven’t you ever wanted to do it outside, Asami? Trees whistling, birds singing, the soil getting in
between your fingers.” He reaches around to take Asami’s hand and brings it up to suck each finger
delicately from palm to tip, tasting wood and fire and outdoor dirt that ignites that ten thousand year
old primal passion inside of him, and he knows Asami’s blood is the darkest of them all, having
awakened Akihito’s own carnal energies.

“C’mon, Asami. You’re teasing the fuck out of me. I’m still nice and wet from earlier and full of
energy. It’ll make you stronger. You wouldn’t need a machete to cut down all those — Aahh!”

Akihito gasps when his hips snap back and Asami thrusts straight home, closing off Akihito’s mouth
with furious kisses. He has no doubt this would hurt in any other instance, but not right now. Both
surprise and excitement spills into Akihito’s voice as he braces his hands against the palm tree and
Asami grips his hips with a punishing force that leaves him bereft of words and all manner of things
that aren’t this man and this cock. He pushes himself back to meet his thrusts with eager tandem,
guiding that gorgeously hard cock deeper inside him, fighting for air it’s so good.

“I know of people who talk like this,” Asami states, the rawness stripping his voice down to a
rolling, sexual growl. “They’d promise you the world for just one more fix.”

And like the veritable addict that he is, Akihito gazes back to see the sweat drip off Asami’s body,
wetting him as they meet. He swears the thrusts are that little bit stronger, that little bit more
breathtaking, and Akihito leans his hips back to demand more of it, his toes nearly lifting off the
ground when Asami drives with incredible strength into him at the lilt of a phrase when Akihito says,
“Promise me?” in the way he knows turns Asami on more than anything else.

Asami abruptly pulls out and turns him back around to lift him against the tree and resume face to
face, Akihito sinks down onto the full length of his cock and begs him to go harder, rougher, deeper. His wings flap and his hands grip Asami’s shoulders, ripping the shirt from his back and curling around him until every single part of him is touching his muscled body, and Asami looks at him like he’s been starved blind and the only thing he’ll ever see is the emotion in Akihito’s face when he completes himself on his cock. He braces his arms heavily against the tree to catch his breath and Akihito’s still clinging to him, laying gentle kisses everywhere on his face and carding his fingers through his hair.

The man’s overflowing again, he can feel it from where they’re connected all the way up his spine, but for Asami, it probably feels like a deluge rushing through every pore of his being. He struggles to contain his smile and tips Asami’s head back so he can kiss him and hopefully take the edge off the sensation, or supply it with more. It’s a lovely idea. When he pulls away, Asami’s serious expression hasn’t changed, aside from his hands moving from the tree to encircle his body.

“If anyone saw you like that just now, Akihito, I’d extract their eyes with my own hands and throw them into that fire pit.”

Akihito notes the severity of his tone and he wants to feel uneasy about it but he’s really not very good at being anything but mesmerised by Asami’s devotion. “That’s a scary kind of possessive, Asami,” he chuckles, but he’s also rife with pride and presses a kiss to his cheek that follows around to nip at his ear.

“I don’t mean it lightly when I say your pleasure is mine alone.”

Akihito’s laugh sounds in harmony with the winds and rustling leaves. “I’m pretty sure Mother Nature won’t tell anyone what she saw.”

Asami looks murderously at him.

"Don’t be like that. She’s a nymphomaniac, didn’t you know?"

“And what does that make you?”

“I suppose we’re one and the same, except...you're all mine, and she gets to watch the best porn she’ll ever have from...wherever she is. I might not be as busy as her, but I’m doing some almighty work. Everybody wins.” He gives a winning smile and Asami’s scowl lifts, and Akihito feels like doing a victory dance.

“Come, let's take a shower before I have to kill my men for seeing us in such a state.”
I know this chapter is well overdue. Very shortly after I posted the last chapter, my cousin died. The shock and circumstances surrounding his death was something we weren't expecting in million years. It was also my birthday around that time and nothing was happy or celebratory about it. The months of February and March just...went to shit.

Needless to say, I couldn't concentrate much on any work and my head was detuned from all noise for quite a bit. But I started to resume progress on this story again because it become quite therapeutic, in a way, at a time when I was especially low. I'm extremely grateful for every comment, kudos, every reader that has reached out and touched my heart in some way or another. I count every single one of you and I can't thank you all enough. Sometimes I feel like I'm climbing up the mountains of life with only flip-flops on and on the verge of falling off. I don't share much in the way of my private life because it's much more interesting to let my work speak for me, but if we're all suffering, it eventually manifests in subliminal ways and that's when some of the worst things can happen (for me, anyway). So, I took that space and came back to this and re-wrote most of what you're about to read in this chapter. It was a necessary process.

And now I'm super psyched at seeing the new material from the Volume 8 tankoubon. Sensei's given us so much and continues to be amazing. There's a lot to be happy about <3 <3

At sundown the four of them sit down for dinner under the pavilion. The fire Asami prepared crackles under a large sizzling hot pot, cooking the fresh seafood and vegetables in a flavourous soup. Sushi, sashimi, hand-rolled sushi and all sorts of carefully prepared side dishes and platters line the table resembling some sort of traditional Kaiseki course. Akihito can hardly stop himself from inhaling all of this incredible cuisine.

"This is absolutely delicious!" he chirps with a mouth full with a dozen different elements.

"It was prepared with you in mind, Takaba-kun," Kirishima says, helping himself to one of the side dishes.

"Really? You didn't have to do all of this just for me, I'm happy with anything." And when he says it his eyes shift to Asami next to him, who's nursing a glass of beer and a cigarette and looking the other way, ignoring all of this deliciousness right in front of him. "Do you cook Asami's lunch at work?" he asks Kirishima.

"Honestly, if Asami-sama asked me to, I would, gladly. As it happens, he has a personal chef who prepares all of his meals."

Akihito’s smirk turns impish. "Poor guy probably lays his neck on the line every time he sends him food."

"I've yet to be dissatisfied," Asami says, coolly dismissing Akihito’s provocative retort and takes
another drag of his cigarette.

Akihito scoffs at him and leans forward, feigning a quiet voice to Kirishima and Suoh. “So, what’s it like working for this guy?”

“I’m right here,” Asami cautions, but the calm and arousingly dangerous intonation only eggs Akihito on.

“You can be completely honest,” he cackles to the bodyguards.

For the sake of regaining his boss some face, Kirishima clears his throat and indulges Akihito’s curiosity. “Asami-sama’s work is very demanding. Much is needed of him, and it’s our dedication and privilege to assist him so he may continue to elevate the company to newer heights. No-one is as astute and forward thinking as Asami-sama. May we continue to work together for long to come, sir.”

Asami nods back to him. “Without a doubt.”

“Hang on, was that scripted? Heh, such a shining boss,” Akihito sniggers, staring incredulously at Asami, who’s really not that concerned with the boy’s consistent critical assessment of his business credentials, Akihito’s own credentials being that of a potato, or thereabout in estimation.

He taps the ash from his cigarette and turns up a wicked smirk. “Are you looking for some dirt on me, Akihito? You'll need to look harder.”

“Hah! Your employees probably have a legal binding not to say anything bad about you or you’ll kneecap them.”

Asami’s gaze swings towards his assistant. “Do I, Kirishima?”

“Not in the slightest. Asami-sama values discretion, but he does not refuse the virtue of honesty.”

“In moderation,” Asami adds.

Akihito stabs his chopsticks into the hot pot and plucks out a tiger king prawn and an oyster into his bowl, devouring it with a fearless urgency lest someone be brave enough to take it away from him, and Asami peers at him from over the rim of his glass that shelters a genuine smile brimming on his face at the very black and white of Akihito's emotions. He’s like a cat with a string that'd amuse him for hours. He straightens his expression and addresses his guards again. “How are your families, Kirishima, Suoh?”

“Very well,” says Kirishima, replying first. “Little Nozomi-chan has already decided she wants to marry one of her classmates. Girls grow up fast these days.”

Akihito raises his head up from his bowl and beams with a grin. “Ehhh! You’re going to give her away, Kirishima-san? How old is she? Can I meet her? Is she cute?”

“She's six and a half, soon to be seven. She reminds me of it daily.”

Akihito’s elation drops when he notices Asami’s shoulders rumbling from concealed laughter. Twat.

“Natsume sends her regards by the way. She err…shortly before this trip, she told me that we’re expecting our second. I thought I was getting too old to have another, but it's the most terrific feeling. She’s ten weeks already.”
Asami holds his glass up for an impromptu toast. “Wonderful news. Congratulations, Kirishima.”

“Congratulations,” Suoh nods.

“Congratulations, Kirishima-san!” Akihito smiles.

The reception stokes Kirishima. “Thank you, everyone.”

“What about you, Suoh, how are Yuzuri and the boys? How old are they now?”

“Sixteen, boss,” Suoh replies, and rues with a grumble of his deep voice, "Teenage problems."

Asami concurs. “It’s a difficult age.”

“They want to go mountain biking in Gunma during summer break. Yuzuri doesn’t think it’s a good idea, but I don’t want to disappoint them.”

“Why shouldn’t you? The boys will be too busy with exams next year. And besides, they’re men now. Leave Yuzuri in a hot spring for the day and take them.”

“If you recommend it, boss.”

Akihito mills around with all the new information he’s learnt from Asami’s closest men and flashes a cheeky smirk towards Asami. “Hehe, so Kirishima-san and Suoh-san have kids. No babies for you, huh, Asami?”

“I have my hands full with one right here,” Asami replies, ruffling his big hand through his boy’s hair, messing it.

“Hey!” Akihito interrupts the fun being made of him by stealing the last king prawn from the pot and the evening flows in much the same way, with ease and comfort between the four of them. From the restlessness of the past six hours, it’s been made good by the comfort he feels right here and now. The usually humourless Kirishima and taciturn Suoh have made decent company, and the man himself is calm and completely content like Akihito’s never known him to be. Every time he catches Asami smiling the genuine thing, it makes him crazy just how much he desires this arrogant, hedonistic, unrelenting man. The perfect man for him.

Night falls and stars gather above a clear night sky, and the subtropical heat drops to cooler temperatures. Another round of beers and udon noodles helps to mop up the last of the delicious hot pot that Akihito makes sure doesn’t go to waste. A portion remains in the earthenware pot that’s supposed to be for Asami’s but he’s barely touched his plate all evening.

“You’ve hardly eaten a thing,” Akihito notes.

Asami concentrates on him and then lifts a morsel of food to his mouth, making a show of chewing it for Akihito’s satisfaction. Having dined on only beer and nicotine for the duration of the evening, he’s sure the boy knows the greater reason for why his appetite has been nullified.

After dinner, Asami goes with Suoh to the jet to make all the necessary preparations for tomorrow’s journey, and Akihito scours the beachfront for shells and anything interesting to take home with him as a souvenir. But the truth is that he doesn’t want to leave. It’s been a sublime, surreal experience for him with no urgency to give it up for a life of nothing back in Tokyo. Here there are no people, very few animals, no pollution, no violence, no hardship. He could easily spend another six months marooned in beautiful, total isolation.
He stands at the shore and closes his eyes and the soft motion of the waves washes over his feet, soothing his thoughts. This whole venture has resonated in him more than he ever could've anticipated. He doesn’t care about the island’s dark history. He’s seen and fought and been force-fed darkness and there isn’t a force to stop its inevitability, like the shrines he once used for safety overrun by loitering gangs who extort priests for money. Nowhere is so sacred anymore, the smear of human hostility is too ever present. No different is it for Asami to build a paradise on top of a nuclear graveyard and make it a home. It definitely fits in with his rarefied madness, Akihito thinks to himself.

And speaking of him, he sees Asami’s tall silhouette move along the shoreline coming to meet him. They take a final walk along the beach together, Asami with his hands in his pockets and Akihito kicking the surf as it approaches. He’s going to miss everything about this — having this much freedom with Asami. He doesn’t know what to expect once he goes home to the acclimatised penthouse and a life of non-living, something he’s been meaning to talk to Asami about.

“What will I do when I get back to Tokyo?” he asks.

“That depends. What do you want to do?”

“I—I don’t know. I don’t want to be holed up in your penthouse until forever, that’s for sure. I want to do something, have a purpose.”

“And what will that purpose be?”

Akihito shrugs, “I suppose I haven’t found it yet. But I wanna get a job and support myself, earn my keep.”

“That’s very honourable of you, but you know you have no obligation to.”

Akihito laughs wryly at that. Asami shouldn’t presume he’d be happy being some kept mistress who expects everything for nothing. Fuck that. “The only way I’m going to accept your money, Asami, is if I earn it from you.”

Asami catches the sass and amuses quietly to himself. “You’d work for me, would you?”

“Sure. Why not? How hard could it be?”

“It’s very boring, actually.”

“How could owning a nightclub be boring?”

“It sounds easy when you put it like that — just owning a nightclub.”

“Then what makes it boring?”

“There are many factors that need to be taken care of. I’m not about to give you the 101 on business management, but I’m sure you can appreciate the microcosm of facets I have to control in order to make it run. I have a continuous stream of meetings which are as monotonous as you can imagine and about a thousand people in my employ who are all my responsibility, just as you are my responsibility.”

Akihito’s head bobs a nod, still only marginally enlightened. “That does sound boring, now that you mention it.”

“There are some pleasurable aspects about it, though. The money is exceedingly good.”
“I bet. So much so that you don't know what to do with it all, huh.” Akihito slyly pokes.

“Who says I don't know what to do with it?” Asami replies back, a honeyed purr of self-assurance.

“How about if you need things done here and there that you wouldn't trouble Kirishima or Suoh-san with, like someone to run your errands or post your letters or...taste your food for poison,” he sniggers.

“As pleasing as it is to hear that you’d do those things for me, I already have people for it,” Asami informs him. “Perhaps not the poison part. Besides, it wouldn’t be the little things I’d want from you.”

Akihito looks up with curiosity and Asami continues. “Things aren’t going to be the same as they used to be. The penthouse is your home and by right, you can come and go as you please. I’ll assign you your own personal bodyguard—”

“—But,” Akihito tries to interject but Asami holds up a forestalling hand, indicating calmly. “Let me finish. I’ll assign you a bodyguard who is only to intervene if your life is in threat of danger. He’ll be at a distance, you’ll hardly ever see or hear him.”

Akihito looks at the gold gleam of Asami’s eyes and judges the sincerity in them. “Do you really mean that?”

Asami gives him a reassuring nod. “You have my word.”

Akihito takes it and swallows it and warmth flowers in his stomach until it feels good, as though they’ve finally struck an understanding. And maybe it’s because of this that the sand feels warmer under his feet, that the swaths of stars across the night sky burn crystal bright like a billion supernovas exploding, and Akihito feels stupidly giddy. As they continue walking, his hand occasionally brushes against Asami’s and their energies conduct between them like mini thunderbolts under his skin. He wonders if Asami can feel it in the same way that he does, these tiny, passionate charges that makes so much profound sense to him in an out-and-out mad world.

“What are you thinking?” Asami asks, which catches him off guard.

Unprepared, Akihito opens his mouth and quickly closes it, then licks his lips nervously as he tries to reform a reply. “Please tell me we can come back here again.”

“You can count on it.”

“For longer, though, next time.”

“Alright.”

Asami chuckles softly and Akihito glances just as the light of the moon catches in his golden eyes, and sees the flickering inferno that resides inside each pupil — a dark, sparkling fire that terrifies and exhilarates him.

“What else are you thinking?” Asami says to him, more expectantly than the first time.

Akihito stutters. “W—What’s with that look?”

“A moment ago it looked like you had something more to say.”

Akihito waves him off. “You’re seeing things.”
“You say a good deal without speaking any words at all.” Asami smirks.

“Then why do you need me to say it if you can read me so well?” Akihito shoots back.

His scorn holds up beautifully against the blanket of darkness. Asami can see him surprisingly clearly, all the twitches and minute tingses in the boy’s body language that tells him how hard he’s finding it to act nonchalant. Yes, it would be that easy just to talk about these things, but as Asami hasn’t failed to notice, Akihito has an affinity for making easy things exceptionally hard for himself and those around him.

“You’re playing mind games with me, aren’t you?” Akihito sneers.

“No,” is Asami’s flat response. “But you’d rather fight with yourself than be honest with yourself.”

“What the heck’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means for you to say whatever it is you want to say, without it taking you to lose your nerve for the floodgates to open.”

“Flood—?” Akihito’s exasperation cuts him mid sentence. “What floodgates, Asami?”

"Maybe I ask for a little transparency for the depths of your mind I can’t read, but that I know play heavily on you. Today is one day, I hasten to think what would happen on another day, and just how much of yourself will come pouring out to maul what’s left of your shattered resolve.”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous,” Akihito scoffs. “Nothing about me is shattered, Asami, don’t fucking bother yourself worrying about my mental state. Just put it to the back of your mind and it’ll eventually die there.”

“Is that for my comfort or yours?”

“Look, I don’t know what else to say. I don’t know what happened, I’m sorry.”

“Will it ever happen again, is what I want to know. And if it’ll be worse next time.”

“If it happens or not, it doesn’t make a single bit of difference. I get up and move on, just like always.”

And on any other given day Asami might believe him. No matter how resilient Akihito thinks himself, his vulnerability sits very close to the surface, the same vulnerability that had Akihito clinging to him this afternoon like it was the last thing he’d ever touch, and that’s something Asami never wants to see in him again. Not ever.

“Don’t do that.” Akihito withers him a look.

“Do what?” Asami inquires.

“That concerned-worry face you do, like I’m so helpless.”

“Are you going to dictate my expressions now?”

“You know I didn’t mean it like that.” Akihito sinks and his feet shuffle to a slow stop.

The feeble mumble draws Asami to the meek, scrunched up form that reminds him of their first morning together in his penthouse, downcast and less brazen than the boy who stood up to him in interrogation and overturned Sion in a single night. “It's actually far from what I was thinking,” he
“Then what were you thinking?” Akihito asks.

Asami brings a hand up to cup the side of Akihito’s cheek and strokes his thumb against his soft, sun-kissed skin, lifting his wilted expression. “That discovering you is like an addiction.”

Akihito puffs out a single perplexing sigh and presses both heels of his palms into his eyes. “You're doing it again. You get inside my head too damn much. It’s annoying.”

“Hence, why it's an addiction.”

“Curb your addiction,” Akihito gripes.

“You don't know everything about a person the very first time you meet them, but you can ascertain certain things from a simple handshake, or the way they dress, or the way they hold their drink. Even so, there's always something that'll defy expectation. And then there’s you, who’s defied every expectation and continues to do so, but how I'm glad for it, so I may spend the rest of eternity reading you from cover to end, and hoping it'll take me that long to discover all of you.”

“You'll discover a nightmare,” Akihito says, his voice wavering as his heart begins to race.

“That wouldn't stop me.”

In that same moment Asami’s looking into the strange ambiance of light in Akihito’s eyes, that alien light bathed in darkness but shining through everything. His pupils whirl green, cat-like, a kaleidoscopic band of emotions milling around and how Asami wishes he could extract them and drink the cornucopia of their individual flavours. He pulls Akihito gently forward and his mouth hovers just shy of his lips, just shy of a kiss and a taste of that beautiful scent.

“On those nights when I lie awake and you’re still asleep, I have four, maybe five hours just to look at you, and I feel as if I’m connected to the heavens and the earth simultaneously. And then when you open your eyes to me for the first time that day, I’m at my highest point, I could literally drink the life energy welling inside my mouth it’s that strong — stronger than instinct — and then I realise that there's no limit to the intensity of this emotion, in your world or in mine, and it's overtaken me. That's the honest truth. Even now as I stand before you, Akihito, it's overwhelming.”

The acknowledgment of his candid words is in the supine drop in Akihito’s shoulders, and the trembles that cascade from him when Asami presses a slow, unravelling kiss to his lips, brushing them from side to side, feather-like and tasting the very thing that could turn his conscious mind in on itself. Nevermind that it’s near silent and the blood is deafening in his ears. It's so close to perfection and insanity that Akihito might break out of his skin, and the effort to stay fixed may just kill him. He pushes up into Asami’s arms and a quivering sound trickles out as though all the anguish he’s ever suffered has been exorcised by Asami’s words. “Y—You’ve never said anything like this to me before.”

“I’ve never said this to anyone,” Asami returns, calmly nosing into the strands of Akihito’s hair. “Only you.”

The little laugh Akihito makes is the most wonderfully helpless response to essentially all of this. He somehow finds the grace to pull Asami’s nose out of his hair and kiss him, kiss away all the anxieties and all the stress of the past few hours that have built up to this sweltering, euphoric point. He smooths his fingers over Asami’s handsome jawline and feels the air leave his lungs at repeating his name again and again like a silk-wrapped confession.
Gentleness gives away to his irrational desire and he starts grabbing at Asami’s shoulders, wrapping his arms around his neck and pressing his mouth to Asami’s lips and cheek and all over, oh god, there’s no refrain but a continuous ecstatic charge beating at the front of his mind and pounding up onto Asami’s chest and hands gripping into the folds of his clothing, uttering, “Damn you, Asami,” over and over until his knees give out and he has to climb into Asami’s arms. “Damn you for saying all this gooey shit to me.” Damn him for making his brain a stuttering mess, for the liquid lightning bolt on his tongue every time they meet in a kiss, and for the life energy flowing as a real physical battery burn across his skin when he lifts his top up over his head to make way for his bursting wings.

Damn you, for making me love you this much.

Asami cracks open a heavy eyelid and his pupils burn in the intensity of sunlight as caws of seabirds and the humming sea breeze surround him as he wakes, sobering to the realisation that sleep had finally come to him. The bed is empty next to him, though, and disappointedly so. Akihito’s warmth is gone and only a few feathers are left behind in place of his presence. And a second realisation comes with it, he recounts, as the taste of that nameless liquid rushes onto his tongue.

He overflowed last night. They both did. He felt himself going back in time to revisit that insanely innocent, timid creature who flooded his mind and taught him the colour, smell and taste of every
sensation contained within his soul. It was an all encompassing foray — needful, overwhelming, phenomenal — a new awakening of some sort. The event created a spiritual reaction in Akihito that he’d never experienced before. A long, silk-like thread appeared from the center of his back between his shoulder blades and wings — a miraculous, luminescent yarn that was as much of a product of the unknown as its bizarre, incapacitating potency when Asami touched it. Akihito trusted him to pull it out and delicately it disintegrated into the air. Dust into atoms. Sleep eventually followed.

Whatever gift it was that Akihito had bestowed to him, he was honoured for having received it.

“Good morning, Asami-sama.” Kirishima bows.

In the downstairs hallway his men prepare the last of the bags for transportation back to Tokyo. Suoh appears to be carrying a camel’s weight of bags over his shoulders and in both hands, and as he’s the only person who can pilot the jet, Asami offers to take some of the load in case he sustains an injury.

“I’ll help you with those.” Asami offloads half of the bags and it feels like he’s carrying a bag of feathers in each hand.

They walk out into the blazing sun and make their way through the dusty open air road to the runway, with still no sign of Akihito.

“Was Akihito not with either of you?” Asami asks.

“I did see him briefly, over there,” Kirishima points far off into the distant eastern part of the island.

He’s probably taking a final flight before they have to leave the island, Asami thinks. “Load the jet, I’ll go and find him.”

He follows his assistant’s direction, cutting through the cavernous foliage to shortcut through the centre of the island. He calls to Akihito when he’s out of the clearing and on the outskirts of the island, and sure enough, a body skims across the sky through the blinding flare of the sun at an impressive speed. Akihito makes a swooping descent and arrives at a running jog in front of him, toppling with momentum into his arms.

“I’m here! I’m here! Don’t leave without me!” He lets out a joyful laugh, radiant and rejuvenated and kissing Asami with his wettened, sweet lips.

“Kirishima and Suoh are loading up the jet. It’s time to go.”

“Alright.” Akihito moves away and immediately leaps up into flight, whipping a gust of sand that Asami shelters his face from. “Race you to the jet!” he shouts, and speeds over the canopy before Asami can tackle him down and bury him in the sand. The conceited brat.

With a cigarette between his lips, Asami leans back and smokes throughout takeoff. The air conditioning is on to its maximum in an effort to equalise the hot little fireballs of life energy battling under his skin that's somehow exacerbated by cabin pressure. Cold, recycled air does it wonders.

In less than five minutes their island is a tiny, nondescript triangle in a sea of blue, and Akihito’s forlorn smile is pressed up against the plane window to see it one last time before it disappears.

“I wish we could’ve stayed longer, I never wanted to leave,” he says, sounding depressed for a love
he'll never see again, a yearning paradise Asami would gladly spend an entire year on if he could, if he knew how to navigate this jet. Nothing would estrange him from his office quicker than spending three hundred and sixty-five sleepless nights with Akihito blissed out of his fevered mind and doing absolutely everything to him. It'd be another reason to call it paradise.

The island gradually becomes saturated by azure, and Akihito follows it as far back as the very last window of the cabin, wrapped in amazement and looking at Asami, as if to say, “Take me back,” and a pilot’s license looks like the most beautiful thing in the world to Asami right now.

“I’ll bring you here again,” he promises. A definite promise.

“I hope so,” Akihito says, turning back to the window and the last traces of the tiny landmass. His smile turns into a yawn and he stretches his arms up in front of him. "How long until we get back to Tokyo?"

“About two and a half hours,” Asami says. “Are you tired?”

“Kinda, yeah.” Akihito yawns again and adjusts to a more comfortable position in his seat.

“Use the bed if you want,” Asami suggests, gesturing to the private bedroom.

“It’s alright. I’ll stay up for a bit longer, watch the view.”

“Of course,” Asami quietly amused to himself.

Akihito does fall asleep eventually when they’re a few hundred miles from Hachijou-jima, slumped in his seat with his hands in his lap and his head supported by a pillow Asami slipped under him to protect him from turbulence. He sleeps soundlessly, and just as well, maybe he can catch up on sleep for the both of them.

When they land at the airfield back on mainland soil, Asami loads his sleeping boy into the BMW and has Suoh drive them back to the penthouse. Both men do a safety check of the premises before they enter, Kirishima puts the kettle on the burner and Asami lays Akihito down in the bedroom.

Asami has his first bourbon of his return and brings both his men up to speed regarding Akihito’s amended freedoms, taking effect immediately. He’s less than enthusiastic about returning to normality and the daily grind, just sitting on his sofa delivering a brief feels like he’s having an out of body experience, and the bourbon goes from tasting like smoked richness to rose water to something else of that horrible ilk. He sets the bourbon aside and Kirishima pours him a palate cleansing Earl Grey tea without milk. The taste is there but his head continues to swim unpleasantly. He should have gotten used to the energy overexposure by now, but there’s always something a little bit imperceptible about how this psychedelic disharmony will last and to what effect. And there's nothing quite like a Dunhill cigarette tasting like an exhumed corpse to kill a man’s addiction.

He dismisses his men and heads back to the bedroom, tossing his shirt over the back of a chair and having the allure of Akihito’s sleeping body seduce that very overexposed part of him. Slipping into bed beside him, the boy remains dead to the world even as he kisses his shoulder up to his neck and Akihito’s soft scent pillows around his head as he inhales and draws him closer. That's when he feels the jut of something angular digging into his thigh.

He reaches into Akihito’s trouser pocket and pulls out a compact digital camera, one of those simple point and shoot models that he remembers bringing to the island a long time ago. What's more surprising is how Akihito managed to get a hold of it, for as far as he knew it was locked away in a cupboard drawer and hasn’t seen the light of day for half a decade. Nevertheless, he flicks it on and
switches to the previewer and swallows down a heartbeat from his gut when the first ten or so photographs are ones he took from five years ago — frozen memoirs of his mother’s final days wearing her favourite dark plum kimono, both arms wrapped in bandages and looking towards the ocean with magnanimous courage contained within her brittle smile. The photographs take him back to that aching period he never wanted to revisit, a hollowed-out pain so preciously balanced against the brand new horizon in the next set of photographs — the one’s of present day.

Slowly he moves out of bed and sits in the armchair by the window, rotating through the images one by one, combing through captures of Akihito’s fascinations, double shots and sequential time lapses of plants and crawling things, strange beetles scuttling over a coconut husk, exotic birds and a butterfly resting on a ginger lily. Some shots are long exposures that look as if he's captured the wrap in space-time — blue being pulled apart frame by frame and lens flare striking diagonally through it. He presses through the next lot of photographs and sees nothing but the sun getting bigger and everything else getting smaller, white clouds and an ever expanding sky. And the very last shot is of Akihito’s elated face as he journeys into the center of the sun, a smile so bright that the inexorable majesty of a celestial body couldn’t compare.
Asami wakes to the sound of his phone vibrating on the bedside table, scheduled to alert him first thing with flight information. He reads it with Akihito's arm slung across his chest while his whole body faces the other way, sprawled in a ragdoll kind of disorderly comfort with his shoulder nearly dislocating out of its socket. It’s eight A.M and Asami is hardly of a mind to think about these things, but this is by far the tamest of Akihito’s sleeping positions.

He places his phone back onto the bedside table and it clatters amongst the foil packets of sleeping pills in various assortments; prescribed, over the counter, capsules in bottles, herbal mixes, he’s tried them all and experienced all their desirable and undesirable effects. Sleep has been a long learning curve, but perhaps still not long enough for effective acclimatisation without the need of a sleeping aid, and it unfortunately doesn’t get rid of the heat constantly cycling through his body. He’s taken the thermostat down a degree or two until the room is a refreshing nineteen degrees and the summer city heat is undetectable inside.

Akihito sleeps like the dead whatever the weather, and he’s hardly going to notice when Asami pulls back the covers and touches him along his weirdly twisted arm, across his shoulder and down his back. The bed sheets smell entirely of him now, ambiguity that’s completely arousing to the senses in all its heady capacity. Even the two exit points of Akihito’s wings next to each shoulder blade are enough to hike up the hunger into a moment where Asami’s salivating just from looking at them, starving for something with such insatiable greed it’s bordering on unnatural.

He’s been experiencing this feeling a lot lately, strange as it is; this feeling of his instincts abandoning him and tempting him with the most taboo of human desires — to feast on another's flesh.

And it’s perhaps the greatest travesty because Akihito does have the most beautiful back, all of it lean, condensed muscle powerful enough to take him into flight, a spine he says is unbreakable, smoothly tapering down. What fascinates him more is that he doesn’t know where his feathered wings reside inside his body, just that they do and it's a wonderment in itself. Akihito doesn't stir when he runs his lips from one shoulder blade to the other, sucking red, mouth-shaped marks into his skin that last no more than a few seconds before turning back into clean, white skin. He knows he could do this all day and Akihito would be none the wiser to all the places he’s guided his tongue, explored without distraction and tasted with complete, explicit focus.

The soft curve of Akihito's back and the two lovely indentations at the base of his spine are like the holes of marrow he wants to suck dry, and he does, pausing just over the cleft of his ass and that virgin-tight hole he enjoyed without a single reservation last night, running his hands over it and gently lapping his tongue. Liquid life energy runs onto his tongue and coats his whole mouth in ecstasy, a double fantasy of visions and touches that he can physically taste and swallow down. A low rumbling growl forms in his throat, half serious and half neutralising the acid intensity of his arousal to the taste, and he has to force himself to be gentle, gentler than he truly wants to be despite
the haze of its potency. His lips and then his tongue lathe over Akihito's soft, sensitive skin, building up to the release of Akihito’s wings bursting out of his back in a flurry of feathers and shocking him awake — the perfect coda to his morning.

"Ah! W—wha...?" Akihito yelps in surprise, breathless and looking through his sleep-sodden daze to see the predatory gleam in Asami’s eyes, body low and his mouth millimeters from his skin, encroaching him, hungry.

“Good morning, Akihito,” Asami says, with his hot breath husking his unquestionable arousal across Akihito’s back, kissing a path all the way down to his buttocks that he takes hold of to bring them closer.

“Nnnn...don't do that...pervert,” Akihito protests, but it dies when Asami licks the flat of his tongue behind his balls in long, agonisingly slow strokes that has him melting back down onto the bed in a conflicted, tired mess.

Asami looks up to see Akihito’s golden hair spilling across his face and breathing heavily against the pillow but canting his hips ever so slightly in way of silent encouragement. And Asami’s whole face lights up with a smirk and his appetite just about peaks when this gorgeous ass lifts and accepts his fingers so readily, greedily, and Akihito's shivering, moaning, they fucked for hours last night but his body’s healed back into impossible tightness that's a pure joy to pry open.

Asami spoons behind him, kissing and touching Akihito’s bed-warmed skin, enveloping him in a strong embrace. He's mindful of his wings and pushes his knee between Akihito's legs and taking just about everything he wants through this one, long kiss. Akihito's blue eyes draw up to look at him, still half asleep as he sucks his bottom lip and hums with a small, appreciative smile like he's still dreaming, and still...

"Are you awake, Akihito?" Asami whispers, amused at the litany of half spoken nonsense he receives from the boy as he works two wet fingers inside him. Akihito’s leg drapes over his arm, falling docile to Asami’s direction but he’s learnt exactly how Asami likes it first thing in the morning, the same way that he knows all of the ways needed to please the man's complicated appetite.

Just preparing Akihito has him purring and gently undulating his hips, making sounds that Asami finds as intoxicating as his scent filling him with such a rare abandon. And Akihito can just about breathe without having to think at the same time when Asami positions him exactly how he wants. He supposes Asami wouldn't get out of bed for less than the five-hundred thousand yen he'll make in his first work hour, and he wouldn’t be throbbing between his legs like this if Asami didn’t desire him so passionately at the earliest hour, before money even comes into it. It's this kind of love making that Akihito can't help but find irresistible to obey.

“Is it today?” Akihito mumbles in a sleep broken slur, and Asami replies back with a crisply enunciated phrase of, “Yes, Akihito, it's today.”

Akihito is ready to give all words over to moans when he feels the hard head of Asami’s cock against his hot entrance and follows with a gasp powerful enough to fully awaken him as its size stretches him. Asami kisses him along his neck, fighting physically with himself to not make it anything more than just that, but it's a real, shocking urge and maybe he needs to sit Akihito down and talk to him about this, how provocative their sex is becoming in driving his carnal senses into an unstoppable desperation for just one bite of his flesh.
"Will you be good while I'm away?" Asami asks, and Akihito judders with laughter, not giving him a spoken answer. Asami tightens his arms around him and his biceps bulge with mouthwatering strength.

"Ah...so amazing," Akihito purrs when Asami goes deeper, pulling a scream from his unused vocal chords. Akihito is mesmerised by Asami’s slow control to make him come with the gentlest of impulses. He's consciously going slower than usual, taking his time to bring Akihito to the brink of madness. It doesn’t fit into their usual fierce and uncompromising morning routine, but first times always broaden the mind and fill with inspiration.

"Sweet boy," Asami chuckles, there’s nothing more to say when Akihito’s laugher sends the residual life energy pouring into him like a drug soaking through every vein in his body, drowning him, comforting him. Akihito whispers for him to wait and he moves to reposition himself on top to ride him in reverse, enough room to spread his wings wide and give Asami the most generous, unforgettable view of his glistening back running a river of sweat right down to his ass impaled on Asami to the hilt. And just like this, Akihito gets to experiment with this interesting little freedom.

Akihito maintains the undulating slowness, tensing only his inner muscles around Asami’s cock and using his hands on Asami’s thighs to push himself up and sink back down, keeping it just unpredictable enough that Asami’s only disapproval comes in harsh upthrusts jabbing powerfully into his prostate.

But Akihito’s slowness is deliberate. His task is to synchronise their energies so no one single push overrides the other, and Asami’s body will be able to contain it while he's away with the barest of side effects. “I’m connecting our core energies”, Akihito tells him, “It’s for your safety.” And he says this while he’s clenching his fingers into Asami’s thighs and moaning about time and patience, the very thing Asami has little of right now.
“...don't want you to become sick from all this energy,” he adds, with a small breathless sigh, “So it'll take an hour...ah...maybe a bit more, if you can take it,” and that only triggers a delicious roll of baritone laughter.

Akihito looks over his shoulder at him, his blue eyes glowing something raw, spectacular, licking the sweat off his lips and smirking, as only this delicious, diabolical angel would through a hyperreal feast of an orgasm.

Asami wills his control that’s deliciously dwindling from him. Once he’s done with this trip, he’s going to devour every last morsel of Akihito until there’s nothing left of him.

Asami closes the door of his office and sits behind his desk, opening up the file containing all the information Kirishima managed to unearth about the Takaba family from their database. He takes a freshening glance over them before he has to catch his flight to Hokkaido. He told Akihito about this being a business trip, but for the sake of all he doesn't know yet, he could never openly divulge the real reason to him.

He'd been present in Kirishima’s office when his assistant made the call to the eldest daughter, Setsuko. Of all of his personal assistants, past and present, Kirishima is by far the most solicitous, sharp when it comes to matters of business and compassionate in ways Asami has never grown to be. He wouldn’t ask this of anyone else.

She’d been pleasant to him on the phone, if a little lost for words at the unexpectedness of his call. With all the niceties applied, it only needed to be this one phone call to confirm that all the evidence they’d found was correct. What they didn’t expect were the questions that followed — “Do you know what happened to him?”, “Do you know where he is?” to which Kirishima had no immediate reply, but raised several questions on their own. She extended them an invitation to meet with her family personally and Asami accepted the invitation immediately for the both of them. Asami’s certain she wouldn't have invited them if she didn’t have more to say.

So he sits and familiarises himself with the papers on Takaba Megumi and her daughters and all their family ties, their histories, public and personal information, committing them to memory until he knows them like the back of his hand. His focus, however, is briefly interrupted by a gentle rap at the door.

“What is it?” he calls out, and his eyes instantly fall to the handle of the door and to any signs that it might open. Akihito knows the rules of the office, and the entering of it when the door is closed.

“I made you some coffee,” comes Akihito’s voice on the other side, followed by a short inserted silence of hesitation. “I'll...I'll leave it outside.”

Asami slips the documents back into the file and puts it in his briefcase, clicking it closed. He finds Akihito in the living room watching morning anime on TV with two steaming mugs on the coffee table. He approaches silently and sits on the sofa next to him, ruffling his hair. "Thank you."

Akihito flattens his hair back into a neat mess and looks at him, disgruntled but warmed from the gesture. "You're welcome, just...don't keep doing that." He pulls his knees to his chest, bare feet tapping away to the poppy tune of an anime about to begin, and feels the need to ask, "How long will you be away for anyway?"

Asami snakes an arm around him and smirks. "Why, will you miss me?"
Akihito turns away from him, scoffing, "You've got to be joking. With you not being here, I get to do whatever I want. It'll be bliss."

_A blissful delusion_, Asami thinks. “Earlier you seemed eager to pay me hours of attention, or was that my imagination?”

“T—That was for your own good, bastard...and anyway, shut up, your coffee's getting cold.”

Asami eyes the steam rising from the mug and then tracks back to the bashful tint to Akihito’s face. “Your honesty is one of the most endearing things about you, Akihito. I hope it never wears thin.”

Akihito’s mouth wants to curl up into a stupid smile but he gets up instead, and a hand clasps around his wrist, not tightly, but persuasive enough to have him sit back down.

"I have something for you," Asami says and leaves momentarily to retrieve something from his office.

He has a business agenda the length of his arm these days, the summer months being heavy for business, and indulgences are left to be enjoyed only in the early hours. For Akihito, his amusement has been taking his brand new DSLR camera on regular trips with him out and around Tokyo. Cities are not as claustrophobic as they once felt, and he’s exhilarated from seeing it through the eye of his lens and experiencing this change in perception through breathtaking one-of-a-kind shots. If it inspires to keep him out of trouble, Asami may as well nurture it.

"I’m setting you an assignment," Asami says when he returns, and gives Akihito a half folded sheet of paper.

Akihito opens it and scans down the list of place names, sights and objects, specific things Asami has compiled for him with a cautious eye. "What's all this for?"

"I want you to photograph these things before I get back."

Akihito looks dubious. "Why?"

“It’s my special assignment for you. If you manage to complete it, your prize is a brand new macro lens for taking extreme close-up shots in high definition.”

Akihito quips with added suspicion. “And there’s no catch?”

“Complete the list and you’ll receive your prize, it’s that simple.”

"Alright then," Akihito agrees, tucking the paper into his jean pocket. "Can I start right now?"

“Not just yet.” Asami pulls him into his lap, his eyes roaming the inspiration and enigma around the boy’s bright blue gaze before kissing him, unabated and with all the honesty Akihito has always shown him, so that the last longing look the boy gives him won't fade from his memory for the duration of his time away. “Now you may start.”

Blushing fiercely, Akihito touches their foreheads together and lingers just for a moment before they part ways. "Call me when you get there, ok?"

Asami nods. "And you, call me, for anything."

“See you tomorrow, then. Have a safe trip,” Akihito says within a whisper, and Asami repeats the same departing words to him before sending him on his way.
At Haneda Airport, everything moves at double speed.

The Business Class lounge at one o'clock bustles from every corner in its full capacity, and Asami’s presence doesn’t go unnoticed. He’s without his usual entourage of bodyguards, only Kirishima is accompanying him to Hokkaido, leaving the day’s management to his other capable delegates. Asami wanted to do this alone, it’s a private matter after all, but Kirishima insisted that he be accompanied by at least one bodyguard, and that, of course, is why he’s here, sitting opposite him, buried in a newspaper.

Asami brings the snifter of brandy up to his lips and sniffs its wood-smoked aroma, something to calm his senses in a place that prohibits smoking. The airport serves oysters and champagne at seven o’clock in the morning. The people sitting next to him are eating smoked salmon and caviar on thin crusty breads and sipping sake in between, and Asami looks down at the four complimentary chocolate truffles sitting in a tiny red box, thinking how harmless that cigarette would be.

On an adjacent table a group of women make eyes at him, co-ordinating the same hairstyles and business suit and the same red smiles. He catches them looking and they titter amongst themselves like nattering birds. He’s never one to be above public appearances, but they are enduring.

Their flight is called and they head to their gate, the hour and a half flight landing them in New Chitose Airport in Sapporo around half-past twelve in the afternoon. They pick up their hire car from the airport and Kirishima drives them to the hotel, a convenient four star on the outskirts of Sapporo, lowkey, but still comfortably within Asami’s tastes.

He drops his overnight bag on the bed and the first thing he does is call Akihito, as he said he would. He’s made to wait until the fifth or sixth ring for Akihito to pick up, and when he does, he's breathing heavily but sounding excited to receive his call.

"Asami, hey! Did you get there alright?"

"I'm at the hotel now. Where are you?"

"...I’m…hold on a sec."

Background interference makes it difficult for him to hear Akihito on the other end, who sounds as if he’s in motion, as the boy usually is when left to roam of his own accord. He sounds particularly laboured. Asami gives it a moment before speaking again.

“What were you doing just now?"

“I was getting one of the shots on your list — The Roppongi Spider.”

“How exactly were you getting it?"

“If you take it from somewhere high, it looks like a giant spider’s chasing all the people on the ground. Scary stuff, huh? You'll get what I mean when you see the photo.”

“You don’t need to go to such extravagant lengths.”

“If I see something, I'll capture it however I want. I'm dedicated to improving myself, Asami. Plus, I want that new lens.”

“My apologies for ever doubting your visionary eye, Akihito.”

“Hey! If there’s something worth doing, you do it properly and don’t walk away until it’s done.”
“I’ll say no more, then. Don’t go tumbling into trouble. I’ll know if you do, even if I’m not there.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m going to Asakusa next to check out the shrines, can’t get too crazy down there. When’s your meeting?”

“In an hour or so. I don’t know when it’ll end.”

“Hmm, alright, I’ll probably speak to you this evening then.”

“I’ll call you. Be good.”

“Heh, you too. See ya!”

He hears Akihito’s laughter in his peripheral nerve banks after he’s hung up, making him smile. No doubt he’s pissing the hell out of his security team by running amok all over Tokyo.

He loosens his tie and then takes it off altogether. It’s hotter than it should be for Japan’s north, resembling the stifling, choking heat he thought he left behind in Tokyo. For where they’re going he doesn’t need the business attire, so he takes off his suit vest as well and places it neatly on the bed with his tie. He considers a suit less than three pieces as sacrilege but Kirishima’s probably doing the same thing next door. Function before formality.

Around twenty minutes later they drive into town where trees in full seasonal bloom line the avenues and cobblestoned roads, along with double-fronted terraced shops with rickety shuttered windows reminiscent of an old Japanese town, or one that hasn’t been touched since the imperial restoration. Kirishima insists on stopping at a patisserie to buy a small cake to take as a gift to the Takaba family. Inside, Asami recoils at facing row upon row of colourful, delicate visions of his culinary nightmare. Kirishima chooses a strawberry gateaux while Asami gives the dumbstruck girl behind the counter the task of boxing up three individual slices of cake he thinks Akihito will like if it stops her from gawking at him.

They continue their journey into the countryside to the city of Yubari sitting buried in the bosom of two green covered mountains. If it was winter, these hills would be stark white with bare trees for miles out, but this lush open grassland tempts a city dweller to want to live out the rest of his days here. The weather is perfect along these long stretches of roads, lakes meander along the valleyside, geese wet their beaks in the lake and herons wade along the edges of the banks, feasting on small fry, and all the while Asami’s wondering how to clear his mind of doubt before this meeting.

Kirishima follows the Mercedes’ built-in sat nav, and Asami has a condensed version of the GPS system open on his phone watching Akihito hundreds of miles away as a little flicker on his screen cradled in his palm — the two of them concentrating on entirely different things that somehow meet at the same crucial point. All of those cordoned off conversations Akihito refuses to have with him will surface today, he hopes. Perhaps, in the most selfish of ways, he’s the most deserving to know.

Kirishima slows down when they’re close, past a pond with moss covered ground and ashy ferns, to a large alpine house with alternating pink and white hanging flower baskets and surrounded by a Japanese hawthorn hedge. This is their destination. They park on the gravel outside, tyre indentations indicating comings and goings here. The hedge looks recently pruned, the grass recently cut and fresh smelling — these are the nonsensical things Asami’s thinking as they walk up the gravel path towards the house, an unspecified nervousness making itself known through these pointless observations.

Kirishima clears his throat before ringing the doorbell and stands slightly behind Asami at a respectable distance, the gift box clasped in both hands as they wait in an uncomfortable silence.
Asami goes to straighten his tie but remembers he removed it, and before he can make up for the misstep, the door opens and a middle-aged woman, as elegant as her two inch by two inch photo, greets them with a warm, blushing smile, as though she’s known them since the beginning of time.

“Welcome, Asami-san, Kirishima-san,” she bows deep from the waist. “Thank you so much for coming.”

“The pleasure is ours, Takaba-san. We're grateful for the invitation,” Asami says, and he and Kirishima bow deeply in return. She introduces her sisters, Sakura and Hanae, who are standing behind her, their deep gratitude voiced as they address the two men, who probably have more to be thankful for.

Setsuko and her sisters step back in the house and Asami and Kirishima take their shoes off in the genkan, changing into slippers and following them inside. The two of them almost cast a shadow over Setsuko, who is petite and unassuming in their tall presence. They round the hallway into the main room, a traditional Japanese room with a double screen door pulled open to the view of a beautiful garden full of colour and the sounds of a bamboo fountain tapping its hollowed sound.

"I hope the journey wasn't too troublesome for you both. It's a surprisingly hot day for us here in Hokkaido. We don't usually get this much heat in June. We were sitting outside enjoying the garden just before you came."

"The journey was not a problem, and I'd have to agree with you about the weather," Asami answers with a small smile.

"I’ll be back with some refreshments. Please, take the weight off your feet."

"This is for you,” Kirishima says, handing over the cake box. “It's only something small."

Setsuko accepts it with both hands and bows. “Thank you very much.”

Setsuko disappears out of the room and they kneel around the large square table, Kirishima and Asami on one side and the sisters on the other. Asami looks at Sakura and Hanae and they smile back at him, cheeks burning as his charm diffuses into them with melting capacity, silently starstruck, silently full of hope.

"You have a splendid garden," Kirishima says, cleaving through the awkward silence.

"Thank you,” Sakura replies. “It was our mother’s pride and joy. Now we all take care of it little by little, in her memory.”

Setsuko returns with a tray of green tea and places it on the table, filling each pebble green cup individually before sitting down on an empty side of the table, looking down at it with something vacant in her expression.

“Forgive me, Asami-san, Kirishima-san, I don’t wish to disrespect you. There aren’t words to express how grateful we are for your visit, and I apologise deeply for saying this, but I never thought that anyone, let alone yourselves would...know about Akihito-chan. It’s...it’s been a family secret buried under the passing of time...I—” She looks down at her cup and sighs uncomfortably. “I didn’t want to revisit it again, I thought you were another fraud, to be honest. We’ve had reporters in the past fishing for information, sending us threatening letters. Insensitive fanatics only wanting one thing out of you. But when I received your phone call, and you said his name and you knew all the things you knew...something in me felt relief for never having had the comfort of closure, if it meant that there’d be a chance, no matter how small, that Akihito might still be alive and well...out there,
somewhere...I wanted to take it. Maybe it’s because our mother is no longer with us, and we haven’t talked about this in so long…but we still have it at the back of our minds. It still lies there, like a mark on your soul.”

Asami and Kirishima glance at each other, sharing the same look of curiosity. Setsuko blows on her tea and takes a sip before continuing.

“It's the one thing that would've burst me open, hearing his name after all these years. That name was a cover up for a baby, who for all his short life, shouldn't have existed, not in the way that he did anyway. I wanted you to be mistaken, I really did, except you’re not one of those reporters, or those conspiracy chasers. I'd like to think that you're our last hope if you know anything that happened to him after he disappeared without a trace from our lives.”

Kirishima proceeds carefully to ask, “Could you tell us what happened, Takaba-san?”

Setsuko lifts her head up and pauses for a momentary, bracing sigh, her sisters looking on as if hearing the story for the first time, patiently listening.

"I must be going back more than twenty five years ago to when I was about sixteen, seventeen. My younger sisters were eleven and nine, I think. It feels so long ago, but it’s not something you can tell yourself to forget so easily. It was early February, snowing and freezing cold outside. I remember our mother coming home one evening and telling us something strange had happened at the hospital where she works, that she heard strange sounds coming from the roof of the nurses’ quarters, this odd sound blanketed by snow and hospital noise. The sound of crying, she'd said. Babies get left at the hospital all the time, but this time was different. It wasn’t until the caretaker let her onto the roof that she found an infant buried under the snow, soaked with blood. She was absolutely horrified.

"I remember her walking in that day like a zombie, her face shell-shocked as anything. I asked what’d happened and she looked at me as if she didn’t know who I was, looking right through me, trying to find an answer. Then she told me all about him, this silent baby, cold and still, covered in blood and snow. She told me he was pale blue and freezing to the touch, and she found a strange, almost black afterbirth coating his lower half. She was sure he must’ve been dead, his small body would never be able to survive that cold, but no sooner did my mother cradle him did he start crying, uncontrollably, like a newborn straight out of the womb. He was maybe only a few days old, a week at most, his eyes barely opened, so fragile. I remember her telling us that he wouldn't stop crying in the ICU room, but when he slept, he slept as though he were making up for a lifetime of not having slept a wink. For hours, sometimes for more than a day, he was peacefully asleep.

“"The turning point came after a few days when the ICU equipment started going haywire, monitors were malfunctioning, ventilators shut down, equipment was imploding in on themselves and catching fire. Nothing in that room held up, all of it gone to smoke in a matter of minutes and no-one knew how or why. The baby’s poor lungs had filled with toxic smoke from the broken ventilator…” She pauses and fiddles her fingers, somehow petrified at revisiting these old memories.

“"He...he died that night on the emergency table...but they brought him back, goodness knows how. They worked tirelessly through the night to keep him alive, especially mother, who stayed at the hospital overnight with him, that's why she was so shattered when she came home. She said it was a strange miracle that he escaped that fireball and came back from death, all in one night.

“"Then there were problems with his blood screenings. His blood...there was something in his blood...no-one in the labs had seen it before, it couldn’t have happened overnight but...something was different...something changed. Something was very, very wrong.

“"What was wrong?” Kirishima asks.
“That’s just the thing, no one knew. All they knew was that every blood group was incompatible. A transfusion or surgery would be lethal. It meant more tests and observations and more nights without our mother, but nothing close to an answer.

“We ended up boarding up at the hospital, my mother, sisters and I. After school I’d collect my sisters and we’d go to the hospital. We’d eat our evening meal in the canteen, do our homework in the day-room. We’d each take five minute showers in the nurse’s washroom and squeeze together into two staff room cots. It became our temporary home. I couldn’t bear to listen to my sisters cry for another night, or cry that our father was in another country and not here. We sat and waited a lot, waiting for the end of our mother’s shift so we could see her. We made a bit of a nuisance of ourselves out of impatience and boredom. But I started to notice things after being there for a while, noticing the routines of people, the patients, the doctors, and I noticed after a few days that men in black suits started coming to look at ‘him’.

“Do you know who those men were?” Kirishima asks.

"I thought they were from the ministry of health or social services, I still don’t know to this day. They were all dressed the same: black suit and tie, dark hats and dark glasses. When they were in that room, everyone else had to leave, but it was always mother who stayed to speak with them. No-one said who they were, and no-one would talk about them, not even mother. I kept thinking what men like that would want with a baby, and that's when I knew I had to see him for myself.

“I used mother's spare keycard to sneak access to the special unit isolated from the rest of the hospital. I borrowed a nurse’s overalls from the laundry room and no one seemed to pay close attention to me, thank God. Through the crack of a window blind, I saw him — that small, nameless baby in a room full of plastic drapes and machinery, incubated and covered in tubes and wires and hazmat wearing consultants guarded him twenty-four-seven as though he were an alien creature or something. It was a horrendous thing to witness and made me realise all the more why those men kept coming to see him.

“They'd come back to the hospital a couple of times, staying a short while and then leaving. I sometimes noticed them carrying large metal briefcases and some of them weren't Japanese. They never seemed to need any clearance, they’d just walk right in, do whatever they came to do and leave. But no one ever spoke about them, only ever to say how uncomfortable they felt whilst they were here.”

“Could you gather any of their names, their organisation perhaps? Anything else that was particularly distinguishing about them?” Kirishima asks.

“I'm sorry, they were all dressed so similar. No-one would talk about them even if I asked, including our mother. She was the most silent of them all, as if threatened to secrecy. There was definitely something going on, but goodness knows what.

“After the black suits came and went, so did the TV and the local press. Someone had tipped them off and they were all over the hospital, swarming like flies trying to get a story. Only the chief of the hospital gave an interview, and as always, he brushed the situations aside — “Everything is running as usual, there’s no need for a panic.” That created more hysteria, of course. “The hospital is trying to hide something”, they’d say, “We can’t trust their word.” All the hysteria made way for more rumours and kept the staff on edge. And then one day it all stopped, like someone forcefully shut them up. Nothing more was seen in the papers or the news after that. There was a strange silence.

"Akihito was stable for weeks, slowly improving. There no longer needed to be long stays at the hospital so we returned home, mother somewhat reluctantly. She told me in confidence that the situation at the hospital was very complicated, and she didn’t want to be away for too long, but she
was under pressure by the hospital to hand Akihito over to an outside team of people.”

Kirishima furrows his eyebrows, asking cautiously. “Being, the men in suits?”

“I guess it’s what she meant, yes,” Setsuko nods. “She said my sisters were too young to understand, but she needed to tell someone in case anything were to happen — a kidnap, or worse. She had a premonition that something was going to happen, and she was risking her safety and that little boy’s life by telling someone. She only ever wanted to protect him...it could have been anyone in the world but it was her and she...she wasn’t going to give him up.

“But, just as she’d predicted, it started to go downhill from then on. It couldn't have been a coincidence that when the hospital not only disagreed, but blocked all outside access to Akihito-chan, consequences arrived in other ways. After being shut out by the world, the only thing mother could do was live in hope that Akihito would recover enough to make it through this grueling war of whispers and threats.”

Setsuko lifts her hands up in the air, her sorrowful smile breaking as her hands fall back down to the table, defeated. “But it was never meant to be. Of all the efforts it took to keep that baby alive, everything else was conspiring against it. Staff would get sick, some of them wouldn’t turn up to work for days. The power would shut off unexplainably. Whole files would go missing. And then little Akihito-chan...Akihito-chan’s signs of existence started...disappearing. Over a gradual period his vitals stopped registering — no beeping from the monitors, no blood pressure changes, no blood oxygen reading, and eventually no heart rate. The machines weren't faulty, he was just...disappearing.

“He fell into a coma and his brain remained active for forty-five days. It was as if he was in a perpetual state of limbo between life and death...for forty-five days. Akihito-chan was declared dead on the fifth of May, 198X, but the truth is we don't know what really happened to him. There was no body, no cremation, no burial. We don’t even know if he really died...or if he really lived.”

She looks at both Asami and Kirishima and her wide eyes register a deep, searching disbelief. “W— why did this happen? One minute he was here, the next minute...gone. Nothing. Those men...they —” She struggles with seizing frustration. “They did something to that baby.”

Asami’s silence up until now has been permeating through the stops and starts of Setsuko’s personal memories, twenty or more years of internalised turmoil streaming from her. Wrinkles crack her knotted brow, crow's feet split the corners of her eyes. He sees the life decaying in them and he doesn’t have a remedy for that.

“I’m afraid I don’t have the answers you wish to know,” Asami says. “I can only offer you what I’ve seen with my own eyes, and know that it's the truth.”

He takes a small photograph from his inner pocket and slides it across the table towards the three women. “This is Takaba Akihito, as he is to this day.”

The confusion and uncontained shock between the three sisters is palpable, and it’s a reaction Asami doesn’t bear lightly. With a shaking hand, Setsuko turns the photo over and the three of them examine the small colour photo taken within the first few days of Akihito’s custody.

“T—this is Akihito-chan?” Setsuko questions, whipping her head up. “H—How...how can it be!?”

“Perhaps he’s a resurrection,” Asami answers. “Perhaps he was, as you say, suspended in a limbo of time. Perhaps there’s a deeper explanation, one which we may never know. But what remains is that he’s an impossibility fleshed out into this very world, and is here with us today, without a shadow of
a doubt.

“There are no easy ways to explain him, or to what reaction my telling of him would yield, or if my coming here and meeting you means to jeopardise Akihito's safety, they are all consequences I'm willing to bear. Having seen for myself what he's capable of, what separates him from anyone else I've ever seen is why I find myself here, seeking the same answers you wish to know."

“What do you mean?” Setsuko asks.

“Everything you've told me just now has made shocking but perfect sense, and I believe there are no coincidences in the conspiracies and cover ups. Takaba Akihito is not like any of us, and someone had the parameters to shield him from us because they knew something which we did not, and still don't.

“While he appears no more than a regular youth, he’s closer to super-human in his physicalities. He has the strength of a hundred men in a deceivingly slender body. Life threatening wounds on his body disappear within a few hours as though they were motes of dust blowing off his skin. Witnessing his strength and regeneration capabilities alone would shatter most minds. Akihito himself doesn't fully understand or know of the origin of his own capabilities, but he doesn’t seem to question them. He’s never known any different.”

Setsuko’s voice cracks with emotion. “He’s...what on earth is he...?”

“I speculate that those men were part of an organisation that had a certain inclination as to what exactly Akihito is, and wanted to obtain him for an exterior purpose, silencing being just another tool for their gain. You were right to be suspicious,” Asami says.

“Asami-san, please tell us...does he remember anything...from that time?”

"It's still unclear. He's told me explicitly that he has no family. He’s never mentioned a childhood. There’s a gap between the earlier events in his life up to now that is missing a logical timeline, Akihito himself is unable to give clarity. If he has knowledge of it, he’s choosing to conceal it.”

“I hope he doesn’t remember,” Setsuko ruefully admits. “It was nothing but cruelty. But is he safe now?”

“Without a doubt,” Asami says, allowing the calmness to be the sisters’ refuge. “I've provided him safety under my supervision. He has a place to live, employment endorsed by my company, a steady salary. He works hard, is well liked, his adaption to life and society is otherwise harmonious. He’s aware of the dangers the outside world presents to someone like him, which is why he’s kept a low presence.”

“I—I’m so glad. If only mum was alive to see him.” Setsuko smiles through the tears while looking at his photograph. “I can’t believe this is really him. He looks so handsome...and sweet...he has blue eyes?”

“A feature that attracts noticeable attention,” Asami says.

“How strange,” all three sisters echo. “If Akihito didn’t know about us, then...how did you know to find us?”

"Kirishima performs background checks on all potential employees, he found Akihito’s non-existent records to be of a concern. Digging a little deeper, we found more than we ever hoped to gain, though we felt none the more cognisant of why he is what he is, and why this was the only thing we found.” Asami passes over the file containing the death certificate to show them.
The document was one Setsuko wasn’t certain existed, but proved what she feared would be the outcome when the hospital had washed their hands of Akihito. She breathes and wipes her tears as she reads the full breadth of the document — Akihito with the Takaba family name and confirmation of his death stamped in hard, black ink.

“I knew it, those bastards,” she curses. “They let us believe he was dead.”

The revelations trigger wide emotions at seeing their mother's name appear on the death certificate, as a bitter consolation for having Akihito taken away from her. It's the most hideous of betrayals.

“Yet,” Setsuko reasons with a calming, tearful breath as her anger gives in, “Had it not have been for this document, we'd never have known Akihito-chan still lives. Isn't there an overwhelming irony to that?”

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Asami hasn’t stopped chain-smoking since they left the Takaba’s. One cigarette after another, burning through an entire packet and then jerking forward to cough his lungs out over the dashboard. Kirishima nearly swerves. He asks him if he’s alright and if he should pull over, but Asami tells him to keep driving.

This is nothing, he tells himself. It isn’t. This visit was about as horrific as he’d expected, but what he feels is irrelevant. Reading emotional scars off a woman’s face, that’s something. Asami wouldn't have allowed himself to watch a woman tear herself up in front of him, frightened by the ambition of modern day grim reapers.

Sitting in his briefcase is the rest of Takaba Megumi’s story — “The things I couldn't say, but when the time is right, you'll understand,” Setsuko had said to him. He’s been here before, receiving strange documents and picking out meanings from the footnotes of corporate files. The only thing that's changed is his desire to destroy everyone who had a hand in hurting Akihito.

He takes a last drag of his cigarette and downs the window to throw it out, the smoky haze within the car diffusing out with it, and Kirishima, who’s been eerily quiet up until now, finally says what's been burning up in the silence for half their journey. “You held a lot back about Takaba-kun. You didn't tell them he could fly.”

There’s a long, calculated pause before Asami contemplates on giving his reply.

“This is enough for them. It’s my turn to protect him now.”

Asami tries unsuccessfully to get in touch with Akihito when they return to the hotel. The dialing tone redirects him straight to voicemail and he doesn’t bother trying a third time. He has a quiet dinner with Kirishima and pays an hour’s custom to the bar and to the elderly bartender who serves him the most blessed scotch after the day he’s had. He tips him twenty-thousand yen as gratitude.

At nine-thirty he tries Akihito again and leaves a simple voicemail of, “Call me when you get this,” with a caustic tone edging towards worry. There’s been nothing from his security team and perhaps he should be a little apprehensive about that, no news is often very bad news when it involves his dearest trouble magnet. He takes a long, hot shower and when he dries off in his room his phone’s light flashes with a notification. As he goes to read it, it vibrates in his hand and Akihito’s caller ID appears.

"Hello Akihito," he answers, deadly serene.
"Hey Asami, open your door."

An apology it was not, and the request far from what he expects. "What?"

"I'm outside your door. Open it."

He does, and Akihito's standing there with his phone to his ear, sweat gleaming on his brow and cocking him a breathless grin and a "Hi," before inviting himself in. He toes off his shoes and takes off his backpack and Asami’s watching him, more than a little speechless. He collapses into the middle of the bed and groans, exhausted. "Gyaaaa! That journey was a killer, my body’s wasted!"

He’s sure he didn’t let slip to Akihito about where he was staying. "How did you...?"

“Huh? Oh...you left an emergency phone number with your guards, didn’t you?” Akihito cocks him a self-satisfied grin from the bed. “I traced it to this hotel and found you.”

“Clever,” Asami chuckles softly, approaching him on the bed. “No-one saw you, did they?”

"Of course not," Akihito swipes. “I slipped away like a ghost in the night sky. A slippery ghost birdy..."

He twiddles his fingers above him and Asami sits next to him on the bed, capturing them and kissing the palm of his hand, worshipful, grateful, a reverence Asami thought was inconceivable for him to feel for another person. Akihito, here, flesh, blood and bone, grinning at him with a bright, delirious smile — oblivious to the threats made to his life. Asami lies down in the space beside him and looks at him, really looks as he did before he left Tokyo, never having imagined the outcome of today
would leave him wanting to tear out his own skin. And Akihito takes their fingers and threads them, a small, “I’m with you,” said without words but fits into all of the missing spaces, exactly where Asami needs them to.

"I’ve completed your challenge, by the way," Akihito says, looking up at the brooding emotions in Asami’s expression, and Asami finds himself softening, his voice close to a whisper as his lips glide across Akihito’s cheek, faintly satisfied.

“Good job.”

"Can I show you my photographs?"

“Certainly.”

Asami’s never been so happy to oblige.

Chapter End Notes

More juiciness over here: Tumblr
The Mirror’s Edge

Chapter Summary

A single drop, in the darkest abyss.

Chapter Notes

A flashback into Akihito's darkest origins.

The sound fades in... swishing...wet...

As he lies in this shallow grave, his senses awaken. First to the thunderous claps of lightning bolts and the metallic crackles of the atmosphere ionizing in the air around him, then to the hammering pain inside of him so overwhelming that it’s paralysing. Every one of his bones feels crushed within his body, his muscle fibres and tendons inflamed and stretched beyond their limits. It steals from him the urgency to fight and scream through the agony.
Cold stiffens his body. Encased around him is the stale, metallic smell of blood coating his whole body in a mantle of mercury that he can feel in every pore; viscous and thick, sub-zero in temperature and yet it burns. Thick globules of it drip from his arms as he raises them, and plunge in heavy wet drops into the pool he’s lying in. He can’t see a thing, but in his mind’s eye he’s looking at himself from a distance in the vision of another’s body, watching himself writhe in this amniotic pool of degradation.

He feels birthed again, squeezed out of the earth in a quagmire of viscera kept warm by the earth’s own beating heart. He can only manage to crawl out of it on his elbows and stomach, his bones shrilling inside with pain as he scrapes along the black volcanic surface of this barren, dark place. Nothing but ash falls from the swirling void above, churning storms that last excruciating lifespans, being that there is no passing of days here, just cons of time. From one moment to the next, it’s the same era, the same dark epoch drowning in a never ending, unchanging dialogue. This world is as ancient as can be, blackened and burnt out, pumping out its primordial remnants through great volcanic structures into an atmosphere so suffocating it could never have existed to create life, let alone sustain it. But here, in this forsaken state, is proof that not all lies dead in this world.

His chest cavity compresses and he shudders violently, expelling the viscid black ooze from the depths of his stomach, and the ensuing gasping croak is his first breath he’s taken in what feels like an eternity. The ooze spreads across the ashy ground and flattens out into a smooth reflective puddle that he’s too blind to see and too immersed with pain to know that if he looked at its oily black surface, he’d see his own image reflecting back at himself; the same face, no matter how many times he’s rebirthed.

He struggles to his feet and stands only for a second before the pain buckles his legs and he topples onto his knees, whimpering with the aftershock of pain. Dislocated from head to toe, it’s nearly impossible to coordinate movement, but somehow he’s being compelled to as if his own skeleton is marching himself into life on the reflex of pain. He hoists himself up once more and takes another unsteady step, only to slip on amniotic matter and hit his elbow as it strikes the ground first and he gives out a howling scream.

Blind and in obscurity, his screams are the only bearing he has to tell the distance between objects. His painful cries map an image of his surroundings from the echoes of his grunts and gasps as they bounce against giant stalagmitic crusts breaking out from the earth, puncturing the other vast pools of mercury surrounding the area. There’s no hope but to wait to die again, to lie and decay as waste in a wasteland will — ash to ash, dust to dust — ash which falls in clumps into his mouth and melt on his tongue with the want to soothe him into a death-like pass, but his body can’t listen. Lying in this mercuric afterbirth with all his extremities bludgeoning his pain receptors to agony — oh dear God, he can’t bear to live through this incredible pain.

A time passes when the winds are no longer running a destruction, and all but a hollow hum vibrates through the air, half a step from total silence and extreme destruction, there’s no way to tell when the tides will turn. He finds the membrane of the amniotic sac has perforated through his struggles and he peels himself out of it, and as he does the blood from the sac slowly absorbs into the ground, transfiguring the ashy soot underneath him into luminous grains of obsidian when coming into contact with it. The earth is yet again rejecting him.

He can feel the hardened ground crack underneath him, sharp but woefully fragile. The ground indents under his weight and begins to sink, sucking him in along with it. The pitfall is about to absorb him and in his blind panic he rolls to one side, and with the last ditch effort escapes the sinkhole. Flickers of obsidian clatter down the hollowed out pit hole, taking with it a thousand shards on its descent into oblivion. No-one and nothing knows where the ground below him leads, or if the eventuality of it is the same vacuous void as the sky, inverted in its shadow and therefore nothing can
ever get out.

He takes a wet slide down the folding mounds of twisted rock and lands somewhere at the bottom in a soft patch of bog that’s unlike the mercury pools, he realises as he’s submerged neck deep that it doesn’t scorch him to immediate death. His feet scrape the bottom, shifting soot from underfoot and his hands grapple at the banks for leverage to pull himself out. The oily blood that coated him washes off his skin and floats above the surface in filmy, undiluted mounds, and he emerges clean from the dark pool.

He’s exhausted and broken but his mind’s eye operates as a separate entity, disassociating itself from the agony to guide his blind body through this horrendous, ramshackled abyss. He wobbles back onto his feet again and takes his first steps, walking through the large cavernous waves of what look like giant dunes of volcanic soot that have calcified in mid-movement and remain like carcasses of this world’s desolation, a constant reminder of demise all around, and the torment of his own immortality.

He can’t ever hope to escape from this; this landscape and the great visions from the dawn of his creation, when he was pushed out of the narrow birth canal of the underworld’s poisoned womb, smaller in size and too weak to crawl from the birthing pool. Then, just as he’d been graced with the very first moments of life, he was engulfed by a black wave absorbing him back into the ground, to be reborn again after he died from its suffocation — rebirth after rebirth after rebirth — his body suffering the same torment as the terrain’s violent upheaval, earthquakes that restructured its surface and great monolithic crests that crushed his newly formed body and swallowed him in an instant as soon as he entered the world.

It's been some hundred thousand eruptions since his first conception, but numbers are an irrelevant obsolescence here. This current world has croaked to a decaying wasteland, halted for half an eon and nothing more than primordial belches open up vast oceans of mercury — still not silent and still not completely dead, but close.

Beneath the umbra of a wave, his highly luminous blue eyes and white skin stand out amongst everything. He's the antithesis of this world, the negative of this stale ebon, his continual rebirthing and survival a contradiction to eons of decaying, substandard life. And still, as he’s died and lived in the same unending sequence, surviving each birth only to be consumed again, he makes an angry place even angrier still with his continual presence.

In spite of this conundrum, the earth shudders beneath him, threatening yet another terrifying eruption. The arching head of a calcified wave crumbles and falls behind him with a deafening sound only this world can produce and nearly pierces his eardrums. He curls over flinching and shielding his head from the falling debris; a lucky escape, this time.

And then he journeys out into nowhere, into nothingness. His heavy eyelids blink repeatedly, trying to see through their glazed opacity, and he covers his nose and mouth to shield the smog from filling all his insides with the same substance that churns the vast black skies and swallows all ability to breathe. He walks for an indeterminate amount of time, through hardened flat grounds and moors of loamy soot, over volcanic hill-forms with jagged scabs of rock that cut the soles of his feet. He howls as he goes, screaming without a language, but his voice comes out in a slurred timestretch of contorted vocal agony. It’s as terrifying to his eardrums as the incoming tremors of another earthquake set to break the earth into pieces, a sense of pressure fast approaching. His cries set off something in the earth and it groans, its tectonic limbs shifting, dividing and separating. Heat is thrown up between the cracks, hissing and spitting out from the slack jaw of two adjacent plates ripping into two, and steam condenses in the air until the smouldering black smoke rains down liquid mercury.
There’s nothing to protect him from it. His cold, tender skin sizzles as droplets of mercury scald everything they touch, shattering the ground as heat and bleak cold provokes a violent reaction. Mercury spills onto the surface where he stands and he feels cold up to his ankles, crackling freezing welts into his flesh as his body starts to go into shock. It’s up to his knees now, freezing cold and unbearable against his naked calves, penetrating bone and destroying the tissue to keep him upright. Mercuric ash moistens on his forehead and drips down the side of his nose, running past his lips and into his mouth, his shocked and irregular breathing opens his mouth wide and he can’t stop himself from drinking it, one frozen icicle drop at a time. It stings as it travels down his gullet and seizes in his throat.

More droplets on his arms and the rest of his body travel upwards, defying gravity as the mercury fills his mouth, flooding him with an unstoppable black gush that invades his organs. By now, his body has given way and he drops through the mercury layer, sinking down into a weightless abyss like a deadweight falling to the centre of the earth, hoping to be reunited with its warmth. But there’s nothing, nothing but a terrible black ocean drowning him, asphyxiating him, and he’s fighting an irresistible need to breathe.

Down, he sinks. Down into the bottomless, blackest sea, and all he can do is scream.
The first week since their return from Hokkaido is spent in a metropolitan heatwave. Three hours of travelling, half a day to unwind and for Asami to pore over reports and reschedule meetings. Come morning, Asami didn’t get up to go to work which Akihito found unusual, and they spent the whole day in bed which turned into five whole days. Insomnia hit Akihito hard on the sixth. He can’t tell how many times they’ve had sex since they’ve been back, and never did he imagine that copious lovemaking would leave him as wide-eyed as this. Lying awake in darkness comes without its atmospheric, sombre merit. He greets the morning when daylight creeps over his face and the detox to his retinas is as good as any alarm clock. But unlike hours of glorious non-stop sex, there’s no such thing as hours of glorious shuteye. Now the tables have turned and it’s him burning a hole in the ceiling.

All those little things he never used to care about suddenly fight for his attention. He starts to notice all the ways Asami’s penthouse comes alive — the air conditioning turns itself on and off at precise times throughout the night; as of now the mechanism clicks on and he can feel the temperature starting to change throughout the apartment. His ears pick up the trickle of liquid percolating in the coffee machine at around ten minutes to nine, ready for when Asami wakes up at exactly nine o’clock. The bathroom blows out a mist of disinfectant spray that he can smell wafting into the bedroom space from the en suite, sweet and antiseptic. Everything runs to an immaculate schedule, as does Asami’s life. Anything beyond it is fair chaos. Though, there’s a certain beauty to it that Akihito thinks about when he lies awake and craves in some overture fashion all of the powerful, furious and beautiful things Asami has ever done to him that were born of this chaos.

He turns to see the man sound asleep next to him, arms wrapped around his pillow and breathing gently, and that complete sexual chaos halfway into their night felt like the door to another world had opened up, and Akihito doesn’t know why. He doesn’t know what’s changed in Asami since he returned from Hokkaido to make him question what’s changed between the both of them.

Akihito leaves their bed and goes to his old bedroom (now a working space for his photography) and rifles through his belongings for the only thing he’s ever acquired with Asami’s money; a thing he’s rather fond of, actually, especially for its purpose right now.

He takes it back to their bed and places it over his face and does his best impression if a youkai calling to Asami from beyond the dead.

“Aaaaaasami. Aaaaa—sa—mi...”
Asami stirs and cracks an eye over his shoulder and looks straight into the black mouth of an ogre. The snorting laughter refutes the possibility that he’s still dreaming and he throws Akihito down onto the bed space next to him.

“You’ve got guts doing this to me first thing in the morning,” Asami growls, with an equally foul and incredible look about him to go with the mask’s expression.

Having Asami loom over him, Akihito’s breathlessness only lasts for a moment before he speaks through the mask again, snorting as his insipid little voice cackles. “Your soul is black, black, black...and evil, evil, evil...and I'm always watching you.”

Asami’s feral grin looks down on him, teeth scarily sharp. “Is that so? Do tell me what you've seen.”

And as the slick, hungry growl in Asami’s throat pierces the fragile flit of Akihito’s laughter, the pleasure of being pinned and ravished has the immediate desired effect that Akihito’s been craving for most of the morning; the most satisfying break in all of Asami’s routines, messing with his schedule, making important business people wait on him while they make it a seventh day and fuck the whole morning until Akihito’s stretched and exhausted and absolutely reamed out to Asami’s maelstrom of chaos.

Asami foregoes the brewed coffee and breakfast altogether after that. Emerging from the bathroom into their bedroom, he starts composing himself, and Akihito watches it all from the bed with lazy interest. He’s seen it so many times now but it’s stunning how meticulous Asami is about his appearance while making it effortless and fascinating to witness; how he tucks in his shirt, twists his Windsor knot and dons his Savile Row suit, cufflinks to match his watch. He’s primed and perfected and smells gorgeous, and Akihito tilts his head in a silent indication for Asami to kiss him before his limo arrives to take him to Sion.
Standing at the doorway, Asami takes care to straighten the creases left in his suit and flicks an affectionate glance at Akihito, then towards the wardrobe. “The tailor finished making you your new suit. I’d like to see you in it tonight.”

“Really? Does it have the special inner lining colour I wanted?” Akihito wonders.

“Aero Blue’,” Asami confirms, “Exactly as you specified. An excellent choice.”

“I have taste, you know,” Akihito grins, and receives a refreshingly diabolical smile from Asami.

“I'll see you at nine,” he says as he leaves.

Akihito waves him off from the bed and buries the torment of his dripping obsession with the man under the duvet.

It’s been nearly three weeks since he began his new position at Sion as photographer in residence. Asami keeps him off the books, of course. Akihito’s worked out that he’s calculated an astronomical rate of pay for him, something like 65,000 yen per hour. It’s nepotism gone mad, but Akihito isn’t going to argue about it.

The revelry among Sion’s filthy rich upper class always leaves him with mixed emotions. People with money like to swan in the best circles, and paying for the privilege of being in the only six-star establishment in Tokyo is a very lucrative thing if splendor is anything to be bought into. As for Akihito, the gap has never been wider. Even though he thinks himself classier than the average upper-crust, he wasn’t born rich (well, he wasn’t born anything) and there’s no in-between to slot himself into. Patrons are either warmly accepting or repugnant to his presence. Asami knows this and doesn’t pay him expensively for nothing.

The one thing he looks forward to between his workdays are evening photography classes at the community college in Hyakunincho twice a week. He has an ongoing dialogue with his teacher about his death-defying urban exploration. “It’s all parkour and upper body strength,” Akihito lets him believe, to which his tutor replies, “Something like this needs a blog,” and under a different moniker, Akihito’s been anonymously showing the world his breathtaking photographs.

It’s then that Akihito thinks today is the beautiful sort of day he’s been envisioning to experiment with his fisheye lens. He rolls out of bed and puts on a pair of jogging bottoms and takes the new lens from his camera bag and attaches it onto his camera. With a single fleet footed spring he hops onto the balcony, his balance stabilising quickly as he aligns the pads of his bare feet along the twenty-centimeter-wide edge and slowly walks along it, snapping pictures as he goes. The way the curvature of his lens bends the whole of Tokyo is something he’s becoming a little bit obsessed with. He can capture most of the city in a single shot, the swell of contortion pulls the sky up and in and light splits and diffracts to makes Tokyo look as if it’s in a glass fishbowl.

The breeze rolling through the air rocks him slightly and hikes his adrenaline. At this very overwhelming height he’d love to topple himself off the balcony and take pictures all the way down and only freeing his wings at the very last second. He lets one foot dangle over the edge and quickly steps it back onto the rail, testing his impulsiveness and that unruly twitch he gets between his shoulder blades every time a moment like this presents itself. That indulgence is going to have to wait for another day.

He offloads the photographs onto his laptop while he showers and drinks the coffee that was meant for Asami, and visualises the next journey with his camera. He heads out along the city suburbs where Asami’s high-rise condominium is the tallest of many on the route to Shinjuku central, and concealed about the area are any number of guards watching his every move and reporting them
back to Asami. He leaves them to bite the dust as soon as he lengthens his stride and bolts to Shinjuku central.

Noise, petrol fumes and smells from shops and eateries bring back memories of sleeping rough. This kind of polluting funk in the air never really leaves him, and Akihito finds himself ducking through the underpass under Shinjuku’s huge train station to get away from it, stopping at a vending machine to pick up a Double Berry Kit Kat and a bottle of juice and eating it on the way out.

Although Shinjuku’s spider web of roads has never appealed to him, having so many buildings packed together means he can free-run without much notice. There’s nothing all that interesting about the architecture of a mall or an office building, but the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building, now that’s something to look at. That’s something to daydream about with two feet on the ground, staring up at a modern day gothic cathedral. And Akihito’s all about instincts and the adrenaline rush, and scaling that thing with his boots mucked from the day’s activities and fingers messed from rough concrete, then going to hell in the back of Asami’s limo after being apprehended by government security is something he’s never not going to look forward to.

But he’s not going to do that today. Today he’s going to take fifteen minutes around the block just to aerate his mind from all the insomnia in the constant eddy of traffic and car horns. It all dies back when there’s that ten seconds of flat calm as soon as he reaches Shinjuku’s National Garden. It’s a strange feeling standing in the centre of the most populated city in the world in a green oasis of luxuriantly kept lawns and traditional gardens. He gets unashamedly excited whenever he’s here, there’s no scene that can swallow him like the sky superimposing itself onto a giant mirror pond, or the gnarly bark of a thousand cherry blossoms bearing hints of fruit in their trees, or huge Himalayan cedars that filter out the noise and purify the toxic air.

He takes his camera from his rucksack and sizes up a scene in his viewfinder. Everywhere he aims is a perfect eye candy moment — the trees obscure the light and with his high-focus lens he can find all those inscrutable details that are overlooked in the everyday hustle and bustle. He focuses in on the tea house pavilion just beyond the pond, going deeper in he snaps the people crossing over the bridge and the skyscrapers towering over nature, and just as he’s about to take another shot, he feels a soft brush against his leg and one of Shinjuku park’s visitor cats casually flops onto its side next to him. He gives it a little scratch on the head.

“Heh, you’re a cute one. Where’s the rest of your buddies, huh?”

The few stray cats that hang around the park hide out in tree hollows waiting for prey or the occasional passerby to drop some food, but somehow they come out in droves when he’s nearby. Some of them even have collars so not all of them are homeless, and yet they know to flock to the park at certain times of the day to find him.

Sure enough as another cat comes to join the first in wrapping itself around his legs, Akihito wonders if their feline senses are drawn to what he is and their overly affectionate behaviour is their way of investigating him. They nip him with their tiny teeth and burrow a way under his jeans to lick around his shins, a thing he doesn’t mind in the slightest because he absolutely adores these cats.
It draws some attention, though. People coo as they see him and some even take pictures, commenting that he’s a human form of catnip, which may or may not be true when he considers that there’s no real difference between Asami and a gang of cats purring for his affections. He steps away, gradually putting more and more space between himself and snaps a few shots of the trailing group of meowing lovelies as they race to catch up to him. He could quite possibly cave in from this adorable ambush.

A bone is thrown by a passerby, in the literal and figurative sense, to distract the cats and they pile onto one another to get it, giving Akihito the opportunity for escape. (Not that he particularly wanted to.)

He’s out onto the street plaza again, at the large diagonal junction that lets people flow between a traffic of vans and taxi cabs. He makes it to the small market district where the channel of back streets and narrow pavements cram small businesses right up onto the road. He’s familiar with this area because his favourite ramen joint is just around the corner, a small wooden fronted shop with three white hiragana brushstrokes spelling ‘Midori’. Akihito gravitates there after photography classes, sometimes with his classmates but mostly on his own. He rather prefers the peace and quiet of eating by himself in a sparsely populated restaurant, somewhere out of sight and left alone. Midori doesn’t have any waitresses and no noisy clientele, loud parties and drunks can forget about coming here.

He steps through the noren curtains and he’s greeted by the owner and his assistant chef with the usual bellowing welcome.

“Ohhh, Takaba-chan! Welcome!”

“‘Sup!” Akihito returns.
Behind a cloud of steam Moriyama-san sieves the last of the moisture out of his freshly cooked ramen noodles and transfers them into a bowl for topping. Akihito’s about to get his ticket from the order machine when Moriyama calls out to him.

“Don’t worry about a ticket, kid. Business is quiet, just have a seat.”

Akihito turns on his heel and takes his seat on the counter. The only other guest in the restaurant is an old man slurping his noodles at the far end while reading a newspaper, and definitely doesn’t look like the conversational type.

“So what’ll it be for today, the usual?” Moriyama asks from over the counter.

The usual being giant king prawns, soft shell crab and squid on top, now that Akihito can regularly afford it. “Yeah, go for it.”

“One ‘mariner special’, coming up.”

The assistant chef throws the seafood into a wok to sizzle and Moriyama fetches fresh ingredients for dressing. It’s not the first time Akihito’s seeing Moriyama’s famed knife skills in action cutting vegetables into artistic shapes for decoration on top of his ramen bowls. Akihito is so enthralled by the way he cuts radishes into lotus flowers and courgettes into roses that he takes a few shots with his camera. He fiddles with the preview and looks through all the photos he took while he waits for his food to cook.

“Photography class today?” Moriyama asks.

“Not today,” Akihito says, “But I got this new lens I was dying to try out. I can get some really cool shots, look at these——” He reaches his camera over the counter and shows Moriyama the photos he took earlier in the park.

“Nice! You could be a professional.”

Akihito chuckles. “Maybe one day.” It’s funny because he could very well be considered a professional at this point, under Asami’s less than gentle push. He puts his camera away and makes small conversation with Moriyama as he serves up his delicious dish.

“Moriyama-san, has cooking always been your passion?”

“To tell you the truth, I wasn’t good at anything else. My old man sculpted things and made pottery for a living. I tried to follow in his footsteps, but let’s just say, I tripped at the first step.”

“But you’re so good at carving and cutting stuff,” Akihito says. “I don’t know anyone who can make stuff out of food like you do.”

“Hey, I wasn’t a natural at this either, it took years and years of practice to get it. I found out that all the things I couldn’t do with clay I could do with food, so my old man left an imprint on me one way or another.”

“I wish I could be half as good as you.”

“Kid, you’ve got the whole world at your feet. Your brain’s like a sponge taking in all kinds of crazy and beautiful things, add passion to that and you can make yourself into anything you want. There’s opportunities today that didn’t exist in my day.”

“I guess you’re right. I’ll do my best.”
“That’s the spirit. You’ll be famous one day, kid. Just remember me when you’re taking photos of the emperor and kings and queens from other nations.” Moriyama hacks with a gruff riff of laughter and sprinkles sliced green onions and chili to finish off the ramen and sets it in front of Akihito. “Here’s your brain food. ‘Mariner Special’, with an extra egg on the house. Enjoy.”

“Thanks!” Akihito snaps his chopstick and digs straight in. “Itadakimasu!”

Akihito wants his stomach full of this stuff all the time. He’s been a starving wanderer on the streets of Japan, eating food from a can, stealing his way out of starvation, he’s choked on all sorts of poisonous things while foraging in the wilderness and he’s killed things, if he had to, to survive, and all it tasted of was despair. Now he eats for the pleasure, for the taste of a dozen different flavours dazzling his tongue. The chili makes all of his taste buds sweeten and his nose run, and he peels the crackled skin off of this giant mutant king prawn and its juices burst within the crevices of hard outer shell and plump, fleshy pink meat. And with his hands burning with chili, he picks up some noodles on his chopsticks to slosh it all back. It’s the best comfort food he can imagine.

With his belly satisfied, he wipes the dregs of soup from his chin with a napkin and leaves his money on the bill tab. On his way out there’s a cute raccoon dog statuette that accepts tips in exchange for a candied plum sweet. Akihito offers it a 500 yen coin.

He pops the sweet into his mouth as he leaves Midori and crosses the road into a by-street. Fewer people use them as shortcuts, favouring the busy main street. He passes a block and then another, past resident apartments with zig-zagged concrete staircases and battered, corrugated shutter fronts of hard-to-sell shops. Every time he walks these winding streets he feels like a mouse in a maze trying to get out, he’s looking up at the blue of the sky and at the edges of balconies, working out if he can traverse the same distance from the rooftops as he can on foot.

He spots an extruding line of brickwork along a wall of a raggedy apartment block and uses it as a boost to hop onto a drainpipe and up onto the roof of a small two story house that’s connected to it. It takes him mere seconds to ascend that building as well as along its flat roof. The multiple power lines that run by his feet are the only real element of danger to a free-run like this, the houses are tightly packed and the streetways so narrow that he easily makes the gap between them with a single jump. He travels a few blocks by roof and climbs another white apartment building up all eight stories from the outside using balcony ledges and gratings and the will of his own strength.

The view at the top is a pretty sweet reward, and situated right in front of him is another apartment block at a slightly lower elevation, with a road separating it a good fifteen feet or so that instinctually sets a bar Akihito wants to cross. Still burning from the ecstasy, he takes a running jump and leaps forward into the air, a full three seconds of airtime, and lands heavily on the tough soles of his combat boots as they crunch into gravel. His landing disturbs a group of pigeons and they scatter around him, and all his movement halts then. For the barest of moments through the panicked flurry of birds, he locks onto something perched on the edge of another apartment block in the distance — something hunched over and dark, something human-like.
As the last of the birds disperse, so does whatever he thinks he saw.

He turns around on the spot and takes a sweeping survey of the city and then focuses back on that particular building, squinting at it, wondering if he’s imagining things, or if it was anything at all.

A tiny ruffle of wind passes by and his heart goes silent for a beat or two, then his adrenaline settles down and he gathers himself together before deciding to head back to the penthouse.

At a quarter to nine he arrives at Sion to the unexpected thrill of having every one of Asami’s disgruntled security guards pay him a tone of respect. Through the mandatory security checks and bag search, the usual heavy handed dumb fingers that turn his camera bag inside out carefully nudge his stuff to the far end of the table without any objection. He didn't mention anything about it to Asami but he must have disciplined them after observing the security footage. Akihito’s neatly turned smile ticks off the security guards as he collects his bag, and when he steps into the club's lobby a uniformed employee calls him by name and ushers him upstairs to Asami’s office.

It’s for a minor debriefing and nothing more, though there's every anticipation that Asami will break their agreement of professionalism when his eyes ease over Akihito’s new suit with ultimate approval, and Akihito absorbs the length and breadth of Asami in his luxuriant office with all its gleaming accents and exorbitant furnishings, like a king in his castle.

“Let me familiarise you with who we have with us tonight,” Asami says, rising from his seat and leading them to the lower floors to Sion’s private rooms. They're housed in a central column that
goes right through the first three floors of Club Sion, a design feature that allows private guests a
tree-sixty view of the upper lounge, lower lounge and dance floor through tinted windows. Akihito
looks down through the smokescreen trailing from every booth as patrons sit locked in tight
conversation, he recognises a few faces but Asami refreshes his memory.

“The former governor of the Bank of Japan is here again. He’s over there talking to the woman in
purple. Look at him lapping up the attention. They’re all the same.”

They’re looking at the old man with thinning hair talking to a lady more than half his age. She raises
her glass to his mouth and he drinks like a pissed-up fucker who’s never had it so good.

“Looks like she’s loving it more than he is,” Akihito observes, though staying mildly disconnected.

“And that group of five sitting over there with Ootori Nami—”

“—I know her! She's that actress in that crazy drama about university freshmen. I recognised her
even before you said her name.”

“She has a serious alcohol problem. Those four men are her minders trying to keep her in check. Her
father’s in charge of her estate and she blows it all on diamond encrusted champagne. She comes
here often as well.”

“So you know that she has an alcohol problem but you still let her in?”

“It’s not my problem what she does with her life. I know her father pays for her membership, so
what does that make him?”

Akihito scoffs. Not quite as awful as you?

And as the smoke clears and the crimson lights halo around every dark head of the lounge, Akihito’s
drawn to an all-white figure sitting in a booth by herself. Her elegance isn't out of place by any
means, but she's the only one without company.

“Who’s that lady over there?”

Asami chuffs and smirks almost knowingly, intrigued that Akihito would pick her out in a room full
of people.

“Her name is Lucy Ballard. She’s a French-Canadian business woman. She’s lived and worked in
Japan for years.”

“What does she do?”

“She’s in the cosmetics industry. A self-made millionairess. Her business is big in Malaysia, Korea,
Thailand and Singapore. Among all her fashion industry exploits, she takes vulnerable girls off the
streets and trains them in her company to become tidy members of society again. I admire her,
actually, she’s one of a kind.”

Asami stays looking at her while Akihito’s eyes stray at the gallant description of this woman’s
savior complex, and because it takes a lot for Asami to compliment anyone.

“Do you know her more personally?” Akihito snips. There’s no polite intention in it, but the palpable
amount of jealousy racks Asami with laughter.

“We've shared nothing more than words, Akihito, I can assure you.” He turns from the window
towards Akihito and a creeping hand follows up the nape of the boy’s neck to dishevel his neatly styled hair, and he’s suddenly very, very close. “Why don’t you introduce yourself to her? Offer to take her picture. She’ll appreciate your company. It’ll cheer her up.”

Akihito swats the hand away. “Does she look miserable to you?” he quips back. “She’s recently lost someone,” Asami replies, suddenly sounding schooled and proper and pulls away, taking a second to neaten his tie and look evermore like the king of the underworld.

Akihito’s irritation reaches some sort of reconciliation then.

They leave the private room and Asami returns Akihito to the lounge level via the private elevator. Asami hits the button and a shiver of want runs down Akihito’s spine as they stand side by side for the few agonising seconds it takes to reach their floor. The elevator chimes and Akihito skims past Asami, taking with him the heavenly musk of the man’s cologne with its aftermark of Dunhill smoke and the last few seconds of Asami’s lascivious smirk before the doors finally close on him.

By now the corridors have become crowded with security and service personnel rushing to their ports of call. Sion has more than a hundred staff members on this floor alone, plenty of fresh-faced wait staff, bartenders, managers, and security staff that flow in and out of the crowded main hall intermittently, out of the bright marbled foyer and into the low-light lounge. Sion’s decor is artfully diverse; traditional forms meeting a more modern blend. Light glitters in deep artificial colours around the black marble and dark wood surfaces and maroon studded leather seats, traditional boxed gardens that section off parts of the lounge are lit underneath like the ecosystem of another world, and huge carved geode sculptures complete the expensive ambience.

Bass-heavy music pumps from the nightclub a floor below and Akihito feels it carrying right through him as he cuts a way through the servers carrying drinks on silver platters, trying to be as unobtrusive as possible with his camera dangling from his neck. He makes it to a safe spot in the corner of the lounge where he surveys everything in every human detail. It’s easy to spot those already on stimulants. His high focus lens zeroes in on a man sitting across from where he is, his eyes glazed black and the whites of his eyes receding into a bloodshot matted mess, locked in a seemingly endless conversation with a woman he’s probably only just met. His mouth hasn’t stopped moving nor has he blinked for several minutes, sweat sticks to his starched collar in the way that phlegm slithers down a dry throat. It’s cocaine in plain view of him, Akihito notes. The temples of high society are one of the best ways to score all sorts of illicit paraphernalia, cocaine being particularly sought after. Asami doesn’t do a lot to stem the use of it in his clubs and Sion’s reputation has never suffered from it, but it’s the one thing out of a potential many that Akihito has trouble forgiving him for. He doesn’t lament, though. There’s nothing anyone could ever offer him here that he would want.

His attention is diverted by a group of guests waving him over to their booth. This group are friendly and enjoying themselves without stimulants and it’s immediately noticeable. They offer to buy him a drink but he politely turns it down. He offers up his business card so they can purchase the photos if they want to. He’s tapped on his shoulder and two ladies pull him across the lounge to have their picture taken in front of the wall sculpture that looks like a dragon morphing out of an abstract wave. It’s so ostentatious (as is the general theme of Sion) and so spectacularly Asami. Everything here is just a lavish, inanimate extension of him.

As he takes the floor again, standing out from the darkly swept room is the lady Lucy Ballard in her all-white chiffon dress, aged but beautifully coiffed. Akihito had been avoiding her area for most of the evening, occasionally seeing her surgically taut face sipping her drink, touching up her lipstick, and smoking her cigarette on a slender holder. Asami said she’d recently lost someone but she has
the look of one who’s expecting to see that person walk right through the door. It’s been nearly an hour and a half that she's been on her own, and even Akihito wouldn't want to be here without company. So he slowly makes his way over to her.

“Good evening, madam. I’m Takaba Akihito, the event photographer. May I take your picture?”

Her whole face lights up when she sees him and extends her reply back to him in accented Japanese. “Why, certainly.” She edges forward on the seat a little and puts the thin end of her cigarette holder to her lips, posing for him as a classic café society girl would. “I never expected to see such a darling face working here. Are you new?”

“I’m just starting out,” he smiles. “I haven’t been here very long.”

“So I see,” she grins, passing her eyes over him none too subtly. “I'm Lucy Ballard, a pleasure.”

Her wiry hand floats to him and Akihito pauses on what to do with it before deciding to shake it. He feels foreign to the gesture, but he’s learnt from Asami to be gracious about it. “Pleased to meet you, Ballard-san.”

“Are you busy? Would you spare a moment to have a drink with me?”

“I err…” Akihito rubs the back of his head, “I’m not really supposed to be drinking on the job.”

“How about a coke then? You look like you could do with one.” Her smile broadens and she pats the seat space next to her, and suddenly Akihito hears his own train of thought in Asami’s coercive voice, telling him to take the seat.

“I hope I’m not making you feel uncomfortable,” she says, moving a lock of hair over her shoulder and inadvertently brushing it against Akihito’s cheek.

“It’s nothing like that,” he laughs awkwardly. Just as he begins to relax into the sweet melody of her accent, an unfamiliar smell rises from her cigarette that Akihito instinctively wants to move away from, but doesn’t, out of politeness. “You speak Japanese really well,” he says instead.

“Thank you, sweetheart. I've worked here for many years with my company.” She takes out a business card from her clutch purse and passes it to him. “I’m the chief director of *Eternité International*.”

“Amazing,” Akihito says, even though he’s never heard of her company.

“I’ve settled in many places, but the Japanese are so warm and friendly, I feel like this is my second home. It makes me miss Canada a little less.”

Asami did mention she was Canadian, but Akihito feigns the knowledge. “You’re from Canada?”

“I’m a first generation French-Canadian. My family emigrated there from Marseille on a ship destined for the Americas many years ago. There’s been a spirit of travelling in my family for generations, you know? From Algeria to France and then to Canada, and now for my work I get to travel the whole world. Very bourgeois, I think. Do you like to travel?”

“Y—Yeah, when I can.” He doesn’t elaborate that he’s more of a seasoned traveller than she’ll ever be, or even Asami for that matter. Lucy shares with him private anecdotes of her travels, to Rome and Prague and the Canary Islands, the exoticism of Istanbul and Casablanca, and the nostalgia of her home town in Marseille. Akihito can only listen.
A waiter walks by their table and Lucy flags him down with the red flare of her nails, ordering a gimlet for herself and a tall vanilla coke for Akihito. As the waiter leaves, her hand falls like a waif onto his knee, whether deliberately or by happenstance, it makes Akihito jolt with a sharp intake of breath as her nails crease slowly into his trousers.

“This is the first time I’ve been to Sion since my best friend passed away,” she says openly. “I say best friend, he was more like my life partner, he’s been with me from the very start. I miss him terribly. My coming here is like I’m trying to rekindle his memory but I’m drowning my sorrows instead.”

“I’m very sorry for your loss,” Akihito says, dipping his head in condolence despite her hand constantly caressing his knee.

“I appreciate it. He loved this place. There are so many clubs in Tokyo, but Sion’s different. Sion has some blood running through it, which is what I need right now. He was...” She pauses as the words dry in her throat and she takes a photograph out of her clutch bag, showing it to Akihito. “His name was Tristan,” she says, fondly touching the worn photograph. “This is us together at Tristan’s villa in Brasilia. That’s him, his boyfriend, me, and my fiancé.” Her manicured finger strokes over Tristan’s image that she’s probably stroked a thousand times in remembrance, so much so that the colours are slightly lifted from his face.

“You all look so happy,” Akihito says, offering what small comfort he can.

She nods tearfully. “Now photographs are all I have left. I thought you might understand if I showed you. Photographs are so precious to me.” She kisses it before putting it away.

“I understand completely, Ballard-san. They’re important to me as well.”

“Darling, please, call me Lucy,” she insists.

“L—Lucy-san,” he corrects. “A photograph is an immaculate memory, at least that’s how I see it. You never know what’s going to happen from one minute to the next, we think we know the future but nothing’s certain—” He’s interrupted when their drinks arrive, the waiter sets down his vanilla coke and Lucy picks up her glass from the tray, daintily sipping it while her attention never drops from Akihito.

“You know, of all the people I’ve seen in Japan, none of them look quite like you. Are you full Japanese?”

He can’t seem to hide the anxiety he feels every time someone asks him about his appearance. “Um...as far as I know.”

She strokes the slim stem of her cocktail glass and carries on with her long, intrigued stare. “Don’t be shy, chéri, I’m just curious about your beauty.”

Blood starts to fill his cheeks. “I—I don’t really pay attention to my looks.”

“No?” she laughs, disbelievingly. “You have a face most young men would die for.”

“No I don’t...” he scoffs, laughing it off.

“It’s true. Everyone wants to be beautiful, even those who say they don’t. Beauty is like a drug, like lust. It’s in our DNA, and some will do anything to achieve an impossible pinnacle of beauty.”

“I get that image is everything these days. I go to photography school and they teach us about
"Yes, yes," she agrees, "That’s become an art in itself. There’s a model I once worked with, she was the face of my company’s ‘Bois de Rose’ campaign back in the early 2000’s. I wanted her because she was fresh, not like those wireframe, razor cheekbone models at the time. She had a fascinating face, you know? She was soft. But she refused to look at any images of herself unless she was airbrushed."

"Why did she feel that way?"

"Who knows. She can ignite a room with her beauty but she can only see herself behind a rose glass. Why become a model if you can’t even look at yourself? Quel gâchis! Such a waste."

"People become even more self-conscious in front of the camera and it can affect the mood a lot. I guess that’s why I prefer photographing landscapes."

"But seeing that beauty is not guaranteed to all, chéri. When I was young my impression of beauty was so naive. We’re so stupid, so apathetic at that age, you know? We want to look like this girl or that girl. I watched my mother in the bathroom putting on a new face every morning and I didn’t know why. Now I know, she was teaching me how to wake up and dress as if the day was going to be a date with destiny.” She holds her gimlet up in salute. “God bless you, maman.”

"Was your mother in cosmetics too?” Akihito asks.

“No no, she was a seamstress in a factory on minimum pay. She raised me single-handed and did her best so that I wouldn’t become pregnant and wretched before I reached seventeen. She said I could do whatever I liked after that, so I went back to France to work in cosmetics in the hopes of catching a glimmer of the fashion world...or find an artist and become his muse. All the best artists are French, and all the best girls are French, and my fate lead me to Tristan in Saint-Tropez, who was struggling to make a living as an artist. He painted fashion mannequins for money, those hideous things,” she laughs. “He was older than me at the time, I relied a little bit on him but we mostly relied on each other, because we wanted the same things...” She closes her eyes and takes a bracing pause to regain her smile. “Sorry, I get emotional thinking about all of this.”

“It sounds like an incredible story,” Akihito says.

“Life is incredible. I thought my life would be a drag, but look at this,” she gestures with broadening arms. “I’m in Tokyo, in this magnificent club, as far from Canada as I can get. It's marvelous, no?”

“I wish I could have a success like that, someday,” Akihito says, and Lady Ballard’s eyes widen as though he’s said something completely ridiculous.

“What are you talking about, chéri? You mean to tell me that you don’t see all this as a success? You work with Monsieur Asami, there’s no greater success than that.”

She says his name and Akihito’s internal reaction is the rampant quickening of his heartbeat.

“Have you ever met him? Asami Ryuichi,” he asks her.

“Oh yes,” she replies, her red lips beam with a fond smile and a swooning sigh. “He's a beautiful, exquisite man. Look at the hairs on my arms as I say his name. This is what it does to me. I never believed a man like him existed until I met him at a gala some years ago. I remember being shyer than a mouse seeing him in the flesh. You know, there were rumors going around that he seduced a Chinese Triad leader’s son. I don’t know if it was true or not, but somehow the thought of such a powerful, desirable man seducing another man is the most erotic thing I'll ever know.”
Her chest heaves and a splinter bites into Akihito’s own, yet he remains calmly indifferent on the outside.

“Apologies if I made you uncomfortable, chéri. It’s just women's talk. But he’s above appearances, and truly generous. He’s donated so much of his fortune to good causes, including my own charity.”

Akihito retrieves himself enough to sound surprised, and he genuinely is. “Really?”

“Oui,” she winks. “I've lost count how much.”

“I never knew that about him,” Akihito says out aloud, and in his mind all the usual searching questions about Asami start to coalesce for him into a subtle, delicious ache. “Does he have businesses outside of Sion?” he proceeds to ask.

“Monsieur Asami has many interests. He owns a state of the art hospital downtown, did you know?”

Akihito shakes his head. “No, I didn't.”

“It’s a specialist hospital; there's not another one like it in the whole of Japan. It treats those who are desperately sick. And did you know that he also...”

Her voice fades out as his mind starts to detune further and further into his own thoughts. The fine hairs on the back of his neck start to prickle in the coming realisation that maybe he’s had Asami wrong from the start, maybe he isn’t a businessman with underhanded activities usurping all the good people of Japan for gain, but that his reputation has stood so impeccably that even the whole world has a cause to know about it. He shoves his moral fist in the man from time to time, and Asami still keeps him here; protecting him, enriching him, loving him. He can’t help but think he’s been angry about the wrong things all along.

As he glances at his watch he realises they've been sat talking for nearly forty minutes. He waits for a convenient segue to bring their conversation to an end. The server walking by to collect their empty glasses provides the opportunity.

“I'm so sorry, Lucy-san, it's been great talking to you but I have to get back to work.” He picks up his camera and Lucy hooks an arm around his elbow and runs her red manicured fingernails up his arm, hoping to sway him to sit back down.

“Please, my chéri, the night is still young. I feel the giddiness of something wonderful sitting next to you. If I could I would have you on a plate this instant.” Her tipsy, fluttering touches stroke up his arm and Akihito stops them mid-sweep, bowing graciously.

“I'm flattered, really, but I have to get back now.”

“Ohhh, you’re the sweetest boy. Take care, mon amour.” She sees him off with a blow of a kiss and he slides out of the booth before meandering through the crowd of servers and bodies that empty from the dance floor. The roar in his ears reaches deafening once he’s outside in the foyer, battling with a riptide of staff passing through him. He takes himself away down the corridor making it look as though he’s fiddling with his camera, and when his hands and thoughts won't obey him he takes his phone out of his pocket to check the time. At the same time the elevator dings at opposite side of the corridor and two tuxedoed security guards and a few female personnel file out. He keeps his head low, not expecting for Asami to emerge out of nowhere and pull him into the awaiting elevator and rush the doors closed behind them.

There isn’t a second to breathe before he’s thrust up against the side and kissed. Akihito never really has any kind of defence for these hard, uncompromising kisses, or any true resistance. He wraps his
arms around the man’s neck and his camera drops absently out of his grip, he hears it crack as it hits
the floor and has no real lamentable reaction to it, because Asami’s quite possibly read this moment,
seen it coming from his ivory towers, reading all the fine tremors shooting up his body that are ready
to erupt and Asami’s so readily here to take him.

“Asami…” he trembles. There’s not an inch of space between them as he speaks, lips to lips,
moaning against them as Asami’s roughing them with tantalising nips of his teeth.

“How’s your evening so far?” Asami asks, so impossibly serene relative to Akihito’s hammering
emotions whilst his hand is reaching into the inside of his suit to touch a sweltering hand along his
back. Akihito instinctually arches to it.

“G—Good. Just needed some air.”

It’s met with a soft chuckle from Asami as his hand slides down the front of Akihito’s shirt and flicks
open a button, then another one, doing exactly as he pleases. “I watched you talk with her,” he then
says.

“Yeah?” Akihito sighs a shiver of laughter. “Is that why you’re undressing me?” A purring chuckle
floats across his ear but no spoken answer. Asami instead leans down to kiss his neck and soothe
whatever answer may have been. “She’s nice but she talks so much. Why did you make me sit with
her?”

Asami rakes his eyes up with something freshly wicked in them as he says, “She only has eyes for
men half her age.”

Akihito admonishes him with a long, berating look. You fucker. He’s made to act on Asami’s
personal request when all Asami wanted was to see him sit next to a cougar to become her next meal,
and now he’s being devoured head to toe and he’s finding himself helplessly awaiting it.

“She showed me a photograph. He’s young like me…her fiancé;” Akihito manages to say with a
broken, luscious voice.

“Ex-fiancé,” Asami adds.

“Oh…’
Asami continues on enthusiastically grinning through a ravishing bite to Akihito’s collarbone. “I watched her get close to you, put her hands on you, thinking she had a chance to have you.”

“Heh, so you did this all on purpose...pervert.”

“You’ll never know how much,” Asami purrs and it triggers the overflow of energy between them to hit just as he lifts Akihito up against the elevators panelling and smashes every inch of haste between them against his lips. Their hands desperately seek, scrunch into each other’s clothes, Akihito’s fingers dive into Asami’s slicked locks and Asami’s clever fingers pull to remove Akihito’s suit altogether.

“If you ruin my new suit, I'll kill you,” Akihito warns so convincingly that it halts Asami momentarily, then he goes right back into undressing him with sensual, greedy, arrogant laughter.

“I look forward to it.”

Akihito moans and gives up trying to reason when Asami’s hand is down the front of his trousers and rolling his balls between his fingers, he’s marred with internal conflict but the rush of this beautiful elevator fuck is almost to the point of undoing him gloriously, and all it took was two minutes for the man to fucking shine.

“You stupid, sexy man,” Akihito whispers against Asami’s temple. “I feel like my wings are going to destroy this elevator if I let them go.”

“Then it’s just as well that I’m taking you to the ‘Sky Suite’.”

Akihito pauses then. “What’s the ‘Sky Suite’?”
“There’s a super moon tonight, and the view of it from the very top of Sion is incomparable to anywhere else in Japan.”

Akihito looks at him curiously, and Asami brushes his hand soothingly against his cheek and through his hair, holding his big-eyed, interested stare for a suspended, blissful moment, and Akihito discovers what it feels like to be completely swallowed by the feeling. He puts his head on Asami’s shoulder and waits for the elevator to chime at the top.

“Take me there.”

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year in 5 days :) The story continues in 2017!
A Brutal Embrace

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the wait guys. I kinda sat on this chapter for a while, tweaking it and going back to it to give it more angst to destroy my readers ψ(´∇`)ψ I love you all really...

Akihito makes an early escape this morning before Asami has the chance to wake. Unable to shake off his insomnia, all manner of things pass through his head in those early solitary hours, and the things Lady Ballard told him the other night occupy his thoughts more than anything else. He decides to throw himself head deep into that curiosity, and so he hastens his way along the rooftops towards the south side of Tokyo where Asami’s hospital is said to be. The streets below are crawling with people crammed together in the morning rush, but Akihito breezes several blocks in a gliding parkour run that swiftly covers an efficient distance.

He stops at the edge of a building and takes a cautious look down, mapping the directions in his head from the satellite streetview he looked up on the internet and trying to think of the best way to drop down onto the roof of the hospital without anyone noticing. He tracks a white service van as it’s let in through the side electric gate and stops in a marked bay to unload, leading Akihito to assume that this particular section of the hospital is restricted to specialised personnel only, and although quiet, carries a high risk of getting caught. He instead chooses to make a running leap off the ledge onto the flat roof just outside the hospital’s vicinity and travels carefully around a skylight, then checks that the coast is clear before hopping over the railing and dropping off the side of the building into the side alley, emerging from it as though he hasn’t just travelled halfway across Tokyo by roof.

He takes a lengthy look at the hospital’s enormous facade and wonders why he’s never noticed it before while passing through Tokyo; this huge sterile smelling building, clean from the stench of blood that soaks through the air of most hospitals. With a steadying breath, he enters through the revolving mouth of the beast to utter calm on the other side. The porcelain white foyer doesn’t croak with the restlessly ill, but with the plain painted faces of the patiently waiting. Akihito makes it over the threshold with careful steps, inching only a few meters inside before being met by two hologram nurses directing people to where they need to go — *Outpatients waiting room to your left, surgical assessment unit to your right, medical imaging and phlebotomy straight ahead* — it’s a relay of calm that stretches the nerves into accepting the warmth of their mechanised feminine vocals; no stress, zero panic, everything’s going to be ‘OK’.

He walks past them and finds the stairwell next to the lifts and follows the small riff of a doctor’s heels up to the first floor, keeping a distance behind her as she speaks with her colleague. They turn towards the east wing while Akihito quietly heads west, passively peering into rooms and surveying their bald white spaces with state of the art equipment in every room. A lot of the rooms have restricted access. Mounted on the walls are card readers as well as high tech identification scanners that read the retina and fingerprints of every staff member. It’s ultra high tech technology for an age they haven’t even stepped into yet, and it’s the only conducive thing that could link this place to Asami.

Staff wheeling crash trolleys and carrying clipboards pass alongside him as he crosses the day ward into the long-stay ward and deep into windowless corridors, as nurses’ smocks become dirtier, their eyes a little more weary, and the air becomes a little more drenched with pus and blood. The
revolting smell of it, no matter how miniscule is an abominable trigger for everything Akihito hates about himself. His heightened senses can detect blood like a shark can in an ocean’s depth full of water. His body recoils from the smell but it's his instincts that react in the opposite, dragging him deeper into the bowels of the hospital to those who are gravely ill, and whose souls lay defenselessly open.

His ears are buzzing with the barely-there sounds of machines keeping everyone alive; the drips of pain medications diffusing intravenously, respirators hissing, the quiet whimpers of pain — so many weak hearts, some so perilously close that there are practically no barriers stopping him from ingesting such precious food if he were to slip out of his astral body and let himself roam and consume. No one would think anything of one of these patients dying in his or her sleep or succumbing to complications, for some it may even be a mercy to greet the end so painlessly.

Nurses see him as innocent as any visitor. They smile as they let him through with their keycard, having no clue as to what he is and what he could do to these patients, and it’s so inherently wrong of him to even be tempted because his body overflows with so much life energy that he could live eternally off of it and never need another long-lasting meal, in all probability. It’s as though his own humanity can’t hear itself for all of five trepidation-filled minutes as he stands outside of a post-op ward with his heart stampeding in his chest and his pupils fully blown, watching as porters wheel unconscious patients from theatre. He's overwhelmed by the vise grip his bottomless, ancient instinct has on him that makes him salve for this much available life energy.

He proceeds cautiously behind them and follows until he can go no further without clearance. There are other ways, though, compelled through instinct by the acrid stench of bleach and surgical silicone of the unbearably clean wing, he searches, looking for access through the labyrinth of tight hallways and rooms where the most vulnerable souls lie in their sick beds, shielded from view by curtains.
But one pair of eyes stops him dead in his tracks; these two small, black eyes belong to a little girl embracing her mother’s shoulders as she speaks with a nurse. Her small head is bandaged around with heavy gauze and a thick wad of dressing staunches the blood flow, and she suckles a pacifier dummy to keep her from crying. Akihito should be imagining what trauma she’s been through as her eyes settle on him with a tired, half-lidded stare, but he can’t stop looking at her as his instincts fail to recede in the presence of a child.

And it’s only then, in that craving, disgraceful ache, that something as peripheral as the smell of cigarette smoke left on someone's clothes shocks him back to reality, preventing him from descending any further into that feral, inhumane state that could unleash hell under this roof — Asami’s roof.

“Asami—” he lets out, in a voice that’s sufficiently raw and far removed from himself, and a welter of fear rides up to flood his mind with every conscious muscle memory of that man.

He disappears from sight, then, around the corner and back down into the stairwell. Braced over the railing, he nearly throws up looking down the spiral drop of the staircase and imagining it as a metaphor for what might have been if he let himself go just then. He takes several deep lungfulls of breath to calm himself and wipes the sweat on his forehead with the sleeve of his jacket.

“—Are you alright there?”

His head immediately whips around to a female staff member clutching her files to her chest and concern drawn across her face.

“Do you need help?” she asks, gently, and with what little sound there is, it amplifies down the shaft of the stairwell and is about to throw everything into disarray again. He can’t stay here for another second.

He gathers enough wits to stutter, “N—No, I...I was just leaving,” and takes off down the stairs and out of the hospital’s nearest exit, so help him God, he rips through the morning crowds and away from the hospital. And while he speeds towards downtown like an unseen bullet, Asami’s limousine drives towards uptown on the same stretch of road towards the commercial district. Suoh steers them through morning rush hour while Kirishima in the front passenger seat occasionally glances at his watch. They’re due for a meeting with the managers at Club Iblis in fifteen minutes and he’s deeply concerned about timekeeping, among other things that have delayed them this morning.

His concern is well concealed as he listens to the phone conversation his boss is having with a foreign client, the divider is down and Asami’s English speaking voice tears in a few places, disrupting its usually perfect deliverance. Short phrases crack into stifled coughs and Kirishima has to deliberately focus on the road ahead. Earlier in the office he spotted bloodied tissues in his boss’s wastepaper bin that were completely contradictory to the perfect health he’s been having lately, and his discretion didn't allow him to ask any further questions on the matter, not when the boss looked to be in a bad mood.

As they approach a red light and stop for it, Asami’s phone call ends abruptly with a heavy, hoarse exhale and then a painful, heaving cough that breaks Kirishima’s tactful silence.

“Is everything alright, sir?”

Asami coughs once, twice more, and a final hack eases the congestion in his throat. He thought he rid himself of this inflammation, or rather, Akihito healed it for him, however mysteriously. A lot of things don’t make sense to him about Akihito but he’s seen the very black and white of Akihito’s healing abilities and so it doesn’t make sense to him why his lungs feel stripped by fire and why he
brought up blood the second he woke up this morning. And now Kirishima’s looking at him with the concern of a housewife, and there’s a side to him that wants to put a bullet in his aide’s head and then another that needs his assistance more than ever.

He pulls a tissue out of his pocket and spits a thin stream of blood that soaks the tissue in a deep crimson red, and it’s then that all calm is obliterated as Kirishima roars at Suoh next to him to change their course for the hospital.

“No,” Asami forces his hand up in a growling refusal.

“But Asami-sama, you’re—!”

“That’s an order.”

Kirishima barely manages to keep his voice restrained in front of his boss. “You expect me to do nothing when there’s blood spilling out of your mouth?”

“I expect you to follow my orders,” Asami spits, low and guttural.

“T—This is madness, sir! You need medical attention!”

“Kirishima— the attempt to challenge chokes in his throat, and Asami leans over and drops his elbow onto the limo’s seat to cough violently into his tissue.

“Sir, forgive me,” Kirishima answers, now sounding resolutely in control. “In any other instance I would obey you, but I cannot now, sir. Please fasten your seatbelt.”

Well, then. Asami tips his head back and closes his eyes, trying to summon strength. He doesn’t have the willpower to argue, not when blood burns in his mouth and his coughs split the flesh from inside
of him with every knife slash of a breath.

Suoh makes a sharp right and pulls an illegal maneuver that turns them back on themselves, tyres squealing as they cross lanes and speed over lights and Suoh commanding the limousine like nothing Asami’s ever witnessed. He’s rocked about in his seat and the movement agitates his chest into coughing blood, spit and bile. It moves him to reach for the whisky in the limo’s mini-fridge and he takes a swig of it straight from the bottle to numb the burn, and as the hard taste hits him, so does its clarity, and the blur suddenly sparks crystal to him of how much risk there is in going to hospital, at them discovering what Akihito’s life energy has done to him.

His senses are still inconceivably sharp in picking up the urgency in his men’s heartbeats and the gurgle of his own blood congealing into clots before his throat ejects the dark red, mucusy blood. Asami’s never baited an eye at the sight of blood before but now the smell is wholeheartedly sickening, being that Akihito’s life energy magnifies everything around him and consequently everything inside of him, from the constant tear and repair of his internal tissues trying to knit, to connective muscles inflaming under stress. He grits through the pain and drinks because it’s all he can do to contain the painful wail that’s fighting with razor blades to get out of him.

Kirishima could dispense with the horrified glance as he constantly checks him, if Asami himself couldn’t gauge the severity of their situation, he doesn’t need the stern eyes behind those glasses to wither at the sight of him. He barks Kirishima back into order and the man resumes the navigator role, guiding Suoh through hectic uptown with the help of satellite navigation. Suoh floors through another set of red lights with cars swerving and horns blaring in their wake, it’s impressive, actually, how the limo overtakes vehicles waiting to turn at an intersection and doesn’t clip a single tail.

“Turn in here,” Kirishima says with renewed calm as Suoh maneuvers the tricky narrow back roads into the restricted side of the hospital controlled by a huge electronic and barbed gate. Security waves them through and Suoh comes to a less than graceful stop outside the rear entrance to the hospital. Kirishima’s already out and running to open Asami’s door but Asami refuses the help. He’s not incapable of holding himself, not at this moment as he breathes wildly through his nose and out of his mouth and storms with purpose through the double doors, looking for the only medical professional he can trust with his well being right now.

“I notified them that you were coming, sir...sir?” Kirishima’s tailing a few steps behind but Asami doesn’t hear him through the overwhelming tension flowing through him. He can feel his nerve synapses going up in semitones, higher and higher until his consciousness will no longer let himself concentrate, only driven by a compulsion to find Kaneda-sensei and have this godforsaken pain excised out of him in some way.

And he finds him, on the first floor in his room consulting with a patient. The horrified woman leaps out of her chair at the sight of the blood on Asami’s suit and flees the room, leaving Kaneda, who isn’t so forgiving about the sudden intrusion, to demand, “What is the meaning of th—?”

Before he can complete the sentence Asami throws the bloody tissues onto his desk and collapses into the chair the woman was previously occupying, breathing shallow, rasping inhales. It takes an effort for Kaneda not to be stirred when he sees the mass of bloodied tissues and Asami slouched forward and gasping agonisingly for breaths. With the amount of blood on Asami’s suit Kaneda checks him for a knife or bullet wound before Asami leans over the arm of the chair and coughs blood onto the floor. Kirishima and Suoh who were frantically in pursuit of their boss stand obtrusively in the doorway with pale expressions.

“You there! Call a nurse!” Kaneda shouts in their direction and Kirishima whips around to find someone. Turning his attention back to Asami, Kaneda places the head of his stethoscope to Asami’s
chest and withholds most of his repressed panic in order to listen. Seconds later a male nurse comes in pushing a hospital wheelchair and approaches to help Asami up out of the chair when he’s thrust away with enough force to make him peddle back and hit the wall.

“Get off me. I can walk,” Asami utters under a harsh, deep growl and proves his word by standing on his feet unaided.

“Suit yourself,” Kaneda chides, and the equally stubborn doctor files out of the room along with the befuddled nurse. By now a crowd of staff have gathered outside, baffled by all the commotion. All but a few leave but the ones that stay are keen to know if the rumours are true that Asami Ryuichi has indeed set foot in the hospital, and soon discussion has erupted all over the wing.

“Take Asami-san down to X-ray, they’re waiting for him,” Kaneda relays to the nurse. “I’ll be down shortly.”

Reluctant but cooperating, Asami allows himself to be ushered down to X-ray with his men following closely by his side, and as he watches him go, Kaneda’s frown deepens as the once striking back of an impenetrable man crumbles forward in weakness.

“Asami Ryuichi, what have you done to yourself?”

✣

Kaneda squints at the illuminated X-rays and scratches the slight tufting of hair at the top of his head as he adjusts his half moon glasses to scrutinize the details in front of him. He pauses to look over his notes on the clipboard and checks them with the X-ray transfers on the light screen.

“From what I see, it's starting to look like emphysema. See how harmful deposits have filled the alveolar cavities,” he indicates the cloudy white areas of Asami’s lungs that have lit up on the X-ray and which cover most of his chest. “Your lungs were already inflamed when you came to see me in April and it was bad then, but your condition has worsened to critical now. There’s immense pressure pushing against your rib cage and irreparable damage to your air sacs, that’s why you’re floundering like a fish out of water. But what’s concerning me the most is this area here.” He hovers over a densely clouded area of the right lung with his pen, “It’s wildly abnormal.” He takes his glasses off and rubs his eyes before addressing Asami and his company.

“Every cause has an effect, Asami-san,” Kaneda goes on to say, his gaze both scalding and overwrought at the same time. “I warned you of what your smoking habit would do to you and now your lungs are dying. I can perform procedures but I'm not a miracle man. You’re the one who has to bear the responsibility of your own actions.”

Sitting on the hospital bed with his shirt open and draped over his shoulders, Asami stays remarkably calm through such a bleak diagnosis. Kaneda looks down on him with a heavy, thoughtful concern that befits a father rather than a physician, waiting for an inspired response that he's probably never going to get. The rest of the room remains deadly silent, Suoh appearing troubled but level, Kirishima showing a more natural anxiety to do something for his boss or better this situation in any way he can.

The reality is that Asami’s not even thinking about himself right now, if he has emphysema or cancer or something else entirely fatal. The one who’s at the forefront of his mind and at the epicentre of everything that matters to him has let his life energy course freely through him for months, reacting with his system, resurrecting dead cells, restructuring all of his faculties, changing his DNA for all he knows, only now it’s as serious as a fingerprint on a murder weapon. It’s Akihito’s fingerprint all over him, and although he doesn’t doubt Kaneda’s confidentiality for a second, he can’t be sure there
aren’t other ears listening and eyes pealing through watertight medical records. If Akihito managed to free himself from whatever institution was hunting him, Asami would bet that the case is still very much wide open for evidence, even if it appears in a completely unrelated case.

“If something is to be done it needs to be done now,” Kaneda continues. “You don’t have the luxury of waiting for medication to mitigate what’s already a losing battle. Air sacs that have only been partially damaged may be able to recover if you stop smoking, but that mass on your right lobe suggests a larger, more sinister picture, and needs to be investigated through a biopsy. Once it's analysed, it needs to come out of your body. One way or another, you’re going to lose a part of your lung.”

There's silence for a moment or two before Asami breaks it with an overdrawn sigh, as the clog in his lungs somehow drains enough to allow him a morsel of sarcasm. “You're as dramatic as ever, sensei.”

Irked by the mocking lilt, Kaneda takes his caustic tone up a million notches. “Please don't misunderstand my words, Asami-san, when I say you’re hanging by the silk of a thread here. You may be under your roof but you’re under my goddamn care, and time is not on your side. If whatever is growing in your lungs doesn't kill you, asphyxiating on your own blood will, most assuredly. If surgery is performed in the upcoming days, your chances of survival are extremely good. If performed as an emergency, the risk is much higher—”

“—No surgery,” Asami states with a gravelly grunt. There’s no logical reason for Kaneda to expect or understand his position, and why he’s being so illogical by refusing treatment. He’s not doing this to save himself.


Kaneda takes off his glasses and rubs the stress from his eyes, ultimately pleading with Asami with his last efforts. “Did you barge into my room to show me how you're going to die, Asami-san, or did you come to me to help you?”

The whole room awaits for Asami’s reply as the silence stretches to its limit, and in those moments Asami contemplates every possible outcome and how to fix them if Akihito’s wonderdust ruins everything.

_Damn it._

What use would all of this be to Akihito if he was dead?

With his fists clenched by his sides, he eventually concedes. “Do the biopsy.”

Kaneda lips thin into a small, pleased smile. “Very well, then. My team will prep you for the procedure. And as you've opted to undertake this without surgery, you're going to feel a lot of discomfort.”

♣

When Asami comes around, he’s alone in the recovery room, and somehow it feels a little easier to breathe. His first conscious draw is a slow, tense breath that filters through his muddled senses. _Painkillers_, he notes, when he sees the intravenous needle in his arm and the drip suspended on a rail by his side. While being free of pain is a welcome distraction, he’s rapidly regaining his consciousness and wonders how much time has passed; his watch was taken off before the
procedure and a windowless room makes it impossible to guess the time of day.

He carefully manoeuvres onto an elbow and becomes immediately aware of his biopsy wound under the tacky gauze on his left side, and the many wires on his torso connecting him to a monitor. He rips one off and the EKG on the machine goes askew, it must be connected remotely to the nurses’ bleeper because two of them follow in seconds later and try to get him to lie back down.

“You mustn’t get out of bed yet, Asami-san,” they say to him, though, in the haze of sedatives they may as well be speaking another language. One of the nurses tries to place the EKG sticker back onto his chest while the other is much closer to him and therefore her heartbeats are fast clusters hammering on his eardrums. She places both dainty hands on his broad shoulders in an attempt to push him down with all her might, but Asami doesn’t budge.

“My men...bring them here,” he grunts out, now fully appreciating the hole in his lung when his phrase comes out short and airless.

“Please, Asami-san, you must follow Kaneda-sensei’s instruction. Your lung might collapse if you continue with strenuous movement.”

“Bring them to me, I won’t tell you again,” he repeats, and this time her delicate face crumbles as she drops everything and flies towards the door. The other nurse balks under his brutal glare and runs out straight after her. Less than a minute later Suoh and Kirishima rush to his bedside, both wearing uncharacteristic looks of despair.

“Asami-sama! How do you feel?” Kirishima is first to say as he falls to his boss’s side. Asami places a hand on both his men’s shoulders in silent acknowledgement, and they support him as he moves to sit upright.

“Are you sure you should be moving around so soon?” Kirishima asks, and Asami hasn’t felt like laughing until now.

“You're starting to sound like one of them,” he tells him.

“Sorry, sir...I don't mean to be—”

“Just...help me up.”

They help him get upright and swing his legs over the bed. With a grimace Asami breathes deeply through the discomfort and then asks, “What time is it?”

“Forty-three minutes past five,” Suoh accurately informs him. 

Shit. He's been knocked out for hours. Realising this it kicks him into high gear and he begins removing the wires and tubes, starting with the intravenous needle in the crook of his elbow.

Kirishima takes a wary step back when Asami’s bare soles touch the floor he rises to his feet. “Sir, what are you...?”

“We're leaving,” Asami tells them. “Get these wires off of me.”

Without question Kirishima does what’s asked of him and pulls off the wires on Asami’s back and disconnects the machine from the mains to stop its incessant bleeping. Suoh holds the door and bars entry from anyone who tries to enter while Kirishima retrieves his boss’s clothes stored in the nearby locker. Asami pulls everything on hastily, formality is the least of his concerns right now. There’s
pain spreading across his ribs but he can’t let himself be stalled by it, getting out of here fast is their only priority. Kirishima and Suoh flank him as he leaves the recovery room and the three of them make their way to the exit with staff looking on in quiet despair, powerless to stop them from leaving the hospital.

Once outside, Kirishima walks ahead to open the limousine door, and Asami clutches his side and grits his teeth with pain as he gets in. It’s a terse, guttural release that causes both of his men to fret but Asami signals them to hurry up and get in. Suoh starts the engine immediately and prepares to drive off when Asami calls to them through the divider.

“Have you both eaten?”

“...we had something at the hospital,” Kirishima answers, then considers that the boss hasn’t eaten anything since the morning. He retrieves his phone from his pocket and begins making a call. “We should return to Sion. I’ll inform the chef to prepare something for you.”

“No,” Asami stops him, “We’ll pick up Akihito from his photography class and go on. He’ll know somewhere good to eat.”

“Understood,” Kirishima nods and hangs up the call.

Suoh puts the car into gear and pulls out of the hospital to head towards Hyakunincho. The journey is calm yet the sensations gnaw at Asami — rupturing, and healing — he can feel life energy in real time healing his biopsy wound at his side and at the same time not having any effect at the center of his chest where his organs are burning up a funeral pyre. His coughing has decreased and that’s only a very minor consolation.

He takes a few mouthfuls of the whisky bottle that rests on the seat to sear whatever pain he can, or make him forget whatever retribution is passing on its merry way. He splutters the last mouthful and wipes his mouth with his sleeve, and the inelegance makes him pick up the dried bloodstains on his suit. It’s an unacceptable state for anyone, let alone Akihito to see him in and he decides on that trip to Sion after all. A fresh suit and a shower seems like a very sensible call.

They manage to intercept Akihito on his way home from class with the help of the GPS tracker. Suoh pulls the limo up to the pavement and Kirishima winds down the window, telling him to get in. The surprise on Akihito’s face is merited, and again when he gets in and is faced with Asami’s soft smile. (A smile that could be a caveat for a long list of unholy acts.) In truth, Akihito’s put on edge slightly at that smile, worried that Asami knows he was prowling his hospital this morning.

“Did something happen?” he asks nervously, half expecting the smile to turn but it doesn’t.

“Not at all. Just passing by,” Asami says casually. “How was class?”

Akihito relaxes at the harmless question. “Same as usual. We learnt about lens refraction. How was your day?”

“Same as usual,” Asami echoes. “I thought we could have dinner together. Anywhere you like.”

Akihito’s mouth drops, genuinely surprised. “Really?”

“Yes, really. Where would you like to go?”

“Well...there’s this place I usually go to after class, Midori, it’s not high class or anything, but they do really good ramen. It’s err...along that back road behind the cinema complex,” Akihito tries to
explain his mental map but ends up getting himself lost. “...I know how to get there from walking, just not by car, heh.”

“No problem. I know where it is,” Suoh confirms from the driver’s seat and he starts up the limo.

As they start to head off the divider ascends slowly, controlled by Asami, and immediately Akihito’s nerves flutters with anticipation. They sit suspended in the silent, closely charged intimacy until Akihito’s composure cracks.

“So, um… I thought you were, mmph—” And then he’s cast headlong into a black hole as Asami’s fierce kiss lands and presses him into the leather seat. His eyes lop backwards into his head and cedes to the stark need in the man’s devouring lips. In the cool air of separation, he mouths a breathless “Wow,” and faces that faint smirk of amusement with a burst of laughter. “Are you sure everything's alright?”

“Yes,” Asami says, simply.

Something Akihito was not anticipating was to hear Asami’s stomach rumble right after he said it.

“You're really hungry, huh.”

“Quite. I haven't eaten you all day,” Asami replies, his hand already halfway into Akihito’s shirt.

The uninspiring plain wooden front has Asami speculating a moth infested, run-down eatery suitable for Akihito’s shabbier tendencies, and while he’s mulling over the exterior and thinking if he’s going to get an upset stomach, Akihito is less judgemental and flips the edges of the curtain and walks straight on through, greeting the chefs with a buoyant, “Sup!” Asami follows in behind Akihito as the head chef slices mid-way through the body of a daikon and then stops dead, muttering with full-on disbelief, “It can't be,” to his equally thunderstruck partner. They drop what they're doing, wipe their hands on their aprons and come to attention like two soldiers in front of Asami, greeting him with their deepest and best bow.

“A—Asami Ryuichi-san! Please accept our warmest welcome!”

It’s a little over the top, and Akihito turns to him with a scrunched up grin, and then with a clever mouth, says, “It's alright guys, he's with me.”

Asami shoots him a narrow, testing look and receives a slightly scoffing laugh as Akihito goes to find them a table. Moriyama’s heard in the background saying things like, “Do you know who Asami Ryuichi is!?” and “Don’t take him so lightly!” and of course, Akihito laughs more.

They take the two seats nestled away in the corner and Moriyama flies over to wipe their table with a cloth.

“He said, let me clean this for you,” he says with an exaggerated toothy grin. “It’s not often we get to cook for such distinguished customers.”

“You don’t pull this special treatment with me, Moriyama-san,” Akihito remarks with disappointment.

“You’re special in your own way, kid, but for Asami Ryuichi-san to come and eat at my restaurant is a great honour.”
Asami’s expression doesn’t change and is smooth otherwise, he’s rarely ever moved by public affection enough to acquiesce them with a muted, polite response, and the attention Moriyama is paying him is only making him keenly aware of the blossoming pain to his side in the ambient heat of the restaurant. That, and the four nicotine patches on either shoulder aren’t doing nearly enough to suppress his craving for a cigarette.

“Oi, Tomo! Go get the expensive Sake from the back,” Moriyama shouts over his shoulder to his assistant chef and whips out two menus from his apron pouch for them to look over. “I'll give you some time. Feel free to choose anything, as much as you want.”

“Nice!” Akihito happily takes the menu while Asami places his on the table without looking at it.

“Order whatever you want. I'll have the same,” he says curtly, slightly distracted by pain.

“You sure you don't wanna pick something out yourself? There's unusual stuff like cheese and Korean barbecue topping. Oh look! There’s all sorts of stuff I never knew they had! Woah, this ‘celebrity’ menu is something else.”

As Akihito flicks enthusiastically through the laminated booklet, Asami’s drawn to some sort of commotion at the front of the restaurant; heads and phones lean in and the crowing of his name filter through. Someone must have given them the tip-off that he was here and now a herd has gathered outside. Moriyama rushes to slide the rusty shutter front door closed and stands back to test its hold. Thankfully it stays put.

Akihito’s eyes light up with amusement. “Paparazzi must've caught a whiff of you being here.”

“My men will move them along,” Asami chuffs.

Akihito leans forward, uttering quietly, “You know, I don't get it, what is it about a guy like you that makes folks like Moriyama-san think he’s won the lottery?”

“Who knows. Perhaps he admires that the restaurant at Sion has a two Michelin star rating.”

Akihito scoffs, as if that was the best Asami could come up with. “Yeah right, do you really think he’s been anywhere near Sion to know?”

“I wouldn’t presume to know where the likes of him has been at all,” Asami says in one long, cutting line of tension.

Akihito’s about to flip him off when Moriyama arrives and the smell of warm sake halts their conversation. He does the honour of generously filling their glasses and then retreats proudly back to the kitchen station. There’s no pause as Asami swallows his sake in one mouthful and holds his cup out for Akihito to fill it up again. Taken aback, Akihito wordlessly unscrews the bottle and fills the little cup to the rim, and Asami tips it back in the same manner as though his gullet is made of pure steel.

After three fills Akihito finds himself asking again, “Are you sure you're ok?”

Asami extends him a short look before replying, “What makes you say that?”


“I had the displeasure of sitting through a slew of dull meetings,” Asami replies. He already ran the script through his head if Akihito were to suspect anything. Akihito’s mind may be travelling a million miles most of the time but his perceptiveness is something Asami isn’t willing to
underestimate.

“Yeah, that'd make anyone want to lose the will to live,” Akihito chuckles and pours another helping into the cup.

“And you, where were you early this morning?” Asami asks with an equal share of curiosity.

Akihito’s response comes out a lot less scripted. “I was just um...just doing last minute homework for class.”

Asami raises a questioning eyebrow. “Is that so?”

“Yeah. Sorry I couldn't lie on my back until 2pm,” Akihito smirks behind his cup. The remark has Asami smiling honestly for a moment.

Akihito puts the menu flat onto the table and then announces, “Okay, I've decided, I'm gonna go for the roasted pork belly ramen. Is that alright with you?”

“Sure,” Asami says, mid sip.

Akihito signals Moriyama over and gives their order, times two. The amber sake bottle sits empty on their table and Moriyama quickly fetches them another, he's only too happy to pile on the hospitality for Asami. Asami, however, is hungry and focused on the rose blush on Akihito's cheeks and neck; it could be from the obvious lie he told or the innuendo sparking thoughts of what could have been of their morning. Either way, everything about Akihito's body language is a fascinating piece of information to absorb.

Akihito catches his gaze and turns to look away from it, touching his neck the way he always does when he’s nervous, and then he bites on those healing, sweet lips that can salve every ache in Asami’s body, and soothe the pain compressing around his heart. Under the table, Akihito playfully nudges him with his foot.

“I’m not on the menu, Asami. You can look at me like that afterwards. Our foods gonna be ready soon,” he says, no louder than a whisper.

The man’s gold eyes soften as he lets out an easy roll of laughter. “Afterwards, then, Akihito.”

When their food does arrive, Asami’s eyebrows climb when he's presented with an extravagant edible lotus pond of carved vegetables floating on top of his ramen, and Akihito hums at his reaction thinking that it’s absolutely fantastic.

“Does he do this with everyone?” Asami asks.

“Moriyama-san has some serious knife skills. Though, he clearly wanted to impress you more than me,” Akihito sniggers, looking at his one lotus compared to Asami’s three.

“Hm. I may have misjudged him,” he then says, slightly impressed.

The answering growl from his stomach has him picking up some noodles with his chopsticks, dipping them back into the bowl to mop up some of the broth and sucking them up into his mouth with the most genteel of slurps.

Akihito wags his eyebrows and grins. “So whad’ya think, tasty huh?”

“It's rather good, actually,” Asami offers, allowing his ravenous appetite to speak for him.
At this point Akihito clasps his hands together and grins to the ceiling as though he's thanking some sort of Food God for giving Asami flawless taste in ramen. Within five minutes Asami finishes his ramen without sparing a single turnip lotus or drop of delicious soup, and orders a side of prawn dumplings, fried ginger salmon and rice. Akihito looks on with bemusement, having seen this starving Asami before when he lived for a whole week on sex, life energy and no food, except the situation now is, admittedly, a little unexplainable to Akihito. He’s just barely finishing his ramen bowl and Asami’s wiping his mouth clean with four empty dishes in from of him.

Asami waits for Akihito to finish up and leaves two 10,000 yen notes on the table that’ll probably deliver the shock of Moriyama’s life when he receives it, and they file out with a fury of gratitude from the ecstatic Moriyama and Tomo. By now crowds have dispersed from outside of Midori and the limo is parked and awaiting them. He lowers himself smoothly into the car, Akihito getting in on the other side and sighing to himself, patting his stomach.

“That was so delicious, I’m stuffed!” Turning to Asami, he flashes a him a broad, playful smirk. “You looked like you could have eaten the whole restaurant, furniture and everything.”

Asami turns his golden eyes to him, and he’s laughing and taking a swift hold of Akihito’s chin to feast on the lips he’s been dying to kiss all night. “I saved a little space, for one last special meal.”

And he did, as he said he would.
Asami helps Akihito out of the lift and up to the door of the penthouse with a steadying arm around his waist. A gentle push encourages him over the threshold and Asami disentangles himself enough to shut the door behind him, because Akihito’s all over him; touching him, kissing him, impatient and blissfully drunk. The sensations briefly override the pain in his side as Akihito’s hands and lips roam him, sensations that are as intensely sharp as Akihito’s grasping fingers, careless and also frightfully gentle as they run across the sides of his cheeks, and Asami knows that he could fall hard for this type of Akihito, so playfully earnest in his inebriation, like the way he pulls the belt from Asami’s buckle even before he’s got his suit jacket off. It’s a test for Asami just to pry Akihito’s hands from him.

“You’re drunk,” he says, that much being obvious from the way Akihito's looking up at him with glossy, black, starving pupils.

“I’m hardly drunk, you drank a lot more than me,” Akihito offers with slightly slurred speech.

Asami holds both of Akihito’s wrists and puts some space between them. “And evidently my tolerance has held up.”

“C’mon, Asami,” Akihito utters sweetly, persuasively tugging at him, “Let’s have some fun.”

“I don’t know if you could handle it,” Asami humours him.

Undeterred, Akihito reaches for him again and pulls his shirt out of his trousers to feel across his abdominals, as wonderful as it feels for Asami, it’s too dangerously close. He forcibly interrupts the boy’s lusty exploration when he picks him up and maneuvers through the darkness to their bedroom and throws him down onto the bed — and that's where it stops, as when Asami carefully reels himself up, he realises Akihito has haplessly fallen asleep.

“Some fun, huh,” he muses to himself and takes the opportunity to slip into the en-suite.
Standing in front of the mirror, Asami lifts up his shirt to see the wound for himself. He peels away the bloodied dressing and a few drops of blood leak from the small incision that should’ve healed by now. He catches the path of blood with the gauze, wipes, and compresses it to the side of his ribcage while he contemplates heavily why the quick-heal of life energy is no longer having the instantaneous effect it once did. There isn’t a palpable reason why after all these months his body is suddenly rejecting it.

He reaches for the shaving razor in the cabinet, dismantles it and takes the blade to his skin, slicing cleanly across his forearm. He passively watches as a line of blood trickles out and runs down the curve of his arm before his skin knits and closes up almost immediately before his eyes. He does the same on the other arm, applying more pressure to deepen the cut, and just as before, muscle and skin heal instantly, and Asami can’t understand it. He can’t understand why there's absolute fucking mayhem going on in one area of his body while the rest of it is blessed with Akihito’s healing touch.

Carmine blood droplets stain the sink as they slide down into the plughole and has a smell that would instinctively send hardened men running, or break out in a cold sweat at its monstrous potency. He studies a dab of it on his finger and an inspecting inhalation makes him nauseous, followed by revulsion from the bottommost depth of his psyche. It blows out his pupils the longer he looks at it, urging dark, exhilarating, savage responses in his cells. He retches as the blood climbs down his throat when he swallows it, and what his human instinct rejects, his feral instinct thrives at the taste swilling in his mouth, slowly turning him insane. And Kaneda has a vial of this strange, feral blood in his lab somewhere, sitting in a centrifuge with all of his other malignant blood samples.

And this, the same mutated blood that is all of Akihito’s make-up, all of what fuels his perfect system, a perfect system intended for no one other than him. For anyone else, it’s the thing that may well end up destroying them for the inside — this slow, beautiful, divine poison.
"My demise a two horse race? Now isn't that interesting," he discloses to his mirror image.

He throws the bloodied dressing into the bin and applies a fresh one to the area, sealing it under thicker padding that'll hopefully soak up the remainder of the bleeding.

Akihito’s still crashed out on the bed in a harmless sprawl when he returns to the bedroom; arms by his head, legs hanging limply off the edge of the bed and his t-shirt creased up over his belly button. If he was at least partially conscious he would’ve moved by now. Asami takes the initiative to undress him and tuck him gently into bed, and as he carries the boy in his arms, the boy’s quiet snuffles feather against his ear and his hypersensitive skin ignites, bringing temptation to the very foreground of his awareness. He wills himself to be controlled and leaves the room to get himself some painkillers and a tall glass of water, then dons a pair of pyjamas and gets into bed beside Akihito, turning himself the other way.

✠

It’s Akihito who wakes a few hours later when his usual insomnia bolts his eyes open at the starkest hour of the night. He looks out onto the velvet black sky, at the pallid light from the waning half moon cresting into their bedroom and wonders with a bleary head how he ended up here. He rubs his eyes and vaguely remembers how much he drank at Midori and how much more sober Asami was to deal with him. His legs slide around bare underneath the covers and he feels the state of his undress. (Boxers left on, surprisingly.) The same can’t be said for the one sleeping next to him, who has a definite stance on wearing nothing to bed. What’s with the modesty all of a sudden, Akihito thinks. Guilt got the better of him? Akihito doesn’t feel like he’s been molested in his state of unconsciousness, on the contrary, he feels lovingly taken care of. So what could’ve brought this on?

He turns to face Asami’s broad back and brushes his naked shin ever so softly against Asami’s leg as he peers over his long sleeping form, running his fingertips along a clothed, black shoulder and down his sides, feeling a strange, building desire to break inside and cocoon himself within Asami’s body. He’s suddenly captivated by the barrier created by the flimsy shirt material and slides underneath it to touch the warmth of Asami’s back and hips under the fabric, becoming ridiculously attracted and obsessed with whatever reason Asami thought it necessary to cover himself up.

He lifts up onto a bent elbow with his other hand splayed against the ridges of Asami’s taught obliques and looks down at him, mind fogged with lust at this godforsaken hour, and he’s heady and slipping into the usual ecstasy he feels around this sleeping, lethal man. It’s tempting him so much so that liquid life energy rushes into his mouth with a burst and he swallows it with a pleasureful greed not nearly enough to satisfy him, and not nearly enough to placate the weight of his sin rising to the surface that makes him want to devour chunks out of Asami’s flesh. The threat of it bleeds into his eyes as the blue of his iris completely peels back and his pupils blow out fully, covering most of his sclera with liquid black —
Then everything becomes lucid again.

He becomes aware of Asami’s strong hand clasping around his fingers and keeping them pressed against his abdomen, stopping his ravaging instincts from venturing any further. Akihito flickers a look of surprise and realises only as a calm few seconds elapse what's just happened. His heart pounds and trepidation sharpens his consciousness to it, though, nothing in Asami’s sleeping face suggests he’s aware of any of it.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you,” Akihito whispers carefully. He’s anxious that Asami has clocked him, even though the man has all the appearance of being asleep.

“Why aren’t you sleeping?” Asami asks quietly, eyes still closed.

“I...I haven’t managed to lately...not since Hokkaido,” Akihito confesses. He owes it to the darkness and Asami’s quiescence for making this incredibly fragile piece of honesty bearable to say.

The seconds creep by, with Akihito placing tiny kisses to Asami’s closed eyelids in an attempt to rid his mind of the same perilous feeling he felt when he was at the hospital. He gets a palm in his face, with Asami telling him to “Go to sleep,” with a completely straight-laced expression even though Akihito points out that he’s grinning.

“What’s brought this on?” Asami says to him afterwards.


Asami’s breathing levels, eventually saying, “Whatever it is...it's not worth losing sleep over.”

“It is though,” Akihito wholeheartedly admits, looking right back at Asami and feeling emotion well
up in his eyes. The only comfort he takes is the contemplative minutes spent observing Asami’s restful form as he lays his head on his shoulder and studies him earnestly, picking up on the subtle strains that crease the man’s brow even in his sleep, and nuances that belie something Akihito can’t quite put his finger on but sends a worrying thrum through him in fine tremors.

“Has something happened that you’re not telling me?” he thinks to himself, as he brushes a stray lock from Asami’s forehead and kisses him there, sharing a moment of tranquility before even that is spoiled when the man jolts up in bed and starts to cough, sharp and violent.

“Your cough’s back,” Akihito says mournfully, putting a hand to Asami’s back to try to soothe the cough but Asami abruptly gets out of bed and goes to the bathroom, locking himself in there.

Hands braced on the countertop, Asami coughs hard into the sink and picks up very quickly on the lack of stunning pain to his side. He lifts his pyjama top up, rips off the dressing and sees a neat patch of new skin has formed in place of the incision. He stands there for a while inspecting it, touching over it and pressing it, feeling for scar tissue that should be there but isn’t.

Again, he’s at a total loss. He’s healed perfectly on the outside but his lungs dread the next tiny breath that will surge and alarm Akihito in the next room. He grips the edges of the basin and feels the weight of the whole world on his lungs as he tries not to cough. He might suffocate like this, turn a morose shade as Akihito’s wonderdust clearly doesn’t give a damn about a cursed pair of organs. He rummages the medicine cabinet and finds his old cough medication, gulping two mouthfuls and washing the bitter taste down with water. It’s the best thing to keep him at bay for the time being.

Akihito’s sitting upright in bed waiting for him when he returns to the bedroom, with quiet but expressive eyes tracking him across the room. Asami pulls his pyjama shirt over his head, slides off his bottoms and kisses Akihito as he gets back into bed with him, kissing him tender, slow, tasting the sweet sensation of the boy’s surprise forming soft, open mouthed gasps against his lips. The straightforwardness of the kiss melts Akihito’s spine back down onto his pillow and all four of his limbs come around at once to embrace Asami’s now naked body and squeeze him in the veritable vice grip that he wants to stay bound to forever. Akihito cards his fingers through his hair and kisses him at odd moments, letting their lips barely touch enough to share in one another’s slow breaths, passing life energy through this extremely gentle supplication that Asami needs, wants. He relinquishes when Akihito stays looking at him, eyes warring with telltale emotions.

“What’s happening to you, Asami?” the boy whispers, with barely enough sound to carry it to his ears.

“Nothing,” Asami answers. But he can see everything in those immensely blue, exotic eyes that are searching him for answers, for a resolution that may be unobtainable, and he doesn’t know how much more he can go on deflecting Akihito’s concerns about his wellbeing or how he’s going to tell him that his heavenly life energy is leaving his body in a literal hell. Akihito patiently waits and Asami moves to stroke his thumb over his cheek, smoothly dismissing him, because there’s no answer that would be the right answer. “You worry too much about me.”

“Am I not allowed to worry when it comes to you?” Akihito quietly protests. “I just want to know that things are alright.”

“There’s nothing to worry about,” Asami assures him again, kissing him on the forehead and down to his cheek and chin, and finally kissing the soft pads of his sullen lips that shut tight in passive objection. Asami’s lips curl up at the boy’s indignation. “Try and get some sleep,” he bids.

Akihito doesn’t, though. His limbs remain secure around Asami’s body in defiance, further tightening, wishing he can connect to all of Asami’s secrets in some existential way and not let things
like this come between them.

“Enough, Akihito.”

Asami arches him a look that makes him loosen the hold, albeit reluctantly, and Asami rolls over onto his pillow, willingly trying to force away an impending cough that he can feel gradually scraping up his windpipe. A single cough clears the irritation and he finally settles down, Akihito too, on his chest, listening to his lungs no doubt croak.

“Your chest doesn’t sound good,” Akihito tells him.

“My lungs have always been like that.” Asami snarks.

“Because you smoke too much,” Akihito remarks.

Asami sighs. “Sleep. Now.”

And while Asami breathes, Akihito stays awake the whole night listening to it.

✣

Come morning, Akihito pretends to be sleeping when Asami wakes up and gently moves him back to his own pillow. His eyes stay shut but his ears are fully alert, listening to Asami get up from the bed and lock himself in the bathroom again. He hears him coughing and spitting into the sink, then hears the shower rain down to mask whatever ill sounds he’s making in there. Ten or so minutes later he follows the clean scent to the far side of the room and cracks a millimeter of an eyelid open at the tall length of Asami’s back in a bathrobe retrieving his mobile phone from his suit pocket and then leaves the room. Akihito is left to stare at the empty doorway with a disconcerting feeling folding in the depths of his stomach, and decides he can’t live like this.

After putting on his discarded t-shirt from the night before and a pair of jogging bottoms, he pads through into the en-suite and opens the door to soapy, fresh air, but Akihito can filter through it to smell the pungency of blood in its vapours. Searching the dustbin bears grim evidence of tissues and a bloodied dressing, and Akihito feels as though a wrench has hit his insides.

There’s so much life energy inside Asami’s body that flesh wounds should be next to impossible for him to receive — blood wouldn’t spray from an artery, veins would close instantly. Nothing would be forceful enough...except if a gun were to do the damage.

“Were you attacked, Asami?”

Akihito’s brain flies into overdrive, rage and fear rising in his stomach at the same time as he pulls up details of last night in his mind; all the things that were out of the ordinary, that didn’t make sense, that made him doubt Asami’s clean, meticulous stride. Something isn’t right with him, but why? Why would he be keeping this from him, of all things?

He treads purposefully through the penthouse with a mind to settle the atmosphere between them, before even being in the same room becomes aggressive territory. It brings him to a cautious stop outside of Asami’s office door when he finds it shut, his unmistakable voice behind it, Akihito presumes talking to someone unsavoury on the phone by the marked manner in which he's speaking. All the walls in the penthouse are reinforced and fully soundproofed so only a faint trickle of sound passes through, even with Akihito’s acute sense of hearing. He doesn’t yield a lot from pressing his ear against the door, and when Akihito thinks about it that’s precisely Asami’s preferred method of communication; to be minimal and cryptic, moving behind a shadow.
Soon it all goes quiet on the other side and Akihito steps back from the door, quick-footing it to the kitchen just as the lock releases and the door handle twists open. He busies himself with the constant clatter of plates and rifles through the cutlery drawer to give the impression he’s been in here for the duration of Asami’s phone call. Luckily the pre-set coffee machine has already filtered fresh coffee and he pours a mug for Asami just as he comes out.

“I made you some coffee,” Akihito calls to him from the kitchen.

Caught between rooms, Asami stands there for a moment, tossing a cigarette packet restlessly between his hands before deciding to pocket it in his robe and take Akihito’s proffered coffee. Akihito studies him from the other side of the island counter with his own coffee, blowing gently over the steam with a clenched jaw.

“Did you manage to sleep?” Asami asks as he seats himself on the counter stool, avoiding meeting his gaze as he takes a sip from his mug.

“Yeah,” Akihito lies.

His simmering, continuous stare bores through a lengthy silence, nothing reciprocates much in way of conversation as Asami flicks idly through the newspaper, preoccupying himself with yesterday’s news. It’s when Akihito narrows in on a red stain contrasting on Asami’s white robe sleeve as his hand turns a page that sets all of his anger into whirling motion. “I want to know what’s going on with you, Asami.”

Asami lifts his eyes to look at him briefly then returns them back to the newspaper, sighing, “This again...”

“Yes, this again.” Akihito’s shoulders square at him, unable to disguise his tension any longer. “Something’s happened between yesterday and today that you’re not telling me about and it’s something serious, I can feel it.”

Asami’s eyebrows furrow in perceived confusion and then parts with it in one graceful gesture. “A lot of things happen day-to-day that are no one else’s business but my own. Just as you have yours, I’m sure.”

“Why is it so off limits to talk about you for once when I’m going out of my mind worrying about you,” Akihito aggressively lets out, and with the coming anger Asami sets aside his newspaper and entertains him, remaining nonchalant but ambiguous.

“Alright. What would you have me answer to?”

“You’ve been coughing again, worse than before. Yesterday was the worst I’ve ever seen it get.”

“I’ve smoked since I was fifteen years old, Akihito. Sore throats, coughs, it comes with the habit. There's nothing for you to be concerned about.”

“This is more than a fucking sore throat, Asami. I’ve never heard you cough like that, like your insides are ripping apart. I know you heal quickly, but...something has damaged you. Did someone hurt you? An assassination attempt? Yesterday you had a face on you like you dodged a bullet,” Akihito says brazenly.

“This is nonsense,” Asami dismisses, the pillar of his patience now rail-thin.

“Am I wrong!?”
“Your imagination is running loose again, as usual,” Asami returns.

Frustration finally splits Akihito’s nerves and the rage that’s been slowly unfolding in him explodes as he slams his coffee mug down onto the granite countertop, pieces of porcelain and coffee shattering everywhere.

“Don’t tell me I’m imagining things when I can smell it on you! I can taste it when we kiss! It’s all over you like something rotten and I can’t stand it!”

Fragments bound over the countertop, and despite it, Asami’s composure doesn’t falter. He’s been waiting for Akihito to finally boil over; to let it all out and reset to zero. He meets Akihito’s fury with a look that would have rendered anyone else into pieces, but for Akihito, the anger drips away into something unreadable, and something all the more frightening as Asami modulates to ice calm.

“You can’t stand what, Akihito?”

“Young blood,” Akihito seethes, loathing the very shape of the sound as he throws it contemptuously at Asami.

Asami casts it off with a languid blink and doesn't say anything. Instead he rises up from his seat, eyes never straying from Akihito and Akihito doesn’t look away either, he’s humming with fury, hands balled by his side with knuckles showing white, Asami is serene in contrast as he picks up an angular shard of porcelain and lifts it gracefully up to his jugular, viewing the unfolding of pure horror in Akihito’s face with a tiny, vicious strain of amusement gleaming in his golden eyes.

“Then cut me, right here. Drain me of my blood so you’ll never taste it again, if that is your wish.”

Akihito nearly folds in devastation. He’s unprepared for the immediate image that conjures in his mind; the black blood lake purging out of Asami’s neck, seized in agony. He twists in fear, overwhelmed and ready to lose it all again when the man tosses the piece in his hand and turns to him, piercingly cold.

“If you’re quite done with your tantrum, clean up this mess.”

Asami turns to leave but Akihito moves before he does, carving a passage of wind past him and out of the kitchen with his wings already partially exposed and tearing his t-shirt to shreds. Asami stays put, allowing the possibility of a further act of stupidity to drain away from him for those twenty or so broadening seconds, restraint being his only refuge from the storm ultimately raging inside of Akihito, and rising in himself. With electric screaming in his nerves, he walks past the remnants of Akihito’s torn clothes to their bedroom, where the wide open balcony door manages to expedite all of his ill feelings of the morning, and this time it’s entirely his doing.

“Shit...”

Chapter End Notes

Boy this chapter was difficult to write :( But at least it let me draw Asami's heavenly abs 🫤❤️💫forgot
To Maim a Butterfly

Chapter Notes

I'm out of hibernation... \o/!

I took a much needed holiday around the end of Aug-October, and then found it a bit daunting getting back into writing on top of being busy irl, and kinda dragged this chapter on its heels for the longest time. Only managed to whip it into shape now. (I hope.) Sorry if I made people worry about my health/dead or alive status, got a few very concerned but sweet comments that really pushed my ass to get this chapter out sooner :) Also had to treat the illustrations with the best TLC. You'll see ♥

Happy readings everyone. <(^_^)>♥

Asami prepares himself something from his liquor cabinet that would burn through fifty leaves of paper if you poured it; a nefariously good Russian vodka he wanted to savour for a better occasion, something that would be worth that crack of its golden seal. Now, all the worth is in its high-proof value as it streams from the bottle, alcoholic fumes already splitting the air as it fills three-quarters of the way up the glass. The first mouthful burns and Asami needs it to burn like a serpent’s stinger to defocus his mind from what Akihito’s irresponsibility has brought on his head. Whatever he aims to achieve with this tirade, Asami hopes he finds it somewhere far away from the center of the city, because he wouldn't be able to rationally or nonviolently deal with anything forthcoming if he were to be caught.

He drinks another mouthful and carries the bottle with him through the penthouse and into the living room where his eyes scan the whole horizon from window to window — nothing but ashy grey smog hangs over Tokyo, squeezing all of the air out of the city and grappling with Asami’s patience. He closes his eyes and drinks down his grief, trying to chase away the itch still scratching furiously against his windpipe.

It aches.

He's only had one cigarette in the last twelve hours and the need to smoke is making him want to slice his neck open. He's applying all the meditative techniques Kirishima encouraged him to embrace for enduring long, tedious board meetings, where smoking and shooting your associate is frowned upon, and that's simply enabling this slow torture, one corroding breath at a time. Only this won't be what kills him.

Just thinking about Akihito flying in open, broad daylight makes his insides seize more than this volcanic liquid ever could. There are pockets of constant security spread about the city that provide meaningful containment on the ground but can do nothing if Akihito is airborne, and the crux of this makes Asami let out a tight, fraying roll of laughter. He can theoretically plan for a scenario a dozen times, put an army of his men to task for one sole purpose, but when the crunch comes down to it, even an army is powerless in the real eventuality that Akihito might take off and leave at any given moment, and at any given impulse.

He concentrates on the horizon again. He idles on the fog in the far distance and the flat, snow
capped head of Mount Fuji and its clouded foot ensconced between two jutting skyscrapers; a view he normally wouldn’t be able to make out through the haze of pollution, but in it is enough clarity to convince him that the strong vodka he’s been drinking is absolutely harmless. He can't even drink himself senseless anymore because of what Akihito’s energies has done to him. Without the numbing effects of alcohol the tumbler feels like a dead weight in his hand, and he places the bottle and glass on the small table next to the armchair and goes to find something he knows will quench his system.

He steps into his office and retrieves the silver lighter on the desk. With a cigarette between his lips, he lights it with an impatient, kindling drag and hangs on for that crucial hit of nicotine that cuts right through the skein of disorientation and drowns wonderfully into his bloodstream. He’s mindless to any distractions for the moment, weightless, even, as he's reunited with this precious pastime. Smoke filters out of his nostrils and mouth simultaneously and flows the tension back and forth between this being the ticket to his doom and it feeling *fucking incredible*.

While sufficiently enjoying his cigarette, he ignores the incessant vibration of his phone against the oak desk, oblivious to the caller or who would ring him three times in succession. By the fourth call he’s reached the end of his cigarette and reluctantly crushes it into the ashtray and spins the phone towards him, noting Kaneda’s caller ID with displeasure. Perhaps it’s better that Akihito isn’t here to eavesdrop on the impending results of his biopsy, which is undoubtedly going to be a miserable prognosis. He swipes a finger over the screen and holds the phone to his ear.

“Hello, sensei,” he begins, neutralising his annoyance into perceived calmness.

“You’re a hard man to get a hold of,” Kaneda says on the other end.

Asami doesn’t reply to that, instead, he makes Kaneda hang on an awkward beat of silence for his own amusement.

“I hate to make this call to you without seeing you face to face. You never do stay in one place for too long, or take heed of anything I say for that matter.”

“You always know where to find me,” Asami returns, already reaching for another cigarette. “In any case, say what you’ve called to say, sensei.”

“If I could put it so simply I would, Asami-san, but I'll cut straight to the point. The tumour sample came back as abnormal, which I'm very aware isn't entirely hopeful news, however, these atypical cells are neither benign nor cancerous, the usual cell patterns we aim to look for are not present.”

“So, if it’s not benign or cancerous, do you deduce that I have some mysterious disease, sensei?”

“‘Mysterious’ would be the word for it, indeed. There’s some sort of stimulus present; the cells are reacting as though they’re still connected to human tissue, which I find quite unexplainable. The lab is taking an unusually long time with your blood samples, which can’t be a coincidence…”

Asami listens with half of his attention on the medical jargon and the other going to the pain starting up in his lungs that makes him want to curl over and combust when Kaneda goes on and on, trying to explain a mystery he already knows.

“...If we're to proceed in attaining any more understanding it would require further tests, and I would ask that you come to the hospital urgently, though, I fear a repeat of yesterday's hasty stunt.”

“You're going to have to make do, sensei. I'm busy,” Asami states bluntly. “Contact me when you have a more concrete determination.”

“Very well, Asami-san. I’m sorry I can’t offer you a more conclusive answer right now.”
“I’ll leave it in your hands, sensei.”

He hangs up on the tail end of Kaneda’s unfinished reply and moves around to sit at his desk chair, breathing a strained sigh when he settles back and alleviates the heavy pressure against his ribs.

The trouble with Kaneda is that he’s the most brilliantly qualified and yet the most ill equipped to deal with a supernatural power. He already has the Holy Grail in front of him, he just doesn’t know what to do with, but it’s all there nonetheless, and it’s already too much. He can't give him any more than this.

He leans back into his seat for the next few minutes trying to find a meaningful calm in all of this bullshit, thinking over what he’s going to do when the car eventually comes to pick him up and take him to Sion. Would facing five scheduled meetings equate to the same five-day headache Akihito’s caused him, and is it worth his time in pain?

He swipes across his phone and dials for the best solution he has on hand.

“Kirishima.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Please handle all of my meetings for today.”

By late evening, Akihito returns to the penthouse grubby and worn-out from wherever he’s been. He balances on the balcony ledge and eyes the shadowed doorway of the bedroom before retracting his wings and stepping through completely. A bare foot touches the chilled wood floor before bringing himself low into a crouch, recovering his breath and wiping his perspiration from having flown miles and miles for distraction and without any exhilaration. When his heavy breathing evens out, the penthouse strums its overbearing silence once again.

He curls himself back up and takes a stealthy few steps past the bedroom's threshold and into the hallway towards the living room, feeling alert as if something’s going to happen again and he’s limber on his feet, ready for it. Though, Akihito’s emotions have well and truly reached an impasse by now. One contentious moment doesn’t wipe out all of the things that’ve bound them together, he reasons with himself. He reached a point this evening where the ferocious emotion that made him break something is the same one that brought him back to Asami, to inevitably put it all back together again.

As the thought passes, he approaches the doorway of the kitchen and sees it's still in a mess when he looks in, (not that he expected Asami to clean up after him in this case). The flat of his palm comes to rest on the granite counter, feeling for the crack he made when his anger collided with something immovable, and now permanently damaged. It could eat away at him, but he slides the remaining broken pieces of mug into a pile and disposes of them in the bin with nothing more than a deflated sigh.

He drifts through the penthouse peeling for the slightest noise that would indicate the other man’s presence, and then he wonders if Asami’s here at all or if he’s gone to Sion for yet another laboriously long night and he has to stew here in a silent, unfinished aftermath as some kind of emotional punishment. That soon becomes moot when the revealing smell of tobacco smoke thickens the air and sends a shiver right down his spinal cord.

“Guess he’s here after all.”

He walks towards the source of the smell, to an inevitable confrontation he won't run away from this
time. Sure enough, there in the living room, Asami’s lonesome silhouette slouches in an armchair facing the magenta and orange mottled sunset, a glass and a bottle lay empty on the small table beside him, as well as an ashtray overflowing with cigarettes. Akihito swallows before taking the first of his footsteps to bridge the distance between them, slowing to a tense stop only when the flare of those golden eyes shift to him and pin him right where he stands as though the man had sensed this moment precisely.

The expression is one Akihito hasn’t faced in a long time; an expression overflowing with contempt that ambushes his whole being. It has him taking an instinctive step back when Asami crushes his cigarette in the ashtray and gets up, moving towards him with motivations Akihito thought he would be ready for but he isn’t, not in the slightest. His trembling legs keep backpedalling, further and further until his heels hit the wall, and Asami presses him there with his imposing stature.

“A—Asami,” he stutters, almost fading into the background as he’s swallowed by Asami’s overhanging shadow.

“Where have you been?” Asami overrides with a simple yet severe question.

“I...” Akihito starts, but it dies on his lips when Asami surveys him in one predatory sweep that stiffens his spine and compels him to answer. “I needed to clear my head. We both did.”

“You decided that for the both of us, did you?” Asami questions. His blatant irritation makes Akihito fret, that and the strong smell of alcohol filling the negligible space between them.

“Please, Asami...you’ve been drinking...”

“Yes, I’ve been drinking,” Asami’s voice turns into smoldering gravel. “Turns out I can’t even get drunk anymore.”

It takes a moment for the tiny, brutal stab to sink into Akihito’s conscience. Steeped in the statement is Asami’s resentment for the derangement his body must be going through because of him; normal habits unravelling, sensations he once enjoyed drying up —

“—Where did you go, Akihito?” Asami repeats, overruling his thoughts.

Akihito instinctively turns away from the glare and then winces when Asami captures his chin, demanding his straying eyes look at him, extinguishing any lie he may have thought to tell him.

“One of the islands off of the mainland, I don’t know which one. No-one would’ve seen—” He falters mid-sentence when Asami agitatedly pushes back from the wall and turns away, raking a frustrated hand through his hair and tension visually rippling through his shoulders. But the ghost of anger is in the steady, concentrated movements Asami’s making to not let his real aggression be known.

“I'm...I'm not trying to antagonise you. I know you're angry,” Akihito tries to reason, “I shouldn't have left the way I did, it was probably the stupidest thing...and, y’know, spending hours sitting in a damp, bug infested forest didn’t make me realise that any sooner,” he adds with a feeble laugh. “Maybe I overreacted...but I couldn’t bear it...what you said to me when you put that thing to your neck...I was sucker-punched by it. And the only thing I could do was get away,” he somberly admits.

By now Asami’s killing look has softened into a resting scowl, which Akihito would take as a small forgiveness for emotionally ravaging himself like this in front of him. And it terrifies him as much as it makes him want to reach out and feel Asami’s touch instead of the short, sharp jabs of his own
heartbeat. He tentatively stretches out a hand towards Asami but pulls back the second the look becomes lethal again, and he falls back against the wall with a broken, dejected laugh.

“Why are we doing this to ourselves? We act as if nothing’s gonna tear us apart, but...what if I want to know what’s hurting you? What’s so wrong in that?”

“Akihito—” Asami growls in warning, but Akihito forces on.

“—Why is it so wrong? Why!? God dammit, Asami! You said it yourself that time, that I shouldn't be afraid to tell you anything. To trust you. Why does it only work one way, huh? Why does it only work one way?!” His fists beat against Asami’s chest, pleading desperately, frantically, “Please, Asami, tell me what’s wrong. Tell me what I can do! Let me help you, please!” but his pleas carry no weight against iris’s that are engulfed in an inferno.

“...please,” he says, in one last ailing breath that’s had all of the fight smothered out of it, and now, finally, finally, Asami drops the most brutal and devastating detail.

“Has it not occurred to you that this is something beyond your help?”

That stills Akihito.

“W—what are you trying to say?” He measures the seriousness of Asami’s statement with palpable confusion. All the while the man's expression doesn't change.

“Nothing you could do could help this, Akihito. Especially not you,” Asami says, and what makes it even more frightening is that his tone is gentle now, his cutting line spoken from that sensual mouth that Akihito's looking at in wordless despair while a howl clutches at his throat. He’s searching Asami for the answer even as a rogue feeling descends on him, and he knows what it is; he can read it all over Asami’s face when the man lowers his eyes and becomes blind to Akihito’s horror.

“...No…”

Only then does cold disbelief shake his core.

“...it's........my fault…” Akihito murmurs, and then he cries it. “It's my fault!”

His voice rings out and Asami throws open his eyes, realising with instant regret the error of his judgment. Out of all the unwanted things he’s had to do to protect Akihito, this is by far the most unconscionable. The most unforgiving. Akihito is faultless, and now his heart is visibly breaking in front of him and he wishes he could undo time to erase all of it.

“Listen to me, Akihito,” he attempts calmly, but it comes out strangled in the same broken way that Akihito’s looking at him with fat wads of unshed tears in his eyes. His hands try to steel around Akihito’s shoulders but the boy’s tense, white-knuckled clasp grips the material of his robe and stops him.

“What have I done...” Akihito repeats, rattling with panic. “What have I done...!?"

“Akihito, look at me—”

“—It’s all my fault!” He continues to cry, deaf and blind to everything but the torment of Asami’s words cycling in his brain. Oh God, please, not this. Please, please, please, please...

“I never meant it, I was wrong—”
“—Then why did this happen!?"  
“Akihito—!”  
“...WHY!?”

...!!

And then an unreal motion strikes at the very edge of Akihito’s vision and splits the air next to his ear. Once the initial shock dissolves, his wide eyes register Asami’s balled fistwedged into the broken wall beside his head, and dart frantically back and forth between Asami’s extended arm and his face. As Asami pulls his hand out of the rubble, he immediately recoils sideways and flinches away from another possible impact, but his chin is seized instead in a rough, tight grip.

And then the mood suddenly, mercifully shifts.

The hand loosens and moves to sweep the hair hanging over his eyes, wipes away a tear with a thumb, and streams through his golden head to pull him forward, for Asami to kiss him on his forehead and against each tearful eyelid when they flutter closed, and say, “You are blameless, Akihito.”

The affection unlocks every terrified muscle in his body and he remembers to breathe again, to feel the simplest touch bring all of his senses back to him. The unexpected, aching gentleness inadvertently brings more tears and Asami wipes every one of them away.

“These aren’t the eyes I want to see,” Asami says gently.

Nevertheless, Akihito whimpers with keening anguish. “I’m so sorry.”

“There's nothing to be sorry for,” Asami replies, wiping the stray tears rolling down Akihito’s cheeks and kissing their wet trails. “This has always been my burden, even before you came to be in my life. Never were you the cause of it. It was wrong of me to have sewn that doubt in your mind,” Asami goes on to say. “Forgive me.”

“Oh, Asami…” Akihito begins to utter, slowly turning to bury himself into Asami’s robe to cry into it.

Asami hushes him with whispers to his temple, “It's not your fault, it's never your fault,” kissing his lips over and over Akihito’s face and repeating it, allowing the comforting mantra to assuage all of the boy’s agony. Akihito chokes and snivels and grips the material of his robe until his knuckles turn white, and the depth of regret scrapes over Asami’s conscience like nothing he’s ever allowed himself to feel before. Akihito’s crying all hell out of himself but Asami’s the one who feels like taking the shredder to his own skin.

With a thin snifflle, Akihito raises his head and looks up from his tear sodden lashes at Asami, who waits on his next move wordlessly. He reaches down and touches Asami’s wrist lightly, encircling his fingers around his injured hand and lifts it to his lips, saying, “I want you to be ok. I won't be able to do anything if I don't have you,” while the pink, bowed line of his lips kiss the ridge of each abraded knuckle.
"I only want to help you, not hurt you," he avows as he cradles the larger hand protectively and allows his kisses to permeate through the skin, fusing the fractures to Asami’s bones and cooling inflamed ligaments, each digit adoringly tended to, adoringly tasted, healing them ever stronger.

And as his red, battered skin begins to close, Asami’s outward expression remains plain and held together, betraying how truly unsettled he feels underneath. It spawns an ugly dissonance in him knowing that this is the most disgraceful thing he’s ever done to someone so undeserving. He takes both of Akihito’s hands into his own and kisses each of them with doleful reverence. “You’ve done more for me than anyone ever could.” A truth that wedges a lump in his throat he could choke himself with.

“...just not this time,” Akihito rues with a weak smile, even though the acceptance is painful. He slowly parts Asami’s robe and places both hands on Asami’s chest, feeling it warm and rugged under his fingers. The heartbeat, as dull as it is, pulses on with life energy, and captures Akihito with what he can only feel is a tinge of hope. “Tell me...if this is a fight you can win...” he says, carefully.

“No matter what,” Asami insists, intending every word to commit like a blood oath, even when the reality remains uncertain.

Later that night, when he’s wrapped in the tender twist of Akihito’s legs, he’s at the mercy of the scent from the boy’s wings circling in the air above him like a soporific, gently ushering him into a painless abyss. Blessed air glides through his passageways as he sinks his face into the pillowy feathers and breathes in until he could burst, and be carried into the next life by the gentle sighs and pleas that spill out from this beautiful creature, lying there gasping for him as he rocks slowly inside of him.

Every inch of him is being cared for by the mercy of pleasure drifting along his back when Akihito
pulls him closer and tousles his hands through his hair, killing his pain receptors dull and making pleasure the only nutriment for his nerves. But still, self-condemnation is strong enough to spark through this extreme pleasure, making this salvation the bitterest to taste.

In the span of a single day he managed to hurt the one person who means everything to him; not once, but twice, and twice that person chose to remain at his side. The very mention of his name on that person’s lips as he gasps from a kiss to his neck is a mercy Asami’s unworthy of. But he takes it, selfishly, willingly, like something essential to his being. He would bend the laws of the universe to have all of it spill into every pore of this wretched body and cure him. Or carry him over. It might be the only thing keeping him alive, and he was almost at the point of losing it.

If he loses Akihito —

If he ever loses Akihito, then...

“Asami, look at me.”

When his eyes meet azure, his fist clenches into the pillow next to Akihito’s head and he lets the energy carve through him as he orgasms and collapses bonelessly onto a wing. Every feather sticks to his damp skin and suffuses their sublime energy through him, inducing him thoroughly into blissful oblivion.

“Asami,” he hears faintly. He has to fight through the askew of his senses but he hears it. And slowly, his tired eyes focus down at the trembling hand pressing against his heart and then up to Akihito’s emotionally wrought face.

“What are you thinking about?” Akihito whispers to him, and it sounds like the trickling of falling powdered snow against his temples. He closes his eyes to it, slipping in and out of consciousness for what may be several minutes or several hours, dreaming of an absolution...
“Asami…”

...

“Asami…”

He wades through the blackness of his mind to find the colours of Akihito’s quiet voice calling to him from the other side of infinity, fighting to stay awake to hear the pale violet wisps of his name bloom into milky, pearlescent ribbons.

“Asami…”

It's all he’ll ever want to hear, until the very end.

Chapter End Notes

I love these two and miss them together so much in the manga ;~; ♥ sensei, hurry up and reunite them!
Chapter Notes

Massive, massive apologies to everything who's been waiting for this chapter, I know it's taken forever and I'm so disappointed and mad at my lack of progress. Life sometimes consumes you and I'm so sorry to have left you all hanging (___|||) But the wait is not more! Finally. FINALLY!!!

I self beta-ed this chapter so that as soon as I did the final edit I could post it straight away and not leave readers waiting any longer. Enjoy!

And, Happy New Year, all ^(*)*(-^)!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Black.

A void.

Pure darkness.
How long has he been suspended in this unending blackness? He can't tell. The feeling of time
writhes along like hellish lifetimes, weighing heavy on his soul...

It's so cold...

He can’t see anything...

And the sounds...

…the scant few that there are vibrate like the liquidised bowels of an abyssal depth, or the
floundering rhythm of his heartbeat, scarce and irregular…
And sometimes there’s nothing at all...

He can't fathom it…

Maybe this is it...

…the end of the tow...

…finally surrendering to his mortality and he’s wading beyond reach of himself, into insurmountable
nothingness.

He had the desire to stay, for him.

Only for him.

The strongest desire to stay...and be with him…

...instead of expiring in this excruciating infinity.
One blink becomes a lifetime.

Another blink, another lifetime.

Soon, hundreds of empty lifetimes accumulate territory in what’s left of his memory, incompatible with the divine upper reaches engraved into his memories created by him, preserved in vestibules the lie between dreams within dreams…

...they keep him afloat through the endless darkness…
Every time he blinks, he dreams of him.

Akihito…

It’s freezing here...

...so unbearably cold…
His senses slowly slip away from him, beyond reach...

“...”

“... ...”

A hum...
Murmurs in the midst of immensity…

“… ...”

“...s ...mi...”

Ahh. A familiar sound…
He wishes he could steer himself towards it...but this unknown atmosphere squeezes him like a grave. Trapped within its pressure, his whole being dissolves in the struggle...

“...as...a...”

“...s...s...”
Tones fill the dead space again, soft and lush and liquid supple around the edges...phasing in and out of his ears.

“...sami”

“...Asa...m...”
He never thought he’d be able to feel this again — this calm, beautiful sound, so mellifluously soothing he could fall into it...

“—Asami...”

...with its indescribable smell. Comforting. Like nothing and yet like everything, framing his temples like a cavern of luscious, giving things.

“...sami...”
His exhausted lungs inflate. A little sigh. Easy breaths.

“...Asami...”

Bliss.

“A...sam...”

Bliss like a lukewarm ocean kissing his forehead...

...Eyes closed...melting in and out of the surf...
...where he can finally breathe again...without struggle...

...finally...

“...wake...”

Finally...
“...wake up...”

Finally.

“...please...”

“...please...”
“...s...mi...”

“...s...s...”
[Bu-bmph.]

...A beat.

[Bu-bmph.]

...A beat.

A sonorous beat...
[Bu-bmph.]

A heartbeat...

...his heartbeat, rising from the furthest depths of his chest.

And light...
...so much light.

It pulls him…

...towards the aurora of spectral light placed in each palm...

...pulling him from the grave towards a warm ascent…
...passing the point where all remembrances...sensations...all that there ever was in this void is cleansed from his memories.

Awake.

Now...
As everything fades from his subconscious, the cold crawl of lucidity slices through Asami on the cusp of consciousness, just as he wakes —

And beside him, Akihito’s jeweled blue eyes are the first thing he sees reflecting brilliantly in the dim bedroom ambience.

“Asami.”

“A...ki...” It feels too raw to say anything. His roughened voice grates on his unused vocal cords, coughing up rust and metallic mucus clogged in his passageway and he struggles before a warm hand presses to the center of his chest directly over his heart, five points of salvation immediately soothing him so he can simply breathe again.

“It’s ok,” Akihito whispers, “just breathe.”

In between his own disorientation and the palish, soft pulls of Akihito’s voice, he descends in relief back onto the pillow, fully adhering and breathing in long full breaths as air blesses all the channels of his body.

“Just breathe,” Akihito soothes, “breathe.”

His voice flutters in soft opalescent clouds in Asami’s peripheral vision, a beautiful lull so out-of-his-mind wondrous that he gives himself to it on reflexive instinct alone, surrendering to the gathering warmth in his chest alleviating all pain, and he closes his eyes, doing nothing until Akihito chooses to lift his hands away. When he opens his eyes, he finds Akihito’s moved away from him to a chair pulled up to the bedside, a thin blanket strewn over the arm as though Akihito’s been sleeping in it.

“How...how long has it been?” Asami asks, pulling himself up onto his elbows.

It's not immediate, but it takes a few empty beats and a few uncomfortable shifts in his chair for Akihito to open up. “About four days.”

Four days.

“Four days...” Asami repeats it to himself, blindsided with the revelation that shoots a bolt of something unnamable through him; an empty, unfillable space, an urge to claw back lost time. He sweeps Akihito for information, searches the answers to unvoiced questions in Akihito’s melancholic eyes but they turn away from him, avoid him to stare down at his feet, would rather sleep in a chair than beside him. “Why...” he says, barely, “Why did this happen?”
Scrunched in his chair, Akihito looks bleary, underslept for days, out of comfort even in his own skin, and this deliberate space — this distance feels like a literal ocean Akihito’s put between them, deep and unreachable and as unbearable as every second Asami has to watch Akihito eat himself.

“Because you’re trying to heal,” Akihito says, finally, looking him in the eye in a static-fire moment of contact, blue and gold under the thin shaft of light convexing on the boy’s corneas from the crack in the curtain.

For heavy seconds those impossible eyes take careful aim at him, strip him, and with a blink seal him perfectly back up again, as if the two things are so interchangeable, like day and night, unrelenting.

Akihito’s on his feet, moving around the bed, saying, “Don’t force yourself, you’ve just woken up,” with his grey mood tucked neatly into a calm repose. It feels too meek, reluctant, like Akihito never is, but Asami isn’t in a frame to question him as Akihito adjusts the bedcovers and pillows for him to sit up more comfortably. Asami’s careful of his side, still holding it and feeling for the wound he remembers belatedly has healed, but a phantom pain keeps reminding him, retains the space even after it’s gone. He’s full of so many odd sensations, actually; ones he can taste, like bile and, somehow, sweet cinnamon on his soft palate, the two most opposing flavours creating noise in his mouth. Akihito rubs him gently on his back when he starts to cough to fight the repulsion and it mellows out to nothing, the divine touch pouring into him like he’s porcelain receiving water, filling out to his exact shape.

“Does it hurt?” Akihito asks, a translucent whisper while his fingers press the notches down the river of his spine, trying to single out a bad nerve.

“I’m alright,” Asami says. It feels weak, not convincing of anything but he is, mostly. A look between them says he will be ok, that his insides won’t burn anymore, that this is ok — to touch and be touched, as simple as it was before all of this happened, as necessary as the need to find Akihito’s hand and hold it, brush his thumb against his knuckles and bring them to his lips, kissing them — none of this will ever change. But he really can’t take that face at all, those eyebrows pinched at a constant crease, eyes dulled of their usual fire, or that tiny flinch of hesitation when he pulls Akihito closer and meets resistance.

“Are you scared of me?” he asks, and Akihito’s eyes widen to it, something close to shocking him stupefied, and a horrified frown breaks out all over him until he can’t take it anymore and Akihito ultimately crumbles forward to him and coils around him in an embrace that carries an untold longing weight.

“How could I ever be,” Akihito says to him, broken on all fronts and Asami feels wet drips fall onto his shoulder as he scoops him into a long, needful embrace.
Asami breathes him in like it’s his very first breath since waking up, and the necessity is sitting there in the crook of Akihito’s neck, a divine smell filling his withered lungs and reinvigorating them. Akihito sniffs softly against him, and Asami kisses the temple that’s sunken into his neck, too overwrought to look at him when he asks Akihito if he’s gotten any sleep in these last few days, if he’s eaten, if he’s *ok*.

“You’re asking *me* that when you’re the one who’s just woken up from a coma?” Akihito scolds weakly, the hot air of a scoff hitting the wetness along Asami’s neck.

Asami stays insistent. “Akihito, look at me.” He lifts the boy’s chin to look squarely at him, so he can see the burden of a silent pain painted all over him, traceable in everything he does even if he’s ready to deny everything, emphatically.

“I’m fine, really,” Akihito asserts with the might of his own conviction, pushing back from Asami’s hold and looking away, swallowing the rest of a loaded reply down with uncomfortable strain. “It’s just…” Akihito says, and his voice trails off. Instead he begins picking absently at the bed covers, finding a stray thread and flicking it away, pressing down a wrinkle to flatten it, doing everything but face Asami’s expectant gaze. And then, when all the creases have been uniformly smoothed, he completes with a fractured laugh, as though it’s killing him, “…four days is a really long time.”

The tension gridlocked in Akihito’s jaw squeezes visibly in his cheeks, and Asami’s starting to think that Akihito condemned himself to torture in these intermittent few days, taking up a hungry and emotionally battered vigil by his side, that it’s the only thing he *could* do but give over and let the invisible forces do their work to try and heal him. Asami draws a thumb to those doleful lips, touches the rigid line of them and closes his palm over Akihito’s cheek, speaking as soft as his voice will let him. “Look at me.”

And when Akihito does, the single drop of a tear slides down his cheek and melts into Asami’s palm,
all reasonably destroying him. Asami takes the open well of Akihito’s palm up to his lips and places a kiss to its centre, lingering to dust one on every finger. “Forgive me,” he says, gentle and rightfully tender after the eyes Akihito gives him crushes several layers of emotional defence he has yet to fully bolster.

Akihito turns his smaller hand in Asami’s palm and traces it over, sealing their fingers together in a precious clasp Asami wants to be wrapped in for eternity.

“There’s nothing to forgive,” Akihito smiles, despite his eyes brimming with tears. His head tips to the side and his sigh quivers out as he brings Asami’s hand up to his lips and drips heavy tears onto his knuckles. These tears are more than he deserves, Asami thinks to himself.

They’re careful against each other, tending to invisible wounds on both sides, in any way their souls need to return to themselves, and still, Asami’s desires are always selfish whenever they concern Akihito, he can’t stop himself leaning into him, nosing Akihito’s wet, ruddy cheek and nudging with the gentlest, pleading supplication, something Akihito all but melts into, just lips, slight and gentle presses, butterfly breaths, kissing as though they’re relearning the sensations of each other again.

“I missed you,” Asami whispers against his lips, stopping for the briefest of breath, forehead resting on Akihito’s and gliding his lips to his tear-streaked cheek, touching a kiss to the corner of his eye.

“I missed you more,” Akihito returns, cupping both hands over Asami’s cheeks and brimming with a smile that goes right up to his eyes.

So beautiful. Asami’s so grateful to see that smile once more and it’s not just a fever dream. He leans in to press another kiss to Akihito’s lips again but his aim misses and his head drops onto Akihito’s shoulder, vision swimming. Too much too soon.

Akihito tips him with concern. “Are you ok?”

“Just a headache,” Asami replies, one ready to split his skull from ear to ear.

“Heart.” Akihito hastily cracks two painkillers out of the foil and pushes them into Asami’s palm as Asami’s clutching his head and reaching for the water on the nightstand to rehydrate the desert in his throat. He quickly drains the glass and Akihito readily takes it from him and disappears out of the room.

He’s left to dwell on the surroundings. The room permeates Akihito’s mood in arguably the same fashion, drowned in sombre darkness that has a perpetual feel about it, concentrated down into this bed with the dark coverlet thrown over, curtains drawn, and Akihito’s gloom slowly absorbing into every piece of furniture, snarling in the dying light from his perch by the bedside.

When Akihito returns, he brings more water as well as a bowl of gentle smelling soup with rice and soft slices of milk bread that Asami doesn’t have the stomach for and immediately refuses.

“—Not now—”

“—Yes now,” Akihito overrides, and places the tray over Asami’s lap before he can physically reject it. “You need to eat. You’re low on energy and you need something substantial to line your stomach if you don’t want it to eat itself.”

He makes a fair point when it feels like there’s nothing existing between the top half of Asami’s body and his feet, it’s all just cannibalised itself. And with the demand comes the tray bearing the weight of dangerously scalding food on his legs and Akihito’s gone over to dump himself in the armchair next to him and a sigh leaves him.
“Your phone was going off a lot by the way. Your people were trying to reach you almost all the time,” Akihito’s says in a small voice, trying not to seem intrusive while Asami’s already struggling to eat. “And your glasses man came wanting to see you.”

Asami’s expression turns discerning, as if to say, “Oh?”

Akihito draws a knee up and leans on it, chewing his worry-worn lips, radiating discomfort that makes the foamy slices of milk bread feel like blocks of concrete for Asami to swallow. “I told him you were ill but he still insisted on speaking with you, like I was lying to him or something. Is he always this pushy?”

“He wouldn’t have come here without a reason,” Asami insists, pushing the cubes of tofu around in his soup pensively, still deciding whether to eat it or not.

“You’re his reason,” Akihito points out. “That man’s like your designated keeper. None of your people can leave you alone for five minutes but he just barges in whenever he wants.”

“You should have left him at the door.”

“Yeah,” Akihito scoffs, “you say that like he’d listen to me. The guy has trust issues. I told him if he wanted to talk he could talk to a sleeping man, so he invited himself in anyway.”

It’s easy to forget that Kirishima was once an investigator for the Japanese Central Intelligence Agency before he was recruited to Sion Corp. He came equipped with a specific set of skills and that sort of qualified interfering doesn’t file away so easily.

“He overstepped.”

“Yeah well, he got the message in the end.” Turning in his chair, Akihito leans over and reaches for a folded slip of paper on the nightstand and places it on Asami’s tray. “He gave me this number before he left. ‘If I ever needed anything’, he said.”

Asami opens it and registers what’s written in a single glance. “That’s his direct line.”

“Pfft,” Akihito huffs, if a little surprised. “The guy’s good at making you feel like a waste of space while giving you the keys to the kingdom at the same time.”

Asami lets an agreeing smile slip. That’s probably the truest assessment Akihito’s ever made about Kirishima. “Kirishima’s one of the most austere men I’ve ever met. Professional in the strictest conventionality, extremely capable, honourable—”

“—and a pain in the ass,” Akihito adds, snorting.

“His…attentiveness was a lot more overbearing once upon a time. I told him he’d still be paid the same if he didn’t iron my underwear for me.”

Akihito’s mouth hangs for long seconds as the info drops like a bomb, and blurts out, “He did what?”

“It was some time ago,” Asami says smoothly, tinged with humour. “I was stuck at home with a fever and committed to bed-rest. I wasn’t in any position to fight his insistence on doing my laundry, unfortunately.”

“Asami, at the whim of Kirishima’s mother-henning, who would’ve thought? Maybe that’s what he came here to do but I threw him off, probably annoyed the hell out of him.”
“He cooked me lobster as well, you know,” Asami tacks on, and watches it pass through Akihito until his face ices over with a scowl.

“Well shit...” Akihito wriggles in his chair, finds a new position to be peeved at Asami from, but he’s not, really. “Lucky for you, my cooking skills only stretch as far as this delicious, amazing, sent from the gods, one of a kind soup.”

“Lucky me indeed,” Asami snides and looks down at his soup, which is actually very palatable given his volatile tastebuds.

“Or I could’ve given you a packet of cabbage Taro crackers and watched you eat those,” Akihito sniggers. “I could’ve fed you all kinds of junk.”

“Spoil me another day,” Asami says flatly, lifting the tray and depositing it on the empty bedspace. “Thank you for the meal.”

Akihito takes it wordlessly to the kitchen and when he comes back he passes Asami his phone so he can deal with the hundreds of notifications and missed calls left for him in his absence. Asami sees a stack of ‘Kirishima’ seventeen notifs deep and feels some remorse for Akihito.

“He always has to be the one to phone you dead on eight in the morning,” the boy comments. He’s moved out of the chair completely to sit on the bed next to Asami’s knees, his hand keeping a warm presence on Asami’s thigh.

Asami scrolls through and confirms the 08:00 timestamps on some of the notifications. “Ever the useful alarm clock.”

“I know right. Still, he goes way too overboard for a secretary or...whatever he is.”

“He’s my right hand,” Asami says in the next second, narrowing his eyebrows towards his phone, temporarily fixed to his screen and not at Akihito who’s poised tightly, suddenly tense. “He’s also my protector, as are all of my men. He’s a man ultimately trained in every way possible to be my shield. He has a family of his own but he’s ready and willing to die for me at any given moment, and he carries that with him every day.”

Akihito’s mouth hangs open, thinking how the fuck to process all of that in only a few seconds. “That’s...how fucked up does your world have to be to have men be your human shield?”

“The same that exists for everyone,” Asami says coolly. “Danger and delight branch from the same tree.” A smirk passes over his face but the air between them has already changed and everything dries up in Akihito’s throat.

“People don’t go throwing themselves in front of a bullet like its nothing. That’s insanity.”

“It is,” Asami agrees. “The world is a crazed place.”

There’s deep, buried understanding in there, and Asami doesn’t have to say a lot of things for Akihito to know he isn’t talking about the dark sides of his job. Akihito swallows and gets up off the bed, pulling his hands behind his back to wipe his sweaty palms against his clothes.

“I have to go through these,” Asami says, schooling his expression and turning his attention back to his phone, “but first I...need a moment to myself. Be an angel and get me my cigarettes, would you?”

Akihito looks right at him and feels his eyebrow twitch violently. “Have you woken up completely senile? Look at what that shit’s done to you and you still want it!”
Asami looks up and holds his hand out to him, unoffended by Akihito’s retort. “Unless you’ll be the one to satiate me, Akihito? You’ve never known a craving until you’ve had two of them gnawing away at you. Four days is a long time, as you said.”

Of all the things to make Akihito angry, he’s mad but Asami is mad the world over. “You’re a mental case, you know that? You’re half dead and still horny as fuck. Fine! I’ll get you your damn cigarettes!”

Akihito throws his hands up and walks away, and Asami’s eyes feel heavy as they watch him go, black spots hang in his vision and converge like weeds climbing into his field of view. It adds stress to Akihito’s afterimage, distorts what would’ve been left of him to savour, that fiery sweetness, blue and gold, a bolt from the unknown that shocked Asami’s life as he knew it.

The best thing that ever happened to him.

He wishes it didn’t have to be like this.

He tries to cough the ache out of his lungs and blood streaks his palm. A slow blink doesn’t refresh his vision, and he can hardly see a thing. The throb in his chest could asphyxiate him, and that’s probably how he’ll go in the end; iron mucus until he drowns, with no melody. Pity...

Time drags slow, and Asami feels himself slipping, and the last rasps of breath sound faint in his mouth, can’t reach the air, can’t feed his muscles to hold him upright. The room tilts and his hands coming down to support him is only a phantom movement. He smacks the floor hard and his diaphragm starts convulsing. More blood...too much.

He’d made preparations in the event of this. Akihito will be protected. He’ll be ok. He’ll survive this.

“..ki..hito..”

He wishes it didn’t have to end like this.

_Akihito...

_There are reasons...why the light doesn’t reach me.

_And there are reasons...

...why I can’t ask you to save me...

“Asami?”
Forgive me.

“Asami—!!”

Four days before.

03:49

03:50

Akihito stares at the fluorescent numerals ticking over, watching them continuously.

03:51

03:52

03:53

Counting every second of every minute, eyes wide awake, filling up the chasm of time with useless contemplations.

03:54

03:55
He contemplated the endless stillness in the penthouse, and how it sometimes unnerves him; the
shiver of loose cladding racketting along the outside wall, specks hitting the window, the sudden
rush of wind up a hollow chute plays on his mind like a death rattle, someone taking their last breath.
It's become synonymous with the scrapes of Asami’s breathing, fragile and grating as he trawls the
depths of a coma-deep sleep.

Akihito stays awake to listen to his every sound, listens to every breath drawing in so dreadfully and
exhaling hollow and crackled, churning like a curdling mess in Asami’s lungs. And then there’d be a
reprieve where Asami would stop breathing for a few seconds too long, and Akihito would hold his
breath in nervous tandem, imagining the miniscule moment that it might be Asami’s last — Asami’s
life slipping silently to the other side and then back again — his life balancing on a thread no thicker
than a wisp of air between his lips, and it terrifies Akihito into insomnia.

And if that wasn’t the worst thing tornadoing around in his mind — the real worst, the thing that
another minute ticking over will grind him to the raw nerve grows ever wider, impossible to avoid in
a room his biology can’t help but react to. He can’t stop his instincts screaming at the apex of their
prime, aggressive from starving himself for so long that the scent of billions of microscopic blood
particles hanging over him, suffusing in the air provokes his primal urges, violating his self-restraint,
pressuring him to feed.

Akihito feels the cold sweat taper off his back as he holds Asami in his arms, body curled
protectively around him, the low roar of a primal hum droning in his ears, pushing the momentum of
his hunger around and around to consummate that urge.

He tries to kill it under the cold spray of the shower before rummaging in the twilight for something
to eat. His appetite for this kind of food is non-existent, but it’s something to take his mind off and
stop the pulsing of nervous energy where idleness creates opportunity. There isn’t much to be
scrounged; some bread, tofu, eggs, some essentials to make a soup or something unfussy. He can’t
even stomach steamed rice but he’ll try, or at the very least he’ll have something ready for Asami
when he eventually wakes up. That hope is his motivation for getting things out onto the chopping
board, it’s the only bit of normalcy he can find in preparing a meal for him, so he’ll take it, but
truthfully, he’s just exhausted. Sleep is beyond him at this point, red-eyed and listless and dragging
his feet from room to room, coming and going from each room like he would a museum, watching
the exhibit of a man who doesn’t know he’s in a coma over and over.

It’s so hard to not know how many days Asami will be like this, how long he’ll have to look at
Asami so prone and powerless, how long he’ll have to glance up from the bed and count the
changing colours of the sky and not feel a single movement beside him. Akihito wants to rip his own
heart out of his chest so he wouldn’t have to feel it physically breaking and bringing him to his
knees.

He draws all the curtains in the apartment, as if that’s the answer to all this; make it dark on top of
quiet, make it so that nothing can get to Asami, and nothing can see him wallow like some ornery kid
mourning the loss of his universe.

He sighs when his knees hit the mattress and lies next to Asami motionless in the darkness, lacing his
fingers together with Asami’s limp hand and contemplates a minefield. The world is his to obliterate,
if he wants it, just to be this close to him. He could watch it all go up in smoke for a touch, a single
quiver over a thousand blood-tinged breaths coating the sides of his lungs like napalm. He’d burn in
it for this feeling, let it consume him, he would.
Akihito squeezes his hand tighter around Asami’s lax fingers, half expecting in deep desperation that by willing enough those fingers will curl around his, and he’d wake up, hold him, fold him in half and kiss him, promise to protect him, promise him everything. He wants it all he can’t stand it. He wants all of it so much he would break his psyche in two for it, live as half a being forever, one guarding Asami’s spirit in the astral world, and one staying here with him, right here.

He burrows into Asami’s side, closing his eyes and tuning his senses to the shallow repetition of Asami’s heartbeat. He’d touch it if he could, to somehow be closer to him, a desire pile-driving into Akihito’s head he can’t see straight, doesn’t trust himself with the mood he’s in, overspilling with acrid thoughts. His free hand hovers above Asami’s ribcage, fingertips a hair away from Asami’s skin from a suspended wrist and dangling, siphoning air between all of his fingers. He peacefully gazes over the arc of Asami’s chest rolling up and down, dreaming of reaching into it, submerging through the gelatinous layer into his ribcage and seeking out to curve his fingers around the organ, touch the thing that makes Asami so human, so fallible. So many colliding visions drain his irises of their colour, so many bloodied outlines of his teeth, red ribbons staining the white bedsheets.

And then world falls into focus again, hard, on the grip of flesh between his teeth, metallic stench effusing straight into his mouth.

No.

He recoils in horror, barreling so far through shock that it’s tangible like a shotgun blasting a giant, gaping hole, and the horror burning behind Akihito’s eyelids burst into full flames, just as everything else sinks into bottomless black.

He locks himself in the bathroom and retches over the sink while a panic attack shudders violently through his muscles, seizing his throat and making it impossible to breathe or raise his head above shoulder level. Just one breath takes an immense effort of will, and the sudden inrush of it is a dam breaking and flooding him internally, overwhelming him with oxygen that may as well be a flashfire exhuming his lungs from the inside-out. His hand snatches at the basin above, facedown and hyperventilating into his knees, trying to breathe the whole world into his lungs and swallowing nothing.

He recovers, barely. Sixteen stilling breaths, Akihito counts. He lives sixteen seconds knowing what it’s like to be robbed of everything. Curling upwards, he swipes at the incipient tears wetting the corners of his eyes and digs the heels of his palms into them, wanting to immolate in the energy it takes to want to scream. And when he does, it’s a bloody lightning of an eruption that bursts his wings through his back from the shock of it. That very second he jams an explosive fist into the mirror and grabs a broken shard to stab into his forearm repeatedly, bludgeoning himself deep enough for the wound to stay open. As his artery sprays, everything follows the pattern of blaze — the flash of red as his blood spills onto the floor, and his mouth latches onto his arm as instinctively as starvation driving him to the height of madness — and he drinks. His eyes roll back into his lids and he slumps back onto the wall, gasps cut short and turning, in all manner of impossible things, into relieved, blissful moans as the bitter, bloodied heat of his own blood travels down his throat.

What a shameful sight this would be for Asami to find him in, in the midst of self-armageddon. How
thankful he is that he can’t, Akihito thinks, as his blood intermingles with tears.

It would all be over otherwise.

In the shadowy encompass of night, Akihito’s mouth stretches to devour something. He hasn’t slept for two days now — can’t sleep — and he wants to peel off his own skin in strips and set fire to them at every imagining of what his resurgent instincts want to do to Asami.

He’s barricaded himself in the spare room, moving out of reach of Asami and cocoons himself in the tight whorl of covers, making himself impervious to the outside world. He blockaded Asami’s door from the outside as well as in, but Akihito doesn’t trust himself not to break down all barriers and grind his teeth into that sinuous neck and fill his mouth with nutrient rich blood, so satisfyingly thick it drives him mad thinking about it. The sensation rushes through like breakwater hurling itself violently inside him constantly.

Akihito’s been here before, used sleep deprivation as a preventative to stave off flesh-hunger, where there’s less of a desire to feast on anything that walks and breathes and would fight him to the death to survive. Those preventatives are useless when he’s shared so much of himself with Asami that identical imprints have etched themselves cell-deep. Asami would never stand the chance. If only, Akihito agonises to himself, if only Asami could fight him off in this state, but as he is, he’s a meal just lying there and Akihito can’t take it anymore.

He launches himself from the bed and out of the apartment window into the night, huge wings spread and steering the breeze until he drops the forty or so storeys to land in and amongst the bushes outside of the apartment complex. The suburbs are quiet and perfectly dark, the sidewinding backstreets of the old neighbourhood one stark light mounted to a wall every few buildings, street lights alternately lit to save money, and there are mirages of human-shaped shadows created by towering bushes that sway with the nightly breeze. He circles the same concrete and wooden facades of houses, feeling the gush of intermittent cold pass through his minimal clothing and Akihito, by contrast, is feeling irrationally like hellfire. It’s searing his mind, as though this feeling has created an entity of its own in his head that doesn’t stop eating him with molten rock for fangs, making a burning man of him.

He hangs back under the mezzanine of a three-storey housing block, adjacent a lonely bus stop that only ever caters to a few of residents, less so in the dead of night — but there’s always one, and it takes just one; an idol-esque girl with a pink dyejob coming back from a night out. She gets off the bus and pigeon steps to a halt to swipe at her phone screen that’s a slither of blinding light in the blackness of night, suitably distracted as well by the music in her headphones, and Akihito’s focused on her, two glaring eyes under the hood of darkness, the roar in his blood full-on charging, screaming at every pulse point, every sound excruciating.

She rounds the corner clutching her phone as a torch to light the passage through the backroads bordered by back gardens and six foot fences, and Akihito follows, treading the road on bare feet and stalking her every step like an encroaching shadow of jungle instincts, all with terrifying efficiency from two meters behind her.

He surges forward, and it’s over in less than a second.

She has no defence to stop him, no time to scream or even blink before her skull smashes face first
into the asphalt and snaps her neck on impact. Blood sprays in an arc and rains from every which way when Akihito yanks her forcefully up by her hair and sinks down onto his hunches in a fervour of blood with no rising panic, no cries of pain, only the lifeless calm of instant death.

There’s nothing but dead horror frozen in the girls broken face as her loose neck lops backwards, exposing it for Akihito to tear violently into her — two, three, four bites, the fifth rips her throat open and blood pours from the gaping hole, streaming relentlessly from the carotid artery, and he swallows, swallows, swallows.

He swallows until it fills all the recesses inside him that were sealed over, kept out of existence in comparative safety of a mundane, humanistic living, finally freed from struggle by the shallow, low-lying threat that’s a constant push against the tide he can never truly reverse. He’s intensely estranged from the boyish, good-nature that Asami knows — the ‘Angel’, the wonderment — who Asami would cook breakfast for, would lift off his feet and kiss up against the wall as soon as he got home from work, would whisper things to in the afterglow and before he settled to sleep, the same Akihito that has his jaw locked onto a victim’s neck, clenching and bearing pressure to depress more blood into his mouth — that’s him, that’s always been him. He’s a curse assimilated into a human form, and this is the way of his survival. Blood dark as ink, teeth gnashing against ligament and bone, ingesting human flesh. Vicious euphoria.

He was already lost to it huddled under the shower with the cold spray beating down on him like a hail of knives, the taste of his own blood resurrecting buried memories his body somehow never forgets. It comes back flooding — and he remembers. He remembers how close he’d always come when he’d leave impressions of his teeth on Asami’s skin when they were intimate, biting into his neck with aching, streaming moans, how aroused Asami would become when he left those savage marks, it would make Akihito want to hollow himself out just to make more room for it, for all of Asami’s pleasure flowering at his core, to disarm the desire to kill him.

He begs for it to stop. He’d lose his mind and he’d still beg over and over for anyone that’ll hear him, and his tears freeflow from dark, massive eyes, irises consumed entirely by pupil.

There’s nothing left of half of her when he’s finally finished consuming. He stands at the foot of her corpse, hands gloved in blood, looking upon the aftermath of the decimation of another being, gouged out in places that would make her impossible to identify, a gruesome chaos and matted pink hair, bits of broken bone, an empty cavity where here heart used to be. Not even an animal would kill in this way.

Eventually, by the light of the moon, the orbit of blue returns to his eyes and he breathes like he’s re-entered the world again. Just breathes, taking most of the night into his lungs. He looks on at the devastation, but he breathes all the same, relief washing away the ashes of his internal effigy, because it would’ve been Asami’s blood between his teeth.

He returns to the penthouse around dawn that same morning, with the powdered lavender glowing sky behind him when he climbs through the bedroom window, hair still damp from having dived into Chiba Bay and floated off, letting it wash him far out while he slowly came back to himself.

The wind picks up the whir of sirens in the near distance. He expected there would be by now. Someone would’ve discovered a mutilated body discarded in and amongst the bushes and notified the police, calling for the whole neighbourhood to be cordoned off. It’s only a matter of time before it’s all over the news; a gruesome murder that will inevitably lead to a large police investigation and a public outcry, and even with all of that single driven purpose, they’ll still turn up with nothing. Just like always.
In that drawn out moment of thought Akihito drops with a boneless slide against the wall and feels completely detached from the reality of it, and not in the least bit emotional. If anything, he’s entirely numb. He’s as faceless in her death as with all the rest of them, and after one there’s always another one, and every prey he consumes makes him stronger and the fatal order of things continues. It’s always been this way, for him. But he shouldn’t be contemptuous of the blindness this world has to all he does.

He should count it as his blessing.

He takes to his own room and finally, finally manages to sink into a dreamless sleep. It’s more of a force of will than anything restful. He sleeps from dawn till midday, making up for the two nights he lost, and upon waking he clears the blockade to Asami’s room and stands there for a time, harrowing with guilt. He’s a twitch of shredded nerves and tangled sensations, a layer of sleep roughening his most primary senses so that detecting and discriminating scents becomes a massive grey area – he thought about that in the small passing moments before he drifted off to sleep, while Asami’s warm skin scent phased in and around the penthouse and soothed instead of incensed him, made him sleep as soon as his head touched the pillow. He dismantles at this feeling even now, of all of his senses falling to ground zero at the foot of the bed, at the foot of the large, familiar man that makes him want to wrap his wings around him for all eternity, makes him forget the brutality of last night.

The few rays that soak through the curtains fall upon Asami’s back, curving over his shoulder, highlighting the ridges of him in soft gold, lucent as a resting buddha, peace stroked into all of the fine edges of him, and Akihito feels both heaven and hell all at the same time looking at him. Here he reflects how close it came to all being over. There’s such an accumulation of agony that he can’t get past yet, can’t forget a horrific daydream like that so easily. He’ll need time for the dust to settle on that, he knows. It’s his punishment to bear.

He wipes his eyes and pulls himself up and allows himself one soft, lingering kiss to the corner of Asami’s mouth, but nothing more. But god, just his lip catching the light scrape of stubble heaves the thickest, aching sigh from him whenever he thinks back to their mornings and kisses that overrode absolutely everything else for that brief moment in time before the day really began, before they would shower or Asami would shave and compose himself for the day. God, Akihito misses all of it with so my physicality he wants to self-destruct. He’s reaching his breaking point and he whimpers to his knees with a broken, choked sigh.

“Asami, please. I wanted to be strong for you but I can’t do this.” He digs his fingers into the meat of his own thighs and scrapes his nails, curling his fingers into fists that clench until they turn numb. ”This is such a mess, all of it. I’m a mess without you.”

He leans forward into the cradle of his arms and hides himself, buries into the bed and closes himself off, letting the anguish flow.

”I can’t do this on my own.”

“I wish I was strong enough for you.”
“I need you.”

“Please wake up soon.”

“Please, Asami.”

“Please.”

“Asami...”

“Asami!!”

It leaves him like an explosive bullet shot into absolute peril when he comes back to find Asami’s body slumped face down on the floor in a pool of his own blood. The shock ravages him instantly and rushes towards him, furious and panic-stricken but mostly furious when he realises why Asami sent him for those goddamn cigarettes. “You bastard! You sent me away!” He’s so livid he doesn’t know if he can find a way out of all the red. “You sent me away on purpose so you could do this to me again!? Damn you, Asami!” He hisses along the floor, pulling air between clenched teeth as he heaves Asami away from the pool of blood and closer to the light. Asami’s bulk thuds onto his back like a dead-weight and Akihito screams at him through a layer of emotional white noise. “Get up! Come on, get up!!” Akihito shakes him by the shoulders, and when there’s still no response he moves on top, holding an ear to Asami’s chest for a few seconds and feels his stomach fall out from underneath him when there’s nothing. Nothing. The absolutely worst sears through him, robbing him like it did when he seized up over the sink — he can’t breathe, Asami can’t breathe and there’s no air in the world for the both of them.

“Asami…please! Y—You can’t be... Get up!!”

He slaps and hits and there’s still no response, no movement, no sound, just two huge unresponsive pools facing the blaring sunlight that burns a fresh nightmare into Akihito, tears a new hole right through the middle of him. “God...please. Wake up.” He pumps at Asami’s sternum with a shallow palm and tips Asami’s chin to breathe for him but chokes on his own agonised sob that seizes him up tight, shut, useless. He can feel the acid in his throat making him want to vomit, make his body tremble helplessly like he’s voluntarily projecting an out of body experience for himself just to cope.

And then he remembers the slip of paper Kirishima gave to him like some sort of premonition he never wanted to think about at the time. But now, he presses Asami’s thumb print onto his phone’s lock screen and dials with trembling, faltering fingers and not one ring later Kirishima receives him,
and Akihito’s bellowing, keening, dying along with every desperate tearful choke that lodges the delivery of his message into the oblivion of his throat and no further. “Kirishima! Something’s...somethings ha—Asami is...Asami—!” Time shifts faster than a slipstream of boiling light but Kirishima, calm and unquestioning, recognises, and rallies a, “Hold on, I’m coming to you,” as Akihito’s storm keeps raging.

He abandons the phone and changes his position, sitting atop Asami’s torso with hands poised at the centre of his chest and pressing into the flesh of his thick pectorals, releasing a pounding breath and a gust of wind as his wings free from his back.

“Come on, Asami,” he pleads and bears down more, wild determination in his glassy eyes, wide and wet and focusing, concentrating his energy like a ball of sun in each palm — his last best hope with all the power to destroy a man, and all the power to raise him from the dead. He’ll use it. Even if it kills him, he’ll use it to bring him back.

“Come on, baby, come on,” he grits out, pushing his palms into Asami’s body with lacerating heat, trying to jump-start his body, trying to jumpstart something. “I’m not going to lose you.” He focuses more energy and the strain capitulates as if his veins are conducting raw lightning in order to make a connection, in order to break through the barrier within himself to reach Asami. His skin feels like it’s curling back from the bone but has to persevere. He’s almost there...

With a last gasp effort he forces all of his power through him, and the energy penetrates into the tissues of Asami’s body in a shockwave that raises all of the hairs of Akihito’s body on end as the transfer breaks through and streams uninhibited from him, filling Asami with all of his life energy. Akihito’s jaw loosens when he feels it happening; he feels every scorched detail in Asami’s pain spill into his senses, sharing his sickness, his pain, he can pinpoint which organs are dying, which ones have tumours — all of the unimaginable spikes of sensations reach their peak when Akihito’s energy finds Asami at his core and aligns his psyche to him, anchoring in.

And then he takes his first breath through Asami’s lungs.

Akihito breathes, and Asami breathes as he breathes.

The agony whittles into a pitter of relieved gasps when Akihito draws in his breath and Asami draws in with him, lifting and dropping his chest, eyes still inanimate but he’s breathing. The throb is paralysing in Akihito’s chest, a torturous squeeze to the point of suffocation but he withstands it, purpose overriding liminal pain to fill all the energy he can into Asami and rid him of his affliction once and for all.

Blood gathers in his mouth and he spits it out of him, it’s blacker than a slick of oil, and his eyes dart from Asami’s face to the bloodstain, gagging at the heinous, metallic stench that gives off a poisonous miasma. It’s horrific, whatever it is. It’s not like anything Akihito’s ever known, but he feels everything as Asami would, as much as he can tell from his body crippling like he’s rotting from the inside out — it ensnares him just as it did Asami, but know he can rid it out of both of them.
All his effort to expel the disease overtakes Akihito’s pain thresholds and he wants to seize up and burst like an overloaded star. His throbbing lungs fill with the stagnancy of blackened air until he feels himself being subsumed by it, the world turning into a tomb walled with a black effloresce and Akihito’s palms burn but he doesn’t stop. The very limit of their connection is being tested and Akihito thinks it might sever at any second, thinks he might die trying to keep them joined but he’ll do anything for Asami, whatever it takes to bring him back, there’s nothing that could stop him giving up everything for this man.

He dives to the bottom of the abyss for Asami, gripping the darkness with a clawing fist, accepting all within himself, all the things he never wanted to make himself do, never wanted to let reach the light of day. He is the grotesque and he is the divine all for one person and his shadow finds salvation in the burnished gold of the bottomless depths of him. Asami’s abyss is eternal, and he’ll never return from it, for as long as they’re both alive.

In a single pulse of pure white light, their connection severs and Akihito collapses down onto the floor steaming, his whole body radiating with heat waves that warp the air around him and his wings fold in of their own accord to dematerialise into thin air. He gave his everything, it’s done, Akihito reflects in the fraying moment.

He struggles onto his hands and knees irrespective of the pain. He can barely move, and everything’s rolling out of him — frail whimperers, searing heat, the last lights of his vision. He clings on, but he knows it’s a lost battle. In a last frail pull, his exhausted arm circles Asami’s neck and he creates a protective cradle around his head until someone can reach them, and he holds on until the very last second before his body finally gives out to black.

Chapter End Notes
I know I said I took way too long to write this, but it was also one of the hardest, I'm emotionally wringed out rn I'm ready to find a hole somewhere and just fall in... ＿ノフ○

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