a fever i am learning to live with

by Hopie (hopiecat)

Summary

Kaito Kid is Phantom Thief Kid, and nobody knows that better, or more intimately, than Saguru Hakuba. Kaito stumbled into his house, bloody and looking for help, and Saguru doesn't regret helping him for a second - even when it comes at the cost of his own peace of mind, and his own reputation. Kaito isn't hurting anyone, after all.

But shortly after a near miss, Saguru has to decide whether he's really helping him at all - and just how far he's prepared to go to help Kaito Kuroba.

[Follows on from 'L'Esprit de L'Escalier'.]

Notes

'Uncle', here, is used instead of the honorific 'ojisan'; 'little brother' is used instead of 'kun'.

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Chapter 1

+010 44 20 27857691: why is a raven like a writing desk?

Blink awake and toss the sheets to the ground, fumble underneath the pillow for the phone, Watson chirruping on her stand head buried under one wind slats of moonlight through ornate curtains and, for a second, Saguru couldn't remember where he was or why he was here, and he was six years old again and scared of the dark and scared of the man in the corner who shook and shook and shook and had taken him from the Mayfair house and

Why is a raven like a writing desk? Sit up, shake off sleep, scowl at the phone. Unknown number, Japanese area code – of course.

Saguru yawned, slumped back against the sheets. His eyes gummed together from sleep, his throat scratchy and rough, he rolled onto his belly and shoved the phone underneath the pillow.

Drrrrrr. Vibrating, the pillow moving underneath his face, put his hand underneath and slid out the phone.

+01 44 20 27857691: give up?

Sighed. Rolled onto his back (bed creaking springs shifting he needed a new mattress because the cold of Mayfair had done for this one and), because Poe wrote on both. Hello, Kaito.

+01 44 20 27857691: wrong. because both are of them are inky! Get it?

"It's too early to get anything," grumbled Saguru, planned to stick the phone back underneath the pillow and to ignore this but there—had to be a reason, for this text. Kaito wouldn't text him out of nowhere. Not him. Aoko, maybe, but not him. Risk the charges, and – risk showing some kind of emotion besides vapidity. Vapidness. Vapidity? Adj. lacking or having lost life, used as a synonym for empty-headed—

I get it, texted back. How are you, Kaito?

Radio silence. Or cellphone silence, as the case was. Roll back onto the other side of the bed, shove his cheek into the mattress. Cold cloth and hot skin; Watson chirrupchirrupchirrup in her sleep; creaking floorboard underneath him where Baaya went for her 2AM glass of water; second creak of floorboard from the back of the house where the driver paced due to his insomnia; traffic cars exhaust wheels on tarmac grinding down to—

The notes of Beethoven's Fifth, fumble the phone, slam it to his face, and— "Kaito, I know full well that you know what time it is over here.' Low-voiced so as not to wake anyone sleeping in the other room (no-one, there had never been, his parents were out for the evening and more).

"Eeeh," said Kaito, "I forgot! You're not in Japan anymore."

Strange thing to bring up. Let it drift aside, yawning and make no attempt to cover it; Kaito deserved all the rudeness for waking him up at 2:45:33AM. "And what's even more offensive is that you woke me up with the wrong suggestion to that riddle. It was never meant to be answered, for one thing, but Carroll himself wrote that—"

"Ah, ah, ah!" Kaito chuckling, the phone-line crackling, how was the reception so clear? "Don't you ever think outside the lines, Detective?"
"That's all I ever do," he mumbled, gave up sleep, and sat up. Flicked on the left light, not the right, for it was farther away from the door, and it wouldn't show due to the chest and the bed and the dresser right next to the door, "think outside the lines and---try and make sense of it."

"Mmh." Kaito sounded farther away, distracted. "You said."

Saguru said nothing.

Two weeks ago, Kaitou KID had been in his house. He'd been injured and bleeding and Kaito, in that moment, maskless, and now Saguru knew without a doubt who he was, now he had proof, and he – had done nothing about it. He hadn't told Nakamori, or found some way to get better proof (hearsay was inadmissible in court), or thought about it, at all. When he'd woken up to find Kaito gone, the next day, he'd been – concerned, but then he'd pushed it out of his mind.

Then the calls had started.

This was the fifth. Sometimes, Kaito said nothing. Sometimes, he sounded as though he wanted to speak, but the words wouldn't come out properly, and he didn't know what to do about it. Saguru knew that feeling very well, so their conversations always ended up trailing off into silence as he tried to give the thief enough peace and quiet to --- think. To try and talk.

"How are you?" said Saguru, muffling a yawn. "Did you finish writing that essay you were writing?"

"You mean the one due tomorrow? I didn't like the way it was coming out, so I tossed it. Now I'm working on a new one, comparing the translation of the Tale of Genji to the archived version – it's really cool!"

"And in Old Japanese," said Saguru. "When did you have time to learn Old Japanese?"

"Oh, I had a lunch break or two free from the drama club," said Kaito. "It's not that difficult, anyway…You could do it."

"I have an eidetic memory," said Saguru, "it's hardly fair to compare yourself to that. I remember everything."

"Arguing with you must be fun."

"It must be, because you seem to do it constantly."

"I don't argue. I debate."

"You're arguing about my definition of your arguing." And a tug up at his mouth, you're smiling like an idiot in your room talking to someone a country away in the middle of the night. "Do you know what I call that?"

"Something complicated with twelve syllables and roots in psychology?"

"Pedantic. And don't be silly. After midnight, I only think of words with eight syllables."

"So sloppy, Detective." Kaito's voice gentled and dipped, something on the other line creaked (mattress? chair?) cooing doves low jazz music (summertime and the living is easy fish are jumping) Kaito in his room, spread out in bed and covered head to toe in doves. "I had no idea you were so bad with night time."
Chuckling, Saguru pushed himself up, glanced across the room to the bookshelves loaded down with old copies of Arthur Conan Doyle, bent-spined and hanged-corner and stuffed full of marks. "Night time is for sleeping," said Saguru, "or it would be, if people didn't keep waking me up."

"You should arrest them," said Kaito. Shift of the creaking springs, he'd turned over to his right. He favoured the right wall that would look out to Aoko's house, remind him of a connection outside his crimes. He'd seen him do it unconsciously, twist himself to face Aoko like he was looking for the sunlight.

"Not a cop yet," yawning, edges of sleep blurring in his voice. "Believe me, once I am a cop, I will find it difficult to resist."

"Are you going to ask them why they did it, too?"

"Naturally. Nothing happens for no reason."

A silence on the other end of the phone, loaded down with more. The easy, floaty, half-asleep feeling disappeared, and Saguru was aware of the darkness, pressing in, the crackle of the line, of Kaito on the other end, bright-voiced. He wasn't sleeping well, and he knew that, but the evidence of it was different when it was practically handed to him on a plate.

"... Do you really think that?" Kaito's voice soft with (fear anxiety worry uncertainty), "that there's a reason for people who do bad things? That sometimes, those reasons can be --- good reasons?"

"I believe it," said Saguru.

Lacking answer. The sudden silence choked.

"I believe no one person is inherently bad," said Saguru, "that when someone commits a crime – because it's not easy, you see. True psychopaths, true --- criminals, they are much more rare than you think. It isn't something that --- is as common as the movies make it out to be, and with the way the world is progressing... it's much more common to—find these things mistaken or misunderstood, or—" you're not making as much sense as you think you are. "Sorry, it's a little hard to --- explain—"

"I think I get it," Kaito. "Some people can be bad for a good reason. Only because we live in a reactionary, kind of messed up world, the reasons get lost? People only see the bad action?"

Relief. "Yes," said Saguru. "Yes, that's it."

Pause.

"Have you ever arrested anyone who was really bad?"

Pause. Twenty seconds of silence.

The house the house with the false basement the screaming the nail marks on the walls so sharp in all the pictures bodies floating facedown and headless in the Thames and he heads nailed to sticks on--

"A few times. Don't think about it not know you'll turn your stomach and be sick for the remainder of the - "The – majority of the people I deal with, they're not – bad people. Misguised, angry, sad, stupid, but not bad. But there was one case, when I was younger, it—was a bad one."

"Can you tell me about it?" Kaito's voice gentle as rain. "Can you talk about it at all?"
"… Why do you want to hear about it?" Not questioning; not prying. "Is there something that's happened, Kaito?"

"Eeh? No! No, I just –" scrabbling for an excuse, "what you do is—"

"If you're going to finish that sentence with 'cool'," said Saguru, "need I remind you, I know full well you have high intelligence, and will know you'll be lying to me. And it's not good to lie to detectives, Kaito. I would strongly advise against it, in fact."

"Tell me about it," groaned Kaito, "you forgetting I grew up with Nakamori, or something? He used to 'arrest' us – me and Aoko – and put us in time out. We'd have to stay there until Mom came to bail us out."

Saguru snorted, rolled onto his back, stared up at the ceiling. The copper tang of blood on his tongue. Old memories scraping like metal against exposed nerves.

"… I was just curious," said Kaito, "just curious what – you said. Last time. About being scared." Pause. "You don't seem like you're scared of anything. It just—" Pause. "It made me wonder, that's all. You know? I don't understand how you can be --- not scared. Doing what you do."

"Habit, and stupidity," muttered Saguru, but the words tasted off in his throat, like old citrus.

I was just curious about being scared...

"Alright," said Saguru.

"Alright?"

"I'll tell you."

Pause. Suspicious twist to Kaito's voice. "… And?"

"And what?"

"You're not going to ask for anything in return? You're just going to tell me anything I want, like that?"

"I didn't say I'd tell you anything you wanted. Just that I'd tell you what I could."

"But this isn't --- this doesn't come with strings attached?"

How many people had Kaito spoken to who'd treated him this way, this exact way, who'd talked to him in double-secrets and tried to manipulate him into being truthful? He knew he'd been one of them, before. He knew that. But how many more?

"No," said Saguru. "On my word. I won't try and manipulate you, I won't try and get you to tell me anything you don't want to tell me. If you say anything to me, it stays between us."

"Okay," Kaito, relaxed. "Okay."

Saguru nodded, though Kaito couldn't see him. Leaned back in his bed, and—

"I was fifteen," said Saguru, just finished for the summer and working part time with Father old leather spices silk sodden through with sweat and the hot stink of bird feathers in sunlight as Watson flew from bookshelf to bookshelf to—
Stomach tightening twisting spinning sharp inside his mouth and blood behind his teeth on his tongue the bodies like pale fish on the Thames cracking bones when they were scooped out and dropped and the room spun spun spun and—

Heave a breath in, focus on speckled wallpaper, trace out constellations in the cracks on the ceiling (andromeda, canis major, grus, hydrus) "Hakuba?"

"I'm here." When he breathed out, he could taste the bitter-fish bile of the Thames in his throat. "Sorry, it's just—"

"You don't have to tell me if it's difficult," said Kaito, his voice gentle, as though he understood.

"The newspapers called him the Black Shuck. It's – an old British folktale. Haunts East Anglia, and foretells doom and demise to everyone who sees it. They say if you see a Black Shuck, you'll die soon enough." Saguru sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose, "of course, for the longest time, that was all the papers were full of – this butcher Black Shuck, and the fact that the police had no clue how to catch him."

Kaito didn't ask what he did to them, which was small grace. The details were on the internet, despite how his father had tried to have them hidden.

"I wasn't working on the case originally," said Saguru, "London isn't mad enough to have the sons of detectives working murder cases. Of course, I knew about it – my father could scarcely talk about anything else for months, and it was plastered all over the internet. 'Black Shuck takes another one', 'second body found in the Thames'… " panic terror how is he doing it how is he taking the girls please if you have any information about my daughter she's only 22—

Kaito made a quiet noise on the other end of the phone; gentle, soft as a dove cooing. Tapping at the keyboard – looking it up?

"I wouldn't recommend looking at the pictures," said Saguru, gently. "he – was not a pleasant man. Pure evil, or as close to it as any one man could get. I've never met that calibre of rage in any other human being before."

Gasp of breath, dragged in. "Woah."

"I told you," gentle, chiding. "Anyway, that wasn't the – terrifying part. I got on the case – my father didn't have a clue how to catch him, so he brought me on trying to – see patterns in his work, see something that they'd missed, something that had slipped their notice, and—" it still stung to remember late nights spent poring over flat pictures, his mind full of torn up bodies bleached of blood and bone protruding from sharp gaps in skin the smiling cuts on bellies and thighs opening up to red muscle— "I couldn't find anything."

"You couldn't—"

"Not a single similarity between the victims. Nothing to connect them to each other, no one figure in their life that showed up in others'. They didn't move in the same circles, but they weren't victims of opportunity – homeless, or on drugs, or lonely girls walking home alone at night. Half of them had been taken from parties, from inside their homes, been kept for two days— " breath catching in his throat on razor-edge memories, and— "I knew what he'd done to them, knew it, and I couldn't stop him. I couldn't tell my father, listen, I've found the man you've missed, couldn't say, it was the maitre'd, it was an ex-boyfriend, it was this bloke— " because there was nothing to connect anyone to anyone and he only functioned well with patterns to follow and when the patterns weren't there what good was he? Just a piece of outdated equipment, a Stone Age
"It wasn't your fault," said Kaito, and his voice sounded tinny on the other end, far away but soft. "Saguru, it's not like you can predict the future."

"The one good thing I can do," said Saguru, "is be able to tell you within a reasonable margin what's going to happen. Who's going to be abducted next. What we can do to catch the villain. I've never been --- wrong before. I've never been stopped before, not like that."

Neither one of them bring up Kaitou Kid, but Saguru knew that it was hovering on the precipice of their minds: he hadn't caught KID either, and he knew who it was.

But that was for some other conversation.

"Is that what scares you?" said Kaito. "The not knowing?"

Saguru paused. "Yes," he said, fifteen seconds later, "the not knowing scares me. The unanswerable question scares me. The Black Shuck terrified me more than anything."

"You were fifteen."

"I am a genius," said Saguru, "for God's sake Saguru you're a genius can't you figure it out? "And I should've done better. Because I wasn't smart enough, another girl got taken, and—"

"Stop that." Kaito's voice like a whiplash of light, cutting through the dark. "Don't be stupid. It's not your fault."

A minute of stunned quiet, as though Kaito didn't know what to do now that he'd snapped at him like he was some sort of small bad-tempered child. Inexplicably, Saguru wanted to giggle; Kaito sounded so shocked, so angry, so –

It was the first time he'd heard him sound anything other than pleasantly amused.

"You were only fifteen," continued Kaito, gently, "and being a genius doesn't mean you're not going to get stumped, right? There are geniuses who get caught up on problems all the time. And usually those geniuses don't blame themselves."

"I had no idea you were on first-name basis with so many geniuses," Saguru said, tried to joke, but the noise of laughter would great on his nerves right now.

"Hey, takes one to know one," said Kaito, and he didn't laugh.

Quiet again, twenty seconds now, getting longer.

"I've never told anyone about the Black Shuck," said Saguru."He was --- one of the cases I didn't -- do as well as I'd hoped. My father was furious with me. One of the cases that gave me nightmares right after, lasted for months. I --- took quite a lot of medication right after the Black Shuck. To try and drown it out, but they didn't make me --- better."

On the other end of the phone: Kaito breathing, chittering of twentythirtyforty doves in tight-packed unison, clattering footsteps up the stairs, static of the distance. "There's nothing wrong with you," said Kaito.

And the words lingered in the air, almost forming a shape that Saguru could see on that back-of-eyelids dark: there's nothing wrong with you. Slight edge to Kaito's voice as though he'd heard it
said before, as though he'd wanted someone to say it to him before and had never heard it back.

"Thank you," clearing his throat, awkward, ridged words catching on his vocal chords, "ah. You're very kind."

"I'm a genius," said Kaito, and he laughed this time. "… you manage to catch him in the end?"

"He threw himself in front of a car," said Saguru, "I was in pursuit."

Shriek of wheels crack of bone two tonne lorry going pass at 50kph thud blood streak on the road that took two days to clean out of tarmac and grout bits of skin stuck to the white lines where he'd been scraped underneath the lorry like a cat—

"Jeez," breathed Kaito. "I'm sorry."

"I never found out why he did it, you know." Saguru counted his breathing: five seconds in, two seconds out, seven seconds in, two seconds out. "I never got the chance to talk to him or to see if there'd been something I'd missed. I still don't know how people made that connection. I still—"

"You did enough – you put yourself through enough, now you gotta say 'I did my best, and that's good', file it away because there's nothing more you can do. It's like magic. You gotta know when to stop yourself."

"You're not a good example for that, really," said Saguru, and the conversation stalled on Kaito's end before: ripple of laughter, ghost of good humour.

"Yeah," said Kaito, thump of his head against the pillow. "Guess I'm not."
Chapter 2

Tokyo covered in four inches of snow by the time he got back. 12 degrees median temperature, outside 8 degrees. Couples walking past the display windows stopping to look at cheerful flowers and life-size mannequins. Muddle of footsteps. Snowflakes whirling in the air like little knives, cutting cold on his cheeks and on his bare hands as he crouched outside the apartment, staring at muddled snow.

"Anything?" Nakamori touched his shoulder (thick heavy reassuring calf-leather gloves) and handed him a mug of tea.

"Near as I can tell," said Saguru, "there's a single set of prints that leads this way—" pointing with his left hand, right hand clutching paper cup of coffee, "which means that our lad got in through the window down below. I checked with the landlord, and he'd said that it led to a store-room, and that it was normally locked from the inside, but someone had forgotten to do it the night before." At the back of his mind: this is all conjecture I have no proof for any of this don't ask me how I know.

Nerves fluttered in his throat. Coffee burning his lips.

Nakamori followed the direction he pointed in, walked over to the window, squeaked it up, squeaked it down. Footsteps from behind them, crunching on cold gravel; Aoko's voice, Daaaaaaad, Kaito grumbling inaudible underneath his breath (can't believe you dragged me all the way out here it's freezing Aoko stop pulling I'm going to--) Turn to face them, two steps closer, and—

Kaito overbalanced on the snowy sidewalk, slid and caught himself on Saguru's arms, ache of muscles pulling as about 60kg of muscle and sinew leaned against him.

"Kaito! I'm sorry, Hakuba-san, he's so clumsy—"

"Perfectly alright," dry-voiced, his stomach felt shaky with fluttering; carefully, he nudged Kaito back, tilted him back so that he was standing on his own two feet and the thief kept watching him looking at him, fingers dug in deep into his arms and—

"I wouldn't have fallen if you didn't pull so much," said Kaito, looking over his shoulder, over to Aoko, over to where she is. Not on him.

His hands felt warm, even through the thick layer of jacket he had on him, and Saguru was almost tempted to keep holding onto him, keep from letting him go, keep him steady.

Two nights ago, they'd talked about fears and cases, and now it felt like something had shifted between them. When Kaito looked at him, it was 10% less vociferous than normal, 10% less hostile. That was something. That was pleasant.

Kaito took his hands away and off him, rubbed them together. There was a hole in the index finger of his gloves, barely big enough to be a problem, but the speck of white flesh in purple was enough to catch Saguru's eye.

"We brought you soup!" he can hear Aoko saying, and knew that Nakamori was now completely out of the crime-scene, focusing on Aoko, out of guilt-happiness-love-some other combination of things that Saguru didn't understand.
"Woah," said Kaito, peering at the building, "swanky. Are you working on that robbery case?"

"In a manner of speaking," said Saguru, "I am. Nakamori thinks that Kaitou Kid is behind it."

"Nakamori thinks that Kaitou Kid is behind everything," said Kaito, with enough of a pause to show what he thought of it: \textit{I don't like that I'm the first choice for him but I can't blame him.} "What do you think?"

Saguru couldn't remember the last time someone asked him what he thought. They expected him to tell them, of course, whether or not it's something they want to hear because that is what a good computer does – but to ask him? To \textit{ask} him what he thinks?

"It's not KID," said Saguru, "too many differences to be a KID crime."

Kaito looked at him, waiting. Expecting more.

"First of all, KID thrives on a certain limelight." Smiled, knew without looking that Kaito'd narrowed his eyes. "He is the very spirit of showmanship. This was a clear in and out job," gesture to the door the prints the window bare of glass. "And done in secret. Besides, there's nothing for Kaitou Kid to get out of a small apartment building owned by the middle-class, is there?"

"Eeh. I wouldn't know," Kaito breezed, blew snowflakes off his face, "you're the—"

Movement of black out of the corner of his eye; flared red dot on Kaito's foreheadnosemouth blinking like a—

\textit{Gun!}

Saguru hooked his arm around him, pulled him close, and twisted to the right, padding himself down onto the snow, hiding Kaito beneath him; earthquake-snap of a gunshot in the silence; Nakamori bellowing, Aoko down on the ground, \textit{people screaming running Kaito squirming underneath him and}—maths whirling in his head, calculating angle and height of the—

Movement of black—

"He's here somewhere," Saguru muttered, rolled off Kaito, and planted his feet in front of him, pushed himself forward, pushed Kaito back. Scan the gathered crowd, footsteps – nobody in all black (hoodie jeans shirt what \textit{was it think Saguru think--})

"Kaito!" Nakamori. Pale with shock and cold. "Are you – was it—"

"I'm fine." The showman nowhere near now, Saguru could hear a tremor in his voice, "I'm fine, Nakamori-san, I'm—Saguru, he--" Squeak of shock as Nakamori reached behind them and (\textit{hugged him like a son}).

"I'll call my driver," said Saguru. Knew that they were gone now, whoever they were. \textit{God you're only sixteen}. "He can pick Kaito up and—take him to the police station, or—"

"Wh—Why me?" said Kaito, "it's not like they were \textit{aiming} for me, right?"

Saguru turned. Half-shock on Kaito's face, half cunning and something more, something pleading, \textit{cover for me explain this to Nakamori—}

"You're right," said Nakamori, "they were probably aiming for you." Patted Saguru's shoulder. "Rich. Influential. And your father—" Shake of the head translated to \textit{you know he has enemies.}
Though it was more his uncle with the enemies. And this was beside the point.

Tell the truth.

Kaito reached up, pushed his hair out of his eyes. It fell back, irresolutely messy. Fingers trembling. He could smell the nerves on him, almost, could see how he was practically vibrating out of his skin.

"I—" If I tell the truth, then Nakamori will want to know why they were aiming at Kaito; will want me to figure it out; if I lie, Kaito's still in danger, and I might be taken off this case and why were they shooting a sixteen year old boy? "Th—that is to say—"

"He's in shock," supplied Kaito, "I'll—"

"I'm –fine," Saguru, sharp, through edge-together teeth. "Really. I'm – it was a shock. But I'm fine. I – suppose this was bound to happen sooner or later. My father..." Trail off, look thoughtful. Angle his head to the ground, toe the snow softly.

Grave nod from Nakamori. "Yes."

Catch Kaito's look out of the corner of his eye – you owe me. "I—think I will go home," said Saguru, picking his words with delicate stilting care (shock leads to stammering and uncertainty), "if Kaito could--?"

"Of course," said Kaito, "yes, ah—Aoko, you should go home. I'll see you later." Honey-silk of a lie; Saguru scanned his face, tried to find the gaps where the truth didn't spoke out, but couldn't see the edges of that sharpness. Kaito was good. Very good. Flawless, which – boded badly for him. He didn't like flawless things.

Nakamori said something else. Touched his shoulder.

"My driver is waiting for me," said Saguru, "she, ah—she will take me home."

"Let me know when you get there," Nakamori said, and touched his shoulder, squeezed it rough. Saguru flinched, barely hid it, and turned towards the sidewalk.

Kaito slipped into sight, tucked his arm through his like a schoolgirl (it's different in Japan you don't have to worry about that) and said, "—thank you."

"Who was shooting at you?" Saguru switched to French, purring and smooth, chance of anyone understanding him here at 24%. "Kaito." When Kaito turned his head away. "You can't keep me in the dark. If I'm to help you—"

Silence. Baaya leaning too hard on the right, scanning the streets ahead on the GPS tracker. Saguru tugged his arm away from Kaito's, shrugged himself free of the niggling little rage that swelled in him, and opened the door for him.

"Young master," Baaya lifted her eyes, steel-gray, pin-sharp. "Nobody hurt?"

"Not this time, Baaya."

"Shall I tell your father?"

"No need to worry him. I can handle it." Slide into the front side seat, tilt his head back; sting of sun-hot leather and machinery, oil and baking dust, Baaya's powdery vanilla perfume (Guerlain
Shalimar) and inching cold; snow in the air like a scrap of metal on his tongue. "Home, please, Baaya. I have a lot of work to do." The Aston Martin jumped like a horse at the touch of her hand, and Kaito yipped in fear from behind him.

Saguru allowed himself one small, vicious curve of a smile.

"And step on it," he said. "Please."

Baaya's smile lost in the wrinkles around her mouth. "With pleasure, young master."

One hour trip shaved down to forty minutes. Kaito gripping the back seat with both hands, wild-haired and even wilder-eyed, scared for the first five minutes, and then bleeding into something feral and vicious and overjoyed to be flying down the streets. It did something funny to his heart (kicked heart rate up to light-jog-RPM) and to his stomach (nausea twist) and to his skin (sparking with cold), and when they tore around a corner on two-point-five wheels, Kaito laughed. Bright, like sunlight flashing off broken glass. It shredded his anger, left him laughing.

It lasted only until they cruised up to the house in Denenchofu, bruised black from the high trees around the house. Baaya parked in the driveway, and he could feel the gravity of the house settling back into his bones, heavy as rock, reminding him that he and Kaito are nowhere close to being friends, and if there was a chance of it, he won't want to now that he sees that Saguru Hakuba's noble lineage makes him a step above. Not –kun, not –san, -sama, horror of fucking horrors.

Saguru hopped out of the car, ankle-deep grass gentle on the soles of his shoes. Kaito followed, his mouth dropping open as he took in the house, curve-roofed and black-windowed, the half-mile of driveway and gravel, the gardens only a fraction smaller than Okuma Park. He saw the house the way Kaito saw it: too big, too gaudy, too fancy, too much like trying to show off their name in the best understated overstated way possible.

"It's—"

"You've seen it before," said Saguru, couldn't resist.

Kaito flashed him a look sharp at the corners. "I must have forgotten," he muttered, and resumed his staring. He gave the house a calculating, focused look.

"I have blue-prints in the foyer," said Saguru, sweetly, as they walked up the gravel driveway. "You're a few figures off."

"Ha! How can you tell?"

"There's a back wing."

Kaito sputtered something incomprehensible. "A back wing—Geez. How rich are you, anyway?"

"Not enough to have sense," said Saguru.

"I'm not rich," said Kaito, after deliberation, "I'm pretty sure I don't have sense either."

"Yes, well. You have an excuse."
"Did you just insult me? Haaa, how rude! Do you talk to all your guests that way?"

Baaya: "He hides upstairs in his room. We have no guests."

Uncomfortable swell of silence. Saguru laughed, split it like water. "I don't like company."

"Your parents don't have friends over?"

Another uncomfortable swell of silence. Saguru dug into his pocket for his keys. Baaya, waylaid by his neighbour's cat, a fat tabby who has made it its life goal to get into the koi fish pond without being outwitted by the fish. "My parents don't live here."

"Oh." Kaito had the grace to look embarrassed that he'd brought it up. "I'm sorry."

As a response, Saguru turned the key in the lock, and pawed the light-switch up.

The foyer looked like a museum piece showroom. He had vases and urns and scrolls hanging on the mahogany-wood walls. The panelling gleamed with original prints that his mother had selected and curated over a number of years. Tossing his coat on the lion-foot coat-rack, Saguru pulled out a pair of slippers for himself, and then dug into the cupboard for a plastic-wrapped pair for Kaito.

"Is that original?"

"Most of them are," without looking up.


Saguru held out the slippers. "It's really not as impressive as all that," he said, touched delicately on the subject of it. "My family is old. It's collected these things over a number of years. This house is more or less a museum dedicated to hoarding."

Another assessing look at the scroll above the wall, the painting hanging in the hallway just visible from their position. A jeweller's glance, fine-pointed and focused. Saguru wouldn't make a mockery of himself by pretending that Kaito wasn't trying to calculate net worth out of everything he had; it was something everyone he brought over did, tried to tie him down to money.

Saguru smacked him on the shoulder with the pair of wrapped slippers, and then padded off down the hallway, ears ringing with Kaito's outraged squeak of protest. Doors mushroomed in the darkness, branching off to rooms never opened, a combination of paper shoji-screens and ornate brick and woodwork.

"My mother couldn't quite decide what look she wanted for the house," he said, when he heard Kaito's footsteps come up behind him; overloud, comical, slapping against the polished hardwood. "She thought a mixture of both would be best. The furniture is all European – imported from France and from England. Well, most of it. I think there are a few pieces that were made in Japan."

"I don't really care about the furniture, you know," said Kaito, after a pause. "I mean – it's cool, and all. But I'm not going to steal anything."

"I wouldn't recommend it," said Saguru, lightly, "they're all quite heavy pieces to move. And I'm sorry. I suppose I've grown used to giving the tour whenever friends of father visit."

"Do they visit often?"

A shrug. Saguru petered into a narrow hallway, two steps lower, and pushed open a small door.
Gashes of wild blond sunlight falling on Persian rugs. Wall to wall bookshelves, French floor to ceiling windows on the north wall to let in the sunlight. Heavy fireplace, armchairs (Regency) and a carved mahogany stand on which—

Tension easing. Chirrupchirrup, and a batter of wings against his face as Watson flew from her perch and landed on the a thickened shoulder-pad. Nibbles at his hair. Smell of warmth and bird, nuzzle against his face.

"Oh," Kaito, soft-voiced with wonder. "Oh, how beautiful."

Saguru raised his hand, let her nub her beak against his thumb, his fingers. Kaito likes birds? And Of course – remember, magicians need the implicit trust of their doves for some of their tricks.

"This is Watson," said Saguru, awkward the way he'd never been taught to be. "She's, a – a Eurasian sparrowhawk. My uncle's idea of a joke. He, um – breeds them for hunting." Watson chirruped again, nibbled at his ear, bustling close to his jaw.

"Can I meet her?" said Kaito, and held out his hand—

"There are treats in the mini-fridge," said Saguru, "she likes blackberries. It's the—"

"I'll find them!" Kaito disappeared from his view, leaving him to sag in an armchair.

There were too many variables. He had three Kaitos to keep in mind: the friendly one, the one who dressed up as Kid, the one who looked at him like he was a stranger. The list of whoever had wanted to shoot him wasn't exhaustive, but he had no proof for any of them, no leads. His head felt like it was cracking open, about to split into reams and reams of words, gibberish words, that made no sense to anyone. Quiet sigh. Closed his eyes, letting the rattle of Watson's heartbeat in his ear calm him down, recreating the scene as Kaito idled in the background.

Crowded street. Sketchartist on the corner. Kaito, Nakamori, himself – looking at crime-scene. Who was on the right? Pack of students; note lots of bags—

Something not right. Saguru's brow creased. He was missing marks. Points.

Start over. Snow on the ground, crisp and fresh. Nakamori to his right. Kaito to his left, holding onto Aoko's arm. Crowd of students – out of the corner of his eye, behind Kaito? No, behind Nakamori, half a street away. Journalists on the sidewalk, jostling for their attention. Police-tape snapping in the breeze.

Then, gunshot. Mere movement of something black – a coat? – and then a shiny, silky-looking gun, and he'd moved to protect Kaito.

But he couldn't picture the split second before that. When he'd seen the gun, he'd moved, immediately, to avoid it, to get Kaito down. He'd not seen the face.

Footsteps.

Saguru cracked open an eye, lazy smile at Kaito. Held out his hand for a few of the berries.

"Nuh uh," cooed Kaito, "these are for Lady Watson --- get your own."

"It's my house," said Saguru, mild and injured, "and my bird."

Watson slapped him in the face with a wing, screamed loud and sharp in his ear. Saguru winced, let
his head fall back, watching Kaito's fingers, glossy with blackberry juice, hold up ripe fruit for Watson's beak. She took them from him delicately, carefully pinching the fruit, and – Kaito's wrist, bare and slim, flexed as he hid the next berry from her in his palm. Watson nibbling at his knuckles, spreading her wings, angry chirruping.

"We need to talk about what happened," said Saguru.

Kaito's face creased, but he said nothing.

"We can't pretend, any longer, that this isn't serious. We can't act like nobody's going to get hurt," quietly, Saguru reached for a berry, and fed it to Watson; felt the juice speckle his face as she took it from his fingers. "Kaito, today, if I hadn't been there—"

"I know." The snarl in Kaito's voice made him blink; he'd never heard him sound anything other than freakishly calm. "I know. It—Fucking. Fuck shit." Kaito squeezed his eyes shut, breathed in, took a second. When he opened his eyes again, he looked calm, soft again, gentle, except for the twitchy way his hands moved.

He flicked a packet of cards out of his sleeve, took to shuffling it.

Saguru took over the box of berries, and held it up to Watson. She'd make him a mess, but now that she had seen the entire container, she wouldn't stop until she figured out how to open the fridge for herself.

Over the sounds of her beak, plunging wet and full into the box: "Was this the first time?"

Kaito, retreating, Kaito distant. He sagged back on his haunches like he couldn't bear to hold himself up any longer, and that was probably true. If anything, now he was looking at Kaito pared down to the basics; Kaito without a plan or a mask, at his wit's end, no more plans. Back to the wall. Even his hair seemed to be drooping, which was a feat Saguru hadn't thought possible for hair, if he was entirely honest.

"No," said Kaito, aged twenty years in a second. "No. Not the first time." His hand went to his right shoulder, gripped it. The gakuran jacket, stiff as rain-specked cement, didn't so much as crinkle underneath his fingers. He was so young. He shouldn't be getting shot at. "I have been. Before, on a heist. And cut." He tilted his head a little, and his smile was Cheshire-cat faint, and just as mysterious. "But you remember that, don't you?"

"I try not to think about it," said Saguru, carefully. "It wasn't a pleasant evening."

Kaito laughed. "Yeah," he said, "not one of my top ten moments." He looked at the bird again, still munching through berries, and then clicked his tongue. "You're going to make her fat. Honestly. Don't you know how to take care of birds? Give it here."

Wordlessly, Saguru handed over the box, and muttered to Watson, "perch." And then: "don't think I don't know that you're trying to avoid me, Kaito. Unfortunately, it's a little late for that. I'm well and truly in it, now. If the gunman saw even a partial image of me, I'm not likely to be forgotten in a hurry. How many other nearly six-foot blond consulting detectives do you know in Tokyo?"

"Consulting detective?" said Kaito, and turned, and his mouth was twitched up at the corners. "Is that what you call yourself?" Voice dropping two octaves, fleck of upperclass London accent. "I'm a consulting detective. Only one in the world. I invented the job."

"Very charming," said Saguru, lips twitching, couldn't hold back the grin, "Though I'm not a fan of Cumberbatch's interpretation of Sherlock."
"You strike me more like a Brett fan," said Kaito. "The mannerisms. You mimic him, in everything but that—" he waved his hands, flicked his wrists, snapped his fingers.

Saguru refused to be charmed by sudden insights – accurate or not – to his character by a magician's brat with a double life. Even if it was charming to see him outside of school, outside of the edgy terrified context that he'd grown to accustom to Kaito. He cleared his throat, and sat up a little higher, said, "... you know, I'm in it now, as much as you are."

Kaito paused. And then said, "you have no idea what it's been like for me. You have no idea what it means to be in it." At the end, his voice broadened again, mimicked himself, like hearing his voice on a recording, only slightly sped up.

"I know you've lost about two kilos due to stress in the last three weeks," said Saguru, "you've slipped up so you're no longer first in class. You still play pranks on Aoko, but the stress is getting to you, and it's clear you're not enjoying it. You haven't been home in a while, you keep clothes in your locker, you take different ways home every day. You spend time in the library, researching, when you're supposed to be eating lunch, which ties back to the weight loss—"

"You'd make a great stalker," said Kaito, with frigid emphasis, "what's with the following me around?"

"If I'm not entirely accurate," said Saguru, "I'm at least close. Are you forgetting already that I'm not exactly as foreign to this life as you seem to imagine?"

At least he had the grace to look chastised. Kaito weakened, lowered his shoulders down. Watson, on her perch, silhouetted in sunlight. Outside, somewhere in the city, were Kaito's enemies. Kaito's problem. Kaito's bane.

"Why are you so interested in helping?" said Kaito, after a two second pause. "What is it for you, besides catching Kaitou Kid?"

"I get to help someone," said Saguru. "It's what I do, Kuroba. Even people like you, who are determined to make me grey before my time."

Kaito smiled. Not a true smile, it didn't quite reach his eyes. "... And you're not interested in all the fame and glory? Being the young detective to catch Kaitou Kid?"

"I get enough fame and glory being a rich bastard," said Saguru, "and I don't want to be that kind of policeman, Kuroba. I don't care about catching you. But you seem to need my help. And I can't turn my back on anyone who needs my help. It's not the way I was made. So please—" near begging, near pleading, he couldn't remember ever feeling quite as out of sorts as he did now, "please, let me help you. Let me help you stop this. I don't care what your end-game is. I don't care if you're planning on keeping this up for the rest of your life – which I'm fairly certain you aren't – but I do care about what's happening to you. The loss of appetite, the sleeplessness—"

"Now you're being creepy," said Kuroba, and sat down on the floor. Knees to his chest. Looking at the patterning on his Persian rug.

"Please," said Saguru, softer.

"... I'm not used to cops wanting to help me," said Kuroba, "and not getting anything in return. I can't—" He trailed off. "I just—I—"

"If I wanted you caught," said Saguru, quietly, "I would've given the tape from my security camera to Nakamori."
"Your what?"

"My house has a very advanced security system. It caught your face a few months ago when you bled all over my garden and the house, Kuroba."

Kaito's face pale as milk, mouth dropped open, stunned. Two months ago, he'd have given his right arm to see him shocked, to have seen any sort of emotion on Kaito's face, but now that the moment had come, it came without fanfare. He didn't feel anything more untoward than pity, that Kaito had assumed he'd been safe when he'd really never been safe.

"Rich people," said Kaito, his voice awed and perhaps a little bit disgusted. "A security system?"

"Normal houses have security systems," said Saguru, "it's just that mine is custom-made. My grandfather had it built, in his laboratory. The images are saved to a remote hard-drive, and they can be accessed from a control panel within the house itself."

Kaito was looking at him, not quite stunned, not quite awed, but something in the middle of all that – something like disbelief that there were people who spent money on security, and had the freedom to build custom systems.

"And you—"

"I deleted them," said Saguru. "There's one copy left. I can show you. I kept it so I could show you. I'll even show you where the cameras are."

"No," said Kaito, "I'll find them."
Chapter 3

Down the dark hallway, studded with paintings and glass cases of artefacts, things his mother saw at museums and private auctions, took from buyers with disreputable sources. Up the winding staircase, rickety as a galleon, the bannister smooth as silk beneath his hand, hot with sunlight. Kaito two steps behind him, staring at the walls, looking for the hidden cameras, refusing to look at him. Kaito and his scent – lavender chamomile talcum powder sweat grass – weaving a noose around him, pulling his attention back in fragments, his brain struggling to keep up with everything that was going on, and with Kaito's presence.

On the landing, turn to the right, another long corridor waiting. He pulled his fingertips along the wall, soothing himself with the cool, soft touch of wood and paint, and then pushed open the door to his bedroom. Neat and precise (borderline obsessive), walled with books. Heavy arm-chair in the corner, a fireplace cold and empty, a bed like one from the films (imported from Europe, and it had cost his mother a fortune). Books on the desk – *Hiding the Elephant, Among the Spirits* – and books on the bedside table – *Villain, Now You're One of Us* – and books on the bookshelves, crowded together, different languages regions different genres. Small door that led to the ensuite bathroom, a wardrobe pushed along one wall and thick with engravings.

"Well?"

"They're in the wooden panels," said Kaito. Glancing around, moving over to his desk, picking up a book and weighing it in his hand. "The walls have been recently redone and painted over. They're technology that hasn't been leased on the market – private, probably still being tested, very discreet. The kind of security system that's custom made, costs thousands, and usually only gets put into spy movies. Your grandfather is a scientist, isn't he?"

"One of them," said Saguru, sat down on his bed (creak of springs wood rustle of sheets whispering hiss of wood shifting underneath his bed), "very astute, Kaito. You're the first who's caught the false panelling."

Kaito grinned, all teeth. "You think you're the only smart one?" he said, innocence personified, sweetness and light and everything bright.

Saguru's smile flickered up from inside him, ached. He pushed it aside, rose and went to the laptop sleeping on his desk, opened up the screen. Humming, navigating binary code to find the feed of last night's security system, Kaito leaning over his shoulder (sugar chamomile sunlight dust) and—

Image flicker, grainy black and white feed. Kaitou Kid staggering down the hallway, bloody and half-dead, face turned up to the camera, hat and monocle gone. Kaito.

Kaito went stiff behind him, hadn't expected to see his own face (had he expected him to be bluffing?)

"I told you," said Saguru. Quiet. "I told you, I know. I know who you are, Kaito. And I—" *don't care don't want to know more want to help want to*—"I'd like to, ah—to help you. I'd like to see you happy. Get to stop this." Gestured at the screen, Kaitou Kid patchy black with blood, shudder of remembrance (so much fucking blood).

Kaito said nothing, stared at the reloop of himself staggering down the hallway, hat gone monocle gone, no mask, bleeding through the ragged hole in his side and just--
"You can delete this, if you like," said Saguru, and stood up, nudged the laptop towards him, "I'm sure you're clever enough to figure out how."

"Why?" Abrupt, sharp. "Why are you doing this? What do you get out of it? Your reputation will be ruined. You won't ever catch Kid if there's no Kid to catch – and if you're caught helping a criminal out, doesn't that mean you have to stop being a cop? It's breaking the law." Perplexed, Kaito chewing on his lower lip, fingers drumming on the bed.

"The law," said Saguru, "is not infallible, Kaito. And I happen to think that there's more than a little room for leeway, law-wise, if it turns out that the law might --- not be for the best."

"That doesn't make any sense," said Kaito, "you're a cop. You can't go around not being a – cop. It's unnatural. You're supposed to be all about justice and truth and—"

"What I am about," said Saguru, "is helping people. I don't care about the end result, Kaito. I don't care if I catch Kid or not – and quite frankly, I'm fairly certain it'll do my reputation good to have one criminal that outwits me. People don't like perfectionists, after all."

Kaito, guarded, looking at him as though he'd never seen a person like him. Kaito, with his sugary smile gone, haunted and hooded eyes. For a moment, Saguru considered he'd tell him to fuck off – tell him to go preach to some other choir. That he'd point out that there was no reason for him to trust him. That being half dead on his feet wasn't reason enough to risk—whoever he was trying to protect.

Then Kaito's shoulders drooped, and his mouth sagged, and he looked like he'd de-aged a handful of years in a breath. He moved over to the ridiculously overwrought four-poster bed, sank down onto the mattress (creak of springs, rustle of sheets) and then said, "how much do you know about Toichi Kuroba?"

"Your father?" Saguru scrolled back in his memory; then he stood up. "Let's go to the study. I keep all my files there."

"I'm sure you do," said Kaito, and didn't get up. Looked lost and small sitting there, as though he wasn't sure what to do with himself now that the truth was out, now that Saguru knew who was behind the mask – and he'd never looked less like Kid. In school, sometimes, Saguru thought that Kaito parsed too much of Kid's personality.

Now, he couldn't believe that the two of them were the same person. This boy who sat on his bed looked as though the last thing he wanted to do was move.

Rise up, economy of movement – elegant twist of his body to put him on the other side of the bed in the time Saguru took to blink. Hair a mess, a constant mess, falling over his forehead, into his eyes, shading his face from view. He took a step, then stopped, cocked his head, looked at the books on the dressing table.

"Magic books?"

"Know the enemy."

"Sun Tzu. More your style." Levity took another jolt of energy from Kaito. Even smiling looked like it took the effort, but he did so anyway, and then gestured to the door. "After you."

Down the hallway and to the right, down a second hallway, third door on the left. Hum of quiet machinery, more of his grandfather's toys whispering inside the walls, the cage alive with wires and sparks.
"The study hasn't been upgraded yet," said Saguru, "we'll have privacy. Nobody knows you're here besides Baaya, and she's—" hesitated, didn't know quite what to call her, "—she's mine. Reliable. Doesn't work for anyone else."

"Is she the only one who lives here?" Quiet, gentle, soft.

"I've only lived here myself for a year," said Saguru, "And my father has a full life in England. My mother, as well. I can't expect them to be here."

Kaito, side-eyeing him, wondering to himself, and have they ever been here? Have they ever been here? Have you always been alone? Is that why you're chasing me?

Saguru knew, after all, how the game was played. He knew the way his own tricks worked against him.

"I'm happy." Almost-truth. "What teenage boy wouldn't want this type of freedom?"

"Me," quietgentlealmostnotthere, "I'd rather have a family than adventure."

Pause. Pause.

Saguru pushed his fingers together, felt the slide of skin to skin somehow separate from him, as though it was being fed through his senses with a spoon. Didn't know how to answer that, what to say to make Kaito's mood brighten (was there anything?) and didn't know how to say it. Say nothing, then. Lean back in his chair – creak of wood – wait two seconds, three seconds, four seconds—

"My father died when I was little," said Kaito, sounding as though he still was. "I, ah-I was there. When it happened." Pause again, words like bits of glass.

His own father flickered in his mind, big broad-shouldered slightly overweight booming voice, saguru don't be silly it would be stupid not to use you you're so bloody smart—And so. Here. Now.

Sunlight dappling the window, coming in through the gap in the curtains. Open an inch, letting in a breeze.

Saguru said nothing, knew what was coming. Kaito hadn't started this conversation for the dust and ashes of it, had he? No. There was an explanation coming. Some—something. Maybe Kaito would try to justify it. Maybe he'd tell him—

"It was an accident," said Kaito. "That's what we believed. What I believed. One of his tricks—went wrong. He'd misjudged—something—and it had gotten him killed; he hadn't thought through what he was doing, and—" Stutterbreaknotearsonhisface.

Guiltily, Saguru thought of the articles he'd downloaded and highlighted and kept rubber-bound in his file on Toichi Kuroba (Magician Dies In Technical Accident, vulture photographers with a picture of the burned-out-wreckage and Tragic End to Magic Show, with a picture of the funeral procession and—)

Kaito shuddered in a breath, shuddered it out. Got himself under control: he could practically see the shutters come down over his eyes, the sudden sharp break between them. There was a barrier he hadn't crossed yet (likely never would).

"Anyway," cracked but stiff, "anyway. He died. I hated him, for a while. All I knew was that Dad had gone away, and wasn't coming back. And then I mourned him, when I was older." He
shrugged, fake-relaxed. "It passed. I grew up. And then one day---"

Pause again, hesitation now, his fingers knitting themselves together in knots as though he wasn't sure what to do with his hands. Fidgeting, then pulling out a pack of cards, flicking them open, sending them cascading through the air in a waterfall of rippling paper-plastic-colour. Geysering up. Then dripping down into his hands.

Saguru watched, knew it for the distraction it was.

Kaito fanned them out, snapped them back together, offered him the top one.

"We don't have to do this right now," said Saguru, gently plucking it from the top, hiding it in his collar. "You don't need to explain everything now."

Half a smile. Then, "... maybe." And then. "Do you know what's worse than your father dying?"

"What?"

"Having everyone think it's his own fault."

File on Toichi Kuroba in bottom left drawer. Seven articles, cause of death unanimous: *mechanical failure*. There wasn't anything left of Toichi Kuroba to salvage. The coffin, as far as Saguru knew, had either been empty, or stuffed with scraps, with whatever scarecrow pieces would've fit together to make a whole body.

Kaito pushed the pack of cards together, and turned them to coloured handkerchiefs – red, white, black. The Ace of Hearts flickered first, then twothreefourfive— "Because eventually," said Kaito, his voice dulled and tired, "eventually, you start to think – maybe everyone's right. Maybe he didn't really care about his family. Maybe he just wanted one last thrill before he retired. Maybe excitement was more important to him than we were."

"That hardly seems fair to your father," said Saguru delicately, not quite sure what to say; his expertise wasn't in comfort. Whenever he worked a case with the London Met, Detective Inspector Cunningham ended up telling him to shut his mouth and just look cute when the witnesses inevitably got teary-eyed. Saguru would have liked to say that he'd lost count of the number of people he'd inadvertently reduced to tears by trying to comfort them with statistics, but unfortunately he remembered the exact number. Two hundred and thirty-three.

Two hundred and thirty-four if one counted in the pensioner who later turned out to be the murderer.

Kaito's smile flickered a little. "... You've got a file on him, haven't you?" he said. "Can I see it?"

"I—ah—" First page: *Magician dies in Tragic Accident*. "Um—"

"I've read all the newspaper articles," said Kaito, and snapped his fingers, turned the handkerchiefs back into paper (sleight of hand, up into his sleeve?) and handed him the topmost one. A grinning KID. Joker. "There's nothing I'm going to read into it that's going to upset me. Besides. You said you'd help. If you're going to help, then you need to know—everything. And I need to know what you know. Make sense?"

"I suppose," said Saguru, "it's just – well, um. I wouldn't want to—bring up bad memories."

"There hasn't been any other kind," said Kaito, "for a long time. Show me."
Hesitation, half a second. Then, getting up, creak of the third step floorboard and over to the cabinet where he kept his files, organized alphabetically. Rifle through to the Ks (fingers brushing over paper ink cardboard butterfly-wing printouts) and pick through – Chikage Kuroba, Kaito Kuroba, Toichi Kuroba. The file thick and heavy in his hands, almost-bursting.

There was information in it that—

"How much do you know about your father?"

Kaito staring at the file, like a dog with a bone in front of his face. Something so hungry in his eyes that Saguru felt the answering ache of it in his chest.

"Not as much as I thought," said Kaito, and took a deep breath in, held it. Then held out both hands.

Saguru kept his hold. Regretted bringing it up, really, because there wasn't any subtle way for him to hide what he'd found out about Toichi – what he'd wished he'd hidden before Kaito had stumbled into his life, not forever, but just – so he wouldn't have to show his son these pages. So he wouldn't have to give him this fucking information.

Kaito wasn't smiling anymore. He'd never seen him not smile before, and the experience left an unpleasant taste in his mouth.

"Please," said Kaito, whispering. Pleading. Asking, and expecting the answer to be no – the way Kaito's eyes darted down to the file, then up to his face, then back down to the file, it broadcast that much. If he didn't give it to him, Saguru knew he'd take it. Knew it'd be clever, and subtle, and hard to detect.

Saguru gave him the file.

Kaito blinked, staring down at the file in his lap. He rose, paced over to the desk crowded with books (research magic crime novels) and pushed a thumbed-through Stuart Macbride aside, toppled over half a dozen pages of criminal statistic reports onto the floor. Didn't notice the shush-shush of pages hitting the ground, whispering along the wood.

The thump of the file on the desk made Saguru jump.

The room shrank around him. Two years ago, he'd had a case like this: a missing person, father of two, happily married, disappeared one day after being witnessed bundled into a car. Unsolved cold case. His father losing sleep over it, pulling him awake, 2AM spot-light patterns on fuzzy security-camera footage and eyewitness reports blurring on the back of his eyelids by 4AM, too much coffee and his teacher writing home to complain that he was falling asleep in class. But he'd found the man, eventually – happily married to a younger woman, two children. He'd walked out on his first family for a second. Staged the kidnapping himself. Cost the police thousands in a fucking—

wild goose chase for nothing.

Had Toichi Kuroba done something similar?

Saguru moved to the desk. Kaito, head bent, three pages into his file, unflinching rigidity in his shoulders.

"He had a whole life I never knew about," said Kaito, clearing his throat. "How did you—uh." Gesturing at the page, Toichi's entire life history spelled out in a handful of characters.
"He wasn't on the family register," said Saguru. "'Kuroba' isn't exactly a—prolific name. There were only a handful of Kurobas that I could find."

"Mom's family," said Kaito. "They, ah – don't talk to her, either. So dad's--"

"Probably immigrated to Japan," said Saguru. "I suspect it was Vietnam."

Kaito with his head tilted to one side. Sunlight on his neck, highlighting a vicious bruise – fingertips?

"My dad's partner," he said, "his magic assistant—"

"Konosuke Jii."

"Yeah. He'd know. I can ask him."

**His background isn't relevant to the case,** thought Saguru, opened his mouth to say so—("Lad," Inspector Cunningham exhausted dripping out of his suit, "lad, would you rather let them go on believing their dad is dead?"), "of course. That'll be helpful."

"No," said Kaito, flicked him a smile without spirit in it, "it won't. But I'll ask him anyway. So – came to Japan. And this – I knew about this." Rustling of paper. "The Hopper show. He would've been—"

"Twenty two. And then he lived in England for a time. Ironically, they coincide with quite a few unsolved cases – jewel robberies mostly, though someone did make off with quite a number of valuable paintings, as well and a jewelled dagger."

"Once a thief," Kaito intoned, put the piece of paper aside and flicked to the next page: five long-distance shots, all men, sleeved with tattoos, low hats, all black. Kaito staring, stiffening in his seat, his fingertips brushing over the face of the closest one—"Wha—" Whatever he'd been about to say stopped halfway, new words replacing old, "... Who are these people?"

Saguru bit his lip, not to ask him what he'd been about to say. "... Yakuza." Reached over, fanned the photographs out in a waterfall: identical narrow faces, identical black eyes and cruel smiles, sleeved with tattoos, expensive suits gaping around bulky muscle, and in the middle of them, like a crow in a field of jackals, Toichi Kuroba.

The resemblance to Kaito – unmistakeable. Same fox jaw, same wild (subdued, in the picture) hair, same constantly-smiling-bloody-pain-in-the-arse smirk. Same way of holding himself.

Kaito, staring at the picture. Frozen for seconds now, too long. "My dad was a **thug**?"

Say nothing. So he didn't. Firmed his mouth shut together, and then reached over, cleared the photographs into a pile. "Would you like some tea?"

Whip around, staring at him, instead. "**Tea?** You tell me—no, you show me that my dad was a criminal, and your only contribution is to ask if I want tea?"

"You knew your father was a criminal," Had he?

"A thief. Not a goddamned—" Waved a hand at the pictures, then brought that same hand to his face, pinched the bridge of his nose. "He was in the **yakuza**?"

"By all accounts," said Saguru, "not willingly."
Kaito lowered his hands, gave him a withering look. "Thank you," he said, "that makes it much better."

Maybe Inspector Cunningham had been correct when he'd told him that he should never talk to anyone, lad, just stand there, look pretty, and memorize everything you hear.

"A thug," Kaito's breath whispered out of him in one swoop, "my dad was a criminal."

Saguru hesitated, then sat next to him. "...He ran their casinos for them. Counted cards. Made a nuisance of himself, but—" A shrug. "—Nothing more than that. And as far as I can piece together, he paid his way out when he met your mother. He wasn't a criminal, not the man you knew. It was just another piece of dead history, by that point."

"That's an oxymoron. History is never dead." Quirk of the lips, all at once too-old and too-cutting, "I should know."

Silence. Saguru twisted his fingers around the hem of his shirt, pleated it. Onetwothreefour small stitches underneath his fingers. Kaito staring at the pictures, shutters over his face, expression cut off from—everything, everyone. He couldn't read him. Had never been able to read Kaito, not in so many words, but this was—more than that. Whatever was going through is mind—whatever mad and crazed idea had taken root—Saguru could no more guess at it than he could accurately predict the future (50.3% was not accurate).

"A thug," said Kaito, fourth time, and with some eerie calm in his voice. "Okay. What else?"

No room to argue against that tone of voice. He'd lapsed into KID mannerisms—his hands playing at the air as though he had cards (was that a Kaito mannerism?), steady and still voice, slightly higher-pitched, but lower than Kaito's own voice, sharp edge to his words, cutting way of angling his head to catch the light. Cold, sweet boy, Aoko Nakamori, and he could see where she'd gotten it now: any colder, and his gaze would freeze air molecules.

Take a deep breath, focus on the task at hand (never difficult, don't start now), and—"As far as I can tell, Toichi Kuroba was—quite young when he joined the Yakuza. I don't think it was willing—there are no records, but given what I know of crime syndicates..." prostitute torture threats your father was clever but he couldn't have out-fought an entire organisation move on Saguru don't dwell, "...at any rate, he worked his way up through the ranks until he was running their casinos—as an enforcer. Apparently, he had an exceptional talent for spotting cheaters, and—creative ways of deterring them."

Kaito saying nothing else, swapping the empty air for the photographs, ruffling through them like he was about to ask him to pick a photo, any photo.

"---He started thieving about two years afterwards. His first heist was a black pearl—the largest known in Asia—nicked from a museum in Osaka."

"This one?" said Kaito, held up a newspaper clipping, JEWEL HEIST AT PREMIERE HISTORY MUSEUM. "Doesn't look like KID."

"That's because it wasn't," said Saguru, "near as I can tell, the KID persona came in later—when your father had, ah—something to prove. This was—"

"Refining," said Kaito, nodded his head.
He waited for him to go on. There was something, it said in the tilt of his head, that he wanted to explain.

"No magician," said Kaito, "ever goes in front of an audience without having planned what he's going to do before. He needs to know how to pull every act off blindfolded, needs to know how to deal with it if something comes up – doesn't surprise me that Dad worked like that."

_No performer should attempt to bite off red-hot iron unless he has a good set of teeth_, Houdini (six years old on uncle Blake's knee watching a magician pulling a ribbon-string of handkerchiefs out from topmost pocket). "I can think of a few similarities between you and him," said Saguru, fingers hooking into each other, watching Kaito's hands, the flickering cards.

Kaito smiled, blade-thin. Said nothing, but something flickered in his face, like a memory pulled back from the brink. Silence, cream-thick, choking, _say something don't just let him stare at you waiting for answers._

"In any case," said Saguru, pushed the file he had, "this is all I have on him. Oh, no doubt there's more to find out, but – I admit I only focused on the parts that seemed—"

"Pertinent," said Kaito, "so the criminal parts." The cards in his hands flexed together, then disappeared up a sleeve. Deep breath, bracing fingers on the table, then reaching for it. "Can I—"

"Of course. I'll, ah—I have some filing to do, anyway. Please do take your time with it." He rose, creaking chair, floorboards cracking underneath his movement, _the old house six seconds away from falling down around him_, "---Kuroba-san?"

"Kaito," said Kaito, without glancing up; flushing red. "I know it's forward. But if we're going to be working together---"

Tip of the head, acknowledgement. "Kaito," said Saguru, and his name felt strange on his tongue (though he'd said it a hundred times alone angry happy sad grumpy, it was—different being _allowed_ to say it), "I don't think you should go home tonight."

"You think they're—watching my house? Waiting for me to leave here?" Ice-calm, white-knuckled grip on the file.

"If it were me," said Saguru, "and I knew you lived alone, I would find a way to get to you. It doesn't even need to be very difficult. A slip of something in your food. Slashed wrists. A typed suicide note—it's easy to make murder look like suicide." (_London 2012 scent of rotten food blood vomit five litres of blood could fill an average bathtub one quarter full and the rest was water milky white splashed on the tiles i've had enough it hurts too much_) "And given that they – tried to kill you in _far more direct means_ tells me that they're hardly going to bother making it look outright tragic. You're a liability."

Kaito flinched. "Heh. Sounds different when you put it like that," he said tiredly, pinched the bridge of his nose. "... Kaasan's away in France, trying to—Dad had property there. She's been trying to get his things, but they won't – anyway. She's not in Japan. Do you think they might—"

"No," said Saguru, couldn't tell, "but I, ah – I don't know who _they_ are, Kaito. This is just --- based on what happened this afternoon. I couldn't possibly—I could be _wrong._"

At that, a grin. Almost genuine. "You can be wrong?" said Kaito. "I wonder if I'll live to see it."

It wasn't funny.
"Well," said Saguru, tried to make it seem as though it was, "I'll promise you, I'll do my utmost to satisfy your curiosity. So, shall I show you to a guest room?"

"What the hell," flippant careless clutching the file close to his chest scraping noise as the chair inched back over the carpet. "Do I get a tour, too?"

"Wouldn't you rather explore on your own?"

"Arara, it's rude to wander around someone else's house uninvited."

Out the door in the hallway half a second glance at the camera in the panelling, must remember to delete tonight's footage—no too obvious maybe leave it and then explain later say we're working on a project together, "it's not like you haven't been here before."

"I don't remember a lot from my last visit," said Kaito, half a step behind him.

Down the hallway and to the right, into the west wing where the guest bedrooms where, trying to remember which one had the cleanest sheets the best view the best access to the other rooms in case of danger.

"Unsurprising," said Saguru, "you'd been through a lot." Doors warm underneath his palm, shoji-screen paper soft with sunlight. He drew back one, showed Kaito the room: Japanese flooring and European furniture, shoji-screens and ruffled lace curtains, a shamisen ancient with the years next to a gramophone. "Would this do? There are other rooms, ah—if you'd like to—pick a better one--"

Kaito pausing, flicker of amusement on his face that all but screamed, you don't get many guests do you, "this is fine," he said, gestured at the double-wide wardrobe, carved grapes in the mahogany, "—but I'll need to go home during the day," he said, "we have rabbits, and doves, to feed. And to socialize. I can't just – leave them there, all alone."

"You could bring them here," said Saguru, "Watson's well-trained. There's rooms we can clear out for them, make safe—" And Kaito was staring at him, did I say too much, "—ah, but it's—entirely up to you, of course. I'll let you get settled in. Do let me know if you need anything." Turn and make for the door, face burning, what did I say wrong?

"Saguru?"

Not Hakuba. Still flushed with warmth to hear it, to hear Kaito telling him, saying his name like that.

"Yes, Kaito?"

Shift of footsteps, floorboards. "I do remember something, from my, ah – my first visit here." Pause. "You came back, when I asked you to."

Bare bright red face, and Saguru didn't know how his tongue was tangled around so many words, and none of them seemed good enough, "ah—"

"Thank you," quietgentlesoft. "I don't—" Stutter to a halt.

What where you going to say? Saguru wanted to turn, look at him, coax him to speak – ask him, please, to say whatever he'd been about to say before Saguru had interrupted him, before he'd thought better of it. The urge to know was an ache inside him, throbbing like a separate heartbeat; the little softly-softly-there-it-goes feelings in Kaito's voice dragging at him like the sound of water to someone parched.
He could demand. Maybe even insist. Ask him, what were you going to say? Because it was – it felt as though he'd been about to admit that he was Kaitou Kid. To say what he'd never told anyone, and Saguru knew he'd never told anyone, because that wasn't the way Kaito worked. He wouldn't want anyone to carry his burden for him.

He could insist now. Guilt him into it.

But then – that sweetness, the soft warmth of his words. It would ruin it.

"You're welcome," he said, just as gentle as Kaito had thanked him, and left the room before he did something stupid.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Sorry this took so long! My life was a bit of a mess for a while, and I was working on another novel, but hopefully things have settled now!

Wide awake at 2:43AM and alone with his thoughts.

Five days since Kaito Kuroba had moved into his house. Ghost-quiet, like he'd never had anyone there to begin with. Only appearing at dinner time, when Baaya had left for the night, or at night, when Kaito imagined he'd be sleeping – Saguru didn't have the heart to tell him that he could hear every creak of the floorboards, knew by sound alone where he was at all times and how he'd gotten there. It was too creepy, it was too—much like loneliness. And he didn't want Kaito to see that, underneath the shell of who he was, there was nothing beating there.

Just binary-code orderliness and nothing else.

Words buzzing on his laptop screen – a murder in Osaka. *Detective consultant Heiji Hattori*—and the rest was mist.

He couldn't stop thinking about Kaito, six steps away from his room, trying to doze and not managing. What did he think of when the shadows grew too long, and daylight was a dream?

Saguru shifted himself away from his desk, cleared his throat. He palmed his hands over his eyes, rubbed deep at the grit in them; colours popping on his eyelids, the back of his throat rough with lack of water. Watson's dozing chirrups as she hid her head underneath her wing, chirrupchirrupchirrup.

A creak of footsteps outside his door. Twothreefour seconds.

Waited for Kaito to pop his head around the door, already going over what he'd tell him first (*couldn't sleep me too want to sit here and watch--*)

Door still and silent.

Perhaps he'd heard wrong.

Quiet pressure, his head like glass. Saguru clicked open a new tab, hesitated, and then closed it, and moved to his installed HOLMES application. He hadn't been able to find crimes connected to Toichi Kuroba in London, but there had to be. A world-famous magician didn't just steal from a set amount of places. And Kaito had mentioned that he'd had an—

Cr-eeaaak.

Too heavy to be Kaito.

His body shocked cold all over. He turned to glance at the door (childlike panic and terror, *oh God there's something in my house please hurry*) could he afford to call the police? *How are you going to explain Kaito, the closest police station is 10.5km away it'll take them too long get here you*
have no proof that there is someone in your house—

Rise like a ghost, reach underneath his bed. The extendable baton, heavy as an iron pole, smooth as marble. One hand clicking over to his laptop, shifting from HOLMES to his home-security feed. Camera one, empty dining room; camera 2, empty living room; camera 3, empty library---

Camera 4, movement.

Camera 5, Kaito's room, and the thief asleep.

Camera 6, hallway outside Kaito's room, movement. Shifting of shadows. Another distant creak—closer, now, he could hear it.

Someone's in my house, cold fear streaked through and through, someone's after Kaito, half a second after it, and a flicker of anger chasing the kernel of terror. He cut the lights in his room, and crept towards the door. Mobile phone in hand, emergency on speed-dial, split-second thought and —

"Emergency, how may I help?"

"Someone's in my house," whispered, "5, 3 Chrome, Denenchofu, Ota-ku. Please hurry."

Clicking of buttons and repetition of his own words, moving out into the hallway, blistering silence. Darkness pressing down on him on all sides, stifling deep: to the right, the hallway that led to the guest bedrooms, to his left the hallway that led to the front of the house music room storage Kaito's room. Avoid the sixth step, the floorboard creak.

This is insane, he thought, and ahead of him, heard creaking. The hiss of a door opening.

Thought of Kaito in bed asleep vulnerable and—

First step throbbing like a jackhammer in his head, loud enough to wake the spirits of the old place even if nothing happened. Second step like peeling gum away from the wall, and after that, it was easier, to step forward and forward and forward and not think about how crazy it was that he, Saguru Hakuba, was marching down the hallway in his own house, towards God knew what because—because. Because what else was he going to do? Serve and protect.

Small, muffled noise up ahead, like a shriek, but softer. Watson quietly ghosting along the walls, following him.

Saguru crept down the hallway took the next right passed by the music room and the first storage area. Kaito's door stood open.

His heart dipped down into his stomach. Please no, no, no, not here—Forward, quicker, skipping the fourth ninth tenth steps because they creaked, and sliding past the shoji-screen door, glancing around, Kaito nowhere to be seen but someone someone stood in the shadows looking over the flattened futon and—

Whipping around all of a sudden seeing him finding him in the darkness, and he could see nothing but a deadly glimmer of night-vision eyes.

Everything happened much too quickly.

Lunge of assailant, stagger back and slam into the shoji-screen door, raise the baton and bring it crack down on a limb, muffled crying. Hands around his throat and (within five steps you have the
advantage fight like the devil to get loose, Jack urged, arm around his neck his voice in his ear, fourteen years old and fighting) Saguru jerked his other arm up and ploughed a fist into a jaw heard a muffled curse. Pressure loosened and breath gone, and then—

Hissing as sharp-edge cards spun inches away from his face. Kaito dancing in the moonlight, wild-eyed and rabid with fear, his bladed card gun shaking in his hand. The assailant twisted around, snarling like an animal, and Saguru went with him, bringing up the baton and crack down on the other arm crack on a shoulder hitting and hitting and hitting and—rage and terror a knot inside him, his hand shaking on the baton and his head full of roaring blood, lights spilling in through the windows as cars shot up to the drive way (much quicker than he'd anticipated). The assailant twisting back to face him click and he had a knife six inches long and gleaming like a smile.

"Get out of the way," guttural Japanese like a rasp of broken glass and tire-crushed gravel, "or I gut you."

Stop in front of the shoji-screen door, listening to the police ram and they were inside. He couldn't read his face. He couldn't read his face.

"Sa—Saguru move," Kaito's voice, small and soft, "Saguru move, please, move—"

A step forward, and Saguru staggered back, spoke too quickly, "listen — no, listen to me, you'll never make it out of here. I'm not moving, and my friend—my friend isn't either. Your best choice is to go quietly, go without hurting us." Flick of eyes towards the door, towards Kaito, and Saguru swallowed, his words shook, "please—please, whoever sent you, they didn't—tell you who you were dealing with, did they?"

Shift of body-language from aggression to confusion.

"I'm rich. I'm Hakuba – that Hakuba," said Saguru, lapsing into the role: baby boy prince detective, more money than the entire prefecture, ice on the outside, ice on the inside, "do you really think, if you – if you hurt me, you'll ever scrape yourself out of prison? You've been, haven't you?" Twitch of the shoulder, yes or no, couldn't tell, press on don't think talk your way out of this, "maybe it was a mistake, the first time. A bar fight gone wrong, something that wasn't your fault – but I guarantee, if you run me through, you'll never see daylight again. Get caught for breaking and entering, you'll get a few months, maybe not even that, with a good lawyer. And I can help you get a good lawyer."

Over his shoulder, meet Kaito's eyes, wide-eyed, terrified.

Hesitation, only a bit, but fear overpowered it. Step forward and Saguru could feel the blade edging through his clothes a spittle of blood running down his side. His eyes, behind the mask, looked inhuman, bug-bright. He couldn't read him, he couldn't read him, we're going to die here I'm sorry I tried to save you I'm sorry--

"Do you really want to have a murder on your conscience?" softer still, near begging, "do you really want to kill me?" Urgent, insistent. "Please. Please, listen to me. Don't—don't do this step. Don't ruin your life."

Wavering half-second pause and, "I have to," the longest thing he'd said so far, and the knife rankled like a live thing, pulled back up, point out—

"Please," begging, no shame in it, "please, please, don't do this, please—I can help you, I can get you preferential treatment, please, just—just--"

And there it was again: a waiver, a moment where he totted up what was going to happen, and
found it wanting. The knife lowered, slowly.

"What do you mean?" Behind the mask his eyes shone like twin candles. "How can you help?"

"Whatever reason you're doing this," said Saguru, "it's probably not going to be enough when the police come in and take you. I have a good security system, they're downstairs right now, you'll either go out bleeding or handcuffed and beaten, and then—then there'll be the charges. My father'll want—the highest justice—" out of the corner of his eye watching Kaito sneak to the window peer out drop down out of sight and he let his tangled breath uncoil from inside him, focus focus focus—

"I can cut you some sort of deal," he said, "keep you from— from being forgotten in some— cell in prison, keep you from being prosecuted as harshly. And whatever reason you're doing this—" money or fear there is no stronger emotion recently released prisoner "—I'll match."

Bark of a laugh, halfway verged on tears. "You think it's that easy?" he asked, this nameless former prisoner with the knife and the candlelight eyes, point of metal buried into his shoulder where a stinging hot heat spread. "—the people I owe, they're not going to be scared off by a brat like you."

In the distance, Kaito's scuffling footsteps, Nakamori's bellowed 'What?' and sudden herd-instinct rush towards the stairs—

"I think you'll find," soft and careful, "I am far more impressive than you give me credit for." Cousin Jack's lessons flashed through his head: **within five paces you have the upper hand bring your fingers up and jam them into his eyes ram your knee into his stomach and when he's distracted take the knife**—He shifted ballet-smooth, caught a hint of knowingness in the other man's eyes—

"They killed Toichi Kuroba," said the man, "and they can kill me, too."

And then surged forward, knocking his forehead against his nose, feeling the knife skitter across his pulse like a kiss, bite deep and then not at all. Footsteps racing up the stairs and Nakamori's bellowing voice, the man staggering back with a hand to his nose as Saguru wrenched one of the hideous idols from its stand, and brought it down hard on his jaw.

Twitch of the right, and he followed, blocking the knife with the idol, and then jabbing it point first into his throat, leaving him gasping, the crack of the blow singing up his arm. Door bursting inwards, and Nakamori and three other policemen blurring in, on him like a pack of wolves on a lump of meat chaos of footsteps and shouting—

A cool small hand touched his, took the wrenched statue, and then led him away to quiet.

2:55AM. Kaito bustling around the kitchen footstep by footstep cabinets opening and closing kettle shrieking Watson on his shoulder with her beak buried in a packet of crumbling biscuits and attempting to feed him by force. Ten minutes. Everything they'd done had taken ten minutes, ten minutes of breathing, ten minutes of movement, ten minutes of utter shaking terror. His hands couldn't grip around the cup of water Kaito poured him.

Watson mashed biscuits against his face, making clicking noises as he failed to eat. Worried noises.

Nakamori upstairs with the criminal in the car outside, inventory of what was stolen.
A shift of old wood. Kaito put down a mug of tea. His hands shook, too.

Somehow, that was comforting, and terrifying, all at once. I'm supposed to be strong. I'm supposed to be the one protecting him.

"How's the shoulder?" Kaito sagged into a chair next to him.

"A twinge," said Saguru, "nothing more." Rasp of fabric on bandages as he moved his arm; he'd changed out of his pyjamas to an undershirt he used for boxing, and now it was bandaged clean. A spot of blood dotted the gauze. The cut, deeper than expected, burned like a lit match, but it could've been worse. Another inch or so, he'd have severed the nerve. Taken away the use of his left arm.

"And the forehead?"

Saguru smiled, and glanced at him. "I've had worse playing rugby with my cousin."

Kaito laughed, soft and hitched. "... You're full of surprises," he said. "Rugby and hand-to-hand? What else can you do?"

"Fence," he said, "play the piano. Play the violin. Trip over my own two feet when I dance. And make the perfect cup of tea." He indicated the mug across from him, "though I'm sure this is—"

"20ml of milk, and one teaspoon of brown sugar," said Kaito, folding his arms onto the table. He raised his brows. "You know how I take tea?"

"You're not the only one who watches and waits," said Kaito.

"How flattering. And disconcerting." Flattering or disconcerting, which emotion stronger? After a minute, Saguru decided that it didn't matter—what mattered now was that they were both fine. Alive. Safe. After everything that had happened, anything less than that would have been— "I'm sure it's fine," he said, "I don't doubt your ability whatsoever."

"It would probably sound better if you were drinking it as you said that," observed Kaito. His words stretched; they dipped from edge to edge, half-asleep; that would be the after-effect of shock, the slurring, the shaking, the way Kaito huddled into his seat as though he was cold, and Saguru remembered, this wasn't the first time, but maybe it had never been this close before, people had never tried to kill him when he was sleeping.

He reached over, hesitated.

Laid his hand over where Kaito's jittered, on the table, tapping out the Fibonacci sequence.

Kaito started, looked down at their hands, then looked up at him. Shadows swam on either side of his face, making his eyes huge, his skin bleached of colour and light. Add stubble and debonair twist to the side, and he'd look like the picture of Toichi Kuroba that he had ensconced upstairs in 'Kuroba, T', under 'Kaitou Kid' in his filing cabinet.

One.

Kaito's fingers shifted under his.

Two.

He could taste his own heartbeat in his tongue: poundpoundpound 140bmp.
Three.
"I—" started Kaito.

Four.

Nakamori's voice cut through the silence: "Eee! Brat! Where are you?"

Five. Six. Seven.

Saguru drew his hand gently away from Kaito. "In here!" he called, and gathered up his mug in both hands. His face, he noticed, two seconds too late, felt hot.

And he wished Nakamori had spoken a few minutes later.

Kaito withdrew into his shell. The mask clicked back into place: perfect poker-face quiet, card-shuffling (from his left slipper), card-tricking, flipping the ace of hearts up into the air, and letting it land face down on the table. Making shapes out of shapes. Distracting himself.

From what? And then Nakamori came in, and Saguru turned to look at him.

Nakamori looked terrible, stressed, two kilos lighter, suit not fitting him as well as it had at the start. Held a chewed pencil in one hand, a riffled-through notebook in the other, bags underneath his eyes. Blue pyjama shirt patterned with parrots underneath his trench-coat. Badge pinned to the top pocket.

"I made you tea, Inspector Nakamori," said Kaito, and bounced out of his seat. He'd begun to build a house of cards; the first row wobbled on the table, imprecariously balanced on two cards, but not falling.

"Eeh? Thank you, Kaito," said Inspector Nakamori, sat down heavily in one of the antique chairs. Resisted the urge to yawn. "We're keeping him at the station until the hearing. I have to take your statement."

"Of course," said Saguru, knew how this played out, hadn't anticipated the shaking uneasiness in his stomach. He took a sip of his tea to steady it, let it melt hot and milky on his tongue, "of course. Anything. Has he—has he said why he—"

"He hasn't said anything," said Nakamori. Doodling something in the margin of his journal, absently, a KID insignia. Keeping himself awake.

"He's obvious, I think. Robbery. This house has – a lot of important things in it."

"Maybe he's KID," suggested Nakamori, moving on from doodling to circles, "maybe this is what KID does before a heist notice. He didn't expect you to catch him. He was surprised."

Kaito to his right building his house of cards the two of spades piled atop a lopsided jack of diamonds, "Kind of far-fetched, isn't it?" he said, "no jewels in the house. Doesn't KID only go after jewels?"

"He does have the brain of a magpie," said Saguru, "I don't think anything historical would hold KID's attention. But maybe he works with KID. It wouldn't be remiss to talk to him..."

Nakamori sighed. "Well," he said, "if anyone can get him to say anything, you can probably do it."
Sudden flush of warmth, pleasantly quick. "Um—thank you."

Kaito quiet to his right Watson finally giving up in disgust and moving off his shoulder to dip her beak in his tea making bubbles; Kaito scooping her up and taking her to the other room, squawksqueak of protest as the door snicked quietly shut.

The wire-tension in his shoulders melted, and Saguru sagged forward, closed his eyes.

"That was a brave and stupid thing you did," said Nakamori. "Going after him yourself."

"If I hadn't," said Saguru, "Kaito wouldn't be in the library, making a mess of my house."

Thirteen seconds of considering this: a man breaking into his house, killing Kaito, killing him, Nakamori stumbling upon the bodies early in the morning when he came to talk about the KID cases. Nakamori repressed a shudder; Saguru pushed his tea aside, and then stood up, padding to the liquor cabinet, took out a bottle of whiskey (Suntory Yamazaki Single-Malt, aged 25 years).

"You're not supposed to drink," said Nakamori, and let him top up his tea with it. "I'm not supposed to drink."

"It's legal in England," said Saguru, poured a finger's width for himself.

Sit there in silence, contemplate what just happened Nakamori's leg bouncing on the hardwood floor his knee driving into the top of the table the shushshushshush of pages ruffling as he went through his notes. Nakamori's voice hoarse with fatigue, asking him questions he'd asked other people himself.

"What time did you notice something was wrong?"

"2:45:22AM. I never went to bed, so I was up working."

"What did you hear?"

"I heard someone moving in my house."

"Why did you think it was an intruder?"

"I checked the security system first."

And on, and on.

"When you confronted him, what happened?"

He tried to kill me and Kaito. "He attacked. I fought and won."

"He didn't say anything?"

I have to.

The people are owe aren't going to be scared by you, brat.

They killed Toichi Kuroba. They can kill me too.

"No," said Saguru, "nothing at all."
3:15:00AM. In his own bedroom, in his own bed, too wide-awake to sleep. Blood buzzing with adrenaline, head sluggish from the whiskey. It felt like being caught in a slowing wind-turbine; images flashing in front of his head.

So they had sent him.

Knock. "Saguru?"

"I'm awake."

Creak of the door, Kaito padding into the room. Wild hair sunken eyes half-awake half-asleep ghostly pale. "I can't sleep."

Saguru sat up, patted his bed. As an afterthought, pulled the sheets higher up; he'd stripped naked from the waist up to avoid the undershirt tangling around him.

Kaito padded into the room, hopped up on the bed, squeal of wood and squelch of mattress, silence, so much silence, radio going downstairs from the police officer let to guard the house inside. Lights from the police officer standing outside his house. Lights from Baaya's room as she paced and paced and tried to call Jack.

Lights everywhere, and not a single goddamned clue of what was going on.

"That man," said Kaito, sagged back on the other side of the bed, "he knew my father. Didn't he?"

"Or heard of him. Or knew enough of him." Hard to think hard to focus hard to do anything. He raised his hand, pushed back his hair, huffed out a breath. "...He knows who's chasing you, at least. Knows what they want. My worry is that they—" whoever the fuck they are "—know too."

Pause, and, "...I don't think they do," Kaito, fiddling with the sheets, then flattening himself down, rolling closer, "---I don't think they know who you are. Maybe he was there, that day, but if they knew where you were—wouldn't they have sent in more than just him?"

It made sense.

Or maybe it didn't, and he just couldn't tell anymore.

"Think about it," Kaito, soft-voiced, "they can't afford to mess this up. I don't think they know where we are."

"It won't take them long to find out," said Saguru. Felt he was being reasonable, rational: how many almost six foot blonde consulting detectives are there in Tokyo? One.

"It's a start," said Kaito. "It's something."

A pause, and Saguru nodded. "You're right," he said. "I just—" I'm tired it hurts I'm scared I don't know what else to do--

"I know."

Shift of mattress springs as he sank down onto the bed, arm beneath his skull, staring up at the ceiling, not looking at Kaito because then he'd see how there was only a scant amount of distance between them. How that little bit of distance was playing havoc with his heart-rate, kicking it up, sending it running, leaving him far more scattered than that whiskey had left him.

"Tomorrow," said Kaito, "we should go and talk to him. Find out what he knows."
"See how much he knows," said Saguru, "it's a good idea. I'll go after school."

"What, and leave me all alone in this mansion?" Kaito shook his head; squeaksqueak of springs, and his face loomed into view above him. "Besides. How are you going to get in and out without anyone seeing you and without anyone knowing what you're talking about? The room has a security camera, and there's a man looking at the footage almost all the time. You need a helper."

Saguru raised a brow, didn't ask how Kaito knew so much.

"I'll go in," murmured Kaito, low-voiced, quiet, "distract the man at the desk. You talk to the guy. Ask him everything he knows. And then come back out."

"What about the tape?"

"Don't worry about that. I can take care of that. You just focus on talking to him."

Saguru huffed a laugh. Closed his eyes. "I can't believe I'm letting you talk me into this," he said, "I'm supposed to be a good influence."

"You're a good person," said Kaito, "I think that's better than being a good influence. Who wants to be a good influence? People follow leaders because they lead by example."

Another flush of warmth, decidedly more than when Nakamori had spoken. He turned onto his side, faced that five inch gap between them: Kaito, at home in his bed, in his bed, arm tucked underneath him, another twisting the hem of his shirt, blue eyes closed. He smelled of chamomile and coconut and sunlit grass, clean and boyish, and mouth-wateringly simple.

"You," decided Saguru, "are talking absolute bollocks."

Kaito laughed, gently. "You know what I noticed?" said Kaito, "when you were talking to him? You didn't lie. People—they lie. When they're scared. People lie all the time, because it's—I don't know, human nature. Even magicians lie. They lie to prove to others that there's magic, that it's real, to convince them to look somewhere else while the trick happens. But you—you didn't lie. You meant it, didn't you?"

Too close, Kaito looking at him, his whole world was paper skin and jewel eyes.

"You meant it," said Kaito, his voice like silk and gossamer, "when you said you'd help him. Even though he tried to kill you. Even though he broke into your house—even though he was still going to, would have done, you meant it. You'd help him."

"It's what I do." His voice came out small. Choked. Quiet. "If I can't even do that, then—what good am I?"

Kaito said nothing. Maybe there wasn't anything to say, but Saguru waited for it, for something, for anything, for—Kaito to tell him that he was right. That he didn't have anything more to offer the world than goodness and fairness and honesty.

"Everyone needs goodness and fairness and help," said Kaito, "even criminals."

Something. It was something.

Saguru shifted, curled his arms underneath him. Watched him.

Kaito had more to say. He could see it in the way he sat there, turning over each sentence in his
mind, looking at it for holes before he said--

"When you said you'd help me," said Kaito, "I didn't – believe it. Not really." A pause, and a shift of the bed, Kaito sitting up. "... I think I believe it a little more now. I think you mean it. I think you'd do anything to help anyone, and that—that scares me."

"You think you might be beyond help?"

"I think," said Kaito, "I might get you killed." He slipped out of bed, and moved towards the door.

"Kaito—"

He was gone, and the room was quiet, and Saguru rolled onto his side to burrow his face into the pillows where Kaito had settled, where the sheets still smelled of chamomile and sunlit grass and coconut.

_I wouldn't mind_, he thought, before he slept, _I just want to help._

But in his dreams, he hurtled after Kaitou KID, watching Kaito jump and fall, watching a red dot popping up on Kaito's forehead, or watching a red slice in the air opening Kaito up, and he never managed to save him.
Chapter 5

Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department: eighteen floors of glass-walled offices divided among the nine bureaus, built in 1980, tall enough to provide an easy guide to the gaggle of umbrella'd tourists wandering Tokyo's streets at all hours of the year. His Aston Martin legally couldn't be parked across the road, but Saguru only needed a few minutes.

Baaya quiet, tapping her fingers on the wheel, headphones in her ears. Lily perfume today. A scent for a funeral.

School cancelled. At this rate, the homework he'd missed would bury him.

Kaito, sitting next to him, tapping his foot against the floor. Black leather jacket over a white-striped purple shirt, peel-off jeans, short ankle boots. Baseball cap pulled low over his head, leaving a wedge of a smile visible.

Saguru caught his eye, held his gaze. One second two second three seconds. Saw a twitch of Kaito's smile, a dunk of his head.

Open the door.

Puddles rimed the ground. 10 degrees Celsius and dropping, but not snowing. Wind coming in cold from the east, billowing his black scarf around his face, tugging at the lapels of his trench coat. Tourists milling across the road: three of them British, unseasonably stripped down to shirt-sleeves, two Scottish ("take a look at that big feckin' thing over there—") Japanese mother, single, pearl sweater and harried jeans, walking with her child; station mascot huddling underneath the awning; no sign of a black speck anywhere. Saguru glanced around, moving just his eyes, the way his cousin Jack had shown him, and then strode across the road.

Kaito clicking at his side, tickticktick of heels.

Mascot raising a hand half a second too late; didn't recognize him through the oblong head and the misshapen crown; went back to scrolling his sign.

The door squealed open (the hinges had needed oiling for eight months) and they were inside: barren floor, wet police-officers, bedraggled receptionist with rain-streaked mascara. Saguru hooked his arm around Kaito's elbow.

"Little brother?" Cock of the head, Task force member Ito (24, single, black hair, brown eyes, freckles, scar on the corner of his lip), "oi, oi, what are you doing here? Did you get into trouble again?"

"Haaa," Kaito. "I never get into trouble, uncle. I'm here with Hakuba." Jabbed a thumb in his direction. "Someone broke into his house last night."

"Haaa," Kaito. "I never get into trouble, uncle. I'm here with Hakuba." Jabbed a thumb in his direction. "Someone broke into his house last night."

Ito raised his brows; no honorific, he was thinking, Saguru could see it on his face.

Saguru turned away. Showed his badge at the desk.

"Mr. Hakuba," said Ito, bowed his head, "Detective Nakamori didn't tell me you'd come in. Are you okay? We heard about the attack."

"I'm perfectly fine." Saguru smiled; Ito's kindness felt like oil, sticking to him. "I just got startled, is
all. Anyway, I was hoping I could talk to the criminal..."

"I don't see why not," said Ito, "but you'll have to ask Detective Nakamori." His eyes slid to Kaito, and he flickered a smile, "it's a good thing you brought Kaito along. Nobody can say 'no' to him."

"So flattering!" Kaito, voice softer, "aaah, you're going to make the detective think bad things about me, Ito!"

As if there's any other kind, thought Saguru. Kept it to himself.

Down the hallway, three abreast, Kaito between him and Ito. Kaito asking, 'how's your mother doing, it was her birthday this weekend, wasn't it? Did you go out to eat? And Ito responding, 'ah, yes, her fiftieth, we went to Ueno Park for a picnic'; muffled shouting behind closed doors; sobbing; footsteps; rain rain rain.

Kaito's laughter. Ito joining in, smack of hands on shoulders. Unfamiliar.

Sixth floor, bullpen, controlled chaos. Six hands up at the sight of Kaito, group of police officers waving him over; Ito with one hand on Kaito's back, Kaito's hand dipping into his pocket and taking out a pack of cards. Hissing shift of paper on paper, and the cards fountained out of his hands and up into the air (wires?).

Saguru tore his eyes away from the clapping and the laughter, cut a line across to Nakamori's desk. Settled on the edge of it.

Nakamori looked as though he'd slept in a suitcase: suit creased, eyes bleary and dull, hands trembling and overexhausted. Sludgy coffee forgotten on the desk, cold mug to the touch which meant it had been there for longer than an hour. Nakamori's desk covered in bits of paper and crime scene reports, Kaitou Kid calling card copies and budgetary requests.

"What are you doing here, brat?" Nakamori, scratching on a paper – Kid report, last known heist. Note-taking. Or still writing it. The paperwork around here didn't get done very often.

Reach into his satchel, take out a cellophane-wrapped wedged sandwich and a pack of lemon mocha; set them down on his desk. "Lunch. Aoko told me that you'd forgotten it. No doubt she'll be along as well, but I thought – after last night--"

Nakamori blinked, sat up. Squinted, then smiled at him, dry and tired. "I get a sandwich for doing my job?" Huff of a laugh. "Nice to be appreciated."

Ah. The Chief Inspector must have reamed him out again. "You saved my life," said Saguru. "If you hadn't gotten there when you had, we wouldn't be sitting together at this desk right now. And if someone believes otherwise, I would more than happily put them to rights." The curl of temper in his voice surprised him. He'd never really lost his temper – at anything – but this did it?

Nakamori laughed. "Brat," he said, affectionate, or maybe something close to it, "I wouldn't wish that on anyone. Now, what did you really want?"

"I want to talk to the man who broke into my house."

Pause, a purse of the lips. Nakamori looking at him up and down, consideringthinkingwondering what he must want with him. "Any reason?"

"I just want to see if I can get something out of him," said Saguru.
"You think he might be KID?"

"It doesn't hurt to be cautious." No. Not KID. "I don't think he is," he added, because the gleam in Nakamori's eyes promised that he'd come along with him, he'd sit there and watch, "but I'd like to know why he did what he did. It just seems like such a big hassle, to come into my house, try to steal – whatever, and then to attack Kaito and I. Most thieves, when startled, run away."

Nakamori grunted; his mind on Kaitou Kid, he could tell by the twitch of his moustache. Rising up, he cleared his desk of files and bits and bobs, and located a ring of keys, sorted through them, handed him one. "Interrogation Room 3. I'll have him brought to you in a bit. There'll be a cop outside the door, so if something happens—"

"I'll call for help," said Saguru, took the key. His tongue sour with lying.

Out of the corner of his eye: Kaito, throwing his cards into the air, making them wiggle and swoop in different shapes. Crowd of laughing policemen. Nakamori watching him for a second, unreadable look on his face, then a smile like a good dream.

"It's good to see him opening up," said Nakamori, "looks like he's finally coming to terms with what happened."

Not even close. "It's a traumatic experience," said Saguru.

Nakamori nodded, solemn and soft. Miles away.

Saguru slipped away while he was contemplating. Kaito caught his eye, winked at him, taking the pack of floating cards as though he was plucking pens out of zero gravity, fiddling them together, and offering them out. Pick a card, any card—

Door slamming shut behind him, the warmth and noise and chaos of the bullpen shuttled out to cold and dark. Narrow hallway full of windows and dim rooms. Interrogation Room #3 was down the hallway, fifth door on the right, boasting of one metal table, one security camera, two chairs.

He took the one that left him with his back to the camera, sat down and waited. His pocket-watch hummed against his chest, a second heart-beat to his own, modulated to remind him, breathe. To remind him, calm. To remind him that he could always step back. The chain looped warm around his fingers; his eyes on the door. Footsteps.

Crack of real light, watery and grey.

In morning, the thief looked—worse for the wear. Bruising spread like stubble all over his face and around his throat. Deep-set black eyes, farmer's tan, broad hands with two missing fingers. White scars trailing over his neck and up the inside of one arm. On the other: faded colour, tattoo, dragon? Hands cuffed in front of him, prodded into the room by the end of a baton. Sat down.

Hands cuffed to the table, where he wouldn't be able to reach. His lip curled – oh, you don't like that – and he stared at him as though he wanted to gut him. Maybe he would have.

Saguru thought of Kaito, a room away, regaling the officers, please, he thought, please have the foresight to help me.

"Thank you," he said, to the cop, a stranger to him, when he placed the arrest file in front of him.

The door squeaked as it closed, and they were alone.
Silence. Saguru put his hands together on the table, listened to the beating of the clock, be a machine, be a machine, be a machine. Flipped open the file, saw a much younger picture, known Yakuza associate running in the yamaguchi-gumi, Watanabe Shinobu. 42 years old. Unmarried.

"You're younger than I thought." Watanabe, trying to needle him. "Detective afterschool programme?"

"You're not stupid enough to believe that I'll fall for that, are you?" said Saguru, arched a brow, "because if so, I'm sorely disappointed."

Approach one: abrasive, sarcastic, cocky.

Watanabe grinned, showing a mouthful of bright teeth. "Oh no," he said, "I'm not criticizing. I'm impressed. In my experience, the young ones make the best agents."

"Is that so?" Affected boredom. Saguru flicked the other pages, ran through 'Criminal Charges', and 'History'. "Hmm. Two counts of assault with a deadly weapon, three of breaking and entering—low-level work."

"Do what you know well," said Watanabe, "and you'll never have a moment's peace. Something to think about, little detective."

"It's Detective," said Saguru, "I can spell it out for you, if you know how to read." Glance up, catch his eye for a second (Watanabe, grinning), and then put the file aside, put his hands down on the table. Smile, hold it. "... You've only been working for these people for a few days, hm?"

No movement. His eyes glanced to the left, "I don't know what you're talking about." Back at him. "You're playing a game of guessing."

"Really?" He tilted his head, "It's quite obvious. Let's go through your history together, shall we?" Feigning ignorance to his sputtering, Saguru opened up the file again, found the first entry, "so. First crime: beating a sixteen year old boy with a tire-iron. Because? Let's see--" squint and read, "—oh. He insulted you. How lovely. A textbook sociopath. I do so enjoy my work. But I suppose like calls to like, doesn't it?"

Quiet, and so Saguru continued. "Missing father, missing mother, older brother, lots of hospital visits. Broken arm at age two. Broken leg at age three. It could be that you were just clumsy—"

Watanabe surged, his handcuffs snapping tight on his wrists, "make your point," he snapped, teeth bared, teeth showing. Struck a nerve.

"Well," said Saguru, "well. The thing is – apparently, an unnamed informant put you behind bars. And now you're out again. However, it means that someone with not a little political clout managed to get you free. You see, a life sentence generally means life." Saguru glanced up, smiled at him. "Not sixteen years."

"I was good," said Watanabe, teeth bared.

The inside of his wrists. Not scarring, thought Saguru, burn marks. He filed that away for later. "So someone took you out. Someone paid someone to let you leave."

"And why would they do that?" said Watanabe, "a low-level thug like me? Good at stealing, and good at beating people?"

"Clearly, they must know more about you than I do," said Saguru, looked down at the file, looked
up at his face, *why are you so familiar, why do you look so familiar.* He'd seen him somewhere. It hadn't occurred to him before, but the cut of his jaw and the deep-set eyes – it tickled at his mind. He couldn't pull himself out now, and try to remember; he couldn't give into the lure to dive deep into memory.

But it was there. He knew him.

"But I would wager," said Saguru, "that they were going to set you up as a scapegoat. 'Yakuza man murders affluent teenager and teenager's friend'. Nobody would blink twice. The newspaper headlines alone—" he flapped a hand, "—would mitigate your case. And you'd go back into prison, and then they'd let you out years later, to start a new life elsewhere."

Watanabe ducked his head, picked at a scab on the inside of his arm, the handcuffs jangling. Thinking, weighing up his options, finding them lacking – but his face was bordering blankness, his eyes dull, nothing to read.

Silence. Saguru pinched the bridge of his nose, felt the headache twitching.

"I can protect you," said Saguru, "the offer I made last night—"

Something in Watanabe seemed to deflate. "... Kid," he said, exhaustion radiating through his words, "kid. There's nothing you can do. You can't protect me. And you can't defeat them. Even Kuroba couldn't defeat them. They're everywhere. They're in your school and your home and your police station, in your fucking hospital, and your fucking law courts. There's no beating them."

"Who are they?" said Saguru, "what do they want?" Watanabe's silence incensed him; he said, "do you think, now that you were caught, that they're going to let you go? Do you think they're just going to let you walk back to prison, let you stay there? They won't trust you anymore. Who knows what you could've said?"

"I know," said Watanabe.

The word, like a blade descending: I know.

Saguru's insides shivered cold.

"It doesn't have to be this way," Saguru said. "Even for someone like you."

"A—what did you call me? Textbook sociopath."

"Perhaps I was hasty." But Watanabe was smiling, smiling. "... You said 'Even Kuroba couldn't defeat them'. What did you mean by that? Did you know Toichi Kuroba?"

Watanabe laughed, like a razor blade on metal. "Everyone knew Toichi Kuroba. The boss had him pulling shit none of us had ever dreamed about. And when a kid like that makes second lieutenant —shit. You pay attention."

"Second lieutenant," said Saguru.

"Of the casinos." Now Watanabe warmed up to it, leaned in, "he took care of the Boss' casinos. Counted cards. Made sure nobody was stealing or trying to con the boss. And Kuroba – he was the best at this shit. Always got his man. No wonder the boss thought he shit gold – Kuroba around, shit got paid. There was someone who owed a debt, he'd cough it up. Kuroba always knew what to say."
Saguru thought of the crowd outside, milling around Kaito, asking him for one more magic trick, one more minute, and then pictured him older, stubbled, mile-wide smile.

"Kuroba didn't get sent down with the rest of us," said Watanabe, "that leak – that did for the boss, and the second lieutenant. But Kuroba got away. Don't know how he swung it, how he ended up free while the rest of us rot in jail."

Saguru clicked back to attention. Watched Watanabe, and his smile, and his sharp knowingness.

"But I always figured—" he leaned in again, man to man, "—that leak? The one that got us all jailed? That sort of information – it isn't just lying around. And what are the odds, little detective, of Kuroba and Yamamoto getting out? Never being around when the raids happened? Always knowing just enough to get away?" Watanabe whistled through his teeth, a noise of pent-up rage and fire.

"You think Kuroba was the informant?"

Watanabe laughed, soft and bitter. "I think," he said, very slowly, "I think I don't care who was the informant. I think it was too long ago. And I think that if someone paid me to kill his kid, then Kuroba fucked up, and fucked up bad. Whatever Kuroba had coming to him? It's done. It's paid. He died. Took him ages to die, but he died."

Saguru nodded. "Is that all?"

"Don't know what else you want to know, kid," said Watanabe. Tired. He sounded tired, his speech softening. "I knew Toichi Kuroba. And then I didn't. I spent sixteen years in prison for that bastard. Someone paid to get me out, and all I had to do was kill the kid."

"That must have been a heavy burden to lay on you," said Saguru. "Yakuza don't tend to kill children, do they?"

"Not unless they're children themselves," said Watanabe, smiled his thin smile, "...but I would've coped with it. Lived with it. You do, don't you? No matter what happens, you live with what comes after." He shrugged.

Saguru thumped open his top pocket, took out his notebook. "Could you tell me the number? The people who called you?"

Watanabe nodded, and recited it dutifully: a local number. Most likely, it would be fake—a payphone, a burn phone, a something— but he noted it down twice, tucked it into the top pocket of his blazer. It felt hot, like a coal burning through his skin.

"I don't know what you're up to," said Watanabe, "but these people – this organization—" he said it in English, jarring against his thick accent, "—I mean what I said. They're not going to be scared off by a kid like you. Even the boss was scared of them. Scared enough to let go of Kuroba, anyway. Let him run loose after he ran his mouth off. The best thing to do is to leave it alone."

"Do you know," said Saguru, "this is the second time they've tried to kill me? I'm afraid I'm taking it on a personal level, now. But – if you help me – I can get you safe. I can make sure you're safe."

"You don't give up, do you?" said Watanabe, amused. "And what are you going to do?"

"Put you in witness protection, daily guard; you can testify to operating under duress, any decent lawyer will be able to get it thrown out in court." A tap at the door, his time up. Saguru rose, and said, "if they ask you – say you want your solicitor. Say you'll be represented by Hakuba Yukito.
I'll give him a call and tell him to expect you."

"Witness protection, daily guard, fancy lawyer," said Watanabe, "I can't give you any more, kid. I don't know any more. Just what they're called. Just what they leave behind when something goes wrong."

"And what's that?" Saguru passing around the table, mindful of the door, the time (ten minutes and eight seconds) that had passed while he'd been talking to him. His head spinning with questions upon questions upon questions.

"Scorched earth," said Watanabe, and the door opened.

The power, Nakamori had explained, had gone out in half the station, putting the hallway into lockdown. It had corrupted some of the footage from the security tapes, which meant that anything that Saguru had gotten from Watanabe was useless in court if Watanabe had a good lawyer.

Saguru said nothing to that, merely nodded, and caught Kaito's eye. A few of the Taskforce policemen looked chastised, as though they'd been yelled at. Probably, they'd had.

Outside, the streets choked with people, Baaya's car gone. Hurrying to avoid the worst of the slurrious rain, he and Kaito bundled themselves into the first street cafe they came across.

Saguru ordered coffee, boiling hot.

Kaito when for hot chocolate, with a shot of mint syrup. Gusts of white fog wisped from his mouth.

"What did you find out?" said Kaito, in French, soft and purring smooth. Underneath the hat, his face looked pinched and small, the stress of everything that had happened the night before expressing itself in lines upon his face, sharp shadows underneath his eyes. "Did he know my father?"

"Not as much as I'd hoped," said Saguru, and told him, quietly, watching the windows, expecting, at any moment, to see a flicker of black, a red dot, a knife hurtling in mid-air. Catching Kaito, catching him. Killing one of them.

Watanabe's soft voice, his deadened I know, the rasp of the chair.

"Shit," Kaito huffed a breath, drank his hot chocolate in silence.

He concurred, but quietly.

They didn't speak again until they were home. Nakamori had made it law that there was to be a guard outside the house at every hour, sitting in an unmarked car across the road. Ito had this hour, and he waved to them with his paper cup as he huddled up against the cold.

There was a tartan blanket in the front that Saguru assumed had come from his house.

Dinner, quiet. He didn't taste anything, and Kaito didn't eat, just pushed his food around on his plate, looking at it. Shifting it. Thinking, no doubt, of what Watanabe had told them; Kuroba was the rat, Kuroba had it coming, Kuroba fucked up so badly the next generation has to pick up the slack.

"How long will it take to run that number?"
"Ordinarily? Days. But I'll call my grandfather and see if I can't use his lab over the weekend – that should shave down the time by half. We might even have it within the hour."

"Good," said Kaito, distracted, shovelling peas on his plate. "Good."

4:50:33AM.

Phone ringing underneath his pillow, roll to face it, grumble to himself.

Answer.

"'lo? Ha--Hakuba S'guru speaking."

Silence.

Silence.

Silence.

Click.
Fshhh-thunk. Balled up note bouncing off the side of his desk and into his lap during the last ten and a half minutes of advanced mathematics; Mr. Chibiki busy scrawling theorems on the board, class distracted, scritch-scrith-scritch of pencils. Saguru glanced down at the paper note, folded not into a ball, but into a four-point origami crane.

Glance out of the corner of his eye; Kaito balancing a pencil on one finger, leaning back in his seat, gakuran jacket wrinkled from sleeping in this morning and forgetting it on the floor. No eye contact but what other crane would have two circular eyes and a bit of paper twisted about to form a bow-tie?

Only nine minutes left for the class; tickticktick of the watch on the inside of his jacket. He reached for the note and unfolded the crane with a tug to the angular beak.

Who called you last night?

Saguru glanced at him again, caught his eye this time. The two of them hadn't stopped jumping at shadows since the break-in; every crack and creak of the house felt like an invasion again, felt like people pressing in on the walls, felt like danger. But a missed phone-call was an easy mistake to make (his number had to be one number off from someone's, it was a simple law of averages).

Wrong number, he wrote, and tried to fold it back into a crane, only to fail. Hushed snicker.

Mr. Chibiki's hand paused, numbers suspended in mid-thought. Saguru could see the end of the formulae and how it would play out: divide thirty two by sixteen, and round it to a decimal—

"Does anyone know the answer?"

Saguru went to raise his hand.

"Kuroba?" a blink.

"I know the answer, Mr. Chibiki," said Kaito.

"Ahh—" a glance, suspicion, stillness from the boys around Kaito's desk as though they were trying to shrink out of the range of Kaito Kuroba's infamous pranks, "—this isn't one of your jokes, is it?"

"No, I promise," said Kaito, "I know the answer."

Gesture at the board, hold out a marker like Excalibur stemming from the lake. Saguru watched Kaito rise out of his chair, note in his hand sticky with intent, and he set it aside, turned his head forward, ignored his half-finished notes and the echoing din of his heartbeat (which was quick, all of a sudden, rapid-fire beating). Kaito's fingers around the marker, point to the white-board, a focused patience on the scrawled theorem (half-illegible, numbers tailing into numbers, it took a bloody genius just to read it) and—

Kaito writing, dividing thirty two by sixteen and rounding it to a decimal, and then taking that decimal and twisting it into a fraction.

"Oi, oi," whispered, "when did Kuroba start paying attention in class?"
Saguru grinned to himself, covered his smile with his hand. Watched him write down the end of the theorem, and then finish with a flourished twisted of his wrist and a bow in front of the whiteboard.

"Show off," he mouthed at him, and Kaito smiled, bright like sunlight; stood by politely while Mr. Chibiki looking over his working.

"It's correct," he said, and opened his mouth to say more, but the electric bell (two tones higher than the one in Yorkshire) got there first. "Ah! Drat. Okay, do pages five to eight for homework—" a groan around the class, "—and I was told to remind you about Culture Festival! Remember, it's in a month's time! Start working on your presentations." Gathering up his books and making for the door.

Ten minute prep between now and English. Saguru pulled out his time-table, frowning down at it, wondering if he could possibly skip English and keep going to the station, see if his grandfather had replied to his email, see if there was anything new on the Watanabe case. It wasn't unlike his grandfather to take so long to respond but—

A shadow fell over his desk. Saguru glanced up, and flicked a smile at Kaito, automatically moved his books to one side so that Kaito could rest a hip against the table.

"So, who called you?" said Kaito, pack of cards in his hands, shuffling it, one after the other.

"A wrong number," said Saguru.

Kaito frowned. Ace of hearts on top, twitch of the fingers, and the pack spread out like the tail of a peacock. "That's it?" said Kaito. "Just a wrong number?"

"Of course," said Saguru. "When you've eliminated the impossible—"

"Ah, ah, no," said Kaito, "no you don't. No quoting Sherlock. You're cut off. You worked three quotes in during breakfast this morning."

"I did not."

Kaito held up a finger. "'You have a grand gift for silence, Watson. It makes you quite invaluable as a companion'," deeper baritone, flecked with an English accent, his own voice parroted back at him, "that was the first one, when you were looking for the milk and you asked Watson where it was. Watson is a bird."

Saguru raised his brows, sat back, and bit back the smile. "A casual remark. That's only one quote."

"Second—" a second finger went up, and Kaito's voice changed again, turned into his, "'There is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact.'" Changed back into Kaito's own, softer and sweeter, and brighter, somehow, always laughing, "You were looking for the coffee and I told you it was in the cupboard, and you got annoyed at me. You're really not a morning person."

"I'll give you that one," said Saguru, "but it's still only two quotes."

Kaito's grin took on an unhealthy sharpness. Add a top-hat and a monocle and—Saguru pushed that thought out of his mind, just Kaito he's just Kaito now. "When I put three sugars in my coffee, you said—" modulation of his voice, and it was so strange to hear his words coming out of Kaito's mouth, "'you do know what you're drinking is meant for eye surgery?'"

"That's not a Sherlock quote."
"It's from the Holmes movie," said Kaito, back to his own voice, grinning, looking so utterly pleased with himself that Saguru couldn't bring himself to argue the point. "Which you were watching last night. I heard the music from my room. Do you always watch your movies in English, or—?"

Open his mouth to respond, a start as someone said—"Kuroba! You're working with the Drama Club for Culture Festival, right?"

Saguru turned his head, caught sight of Naruhodo Ryuichi: mask in place, muffled voice, his gakuran jacket unbuttoned at the top and the bottom, a stack of leaflets in his arms.

Kaito flustered. "I mean—I—"

"You did the Gymnastics Club last year," said Ryuichi, "it's the Drama Club's turn."

"Popular," said Saguru, out of the corner of his mouth, "aren't you?"

Kaito slanted him a look. If he wasn't mistaken, there was quite a hefty dose of huffy, pouty, grumpy magician in it, but it was early on a school day and he couldn't be one hundred percent certain. "Ah—Okay, Naruhodo. I'll work with the drama club this year – what are we doing?" And then, as if struck by a sudden realization, "do you have culture festival in England, Saguru? No, right?"

"What is the culture festival?" said Saguru, curling his hand into a fist.

Kaito shrugged, pulled himself up to sit on his desk, half-squashing his stack of notes. "Ah, it's difficult to explain—basically, schools have a kind of—" he struggled for a second, switched to English, "open day—" and back to Japanese, "—and schools put on presentations and shows and exhibits, and shows off their work. Ah, parents come, and there are games, and lots of food, and sweets—"

Saguru covered his mouth with his hand, so no-one would see him smirking.

"—and, ah, students work together to put on a show. I'm working with the drama club this year," said Kaito, catching sight of Ryuichi's eye. "Apparently."

A tap on his shoulder. Saguru turned to see Aoko, stage-whispering, "Kaito's always really popular," she said, "people always want him to join them."

"I'm a natural-born performer," said Kaito, fluttering a little bow, "people know quality when they see it." He straightened up, putting his folded hands onto his folded knees. "Aaah, but I don't like it so much when I have to say 'no' to people. Last year, Ryuichi didn't talk to me for a week all because I worked with the gymnastics club."

Saguru glanced over. Ryuichi Naruhodo, 5'5'', oversized hand-me-down clothing, worn with repeated washings, brown-black hair spiked up into a cockatoo crest, perpetual mask covering his mouth, brown eyes, close friends with almost everyone, one of those effortlessly harmless boys that didn't have a single negative thought in their head. He'd not talked to him as much as he could, but students muttered about, I wonder what play Ryuichi will pick this year and aaa, he always picks so many difficult ones and do you think Nakamori-san will bake that chocolate cake again this year?

"Hm," he said, and then glanced at Aoko, "do you have any idea what you're doing, Nakamori?"

"Probably the Home Economics club," she said, and moved her narrow shoulders, "I like baking."
"Make sure the Home Ec club sets up next to the nurse's office," said Kaito, solemnly, "last year —"

"Aaah! Stupid Kaito, shut up!"

"—Aoko put salt instead of sugar in her cake—" Kaito leapt off his desk to avoid a dead-to-rights throw of a sixty-four page mathematics hard-cover, "—people got sick! It was so funny, Aoko was —"

Thunk as Kaito landed on Yamada's desk, sending papers squirreling away into all corners; Yamada not noticing, busy talking with the student behind him (Sakurazuka?) about the archery club; shouting from Aoko disintegrating into grunts of purposeful abuse, squeak of chairs, of desks, of students cheering on Aoko—

"Ah—Mr. Hakuba?"

Young female student, light-brown hair with dark eyes hidden behind big floral glasses, books huddled to her chest, top volume: *The Collected Stories of Arthur Conan Doyle* —"Ah—yes?" fumbling himself forward, trying to seem like he'd been paying attention to her (how long had she stood at his desk, had she spoken to him before now?)

"I, ah—" She flushed pink, shifted her books to the crook of one arm, and pointed at herself. "K—Konoshima Maki. I'm in the literature club, ah—nice to meet you!"

"Oh, nice to meet you too," said Saguru, thrust out a hand only for her to stare at it, pinking further, and he dropped it to the desk, *bloody loon you aren't in England remember*, "ah—can I help, Ms. Konoshima?"

"Yes, I—I wanted to know if you would join us for Culture Festival. Ah—on your first day, you said you liked to read, and—" She tilted the books in her arms so he could see the rest of the titles: *Pride and Prejudice, Wuthering Heights*, "—we're—we're not sure what we're doing yet, but, ah, you'd be a big help!"

A crash-bang of noises, Kaito squeaking in alarm, out of the corner of his eye, he could see Aoko cornering him with a broom.

"Perhaps we should talk in the hall, Ms. Konoshima?" he said, "It appears Nakamori is going to murder Kuroba, and I wouldn't like to be a witness."

Maki stared at him, then gave a frightened little burst of a laugh. "Of—Of course. Ah—but I don't have anything to say, I just --- wanted to know if you'd like to join in. With the literature club."

"I'd—" *I'm busy I have work someone tried to kill me a week ago*. Kaito Kuroba laughing and dancing out of the way, Aoko slamming the broom down hard against the wall, the noises of students cheering, and Saguru didn't know how, why, when, but his mouth ran away with him, and he said, "I'd—I'd love to. I've never been to a culture festival, so I don't know what I—"

"That's—that's fine!" said Maki, and her face lit up with a smile, "That's fine. We're meeting in the library during lunch, if you'd like to us? Ah, so we can pick what we're going to do as a group."

"I'd like that," said Saguru, "thank you for asking me." Another whallop, and Kaito sprang back onto his desk, slid off, and hid behind his chair.

"Safe!" he crowed, "you wouldn't hit Hakuba as well, would you?"
For a moment, he saw Aoko considering it, broom levelled high. Then she dropped it, and said, in the sweetest voice, "no, never. Hakuba is nice. But you forget we're neighbours, and Hakuba is not."

"Ah, but Hakuba's walking with us today!" said Kaito, "he's helping me with the rabbits. Mom told me to take care of them!" He stuck his tongue out in her direction, and then said, "besides, Hakuba's a real police officer. You wouldn't hurt me in front of a real police officer, would you?"

"Rest assured," said Saguru, "when the time comes, Aoko, I'll pretend not to see anything."

"Traitor!" Kaito hissed, and smacked the back of his head before he leapt back into his seat, just as the bell rang for English, second period. His eyes lingered for a second on Konoshima Maki, and then he glanced at him, brows raised, head tilted, asking, *what's this all about?*

"Just culture festival," said Saguru, and stooped to pick up his English book, "I'm working with the literature club, I think."

"Oh," said Kuroba. "I was gonna ask Ryuichi to give you a part in the play—"

Did Kaito sound—

"I mean—" Saguru hesitated, "—I could tell Ms. Konoshima—"

"Ah, no, no, don't bother! It's not like we have to spend all our time together!" Kaito said, "we live together, that's a lot of time already." Low voiced to keep the rest of the class from hearing, not looking at him, busy folding the paper into threes fours fives as the English teacher took over the desk, nod and a bow, started to write.

Saguru didn't say anything more, thought of it, but couldn't figure out how to phrase everything well enough. "Are you—"

"Totally sure," said Kaito, "now shush, you're going to get me into trouble." A flap of his hand, and he turned his attention towards the front of the class, looking forward with perfectly assumed innocence.

Saguru watched his face for a moment longer. Not a flicker out of place – so why did it feel like there was?

Lunch period, 12:00:30PM. Konoshima Maki came up to his desk as soon as the bell had finished ringing, books in hand, eyes huge behind her glasses. "Hakuba-san? Are you ready?"

Kaito, over her shoulder, gave him a thumbs up.

"I am, yes," said Saguru, picked up a sandwich he'd bought from the vending machine outside the school, tugged his bag up over one shoulder. Cellphone in one pocket, pager in the other, both tuned to silence; nothing from Nakamori, a first for the detective; nothing from his grandfather, whom he'd messaged in the morning.

Kaito watched him leave, his head tilted to one side. When the door swung shut behind him, he could hear the peal of his laughter, the echo of it in the other classmates. Hallway outside Class 3B, stinking of lemon cleaner and floor polish; Konoshima Maki's shoes on the tiled floor, clickclickclickclick, sounds of football club in the grounds playing a game with some visiting students (*hey! Hey, Silver Bullet's got the ball, stop him!*).
His back itched; he couldn't settle, his mind fragmented and broke into pieces, tugged this way and that by things beyond the hallway – the shushshushshush of a broom on the second floor, the squeak of students walking around the school, the silence of the emptied classrooms. Konoshima Maki opened her mouth twice, said nothing twice, looked like she wanted to grab his arm, didn't do a thing. He could count the amount of times she pushed her glasses up. It was a bad day, one of those days where his head didn't do what it was supposed to do.

He slipped his fingers into the top coat pocket, took out the clock, round and smooth and pricelessly old – his uncle's. For luck, he'd told him.

*Don't Penfolds make their own?*

*Aye. But a little reminder of that doesn't help.*

Fist tight around the watch, count breaths, one two three four, out, one two three four, in.

The study room next to the library. Six students, none of which he knew except—

"Ms. Koizumi?" brows raised. "I didn't know you were a fan of books."

"I'm a fan of many things," said Akako; five nine black hair down to the waist eyes like a deep cabernet catching the sunlight. Tug of something secret in her voice, a whisper that he could never place. "Books are one of those things." *The Hollow Needle*, the title of the book in her arms. Student next to her, broad-built, tall as he was almost, glasses, square jaw, *Pride and Prejudice*.

Konoshima pulled a chair out for herself, and looked expectantly at him, waiting for him to sit.

He sat. The watch hot in his palm, feeling it tick tick tick like someone else's heartbeat. Calmer than his own, regulated. Ordinary.

Breath in.

"So, ah—" Konoshima placed her hands on top of the book, fingers steepled, "Hakuba agreed to join us for Culture Festival!" A small smattering of applause.

Breath out. Had he really been that important to the culture festival?

"But that doesn't mean we've got it all easy!" said Konoshima, her voice suddenly solid, "we're going to need to work just as hard as the rest of the clubs if we don't want another repeat of last year!"

_Last year?_ Akako listening with rapt attention, head to one side, not looking at him, pointedly not looking at him.

He felt like he was in a spiderweb, and she was the spider. The watch underneath his palm, tick tick tick, another minute past. Swimming heat in his head.

_Is Kaito okay?_

Of course he was. He'd only been gone for five minutes.

"Does anyone have any ideas?"

Student to Akako's right: "How about a play? Oscar Wilde has some plays—"

"The drama club's doing a play," said Konoshima.
Student with glasses on his left: "Maybe we can cook dishes from some books? You know, have proper English breakfast—"

All eyes on him. Saguru managed a small smile, wondered if it was prudent to tell them that his English breakfast usually consisted of coffee and a handful of cereal scarfed down on the way to class.

"Maybe," Konoshima considered this idea, put her hands over her mouth.

Tick tick tick. Another minute past. No screaming from down the hall, no footsteps — Kuroba had to be fine. Stop that. You're not his mother. This is a safe place. Even they're not stupid enough to break in and steal a student—

Silence, some other small suggestions: quiz, game show, interviews with famous literary characters. Bickering and agreements — Student on Akako's left wanted the game show, Konoshima wasn't convinced, Akako thought the interview and dress up had merit and then—

Akako: "Why don't we combine some of the ideas? Dress up and serve food?"

"Isn't that just a cafe though?" Student to his left.

Slam of her hands on the table, and Maki: "I've got it! Book host club! We can all dress as our favourite literary characters and serve food and interact with the students—"

Tick tick tick. The panic ebbing in little ripples. A host club?

"What do you think, Saguru?"

"I think that sounds good?" he ventured, "It sounds interesting, and food will be a good lure." Host clubs, host clubs, had he ever been? "I'm afraid I'm unfamiliar with them—" he started.

"You should go," said Konoshima Maki, "familiarize yourself. Is everyone else good with the host club idea?" A show of hands, onetwothreefourfive, his own not up because he didn't know what he was volunteering for yet, but Konoshima counted him anyway. "Okay! So what we need to do now is figure out what books we're going to use — everyone think of your favourite books, and come up with a couple of characters you can dress up as—"

*Sherlock Holmes.*

*Oh no, you got three quotes in before breakfast this morning.*

To dress up as Sherlock would probably make Kaito laugh, or cry, depending. His mouth crooked up at one side, and he tucked the watch back into his top pocket, considered it from all angles: would Sherlock be a good costume? Could he pull it off with the same grandeur that Brett did? Was it worth getting involved in something so time-consuming when—

*You can't live like this, Jack's voice, you're a kid, Saguru.*

Point.

"I'd like to be Sherlock, if, ah—" Saguru said, "—if nobody's picked him yet."

Surreptitious eye roll from Akako, was he really that obvious?

"Sherlock," said Konoshima, "okay, he's – Victorian era?"
"That's right."

"Is anyone else picking Victorian era characters?"

"I'd like to be Catherine," said Akako, "from Wuthering Heights." A pause. "The older version." Her fingers curled a lock of hair, straightened it, curled it again, "I have a costume that would fit, and I have some props I can bring—"

A few more suggestions: Jane Eyre, Mr. Rochester, Don Juan, Mr. Bingley, Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth Bennett, Irene Adler – this made by Akako again, her eyes gleaming, looking at him head cocked and eyes wide and bright sharp smile on her mouth that made him think of knife darkness Kaito his stomach clenched, and he pushed away from the table, and said, "please excuse me."

"Ah – okay, Hakuba! Break's almost other, so if you don't come back, please stay behind after clean up time, so we can talk about your character," Maki, her face worried.

He nodded, and stepped out into the hallway, and right into Kaito.

Thump, step back, reach out to steady Kaito because he'd nearly knocked him across the hallway. "Did something happen?" he said, "why are you here?"

"Rude," said Kaito, folded his arms. Sunlight kissed red streaks across his face from where he'd been outside, his smile half-distracted, "I just came to see if you were okay. You know, because I didn't hear anything, and it's been—" his fingers flickered, "—zero days since our last murderous attempt, so, I was worried."

Saguru chuckled. It wasn't funny, but some response was necessary. "And you suspected Konoshima Maki of being the mastermind behind the break in last night?"

"Naaaah," yawned Kaito, hooked his arms behind his head, "but if she was, you'd be too polite to say anything."

Saguru smiled. Realized he still had his lunch, back in the room, hadn't eaten, had worried too much.

"Did you eat?" said Kaito.

"Uh," said Saguru, "I'm not—"

"That means no." Grabbing his arm, hand to wrist, pulling him down the hallway. Their indoor shoes smacking against the tiles and downstairs, into the room where three long vending machines stood just by the doors. Outside, a glimmering day, bright and hot for November, stiff breeze coming in from the north, shouts of glee from the students.

Kaito thumbed in a five hundred yen note, and clicked a random assortment of buttons. Out thunked: wasabi chocolate Kit Kat, tub of ramen with small plastic fork. Kaito scooped them up, moved to the next, cracked open the top of the tub of noodles (dehydrated carrot edamame chunks of chicken? Small bits of powdery egg) and filled it up to the brimful, gave him the fork and the chocolate.

"Did you eat?" said Saguru, when he had come to terms with his food.

"I ate," said Kaito, "but I'll have some of that chocolate. Come on."

Following him back up the stairs, mindful that there was maybe five minutes left of break. Up
another flight of stairs, and to the rooftop, where no students were technically allowed, but Kaito flipped the 'DANGER – KEEP OUT' sign back to front so it was like it had never existed (in Kaito's mind, Saguru thought, these things often worked). Creaaak of the door opening. Stepping outside on a bright hot November day, just the two of them, miles above the real world, miles above someone trying to kill them, just the two of them.

Kaito sourced out two old boxes and flipped them over, sat down on one.

Saguru sat with him, scooping up a mouthful of tepid noodle and carrot and bits of beef. "So," he said, "did Naruhodo pick the school play?"

"An adaptation of *Arsène Lupin contre Herlock Sholmes*," said in French, perfectly accented, he'd nearly forgotten that Kaito could speak French. "Guess who I'm playing?"

"Tree number four?" said Saguru, crunching a bit of carrot, muffling his laugh at Kaito's pouting look.

"No!" said Kaito, "but I'd make a great tree. I'd steal the show!"

"Was that a pun?" said Saguru, arched brows and a smile.

Kaito paused, then laughed. "Detective," said Kaito, "I think you're working too hard. You're seeing thieves in everything. It's almost like you're a workaholic."

"Perish the thought." Two mouthfuls of ramen left; Saguru offered them to Kaito, who took the pot from him. "I don't have a—"

"Diseases?" said Kaito, plucking the fork from his fingers. "No?" Eyes averted, and he stuck the fork into the ramen, lifted a mouthful to his mouth, mumbling around it, "I don't mind sharing. You're not gross like—" disappearing words behind the food.

Saguru felt himself flush, think, indirectly, we're kissing. Why is that enticing? He knew hormones. This wasn't the act of hormones, this was more—

*Closeness intimacy the sudden shock of realizing that there are people in the world who care about you want you alive want you to be happy want to be around you.* That didn't sound at all crazy, did it?

Kaito slurped noodles into his mouth, puckered up like a kiss, spatter of wasabi-soy-ginger. He could hypnotize himself watching Kaito's mouth move on his ramen; pink lips, reddened with wind and—stop staring stop staring stop staring. He dropped his gaze, looked at his hands, forgot that they'd been having a conversation, were having a conversation, Kaito chuckling and—

"—and I think Ryuichi will want me to play Lupin but I wouldn't know the first thing about playing a master thief," Kaito said, head cocked to one side. "But I think I'll just re-read the Lupin novels and try to – build him up. Do we have those at home?"

*We. Home.*

"We do," said Saguru, *we again*, the word felt sharp on his tongue, sitting there like a needle, *we*, he didn't know that he'd ever referred to 'home' to anyone. Grin, and lean forward a little, sudden brightness catching the darker lights in Kaito's hair, small wind ruffling it, and the shouts of the students echoind up from the playground hot tarmac underneath his hands and his thighs so good to sit out here and *enjoy*--
"What's the book club doing?" said Kaito, set the empty noodle cup aside, looking longingly at the chocolate in his front pocket.

Saguru tugged it out and opened it, cracked it in two and took a square for himself. Set it on his tongue to let the chocolate (sugar palm oil cocoa powder) melt, the tingle of wasabi sharp on his senses. "A host club, I think." It occurred to him that maybe he was not supposed to say, but— It was Kaito. How could he not tell Kaito what was going on? "We're all dressing up as characters and going to run a kind of food stand. I think maybe we'll get the Home Economics club to help in exchange for free --- advertising?" He sucked the chocolate, frowned, "that doesn't sound right."

"A host club?" said Kaito, laughed, "have you ever even been to a host club? They don't have those in England, do they?"

"No," said Saguru, "we have pubs in England, where the owners give you a choice of beer with your fried fish or ploughman's lunch or steak and kidney pie—" Kaito wrinkling his nose adorably disgust at the thought of steak and kidney pie, how would he look if you showed him a picture of stargazy pie or fish and chips fresh out of the oven or—"I was asked to go along to a host club to familiarize myself with the concept. If I'm honest, that thought rather scares me."

"As it should," Kaito, cheerful, "host clubs are not for the faint-hearted, and not something you should do alone, my foreigner friend." A pause, another snuck chocolate block, the wasabi leaving no discernible bite of taste for Kaito. He stuffed two into his mouth, handed him the pack and the remaining one back. "We should go to one together." Said casually, meant casually, his heart about stopped when he heard it.

We should go to one together.

"Ah, that would be helpful," said Saguru, nodded, "I wouldn't know the first thing to look for. You could feed me any old trite remark and I'd believe you—well, not to a certain point, of course, because I know you well enough by now, but—"

"I understand," grinning, Kaito shifting back and forth, rocking a little as they sat there.

The breeze whispering over the two of them. He couldn't hear the shouting anymore; the two-tone alarm run, announced the end of the break, and yet Saguru didn't move. The next class was English, and he didn't need the lessons, but—

"Do you want to go now?" said Saguru. "Skive off the rest of the day?"

Kaito raised his brows so far up, they were in danger of disappearing into his hairline. "Today?" he said, grinning, grinning, grinning, "right now? Saguru, are you feeling okay?" A hand out, patting his forehead like a mother checking her son for fever.

The flare of heat along his cheeks was pure embarrassment, he was sure of it, certain that it was nothing more than that, looking down at the ground and avoiding Kaito's steady gaze. His fingers soft, feathering through the tangled, wind-tousled mess of his hair, fiddling with the curls as they wrapped around his fingers and and—

Saguru shuddered in a breath, let it out like smoke.

Kaito didn't notice. "Aaah," he said, serious-voiced, "you're suffering from a bad case of the Monday grumpies. There's nothing to it. I'll have to risk my academic career and join you on your trip away from school." A pause, and then Kaito stood up and went to the edge of the rooftop, looked down, as though judging the distance.
Saguru had an image of him stepping up onto the low ledge around the rooftop, spreading his wings, and jumping free, **falling four stories to the ground spatter of blood everywhere circling around him like a halo and Kaito not moving not breathing no longer laughing.** He stood up, and went with him, dithered for a moment, and then leaned over the wall with him, ready to catch hold of his shirt, pull him back, if he needed to.

"Do you see that wall over there?"

Ekoda High: four stories six buildings in a campus surrounded by a narrow stone wall that went around the whole of the grounds. Accessible through one gate in the back that was guarded by a security woman, and one gate in the front that was never guarded, but only used for exits. The wall itself was around seven feet and a half of height, and a good pole-vaulter could clear it with ease and speed.

"I do," said Saguru.

"We go over it," said Kaito, "that wall leads out to the main road. We can catch a bus into central Tokyo from there." Nod of his head, then another smile at him, soft and bright, "still interested?"

Saguru glanced down at the wall, streams of students leading back into the building, people quietly returning to their classes. Thought of the day as it had passed: three more hours to go, periods of study that he didn't need (wouldn't use).

"Yes," said Saguru, "yes, we'll go now."
Slight problem with their plan: host clubs, Kaito determined, were mostly open at night. To find one open in the morning wasn't going to be easy, but now that he had his mind wrapped around the idea of a singular day off, then he wanted to go. Any longer spent inside that classroom, crushed in between four walls, going over facts and figures and his head buzzing with what was going on around him, and Saguru felt like he'd do something drastic. Possibly even risky.

It was better this way. Go out. Scout a host club for study. Maybe go and have coffee at a little cafe, and then go to Kaito's house, pick up the doves and the rabbits, see where they'd fit into his house, only a temporary measure until this case is over.

Six minutes after the bell rang, the hallway completely empty but for a late head teacher shuffling to class. Kaito took him down to the second floor hallway, and they snuck past loaded classrooms to get to the stairwell, took the rest of the stairs down to the ground floor where their outdoor shoes and bags were. Toe them on, and push open the third door on the left, the one that led to the back of the school, as the one in front would be too obvious, and it squeaked.

The air in Tokyo smelled like ozone burning and gas. Kaito leading the way, his figure bobbing up and down in the half-shadow that the school cast onto the grass. Saguru followed, keeping to the school wall, listening out for the crawl of voices that indicated a class in session.

Did Kaito sneak out in school often?

Yes, of course he does, Saguru tilted his head to the side, watched Kaito size up the wall, when else would be plan those heists? And that brings his emotions crashing down again because it should be like this, Kaito should have better reasons to leave than because someone's trying to kill him.

But Saguru knew that they'd argue, so he said nothing, watched Kaito take two steps back, and run at the wall. Leap up, kick off the middle, and haul himself up like a gymnast on a bar. Less than two seconds from floor to the top of the wall, and then over.

Kaito, from the other side: "Come on, Saguru! What are you waiting for, an engraved invitation?" Thump as he dropped his bag.

Saguru tossed his bag over the wall, heard it jostle against the grass, and Kaito's grumbling.

No run up, but he remembered what cousin Jack had taught him about rock-climbing, and this was more or less rock-climbing without the hand-holds. He was nearly tall enough to reach the top, so: find a crack near the bottom of the wall, fit his toe there, launch himself up and grab hold of the top. Pull, all his strength, creaking shoulders and aching muscles as he hauled himself up, up, up. The school caught the sunlight on all sides, and he was atop, watching it gleam, no eyes on him.

The last time he'd left school during a school day was --- two months ago? A KID heist.

Now he was doing it for fun.

With the thief he'd been chasing in the first place.

Saguru swung his leg over the wall, shifted to look at Kaito, and then pushed off. Hit the ground, knees bent to avoid the worst of the shock, and then straighten up, run his hand through his mussed hair, and his dirtied hands. Kaito staring for one two three four seconds, and then, "... Well that was less painful than I expected. I thought I'd have to carry you up there!"
Saguru snorting, and giving him a bright, lazy smile, "you think you're the only bloke with an overachieving family?"

"Aaah," said Kaito, "so that explains it. You English people, so competitive!" His hands together, and he turned towards the road: Tokyo, laid bare, few cars, nobody looking at two students in their uniforms near a school, the further away they got the more they'd—

"We should change clothes," said Saguru, "we'll look conspicuous in our uniforms if we go into the city. Do you have any spares?"

Kaito nodding, gesturing to his bag, "I keep a spare T-shirt in there, never know when you'll need it. Nobody'll look at the trousers, they'll just look like normal, uniform trousers. Do you have a—"

Saguru nodding, and then looking around, gesturing towards a copse of trees near the back of the school, just planted in front of the wall. "Change there?" he said, "we'll only be stripping down to undershirts, so it should be okay---"

A nod, and they moved into the shade, bags thumping against shoulders feet on stones and then on grass. Kaito set his bag down and tugged his gakuran jacket open to the plain white button up underneath, hesitated, and then shucked it off.

Saguru didn't mean to stare, didn't have it planned, but—Kaito was so thin. Height 156cm average weight for someone of his bodily composition should've been around 60kg he looked as though he weighed 45kg soaking wet. Ribs pressed out against his flesh and over them the snaking silver trail of old scars. Round shiny gunshot wound on his shoulder, pressed into his skin like a large freckle.

God. Someone had shot him, this boy. Aimed a gun waited pulled the trigger missed the mark that they were supposed to hit – his neck, a vein, a snaking artery. Death in 2 minutes or less. And the rest of those scars, from where? Some faint, some larger, some—

"It's tough work being a magician," said Kaito, he'd seen him looking.

Saguru pulled his shirt over his head, tossed it into his bag. No undershirt underneath today. He'd run out quicker than the previous days, had left behind half his clothing.

Sudden pause from Kaito, and then: "Shit—"

Saguru glanced up, looked at him, stood there, shirt in hand, half-naked, protected by the copse of trees into which they'd smuggled.

"Are all those from work?"

"It's tough work being a detective," said Saguru.

Scars: diagonal cuts across his spine low on his back thirteen centimetres in length and made with the curved end of a deboning knife; constellation of three gunshot wounds one two three spread from shoulder to third and fourth rib to shoulder again. Narrow claw marks on his hips that snaked up to join the silver trails across his chest.

Kaito next to him, staring, staring, "fuck," he said, "what happened to you?"

His hand raised, and down onto his back, lower back, lowest cut.

2012 cornwall the butcher of st. ives chopping up teenagers and leaving them in bits all around the countryside i was stupid i took risks i wanted it to stop i put myself in his viewset and and and—"A
case gone terribly wrong," said Saguru. Ohh I love how young you look little detective now don't be shy scream as much as you like no-one will hear you—"Fortunately, I worked with rather competent police officers. They managed to catch the bloke before he finished his work. His victims weren't as lucky as I was."

Kaito's fingers like gossamer on his skin, like a hint of warmth, touching, touching. Trailing over one two three four five centimetres, pause, six seven eight nine ten centimetres. "Fuck," said Kaito, again, as though he'd never considered it. "Fuck. Why do you even do this work, Saguru? Jesus. And this one?"

"Black Shuck," said Saguru. "You remember him?"

Slight nod. Touching the gash across his lower forearm, from where the Shuck had tried to slice him into giblets, and he'd thrown up his arm to protect himself, caught the gash, still ran after him when he'd run. Not good to call him by a media name, but Black Shuck gave him what Andrew McKay had taken: how could something so evil live in something so benign? Could it spread infect settle inside a person?

"His name was Andrew McKay," said Saguru. "His real name. The papers gave him Black Shuck." A shrug, shifting Kaito's hand on his skin, making it shudder against his back, "it's easier to call monsters by monstrous names. It doesn't let us think that they're still human, underneath."

"Some people," Kaito's fingertips brushing again, going down, touching the shiny indented bullet-marks on his hip, "aren't human. These?"

"A robbery," said Saguru, "a burglary. A mistake." Two hostages for the first shot dead before the gun had ripped through him one policeman injured in the second ten minutes of sobbing and panicking and trying to wad together enough fabric to tape over the hole put inadvertently into another person.

Kaito's fingers were so light, soft, on his flesh. They didn't feel real, none of this felt real, how could he corroborate skiving off a day of school with straight-A student Saguru Hakuba part time job as a detective currently in pursuit of Japan's most infamous thief who had a fondness for stealing all the chocolate biscuits and a crime gang on his tail?

Saguru cleared his throat, lifted the shirt a little. "Kaito---" he started. Wanted to say something about the touching the way he stroked his back the--something, but it must've come out rough, sharp, because the thief jumped.

Kaito flushed; backed off. "Sorry," he said, "it's just... you're rich, I didn't think you'd have marks like that."

Saguru smiled. "Thought the only injuries I'd have were from, what? Boiling too many teas? Falling on my priceless collection of blood diamonds?"

"Aaah shut up," Kaito grumbled, and turned away from him, blushing faintly as he pulled his shirt over his head.

Saguru dressed himself, smoothed the shirt out over his chest, hid the scars. Pushed what they were talking about out of his head.

More staring. "You own T-shirts."

"Most people do," said Saguru.
"You own t-shirts with Professor Layton on them," said Kaito, stressing the point.

"I like the games," Saguru, mildly injured. "I like solving puzzles. And I have other t-shirts. It's just I had this t-shirt in my bagâ€”"anyway, how old do you think I am, really? I am still allowed to like youthful things, aren't I?"

"I don't think so," Kaito, "it's just too weird. It's like finding out Nakamori likes Sanrio, and keeps a model of Bonbonribbon on his desk."

"Wouldn't he like the grumpy blackbird more?" Saguru wondered, stepped out of the copse of trees, combed his hair back out of his eyes.

A derisive 'pah' from behind him, and "Badtz-Maru is a penguin, you foreigner!"

"My mistake," smiling to himself, and then, Kaito stepping out next to him, cartoon skeleton pirate stamped across his shirt, waving a sword, eye patch on lopsided and – "oh, that's much more mature. Why would a skeleton need an eyepatch, anyway? By definition they don't have eyes."

"This isn't one of your puzzles," said Kaito, fell into step beside him, "Layton groupie. Ah, where are we going? Scout out host clubs? Maybe get some food? I'm still hungry." Animated bright so as not to think about the risk of this, of wandering around quietly on their own out of school at the mercy of snipers gunmen random assaults—

"Sounds like a good idea," said Saguru. "Ah, I don't know Tokyo as well as I do Kyoto—"

"Of course," said Kaito, exaggerated roll of his eyes, slanted grin, "It's okay! You're with me, I'm an expert."

A street plastered with shops, moving side by side, hurrying towards the centre of the city where the cars clumped together and the people crossed at random and everywhere was signs and advertising and the snap-hiss of exhaust and ozone, the burning of a hundred bright lights, footsteps of a thousand people heading out for lunch or errands or a lucky day off.

England, his part of England, overlaid the scene in his mind: London, graceless and sprawling in the sun, packed with hapless tourists all bustling running trying to catch the double-decker to the next museum everyone busy but for the policemen massed on corners the street performers crowding the parks the quiet anonymity of children ferried to their schools and university students late for lectures. Mayfair, his father's house, the neighbours peering out their curtains to try and catch a glimpse of the Inspector (she's rich, you know, absolutely loaded, some Japanese princess or other) or his son (it's madness, them letting that boy play cops and robbers he's only a little thing who the hell runs the department over there?)

But focus, focus: neon-patterned street lights snaking over blackened asphalt, people bustling past them. Kaito walking on his left, they've reached a cross-walk.

Someone on the other end watching them watching them. Black from head to toe and—

You're hallucinating you're seeing things a compromised brain is—but no, they were watching them, they were there, military black, beanie hat pulled down low features invisible but he was looking at them everything about the way his head tilted said that he was looking at them watching them. Baggy clothes indicated that he might've had a gun a knife something illegal hidden on his person.

A hand gripping his, holding him steady. Light red, blinking, cars ferrying past.
"Saguru—" Voice bright. "What do you see?"

"I think someone's watching us," out of the corner of his mouth and in French.

Kaito's fingers tightened on his hand, relaxed. Barely a second. Light flickering. "How close?"

"Across the road," said Saguru.

A barely-perceptible nod, and then, "has he seen you?"

Saguru looked again, tried to tell apart expression face intent but he couldn't with his head bowed that way. Nothing in his hands, hands in his pockets, holding himself to one side as though he was reading the signs at their side, and Saguru remembered reading about Georgi Markov and the bullet umbrella. No umbrella, but modern spooks no doubt had better (and faster) materials, and--

"Can't tell," said Saguru, his heart-beat fluttering but not panicked, *just another day at work breathe in keep your gaze forward don't worry about the other stuff. "Head's tilted at a forty-five degree angle to the ground. Looks like he's reading the pamphlets."

"Assume he's seen us," murmured Kaito, "assume he's looking for us. Too many boys look like me, so – put your arm around me, pretend we're dating. Head bent. Glare."

Magician's assistant, that was his job now. Saguru snorted, hesitated, curled his arm over his shoulder, and then pulled Kaito close, unpleasant tightness in his stomach as the man shifted his gaze off the pamphlets across the road blue eyes seeking out something them? Not clear not clear, Saguru shifted himself closer. Glared, like Kaito told him, bared his teeth.

Light flickering to green, and they walked. Man in black to the right of him, his face bleeding in closer features becoming obvious: sharp nose blue eyes full pink mouth and—

"Don't you have school?" Man in black, brows raised, scarring on the corner of his mouth pulling it up one side more than the other. "I'm pretty sure today isn't a national holiday."

Saguru scowled, and dropped his arm from Kaito's shoulders, buzzing, his knees shaking with relief. "Have you been spying on me?" he demanded, switched from Japanese to Mandarin in a blink – used the wrong clause, realized a half second too late.

Jack smiled, like a knife, like a heart-attack, like a Liverpudlian thug with war on his mind. Which he was. "Only on days of the week that are numbered," he said cheerfully, and held out his hand to Kaito, "Jack Penfold. Guru's cousin."

"Kaito Kuroba," remarkably smooth, "I'm a—friend."

Brows again, Jack could have an entire conversation in brows and flirtatious commentary and significant pauses and Saguru had never so badly wanted him to be here, never so badly wanted him to be anywhere else.

"Thought you were a genius," to him, head cocked, looking at Kaito, flicker of a smile that looked a shade menacing.

Saguru flushed. "Shut up," sullenly, "did uncle Blake send you?"

"No," said Jack. "Uncle Blake sent you a care package. It's at my place. Come on, I'll treat you boys to lunch – on me. Since we're having a holiday, I suppose?"
Kaito blending seamlessly into place at his side, holding his hand tightly as though Jack might open up his mouth bare his teeth eat him whole, "we, uh—"

"Don't bother, Kaito," too late to add the honorific, "Jack's just teasing."

"That's right," said Jack, "didn't go a full day of school in my life." Cheerfully, he led them to the other side of the road and to the wicked-looking ginsu-silver Lexus RC F, grille bared like sabre teeth, top down. "Of course, I don't think you need to know a lot of school when all you do in life is stab people for the price of a packet of Asda ham. Did Saguru tell you I was a thug?"

"No," said Kaito, "do thugs usually talk like they're from *My Fair Lady*?"

"This one does," said Saguru, though his heart has calmed now, the words come out affectionate. "How much did this monster put you back?" he indicated the Lexus, head tilted, "it's—"

"2015, 0-60 in 4.3 seconds," said Jack, "cost me practically nothing. I did a favour for a friend once."

Saguru's heartbeat tripled, then settled. "It's ridiculous for Tokyo," he says, "You don't get up to sixty anywhere in Tok—" he stopped, because he knew the way that Jack was grinning at him, knew it would lead to Jack gunning the engine, pulling them madly madly madly into the oncoming rush of traffic, knew it would end with Kaito shaking and clinging to him (*on second thoughts maybe you should let—*)

"Jack," he said, "we have guests. Be nice."

Kaito giving him a curious look.

"Scout's honour," said Jack, and clicked the key-fob, unlocked the doors all at once. Saguru slid into the back, gratified to feel Kaito sliding in next to him, huddling up although the back of the Lexus looked like it could fit a mid-sized family of four with room to spare for the ailing dog, and the passenger seat wouldn't be out of place in a private jet. Jack got behind the wheel; the Lexus purred to life underneath his hands, and Saguru felt the wind shake.

"Or, well, it would be," Jack observed, "if I was ever in the Scouts. Thug's honour, I suppose. Seatbelts on, don't want either one of you to make a mess of my windshield."

Kaito clipped his seatbelt into the holder. Saguru did the same, only marginally slower, marginally slow enough that the car was already rolling by the time it tchicked, which meant he slid forward bumped into the seat in front of him, hadn't even rightened himself when the wheels screeched and Jack pulled into the traffic like they'd move to make a place for him. Whip around a doddering Toyota (2012) and take the corner on two wheels, pushing the Lexus to 60 in 3 seconds flat.

Kaito yipped in fear, grabbed hold of his hand and squeezed as tightly as he could. Saguru squeezed back as Tokyo turned Impressionist, flickering past the windows like guttered candle wax in so many shapes. Another corner, and Jack rolled the steering wheel like he was playing gameshow host, forcing the Lexus to dip on one side, rise on the other, and to slam Kaito into him.

He swore, absolutely would've stated his life reputation honour on it, that Jack grinned at him in the rearview mirror, and then had to break and gun it to avoid spilling into the oncoming traffic lane, weaving in and out between two packed trucks and a slew of bicyclists going the wrong way.

"Where the—" Kaito wheezing, his fingers gripped tight into the front of his shirt, "—did he learn to drive?"
Saguru wondered which version of the truth was better for Jack: a youth spent stealing cars in Liverpool; six years spent as a soldier in the Royal Army; five years as MI6 agent Mr. White.

"James Bond movies," said Saguru, which was not a response by any means, but it made Jack laugh high and loud, made Kaito yip again in his terror and then relax at ease relax. Kaito still slumped against his chest, gripping him like Saguru was all that stood between him and a fiery crash (and that was very nearly the truth except Jack would never crash, Jack wouldn't unless he saw a need to).

Sixteen minutes of driving, and they were out of Central Tokyo, away from school, away from people chasing them in the dark. Sign reading, Minato-ku, and Jack finally slowed enough that they weren't actively trying to break the land-speed record.

He could feel Kaito's heartbeat against his chest, pulsing too quick to be safe. Fingers in his.

"Breathe in."

Kaito blinking up his eyes teary from the open windows. "Wh—"

Tip of the chin. "Breathe in," slower, and he did it himself, feeling his stomach and chest expand, shifting Kaito.

Kaito watching him, and then, breathing in: slowly, his breath like maple and sugar. Holding it. One two three four.

"Out."

One two three four and out. Saguru could feel him shudder.

"You people are crazy," said Kaito, pushed himself back and up, leaned into his seat. His face red, one cheek reddened further by the fact that he'd been slumped into his arms, holding him steady and still.

"Penfold family trait," said Jack, pulling into a parking space with two centimetres to spare from bashing into the car in front of him. "You want to know what's funny?"

"Please," said Kaito, leaning forward.

"'Guru drives worse than I do."

Saguru flushing, and—

"You drive?!" said Kaito, whipped his head around.

"Not, ah—official," said Saguru, "only in England. When there's no people around."

"We live in Yorkshire," said Jack, "nothing about for miles but sheep and sheep-shaggers. Here we go, lads. Out you go, let's get some proper food in you."

Click of the car locks disengaging, and Saguru pushed the door open and stepped out first, scanned the crowd for anyone in black anyone looking at them oddly anyone paying too much attention —crowd of students ferrying away in a pack young woman with bag on her mobile phone business suit gentleman eating lunch by a park bench and tapping away at an iPad, front of a large restaurant reading Tokyo Shibu Tofuya Ukai sprawling gardens behind the just-risen yellow walls cultured and curated tree growing out of a pot heavy and green and dipping.
Jack hooked his arm around his shoulder, and squeezed tight. "I've missed you," he said, in English, and the language didn't feel like it belonged on his tongue.

"I've, um—" didn't know what to say so he ducked his head, nodded, and grabbed Kaito's arm as Jack whisked him towards the doors. "I've missed you I'm terrified please help me please I'm in way over my head I don't know what these people want with Kaito I don't know what they want with me—

"Table for three, gentlemen?" Maitre'd moustached dressed in a heavy yukata swirled with yellow and black.

"Please," said Jack, breezed in after him as though the place was his to rent.

Kaito's hand slid into his again, held on as Jack navigated the narrow passages between the little tables to a private dining room in the back, private dining room where nothing would be visible from the outside and they'd be free to eat in peace. Relief a blurring in his veins, whispering to him, this is probably the first time you've been outside without being terrified and he could tell that Kaito felt it too, that Kaito knew about it too.

They wouldn't attack them if they were with other people, would they? That sniping attempt near the start, that had gone so badly – they wouldn't be stupid enough to attack them with other people, not again, would they?

Saguru wished he had the answers spelled out for him. He wished he knew more than guesswork and variables and probabilities.

Sit down at the table, Jack in front of them, the two of them sharing a side. Menus hand-made, fine and detailed, fude-brush kanji on the pages inside. The prices made Kaito's eyes pop, and he—

"My treat," said Jack, "I love food. Didn't get enough of it growing up, and Saguru doesn't eat a lot —"

"I eat an adequate amount for my bodyweight," said Saguru, flipping the pages with a finger, trying to decide between the dishes.

Kaito quiet, whispering of the turning pages tshh tshh.

"For a genius, he's terrible at taking care of himself." Jack, addressing Kaito, easy familiarity and charm. "Did he tell you about the time he passed out while he was—"

Saguru made a noise in the back of his throat, appropriately grumpy. "I'm sure Kaito doesn't need to hear about my short-comings," he said, sharp like his mother taught him, staring down at his menu (a swirl of candy-coated colours and minimalist cooking jargon, how does one exactly measure a 'whisper of sauce?)

"No, I'd like to hear," said Kaito, clapped his hands together, "he's so perfect, it's annoying. He's first in class. First. What kind of overachiever—" Kaito rolling his eyes, neglecting to mention that he was second, and only because he'd missed his English exam.

Jack grinned, straight white teeth, crooked smile, nothing of the street thug in the way he folded his hands together, but his eyes, flat and focused, his eyes betrayed everything he did. "Okay, okay, okay," said Jack, "let's order food, and then you and I—" a jab of his menu at Kaito, "—we're going to swap stories."

"Do I get a say in this?" said Saguru. He closed his menu, set it aside, glared at Jack, "or did you
come to Japan specifically to bother me?" The curl of heat in his voice had no effect; Jack knew he was play-acting at temper (didn't know the appropriate response to familial ribbing, joking and teasing in return? Smacking him about the head? Telling him to be quiet?)

"Rude," said Jack. Tipped his perfectly-coiffed hair, smiled his perfectly-straight smile. "I've actually been working here for a while – translation and teaching."

Meaning: *I can't talk about what I'm actually doing.*

"God help your students," said Saguru.

Hooked arm around his neck, pulling him close, scent of spice and gunsmoke and cleansing oil, *silence,* and then, rattle of a heartbeat and—"Arara, you're so rude," said Jack, "just for that, I'm going to tell all the embarrassing stories about you. All of them. To your cute little—"

Jab of the elbow into Jack's ribs to get him to shut up shut up shut up shut up.

Jack stopped, tilted his head, he could feel the blush radiating in his cheeks.

Awkward pause where Kaito tried to pretend Jack didn't say what he said and Saguru tried to think of a plausible reason for why he'd been so against it.

"So how come you don't have school today?" Jack, putting his menu aside.

"We're doing some research for Culture Festival," said Kaito, "looking at, ah—themed cafes."

*Themes cafes?*

"What kind of themed cafes?"

"Any kind," said Saguru, "I'll be dressing up as Sherlock Holmes and serving food at the school's —" A snicker to his left, Jack's shoulders shaking, "what on earth is so funny?"

Jack's wicked grin flashing at him again, and then he turned to Kaito, "you know," he said, "he's been dressing up as Sherlock Holmes since he was three years old or something? Uncle Blake – his uncle Blake – told me this one story—ah, how did it go already—" Furrowed brows. "Ah, okay – so. He was five years old at the time. Uncle Blake used to have this habit of coming in with, ah—"

"Gentleman friends," said Saguru, resigned to his fate. "Very obvious gentleman friends. Or, friend, as it turned out to be the case, but I didn't know that, at the time. Someone told me that the house was haunted—"

Jack's grin widened. Kaito leaning in closer, his eyes wide with horror-amusement-affection-something else?

"He was a gullible kid," said Jack, cheerfully, "bright, sure, but still a kid. Anyway, one night, Guru decides he has to have *proof,* okay? There needs to be some reasonable explanation for all the weird noises he kept hearing, and doors he kept finding open – so he sets up this trap, I – What did you even do, I always blank on this bit?"

Saguru groaned, said, "It was twelve bloody years ago!"

"All I know is," said Jack, "it involved twine and water, and some kind of netting he rigged to the ceiling. So Uncle Blake goes to bed, sneaks out via the side door. Two hours later, he's coming back in, and—" He smacked his hands together, "—goes flying arse over tea-kettle because the
little genius put twine everywhere, and it tripped him up. Then his gentleman friend screams because he's covered in—what was it, flour? Flour and water?"

"I thought it would stick better, and it would be visible—"

"And Saguru comes running out—"

Kaito's bright laughter shook the whole room, his hands on the table, leaning over it, near wheezing, and it was good, Saguru thought, it was good to hear him laugh, he didn't mind if it was at him. Even if it was at him, it was good to hear him laugh.

Dragging in deep mouthfuls of air and, "oh my—did you get into a lot of trouble?"

"Nah," said Jack, "Uncle Blake never had the heart to yell at him. He'd have tanned my arse black if I'd done the same thing—"

"You bloody liar, no, he wouldn't have! He liked you better." Saguru glancing at Jack, amused. "I mean, he adopted you, didn't he? He was stuck with me, but he chose you—"

"Oh, knock it off with that shite," said Jack, "and pipe down, I'm talking to your friend now. Let me tell you about the time Saguru decided the neighbours were axe murderers and discovered that they were having separate affairs with the same set of twins—"

For the next half hour: Jack regaling Kaito with tales of his misspent youth in Yorkshire (and then he calls the local police, right, tells them that he has a suspected murderer in mind and the silly sods show up--). Waiter coming over to their table, taking a flurry of perfectly-pronounced dishes from Jack, Kaito, himself after a pause, realizing that he'd been sitting there listening and completely forgetting about the food – completely forgetting about everything but sitting at a nice table in the dim of the restaurant, listening to Jack's voice, Kaito's laughter (oh, no, he didn't! What did the neighbours think? / They thought he was bloody adorable but if you ask me Uncle Blake paid them some money to think so—)

Driiiing.

Jack mid-story, pause, raise brows, "someone figure out you were skiving?"

Saguru patted his pockets, found the lumped-up mess of his phone, and flipped it open, put it to his cheek.

"Where are you?" Nakamori.

"Ah—Out." Couldn't very well tell him he'd skipped school, could he? "My cousin came and took me to lunch. I don't see him very—"

"That's fine. That's fine." Distracted, tapping pencil on the other end. "I need to ask you to come into the station as soon as you can."

Saguru stiffened. Ice down his back. "I—yes, of course. At once. Is something the matter? Is it KID?" across the table, Kaito's eyes flickering to him for a bare second, then back again, to Jack, quietly watching them. "Is there another heist notice?"

A snort. "When isn't there?" Nakamori's tired voice streaming heat at him, "not a heist notice. Just need to ask you some questions – standard procedure."

"Questions about—" Clink of the door to the private dining area opening, waiter streaming in with
the plates, clatter of dishes on hardwood table. Saguru struggled up, pushed himself towards the door, and left the room restaurant building, loitered just behind Jack's car. Nakamori's voice fuzzed by static, hemmed in by pauses.

"That is – we think—" A sigh, and then, "fuck. Watanabe tried to kill himself last night."

Stopped still. Mother with two children one in a push chair students jogging past with phones clamped to the ears man loitering by the edges of the park fiddling about with his phone and static hum in his ears nonono—

"How?" Voice rasping. "How did he – how—"

"We think," Nakamori's voice heavy, "he got a knife from somewhere. Think he cut his tongue out to keep from making noise. Stabbed straight through the jugular. One of the cops found him and managed to keep him alive until the ambulance got him."

You don't cut your tongue out to keep yourself quiet someone else does it for you to keep you quiet, "and wh—why do you need to talk to me?"

"You're not in trouble," Nakamori, immediately, "we just – need to know how things were between you two. There was some problem with the tapes, it didn't record your interview – so I need to ask you what you talked about, ask you how he was – maybe you can help me figure out what he used. Couldn't find any weapons."

"Is he – I mean, is he—Can I talk to him?"

Nakamori laughing, a tired, huffed-out husk of a noise. "Not much point," said Nakamori. "He can't talk back." A pause. "Come down to the station as soon as you can. Make sure you eat before – you know how long these things take. And don't stay—"

Man across the street sticking his phone in his pocket walking off meeting his girlfriend.

"—outside too long. We still haven't caught that bastard who shot you. Thought it was Watanabe, but—" A sigh. "Watanabe said he didn't even know who you were. Was just paid to do it by 'someone English'. You have any English enemies?"

Hands shaking his voice shaking, "j—Just my immediate family."

On the other end, silence.

"That was a joke." Deep breath in, deep breath out. You're not a kid don't act like a kid you need to be professional you need to be calm and cool think about what your father would do. (Father would never in his life shelter a criminal from his just reward no matter how desperately young that criminal was and how much bad shit his father had gotten him into--) "I've made a number of enemies in England, but most of them are behind bars... I'll contact my supervisor at the London Met and see if there were any who were recently released or who failed their trials. If I find anything out, I'll let you know."

Some English guy. Truth or fiction? 60% chance of Watanabe hearing his accent and deciding, they're a bunch of murdering bastards down there anyway he's a rich influential kid there's a huge possibility someone wants him dead or for ransom. But if he was telling the truth—how international were the men in black? How far had Toichi Kuroba gone down the rabbit hole?

"Thank you." Nakamori. "I'll be waiting for you, kid. Enjoy your food."
Hung up the phone. Sagged back against the wall, breathing in, out, in out.

Someone had tried to kill Watanabe. Inside a police-station, open twenty-four hours, manned at all times by uniforms or detective inspectors or sergeants or someone a damned sight higher up than he was. Someone had managed to sneak into the station, past the security system, blend in with the cops, and do a damn good job of murdering the hell out of Watanabe Shinobu before they'd been disturbed.

His good mood evaporated. He pushed his hands through his hair, and rubbed them over his face. Could start with talking to the late-night shift detectives. See if there'd been anyone around, if they'd seen anything strange.

Saguru went back inside.

The food sat untouched on the table: great steaming bowls of miso soup dwarfed by sticky bundles of rice, hand-rolled, glossy-topped sushi, vegetables egged and fried in batter. Jack paused, sushi roll at his mouth, glanced at him.

"I need to go," said Saguru, didn't look at Kaito, "there's a—problem at the station. They need to talk to me."

Jack frowned, set the roll down. "what happened?"

"I'll explain later," said Saguru, "please, enjoy your food, I—I'm not hungry anymore."

"I'm coming with you." Kaito putting his chopsticks down, "you can't go alone. Besides, do you want to leave me alone with your cousin? He knows so many of your dirty little secrets."

"It's not – you don't have to—"

"Little brother's right," said Jack, "you don't go alone. Let me get this for takeaway." A swish of clothing, and Jack left, clinking the door behind him.


"Fine. I'm fine." Soft voice quiet voice dead voice. "Just had a shock. I'm fine." He glanced at the table, found the bottle of sake, poured himself a measure, and knocked it back.

"What happened?"

It went down smooth and burning, scalding a trail down to his stomach. His hands stopped shaking, marginally.

Truth or fiction? He eyed Kaito, wondered what would be the best to tell him.

*Truth. If you start keeping secrets now, then you're not going to stop, and is that really what you want this to turn into? Lies on top of lies on top of lies?*

"Someone tried to kill Watanabe last night," he told him.
Chapter 8

Inside the Tokyo Police Department: chaos. Sixteen desks in a loose square formation formed the bullpen where the regular constables took their lunch, did their paperwork, lived breathed existed for the first five to ten years of their career. Three narrow steps to a walkway surrounding the entire room, branched by closed doors where the detective inspectors had their offices. Mascot in soggy clothing, head off, looking supersized in his bright blue suit, smoking a cigarette in between surreptitious glances.

Saguru hadn't forced down any of the food Jack had ordered, nibbled here and there at a roll or two when Kaito prompted him. Food felt too heavy for him at the moment, another issue crowding his head that he didn't need.

Someone had tried to kill Watanabe. Who what why how did they manage to get in? Could he get a list of active police officers who'd been on duty the night before?

"We are never skiving off school again," Kaito, to his left. "This is karma. Divine retribution."
Flipped a card in the air, caught it, put it up his sleeve. Then showed him his hands, empty.

Ito's desk was a mess of paperwork, but he cleared half of it to the floor and relegated the rest to the emptied desk next to his. "The sergeant's out on sick leave," he told Kaito, "he'll never know."

Kaito winked, and flicked him a handful of cards, "your secret's safe with me."

Inspector Nakamori's office door stood shut, blocking him out. Saguru perched at the edge of Ito's desk, his stomach roiling with hunger and nausea, trying to think: how would he get in if he didn't want police officers to notice? The doors opened up into a reception that was always manned by people, and from there, there was an elevator, or stairs. Stairs would make noise, but the elevator didn't work unless you had the key. Maybe someone's key had gone missing—

He wandered over to the noticeboard tacked up by the double doors, glancing over collection for Inspector Nakamori's birthday and Friday 14th: Drinks! Tacked on with pins that looked half-rusted and helplessly worn through. Low-edged buzz of people whispering around him, about him, looking at him, and at his elegant cousin Jack, sprawled at a sergeant's desk, and saying things to him that made him blush. He should go stop him, but—Jack would keep himself busy in other ways, and this was better than most.

Did a lap around the room, counting the steps in his head. There was no way around the walkway without the people in the bullpen seeing you; the floor was linoleum, loud on heeled shoes, so he had to have worn something soft, and a disguise. Police officers at night might not have been plentiful, but they'd have been alert regardless, wouldn't they? Then again, you and Kaito snuck in last night without even tripping the alarm but that was different, people knew them, people expected them to be here, people—

The door slammed open. Nakamori, aged ten years in the last ten minutes, saw him standing by the noticeboard, gestured.

Saguru clicked up the stairs. After a minute, Jack followed, tucking the sergeant's number into the topmost pocket of his suit.

"You don't need to—"
"You're underage," said Jack, "and you need adult supervision in the case of someone interviewing you, don't you?" Head cocked to one side. "That's the way it works in England."

"I'm a bloody police officer," Saguru grumbled, "and I'm not a suspect."

"Are you so sure about that?"

Saguru winced. Said nothing, and then walked inside Nakamori's office.

Was he a suspect?

Nakamori's office was a mess: photocopied heist notes stuck to the wall with Blu-tack, photocopied pictures of stolen jewels, a huge whiteboard trying to find some connection in between the museums, private residences, trains, airports, galleries, etcetera, that KID had robbed. Crisscrossing red and green lines hovering over places with words like 'CONNECTION?' and 'CHECK WITH GUARDS'. Nakamori's desk: small and wedged into the corner, away from the windows, crowded with tall stacks of paper that wobbled as the Inspector sat himself down, half an uneaten meal in front of him, the rest congealing in the bin. Looks like he hadn't been the only one to lose his appetite.

Saguru shifted into the cleanest chair. Jack leaned a shoulder against the wall, and cocked his head to one side.

"Saguru," Inspector Nakamori sighed, "thank you for coming in. I'm sorry I had to take you away from your day—" his eyes slid across to Jack, silent and watchful as a statue.

"Jack Penfold," said Saguru, "my cousin. He's here because he's overprotective and thinks I'm in trouble with the police, Inspector Nakamori. Am I?"

Nakamori startling, shaking his head. "No," he said, "you're not in trouble. Like I said, there was some problem with the tapes – it stopped recording when you were in there with Watanabe. I just want to know what you talked about." His eyes going back to Jack, who grinned at him, bare teeth and a smile for war. "But you're a kid," said Nakamori. "You need an appropriate adult present no matter what you do with the police, so—"

"Glad to be of service," said Jack, cleared a stack of magazines off a chair, and dropped himself into it, folded his arms, leaned back. "Go ahead." And to Saguru, in Mandarin, "I'm right here. We leave when you feel uncomfortable."

Interview, 13:02:01PM. Nakamori sitting across his desk, his fingers steepled together.

What did you and Watanabe talk about? "I wanted to know why he broke into my house. My security system is top of the range – usually thieves wouldn't risk being arrested for a handful of baubles that would be difficult to fence, anyway." Shrug of the shoulders, folding his fingers together to mimic Nakamori's seated pose, neuro-linguistic programming. "He didn't say much of value. I suspected he was working with a team, but I couldn't really get anything out of him."

"Not even the name of his associates?" Nakamori sighed. "Damn it."

"He's Yakuza," said Saguru. "Wouldn't I need to be a lot scarier than I am for me to get that sort of information?"

Nakamori grumbled his response – something like 'yes', too distorted to make out for good.

How did Watanabe seem when you left? "Angry. Resigned to his fate. He's a career criminal,
Inspector Nakamori. A teenage boy visiting him and analyzing his life wasn't about to put him on
the straight and narrow. He's been through this enough times that it's an old game by now."

Nakamori nodded, scribbled something on his report. "And you had no idea he'd try to kill himself
once you left?"

"No. He didn't seem the type." This wasn't a suicide, it was attempted murder. "Why are you so
certain it's suicide?" he asked. "Did you find something on his person—a note to his loved ones,
something?"

Nakamori glanced up, and then down at his desk: manila folder on top of the pile, lopsided, clean.
Watanabe's file, it hadn't had the time to gather that thin film of dust that everything in Nakamori's
office seemed to carry like a shine. "We found a note apologizing for everything," said Nakamori,
"and he had a cellphone with him. Don't know how he got it, but one of the cops reported a missing
cellphone – Do you know Keiichi? Constable Ito?"

Remembering the constable who'd walked them to the homicide floor: six one thin as a stick curl-
tipped hair wide mouth brown eyes. "Yes," said Saguru, "he lost his phone? And Watanabe got a
hold of it?"

"He made two calls. We're tracing them, but – it'll take time. Not really a 'top priority'." Curl of the
lip. Nakamori looked down at his notes, wrote something else. "Is that all? Did you talk about
anything else, or--?"

"Just his motivations for breaking into my house," said Saguru, "that's all." And about the people
who'd bought him. About the people who are trying to kill me and Kaito. About the people who are
apparently everywhere and nowhere at once. He schooled his face: concern, lightly worried,
pushed his hands together, "can I see the crime-scene?" he asked, "the photos of it?"

Nakamori hesitated. "I don't—"

"If it's suicide," said Saguru, hated the way the words came out of his mouth: stiff still
businesslike. "If it's suicide, then it doesn't matter, right? I just want to understand why he did it.
It's such a – hard step to take."

Jack's eyes on him, burning. He could feel his gaze like a hot iron brand. Even if Nakamori bought
the act, Jack was—

"Guess it can't hurt," said Nakamori. "Do you want to see the scene, or?"

"Both, if possible. I'll go along and take the file. Do, ah – a walkthrough of the crime. Is that
alright?"

Shrug. Nakamori handed over the manila folder, and then rose. "It happened in the holding cells on
the second floor. Do you want someone to take you?"

"I can find my way," said Saguru, stood up. "Thank you, Inspector."

Out the door. Collecting Kaito from the desk where Keiichi Ito regaled him with stories, made him
laugh toss his head smile like he was something wonderful. Saguru's stomach hot and angry with
the lies he'd fed Nakamori.

Kaito's smile falling away as soon as they stepped outside the door, and that was fucking – that
was his fault too.
"Where to?" said Kaito.

"Second floor. Crime scene. Walkthrough." Saguru tucked the folder underneath his arm, ferried them into the lift.

Jack saying nothing, but watching him calmly, like he was trying to figure out how to wire him loose from the inside out. Jabbed an elbow at the row of buttons, hit the one for the second floor. The precinct lift jogged to shuddering life and then lurched downwards.

"What did Nakamori say?"

"Just wanted to know what I was doing talking to a known Yakuza associate," said Saguru, opened the file folder.

The first wave of pictures shoved his heart into his throat.

Watanabe, before: greying old wrinkled rough around the edges. Gleaming black button eyes thin mouth scar on his face. Thin wiry fingers and long hands.

Watanabe, after: face a mass of gore, opened mouth, stump of a tongue wiggling rawly in the black. Eyes swollen shut, lacerated cheeks. Missing fingers, defensive wounds? Red crawling all the way down his wrists arms soaking into the floor. Almost looked as though he was pleading, his mouth begging, his whole body poised up and accusing, *you did this you did this your fault your fault your—*

Saguru rattled in a breath, let it out like it hurt his lungs.

Kaito leaning over his shoulder gasping in shock and turning his head away green at the edges Jack peering over to see and eyes wide as saucers not afraid but surprised maybe surprised at the bright bright redness splashed all over the page and the wicked darkening of the page surprised at how casually cops here gave a teenager their files surprised that maybe he didn't tell him anything about this, didn't tell him anything about what was going on—

Incident report: *at 22:30PM I walked down to the holding cells looking for my missing cellphone and found blood on the floor. After ascertaining that there was no immediate danger to myself or my colleagues, I opened the door—*

The lift halting, doors squeaking open, long corridor filled with nothing but empty white tiles and white walls. Saguru stepped out, Kaito close behind him (the scent of him, chamomile, lavender, sugar, cinnamon) and down the hallway to the left down another hallway and there was police tape streaking all over the doorway of one room. Brown stains on the white floor, on the white walls, curving out into a semi-circle away from the door.

Saguru stepped over the threshold, ducked underneath the tape.

More staining: halfway up the wall (six feet off the ground indicative of a spray pattern) and all over the floor on the corner of the lopsided table. Fragments of broken camera in the corner, glittering like spilled mechanical teeth. Stinking air: fetid and unmoving, rasping with the scent of something dead long-dead.

"Comes in through the door," Saguru muttered, "takes Watanabe by surprise—cell only six by four, bed, corrugated iron window on the back, nowhere in or out by the door, Watanabe would've seen anyone—

"Maybe he knew him?" said Kaito. Eyes drawn to the blood head bent focused on the way the arc
of the staining took over half the wall and went up up up as though someone had taken Watanabe from behind, wrenched his mouth open, sliced his tongue out, cut an artery? But he'd have bled out if they'd cut an artery.

"Is this what you boys do for fun?" dry as dust, Jack leaning against one of the walls without stains on it. "The youth today." Head cocked to one side. Gentler, "come on, Saguru. Let's take you home. There's nothing more to be learned here anyway."

The air humming with disturbance: Watanabe hadn't been expecting anyone (spilled plate on the floor empty now camera broken into pieces). Someone with access to the key had opened the door (had any keys gone missing in the past few days?) Camera broken (before or after?) Nobody upstairs realizing (had they been watching the screens at all?)

Kaito hopping up on the chair, measuring how high off the ground the camera was. "How do you break a security camera?" he said, "throw something at it?"

You've broken your fair share. "Like what?" said Saguru, "chair's bolted. He couldn't have moved it. Didn't have anything on him, so--"

Kaito frowning, looking at the debris, something brimming in his mind, but kept to himself.

For some reason, sputtering temper, we're supposed to be a team. Saguru forced it down and away i'm not like that, and looked again at the streaked floor walls wainscoting table.

Someone had been watching him. Someone had known he'd spoken to Watanabe. Someone had known he'd given him his grandfather's number.

Saguru hadn't held him down and cut his tongue out, but he might as well have.

20:33:00PM. Central Tokyo. Nameless bar, lopsided sign, cheap prices.

He found a stool on his own in a booth in the corner, holed himself up there on the faded leather seating, picked his menu up and twirled it in his hands. Settled on a shot of Glenmorangie whiskey, 18 year old, paid the amount without blinking looking at the waiter taking a breath. The colour of it like old bloodstains, gleaming in the cup, making his stomach sick already without it every touching his lips, but he needed --- something.

Anything. Something to take his head away from him, keep his mind quiet for a night. Something to make him stop.

Circled his fingers around the cup, felt it cool and chilled against his palm. His eyes wandered the bar: two foreigners, English and Australian, one black American exchange student, Japanese salarymen out on a social drinking expedition. Glances his way, as though he had a big sign on his forehead reading, I nearly got a man killed today.

Beeper on the table, silent. Even Nakamori didn't want to talk to him.

Saguru took the shot in one swallow, shuddered, and signalled for another. Might as well run a tab, burn some of the money his father had given him for 'just those occasions, my boy, when you need a little something to unwind'. He'd thought: books, good food, museums, art galleries. The truth: whiskey, whiskey, whiskey, and more whiskey.

What a fucking day. His insides felt churned up and broken, like he'd just stepped off a malfunctioning ferris wheel. Everything spun and ached, twitched and hurt, and he couldn't stop thinking of Watanabe and his wide eyes and his broken tongue and the fact that someone had
known he'd talked to him, someone had wanted to stop him from – what? He didn't know.

He didn't know any of this.

So he had another whiskey, and checked his phone. No messages from Kaito – probably still settling the doves and the rabbits into their corners of the house: the cages lining the walls outside Kaito's room, inside Kaito's room, in the hallway. Six trips in Jack's ridiculous car, going slow for the precious cargo. Two hours helping Kaito choose what he needed from his house, carrying it to his.

Kaito's house: quiet, barely lived in, testimony to a dead man.

The second whiskey arrived, and he toasted Toichi Kuroba, father of the year, known yakuza associate, man who'd gotten them into this mess.

Creak of floorboards as people moved paid left went on with their lives quiet and apart from this nameless place in the middle of nameless Tokyo, and suddenly he wanted to be home so strongly, every inch of him ached like he'd been beaten. Knock back the second whiskey, ask for another, and doubled. The back of his neck prickling as slow, peat-bog fire slid through his veins; his heartbeat slowing by one then two seconds, relaxing, finally, after the day.

Phone buzzing, Kaito's ringtone, two messages: r u ok?? And guru txt back.

Text back: fine, at work, and put the phone facedown on the table, fingertip-reach away, pick up the glass of whiskey and raise it up to the light, golden gleam of liquor, and—

"Oh, thank God," slightly frazzled voice, "oh, another Englishman, I'm so happy to see one of us —"

Saguru set the shotglass down, glanced to the right: man, 25-30, brown hair curling from the heat, laugh-crinkled eyes, small worried mouth pulled into a line, South London drawl affected, Northerner slant to his voice. Blue eyes, sharp blue eyes; blue-white teeth in a small, thin mouth. Two and a bit shots of whiskey made it available, which made it attractive, which made it wanted.

At his face: mouth falling, comical brows arched and—"Oh—Oh, I'm sorry, I thought you were—"

"I am," dropped the rolling Japanese shift for the Queen's English hum, "English, I mean. But also Japanese." Tilted his head, smiled a second too late, the whiskey six times stronger with his head to one side, a Penfold man learns how to hold his liquor, Uncle Blake talking through the bathroom door, fifteen years old, Rhys gone, Jack gone, everyone gone, but Christ, lad, wait until you grow into your legs before you touch the stuff. "Can I help you?"

"Someone speaks English," muttered he, slid into the chair opposite without being asked.

Most of us do, arched brows said all that for him, you just haven't been looking.

A map from one pocket.

"I'm completely, hopelessly lost," he confided, "sorry, let me start over – I'm Quinn." Hand out, thick-furred fingers with short nails. "Here on holiday, and I thought I'd go for a jolly into town, and one thing led to another—God, it's so difficult to get around here, absolutely mental, thought it'd be more like London, but I've been bashing into people all afternoon trying to get back to my hotel room—" push of the map into the centre of the table, hands brushing, electric fire down his back but—
"If I could be so bold," said Quinn, "can I get you a drink? Only, you're helping me, and I'd be loath to take advantage of you."

Saguru laughed. Short-sharp. "Really?" he said, "because the discerning gentleman would think that was absolutely what you were trying to do."

Flash of one-second rage on his face and then surpriseshock, "what?"

"You've been watching me," said Saguru, now he remembered, "you were in the corner when I came in, drinking a double shot of – what was it, sake? It could have been vodka, I'm good, but I'm not that good." Tongue loosened by the liquor, arms folded on the table, slumped a little, "by the way, most Japanese people know their area enough to know that this map is of Nagoya prefecture, nowhere near the Greater Tokyo Area, but I imagine you picked it up in the airport and thought it would be a good ice-breaker?"

Mouth open still startlingly attractive red rising up the back of his neck, "—um—"

"And I'd give you points for effort, except you don't just 'go for a jolly into town' in Tokyo and then forget how to get back to Nagoya, so really I imagine you've been in Tokyo for a while, and you've just been carrying around this map in the hopes of picking up easily distracted tourists? Shame on you." But he smiled, leaned his cheek on his hand.

Huff of air and Quinn folded the map up. "Jesus," injured voice, "would it have been better if I'd just come over and said, 'God, you're so pretty, I'd like to kiss the mouth off you'?"

"It would've been far more honest," said Saguru, thoughtfully, "but, no, I don't suppose so, not if that was the line you were going to lead with."

"I know how to pick 'em," Quinn, grinning. "Alright, well – I'm a bloody idiot, apparently, so, the drink's on me, and you won't even have to kiss me for it."

A phone vibrated, his.

Saguru didn't take his eyes off of Quinn's, "and if I should want to?" quiet, not challenging.

"Then we'll settle up," said Quinn, "and get out of here." Put the map back into his bag.

"Don't do it, common sense, you're just drunk and sad and vulnerable you're going through a hard time don't do it don't do it don't—"

Get up, scrape the chair back, and nod. "Okay," he said, soft-voiced, thumbing out his wallet, tossing a handful of bills onto the table. Room swaying, and then steadying, his phone humming again; pick it up, push it into his pocket, his mind focused on elsewhere, anywhere but here, somewhere dark and quiet to soothe his head, somewhere where the details didn't blur together quite so much.

Quinn stood up, took his arm, and led him out, gentleman-poise. Blinking Tokyo lights like knives on his eyes, but Saguru drew his chin up, stared down the road, said, "where?"

"Ueno?"
He calculated; it was around nine o'clock, there wouldn't be anyone around the place. Might have to hike over the walls to get there, but—"Okay."

Quinn took his hand; clammy hot.

Trip a blur: taxi to Ueno that he paid for, snaking cars, heat of Quinn pressed up against his side, phone vibrating inside his pocket like a small earthquake (not Kaito this time, Kaito would know enough not to text him and Saguru couldn't get his hand loose to check – Quinn had it in his grasp, held it like he was going to stop the car, drop out of the door, roll away to somewhere else). No conversation.

Did he think him older, or did he just not care?

"Do you work here?" said Quinn, leaned back, dark coif of hair like a cloud, fuzzy and indistinct against the leather upholstery, "you look a bit young to be drinking."

"I work with the police," said Saguru, "and I go to school. Ekoda." A thought flitted inside his mind: are you so sure you should say this? After all, how many attempts on his life have there been so far?

One – sniper rifle in the middle of Tokyo.

Two – home invasion during the night.

Three – picking up a hapless boy, tipsy and drunk, taking him to Ueno, shoving his head under the water, newspapers: Heir to the Hakuba fortune, Saguru Hakuba, found drowned today in the lake at Ueno Park—

Car pulling to a stop, money changing hands, Quinn's hand braced on his back as he left first, Quinn following. Fingers straying down to his arse, and Saguru repressed a shudder, a sense-memory of Rhys (o what can ail thee knight at arms / aren't you a bit too young to be out drinking? Nevermind I won't tell if you won't; the moors black with night, springy heather purpling and swollen with rain, Rhys teeth gnashing down on his collarbone like a cattle-brand – the bruise taking days to hear scarves in dead winter to cover it up – and rucking him up against a tree, fingers invading, then--) Gasped in, dragged his breath over his teeth and it wheezed, as Quinn took him through the wrought-iron gate.

Ueno, dark and dim, spotlights strung along the jogging path and in the lampposts; firefly glow as Quinn took them both sharp to the right, veered away from the lights and into the clutch-together trees, two feet away from the wall, low shrubberies gleaming with thick flowers and dew. Naked branches straggling up towards the sky, rending it into slivers; white clouds heavy with the next rainfall, and wasn't he supposed to be paying attention to the man who'd brought him here, but his head swum heavy, couldn't focus, couldn't—

Quinn pushed him back, up against a tree, and his mouth was sweet and bitter, the kiss wet and flavoured with vodka and bad intentions; overpowering scent of cologne. Saguru lost himself in the smell of it (chemicals, distilled apple, scabrous floral scent with a biting edge of spice).

And the kiss: quick and wet, kissing with a purpose, kissing outside of the movies. Not to comfort or to taste, but to devour and to have.

Kissing like he deserved.

Saguru twisted his hips, overbalanced Quinn and both falling, unevenly, onto ground like rocks; shoulders aching as he jamed one against the grass, his back digging into a rock, his mouth tasted
of vodka and someone else. Quinn's laugh like smoke, "God, you're eager—", Saguru digging his hands into the shirt at his waistband, ripping it up, exposing skin, exposing fur, exposing flesh he could dig his teeth into. Slight pot-belly, gratuitously sharp hip-bones, furred black from naval to the top of Calvin Klein boxers (how very vain, thought Saguru, bent his head and kissed his sweat-tang skin.)

Fingers buried in his hair, pushed his head down, "oh, fuck, baby—" groaned from up above.

Phone vibrating vibrating, voicemail.

What if it's Kaito? Saguru bit gently, grazed his teeth on bone and muscle. What if something happened to Kaito?

"Fuck," again, above, Quinn pushing himself up on an elbow, looking at him. Eyes hazy with want, his brows knit together as Saguru kissed is way up—"wrong direction, baby—"

Squirming out of clothes, eager wasn't he, compact body, thick cock curved over his belly, boxer shorts.


Quinn laughed. "Power-bottom, hm?" Smile that showed too many teeth— "Oh, I like the sound of —"

Burst of lights, sirens in the street. Saguru jerked his head up, turned towards the sound – east of where they were. Location: Newsday Convenience Store, Kanshion Shrine, Gallery of Horyuji Treasures. Police.

Saguru dragged his head up, saw a flicker of white, stomach dropped dead into his shoes.

"Babe?" Quinn following his gaze up towards the lights and—

White wings over Ueno as Kaitou Kid burst into the sky. Saguru scrambled to his feet, ignored the squawk of protest from Quinn, staring upwards as Kaitou Kid sailed closer and closer – something's wrong he's not going high enough to avoid the trees, squealing of police-sirens as cars whipped up near Ueno's entrance.

"What the—" Quinn scrambling up, and, "shit, the cops, we gotta—hey!

Saguru strode forwards, making for the speck of white growing bigger and bigger, closer and closer; now barely above the top of the trees, and he could see the hang-glider in detail (the wings chewed up by holes like someone had methodically and creatively run it through a shredder; Kaito's white-edged face catching sight of him, sight of Quinn, freezing. Mouth open, panting. One hand over his chest, wedged over a spot of red growing deeper and thicker and--)

Saguru couldn't risk Quinn seeing him, knew the cops were on their way through the northern entrance. He watched the wavering hang-glider dip towards the trees—slide into a nest of sakura-blossom branches---

Crash, muffled.

Reached down, grabbed the discarded pile of clothes, and threw a handful of yen at Quinn, who gaped at him—"hey!"

"Sorry, I just remembered I had to get home," he said, stuffing his clothes into his backpack,
pulling his own over, praying that Quinn would be too distracted to question how his clothing had vanished—"for the taxi ride home," he said, "this was lovely, really lovely, thank you—"

"I—wait! I don't even—" Voice trailing to silence behind him as Saguru burst out of there running, weaving around the backdrop of trees to find tattered white hanging on the branches, it was a heist it was a heist I wasn't answering my phone and someone got to Kaito someone might have hurt him I'm so fucking selfish and stupid and—stop that stop that, none of this would help Kaito now. Elbowed his way through the thick of sakura trees and bushes, found the hang-glider in a tangled heap, and—

Underneath it, shifting, groaning, Kaito.

"Shh, it's me, it's me, listen, you've got to strip, okay?" Words rushing out of his mouth aching on his tongue, "you've got to take off your suit, here, I've brought you some—"

"Guru?" Kaito struggling out from the hang-glider, front of his suit stained red, "Guru, I—where were you?!? I thought they—"

"No, I just—later, we'll talk later, are you very hurt?"

"No," breath in deep, "no, just a – I got away. Just a scratch. Help me." Bloodstained glove first, bundled around a jewel the size of his fist, "put that somewhere safe, I want to give it back – it's not Pandora—"

Saguru dropped his backpack, pulled out the discarded clothes (did they still smell of smoke and half-sex and cigarettes?) and handed them over, found his maths book, and ripped the first two pages out, bundled it into a parcel around the jewel and the tattered glove. "I need to go and—" Footsteps coming closer, "I'm going to go, distract them. Call Jack. Okay? Call Jack, tell him to take you home, I'm going to distract them."

Nodding, Kaito with his fingers clean, his hands trembling, pulling on borrowed clothes; his suit crumpled, laying on the grass like the skin of a massive snake, stained pinkish down the front. Saguru looked at it, looked at Kaito, saw the narrow gash on his chest dripping where someone had tried to—

"They didn't hurt me," said Kaito, "they tried, but they didn't—" head up, chin out,"—they didn't hurt me."

Saguru took two steps, wrapped his arms tight around him and squeezed as much as he could, tried to put everything into that hug (I'm so sorry I'm such an asshole I should've answered my phone you shouldn't have been alone please forgive me please I won't leave you alone again--), and —"I'm sorry," said Saguru, "I'm sorry, I just needed some time alone, I'm sorry, does it—"

Kaito flushed pink, awkwardly huddled in his arms, and then he wrapped his own around his neck and crushed him too him, buried his face into his shoulder, and for two seconds three seconds six seconds, Saguru felt as though he was on solid ground again.

And then Kaito stepped back. Gave him a sharp nod, and, "go, distract them," he said, "give back that jewel. Make it good, Guru."

"Will you be safe?" In the middle of the woods in the dark with people who want to hurt you around—"I can stay here, I can—"

Kaito in borrowed clothing. The shirt was too big on him, the jeans baggy, he pulled his hair forward to hide his face, and then—"can I have your jacket?"
Saguru shrugged it off, handed it over.

"There," said Kaito, "now I'm just a random teenage boy. Go. I'll be fine. I'll text you ever five minutes until Jack gets here. Is your phone on silent?"

Nodding, and the ground underneath him shifting, God, could it ever be easier than this? "Every five minutes," said Saguru.

Turning away from him, walking away, had to be the most difficult thing he'd ever done today. Leaving him alone. Leaving him vulnerable, his suit streaked on the ground like melted cloud. His legs shook. Every step away like betrayal.

He couldn't see Quinn anymore, but he could see a regiment of police officers, marching up and down the pathways, checking into the bushes, into the trees, peering into the lake like they might spot the hand-glider in the water.

He spotted Nakamori alone, standing there with a young man: black hair pushed back over his face, another gentleman with a baseball cap, and—"Hakuba!"

Nerves clenching in his stomach, one hard squeeze, and then he walked over. "Inspector Nakamori," he said, his voice smooth and practiced, careful and slow, too slow would make it sound like you have something to hide, "I apologize if I arrived late. I was at a show tonight, and we had to turn our mobiles off—" A flimsy excuse, but—

"Ah." In the light he hadn't recognized him, but now he did: Kudo, worked for Division One, had an illegal handgun that he'd somehow gotten the permit for, knew four languages to his six; ruthless, enigmatic, vicious, sharp enough to tell that he was lying. "What did you go and see, Detective? Sorry we pulled you away from your evening." A big smile that didn't hide the teeth in that question.

Saguru smiling, arching his brows. "Romeo and Juliet," said Saguru, "my housekeeper bought me the tickets. It's playing at the Bunka Kaikan theatre, have you ever been?"

"Once or twice," said Shinichi. "Though I haven't been to the ballet in years."

The other boy – baseball cap dark skin accent brown hair – "sounds boring."

"If you're uncultured, yes," said Saguru, turned to Nakamori before Hattori could respond, "I think I saw Kaitou Kid flying in that direction—" gestured to the Western part of Ueno, "he seemed to be in some difficulty, so the hand-glider couldn't have gone far. The fact that we can't see him suggests that he ditched the machine and walked from here. However, he'll be distinctive – white is impossible to mistake for any other colour, even muddied or stained."

Shinichi Kudo: "Over there? Are you sure?" Head cocked to one side, pure Kaito, had Toichi—

"Of course I am," said Saguru, "I arrived as soon as he took his leave. I saw the glider heading in that direction."

"Really?" Heiji. "Cause I'm pretty sure I saw it over there." Jab of the chin towards the east.

"Towards Central Tokyo?" said Saguru, stuffed his voice with as much haughty sharpness as he dared. "With his face plastered on every available billboard, television screen, and sign?"

"You're the KID expert," Hattori shrugged, "seems like something he'd do to me. Besides -- he could catch a train, head down to Shibuya, nobody's going to look twice at him. Don't they have
some kinda costume contest going on down there?"

Brain slipping to a stop, do they I don't know I've never been, "not sure," said Saguru, "but in any case, I doubt KID would risk losing the jewel—" burning like a coal in his pocket "—and risk his own capture by walking around Central Tokyo. He'd want to go somewhere quiet, and dark, somewhere where he can properly look at the jewel in peace, put his machine away, and then run off. We might be able to—"

A sudden sharp, sharp noise, feet on grass, skidding to a stop, and then: boom, flesh on flesh, and a voice, ringing in the darkness like a clanging bell: "We got him!"
Chapter 9

No no no no no, not Kaito, not Kaito.

Spin around at the sound of the constable's voice, Kudo on his left, Hattori on his right, stride across the ground and find a knot of people resting on top of a squirming figure on the ground. Yelling: Japanese, English. Saguru's knees shaking and shaking, his heart hurting him, not Kaito not Kaito not—

"Let me go!" flailing arms, "buggering Christ, let me go—"

Not Kaito. Quinn. Saguru held his breath until it hurt, didn't let himself sigh in relief. Kudo watching him. Kudo very carefully leaning over and saying, "I don't suppose this is Kaito KID, is it?"

"The height's wrong," said Saguru, without a pause, "probably just a weird foreigner." Coming from a weird foreigner to a weird foreigner, the irony almost enough to make him laugh. He didn't, but hysteria tickled his throat, made him cough a lungful of air in, hide his face behind his handkerchief.

Inspector Nakamori marching up behind him, grin a mile wide, imperious in his joy, and—"let him up, I want to see," said Nakamori, two constables dragging Quinn up onto the floor.

Quinn: leaves in his hair mud streaked all along his face standing in expensive boxers. His eyes rounded when he saw him, and his mouth dropped open, and he said, "you." Hissed, with anger in every syllable. English.

Nakamori frowned, looked down at him. "What's he saying?" he said, "is it KID?"

Saguru raised his brows, and then turned to Nakamori. "The height's wrong," said Saguru, "KID is much smaller. And KID's Japanese. No. Not KID."

"You—you sodding little bastard," said Quinn, lunged at him, "did you do this? Did you call the police?"

Kudo, brows raising, "a friend of yours, Hakuba?"

"Hardly," said Saguru. "I was bored." To Quinn, in English, "I'm very sorry, sir. I don't believe I know who you are." Eyes widening a little – show shock, show confusion, don't show any sign of recognition. Shifted two inches to the left, and, "you're going to catch your death out here," he said.

"You took my clothes!"

Kudo snorted in amusement.

"That doesn't sound like something I would do," said Saguru. "Please let him go, Inspector Nakamori. He'll catch his death out here." Glancing up at the Inspector, glum-faced, looking at the man like he couldn't believe his bad luck.

"I'm going to sue you—" hissed as the constables dropped his arms. Quinn stepped forward, bare chest goosepimpled, hands fisted at his side, took one step forward and—

Saguru laughed. Cold, and soft. "Take your best shot," he said, "we'll see how far you get." And
then turning on his heel, gesturing to Nakamori, "I'm going to go look for KID," he said, "I'll give it an hour, and then turn in. I'll do my report in the morning."

Nakamori nodding, then as an afterthought: "Take Kudo and Hattori with you. You could use an extra pair of eyes."

An hour of fruitless searching, the three of them not speaking, fingertip search. Unearthing clumps of leaves, shaking the trees, looking for a speck of white somewhere in the ground in the opposite direction. His phone vibrating in his pocket, every five minutes, counted down to the last second.

He slipped the jewel from his pack, dropped it in the grass ahead of Kudo and Hattori, heard two seconds later the cry of surprise as Hattori found it.

Nipped back to where Kaito had crash landed while they were busy, stuffed the bloody white suit in his backpack, kicked the hang-glider underneath the bracken and the bushes, then heard them coming, tap-tap-tap.

"Saguru?"

Pop out from behind the bushes, appropriate wide eyes, shock-awe at the sight of the jewel, his back-pack heavy with Kaito's suit, heart hammering. Keep calm, keep calm.

Then back to Nakamori, a quick debriefing, helping the constables cordon off the scene for further exploration in the morning, his head buzzing with the whiskey and with exhaustion, his hands shaking much too hard to hold the coffee that Kudo got him from a vending machine. Drank it scalding, burned his lip on the cup.

"Are you okay?" said Kudo. "You don't seem in your right place." He had a latte, the foam droopy as soap scum, blowing on it.

"A very long and exhausting day," he said – he'd texted Jack, asked him to pick him up, and he was waiting outside Ueno, waiting for Jack to pick him up, mind straying back to Kaito – was he okay? Did Kudo notice anything strange?

Kudo seemed to want more than what he'd given him.

"I had to investigate a suicide," said Saguru. "I—"

Shinichi nodding, his face softening. "Ah," he said, quietly, "I see. Sorry, I didn't—" Shrug of the shoulders and a sudden embarrassed flush. "...Who was it? Suicide?"

"Watanabe," said Saguru. "The man who broke into my house. He was being held at the station. Cut out his—" Flicker of something in Shinichi's eyes. "Mh?"

"Nothing, nothing," said Shinichi, blew on his coffee to cool it further. "It's just – very strange for a suicide, isn't it?"

Can I trust you? Lights gleaming on the tarmac, hungry Tokyo glowing neon in the night. Can I tell you what's going on? But then he thought of Shinichi and his gun, bright and shiny; thought of the cases he'd read with Shinichi at the forefront (chaos incarnate, but he always got the right man and—).

But he couldn't lie to another police officer, even a junior one.
"Watanabe broke into my house. Said he'd been paid to do it by 'someone English'. Approximately two days later, someone breaks into a guarded cell, cuts out his tongue, and scrawls a very unconvincing suicide note." Saguru shrugged his shoulders, twisted the coffee cup three times and then set it on the low wall around Ueno.

"Hm," Shinichi cocked his head to one side, "Well. Any leads?"

"None yet. You'd think there would be. How many English people do you know with access to a police station?"

"Assuming it was the same person who paid to have you killed. Do you have any English enemies?"

Laughed, short, sharp. "Would you like to see my mailbox on a good day?"

Shinichi smiled, almost. "Point taken." Then the smile was gone, and the coffee dumped in a bin next to them, and Shinichi stretched his arms up above his head, curled them back, stretched like his spine ached. "Well, whoever it was, he had to have access to the station after hours. I was there until 1AM."

"Don't you sleep?"

"As much as you do. But my point is – do you have a key to the station?"

"Never needed to use it," said Saguru, "I always expect night shift to let me in."

"Maybe we can find out who was on night-shift that day. See if they remembered anything out of place – keys to the holding cell that went missing, or strange noises, someone hanging around the machine." Shinichi pushed his hands into his pockets, stared out at the road, humming of the car as a vehicle peeled around the corner, pulled to a stop, and—"I think that's for you."

Jack leaning out of the driver's side, flicked a glance towards Shinichi, and said, "you want a lift somewhere, little brother?"

"No thanks. I'll catch a ride with Nakamori," Shinichi called back, and then glanced at Saguru, "hey – if you're going to be in tomorrow, I'll come by. We can start looking into who was on night-shift. Start talking to them."

"Thank you," said Saguru, inclined his head. "I should be in to work, though I might go and visit Watanabe first. I'll let you know."

Peeled away from Shinichi and walked over to the car, slid into the passenger's seat, and glanced behind him: Ueno, empty but for the police officers and Quinn's ranting, and Shinichi standing underneath a street-lamp, watching the car as it pulled away from the curb and slid into the waiting dark.

Kabuki-cho, neon glow splattered on the ground, host clubs by the dozen and known Yakuza hangout. Saguru turned his head to the side, watched a group of men skulking by a side-entrance, a young woman loitering on a street corner, restaurant: OISHII!!., long rows of clammy apartment buildings squeezed into a spot where only one full house could've stood. People eyeing Jack, hungry as vultures, taking apart the car he drove like they were taking apart yen.

Jack parked in a lopsided garage, slammed down the shutter, left them in darkness. Flicked on his mobile phone to light the way up three short steps, and into a small hallway, riddled with staircases. Sleepy posters on a chipboard, asking and advertising for lost cats and silence. Jack gave
it a glance, then took his arm, led him up two flights of creaking, green-carpeted stairs. Doors closed on either side.

"You live here?" said Saguru, eyed the water-stained ceiling. "In Kabuki-cho?"

"Not much worse than Liverpool," said Jack, cheerfully. "Decor's a bit nicer, and the company's much better. Well, some of the time. Hei has a tendency to grump."

"Hei?"

"I wanted to introduce you properly," said Jack, "but then again I didn't expect you to have caught yourself up in--whatever you're caught up in."

"Later," said Saguru, didn't glance at him but felt his cheeks burn, "just—"

"Saguru." Sighed out disappointed. Jack stopped on the third floor last apartment, turned to look at him; the light sending scabby dark all over his face, the shadows hollowing out his jaw until he looked half-starved (until he looked younger and leaner and lethal and mean, the way he'd looked when Saguru had seen him the first time), "... Saguru, are you in trouble?"

"I—" I don't know I don't know I have no idea what I'm in. Everything's going too fast. I've been shot at and burgled and someone's tried to kill me twice. "—Later," said Saguru, his voice thin and soft, and he glanced towards the door, heard music coming from behind it. "Later. And don't tell Uncle Blake."

Jack eyeing him for a second two seconds three seconds and then sighing, reaching into his pocket, pulling out a wallet. Unfolded, took out a key, unmarked, simple, and slid it into the lock, cracked it open. The door swung back, and Jack called out, "Hei – it's just me and Saguru."

Do people usually call out their intentions, thought Saguru, and then he stepped inside after Jack, maybe because it's Kabuki-cho.

Inside: long hallway painted off white, smudgy post-modernist paintings on the walls bought ten a dozen at market. Scenes of indeterminate Asian city – somewhere in China? – gleaming through a watery lens, smudge-black buildings and sooty darkness, smeared with bright splotches of neon where street signs blinked out unfamiliar names, and in the distance, a mountain or a hill, something black and peaked. Expensive rug on the floor, Persian, most likely an antique. Hardwood, genuine. Nothing that he'd have expected to find in a Kabuki-cho above-restaurant apartment but Jack had never once not made a place for himself wherever he was.

Coat rack by the door, two puffy winter jackets. Two pairs of shoes left in a shoe-rack, one slippers still wrapped in plastic. Jack stooped, swapped his boots for a pair of flat union-jack-patterned slip ons, and then slid the sunglasses from top of his head, tossed it onto the little stand where a bowl of keys glittered. His hair fell in wings around his face, scuffed by fingers.

Soft light from cupped-hand sconces indented into the walls, smell of fresh paint. Jack slid home the double-bolt, and put the chain on the door, waved him down the hallway. "It's just down there." Small hallway, two doors, bedroom, bathroom, and then an open-plan living room (Eames chair leaned back in front of a small television, dinged kotatsu patterned with sheep with a bowl of artificial stargazer lilies, black leather sofa against the low wall dividing the kitchen and the living room. Wall of books, mostly science and cookery, thumbed through, worn spines, bitten pages. Shelves upon shelves of knick-knacks, travel trinkets). Cramped, even with the white walls, the illusion of bigger space granted by the softened drapes, the plush cushions and warm blankets thrown over the couch. Much smaller than his place in London, much smaller than he'd expected
Jack to go for.

Turn to the right, and the kitchen: full restaurant hob, gleaming silver appliances, countertops squared away all around the room. At the stove: man, 5'7", black hair, black clothing, soiled apron tucked over himself, and sitting at the table, hands curled around a mug of hot steaming green tea, Kaito Kuroba.

Saguru's heart lurched and he took two steps closer to him, something in his head whispering, there you are.

"Saguru," Kaito's worried expression collapsing into a sun-bright smile, "you're here! I—"
Hesitation, the smile disappearing, replaced by a frown and a sudden awareness of Jack's presence looming behind him. "Did you run into any trouble?"

Saguru shook his head, shifted into a seat next to him. "I worked with Kudo and Hattori, though," he said, casually, his hands aching from the way he'd curled them into fists.

Kaito taking it for what it was, a warning. He pursed his mouth, then pushed the mug at him. "Drink up," he said, "you must be freezing."

Jack behind the stove, chin resting on the other man's shoulder, not watching them, so Saguru took the cup, sipped at it (the mug still warm from Kaito's lips) and shuddered as the hot tea burned him.

Like whiskey, oh thank god you're English maybe you can—

"How was your night?" said Kaito, out of the corner of his mouth. Was he looking paler than usual, had he bled too much?

"Awful," said Saguru, paused. Couldn't remember the last time he'd spoken honestly to that question, the last time he hadn't said alright or could be better or absolutely fantastic. But even if he'd pulled out one of those platitudes for Kaito, he wouldn't have listened. "How was yours?"

"Terrible," said Kaito, and underneath the table, fingers curling at his hand, spreading warmth through his frozen grip, "I had a bad show."

Curve of the mouth, just – curve of the mouth. And then the smile fell, and Saguru's head drooped with it. "... You were attacked?"

"They were waiting for me," said Kaito, quietly. "I got to the second floor and—they were there. Two of them. I got away, but—" His hand touching his own chest, the heart of his t-shirt padded out a little as though someone had stuffed him wrongly, as though his heart was pounding its way out of his chest. Fingers gripping tighter, and then smaller, smaller, "... I was terrified."

Saguru felt his throat swell shut and ache.

Sudden movement from the stove and squeak of a chair as Jack pulled out the one across from him and said, "you know, I'm still waiting for an explanation here."

Saguru's fingers squeezing shut around Kaito's tightening grip. "... Just a busy night at work, Jack. Nothing I haven't dealt with before. There was an incident at Ueno – strictly police information, so I can't share it with you, but we got into a fight and—well—" Shrug of the shoulders, try to make it convincing Jack knows you almost as good as Kaito.

Brows raised, Jack folded his arms on the table, making a mountain of muscle. "So if they're after you," said Jack, "why was Kaito hanging around? No offense," said to Kaito, smooth as silk, "but
Saguru is an awful martyr. If he really believed he was dangerous to you, he wouldn't be, ah—"

"We're dating," said Kaito, and the silence that followed—"We were out on a date when, ah – when he got the call..."

Two people staring at him: Jack Simon, Saguru Hakuba.

"Dating," said Jack. "... Dating?" This one at him, eyes narrowed watching him as though he didn't believe him (which he didn't because Jack wasn't stupid wasn't going to buy this lie), "... come off it, Guru, you're a hell of a lot smarter than this."

"Isn't he supposed to have the brains in the family?" Smooth, soft voice. The man at the stove turned, looked at them – shadowed black-blue eyes, shock of dark hair falling over his forehead, small Cupid mouth. Slant of an accent that Saguru couldn't place. "Arara. Don't interrogate them before dinner, you brute."

Jack snorted, turned to look at him. "Airen—" Mandarin, Saguru realized, Mandarin, "—I'm not interrogating them. I'm pointing out, respectfully, that they're trying to feed me a load of bullshit, and I'm not buying it." Back to him, looking at him, dead in the eyes, Jack's calm soft voice at odds with the spark in his gaze. "You've never been in a fight in your life! I'm supposed to believe you're some kind of bad boy now because you're dating?"

"I remember a few of our dates," the man, flipping something in a skillet, then turning to lean against the countertop, "that seems to follow the pattern. Didn't you have an Irish boyfriend who stabbed you?"

Jack's mouth twitched, fond smile. "In his defence," said Jack, "he didn't know the knife was real. I don't think my cousin's that stupid, is he?"

"It was—" Grabbing at straws, think think you're supposed to be clever, "...Kaito and I went to Ueno, to, ah—" Trail off, blush, look down and mumble, "—hook up and—we got, um. Mugged, and I, well, I – he was—insulted Kaito, and I—"

Head cocked to the side. Then glancing back to see what the young man was doing (something at the stove still, the air full of the smell of hot prawns in melting butter).

Jack, brows raised, "so you—what, whalloped him one? Because he insulted your date?"

"And I got in the way because he was really big—" Kaito, animated, hopping on his chair, "—and he was going to attack Saguru, and then, ah, there was this heist at night, you know, Kaitou Kid? And Saguru had to stay on at work so I called you and—"


Silence, and then the young man pulled away from the stove, clattered plates. "Dinner's done," he said. "You'll eat when it's hot, or not at all."

"Hei—"

"Jack," said Hei, "they've had a hard night. And if you're going to ask them more questions, you'll ask them after they've eaten and washed up. They're not going anywhere." Cocked head, glancing at him, no-words exchange, I won't let them get out? Saguru tried to translate, I won't let them get away?

"But they—"
"They're just children," Hei, switched to Mandarin, and whatever he said softened Jack's face. He sighed, rubbed both hands against his jaw, and then nodded, stood up with a scrape of the chair.

"At least this explains why you showed up bleeding," said to Kaito, and then softer, "why wouldn't you tell me all of this—"

"Jack," warning tone, last-chance voice. "Get me the plates."

"Yes, yes." Jack fluttered a hand in his direction, was rewarded with a smack on the back of the head for his trouble. Plates clattering, spoons in pots, the smell of spice and butter and prawn heavy in the air, over the scent of steamed meat and dough and the sweet-sour scent of sauces.

Kaito squeezed his hand tightly, mouthed out of the corner of his mouth, thank you, and then straightened in his chair like Jack was a firing squad, and he was next in line.

Saguru's head throbbed with sensations sounds scents. Jack lifting the top off a pot studded with steam and pouring out a ladleful of something glossy and red into a bowl, Hei setting it down on the table, and then picking up another bowl, the two of them a conveyer belt of homemade food that rapidly filled up the table: red soup, stacks of steamed bao, a plate of vegetables fried up in egg and tempura, a stack of shiny butter-fattened prawns oozing wet and slick on a plate. His stomach shrank to a tiny pinprick, but he let Hei slide a bowl of soup in front of him (took it with a smile, a grimace) and then picked up his spoon. Kaito shuffling closer to him, thigh to thigh, the scent of him (grass sweat tangy-sweet blood) overlaid over the smell of the food.

Jack pulled on Hei's chair, let him sit, took his smile and the smack to the hand like affection. Bent his head to kiss Hei's hair (did he whisper something?) and then took his own seat, reached over to pass the bao, used his chopsticks to put food on Hei's plate first. Hei rolling his eyes.

"It's good to meet you, finally," said Hei, words soft. "Jack talks a lot about you."

Saguru smiled, or tried to, wanted to. His expressions felt as though they were freezing up halfway on his face, making him a caricature, a robot of emotion. "Does he?"

"Only good things," said Hei, and split a bao in half, dipped half of it in shiny black sauce. "Mostly."

"I make you look as terrible as I can," said Jack, "so he doesn't run off and fall in love with you." Easy smile, something between them fractured, but still there? "Like everyone else I seem to meet."

"Not my fault," said Saguru, and picked up his spoon, no appetite but it would've been rude not to eat. Tasted blood in his mouth when he sipped at the soup. "I'm non-threatening and young. People go for that sort of thing, I imagine."

"I wouldn't know," said Jack, thoughtfully, "I've never been non-threatening."

Hei smiled, sneaky-sharp. "I can think of a few occasions," he said, "but I won't embarrass you in front of your little cousin."

"Ah, true love." And a smile at him, soft and tender. Jack shared his food with him, fed him right from his chopsticks. Hei ate in delicate little bites, flat shark eyes sliding to Saguru focusing on him as though he could see all the lies stamped on his face.

Bump of food against his cheek and—
"Detective," clicked tongue, Kaito picking up the dropped bao, and then offering it again, "be more careful."

Staring at him, at the chopsticks, indirect kiss? And of course yes we're dating get a fucking grip not like you haven't dated before but the thing of it was he'd never dated and wanted to date; it had always been a means towards an end, never something to strive for, always something gotten by accident. Kaito sitting across from him, chopsticks waggling, detective? Felt like he couldn't possibly open his mouth couldn't take a bite this is wrong this is lying i'm—but he hinged his jaw open and took the morsel of bao. Kaito's eyes flickering unknowable waiting for him to agree disagree? He couldn't tell didn't know. Swallowed the morsel of food and washed it down with wine.

His stomach churned.

Kaito's head ducked, apology or acceptance. Another bite of bao, sliding easier now, Jack watching him and amused suspicious? He couldn't tell.

"Way to let me in on the loop, little cousin," Jack, smiling. "Afraid I was going to tell uncle Blake?"

Saguru sighed, "I just—I don't find it easy to talk about," said Saguru, sliding into the role given, wondering idly if this was going to be his life now – lies on top of more lies, on top of more lies. "With—um." My last relationship you remember Rhys of course you do I know you made him disappear.

Jack tilting his head to one side understanding without being explained. "Well, I like him better than your last boyfriend," said Jack. "Your own age, for one. You are his age, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Kaito, "when I'm not wearing stage-make-up."

*If you feed me again*, thought Saguru, watching him cleave his way through his soup, *I won't—* "So, ah—Hei, yes?"

Hei paused in his eating, glanced up. Something foxy and predatory in the way he looked, black-glass eyes watching him.

"H—How long have you and Jack been--?"

"Hm." Hei putting his head to one side. "I don't know. A year? It feels longer."

"Thank you, darling," Jack, dryly, reaching over to scoop up one of the beheaded, glistening prawns, "so flattering, my heart. What would I do without you?"

"Starve and die," said Hei, "but I'm surprised you didn't know that already."

Roll of the eyes, and, "we met in Shanghai last year. Hei was working at a restaurant there, and we lived in the same building."

Lies on lies. Jack had a tell, his fingers twitching to the right whenever he was making stuff up. What was it this time? Probably, he'd met Hei somewhere darker – a strip club, a stakeout, a murder scene. Probably, Hei had shot at him, or tried to kill him, because that was the only sort of person that Jack dealt with in his life.

They weren't so different. Except Jack could take a killing blow (could he?) and Saguru—
Well, that remained to be seen. But he knew Jack could do it.

(Baby cousin I killed a man today I didn't want to but it was kill him or get the shit blown out of me and my unit I love you I want to be home God fucking save the fucking Queen and her fucking military pretensions how are you doing I want to see you again please write it makes me happy to hear how you're doing--)

And then months of radio silence, and then—

Jack repeated his question. "How did you meet?"

"I swept him off his feet," said Kaito. "He was powerless to resist my charms." Big smile, full of teeth, *the funny thing was he was probably right.* "But I didn't like him at first. Too perfect."

"I got more chocolate than him on Valentine's Day," said Saguru, quietly, "and I beat him for top spot in school. After that, he, ah—always found a way to be where I was. Trying to show me up. Quite literally took my breath away—" *knock-out gas bottom of a museum grappling for the mask and not quite getting it slumping onto the floor with his vision spotting black grey purple.*

Jack laughed, caught Hei's eye. Slid his hand over to cover his, gave it a squeeze, as if saying, *look at them, aren't they young and unblemished and good?*

Hei smiled, dished out more food: sticky-sweet rice in pots hot enough to boil in, chicken in sweet spicy sauce, xiaolongbao and packets of pastry stuffed thick with vegetables. Saguru didn't have the stomach to eat much, just picked at his food, the urge to just—grab Jack and tell him, *help me please help me someone's after Kaito I can't do this on my own anymore I can't sleep at night every noise means something terrifying help me help me help me—but what would that accomplish? Jack might pull him out of school (would maybe tell Uncle Blake to pull him out of school) try to get him away from the danger he meant well but this is not the time to run.*

Kaito’s animated voice, drilling holes in his head. *Dating, now. They were dating. He had to act the dutiful boyfriend, which was—he'd laugh, if he had air left in him to laugh, but even the air seemed choked.*

Dating, God's sake.

Dinner over, dessert sweet peaches fried and drizzled in ice-cream. Saguru pushed his chair back, said, "might I be excused? I'm stuffed, couldn't eat another bite—I thought I'd go and clean up, get ready for bed. Had a horribly long day..."

"Of course," said Hei, and rose, "let me show you where the shower is—Jack, the spare room's—?"

"Finished it this morning, *airen,*" said Jack. His eyes on Kaito's hands as Kaito magicked the spoon out of his grip. "All ready for people to sleep over—you boys have school tomorrow?"

"Clubs," said Saguru. "Saturday. I'd skip, but I promised I'd help up with Culture Festival. But I can find—"

"Not in Kabuki-cho," said Jack, "I'll drive you back home. It's not a problem. I don't want you wandering around Kabuki-cho, not when it's dark, and not when it's daylight. I'm not sure of them, but I bet you know the crime statistics of Kabuki-cho."

"Point taken," said Saguru, too tired to argue think worry about anyone else trying to do anything else to him. It was just easier to nod his head, let Jack play the protective older cousin, follow Hei out into the hallway. Sounds of Jack's booming laugh trailing off to quiet, Kaito's bright
In the hallway with the paintings humming with colour, the edges of the world seemed blurred. He plodded after Hei one foot after the other, shoulders weighed down and aching. Quinn's face flashed in front of his mind, angry, accusing, I'm going to sue you, as if it would go to court.

We're dating. I got in the way.

"It's just here," said Hei, one of the closed doors, gave it a knock with his hand and it opened up to a small bathroom: claw-foot bath-tub sink seven day drawer, "there's some spare clothes in the bottom drawer. They might be a little big for you but you're closer to Jack's size than to mine."

"Thank you," said Saguru, managed a smile. "I'm sorry we didn't meet under better circumstances. I assure you, I'm much better when I'm not—"

"Lying to your cousin?" said Hei.

Silence. Saguru opened his mouth to reply, but Hei—

Shook his head. "You don't need to pretend, you know," said Hei. "Jack would do anything to keep you safe."

"I'm not—"

"He can't tell," said Hei, "because he's a big dumb dog. He trusts you, and he doesn't think you'd lie to him." Pleasant and to the point, short and gentle. "Not if you're in trouble."

"What makes you think I'm in trouble?" said Saguru. Sharpened his voice to sound like his father's, when he was banging on at the help for, stop making that bloody racket I'm trying to work here, Christ alive this is a sodding mess—

Hei didn't say anything. Two seconds, three seconds. "You look like you're running from something," he said, finally, turned away. "Believe me. I know what it looks like." And then the snap of a door shutting, leaving Saguru alone in the middle of the hallway, outside the bathroom, pooling golden light making his eyes hurt.

Midnight. The spare bedroom had nothing in it but a couple of paintings on the walls – Xitang, said one, and the other was a village deep in some jungle, the snaking curve of a river cutting through the trees and the overgrown grass. Flat-brimmed hats, people working, one woman gutting a fish, the bright red of the blood eye-catching in the sea of muted grey brown black green. Wardrobe, empty. Two bedside tables, a lamp at either one. Bookshelf stacked with volumes on science and philosophy and National Geographic, and battered second-hand Penguin editions of A Study in Scarlet and The Hound of the Baskervilles. He got up, picked up The Hound of the Baskervilles, flipped through it without interest. Track-suit bottoms slipping down his hips. Heating up too high and he'd eschewed a shirt, didn't think he'd sleep with that strangle-hold of—

Knock at the door, and Kaito's voice, "Guru?"

His voice made his heart trip. Dating, Kaito, confident and soft, we're dating and I didn't—

He crossed the room in three steps, opened the door and moved to the side, let Kaito in. Someone
had given him a baggy shirt to wear and a matching pair of track-suit bottoms, but they sagged on him like loose skin. Wild hair pulled up in crazy peaks, spiking over his forehead.

And, God, his mouth dried out at the sight of him; every beat tripled, but—

"Jack said I could sleep on the couch but, um—" Red face, "—thought we could. Share. Since we're—" Didn't seem to know how to finish that sentence; Saguru didn't think he could say the word out loud. It would make it real, would bring this hellishly long night to a point, would make it—

"Dating," he said, like a dare, like blasphemy.

Kaito flinched. "Ah," he said, "yes. That. Um. So can I--?"

Saguru gestured to the bed. "We can put bolsters in the middle," he said, "I'm liable to roll over and crush you in the night." *Or to pull you close and scare the shit out of you Rhys always said I liked to cuddle.*

"Oh. Yeah. Sure. Bolsters," said Kaito, slid past him and sat on the bed. Bounced a little, the mattress squeaking, the springs sharp. "I'm – sorry. About the dating thing. It just seemed like the most logical thing, you know? I thought—"

"No," said Saguru, "no, it was a very good—strategy." His mouth soured the word, he couldn't help it. Fucking—this wasn't—"Sorry, it just. Took me at unawares, that's all. The only time I've had to pretend to date someone is to stop my mother from forcing engagements between me and every crowned head of Europe. I think I've broken more marriage promises than any one of them alone." To move over felt too risky, but he could hardly stand by the door all night, and it was only Kaito. Only Kaito. They needed to talk, plan, do things—but he couldn't bring himself to step over and take the other side of the bed, to be close enough to touch, to inhale cinnamon sugar and spice. He couldn't do it.

"Huh," said Kaito. "Is she really that bad?"

"Most of the people that know her develop aches and pains before every dinner party she throws," said Saguru. "That's the sort of effect she has on people. And with me—only heir to a bloody fortune—" Sag back; take the first couple of steps to the bed and sit down, bounce, slide himself flat. Didn't have anything for the bolster in the middle he'd promised, so he rucked up his side of the quilt and puffed it up, pushed it until it would form a little wall.

Kaito stretched out on the other side, staring at the ceiling, one arm behind his head. He could still see the spot where the bandages and gauze pressed, hollowing out a spot on his chest, his heart sharply thrust up until if he reached over and cupped his hand there he'd feel it, fluttering in his hands, pulsing like a little bird.

*Get a grip.*

"Am I going to get you into trouble?" said Kaito, "with your family?" Worrying at his lower lip. "It's, ah – I didn't think about that, if you want me to—Because I didn't think it might be a—problem. I mean, it's a...problem here, but I thought... England's more progressive—right?"

Took a couple of minutes to catch onto what Kaito meant, *oh*, he thought, *oh because you think my mother would hear I'm dating a man and decide—"She'd be more upset that you were—"* how to put it not to sound cruel, "—um—"

Kaito huffing, turning his head to one side, looking away from him, "well, we're not really dating,
so we can—keep it a secret. Can't we?"

"We're not really dating, right yes Saguru cleared his throat. "Yes," he said, looked away, "sure. We can keep it a secret. Probably do well to keep it a secret at school, too. I'm sure Aoko would—find it easier to deal with."

"Aoko?" said Kaito. Shifting of the blankets and the mattress, and out of the corner of his vision: soft black hair pulled over his face bright blue eyes cheekbones pressed out against his skin like the corners of fine machinery, "—why would Aoko be upset?" Cocked head to the side and—"we're like brother and sister."

"Ah." Flushing damned English skin going scarlet in a breath. "Well—"

"Did you think we were dating?"

"You're very close."

"Because we grew up together!" Flickering smile, brighter than sunlight. "You thought Aoko and I were seeing each other?"

"I—not—not in so many words—"

"Wait, but you asked Aoko out," Kaito stuffing his fist underneath his cheek, damnable grin bright, "is that what you do in England? Steal peoples' girlfriends? Maaa, you're a terrible person, 'Guru."

"What would I need with people's girlfriends?" said Saguru, exasperated, "when have you ever seen me to show any interest in women?"

"Aoko. Akako."

"Plotting. And unprecedented behaviour that hasn't happened since."

Kaito chuckled. "Akako has that effect on many people," he said, sounded as though he knew –more? But wasn't sharing, rolled back onto his back, and then, "—so are you—aah, it's rude to ask. But do you—have any interest in women?"

"...No," said Saguru. "No. I don't." Air sharp in his throat, cutting the inside of him on every breath. God why did you say that you idiot you don't know what he's like you don't know—"I'm gay. I've dated men, almost exclusively. My last girlfriend pushed me into the fountain. I was six, and I took it rather hard, honestly."

And sixteen torturous seconds of silence later, Kaito said, "...oh. Okay."

Should he ask if he was—? "Does that put a damper on your plan?" said Saguru. "To pretend we're dating? I understand if you—"

"No! No, that's not—that's not it, I just—" Rolling over to face him again, and Kaito looked vulnerably tousled, "—you don't—look like you're gay."

"Ah, yes," said Saguru. "According to Aoko, I should be wearing a white suit."

"Gah." Wrinkled nose, pouted-out bottom lip. "That's not what I meant, either. It's just – I never thought you might be. I suspected maybe? But it's rude to bring it up, and I didn't want to ask, but—" shrugged. "It doesn't—It doesn't bother me. I mean, I—I'm not? But—" Stop. "—Nothing."

You what? Thought Saguru, went to ask him – but Kaito rolled over flat onto his back, onto the
other side, looked away from him, and left him staring at the way the moonlight dipped over his neck, the crawl of light on exposed skin, how his spine curved. There were freckles, faint ones, on one bare shoulder, and Saguru wanted to taste each one with his tongue.

_I mean I'm not but—an what?

"Someone helped me out at the heist tonight," said Kaito. Rolled back to face him, another squeak of the mattress.

The earlier conversation tugged at him, but Saguru pushed it out of his mind, turned his attention to Kaito's words, his careful phrasing, _someone helped me out at the heist tonight_, "oh?" Wondering what it was Kaito had been about to say, what followed after _I mean I'm not but_.

But it wasn't important, didn't matter as much as the heist, as much as what had happened during those two hours he'd been away and, "—when I picked up the jewel," said Kaito, "—the people in black, they came out, they—ran after me, and I tried to lose them, but I think they must've had night-vision goggles, and I had to avoid the police? So I went up to the rooftop, and all of a sudden, I hear this voice—"

And Kaito paused, hesitant, "—he told me that he'd left the key to the rooftop for me, and that he wanted to strike up a bargain. Half the heist for his help. I didn't—accept it, but—" Lopsided smile.

Saguru nodded. "Did he—give you a name? Identify himself? Was he a police officer?"

Kaito shook his head, slowly. "No," he said, "not a police officer." A pause, and then: "He called himself Nightmare."
Kabuki-cho never silent, not even in the morning.

6AM, and he could hear the traffic outside his window humming with sharpened focus thick clouds of electronic music drifting across the glass, thump thump thump, and pressing it outwards. Kaito slept on his side, curled around himself as though he was trying to fit into the smallest possible space, uncovered, shivering. One bare shoulder, silvered with scars.

His fingers itched to touch them, and Saguru turned on his other side, blocked his eyes of Kaito. Then turned back, when the urge had passed, look at him.

Kaito'd slept jolting, juddering, waking through the night, shifting and creaking on his side of the bed. Waking up for water, switching his pillow, huddling the sheets further around him, never lingering in one spot for too long. If he'd slept, Saguru calculated, it'd be for two hours at the absolute maximum, but he was resting now, his breathing deep and even, his curled-over arm hiding his face from the neon glow, piercing the fog of early morning. Still dark.

Could get some more sleep.

Saguru pulled the sheets up over Kaito's shoulder, and pulled the pillow over his face. Shifting of the mattress as Kaito twisted to face him sudden wash of cinnamon-spice-sugar-lavender, and then warmth against his side—

Kaito'd curled against him.

Saguru shifted minutely to the left, to give him more room.

He was so warm.

Barely dared to breathe, his heartbeat too loud even in his own head, but Kaito mumbled in his sleep and buried his face deep, didn't make another sound. Fingers curling against the sheets against the mattress twitching, does he dream of Toichi and the way that Toichi died? Too peaceful. Probably he was exhausted, he wouldn't remember his dreams. Probably, he didn't dream of anything but jewels, and heists, of black shapes in the dark swallowing up every last glow.

Nightmare.

Saguru sat up, reached for his phone, slumped on the bedside table with his watch and a notebook. Picked it up, and tapped it open, googled 'nightmare' and 'heist'. Disregarded the first two results on Google – Heist Nightmare as Six Paintings Go Missing from the Louvre – and tapped on the third, Japanese news site, Nightmare: Myth or Master?

("He called himself Nightmare."

"How wonderful. A flair for the dramatic. That's all we need." Exhaustion in every syllable.)

Kaito shifted again, rolled closer. His hair smelled like lemon cake and powder softness. Arm thrown across his chest, nuzzled face into his neck, the whole long length of him pressed into a space about half as much as the rest of the bed, snoring faintly, sleeping deeply. Saguru's phone thumped down on his chest, his rattling heartbeat shaking his ribs, the taste of the air around him flavoured with sweetness.
And he couldn't move. Well, he could. But Kaito – the night in fits and bursts.

He didn't move, barely dared to take a breath. Kaito'd pinned his arm beneath his, and it pricked, already, with dozing nerves.

Picked up the phone instead, and crooked it up so he could read, going over what he knew what Kaito told him not focusing on the smell of his skin (clean and soft) or the feel of his hair against his cheek (the warmth of his fingers curled into the gap between skin and shirt) or his slow, slow heartbeat, which Saguru could feel against his shoulder (it wasn't his, his was a jack-hammer, carving his ribs away in chips).

Nightmare: unknown figure dressed in black with (stolen?) ornate golden mask (reminder: look up missing artefacts taken from museums with a particular emphasis on legends surrounding--). Teamed up with criminals from all over the world, and helped them evade the police.

(at his side, Kaito yawned, pushed himself closer, the sheets bunching around him.)

His pinned arm shifting a little, curling over Kaito's shoulder. Touching the spot where the scars were hidden, feeling the smouldering flesh beneath, following the curvature of bone with a fingertip.

Next day, the criminals would wind up dead or arrested. Reported two of them leapt from a building’s rooftop (origin of the name?), three wound up arrested, the rest killed in the pursuit. He didn't have access to his laptop, or the police database, but when he went into work, he'd look them up. There might be something—

Yawning, Kaito pushed his head up, stretched like a cat, and rolled onto the other side of the bed. Hair pulled over his face, spiked up at the back, squinting at him with one blue eye. "Time s'it?"

"Six o'clock," said Saguru, kept his voice low and gentle, "go back to sleep, there's – no rush to wake up, is there?"

"Rehearsals," yawned, the word stretched out and warped, "promised—promised Ryuichi. Nghh —" huddling down into the sheets, making himself a nest of blankets and of pillows. "What are you—" another yawn, "—what are you looking up?"

"I'm trying to find some information on Nightmare," said Saguru. "I thought you probably weren't his first attempt at, ah – community thieving."

Kaito snorted. "What did you find?" he said. Didn't say 'I'm not Kid', didn't say anything, but he rolled over closer, reached over and took his phone. Fingers barely brushing his chest. Heat spreading out at that almost-touch.

Underneath the sheets, a sudden—stirring.

Saguru flushed, looked away as Kaito read the article on his phone, frowning, bottom lip pulled tight between his teeth. Overlarge shirt sleeve slipping off onto his shoulder, exposing a mile of bare skin, the nape of his neck, surprisingly naked and vulnerable, the arch of his spine. He could see muscles moving as he breathed, the interlocking mechanism of his body working like machinery, shifting through the thin fabric like a dream, unwittingly distracting.

Turned his head away, focused on Quinn's face, to quell the tightening ache below, focus don't think of Kaito.

Don't think of Kaito naked don't think of Kaito's shoulder neck scent finger-ruffled hair don't think
"Hm," said Kaito, and handed him his phone, thunk, against his chest, shifting up onto his haunches. "Well, that makes me feel a little bit better. It's nice to have just your regular run-of-the-mill menace instead of 'conspiracy theory' menace." Flicked him a smile, shifted himself back onto his hands, the shirt he was wearing doing its best to unhook from his shoulders fall away from him and Saguru wanted to strip it off the rest of the way and throw it to the ground, put his teeth on him —

I'm not gay but—

"I was thinking of looking further into his previous cases," said Saguru, "I don't like the idea of getting randomly shot. As far-fetched as it may seem, maybe there's something to the whole thing. It would be fairly easy, after all, to make a murder seem like an accident." Or an attempted murder seem like suicide. But he didn't voice that thought, didn't want Kaito to worry.

"Cheerful," said Kaito, and his fingers twitched, the sleeves of his shirt riding down over his wrists hands covering it up until he was sure the thief was looking for his pack of cards, his fidget-proof deck. He came out with a string of hankerchiefs instead, busied himself tying one to the other, "...what are we going to do about them?"

He'd been pondering the same thing for hours before, but the answers that had solidified after a hasty hour's sleep didn't bring him much faith that they'd find them. Of course, the odds of finding out whatever syndicate was running the show – assuming there was one, assuming it wasn't Toichi Kuroba's fault again, assuming they weren't chasing ghosts – were around 30.4%, and that was if he used Jack's help, told him what was going on, and asked for the name of one of his MI6 colleagues.

And how long have you sat on this information?

Apparently my cousin didn't think I could be trusted with sensitive information.

"Look into known associates," said Saguru. "Try to find anyone with a grudge against your father."

"In this country, or the world?" said Kaito, flicked the knotted handkerchiefs up, and somehow they became a rainbow-striped bird. "Because we might have a big problem either way."

"I didn't expect it to be easy," said Saguru, "even if he didn't have enemies, Yakuza aren't known for being talkative. But it's a matter of finding out what incentive, what pressure to apply. If we could start by branching out into your father's life..."

Kaito angled his eyes away from him, nodded. "Sounds good," he said, not lacking for enthusiasm, but miles away, his head overruled by his heart; Toichi Kuroba, still a raw, red sore in the centre of Kaito's being, dominating everything he did. To pull apart his life looking for enemies, looking for monsters – he couldn't make Kaito go through with it.

"I can—"

"I'm going to help you," said Kaito, "so don't even think about shutting me out. Besides, we're dating now. We're supposed to do couple things."

Flushing pink, and a return of the throbbing want below, distracting him from Toichi's life, Kaito's blank-mask face, "couple things?"

"It needs to look good," said Kaito, "or your cousin's going to suspect something. He grilled me a
little about us last night, so—" Shrugged, "—I don't think he believes us, but we're going to have to make it look good."

"This is – I mean, I doubt Jack *cares*. He's been on at me to date for years, but I don't think—" Pause, and then, "—why don't we just tell him? He's a bloody *spy*. Or he's something like that. He might be able to help, Kaito."

"And paint a target on his back as well?" said Kaito, quietly. "They're not going to avoid him just because of who he is, Saguru. Don't you think they might have people in those fields, too? I mean – it's not like they're wanting for people."

Good point.

"Okay," said Saguru. "Okay. You're right." The little flare of hope in his chest died, and he sat up, rubbed his hands over his face. "Couple things?"

"Yeah, I—" Kaito puffed out both cheeks, let it drain from him in one long sigh, "—holding hands, I guess? And, um. You know. Couple things."

"I'm not exactly the resident expert on couple things," said Saguru. "You did remember my heart-rending tale of when I was six, and my girlfriend pushed me into the fountain, didn't you? I've dated since then, but believe me, my luck hasn't improved." Push his hands through his hair, shoving it off his face, where it spiked back. "...Okay. Okay. Give me a couple of minutes to think."

"That's longer than your usually couple of seconds," said Kaito, "you must still be half asleep."

Saguru gave him a sour look, said, "I'm sorry, I usually don't have to think on how best to convince my cousin I'm dating a sodding *schoolmate*."

"It's easy," said Kaito, "just – you know. Act like I'm important to you."

"That doesn't bloody *help*," said Saguru, exasperated, "you're *already* sodding important to me, otherwise I'd have bloody turned you in ages ago."

"Keep your voice down!" Kaito said, "someone's going to hear." Face turning slowly pink; cleared his throat, and said, "—I'm really important to you?"

*Haven't you heard that before?"* "...Yes," he said, "yes, of course you are. *Has no one ever told you this before?*

"That's a weird thing to say," said Kaito, "I, uh. Thanks. I guess?"

"It's not just me, you know," said Saguru, "you're important to a lot of people."

Kaito twitched a smile at him, said, "really? Is that why I'm—what did you say?" Modulated his voice, Saguru's deeper baritone echoing softly, "—sixteen years old and jumping off of high buildings and being shot at, completely alone?"

Outside the window: truck, tsh-tsh-tsh of music, *who was even out clubbing at this hour of the night?* Laughter sizzling hot, smoky with drink; Saguru could count on one hand the amount of times he'd lain awake in Yorkshire, tried to sleep while his head was a buzzing, buzzing mess, couldn't think of it now. Kaito's words rang hollow in him, reminded him—

*Mum? Mum?*
They've gone out, little master. Do you want for anything? Would you like some lunch?

A—Ah. No. No, thank you. I just wanted to—Dropping the book in his hands and picking it up, the maid's face carefully blank, no, it's just—we were going to read—

Kaito had his head turned away, his hands intent on knotting and unknotting, turning the birds in his hands to flowers hearts spades cards other ribboning shapes.

"I'm here," said Saguru, for lack of anything else.

Kaito's eyes flashed, some emotion too quick for him to catch; he laughed, easy and bright, "because you like solving puzzles, Detective. And I'm a very good puzzle, aren't I?"

No, thought Saguru, only terrible detectives solve puzzles. Good ones solve them and help. But that was a matter of semantics. Maybe not even that.

He sat up, and reached for Kaito's handkerchiefs, a red one in the shape of his Watson (tended to by Baaya, but when he'd get home, he knew he'd find a small cushion torn to shreds, artificial feathers everywhere, Baaya's remorseful, young master, will you please control your bird,) and suddenly, suddenly, his chest hurt so much (not a heart attack) that he couldn't breathe, and he wanted to be home, wherever Watson was, and he didn't want to be alone anymore. Go home, pet his bird, talk to his maid, go up to bed, work until he fell asleep on his desk from exhaustion, wake up, go to school, get called out—

It could be worse, you could be getting shot hurt your father could've died right in front of you.

He cupped his hands around the handkerchief-bird, felt the solidness of it, tried to look for wires. Kaito’s smile like a shard of broken glass, caught in sunlight.

"How does it work?" said Saguru.

Kaito's smile widened, and he leaned in close, and they were inches away from each other, blue eyes and pink mouth and sleep-bright cheeks, and Kaito's scent (caramelly and sweet, spicy and soft, a clean breeze, a Scottish winter, a warmth) washed over him.

"It's a secret," said Kaito, down-soft.

"Two people can keep a secret," he countered, and raised the fake bird, half-expectected it to raise its wings and dark out of his hands. He could see the nub of its beak, the shape of its head. He hadn't even seen him fold so much as a corner, and there it was in his hands, delicate and improbable and real.

Kaito laughed, but it didn't seem as though he found it funny. His eyes were on his, crags and corners, and there was so much of him that he didn't know yet.

"What's the fun of explaining?" murmured Kaito, and tipped his head forward, took his hands and covered Saguru's. Beat of the blood, aching in his head and his chest, increasing dizziness as the scent of Kaito's skin washed over him again, every tilt of his head a fresh wave of scent. "Don't you like puzzles, detective?"

"Not the ones I can't figure out," said Saguru, and their noses brushed, their foreheads, Kaito's eyes widening a little. Electric sparks singing in his wrist, in the ends of his fingers, and then—

Crashwallop, a mumbled curse, and a knock.
Kaito sprang back as though scalded, rolled onto his side and buried his face in the pillow like he was sleeping, leaving Saguru to pull the sheets tight up to his chest, to say, "come in," in a voice sandpapered rough.

Creak of the hinges, and Hei poked his head in, took one look at them both, curled up to sleep in the same bed, raised his brows. "You're awake early."

"Force of habit," said Saguru, and made his words slow. Everything inside him wanted to rage. "Jack and I would get up early to take care of the animals on the land. Well, Jack took care of the animals. I mostly got in the way and got chased by the chickens."

Snort of laughter from the pillow next to his, and Hei's mouth twitched. "I see," he said, "well, since you're up – what time do you need to be at school? I can have Jack drive you. Is Mr. Kuroba going as well?" Hei's Japanese seemed – not forced. But edged. Learned late, stumbling.

It hadn't occurred to him the night before, but he'd never even bothered asking where they'd met. How they'd met. He'd just assumed that Hei had appeared, suddenly, in Jack's life, and Jack hadn't told him because he was Jack, and secrets were what he dealt with.

*Must ask them about themselves later.* "Ten would be good," said Saguru, "ah—I don't know if Kaito is coming along. Probably, because he has rehearsals, I think, for the play."

"Okay," said Hei. "I'm going to go make breakfast." Another minute where he watched, watched, watched, his bruise-dark eyes flicking from Kaito's lumped-over form, to Saguru, deliberating (words thoughts actions) before he pulled back and closed the door, and left them in silence.

Kaito, mumbling quietly, "he's kind of intense."

"Jack's an intense person," said Saguru, and judged it safe to get out of bed; the problem wouldn't happen again, he was sure. Besides, it was – natural. Perfectly natural. Nothing to be embarrassed about, but he hitched his sweatpants up higher as he rolled out of bed, stretched his arms above his head and arched his back, "his last boyfriend was—" pause, try to think of a way to describe him (bright witty Irish dark wicked missed), "—intense, too."

"Does it run in the family?" said Kaito, "do all Hakuba men date intense boys?"

Quinn, pliable and willing and stupid, so stupid, "most of them do," said Saguru. "I'll introduce you to my grandfather, Yukito. You'd like him. As a matter of fact, I'm going to see him today – I thought it would be better to research Nightmare at his... facilities, instead."

"Okay," said Kaito. "After rehearsals?"

Saguru nodded, moved towards the door, "yeah. We can go after rehearsals."

"Okay," said Kaito, snuggled down deep into the bed, just the crop of pitch-dark hair visible, soft and mussed and shadowy on his pillow. "Come back to bed, 'Guru."

Startle to a stop, *Guru*; not quite sure what to say, but he glanced over his shoulder (felt the throb of it deep inside his chest, how badly he wanted to move over and settle down next to him, to curl up to him and breathe in the scent of his skin his hair his presence warm against him and--) "I should go and get breakfast," he said, "Hei already knows I'm awake."

"We can go together. Give it a couple of minutes, though, because he thinks I'm asleep."

Saguru hesitated, moved back to bed, sat at the edge of the mattress. *What am I doing? Unvoiced*
because it was a good idea, it would explain so much about their situation, but at the same time – Jack might tell, Jack would be hurt if he knew they'd lied to him, though could he really tell him and avoid Jack becoming a target?

Was everyone around him a target, the same as he was for Kaito?

"How badly do you think they want to catch us?" said Saguru. Fingers curled together, then apart. "Do you think they'd—" *Kill anyone in the way rip them apart like they were nothing but tissue paper—*

"I don't know," said Kaito, his voice miles away. "But they killed my father because he wouldn't steal for them. They tried to kill me. They tried to kill you because you helped me, Saguru. I don't think—" Pause, and, "—is this about Jack?"

Bare nod, and, "—I don't want him to get hurt," said Saguru, "I was thinking of limiting our, ah. Presence here. We could tell Jack that we're eager to get home. He knows I live alone, and he'll think—" Flushed to the roots of his hair because he knew where Jack's mind would wander, he knew what Jack would think of him and his excuses. "—Is that okay?"

"I like your house," said Kaito, "so, uh – we can tell him that I'm living with you for a little while. Might be better to tell Nakamori, too, in case he, uh, goes over and doesn't find me there. Probably, he'd worry." *Probably, like he wasn't sure.* Saguru kept his mouth shut, didn't point out, *it's like Nakamori has two children, you and Aoko* because he knew Kaito wouldn't listen accept it understand it, the same way he didn't understand that to call him *boyfriend* and pretend to be dating him was –

Necessary evil.

Breakfast: the two of them and Hei sitting at a table crowded with dishes again, half of them unfamiliar to Saguru, though he recognized the shiny bowls of congee, the thick jian-dui piled high on his plate. Hei, hair wild and up in spikes, his eyes down on the table, feeding them both more food when they'd emptied even a corner. Kaito ate and chattered, told him about school and his work and his mother's work as a magician.

Saguru ate, and felt the food turn to stone in his stomach, couldn't handle the taste of spices on his tongue. Drank glass of water after glass of water (at least it was something).

Jack wandered in thirteen minutes later, dressed in a grey Gieves & Hawkes suit, phone clamped to his ear, saying, "---yes, I'll keep an eye out. Yeah. Japan. Visiting my cousin. Christ alive, do you want me to tell you what we're bloody eating, too?—Yeah, alright, he's here." Phone pulled away from his ear, Jack: "Mathias says 'hi'."

Kaito catching his eye, brow raising, "is he the one—"

"In his defence," said Saguru, "he thought the knife was fake. Jack played pranks like that on him all the time." Didn't want to talk about Mathias, hadn't answered his last email properly – *Dear Mat, I'm having a wonderful time in Japan, only someone's trying to kill this boy I might like a little bit too much and I'm not sure I can handle being shot at any longer—and he had to worry. They're, um. Friends.*"

Hei glancing up as the phonecall ended, saying, "the boys need a lift to their school, Jack. Can you
"Good morning to you too, love," dipped his head to kiss Hei's brow, "yes, I was thinking of going into town. You want to come along? We could play tourist. Break a couple of decency laws."

Hei cracked a smile, but only a small one. Slid his eyes towards Saguru, as if reminding him he knew suspected knew that Saguru was lying to him and Jack both. "I'll come into town," said Hei, "but you'll keep your hands to yourself, Jack."

"Slave driver," said Jack, tugged his hair, and then slid into a seat next to his. Used his chopsticks to move two jian-dui to Hei's plate, to lift half a glossy pale-white pancake, smiled at Hei and leaned in to kiss his cheek, and then, "what are you working on for culture festival?"

"Host club," said Saguru, and Kaito said, "I'm starring in the play with the drama club."

And ten crawling minutes sliding past while Kaito talked about the play, animated and bright and easy, and Jack prompted him to laugh a couple of times. The way he laughed, careless and loud, snorting with amusement, the way Saguru didn't think he'd seen him do before now. Masks upon masks upon masks, and he remembered Aoko telling him, he's a cold, sweet boy. Was it any wonder that no-one knew him, that even he had his doubts which Kaito was the genuine article, which Kaito was the grieving son who'd do anything for his father?

"We were actually thinking we'd go to a host club," said Kaito, "character work, you know? Because Saguru's never been, and it's a hard experience, to explain, but—" Puffed out his cheeks, indicated the both of them, and then pinched his fingers together, "we're both too young."

Jack raised his brows, chuckled. "You're not missing much," said Jack, "besides, host clubs aren't places for couples." A pause, and then, "—if you're going to go to one, go to the Stardust Club. It's in Shibuya. I know the guy there, and if you go with Kaito, he'll probably let you in."

"And take a weapon with you," said Hei. "You never know when you might need it."

Saguru blinking, catching his eye as he poured out another glass of water. "Is that, uh – advice you give to everyone?"

"Only to teenage boys," said Hei, "who wouldn't know any better. And if you're going, Jack will drop you off and pick you up. And I want a text message every hour."

"Good thinking. I mean, I think it's dumb shit," said Jack, "but if you're going to do stupid shit, better you do it with permission than without."

"Man," said Kaito, "your family's way more relaxed than mine." Catching Saguru's eye, and smiling at him, strained at the edges, had he told Jack at some point that his mother was travelling and his father was dead? "Okay, yes, if we go, we'll be good. It's just so Saguru can see what it's like." Standing up, piling the plates gently together and then moving towards the sink, humming a song underneath his breath.

Saguru eyed him, then looked at Jack, shrugged. "I'm not a method actor," he said, "and I'm not very good at flirting."

"I don't know where you get it from," said Jack, "I'm great at flirting."

"That's news to me," said Hei. Rose to help Kaito, leaving the two of them alone, chasm of words between them, neither one of them knowing what to say.
Saguru wanted to say: please help me, everything's spiralling out of control, I don't know what else to do. I don't want to get you hurt but I'm drowning. Please help me. Please.

Saguru said: "Whenever you're free to take us, Jack, we can go." And then stood up to help with the drying of the dishes, feeling every step between him and his cousin grow, like a rubber band stretching out to its limit.

Ekoda High, pale and shining in the sunlight, ghostly with quiet. Jack's car left smears of dust on the street as he burned rubber getting them there, and then screeched off, Hei in the passenger's seat, the car scented of expensive cherry cologne and something homey and rough. The entire ride over, Jack pointing out places in Kabuki-cho that they were absolutely never to go into, and don't think I won't know if you do, I'm not kidding around here, I don't give a fucking shit if you want to drink but you're not drinking here'. Couple of places with men strapped and folded-armed in front of the doorways, watching Jack's sleek car pull past the garbage and the dust.

Two of them, Saguru was nearly certain, he'd seen in Toichi's file. It was hard to mistake those kind of markings for anyone else, but knowing what had happened to Watanabe—

Watanabe. He hadn't gone to see him yet, but today, after rehearsal – fucking rehearsal – he'd go and see him. Make sure that the police officer posted at the door knew that they were looking for someone who might come back, loop around for him.

"Ah! Mr. Hakuba!" Konoshima waved at him as soon as he padded into the school, "you're here!" Her face creased at the edges, worried light glinting off her glasses, "ah, is it too early? Sorry, it's just everyone else has other clubs to get to, and I wanted to—"

"Ah," said Saguru, "no, no, not too early. I usually get up this early." Aware that Kaito was standing next to him, close enough to leave an impression of the heat of him behind, but not to attract careless attention. "Ah, do you know Mr. Kuroba?"

"Only by, um—" Konoshima flustered her words, clutched the stack of books closer to her chest, "you're Miss Nakamori's friend."

"When he's not annoying her to bits," said Saguru, "yes, he is."

"Ignore him." Kaito reaching out with a flourish, taking her hand, and bowing low over it, "And yes, I am familiar with you, Miss Konoshima. You beat me in English during our last test! But it's an honour to be beaten by one so talented!"

Three pairs of eyes staring at Kaito: Saguru's, Konoshima's, Aoko's (who had just walked in arms filled with Tupperware boxes lumped high with something of dubious colouration).

"Um," said Konoshima, and flushed to the roots of her hair. "Ah. Thank you."

Kaito dropped her hand, smiled at her.

Saguru's stomach clenched, relaxed. I'm not gay, but—Stupid to think that it meant, I'm not gay but I like you. I'm not gay but— "Are you quite done, Kaito?" he said, best bored British socialite voice. "I think you're embarrassing Miss Konoshima."

Kaito's eyes flashing up, half taken aback at his sharp voice, and—"Ha! I'm trying to show you what you should do for Culture Festival. Hosts flirt with people."
Saguru folding his arms across his chest, "Sherlock doesn't flirt," he said. "Anyway, aren't you late for rehearsal?"

"Naruhodo was looking for you," said Aoko, stacking Tupperware boxes on the staircase, "something about running lines, or checking your part, or something. Here, take one with you! I'm trying out recipes." Handing him the box. "Chocolate-cherry brownies."

Kaito picking it up, glancing at Saguru as if he wanted to say something, and then whistling his way away, down the hallway up a staircase out of sight. Disappeared like he'd never been there.

Saguru forced a smile, turned to look at Konoshima, did he look as frighteningly blank as he felt? "Sorry about him," he said, "really, he doesn't—"

"O—Oh, it's okay, ah—" Blushing even more red, and God, can't you do anything right? "Come on, ah – the book club's waiting for us."

Another box of brownies from Aoko ("Chilli coconut chocolate!") and the two of them going up to the second floor, Class 3B where the rest of the book club waited. Akako picking out the chunks of chilli chocolate in her brownie, flecks of coconut on her fingers, the talk around him buzzing about the food and the setting and, classroom 4A has the best light and maybe we can ask the Drama Club to loan us some costumes? And ahaah, Ms. Aoko really outdid herself this time!, and his own mind spinning around Watanabe's gouged-out tongue and the—

"Let's go and see if we can find some costumes," Konoshima, in her element as leader, and a troop of students following her downstairs to the little school auditorium and its creaking backstage nest of passages. From the door: laughter and Naruhodo's voice shouting out directions ("Kaito, stop hanging off of that!", "Mr. Fujimoto, it's 'devious' not 'DEVIENT'!, "Can someone please turn down the lights, the French citizens are cooking over there!") and the door creaking open to the empty auditorium stage empty but for a handful of people in bonnets and hoop skirts and three-piece suits, Kaito Kuroba hanging upside down from something that he probably shouldn't have been hanging upside down from.

"Naruhodo! Can we look for some costumes?" said Konoshima, tapping Naruhodo on one sharp-jutted shoulder, and he gestured her onwards.

Inside, long hallway bracketed with shelves, smell of old clothes left to moulder in fabric-cloth bags. While the rest of them dove down, Saguru checked his mobile phone:

1. Nakamori, when you have time get to the station someone I want to introduce you to.
2. Jack, you kids going to make your way home later?
3. Grandfather Yukito, of course, come any day you wish, you know I don't see enough of you.

"Saguru, are you—"

Glancing up; fake 1700s dresses in cheap fabric not in production until early 2000s at least, hoops plastic and clicking and clacking together; men in stove-pipe trousers, spirit-gumming moustaches onto their faces.

Konoshima holding a forest-green sou-wester, "aah—Mr. Hakuba? Is this good for Holmes?"

Bite back the laugh, shake his head, and, "I, ah. I actually have a costume at home; I can bring it next time?"

"You have your own Holmes costume?" Konoshima, saying it like it was abnormal, which, well, he supposed it was, but it wasn't difficult to—"That's so cool! What does it look like?"
"Ah---" Like Jeremy Brett's in 'A Scandal in Bohemia', first broadcast 1984, six hundred and one trips to Camden Town vintage market to get the stuff he needed, Jack hooking his arm around him and laughing as the rain kicked up again, two years and six months ago. He'd never even worn it, had kept it there for a party his uncle Blake was going to throw but (there's this thief in Japan and the police can't catch him, maybe you can--) "I, ah. I can show you a picture of it," said Saguru, "because I modelled it on this actor who starred in, um. My favourite adaptation of Holmes – the Granada series? It—really does good things to his character, I really like it. Have you ever seen it?"

"Is it... the BBC one?" Konoshima ventured hesitantly.

Saguru winced, shook his head. "No, ah. I don't, um. Like that one. It's not very Holmes," he said, "I mean, if you read the books, um – Holmes is very – he's sort of – rough, but he's kind? And the BBC Holmes is an absolute mockery of the character. I mean, in the first episode, doesn't he threaten to shoot someone? It's ridiculous."

"I—ah—" Konoshima shrugging, flushing a little, "I'm not sure!"

"Now the Robert Downey Jr. Movies," said Saguru, sweeping inwards, because he might not find a costume, but he felt awkward being the only one in proper clothing, "are a bit better. And Jude Law is a wonderful Watson." Flickflickflick through black trench coats, "and I did like RDJ as Holmes, though as with everything he plays, he does have a tendency to lapse into, ah, neurotic, strung-out, dying-from-stress Holmes, which I suppose is good, considering Holmes did use cocaine to calm himself down—oh, this is good." Pull out a trench coat, which wasn't a frock coat, but it was made of thicker material, so it would do, and—"this too, it'll look just like The Dancing Men—"

Konoshima fiddling with a floral bonnet as he collected: brown stove-pipe trousers with white pinstripe from the 1800s section, brown waistcoat with gold buttons, white shirt and a black bow-tie, and unearthed from the very bottom of a props box, a brown deerstalker with a yellow grid pattern. Found an empty pipe in one of the boxes, and tucked it into the topmost pocket.

And then disappeared into the changing room to dress, leaving Konoshima staring after him, bemused.

The mirror, cracked with someone's overzealous cane-twirling, and he fitted the deer-stalker hat on and saw himself staring back – thin face, too long almond eyes (red from lack of proper sleep) and mouth a smidge too angular, jaw like a cliff edge. He'd lost weight since all this had started, everything he ate turning to dust and ash in his mouth, but in the suit, it hid some of the effects. Didn't feel as roomy, as at-home, as his Brett-inspired costume at home, but—

Step outside, twirl the trench coat a little, and then march out after Konoshima.

And—

"Maitre Holmes!" Kaito: spirit-gummed black moustache over his top lip, artificial wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, dressed in: sweeping black cape three piece black suit crisp ruffled white shirt and black bow tie black top hat silver tipped black cane, "I had no idea you'd be here! What a pleasant surprise!" Stalking down from the stage despite Naruhodo's squawking, every step purposeful, moving like a panther.

Maitre—ah!

"Monsieur Lupin," said Saguru, ducked his head a little, Kaito wore lifts and that put them nearly at the same height, "what a surprise. Had I known you were here, I would've secured my watch. I don't want to be troubled getting it back from you."
A snort of laughter, and another step closer, breath to breath now, Kaito's blue eyes odd in Lupin's angular 30-something-year-old Frenchman face, "Monsieur Holmes," said Kaito, and every word a caress, pushing on Lupin's la belle mort attitude, "I doubt very much that there is a method by which you could secure it from me, my dear maitre. As you must know, what Lupin wants, Lupin takes." And a finger tipping up his jaw (white gloves so he couldn't touch Kaito's flesh but it burned stung ached) and—

Saguru bit the shudder back, forced it aside and Holmes, be Holmes, be—"And as you know," Saguru said, affected boredom and a slant to his voice like hunger, "what Holmes chases, Holmes catches." Snick-snap of handcuffs, and Kaito glanced down at the manacles on both their wrists, looked up at him, burst out laughing, and was him again.

Saguru felt the smile tug up at the corners of his mouth, and laughed himself, reaching for the key in his other pocket.

"I'm glad you're not in the play," said Kaito, grinning, "you're a scary Holmes, Saguru.

And why was it when Kaito said his name, it felt like everyone else had vanished off the face of the earth? "It's always been my wish to play Holmes," said Saguru, "but I don't think I'm quite as scary as you expect."

"Oh, terrifying," said Kaito, "absolutely terrifying." Big smile, sweet and soft, and he reached up, palmed his hand against his cheek, and then—leaned in, their noses brushing, and are you going to kiss me right here, and I'm not ready I don't know what to do don't—Saguru holding his breath not sure where the rest of the room had vanished to, it had shrunk just to Kaito holding court.

"Is this what you're looking for?" The key to the handcuffs. He'd taken it, somehow, too quickly for Saguru to notice.

No, "Yes," said Saguru, "how did you--?"

"Magic," said Kaito, "and a distracted audience." And then a pause, and, "I'm sorry if I — ah — if I upset you, earlier. With Miss Konoshima. She's, uh—pretty special to you?"

"She's easily embarrassed, and you're a brute," said Saguru, glanced up. Naruhodo conversing with another student, he didn't know; Konoshima next to him, arguing. "I'm sorry. It's been — a trying few days."

Kaito's face softening, he nodded. "I'll be more careful. I just—" A pause and, "—I've been like this for so long, I don't know what to do when I'm not—" not me, not like this "—I'm stupid during the day," murmured Kaito, "it's easier. People underestimate you if you're—flirty and stupid."

"I should try it some time," said Saguru, but he understood what it was: playing the role expected of you, wasn't this what it was all about? Clever British pedantic polite never breaks the rules that was why nobody had suspected that he had hidden Kaito why Jack didn't blink when Kaito told him they were dating why nobody thought that he'd have ulterior motives to hide KID.

The handcuffs fell away, clanked on the ground. He rubbed his wrist, watching Kaito rejoin the group of students huddled a few feet away from the stage, flipping onto his hands and walking the rest of the way there. Smiled a little – idiot – and went to join them, but his phone buzzed first.

Unknown number.

"Hi—Saguru Hakuba speaking?"
Silence.

"Hello?"

Huffing noises on the other end, someone breathing ragged and sharp – in pain?

Saguru frowned. "Is there someone there with you?" Sudden realization, "press the buttons on your phone. Once for 'yes', and twice for 'no'."

Beep.

"Who is this?" If it was Jack he'd speak, if it was Hei he'd—unless someone had caught them. Captured them, but—

Who do you know who can't speak?

"Watanabe?"

Beep.

Heart tripping sharp over his ribs, the world shrinking a little, oh Christ what now. Why would he call him? "Do you need something?"

Beep.

"Okay. I'll catch the train and—"

Beep. Beep.

"No? But—"

An explosion of beeping a wordless shriek of pain and the line popped like something overinflated. Saguru fumbled his phone, his hands unsteady, snatching off the deerstalker hat and calling Nakamori.

"Nakamori? Is there someone standing guard over Watanabe?"

"Eeeh? Yes, of course there is, what do you—"

"I need you to send back-up. I think something must've happened to Watanabe."

"What?" his voice sharp as a blade, "what do you mean something happened?"

Explaining, aware the rest of the students were staring at him as though he was mad, stripping clothing off as he marched back to the back room. Nakamori humming and hawing and, "I'll call Keiichi, he was there; if we don't get a response—"

"I'm going over there," said Saguru, tossing his shirt onto a chair and reaching for the other one one-armed, "he called me, there has to be something going on—"

"You're not going anywhere," said Nakamori, snapping down the line, "if something's happened at the hospital, then you'll just get in the way – you're not even armed. Stay wherever you are. I'll let you know."

Do you know what they leave behind Mr. Hakuba? Scorched earth.
And that scream.

"But—"

"No arguments," said Nakamori, and hung up, already dialling another number.

Saguru put his own phone down, his hand shaking. Heard a footstep, and saw Kaito in the doorway, looking confused.

"Guru?"

"Watanabe talked to us," said Saguru, "told us about this – this organization. Why would they let him live after that, Kaito?" Shook his head, and then, "—he called me, a couple of minutes ago. The line cut, but I think he was – I think someone hurt him. I heard him scream." Whimpering and wordless and shrieking.

"Isn't he supposed to be under—"

"They're everywhere. They're in your school and your home and your police station, in your fucking hospital, and your fucking law courts. There's no beating them,'" said Saguru, "that's what he said. They're everywhere. If I got him killed—"

Two steps into the room and Kaito took hold of his shoulders, gave him a shake, "stop that," he said, "we don't even know if something's happened yet."

"I'm going to the hospital," said Saguru, pulled his tie straight and knotted it with shaking hands. "I have to see what he wanted."

Kaito sighing, and then pulling off the spirit-gummed moustache. "For the record," said Kaito, "I think this is a stupid idea. But I'm not letting you go alone."
Chapter 11

Rush-hour traffic blocking the roads in every direction even on a Saturday and Saguru couldn't keep still, felt himself vibrating on the bus ride over to the University of Tokyo Hospital; kept replaying, over and over and over again, that shriek Watanabe's muffled voice the sound of him trying to say something.

Your fault, he thought, because it was; if he'd kept a closer watch on him, if he'd pushed harder for better protection, you know what informants get when they're out from behind bars. Trembling fingers wrapped around the seat in front of him; Kaito silent next to him, flipping cards one handed, his phone in the other, typing out text messages excuses sorry Guru's cousin wanted to see him we'll be back right away! Or sorry, Guru felt ill, or maybe just, sorry, work! If he asked him, Kaito would tell him, but could he risk it, knowing that everyone he spoke to seemed to end up injured hurt mute?

Squeezed his eyes shut as the bus trundled to a stop outside the hospital, and the two of them slid out into the crowd of people, by now second nature to flit his eyes all around him looking for someone paying them too much attention, a bright red dot, an umbrella shoved unceremoniously into their sides (departing poison, leaving them gasping and strangling on the ground, dead in seconds).

University of Tokyo Hospital loomed above them, floors of black-glass windows and double doors, the antiseptic stench of hospitals (not clean, but somehow too clean, something daubed in bleach to get rid of criminal evidence). Saguru hesitated, then marched inside, Kaito trailing behind him. A single humming fan wafting over a crowded waiting room, a nurse at the desk playing something on her phone, stacks of paperwork, "yes?"

"Police," said Saguru, his thickest voice, pulling out the temporary warrant card, and handing it over. "For Mr. Watanabe, please."

Her eyes flickered between the card and his face, looking for forgery, and then stop on his name. Hakuba. "Ah—that'll be a problem," she said, handing back his warrant card. "Mr. Watanabe is in no shape to answer questions."

Shock of ice blurring through him, the whole world hot and cold at his feet. He swallowed past the lump of his throat, said, "---how---what---happened to Mr. Watanabe?"

Third floor, the intensive care ward. Keiichi Ito sitting outside the door, his hands shaking around a plastic cup of machine coffee, slopping it over one edge and the other. Kaito clicked his tongue, walked to the vending machine, and bought him a chocolate bar.

"Mr. Ito," said Saguru, when they approached. Had a handle of himself, a little, enough to keep his hands from shaking, "I heard you were the attending, um. Officer."

"I've been on duty since—since the night before," said Keiichi, stared bleakly at the puddle of brownish liquid on the floor before getting up, tossing out both coffee and cup, wiping his hands on a disposable tissue, "I was—I thought someone was coming to relieve me, but there's—uh, the detective who was supposed to come take my place had to pick up some guy from the airport, and so I—" waved at the door to Watanabe's room. "I've been here. I was here, for the—" Swallowed.

Saguru peered inside through the small window: Watanabe, hooked up to six more machines now, spaghetti wires tangled around his arms and his legs, his bare chest painfully thing, the burn marks
Keiichi took a breath in, let it out slowly. "I was outside the room the entire time," on the defensive, which would suggest that he wasn't, "he was – fussy, wouldn't settle down, kept banging on the bedside table for things. More water, stuff like that – nurses kept going in and out of the room. At one point, I thought they were going to hit him, he kept calling them so often—" voice trailing off, and then, "—I go in there, early in the morning, and Watanabe isn't breathing – so I call for a nurse, and they – they bring him around—they think he might've had a seizure, or, or taken something, and triggered a heart-attack – he's on a lot of pain killers, for the, um—" and gesturing towards his mouth. "The medical chart's in there. You can go in there and read it properly, I – don't really understand all this stuff."

Eager to go in but not yet he had to see where this fit how this fit with the story that he'd heard on the phone, how Watanabe had managed to call him and how he'd phoned him and why Keiichi had not seen anyone walking in or out of Watanabe's room. "And you didn't see anything?" he said, tilted his head a little towards the room and indicated Watanabe the medical spaghetti meshing him into the bed the nurse's desk, "you never left at any point?"

Keiichi shook his head, dark eyes dinner-plate wide, focusing on him as though this was the first time he'd seen him, "you can check the security tapes," said Keiichi, "I requisitioned them when Inspector Nakamori called me."

"What time was this?" said Saguru, "what time did you realize there was something wrong with Watanabe?"

Hesitation, glancing at his watch, his mind ticking through hours minutes seconds – "not long," said Watanabe, "maybe it had just gone nine, or nine fifteen?"

The time of the call was 9:10:33AM. That put the call well within the realms of possibility but if Watanabe had been on the phone with him, then how hadn't he heard someone entering? Or the noises of someone moving around? Something should've startled Watanabe, something should've come across on his phone, but instead he'd heard nothing but silence, and Watanabe's ragged breathing, the beeping of the buttons – had someone been in there with him when he'd been calling him?

"How'd you know something'd happened to Watanabe, little brother?" said Keiichi.

Kaito shrugged, tucked his hands into the pockets of his maroon sweater, and, "we were coming to see him today, anyway," he said, "but Watanabe called Saguru a few minutes ago, and he sounded —" Looking at him as though not quite sure how to put it into words. "Saguru was worried about him."

Did he sound so disingenuous, so worried, that even Kaito didn't know how to put it into words, how to make his fears – real? Shook his head, didn't know what to tell him except that, "Watanabe sounded like he was in a great deal of pain, and under duress. Given his history with the local Yakuza, I thought it might be best to provide a police presence, and to come and see him. After all, I do bear some responsibility for what happened to him—"

"Dangerous thing to say, little brother," said Keiichi, and his smile was a thin, watery affair, "people might think you made him cut his tongue out."

Saguru fumbled, shook his head, "he did it because of me, didn't he? If he hadn't been so afraid—"
Keiichisoftly, "he did it because he was guilty, little brother. I don't think you have to blame yourself for what other people do."

Kaitonodding, earnest in his belief, "exactly," said brightly, and then hushing down, "...do you think we can go in? Read the chart?"

"Nurse says he's going to be out for a while," said Keiichi, and then, "and if Inspector Nakamori comes in, I'll tell you that the doctor asked you to take a look at it." Smiled and winked at him, "he'll believe that, won't he?"

I—Brain lodging in place, his head spinning around Watanabe's strange call and how he'd sounded on the phone and the beeping and that **scream**. "Yes, I think—yes," said Saguru, inclined his head in a bare nod, and then moved so that he was standing on the threshold, looking into the room, counting the machines (three at least, huge silvered things like parasites, hovering over Watanabe's prone form).

"Do you want me to go in with you?" said Kaito, his voice soft and careful, "I don't mind."

Shaking his head, 'no', he didn't mind going into the room, he just—

(London 2014, Germany 2013, France 2012—)

Saguru took a deep breath, stepped into the room – antiseptic lemon floor polish chemicals zinging the air on his tongue like an electrical current. When he moved, the floor squeaked, had just been washed because his shoes slipped a little on the linoleum. White walls, fresh painted recently, the paint hadn't started to dust or to bubble the way old paint did. There was a half a sandwich on a plastic tray in the corner of the room, an uneven bite mark taken out of it.

Biding his time until his eyes moved to Watanabe, prone in his bed. One tube running from wrist to a bag hanging near him, the other disappearing underneath the sheets, eyes still on artificial sleep, tattoos blacker against his skin as though they were leeching the life out of him as he watched. His limp fingers hanging off the side of the bed, and Saguru picked them up gently (spongy flesh half-dead flesh) and put his hand on the bed, curled it so that the nails were in the sheet.

What were you trying to tell him? Where was his phone?

Ignore the medical chart for a minute or two, and then reach over to the side of the bed, to the bedside table, open up the drawer and peer into the depths, nothing but a notepad and a pen. Second drawer empty. Maybe underneath the sheets? Slide his hand underneath to the mattress, feeling around beneath the pillow for the smooth rectangular bump of the phone, for the curve of buttons.

Nothing on the right.

Step around to the left, and try again: pillow, mattress, underneath the sheet. The other bedside table, also empty. Packet of tissues unearthed from beneath the left hand corner of the mattress, but no phone, nothing to indicate that Watanabe had been able to call him.

Saguru frowned. Was aware of the people outside, Keiichi and Kaito, watching him. Sat down on the visitor's chair, taking the medical chart from the end of the bed, flipped it open but didn't look at it.

How had Watanabe called him without a phone? A nurse could've loaned him one, but then the nurse would've taken it with her – and it would also make her the last person to have seen Watanabe awake. So had the visitor, whoever he'd been, given him a phone, realized that he was
calling him, and—? What? Killed him, attacked him, in full view of whoever might've been walking past the corridor at that moment?

They're everywhere. They're in your school and your home and your police station, in your fucking hospital, and your fucking law courts. There's no beating them.

Who would be the most unassuming person to see in a hospital? Nurse. Doctor. Maybe a janitor, at a pinch, or a physical therapist – but he'd had his tongue removed, he didn't need physical therapy, did he? Speech therapist, perhaps, or a psychologist, to deal with missing-limb syndrome... Family? Could it have been family? It wouldn't be workmates – he didn't imagine the Yakuza cared a lot about these things.

Unless they're all on the payroll, the thought slithered into his mind, unless there's an entire syndicate working to try and kill Kaito. Head aching at that thought, he pushed it away, too unlikely; Yakuza syndicates didn't work with other syndicates as far as he knew, and while there was absolutely a first time for everything, he didn't think that this would be it. No. It would be something else, something cleaner. Probably, then, it was a nurse. Maybe a doctor, but he could vet each and every one if he had the man power, set two police to do the interviews—

In the bed, Watanabe silent.

Saguru sighed, reached over and touched his cold hand. "I'm so sorry," he said, quietly, "I didn't mean for any of this to happen to you."

Flipped open the medical chart, read through it: patient admitted with acute bleeding and trauma, stump disinfected, cauterized, detailed listings of the medication—flip flip, until he came to the end.

Seizure at approximately 09:11, cause to be determined but suspected to be drugs; stitches popped and had to be resewn, patient subdued and put under anaesthetic. Patient was found mostly unresponsive. Immediate care given.

Creak of the door, and a nurse shuffled in, saw him, opened her mouth to demand what he was doing here. Saguru reached into his pocket, handed over his warrant card without even a flick upwards at her, frowning down at the chart – seizure, induced by nothing? Suspected to be drugs, but without the tox-screen to tell him if drugs were found in system they couldn't be sure, and how would Watanabe have even gotten drugs in here anyway?

Seizure, caused by nothing...

Saguru frowned, his eyes travelling up to the morphine drip, the heart monitor, focused there, and—

Kaito tiptoeing in next to him, leaning over his shoulder, reading.

Frowning, as though he realized, too, that there was something—

"Does Watanabe have a history of seizures?"

"It's possible," said Saguru, "but wouldn't it be in his file if he did?" Times like these, he could curse his unfamiliarity with the Japanese hospital system, but it made sense that the file would have something so crucially important to the patient.

Kaito looking over at Watanabe, one shoulder resting on the back of his chair, close as a dream to him, but—"It would be," but his voice was far away, his brain locked somewhere else, and, "—he
looks a lot less scary when he's not—moving, doesn't he?"

Had to nod, that much was true. The time in the hospital had shrunk Watanabe down to a shell, muscle and bone. Mouth closed, the aborted stub of his tongue hidden so that Saguru didn't have to look at what he'd done and know that it was his fault.

Kaito's eyes travelling up towards the morphine drip, and, "... Poisoned, do you think?"

"I don't know if it's drugs or—poison or---," said Saguru, "or if it's drugs, it's so—" small insignificant well-hidden new, "—it isn't on the chart yet." Set the chart down and pinch the bridge of his nose with his forehead, Watanabe's voice, his screaming, the sudden realization that there was danger and he'd caused it. "Even fast-acting poisons would be easy to find, but if it's something that we don't know, or maybe—" Huff out a breath of air, and rub his fingers over his face, couldn't understand at all what had happened, knew only two things: that someone had stepped into Watanabe's room while he was on the phone, that someone had tried to hurt him and had very nearly succeeded. What did Watanabe know that they didn't want him to tell them?

A knock at the door, and an unfamiliar man stuck his head around the doorway. To his right, a young boy, holding onto his hand. Hugo Boss suit in camel with a black trench coat, and flat green eyes, blond hair cut military short, a Westerner. His Japanese halting, but decent for the way he was using it.

"Saguru Hakuba?" Said looking at Kaito.

Saguru raised his hand, realized he was being rude and stood up. His legs wobbled a little, and he put the medical chart back into its pocket, smiled a little at the stranger, though in the back of his head, he wondered where he'd been at approximately 9:15 this morning, and if the Yakuza hired blond foreigners to do their dirty work (of course, for that, he supposed, he could just ask Jack but it was unlikely that Jack would give him a straight answer, or even much of an answer. But he always had the option.)

"I'm sorry, it's been a trying day," said Saguru, "I'm Saguru Hakuba. May I help you?"

"Not in so many words," said the gentleman, held out a hand, "Jack Connery, ICPO. Your colleague outside told me you were in here, and I thought, best to introduce myself. I'll be working with you on the latest Kaitou Kid case."

The latest—there's been a heist warning?

Saguru's eyes sliding towards Kaito. Flare of temper, why don't you trust me why don't you tell me these things.

Kaito not flinching, laughing a little, "man! Japan's becoming such a holiday destination for you police types." Reaching into a pocket and pulling out a handful of cards, getting to stacking and flipping them, whistling as he sauntered towards the door, "okay, okay, I know when I'm not wanted, I'll let you police officers talk! I'll be outside, Saguru." Subtle clack of the door closing, the little boy wide-eyed as Kaito's flipping cards caught the light and arrowed it in all directions.

"Daddy, daddy—" breathlessly, tugging on his sleeve, "look!"

Jack Connery: 42 years old at the most, lived-in face, corners of his eyes wrinkled, slight Scottish accent leaning more towards Glasgow than Edinburgh. Looked at Kaito, small and slight in his oversized burgundy shirt and tight jeans, flipping the cards in the air and creating shapes out of nothing, performing for the little boy hanging onto Connery's hand.
"He's a show off," said Saguru, wasn't prepared for how fond the words came out sounding, "why
don't you ask him to show you some more magic tricks?" he told the child, didn't know how to talk
to him but it seemed nature to ask him.

The boy's eyes widening like dinner plates, and then looking up at his father, beseeching and
manipulative, "pleaaase?"

"Oh—okay. But stay where I can see you," said Connery, watched him like a hawk as he took two
sharp stumbling steps after Kaito.

Kaito stooping low, grinning at the boy, his cards all in his hand, and presented with a flourish.

"Sorry about—I didn't mean to imply—" said Saguru, realizing, perhaps, that it might've been
taken the wrong way, "Kaito's very good with children," he ended, didn't know what else to say to
make up for the gaffe for implying that the boy was in any way a hindrance.

Connery smiling, waving off the worry, "it's fine," he said, "I know. Ah, well—" looked at the
man in the bed, brows crinkling, "...I thought KID was non-violent?"

"This isn't a KID victim," said Saguru. "He isn't, I mean. KID. Not violent, but I'm working on
another case, and I was just—" gestured at the figure in the bed, "—well. I'm not making much
progress, as you can see."

"Some cases have a tendency to drive you crazier than others," said Connery, nodded his head.
"Would you like to tell me a little bit about it? Maybe I can help."

Eyed him for a second, considered it, but shook his head, smiled, "it's very kind of you," said
Saguru, "but I wouldn't like to take up a lot of your time. He's only under anaesthetic, so when he
wakes up, hopefully, we can clear up everything—"

Why would they mean him to wake up?

He needed to remind Nakamori to put a guard on the door. Someone would come for Watanabe
soon, someone would come and try to finish up what they'd started, and he didn't need another dead
man on his mind. There were already too many crowding for purchase there.

Connery nodding, understanding, and, "well, then, may I bring in a seat? I'd like to be updated a
little on the KID case, and I've been told you're the lead detective—"

"Hardly," said Saguru, gave up his seat, fidgeting already – Kaito was only in the hallway, but
knowing what he knew, Watanabe as proof in front of him, it felt too far away. "I don't mean to be
disrespectful, sir, but I'm only a consulting detective. I'm here on temporary adjournment from the
London Metropolitan Police. My father has connections in the Tokyo Metropolitan Police, and I'm
afraid Inspector Nakamori had no choice but to employ me."

"Yes," said Connery, and smiled a little, "but that's hardly polite to say during a first introduction,
is it?"

Saguru chuckled, found himself leaning against the wall, a bad British habit that gave him looks in
Japan, but Connery didn't know the etiquette, and so—"no," he said, "I suppose it wouldn't be
polite, but it would be honest. Inspector Nakamori is a wonderful detective who is doing the most
that he can with a perplexing case. And I wouldn't like to go over his head—he really should be
providing you with the information, given that he's the one who's lead."

"We'll call it our little secret, then," said Connery.
Suppose it wouldn't hurt – after all, what was there to say about KID that was new or shocking? Connery had probably heard some of the stuff he'd done already, or he wouldn't be here, trying to ask him for his run-down of KID cases.

But what did he mean, the latest KID heist?

"KID is a particular thief," said Saguru, rehearsed to the letter, to the pauses and the thoughtful by-the-ways, to the way he tilted his head; nothing he said now could be too subtle or he ran the risk of exposing Kaito as KID, and—it's actually a little hard to explain what he does without running into, uh—problems, but I'll give it my best shot."

Sat there and explained to this stranger, pale-eyed blond-haired knife-mouth stranger, how KID was a magician and a performer, and how every heist he orchestrated was pulled off like music, how he sent letters taunting the police, and how they weren't any closer to catching him than they had been in the beginning; "he's the perfect criminal," said Saguru, "smart and sneaky, and you know he has quite a following here in Japan, so I wouldn't even be surprised if we did manage to catch him and we couldn't keep him locked in jail—"

"There's nothing like a perfect criminal, Detective Hakuba," inclined his head a little, and suddenly, he seemed older and brittle, the edges of his mouth curled down to express his distaste, "there's only clever criminals, and stupid criminals. But, don't worry. KID won't be running free for very long."

His back arching a little, his body going stiff, couldn't help it.

"With all due respect, Mr. Connery," said Saguru, couldn't keep the way his voice dropped down two degrees, "I think that's very unlikely. You've just arrived."

"Every thief has their reckoning-day, Detective Hakuba," said Connery, "you might not realize it now, but a thief is the worst sort of criminal to be. Eventually, they'll trip themselves up – take an unnecessary risk and plunge to their deaths, or miscalculate their own intelligence and blunder into a trap. The life of a thief is a short one, Detective Hakuba. Sooner or later, it ends."

"Perhaps," said Saguru, and can't stop his voice from icing over, "but I would very much doubt that Kaitou Kid is your run of the mill thief. He's been in operation since the late 90s."

"All the more reason," said Connery, "for him to trip up. Good God, has he really been operating unhindered for so long?" His mouth forming a moue of surprise, as though he was going to segue into, don't you bastards know how to catch your own thieves and what else do I expect from the police force that employs children but he, "—perhaps he'll be a worthy challenge, then."

"You mentioned another heist," said Saguru, to pull the conversation away from KID and Connery's sheer gaul, "are you here hunting KID, or--?"

"No," said Connery, "more's the pity, really. From the little you told me, he seems like an interesting challenge. No, our concern is Nightmare – Kid's, ah—late night accomplice."

His mood lifting briefly, at least it's not Kaito this time. "Yes – I heard something about that," didn't say, obviously, that he'd heard it from Kaito's mouth, that Kaito had told him that a man had approached him saying that he would help him, "but I'm afraid I'm not very familiar with the case. I Googled it this morning, but most of what I found seems to be—"

"Exaggerated?" said Connery, with his whip-thin smile, "unusual? I mean, compared to a magician thief, I would imagine he's not so strange."
"You would think," said Saguru, "but our magician thief is a performer, and nothing more. I wouldn't say he's—" the word leaping out at him from the Google documents, cursed, "— everything I read about Nightmare seems to imply that he's the cause of over ten deaths already. Do you have reason to believe he might be targeting Kaitou Kid?"

Brow raising, and, "wouldn't you think it a good thing?" said Connery, "you'd get rid of your thief, and the blight on your record."

Outside the door, subtle but Kaito stiffening a little, glancing towards him as though he didn't want to hear anymore, content to play his card tricks for the boy but—

"I'm not sure what they teach you at Interpol, Detective Connery," didn't bother, this time, to hide the ice in his voice, "but in Japan we prefer our villains captured alive, and not needlessly killed. There is a reason, I would imagine, that the death penalty is so ill-used."

Connery didn't take the insult for what it was, smiled again, now old now tired now greying. "How old are you?" he asked, and held up his hands when Saguru visibly bristled. "No disrespect intended, whatsoever. I just – would like to know."

"I'm seventeen," said Saguru, "to be eighteen this coming August."

"Young," said Connery.

"I assure you," said Saguru, "my qualifications are hardly suffering because of my age, but if you have issue to believe that I am a problem, please do bring it up with Inspector Nakamori." A lift of the chin, his jagged blade voice cutting every vowel down to size, "though I will save you the trouble, and inform you that Inspector Nakamori is hardly likely to listen to you."

"That's not what I meant," said Connery, gently, "it's just – you're young. It's natural that you're full of ideals, at this age. I remember when I was your age – oh, we're talking years ago – all I wanted to do was be a police officer. Dressed up as one for three, four years running, until my mum had to buy me a different costume because it was starting to fray – you can imagine, of course, how popular that made me in Glasgow." A wink, had he heard of his cases there? Saguru didn't want to ask, didn't want to look stupid, kept his mouth shut and gave him his best curated 'haughty little lord' stare. "My point is—oh, Christ, lad. You're a child. Come a couple of years time, you won't be thinking the way you're thinking now. They're not—"

"Do you know what my father tells me, Inspector Connery?" Putting himself two steps away from him, looking at Watanabe, his fading breath, the steady beeping of the EKG. "My father is the Chief Superintendent of the Homicide Division in the London Metropolitan Police force – I'm sure you've heard of him, Lord James Hakuba? He took my mother's name when he married."

"I'm familiar," said Connery, and the flicker of amusement set Saguru's teeth on edge.

But he smiled.

"He tells me, 'look at them as cases, not as people'," said Saguru. "Before every interview and every court case, before every briefing. 'Look at them as cases, not as people'. He's solved 60% of every criminal case that he has dealt with, and been investigated five times for misconduct. I've solved every one of mine, and very few of my criminals have died. My record is unblemished. It's amazing, what treating people as people will do."

Connery's smile brightening a little, and then saying, softly, as he walked towards the door, "sometimes," he said, "Detective Hakuba, you'll find that that isn't enough."
"And when that isn't enough," said Saguru, "I'll hand in my badge and take up a different career. But until then, Inspector Connery, have a wonderful day in Japan."

Step outside the room and leave Jack Connery staring after him, his hands practically fists; nearly stumble into the doorjamb, and the little boy (son nephew brother?) animatedly talking to Kaito, "how did you do that one?" cries of utter enjoyment.

"You okay, little brother?" Keiichi, looking harder, suddenly, cup of coffee next to him drained down to the dregs. Someone had wiped up the puddle of his spilled coffee; crushed candy bar wrapper next to him, crumbs on his tie. "You look kind of—" At a loss for words.

"I don't think Inspector Connery and I will make friends," said Saguru, mildly, "he has completely different ideas of how to handle a criminal case."

Kaito chuckling, reaching down and pulling a paper bird out of the boy's ear; gasp of surprise, and then a racking cough, bone-deep and aching, the little child bent double, heavy padded jacket making him liable to fall over – wet, damp cough made him think of pneumonia, or maybe influenza.

"Oh, dear," said Kaito, face wrinkling in concern, sitting down on the floor and producing a string of handkerchiefs from one sleeve – didn't even manage to get the boy to smile a little, "that's a nasty cough. Are you okay, Kenta?"

"Y—Yes," in between gasps for air, pinching off one handkerchief (the rest melted into smoke, somehow, but the boy was preoccupied with his coughing fit, preoccupied with dragging in hollow lungfuls of air--), "yes, I'm okay, I—"

"Kenta!" Connery, quick footsteps and scooping him up against his chest; the boy twisting into him, burying his face into his neck, and, "I'm sorry, he's not—he's not supposed to get overexcited."

"Is he okay?" said Kaito, his face pale white with worry, "I didn't mean to—I was just—"

"It's perfectly fine," said Connery, squeezed him, "I know you didn't meant to – it's just – Kenta's health is a little delicate. I try not to excite him too much, because he'll—well, you've seen."

Kaito's mouth drooping at the corners, his fingers absently pinching his sleeve, about to pull out his pack of cards; Saguru reached out and took his hand, to stop him, squeezed it tight. Sudden sidelong glance, a startled cough, "Ah—"

"I was having fun!" Kenta said, tearfully peering out from his father's embrace, "I'm sorry!"

"No, it's okay," said Kaito, "I'm sorry, too, I didn't mean to—look, next time, I'll show you more magic, okay? If your dad says it's okay, I can even teach you some—would you like that?"

"Really, you don't have to," said Connery, but his voice was soft, tired, wanting?

"I'd like that!" whispered, the coughing had wrecked the boy's throat.

Saguru glanced at Connery, wondered if he should ask what was wrong, if he could help – could he take care of him when he was working on the Nightmare case? "Inspector Connery," he said, "should you need any help taking care of Kenta, please do let me know. I have a very dedicated housekeeper who'd love the company."
Connery's eyes crinkling at the corners, smiling a little, "would she?"

"Hey, hey—I don't get to stay too?" said Kaito, and his fingers squeezed tight, "if, um. If you don't mind, Inspector Connery. Baaya is wonderful, but Saguru and I are working on a project right now, and I'm always at the house, so if you'd like to—"

Connery laughing, "that's very kind of you, I'm sure Kenta would enjoy that—"

The boy drooped against his father's chest. High colour indicating over-exertion, half-asleep eyes – already tired, even after so little? – and Saguru hadn't paid attention before, but a high plaster sat on his right arm. Hair shaved near the back, visible underneath the hat. Old scars on his elbow from an intravenous drip—

Saguru reached for a pencil, had Kaito hand him one out of thin air (Keiichi going, "when did you take that?") and a notebook paper. Wrote down his name, address, Baaya's mobile phone, then after a moment's pause, Kaito's name and number. Tore off the page, and handed it over. "Call whenever you need," said Saguru. "I'd be happy to help. And Kaito'd be more than happy to have him as a guest, wouldn't you?"

"I would!" Kaito, bright and cheerful, "do you like birds? I have lots of birds – right now, we're all staying at Saguru's house, because we're working really hard on a project for school, so all the birds are there – and we have rabbits, and Saguru has a hawk named Watson—"

Kenta stirring sleepily, smiling at Kaito and then at him, and then, "dad," he said, "when the bad man in my head goes away, can we stay here a little longer?"

A stifling silence and—

"We'll see, Kenta. We really must be going," said Connery, quiet again, silent, drifting back towards the hallway, "Detective Hakuba, it's been a pleasure. Mr. Kuroba, if you're really sure about keeping Kenta, I'll call you sometime tonight – Inspector Nakamori would like me to arrange a quick briefing for everyone about Nightmare. If you're sure it's not a problem?"

"Arara, never a problem with such a good audience," chirped Kaito, flourished one hand, and pulled a paper rabbit out of his sleeve, handed it over, "here – to remember me. Until we meet again, little brother!"

Connery disappearing down the hallway, receding further and further away.

Kaito's smile disappearing with him; hollow and sad and quiet, staring after Connery with his eyes filled with longing and little-boy sorrow.

Keiichi sighed, "great," he said, "that means I'll be stuck on late shift again. If you're going to the station, tell Inspector Nakamori to send someone over to cover, will you? I'm tired, and I need to be at the briefing."

"I will, yes," said Saguru, glanced over at Watanabe, "—could you do me a favour? Could you make me copies of those hospital tapes, please?"

Back at the Denenchofu house, three missed calls for Konoshima Maki, two from Ryuichi, two from Jack. Red beeping light reminding him to call them back, so Saguru turned the machine to face the wall while they ate in the garden (full bloom the garden heavy with blossom the air sweet with crocus and iris and orchid and other plants that had grown in between that Saguru hadn't quite
taken care of). In the background: Watson chirruping with her toy house, music from the tiny radio he'd carried into the garden, sounds of traffic and exhaust, the laughter of distant children.

"I didn't know of any heist," said Kaito, voice pitched low, picking at his food – the visit to the hospital stuck to them both, and every time Saguru moved his head, he smelled lemon floor polish and the antiseptic reek of medication, "I swear, I wasn't planning any heist – not with Nightmare watching me, anyway."

"The odds stacked against you?" said Saguru, "a risk you don't want to take?" He raised his brows, wondered if it felt as odd to say as it was to feel it.

Kaito said nothing, picked a mushroom out of his noodles, and then tossed it to Watson. She ravaged it, squeaking her rage when it turned out not to be meat, her feathers fluffing up. Turned back to her toy.

"I'm not working on my own anymore," said Kaito, looking away as though it stung him, somehow, to say it, "and if I get – if I'm caught by them, they won't just – forget that you helped me. You'll be in their line of fire just as much as I was. Worse, because you – weren't forced into it. You did it because you thought it was right." Picked out another mushroom, and then tossed it to Watson again, more shrieking, more feathers fluffing, more noise. "So if I take risks, then they need to be calculated risks, and Nightmare—"

"Is too great a risk?" said Saguru, ruminated on that thought; they hadn't had time yet to go visit his grandfather, to use his database and see what they could dig up on him. "...Just because I'm helping you—"

"I know," said Kaito, "I know. You know the risks. You help me anyway, but the least I can do is make sure – if we're both already in so much danger – is not to make the situation worse." Finally took a bite of his noodles, chewing lethargically, focused on something else, thinking of, "I wonder what KID's going to steal next."

Hadn't called Nakamori back either, but Saguru had received an email from him, and he took out his phone, scrolled one handed to the one marked URGENT – KID, and opened it (Watson shrieking as her mouse flew off into the koi pond, flapping over their heads, frightening the fish the sound of cars trundling past humming buzzing sound of bees in the flowers and the encroaching threat of rain), "here it is—hold this—" Handed him his bowl, and navigated to the links below, clicked on the first one. "A pair of fifteen carat black opal earrings known as the Dark Knight. Look, there's a picture—"

Lean over, shuffled his chair closer, and Kaito bent his head, breath fogging up against his fingertips, so close that Saguru could smell the scent of chamomile on him (no hospital smells on Kaito nothing so base and dark just cleanliness and purity, just something sweet and achingly homey), "they're Australian black opals," said Saguru, "which sell for about, if I'm not mistaken —"

"When are you ever mistaken?"

Saguru snorting, elbowing him a little in the side, "—for approximately 1,146,145 yen. Per carat."

"Which would make it—" quick calculation in his head Kaito's eyes widening, "—oh. Jesus. That's —"

"Almost as much as I'm worth," said Saguru, said it innocently so that Kaito's eyes flickered over to him, held his gaze for a second, then smiled – just a little smile, but he liked it, cherished that
smile, everything had been too dark.

"Modest," said Kaito, and leaned back in his seat, thinking, "okay, and they're at the Tokyo Metropolitan Meien Art Museum, right?"

"Um—" quick flick down the link, "—yes. On the first floor."

"Hm," said Kaito, clicked his tongue a little, "and when is the heist?"

"Two days from now," said Saguru, "Nightmare sent a heist note to Nakamori. It says, 'I helped you, now you help me. Kaitou KID will be my apprentice as we target the Dark Knight earrings being held at the art museum'."

"Pah," said Kaito, waved a hand at him, "such an amateur. Everyone knows you should rhyme your heist notes. Makes it easy for detectives to remember." Flicked him an easy smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "I've never actually been to the Metropolitan Teien Art Museum," he said, "I don't know the layout. Would you—" A pause, hesitation, uncertainty written large across his face, "would you help me?"

"Help you?" said Saguru, moved his shoulders a little, "help you?"

"With the heist." Even smaller voice, even quieter. "Grandfather usually helps me, but—" but?

"I'd—What can I do to help?" said Saguru, "of course I'd help you, but I've never actually, um—planned a heist. Or been involved in one."

Kaito smiling at him, again, that cool smile that didn't quite reach his eyes, "it's easy," said Kaito, "all you have to do is just – tag along and trust me."

"Nothing new, then," said Saguru, went back to his food, and didn't quite notice how Kaito stopped his eating, stared at him for two point five seconds, then flickered a quick smile.

This one did reach his eyes, made him look younger, brighter, happier.

"I—yeah. I suppose not," said Kaito, the earlier mood gone. And then, "—before we go to the museum, can we stop off at my house? There's something I want to show you."
Chapter 12

14:23:22PM, outside the Kuroba house, dark and quiet in the afternoon sun. Well-maintained lawn, no flowers, one garden gnome with a top hat near the door; somehow, the presence of the empty dove coop on the rooftop made it look bigger and more hollow than the house had a right to be, all those empty windows staring out at them like eyes. No car out-front, no bicycle in the yard, if not for the absence of weeds, it could’ve been for sale, and nobody would’ve noticed anything else. One door away, Nakamori’s house: music pouring from the windows, a bicycle discarded in the yard, someone singing along tunelessly to the radio.

He’d never been this close to Kaito Kuroba’s house before, didn't know what to think.

_It looks like Mayfair_, thought instead, sneaking in unbidden before he could stop it (black-wood walls and dark carpet and the servants sneaking around quietly because _don't disturb the little master he's working on another murder case there's something wrong with that boy it's disgusting how they show him those pictures yes but he's a genius he caught that—_mother out for another party his father in his study the piece-apart people on the walls—)

"It's—" 'nice' didn't fit, 'homey' didn't fit, he didn't know what fit there. Didn't know what to say to Kaito.

"Come on up," said Kaito, walked up the pathway with maybe a little hesitation (_nobody waiting at home and he doesn't want to remember that I wonder where his mother is he doesn't talk about her much_) reaching into his pocket for the key a jangling of key-chains and the key in the lock _snick_ of the tumblers twisting open and Kaito pushed the door back.

"I'm home," called out to an empty house, nothing responding, not even the animals (which were now at his house perplexing Watson and the help, delighting Kaito).

The hallway: carpeted in blue, yellow walls, a picture of Toichi Kuroba at the farthest end, eyes following him. Right across, a dead man staring at him, and Saguru didn't imagine the flinch of Kaito's shoulders, the sudden reminder of, _oh yes you're not here anymore._

Reached out and took his hand, linked their fingers together, felt Kaito squeeze tight.

"Living-room," said Kaito, nodded his head to the right and a magazine-tidy living room: white floors black furniture a sofa and two chairs and a television. Pictures crowding the top of the kotatsu, but Saguru was too far away for him to make out any of them, thought he might've seen a small Kaito but— "I'll give you the longer tour later. This is—" Deep breath, and let it out again, slowly, "sorry. I'm nervous. I've never shown anyone this—" Trailing off, and then giving his hand another squeeze, pulling him down the hall and towards the alcove with the staircase, closer to the painting of Toichi Kuroba and his bright blue eyes.

Up the stairs, past empty cages barren of their animals, past doors shut; the entire house smelled like a show-home – window polish and dust squeezed into too-small places.

Saguru knew that smell by heart, had lived in Mayfair with that smell as his company.

Down the hallway and to the last room, Kaito with his hand on the yellow wood, pushing it open: a bed, neatly-made, shelves crowded with books on maths and science and history and philosophy, Houdini posters on the wall next to a standing portrait of Toichi Kuroba, aimed at the right of the wardrobe.
What was it like to wake up looking at one's dead father?

"That's, um—"

"Terrifying?" said Kaito, laughed a little, "yeah. I mean, when I was little it – made me feel better, you know? I'd have nightmares, and I'd wake up, and dad was there, and so for a little while, I could think, maybe, 'hey, it's a bad dream, I can just call out to him and he'll come get me'—" voice breaking on the last word and Saguru regretted asking, "—still waiting for him to come get me when I have bad dreams. In the meantime, I've got—this portrait. To remind me."

Two of them standing before it, looking at Toichi Kuroba in a black suit white shirt black bow tie, top hat spilling open rabbit in one hand doves behind him cards floating around him – elements of David Copperfield and Houdini, Saguru thought, could tell by the way Toichi looked at the people looking at him, daring them to laugh daring them to look away.

Thought of a much younger Kaito waking up in the middle of the night (imagining his father dying dying crying for him and trying to save him) and toddling over to the painting, sitting down, face against the canvas hand. His heart hurt, and so he pushed it away, looked to his right at the older Kaito standing next to him, looking at that painting as though he wanted to light a match and set it ablaze.

"Is this what you wanted to show me?" said Saguru, gently, not to disturb him, but, God, the way that Kaito stared was—


Saguru shook his head. His hand felt clammy in Kaito's too hot, he could feel his own pulse throbbing in his wrist.

"And you never asked," said Kaito, "but I think maybe – I think maybe you should know. It's just – It's a little difficult to explain, so – I have to show you." A pause, and quieter, smaller, "do you trust me?"

"Yes," without giving Kaito time to think, "yes. Of course I trust you." With anything you ask for I'd trust you with my life.

Kaito nodded, didn't look distracted, but looked – almost preoccupied. "Okay. Put your hand on the painting."

"What?" Blinking.

"Just—" Kaito taking his hand, and somehow it felt different stranger stronger to have his hand over his fingers linked now.

Sunlight guttering through the window and painting the edges of his jaw in light cheeks like razorblades his blue eyes watchful waiting for—

"Is this okay?" barely a sentence, words so small that Saguru had to strain to hear them.

Of course, thought, and then said, wavering, "of course," only a fraction of the wanting seeped into it, only a fraction of the hunger. "Though I'm, ah – a little bit confused, what does the painting—?"

"Hold on," said Kaito, and then pressed down.
Nothing happened for a nanosecond, and then the world tilted, the painting swinging back like a pendulum, tipping into a cavernous emptiness, winking lights coming to life on the walls, sharp against the darkness. The painting of Toichi Kuroba tilted back as though not even attached to the wall anymore (how did they do this isn't this a load-bearing wall wait Kaito --)

"Is this—"

Kaito leaped, dragged him with him, and they were falling, the pair of them tumbling through darkness and fairylights hands linked like it would keep them together (Saguru mentally calculating five ten feet down plunging straight into the earth at a maximum speed of 120 miles per hour which we are nowhere near --) and before he could finish the thought, whump, into something soft and cushioned that knocked the air out of him regardless. Laying there on top of the stuffed mattress, staring up at a black ceiling sparkling with in-built lights and—

"Are you okay?" Kaito shifting up and leaning over him, still holding onto his hand, "sorry, I just —"

"Wait," said Saguru, "give me a bloody minute—" his head spinning from the fall the closeness of Kaito how he always smelled like spice and sunlight and the bloody fall—"what in the hell was that? Has nobody in this house heard of stair-cases?"

Kaito staring at him, and then a quick smile and a, "you're not the adventurous type? I would've thought the opposite." Grinning, like they hadn't just dropped a floor and a half into some dark pit underneath the Kuroba household onto what felt like two mattress stacked very poorly on top of each other – the ramifications of missing the drop zone alone made his head spin.

"There's nothing adventurous about plunging down a dark hole towards certain doom!" said Saguru, raised his voice perhaps a fraction and just—

Kaito snickering, mouth turned up at the corners.

"It's not funny," said Saguru, exasperated but starting to smile too he could feel it turning up the corners of his mouth and this was unfair he didn't want to smile he didn't want to laugh didn't want to see the funny side of a full floor and a half's drop into the dark, "God, you magicians are so dramatic."

"You detectives are so boring," said Kaito, springing up and onto the wobbling surface, sliding off. Their hands disconnected, and Saguru felt the loss of it immediately, wanted to reach out and grab hold of it again just keep hold of it keep hold of him but that was childish stupid you're a big boy, act like it.

Ignored the pull that told him to follow Kaito and take his hand, and rolled off the mattress – he was right, it was a mattress, he could feel the springs underneath him, but it was deeper and thicker, the springs less – springy, custom made? God, to have gone towards custom-making a special landing area instead of having a rope a staircase something safer than what there was.

Saguru stood up, made his way off the side, brushed off his trousers, and stopped.

Small room maybe 10x15 red velvet carpet and red walls, antique playbills tacked up to the plaster: Houdini Copperfield Blackstone Hopper, disapproving portraits staring down underneath the selection of playbills and a tall glass case in the middle of the room. As soon as he stepped off onto the floor, feet sinking into the thick carpet.

In the corner, a gramophone clicked and whirred into life, soft music (Nina Simone? Billie
Holliday?) lilting like jazz hot as blues.

The glass case held Kaitou Kid's skin.

Saguru made for it, first.

White suit, taller than he was as he stood in front of it, faintly stained with red near the shoulder and the collarbone (baking soda or bicarbonate?) couldn't take his eyes away from those bloodstains, those old wounds. Heard Kaito shifting around behind him, but didn't turn his eyes away from the suit, drinking it in, somehow much bigger without Kaito in it. It subsumed him, made him into another person – he'd expected it to not be quite so—

*Imposing*, thought Saguru, *scary*. It looked almost alive, standing there, empty, waiting to swallow Kaito whole.

Would he ever crawl into Kaitou Kid and forget to come back out?

"It's much more impressive up close, hm?" said Kaito who, Saguru noticed, kept away from it, was fiddling with a pack of cards again – he hid them up his sleeves like they were going to go out of stock soon, and he was flicking them together, rolling them over his knuckles and cutting the pack, "my—" words lodging together, Kaito choking for a second on them, and then forcing them out almost ferociously, "—father wore that for years."

What did it feel like to know your father had lied for your whole life?

Saguru glanced back at the suit, saw the pinkish stain near the heart, the studded black buttons and the empty blue shirt, the red tie knotted and precise. Imagined Toichi Kuroba, taller than Kaito by at least fifteen centimetres, perhaps even more, slipping into the night, leaving behind a sleeping boy and a dozing wife, taking to the rooftops and—stealing. *Stealing*. For what? What had been so important that it would take him away from a family he loved, who loved him?

Behind the suit, another painting, superimposed in such a way that it looked like Toichi would step right into it, like he was watching from the shadows.

"This is—" Didn't have quite the right word for it, though several sprang to mind, each not-quite-good, *how can you live knowing that this was on your head?* And Saguru turned away from the stained suit to look at the rows upon rows of cabinets, holding cards and handkerchiefs and handcuffs, a stocky gun with a notched barrel and an engraving on the side, a trio of ropes harnessed together, and none of them, none of them were enough to put it away from his mind that Kaito had somehow been living above this room for so long, had stumbled upon this—shrine to his dead father, and kept it to himself for the better part of the year. "Is this all your father's doing?"

"Him and Jii, I imagine," said Kaito, "I tried asking Jii, but he wouldn't really tell me anything." The cards were gone, and he stood slightly in the shadows, looking at the record player (not something that he recognized, the spinning music off-kilter to what he knew, the smooth body unmarked by any differentiating features). "I think my dad built it, though. This, and all of these things—" waved his arm at the cabinets with modified weaponry, the tricks and the trade of Kaitou Kid.

Toichi *fucking* Kuroba.

Saguru bit back the anger (*don't say anything not your father not your business Kaito worships him*). "How did you find this place, anyway?" said Saguru, hoped it wasn't strange to ask, did Kaito go leaning against paintings normally? "It's relatively well hidden, isn't it? Put behind the
painting?"

"I know," said Kaito, smiled a little, but didn't meet his eyes, "I mean – my room used to be Dad's workshop, you know? But a couple of years ago, Dad decided that he didn't need the space, and it was way bigger than my room, and with better light, so we moved all my furniture and stuff there – I didn't know what that painting was, just knew that Dad left it up there, and I guess I didn't mind. Felt kind of creepy, at the start, but—it was comforting, in a weird way. And then he died, and I didn't want to take it down."

"You didn't think about it?"

"Dozens of times," said Kaito, laughed a little, "but—I mean. It's one of the only things I have left of him." Quieter, then, "...is this—it's weird, isn't it? Portrait of your dead father, hiding a secret passage?"

"I mean," said Saguru, "I sincerely hope none of my other criminals have the same set up because I would find it very difficult to accuse them, I think."

A weak smile, and Kaito turning away to touch the gramophone, shifting the needle until the music crackled to silence.

"I've thought about it, over the years," said Kaito, "if Dad always meant me to have this room. If he meant to seal it off, but then always forgot, or maybe—" A stutter, a deep breath in, and letting it shudder out of him, "—I'm drowning," said Kaito, quietly, "and it killed him. How was I supposed to make up for him? How was I supposed to become him? And why the hell would I want to? He died!"

Sudden, sharp climb in his voice, and Saguru made his way forward, wondered if he should touch Kaito (put his arm around him touch his hand take hold of his shoulders and give him a shake something so that he didn't feel alone) and settled for a hand on his shoulder, squeeze of the fingers, "I know," quiet, "I'm sorry, I know."

Sharp jerk of the head, and Kaito sighed, ran his hands up into his hair, his back like concrete, staring at nothing, "... I keep trying to figure it out," said Kaito, "what it means, that he – might've meant for me to find this. Did he just—Did he want me to become something like him?"

Thought of his records at home, Toichi Kuroba as the unnamed witness, turning on his Yakuza thugs – could the same man who'd done that have planned to make his son take over his mantle?

"Have you tried asking Jii?"

"Jii doesn't talk about Dad," said Kaito. "He has to be drunk to even mention his name. Or I have to be doing something stupid."

"Well, then," said Saguru, tried for a joke that fell flat before it got out of his mouth, and so he let it die, didn't matter, nothing mattered by Kaito standing like a block, staring at a playbill, at the gramophone beneath it, the whirring of the needle without music.

This tomb of a room, ensconced underneath the house, made his back itch. Shrine to a dead man, a shelter for everything Toichi Kuroba had wanted to do; he hadn't read clearly on the old KID cases, but maybe it was time to revisit them, see what he could learn about the man (could it help him understand whom he'd angered, why he'd refused?).

"There's something else," said Kaito, "but this is—kind of weird."
Gave a pointed glance around the room, the portrait of Toichi watching them from the farther wall, the stacks of adverts stuck to the just-laid paint, the cabinets filled with things that Saguru only had the slightest idea of, and the suit, like a king in the middle of it, brown-pink near the collar where someone had tried to kill Kaito Kuroba.

"Yes, okay," said Kaito, caught his look, didn't smile, but didn't take offence, "a little weirder. But I—I wanted to bring you down here to show you everything, so this, uh. This counts, too." Didn't move, even then, looking at the floor, and then shuddered, shifted forward and walked towards the creaking gramophone.

Music spinning to a halt and Saguru tucked his hands into his pockets, tried to avoid looking at the smeared suit. Kaito bent over the gramophone, looking at the disk as though steeling himself, and then: flipping it over, putting it back in one sharp motion, putting the needle. Humming grinding purring note of vinyl underneath the needle's smoothed track, the music kicking up again and—

"— unsure about which way to take a trick—" smooth dulcet hint of an accent that travelled everywhere from Vietnam to England, deep-voiced and (educated but educated late not from money he's mimicking the people he's heard talking, hated that his first thought was that, and right on the heels of it, his father telling him, you can always tell how a man is by the way he talks) "— the greatest tool at your disposal is reverse psychology. A magician must always outwit his audience. If you get stuck on an idea, then you'll just have to take it in the opposite direction." Soft laughter, and, "—it's not as difficult as it sounds. Think like your audience, and—"

Didn't want to interrupt, but that voice. "Who is this?" said Saguru, didn't go up behind Kaito but he could see the way he stood at the gramophone, gripping it as though he longed to pick it up and fling it on the ground break it into a hundred pieces make it never play again.

Kaito, deep breath, shoulders rising up and then falling, the way he stood a lifetime of good posturing and think as they do not as you do attitude, and, "that," said Kaito, "is the last known recording of Toichi Kuroba's voice: a magician spilling his secrets." Looked faintly disturbed at the thought, looked at the gramophone, and then turned away from it (what did it cost him to do that, turn his back on his father's voice, look towards him?) "Even my mother doesn't know that that's down here. I found it by accident."

Saguru wanting to press the point of how he'd found the entire room 'by accident', what did it even mean when the whole setting was clearly planned, had been built into the foundation of the house, but he didn't dare ask him any of that. Looked at the gramophone, still humming with Toichi's voice, overlaid on music a half-pitch too high to be relaxing, "...Oh."

"I shouldn't have shown you that, probably," said Kaito, crooked a smile at him that didn't go anywhere near his eyes, "it's bad luck for a magician to show all his cards in one hand."

"Is it?" said Saguru, God, you have a recording of your dead father speaking to you, "I've never heard that about magicians."

"Magicians are competitive," said Kaito, "if you show your hand – if you show them a trick once – they're going to try to recreate it, and when they can't, they'll cry foul." A pause, and then a smaller smile, this one a little more obvious, "...Mother and I would go to the magic convention, and have to move rooms after two nights. When they figured out where we were staying, they'd break in and go through our stuff, trying to find what we were using for our act. Don't think they ever managed to find anything."

"...All of that for magic tricks?" said Saguru.
"It's not a *magic trick,*" said Kaito, but without heat, had been taught this, "it's magic. 'Trick' implies that I'm trying to con you. Magicians don't con people."

"Well, magicians in England do," said Saguru. "They'll set up a bloody glass case in the middle of bloody London and stay there for some stupid length of time. Rake in money while everyone stops to gawk at them being utter tits."

"Then they're not real magicians," said Kaito, almost-sharp, but without the heat required. Soft voiced.

God. He had a recording of his *dead father*—

"Wait," said Saguru, "you said—your decision to become Kaitou Kid—"

"It's in one of the records," said Kaito, waved a hand towards the cabinet where the gramophone stood, "I'll try and find it – they're all unmarked, and they pre-load themselves, so I don't always know which I've listened to and which I haven't—"

Saguru watched him move over to the cabinet, start to rifle through the discs there: flat black plates marked with nothing more than a speck of red at the centre. He left him, moving over to the glass case: flat, sixty by forty centimetres, holding: silver gun with a fattened barrel and a carved grip; a pair of handcuffs with a depressed button on the inside, a pack of cards with gleaming edges, two fat black – bombs? Smoke bombs, perhaps, with a compound inside to lull the person who inhaled it to sleep, leaving them to wake up with a throbbing headache some time the next day.

The next case – long coils of silvery rope, a paper flower in bud, a paper flower in bloom, more of the black pellets, a length of chain-link and—

"I found it!" said Kaito, and Saguru left the strange things behind, went over to watch as Kaito loaded the disc into the machine. Again, that strange humming, the needle clicking onto the disc, a burst of music that died down and—

Creak of a chair, and a long, long sigh.

"Kaito," said differently how he'd expected, sounded *exhausted* right down to the core, "I know you'll probably end up finding this room sooner or later, but I hope you won't have to find this disc with it." A pause, and a clink of glass and ice, and a laugh, "—hah. That's so cheesy to say – 'when you're listening to this, I'll be dead!' But I don't plan on dying any time soon, so don't worry. This is just a precaution. A last will, of sorts, in case anything happen to me."

Another pause. Toichi sighing, and, "—But if something does—I want you to know that I loved you and your mother, the White Rabbit, and Jii, very much. There's nothing more important to me than the four of you. I'd do anything to keep you safe – which is why I'm making this. Or something. I'm a –little drunk. It seemed like a good idea at the time." Pause, muttering, "—ah, shouldn't have had that second whiskey—"

Kaito sitting like a stone on the ground, his knees drawn up to his chin, staring everywhere but at the gramophone.

"—I was involved in some bad things, growing up. I did work for—some unsavoury people; stuff that I could get when nobody else would give me a job. This was a different time – I wasn't happy in Vietnam, and so I left, I landed here—and I got into trouble. The – people I worked for, they're not going to come after you. I'm not worried about them." Musingly, "—the White Rabbit's looking out for you, anyway. Nobody'll dare come near you while he's still alive."
"White Rabbit?"

"I think he means Jii," murmurs Kaito, "I don't know why he refers to him differently though—"

Ice-cubes clicking together, and, "—there are some—" stumbling, trying to find the words, pausing, "—people who mean to hurt you, and your mother. I'm trying to hold them off, but—ah. They don't like me very much. Which I find hard to believe, by the way! I'm very likable. You like me, and you're picky. When Mr. Kudo picked you up, you wouldn't stop crying..."

"I've never really—" Kaito starting when there was a pause, "—Dad didn't drink. I've never heard him so—"

Defeated broken sad grounded.

"—ah. Look at me, I'm a mess." Click of the tongue, and, "—if something happens to me – it was them. I didn't 'have an accident'. I didn't make a mistake. I'm a good magician. If something happens to me, then—they killed me. I want you to know that. I don't—want you to think I risked anything, anything, when I had you and your mother to think of. I tried to be good. I was good. Mostly."

Of course you were, kept it to himself, locked his fingers together, and wondered if he should touch Kaito hold his hand do something, but he sat there so stiff and still that Saguru felt he'd shatter if he'd touch him, that if he reached out to him he'd bruise Kaito.

"The stuff in this room," said Toichi, "it's what I used to be him – Kaitou Kid. I told you, I tried to be good, but—" another sigh, a sharp little laugh, full of hurt, "—there are so many people in this world that need disciplining. Kaito. Taking down a peg or two, reminding them that they aren't infallible, but—" Saguru pictured him leaning back, running his hands through his hair, half a glass of whiskey on the table next to him, talking to the air, jumbled alcohol thoughts making him more honest, "—it got out of hand. It was never planned to go this far, and once I started—"

Another pause, and Toichi didn't speak for two minutes this time, and when he did, "—I'm sorry. I'm sorry I started as KID. I'm sorry I made the mistakes I made. But you – my little shadow – you are going to be better than I am ever going to be, and I'm going to help you. I'll teach you everything I know, starting with the most important: always, mon petit étoile, stay five steps ahead of your audience. Anticipate, don't react—"

Kaito stood up, walked over, and pressed a button. The music shut itself off, left them in ringing silence.

"The rest of it is just—" said strained and too-quiet, "—magic stuff. Some stories from when he worked in Paris, I—if you'd like to listen to it--?"

"No," said Saguru, "no, I—it's okay. Ah," I'm sorry I'm so sorry I didn't mean to bring up bad memories but, "—are you—?"

"I'm fine," said Kaito, but wouldn't turn to face him, surreptitiously pawed at his face, "it's just—hard, listening to his voice. The other tapes are – I mean, they're lessons. Stuff I know, or already heard about, or that mum taught me, but this one—I've never heard him drunk. He didn't drink."

"He was under duress," said Saguru, "he—"

"Why didn't he tell us?" said Kaito, and his voice shot up a level, "why didn't he—tell anyone? Why didn't anyone tell me? I had to find out by accident! I had to find out, by accident, that someone killed my father! It's not—" Wild eyes racing around the room trying to find something to
throw break cut himself on and Saguru stepped forward caught hold of his wrists before he could reach for anything.

Zing of skin on skin, his breath stilling in his lungs for a half-minute, and then, "—what good would it have done?" said Saguru. "It might have put you in danger. If these people are as – violent and unpredictable as he said, if they were going to go after him—"

"What good are the police if they couldn't even stop him from being murdered?" Kaito snarled.

Didn't have anything to say to that, wondered if Toichi had ever— "Watanabe told us that whoever they are, they're—widely available. They might have had someone in the police, too; in the law courts, everywhere."

"He's a thug," said Kaito, "what reason does he have to tell us the truth? You're a cop." Sagging, the fight seeping out of him, and he broke his hold as easily as paddling through water, and rubbed both hands over his face. "—Criminals don't talk to cops," said Kaito, "because they never help." Vitriol and rage, a child lashing out at the dog that bit him.

Flinch, unable to stop it, and then, "...okay," said Saguru, quietly, "okay. You're right. The police don't always help. There's a bias against former criminals."

Kaito buzzing in his arms, tight as a spring, and then, "He could've told someone," as if it was the most obvious thing in the world, "he didn't have to do any of it alone." Shook his head as though he hadn't done the same thing, hadn't gone hurtling after his father's footsteps as though nothing lay between him and the edge of the cliff.

Saguru let go of his wrists, watched him drift away. "Maybe he did," said Saguru, "maybe he talked to this – White Rabbit, whoever he is."

"If it's not Jii," said Kaito, "then—I don't know who it could be. Dad didn't have friends. Just competitors, and acquaintances." Sighed, ran his hands up to his hair, pushed it back, and then, "maybe Jii would know who it is, though. Worth asking him, do you think?"

"It couldn't hurt," said Saguru.

"Let's go now." Kaito turning his back on the gramophone, moving towards the back of the room, "there's a staircase here, it leads up to the broom closet – come on. No time like the present. Strike while the iron is hot." Voice drifting off, English idioms strained cheerfulness the stench of the place was too much like (Chichester 2013 approximately 32 years old male appears to be in an advanced state of decay—do you have a name?) and then he was gone, leaving him behind in a room that vibrated with grief.

Saguru gave another look towards the gramophone, still echoing with Toichi's voice, and then turned, and walked after him, coming out upstairs, in the broom closet Kaito promised. Smell of dust and darkness – the house had been shut up for a very long time, hadn't anyone come by to clean it, to tend to it?

Where was Kaito's mother?

Kaito on the landing, looking back at him, his face unreadable. As soon as he reached him, he turned back to the staircase, padding down the steps like a rabbit, the noise he made almost obscene in the silence.

"Goodbye!" Echoing into nothing, and then they were out into the sunlight, away from the claustrophobic dark and the ghost of Toichi Kuroba.
The Blue Parrot, established 1950, sold to Konosuke Jii thirty years later for half of the asking price, renovated from top to bottom with new hardwood floors, a second coat of paint on the walls, new fitted lights and art-deco lamps, and a billiard table the size of half the room. No suspected fraud involved, but nobody was that clean without a body or two to hide; Saguru just had to hope that it wasn't literal, in Jii's case. Thick red carpet sinking up to his ankles as he and Kaito sat at a hardwood bar.

Waited for Jii to appear from the back, where he'd gone to fetch his glasses.

Nobody in this hour of the day. Saguru folded his arms on the bar before he could stop himself, draped himself forward, feeling the ache and echo of tiredness in his bones. Phone vibrating, Keiichi Ito messaging him with, sent those tapes to your desk + email, see you tonight? J

Right. The briefing.

"How are you going to plan for Nightmare?" murmured, because Kaito hadn't said anything about the heist, "are you going to go through with it?"

"He challenged me," said Kaito, "I have to. Can't really say 'sorry, I'm busy tonight'." He'd ordered himself something non-alcoholic, frothy with coloured juice and sugar; Saguru had lost track of what Jii had mixed into it. "It's not what Kaitou KID would do. He'd take any challenge offered to him, so I have to, too."

Wondered if 'Kaitou KID' translated to 'Toichi Kuroba', in Kaito's mind. He didn't think so, not the way that Kaito said it, but it could be close. There was certainly more available on Toichi-as-Kaitou-KID than on Toichi-as-a-loving-father-and-gifted-magician.

Crack of the door slamming back into the wall, and Jii came back, glasses on, sleeves rolled up to his elbows, faded scarring and coloured ink on display. Looked right at him when he saw him looking at them, those scrawled impressions of his other life, and then smiled – slow and grinding, like a shark.

"Young master," said Jii, to him, hint of sarcasm, and then to Kaito, warmer, "Kaito. How are you?"

"Wonderful, Jii," said Kaito, toasted him with his glass, "never better. Arara, old man, sit down, you shouldn't wait on us young people to ask you! Sheesh."

Jii laughed, pulled himself up on a chair behind the counter, didn't look at him again, but kept him in sight as though he might knock Kaito down and hurt him or something. Saguru raised his brows, amused annoyed, didn't bother saying anything to him. Let him think of him as a threat. Let him think of him as a problem.

Devil you know.

"Jii," said Kaito, "you and dad – you were pretty close, right?"

"I was his assistant for years, young master," said Jii, casually, "but I can't really claim to know what went on in his head half the time. As much as Toichi was close to anyone, though, he was close to me." Said his name – soft and fond. Saddened.

Looked at him as he said it, as though challenging him.
"I suspect it must be difficult to chase after magicians," said Saguru, to say something, earned a
dicker of a smile from Kaito, "so I do suspect you won't have an answer for us, but did—Toichi
ever call you the 'White Rabbit'?"

Jii went still, raised his brows, and looked away, all in the span of a second, definitely knows
something. Kaito realizing it a second later, setting aside his drink, and—

"No," said Jii, hard and brief, "no. Not me."

Clink of the door, a customer. Jii moved away from them, asked him what he wanted, served him,
leaving them staring at each other.

"Not suspicious at all," Kaito murmured, and shifted in his seat so that their knees brushed
together. "But—if it wasn't Jii, I don't think they ever came to the house. I would've remembered
them, Saguru." Another secret from him; Saguru could see the frustration knotting up his face,
hated, for a brief second, that he was the one who kept bringing these things up to him, who kept
uncovering them for him.

Looked away from Kaito so that he didn't have to see him, or his wanting face; looked instead at
the man sitting at a singular table near the back, nursing a (from this distance) whiskey, reading a
book, turned away from them.

Jii coming back, picking up his discarded glass of water without asking if he'd finished with it, and
rinsing it out in the sink, filling it up again.

"Do you know who the White Rabbit is, Jii?" said Kaito, shifting in his seat like he couldn't sit
still, "ah—we heard it on Dad's tapes. I always figured it was you, so I didn't—but if it's not you—
then—?"

"It's not me," said Jii, slid Saguru the glass of water, "and I don't know exactly who he is."

Disappointment on Kaito's face. "Oh."

"Your father didn't talk about him much," said Jii, "but he came around the house once or twice.
When I was out. I have an address for him somewhere – let me go and get it." Pulling out of the
room and going back to the office, the door slapping shut behind him.

"One step forward," said Kaito, "and six steps back." Huffed, and fist his hand, slumped his
cheek against his propped-up fist, "at this rate, I'll be old by the time I figure out what the old man
was up to."

At least you'll be old, didn't even think of it, thought of his dreams where Kaito was hurtling
towards the ground, freefalling without a safety net,
at least you'll have that. Toichi had only been
around 35 when he died, only ten years older than Jack.

Door opening, Jii coming back again, holding a plastic envelope in his hands, "can't seem to find it
now," said Jii, "but it's somewhere in here, I'm sure of it. Toichi gave me a couple of them, in case
– something happened. Don't think I've ever used it." Digging through the plastic folder, spilling
old receipts and stubs of drink recipe cards on the polished bar top; half a postcard with Mount Fuji
in the background; a crumpled playbill for a show in Las Vegas; two ticket stubs to an opera
played at the Royal Opera House in London. The dregs of his life in twists of paper and little
circles of spent years money time.

"It's okay, Jii," said Kaito, "we're in no hurry, it's just—if you can find it, the sooner, the better?"
In response, spilling the entire envelope onto the bar top, leaning over to start looking better.

A minute in silence, just the shushing of pages turning and then Jii said, "did I hear the news right? Kaitou KID is trying to steal a pair of earrings from the art gallery?"

"Tomorrow night," said Kaito, holding up a scrap of paper with a scrawled address, "is it this?"

"Nakamori is going a little overboard," said Saguru, "he's going to try and make this KID's last heist." Folded his arms to look at them searching, watching Kaito's fingers play through the paper as though they were a set of his cards, "so he's pulling out all the stops. Mind you, I don't know what he has planned yet, but I know that the ICPO agent is—probably not helping." Remembered Jack Connery at the hospital, a pale shadow of a man, holding his son (sick and coughing, the underside of his head shaved almost completely bare, old tracery of stitches). "Whatever he's planning, it'll probably involve the case, though." How else, after all, to protect a pair of priceless earrings than by bugging the case they were in?

Both Jii and Kaito digesting that knowledge, putting it aside for later, still searching in the pile of scrap paper.

"Hah," said Kaito, but without heart, play acting for nothing, "the day that detective catches KID'll be a sad day. What else is he going to do with his life if he's not chasing that thief?"

"Take up gardening," said Saguru, "can I help at all?"

"No," said Jii, "it's alright. Two people will work faster than three." Already the pile of things dwindling and then to Kaito, "your mother's show in Las Vegas – she has a new trick. It uses a weighted plate and water, to simulate that she's not actually there at all. Do you know how it works?"

Kaito sliding him a look, and Saguru obligingly shifting a couple of inches to the left, out of earshot, wondering how it was that Kaito trusted him with KID, but not with learning the work behind it.

Pair of them discussing the show – even if he hadn't moved, he wouldn't have understood it (read their lips, didn't get far, got lost in the shorthand that they used; Kaito's voice sometimes louder, sometimes sharper, saying a word that he understood on its own but not in any context. Watched the paper set aside, moving closer and closer to completed, but nowhere near discovering that address.)

Who was the White Rabbit?

Toichi Kuroba trusted him. Did that mean that they could? So far, none of his friends – Jii included – had given them much to work with, but they had to start somewhere, didn't they?

Tapped his fingers on the bar, got up. "Excuse me," he said, "bathroom."

Kaito glancing at him, trace of worry on his face, and then nodding, letting him go, pull out of sight. He pulled out his mobile, checked his messages (aside from the one from Keiichi, Jack had texted him, you okay?)

I'm fine, texted back, and then slipped into the bathroom, caught sight of himself in the mirror: below-ground pale and hungry-eyed, cheekbones thrust out against his face like shrapnel, edges of his mouth curled down from everything on his mind. Walked over to the sink and stood there, for thirty-two seconds, looking at himself, a shadow stained onto the glass. Phone vibrating with Jack's responding message, but Saguru kept it in his pocket, leaned over to touch his own reflection;
needle-point scar on his cheek from where the Mastrick Madman tried to cut his face right off his skull.

Door slamming shut behind him, and Saguru started, turned around; gentleman, 40-older years old, nice trenchcoat over a blue shirt and a tiepin in the shape of an anchor, carrying a folder underneath one arm that he put on the side of the sink, turned on the water, tucked his hands underneath it, and then—

"Don't I know you from somewhere?" Addressing him: deep voice with a northern slant. "You look familiar."

Forced a smile, get used to it, little one, his mother's voice like sugar in his ear, her nails digging into his arm, you're a Hakuba. People will recognize you wherever you go. "From the television?" said Saguru, turned and bent over the sink, switched it on so that the water guttered out into his hands; paused and wet his fingertips, rubbed them over his face, the cold stinging his skin, "I'm, ah —there quite often, nowadays."

The man frowning, and then brightening a little, saying, "ah! The little detective, of course – I'm a big fan of your work."

Fought back the urge to raise a brow, and then, "thank you," said Saguru, lifted his dripping face, and accepted a towel from the man's pocket, "I do what I can, really. It's nice to meet a fan of the police," engage empathize get the hell out of here before someone wonders where you've gone, "most of the people I do meet are a little—"

Criminals don't talk to the police. They never help.

"—Suspicious," said Saguru, wiped the excess water off his face, and crumpled it in his hand.

"I don't know why," said the man; hushing water crashing over the basin, "you're doing a good job, from what I can see. The rest of the police department haven't gotten anywhere near to Kaitou KID in years, why shouldn't you be given the chance to do what they couldn't?" Soap, the reek of artificial coconut and something frothy and summery; he had to tell Jii that the soap was running low here. "After all, it isn't like KID is a regular thief, is he? They should've caught him by now."

"He's a clever challenge," said Saguru. "Not your ordinary thief at all, which makes him difficult to pin down, and even more difficult to catch." As I've said countless of times on television, remembered flashing lights and microphones in his face and his mother's voice whispering to him, if you show them you're afraid then they're going to tear you apart, little bird.

"Tell me," said the gentleman, "do you think the police will ever catch Kaitou KID? He's been operating since the – what? 80s? 90s?"

Even earlier, if his suspicions about Toichi Kuroba were correct; nod, to show that he was listening, force his brain back to here now look him in the eye now smile look away. "something like that, but it's—quite normal, really, for criminals to have long bouts of time between heists. Becoming active after a ten year stop, however, is a little bit rare—but there are several theories for why that could be."

"Such as?" Black-beetle eyes gleaming at him, and the room seemed a little claustrophobic now, fake wood and blue paint shrinking on him.

"He was arrested. He was ill. He was travelling and pulling off heists in other countries; there are a few that match Kaitou KID's modus operandi, without the suit or the magic tricks—" Did that
really count? Didn't know, but he said it anyway, kept his gaze on the man's black eyes, and said, "—it's my opinion that KID was never really inactive. We've just yet to find where he was working when he wasn't stealing in Japan."

"Brilliant," breathed the gentleman, "ah, you're so clever. Do you know who he is?"

"No," said Saguru, "but that's hardly what I do. I catch the thief. Nothing more." The lie like his name, coming easily, slipping off his tongue, and he managed a facsimile of his father's camera-print smile, the cock of his head, arrogant set to his shoulders that he'd seen Shinichi do when crowded in on a case. "His identity is of no concern to me." Something about the man's eyes struck him as strange; he stared him in the face, unheard of here, daring him to drop his gaze first.

"Good," said the gentleman, "very good to hear that. I hope I meet you again, Mr. Hakuba, and in better circumstances. Who knows?" smiled at him, "maybe I'll have news for you, next time."

Left the room, door swinging behind him with an ominous squeaking cry, leaving behind the—

"You forgot your envelope!" Bellowed after him, and Saguru picked it up by one end, swore as the bottom of the envelope gave out, scattered photographs all over the floor, "dammit." Grumbled as he knelt to pick them up, and then froze.

Jack's face stared up at him, looking away from the lens, on his phone and in his hideously oversouped car. Outside Ekoda High, waiting for them, the date printed neatly on the back: 08:23:00AM.

This morning.
Chapter 13

Head spinning, *this morning*. Picked up the photograph, and then noticed the others: Jack with his arm around his shoulders at the restaurant, Jack talking to Kaito on the balcony of his Kabuki-cho flat, Hei walking down a blackened road, himself standing at the edges of a crime-scene looking at the remains of another KID heist, the missing gemstones. More pictures, himself again, watching Shinichi, watching Heiji, the glinting of the street-lights off his hair. Kaito holding his hand as they walked into Ekoda.

His hands shaking, he shook out every photograph in the envelope, reached into his pocket, and patted himself down for the pair of rubber gloves he kept with him at all times; found them, tucked in between his wallet and a handkerchief, took them out, snapped them on (it was futile, of course, either they would be so loaded down with prints that isolating them would prove impossible, or they would be wiped clean, but he had to be careful, still, didn't want to mess up the 10% chance that he was dealing with incompetent criminals who didn't watch bloody true crime shows) and fanned them out on the floor: Jack Hei Kaito him Jack again Hei again Konoshima Maki Watanabe Jack Hei Kaito holding a dove and leaning out of the window at his house Watanabe again with his face bloodied and his mouth gaped open to show the missing edges of his tongue.

Saguru's hands shaking, his breath coming in slow, slow, shudders, and he packed the pictures back up in the envelope, was about to pick them up and chase after him when he noticed a twist of paper on the floor. Hesitated for a second, and then picked it up, gently running his thumb against each corner as though he could unfold it without creasing it, and then smoothed it open. Scrawled kanji, a date, a place, a time, *Monet Lounge*, 20th February 2016.

Stood up, put the paper into the envelope, carefully sealed it up.

"You don't scare me," said to himself, to the envelope, to whoever was watching bugging him keeping a close eye on his movements, Jack's picture sharp in his mind out of everything else – Jack this morning, Hei walking home, how close had they been to take those? Why hadn't Jack seen them? *They blend in, they don't look threatening, they're probably someone Jack sees every day*—Took another deep breath because he felt his heartbeat triplicate, worked it out slowly, and then turned and walked out of the bar.

"—but if we do that, then I'll need to reinforce the glass before I get there—" French, Kaito's voice soft as gossamer, lost in thought; he hated to interrupt them, *could I keep the pictures to myself?*

Thought of the room, Kaito showing him, thought of his face when he'd seen the picture of Toichi and the suit.

*I want you to know everything.*

Walked out and waited for the conversation to dim (fading immediately into his mother's show again as though he had any idea of what any of their talk meant) and for Kaito to look up.

"Did you see the man who left before me?" Saguru sliding into the seat, turning his head so that he could look out the door, wondered if there was CCTV here, if he could catch an image of his face, recreate it with a sketchchartist – put it on a BOLO, but what would it be for? *Man wanted in connection with stalking*, that would go over well with the entire department; they already didn't tolerate him enough. At least he could tell Nakamori, but wouldn't that be putting Nakamori in danger as well?
"The one in the trench-coat?" said Kaito, "we saw him leave. Why?"

Wordlessly pulling out the folder, setting it onto the bar-top.

"Did he drop this?" said Jii, reached for the envelope, "I'll put it behind the bar, I can see if maybe he comes in again——"

"Open it," said Saguru, voice steady and still. "I already have."

Kaito picking up on his voice, on the way he said it, slipping the top open, and then—"Jii, you have those gloves? The yellow ones?"

Jii handing them to him, and Kaito struggling into them, waiting, and then, "and that notebook, too. Cut out a couple of sheets of paper."

Modified examination centre made up of three sheets of A4 paper end to end. Kaito turned the flap open with his inflated thumb, shook out the first three photographs, and went sheet white: Jack smoking a cigarette, Hei cooking in the kitchen (how far away did that lens reach?) Kaito sitting in the garden with his eyes closed and Baaya in the background.

"This was——"

"This morning," said Saguru, "this afternoon. Two days ago." Gently tapping each photograph with a finger, the dates emblazoned on the bottom as though someone had wanted to keep an album, an intricate little nest of memories. "Someone's been watching us for a very long time." Hadn't expected it to extend to Jack, though, wondered what was the purpose of leaving these pictures; they knew, now, if they hadn't already, that they were watching them; did they suspect him to go to the police, did they want him to do—what?

"Shit," said Kaito, didn't sound surprised, but— "how are they even taking these?"

Fourth picture: Saguru at work, talking to Shinichi, leaning against a wall and with his hands in his pockets, Nakamori dozing on his desk behind them, Shinichi wearing a Teitan High shirt riding up enough to show the pale line of his spine.

"A very strong camera," said Saguru, "and someone who blends in. Someone who doesn't attract attention." Tried to think: janitor of the police department, any clerks that he hadn't seen in a while, someone who'd just started (would they be that sloppy, that obvious?), "I don't know what the purpose of this is, though."

"Scare tactics," said Jii, grimly, picking up a picture of Kaito entering his house (just that day, just two hours ago) and holding it up to his face, "they want you making stupid mistakes. It's unnerving, knowing someone's following you, is it?"

"I could do without a repeat of it," said Saguru, "once was enough, thanks."

Kaito’s laugh like a razor blade, dragged rusty out of his throat. “Loses the novelty, doesn’t it?” said Kaito, leaning over the table so that he could see the crumpled up pictures the half-moon thumbnail prints where he’d bitten into the glossy paper when he’d gripped it, “can you remember anyone strange there at all?” Glancing up at him, his hands oversized and huge in the yellow gloves, as though he was asking something simple as though he was asking something that Saguru could just pull out of a hat, “like a – cleaning lady? Someone who kept walking past?”

Saguru frowned, pinched his brows together, went back three days to when they’d been staying at Kabuki-cho and had anyone in particular come across his mind more than once? He thought back
to the car trip the way the wind whipped and whistled through his hair the sharp bite of it in his teeth as Jack trundled to a stop on a street more shadow than light and then Hei leaning out the window – at the corner there were two men and a women neither one of which had their faces visible, but one had a tattoo all the way up his arm. Bars spilling out hapless tourists was it ever quite as loud in Kabuki-cho as it was in London in the middle of the afternoon at the train station? Didn’t remember anyone going past the window, and then they were up and inside, and then he was in his room, and then there was Kaito curled up against his chest, and the rest of the night was shadow and darkness.

“No,” said Saguru, “no, nobody stands out.”

Kaito frowned, said nothing.

It felt, bizarrely, like he’d disappointed him.

“That’s a shame,” said Kaito, “would’ve helped.” Didn’t sound accusing but the way he said it –

“Even then,” said Saguru, “it wouldn’t have been much of a lead. If Jack didn’t notice him, then he doesn’t stand out. He’s an average man, probably around five ten or six feet tall; he won’t have anything that catches the eye, like a tattoo or a birth mark in a prominent area. Won’t be wearing a colour that attracts attention. And it’s Kabuki-cho,” stressing this, “there are a lot of weird people hanging around there at night.”

Jii smirking, then letting it fade, looking at the pictures as though he wasn’t sure what else to say to that.

“Yes, but,” Kaito, exasperated and exhausted, “what else do we do about these? Inform the police?”

They’re everywhere a muffled shriek and Watanabe’s wide white eyes rolling in his death-mask face while his mouth gushed red and warm and wet--

“No,” said Saguru, too sharp, saw Kaito recoil at the sound of his voice, and added, gentler and quieter, “no, we’re not – let’s not tell them. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to snap, but--”

Awkward tilt of the head and of course, Saguru felt like laughing, of course Kaito didn’t mean it seriously seriously, he’d just been saying, he’d just been – but the image of Jack in his head, Jack walking home, someone coming up behind him and running a knife underneath his jaw, opening him up like a present: gushing red and wet, slick and damp with hot life. Saguru shuddered, hoped no-one caught it, but Kaito held his eye as though he knew, as though he’d seen.

“Let’s--” his head wouldn’t settle in straight lines, kept jumping from one to the other; he would’ve liked a sequence of events, something to follow, but every thought spiralled to another thought to another thought, none of which led to a solution. He couldn’t tell Jack, he couldn’t tell Nakamori, he couldn’t tell Hei because Hei would tell Jack. Where did that leave them?

Alone all alone all alone, incantation in his head, and Saguru picked up the photographs, set them back into the folder without touching any one of them.

“My grandfather has ties to a very strong lab,” said Saguru, “we need to go by there anyway so today, we’ll take these, and those tapes, and go see him. What we haven’t figured out we can probably find out there.”

“Okay,” said Kaito, absently fiddled with the glass the flap of the envelope the fraying edges of his trousers, “---I have to prepare for the heist, too.” Said almost absently as though he didn’t know
what he could do about that, who he could speak to.

Wondered if he meant it differently to what it sounded like, which was, please help me, I need you, please--

“We’ll have time,” said Saguru, “would you like me to go on my own to see my grandfather? I can do that, he won’t – mind.”

Kaito smiling at him, flick of the corners of his mouth, and it made him look foxish and too sharp and too canny, “what?” he said, “and let you have all the fun? I don’t think so. I’ll be coming along.”

His chest deflating a little, in the back of his head wondering, will it be alright to take him home? And I wonder what Grandfather will think of him and-- “okay,” said Saguru, “um, that’s good. Okay. Shall we say around two o’clock?”

A tilt of his head, another twist of his sharp mouth, and Saguru bundled the envelope up into his shirt, nodded.

“We need to visit the White Rabbit, as well,” said Saguru. Jii, out of the corner of his eye, buffing down the bar with more violence than necessary, his fingers twitching against the wood, the scrappy cloth leaving fibres on the oak polish, “shall we do that today as well?”

“Best get it over with,” said Kaito, “it’s not that far away. Shall we go now?”

At his nod, Kaito turned and smiled at Jii, said something singsong in Korean-Vietnamese-Chinese? That Saguru couldn’t catch, and then the two of them turned towards the door, through where the man and his camera and his secrets had vanished to, and left.

This part of the country a blur to him, but a familiar blur, like seeing a Monet through frosted glass; he hasn’t been, doesn’t know the region the same way he knows the tracery of London streets, the veins of Denenchofu, but he knew old money; he knew where it gathered; he knew the way it acted, and everything about Azabu screamed it. Knew from the google search in the car on the way over that it was one of the richest districts in Tokyo; that to have a house there was to have a name surrounded by infamy; that it was home to most of the embassies of the world, a few of the roughest criminals, a handful of celebrities with gold-edged lives.

The two of them sticking out like sore thumbs loitering on the side of the street side-eyed by the people going through. Saguru straightened his back, made sure his spine was an arrow, remembered what his mother (the few times she’d spoken to him, the few times she hadn’t been taken by the nurses) had told him taught him before he ever knew words: show them you don’t belong and you might as well not.

They were, after all, just people, and he was good at people; he could read people.

Kaito shifting from foot to foot as the gleaming train station emptied out, leaving them alone on a sidewalk. Misty rain drifting from above them, gleaming dew-like on the metal, and Saguru hesitated, reached for his umbrella, took it by the end.

Held it out to Kaito, who was soaked through already, didn’t help their case because he looked so plainly other in his mismatched trousers and black-tipped hair, his purple hoodie and the faded grey jeans that had artistic holes and splatters of black buttons all along the siding.

“No, it’s--” Kaito said, started to wave it off, but Saguru pressed it into his hand.
“Take it,” he said, “no use in the pair of us getting soaking wet. I’m fine.”

“In the blood?” said Kaito, took the umbrella, and shook it out (repressed a smile, almost, when he saw that it was patterned with watches, picked out in black patterning on a tea-stain background, “do Englishmen just get thrown out into the rain when they’re young, to get used to it?”

“If we cry, we’re left to die in a Tesco’s,” said Saguru, tilted his head back, and closed his eyes, let the water shudder over his face, slide through his hair, several cold, sharp beads of it hovering down his back and everywhere the rain touched felt – soothed. He missed the driving cold of Yorkshire, the fire-and-pudding chill that meant he’d spent half his childhood indoors (but he only missed the later years, when he lived with his Uncle Blake, and not a drafty broken-in house in money-slick Mayfair, not sitting there waiting for his mother to pull him out as a party trick to guests look at my son he’s only two and he can read in three languages show them darling show them how--)

Snapped his eyes open, her voice so hard and sharp on his memories that it felt as though she was standing next to him; gave a couple of quick glances around, saw no-one, breathed a sigh of relief that didn’t quite take, caught in his throat like barbed wire.

“You okay?” said Kaito, nestling closer, watching the rain form slick mirrors on the pavement below them; the gutter was so clean, Saguru imagined you could eat from it (of course nobody in Azabu would claim to have any idea how to clean it, it was other people’s jobs, it was someone else’s worry).

“I’m okay,” this was a natural response, didn’t think about it further except that I’m okay I’m okay and then pulling away from him. People in Azabu wouldn’t understand that there was such a thing as friendship such a thing as men sharing an umbrella; it was rich, yes, but it was money that started and stopped with the family, money that never went past the first few things, money that didn’t grow much farther than the end of a generation.

Kaito eyeing him like he didn’t believe him, and then dropping it, looking at the scrap of paper in his hand.

“Do you have any idea where that is?” he said, pointing at a complicated squiggle of names and addresses, bookended by English (the Avenue, the Place, Skylight Lounge).

Saguru reached for it (their fingers touched his heartbeat skipped the air around them lightning-sharp for a minute) and held it up to his eyes, squinted at Jii’s chicken-scratch scrawling tried to think of it carefully. The numbers on the sides were street numbers, the names clearly buildings, but-- “I’ve never been here,” said Saguru, “and we can’t exactly go and ask, so let’s just--” gestured with his free hand at the rain-emptied streets, the miles of glistening gleaming glowing buildings that lay just ahead of them, fuzzy with neon lighting and avant garde architecture.

Kaito sighing for a moment and then nodding, as if he realized that it was futile to just stand there (it was) and it was futile to expect him to know everywhere (which wasn’t). Smiled, instead, and then hooked his arm purposefully into Saguru’s, pushed the umbrella into his hand.

The warmth of him fire-brand-hot against his side, his smile like a blade as he said, “you’re taller, so you can hold it.”

On his tongue: we can’t this is Azabu people won’t understand we’ll stand out.

What he said: “Okay,” hint of exasperation and amusement, shifting the umbrella higher so that the tines wouldn’t bump into Kaito’s head, pulling him towards the biggest of the clean, truck-wide
streets, pulling him towards the glassy storefronts of stores manned by bored and affluent people, waiting for the rain to break to bring their day’s work back to them, towards the houses stuffed with money and purpose. Hadn’t come to Azabu in years, didn’t have the connections or the will or the money to waste here, but the streets felt familiar to him, an old memory, a smeared-open photograph. Waited, his mouth drawn into a sharp line, flicked his gaze side to side to see the streaky rain on glass and people milling inside shops.

Kaito’s fingers crooking into his elbow, startling him, his breath fogging out of him in one sharp dose of air. Pulling him steady.

Holding him tightly, every ripple and fingertip-press like a coal into his flesh.

“Puddle,” said Kaito, indicated with one jab of his sharp chin. A glassy stretch of sidewalk like polished wishes, gleaming underneath their feet, the tip of his shoe away from it.

“Tha--” he began, only got halfway before he saw a glint of something so familiarly other in Kaito’s eyes that it stopped his heart mid-beat, and then Kaito jumped.

Water geysering up from the pavement and soaking the bottom of his trousers, some parts up to his knee, some parts less than that, and Kaito’s mad grin like a slicing knife, winking out at him in the middle of nowhere.

“You--” Saguru began, gasped as Kaito whipped away from him, the umbrella bobbling in the breeze, and he felt something in his chest pocket lift and give – saw a sparkling chain tail after Kaito’s closed hand, thought, in leaps, watch Kaito shining, “come back here!”

Kaito dancing just out of his reach, not running, but skipping backwards through the rain, drawing attention to him; people in the shops peering out at the two of them, doors creaking open and windows sending icicle rain as they were shifted up, people whispering behind hands. The air tasted of whispers, mutters; and Kaito laughed, wild and mad, when he saw him, laughed and pulled away further the second Saguru reached him.

It wasn’t sane, this wasn’t sane, they had things to do and places to be but--

Kaito stock still beaming at him a foxy gleam in his eyes only a shade removed from animalistic and a smile on his mouth that made his chest thump thump thump, every inch of him poised to chase catch hold run and Kaito’s smile like melting molten metal and Kaito--

Kaito ran, and Saguru chased.

Down the streets splashing through puddles big enough to drown them past houses built high and tall and glossy with expensive paint and people staring and people whispering behind their hands; the umbrella whistling behind him his shoes slapping into the pavement the wind shrieking past his face with knife-blade sharpness and Kaito a blur in front of him Kaito a shiny black streak in the air leaping gracefully into the air like a fawn, always just one step ahead, one moment too late, one inch out of his grasp. Past an alleyway with parking-lot binbags organized into piles, and Kaito took a sharp right, scrambled on the closed lid of a dumpster, leapt onto a rain-glossed fire-escape, and was up and over before Saguru had even reached the mouth of the alleyway. Clambering higher, a thousand penny-clinking noises following every slap of his shoe.

Gauzy light spoked down between the slats, and Kaito stopped near the middle, looked down at him, and there, where he was halo’d, beaming like a child, and waving his family’s watch over the edge (not carelessly, but pretend-carelessly; Saguru saw how he held it just slightly away from the edge, curled so that it would fall into him if it fell) and Saguru thought, I’m in love with him.
Not a big revelation, nothing like what he’d expected, nothing earth-shaking; one minute not there, and the next, he was aware of it, he knew it, it went so deeply that every inch of him hurt.

Again: *I’m in love with him* to *I love you to* I love you I love you I--

Kaito clanging against the metalwork again, and Saguru gave chase, followed him up towards the fire-escape, his own movements clumsy and his mind thundering with words words words each one dangerously close to bursting out of his mouth (imagined telling Kaito *I love you* and Kaito saying *I love you too I don’t love you I just want to be friends I’m in love with someone else*) minutes of minute scenes a rolling film in his head. Second floor, third floor, fourth floor, Kaito on the sixth, seventh, eight, up the rickety slippery wobbling mess of the fire-escape until it felt like it would crack in two beneath them.

Up ahead of him, Kaito disappearing over the lip of the building, and himself not too far behind.

Saguru threw himself over the edge, shook his grazed knees and his ice-bitten fingers, and watched Kaito come to a stop at the edge of the rooftop. Walked towards him, knew, somehow, inside, that it was over. He wouldn’t run now.

Kaito looking out over Azabu: buildings gleaming with diamond rain, gardens rampant with greenery and exotic hothouse flowers. The rain pouring down the cement roads like a new promise, a better beginning, washing away the dirt; if only, Saguru thought, if only things were that simple, could be solved by a run in the rain, could be washed down into the gutter the same way as bits of trash and ragtag dust was washed.

The knowledge of those words burned, and he laid both hands on Kaito’s shoulders (and he felt brittle as glass beneath his fingers, not strong like KID was, not strong like Saguru thought).

“… I love the view from up here,” said Kaito, as if he hadn’t noticed him standing behind him close enough to breathe in his scent hadn’t noticed the grip of his fingers gently on his shoulders and how he leaned in against him aching for the warmth of his body and the promise of his scent, aching for the presence that he had, for him and him and him.

“Have you been here before?” said quiet, sacred, even though they were standing on a rooftop belonging to someone else; felt like he needed to be, felt like he needed to whisper, felt like loudness would bring all the (memories instances horrible little moments carved out of the day) rushing back.

“Once,” said Kaito, “I was little – I don’t know how little. But dad, he—brought me here.” A pause, and then a jerk of his chin to the north, a stretch of trees rubber-banding around a knot of buildings, “he had a show in Azabu. I was being a brat – running away from him, and hiding – and I came and hid up here. He found me, of course. He could always--” shifting of his throat a careful rough noise and Kaito dropped his hands to the top of the wall.

*Say something say something* no words in his mind on his tongue everything trite and pallid in light of how Kaito spoke. Squeezed his shoulders instead, tight enough to hurt himself, cut himself on Kaito’s bladed back.

Kaito turning looking at him. A minute, stopped, suspended; blue eyes blown wide red cheeks from the biting cold apple-blush lips parted in wisps of smoke he wanted to swallow, he wanted to taste; staring staring staring, his own heart twisting inside his chest like something mad, something wild, something wanting to be free.

A second more, and Saguru leaned in, saw the flare of his eyes, the red tip of his nose and then--
The pocket-watch hung between them, twisting in the wind, catching the hazy light from a thousand glowing neon signs, the refraction of it off the expensive windows and from the halo’d streetlamps.

“I believe this is yours,” said Kaito, but his words were delayed, thirteen seconds too late.

Thirteen seconds of pure silence while the watch hung between them, while Kaito’s eyes bore into his and left him breathless and hollowed, shaking underneath his expensive coat, wanting to grab him and shake him and scream at him, *I’m here I’m here I’m here*—

“My uncle’s,” said Saguru, didn’t know why he’d said that, “it was --- used to be – my uncle’s.” Even that not good enough for an explanation and Saguru pausing, trying to phrase it in such a way that it didn’t sound like he was chasing anything that would drag this minute out longer, that would drag this moment out longer; like he wasn’t just trying striving wanting this hour to go on until the rest of the world crumbled outside his vision.

Kaito made things quiet; he’d never had that before, that he could sit near someone, hear the humming silence instead of let his mind wander and wander tie itself in knots thinking about everything and nothing at all and he didn’t want to lose that.

“It’s nice,” said Kaito, drew his attention back to the lazy-spinning watch, twisting in a breeze like a kiss, “is it very old?”

“About sixty or seventy years old,” said Saguru, “passed down through the family.” Can take it apart (his uncle taught him how) and put it back together without a manual; he knew every inch of the watch, every scratch and dent in the gold; he knew how it closed with a clack, and didn’t open unless it was pushed; he knew the stubborn way it would wind back the minutes until he was desperately checking to see how far back it had gone. As a watch, completely useless, moving backwards through time, but as a relic?

Kaito shared with him so much already, and Saguru opened his mouth to share himself, to tell him something, and then closed it again, shook his head, what made him think Kaito would be interested?

“That old?” said Kaito, widened his eyes like he’d never heard of anything so wild, “huh. And you just – carry it around? That has to be worth a small fortune, doesn’t it? I mean, just based on the going-rates for watches of that make and from that time period--”

Saguru restrained his laughter, gave him a look bordering on amusement affection he hoped nothing else, “brain of a magpie,” he said, and caught Kaito off guard, watched his eyes flickering for a second, and then that smile break out slowly across his face.

“That’s me,” said Kaito, “bird-brain.” Tapped a finger to the side of his head as though Saguru hadn’t seen him pull complicated mathematical equations out of thin air, as though he didn’t keep up with him every hour of every day as though Kaito was less. He knew it for better, understood it better.

Unmatched, before now.

Kaito sighing, and closing his eyes, and for a second, Saguru imagined how it would be: lean in, lay his mouth over Kaito’s, kiss away the speckled rain and the cold burn of his mouth, and then, a flicker of blue, Kaito looking at him again, saying, “should we keep going?”

Because the mission, the task, the duty, came first.
Saguru swallowed down his disappointed, nodded. Took the pocket-watch from him, when Kaito offered it, and tucked it into his top pocket again, feeling it settle against his ribs like a second heart, the familiar humming ‘tickticktick’ of it comforting him, sinking into his bones like a warm bath.

Kaito went first, disappeared over the edge, and Saguru stood there for a second longer, watching the storm creep over Azabu, tasting the metallic bite of it in the air, considering just spreading his arms wide and then falling into the arms of the wind. Kaito in the distant, clinking the fire-escape as he climbed down, farther and farther away from him, never close enough to reach.

These feelings were – he needed to understand them, tame them, and soon – but for now, Saguru watched the storm hover closer, felt the first tickling spatter of rain, and thought of the shape of Kaito’s mouth, the flush-red lips, how it felt to feel his warm fingertips sliding in between his own and holding on, holding on.

Azabu puddling and melting in the rain, huge puddles taking on neon gleams as the rest of the city ran for cover, and it was just the two of them marching alongside each other, past shop windows fogged with central heating and houses gone grey and dim in the darkening day; Kaito half-hanging out of the edge of the umbrella, running his hand along the damp wall and leaving behind a smear of his existence, and Saguru trying to keep him underneath the umbrella, to keep him sheltered – but every movement closer felt like sharpness, every movement to save him felt unnecessary.

The water dragging at their shoes, suckling their soles into the pavement. A taxi car blurring past, followed by a Honda Civic; multiple lights likes stars, but flaking at the edges.

He thought of Yorkshire, the smell of it after rain, how Jack would poke his head in through the door, and tell him it’s raining want to help me round up the sheep the horses the cows the chickens, and the pair of them running in muck and mud, trying to get the animals that couldn’t give a toss about whether they were damp or not, Jack fretting over the chickens as they pecked at his hands and clucked at his intrusion; doing it anyway (lads, his uncle, exasperated, leave the door open and the animals’ll find their own way in) knowing that it was accepted that they would, knowing they’d go and find hot chocolate and warmth inside the manor house, that they’d find their uncle Alois playing at the piano, uncle Blake reading one of his artillery magazines, the maid at the ready with fresh clothes and the central heating turned up as high as it would go so that they wouldn’t catch a chill.

And here, it smelled different and strange, the scent of the rain smeared on top of exhaust and the faintest hint of Kaito’s chamomile. Saguru swallowed the air bulking his throat, glanced sideways and watched him tilt his head out from underneath the umbrella to catch raindrops on his face, staring upwards like there were answers scrawled in the sky.

“I think it’s down this road,” said Kaito, took hold of his arm, shock of contact. “Isn’t that the same number?”

Looking down at the soaked-through paper in his hand, the ink faint and runny, knowing it enough by heart to know that it was the right road.

Saguru nodded, crumpled it aside, and threw it into a passing bin, where it bounced off the lip and soaked into the ground, tearing into bird-bite pieces.

“Why do you do that?” said Kaito, two seconds after they’d taken that road, were pushed in on all sides by houses, “why do you keep looking at information you already know?”
Saguru raising his brows, looking at him, waiting, and--

“Like the paper,” said Kaito, “you kept looking at it, even though I know you’d memorized it. And in class, whenever the teacher asks you to read out loud, you make this whole – show of looking down at your book, even though you’d read that bit already, twice, maybe even three times.” Cocked his head to one side, curiously.

Saguru, startled, “….It’s just—I don’t know,” shrugging, “--when I was in school, lads would make a big deal out of it, if I showed that I already knew what was on the page, and the next page, and the next.”

Kaito nodding along as though it made sense wasn’t another holdover from a childhood he could (maybe) forget when he was drinking drunk sleeping dreaming.

“Made me feel more normal,” said Saguru, pushed his shoulders together as a sneaky chill curled around his back like an arm, “--to have to look at the book, like everyone else. And it made a few rather horrible children in my year leave me alone – not notice me as much if I didn’t make it obvious that I was--”

“Smarter,” said Kaito, to finish his sentence.

“...Different,” said Saguru, though he’d been going to go with ‘freakish’ ‘monstrous’ ‘hideous’.

A pause, and then Kaito, “… have you ever not hidden?” flicking his fingers through his hair, combing it away from his forehead, “…just—let people know what you could do? Know how smart you are?”

“...Not wear a mask, you mean?” said pointed.

Kaito flushed glared elbowed him in the side said something rude underneath his breath in French that he didn’t quite catch. His chest aching, not from the elbow, just the heat of it pressed briefly against his heart.

“… Around you,” said Saguru, when the moment had passed and Kaito was engrossed in the numbers of the houses, “… I don’t hide around you.”

Kaito whipping his head around staring at him, narrowed eyes and a tight-line mouth.

Down the remainder of the road, to the right, and, “...I don’t hide around you either,” said Kaito, soft enough to be a dream, “…it feels weird.”

That flare of heat again, and Saguru swallowed it down, swallowed a knot of words down, didn’t want them to lead where they would have lead.

Houses growing farther and farther apart like every building was in quarantine; forest gardens, and jungle flowers paving a cut path through the grass; the air wet and heavy with silence. Down the street, to the right, and then turning into the corner, a pause.

“That’s it,” said Kaito, jabbed his thumb at a manor mansion castle set two metres away from the pavement, up a long narrow walk paved in gravel stone; wooden and ancient, somehow standing despite two wars countless storms three earthquakes in the last few handful of years alone the wood red and swollen with the rain. A bird chime crinkling at the window.

Up the path, fringed in on all sides by flowers growing in thick midnight-blue clumps, three steps towards the door. Kaito raising his hand, knocking on the heavy wooden door.
Footsteps.

“We don’t have a plan,” whispered Saguru; they hadn’t stopped to think of one, just had a vague idea of what they wanted to ask the White Rabbit.

Closer, closer.

“We’ll wing it,” said Kaito, and the door cracked open.

Wave of alcohol accompanying a man six feet tall pepper-grey hair down to his waist and loose all around his face; features cut with a paring knife into granite; strong-jaw and narrow sharp nose, a full mouth; anywhere between forty and eighty years old. His arms bare, faint blackyellowgreen lines exposed going up into the baggy sleeve of his black yukata.

Black eyes, sharp, intelligent, fogged with drink, narrowing at them, and---

Saguru started, stepped back as though slapped, stared again, and then said, “...Grandfather Yukito?”
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

a chapter alternatively titled as 'the plot thickens like custard left to simmer on the stove'.

as always, yell at me about how late this update has been, and allow me to talk incessantly about my course and the ten billion ladybirds that are currently inhabiting my dorm room.

Kaito whipping around to stare at him stare at his grandfather stare at him again.

Grandfather Yukito frowning first, his eyes on Kaito, narrowing staring; features pinching the dark edges of his jaw tightening staring; features pinching the dark edges of his jaw tightening into a frown a sigh a something a something that he couldn’t read and then switching back to him. His eyes not quite clear, but not dull by a long shot, and yet the way he swayed on the step made Saguru worry for him; the drafty sleeve of his yukata made Saguru shift himself closer to block him from the wind.

“Little bird,” said with such warmth, “what brings you here?” As if it was entirely normal did he not remember that Saguru didn’t know the existence of this house? He’d been to the one in Osaka in Tokyo in Kobe, the one on the beach, but this one, this one in Azabu where his grandfather (roughly) belonged and so did he was new and unfamiliar, was the rasping biting edge of metal against everything else that had happened thus far.

But he couldn’t make his voice snap when he said, “...Grandfather, it’s cold. What are you doing dressed so lightly?” Gesturing to the yukata hanging off his body (had he lost weight again), silky and embroidered and gaping on him. “You’re going to catch your death.”

Grandfather Yukito’s mouth curling at the edges, “that will be a novel experience,” he said, “I don’t think I’ve been sick once these last handful of years. I’m starting to forget what the feeling’s like.”

“Horrible,” said Saguru, “it’s horrible. Go inside, grandfather. We must have the wrong house.” Had taken a wrong turn somewhere somehow had taken a step too far it couldn’t be here. What would Toichi Kuroba have to do with a lawyer, with the lawyer; what could he have hoped to achieve? He knew he’d had friends in high places, but even then, it strained belief to imagine Grandfather Yukito sitting across from Toichi Kuroba, knowing what he was, knowing what he did, knowing--

Grandfather Yukito glancing at Kaito, his face half-hidden in the shade of the curved rooftop, half a minute humming past, and then, as if, “...no,” he said, “I think you have the right house.” Resigned and soft and quiet, like the words themselves didn’t quite make sense to him, but he said them anyway, had to say them, wanted to say them.

Complete silence, and Kaito looking at him back, his face a mask again, retreated behind one of his personalities – one Saguru didn’t think he’d seen before, couldn’t remember if he had. Had Kaito ever been so quiet still steady thoughtful?
“Where are my manners?” said Grandfather Yukito, laughed, jagged as broken glass, “come in, come in – mind the step, it is a little uneven.”

“We really—” Saguru began, but Kaito stepped in ahead of him, said nothing and nudged himself forward, disappeared into the gaping maw of the house, leaving him outside with the plinking rain.

Saguru hesitated, followed after him only two seconds later, shuddering as the central heating sank into his bones (stale air accentuated by dead flowers and tumble-dried laundry and the musty reek of soft furnishings that hadn’t seen the sun in ages of dust and forgotten surfaces of a place left locked up and only opened when there were visitors when there was nothing better to do; mahogany panelling off-set by creamy paper walls, pictures studding the walls in splotches of colour, all of them unsigned and Grandfather Yukito disappearing down the hallway and coming back with a pair of plastic wrapped slippers that he placed in front of them).

Kaito’s eyes flicked towards the painting on the opposite wall, a streaky galaxy gleaming underneath the flickering light, focused on it as though he wanted to piece it apart. Saguru shifted his shoes off, put them on.

The air around Grandfather perfumed with alcohol, with the same staleness of old houses, with something biting and acrid underneath it.

“What are you boys doing out in this weather?” Despite the scent, his voice steady and still, “honestly, you silly lads – you should’ve stayed at home. Did your mother put you up to this?” His voice curving on the word ‘mother’, barely able to disguise--

Saguru didn’t know, had never been able to guess; all he knew was that there were entire photo- albums with Yukito’s face blanked out of them, that his grandfather didn’t speak to his mother for some reason (once, when she’d been drunk and he’d been good, she’d told him that he’d done something unspeakable, something she could never forgive him for; told him that he needed to learn that he couldn’t ‘do things like this my darling little boy you’d never do anything like that would you’ and Saguru not knowing what to say except that his mother was caring and she was never caring that she wanted and she never wanted and so he’d nodded and)

“No,” said Saguru, “we’re, ah--”

Kaito starting, taking his eyes off the painting, and then looking at Yukito, and then at Saguru, split-second thinking leading to, “Saguru just thought we should meet,” said softly half-hesitant half-accusing half-something-else-entirely, “he and I are---friends.”

Not dating, Saguru noted, not for Yukito, playing to his audience? Tried to ignore the twinge of his heart; his grandfather’s brows lifting a little, then dipping, his face softening underneath the honeybeam lights, “I see,” said Yukito, layers of layers of understanding.

Kaito flickered his eyes back to the painting on the wall, the galaxy smeared across blackened canvas, looked at it for thirteen more seconds, and then looked at Yukito, smiled at him (strained at the edges) and tucked his hands against his heart, flattened himself in a low bow. Yukito bowing likewise, Saguru trailing behind them a handful of nanoseconds too late, having forgotten (was he supposed to? He couldn’t remember how it worked for family).

“One in,” said Yukito, “into the kitchen; it’s warmer there.”

The hallway stretching ahead of them like a film, Yukito sauntering jauntily ahead, the sleek foxtail of his hair hugging the spot between his shoulder-blades. On either side, doors shuttling to separate parts of the house, cracked open enough that Saguru could see dust-sheet furniture,
covered paintings, an entire life shuttled away behind wood and walls, forgotten and left to moulder. Paintings, though, paintings everywhere he turned his eyes, paintings hanging upon the cream-tone walls, paintings sagging off the paper and deepening the shadows on the floor; paintings that caught and held Kaito’s attention at every turn, had him pausing, stumbling ahead late, pausing again, until Saguru had run into him so many times, he ceased to say ‘sorry’, merely sidestepped, stopped, looked at him looking and wondered what he was seeing, why he was so---

“In here,” said Yukito, opened a door into a wood-panelled kitchen, roaring fireplace set into a 20th century marble setpiece, all long pieces of glimmering dove-grey, hastily-framed pictures of blurry landscapes that looked as though they were all from different places. A smudge in every picture, like a thumb, someone’s finger obscuring part of the lens – strange, considering the paintings on the wall, hanging on ever flat, spare space. “Would you like some tea, coffee?”

Saguru shook his head; his grandfather tutted, looked at Kaito, and then decided, “I’ll make some, anyway. You can have or not have, it doesn’t matter.” Moving away from them to go to the stove, a beast between two heavy brown cabinets, silvered like forgotten cutlery. Hiss of the kettle on the hobb, and then quiet as it bubbled.

Kaito moving closer to him, nearly brushing, saying, “mother or father’s side?”

“Mother,” said Saguru, didn’t know why, but he added, “though they don’t, ah---talk. Very much. Had a bit of a falling out.” Remembered his mother screaming that she didn’t want him anywhere near my son go away you fucking monster—and the crack of pottery his grandfather’s dark eyes flashing a hand lashing out and--

A pause, and Saguru shook off the memory before he drowned in it, looked at Kaito, absorbed in the portrait by the fireplace – someone’s back, streaked with blue and green and gold, hazy sunlight falling on tattoo’d skin just a shade too bright to be—real, looked soft and dreamy; Kaito saying, casually, “your grandfather has a lot of artwork, doesn’t he?”

“He’s a collector,” said Saguru, remembered that from one of their conversations when he’d been too young to know what a collector was (before his mother had lost her temper with him had told him to never speak to him again before grandfather Yukito had become a ghost in the house, a haunting they never spoke of), “he had a favourite artist, but he—the artist—was very quiet about the whole thing. I think these are all his – did you see a name?”

“Not quite,” said Kaito, quietly, distracted, “but I’ve seen work like this before.” Touching the edge of the frame, his fingertips like a feather as though a press too hard would somehow dent the frame, “it’s, um--”

Grandfather Yukito reapproaching with a tea-tray, a teapot, three fat green cups. Sitting down at the table, closest seat to the fire, passing out cups, making a show of filling the cups three-quarters of the way up. A plate of powdered-sugar mochi on the tray, that he put out in the middle of the table.

His cheeks wet, as though he’d ducked his head underneath a running tap, but his hair was dry and neat, combed back, a strand of it falling over his forehead and down to the bridge of his nose.

“Did you want to use the lab, little bird?” said Yukito, glancing at Saguru, smiling, but somehow the edges of it were distant, “you know, you don’t need to come and see me any time you need to use it – you know how to get in and everything. Not that I mind seeing you! Not at all. I’d like to see you more often, in fact--”

“I’m sorry,” said Saguru, felt himself flush, “I’ve been--” busy stalked watched in danger help me
Grandfather Yukito watching him out of the corner of his eye as though he could taste how he was lying, as though he knew and didn’t want to bring it up in front of people. Flick of a smile, distant still, his whole body twisted away from the table as though he was about to get up and bolt – nothing that he’d seen his grandfather wear in quite some time, couldn’t remember ever seeing him worried about anything in his life.

“I’ll visit more often,” said Saguru, knew it was a promise that he could only keep halfway until the men that were following him stopped, but he had to say something had to say that he’d try had to try. There was no-one left to take care of his grandfather in Japan; of the Hakubas, it was just them left.

Yukito laughing, stilted and strained somehow, still, “afraid I’ll fall and die?” Almost amused but not quite as if he’d thought of it himself had debated it himself knew that it would take someone ages to realize (retired single living alone all of these adding up one on top of the other until tragedy struck), “I’m not that old yet.”

Saguru said nothing, glanced at Kaito instead, thought that maybe they could make an excuse and get up and walk out, go back to Jii, see if the address that he’d had for the White Rabbit was--

Kaito smiling a little, not quite reaching the sides of his face, and then leaning forward, and saying, “can you do something for me?” sugar-sweet, magicking a paper up from his sleeve a pencil from behind his ear, “could you write your name for me?”

Yukito raising his brows, opening his mouth as if to deny, changing his mind and taking the paper and the pencil, pulling it towards him. A sharp series of slashes, the pencil biting into the paper, lead dusting on the back of Yukito’s hand. Kaito looking at the pencil as though it held all of the answers, not quite meeting his eyes, and Saguru sitting there, feeling as though the world was afloat beneath him and nobody wanted to tell him so, feeling a little bit like he’d forgotten how things worked.

“Is there a reason you would like to know?”

“Just youthful curiosity,” said Kaito, and beamed at him.

Yukito’s hand stilling for a second, when he smiled, staring at him, when he smiled, and then finishing his name with a slash against the page, almost violent, almost cutting; pushing it across the table.

‘Hakuba Yukito’ written in neat kanji, hiragana underneath it; Kaito scanning the letters as though they had a secret embedded in the ink.

“Hm,” said Kaito. “And these are the characters you use?”

“Most of the time,” said Yukito, and then looked at him, “… how are you getting on at school? Are you having any trouble?”

“Most of the time?” said Kaito, before he could open his mouth.

Yukito flicking him a look, debating some morsel of information, and then sighing, sagging forward, arms folded onto the table, the inky sleeve of his yukata riding down and hiding the smudgy blackened ink on his arm, “why are you boys really here?” he said, “it’s not to visit your grandfather – I know that much. It’s fine,” he added, “I’m just curious as to what you’re trying to accomplish here.”
“We were looking for someone,” said Saguru, “but we got the wrong address, I think.”

“Looking for someone?” said Yukito, not a question, somehow, but a needling remark, a – something else.

Kaito’s attention snagged again by the painting just behind them, the muddled multicoloured mess of the universe (white pink blue green purple forming a hazy shape in the middle of the--)

“We’re looking for the White Rabbit,” said Kaito, and then moved his attention back to Yukito, a sizzle in his words, his voice, in the way he looked at him (as though he’d like to bare his teeth and bite as though he wanted to take Yukito apart piece by little piece), “he was a friend of my father.”

Yukito quiet, cupping both hands around the little green cup and raising it to his mouth; bitter scent of green tea washing over them as he sipped, curls of steam silky in the air.

“My father,” said Kaito, his voice getting louder, louder, “Toichi Kuroba, the magician. Did you know him?”

Saguru blinking, leaning forward to see Kaito’s face clearer (in the dim kitchen his expression muddled together but he could see Kaito’s lip curled his glinting anger the edge to the way he spoke and the bite to his words), “I don’t think--”

“My father,” said Kaito, “who turned on the mob he was a part of – became an informer, and then started a life, a new family. Who tried to do things right.” There, his voice wobbling, as though it wasn’t enough just to say it, “who might have died because of it. Do you know my father, Mr. Hakuba?”

“Kaito,” his voice coming out sharper than he’d expected, “Kaito, that’s--”

Yukito sighing, setting his tea aside with a sharpened ‘clink’ of ceramic on wood. “… I think this calls for something stronger,” he said, looking at the three glasses, still gently hot, the two of them sitting next to him, the plate of untouched mochi, and then got up. Shuffled off into the recesses of the kitchen, opening the pantry door, disappearing down a staircase that Saguru could hear creaking on the fifth seventh twelfth steps.

Waiting until he was gone, and then turning his head to glare at Kaito, sitting there with his hands tightly knotted, his eyes stuck onto the painting on the wall next to them, the galaxy that he couldn’t stop staring at.

“What are you doing?” said Saguru, “fuck’s sake, he’s an old man, Kaito; when your father was active, he would’ve been--”

“If you have such an influential case,” said Kaito, “who do you give it to? An influential lawyer, or someone just starting out?”

“That—is complete bollocks, it doesn’t mean any--”

“Have you ever tried to see the details of the court case? They’ve all been redacted.”

“Because it’s a bloody mob case!” His voice raising up a level, “because--”

“People could get revenge?” Kaito raising his brows, saying, “on who? My father’s---” always a hitch there, like he couldn’t make himself say it, like it never got any easier, “---dead. Jii wasn’t the one who told, and he wouldn’t be in danger. My mother didn’t have anything to do with it, so – who’s left?”
“There could have been other informers.”

“Or there could just be the lawyer,” said Kaito, “he’d still count, wouldn’t he? And your grandfather is--”

Clattering of footsteps, and Kaito stopped talking, turned his head to look at Yukito’s approach.

Yukito with half a bottle of glossy whiskey in his hands, a glass for himself; coming over, and the creak of the chair as he settled down into his seat, turned the glass upright, and pushed away his tea, glugging out a three-finger measure of whiskey that Saguru couldn’t read the name of; complete silence as he knocked back half of it, choked a little, coughed.

And then set the glass down with a clink, looked at Kaito as though trying to find a handful of words and nothing would fit, paused again, opened his mouth to speak, and then rose from the table, and went over to the cabinet where his wallet sat. Took something from it, a piece of paper bent over twice three times four times, the creases picked out in sharpened silver from age and from being left there forgotten.

Sat down again, and unfolded it, smoothing out the edges before pushing it closer.

In the picture: sepia lights a dimmed gleam of glass cutting swatches across the photograph blurred people in the background; Yukito on one seat, much younger, his hair pulled up into a topknot and loose down his shoulders the rest of the way, leaning forward, head bent, a smile on his mouth with too many conflicting things to isolate (looked happy looked peaceful looked tired look wary) and the other man--

Heard Kaito hiss his breath in, reach over with crab-claw fingers and snatch the photograph up, bring it up to the light as though it was a piece of false money, as though there would be a signature a sign of its forgery, a something.

Because the other man, the one whispering in Yukito’s ear, leaned in lover-close, the one with his hand on his thigh, and that promise at the corners of his mouth, the one who looked just as in love with him as Yukito did, was Toichi Kuroba.

World tilting, and Saguru looked at his grandfather, tried to fit the image with the man he knew (stately quiet unobtrusive outside of work; nobody believed he was Japan’s most terrifying lawyer that he’d won every court case he’d ever taken) and found himself dawdling. Yukito, his face hollowed out, nearly as greyed as the photo, the whiskey scratching exhaustion into the corners of his mouth his eyes the way he tilted his head.

“...This—that—it can’t--” Kaito never lost for words, but he was now, he was now, his hands shaking on the picture, “he wasn’t--”

Yukito saying nothing, pouring out another half-measure of whiskey, and bringing it to his mouth, taking it down like medicine, without a shudder, without a twitch, without a single bat of his lashes.

Kaito’s fingers hooking hard into the photograph, and then slapping it down onto the table, his eyes on Yukito, not saying anything but glaring at him glaring hard enough that Saguru felt the air between them almost scorch. Cocked his head as if to demand, explain; folded his arms on the table and leaned closer, and Saguru remembered where he’d seen that gesture before, remembered seeing Toichi Kuroba in another picture, leaning on a baccarat table, grinning that wild grin with a kill-look in his eyes.
“… That was how I knew him,” said quietly, almost absentmindedly. “…That was the Toichi I knew.” And Yukito laughing, a broken-glass sound that started brittle and ended in a hitched breath, the whiskey glass in his hand wavering between angles.

Kaito’s glower deepening darkening but underneath it all an edge of despair and Saguru wondered if he was thinking of all the gaps in his father that he’d never known about, of all the secrets that he was only just discovering now, every few hours a new picture of Toichi Kuroba.

“That’s at the Blue Parrot,” said Yukito, and yes, he could see the similarities now that he was looking at the picture properly; the boxy bar, the pool table fuzzed in the background, but so much of the camera was taken up by the two men, leaning in, not improper but--

Did friends ever just touch each other like that? His throat swelling up as he thought of Kaito snuggling into him in bed, the way he grabbed his hand and pulled him along without even a second’s thought, would that survive this new revelation?

“Were you--” can’t think of a way to phrase it in a way that wouldn’t make Kaito put his teeth on edge, and so Saguru trailed off, just stared at the picture as though he didn’t quite know how to ask, “did you--” that seems like a worse start to the sentence than he can anticipate, and that sentence dies as well, gone the way of the other one.

Suddenly, he wished he had even a mouthful of that alcohol, something to stay the balmy heat of Kaito’s palpable anger, something to offer him when he finally spoke, when he finally broke.

“…We were together,” said Yukito, even more gently, as though announcing that he had a wasting disease.

Kaito hissing in a sharp breath, his eyes gleaming with something caught between horror and rage and resignation; the scrape of the chair against the floorboards as he shoved it back, stood up, and left the room, slamming the shoji-screen door so hard behind him that it punctured the paper.

Yukito glancing at the hole in the silk; laughing a little, but not out of humour.

“Was it--” started Saguru again, because he had to say something to make sense of this to understand what was going on, what had happened, “--was it just--did you meet on the case?” He can remember Yukito joking about his appetite for younger men, calling them his ‘treats’, “… was he--”

“…I loved him so much,” said Yukito, in such a small, small, small voice, and then he put his hands over his face, sagged his head down onto the table, and wept.

Standing up and padding his way out of the kitchen not quite sure where he was going but needing to be elsewhere needing to be out of there wanting to be somewhere where the air didn’t stink of whiskey; passed his way down the hallway, turned to the right, and then to the left, cracked open the garden door and stepped outside.

The garden drunk underneath the water, flowers blooming in every direction, weeds lacerating between the cobblestones and tight knots of flowers bundling underneath the awning. His head thumping spinning aching with the information it had in it, and he pinched the bridge of his nose, took a deep breath in, and let it out; felt the clock tick tick ticking against his heart; felt the wind stir. A cacophony of raindrops clattering from leaf to leaf to ground, the sky darkening again and in a minute it would start to rain again in a minute he’d have to go inside and face his uncle and Kaito and think about everything he’d just--
Crack of twigs, and Saguru glanced behind him, saw Kaito standing on the doorstep, face ashy white, staring outwards.

Crack of the grass as he stepped closer to him, and Kaito said, “... I don’t think I ever really--”

Pause, and Saguru leaned his shoulder against his; words too tangled up too sharp too everything to be enough, nothing he could say good enough to explain that people were people made mistakes didn’t turn out the way they were expected to turn out, and some part of him understood what Kaito meant too: how could he not have known this part of his father, how could he have never seen this happening?

Hitch of breath and Kaito swallowing, his eyes gleaming wet and bright.

Wanted to put his arm around him and to comfort him, to say something, but all that was in his mind was his grandfather’s crumpled shoulders, the choked-up way he asked him to leave the room, the way he looked at Kaito as though he didn’t know what to do with him, to say to him didn’t know how to live with his existence.

Kaito shuddering, “I didn’t mean to, um---Is your grandfather alright?”

Hadn’t ever known him to cry, but Saguru nodded, ran his hand through his hair, staring at a clump of wilting orchids, “... he’s fine,” said Saguru, the lie sliding on his tongue, “he’s, a---” genius brain screeching to a stop because what would sound genuine what would lead to his grandfather crumpling and crying like that?

Yukito with his head down on the table face hidden shoulders shaking as he sobbed and sobbed and sobbed.

“He’s fine,” said again, softer, quieter, gentler.

Kaito nodding, swallowing, compulsive tapping of his fingers against his jeans and the quiet he gave off was drowning quiet crying quiet that moment before the whole world cracked, and Saguru wanted to say something to avoid it, but nothing he could think of would make this better.

Thought, instead, of his grandfather, the delicate way he said, I loved him so much had he meant it? Didn’t know enough about him to say one way or the other – whenever his mum was a little bit tipsy angry out of sorts and he’d ask her (mumbling to herself in Japanese wine sloshing against the edge of her glass two bottles mixing in the belly-bottom of her wineglass) she’d say nothing she’d shake her head tilt it to one side, focus on him with just one eye.

He’s a bad man.

“He’s just---” Saguru said, stopped again, “---I think it’s just a hard day for him. Maybe, um. Work.”

Kaito nodding absently, not listening to him, he could tell; the way he cocked his head, how his eyes swept along the ground as if calculating a leap inside his head.

“...Do you think my mother knew?” said Kaito, and the hurt in his voice--- “or was he just---”

“I don’t think Chikage would let anyone play with her emotions like that,” said Saguru, and fought to keep his voice steady, didn’t even realize he’d slipped the honorific until the moment was well passed.

Kaito, not realizing either, nodding his head, looking at him, and then, “---I didn’t know him at all,
did I?” Had said it before, once, but now there was a deepness to his voice, a hard edge to it that didn’t become Kaito, “everything I knew, everyth---everything he was to me---none of it was real. He---he was just---” A hard hushing noise as he swallowed air.

Saguru taking half a step forward and his arms extending, but Kaito backing away, sweeping away from him to look at the flowers ribbing the path to the koi pond, his shoulders trembling. Distant, cut off, a smear on the horizon that he could only glance at could never touch.

“...I don’t think that’s true,” said Saguru, joined him anyway. “...I don’t think he loved you any less, just because he had a lot of secrets. You can see it in the pictures of you—two together.”

Kaito laughing, bittersharp. “All fathers have those pictures.”

A pause, and then, “...mine doesn’t.”

“Mh?”

“Pictures. Doesn’t have pictures. He---didn’t like to be photographed out of work. And I was--” young small quiet head to one side and looking at photos of blood spray patterns when he was four and all other times father was busy working don’t disturb him saguru go to your room, “--not very good with people.”

Kaito pausing taking this in, and then, “---your father seemed nice.”

“He is, to strangers. But any more than that, and he struggles. There’s not a lot of depth to him,” leaning down to pick up a crushed flower, blood-pink petals spilling against his fingertips, falling apart, “he likes solving puzzles, and being the best at everything. He’s not very good at that last bit.”

Can’t remember when Kaito had met his father, but it had to be at some point before Saguru had arrived, and so he wouldn’t know, wouldn’t have seen his father at home the way Saguru saw him.

“...That’s—I’m sure it’s not true.”

Saguru laughing, soft and hitched. “No,” he said, “it’s true. It’s fine. I’m used to it – used to him.” Pause looking inside the house where his grandfather waited, was trying to put himself back together; he’d never known him to fall apart like that in any situation, had never known him to break. “...I don’t have the relationship you—had with your father.”

Kaito smiling, tight and sharp, “don’t say that,” he said, “I didn’t seem to have much of a relationship with mine, either.” His smile fading away fingers tapping at his thighs again itching to bring out a pack of cards or something anything that he could flip and play with, “...I just don’t understand him anymore, Saguru. I don’t know what was going on with him – who he even is. I always thought--” quietly, “--before this, I always thought he was just a – magician who had an accident. And now he’s a thug, and a criminal, and he had a boyfriend, and---he doesn’t feel like my dad anymore. I don’t know who he is any more.”

Did you ever, thinks Saguru; regrets it, because that isn’t true isn’t accurate, of course Kaito would think of his father the way he mentioned, but Toichi being Toichi--

“I’m just--” Kaito huffing out a breath, letting it in slowly, “---I don’t know. I just want to know the truth. I want to know who he was, before everything happened. Why everything happened. Is that... Is that stupid?”

“...No,” said Saguru, “but you might be asking the wrong person. You know how I am with
puzzles.”

For a second, a flickering smile, and then it was gone, and Kaito looked younger and softer and far too fragile. His eyes sliding to the gaping open door of the house, standing open and waiting for them to enter; somewhere deep, a tangled-up mystery with ends spiralling outwards and outwards.

“The paintings,” said Kaito, “… they’re his. My dad’s. He, ah. He liked drawing galaxies. Colourful things, too, like peacocks and koi fish, but mostly, he liked stars. And in the bottom corner——” Stopping again, as if he wasn’t sure what to say, “—his name. I’ve——It’s been so long since I’ve seen his name written down on anything. I’d almost forgotten what it looked like.”

Saguru shifting closer, their shoulders rubbing; nothing he could say to that, nothing he might be able to soothe.

But Kaito didn’t seem to need the soothing; breathe in, let it out softly, and then glanced towards the door. “… Do you think your grandfather will talk to us anyway?” said Kaito, “even though I stormed out – aah, I was so rude——”

“Understandable,” shrugging, “he will.”

Darkness inside, the storm gathering like a building migraine; shattered light falling on the tabletop as his grandfather (pale red eyed half-drunk) took them into the living room (European Rococo French style with a thick red carpet on the floor and a long sofa piled deep with cushions; on the floor, a charcoal landscape of Paris, no name on it that Saguru could see but could it be one of Toichi Kuroba’s, again?)

Kaito not looking at Yukito; Yukito not looking at either of them, pouring himself another measure of whiskey, on his second third fourth cup now. Swaying a little where he sat, slumped backwards as though he couldn’t hold himself up any more.

Silence, and then Kaito leaning forward, balancing his elbows on his folded knees, looking at Yukito.

“Yes,” said Yukito, dull and soft and shuddering. Again, “yes, I knew your father.”

Silence two second pause while Kaito digested this, braced himself against the words like a blow; faint trembling in his shoulders as it ran right through him, and he wanted to go over, sit next to him, tuck his fingers through his, do something to make him feel safer secure more comfortable do something anything to make him feel the way he should.

Yukito’s eyes on him, and then moving to the flat book in his lap. Touching the edges of it, his fingers tracing out the goldwork on the spine before he braced himself, flipped the book open, and went to the last handful of pages.

Whatever was there misted his eyes, turned them glossy; he didn’t seem to want to let go of the album, but he shifted it forwards, gave it to Kaito, who took it without looking at the page.

“I--” a pause, and then, “...I represented him. In court. He wasn’t --- When he gave evidence, he did it in a locked court-room. As an unidentified witness – the court, ah – wanted him to be there.
Show who he was, to get an idea of how to treat him, but if they’d known—” A crook of the corner of his mouth, “--I thought I was keeping him safe.”

Never anything safe, thought Saguru, *not when we’re around.*

Kaito nodding, looking down at the album on his lap, and then standing up, moving to sit next to him, the scrape of his leg against his as he sat down; heat and warmth.

On the page, four pictures, unevenly cut; the first one Toichi standing on a balcony in Paris, grinning and raising a champagne glass; the second, somewhere else, somewhere dim and dark, a nightclub? Smoke in the air, snaring around Toichi’s head, cigarette in the corner of his mouth as he leaned in, pencil-scratch writing on the bottom white strip, smudged date and an ink stain at the corner. Kaito tight-mouthed as he turned the pages with the tips of his fingers; there was Toichi on a beach, there was Toichi in a country house, there was Toichi on stage. Every picture with a name at the bottom, a time, place, date; four to every sticky page.

Yukito watching the pages turn, his mouth crooked to one side, and the whiskey rolling off him like perfume.

“That was in Paris,” at one picture, “he was there for a show, and I tagged along—bought a nice hotel room, spent the day in the city—and there’s Germany; I was working there for a year, and he’d visit—” two men bundled in clothes, hats pulled low, snowflakes frozen in motion on the page.

Turned the page again and there was a picture of a wedding: Toichi Kuroba, and Chikage Kuroba, flowers on an awning above them, Jii in his best suit just behind him. No sign of Yukito, and then at the corner of the picture, a single glass held suspended in the air, the curve of fingers, a wrist tapering off into the corner of the page. Kaito hissing in a breath like scalded air, letting it out, and then, “you were at their wedding?”

“Of course I was,” mildly affronted at the accusation, as though--, “he was my friend. Whatever else he was to me—” faltering, Yukito watching the picture like it might move at any second, words fading quieter and quieter until he had to lean forward to hear him, “--friend first.”

“I just--” Kaito shaking his head, looking at the picture, looking at the next page of the album (Toichi alone again, Toichi on a stage, Toichi in a robe with his shoulders exposed and the sun catching on the painted edges of his tattoo), “--it’s hard to wrap my head around this. I thought Dad wasn’t--” Looking at him, pleading with him as though to ask, *help me, help me please.*

“Gay?” said Yukito, almost-amused, smoky laugh, “he wasn’t. He loves—loved your mother.” A catch of breath when he said it, like the reminder that Toichi wasn’t there was an ache in him, a sharpness he couldn’t deal with, “--but he love—d me too. And Jii.” Quieter still, almost apologizing. “--Chikage knew. He wouldn’t have – if she’d been unhappy with it, he wouldn’t have done it.”

Kaito nodding paling not sure what to say anymore.

Saguru clacked his nails against the coating of the watch, “…So you represented him in court,” said Saguru, “was there anyone else who knew it was you?”

Yukito laughed, a real one this time, tossed his head back a little, “who didn’t?” he said, “leaks have always been a problem at the Ministry of Justice. It’s the same for the police force, as well. There were people who knew it was Toichi – but there wasn’t any way they could prove it, and so they left it, then. I suppose it wasn’t worth the lawsuit they’d have to fight if they tried anything.” Tiger-hunger in his smile, relishing the moment; and then Kaito turned another page, and there was
Toichi again, smiling from a flat, glossy picture, sepia’d with age, and the smile faded.

Holding Kaito in this picture, and Kaito stopped at it, stared at it, tilted the page one way and then another as though trying to see if it was a sketch a drawing a lie somehow. Toichi exhausted, slumped in a chair, hair wildly spiked, baby in the crook of his arm, and soft rabbit in another, smear of black on his cheek.

Yukito laughing, suddenly, leaning in and looking at it, “I took that—you were teething in this picture,” grinning, soft and gentle, “Toichi had to cancel all his shows because you wouldn’t stay quiet for anyone. Not Chikage, or Jii, not me; but he could make you stop crying. I think this was —after four hours?”

Kaito swallowing, nodding, his eyes shiny even from here. Pleating the corner of the page, where there were no pictures.

“It was two in the morning,” said Yukito, and his smile softening, softening, “he called me up and asked me to come over. I had to take a picture of it.”

“Did you--” clearing his throat, “did you live close?”

“A heartbeat away,” said Yukito, “always.”

You lived with them, didn’t you? Saguru cocked his head to one side, tried to catch his eye, but his grandfather didn’t look up, that was how you took the picture, you lived with them.

Unbidden, Jack in his head, laughing like a loon, telling him, oh, Christ, he’s a dirty old man, isn’t he but look at the pictures the shadow-impressions of Toichi captured at every moment the love in Toichi’s voice in that recording (the White Rabbit) and Saguru didn’t know, anymore, what to think of it, didn’t know if he should be thinking of it, didn’t know what would happen.

Kaito coughing, reaching up to rub his hand over his face, “he looks so young.”

Toichi smiling up at them, exhausted, smear of black on one cheek, baby in the crook of his arm.

“Good genetics,” said Yukito, distracted.

Saguru leaned in closer, Kaito against his front, the ragged sound of his breath against his ear, his heartbeat against his heartbeat, thumpthumpthump, ravaged and broken.

“I--” Kaito shuddering, “--I don’t understand him at all, do I? I don’t—I never knew about you.” Looking at Yukito, as if to plead with him. “I never knew about anything he did. Did you—did you know?”

Something about the picture---

“Not as much as I would hope,” said Yukito.

Saguru frowning, leaning closer – smudgy colours, the baby in his arm, Toichi’s wild hair cut and--

A white suit. He was wearing a white suit.
Chapter 15

Six

Sixteen minutes late and burst into the police department in one fell movement, door clattering behind him; the receptionist staring at him as he hurried up the staircase at a jog. In the back of his mind, running over a mental checklist of everything he had to do when he was out of the apartment (not thinking about his grandfather or Kaito or the way the pair of them had looked at the sight of Toichi Kuroba each other the idea that there’d been someone different).

Nakamori waiting for him as soon as he made it up to the third floor, not glaring but annoyed (tapping fingers his foot bouncing on the floor you’re late)--

“Sorry I’m late,” panted out, the air leaving him in sharp little shudders, “I didn’t—I was held up.”

Nakamori nodding, saying nothing, “we should go in,” and tilting his head towards the door to his office (briefly he wondered how he’d fit everyone in there wondered how long it had taken him to move enough chairs and flat surfaces in there so that the entire KID team would have a place to sit and right)---“okay?”

Blink, and the conversation had gaps in it; Saguru glanced up at him, tried to think back to when it made sense, couldn’t, “I’m sorry?”

“I said, are you okay?” Nakamori, falling into step beside him. “You’ve been a little strange these past few days.”

And that burst of want need aching something to tell him, help me help me there’s people trying to kill me they’re watching me I can’t even breathe without expecting a bullet to the back of my head but telling him wouldn’t solve anything would make things worse and so he kept it to himself; pushed the conversation with his grandfather out of his mind, didn’t think about Kaito at home, planning for a heist he hadn’t organized.

“I’m fine,” said Saguru, wondered at what point words ceased to be words, became shadows of words instead, “it’s just been a very long day. I went to visit my grandfather, and we spoke about the family.”

That was almost truth, that was good enough; Saguru didn’t think it could get any better than that, than what he said. Didn’t want to tell Nakamori that his grandfather had been something to Toichi Kuroba, that Toichi Kuroba had been the Kaitou Kid, that there were deeper gaps and ridges in the story than he had ever anticipated having. Every answer unravelled more questions. Didn’t want to tell him that, either, that he had no answers; that his one function in life had ceased to be.

Quiet pause as Nakamori looked at him, found his explanation wanting, didn’t say a single thing about it because it was good enough not to ask.

Into the office, then, the row of faces turning to look at them; Saguru slipped into an empty seat next to Keiichi, ignored the mumbling underneath their breaths, the taste of their disbelief and watchfulness, is he really going to let the child sit in on this investigation doesn’t he--

Silence falling and Jack Connery, in the background, standing up, moving towards a whiteboard that had been unceremoniously crushed in between the desk and the window, covering half the meagre view of Tokyo. Cleared his throat twice; he looked faded in the overhead lights, like a memory that was just smudging at the edges, starting to crisp and crumble.
“Thank you all for coming here tonight,” he said, looked at Nakamori, and then at him, and for a second, lingered. “I know the last thing anyone would like to do is attend a strategy meeting for this, but I promise you, it’s quite good practice. It really will help, and I’ll buy dinner at the end of it” Forced cheer, a schoolteacher trying to cajole children to behave, half-working because he could hear the turning of the mumbling.

Keiichi scrawling next to him on a sheet of paper, nudging it over, in a moment, he’s going to promise us new toys if we behave.

Unbidden, smiled, regretted it; it was nice of him, he didn’t have to, but--

“Who knows something about the thief Nightmare?”

Eyes swivelling to him almost on immediate command; knew what they called him when he wasn’t there, inspector’s brat station encyclopedia insufferable know-it-all. Saguru glanced up, met their gazes, half his mind still buzzing from the conversation before, and--

(in that picture Toichi Kuroba slumped in a seat his hair wild a baby in the crook of his arm and the white suit fogging up the edges of the picture; Yukito noticing first, watching him look at the picture, and then making an excuse to go and pour himself another measure of whiskey.

Kaito noticing, shutters over his eyes, looking at it, and then saying, “...hah.” nothing more, just that sound, exhausted and disbelieving, as though he didn’t know what the white suit meant.

And himself, thinking, thinking, you had a family what the hell was wrong with you why did you keep playing that game knowing how it was going to end up what made you keep going because he’d thought—)

“Saguru?”

Flinch, come back to the present moment (the smell of his grandfather’s house, spice and sugar, still biting at his senses; the rain on the windows taking him back reminding him pushing memories forward when he was supposed to focus, focus, to think of--), “Nightmare is a very capable thief,” beginning of a lecture, absently sitting up straighter and focusing his attention on the white board, “he hasn’t struck Japan before, though there are a few unsolved cases which bear his modus operandi--”

Eyes starting to glaze, Keiichi looking at him out of the corner of his eye; Jack Connery, halo’d in light, arms folded, listening with his head cocked to one side as he ran through Nightmare’s history (in brief) his way of operating (even briefer) and the only clues they had on him (that he’d be joining the heist with KID in some hours).

Talked through the first heists for Nightmare (Paris, Istanbul, Germany, Australia) and how his helpers wound up (jailed falling off a building sick captured); Jack Connery nodding his head along, fingers tapping at the top of his oak-polish desk, waiting for him to wind up.

“---finished reports can be found on the internet; Interpol sent us their files on Nightmare, and I think there are a few decent websites that you can look at.”

“Well put,” said Connery, “thank you, Saguru. You clearly did a lot of research--”

No, unbidden, haven’t even looked at the file remembered though looking at the reports in bed (Kaito huddled to his side and asleep first time he’d seen him look happy and relaxed and Saguru wanted to immortalize that in his head knowing that every time they moved a step forward, he peeled apart some new layer of Toichi Kuroba).
“What we’ll do,” said Connery, “is practice. Nightmare and KID are going to strike this building—”
tapping at the projector screen with the point of a laser pointer, showing a blocky building facing,
title blocked out of view by the top of Nakamori’s head; talked about entrances exits how many
men should be on what floor--

Saguru tuned him out, turned his attention to the desk, blank and smooth; his mind wanted to
bound back to the conversation with Yukito (the White Rabbit, who’d given him that name) and
the reports in Kaito’s bag (this is everything I have about the case, Yukito shoving them into his
hand, and pretending not to notice that he’d given Kaito pictures, sepia-toned and creased and
crinkled--)

Keiichi clearing his throat, leaning into his space, a phone pushed towards him, the screen
blinking, want to get a drink after this?

Blink, and is Kaito going to be home tonight or is he practicing—didn’t want to be home, not now,
his mind still tumbling over Yukito and Toichi and Jack (home didn’t feel like home anymore, felt
biting instead, didn’t really make him feel safe). Kaito had practice, he’d be alone with his
thoughts, his circling brain, the endless--

Reached over for the phone without thinking, tapped out, only one, nudged it back.

Connery’s eyes flicking towards him as though he’d seen, holding for a little bit, and then sliding
away to answer a question (Nakamori) about how they were going to get the extra bodies for the
raid.

Caught Keiichi smiling at him out of the corner of his eye, and ducked his head further down. Guilt
gnawing at the edges of his stomach should I have just gone home should I just have stayed with
Kaito but he’d already told Keiichi he would and maybe he could invite Kaito, get him away from
the house--

Meeting adjourning for a coffee break. Chairs scraping against the floor and the hum of police
officers filing out of the room and heading for the back-office coffee machines.

Connery stopping by him, “are you going to be at the raid tonight? It’s a school night,
unfortunately---”

“Of course,” said Saguru, and glanced up, smiled a little, “this is a little bit more important than
school, I imagine. And I can easily catch up.” At his blank look, reiterating, “eidetic memory.”

“Is that a thing that exists?” said Connery, eyes wide hip against the desk the overhead lights
creasing his brow with wrinkles, “I’ve never really met anyone who, ah – had that sort of thing.
I’ve always thought it was something that the movies made up. What’s it like?”

“Repetition,” said Saguru, “distraction. Keeping track of everything all at once does get very tiring,
and it’s awfully inconvenient at times.”

(What’s it like? Kaito with his legs dangling over the side of the rooftop his arms behind him,
poised to kick off and fly, and his voice almost almost almost like KID’s, but different, different--

And him, standing just a little bit behind him, not sure whether he needed to go closer or whether it
was safe to be this distant, startling because had anyone ever asked that before? Not with interest,
and how could he put into words something that he’d lived with that effected less than 1% of the
population that wasn’t even real in some scientific circles?
In the end, going to sit by him and dropping down next to him, saying, *like drowning.*

“I can imagine,” said Connery. Uncomfortably moving from side to side, “ah—I do hate to ask, but will your friends mind watching Kenta today, while we’re practicing? I wouldn’t ask but babysitters are an awfully bloodless thing to do to the boy. I would much rather have him stay with people who, ah—” Shrugged, helplessly old.

He almost felt sorry for him. “I’m sure they will,” said Saguru, “I can call them now, and ask?”

Nod of the head, and then: get up (*screeee* of the chair on the hard wood) walk outside go to the hallway away from the whisper-thin conversations of cops and pull out his cellphone. Aoko’s number first, prefunctory conversation (*do you mind watching Kenta the cop’s son thank you so much he’ll be at my house just let Kaito to let you in*) and then scrolling down, hovering over ‘Kaito Kuroba’.

Should he?

(*Drowning, said Kaito, cocked his head to one side. That doesn’t sound pleasant.*

Split-second laugh in his voice.)

Tap the button, wait. Ringing on the other end, a click, a tired, “hai?”

“Hello, it’s, ah --- it’s me. How are you doing?” Winced at the sound of the words, wooden and sharp and mechanical.

“Wonderful,” slightly slurried at the edges, “absolutely wonderful. I’m alone in a big, stupid, rich house, reading old case files. My father is – was a thug with a thing for rich lawyers, and apparently dated while he was married to my mom. And did I mention the fact that he didn’t care enough to stop--” hitched breath barrelling through “--being him to stay with the family.”

Pause, and he wished he had an answer, any answer, wished he knew enough to tell him what could make this better; wasn’t he supposed to have a response for everything? What did all his cleverness do if it couldn’t even fix the jagged edge to Kaito’s voice?

“I’m sure that’s not--”

Snort of laughter on the other end of the line. “Really?” Interrupting him, which Kaito never did, always spoke quietly and after everyone had finished; not this quickly not this hard not this tumbling, “really, Saguru?”

Shook his head, though he couldn’t see him, and let that line of conversation drift. “…Aoko’s coming over to watch Kenta with you. Is that okay?”

“It’s your house.” Flip flip of pages, a crack of something glassy; edge of glass to bottle? “I’m just a guest.”

“Be that as it may,” ignored the twinge of pain in his chest, “you’re staying in there so it’s your house, too. I don’t want to do anything to make you--”

“I’m fine,” like a knife through paper, “just---I’m fine.” Pause again, and then softer, “I should go. I have a lot of reading to do.”
Bit his lip, wanted to ask him what he was reading, would you like to come out for a drink? “After
his, Keiichi and I are going somewhere for a drink – would you like to come?”

Laugh on the other end, “I don’t think Keiichi would want me there,” said soft. “He asked you out
for a drink, not me. Did you say yes?”

“It seemed harmless—”

“Ah,” words like metal, clashclang of vowels against each other, “…I should go.”

“Good—”

Click. Dial tone hum, and Saguru peeled the phone away from his ear, stared at the mute screen,
resisted the urge to throw it out of the window and have it plunge down all eight floors crack into a
hundred pieces on the tarmac below. Wanted to dial the number again call him up and tell him that
he didn’t have to do any of this alone and if he stopped thinking about his father for a single
second---

“Everything okay?” Keiichi, from nowhere, coming up with two styrofoam mugs of mud-black
coffee, sludgy and machined. “You look like you’re going to pass out.”

Squeezing his phone tightly for a second, envisioning the plunge and fall, the crack of metal
rubber glass on tarmac and how sweet it would sound to someone who was waiting for it, “I’m
fine,” didn’t even sound like a genuine word anymore. “Is that—”

“Only machine,” apologetically, leaning over to hand him his cup, which he took in both hands,
cupped his hands around it for the warmth, “where would you like to go? After food?”

“I—” didn’t face up to the prospect of food people conversation, “--I might have to take a rain-
check,” said Saguru, “I, ah—I feel a bit ill, if I’m honest, don’t really want to give it to you too--”

“Oh, I wouldn’t mind,” said Keiichi, “you look like you need a night out.” Leaning back, uniform
creasing at the shoulders where his back touched the pinboard, “or maybe just a friendly ear?”

Considered it, for a second, two seconds, three, and then gently shook his head, “I—perhaps we
can do it next week?”

Keiichi tilting his head to the side, rubbing his jaw, hand wrapped around his cup of machine
coffee and the golden pins on his clothing steaming underneath the stream of hot air, “…okay,” he
said, “do you want me to make excuses for you for dinner?”

“Yes,” relieved beyond belief, nodding his head, ‘yes, that would be--”

Crack of shoes on the linoleum outside, and Nakamori running full pelt, shouting down the
corridor, “heist warning! Heist warning!” streaking into view and heading directly into his office
(crash crack bang of stuff falling over and swearing and papers tearing underneath the pressure of
his own running feet).

Saguru crushed the coffee cup, felt coffee slosh over on his fingers, hotly burning; swore
underneath his breath; dumped it into the bin, and followed, Keiichi on his heels, the two of them
bumping into each other.

Nakamori tangled up in a pile of chairs. Keiichi went over to help him, and in between the clicking
of the metal legs and the swearing, Nakamori said, “heist warning, just got it, he’s robbing a
museum on the other side of town in an hour—I need twenty men from different departments, I
want a team of hostage negotiators, and I want someone over there yesterday to give us an idea of what the layout is—"

“What’s he robbing?” said Saguru, thought to himself that he’d just spoken to him on the phone; remembered how his voice had slurred at the edges, *what are you doing Kaito this isn’t in the plan what’s going*—quietly moved to the right and took out his phone texted Kaito, *will be home late. There’s a KID heist.*

Sent.

Nakamori, in the background, yelling down the phone line for more men, more people, two snipers armed with tranquilizer guns, he wanted someone to contact the head of the museum so that they could talk about strategy; pacing pacing pacing, and Saguru watched him, gripped his phone in both hands and waited for an answer, a something, a sign that Kaito wasn’t going to do this, that it was a joke, a hoax, a lie.

Silence from his phone, Nakamori whipping around and heading to the other side of the room, jabbing pins into a map.

“Can I see the heist note?” said Saguru, “it might be a hoax, Inspector.”

Impatiently, Nakamori shoved over a printed page, a laminated folder with a scrap of buff paper inside. Saguru glanced around for gloves, couldn’t find any, and so rolled the paper up.

Different drawing in the corner: KID’s grin a jarring mess of sharp lines, cutting lines, slash of the hat, jerky handwriting seared into the paper; remembered Kaito’s voice on the phone, flurried and sleepy from the alcohol, and wanted to call him again, hear his voice, hear that he wasn’t going to do what he was doing.

Felt his phone in his pocket; read the note three times although all it was was three short lines:

*Inspector,*

*I apologize for the short notice, but a magician thrives on unpredictability.*

*I’ll be at the Tokyo National Museum in an hour. See you soon.*

Read it twice over; compared it, in his mind, to what Kaito had written before (his handwriting carefully sloppy, letters leaning against each other like drunken men, slashed ‘t’s and cut-throat fullstops). Could be his, but it was inconclusive, it was strange, and the fact that there was no target---

Connery coming up behind him, leaning over his shoulder, his brow furrowing. “Is it normal for KID to give you so little notice?”

“...No,” said Saguru, stepped out of his reach and closer to the light, holding up the letter as though he could see through it, “no, it’s not his usual pattern.” Was that a smudgy fingertip near the corners, where the edges of the paper curled together, in the smeared ink? Squinted closer, tilted his head nearer, and decided that it couldn’t be, Kaito wasn’t that sloopy. “I don’t think this is the
heist he has planned with Nightmare. Something must have thrown him off---” Such as discovering his father was sleeping with a lawyer while married and still robbing museums when he had a child and a family to take care of--

“Well,” said Connery, “nevermind, then. A thief is a thief, and a thief must be caught. Do you have any plans?”

Gestured one-shouldered to Nakamori, and put the letter back on his desk, excused himself, left.

In the corridor (police officers darting past him sixteen different conversations skewing around him lemon polish and bitter coffee stinging the air clicking of doors as they swung open to admit tip-top officers in skinny uniforms) where there was some quiet, near the pin-board with the bulletins posted up (‘missing police badge!! reward offered’; ‘whoever ate my lunch, please replace it DO NOT TOUCH IT NEXT TIME’; a blurry picture of someone’s holiday to Europe). Saguru leaned against the wall, took his phone, dialled Kaito’s number without checking and double-checking, waited for the dial tone.

Click, voicemail; the cheery drone of completely useless information (‘hi! I’m not here right now, please leave a message--’).

“Hey, Kaito,” lowered his voice as though there was more to them than just friends, “I’m going to be home late – we had a surprise KID notice, and I’ll be heading to the Tokyo Natural Museum. Nakamori’s really bringing out the guns on this one.” Pause, and then, “we’ll be taking Jack Connery, too. He has some ideas on how to try and catch KID, I think. Maybe he thinks we can convince him to work for us so that we could catch Nightmare.”

Knew how that sounded, and hated that his mind ran in those circles, but it was true, wasn’t it? Why else would Connery throw so much effort into catching Kaitou Kid? Not his thief, not his problem; jurisdiction had a rule on some parts of the world, still, didn’t it?

Scuff of his shoes on the floor, and Saguru tried to lower his voice even further, “ah, I’m not supposed to tell you, but Nakamori thinks that we might be able to catch him. He doesn’t sound very prepared this time – we don’t even know what he’s going for! So I might be home too late to see you. Don’t worry about me. Goodnight.”

Where was he?

Pictured him on the rooftop at the Metropolitan, legs swinging, his arms pinned to his side by a puff of cold-breath wind, the edge of his hair rippling underneath a sigh of condensation, and the taste of the cold stinging his tongue; pictured him leaning forward, his cape like wings behind him, a halo of light fuzzing up the edges of his outline until he was dreamlike and gauzy.

Pictured him pitching forward, arms wide wide wide, falling and falling, and then a sudden swoop upwards and he was airborne, he was a dream, he was nothing like anything Saguru had seen. He became magic.

“….Stay safe,” said Saguru, quiet and gentle, and soft, “I’ll see you when I get home.”

The ‘snap’ of his phone shutting seemed so lonely in the hallway.

Put his phone away, but before he could tuck it into his pocket--

“Hai?”

“Saguru,” grandfather Yukito, his voice calm and clear, level as though he hadn’t sobbed his heart
out onto the table earlier, “sorry to call you when you’re working! Is your boyfriend okay?”

_Do you know?_ Tasted the question on his tongue, the hard edge of suspicion – had he guessed? Thought that the apple didn’t fall far from the tree?

“He’s not my boyfriend,” said sharp and rough, the words like sandpaper.

Pause on the other end, a chuckle quickly swallowed, and, “I’m sorry,” said Yukito, “I didn’t mean to – is he okay?”

“He’s as well as can be expected,” said Saguru, “I think he’s, ah – finding it a little difficult to cope.” Out of the corner of his eye, Nakamori marching down the hallway towards the lift; Keiichi and Connery following him, Keiichi lingering to wave him over. “It’s difficult finding out that someone you love is nothing like you expected.”

Two seconds of silence on the other end, and a sigh, “yes,” said Yukito, “yes, it is. I didn’t mean to---you caught me on a bad day, I’m afraid.”

Drunk and maudlin, swaying, black-bird eyes dulled by alcohol, and he looked like what his mother had always called him, a layabout a lout a bastard who worked and worked and didn’t have anything to do with family and _believe me my darling little one you’re much better off without him in your life that man was nothing to me, nothing--_

“I understand,” said Saguru, didn’t really; started walking after Nakamori because that was something he could do and not ruin the way he ruined everything (his family his job Kaito his career), “we should have phoned before, it’s just – I didn’t think it was you. I didn’t--” wanted to ask him if he’d known that Toichi was married, if he’d known that he’d had children, and would that have stopped him, would that have changed anything?

He could feel the questions on his tongue, scalding and hot, telling him to ask.

He didn’t.

“I didn’t know,” said Saguru, to finish what he was saying, “I should have, ah—thought about it a little more. Maybe thought more on the characters.”

“Ah, but you wouldn’t have guessed,” said Yukito, and there was a hint of a smile in his words, “you’re a good boy. Too good to get involved with criminals, aren’t you?”

Though of Kaito teetering at the edge of a glossy-slick rooftop, his arms spread wide, and the cape fanning out behind him, a fortune clutched in his hands; thought of Kaito, and how he felt when he curled against his side, the shape of him in the dark, how he’d know him in a crowd. His eyes tearing up, his voice hitching a little, breath wobbling, and on the other end--

“...Are you okay, Saguru?” soft, and gentle.

Swallowed air and pain; nodded as he took the stairs two at a time. “I’m—f—fine.”

Pause, and then Yukito said, “… are you sure?”

No, no, _I’m not sure of anything any more_, the words tumbling in his skull like he was hanging upside down, _I don’t know what anything means, I don’t know what I stand for, I don’t know who--_ “...why did you do it?” he said, distracted himself with the glazed-over lights, the tired stretch of wallpaper that blurred past him on the right, “... gotten involved with someone like that?”
Silence, thick and unyielding, stretching so long that he pulled the phone away from his ear, and looked at it; had he hung up. Put it to his cheek again, the buttons cool, the screen like lava. “…Grandfather Yukito?”

“…Oh, there was never going to be a chance to avoid it,” said Yukito, and his voice sounded distant, his memories far away, “…when I saw him, I knew. I looked at him, and I just---” Two seconds of silence, and then, “---I---had someone, before him. A painter. He was very good, and very kind, and very sweet. When I lost him, it was like someone had taken my eyes. Nothing I did – no-one I was with – could bring the light back to me. And then I saw – I met—Toichi.”

(Kaito Kuroba, silhouetted in a school doorway, hands on his hips, watching the class throw itself into a ruckus, the faint little smile on the corner of his mouth; then sitting at his desk, staring him straight in the face as Saguru stood in front of them, gave his name, his address, his age, what he was doing in Japan; let them pick on his accent; never forgot how Kaito watched, waited, competed to be first.

How he was always, dark or light or in-between, surrounded by brightness, by energy, by---)

“…It was like someone had given me back my sight,” said Yukito, and he could hear his voice thickening, the ache of it like sugar, “like I’d been locked in a dark room, and finally they’d let me out. Do you know what that’s like?”

“Yes,” said Saguru, and thought of quiet, thought of screaming details huddling to a stop, thought of peace in chaos, “…I know what that’s like.”

Six cars bearing five police men each (six in squad car 323), parked outside the Tokyo National Museum; two more unmarked on either side of the road and hinging in the rest of traffic; no people, no lights, no audience.

No Kaito.

Museum dark as pitch on the inside; the mental map he had of where everything was and how it fit into the casements rolled inside his head. Second floor had no jewellery, third floor had only broken pieces of jewellery, and no gemstones, fourth floor had some that he did not think Kaito would want.

Fifth floor had an exhibition on the court jewels of Marie Antoinette, and Nakamori had determined these to be the target, set him there to patrol. Saguru snuck in Keiichi, asked him to cover while he went to the bathroom, went upstairs instead. Further and further up, on carpeted staircases, past liminal-space art galleries haunted with the ghost of former viewings, past windows that looked like they weren’t there at all.

Up, and up, until he reached the doorway to the rooftop, found it cracked open enough. Pushed it open.

Stepped out into air.

This deeply into Tokyo, the stars were muddied, blanked-out spaces; the buildings around them shone brighter and clearer than the heavens ever could. Concrete flooring pockmarked with bird
excrement, stained white from sunlight; a water tank to his right, a water tank to his left. The 
breeze snuck in underneath his jacket, brushed along his face like fingers.

“...I know you’re up here,” said Saguru, his voice drifting like smoke on a breeze, “...I know you 
haven’t planned this out. What are you doing?”

Nothing nobody no-one.

Saguru sighed, turned to walk downstairs; caught a movement out of the corner of his eye, a shift 
of fabric. Kaito, black from head to toe, lopsided cop hat, not smiling, not moving, standing at the 
ledge that bordered the wall and looking down.

Hesitated, and went over, stood next to him. Tokyo below, sixteen floors below, cars like ants and 
people” running around preparing for Kaitou Kid.

“...I do stupid things when I’m drunk,” said Kaito, slurred words and a lopsided smile that didn’t 
reach his eyes.

“Really?” said Saguru, couldn’t make his voice harder than it was, “I hadn’t noticed.”

Kaito lifting a lazy hand, peace-signing him; his arm making a rustling noise as the cape moved. 
He could taste the air burning with neon, every glowing filament staining the atmosphere with the 
taste of burning ozone. Shadows crawled over Kaito, and all he could see was the curve of a jaw, a 
single diamond eye, the tip of a blade-sharp nose.

“I don’t know what to do anymore,” said Kaito, and laughed, laughed sharp, “it’s silly, isn’t it? How 
new information can change everything, all of a sudden. I was so sure what I was doing was 
right, and now...” Words trailing off to car alarms and humming silence; he could hear Nakamori 
below, the bellow of his voice, clumping of footsteps on expensive linoleum, “…I don’t know. I 
don’t think Toichi Kuroba should be remembered anymore. I don’t think---” his breath hitched, 
and the words following came out thick as cream; Kaito staring resolutely ahead, but the firelight 
glow of lights caught the sparkling dimness of his gaze, “--he wasn’t—a good man. Or a good 
father. Or a g—good--”

“Does that matter?” said Saguru, gently. “‘Good’ is such an extremist view, Kaito.”

“What would you call him, then?” said Kaito, his voice raw, edges bleeding into incomprehension, 
“--dated while he was married. Worked for the Yakuza. Stole things. M-Maybe the people who 
killed him had a reason to do it. Who knows how many people he’s hurt, Saguru? How many 
people he’s—taken advantage of and ruined. What would you call him?”

Saguru swung his legs over the wall, sat next to him, didn’t look down; distinctly remembered Jack 
explaining to him, as they huddled into the belly of Alois’ small plane, how vertigo was a trick of 
the mind (and how he’d wondered at that how he’d wanted to ask him where he’d read it and how) 
because it was only looking down that set it off. Kaito in half light, staring at the earth as though 
he wanted to leap and fly, worried him, worried him greatly.

“Flawed,” said Saguru. “But I don’t believe in absolutes, Kaito. I don’t think anyone is – wholly 
good. Or wholly evil.”

Kaito laughing, sound like tearing fabric, “…You are, though,” said Kaito.

“I’m--?”

“You’re good.” Turned his head to look at him, and he could see how ravaged his face was: his
eyes burn-red, nose red, streaky tears down his cheeks, and in the back of his mind, he knew he couldn’t focus on his mouth, his bitten-lip, plump, red mouth, but his eyes darted down to it and his breath lodged inside his chest like a lump.

“I’m not,” said Saguru, glanced up before he was caught. “Not--”

Kaito laughing, a little bit like his own self; soft, gentle, sweet, “you are, though,” said Kaito, “you’re the best person I’ve ever met. It’s sickening how good you are. How much I want to be like you, but I—I can’t. I can’t be that good, Saguru.”

“You want to be like me?” said Saguru, and chuckled, “you want to live life drowning in irrelevant detail? Unable to focus on people being people, having to reduce them to code just to understand them – you want to live life alone because, Christ almighty, people look at you like you’re fucking crazy all the time?” Hadn’t been angry when he’d started speaking, but his temper eked in slowly; he could feel the slow, poisonous burn of it inside him, spreading thickly through his veins, keeping him captured. “Even my mother thinks I’m a machine. I’m--”

“Kind,” said Kaito, “and brave, and gentle, and noble.” Fidgeted, his fingers looping together, searching for the pack of cards, the rifling papers, “...someone tried to kill me, and your first reaction was to put me into your home. They’re threatening your family, and you haven’t---you haven’t stopped trying to help. You haven’t told me that we need to—tell Nakamori. Or that we need to tell Jack. You haven’t told me my father is—completely not worth it.” Staring down at the ground, floors below them, his fingers working--

Saguru reached out, cupped his hands over his; felt them, vibrant and small and strong, between his own, somehow fragile, somehow delicate.

Shock of heat, Kaito looking up, looking at him, watching him.

“...Everyone deserves help,” said Saguru, wanted to say something smarter and more cunning than that, “... and it’s not for me to tell anyone who you are.”

Kaito huffing, saying, “you’re a detective--”

“I’m your friend, first,” said Saguru, and that felt like too much, felt like--

“I want to kiss you,” Kaito, sharp and bright and burning-hot.

Saguru blinked, went to pull his hands away, but suddenly, Kaito’s fingers were on his wrists, holding him pinned, holding him there, the two of them at the precipice of something larger and scarier and too dangerous. I want to kiss you, and Kaito leaning in, the tip of his nose almost close to his, his bright blue eyes sending holes through him, I want to kiss you, and all Saguru could think of was how the world had gone quiet and still and silent and all there was was was Kaito--

And the soft, sweet smell of liquor on his breath, curling up from his tongue.

“Do you--” Kaito shuddering, and his hat going lopsided, “--do you want to kiss me?”

Words, thought Saguru, say something anything, “I--” Swallowed, felt his heart like a splinter, digging into his ribs; the world behind Kaito greyed out and indistinct, “I—I do,” he said, mouse-quiet, “more than anything, I--”

Kaito leaning in, and they were close, they were so close, and then, before--

“Not--” Saguru swallowing again, compulsively, hoping the words didn’t sting, “--not like this.”
Kaito stopping, leaning back, confused, “no?” as though it didn’t make any sense.

The world was humming in complete silence, and below them, Saguru knew, there were cops, there were people, there were eyes that could suddenly turn onto them, but he couldn’t stop himself from speaking, “--because you’re -- you can forget it today,” said Saguru, “--you can say that it happened to KID, and not to you, and so you’ll--” shrugged; what else could happen? His background in these things wasn’t as good as Jack’s, who could tell him exactly what would happen (and somehow things always worked out for Jack), “--I don’t want you to forget me.” A pause, and then, “.. when I kiss you, I want you to remember. And I don’t want masks there. It’s going to be---good.”

And he couldn’t think of when he’d ever said that to another person, when anyone had ever looked at him with wide eyes, unblinking and focused; had seen him. Not his brain or the way he thought or the long string of titles behind his name; not the taste of him on someone’s lips, but him, him, him, the shape and breadth and size of him, all his faults, all his problems, all his chaos - and found that they wanted him still.

“Is that--” said Saguru, hated how his voice shook, “is that okay? If we--wait?”

Kaito stopped, suspended on the side of a building, lopsided hat and silence. In his fingers, now, twisting over his knuckles, the jewel, glinting in the moonlight.

“I--” and he seemed so young and vulnerable then, as if he’d shrunk, “--do you really want to?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

No answer to that.

Saguru looked down over the edge of the building. Kaito’s heat burned next to him, falling-star vibrant, scalding his arm and his shoulder and his side and the curve of his hip. He could smell him on the night wind, sweet and soft and gently sugared. The sounds of the gemstone whipping around his fingers kept him grounded.

If there was nothing else, then there was Kaito, Kaito and his habits, Kaito and the gemstone spinning over his knuckles.

“... I don’t--” Kaito started, stopped, “--I don’t know how to be about this.”

“How to be?”

Kaito gestured at his face, half concealed with a hat, the monocle, shadows. “…I don’t know if I can get back to just--me,” said quietly, “to the way I was before. And the way I am now--”

You’re sitting on a rooftop and you’re seventeen years old and people are shooting at you and you’re--

“I’m ---” the words sticking in his mouth, “---broken, Saguru. I don’t know how I’m going to fix it. I--I didn’t know how deep the rabbit hole was, and now I’m sinking, and you said you wanted the - - me, me, and I don’t know if I--if I can give you that anymore. I don’t know if I am that anymore. So you should -- kiss me now, maybe,” said Kaito. “And it can be good, still. It can be--better. Because I’m not--a seventeen year old boy who gets shot at, and whose father was a cheating thug. I’m someone better.”

“There’s no-one better than you,” said Saguru, and when he moved, his arm rubbed against Kaito’s shoulder, and it felt like the skin was melting off in strips, “…there’s no-one in the world I’d take
over you. Not KID; you. With all your masks. With all your problems. With everything you think is wrong with you, and everything that isn’t.”

A deep, shuddering breath from Kaito, and when he looked at him, his eyes were swimming, too bright in the darkness, his red mouth bright, and for a moment, Saguru thought it would happen anyway - they’d kiss, they’d kiss, and it wouldn’t matter the way he wanted it to matter; they’d kiss, and Kaito wouldn’t talk about it again after today; they’d kiss and it’d be a dream.

“I don’t deserve you,” murmured Kaito, soft and careful, and leaned forward.

Their foreheads touched. Noses tip to tip. He could feel his breath against his mouth, and the ache of it went down to the bones; his wanting went down to the bones.

“You do,” said Saguru, and his voice had turned hoarse, somehow, gravel-rough. “You deserve better than me, Kaito Kuroba. You deserve so much better than what I can give you.”

“Shh,” said Kaito, touched his fingers to his lips.

He obeyed.

Tried to memorize everything exactly the way it was: Kaito forty-five degrees to him, angled forward so that his legs dangled over the edge of the rooftop and his body nearly touched his; the scattering of wild lights below as cars rushed towards home or elsewhere; red and blue lights splashing on the tarmac from the police cars; Nakamori somewhere below, waiting for KID, waiting for him to show up; wind ruffling his hair, Kaito’s cap, Kaito’s hat; the gemstone between his fingertips, and how it caught the light and broke it into a hundred shining lines.

Kaito’s scent, sweet and potent, drifting over him, lulling him closer, pulling him deeper and deeper and deeper into the little micro-world. The scratch of gravel on his hand. How it felt to move closer, to feel Kaito’s heat all along his sides.

How it felt to reach up, the satiny skin underneath his fingertips as he traced out shadowy bruising.

“This is not a kiss,” whispered Kaito, brushed his nose against his, and sent sparks down to his toes.

“No,” said Saguru, and brought his thumb just underneath his ear, brushed the spot there, tender (heard Kaito gasp shudder lean closer); tried to think, memorize, forehead to forehead nose against nose my hand on the right side of his face but the thoughts fuzzed at the edges, got lost in retelling, became air.

Lips parted, almost touching, an inch or half an inch apart, and Saguru wanted to wanted to lean over and kiss him and damn everything else and forget about masks and forget about good, and forget about--

“The real me,” murmured Kaito, “I don’t think everyone’s ever wanted that.”

---took his thoughts right back because---

“I do,” said Saguru, and drew away hands shaking; Kaito’s eyes black and dilated, the sight of his glossy mouth almost painful, and so close it was--- “…I’ve seen you being you.”

Kaito smiling, crooked and a little drunk, “have you?” almost taunting, but gently so, “and what am
I like? The real me?"


A real laugh, then, like a lick of fire. “Let me be you, for a second,” said Kaito, and his cheeks were flushed pink, and his words ran together in a daze; leaned forward, put his hands together, eyes on his and, “how does that make you feel detective?”

And there was something drunken in the way the air around him felt; electricity zinging his throat on every breath in, every breath out, every taste of oxygen driving him deeper and deeper, dragging words out of him that he didn’t know, and probably, Saguru half-thought, probably it was Kaito looking at him with eyes that black that wide that focused, with I want to kiss you, but he couldn’t wrap his head around it yet, couldn’t understand why his whole body hummed, why his heart felt like sped-up clockwork, why he said---

“Like I’m finally home,” barely whispered.

Kaito’s eyes widening, and then his head tilting forward, his forehead against his again, their noses brushing on every breath, mouths so close and so far.

They stayed like that until the sirens grew louder.

2AM, and the house was a nest of darkness and bumped shins on tables and giggling in the dark and he couldn’t quite tell how he’d gotten home except that he was home that they were home that it was late and he needed sleep and that sod school in the morning let’s sleep in; smacking his side into the banister, the creak of doors opening and remembering that Kaito hadn’t even stolen anything, hadn’t told him what he was at the National Tokyo Museum for, didn’t know if he’d gone back to it (something for the morning, where the light would help settle I want to kiss you into something normalized, something that didn’t send his heart pounding every time he thought of it).

Tumbled into bed, heard the click and creak of the door, rolled to the right. Rolled to the left, his pillow against the cooler side of the pillow.

Footsteps down the hall, and then the door opening, Watson chirruping in annoyance, and a warmth sliding in against him, liquor-sweet and hot as fire, and Kaito burying his face into his neck. Fingers tangling in his shirt, clinging to him.

The ticking of the clock keeping him company as he tried to stay awake tried to remember remember remember but slipping off deeper and faster into sleep and only thinking, only thinking, am I home to you too?
Morning glazing over the windows, light sharp on his eyelids; a bitter cold trickling in through the edges of the window the central heating dulled by frost. 8:11:30AM and the crows chirruping in the background (Watson rustling on her perch and dancing in front of the window, wings spreading like she was chasing diving catching and the light gleaming on her feathers on her beak on her talons--)

Kaito shifted into his arms, burrowed himself deeper against his side, and his thoughts spiralled to silence.

He looked different in the morning, smaller, more delicate, more vulnerable; Saguru could still see the bruising on his jaw, the hungry edges of his bones pressing against skin like gossamer and silk (not eating enough, filed away for later when he was speaking to Baaya), and the curl of his body against his, burrowed into his, close enough to touch, and somehow--

If he touched him, would he disappear? In the back of his mind, he knew that that was silly to consider; men were men, not mirages, but--

I want to kiss you, blurted out and too quick, burning like a mouthful of whiskey.

Saguru crooked himself up on an elbow, and yawned. Touched his fingertips to the edges of Kaito’s mouth, where a smile half-curled, wanted to lean down and kiss it then (kiss him then) but not yet, too soon, not right enough. He needed a moment, a better moment, than this. It needed to be good, to mean something to them both, to be important to them both.

Kaito yawned, shifted, rolled away from him, one arm outstretched, and--

Bzzzzz.

His phone. Saguru shifted his eyes away from Kaito for half-a-second, groped blindly for it, not wanting to look away from him for too long. Curled himself back down, hidden underneath the mess of blankets, looking and watching and memorizing: curved musculature in glossy sunlight, faint dusting of black hair on the back of his arm, the wild sleep-curled mess of his hair spread out over the pillow, his lips parted and pink. Fumbled; swiped his thumb across the screen, phone humming.

“Hakuba?” Ryuichi, distant and frazzled, “Hakuba, where are you?”

Roll onto the side and nuzzle his face deeper into the pillow; the arm around Kaito uncurling to run fingertip-light across the sheets, drawing it farther up, hiding Kaito from the sunlight. The sliver of daylight through the window making him pause, reconsider just sleeping; should he go and pull the curtains tight across the light? “At home,” said too late, “I’m sick.” Unconvincing cough into the flat of his hand.

Ryuichi grumbling something indistinct, and then saying, “---my Sherlock’s dropped out of the play. Could you come in and run lines for me until I find a new one? Ah, unless you’d like--?”

“I’m with the literature club,” said Saguru, couldn’t remember then if it was correct because Kaito rolling over, Kaito burrowing nose-first into him, “ah--I can do that, thought, what time would you--?”

“Aren’t you going to come into school at all today?” Sigh, and then, “and Kaito’s missing too--
you haven’t seen him, have you?”

Glancing down to the sleeping boy, curled longwise against him, his fingers a knot in the back of his pyjama shirt, and Saguru didn’t think he’d ever wash it again, didn’t think he wanted to move from this bed this position this moment didn’t want to give it away to anything like real life.

“No,” said Saguru, tried to sound as apologetic as he could, “I really am very sick. I’ll come in and run lines with you some other time, though - any time you want. I’ll even help you find a Holmes.”

“It’s a shame Kudo goes to Teitan,” grumbled again, “he’d make a good Holmes--”

Kaito’s lashes fluttering, a sliver of soft blue, and a sigh so gentle, it felt like the wind.

“Yes,” said Saguru, “yes, he would. I should, ah---go and rest.” Hung up to the sound of Ryuichi’s muttering, Ryuichi’s planning, Ryuichi’s ‘I think’.

The clock hushed and slow, minutes trickling like poured water.

Kaito glancing up at him, wincing as the light hit his face - he should have gotten up and dragged the curtains tight across the window, as he’d planned - and then turning a little, pulling his arm up and over his eyes. Said nothing, and the quiet stilled him.

He could feel his heart buzzing, could hear the noise it made in his head. So much silence, and he could hear himself thinking (could hear Baaya moving downstairs and followed her routine, two steps into the living room to pick up any shoes left behind, fourteen to the kitchen to deposit them outside for cleaning, a back-track--)

Kaito hadn’t said anything, yet.

“Is your head hurting?” said Saguru, remembered the sweet, sweet smell of liquor on his tongue. “Would you like some aspirin?”

Kaito cracking open an eye, pulling his arm just askew enough so that he could see him, and a single nod. Saguru rolling over, having to take his arm from around him, and sitting up to lean over to the bedside cabinet. First drawer: notebooks, glasses case, a fountain pen, miscellaneous cufflinks long abandoned by their twin, and in the corner, a crumpled packet of aspirin.

No water, though, and Saguru sighed, and pulled himself out of bed. “I’ll get you a glass,” he said, “you need to take two of these.”

“What are they?” the first thing he said, and it was cracked and soft.

“Just paracetamol,” said Saguru, “an English brand. I’m sorry, it’s all I have.”

The arm falling back across Kaito’s eyes, a deeper wince creasing his face.

The bed creaked, snap of cold wood when he put his feet down, six footsteps to get to the door, and he paused there, looked over to see Kaito stretched out in his bed, his arm across his face, looking so much like he belonged there that---His heart swelled stretched ached, and Saguru smiled a little, ran his hand over his jaw and padded out of the room to the bathroom ensuite. Poured a glass of water from the tap, chill and cold, and went back.

Kaito sitting up, his feet on the floor, looking as though he wanted to propel himself out of bed, but couldn’t seem to manage; and when he came in with the glass, looking up at him, he looked so miserable that Saguru had to bite his cheek to keep from smiling at him. Had to keep himself from
laughing at him.

“What?” said Kaito, took the glass and the pills and knocked two back like sweets.

“I’ve never seen you look so miserable,” said Saguru, “it’s almost daunting.”

Kaito huffing at him, drinking the rest of his water down, and coughing when some of it went the wrong way. “It’s rude to make fun of the sick,” said poutily, and he sagged back flat in bed, tucked himself back in underneath the sheets. The blankets curling up higher over him, until he was nearly a shapeless pile in the middle.

Saguru sat down on the other side, leaned over, propped himself up on an elbow. To the blankets, and Kaito beneath, he said, “That’s what you get for drinking. What did it?”

Huffing, and, “A very nice French vintage,” barely-audible. The top of his head visible over the top of the sheets, but everything else was a mystery, faintly imprinted on flannelette.

“There you go,” said Saguru, smiled a little at him, “nothing good can come of drinking French wine on your own.”

Snort of laughter from beneath the blankets, followed by a groan. “Don’t make me laugh,” faintly whiny, “I’m sick.”

Saguru chuckling. He raised the sheets, slid himself back in underneath, wished he could see something in the blanket darkness, could see Kaito, but the shadows were too deep, the blanket too tightly pulled across Kaito’s face. “You’re hungover,” said Saguru, but softened his voice, “that’s hardly the same.”

Annoyed grumbling noises. Saguru let him, shifting a little bit closer, wondering at what point he could bring up the night before the talk they had, the *I want to kiss you*. Now? Did he wait?

Probably he waited. It didn’t seem fair to bring it up when Kaito had a pounding headache and more on his mind than he knew what to do with; couldn’t forget, even after last night, that there were people chasing after them wanting them dead wanting them hurt and how could he ask Kaito now when everything was stacked up against them but at the same time, deep inside his belly, he wanted to know, he wanted to ask him, he wanted to see what Kaito thought the night before; if he’d meant it.

And if he hadn’t, he--

“About last night…” said gentle, almost a hitch in his voice and Saguru’s heart double-triple-quadruple skipped a beat, and the blankets seemed too close and too tight across his face, but he didn’t want to move them, “…I’m sorry. I didn’t, ah--I shouldn’t have done that.”

Clank of the world shrinking down to a pinprick, a glaze of light shiny and cutting bright along the top of his head; sweet, smoky scent of the pillows and the blankets, the fabric softener that Baaya used suddenly fit to strangle,and Kaito shifting against him, *I shouldn’t have done that*, and *I shouldn’t have done that I shouldn’t have done that I shouldn’t*--

“It was so stupid,” Kaito said, “I could have gotten both of us captured -- *killed.*”

What?

“---heading out there, drunk, without a heist warning before, was probably--one of the stupidest things I’ve ever done. I’m sorry. You deserve better than that.”
Probably did, but Saguru couldn’t wrap his brain around it, just yet; shuddering relief rolling up from the tips of his toes, and the only thing that came to mind was, “you’re not talking about wanting to kiss me?”

Silence that could be cut with a knife.

_Did I really just--_ (Jack laughing at him as the boy he’d been watching all evening asked him to dance and in a fit of panic blurted out _no I don’t dance I’m sorry_ and the slump of his shoulders as he walked away pinpointing the fact that Saguru Hakuba didn’t have a single fucking clue of what to do when people liked him and this was)

Silence to choke on, and Kaito rolling around to face him, squinting against the pain in his skull, his face a mask of fuzz-white underneath the blankets, blurrily close. Raise of a brow, and Kaito’s mouth quirked, and he was _so stupid._

“...You remembered?” said Kaito, and then before he could say anything, “---stupid comment, I know, eidetic memory, I know.”

Said nothing to that; Kaito seemed like he had more to say. God, he’d just - blurted it out, just like that, what was _wrong_ with him? (Jack would say that he hadn’t dated in a while needed companionship needed to go out clubbing and have fun, and he’d never really understood the idea behind that sentiment; if he was bad at relationships going into them, he couldn’t understand how being bad at them with another person would help him to become better but--)

“...I just…” Kaito, quiet, his voice almost hidden underneath the press of the mattress, the squeak of the springs, “part of me kind of hoped you’d forget about it.”

_Forget about it_, and, “---ah---you didn’t---mean it?” The words like bits of metal in his mouth, ridged and biting; he could taste copper when he spoke, must have bitten his tongue or his lip, and couldn’t remember doing it, “---it’s--ah---”

“I--” A pause, and he could should needed to say something there, “---no, I --- I meant it.”

Relief. _You’re a pathetic mess_, his mother’s voice in his head, and he shook his head to clear it, “...okay,” said Saguru.

“...But I--” Frustrated noise in the back of his throat, “---I didn’t want to tell you like that. I wanted it to --- mean something. For both of us. You know? It’s just---It should be special.”

Saguru sagged back against the blankets, hooked his fist against his cheek; the crack of daylight coming in through the windows highlighting Kaito’s pitch-dark hair, ruffled and messy, the sallow glaze over his skin, how he looked as though he was a split second from falling asleep, and last night, last night popped into his head, Kaito lit up by sirens and Tokyo neon, drifting closer to him, closer than he’d ever been before, and now--

Now, pale and pallid, a shadow of the moment from the night before, but Kaito said that he’d meant it, and it wasn’t so bad, was it, to wait?

“...It is special already, though,” said Saguru, and regretted it the moment it came out of his mouth. He didn’t know what else to say, though, how to say it; knew only what he felt, how it felt to him, the terror that took hold of him when Kaito had said, _I’m sorry for last night_. “…it is to me.”
“Saguru,” drifting and sleepy and exhausted, “---I came into your life, and --- turned it all upside down. What if you’re just---feeling some kind of transference?”

“I doubt that,” said Saguru, “you could be, though.”

“...No,” said Kaito, quietly, “I don’t think I am. It’s um---It started. Ah. Before.”

“Before?”

Squirming, and Kaito waited for a second, two seconds, three, he could shake the answer out of him at this point but, “…I think it was---do you remember your first day at Ekoda high?”

“ Barely, ” but that was a bare-faced lie, since when had he ever forgotten anything like that? Ekoda High, sixth school he’d been to fresh off three months of homeschooling and a case in England that left him jumping at shadows; standing in front of a class and repeating, my name is Saguru Hakuba I’m seventeen years old I’m going to be a student here for the rest of the year and I transferred here from England—catching roughly thirty pair of eyes glancing at him taking him in wondering why a halfu would choose to come to school in Japan (gauging his clothes, his cream-blond hair, the way he stood, how he talked, everything pinpointing him into a category; in England, foreigner, in Japan, foreigner), “…I remember I was very jetlagged.” Because he’d flown in a couple of days before, should’ve stayed at home to rest and sleep the time difference away, but he’d never really been very good at resting when it was necessary.

“You didn’t look like it,” said Kaito, and Saguru startled; had forgotten what had started this in the first place, why he’d come here in the first place.

He’d seen KID on television. His father’s colleagues in Japan had written to Lord Hakuba, and asked him what he could do, if he could help catch the thief.

They’d sent him instead.

“Did I not?” said Saguru, “I was having trouble holding onto my English. I’m surprised I made it through the whole speech without collapsing into a heap.” The class squint-bright with sunlight, shiny desks crowded with papers, and in the back, Kaito Kuroba, chair supported on two legs, his hair falling over his brow, watching him, watching him.

A smirk, and then looking away.

“You looked good,” said Kaito.

Frowning, and thinking back to what he wore: a gakuran jacket, and stovepipe trousers and shiny brown shoes. Opened his mouth to disagree, but Kaito had that look on his face that meant there was more to say.

Didn’t forget, hadn’t forgotten, that this was about transference and feelings and could he have made up everything he felt for Kaito? A couple of days ago, the rooftop in Azabu, gleaming chrome rain-washed stone his stomach fluttering and, in his head, I love you I love you I love you.

In the light of day, now, it felt--

Softer. He could sense it still, there in the background, but I kind of hoped you’d forget about it came first, was louder, swallowed everything else until his head was white noise and that sentence and Kaito’s too-long pauses between his word and why wouldn’t anything go right for a change?

“...I’m not--I told you I didn’t know what I was,” crushed into the pillow; Kaito’s eyes closing, the
aftermath of his drinking post-bleach skin and wrinkles and softness to his mouth that seemed to sag, “---I’ve liked girls before. Never boys, and then you showed up in school, and it was just ‘oh, hello, hormones I’d forgotten about’.”

Flushing red and huddling deeper into the pillows to avoid looking at him in turn, to avoid the pleased did you really think that about me darting over his face and making it obvious.

Kaito, laughing. Gentle, quiet, careful not to move, careful not to breathe too deeply, careful not to do anything to aggravate his head. “It was---so annoying,” breathed out more than said, “you said you were --- helping to catch KID.”

“Couldn’t have been pleasant to hear,” the only thing that came to mind. “Did it worry you?”

And those eyes were open again, looking at him, and Saguru had to resist the urge to squirm away and hide, “… it didn’t,” said Kaito, “not at first. Then I started to get to know you - you know, that was probably more annoying than meeting you. When I didn’t know you, it was easy to just--pretend you didn’t exist. And then you were there, you were always there, and you got close, and I just--” Breathed out, and shuddered, all his feelings like hot light, pouring out of him, “--I didn’t want you near me.”

Glanced down at the bed, the two of them close to one another; thought on how long they’d been living together, working together, side by side and shoulder to shoulder, and--breathinglivingworking on the same case, in the same way, pushing forwards when the road beneath them dropped.

Kaito shuddering, letting out another breath, and then sitting up, an elbow digging into the mattress, a squeak of springs, “…but it was -- the point was, I saw you, and I just--part of me wanted you so badly, I couldn’t--I didn’t know what to do with it.”

The first few weeks, Kaito avoiding him, ducking into abandoned classrooms and taking other clubs, and he’d thought that it was--

“I thought you were just scared of my skills as a detective,” sheepish, but smiling a little.

“I mean,” Kaito smiling back, and he could live with that fleck of a smile, he could live with Kaito not being sure if he acted like this, “your first act was to flirt with Aoko. That wasn’t very smart.”

Ah, of course he remembered that. “I was trying to get close to you,” an arguable decision, but, “you didn’t make it easy.”

“So you thought you’d do that by… making me jealous?”

“It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

A laugh, and yes, he could live with that, he could live with Kaito’s amusement, and his warmth against his body and how he felt when he curled deeper into him, and it felt like they’d maybe crawled another half-step forward, but he didn’t want to say anything and ruin it.

“World’s greatest detective,” said Kaito.

“Tokyo’s, anyway.”

“Oh, fighting words. I’ll tell Kudo.”

“I can take Kudo.”
Kaito considering this, head to one side, pursed mouth, and, “I’ve seen him play football. He can take you.”

Saguru tucking his cheek against his fist, pushing himself up so he could look at Kaito, sprawled out and still hungover, achy and pale, nestled into the darkness of the blankets like an owl inside a tree, and said, “I have the height advantage, and KID wouldn’t let him.”

“Maybe,” said Kaito, and his smile slow and careful, “but do you really want to stake everything on a flighty thief?”

Without even thinking about it, “He’s been the only constant in my life in years.”

Early morning silence replaced by Baaya unlocking the door the ruffling of Watson’s feathers, a chirruping noise like water dripping on metal; Kaito’s eyes in the dark, watching him, thoughtful, considering, careful, and then, “… is that really true?” Cocked his head to one side, considered it. “You’ve never--”

Had anyone, but Kaito didn’t put it into words, let his voice lapse to silence.

The sunlight carved out his cheekbones like marble.

“Jack’s a military man,” said Saguru, “he’s been away for years. My uncles have each other, and my parents--” the less said about them the better, but he’d seen the way that Kaito worshipped his; it wouldn’t satisfy him to hear, “…my parents have their own lives, separate from mine. My father’s very busy, and my mother has--” estate responsibilities.

“Your grandfather?” prompted Kaito.

“Mother despised him,” murmured, and quiet, “I never really knew why. I suppose I have a handful of ideas now, but--” shrugged, didn’t really matter anymore. When he’d been little, and alone in the house but for the servants, or at school surrounded by peers, he’d wondered, and watched, and wanted to know, ached to know how and why he was alone, tried to find reasons and ways for his parents to be at home, to be united. For a time, it even worked.

Never for very long. There was always another case or another party, another reason to keep him away from the general population, who wouldn’t understand why the Hakuba heir stood in small corners on his own, and remembered everything he’d ever been told, everything he’d ever heard, knew when people were lying.

Baaya’s footsteps on the landing outside, doors opening, sunlight shuttering into rooms he’d kept closed up since he’d gotten here.

“I should get up,” said Saguru, and moved to roll out of bed, “go to the station, see what’s going on with the heist, maybe see if I can get the security tapes from the corridor outside Watanabe’s cell - probably should head down to school as well, one of us needs the notes, and--”

Kaito’s hand catching his wrist, tugging him back, back underneath the sheets, back to the dark. His eyes gleaming blue there, sharp and bright as any jewel, his words whiskey-laced and pained, “stay?”

Halt to all the things he had to do, the list he had to prepare for; the heist, first and foremost; Jack Connery would want, need, someone involved who knew Tokyo and could get through the districts without a map, needed to know how to head off Kaitou KID and Nightmare in the easiest way possible. If it were him, he’d want doubled amounts of police officers, every possible taken into account, all escape routes noted and marked - if it was him, he’d have extra police officers on
the rooftop, knowing only that that was how KID favoured running. Others on other rooftops, chartering his escape.

But Kaito, warm and soft, and close to him, and---

His eyes dipped down to his mouth, half-parted and pink; the touch of his breath on his face made him shudder.

Kaito’s lashes lowering, coyly, sweetly; the pulse of his heart in his chest like a hammer, aching against his ribs, cracking bone. Flush of blood high in his cheeks, and Kaito looked like he was a handful of seconds away from saying something that he’d regret in the morning, and---

“Please?” quiet, quieter than air, “don’t go just yet. Stay.”

Thought, no, I need the distance I don’t know what you want from me I can’t handle you playing around with my heart any longer, I don’t understand, one of us needs to be the adult and to do whatever needs to be done to make sure--

Stopped it, said: “Okay. But you should get some rest.”

Quiet, murmured noise, and Kaito curling against his chest, his arms wrapping around him, eyes closed, burrowed deep into his arms until he was hidden from the world. In sleep, soft-cheeked and young, so young, tired and wan in the pale sunlight that poked in through the blinds; you looked good, said Kaito, you scared me, in another breath. His hand passed down his back, stroking his spine, feeling him curl deeper into him, and make a grumbly sound in his sleep, and at least now, it seemed, Kaito had revisited his opinion.

The next few days a blur of planning and paperwork and cold sandwiches chewed in hasty bites; sleep station sleep station, his days lacework, melding seamlessly into the other. Nakamori pulling him out of class to talk to him about Connery’s strategy; Keiichi texting him at midnight to tell him that they’d pulled extra police officers from stations in Nagoya and Shibuya, and a few from neighbouring koban; and so much to write about that he thought he’d drown in it. Kaito, a fuzzy absence for two days, only a warm body snuggled into him at night (when had that happened? He couldn’t understand it), and a laugh during class, when he wasn’t asleep, and notes left on his desk with a post-it note on top, you need to keep up or they’ll throw you out, Mr. Genius.

Slept anywhere he could find.

Kudo had been seconded to the investigation underneath Connery’s demand, and Heiji had come along with a contingent of Osaka police officers. The sounds of their voices, on four hours sleep and two of panicked napping, made him twitch.

This was so much bigger, so much worse, than he’d envisioned. There was a chance Kaito wouldn’t out-run them. There was a chance he’d be caught.

Over dinner, dropping hints: “There’s sixteen police officers from Osaka in the station today - I think they’re working in Division 2 crimes, but Heiji hand-picked them because--”

In the morning, slurred and high on coffee: “Connery’s trying to get a helicopter for air support. He thinks it’ll be easier to follow KID by air but--”

Kaito never answering directly, but he could see him filing it away, putting it in whatever compartment he put police planning in.
Twelve hours to the heist, and he couldn’t rest; pacing in the middle of the night, trying to look at it from different angles, to see what Jack Connery would see when he walked into the museum, when KID and Nightmare appeared - would he notice his absence if he had to sneak out, clear a path for Kaito, tell them that he was in one place when he was really in another? Remembered Connery’s eyes, flat and pale, heavy and tired, but watchful, watchful; if push came to shove, Saguru felt like he’d realize before anyone else that there was something to be noticed about a young detective with a bleeding heart.

Nine hours to the heist, and he was back at the museum, watching them set up a weighted case, suspended block in water, opals balanced; electrified chains, no-one knew who’d bankrolled it (Saguru couldn’t imagine Kondou doing it, too quiet, too demure, too focused on the safety of his opals, but he’d met mysterious people before).

The museum too loud sharp bright, Kondou to the right talking to Nakamori (the task-force a knot of people tangling around the exhibits, cameras everywhere, Connery somewhere off to the right and talking to a handful of people; the file in front of him swimming, sliding, indistinct. Nightmare, Nightmare, why couldn’t he focus, why couldn’t he read quicker, why couldn’t he--

“Kenta!”

Connery’s voice like a crack of the whip, and Saguru raised his head, glanced down to where the Inspector had scooped up his son, cradled him, his face still and false, “you’re not supposed to be here! It’s an active scene -- what are you doing here?”

A clickclickclick of heels and then Aoko running into sight, out of breath and apologetic, I’m so sorry he got away from me we were heading back from the playground and he ran off, I’m really sorry -- Connery’s reddened face relaxing a little, and--

“Penny for your thoughts?” whispered a voice in his ear, and Saguru started, glanced over his shoulder at Kaito; had grown used to, by now, the little tilt-shift in his stomach, how the air around Kaito seemed brighter and cleaner and purer for having him in it.

“I was just wondering,” said Saguru, “what playground Kenta went to. I’m fairly certain that the only one close enough would be ludicrous to attempt to access from this road.” Tilt of his head, and not looking at Kaito’s mouth or the bright blue eyes, or how he crowded effortlessly into his space and how he wasn’t questioning his nearness anymore, if he ever had, “to get to the playground from here, you’d have to--”

“We took the scenic route,” said Kaito, hitched himself up onto the desk, crossed long legs in mustard-yellow trousers so bright they made his ears sear, “and Kenta couldn’t resist coming in to see his father at work.”

Saguru looking back over his shoulder; Connery, cradling Kenta against his chest, face still, telling Aoko something (it’s alright what kind of babysitter are you I told you I didn’t want Kenta anywhere near the crime scene) though judging by the way she stood so calmly, didn’t flinch, he hadn’t yelled at her.

“Did your father ever--” began Kaito, remembered midway, and then stopped.

“He had me analyzing crime scene photos when I was little,” said Saguru, “blood-spray patterns, too. I was good at picking up similarities.” Kenta in his father’s arms, slumping a little, one small hand to his head.

“How little is little?”
Looking away to look at Kaito instead, and he shrugged. “Four. Maybe five.”

The quick little hissed-in breath told him everything, yet again, Saguru Hakuba makes himself out to be a total lunatic with a family the Borgias would be envious of, bit it back, bit it all back, and said, instead, “how was Kenta, anyway?”

“...Quiet,” said Kaito, and slid up onto the arm of his chair; his cologne so much closer from here, the smell of it perfumed and sweet and slipping inside him like air, “he said his head was hurting a lot, and that it meant his father was getting ready to fight the bad men. He said it always hurt when the bad men are about to show up.”

Quick twinge of his chest, and he looked again, saw the way Kenta slumped into Connery’s arms, “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“So am I,” said Kaito, and, “he has some medicine with him. I saw him take some. It’s---strong stuff, Saguru.”

In his head, a laundry-list of medications, “Temozolomide?”

“Oxycodone,” quiet quiet quiet, “he’s only a little boy.”

Saguru shuddering. Watching Kenta pull himself up with effort, smile at his father, say something to him, bright and sparkling-sharp. “Do you know what he has?”

Kaito shaking his head. Leaning into him a little, the warmth of him against his side like a furnace. “I can guess, though,” said Kaito, and, “I’m surprised Connery brought him here at all. He should have stayed with him. He should be resting.” Something lashed and hurt in his voice.

“Some men work through their pain,” said Saguru.

“They shouldn’t, if they’re fathers. Children should come first.” And then another sigh, and a flick of a smile, and sliding off the arm of his chair, putting distance between them again as if he wasn’t sure that he was allowed to be close to him anymore. “But then again, I am a walking cliche, so I don’t think that I really know anything about what fathers should be like.”

Nor I, thought Saguru, and didn’t say it. Kaito knew.

Kenta holding onto his father’s jaw, telling him (my head hurts, from this angle, at this speed) and Connery’s face falling even further, and growing dim. Ferrying away into the office at the back, cradling his son, Aoko on his heels.

Saguru rose, and fell into step besides Kaito, beelining for the case.

“---ah, is this what you guys have come up with for KID?” said Kaito, when they were within eyesight, “---water in a box? Well, I mean---if you’re aiming to get his socks wet, that is one way to do it. I bet nobody really wants wet socks.”

Half-flickered smile, and a laugh that felt like gravel. “I suppose not,” said Saguru, glanced around behind him to see where everyone else was; Connery, in the office with Kenta, Aoko in the office with Kenta, Nakamori lecturing a troupe of the police officers brought in from one of the other stations; Heiji, presumably at school; Shinichi, presumably with him. No-one around to listen or pay attention. “Electrified chains,” said Saguru, “suspended case. You need to remove the chains from the box before you can open it, somehow without giving yourself quite a nasty shock. Working underneath pressure, and as quickly as he is, KID will probably trigger the electricity in one way or another.”
Kaito’s smile a lick of heat right through him; the under-lashes look a lump in his throat.

“And the water?”

“Black opals crack if they dry out,” said Saguru, “and if the water dumps out onto KID, it’ll just make the electric shock a little stronger. Connery seemed to enjoy the idea of that possibility.”

“About 50 centimeters width and length?” said Kaito, looping around it in a slow circle; what did his eyes see when he looked at it? Fingers laced behind his back, his footsteps slow and measured, head cocked.

“Right within a narrow margin,” said Saguru, “it’s about 48 centimeters wide, and 48 centimeters long.”

“Diameter sixteen centimeters,” murmured underneath Kaito’s breath, and he crouched to peer beneath it, “suspended - to--?” Glanced up.

“KID is more than capable of coming up beneath the air vents in the floor, and unscrewing the bottom of the case,” said Saguru, didn’t think he needed to mention every time he’d caught Kaito doing precisely that (the dates ran in his head anyway, numbers and heist marks, detective I hope you’ll be there this time) and just shrugged, “Nakamori didn’t want to take the chance that KID could get away with the jewels from underneath. He wanted every possibility covered.” And that wasn’t including the extra police officers Nakamori had dragged from every source, the two detectives he’d pulled from Division 1, and the ICPO police officer quietly struggling in the curator’s glass-walled office.

Kaito nodded, finished his loop and returned to his side. “KID has his work cut out for him,” said Kaito.

Made his heart skip-shudder a beat.

“I suppose so,” said quiet and thoughtful, “I haven’t really thought about it from that point of view.” Hadn’t thought of anything else in the past forty-eight hours.

Kaito grinned. “It doesn’t matter, you know,” said Kaito, and his hands went into his pockets, his shoulders relaxed, his smile like sunlight, refracting off the glass. Saguru could see Kaito’s reflection in it, the opals glinting near the breast pocket on his shirt, like two small, shiny black hearts, “no matter how much you prepare, you’re not going to catch KID.”

Relief; nipping at its heels, pride. “We might surprise you yet, Kaito,” he said; Nakamori was within earshot enough that he didn’t want to agree, to nod, to look anything other than mildly affronted (Jack did tell him that, as a Hakuba, he had a natural flair for it), “no thief can run forever.”

“That’s never been proven yet,” said Kaito, airily, “there’s a first time for everything, detective.”

Caught his eyes in the reflection, and underneath the overhead lights and the bravado like a gloss over him, his face was too pale and his mouth too tight, and his eyes too old to be in a face that young, and he remembered the scars over him, over his back, over his heart; the shaking after he’d been shot at the first time; the man sneaking into the dark in his own house to try and kill Kaito, and Kaito knowing all of this, Kaito not being able to rest for all of this.

“I hope that’s true,” said unbidden, unplanned.

Kaito’s still face broke for a half-second, froze in something that leaned close to gratefulness and
surprise, and then reformed; poker face resumed, as though Saguru had said nothing else.

Stood there for a minute, two, three longer.

*I want to kiss you.*

*You’re so good, Saguru.*

Good enough to help a thief when he really shouldn’t be, good enough not to get caught doing it; everything was relative on this side of the law, but it made him itch, sometimes, just how much he shouldn’t have been enabling this, just how much he should’ve forced Kaito to go to the police or to Jack or to tell someone, anyone, what he was going through.

Kaito pulled away first, gave the opals another long look, and then slipped off into the shadows. In a second, he was huddled within a mass of young policemen like he’d always been there; Connery came out from the office, without Kenta; Nakamori came over from where he’d been studying some of the other displays, and like that, time resumed, as though it had never stopped in the first place.

He could hear him laughing, high and wild and free, and furious, and crossed his fingers, thinking to himself, *let me hear that again after tonight. Let me keep hearing it for years.*

At home, staggering in after a handful of hours of sleep in the past three days, falling face first into the uncomfortably lumpy sofa in his library and letting the ache in his back soothe itself; Baaya lighting a fire somewhere in his peripheral vision, and drifting out of the room. Dreamless sleep, hazy and shallow, shadow-fire playing and turning the inside of his eyelids red, Watson a chirping constant. Wake, and roll over, grab his phone before he thought of anything else, scrolling down his notifications: Nakamori, Nakamori, Nakamori, Keiichi, Nakamori, all of them updates on the case, hadn’t he told them to stop sending him text updates what if his phone was stolen or misplaced? In the back of his mind, pictured the argument he could pose for it, *KID might steal my phone and get all our plans,* as if Kaito didn’t know already, hadn’t anticipated it already, hadn’t heard it through him.

Still.

Pushed his phone aside, and rolled to his feet, stretched; crime scene in an hour, just enough time to shower and dress, take the car, and think up a plan on the way to keep Connery away from KID as much as possible, didn’t trust him not to see through him. In the shower, water steaming down around him, went through the ideas of putting Kaito as far away from him as possible (wondered what was happening then if Kaito was preparing how he could avoid Connery).

Dress, grey-green suit and button up, badge and ID card in his top coat pocket, keys, phone. Baaya meeting him at the door, the keys to the Aston in her hand.

“Anticipating a busy night, young master?”

“A KID heist is never quiet, Baaya,” said Saguru, distracted by his phone, flicking through the updated messages:

*Nakamori - arrived at museum, no sign of kid, setting up security. Am moving squad four to the third floor and squad five to the roof.*
Nakamori - curator wants to come by and see that the opals are safe. Am allowing him

Nakamori - when you get to the museum, come and see me immediately; I’ve moved squad four back down to the second floor, and third floor is currently unguarded.

“I told him to keep at least one man on the third floor,” sighed Saguru, closed his phone and tucked it into his pocket.

Fourteen degrees with wind blowing in from the north; the Aston, glossy after last night’s rain, sitting in the driveway, Jack’s present to Baaya for taking care of him all these years. Flick of the button in her hands, and the Aston’s lights flickered, and the engine purred like a beast.

Baaya behind the driver’s wheel, and himself sliding in the passenger’s seat, the night sharp and crisp on his face. Out into the road, no traffic until they neared Tokyo.

Baaya, suddenly, “---is master Kaito going to be staying over for much longer, master Saguru?”

“Possibly,” traffic congestion all in front of them; if it got very much worse, he’d need to--

“And will he be sleeping in his bed or yours, Master Saguru?”

Saguru’s arm slid off the door, bumped into his knee, his head spinning with what, “U---um, I--- beg your pardon, Baaya?”

Baaya with her eyes on the road and a smile on her mouth like she had a secret.

Heartbeat tripling in his chest and the open-top car was too confined and tight; breath razoring against his throat, ash on his tongue, and he couldn’t think (the car in front of them had two small children in the back watching him and their tongues lolled out like dogs) so he didn’t, said nothing but counted the halo of headlights in front of them, made it to four before Baaya said,

“I’m not angry at you, young master.”

“I didn’t--I haven’t--” done anything futile lie but the first thing that popped into his mind, sat on his tongue like it was meant to, “I just---Kaito and I were---”

“You are, of course, far too young to form any meaningful attachments,” thoughtful concern in the edges of her voice; gunned the engine and slid between two cars in the lefthand lane, honking of horns ear-splitting, too close, “and I wouldn’t put it past you to have built it up far more than it is--”

Is that what I’m doing? No of course not but it could be possible I don’t have very many friends I don’t date I don’t-- “Baaya,” kept his voice steady and careful, “I’m sure you mean well, but it is hardly your concern what I do with my life.”

(In his mind, his father standing over him - four years old and tall even then, tall enough to see over the edge of the table at the glossy-black charred-beaten-bruised face of Jane Doe, found in a dumpster in Hackney with her arms wrapped up in brown paper next to her - saying the only thing I expect from you is not to embarrass me and carry on the tradition, lad. Now what were you saying about the bruising on Doe’s face?)
Hated that his voice sounded similar to his, even just a little.)

Baaya laughing, not offended. Another switch of the lane, the car pinwheeling between vehicles, and Saguru’s head spinning with it, “until you’re of age, young master,” she said, “you’ll be my concern. Probably after then, too. Even Sherlock—” in her accent, the name skewed hard to a glottal stop, “—had Mrs. Hudson.”

Supposed to soften him, Saguru thought, reference something familiar distract lead away from the issue, done so subtly if it had been anyone else— “…You’re wrong,” and he sounded childish and weak, and softer than he meant to, “whatever you think of Kaito - whatever you think of me - you’re wrong about my feelings for him. You’re wrong about when they started. And I would prefer not to discuss it with you in any capacity, Baaya. I’m well aware that I’m my father’s disappointment, and my mother’s biggest shame—”

“Young master—”

Raising his voice just enough, edging it with steel and temper, “—but Kaito looks at me and I can see he thinks I’m better than that. That I’m better than what they taught me. Kaito pushes me to be better than that. I’m in love with him, but not because he’s been there this whole time, helped form who I was—”

Squealing of tires on tarmac, and the car veered, his spine curled at the oncoming truck barrelling down the road, Baaya pulling off a hair-thin curve in a way that Jack would have been proud of, in a way that Jack would’ve laughed. His stomach twisted, wanted to choke him on his words, but—

“—but because he thinks I’m a better person,” at some point, his voice softening, the hard edge melting away, “than what I am. Because, when I’m with him, all I can think about is how I can live up to what he thinks of me. Because he makes me want to be better, to work harder --- to be kinder. And I won’t have you cheapening it with this nonsense.”

Baaya quiet, the car purring, a gliding stop behind a mid-sized Subaru.

“Young master,” said carefully, “I apologise. I—”

Crackling of the police radio in the glovebox, garbled Japanese, and Nakamori saying, “goddamnit! Saguru, where are you?”

“Stuck in traffic,” couldn’t keep the snap out of his voice, thunderous and low, “what’s going on?”

“KID’s taken the jewels.”

Already? Frown, and glance at his watch; Kaito was supposed to delay until he’d got there, had back-up support, something, but— “are you sure? Check the case.”

“I’ve checked the case,” Nakamori, equally growling, “the Curator checked the case. He said the jewels are fake.”

Frowning, did you switch the jewels around, Kaito investigating the case, electrified chains and water, fake opals--- “Nakamori,” low and level and careful, “check the case.”

“I just—”

“For once,” said Saguru, low and firm, fumbling for his phone, where was Kaito if he wasn’t at the department? Where were the jewels, “do as you’re told. Open it.”
A pause on the other end like nails on a chalkboard, a snap of footsteps. Baaya looking at him out of the corner of her eye. His phone, silent and dark, no messages, no contacts, nothing from Kaito, wasn’t he supposed to have waited? What had gone wrong?

“I opened it,” Nakamori’s voice crackling over the line. “There’s water. The fakes are floating on top of it.”

“Are you sure they haven’t been--” what would Kaito do what would Kaito do, “--hidden, somehow? Reach into the case.”

Splish of water, grumbling underneath Nakamori’s breath, and then--- “that’s funny,” all traces of anger gone, “this case is smaller on the inside.”

Saguru, quietly tapping out, where are you? I’m going to be home late; are you at Ryuichi’s? I can pick you up after work if so.

Kaito’s phone would be off. Please don’t be off please don’t be off please don’t be off, pressed send, and, “what do you mean?” aware he’d paused for too long, “how is the case bigger on the outside?”

Grunting on the other end, a curse underneath Nakamori’s breath and--- “there’s a piece of plastic here,” said Nakamori, hushing sound of water sloshing everywhere, “--something plastic on the sides, too---feels thick. Like those sandwich boxes.”

Plastic on the sides. Plastic--- “is it the size of the case?”

Pause, and then, “I think so.”

“The things on the sides -- are they holding it up?”

More splashing, and then, quieter, “….yes.”

(Kaito grinning at him, plucking a card from behind his ear [up his sleeve in his shirt collar somewhere else] two days thirteen hours sixteen minutes ago, When in doubt, hide it in plain sight. No-one ever thinks to check if the sky is blue, they just assume it is.

Told him that saying didn’t exist, and Kaito saying, defiantly definitely, my father said it all the time.)

“The jewels were swapped out,” the car veering again, hitting thirty in 0.4 seconds, “but fairly recently, I would imagine; KID has to be close enough to---”

Crackling on the other end, and Nakamori snapping down the line, “we know where KID is!”

“Wha--”

“One of Connery’s cops just called in a tip -- the abandoned warehouse in Shitamachi -- how soon can you get there?”

Traffic a tight knot from here to the museum, and to get to the warehouse, “if I run there,” said Saguru, “fifteen minutes, maybe less. Keep me informed.”

His phone, silent and dim, sat on his lap like a brick, no message from Kaito, nothing to hold onto, an abandoned warehouse in Shitamachi? “Baaya, go home.”

“Young Master---” squawked out at him, alarm amusement worry, as he pushed the door open and
snaked between the gleaming cars to the curb - in the distance, car horns squealing, and ahead of him, a knotted mess of travellers and roads; no use heading to the station, but if he wanted to get to Shitamachi quick, he could jump into a taxi when the road cleared.

Until then, radio silence from Kaito, no clues who Nightmare was (the articles he’d read two days ago singing in his head, *every accomplice of his winds up dead*) and a time limit to get to him (if Nightmare was there, then Kaito would be there, had to be there, had to--)

The whole trip a blur; cars fuzzing the edges of his vision, neon lights soft in the background, and engines purring like cats; people getting out of his way (wondered what he looked like; six feet of blond built man in a suit, racing through the streets of Tokyo like he was going to miss the last train home); Tokyo bleeding out at the edges and turning into quiet and silence and stillness. Shitamachi, graveyard of buildings, a hundred and five different abandoned places to look into; pause, orient, breathe---

Cars outside the oldest factory, rotten skeletons of their former selves; onwards, through streets left dusty and dirty, onwards, onwards, past a shop that had no glass left in its storefront, mildews and moss eating away at the things in the windows; past a supermarket trolley left abandoned on its side. His heart in his head, pounding, pounding; every heartbeat like a hammer inside him, throbbing sharp.

Kaito, where was Kaito, where would he go? Stop and force his breath to still; look around - large building with shattered windows, used to be owned by the NishiTech corp, fragments of old metal and machine in the grass, unsettled here, muddy foot-prints leading to the gaped-open door and darkness; every instinct screamed at him, *stay wait for back up wait for back up*, but no time to wait, no time to think, he had to get to Kaito before anyone else did.

(London 2014, ground-bottom door to a cellar in pursuit of Peter O'Keefe the butcher clock ticking down to over forty eight hours abducted and the chances of finding Sonya Silverwood eighteen uni student snatched from her car while she was leaving for school spiralling down down down)

Inside, gauzy moonlight on rust-bitten metal and forgotten machinery. Hold to the wall, keep to the shadows, and creeping along footstep by footstep, moving further. No movement. No breath, no noise. Above his head, abandoned walkways, crumbling into ash the longer they stood there; particles of dust and rust in the air, stinging his throat on every exhale.

Round a corner and crouch into the shadows, peer along all the walls, and into the depth of the darkness; he could see the machinery carved out of blacker black, rubberized treads to move products along, no Kaito, and on down the lenght of the building, no Kaito, still, and--a pause, a shift in the air, voices racing along the metalwork, *you counted with your own eyes*---

Crept along the wall, quiet and careful, glanced up; tracked a shadow on the wall down to the right, along the windows, to a walkway in the middle of the room, and there he was.

Kaito, cape streaming in night wind, facing Nightmare, tall and masked, “that is why I will continue giving nightmares to thieves---” *Connery*?

Red-blue-white cars outside, ringing of sirens, and policemen surrounding them; out of the corner of his eye, Aoko, toddling along with Kenta (Kenta?!), Kenta shouting out, “papa!”

Up above him, Nightmare freezing, turning, slipping.
Kaito moved before he could see him move, and one minute he was there, the next he was hanging over the walkway, his hand gripping Connery’s, the mask clinging on by sheer will. Kaito’s voice, warped with terror, *drop them drop the jewels.*

Connery’s body dangling sixteen feet above the air, his *no* felt before he said it.

Kaito’s glove slipping, slipping, slipping.

Connery’s hand sliding down. Further. Further.

And loose.

Darted out, tried to catch him, two cracks in rapid succession: Kaito’s gun, silver-muzzled, spitting a card that smacked into the mask on his face (whipping it off and somewhere far into the darkness, where he saw it glinting) and---

Connery’s head, *smack*, into the concrete below.
Chapter 17

Blood puddling around Connery’s skull and Saguru unbidden thinking (a force times the mass it exerts on) scuttling over to see in the back of his head knowing that he couldn’t be caught here with Kaito hanging above them on a walkway, Connery dead at his feet, the mask somewhere; looked up to tell Kaito to run, hide, but he wasn’t there.

Footsteps behind him, and in the back of his mind, Kenta shouting Papa.

And Connery, stumbling, slipping, falling, crack.

He couldn’t see his father like this.

Saguru whipped around, came face to face with Keiichi, in his riot gear, his face obscured by a half-face mask; knew he looked guilty, a dead Connery at his feet.

Breathe a sigh of relief, and look distraught (and he was, but it hadn’t sunk in yet; emotion slow to process through adrenaline). Remember, seventeen years old a boy wouldn’t know how to react to a dead body but you do, you do.

Keiichi behind his visor, looking at Connery, looking at him. “What happened?”

Nakamori, behind him, a split second later. Skidded into view, took one look at the body, and then over his shoulder, bellowing, “Aoko! Get that child out of here!” Turned to him, his face flat and calm, eyes so dark you could sink into them, and bit out, “explain.”

Explain. How could he explain any of this?

Connery, the Nightmare mask on his face, his voice coming from the walkway; he’d killed so many people. Fourteen Nightmare cases, twenty or more victims, he owed him nothing. He should tell Nakamori the truth.

But Kenta, small and quiet, in pain, looking for his father, looking up to his father---

Tell Nakamori the truth, you stupid boy, haven’t you learned anything that I’ve tried to teach you?

“Connery confronted Nightmare,” said Saguru, “tried to arrest him, and KID, both---”

“KID was here, then?” Eyes narrowed, Nakamori looking up at the walkway as though he could sense him, “Where? Up there?”

“With Nightmare, yes.” Focus focus make it sound good don’t think about where Kaito went don’t worry about how he’s doing just focus. “Connery was up against both of them. Nightmare shot at him - he went to step back, and---” Kaito’s face, wide-eyed and horrified, his fingers grasping onto his glove, holding on by a hair, a rising, hysterical note in his voice as he begged, drop them drop them.

Connery slipping further.

Further.

Crack.
“--and the walkway crumbled beneath him,” said Saguru, and jerked his chin at the pile of petrified metal. In the mean time, Shinichi Kudo approaching from behind Nakamori, a glance at the body, his eyes flattening out, looking around; did he see the mask somewhere? Did he see holes in his story? “KID tried to stop him.”

All eyes on him, but funny enough, *funnily enough*, that was the only truth. KID had tried to save Connery---Nightmare’s---life.

Nakamori sighing, deep and heavy, both hands on his face, pinching his cheeks together. “KID tried to save Connery’s life?”

“KID doesn’t kill,” quieter, “you know this about him, Nakamori.”

Nakamori saying nothing, nothing; Shinichi Kudo’s eyes drawn to the body, the slick-wet-sloppy pool of blood spreading out around Connery’s head, turning to look at him, hold his eyes, watch him as though he wanted to peel him open first, did he not believe him? *If Connery was up there fighting KID and Nightmare both where did they go? They aren’t quick enough to run away, both of them, without attracting some attention.*

“I suppose,” begrudging, “perhaps that makes sense.” Even softer, looking at Connery, the mess of him left behind, “…how are we going to tell next of kin?”

“I can do it,” said Saguru, shoulders slumping.

“I have more experience,” Shinichi, looking away from him and to the body again, unreadably grim in the half light.

Nakamori, shaking his head, “neither one of your are experienced enough,” but said as if he was considering it. Heaved a sigh a split second later, gave Connery a look, mixed regret and anger, and said, “---okay. Kudo, I want you to head back to the station and try and pick up KID’s trail.”

“Sir,” said Shinichi, “wouldn’t I be more use---”

“Station,” Nakamori, uncharacteristically sharp. “Take Hattori with you, you’ll need the help. Search every street camera in the vicinity and see if you can spot KID flying away - it’s not windy out, but maybe he found a way to use his hang-glider without wind. Hakuba---”

Saguru swaying a little as he glanced up at him.

“Go with Keiichi,” said Nakamori, “he’ll take your statement. And go home after that.”

“Sir---” Took a half step forward to protest.

Nakamori holding up a hand, silencing him before he’d even started. “As of this moment,” said Nakamori, “everything that happens on this crime scene reflects on me. I respect you a great deal, but you are *just* a seventeen year old boy, and that is a murder. I don’t care if KID didn’t push him.” Gritted teeth, and sharpness slanting his words, “when I find him, I’m going to get him for this.”

“KID tried to save him!” Protest, thinking of Kaito, how he’d held onto him, and begged, begged, begged, “KID tried to---”

“Saguru,” a low and dangerous hum in Nakamori’s voice.

Saguru quietened. Took a half-step away from Nakamori.
“I’ve tolerated your strange ideas,” said Nakamori, “for a very long time. I’ve tolerated more than what other division chiefs would tolerate. What your father says or does not say no longer matters. A man died chasing after KID. As far as I’m concerned, that makes KID a murderer --- and if you would like to keep working this investigation, you’ll dispel your ideas of KID as some sort of benevolent thief. He’s a criminal.”

Every word a sting. Saguru squared his shoulders, straightened his spine, took the borrowed height it gave him, and made himself larger. Even then, he was only marginally taller than Nakamori.

But he had what his mother taught him in spades: never let the rabble forget you’re a Hakuba.

“Detective Nakamori,” said soft, and firm, “I believe you’ll find that my assistance on your cases is nothing you can opt out of. Write to my father, if you must. Write to the prosecuting attorney, and the division chief. I can promise you, they won’t listen.”

“They will,” said Nakamori, but his voice lacked conviction, was edging into hazy exhaustion.

“A detective with a 3% solve rate,” said Saguru, and his voice dropped ten degrees, “against a detective with an unblemished record. Even you can see how that will go.”

Nakamori flinching back. Fingers of his right hand twitching, and if he swung at him, he’d duck the blow, block it with his forearm the way Jack taught him, take a step to the right and--stop.

What was he doing?

“Ito,” without taking his eyes off him. “take young Hakuba’s statement. And then escort him home.”

Home.

Baaya’s car in the driveway, but the house grave-dark, and shadow-still.

“Still time to get that drink,” said Keiichi, driver’s side, patrol car lights flashing red, blue, red, blue. Could have told him, cited the law, that said he wasn’t supposed to have those on in a non-emergency, but the words didn’t want to form the way they should form. He kept thinking in muddled English, half-thought sentences, broken-up noises.

Squeak.

Slide.

Crack.

“No thanks,” said Saguru, and opened the car door, stepped out onto the pavement. “I’m not in the mood.”

“Okay,” said Keiichi, and stood up, walked outside with him. Stood shoulder to shoulder with him, watching the house in the shadows of the car, red blue, red blue, “nice house.”

“My mother’s,” didn’t need to specify, but needed to, somehow, let him know that he wasn’t this house, he wasn’t this garden with its variety of hothouse flowers, he wasn’t rich and petty, he wasn’t anything like what he’d been raised.
Even if he’d acted like it tonight. Even if he’d---

Closed his eyes. Tomorrow. He’d apologize to Nakamori tomorrow. He’d talk to Kudo. He’d do something to fix what he’d broken.

“Nakamori was just stressed,” said Keiichi, “he’ll forgive you.”

“I’m not---” said Saguru, wanted to say ‘worried’, “----thank you.”

Keiichi smiled.

Heat flickered, for just a minute, in his belly. He dropped his gaze, looked up at the house again. Would anyone be home?

Would Kaito be home?

“Thank you for driving me home,” said Saguru, and stepped away from him, towards the wrought-iron gates, and the high stone walls, “I appreciate your escorting me to my door.”

“Anything,” said Keiichi, “to spend a little more time with you, Detective.”

Half-pause, his fingers wrapping around the metal, gripping it; cool, dew-slick underneath his fingertips.

Keyed in the code blind, and opened the gate, put himself on the other side of metalwork, “Good night, Keiichi.”

“Sleep well, detective.”

Keiichi’s eyes on him as he walked up the pathway, dislodging gravel where it sat on the path, frightening the koi into poking out their heads. In the distance, a hum of engines, and Baaya’s music on low, travelling down the entire length of the garden. Somewhere in the back of his head: shouldn’t it feel better to go home? Thief put out of the way. His father would tell him he should celebrate.

_A good man died_, on the landing of his house in Mayfair, staring down six feet so the sixteenth step from the top, his father in his dress glues, jacket hooked over his shoulder, _father, a man died_.

_A thief died. If he wanted to live, he shouldn’t have broken the law. I had every right to use force._

Click of the key in the lock, the tumbling of metal on metal. It creaked when it opened. His security system scanned his face, found him on the list of visitors, didn’t ring out or send a silent alarm, but he reached over, and keyed the code in anyway. Stupid place for a keypad, someone behind him could see it---

“Young master,” Baaya, floating in from the dark beyond the dark, tray in her hands, teapot and teacups, “welcome home. Was work well?”

“No,” said Saguru, and steadied himself on the wall to toe off his shoes, took up a pair of slippers. The house hummed with silence around him, pressing down on his ears; when Baaya stopped talking, it was like the whole world was bearing down on his head. “No,” gentler quieter softer, “no.” Third time, and Baaya looked as though she wanted to ask him, but---

“I apologise, young master.”
The argument in the car. He should--

“I have tea ready for you,” she said, “it’s waiting in the library. I suggest a film, young Master. It’s been a while since you’ve watched Lupin, perhaps--”

His stomach lurching (as Connery took a step back too far the walkway crumbling falling sixteen precise seconds and crack), “no,” sharper and louder than he’d intended, Baaya raising her brows, gentled his voice so that she didn’t ask him questions, “n--no, I---I’d like to---” A pause, eyeing the tray, “---is Kaito home?”

Didn’t bother trying to pretend like that wasn’t the word that came to mind. Didn’t bother trying to pretend like it didn’t---like it wasn’t---true.

“He’s upstairs, young master;” said Baaya. The tea tray in her hands shook a little as she turned to the staircase, “he was feeling poorly, and didn’t come down for dinner -- I thought I would take him up some sandwiches, at least, in case he felt hungry later.”

He wouldn’t.

Connery’s head, egg-shell cracked, blood puddling around him---

“I’ll take it,” said Saguru, and his voice sounded like it was coming from far away. “I’ll---I’ll take it, Baaya. I’m going upstairs anyway. And the doctor did tell you not to climb the stairs too often.”

“I haven’t---”

“You’re favouring your left leg,” said Saguru, and crossed the landing in three steps; took the tray from her (without argument), “which means you’ve strained your climbing injury. I’m a young, relatively fit, teenager. I can handle a tea-tray, and a surly guest.”

Baaya, pausing, and then leaning up.

Her perfume (Guerlain Shalimar, flour, butter, cinnamon); her mouth against his cheek, grandmother-dry kiss.

“You’re a good boy, Saguru.”

No, in the recesses of his mind, no. I’m not.

Because if he was, he’d have seen Connery for what he was; he’d have realized what Connery was doing; he’d have stopped him, somehow, he’d have found a way to get him to back down without him losing his life in his process, he’d have done something that didn’t---didn’t lead in an orphaned child.

“Have a nice night, Baaya,” his voice sounded as if it was coming from so far off, and Saguru didn’t know how to control it, pull it back, hold it present, hold himself present.

Walking up the stairs, skipping the sixth one (which creaked), the ninth (which squeaked), the eleventh (for luck). Down the upper landing, the hallway to the right, to his room. The door locked, thought to be locked, but when he tried the doorknob again, it swung open.

Pitch darkness, nothing but the glow of his laptop in the corner, a huddled figure in the middle of the bed.

Small, stifled, hurt-animal noises.
Saguru put the tray down, locked the door behind him.

Where to even begin? *Men die, Kaito. It’s not your fault, Kaito. He knew what he was doing, Kaito.* None of those were good enough, none of those would make Kaito feel better, would take the edge off of him. Maybe he could say nothing. He could sit by his side.

Start there, then.

Two steps to the bed, a shift upwards onto the mattress. When he sat, the bed dipped underneath his weight. Kaito didn’t move from underneath the lumpy pile of sheets. Pillows massed around his head, and it felt ridiculous to talk to the lump, but he didn’t want to pull the sheets over his head, to move him.

A quiet, quiet noise.

“----Guru?”

“I’m here,” said Saguru, laid his hand on somewhere-on-the-bundle. His head? Couldn’t tell. He was so tired, his eyes kept drooping; the adrenaline from earlier had worn off, bled out of him like wind on bare skin.

And all his words, all his words, weren’t good enough.

The sheets moved. Kaito popped his head out, his eyes huge and swollen, even in the light of the laptop, his skin paler for the fake light. He looked like he was made out of paper, so delicate that the wind would blow him to pieces.

Kaito stared at him, and he stared back.

“I---I tried,” in the smallest voice, “I tried to save him. I tried.”

“I know,” said Saguru, and held out his arms.

Kaito didn’t move. Then he melted, all at once, buried his face hard into his chest, pressed and pressed until his rib-cage felt like it had moved out of place.

“How---” swallowing, Kaito breathless in his arms, “how do you do it? How do you keep doing this?” A nanosecond, and then quicker, faster, as if the words were choking him and he needed to push them out before he drowned in them, “you’ve been doing this for how long?”

Professionally or casually? “Long enough,” which wasn’t an answer.

Connery flashed in his mind’s eye again, stumbling, sliding, falling, breaking. *Crack*, bones to powder and dust, *crack*, blood guttering, *crack*, Connery--

Saguru closed his eyes, shook his head.

“'How----' swallowing, Kaito breathless in his arms, “how do you do it? How do you keep doing this?” A nanosecond, and then quicker, faster, as if the words were choking him and he needed to push them out before he drowned in them, “you’ve been doing this for how long?”

*Professionally or casually?* “Long enough,” which wasn’t an answer.

Kaito lifted his head, tear-stained and cracked, his skin pallid and stretched tight; he’d lost so much weight, his cheekbones stood out like book-ends, his mouth looked bitten and bruised, his eyes Bambi-huge in his face. “How do you do it?” whispered, desperate, Kaito’s fingers digging into his arms, into his chest. “How do you--keep it from eating you alive?”
“I’ve been doing it for long enough that it doesn’t, anymore,” said Saguru; wondered, briefly, if what he’d meant to say was, what makes you think there’s anything left of me for my job to have? No family no relationship nothing besides his career; it was the same for Kudo; he knew the patterns of his days like clockwork (school work paperwork research school work paperwork research) with no-one and nothing to interrupt except a lonely phonecall here and there, a sudden realization from the other side of the world that he existed still and then Kaito---

Kaito, shooting into his life like a rocket, exploding over all his careful orderliness, making him remember these things: companionship and safety and the pain of losing a good man to bad decisions.

“I don’t believe you.” Kaito’s words swaying, drunk-unsteady, and then the tears redoubled; attacked; dripped down his cheeks, and he buried his face into his chest and sobbed.

(Wondering to himself as he tucked Kaito into bed if he’d have cried this much if Connery hadn’t been a single father and no don’t think that way Connery being a single father has nothing to do with it but Toichi did he think of Toichi did he think of Kenta sitting alone in a hospital and wondering what had happened where his father had gone when he’d be coming home?

Kaito seven years old holding onto his mother’s hand and waiting for his father to appear staring at the door and Toichi never coming home).

Let Kaito cry, stroking his back, stroking his hand through his hair, feeling the hitch and stutter of his breath, and hoping, wishing, wanting, to say something that would help.

Eventually, Kaito sobbed himself into an unsteady sleep, clutching onto him with fingers of bird-bone fragility, strangle-holding his shirt, his face still red, his body slumped and curled around himself as though he was trying to protect himself from a blow. Saguru pushed his sodden hair back, moved out of his grip to tuck him in, was planning on sleeping when his phone rang.

Fumbled for it, answered without looking, “yes?”

“Saguru,” said Grandfather Yukito, more cheerful than he’d sounded the last time they’d spoken, “I found a few photographs that I think Kaito would like to have - maybe you can come by and see them soon? Ah, it was so nice to see you the other day.” No trace of misery in his voice (did it only come out when he drank?) “I was hoping we could talk more -- your mother doesn’t have to know.”

Of course, there was that.

“Thank you, grandfather.” Couldn’t muster the enthusiasm to sound up beat about it.

A pause, and then, “…something happened, hasn’t it?”

Police business, such an easy response. Nothing I can talk about.

Kaito rolled onto his side, dead asleep, clutching the blankets. Tears still drying on his lashes, and his head felt like it wanted to explode, all the words and thoughts and numbers and things in it beating against the walls of his skull, slide creak crack blood so much blood force times mass equals-- “a man died today,” before he could get his brain wrapped around how risky this was.

A pause, a pause. Grandfather Yukito calculating, of course; he knew better than he did how the law worked. “Anyone I know?”

“A--” A thief named Nightmare who was going to kill Kaitou Kid in order to get himself enough
money to---what? He hadn’t looked into motive, hadn’t thought of it, but---

Kenta, coughing in Aoko’s arms; Kenta and his bottle of painkillers; Kenta, and the bad man inside his head.


Kaito twitching, like the name was a caress; Saguru gentled his voice so he wouldn’t wake him. “He was chasing down a thief, and, ah-- there was an accident.”

There was no Nightmare.

Grandfather Yukito, quiet. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d spoken to someone about his work and hadn’t been interrupted told he was doing it wrong made to feel like he hadn’t looked quick enough found a quick enough solution. “I’m sorry to hear that,” said Grandfather Yukito, a shifting of fabric on the other end as though he was in bed, “do you---are you okay?”

I didn’t feel anything, dazed and distant worry about Kaito overwhelming everything else, “I’m sad for his son,” said Saguru. “He’ll have to grow up without a father.”

“And there’s the matter of his illness---” said Yukito.

A rattling of keyboard keys.

“….Connery, did you say?”

Saguru, pausing. “Kenta Connery,” he said, “the son of Jack Connery, an ICPO police officer. What are you---?”

“Hospital records are so insecure nowadays.”

“Grandfather! That’s illegal!”

A laugh, on the other end. “Of course it is.” Humming. Keys again - what was he doing? “But there are only so many ways to---oh. Oh, I see. Hm.”

In spite of himself, curious, “what?”

“That,” said Yukito, “is a very expensive operation.”

Connery’s fist ensconcing the jewels, the glinting desperation in his eyes, fox-hungry growl to his words, no, I can’t, I won’t--

Stupid fucking bastard.

“Success rate?” said Saguru.

Kaito and the noises he made in sleep, half-quiet, half-sobbing. The sound of his breath could cut a man in two. The way he clutched the pillow, the way he turned towards the warmth of his body, kept himself back -- Saguru wouldn’t wish it on anyone, to want, and not know if you could take.

Moved a half-inch closer, pressed himself skin to skin. Kaito’s fingers looping into his shirt, the dim shadow of his lashes against his cheeks startlingly dark.

Grandfather, on the other end, clicking his tongue against the back of his teeth.
“That bad?” said Saguru.

“I’ve seen better numbers,” said Yukito, and the keyboard noises echoed again; a ding on the other end. “But that means so little these days. The things doctors do—amazing. There’s always hope.”

Saguru closed his eyes, and even that dark wasn’t dark enough, wasn’t still enough, wasn’t quiet enough. “Could you do me a favour?”

“Always,” said Yukito, “you’re my favourite grandchild.”

“I’ll pay for the operation,” said Saguru, “but I don’t know how much of the estate I’m allowed to access until my 21st. Could you—”

“Break the law for you?” said Yukito, and his voice was a breath, and his amusement felt misplaced, laughter a second too late at a joke already over. “You’ll find I’m very good at that.”

All the conversations in his life seemed to revolve around this, and his father’s voice floated through the smoke of his thoughts: a good cop wouldn’t need to break the law it’s sad that that child’s father died but he shouldn’t have been doing what he’d been doing and that child isn’t your responsibility and—

“Do it,” said Saguru. “Draw up the paperwork. I’ll come in and sign what I need to sign, just—tell me when.”

A flurry of typing on the other end, silence to drown in.

Yukito, from somewhere distant: “Okay.”

Connery’s funeral a two hour break in the day to throw on the only bloodless suit he had stuffed in his at-work locker, and meet in the bullpen at the station for a memorial. Half his team in mourning black, the rest in ICPO gear, faces hidden behind the bills of caps and surgical masks. Nakamori speaking first, talking about his brief acquaintance of Connery, and what a great police man he’d been, how he left behind an ill son, and if there was anything any of them could do to help? ICPO officers taking their turns to say anecdotes about Connery (do you remember when we were in France and Connery chased that thief three blocks in his bathrobe and slippers do you remember when we were in Germany and Connery mispronounced the word cat do you remember—)

In the serried ranks of Tokyo’s police department, Keiichi on his right, Shinichi on his left, the three of them like statues, staring elsewhere, pocket-worlds away.

Nakamori pointedly ignoring him during an impassioned speech about how Kaitou Kid had the blood of a single father on his hands, and how everyone here with children—

Bit his tongue to keep the words to himself: what would you know about children you’ve only been home for two hours every day since March 2015.

Because it was still more than his father, and he’d turned out fine. Just fine.

Shinichi catching his eye on his way out. Saying: “the tapes from Watanabe’s murder -- do you want to go over them this weekend?”

Thought of the weekend, unplanned and stretching ahead of him: six weeks’ worth of homework to catch up on, and two ten inch stacks of paperwork to get through. “Yes,” he said; anything to keep him out of the house, anything to keep his mind from rebelling and stagnating and sinking.
Monday morning, sign the paperwork that Yukito had drawn up.

The Ministry of Justice faded in the morning light, left to moulder and dwindle and dip over the years: old wood and mildew, tiled floors echoing up at him as he took the lift to the sixth floor, knocked on the door of Yukito’s office. Only half-heard his words as he signed the bottom line with a flourish, wondered how long it would take for his mother to realize what he was doing, to stop him.

_The man knew what he was doing when he chose his career, darling._

“How is your mother?” said Yukito.

Had he been speaking out loud? “Very well,” said Saguru; dying, ill, divorced, or mad, the answer would always be the same. “She’s hosting a dinner for NHS sponsors this weekend.”

Yukito inclined his head, opened his mouth as if to say something.

“What made her stop talking to you?” said Saguru, before he could; his mind couldn’t stop gnawing on it, hadn’t been able to stop gnawing on it. “She never mentions you. We don’t have any photographs -- when I took her family name, she threw a fit for two whole weeks. Threatened to put me up for adoption.”

Yukito’s eyes widening a little, brows arching.

“Don’t worry. She threatened that often.”

Yukito, unconvinced.

That was meant to be a joke. Why wasn’t it funny, now that he’d actually said it?

His eyes slid to the photograph on his desk, Yukito at a graduation of some sort, a familiar grin, a flash of white, a woman in a tight green dress: Toichi Kuroba, seventeen years younger, Chikage Kuroba, black-haired still.

“I made some bad decisions,” said Yukito, took his eyes off the photograph, and shrugged, smiled like a rake, a depth of --- something else in his eyes. “Your mother took umbrage to them --- but you should ask her for the story. Anything I say will, of course, be biased.”

“So will anything she says,” said Saguru, signed the last sheet of paper on the dotted line. “Mother is known to bend the truth when it suits her.”

To make the truth her own if it didn’t, and now that he had paused to think of it, he couldn’t remember any situation where Charlotte had spoken voluntarily of her father, what she’d done with her original name; why she’d moved across the world and scrubbed out every trace of her identity (and when she was drunk and maudlin, and bitter about something else: sitting in the living room below, telling him about the stupid people his father catered to, the stupid country she lived in, the sacrifices she’d made to make sure Saguru would never grow up like her).

But imagined, with Yukito as his father: a houseful of love, so much noise it was perpetually a concert, pride and love and something else in a bundle with protectiveness and sugary care.

Yukito followed his gaze, caught the photograph, and slid a smile at him, fond and soft and cracking at the edges where he couldn’t paper over the loneliness with a joke, “They were a
wonderful couple. I wish you could’ve met Toichi -- you’d have liked him, even if your mother didn’t."

Couldn’t bring himself to be surprised. Saguru smiled, weak-wan; rose from the creaking 19th century chair to move towards the door, stopped. “…How old was Mama when you met Toichi?”

A flicker of surprise, and then Yukito knotted his brows together, frowned. “… Nineteen, twenty,” he said, wobbled his hand from side to side to mean ‘thereabouts’, “Your grandmama and I had just decided to separate.”

In 1980s Japan? Imagined Grandmama, stiff and still in the sepia photograph on the mantelpiece in Mayfair: oilslick hair and a floppy-brimmed hat, eyes like ink stains, a small, choked smile, sitting on her own on a beach somewhere in the distant north (Father, his mother’s voice drunk-slurred, was always working, and when he wasn’t he was with them,. It broke Mama’s heart.)

“As Grandmama died,” said Saguru; remembered a funeral, his first taste of okonomiyaki, the misty rain crawling over knee-high grass, his father in the background stunned and surprised, do you mean to tell me you lived in this backwater? And his mother’s voice, a slicing blade, this is Kyoto, and the argument later on about don’t embarrass me like that in front of people, the slam of a door, small sobs from the other room.

(Why are you sad, Mama?)

My Mama is gone. I’m all alone now. I’m an orphan.

You don’t have a Pa--

And a lashing slap across his face, stinging and sharp, until he tumbled off the bed and hid in the other room, ignored his mother’s cloyingly sweet voice, the desperation as she told him I’m sorry come out I’m sorry, never mention his name ever again).

Went back home still thinking of his mother, and padded upstairs to see Kaito; heard him before he even touched the door to his room, the music blasting concert-loud, and the sharpened edge of candlesmoke in the air. Opened the door to Kaito laying on the floor, surrounded by crumpled balls of paper, half a bottle of whiskey open on the bedside table, staring glassy eyed at the ceiling; the bang of the door didn’t so much as make him twitch.

Sat next to him, and held out the crumpled paperwork his grandfather had printed out for him, signed and initialled.

Watched Kaito sit up, and take it, read it once, and read it again as his music muted itself down to adagio strings and Beethoven trills.

Kaito’s eyes widened. “Are you really---”

“It’s the least I could do,” he said, “it’s the very least I could--”

Kaito throwing his arms around him and burrowing his face into his shoulder, not crying, but leaving damp patches in his shirt-front, and he’d held him before, but when he wrapped his arms around him then, Saguru swore he’d break him in half; could feel the bones against his hands, and the way his skin stretched drum tight across them, could feel the churning heat of his skin, and the way he leaned into him without a single thought to it, and underneath the dullness of everything
that had happened and the crack-thud of Connery’s head hitting the ground, something warm flickered.

Kenta’s operation on the sixteenth of the month. Mysterious doner had supplied the funds for it, Nakamori announced, and Saguru busied himself looking elsewhere.

On the seventeenth, Saguru nudged Kaito awake blisteringly early in the morning, packed him up into Baaya’s ridiculous car, and drove themselves over to the hospital. Not awake yet, but Saguru wanted to be there when he was, to have someone there while he woke up.

Three ICPO officers sitting around and talking, glancing up at them as they came in. Saguru smiled at them out of habit, sank into a hard plastic seat two chairs removed from them, linked his fingers together in his lap (tried not to think of London and and the two hundred sixty three hours he had spent in hospitals watching his colleagues get sewn back together watching over victims beaten and bludgeoned and burned watching over people he didn’t know but grew to know on the basis of who hurt them who they’d hurt who they’d tried to save from being hurt; the antiseptic airport smell of the air sinking into his nose, the cold of it seeping into his bones and--)

Kaito’s fingers gripping tightly, and he knew without knowing, without them ever having spoken about it.

“I hate hospitals,” murmured out of the corner of his mouth.

Kaito’s fingers tightened, and, “we can wait outside.”

But then Kenta would wake up wouldn’t see them would be alone (ICPO officers besides; he didn’t doubt that they knew Kenta, but he’d known him too, had spent some time with him). Saguru shook his head.

Kaito, pausing, and then smiling a little. “…Did I ever tell you about the time Mama had to consult for a show in Paris?”

Shook his head, watching the room where Kenta was, waiting for a sign from within.

Kaito, telling him about playing close to the fire in a fancy house, under the watchful eye of his father, chasing the rabbits around the floor (a nurse walking past with a metal cart a pause in the air as she glanced at them and considered saying something but didn’t) and Toichi picking him up for dinner, realizing he was boiling hot, driving like a mad man to the closest hospital, (“I remember it was fast because Mama had the speeding tickets framed and he lost his license for a bit because he’d already done it before--”) to get his son to a doctor.

At home, in his file, a psychiatrist’s analysis of Toichi Kuroba: it would be hard to consider him a viable character witness given his almost supernatural talent at lying and the ease of which it occurs to him; we recommended that another candidate is chosen---

“Turns out, all I had was the flu,” finished Kaito, leaned against him, his hot cheek against his arm; the floor beneath them crisscrossed tiles, a patterning of speckled linoleum, “but Dad was never really good at, uh. Responding with --- appropriate levels, when it came to me. Mama always said it was like he tried to find excuses to panic.”

Imagined Toichi Kuroba, cradling his son in his arms.
Saguru chuckled, glanced sideways at Kaito.

Last night, he’d slept in his bed, and he’d only woken up once.

“My father always said it was remarkable that I was so self-sufficient for my age,” he said, “but there was one time where I got hurt at a crime scene——”

A double-take from a passing nurse, the frown across her face making him think of home and DI White, looking at him askance, whispering in private to the Chief Constable, *are you sure this is sodding legal he’s only a wee boy what the fuck*—and Chief Constable shrugging, smiling through gritted teeth, and saying without a beat that it was Lord Hakuba-Grey’s son, and he’d—

“Detective Hakuba?”

Saguru stood up, looked towards the (twenty-three years old verging on three nights of two hour naps black hair in a bun strands around her face the scalpel edges of her cheekbones showing a lack of nutrition and a lack of overall food) nurse that came out of Kenta’s room.

Kaito’s smile had gone again, vanished somewhere into the recesses of the weeks before: a pig-squeal of fragile metal, the rustle of fabric, wet thud of swollen fruit on a hard surface.

A blink. Saguru dug into his pocket for his badge and took it out for her inspection, bit his tongue to keep from asking her how she was doing (that wasn’t what people did in Japan) and, “are you a friend of Agent Connery?”

The ICPO agent dozing in his chair starting at Jack’s name, glancing up at them, meeting the nurse’s eyes, and giving an officious nod.

Looking down again at his bad, shiny pewter, a children’s facsimile of the real thing, dented and scraped from too many times dropped, too many times shown.

“This way,” said the nurse, uncertain but too tired to argue.

Led them down a branching hallway, graveyard empty, the birdsong beeping of machines the only company, and down to the last room on the right; crack the door open, and glance in to where Kenta was: a tiny foam doll in a bed much too big for him, his head bandaged, one side of his face completely subsumed by gauze, his eye hidden.

Kaito swaying on his feet, staring at the ground.

The nurse looking as though she didn’t want to tell them how he was doing, wasn’t sure that it was in her job description, but to fill up the silence, “he’s stable,” she said, “the operation went well.”

*That is a very expensive operation*, Yukito, clicktapping his way through the hospital’s mainframe, already planning on doing what Saguru had done.

“Is he sedated?”

“The sedative should wear off soon,” said the nurse, and then revisited her thoughts on what they were doing here; added, sternly, “and you’re not to excite him. I’m giving you ten minutes, and if he doesn’t wake up on his own, you’ll leave when they’re up anyway.”

“That’s fair,” said Saguru, not fighting back.

Her shoulders deflating; he wondered what had happened earlier in the day to make her carry
herself like a soldier, to make every one of her words edged and hard.

The nurse watching them, her mouth pursed up and thinned, and then whipping herself around, marching out of the hallway; the electronic ‘ping’ of the door lock releasing twenty steps away, and then they were alone.

Kaito, first, his hands on the glass, watching him, “…he looks so small.”

“He’s only a child, still,” said Saguru, but he could see what he meant; Kenta didn’t look boy sized, he looked shrunken, like the bed was eating him alive, and the chair next to him looked profoundly empty, bittersweet knowing that two weeks ago they’d buried Jack Connery, and he’d sobbed and sobbed and clung to Saguru’s leg, and refused to let go of his father’s badge until it was taken from him.

Somehow, it found its way back to Kenta.

Saguru had his suspicions.

“So you think,” said Kaito, “…do you think he’ll---find a good home?”

“I would hope so,” said Saguru, “I would hope that there are thoughts in place for where he’s going. Didn’t Connery have family somewhere in Paris?”

“He doesn’t like them very much,” said Kaito, quietly, “but that was a couple of weeks ago --- after Agent Connery---”

The silence at the end said so much more than the word ‘died’.

Kaito’s eyes welling up again, and he saw him raised his hand to his face, dash it over his cheeks.

“That’s where he’ll go if Connery stipulated it in his will,” said Saguru, “but there’s always the chance that Connery had other plans in mind -- maybe he’ll go to one of his colleagues. Maybe he’ll go to an orphanage until he’s of age.”

Kaito flinching, like the word was a slur; his eyes on the small lump of Kenta underneath the covers, the hidden edges of his bones laid bare in his concave chest and his stick ribs. “I didn’t mean for any of this to happen,” a half-second later, like an afterthought, his voice hollowed out of any feeling. “I didn’t want anyone to get hurt.”

Not your fault on the heels of I know on the heels of you should have known something like this would happen, and the safest thing to do was to keep all the words to himself and not consider, not think, not even look, at any of them; the safest thing to do was to pretend like he was better equipped to deal with this situation than he was, like a chief detective hadn’t once told him, stand there, look pretty, don’t open your mouth.

Thought of Connery and the corners of his eyes crinkling when he smiled, and then of Connery, a closed-casket funeral, the disjointed words of grieving interspersed with the sound of Kenta crying and calling, Papa, Papa, Pa--

“---Papa?” the first whimper from the bed, and Kaito moved without hesitation, found himself in there, anchored to Kenta’s side. A shifting of the blankets, and the hospital room too much like the places he’d spent his time in in London, too much like the bad aftermath of a crime he hadn’t been quick enough to solve (the same antiseptic reek of the floors the walls the same hopeless prayers
soaked into the liminal spaces between the reception desk and the hallways and the rooms where the patients hovered in some uncertain state and) *stop that he’s a child he’s a child grieving for his father.*

Stepped into the room, and remembered Watanabe with his gaping mouth, the bloody wriggling meat-mash mess of his tongue (*we think he did it to himself* and Shinichi Kudo’s certainty corroborating with his own, *that wasn’t suicide that was attempted murder*). Walking over, and sitting next to Kenta, hooking his fingers together on his lap, feeling oversized and undersized all at once, not sure if he should be here.

Kaito, with a pack of cards in his hands, shuffling, shuffling. “How are you feeling?”

“Hurts,” said Kenta, and couldn’t move his head enough to see the empty chair, seemed a heartbeat disoriented enough to not remember that his father wasn’t coming. “Papa?”

The silence could cut.

Kaito’s shuffling stilling for a moment, and, “your Papa, is, um---”

Kenta, realizing, all at once, the rising triplicate beat of the machine, “--the bad man got him.” Tearful and strained.

Kaito’s face crumbling behind his reserve, a shattered mess in his eyes, and (Yukito chuckling as he passed him a cup of tea, and telling him, *Toichi’s poker face was legendary, I never used to know what he was thinking*) and it wasn’t like that, with Kaito. Kaito wore his heart on his sleeve on his face in his eyes; Kaito carried his bleeding soul with him like a patch, stubborn and ingrained, a bird with clipped wings trying to fly.

“The bad man got him,” and it cost him more to say those words, Saguru saw, than to say anything else. His voice rising, breaking on the glottal stop, a pause in between where he sucked in a breath of air like it was drugging and powerful, and let it out in mouthfuls of foggy smoke.

“I hate him,” said Kenta, savagely, “I hate the bad man. He took away Papa.” His eyes roving to Saguru, his head immobile on the pillow, swathed in bandages, small and burning-coal fierce, “are you going to catch him, Mr. Policeman?”

Saguru flinching, and Kaito’s laser-beam gaze on him. He moved to the bed, in the back of his mind a constant fluttering echo of *I don’t know what to say I don’t know what to say I’ve never talked to children,* and instead what came out was, “---Would that bring your papa back?”

Kenta’s eyes filling with tears, trickling down his cheeks, and he was painfully aware of the machine that strapped him in and took measure of his heartbeat, and how it could start screaming for the nurse, and how woefully unprepared he was to talk to children, to any childrent, *stay in the corner and look pretty and for God’s sake don’t talk to anyone, boy.*

“I mean--” hasty and rushed, and God, he wished that Jack was here, Jack would know what to say, understood children and loss better than he had grasped it, “your Papa---”

“---wouldn’t want you to be so angry,” said Kaito, finally, stepping in before he finished the sentence with, ‘is dead, isn’t coming back, is not in a position to care about bad men’, any one of the catastrophic things he could have said to a grieving child, “---you know, it doesn’t feel good to
go through life when you’re angry. Have you ever been really, really angry, Kenta?”

His bottom lip wobbling, the tears on his face gleaming silver-bright.

“I’ve been really angry,” said Kaito, when there was no answer, “people made me really angry, and so I decided to do bad things -- you know? Like lie to people. It doesn’t make me feel very good, because I know I’m being dishonest.”

“You don’t understand,” said Kenta, and his words teetering up to a wail. A screech of static from the machine he was strapped into, and for a moment, Saguru envisaged the nurse barrelling into the room.

Kaito, reaching out, abandoning his cards, saying, “bad men took my papa, too, Kenta.”

Out loud, the words blistered; Kenta silenced, his huge, teary eyes watcing Kaito’s face like he thought he was lying to him, the bandages around him blindingly bright underneath the lights.

Kaito, his fingers pinching the blanket’s ragged hem, watching Kenta, cracked feeling in his eyes (that Saguru couldn’t read couldn’t place couldn’t put down to anything).

Kenta sniffed, reached for the box of tissues on the bedside table, didn’t crack a smile when Kaito made one appear from thin air, origami-folded into a crane. Took it, broke the bird down to a sheet of plain white, sniffed noisily into the tissue paper. Kaito, sitting there, uncomfortably other, his shoulders sloping forwards underneath the weight of the words.

“Was it the same bad man?” said Kenta, tucking the tissue underneath his pillow case.

Kaito, shaking his head, and for a second, looking as though he regretted bringing it up. Then, “---I was--a little bit older than you were, I think, and my papa--my Papa was everything to me. He told the...”

“My Papa tells better ones,” sulky, present-tense; it hurt more knowing what faced Kenta.

“He might,” said Kaito, playing along, “I liked my Papa’s stories, though. He’d do all the voices, and sometimes he’d get out Mama’s hats---put them on his head, and pretend like he was different people. He’d have a hat for being a villain, and a hat for being a hero, and a hat for being a farmer---”

Kenta nodding along, dipping into the story despite himself, his small fists tight in the sheets.

On the reverse side of the mirrored wall, the nurse, meeting his eyes, tapping her watch, and then glancing at Kaito perched almost on the edge of Kenta’s bed, making shadows out of his fingertips. Kenta, laughing, watery and weak at first.

“---and if I couldn’t guess it,” said Kaito, switched the shadow-puppet on the wall to a dog, “he’d keep coming back to it until I did. What’s this one?”

Two fingers pointed up and curved, thumbs splayed out on either side, a hulking ridged back; the very presence of it completely unfamiliar, and Saguru pinched his brows together, went through all the possible outlines of animals--

“Swan!” Kenta, immediately, gleeful.

Saguru catching Kaito’s eye, and then the nurse’s.
“I’ll be outside,” said Saguru, and inched outside where the air wasn’t cloyingly sad, where he wasn’t standing there like a Reaper, gluttoning himself on misery.

The nurse met him at the door, said, “your ten minutes are up.”

“Give him a few minutes more,” said Saguru, too tired to put authority in his voice, and in any case, it didn’t extend to the hospital, “Kenta just woke up. It would be good for him to see people who aren’t hospital workers. See someone his own age, and Kaito—is good with children.”

“He’s been through a lot,” said the nurse.

And she was right, and he didn’t know, and his head hurt, and Saguru just shrugged, leaned back against the glass, said, “He’s resting, he’s not animated, it should be alright, shouldn’t it?” and before the nurse could speak, adding, “but if you think it would be best that we leave, please just let us know -- I don’t want to aggravate Kenta anymore than I need to.”

The nurse suspicious, narrowing her eyes at him, and inside, Kaito picking up his cards again; whatever he was saying leaving Kenta sniffling, wiping his own face.

The empty chair beside his bedside glaringly obvious, and Saguru wondered if they could get it taken away, if they could get it moved somewhere where Kenta wouldn’t see it, and would he even have visitors beside them?

“Do you know him very well?” said the nurse, who’d decided, apparently, that they weren’t worth kicking out; her arms folded, leaning back, watching Kenta with the hawkish gaze of someone who’d seen injured children far too many times before.

“I worked with his father,” said Saguru, prepared himself for the scoff and derision.

The nurse, “I thought you looked familiar. You’re that young detective, aren’t you?”

“One of many.” At least two others. No, he still didn’t know how they’d swung it in the government, or whoever it was that made these decisions.

“You’re the one who’s trying to catch that thief,” said the nurse.

Saguru closed his eyes for two seconds, opened them again, wondered if this would be what his life was now; a constant parade of catch the thief catch the thief catch the thief, no-one realizing that if he’d wanted to catch him he’d have caught him by now, and that everything that happened was not circumstance, but a changing of the way he thought (in the beginning, catching Kaitou Kid for honour; now, nothing would entail him to catch him and give him up to the police).

“I am.”

Quiet silence, and then the nurse, “I’m a bit of a crime buff. Are you close to catching him?”

Saved from answering by Kaito opening the door, stepping out, coming over to him, and the nurse melted away into the background like so much white noise.

“Ready to go?” said Saguru.

Kaito barely nodded his head, glanced back around to look at Kenta sitting up in bed, staring at them, at the empty chair, his hands tight on the top of the sheets.

Saguru raised his hand, waved, said to the nurse, “have a good day.” Pulled Kaito away from there,
step by step; left the hallway, down to the first floor, out into the parking lot where Baaya was waiting, never glancing up to see the nurse on the Intensive Care floor looking out the window, watching him.
Chapter 18

Two weeks later, and things settling down again.

There was a pattern to grieving for someone that you didn’t know well enough: wake up, go to school, go to work, avoid any mentions of him past and present, practice for Culture Fest, go home. Avoid talking about work. Avoid talking about heists. Functioning enough to forget that there’d been a person there, that he’d used that desk in the corner, drunk his coffee too hot, didn’t know enough of the culture of a Japanese bullpen not to make small talk unless absolutely necessary. By day three, the ‘in memoriam’ picture of Connery had been papered over with a sign-up sheet for a football after-hours club; by day five, the consonants in his name no longer sloped with misery.

Day ten, and he wasn’t mentioned anymore; was another memory fallen in the line of duty, immortalized like a myth - no one spoke of him in reverence anymore, but as a passing cautionary tale.

That was the way police men died: with a bang, and then with a whimper.

Nakamori exceedingly neurotic that KID has gone underground again; yelling, flailing, sharpness, always moving in too-sharp corners at the edges of his vision, and he’d spoken to someone above him to get him removed from the case (it hadn’t taken; he was still there, and Nakamori was still angry, and he wasn’t budging until he got to the bottom of who was trying to kill Kaito Kid).

Over the phone, to Yukito, asking him for access to the files from the Ministry of Justice (“most of them will be redacted,” said Yukito / “It doesn’t matter,” his response), and at night, reading over them until his eyes bled, and the aching in the middle of his skull felt like an old friend.

Kaito, curled into his side at night, another strangeness in his life that he couldn’t wrap his head around.

An entire Yakuza syndicate taken down; his grandfather’s face blurred out of newspaper photographs, Toichi quietly unlinked to either one of his associates.

(In the back of his mind, visit Watanabe, but there never seemed a time good enough to go and see him, and even if he did, what could he say to him? According to his grandfather: on painkillers, unaware, always sleeping, the guard posted at his door with nothing to do, moving him to a stable, safe location undisclosed to anyone).

His case file a glaring unsolved, sitting in the corner of his desk, shuffled along for a heist in Shibuya, an attempt murder in Roppongi Heights, two meetings with Inspector Ashford of the Metropolitan Police over Skype, a disciplinary meeting with Nakamori where he didn’t look at him and criticized him for his habit of running off on KID cases. Every afternoon, Saguru picked it up, leafed through the scrap paper of crime, details, pictures of Watanabe’s gore-streaked jaw, and the ripped-out tongue, and then set it down again.

And his whole life felt like it was suspended in amber, waiting for the thaw of something greater, waiting for something to happen.

No heists for two weeks, and Kaito growing tighter and tighter wound until—
Suzuki Jirokichi Challenges Kaito Kid to a heist.

Six AM, breakfast: french pastries from the shop down the road, miso soup, rice from the night before. Kaito with a newspaper, Saguru with his iPad, not looking at each other. Watson, pinching bits of bacon off of Saguru’s plate when she thought he wasn’t looking.

Scroll down to the end of the story, click on the hyperlink that took him to Suzuki Jirokichi’s Wikipedia page, and while skim reading it, said, “Kaito, have you---”

“I saw.” A rustle of the pages, and his head popped up from above it, thinned out over weeks of eating the bare minimum, exercising more than he was meant to. “That crazy old man always finds some way to mess up my life.”

Putting him on the list of interested parties, Saguru reached over, poured them both small mugfuls of green tea. “Are you going to do it?”

Kaito nibbling at his thumbnail, staring at nothing on the table; “I don’t know.” Hesitance in every syllable, and without asking, Saguru knew where his mind had wanted back to: screech squeak crash crack. Every heist of KID’s watched, every heist of his manipulated so that he was always at the forefront, and then at the last one--no-one had shot at Kaito, and someone had died, still.

To try and try and try, and have someone die instead of you--

Stopped the memory in its tracks before it whispered to him, Edinburgh, 2015, and said, “KID doesn’t need to take this heist.”

A pause, and then, “---but he does,” said Kaito, “because KID would. Because my father would. It’s just---”

Saguru, watching him, waiting for him, “---you’re afraid?”

And these things, out of Kaito, like pulling teeth; he could see the hundred and sixteen different ways Kaito tried to rephrase it to try and make it make a better sound in his head; could see how he chewed his thumbnail with purpose, with aim, trying to justify his terror, and coming up short, because KID wasn’t afraid, because his father wouldn’t have been afraid, because---stop projecting.

Say nothing, but he nudged the mug of green tea towards him, put a dash of milk in it, two sugars.

Kaito, taking it without thanks, and then, “…I’m afraid,” quieter; he wasn’t used to admitting it out loud.

His chest expanding, and the high windows of the dining room didn’t usually allow this much light in, but Kaito looked haloed, gilded, an illuminated manuscript made real. His fingers wrapped around the mug, and he raised it to his lips, wearing one of his sweaters (the overlarge argyle print in red and black and blue) and looking impossibly fragile in it, all his whip-cord muscle buried underneath layers and layers and layers of downy-soft cashmere, and it hadn’t gone away, but he was still surprised to feel, echoing, echoing, in his head, I love you I want to kiss you I want to take care of you, nipping at the heels of a formless nameless shapeless feeling.

Looked down before Kaito noticed, but he saw him blushing in the reflection of his face in the silver teapot.

“It’s okay,” said Saguru, quiet, quiet, quiet. “It’s okay to be afraid.” His mind spinning with the step closer they’d pulled towards, the quiet certainty of it’s okay to be afraid, of Kaito looking at
him like the words were an unfamiliar tongue and he was only just starting to parse their meaning together, and he didn’t want to go to school, didn’t want this moment to end, didn’t want it to turn into one of those half-conversations where both of them said things that danced around what they meant, like life was a poetry book, and everything was metaphor. “I’m afraid. I’m afraid all the time.”

Kaito, his crooked smile half a second too late, his eyes glinting in the semi-dark, and the steam seemed to turn his face more ghostly, more ethereal, than it had any right to be, “are you?”

“Terrified,” said Saguru, “of everything. All the time.”

Underneath the table, Kaito’s ankle brushed against his. Their knees touched, and it scalded.

Kaito’s ankle hooked around his ankle, and he swallowed, felt the gesture deep in his stomach, felt it take hold and flutter, and somehow it was more intimate than he’d imagined, this hook-around of limbs; it was more intimate than it had a right to be for them, and Kaito couldn’t go around doing these things without warning him. Why did the air feel so thin in his house now?

“I’m scared, too,” said Kaito, and the words inched out of him, breath by breath, and Saguru didn’t know how long he’d waited to hear something like that out of him. “More now than before. Connery---”

His name was a ghost, hovering around them in unsaid little nods, visits to toy shops and letters mailed off early in the morning, and checks signed quickly, and half-screamed phone calls at 3AM about ‘paying for some cop’s bastard child without consulting us’, which spun into, ‘at least tell the newspapers you worthless boy, your reputation’s getting a beating in the press’ which spun into drinking at 4AM, and Kaito waking up to brush his hand along his back, to tell him--

(You did the right thing, whispered into the crook of his neck, and the whiskey made everything fuzzy, and he couldn’t laughed, really, at how both he and Kaito seemed to have their tenderest conversations when one or both of them were drunk, he could’ve laughed, except it wasn’t fucking funny, and they were only seventeen, and hearing it from a friend shouldn’t have shaken him down to the ground, but it did, it did.

Saguru turning to face him, the gauzy light of moonlight like fresh milk hitting Kaito’s face, his eyes caverns, and, did I? Thought of Kenta alone in the hospital and the silence that would chase him when he walked into the house and how it would feel to know that there was a loss, and this was stupid, of course it was a good thing that he’d done, but for half a second more, he was four years old again, unable to comprehend what life and death were, murder a game for his father to lull him to sleep with, honourable causes spilling out of his mouth at every junction because his mother had prepared him so thoroughly---

You saved his life, Kaito’s forehead rested against the back of his neck; his flesh was cool and soft. He’ll heal, eventually. He’ll have his whole life ahead of him.

Didn’t point out the irony of one fatherless boy, madcap and maddened, point to another, and saying that they’d heal; it smacked too much of Hamlet, and he knew how that play ended).

“So don’t do it,” to starve his thoughts of Connery and hazy 4AM memories, “don’t give in. Suzuki doesn’t need to be addressed by Kaitou Kid.”

“Except it’s a challenge,” said Kaito, frowning.

Resisted the urge to throw his arms up and ask him what was different about that; a challenge was
only a challenge if it was responded to. But Kaito stared into his tea, and said nothing, and so he let him, his fingers pin-pricking at the crumbs on his plate, waiting for the quiet to tire itself out, and resolve itself into sounds, into words.

“Help me,” said Kaito.

Saguru glanced up; it smacked of an earlier offer, *I’ll show you how a heist works*, half-mentioned and then just as quickly forgotten. “Will it help?”

Flushing bright, and Kaito looking down at his tea, glaring at it, his mumbling lost to the eddying steam.

“Pardon -- could you say again?”

“You make me feel safe,” louder, but not loud enough to cement itself as fact, as heard. The noises floated through his skull like whalesong, vaguely understood, mostly different; his heart triplicated anyway, like the touch of them was all he needed to float right off into space.

Saguru grinned, hid it unsuccessfully.

Kaito narrowed his eyes, and balled up a napkin from his side of the table, and flicked it at his head. “Shut up,” he said sullenly, awkwardly, softly childish, almost-pleading with him not to give in and mock him.

Didn’t do that, let Kaito return to the sanctity of his tea, and the swell of his food, until he was no longer quite as red, quite as embarrassed, and then said, “---Kaito?”

A glance upwards. His lashes cast shadows on his cheeks, and every inch of him was so beautifully created, every inch of him caught so much light, that he couldn’t fathom anyone else competing against him, and in the back of his mind he knew what they said about hero worship and beauty, but Shakespeare had written that sonnet before there’d been a Kaito Kuroba, and his master’s eyes were like the sun, thank you very much.

Ducked his head, because Christ alive, even for him, that was much.

“I can’t read minds, Saguur,” a cat-sly smile on his mouth, like he could.

“You make me feel safe, too,” said Saguru, huffily.

Flicker of a flicker of some emotion yet unconsidered, and he thought of Tokyo rooftops, the blanket of the city spread out beneath them, starry with light and purpose, and the air biting of exhaust, and the barrier they’d somehow-maybe-almost crossed; Kaito, with his head tipped against him, his breath against his, the pair of them talking in hushed and gentle voices as though the city itself was eavesdropping, and how they’d never really approached that conversation again. There was always something else to think about, another problem to solve, another issue that snaked in and kept him busy.

*I want to kiss you.*

He’d wanted it to be different than the first time. Not rushed. Not over in a handful of heartbeats.

But maybe he’d been wrong about that.

“That’s not embarrassing,” said Kaito, as though he hadn’t just blushed on the reverse, hadn’t just told himself the same thing, hadn’t just done the same thing. Picked at his food, pushing crumbs
and flecks of pastry around, his fingertips gliding over the glaze at the edge, and then---Looked up, and, “…What I said. On the rooftop, in Tokyo?”

No specification, and there were a dozen rooftops, but somehow, somehow, he knew. There was only one memory that jumped out that clearly; there was only one handful of minutes he kept replaying over and over in his head while Kaito snored beside him, clinging to his arm and incomprehensibly warm for a little fellow, incomprehensibly pushy.

His face coloured red, and he wanted to stare at his plate; made himself look up, stare right at Kaito, pin him with his gaze; made himself not get distracted by the sweep of his lashes over his cheek, the full-bow upper lip, the faint scar at the edge of his jaw and snaking downwards. “Mh?”

Kaito pushed his chair back, a screech of wood on wood. Stood up, and it was ridiculous, absolutely ridiculous, that someone whose legs dangled off the chair when he sat down could suck a room into him, could expel so much sunlight and bright-star warmth.

“I meant it,” he said, and the world---
---ticked to a stop, half a second, then half a second more, while Saguru’s heart rampaged in a mess in his chest, beating itself senseless against his ribcage, choking the air out of him, out of him, and it wasn’t like he’d thought it was a half-dreamed fugue but---

“Well?”

Kaito watching him, earnest, desperate, hungry, a hundred emotions that Saguru couldn’t place, had never felt, knew only by the images that they conjured in his head. “Yes,” unflinching honesty, force-himself honesty.

That stuff about an ‘honest man’s voice’ was a loud of old wank, but Kaito sounded so much like he wanted him to believe, and he believed him. Anything said in that voice was barren truth; anything that made his body feel like it was floating had to be truthful.

Nod, and push himself up, realize on the up that he wasn’t done with breakfast, but he had to follow through, and the distance between themselves was always staggering, always stunning, why weren’t they closer to one another? A table of food between them, and all he wanted was to taste the dip in Kaito’s lower lip, to see if the creamy flesh underneath his ear would whet his appetite; and when he dropped his eyes to the table, he could still think about that, could still see him, long hands to long wrists to arms with whip-cord muscle that Saguru wanted around him, so desperately, acutely, wantingly around him, that some days it hurt to think about it.

And this was stupid. This was so sodding stupid. He’d dated before! There’d been other men---
---what’s a pretty young thing like you doing in a pub all alone don’t you know that’s when the big bad wolf comes out to play but don’t worry I’ll take you somewhere safe trust me follow me make sure you stick close to me is this park alright, and then kisses edged and rippling with teeth, a hunger so huge it stunned him, the sting of dirt in his nose, a rasp of pain, silvery-bright, and---

---but none of them like Kaito.

“Oh, okay,” said Saguru, cleared his throat, “Okay. Wonderful. Good talk. Um, I---me too. I said that, didn’t I?”

Kaito’s mouth crooking up at the corner like it always did when Saguru did something stupid, something less than honourable. It didn’t sting. Nothing Kaito did to him, with him, about him, hurt.
He could handle being stupid if it got him that smile a little more often.

“Okay,” said Kaito, flipped his wrist upside down to look at his watch, frowned, “ah---I need to run to school, I promised Ryuichi I’d help him sort out costumes for the culture festival---”

Right. Right. That was still a thing, wasn’t it? He’d not looked at what he was doing, at any of the twenty emails sent to him by Konosuke, at the costume he was to wear for the host club.

“---but I’ll give you a magic lesson when I get back,” said Kaito, and he’d just told him he would, but hearing it from him, knowing everything he’d gone through, knowing what it meant to him---

Saguru’s chest squeezed tightly, and he was gone, he was gone, he was gone, he couldn’t fathom anything that Kaito told him to be sweeter more meaningful more wanting than that, he couldn’t think of anything that would matter more. Kaito’s face lit up with hesitance, determination, a confusing muddle of things, and he was still saying, talking to him, I’ll teach you magic.

The magic he’d learned as a child, the magic he’d grown up with, the magic behind Kaitou Kid.

“Okay,” said Saguru, eagerly, snatching the words out of the air like the opportunity might disappear if he waited too long to respond. “Okay. I’ll look forward to that, shall we say---around four? Five?”

A nod from Kaito, and he bounced out of his chair, didn’t so much walk the door as run to it, shouting goodbye to Baaya, making Watson shriek back at him, and Saguru turned to his breakfast, prepared to eat around the lump of his throat - heard the footsteps behind him too late, turned too late, and so he didn’t see Kaito, he saw his shoulder, the shock of his hair, the gleam of a single blue eye before his mouth was pressed up against the jutting edge of his collarbone (and he smelled, always smelled, like the embers before a bonfire and the deep, dark night, and rain on rooftops, and something so quintessentially Kaito that Saguru hadn’t figured out a name for it yet, felt like a man trying to rediscover how language worked every time he put it into words).

“Have a good day, Saguru,” muffled, against the top of his head.

(in the back of his mind wondering how Kaito had managed to lean himself up high enough that he could rest his chin on the top of his head and he wanted to ask, to crack the fragile moment before it became too much to bear and cut him open, but the words wouldn’t form, his tongue couldn’t unknotted, and the scent of him was so sweet and achingly familiar that Saguru couldn’t think of anything else).

“Yes,” burbled, in English, even, his Japanese abandoning him like a suitcase forgotten at an airport, and he struggled to clear his throat, to clear the breaking of his voice, didn’t manage, “ah---you too.”

Kaito’s sunshine laughter the only trace of him left behind, the room emptier darker huger hungrier for his lack. Saguru stared at the table, overflowing with food like a Bacchanalian ritual: a tureen of miso soup, tiny ramekins of fresh-made rice, delicate, crumbling French pastries dusting and disintegrating just from his breath; Kaito’s breakfast, half-abandoned, a presence, a reminder, a note, I was here I’ll come back you’re not alone, I’m not leaving.

Even Jack, even Mattie, even his uncle, hadn’t breakfasted with him in years, and he’d grown used to the sight of emptiness, to the hum of Watson chewing on pastry she could neither eat, nor wanted to, content only in tearing it apart and making a merry mess, stealing fresh berries from the table when she thought he wasn’t looking, forcing bits and scrap pieces of toast into his mouth when she thought he hadn’t eaten enough. The sight of empty chairs at an empty table better, more
familiar to him, than pictures of his mother’s face, his father’s badge, his uncle’s wild-moor house in Scotland.

And now, now, now, he was seventeen years old, and the sight of half-eaten miso soup and someone else’s slippers by the door made him choke up on air.

Watson, chirruping.

“I know,” he told her, fished a blueberry from the bowl, and held it out to her, took the glance of her beak against his fingertips as the just admonishment for his weakness, “I know.”

But the sight of that bowl, Kaito’s lingering presence in the hoodie draped over the back of his chair, and the doves in the attic above, and the rabbits running wild in the gardens and terrorizing the gardener, and the scent he left behind on the sheets and his pillows, and the hundred little things that seemed to gravitate around Kaito Kuroba (books, sweets, hair ties, hair clips, pen, papers, playing cards), made him smile.

Four o’clock; the library dark with early-winter gloom, half the shades drawn, and the rest open to let in hazy grey not-light and the scent of the rain (petrichor, petrichor, he loved the sound it made in his head); Watson, on her perch, hunched over and miserably chirruping to the underside of her wing, every raindrop on grass making her irritated. The rabbits, sequestered in the warm space that Kaito had carved out for them in the basement, and the last he’d checked on them, they were asleep in a pile.

Bang, the door opening and closing, Kaito’s sing-song voice chasing shadows.

Saguru glanced down, the book heavy in his lap, Arthur Conan Doyle’s collected stories. Put it aside, and got up, turned to face the door just as it blew open, and Kaito sailed in, streaky with rain, dragging the cold with him, despite the snapping fire in the grate.

“Ryuichi is a slave driver,” Kaito said, threw himself down onto the carpet in front of the fire, held his hands out to the flames; rain, beaded on his hair, trickling down the naked stretch of his neck, and Saguru wasn’t looking, wasn’t following that little droplet down beneath the fabric of his shirt, wasn’t imagining where it was going, “he wants to redo Lupin’s entire part. The entire part.” Threw one hand into the air, “and he wouldn’t listen to me when I told him there was no way I could manage it.”

All afternoon he’d been rehearsing what to say, how to act now, whether the line they’d crossed again in the morning should change the way he talked to him; should he be sweeter? More understanding? Should he talk to him like a lover?

And now: nothing’s changed, Kaito still laughing and talking to him like normal.

Follow his lead.

This wasn’t what he was used to, this wasn’t Rhys and his Keatsian poetry, Rhys and his sunny quotes, Rhys and his beauty and his grace and his cutting edges disguised as pared down and broken; Rhys, and his want disguised as innocence and passion, his needs surpassing everything else.

Nothing like romance. Saguru breathed out, felt the air leave him, the tightness in his chest lifting.
“He was right,” said Saguru, “I’ve seen you memorize things far more lengthy and involved than Lupin’s lines.”

Kaito frowning, and, “was I sick during that time? Because I’m pretty sure she only thing I’ve memorized quickly are J-Pop songs and recipes for desserts.”

Choked out a laugh, because he’d seen more than that in the space of this morning; Kaito half-asleep, balancing ‘The Tale of Genji’ in Old Japanese, half-transcribed and notes everywhere, scattered, along his bedside table, underneath complicated diagrams of things Saguru couldn’t place; he’d seen his eyes scan a perfect cube of glass and come up with weight, depth, diameter, in the space of a handful of shaking minutes, and how, how, how was it that he could manage these things, and Saguru hadn’t heard of him before, hadn’t noticed him, hadn’t had him as a blip on the radar?

Couldn’t tell, even when, how Kaito had managed to slip underneath his reckoning, and exist, just like him, in the same vicinity, without Saguru knowing, when he’d been starved for anyone who could think the way he did, or similar; could bring up numbers easier than names, patterns easier than sound.

Would his life have been less lonely with someone else like him to share it with?

Yes.

“I won’t disgrace either of us,” said Saguru, “by pointing out the fact that you took my copy of The Tale of Genji two weeks ago and you already have it half-transcribed.”

“Good,” said primly, a flicker of a laugh in his words, like lacework, “that wouldn’t be like you at all. Especially not after pointing out that you have an eidetic memory.”

As a matter of fact, the next handful of words on his tongue were those, and Saguru swallowed them down, stared at his hands so that he didn’t stare at Kaito, didn’t want to admit that Kaito was right, was right.

They both knew each other too well by now, and Saguru didn’t want to dream of that yet, didn’t want to risk it going to dust.

Kaito, slumping back on the floor, making a noise part-pleasure, part-triumph. The firelight, gold over cream, the edges of him beguiling, enticing, Old Master-pictured. Beautiful, arm over his brow, fingers trailing into the thick carpet, his hair like shadow, his smile open and full, but hidden eyes, and Saguru could sit there all afternoon, drink him in minute by minute, scratch and refill his memory of him like he’d gone away for an age and he needed to learn all his nuances again but--

“You’re staring,” without lifting the hand over his eyes. “I can’t understand why you do that. You remember everything.” Lifted then, to grin at him, bright teeth and brighter vision, “It’s one of your worst habits.”

Couldn’t tell him that Kaito gave him fluidity in stagnation, reminded him of long summer days spread out in growing grass, staring at never-steady skies, and knowing where the stars changed; gave him something for his mind to latch onto, and he couldn’t tell him that he scribbled out and updated and resketched his face every time he had a chance to, to make sure he was never in the risk of forgetting it, never in the risk of--

“I just like looking at you,” said Saguru, the easiest, easiest way he could sum it up, and very nearly truthful, anyway, just like it was very nearly truthful when he’d told Kaito that he cared
about him (what he meant was he loved him, he loved him, he loved him like an Auden poem, a
Keatsian song, a Shakespeare sonnet written half-maddened in Elizabethan fervour).

Kaito stilling, and then a snort, a bubbly laugh, “weirdo,” like he meant it, but Saguru could see the
blush pinking his cheeks, and how it spread across his nose in a way that meant it wasn’t from the
fireplace.

Saguru smiled, and for once, it didn’t feel like a curse, or a slur, a slant against his character.

Kaito, sitting up, and putting his hands together, bringing out a sheaf of cards from between his
palms when he opened them, and Kaito, saying, “are you ready for your magic lesson?”


Kaito stood up, the fire at his back, and for a wild, wild, wild minute, Saguru imagined the flames
roaring up behind him, taller and higher than the room could fit; a herd of doves bursting out of
every inch of Kaito’s snow-pale skin, rabbits appearing from his ears, the whole room zoo-wild in
a second - but nothing, nothing like that happened, and there was only Kaito, and a look on his face
that Saguru hadn’t seen before (he’d memorized all of them, hadn’t he? And no, no, he hadn’t, this
was new, this was new).

Walked over to him, and sat down next to him, and said nothing, said nothing.

And, “… I don’t know where to begin,” he said, quiet, “I’ve been around magicians for so long
that talking to a complete … newcomer about it seems ….”

“Risky?”

“Wrong,” said Kaito, and pursed up his mouth, and then, hesitantly, as if the words he had in mind
weren’t the words he wanted to use but couldn’t think of any better ones, “magicians are…
territorial, and possessive, about their tricks. There’s a lot of copying and backstabbing at
conferences because, you know, the Great That One stole a card trick from the Amazing
Something or Other, and because Wild Card had an extra pigeon in his sleeve, and therefore taught
the trick wrong---”

“Sounds like any workplace,” said Saguru, thought of the bullpen, snide looks and back-of-throat
comments just out of his earshot.

Kaito, shaking his head, frowning, and, “…. for a lot of magicians, this is a family business,”
quieter, almost reverent, “and so when they see their secrets being shared, it’s like --- people
sharing pictures of your family. You know?”

Shook his head. “I haven’t stopped having cameras in my face since I was two,” said Saguru, “my
family doesn’t do ‘restrained’. But I think I have the idea of what you mean.”

A pause, and Kaito trying, again, his words softer, softer, softer, “---you won’t tell anyone what I
tell you?”

“No,” said Saguru, and reached out, brushed his hand against his jaw, felt the whip-cord tightness
of it, the grim look in his eyes twice as dark as it had ever been. “No. Anything you tell me, I’ll
keep to myself. Even magic tricks.”

Kaito, considering, looking at him; Anubis with his scales, measuring a bloody heart for truth and
honesty, for sin and sacrifice. Smiled, half-hearted, his hands shaking a little as he palmed out a stack of cards from somewhere up his sleeve, and said, “okay. Okay. I----Okay. Thank you. You---probably think I’m being silly.”

“Not more so than usual,” said without thinking.

Kaito stared for a moment; hitched a laugh at him, and then, “where’d you get all this courage, all of a sudden?” Dealt his cards out face down. “Pick one.”

Centre-right. Saguru tapped the glossy back, lifted it at a corner to see that it was the ace of hearts, watched it go back into the pile, the seamless shuffling and spinning, card-edges bent so they spiralled out with a noise like paper whipping through a wind tunnel, ten-card-thick sections tumbling over his knuckles likes tones, and bumping against his fingertips. “You mock me all the time,” he said, to stall; didn’t want to give him the real answer just yet, which started with, I love you, ended with, And you think I’m tolerable and that’s enough. “Is this part of the lesson?”

“Yeah,” said Kaito, “Pay attention.”

Flip flicker flip. Tossed cards into the air, so they scattered around them like hanami, startled Watson into waking and squawking at them from her perch.

“I’ll pick your card out of the line-up now,” said Kaito, and scattered his hand over the cards, shuffling them further, “do you agree that there’s no possible way I could have marked which one?”

Saguru thought back: the card, the reintroduction to the pack, Kaito shuffling, there’d been no minute for him to tuck it into his sleeve, slide it away, skim it to the top. He hadn’t seen him look at it, memorize it; the probability that he remembered what there was on his card was so negligible as to be completely gone, and so, nodded, let him go ahead, and stare at the cards between them.

Kaito, his eyes darkening like shadows, scanning the belly-down cards, his hand hovering over this one that one the other one, always making as though he was going to pick one up, and then moving away, redoubling his efforts, going back to the same spot. One minute, two minute, three minute, and then a flourish.

Wagged the blue-backed card in his face, said, “is this your card?”

Handed it to him face down, and then, when he flipped it over: the ace of hearts.

Kaito chuckled - at his face, probably, or at him, Saguru couldn’t tell.

“How?” he said, put the card back, and then, on a whim, flipped them all over. Different faces numbers colours stared up at him - so it wasn’t a trick deck, he didn’t have multiples of the same card. Examined the card back, looking for scratches and nicks, for anything that might have give it away.

Kaito, quiet, grinning a little, not saying anything like the damnable pest that he was.

Had he slipped it into a specific position? Third from the top, kept hold of it so that when the cards were thrown into the air and shuffled, it would take a position within a margin? How far did cards move if they were marked, and could he mistake one for the other?

“Give up?”

“Shh,” said Saguru, scowled at him, and picked up the two of spaces, turned it over, angled it so
that it hit the light - no glare, no false backing, no bent corner. Nothing.

Kaito’s cat grin stretched, stretched, and he draped himself back, arms over his head, said, “go ahead, I’ll wait.”

Legs to one side, and his shirt riding up over his belly, distracting him, glossy-pale the same as the cards; flesh naked, flesh for biting, flesh for marking, stop it look at the cards look at the cards, looked at the cards. Maybe it was differently weighted, and he stood up, fetched the scales from the kitchen, and dropped each card onto it, 0.001g for one, 0.001g for the other, so that wasn’t it.

Watson, hopping next to him, pecking at the cards with her beak, curious, curious noises in the back of her throat.

Saguru shooed her away with his hand, glanced up to look at Kaito, stretched bodily on the floor, eyes closed, peaceful, the long line of him golden from the fire, underfed but less so than he had been when he showed up. The bony curve of a hip, disappearing underneath layers of layers of denim; a jut of hipbone that he could scratch the itch in his mouth on, thighs and hips for holding onto, ducked his head again, ground down the burning in his blood.

*Not like Rhys, I’m not like Rhys.*

Cleared his throat, gave up even the pretense of understanding, and said, “I don’t get it. How did you do it?”

“When you were talking to me,” said Kaito, “I hid it up my sleeve.” Opened one eye and grinned at him, bright-starry-sharp, “you didn’t notice because you were too busy *gazing* at me.”

Saguru, retorting, “I wasn’t *gazing*, I was *looking*---”

Kaito’s grin widening, widened; helped take the sting off by the way he blushed, and squirmed on the carpet, sat up with his hair wild, and chittered Watson closer, let her land on his double-thick jumper’d shoulder.

“--And that doesn’t explain how you managed to get it up your sleeve when you were showing me everything you were doing, and I didn’t look away from you for a second,” said Saguru.

Kaito said, “you weren’t paying attention to what my hands were doing, were you, Saguru?”

Glanced down at his hands on automatic, looked at long fingers, hooked together; thought back to the nanoseconds of the trick, Kaito spreading cards out onto the floor, the fire behind him licking glowing shadows everywhere, Watson chittering in the corner, the schick-schick-schick of cards rippling and rifling together, and the way they hit the carpet. Kaito hands, always moving, ruffling the pack, then pausing, then giving, then nothing until his fingertips hovered over his, carefully picked out a single card from a pack of them on the floor, and he still couldn’t isolate how.

“I was,” but not closely enough, so Saguru shrugged, leaned over to see what Kaito meant.

Gathering up the cards, a grin in his direction, and he looked happier than he’d ever seen him in months. “Watch closely,” which was a given, but Saguru angled his gave down, watched his hands. Flip flicker flip flip flicker, and offering him the pack, impossibly fan-tailed out (and how could he hold all of them without bending them in on each other, without dropping some onto the floor?); different to how he showed him before, with the cards flat on the ground, but Saguru picked one out of the line-up, tilted it to see the three of spades, and then it was back into the folds, mixing
twisting churning in the belly of the fanned cards, and Kaito’s hands never stopped moving; flip, shuffle, bend inwards so that they pinged into his other hand in an arc, and he wouldn’t even get into the pressure it had to take to propel them from one hand to another, but he watched, he watched. Kaito’s fingers hooking into the back of one of the other cards, turning it in quarters, and then a toss up into the air, a fluttering rain of them, and Kaito’s eyes watching their descent to the carpet. Flushed. His bottom lip between his teeth, bruised like it’d been kissed.

Saguru shouldn’t think that way, not sitting this close to him. Shrugged. “I didn’t see anything different,” and it called to admit that he hadn’t analyzed his trick. “But---I assume when you were shuffling, you slipped it up your sleeve somehow?”

Kaito laughed. Leaned back, his back against the chair, one leg up, the mess of cards between them, and flicked the card out of his sleeve, the three of spades, held between two fingers. “Well,” he said, “you understand how it works. That’s something.” Smile fading a little; did it gall him to admit magic wasn’t magic, was only tricks and nuances, sleight of hand, willing suspension of belief?

Took a deep breath, his chest shifting underneath his shirt, and said, “misdirection is the name of the game. Not --- lying, just--- Okay. Most people go to magic shows because they want to believe in magic, right?”

He’d never been, but, “humans have always wanted to believe in something greater than they were.” Didn’t admit that he’d never been good at magic shows, hated street performers who blocked the roads pulling off ‘magic’ (suspending themselves in a giant glass cube was probably no sort of magic but who was he to argue?).

Kaito nodded. “My dad always said,” a two-tone hitch at ‘dad’, “that magic is---kind of like a broadway show. It’s giving the people what they want to see - and what they want to see is --- something wonderful. Ever magic show is built around that, that the people want to see something wonderful, and the magician wants to show them something wonderful. Wants to make people happy, and smile. That’s -- always been the way I was brought up.”

*But not the way your father was,* remembered six cases unsolved with Kaitou Kid’s name on them, jewels stolen and never returned; stopped his brain in his tracks because it was easier, better, to just listen to the cadence of Kaito’s voice, and focus on what he was saying, on how carefully he picked his words.

“So when you’re performing, it’s built on the reactions of the people around you? An improvised stage-play for their enjoyment?”

Kaito huffed, deep in his throat; shifted his head from side to side, and said, “kind of, but---no, not really. It’s --- not for just them. It’s for me, too.”

In the back of his head, wondering if this would help him, but Kaito was looking pensive, being so careful with how he phrased things, couldn’t really tell him how this would help. “What do you get out of it?” asked to straighten it in his mind; pure applause couldn’t just be the ticket, and it hadn’t been the drive for Toichi, had it?

A startled flutter of his lashes, and Kaito biting into his lower lip, and saying, hesitantly, slowly, “---I just like making people happy,” mumble-quiet and soft. “I like being --- smarter than everyone else, but --- magic just---- cheers people up. It cheered Aoko up on her birthday. And every year, I’d practice so I could go over and show Nakamori all my tricks -- it made him come home early. I mean --- probably, he was coming home early for some other reason, but it --- felt like I was helping. You know?”
(Jack, his arms in soapy lather, scrubbing the dishes clean; taking to the fields with a hoe, and
Uncle Blake leaning out from the window, shouting, you don’t have to do that, lad, it’s what the
servants are for, but Jack laughing, scooping bales of hay into the stables, telling him, when he
snuck out without doing his homework, that it made him feel good to help;

Nightmares on nightmares of piece-apart people, and split flesh, and gutter-black eyes exposed
spines and a mother weeping in his arms because, you found her you found her, when all he’d done
was match numbers and follow hunches until he’d located a doubled mark, a false fact; mingled
embarrassment and heat and pride, determination like a fizzy wine, in his blood, in his head, this is
what I want to do).

“I do,” said Saguru.

Kaito flexing his fingers, taking the pack of cards apart like a body, building it up again, and, “----
my dad wasn’t ---- like that. He wasn’t in it to make people happy, you know? Not --- entirely.”
Lined them up in a pack again, split them apart, shuffled. “He always said the only way anyone
would pay any attention to him was through magic, so -- he had to be the best at it. Never knew
what that meant until you dug up his past.”

“Which I am still sorry for,” said Saguru, hadn’t really picked a good moment to drop that
bombshell, had he? “I didn’t think you didn’t know.”

Kaito, laughing, offering him the cards again, and this time, he picked one from the bottom,
memorized it, slipped it back, and watched his wrists, his fingers, how his hands flexed around the
shuffling, bent in ways that wasn’t possible, cards rolling off the back of his knuckles and into his
palms. Up into the air, and then down to the ground, shuffled again, a jungle-maze of cards.

“It explains a little,” said Kaito. “It explains why dad never talked about his parents. Why he never
talked about growing up. Ah, when I was little, sometimes, and he took me to parks, he’d --- point
out restaurants he’d like to try. And once I heard him arguing with someone on the phone about---”
knotted brow, and “---money. Someone wanted to pay him money to do a show. It was insulting,
and he wouldn’t take it, but---there was a lot of yelling, after that.”

Flicked two fingers, and he saw the card leaving his sleeve this time, the berry-bright smear of the
numbers on the white background: four of clubs.

“I caught it that time,” said Saguru, grinned.

“Third time’s the charm,” said Kaito, and grinned back.

And it didn’t feel like an insult, something he needed to defend; it just left him warm, a heat
blossoming out of his chest, spreading everywhere. He ducked his head on a smile, and picked up
the cards, shuffling them together.

“What’s the secret to magic?” he said.

Kaito pausing, looking down at his hands, silent for so long that it bit.

“Lie,” said Kaito, quiet and soft, looking away. “Lie to the people. Lie to yourself. Lie until you
start to believe it, until there is no doubt in your mind that what you’re saying is the truth; until you
believe you can make cards fly, and people disappear, and make yourself walk in thin air. All lies
turn to the truth somehow.”

A silence, a single horrified second of how can you live life this way chased on its heels by isn’t
that what you do, and he had to pause, offered him the cards while he thought; hadn’t told his
parents anything of what he was doing here, hadn’t told Jack about Kaito being stalked and chased and people shooting at him; hadn’t told Nakamori that he knew Kaitou Kid. His entire life was a house of cards, poised to topple.

Kaito picked a card, looked at it, put it back.

“I can do that,” said Saguru, shuffled the cards, and forgot midway that he had to thumb it up his sleeve; sheepishly tried to memorize the shuffling (down down split the pack spliced together the chances of finding it were 1 in 32), “I can lie and make it believable.”

A hooked smile, and, “I know,” said Kaito, slanted him a smile verging on something miserable, “aren’t you doing that now? Lying, and pretending I’m worth much more as a friend, than a struck record?”

A flinch and, “no,” said Saguru, gave up on searching for the card, and laid them out onto the floor, hit them. “You’re worth more to me than anyone I’ve ever met. You are the most frustrated, pigheaded, ridiculous, stubborn sodding piece of shit I have ever had the misfortune to meet—–”

“Tell me how you really feel, Detective!” crowed at him, giggling bright, the dead-end look in his eyes lightening, brightening, and God, he was weak, he was weak, he was weak for how Kaito looked when he smiled.

“---And I can’t imagine my life without you,” said Saguru. “I can’t imagine my life not spent chasing you. I can’t imagine not being here now. When I tell you I care about you, you stupid bastard, I mean it. I always mean it.”

Kaito staring at him, wide-eyed, the smile slipping off his face.

“Now,” said Saguru, and held up a card, “is this your card?”

Kaito, looking, looking, a second, two seconds, three seconds. “No,” he said, leaned in, “not even close.”

And kissed him.
Saguru freezing, and the card tumbling out from his fingertips to the ground, shushshush; in the background. Watson’s gleeful chirruping as she flung around a felt mouse from the pet-store, the fire crackling in the background, an edge of hungry thunder crawling over the sky; the rattling of the windows underneath the rain and the wind; silence from the rest of the house, Baaya still out and the gardener off, and then white-noise-white-noise-stop.

Kaito’s hand on his face, tracing out the curve of his jaw, and following it up to his cheekbone. His fingertips burned (not literally, stop being stupid Saguru, but he reached up, checked, was surprised not to feel the flesh melting off of his face, onto his hands, oh God, oh God, they were kissing).

He’d kissed before. Rhys, he’d kissed Rhys. There were nameless others, but Rhys came to mind, and the nipping teeth, the slip of a tongue when he wasn’t ready for it; a kiss like drowning in sensation, too much happening all at once, and his brain screaming, trying to catch up, and this--

Underneath the white noise and the helpless desperate no I have to remember everything I have to memorize it all it was quiet.

Kaito’s hand cupped his jaw, and he breathed out, shuddered, leaned in. Forehead brushed forehead, and how was this more intimate than the rooftop on Tokyo (felt more intimate than the rooftop on Tokyo, and all of his past relationships combined)? Kaito humming, his fingertip brushing along a cheekbone, stopping his heart.

His mouth tilted to one side, and there it was, a nibble, so faint, nearly absent and (oh God) stopping him in his tracks and leaving him whimpering, whimpering. Saguru’s hands grabbing hold of the carpet, the cards, fumbling for control, and a better space, and then reaching up---

Finding Kaito’s face, underneath his fingertips; a triangle of marble flesh and softness. Cupped his hand over his cheeks. Held on. Fingertip trace over bones like Grecian art, mapping him out without sight; he needed to know him blind, how every curvature of his face felt in the darkness. He needed to know him, every inch of him.

Kaito laughing, and then, quiet, against his mouth, in between kisses, somehow, “I’m not going anywhere. Don’t grip so tightly.”

Shuddering on a, “sorry,” and loosening his grip, letting him go, and it didn’t feel like he should, he felt like he’d melt to ash in his fingertips. Up into his hair, and---

Kaito, suddenly, closer. Body to body (and he still smelled like after-dark and fire-smoke and something warm and something cosmic and something so nameless and formless and new that Saguru didn’t have the words for it) and then closer, Kaito spilling himself into his lap.

And it was so slow. It was so slow. Were all kisses this slow?

(rhys hadn’t been slow; Rhys had chewed him up and spit him out, had him and found him lacking, by the time he’d fumbled his jeans off; Rhys had been violence and power, pushing and prying, Rhys had been, had been---)

Nothing like this.

Kaito drew back, slowly, and Saguru went with him, made a half-growled noise in his throat.
“Why’d you---”

“There’s a lot of work to be done, Detective,” said Kaito, and levity couldn’t mask how his eyes darted to the windows and the wild sky, like he wanted to turn into Watson, and fly, fly, “and you haven’t even mastered the basic---”

Took hold of his jaw, and guided his mouth back around; starved out and desperate for another taste, another flick of tongue, another rasp of teeth against his lower lip. Shudders of heat invading, spreading out from his chest - Kaito purred into his mouth, and that was all he needed to shuffle closer, body to body, closer than close; to run his hand through his hair, and make him make that noise again, that purr. Kaito arching; his scent wrapped around him, blinding him, keeping him mute.

He tasted too much like fire, and Saguru was going to scald himself alive if he kept kissing, but he couldn’t stop.

He needed to--have this. Just this, just once, just this one moment, and it could never happen again (it had to happen again) but for now, everything could be okay. Everything could be settled, and they could be two boys kissing, two boys without a past, two boys without pain, two boys without men after them who wanted to hurt them; he could have a family who loved him; Kaito could have a family who lived; they could have grown up in Japan, dancing around each other from class to class, and competing, and competing, but happy.

Happy, and safe, and quiet, and normal.

A ringing in his head.

Saguru gasped as Kaito’s fingers ran into his hair, caught hold of it, tugged; spiky pleasure blurring into his blood, and he growled, nipped his tongue, sank into his mouth like a drowning man.

Ringing, ringing, ringing---

Kaito drawing back, and saying, half-laughed, half-incredulous, “Saguru, the phone. Your phone.”

What?

Blinked at him (God, those eyes), and said, unsure, “phone?”

“The house phone!”

Blinked again, and --- the ringing. In the background. His phone. Who even had that number? Inconsequential, and he leaned in to kiss him again---

To be stopped by a hand over his mouth, and a sparkling smile, and, “no, Detective.”

The noise he made, in the back of his throat, wasn’t worthy of an heir to one of the largest fortunes in the world, a junior detective, top of his class, straight-A student. It happened anyway, something between a whine and a growl, leaving him clawing for reasons not to move, not to get up, not to answer the phone.

“You don’t have to answer it,” said Kaito, as if he could read his mind, “but that’s---that’s enough. For now. Okay?”

Too much? Kaito not meeting his eyes, he noticed, suddenly; looking over his shoulder, or through him, but not at his eyes, not at him, and Saguru asked, “---did I---was it----okay?”
Kaito, quiet, and then, “---I just---you scare me.”

Wait. He hadn’t heard right. Had he said--

“I scare you?”

Kaito’s hands knotting in his lap, but his habitual cards were on the floor, and he started to pick them up, one by one, not looking at him. They seemed to do this too much, spin around in half-said words and conversations in allegories, and it was never enough, and it was never clear, and sometimes, Saguru felt like he was trying to break down a wall with his brain (and he was tired, so tired, of everything being couched in deeper meaning, and for once, couldn’t things be easy?)

“---Most people don’t----” began Kaito, and paused. Three cards in one hand, three cards in another. He put his hands together, spliced them into one, a monstrosity of aces and diamonds and hearts and spades, and this was all very interesting, but not now.

Glared at him, just slightly, to keep him talking.

“Give me a minute!” said Kaito, “I haven’t had this many personal conversations with people. I need time to think.”

“Tough,” said Saguru, flat, soft, not threatening because he didn’t want to fit the words Kaito said into an image, didn’t want to be scary (you scare me) not to Kaito not to anyone but not to Kaito especially. Shifted back on his haunches and made himself keep his eyes off of the rippling cards in Kaito’s hands, made himself wait, made himself patient.

“What were you like as a child?” asked Kaito, strained, small.

“How is this--”

“It’s relevant.”

Blew out air that felt superheated, and tried to think: he could remember his childhood, he could remember the flaws of him as a little boy, but what did it matter? He’d been alone. He’d grown up in the shadow of two people, in the wilds of Scotland, in the heart of sun-hidden Mayfair; he’d had half a dozen childhood nightmares that dogged him into his adulthood, a fondness for birds that started in the cusp of his sixth year, a temper that scared all the other boys in secondary school during their production of Othello, where he’d played the Moor (swapping one nationality for another had seemed so clever back then, but he’d burned with it, raged with it, let out his frustration in striding footsteps and shouting so loud it shook the dust from the ceiling) and strangled fair Ophelia, and-and-and---

“I was a pain in the arse,” said Saguru. “Too loud. Too quiet. Too much of everything my mum didn’t want.”

Kaito nodding, flipping the cards together to form something different, and he tore his eyes away from it before he could see what.

“I didn’t have a lot of friends because no-one wanted to play with the sodding weirdo who could talk about dead body deterioration,” said Saguru. “And I didn’t really need friends anyway because other children bored me to tears.” It came out without prompting, a bite of a phrase, sharp as a needle; other children bored me. And now, older, wiser, stronger, now---

Oh.
Kaito looking away so he didn’t see the sudden realization down on his face, the understanding of what Kaito was driving at.

“What were you like?” he asked.

Kaito squirmed a little, said, “---a lot like you,” and it was stupid, it was so stupid, but his heart triple-quadrupled in speed, beat so hard his chest hurt, and in the back of his mind, he imagined being smaller and younger, imagined Kaito.

“How smart for your own good?” gentle, teasing; it felt better as a joke.

Kaito laughed, even if it was sudden and smarting and too quick. “Something like that,” he said, “Aoko would get annoyed at me because I figured out languages pretty quickly, so I could---out-think her. Make her frustrated with me. She was nice, anyway, but I’ve never been---” a pause, the words running through his head, and Saguru holding his breath, waiting for him to say them, say something, mean something more of them.

“I’ve never been,” Kaito started again, all over, “---challenged, I guess. I’ve never had anyone keep up with me.”

The heat low in his belly rose up to his face, and Saguru looked down at his hands, the cards splayed between them and abandoned.

“I see,” said Saguru. His fingers curled, uncurled, found the edge of a card, and felt along it, thumb to corner, forefinger to long edge, thinking of it, thinking of him sitting there and alone in his youth (thinking of himself sitting here and alone in his youth and), “---I’ve never---”

Kaito nodding, his hair ridiculously everywhere, and his eyes so earnest, so blue, so deep, he couldn’t look for too long without losing his breath, “you understand, don’t you?”

Saguru looking away, considering his words, how much to tell him, how to phrase it, how could he make it seem -- better than it was when someone had dropped the file onto his desk, shoved it at him, and said, look at this thief, look at what he’s doing to the rest of Japan? “As soon as I heard about your case,” said Saguru, “I knew I wanted it to be mine.”

Kaito blinking, then laughing, startled. “Romantic,” he said, and some of the rabbit-run fear went out of his face, replaced by interest, curiosity. “Same reason?”

“More or less,” said Saguru. “I came here, expecting to prove you wrong. Catch the thief, and show all the policemen who’d failed that it wasn’t that difficult - that you just needed logic, and forward thinking, and a little sodding genius who thinks he’s the next best thing---”

“Now that clearly isn’t referring to you,” said Kaito, and his smile could stop a war, “I’ve never met anyone with such low self-esteem.”

Choked on his words, and coughed them out, one by one, “---as I was saying, I---I came here to prove you wrong, and then I met you in class.”

The jokes gone, replaced by wariness again, and it didn’t hurt to look at it now, knowing what was behind it, knowing the edges of Kaito as well as he knew the edges of himself, knowing they were past this, they had spoken about this enough, they were more and more of the same. “I met you,” said Saguru (sunlight falling in over his head and blinding him and chaos as one student backflipped from desk to desk chased by another student holding a broom, echos of ‘KUROBA’ and ‘NAKAMORI’ from the teacher, and mid-flip, catching his eyes, that grin, that single startling arrow-bolt of I know you), “---and I wanted to be your friend. I wanted to --- have someone who
understood.”

“Bit of a shock, then,” said Kaito, “finding out I wasn’t all that friendly?”

Saguru smiled, felt it tug on old hurts. “No,” he said, “I expected it. A big, blonde foreigner, trying to make friends in a foreign country? A recipe for disaster.”

“Only with small magicians with lots of secrets,” said Kaito, and he thought the story had lifted some old worries from Kaito, left him young and boyish, smiling easier, brighter. “Everyone else would trip over themselves to be your friend.”

“We did go to the same school, didn’t we?” said Saguru, remembered his first few days here very differently (people staring but people always stared; people whispering but out of the corner of their eyes watching and saying it’s the Hakuba heir you know he’s the won who works on all those big cases in England do you think he’s here for KID he’s so young! I bet he’s really rich do you suppose---) sitting in classes like dominos, waiting for one to tip into the other, eating lunch alone, avoiding the company of other students because he knew how it it would go (and other people were unspeakably confusing, didn’t challenge him but)

But then Kaito, Kaito, two seats in front of him and to the right, you scared me.

“Well, you’d have made a lot of friends if you weren’t so quiet,” said Kaito, and then paused, thought of it; the words like ribbons in his head, and, “---though I don’t know if you’d have wanted to be friends with those people. You would’ve been bored.”

To himself, I would have. To Kaito, watching him, “I wasn’t here for that, anyway. I was here to catch---”

The truth of what he’d been here for between them like a desert, branching out from story to story; that was all there was to the start of all this, wasn’t there? He’d never been meant to linger, he’d never been meant to save KID, he’d never been meant to give the thief a second thought.

Kaito realising the same thing, quiet for a minute, and then, “---you scared me then, too. I’ve---” and another pause, like the words were physically painful to speak.

(He wondered if it would get easier for both of them; if there’d be days where Kaito would tell him what he was feeling without running it through the half-dozen filters in his head, without making it painful for both of them; wondered if he’d ever reach that place where he’d talk to him like he’d talk to Jii.

Felt his heart beat quicker at the thought of it.)

“---People see what I want them to see,” said Kaito, and folded his hands together, and suddenly the ribboning cards were gone, and Saguru didn’t know where, didn’t know the trick of it; he’d always been half a step behind Kaito, never next to him, never with him.

The pain in his voice, though. How it sounded to hear him struggle with his words.

“I understand,” said Saguru, and thought of his youth, picking which personality to put on like clothing, what would drive the best reaction home.

Kaito smiling, helplessly, softly, and going, “---it’s been like that ever since I --- was old enough to realize that---it was fun to wear masks. Fun to convince people I was different, you know? I could
be anything, with enough practice. Could be anyone. Dad---” a hitch, and a laugh, and he couldn’t
tell which had come first, “---Dad was great at it. He’d have people eating out of the palm of his
hands, that’s how good he was. Would go from --- being one person, like a friendly person, to
another so fast, it was just---” Shook his head, half-admiring, half-jealous, the perpetual state of the
performer, “---so I started to do it too.”

“That makes sense,” said Saguru. Shifted, so he was sitting alongside him, and the burning warmth
of Kaito’s shoulder against his threatened to distract him, but it was easier to listen to him and not
lose himself in the shapes of the words. To listen to his voice, and know it for what it was, know
him for what he was, understand him. “I would’ve done the same if I had the opportunity.”

“Except,” said Kaito, and a hesitation, and then their hands were together, their fingers linked, “---it
becomes easy to forget who you were to start with.”

“Is it?” said Saguru, and tried to picture it; he’d always had an idea of who he was, even when he’d
been little. He’d always known that he was that bright, that quiet; he’d always known what drew
him, what distanced him, what he was.

Kaito nodded, and then, quieter, “---So I’m not used to people --- looking at me. The real me. Not--
-KID, or a role I put on. Who know I’m different to the way I act, and I wasn’t --- I wasn’t
expecting, that. It just---It’s scary. Knowing someone’s looking at you, and seeing you. It’s scary,
and exciting, and it bothered me, and I wanted more, and just---” Kaito swallowed, shrugged his
narrow shoulders. Didn’t look at him. “It was everything like that.”

“Do I still scare you?” said Saguru, needed to know. “Now that I’m --- closer? That we’re closer?”

“Sometimes,” said Kaito, and closed his eyes; and when he opened them again, it was to look at
him, and they were so blue, Saguru felt like they needed a colour name all of their own. “When I
least expect it, you’re --- there. You’re there, and you can see me. I’m not used to it yet.”

“You should get used to it,” said Saguru. “I’ve very little intention of going anywhere.”

Kaito’s mouth twitched up at the corners. “Good,” he said, and his voice was fringed with fear, but
there was something underneath it that was stronger, more defined, than he’d heard before. “You’d
better keep your promise.”

Saguru lifted his hand to his mouth, turned his knuckles to his cheek. He could feel scar tissue
beneath his skin, rippling like webbing between his knuckles, and he wondered what had happened
to his hands, “I promise,” said Saguru, “that I’ll always see you. Not whoever you’re pretending to
be - you. Kaito Kuroba, vexing, and bright, and brilliant, and---” he hesitated, said, “---warm. And
important to me.”

Kaito blushed. It suited him, Saguru thought; he wanted to make him do it more.

“Oi, oi, how embarrassing,” said Kaito, and his head ducked down, the blush on his cheeks
virulent, eye-catching, mind-haunting. “Don’t say things like that -- it’s weird.” But his words had
no bite to them, and he said them soft and wanting, as though he didn’t know yet that he could
have it, could have him, could have everything he wanted.

(And if he was like him it wouldn’t dawn yet; it would take years, years, years to sink in and
become second nature, to make it easy to understand that there were people who’d be there even
when it was inconvenient for them to be, who’d know inflection and voice and tone all made a
difference; there’d be people who’d understand your thoughts better than you did).
Kaito staring at the cards between them, spread out like a map, and then saying, “aah, we got sidetracked.”

“It’s okay,” said Saguru, and his grin like an infection, spreading light everywhere in him, “I quite like getting side-tracked by you. It’s one of my favourite hobbies.”

“Asshole,” said Kaito, a brighter, brighter pink, stabbing the cards together into a sheaf.

He made him go over the trick again; watch his eyes, watch his face as he never looked away, disappeared the card that Saguru chose, and made it come out of thin air. Bit by bit, Saguru built the trick in his brain like a machine, watched the split-second shift that it took to hide it up a sleeve under the edge of his thigh, in his shoe.

Kaito did it again, slower, slower, his fingers twisting it into a C, tucking it into his collar. “Don’t look at me,” he told him, impossible because how could he not he was everything, everything he wanted, everything he needed to look at, everything in the room; his hands gave him an ache inside his chest.

By the end of it, drenched in sweat, his mind over-stuffed with thinking, technique, thoughts, and Kaito amused, and just as exhausted.

“Magic is hard work,” said Saguru, stood up and felt his legs tingle from the movement; they’d fallen asleep while he was watching Kaito twist the cards around.

“How do you think I keep my boyish figure?” Kaito drawled, and batted his lashes, caught the cards and disappeared them en-masse into one of his pockets (but he caught that one, caught Kaito watching him watch him to see if he saw the moment where they slipped from his palm and into his pocket), “you think it’s easy looking this good?”

“For you?” said Saguru, “absolutely. Unfair, and ridiculous, and true.”

Kaito, not knowing what to answer, not expecting him to answer, and only blushing, muttering underneath his breath something that sounded insulting (sounded ancient), and then stalking from the room like an offended cat. Watson, following in his wake, looking for the blueberries Kaito thought he didn’t know about, and Saguru stood staring at his messy wake, the imprint of him on the Persian rug, the presence of his voice in the house, filling it up to the rafters, making it live more than when he’d arrived here.

He followed, slower, slower, to linger in the twilight, and let the moment last until it blotted out everything else.

Five o’clock, and Saguru in his room with a pile of magic books that Kaito had gone to the house to get for him, reading his third one of the day; cover half-off, covered in crabbed katanka in the corners, notes in French and English, others in languages he didn’t know, and he knew, somehow, that it wasn’t Kaito’s writing; it didn’t have the same neatness to it, the same regimented, careful quality; it exploded around the edges of the page, knotted itself around paragraphs. Head buzzing, but hard to focus - Kaito had left, and he knew the heist was in four hours, and he hadn’t come back home, and part of him wondered if he’d had enough and he’d finally run (didn’t want to be around him any more and had finally run) but no, that was stupid, that was stupid, Kaito wouldn’t.

Except every step he took towards knowing him felt like a crawl, and every step there was left to
know him felt like a chasm, and sometimes Kaito took it upon himself to dance farther and farther out of reach.

Wondered if it had anything to do with his father, or if it was just Kaito, that it was easier to run than stand still and let someone love you.

Love you.

The door slamming below, footsteps on the stairs, Kaito’s voice on the phone---

“No, Jii, if you’re sick, you’re sick -- it’s okay, I’ll figure out something else. No, you’re not doing it -- hey, the famous Kaitou KID doesn’t get sick. If you pull the trick now, you might hurt yourself.” Stern, focused. Saguru lifted his head, closed his eyes, let the noise of Kaito’s head fill it up and chase away the humming noise of background information (Watson on her perch the traffic outside the window the gardener singing a lopsided song and weeding the beds Baaya slamming pans in the kitchen buzzing mosquitoes in the gloom, hitting the window as they tried to get his lamp).

“---I’ll figure it out. I can cancel it, and we can run it again some other time---”

A pause; Saguru frowned, shifted back like a dowsing rod to find Kaito’s voice.

Softer, “---I said no. Go get some rest, old man.”

Silence.

The door behind him creaking open, slamming shut, footsteps, and he opened his eyes just in time to see Kaito flop onto the bed, and groan.

“What a mess,” he said, petulant as a child, flopping an arm over his eyes in a gesture so intrinsically boyish, it hurt his heart. “Jii-chan’s sick, and can’t help me tonight, I’ll need to cancel the heist---aaa, it’s going to look terrible.”

“What does he have?” quiet and gentle as he dropped down next to him, reached over to skim his fingers through his hair; Kaito closing his eyes, cat-gentle purring. “Should I call the doctor?”

“Nausea,” said Kit, “a fever. He’s fine, but---” Kaito shrugged; worry underneath the set of his jaw, in the tilt of his head, “---I’ll have to cancel the heist. I can’t do it on my own.” Worried at his lip, looking down at the bed, his hands, twitching fingers. “It’s a two-person job.”

Saguru reached for his phone, flipped through until he found Nick’s number, hovered over it. Kaito, his head bent, pleating the edge of the blanket into folds, holding it between his fingers like a fan. Didn’t say anything, didn’t even move, just pleated in silence, until---

“Can I help you?” said Saguru; pressed ‘call’ and put the phone to his ear. “Is there anything I can do?”

A pause, Kaito’s head coming up, narrowed eyes as he looked at him, considered it; Kaito’s scrutiny worse, more pin-point sharp than anyone else’s, like all of him was on display and Kaito’s eyes were knives, cutting away what he didn’t like, what he didn’t agree with (wasn’t fair to think of it that way but that was what it felt like to him; knew Kaito would disagree).

“...There might be, but---I can’t ask you to do it,” said Kaito, soft and quiet and thoughtful; looked away, the corners of his lips falling again; the pleated edge of the blanket turning into a mountain of folds. “It’s risky, even for me, and you’re not---you’re not used to it.”
“I want to help,” insisted, just as softly; in the gloom, Kaito’s cheekbones looked hollow and bladed, and when he touched one with his knuckles, it bruised him (on the other end of the phone, a dimness to the voice that said, ‘hello’ / “Dr. Nick, it’s Saguru, Jack’s cousin---” rattling off the address of the Kuroba household, scritchscritch of a pen on paper and a sudden dead drop). “Tell me what to do. I’ll do it, whatever it is.”

Pursed mouth, bright eyes, and then, “---we’d better go home.”

Down the slide again (because Toichi Kuroba had done nothing normally including the staircases) and into the room below the house, old-gold lighting and amber wood, honey-yellow spotlights on a dented couch and a pinboard overloaded with pictures; furniture well-made, but cheaply lacquered, the suit in the middle of the room. Kaito touched a hidden button on the underside of a table, and brought up a rippling cabinet of magician’s toys (the gun that nicked the side of his face when he’d shot at him once the hand-glider folded impossibly small, the handcuffs modified to release at a certain amount of pressure, smoke canisters, sleep bombs, a hundred other small things that Saguru didn’t know the name of, didn’t want to know the name of; better deniability in case all of this goes wrong).

Music playing low in the background, Sinatra crooning about New York, New York.

Kaito, small and neat in the middle of the room, smaller than he had any right to be, pausing for a second to get himself under control; a flick to the portrait on the other side, faded and forgotten, Toichi Kuroba standing ram-rod straight with a showman smile, hand extended, doves fantailing behind him in a halo.

Snapped his gaze away from the portrait and drew a portable white board out from behind him, snuck in between the two display cabinets, heavy with schematics and numbers. Drew a rag across of it, cutting a swathe through mathematics while Saguru found a place on the weakened sofa, dropped into it (made for someone much smaller; his knees came up to his cheeks), and folded his hands together in his lap, watched Kaito stare at the white-board, think, think.

Wondered if he regretted it, if he regretted it all; wondered if he was going to tell him to forget it, and do everything on his own the way that he’d been doing all this time.

Drew a jagged peak, smaller squares, narrow lines. Face furrowed in concentration, small bubbles revolving around the top of one of the buildings, scribbles for people at the very bottom of the picture.

Suzuki Museum.

“This is where it’ll be,” said Kaito, swapped his black marker for a red one, and crossed the top of one of the buildings. “Helicopters and camera crews will take to the skies -- Suzuki doesn’t do anything without an audience involved. That’s why he’s messing with me in the first place.” Curl of the lip, exasperated instead of angry. “It’s bordered by other buildings here, here, and here---” more crosses, in green, this time, and he didn’t know when he’d switched out the colours, his hands moved so quickly.

Saguru nodding, closing his eyes, trying to bring to mind the image of the Suzuki Museum, the square of the park around it, a sliver of lake, and then buildings on buildings crowded closest to the door, the smell of tarmac hot from the sun and air stinging from artificial cold; Kaito’s drawings
weren’t good, but he knew where it was, had been there, had safeguarded it with Nakamori.
“Okay,” eyes still closed, letting Kaito’s voice drift into his head, telling him about everything else
located near it, down to the ramen cart that set up at the corner and sold out by the late afternoon.

Too many buildings, too many people, helicopters and low walls made the hand-glider impossible
to use, and the roads would be blocked.

“What about inside?” said Saguru, “could you impersonate someone on the inside?”

“Jii-chan stole the security plan,” said Kaito, scribbled something else on the bottom, “there’s no-
one that’s going to be inside. I won’t have anyone to copy. And even your name won’t get you into
a locked building.”

“No,” mused on trying anyway, and then looked up said, “what if you climb up the back?”

Kaito, considering that, shaking his head, “it’ll be guarded.”

“No if I’m there.”

“You’re not in Nakamori’s good books anymore,” said softly, but sharply enough that it stung
anyway. “And you can’t afford to get pushed out, or suspected --- so just--- I have a plan, but I need
someone else to make it work.”

Saguru, pausing, encouraging him to go on.

Kaito looked down, began hesitantly, “the thing is,” he said, “it can’t just be a grab and go.
Jirokichi challenged me - I need to give him a show worthy of his name, and mine.”

“Which means whatever your plan,” said Saguru, “it’s going to be complicated. It’s going to be
aimed for the cameras.” A pause, and then, “aren’t you worried the people following you will
catch you?”

“I’m terrified,” said Kaito, and it came easier to him now, was much quicker to admit it, “but
there’s no other way to get around it. KID wouldn’t hide. My father wouldn’t hide. He’d give them
the show of a lifetime -- I-- I have to do that too.”

Didn’t make sense to him, but then he’d never had anything to prove to anyone (his father had
taken one look at him in his youth and decided that he wasn’t worth the effort to raise; his mother
took it upon herself to talk about the difficulties of a child with a brain like a computer; his uncle
knew he’d grow up to be whatever he put his mind to and nothing would change that), but Kaito
had visions to live up to, shoes to fill, a name to make his own and he could understand that.

And more importantly, more importantly, he’d said he’d help.

“Tell me your plan,” said Saguru, folded his legs.

Kaito told him.

First reaction, immediate, instinctive, that’s insane, we’ll die; second, smaller, slighter, figuring out
the loopholes in Kaito’s thinking. “Where are we even going to get a helicopter?”

“Jii has a friend of a friend,” said Kaito. “It’s all legal. Licenses and everything.”

It didn’t sound very legal. Reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose, felt a headache build
delicately behind his eyes - wondered if it was just this, just him, just Kaito, which of it would
break him first, and---a helicopter. A helicopter for a heist that was basically a trap.

“How did you even come up with that plan?” Not mocking it but staring at him in the dim-dark of the room, standing tall and still and slim, the whiteboard behind him foggy with his writing. “Why did you even come up with that plan?”

Shrug of his shoulders, a smile that looked closer to real than any other one he’d seen. “My father had a lot of crazy plans,” he said, “it rubs off.”

Saguru laughed, half-huffed. Looked at the whiteboard, the crosses, the impossibility of what they were discussing: a heist in the middle of a wolf’s den, sheep traipsing in to make off with the jewel, full view of everyone, nowhere to hide - this should be the part where he took up his phone and called Jack and begged him for help, but he knew he wouldn’t, knew he couldn’t betray Kaito’s trust that way.

“Okay,” said Saguru. “We’ll do it.”

Midnight, Saturday. Crowd below writhing with people, eyes turned up to the skies. Helicopters, more than they’d anticipated, black flies in space.

He’d never been up this high before. Tokyo was a blurry map beneath him, and all he could see where the people, Impressionism-splash details of their clothes; the wind roared around him, the chopper moved, and he didn’t know if he wanted to think about how precarious and risky helicopters were compared to airline. In the sky, the helicopters Suzuki had hired sleeker and smaller, the ones from the television station clunkier, bigger. Theirs was somewhere in between, fitting in with the rest of them, like a hand in a handprint on glass.

His heart was pounding so much, he could taste it. Saguru pressed his hand to his chest, focused on the whapwhapwhap of blades into the air; tried to remember the trick that Kaito had shown him the night before, to remember his words, show the audience what’s there once and they’ll take it for granted it will be there again that’s one of the secrets of magic--

Kaito, quiet and calm over the headset, “it’s okay. You can do it.”

“If we make it out of this alive,” muttered, “I have so many questions.”

Almost time. Ten minutes to go. Everything prepared already, knew that it was foolproof, but he couldn’t think through the rabbit fear in his brain that told him this was insane, he’d get caught, they’d get arrested, somehow someone would realize, and he wouldn’t be able to help Kaito in a jail cell (in the back of his head, Yukito’s voice, scornful, like I’d let you get arrested, you stupid boy).

“You don’t have to do this,” said Kaito, again; his voice drowned out by helicopter wings and the sound of muttering from below, “you can just say ‘no’, and we’ll go away. We won’t think about it. You don’t need to help me.”

“I want to,” said Saguru, and stood up.

The white suit didn’t fit him as neatly as it had Kaito, and he had to hope that nobody would film it, wouldn’t film him stumbling through magician’s poise and grace; the tie strangled him, the hat tilted lopsided, and the monocle wouldn’t stay where it was; he’d pulled a wig on over his hair, and
spirit-gummed a narrow moustache into place, and when he looked into the mirror, he didn’t recognize himself. Kaito said nothing, made adjustments to one of the hundreds of copies of suits that he had, sewing with a needle like a snake tooth.

Saguru could feel the helicopter shifting beneath him, the wires digging into the back of the suit.

Over the headset, Kaito: “you are such a crazy bastard,” half in awe, half amused. “Do you say ‘no’ to anything?”

“Not when people’s lives are at stake,” said without looking down; there was a distance of approximately ten thousand to twenty thousand feet, and if he looked down, he’d end up realizing the accuracy of that calculation, thinking about how the wire could snap and send him plunging down to the ground. Reached into his pocket, felt the music player, the recording they’d done of it safely ensconced. “I like to help.”

“You like to help too much,” but not cruel, just shocked, just sad, just stunned.

“Maybe I like you too much,” came out shaky, but Kaito laughed, edged with wild, beating air where the helicopter wings hummed, “maybe I’m just stupid when you’re around.”

“Never stupid,” said Kaito, and the helicopter dipped to whatever he was doing at the controls - he didn’t want to think about how they’d snuck into the sky, where it had come from, who Jii had known. Didn’t want to think about Jii over the headset, hacking his lungs up into a tissue, there in case something went wrong (an eighty percent chance of something going wrong).

Breathed in, and looked down: Kaitou Kid’s fans waiting for him, news-crews tracking the skies, blues-and-twos blinking like eyes at the fringe edges.

“I don’t know,” said Saguru, “I’m about to jump out of a helicopter in a too small suit. What would you call it, then?”

“Well,” said Kaito, and he could hear the grin in his voice, tempering down fear, “when you put it like that----”

Two minutes to go.

Saguru tracked the shape of Nakamori below him (if the wire snapped he’d die on impact), “Tell me something positive,” he said, “tell me what you think about when you go out on stage.”

A pause, and then, “everyone down there’s waiting for a show,” he said, “so I’ll give them a show. I don’t want to disappoint anyone --- I want everyone to leave this feeling happy, because they were part of something --- crazy. Because it added a little magic to everyone’s lives.”

Sucked in a breath through his teeth. The air was cold, stinging. “Is that for all magicians?”

“All the good ones,” said Kaito. “That’s what I think, anyway. What’s the point of magic if you can’t make people happy with it?” Drowning in noise.

The helicopter dipped on a gust of wind, and he felt space beneath him, shifting and uncertain, roiling like boiling water.

“That’s---” thought of Kaito skimming past the people trying to kill him, thought of Kaito making a show when he could have snuck around, thought he understood, then, what gears shifted inside Kaito during a performance; wasn’t sure if he could use them himself yet, wasn’t sure if that avenue was open, but he could imagine it (could imagine Kaito, sitting at his father’s desk,
scratching out plans, building it up better and bigger, pulling out tricks he hadn’t used yet; thought of him at his desk in school, stunning Aoko with a series of card tricks, bothering Ryo to put more magic in his stage play---)

“Last chance to back out,” said Kaito, crackling and soft.

Steeled his spine, and looked down again. So many people; everywhere in front of the museum was packed packed packed grass invisible underneath too many stomping feet vans fencing everyone in and he could see Nakamori and Aoko and Shinichi and Hattori, the vague shapes of them in the crowd, standing out; could see no-one that looked remotely like the men in black that dogged every heist, but they had to be there (had they? It had been on all the news sites, so they should be there, they should).

“No,” said Saguru, and that was -- that was good, that was good. He could feel the words settle in his stomach, steel him against terror, make it easier to stand up straighter, catch a sight of his reflection in the back of the glass window: KID’s lopsided hat, his monocle, his tie whipping back in the wind, everything but smile and laughter. He looked serious, he thought, more like the classical KID (Toichi Kuroba had worn that mask, but if he’d learned anything about him slogging through the cold case, it would be this, wouldn’t it?)

Silence, and then Kaito said, “---thank you, Saguru. I---” the rest of his words garbled underneath the helicopter’s blades, and Saguru shook his head, motioned to his ear.

And --- midnight.

“I’ll see you at home,” he said, turned his head to see him out of the corner of his eye, “and I will have so many questions for you.”

He cracked a smoke bomb, tossed it out the window, turned to give Kaito a single sun-shine smile.

And he stepped out, then, into unbroken, glass-clear air, on Kaito’s bright, hitched laughter.
Chapter 20

Fell straight down like an arrow, this is it this is Kaitou KID’s last stand I’m going to die splattered all over the ground and the people and Kaito’s going to have to live with---

Sudden startling pain of the wires pulling taut, stopping his descent; the smoke billowed around him, pushing into his face, acrid and biting, pulling his attention every which direction. Kaito, above him, the helicopter hidden by the blackened sky, and he was floating, he was hovering, suspended by the wires that Kaito had changed out for his own, hovering above a crowd of people cheering roaring calling out his name.

Stars above, stars below.

Saguru didn’t look down, didn’t need to; Kaito’s voice came out louder and looped in his head, ladies and gentleman-- but they’d decided that it would be too risky to have them on a recorder. Slipped his hand into his pocket, pressed the button to start the loop of footsteps, and moved one step after the other, trying to time it to the locked-in beat (and God he couldn’t think of why Kaito had thought footsteps were necessary but he didn’t know if---)

Below him, Nakamori’s voice rising above the screaming of fans where’s the fucking police chopper above him Kaito holding the helicopter steady and still, inching it forward and Saguru wasn’t going to think about the muscle control and knowledge it required to keep a helicopter steady in midair while suspending a person from it didn’t think about the buckling weight of his body against the wires didn’t want to think about how little it would take to smash him to pieces on the ground. Footsteps in his head, the breeze beneath him, fighting terror not to go limp and give the show away (a detective always knows so act the opposite); Shinichi was below him, and if not able to tell, he’d know it wasn’t KID.

Tried to imagine what Kaito would do, but it was difficult to keep his brain on this; footstep after footstep, Kaito above him. Nakamori below, a helicopter veering in from the right and hovering too close and God what if his wig slipped off and they thought that he was KID what if he lost his footing and showed his hand too early, what if what if---

“Well!” Moving his mouth to the words, Kaito’s voice burning through him, through him, and he could almost imagine it, imagine himself, imagine what it had to feel like to be on the verge of a place like this, imagine what it was like to live like this. “That’s enough of a preview!” Scanned the crowd below him, saw Keiichi, recognized him by the gold-faced watch he wore; saw Nakamori; saw Shinichi running for the stairs, battling through the crowd.

Felt, unbelievably, the hint of a hint of a grin, and the laugh that poured out of him was pure KID, wild and careless, head tilted back to the star-spattered sky.

Now! In his ear, and Saguru cracked the second smoke bomb, and zoomed back up, retracted into the plane like one of those children’s toys that promised treasure and never delivered; screaming beneath him, Nakamori cursing, the buildings reeking heat as he zipped back; dropped his hat and his cape, watched the crowd blur into Monet softness, then disappear.

Hit the chopper shoulder first, and rolled onto his back, watching the rooftop, the sliver of sky. His head thumped into the floor, and he closed his eyes, letting the rocking lull him,

“That was good!” Kaito, grinning, grinning, always grinning, veering the chopper right to take them to a private landing strip owned by a friend of a friend of a friend, “aaa, we’ll make a
magician of you yet -- but you could’ve made it a little more believable. Had fun with it.”

Cracked open one eye, and glanced at the back of his head, the top of his hair mad over the headrest. “I was focusing on not dying,” he said, pleasantly soft, “I didn’t think the wire would snap, but I’m a heavy lad--”

“My ass,” said Kaito, dipped between two buildings in a way that made his head spin. “I could lift you.”

“I implore you not to try,” he said, imagined it ending very badly.

The stars were so bright from here, and he knew that was inconceivable, illogical; it was just his adrenaline, running too high, making everything much bigger and better than it seemed, making him float; it was the same reason for why Kaito’s voice seemed to fill his head, blocking out everything else; for why he wanted to stride across the floor, and kiss that stupid grin off his face.

“Oh, you implore me.” A scrape of something metal, and the helicopter spun a little. “Now I kind of have to. Sorry. Didn’t anyone ever tell you not to bet on a sure thing?”

“I’m pretty sure that, no, no one has.”

Miles away, Suzuki Jirokichi was probably losing his mind over KID’s appearance; Nakamori would be rallying the police officers and the helicopter to chase after KID; Shinichi would be looking for him, blowing up his phone, wanting him to come out even though he told him that he was stuck en route. On the floor of the helicopter, Saguru ran through the preparations he’d made: Baaya, to sit in a car broken down by the side of the road, her story, young master just ran off I suspect he’s at the crime scene now, show up at the department two hours after everything was done and listen to Nakamori rage because he’d lost them---

“Were they there tonight? Do you think?” from the front, quieter than Kaito’s usual pomp.

Saguru sat up. His racing heart had stopped enough that he could appreciate the gridlock of Tokyo buildings, neo-noir brightness daubed with electronic light, “I don’t know,” he admitted, “I couldn’t see anyone there, but it’s not like they’re amateurs, is it?”

Quiet from the front, and then Kaito, “---I just wish I knew who they were. I wish I knew anything about them, besides the fact that they’re not Yakuza.”

“Any particular reason why you think they aren’t?” asked Saguru.

Shrug of the shoulder, and then, “---it just --- doesn’t seem like Yakuza. Yakuza’s an organization built on efficiency. This --- doesn’t seem very efficient. Chasing one teenage boy around to make him steal the precise jewel you want? It would probably mean less time gambling, or running illegal dens, or whatever else they do.”

Shudder and jump as the helicopter hit the landing strip. Kaito pulled off his headset, shook out his hair, still deep in thought, “I mean, doesn’t it strike you as weird behaviour?”

“All of this strikes me as weird behaviour,” but gently, not to sting him, “but I suppose you have a point. It’s definitely not very sensible… and I suppose there’s not a lot of organization, is there?”

“Have you thought about it a lot?” asked Kaito, turning to look at him.

“Profiled them, you mean?” dryly.
Kaito’s ears turning pink because he knew for a fact had the indisputable proof that Kaito was addicted to crime television shows, the cheesier the better (a month ago he’d walked downstairs to find him mainlining White Collar and now that lived in his memories where the good memories lived: Kaito sprawled out on his stomach, doodling Watson on her perch, a rabbit a mad white blur around him).

Didn’t want to taint that with tonight, with thoughts that they were still lost, didn’t have a clue what they were up against, that he wasn’t living up to his name.

“Whatever it’s called,” said Kaito, and slipped out of his seat, “spare clothes in the back.”

Went and got them, taking off Kaito’s top hat and Kaito’s tie, letting them slip down and out of his hands and to the floor beneath him. Profiles, profiles; he didn’t quite believe in them, knew all too well the capricious nature of the beast of humanity, knew that it wasn’t enough to know a fraction of a personality, there needed to be more. Didn’t want to give Kaito false hope, seem intelligent when he was just grasping at straws, just using elaborate guess-work.

“One thing that bothers me,” says Saguru, stripping off the suit jacket first, listening to pins clatter at his feet from where Kaito had taken it deftly inwards, “is that their actions are at odds with each other.”

Kaito quiet in the back, soft with silence and he wished he’d say something, anything, wished he’d move or come help him, touch him and take away the ghost of Toichi Kuroba’s voice, do something that pulled him out of the mid-space suspension with the crowd beneath him, that didn’t make him feel like he was lying to himself, but Kaito stayed away and Saguru folded the suit jacket over the seat and took off the shirt next. Felt it catching, dragging, on old scars like fingertips (London Tokyo Cannes all the places in between where he’d been a shadow on the heels of the police forces leading them to that blood spatter that clue that piece of glass inexplicably placed where it shouldn’t and never himself, never just himself and what would they say if they could see him now?)

“Chasing you requires thought and dedication and planning,” said Saguru, shirt off, the chill of the outside against his back like a lover, “chasing you means that, like you said, they’re devoting time and resources to you, but also somehow means that they know the way you act - that they know what you’re going to do before you do it. It’s like they know, somehow, what your next move is going to be, which suggests they may have an inside source---”

“But no-one but you, me, and Jii-chan know about it,” said Kaito, “so it can’t be that.”

Can it not? Unbidden, poisonous, hot-leaded, how well do you know Jii-chan?

Shook that thought away, or tried to, but it clung to the corners of his mind and refused to go, to go.

If anyone would know Toichi Kuroba’s tricks so well, why not his assistant?

Why raise him in that case? Why take care of him like a son? Doesn’t know the full extent of what they’re planning, what they want Kaito for doesn’t think he’s going to get hurt doesn’t know they killed Toichi Kuroba doesn’t care doesn’t care doesn’t--

No, Jii-chan wouldn’t fit.

Investigate deeper into his background, mental note tacked to the pinboard of his brain, lost his track of thought in his thoughts. A breath, the cold air invigorating, and he shrugged off the trousers, picked up the spare clothes that Kaito had brought with him.
“Except,” said Saguru, “they’re chasing you on the whims of this mythical jewel that may or may not exist, and that may or may not grant immortality. To me, that says a disorganized state of mind — which seems odd, to me, because a disorganized and an organized personality don’t coexist well. They’re— hard to find within one organisation, if the organized personality is in control, which it usually would be. Why this fixation on the jewel?”

“Maybe someone rich wants it,” Kaito’s voice floating in from outside the helicopter. “Maybe someone’s paying them a lot of money to find it.”

“Except it still doesn’t tell us anything except that they’re disorganized enough to make this the hill that they die on. Think about it. Think about the expenses that they’re throwing at trying to catch you.” Pulled on the clothes, soft jogging trousers, softer shirt, “it’s not -- going to pay off, even if they do find the jewel. There’s enough money wasted on trying to catch you that the amount they get for the jewel would be negligible. Besides which, if it’s a renowned jewel, it can’t be sold. No buyer would touch it with a ten foot pole.”

Kaito, a frustrated noise, his head poking in around the door, “that’s it? That’s your profile?”

Saguru shrugging, “you do realize that’s a lot of guesswork, right?”

“That’s not how they do it on the television,” said with a pout, a slanted, bright pout that didn’t go with the rest of his expression: somber, quiet, dull, and he wanted -- he wanted, he wanted, he wanted to touch him, he wanted to reach out and take that misery away from him he wanted to help and he couldn’t, couldn’t.

“You may be surprised to hear this,” said in desperate need for levity, “but I’m not a television detective. I’d need a broader accent for that.”

Kaito huffing out a laugh and then silence. Saguru bundling the suit into the black carry all case, worry about it later; three steps to the doorway and then he was out on a rooftop narrow and angled, and the whole of Tokyo was beneath him, and they were far, far away from the crowd, or the massive helicopters, or anything recognizable.

Wondered how Kaito got home, on nights like this where he had to work alone because of chance or circumstance.

The whole world seemed quiet for the two of them, and bated breath and patience. Hooked his arm around his neck.

Kaito, releasing a hot blur of air inside his chest that tangled up around him like wires.

“Do you think we’ll figure it out?”

“Well, I do have an unblemished track record,” to say something, to fill the void, to put off the ‘at this current moment, all answers point to no’.

Kaito looking at him, and he knew, he knew.

“I don’t know,” said gently, softly. “I’d hope we would, but—” the statistics pointed to this being a crime organization and he was canny enough clever enough had worked in this field enough to know that if it was, they’d have friends in higher places than he did; there were some things that even the Hakubas couldn’t touch, that even their money couldn’t buy. If it was a criminal organization, a group of people focused on this jewel, and wanting to attain it without thinking of the scorched earth behind and ahead of them, then—-
Then there was someone in control who had nothing to lose, and those people were dangerous to fight with, to deal with, to try and understand.

Quietened himself down, didn’t think about it, didn’t think about it.

“It’s a nice night,” said Kaito, and the silence dragged his words down like they had layers of meaning. He pushed into his arm, into the crook of his arm, hid himself well. The tip of his nose against his chest. One arm around Saguru’s waist, circling tightly, holding him in place like there was nothing to keep Kaito from falling right through the roof.

Saguru nodding, not thinking of anything to say, and then, “---we should move. We need to get out of here in case they’ve picked up our trail.”

Halfway to home, the sky cracked open.

Small drops, at first, pinprick wetness phasing through his shirt as they walked past Ueno Park. Should have taken a taxi to home, but flagging down the car would draw the night to a close; they’d be there, then, there wouldn’t be anything else to talk about, it would end too soon, and Saguru wanted it to last a little while longer; wanted to think of himself suspended in the air for a little while longer, relying only, only, on Kaito. Trusting him to hold him steady. Trusting him to keep him safe.

Kaito, relying on him to do his work.

Heavier drops as they boarded the train to Denenchofu, crowded into one corner of it, and Saguru never took the train because it was too many people and too much stimuli, too many crowded voices, too many things that his brain wanted to lash onto, but it was halfway empty, and they made a sad picture, bedraggled and damp, holding onto the overhead bar, feeling it judder underneath his feet. Kaito close enough to feel the jungle heat of his skin against his, the coolness of the rain rising up out of his clothes, out of his flesh. Close enough to kiss, run his fingers through his hair, hold onto him tighter.

Station stop, the two of them tumbling out, and Saguru reached out, steadied him when Kaito hit a patch of sloppy damp on the floor, nearly went flying. Caught him, held onto him, saw Kaito glance up; could almost see the wheels in his brain turning, and then shyly, shyly---

Fingers locking. Holding on.

The rest of the walk quiet, quiet, quiet. Kaito against his shoulder, and no rush to get home, even with the thunder overhead, the sky pink and orange with smoky heat, lightning cutting across the sky. Heat suffused the raindrops, made it warm; every step dragged because his clothes were weighed down, heavy.

And Kaito’s hand in his, fingers hooked together, kept him moving slower, wanting it to last, wanting it to feel like something --- like something he could hang his thoughts on. A safe place to come back to.

“Do you want my coat?” a block away, hadn’t asked.

Kaito looking up, laughing. Gesturing at his shirt, translucent with rainwater, outlining starved-out muscles, the delicate wings of his ribs. “Kind of late for that, don’t you think? Besides, you’re a
giant - your coat is never going to fit me.”

Flushed; that was true, but he had to ask.

Thought of being suspended in air, people watching, the rush of death a step away, too many variables the wire could snap the plane could get jostled I could move too quickly and wrench a shoulder ruin the illusion and from the ground, from the ground, he’d seen the heists, he’d seen what Kaito would do, and it was more impressive knowing that after being in one. The amount of strength it took, of control, of patience---

At his house, the wrought-iron gates whispering open, garden half-drowned in the rain. Flickers of golden and white koi in the pond as Saguru hurried him up to the covered porch, up the steps, onto creaking wood. Behind him, the house silent, still, silent as always, but somehow---

More welcoming. More welcoming with Kaito beside him, and his rabbits in the basement, and his doves in the attic, and all of his magical paraphenelia everywhere, an extra pair of shoes in the doorway, and that wild, wild laugh melted into the wood so that it echoed within his memories when he stepped inside, and he hadn’t noticed, not before now, how lonely the house was, how deeply, brokenly, hugely lonely.

How lonely he’d been.

Turned to look at him, caught sight of him staring at him, and leaned down.

“You’ve made my life better,” wasn’t what he’d intended to say - he’d wanted to say something else, something suave, but that was what came out, and he couldn’t take it back, pretend not to, didn’t want to. If this wouldn’t last (statistically realistically it wouldn’t because he had nothing to offer but money and fortune, and he’d seen how little that was worth in real relationships) then he didn’t want it to be because of him; didn’t want Kaito to ever think that he hadn’t cared for him every day they had --- something. Every day they were something.

Held his breath, those lightning-blue eyes on him. Kept it held when Kaito leaned up and kissed him, closed-mouth, cold mouth, soft as gossamer. Shuddered, hot with feeling, reaching up to rest his damp hand on his cheek, drift it down to his throat, feel his pulse trembling underneath his thumb, his heartbeat like a hammer beat beneath his fingertips.

Kaito, willing, yielding, giving. His fingers on his cheek, then travelling up, trailing fire, touching the nape of his neck until he melted, he melted, sagged against the wall and him.

Behind them, thunder cracking the sky open, and rain falling faster, faster, faster.

“Saguru---” dazed, the taste of his own name on his lips; blinked to see Kaito watching him, dark-eyed, hungry-looking, the whole of the world reflected back in lightning strikes. “Not here. Inside.”

“I---I didn’t mean to---”

Kaito took his hand and tugged him in.

Door swinging shut behind him and the clatter of feet on the steps as he followed Kaito up, to the barren landing with the staring portraits and the jewel-blink casements, with the kimonos and the haori held in stasis in the middle, hanging from walls, arms outstretched, forgotten for decades. Through the sliding door, into the Western bedroom, hideously gauche, his mother’s European taste crushed into a Japanese room: four-poster bed, Louis XVI wardrobe, chaise longue by the window embroidered in cranes and heavy blossoms, roll top desk cracked wide to show off books
and notes, casefiles, his idle-blink laptop. Door sliding shut behind them, Watson’s perch abandoned (sleeping downstairs), and Kaito ghostly in the flashing light, stopping by the end of the bed, hesitating.

Pulling his shirt over his head, and there were so many scars.

Hard to believe it without seeing it, but Kaito was covered in them: rebound bullet off of a diamond, scrapes of rock against bare skin, a giant raking one that went down nearly the entire side of his stomach, a fingertip’s wide. Muscle tapering down to softness where his regime wasn’t working, where he wasn’t eating enough; need to force him to eat more in the back of his head underneath the wide-eyed gasping awe of seeing him again, again, again---

“It’s not li--like this is the first,” Kaito muttering, reaching up to clasp the back of his neck with one hand, dig his fingers in tightly, and, “you’ve seen me like this before.”

“Unattainably,” said Saguru - thought of sleeping at Jack’s, of Kaito staying here, of how close they’d kept dancing to something like this, but never reading it, never coming to it.

Kaito pausing, looking away, like he couldn’t bear to have his eyes on him any longer, but he couldn’t, he couldn’t. Wanted to see him more.

“It’s embarrassing with you staring,” muttered but Kaito’s hands drifted to his jeans, held onto them, slid them down slowly, slowly. Bare flesh rippling over the top of it, more scars, gray boxers worn soft with washing, his legs endless and long and strong, and---suck in a breath between his teeth take half a step closer stop like he was going to scare him and maybe he would and maybe Kaito would realize that this was too much and he’d go and---

“I can’t help it,” honest truth, strained and raw. “You’re---I can’t think of a word. I can’t think.” White noise brain, his tongue thick and fuzzy in his mouth, and he wanted to ask him how he could stand there and be so calm, and be so still and be so perfect, but it wouldn’t make sense to him anyway.

Kaito startling, then laughing, strangle-soft. “Ah---you say that like you haven’t done things before---”

“I h---I have but----not like this.”

Started glance in his direction, and then away again, a momentary mask slipping, and, “you have?”

“I dated. In England.” Couldn’t remember his fucking name now; all he had in his head was Kaito’s eyes, the shape of his mouth in half-dark, how the lightning swam out from behind him and turned the whole scene underwater, ethereal, insane. “Not a very long relationship. Not very healthy.”

Kaito angling his head up, challenging, bristling, smiling, “and this is?” It didn’t dig in deep the way Saguru expected; in hindsight, it was funny, left him smiling.

Took a step forward, and they were close again, and he was sick of dancing and thinking and trying to have his brain in the right order when all he wanted was the taste of Kaito’s skin on his lips, the noise of his heartbeat deep inside him, where his own didn’t venture.

Kaito angled his head up, looked at him from under lashes, and he was so ---

“I can’t get over how you look at me,” Kaito, soft, soft, soft, barely a whisper.
Saguru leaned down, rested his forehead against his, hilarious how ridiculously warped their heights were, how small Kaito was when he thought about it seriously, tried to rest his shoulder against him. Breathed him in, rain and damp skin and honeysuckle heavy and ripe with blooming, cinnamon and sugar, and something else he could never name. “It’s how everyone looks at you,” because that much was true; he’d seen people watch KID.

Kaito’s arms around his neck. He dipped himself down lower, and ran his hands to the small of his back, took hold of his hips, felt the shape and the warmth and the steadiness of his skin, grounding him, always grounding him.

“People look at KID like that,” said Kaito, chiding, “like he’s beautiful, and wild, and they want him.”

“People look at you like that too,” Saguru said, ran his hand up Kaito’s back, and the feel of him, God, the feel of him, “people look at you, and want you. I know I did.”

Kaito laughing, and the laughter fringed with something brokenly miserably horribly sad and, “it’s different with you,” raised his head, and then they were kissing, and all the words Saguru had poised to argue back weren’t strong enough to stop him from scooping him up around the waist and carrying him over, two steps to the right, the side of his knee smacking into the bed, collapsing the pair of them onto the mattress, squeak of the bed against the wall, the wood creaking with the weight of them both.

Kaito’s mouth, his mouth, live-wire, live fire, burning him up, up, up on the inside until he was squirming to roll him over, pin him down, hold him in place with kisses edged with too many teeth, never soft enough for Kaito; to hold him in place while he gorged, and gorged, and gorged himself, until everything in his head rose and fall on the small, hungry noises Kaito made, and how he arched his back to press them both together and left his head spinning, too-hot, too-small-too-tight, and in the back of the back of his head, there was nothing but white noise.

Static electric pressure in how Kaito shifted his hips up, and the whole world spinning on its axis leaving him gasping for air for more of him for mercy; running his hands down to take hold of those hips, raise him up, listen to the rattling beat of his own heart threaded in between pounding, throbbing heat, and none of this was---

*Enough it’s enough you’re enough*-- in every kiss that Kaito pressed to his mouth, every kiss that stung.

Roll with him, sudden movement, pinned to the bottom. Kaito, his eyes wild wide dark, staring down at him like he could see through him, hungry purring in the way that he arched his back, and moved his hips, and there was pleasure layered somewhere underneath that breathless, aching tightness, but Saguru couldn’t feel it through the thin haze of want and wonder, through the hungry goddamn aching of his heart. Reached up, took hold of his face, tried to draw him down, but Kaito pulled back, was like water or a dream.

“There it is,” sweet soft stunned, “that’s the---that’s the way. I wish I had a mirror.”

“Have my phone,” managed in half-second sharp little bursts of language, snuggled in between breath and heartbeat, “God, you’re so---” not beautiful not perfect not sweet not the most amazing thing he’d ever seen, but all of those, all of those and more and why couldn’t he think? Where were his words when he needed them, his brain when he wanted to actually think about these things? Why, when he wanted to, was it just struggle, struggle, struggle all the way?

Kaito laughing, arching his back, and God, God, the pressure of him in his lap made his eyes roll
back in his head, a slow whimper building in his throat (never like this even with Rhys on his good days never felt anything like this even in his wildest dreams) and the hands on him slipped down, caught hold of his hips, held on, and tried not to lose him, and---

Hands on his chest, leaning down, tip of nose to tip of nose. Kaito, too close, smiling at him, the trail of hot kisses up to his ear leaving his head twisting in circles.

“Do you---” sudden shyness, “do you want to? With me? I’ve never---”

Words trailing to silence, and oh, oh.

He’s not like you, in the interim, his brain snarling back from where it was hiding all the good words, he’s not like you he’s clean and perfect and you’re going to break him you’re going to touch him and break him make him dirty make him regret ever being your friend you’re going to ruin everything. Held his breath, because he knew it was a lie, but it was---

“It’s okay if you don’t want to,” Kaito, furiously pink, even in the shadow, “just---I---I’d like to.”

Saguru closed his eyes shut, pushed the throb of his thoughts away, and, “---I’ve---before, I’ve done it.”

Kaito blinking, surprised, “o-oh, I mean, uh, s---sure? That wasn’t --- that’s not really what I, uh---what I wanted to know, but---”

“It wasn’t good,” said Saguru, over him, needed to tell him, “it hurt, and it left me bleeding and in the dirt, and it wasn’t---and he wasn’t---” stuttered, “---he didn’t---care. I care, I care about you so much, I don’t want to mess this up, please just---just tell me that. Whatever I do, tell me I won’t---I won’t break it.”

“I’m not that delicate,” instead, “you’re not that strong.” And then a pause, and softer, softer, “is that what you think of yourself?

“It’s what everyone else thinks of me too,” it’s what Rhys and Quinn and all those nameless salarymen think of you it’s what you are it’s what you deserve, “---Kaito, I---”

Quiet, quiet, and, “that’s not who you are,” Kaito’s mouth resting against his collarbone, and the kiss burned like it was holy water and he was relentlessly less, “that’s not what you’re like. A--And even if you are, I---I don’t think you’ll hurt me. R-right?”

“I never want to hurt you,” savage, torn words. It hurt to say them, to even think there was a possibility, but the chances of it were --- more than zero, and so too much, and what did Kaito expect of him, really, the darling of the TMPD, one of the richest heirs in Japan, a boy who relied on the breaking? What did he think he was going to do when he was faced with something that he wanted, needed, and could get if he just called up men in power and dropped the Hakuba name?

“You’re never going to,” said Kaito, and slipped his hands underneath his shirt.

No preparation no thinking did he care did he want them to stop and go through cleaning (it would make it real if he showed Kaito the shower and told him what they were doing, and why had he assumed that he would be the one on top?) but the words died in his throat as soon as he tried to say them and he gave up, instead, leaned over, instead, kissed him, instead.

Kaito’s body shifting underneath his hands, one millimeter too far, and then his hands were on the headboard, and Kaito was beneath him, grinding up, rutting up, and his mouth hurt him all the way down his throat, and it felt like he could prick through his skin and find his heart, and eat it up
(what little of it there was left, that didn’t beat for Kaito) and he’d let him, he’d let him. Dragged his head back for air and clarity, looked down at him, and thought, *I want this.*

“Have you---” flushed pink, “---do you, uh---know. What it’s like? L--Like from. Uh. Porn, or---”

His blustering leading to peals of laughter, Kaito grinning at him, reaching up to snap his fingers, small and clever, around his hand, rub his hammer-fall pulse, “are you asking me if I watch *porn* detective?”

Saguru choking on the words he needed to say, and just glaring at him. “It’s not *funny,*” huffy and soft, leaning down so that at least he wouldn’t see his hideously amused face, he could inhale the scent of him instead, the feel of him, the *taste* of his skin on his mouth, and--- “I-It’s just, it, uh. It takes a lot of---”

“I know,” and wordlessly moving, reaching up to take his hand and disappear into the bathroom, first, first.

Leaving him alone, with his thoughts, that circled, and circled, and made him wonder, *what are you doing you’re both so young none of this is going to make you feel better in the morning* but the way Kaito looked *Jack would be so ashamed of you* and the way he felt beneath him. Pulse pulse of the shower going on, and Saguru rolled over onto his back stared into the ceiling summoned back the heat and the fire and the fear of jumping out of a helicopter tethered to a thin wire, trusting Kaito not to hurt him, to bring him back from the brink, and this -- this was less than that, but this scared him more, how was that possible?

Ten minutes later to the dot Kaito coming out, and switch, going in, turning on the shower, standing beneath it for too long while he shivered, shivered, cleaned himself up as best as he could - it wouldn’t be the best, but his last meal had been a while ago, and he was clean, he was clean. Dug through the bathroom cabinet for a bottle of lube (ten days to expire) and a box of condoms; they rattled as he walked back out, set them down, towel around his waist, Kaito beneath the sheets.

Expectant, flushed pink from the heat of the shower, and Saguru wanted to --- memorize it, memorize all of it, memorize him.

“You’re---really nice,” said Saguru, amended with, “to---to look at.”

Kaito laughing a little, but he could see the blush on his cheeks spreading out, and he was so pretty, he was so *pretty*. Moved over to sit next to him, grateful it was dark and he wouldn’t see how badly his hands were shaking as he pulled him closer, front to front, tilted his head down to Kaito’s damp forehead, and kissed him.

Lost time in kissing him, touching him, his hands wandering over the scars on Kaito’s back, on the back of his thighs, rediscovering noises he’d never heard before: the little gasp when he nibbled on the spot beneath his ear, how he arched and purred when his hands took hold of his arse and squeezed him closer, the hesitant, huffing breath when Saguru kissed lower, worked his way down over his throat, felt his pulse in his mouth like a melting sweet -- and lower, rolling them over so that Kaito was beneath him, running the tip of his tongue against a pearl-pink nipple (“fuck,” half-whispered, Kaito’s body twitching up, driving against him, and he was so hard it made Saguru whimper in the back of his throat, and want to pull back to see but he couldn’t he couldn’t see if he saw he’d burst into flames or--)

Suckled at that nipple, slid his hand over to the other one, and (worked off Kaito’s gasp of pain; slicked his fingers up with his own spit, and pinched, gently, rubbed, rolled; Kaito’s body rocking,
twitching up, never quite---stopping, always restless, always nervous, even when there was nothing, when he did nothing, when all he did was kiss). Kissed, and suckled, and tasted, and Kaito clutching the back of his head to him, his skin smoky-hot, and the world spinning, spinning, spinning.

Down over his belly, lingering nervously at the small arrow of dark hair beneath his naval, the twin arch of his hipbones (didn’t eat enough, wasn’t eating enough still) and---

“Fuck,” gasped into hot, breathless air as he found his way, sightless, fumbling, distracted, to the head of Kaito’s cock, and took him into his mouth (and it wasn’t like --- before, like Rhys, sticky-salty, and too much, always too much; it wasn’t like it was jackhammered right into the back of his throat, and was this what it was meant to be all this while?) and suckled, just a little; felt the hot, slick heat drip out of Kaito, and thought, oh, oh.

Kaito, louder than he was, moaning, arching his back off of the bed, muffling his noises by biting down onto his knuckles. Not like porn at all, nothing like porn, too bright, too bold, too dirty for that, almost, and he felt the tips of his ears go scarlet, and his whole face burn like fire, and wanted to hide himself down into the depths of the blankets and wanted to keep going and didn’t know which came first, which fought first, which made him want more. Swallowed down air through his nose (and the scent of Kaito too, different now, hotter, darker, swelter heat and layered honeyblossom, and something sugar, and something spice), and inched himself forward, well-practiced, so well-practiced---

Countless boys and countless men and yes he knew how foul it was that he gave and gave and gave without even stopping to think of what he was giving away (not that he held any thoughts to the importance of virginity but there were parts of him lodged in cheap motel rooms all over the UK, there were shrapnel-pieces of his affection in every pretty boy who’d looked at him askance in a bar and asked him to go with him, and Saguru didn’t want to think of this now, didn’t want to think about how all of those times meant so little---)

Only wanted to think of Kaito. Kaito gasping his name, unable to stop from moving, even now, even now, his fingers gripping the blanket above his head, then the pillows, one hand raking through Saguru’s hair and leaving him mute with pleasure; one leg twitching underneath Saguru, the heat of his knee against his belly, soft noises above his head (“Saguru, Saguru, fuck---fuck!” sharp as glass, rending him open) and inside him, soft noises everywhere, everywhere, leaving him whimpering.

Taste of him deepening the further down he went, and Kaito wheezed out air, gripped his head, begged, “Stop, stop stop stop---”

And he stopped. Head spinning, ears ringing, the taste of him so sweet on his tongue that Saguru wanted to keep going, swallow him down again, eat him up. Pulled himself up slowly, shaking, shaking, so hard he could feel the blood pounding in three separate places in his body, blinked until Kaito stopped blurring in front of his vision and asked, “wha---did I do---Did I do something wrong?”

Kaito shaking his head, mute and trembling, lunging forward, and this kiss was messier, darker, deeper, this kiss too a chunk out of him and left him spinning aimlessly in Kaito’s storm-strong wake, flailing helplessly. Too much to memorize: Kaito’s hands down his back, Kaito’s legs around his waist, the two of them rutting against each other like animals, fabric popping and tearing underneath fingers. Twitch of pain in his scalp as Kaito pulled his hair a little too hard; Kaito hissing in pain when he bit his lip, and drew a fleck of a fleck of blood, and yet, yet, yet --- it wasn’t painful, it didn’t hurt.
He wanted more.

Rolled over so that Kaito was above him, straddling him, all locked limbs, and lazy, lazy smiles. Pulled his head down for another kiss, and snaked the other hand between them, found Kaito’s cock, closed around it, gave an experimental squeeze.

In his mouth, Kaito whined, bucked down, and whispered, “I---fuck. *Fuck*, you feel so good --- ah, I want---I want you to---t-to do more than this.”

More than this? What could be more than this, this closeness this heat, this---

Oh. Two seconds late, the idea springing into his head, and with it, a heat blast from his face down the rest of his body (a twitch of his cock so painful it made him whine), and Saguru swallowed down what he’d been about to say, what had left him in the heat, “I’m---won’t I---won’t I be too, uh---”

Kaito was so slim, so slender, he was so much the opposite, wouldn’t it hurt?

Slowly could only do so much.

Kaito shaking his head, stubborn, rolling over onto his side, “I---it’ll be fine, I just --- I want to try, okay?”

The bottle of lube on the bedside table seemed to glow. In a daze he reached for it, wondered if he should tell Kaito that maybe it should be reversed (would that be insulting, would it imply he was smaller? *Well it’s not like he’s bigger than you are, let’s be real, he’s---*) hadn’t taken a good enough look at him, and he wasn’t experienced in *this*, but he’d read a lot of books, surely it couldn’t be that difficult?

Tried to remember what the books said, and came up with nothing but buzzing as he opened up the lube, splashed some onto his fingers, and curled into Kaito’s back, glad that he couldn’t see him turning pink, that he couldn’t see how his hand trembled when he reached down, between his legs, found the curve of his arse, and slid down, lower, lower, and none of the books came to mind, nothing came to mind, just *oh God oh God oh God*.

The heat of him was unreal, a separate temperature to anything in the world; how could he not know this? Whined, close to Kaito’s ear, two of his fingers sliding against his hole, slicking him up with lubricant; Kaito’s breathing deepening, but not saying anything, not making a noise. Saguru squeezed his eyes shut, tried to think (how many nerve endings what felt pleasurable what did he do) and moved his fingers slowly, around, around, around, worked his way in gentle little circles. This would be slow, wouldn’t it, until Kaito loosened up enough to take fingers, and he --- he didn’t know, he didn’t know, there was too much going on, and he couldn’t focus on anything.

Kaito, surprised, soft, intake of breath, a little arch of his back, one leg hitching higher, and Saguru had to bite his lower lip down hard enough to make it bleed so that he didn’t cry out.

Slow. Around, around, stopping to get more lube, trying to recall anything of the blurry-faced porn he’d watched in the dark, anything that could help him understand how this worked how this needed to be between them.

A choked-up broken-in broken-up noise and Saguru felt like something inside him had just snapped clean in two, and the spare parts of him weren’t long enough to close the gap, but Kaito’s noises bled so seamlessly into him that they didn’t need to be; slick, soft strokes against his hole, the lubricant slippery-hot on his fingers, the air around him filled with choked-down mouthfuls of
air.

Kissed his shoulder, trembling; lost track of time, how many minutes his fingers made the trip around his hole. Stopped to get more lube, slicked up his fingers again, and went back to circling, teasing, touching, working on sound alone.

Tried a finger, a single finger, and it slid in carefully, with work; Kaito whined, rutted back, was so much more evocative than Saguru felt he could be at the moment, and he loved it, he loved how vibrant Kaito grew, he loved the noises he made, he loved how he huddled against him, hid against him, made him feel like -- this was something worth it, something to remember, something to read into.

“Does it hurt?” into the crook of Kaito’s ears as he twisted his wrist around so that it sat up; curled his finger just a little, and felt, with the tip of it, the bump of his prostate.

Kaito’s two-part ‘no’, his arched back, the taste of his sweat on his mouth.

Slower, slower. Fingers in incredible heat, and he could be satisfied with just this, Saguru thought, he could be satisfied with just this, just Kaito rutting onto his fingers, panting, hot-eyed, wild-brained with everything that was happening to him, and he didn’t really care if he didn’t get off, but Kaito, Kaito, Kaito looked so beautiful and he was nowhere near close, and Saguru was desperate to see him more, more---

Waited, kissed him again; tasted his heartbeat against his mouth, felt it hitch when a second finger slid in, a little slower, a little more carefully, and---

“Ah, fuck,” whispered slightly, and Kaito’s head rocked back, muffled his mouth with the scent of his hair, the feel of him arched up like a bow against him. “Saguru, I---I can’t, I have to, I can’t----”

“It’s okay,” nipped at his ear, and felt the full-body shudder that followed, the hot, hot whine of air in his throat, “it’s okay, just---just, if you want to, it’s okay.” Somehow saying the words seemed more intimate, and that was stupid, of-fucking-course he knew that it was stupid, but this---this.

This was everything it was meant to be, and Saguru had never had that, not with anyone. His boyfriends had been older, eager to get to the part of it that was pleasureable; this was a novelty, to be allowed to touch and linger, let his hungry brain devour all the memories, store every ripple and gleam of Kaito’s flesh for future memory; this was more than what he was worth to ruin, and he didn’t think he could. Not with Kaito making those noises, heavy-bodied with pleasure; not with Kaito arching back and pushing back and trying to get more and more and more of him.

Three fingers, and Kaito complained, low and whiny in his throat, didn’t let him stop; his thighs clamped hard around his hand, and Saguru buried his head into the back of his neck, breathed him in, tried to savour the smell of him. Didn’t believe in fate, or reason, or things that---happened like this, but he believed in this, in Kaito, he believed they’d needed to find each other.

“Is it---” a gasp as his fingers rocked back into him, “I---is it good for you?”

“Better,” said Saguru, and Kaito laughed, high, wild, sweet, beautiful, and said, “I don’t believe you.”

Couldn’t tell how long it had been. Felt like it had been no time at all, but when he looked, the numbers on the clock had shifted forward almost an hour, gleaming red in the gloom. His fingers slipped in too easily now, all three of them; it was time, he was ready, he could take Kaito the same way someone else had taken him two three four months ago.
Didn’t want to stop this, though, and Saguru lingered, experimented with the way he curled his fingers, driving higher, sharper noises out of Kaito; experimented with reaching around with his free hand, taking cold of his cock (brand-hot, throbbing like scalded skin in his hand), and running his thumb against the wet slit.

The jump in Kaito’s blood, the way he threw his head back and almost howled out his name; that would -- stay with him, Saguru was sure, that would die with him.

“No,” breathless, airless, “nonono, want you --- want you in me, come on. I can take it. Please, Saguru?”

Saguru sighing, drawing his fingers back as slowly as he dared, and he missed the heat, he missed the clutch-tight pressure of Kaito’s body, he missed it all already. “Okay,” he said, “but --- but I’m afraid I’m too---”

Cut off by Kaito’s rippling, sugar-spun, sweet-soft laugh, his “Saguru,” like he’d said something silly.

In his head, I love you I love you I love you I---

Rolled him over, and this wasn’t ideal (the optimum position would be to roll Kaito over onto his front, to prop him up on pillows and open him up, angle him so that he’d be able to drag across his prostate on every thrust but he wanted to see him, he wanted to see his face, and the thought of not being able to hurt him, the thought of not being able to witness him hurt him) but it would do, and he leaned down, kissed his forehead, kissed his mouth, kissed his jaw, kissed him everywhere he hadn’t yet (there weren’t that many, but it was still too much).

Cupped his hips, lifted him up, brought them together, and---

Didn’t slide in seamlessly, not like porn where it was one thrust, a half-second glimpse of someone’s face contorted in pleasure, no hissing in pain, no pause where he could feel, twinned, maybe we shouldn’t do this. Kaito hissed, then yelped, dug his nails knife-point sharp into his shoulders, held on.

In his mouth, words like ash, “do you want me to stop?” Urged his hips forward, the tip of his cock flirting with Kaito’s hole, in his head mantraing too big too big too big--

“Can take it,” stubborn, a devil gleam in his eyes, something else undecipherable, indistinguishable from Kaitou KID (did he count as a leap off a tall building a sneaking mission through massed cops something dangerous and sinuous and deadly that could snap back and kill him?) and Saguru closed his eyes, buried his head against his shoulder, breathed in, and tried again, again, slower, slower, slower---

Carefully teasing him open, one small movement every breath; Kaito made no more noises, no pleased sounds, no hisses of pain, but Saguru strained his ears to hear them anyway, fancied he could hear his heart beating in the dark, rattling like a handful of teeth: beat beat beat, and he couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think, all the air around him was gone and his head was full of hot cotton wool, and another inch in, and---pop, the head of his cock in swelter, wet, warm, velvet-glove heat; Saguru keened, embarrassingly high; Kaito laughed, somewhere close, exhausted-sounding like the effort had been knocked right out of him.

In the dark, his eyes, his eyes, Pandora-blue.

“Does it h---”
“No,” stubborn, and wilful, even now, even trembling. “No, never, more.”

“Please,” whispered against the crook of his neck, both of his hands cupped over his hips, lifting him up, up, holding him there, and keeping them poised, balanced on this moment, this cusp of where they were, how they were, “please, don’t lie to me, not about this, don’t---”

“Shhh,” Kaito, gentle, sweet, “shhh, I’m not, I---it hurts a little, but I can take it. C-come on. Please, give me---everything you can give me. Please.”

Huffed out air, and then lifted his hips again, crept in, memorized this: Kaito gripping the headboard behind him, his head thrown back, sweat slick and glossy on his throat, broken sight-lines of him where shadow cut across what he was, made him so much softer looking than he was; hollowed out spaces where muscle lapsed and there wasn’t enough softness to cover bone (not eating enough getting by on bare minimum running on fumes) and then lowered his head, kissed him, kissed his mouth, tasted sweat and iron.

Tried to take a breath of air, tried again, a breath of air, tried again, working his way into Kaito’s tight body as slowly as he could; head spinning, breath a spiral, couldn’t focus on anything that wasn’t directly in front of him or a higher function. Even breathing seemed ridiculous when Kaito was underneath him, arching, moaning, begging.

When they were hip to hip, mouth to mouth, Saguru collapsed a little, his trembling arms giving out; their mouths brushed, and Kaito made a noise in his throat like a squeak, and then he was tipping his head back and saying, “fuck,” exhaled like a prayer.

“Sorry,” said Saguru, “should’ve --- warned you.”

“Fuck,” again, quicker now, terser, on the verge of a whine, almost amusing if he wasn’t having the air squeezed out of him; could’ve made a joke about that, but it felt - this moment, it felt too fragile to survive it. Kaito’s eyes blown wide, electric in the dark, and his mouth slick and glossy from kisses, and it felt like he’d carved and pried away a section of the mask Kaito wore every day like a banner, felt like he wasn’t --- maybe seeing him truly, but seeing him closer to true than he’d ever had.

Bent his head, rested forehead to forehead, and moved. Slowly, at first, a breath-held slide back that pulled him out of Kaito, the cold air stinging exposed skin; Kaito swearing underneath his breath, gripping his back so hard, he felt his nails bite through his flesh, and then slid back in just as careful, just as slowly.

Again. One heart-stopping pull-back, one long, wet, hot drive in. Again. Again.

Quicker, faster, colours blurring in the corner of his vision, Kaito’s nails slipping off his shoulders, gripping sheets, in the distant the headboard banging against the wall, and he should be careful, knew Baaya was downstairs and the walls of the house were relatively thin and in the same breath, didn’t care didn’t care didn’t care just wanted more of this, more of Kaito and the tightness and the heat and the wet, more of Kaito and toothy kisses, more of Kaito’s nails razor-blading down his back until he could feel blood sting. Rolled with him, Kaito shifting triumphant, glossy with sweat and moonlight, grinning down at him like he was the plunge, the ledge of a building, the cameras all watching waiting breathless like he was---

Moved his hips, and Saguru cracked his head back so hard against the headboard, he saw stars and spotlights.

Kaito laughing, leaning over and forcing his head up to see if he was concussed, checking his
pupils by the light of a mobile phone screen ("I’m fine," gasped out as Kaito’s hips shifted forward, shy and hesitant, hitting all the right spots, the heat of his body still crazy, still too-hot, still too much, “I’m fine, I’m fine--")

“Be---” breath pause shift, “more---” breath pause shift, and Kaito speaking somehow with a grin on his mouth that looked like it would tear his face in half, “careful!” squeaking of the mattress the board against the wall had an image, a mental image, of Baaya coming upstairs to see what the source of the swearing and the noises was and the door slamming open and, Saguru? No no no pushed that thought of his head, and focused on Kaito instead, had to focus on Kaito instead, but it was easy, it was so easy to look and get drawn in and drown in the sight of him with arched back, arms above his head; drown in the noises he made, shattered-glass sharp and trembling; drown in him, in him; breathed in again, and reached up for his face, drew him down, and kissed him, and he tasted, still, still, of moonlight and cinnamon and something cold, something distant.

Crack, the headboard again, at this rate he’d go through the wall, but Saguru’s mind flashed white and hazy with noise, and he didn’t care; not important, nothing important but Kaito.

Tightening in the base of his belly, and Kaito’s movements a slurry of jack-knife bounces, twisting hips, his face half-hidden in shadow but he could see his eyes closed, his mouth hanging open, could hear the little noises he made under his skin in his heart each one like a little needle slipping in so subtly into him he didn’t notice until there were a dozen, until his head rang with Kaito’s whimpering, Kaito’s noises, the sound of slick against slick, wet bubbling out of Kaito and spattering against his belly, too slick, too loose, for him to have come yet.

Rear up and burrow his face into Kaito’s throat, and think, think hard, tried to keep this moment just as it was: Kaito against him, bucking, arching, moaning against his skin; his body cumbersome, heavy, drowning heat all around him, the sound of the bed against the wall the mattress springs screaming for mercy the creak of floorboards beneath them Kaito’s fingernails chipping into his flesh searing a trail down the nape of his neck and--

-- whitenoisepleasureonpleasureonpleasuretheroomspinningandthenflashingwhiteandlikeaswitchbeingflicked--

Until there was nothing but buzzing,lightning humming in his veins, his head filled with blue.

Later, at some point, sagged against each other. His head throbbing in time with the scratch marks on his neck, on his back, with his heartbeat, with the pounding heat still wrapped around his cock and milking him, leaving him breathless, whimpery in the aftermath. Kaito, a comma, grumbling against his neck in a language he couldn’t piece apart yet, not with his brain on backwards, with everything he was focused on memorizing, memorizing.

Kaito’s skin scalded to the touch, and Saguru couldn’t bear it.

“Well,” said Kaito, half-laughed, half-sighed, “that was---”

Terrible, awkward, rough too much---Didn’t meet his eyes, couldn’t, had he been too pushy? Had he tried too much, asked for too much, wanted too much?

“I’m sorry,” begun when the silence stretched, “I didn’t --- I thought you were---”

Kaito huffing, elbowing him in the stomach not hard enough to even dent the skin; he was so weak, Saguru could feel his body trembling against him, like the effort of lifting his arm cost him more than he knew. “I was,” said Kaito, and didn’t look at him, “I wanted it -- I wanted the first to be
with you. You know? And I just felt---” pause again, and, “don’t fill in the blanks while I’m thinking, I want to find the right word.”

Twitch of the corner of his mouth, and Saguru tilted his head down, rested it on the pillow. His chin was just high enough to touch the top of Kaito’s head when he was down like that, curled up like that, “Okay.”

Silence, but comfortable, now, not itching underneath his skin, not gapped with pauses. Kaito’s hand drifted over his back, and he let it, leaning back a little so he could see him; if there was more light, he could sketch him out in his brain, superimpose the image he had of him five minutes and sixteen seconds ago with this one, with Kaito with messy hair, and bright eyes, his mouth kiss-red, his neck pock-marked where his teeth left too much of an indent, bruises blooming where Saguru’s hands had gripped too tightly, and if he let him pull out now, he’d roll him over, tend to him, kiss them all until Kaito warmed again underneath his mouth and---

Too greedy. Too much.

Right, right, he was being a pervert, he was being dirty, the sort of dirty that Rhys had seen in him in the bar; the sort that would take and take and never pause.

“---Like I was going to burst,” said Kaito, “you know? I just---I needed to be---just me, for a while, and the rush from the heist, and---” disjointed noise, split in two, “---I just wanted you,” quieter, “I just wanted you to --- touch me. Keep me here. Keep me me.”

“I, for one, relish this method of retaining information,” said deadpan, his usual voice, his ‘I’m giving a lecture to a roomful of cops’ voice. It worked. Kaito laughed.

He’d give anything in the world to hear him laugh like that: unconstrained, a little inelegant, the noise catching on his exhaustion and blossoming that little bit louder, that little bit wilder.

“Pervert,” said Kaito, fondly.

“Been called that before,” said Saguru, and shifted his arm a little, to drape it over the top of Kaito’s head so he could drive his fingertips into his hair, and relive the texture of it, the feeling of it. “Been called that by a lot less kinder people than you.”

Kaito crooking a smile at him, leaning in, the butterfly-touch of his mouth against the tip of his nose. “I’m a pervert too,” half-whispered like it was a secret, “but only around you. You’re a bad influence.”

“Of course I am,” said Saguru, laughing, laughing, and it felt good to laugh, roll around in bed, not to think about the four hundred and sixty six other things he needed to think about; it felt like freedom, almost. “I’m a terrible influence. Terrible cop. Terrible boyfriend, if you believe my ex.”

Kaito, piqued curiosity. “Your ex? You dated --- seriously, before---” a faltering, did he mean ‘me’? Please let that be what he meant.

Idled his fingers through his hair, combing it back, feeling the wet, hot place where they were joined a throbbing low in his belly; his fingers felt clumsy, too big, too inelegant, but he couldn’t get enough of touching him, wanting to touch him, of memorizing him from top to bottom. “---It seemed serious to me, at the time,” said Saguru, “but, in hindsight, knowing what I know now---it probably never was.”
Kaito crooking himself up on an elbow, and watching him; a ripple of pleasure blurring through him. “Tell me about it?”

And it was ludicrous, wasn’t it, to sit there and think about things that he’d buried so deep inside they became nothing; not forgotten, but useless bits of information, piecemeal, dredged up from the bottom of the bottom of what he remembered - disjointed, gleam of first-frost grass in moonlight, a Keatsian line, dark eyes dark hair dark smile, the pub he was in swirling and smoggy with cigarette smoke, the feel of two fingers stabbing deep into him and the cold ground against his back, staring up, was this all that there was? Rhys grunting against his neck as he burrowed himself into him, no passion, or some passion, but overwrought, play-pretend passion, nothing like what had happened in the last half hour.

Nothing like what it should be.

“It wasn’t really dating, I suppose,” said Saguru, “…he was older than me. Twenty, to my fifteen, I would say? Perhaps older - he was quite a good liar.”

Kaito’s eyes on him, not judgemental. Had he even told anyone about this other than Jack? Tried to think back while the rest of him was busy memorizing Kaito, came back with no, not anyone, nobody who looked at him the way Kaito looked at him, who wanted to know the way Kaito wanted to know, for the same reasons Kaito wanted to know: I want to help, I want to make you feel better, I want to be a part of your life.

Wasn’t it that? Was he reading too much ahead?

“You were young,” said Kaito, skipped a beat when he laughed, “ahh, I’m so inexperienced next to you.”

“It wasn’t a good idea,” said Saguru, quietly. “I didn’t really --- know anything. And Rhys was --- well, an English graduate. He studied at Oxford - very smart boy, really… a little bit, ah…..” There had to be kinder words for the words in his mind, but Saguru couldn’t think through the fog of his brain, “…selfish, I suppose. He wanted the world to be the way he saw it. Couldn’t understand that it wasn’t.” A smile, gentle, at the corner of his lips - God, Rhys had been foolish, in hindsight. Stupid, and petty, and childish, and not the sort of person Saguru could imagine having on his arm, trailing him around the world, at peace with his wicked job and the demands it made of him.

Is Kaito?

“---He saw me in a pub, and I suppose I was --- well, I wasn’t feeling my best. My mother had a complex about how much I ate, and I’d been made to go out with the family, and then---” Saguru sighed, rolled a little onto his back to stare into the blank ceiling; his arm, around Kaito, curled him closer. “---well, it was an unpleasant evening all around. I just wanted to sit alone in the pub and read my book, and then Rhys walked in.”

(Tall elegant Byronic eyes in a Keatsian face wild curly hair and a narrow jaw and a smile that bordered on cruel when the right light hit it and he saw him and he stopped and Saguru’s heart beatbeating quicker what did he want what did he see why was he looking at him---Can I sit here / Oh, um, ah --- no chance taken and the booth seat squeaking as he sat down steepled his fingers said you look like the best kind of artwork

Stumbling, pushing his uneaten peas around his plate, not looking up to meet his eyes, and that would be?

Touchable, said smirked, a hand reaching out and touching the edge of his jaw)
Told Kaito, who snorted, but didn’t joke - didn’t joke.

“---I was young and vulnerable, and in a bad place,” said Saguru; easier to see now, “my mother and I never did get on well, but she had days where I was her --- primary target. I was too loud. Too tall. I liked the wrong things. I never spoke enough. I spoke too much---” her staccato voice like a branding iron chipping away bits of him and replacing them with what she wanted to see: perfect poised pleasant dead on the inside doll eyes staring out, “---it was---easy, to fall for his charm. He could be charming, when he wanted to, and he was that night----took me away with him to a garden somewhere---”

(The University’s Botanical Gardens, walls hemming them in and Rhys sauntering ahead pulling him along without giving a thought to how he stumbled on the ice, reciting poetry, one arm extended until they reached a gap where the wall had crumbled dust-like to the ground and then they were over and inside and the air tasted of ice and orchids and Saguru couldn’t----)

Pushed against the wall, stinging kisses, cold ground, his trousers around his ankles---)

“Rhys made such a show of how good it had been for him,” skipped past that, and he could see Kaito’s brain latching onto the omission, read into the hints; his face didn’t move, but he curled closer, rubbed his cheek against his shoulder, “---It’s---”

“Is it different?” asked Kaito. “Was it different, with him?”

“It was boring,” sharp, soft laugh, “boring, and painful. Not --- hugely exciting. Quite a disappointment to me then, really, because I was young, and childish, and---” pause, rethink, come back to this, always to this, “---it’s different, with you. It’s better. Feels nicer.”

“I’d hope so,” muttered, but the faint blush on his cheeks was visible, glowing. Bright. “Geez, you’re a big bastard, Saguru.”

“I did warn you.”

“Oi, I thought you were bragging.” Groaned, and rolled onto his back, stretched, grimaced, “---won’t be able to sit down for a week.”

“I’m not that big,” said Saguru, rolled with him to burrow against his side, ran his fingertips down over his chest, the diamond-gleam of scar tissue: bullet graze on his right shoulder, a hair-thin knife-mark running from collarbone to belly, small cuts from exploding glass, glossy like they’d been seared into his skin.

“Big foreign bastard,” singsonged Kaito, and his breath hitched when he touched his scars, and his hand half-rose like he was going to stop him, and then stilled, slipped back, “----I’m sorry it hurt. With your, uh---your---ex. I don’t think it’s supposed to hurt. … This didn’t hurt, and I’m kind of---not----”

A pause, and Saguru looked up, couldn’t help the smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth: Kaito, flushed, grumpy-looking, viciously, vividly embarrassed, “experienced?” said in a half-breath, half-laugh.

Kaito growled, and burrowed his head into his shoulder. “Shut up,” sulky-voiced, “it’s normal for boys my age, okay---”

“Weren’t you teasing Aoko just the other day about never having had a boyfriend?”

“Do as I say,” from the depths of the pillow as Kaito rolled over in disgust, hid his face, “not as I
do. A-anyway, how was I supposed to----to get experience with this kind of thing? Not like I knew--
--all along that this would be---that I’d be---”

“Gay?” A thought, then, “maybe bisexual--do you still find women attractive?”

Muffled noises that he took to mean ‘shut up, stop talking’. Ah, well. He supposed, right now, it
didn’t matter; that right now, it didn’t really have any bearing on what else happened.

Saguru leaned over, burrowed himself against him again. Kaito raised his head, and turned, and in
the dark he couldn’t see him or the expression on his face, or the way he looked when he brushed
up against his chest, and then curled there, in a tight little whorl, his arm thrown around his waist.

In the dark, in the quiet, he could almost sleep.

Except Kaito: “…I’m glad you’re here,” half-breathed again, like if he said the words any louder
they’d hurt, tear his throat open, show everything he was to him, “---I’m glad it’s you. Don’t---
don’t go away.” Shaking, choked-up. “I’m so sick of being alone.”

Thought of the house, the Kuroba house, walls galleried with pictures of Toichi and Chikage and
happy family shots at the beach and at the parks and during festivals, the thick layer of dust on the
kitchen counters, the silence split open by Kaito Kuroba shouting out every day ‘I’m home’ and
getting nothing but echos back, and then the room beneath, the clutch of Kaitou Kid, and his own
house, his own house so similar to what Kaito had to deal with, except there were no family
pictures on the walls and no dust on the counter-tops, and every time he came home, it was to
Watson and to Baaya, and to indistinct servants who slid in behind him and cleaned up every trace
that he lived, breathed, used this house.

Kaito’s breath ragged against his chest, but growing slower, slower, the heist and the moment and
everything wearing on his nerves and his energy like a weight, and Saguru leaned down and kissed
his forehead, soft and warm, skin like velvet; touched his nose to his as Kaito snuggled up, and
was there, was there, was there.

“I’m here,” whispered, just as fragile, and he knew now what it felt like to say words that felt
bladed, felt too-big, felt too important, and saying them made them real, made them a weapon,
made him vulnerable; so this is what it’s like to be on the other side of this, thought about Jack and
the way he slid his gaze over to Hei every time they were in the same room, checking that he was
there, checking that he hadn’t left; his grandfather and the dark in his gaze when he folded out the
pictures of Toichi Kuroba; Shinichi, exhausted to the bone, eyes closed, smile on his face as he
spoke on the phone to someone on the other end.

In his life, he’d only ever used them as tab A to slot B - strong feelings that led to strong crimes -
just stand there and look pretty Detective Sergeant Harrington shaking his head at him and in a
stage whisper to his Detective Constable, brain of a supercomputer, and heart of the fucking Tin
Man.

“Will you stay?” quieter, gentler. “I don’t -- need people to just be here. People can be here. I need
them to stay. All the time. No matter what.”

“I will,” said Saguru, insistent, found his jaw, tilted his head back up so he could see him in the
dark: blue eyes like fire, the tip of his nose, the curve of his mouth, his jaw angled and skeletal
from too-little food. ‘I’ll stay with you as long as you’ll let me.”
And Kaito smiled, and leaned up, and kissed him, and it was soft, and gentle, and warm, and completely disbelieving.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

it’s ya girl, back at it again with the world’s most infrequently updated fic, still floored by the fact that people ??? genuinely enjoy this???? it’s just so bizarre to me, considering this started as a passion project and a writing exercise and has blossomed into so much more, and introduced me to so many wonderful people.

thank you for all your comments; i read each and every one, and i do plan on replying to them some day! a few notes:

- this is pre or in an alternate universe, so shinichi never gets the serum (or hasn’t yet; I haven’t decided how to work that particular issue in).
- this is also in an alternative universe where jack and hei (darker than black) are not really metahumans, but former secret agents, with jack working for MI6 and Hei as a former member of an international agency.

The past few weeks distilled: two heists, exams, the last week before the Culture Festival a mess of rehearsal and rehashing. Shinichi Kudo no longer at the department, and every time he called him to try and arrange a meeting to watch those tapes, he got rerouted to his voice-mail - Teitan High was playing against one of the other schools, and things took a back seat.

No more sightings of strange men in black outside his house, but Saguru knew they were there, somehow. They were watching from somewhere else, waiting for their moment - that they had given up was so slight a chance (0.4%) that he couldn’t even count it within the realm of options, but he hoped. Hoped, little-boy hoped, that they’d grown tired of this game, that they’d stopped, that they’d had enough; what could a teenage boy get them what a grown man couldn’t?

But in the back of his mind, every whisper in the wind took on a different meaning; every shadowed corner had eyes. At every heist, he was there, scanning the crowd, pretending to look for Kaitou Kid and letting him slip out of his reach (an unsecured window in a police officer’s disguise a backwards climb down from a third floor window in a part of the building where nobody could access without the misplaced keycard) and looking waiting watching for a pair of steel-blade eyes, a pair of skulking forms would he know them without knowing them? Would they look like they looked in his head, large and unwieldy, shimmery-faint with rage, sliding through the crowd like an absence, a piece of the world hollowed out and left emptied.

But they weren’t there and Saguru focused on other things: homework he’d forgotten to do, classes he was in danger of failing, lines he hadn’t learned yet for the Culture Festival. Evenings in a haze, Kaito in his lap, throwing blueberries to Watson from across the room, writing in code on one of his notebooks, leaning over his shoulder to look at his homework, correcting his French or his English, scurrying him upstairs as soon as the clock chimed a late enough hour that it wouldn’t be lazy to go to bed (they never went straight to bed).

Kaito delighted, for some reason, in keeping him all to himself, and Saguru let him, clutched that to him like it was the last thing he’d live on, and let the days roll past and the nights disappear too quickly.
Day of the Culture Festival, and he rolled out of bed two hours too late, dashed to school with his Sherlock uniform in his bag, and met Ryuichi outfront, panicked pacing beyond the gates, separate from all the parents and the people who’d come to see their children; saw him, and took hold of him, grabbed him by the arm and drew him aside to yell at him in stage whispers as he bundled him down the hallway to the third floor classrooms, and shoved him into 1-F, which they’d requisitioned as a changing room.

“Get changed!” barked at him from beyond the door, “honestly, he wears a pocket watch and he’s the one late---” fading into the background until it left him in the sun-dazed buzz of the classroom, empty, the windows to the hallway fringed by rolling racks of clothing, someone’s gigantic mirror props in cardboard boxes spilling like toys all over the floor. Sighed, and slipped his shirt up over his head, tossing it aside, reaching for the bag of---

---the window opening behind him---

Rerouted his hand to his front pocket and slipped the extendable baton loose; swished it to its full length and turned around to see Kaito, dangling one foot beyond the window, the other flat on the floor inside, grinning at him. Hair smoothed back flat and dark with pomade, in black trousers and a white button up ruffled at the collar, shirtsleeves undone and fluttering like dove wings, one monocle hiding lightning-bright eyes.

“Excited to see me?” said with a twitch of his hand to the baton held hip height, the grin on his mouth every inch older wiser sharper more like KID than anything he ever held in his presence, and it was marvellous how he managed to slip underneath the skin of someone else, and hold onto it; to become someone else so smoothly that it was hard to start to tell apart which one of him was the real one (except he knew, he always knew, he’d watched him for so long that he could tell Kaito from KID from Arsene from the gunshy cop he liked to pretend to be from the very spirit of the phantom thief, and it was this: Kaito’s smile two seconds slow, his hand gripping hold of the window sill so that he didn’t slip free the single humming minute before his appearance and his speaking and how he fiddled with the monocle with his free hand pushing it back like it would put Saguru better into focus when Saguru knew it was only made of glass).

“Always,” said Saguru, and set the baton down, reached out his hand and, “could you come in? You’re giving me heart-palpitations just looking at you.”

“I’m not the one who jumped from a helicopter with just a cable attached,” said Kaito, and slid off the window-sill; stood next to him, and he was still small even with lifts in his shoes and the wedged heel that Ryuichi had dug up from who-knew-where, and Saguru wanted to smile at that (didn’t because Kaito would huff at him which would make him smile more which would make Kaito huff more which would turn into an hour long--) “you’re much more dangerous than I am, Saguru.”

“Never again,” like he’d said every night afterwards. “You look good. Are you my Arsene?”

“The one and only,” said Kaito, stepped back and spread his hands wide, wide, “what do you think?”

“Mmh…” Cocked his head to the side and considered him from all angles: ruffled shirt was very indicative of the period but he didn’t know if Arsene had ever worn such atrociously tight (trousers?) clothing or the gleaming gold locket around his neck or the monocle or the top hat or the blood-bright coat and he didn’t remember if Arsene had such a skeletal face, such a grinning wickedness to him, but Kaito carried it so well that from now on that would be what he saw in the books: Kaito, a thief’s grin, the bloody coat, that purpose blinding in its magnitude incredible to watch and keep watching even when everything else turned to ash around him.
“I like it,” decided, in the moment that he did; canon had only ever been such a narrow scope for him, had only ever pierced into the world he created where he could be everything he wanted - a good detective, a help to the police, someone with a friend who stayed behind with him when everyone else called him strange and weird, and crazy, and nobody had ever really told him that Sherlock was always meant to be an archetype because for him at four years old, he was -- everything.

“Not too much?” Spinning around to catch himself in the mirror, eyeing it up with a showman’s gaze, trying to decide what would take away from the lines the background the play that Ryuichi had painstakingly rewritten every rehearsal, making it tighter, sharper, bringing current events into it, taking it out, making it more than it was. “I think the coat’s a little bright --- maybe I should take it off?”

Which reminded him he’d been undressing and he slipped his shirt over his head, tossed it aside, and pulled on his button up, fingers fumbling, the buttons too slick and small underneath his fingertips, “try,” suggested as he stepped out of his trousers, bent over the desk to ruffle through his bag and see where he’d put his socks, his sock garters, the trousers he’d picked out for his suit, and Kaito moving to take off his coat, the flash of crimson in the forefront as he shed his coat, not even stopping between breaths. Underneath it a thin shirt, the ruffles making too much of his chest, making his thinness seem softer, blurred a little bit.

Didn’t hide his ass, either, framed inside his trousers, and Saguru groaned, ducked his head back down to the bag and pulled out his trousers from the very bottom; started with his socks, then his sock garters, busying himself so he didn’t look up and watch Kaito in front of the mirror like a budgie, making accessories appear and disappear, trying to decide what he was going to put forward for Arsene.

“Are you ever going to get done dressing?” said Kaito, grinning, grinning, “or are you just going to keep checking me out at every opportunity?”

Fumbled, and then, in a voice smoother than he anticipated, “I can do both.”

“Only ’cause Ryuichi will kill you if you’re not do---”

Footsteps outside the room, slow measured careful and then the door opening, a single moment where the air stuttered to a pause, and he was looking right at his mother.

Tall, in her heels, in her black suit, her hair swept up into a bun like a shiny black cap on top of her head and lips stained red from expensive lipstick, no ladders in her stockings, not a hair out of place; stopped, there, and looking at him, her head tilted to one side, looking at him and looking at him and looking at him and then at Kaito.

His heart slipping up tight into his chest and he pulled his trousers on, buttoned them hastily, said with all the stiff formality he could muster (that she preferred), “mother.”

His mother with her head cocked to the side, then to the other side, not saying anything. Tapped a bright glossy nail against the doorjamb to the classroom. “You’re involved in this as well?” Melodious, a hint of an English accent kept carefully to a minimum, just enough to please the social circle back home, just enough to make her seem something apart; he wondered if she ever tired of the balancing act, of making herself fascinating by making herself other. “I didn’t think you’d give into such foolishness.”

Kaito slipping away from the mirror, putting on his coat.
Saguru moved his shoulders, put forward a confidence he didn’t feel, couldn’t fake, “I thought it would prove an entertaining experience,” and he was six years old again and having to justify why he didn’t want to go to football (when he wanted to try) when he didn’t want to read French literature (when he wanted to read everything) when he was telling cousin Jack that he couldn’t stay behind and play with him because he had things to do and people to see (and he was twelve years old and his mother didn’t want him open to Jack’s casual influence, didn’t want him to turn into what his uncle had seen desirable: open friendly left alone to fend for himself canny as a starving fox).

“Did you?” A question without an answer, because the answer was predetermined and it was: you’re wrong this is foolish you look ridiculous.

Felt his cheeks heat and he ducked his head, resolutely buttoned his cufflinks, reminded himself that this was nothing new, this was nothing that he hadn’t anticipated. “What are you doing in Japan?” he said, tried to think past the blind-panic fog in his brain, “is it not party season in the UK, then?”

“I thought I would drop by and see my son.” Said flatly, no inflection; he’d always admired how she could manage that, empty her words so that he couldn’t read into them, so that he wasn’t able to understand what she really felt; it was something she learned to do when he was little, when everything she said stank of reproval or validation and the psychiatrist said--

“Oh,” said Saguru, and finished dressing, picked up his deerstalker and his uncle’s pipe, and tucked the pipe into the top pocket of his trench coat. “Well, thank you for visiting. I’m well. The house, I believe, is open if you would like to rest after your trip.”

“I’ve been here for a few days,” his mother folding her fingers together, looking again to Kaito and thinking wondering considering his presence. “Who is this boy, Saguru?” A pause.

“This is Kaito Kuroba,” said Saguru, just as flat, just as dead, some jealous part of his brain panicking running away with him telling him to give the bare minimum information, “he’s a---”

boyfriend my reason for happiness the thief I’m here to catch a friend a friend a, “—a—-a friend.”

A flare of something like recognition, deep in her eyes, but burrowed down so that he didn’t understand what it referenced, but it had to be what Grandfather Yukito had told him in his house, in his garden on a rainy day that felt like it was years ago, calmer calmer calmer than it was now: she hated Toichi. But Toichi was dead, and his son was here, and he could see Kaito balancing on the balls of his feet like he wanted to be anywhere but here and it was his fault he should have said--

“I see.” Sharp, sharp, sharp. Didn’t approve of Kaito, clearly, but it was hard to tell what she didn’t approve of specifically. “Hm.” Cut across a look at him so bladed Saguru felt the air whistle when she turned, pinned him down, looked him over.

Kaito, quiet, tipping his top-hat a little; there it was again, a flush of red in her face that didn’t look like it was embarrassment, didn’t look like it was flirtatious, didn’t look like anything but blind rage.

“When you’re done with this foolishness,” she said, snapped her gaze to him instead, and Saguru straightened self-consciously, all too aware that he looked ridiculous in his Sherlock outfit, “meet me at the house. It has been a while since we have spoken, and I would like to be updated on your life.” A pause, and then, “your father sends his regards, and apologises for not coming along. He is currently very busy with a case.” A sliver, just a sliver, of disapproval crept into her voice, but it was something, “and he’s very annoyed that you haven’t read over the case files he sent you. Don’t
you know his career relies on your cooperation?"

“Yes,” quietly, “I’ll look them over immediately.”

“As you should have done,” she said, “instead of this childishness.” To Kaito, a mechanical-doll tilt of her head, and then she was gone, her heels staccato on the tiles, the wake she left behind bristling with hostility.

Kaito, a full five seconds after her departure. “…that’s your mother?” So shocked, so awed, like he’d never anticipated it. What had he imagined, Saguru wanted to know - was there any other way for an influential mother to be?

Didn’t say that. Instead, “I wish she’d told me she was visiting. I could have planned something.” Kept her out of the house, so she wouldn’t see the rabbits and the doves, the casual mess of Kaito living there too, the noise it was in now; how he’d kept the staff she’d told him to fire, put up modern paintings on walls that had only held scrolls before; locked the rooms that nobody used. Invested in a better security system.

“My mother?” said Kaito, again, and shook his head, the top hat bobbing.

“Not what you expected?” said Saguru, glanced up as he fiddled with the cufflinks on his shirt; how stupid, he’d brought ones shaped like magnifying glasses, cheap ones from ebay that he liked the look of, had never worn. His mother was right - this entire endeavour was childish, a little boy playing pretend while he had things to do. If not this, then he could have looked into the Organization more, he could have -- done something about the men following Kaito.

“You’re so---” stumbling, hesitant, “---different.”

Saguru smiled at him, glanced up, finally; Kaito looking in the space she’d left, like her imprint was still there, her shadow glaring at them. “Her life has been difficult,” said Saguru. “I grew up in relative wealth and freedom. My mother had only her mother - my grandmother - and she died when she was quite little, I’ve been told. And, well… she doesn’t get on well with my grandfather.”

Because of your father. Because he abandoned them. Because he---

*Ruined her reputation ruined her name she couldn’t work she couldn’t do anything do you know how mortifying it is to have your own husband living with another man her clients stopped coming they foreclosed the house they---*

“I gathered,” said Kaito, and then, softer, “---are you okay? You seem --- quieter, now.”

“Well, she does have a point,” said Saguru. Straightened his back, and looked at himself in the mirror, an overgrown boy in an old suit that had cost too much money, all because it looked similar to his idol - silly child, his mother would’ve said, and she was right, as always, she was right, she knew him better than he knew himself, and she was right about this and right about coming here and right about everything. “I shouldn’t have joined up, I should’ve just - worked on the cases I had. Maybe tried to track down the organization instead of --- instead of wasting my time doing this.”

Kaito, quiet. “… Yeah,” he conceded, and then hopped up onto his desk, folded one leg over the other. “But that wouldn’t have gotten you any closer to solving the case, would it?”

“Your faith in my talent astounds me,” said Saguru, through the sting, the sharpness, the bite of it.
Kaito smiled, said, “---if you don’t know your audience, how do you know what will make them respond? Do you try things and hope for the best, or just --- do some research, distract yourself, do stuff on the periphery?”

“Is this another magician question without an answer?” said Saguru, sighing.

“It’s what my dad taught me, okay?” Huffed. Then: “...you can’t focus on one aspect of your act. If you do, then the rest of it is going to suffer. You’ll have good timing, but terrible showmanship. Or you’ll have great showmanship, but no timing, no confidence. Everything needs to play together, otherwise what you’ll end up with is a lot of stress, and an audience who isn’t really invested in what you’re doing.”

Every time Kaito brought up these ideas, these challenges, Saguru tried to picture how old he must have been; imagined, every time, Kaito being small and bundled up in performer black and white, looking up at his father as Toichi explained (secrets hints lessons) everything there was to explain about being a magician and he wondered, he wondered, between the room that Toichi had in the belly of the house and the message he’d left for Kaito, between the lessons and everything else he’d lumped onto him, this little spark of a child, had he known this would happen? Or had he just anticipated, wanted nothing more than a son to continue his legacy, to finish everything he started?

Like his own father. Like what he’d been told, two years old, held on his lap, *you’ll be a great asset.*

“It makes sense,” said Saguru, turned to look at him; Kaito faced the other way, watching the way the sunlight flickered on the leaves outside, “It’s definitely something to keep in mind, but--it hardly applies to crime, doesn’t it?”

A flicker of amusement, and then, “---if you didn’t understand the case,” as if speaking to a small child, “how are you going to solve it? Don’t you think being around me - even here - makes a lot more sense than spending all your time with books and records and case files?”

His mother, standing in the doorway, her eyes on his face, and she didn’t say anything but he knew she meant, in a mouthful, useless, time-waste, everything they’d given him and taught him squandered.

“...That’s not how I was taught,” stiffly, changing the sweep of hair over his brow, cramming his hat back on. “It’s not how things work.”

“Why not?” said Kaito.

Turned and he was there, grinning up at him, and there needed to be a moment, a pause in time so he could memorize all over again how beautiful he was in sunlight, how all the circumstances of fate had come together and decided that this would be the face that launched a thousand ships and given it more: the crook in his smile that made it look a little mean, his lopsided hair cut which swept low over his forehead, the fingernail-width scar scraping along the underside of his jaw from a childhood accident, and his eyes, his eyes, in the dark, Saguru always came back to his eyes, and in the light they were more, more, more.

“Why not?” said Saguru, and he couldn’t --- he didn’t have an answer for that, which was ridiculous, because he had an answer for everything, even if that answer was just ‘because it’s so’, that would suffice for crime. But when he tried to speak it, the words went to ash in his mouth, and in the recesses of his brain, past all the other thoughts, it glowed neon-bright like a Shibuya advert,
going, ‘why not why not why not why not’.

Kaito leaned up, kissed him, and he tasted like the night before: late night stumbling into the house with two fingertips of sake inside his stomach, shower blasting cold, into bed where Kaito turned to him in the dark and found his face, kissed him, kissed his neck, kissed his chest and pushed his heart to beating again after that blast of cold. Saguru melted, couldn’t think for two three four seconds maybe, slipped his hands into his hair and held onto him, bitterly aware that the moment would end and he’d have to think like a detective and not a thief or a magician, but just for now, he could pretend.

“Trust me,” murmured against his mouth, “when have I ever led you wrong?”

Laughed, laughed, and said, “when you took my gas mask and left me tied up in the middle of a museum floor?”

“---Creative differences,” but Kaito couldn’t hold onto his stiff tone, and it dissolved into a giggle against his neck, and there was a strange, strange moment where Saguru wanted to tilt his head back and kiss him again, harder, for that laugh, for everything he’d done for him, for everything he kept doing to him.

Didn’t, because it was just -- it was enough, now. This was enough.

“Right,” said Saguru, and smiled, drew himself back, thumbed his fingers against his cheekbones, “creative differences. Absolutely.”

Smiled, that smile that could make him do anything, and he knew it.

Stepped back, and then Kaito’s hands were on his chest, taking the tie he’d picked up at some point and couldn’t remember, slipping it into place, knotting it for him; Arsene helping his beloved Holmes, just before he vanished away into the night and left him seeking for him, left him half-mad in his absence. Kaito really did look the part; his hair wild enough, his skin pale enough, his eyes blue enough; he didn’t look real in that coat, looked like a wraith or something else dreamed up in an opium fit, the perfect challenge, the perfect villain, gentlemanly, impossible not to fall in love with, creative, talented, maddening, frustrating, above all the very antithesis of Holmes, the opposite that slotted in right where he belonged when they were together.

Cupped his cheek and leaned down, kissed his forehead as Kaito fiddled with his tie and pushed it into place, and said, “you make me believe---” stopped, and then hesitated, looked aside.

“In magic?” Cheekily, always with a quick witted response, always with that fucking smile, and Saguru wanted to --- he didn’t know how he could memorize it more, better, than it already was, sketched out in the black dark of his mind and summoned up when he was sad, but he needed to find out, he needed to do it.

“---In happiness,” softly, softly, softly, “in simple happiness, to be specific.”

The tips of Kaito’s ears hot-coal red, “is there any other kind?” but he said it to be contrary, and push him away, and did he think that Saguru wouldn’t notice this in him by now, that duality of ‘come, stay’ and holding himself just out of reach; wrapped around him in the dark, in bed, and his face still a mask, and underneath that a mask, and underneath that another mask, on and on because there were no ends to the fragments of Kaito he’d absorbed into himself over the years.

And Kaito knew he knew it, too; the way he looked at him, how he half-tilted his head, he knew. How he avoided looking at him, didn’t want to continue the line of conversation: he knew.
They’d paused, and Saguru wanted to leave him with this, wanted it to ring in his head the way it rang in him, “—how many happy people can you name, truly?”

Kaito opened his mouth, stopped because the intricacy of the question hit him last; narrowed his eyes, and slid his gaze away, and didn’t say anything for a handful of minutes before, “…Everyone’s happy some of the time.”

“Do you ever consider just conceding, just once?” Laughed, and the tight band of worry in his chest eased a little, and his mother might have been out there stalking the halls of Ekoda but he could handle her when the time appeared, and in here, it didn’t feel like it would. Time had stopped mattering, like they’d slipped sideways into another hell of a universe next door, let’s go there. “Not arguing with a certifiable genius?”

“Who doesn’t know the difference between ‘certified’ and ‘certifiable’?” sneered, not said, but he could get used to the mean curve of his mouth, that little bit of otherness that crept in when Kaito was off-balance, and it was incredibly easy to tell now that he was used to it. “Not a chance.”

“Oh, I did mean ‘certifiable’,” said Saguru.

A single beat, and then Kaito laughed, and he laughed with him, hard enough to feel his ribs shaking underneath the mirth, and at some point, they gravitated towards each other, and Saguru had his arms around his waist again, and his mouth on his, and he was still, still, still sunshine poured into a kintsugi soul.

Drew away, touched his nose to his and said, needed him to understand this, the way he viewed the world, “everyone can be happy, some of the time. You make me happy constantly.”

A flinch, a half-hearted tug away, his mouth opening to argue again, and Saguru held tight, gave him a little shake, said, again, “I mean it. Every moment I’ve spent with you, it’s been a high point - it doesn’t matter what. It’s what I turn to when I’m sad, and I’m—I’m finding there are a lot less reasons to turn to those memories, now. Because you’re there. Wherever you are, I am.” Slid his hands up to touch his face, cupped hold of it, and kissed his forehead, once, because Kaito didn’t look like he wanted to speak; sulky-mouthed, looking askance, always just a little bit further back than he was, but he didn’t flinch and he didn’t try to pull away, so he’d count that as positive reaction.

Every step forward started with intent, after all.

“You’re such a weirdo,” muttered, but softly, almost fondly, and he felt it slip into him, wrap around his heart like an iron band, make it hard to breathe. “And you’ll be a dead weirdo if you don’t hurry up and get dressed. I’m surprised Ryuichi—”

A flurry of footsteps, the door slamming open, and Ryuichi looking like he’d taken the three-floor journey four steps at a time, hurdling students as he walked past. Didn’t bother to say ‘hello’, just slammed the door on his way in and said, gritted teeth and edges to every letter, “are you two just about done?”

“You’re going to pop a vein,” said Kaito, cheerfully, and drew his ire; Ryuichi took a single deep and forewarning breath, and before he started to yell, Kaito disappeared. A cloud of smoke in his place, a little note where he was reading, ‘chill out!’, and Ryuichi slumped his shoulders, turned to Saguru with a look of such abject horror on his face that he couldn’t help but cough to hide his laughter.

“What have I done?” dazed, dull-voiced, “I woke up a monster. Kuroba was already kind of a pain
in the ass---"

From somewhere very far, far off: "hey!"

"---and I went and had him method-acting. I gave him the role of Arsene." Ryuichi covered his
face with his hands, moaned, "---damn my artistic vision. All I wanted to do was do something
different, this year. You guys had such great chemistry, but at what cost?"

Saguru, coughing politely, out of the corner of his eye watching Kaito’s hand appear at the edge of
the window, and his top-hatted head pop up. Ryuichi didn’t notice; was busy muttering one of the
speeches from Macbeth, a constant drone in the background as Saguru fixed his hat, checked his
tie, considered the idea of makeup, and then set it aside.

Kaito slipped inside, tucking his arm around Ryuichi, ushering him out from the room. "Two
minutes!" he called over his shoulder, in between a soliloquy about forests and fate, and
disappeared.

The room was quieter, smaller, darker, in his absence. Saguru waited, looked towards the door, and
then towards his reflection. His mother had seen him like this: dressed in make-believe, lopsided
hat, no bags underneath his eyes or drawn-tight wrinkles at his mouth from undereating and
overexertion. That should have made her happy - would make her happy, if he could just explain it.

Later, then. A nice dinner with him, and Kaito, and he’d explain the story to her. She wouldn’t
appreciate him letting Kaito into the house, but it would make good publicity - and with his
mother, that was all she could appreciate, unless some drastic change in her personality had
occurred to her while he was Japan-bound.

Precisely two minutes and thirteen seconds later, in the middling crowd of Culture Day:
multicoloured clothing, press-tight chaos of family and friends puddling up against the stalls, this
year one of the biggest turnouts to begin with. A rushed-blind third-year ferrying people along to
the bake sale on the second floor (by the cooking club, Aoko’s domain) while a second-year
wandered around in Victorian clothing, examining the floor grouting very carefully for interesting
samples and mostly getting trampled on; probably one of the students who were performing with
them, but without being close, he couldn’t tell.

Book club, then, with their host club stand, and he loitered there for a few seconds, awkwardly
hovering until Akako grabbed him by the arm, mid-Austenian witticism, drew him away with a
gentle wave of her hand, a confused cloudy-eyed student in her wake. Pulled him to one side, and
told him, low voiced, “start talking to people - Konoshima wants us to play to our characters.”
Eyed him up and down, and half a laugh, barely air, “you went all out, didn’t you?”

“This isn’t even the worst interpretation---” but Akako was walking away already, taking another
besotted student by the arm and leading him away to whisper into his ear. Konoshima, her hair
wild, and clothes dark, little fangs in her mouth which gave her a lisp, pointed him to a table with
‘Sherlock’ in neat printed script, shooed him away before he could ask her what on earth she was
dressed as.

Sat down, slid his hat off and put it to one side, linked his fingers together and prepared to wait.
Their host club was on the second floor, in the class room opposite the staircase; students looked in
habitually, saw them dressed as their characters, waiting for punters, disappeared again. Some
trickled in for the buns and the biscuits, the coffee made using a small hot plate and a little french press in the corner (surely not legal to have in class, but he didn’t want to be the one to point it out) before disappearing again, and he was mindful of the time passing, of his part in Ryuichi’s play, and---

“You look absolutely ridiculous,” and Shinichi with his head poking in, in his Teitan-green shorts, his football jersey, flushed from exertion and was the game between Teitan and Ekoda today? He couldn’t remember, or had Shinichi just been practicing and---over his shoulder, sun-seared skin and a backwards cap, Heiji poking his head over his shoulder, blinking owlishly, hiding the grin in an unconvincing cough.

Saguru shrugged his shoulders, gestured to the chairs in front of him.

Whispering from the corner, ‘ahhhh Kudo and Hakuba are friends that makes so much sense now I didn’t think they knew each other and that’s Hattori right from Osaka I wonder if---’ as Shinichi sauntered in, dropped himself casually into the chair opposite, kicked the other one out for Hattori. The two of them staring at him, Shinichi moving to brace his hands on the table, to ask, “so, uh -- what are you supposed to be doing?”

“Being Sherlock - giving character analysis, and things like that. Deductions. So forth.” Glanced sideways to see Konoshima staring at him, and when she saw him looking, flinched turned away to talk to Akako instead. “Until two, at least, and then I’m performing in the Culture Club’s play -- their Sherlock fell through.”

Shinichi cocking his head to one side and then to the other, and grinning, “---Granada Sherlock, hm? Good choice, good choice --- the deerstalker’s new, though.”

“I can’t resist a little homage to the modern Sherlock - besides, I’m only wearing it for this. I was afraid people wouldn’t know who I was - Granada Sherlock isn’t a hugely recognizable character, and I doubt many people here have---”

“Ah!” Konoshima descending on their table, fuelled by Akako, “Silver Bullet Kudo! A pl--pleasure to have you here---” attempting to make her voice deeper, but not quite managing, and Saguru felt a rush of sympathy just for the way she was standing there, in her bustle and ruffled shirt, staring down at her feet, “c---can our Sherlock int--interest you in a character analysis?”

For a second looked at Shinichi askance, expected him to laugh or brush her off, but Shinichi, “sure.” Almost drawled, like Japanese could work that way, and he looked at him like he was having trouble hiding his smile, said, “go on, Sherlock. What are you reading about me?”

To his left, Heiji smirking, and Saguru blocked him out because it wasn’t worth the effort, focused his attention on Shinichi and Shinichi only.

Shirt damp all the way through which meant that he had to have come from training, but the way it wrinkled uniformly - had a shower and then stepped out? When he leaned in close, he could smell the school soap, which meant the match or practice had been over for an average time of thirty minutes; their floor was way up here, which meant they’d gone through the first floor first. Light dusting of powdered sugar on his lower lip which he hadn’t noticed before - not the cookery club, and no breakfast before a match, so they’d come from the cafe down the road which catered almost exclusively to students and had powdered donuts.

His left hand playing with his phone, relentlessly clicking the home button, checking the screen, turning it off again - waiting for details on a case, for something he’d been after. It couldn’t be fresh and new; leads would have been pouring into his phone, and he wouldn’t have shown up here
to begin with, so older than six months, potentially a career-making case. Think, what had Shinichi been working on the last time they’d spoken? Murder in Kyoto, a possible suicide in Akihabara, a Shibuya gang-hit—except he’d closed that one two days ago, so it couldn’t be that; was the murder in Kyoto an active case? It could be something more mundane - waiting for a call from his mother or his father - but, no, Saguru knew the way he thought, knew what pumped through Shinichi the same way it did through him, so it had to be a case. Couldn’t leave it at that, but abandoned it for the moment. What else, what else?

Shinichi grinning expectantly, waiting for him.

“You’ve come from training,” began haltingly, slowly, “your shirt is damp, but it’s damp all over, which means you stepped into the shower and didn’t have time to dry off before coming here - therefore the match had to have happened sometime in the last half hour. Your hair’s still wet, but it’s starting to curl, and you smell of school soap - our school soap, so the match was an away game.”

“Did I win or lose?” amused, but leaning forward, his eyes shining, part of the game now, part of the moment.

Ah, tricky. Glanced up to the room around him: some looks at Shinichi, but that couldn’t be indicative of everything because people stared at him wherever they went. Was that a hideous muttering that he could hear from the back --- something, something, Kudo, something --- no, not enough, there had to be another tell. Slid his glance to Heiji, grinning too, practically vibrating; how about him? He’d be easy enough to read; there wasn’t the same level of depth to him as there was to Shinichi.

The curve of his lips, the way he kept glancing at Shinichi half-admiringly half-amused the fingers laced tight together so he didn’t drum with his hands but there had to be more, more; what had he heard in the last half hour? Nothing much, the classroom was far away from the field.

“You won,” said Saguru, a guess, not a deduction, but out of the corner of his eye: Heiji’s brimming grin stretching and stretching and a laugh out of him like he wanted to say, of course he won, dumbass.

“A guess,” Shinichi said, leaning back.

“An accurate guess,” said Saguru, “also your friend gave it away. What was the score?”

“5-2, Teitan,” said Shinichi; couldn’t hide the grin, and now it was obvious, just looking at him, but he’d make a poor Sherlock if he couldn’t have gained that from the beginning.

But he didn’t want to be Sherlock (some part of him did still thought he was alone and friendless nothing to show for it but a record-breaking case-breaking streak) he wanted to be him the way he was now: ridiculous over the top silly his age, his age, his age. In the end, more than happiness, more than anything, wasn’t that was Kaito had given him?

“What else?” Shinichi leaning forward, and Konoshima looked like she regretted ever starting him on this path, shot him a sorry look, disappeared to help someone else before Shinichi could drag her into it too and---

A flash of white and red at the corner of his vision, there for a second, gone the next. Saguru turned his head to look for it, didn’t see anything, looked back at Shinichi, and straightened his spine, tried to push being Saguru out of his head so he could let Sherlock take over consume him make him something different make him someone who was better at him than this.
“You went to have breakfast after your match; there’s a speck of powdered sugar on your upper lip, which would be from the cafe down the road, the one that has the French chef that sells out every Wednesday - it could be from breakfast from before, but then the shower would’ve washed it off, so---after.”

Shinichi discreetly thumbing at his lower lip, for some reason shooting Heiji a glare.

Heiji, shrugging, muttering underneath his breath, “wasn’t looking that close at your face.”

“Furthermore, there’s a case you’re waiting to hear updates on,” said Saguru, “you have a nervous habit of playing with your phone ordinarily---” mostly one-click games, Nitrome downloadables, crosswords and brain teasers and one game that relied on accurate colour matching, “it can’t be the gang hit, you closed that, so I would say----” Nothing on the news about another body discovered, so--- “it happened recently, but the leads have started to dry up, so---The Akihabara suicide? A new lead?”

“Very good,” said Shinichi, “though I question your methods. And I don’t think you’d take Granada Sherlock’s job any day.”

Saguru shrugged, grinned, let the personality drop. “What happened?”

A surreptitious glance around to see if people were listening, and then Shinichi leaned in, confirmed, “I have a lead on the Akihabara suicide. It’s starting not to look like suicide. Do you remember the details of that case?”

Gave him a look; Shinichi caught himself saying, “I forgot who I was talking to.” Heiji rolling his eyes, leaning back so that the chair beneath him creaked, lacing his fingers together at the nape of his neck.

“Found hanging inside his closet after neighbours complained about the smell,” said Saguru, “dead for three days, so rigor had already come and set; it was during that heat wave, wasn’t it? He rotted faster than the pathologist anticipated.”

Shinichi nodding, going, “---I’ve been requesting his files for a straight month, but they kept getting lost somehow, so I stopped by Division 2 to see if I could get the investigating officer’s copy of the files.”

“Was it Mr. Kobayakawa?” said Saguru, frowned as he tried to remember, “who was investigating that case?”

“Mr. Kobayakawa - you’re right, but he had a second. Mr. Kobayakawa wasn’t there, but Mr. Ito was there, and he gave me the files.” Leaned forward, lowered his voice as if suddenly aware that they were having this conversation in a public place, “apparently, the victim came to the TMPD in the morning, heavily intoxicated, and raving about someone trying to kill him. Ah, they calmed him down and sent him away---”

“And a few hours later, he hung himself?” a slow boil of rage an angry snap of temper how easily could all of this have been avoided if someone had just listened to him kept him there for a handful of minutes longer done something that a terminally stretched-exhausted-sleep-deprived-hungry police force couldn’t really manage.

“Do you remember how he had wounds inconsistent with the hanging?”

“From twitching around in the closet, though, right?”
“Not so; there were some that were highly suspicious - anyway, my lead is this: I have the file now, and my request for the tapes from the security cameras have finally come in - I think I might be able to solve this case this afternoon---”

A sudden clack of noise to his right, and Lupin was in the room.

“Detectives!” Crowed at them as he appeared in the middle of the table for some reason pushed himself to stretch out on the polished surface, “ah, what are you doing colluding together on such a nice day? You should go out - enjoy the sunlight.” In a lower, normal voice, “you guys are freaking out the students. Quit it.”

Had they---

Glanced up and everyone was half-watching them, half-not, and the averted gazes looked pinched and strained like it was taking all of their energy not to interrupt not to realize and to his left Konoshima looked like she wanted to ask him questions but was restraining herself, and Akako looked like she was done with the afternoon already and Kaito sat up, a wave of his cologne washing over him, arched his back as he said---

“Who are you supposed to be?” Shinichi first, raising his brows, too innocent to be genuine, and Saguru wasn’t sure if he was banking on Kaito’s hero-worship coming in ahead of him, or for him not to drop the act of Arsene, but either way: Kaito huffing, puffing out his chest like a parrot, shifting to sit up, straightening his top hat.

“You’ve never heard of the great thief Arsene?” half his voice half Arsene’s, and yes, genuine irritation.

Shinichi, his eyes wide, wide, wide, the smile on his face there even if he wasn’t physically smiling: in the crinkling of his eyes, the deeper dip to his voice like he was swallowing back his laughter, and, “I’m sorry, I don’t follow the, uh --- lives of thieves very much. This guy, though, he does. A total thief fanatic.”

“I am not,” mumbled as he glanced through his phone, “I’m pursuing one thief, that’s all.”

“How is the KID case going?” said Shinichi, “which reminds me,”

Be calm, raise head normally, do not give into fear. Shinichi could look through that - could notice that - and slow, slow, raised his head to look at him, shrugged. “He’s a tougher challenge than I anticipated.”

Shinichi’s blue eyes piercing, too-bright and too-knowing, and did he know? Had he seen something in Kaito’s gait, did he guess who he was?

“No ideas?” prompted when he lapsed into silence and now he could see ears twitching in their direction, could see Heiji straightening up and taking an interest in him, “didn’t you solve something similar back in the UK?”

“It’s not the same,” quieter. “KID’s a far more challenging rival.” Kaito’s back straight as an arrow like Shinichi would tell if he sagged. “Besides, I’m -- working my way through it. The KID case has a long history - an even longer backstory behind it. Getting all the pieces in place is crucial if I want to be able to accurately track and catch him.”

A nod, that made sense to him, good - something, though, something still suspicious in the way that he looked at him, and Saguru looked back, pushed to blur the minute details so he could focus on Shinichi only, sitting there like he knew something, leaned back in his seat.
“Do you even want to catch him?” At least had the grace to lower his voice so that the antenna-ears didn’t pick it up and run with it, “you should at least have a list of suspects.”

“Are you so concerned with my cases because you’re stalled in yours?” Saguru said, like ice; and he could feel the cold of his words. “Which is why you’ve brought your friend along - you’re hoping he could give you some insight. You’re lagging and it’s bothering you.”

Shinichi staring, staring, staring, and then, a beat, and, “let me know exactly how you feel,” said with a hint of something underlining his words. “Where did that come from?”

Aware, suddenly, that Kaito had disappeared, and Saguru’s shoulders slumped, looked everywhere but at Hattori’s face (could feel his glare all the way across the table and he’d deserved it), “I’m just---” sick of everyone asking me to solve this case solve that case asking me my opinion about KID I’m sick of talking about KID there’s so much more that’s more important but he couldn’t say any of that because Shinichi was smarter than Nakamori and he wouldn’t take it as Nakamori would, frustrated pride and a problem stuck like burr in his mind; he’d see through him like glass, he’d cut down to the root of the issue, he’d break him open. “Nothing,” said Saguru, and “---I spoke to my mother earlier, and it’s left a bad taste in my mouth.”

“So naturally you spew it over everyone,” said Hattori, not loud enough to be heard, but Saguru felt the words dig. Lies on top of lies. “Hmph.”

“Your mother sounds delightful,” said Shinichi, “if this is what she makes you do, I don’t think I’d like you to introduce me.” A scrape of his chair as he pulled himself back, not hurt but retreating, the game gone, the moment disappearing into ash, “I think I’ll take myself and my stalled cases everywhere, if you’d be---”

“I’m sorry,” rushed out and quick, “I’m --- sorry, it was an unpleasant thing of me to say.”

A blur of white again and there was Kaito-Arsene, and did he have to wear white, too, make him have a small heart-attack every time he saw him in the corner of his eye, make him think that someone would see the way he moved would link it to KID and he wouldn’t be able to protect him; there was only so much a detective’s son could do, and the Hakuba name had a history in Japan as long as writing but even then--

“Ah!” Kaito, bird-chirp-bright, “leaving so soon, Detective of the East?” In his French accent, the name ludicrous, a pastiche born from crime novels.

Shinichi’s crooked smile, the way he looked at him for a moment too longer. “I think our Holmes is in a crabby mood, so I’d best be on my way.” A nod to him, formal, educated, polite; Hattori didn’t nod, but didn’t scowl either, so the damage he had to do was at least minimal, and then the two of them walking off, shoulders touching, heads above other students.

“What was that about?” Kaito slinking into the vacated seat, and it was so, so strange to have a French accent with Kaito’s face, with Kaito’s streamlined movements, with Kaito’s blue eyes and soft voice and presence, “ahhh, Detective, are you perhaps not getting enough sleep?” And a grin so wild, it had teeth to tear, “perhaps finding yourself occupied with salacious thoughts?”

Snort of laughter, and Saguru rubbed his hand over his face; at this point easier to be Sherlock and rattle off lines and how could he explain to Kaito that he was worried and this needed to end at some point and Nakamori was getting restless and he couldn’t keep this job forever and---his mother’s eyes kept cutting into the panic-stream of his thoughts telling him be quiet be calmer think through it but it didn’t work and---
“My mind is on my work, thief,” his clipped Scottish blur hungry at the edges, chewing up his vowels, making his consonants a mess, “and nothing more.”

Kaito cocking his head to one side, and holding up a hand; his pocket watch in the middle of it like a heart from a chest, and something in the way he tilted his head and smiled at him and wagged it at him took him back back back to the first time and his pocket watching going missing and always returned to him just slightly of and Kaito always seemed to find it take it make himself a nuisance with it.

Saguru smiled, and reached over to pluck it from his palm.

“At some point,” said Saguru, “your charm will wear off, and where will you be?”

Kaito’s reply, purred and deep-voiced, half an octave lower than his own, “where I’ve been all this time, Detective: two steps ahead of you.”

Snickers from around them, but he could take that, he could live with that and the fondness in his eyes and that was something he could try and convey more to Nakamori: Kaitou KID always being a step ahead of him, always knowing his plans, Kaitou KID defeating him, fading into obscurity once the organization hunting him was dealt with, Kaitou KID becoming the Goemon of modern Japan (without being boiled alive in a bath because he didn’t think that would be a fitting end for them both).

Slipped the pocket watch into his breast pocket, felt it thud there, every ticking minute like a smaller heartbeat. Said, “perhaps we should adjourn to our director before he comes searching for us again. I don’t think we’ll survive a second attack from him.”

“Perhaps you are right,” mimicking him, and then rising, holding out his hand, and the world wasn’t steady again when Kaito looked at him so softly and wanted him so ardently and was always, always, at the edges with him, always reaching out to him, always holding onto him. Took his hand, felt the tug of it all the way to his heart, rose to his feet, and there were too many people in here for him to do something as bold as kiss him, but he considered it, he considered bending him over one arm, kissing him stupid in a room full of their peers, his mother prowling outside like a shark with blood in the water, Konoshima with her lopsided bonnet, Akako with something in her eyes he couldn’t identify.

Kaito seemed to realize, tilted his head down, hid the flush a little but not enough that Saguru couldn’t see it peeling at the edges, and then slipped back, into the crowd, out of the room, trailing sparks where he walked in that murder-red coat. Later, Saguru thought, later he’d apologise to Shinichi, tell him he was stressed, tell him he hadn’t really thought about what he was saying and that he shouldn’t have taken it out on him, but for now, the show needed to go on. Always moving, always pushing, always dragging them with it whether they wanted to or not, but finally, Saguru felt like he had some sort of control over it, some kind of say in what happened and what didn’t.

Backstage hot and smoky with the lights on full blast, and Saguru could hear the chaos of the auditorium filling up, chairs creaking, the squeak-spring of the whiny floorboards by the door puncturing Ryuichi’s loud voice as he shouted at the backstage hands to bring the costumes out in order of appearance have everyone ready for a quick change and where was the makeup artist and where was his Sherlock (diminuitively held up a hand at that, so he could see him) and where was his Lupin (hanging upside down again from one of the ropes above their heads, getting yelled at,
and Saguru caught his smile when he slid down, appeared next to him in a blink; caught the barely-there softness of his hand touching his back, the whisper of ‘see you in the light Detective’ as he strode out onto a stage to applause, wacky tumble-tip music). For Lupin, Ryuichi wanted something quick and infectious, a devil’s trill of violins and piano, something that wormed into people and made it impossible not to hum along, not to dance, not to move to the sound of its beat, and he could see through the inch-gap of the curtain Kaito spinning on stage, stealing that, taking another, a sumptuous, elegant heist for hungry viewing.

Never KID on stage, never anything like that, but Kaito: enjoying his trade, living off the applause and the laughter, putting something to his movements that Lupin-in-the-books didn’t have; a gentleman’s gentleman thief, a little mean, a little too flirtatious, a little---

“Sherlock!” hissed in his ear and he pulled himself out of thoughts, stumbled into the blinding light and papier-mache Paris, almost ran into Kaito. The crowd a humming blur in the background and he’d been on television before and in interviews and he’d been in crowded rooms but he’d never been on display in any of those situations and his breathing hitched a little when he saw the rafter-packed room, his mother in the background with hard flint in her eyes, Nakamori looking bedraggled and haggard and sitting next to Aoko--

And then he turned and saw Kaito, looking at him with that big grin, the tip of his hat more rakish than gentleman, and it melted away, all of that fear melted away.

“You’re staring, Detective,” not a line, but it became one, it became one.

“Men stare at things they do not understand,” and in the background he wondered if Ryuichi was tearing out his hair yet, his play already veering slowly off the rails (“it happens to every opening night” he said when they were done late one night and they didn’t have to be home for another hour, “something inevitably goes wrong” but how could ‘your actors deciding to improvise lines because of strong emotion’ go wrong).

Kaito, delighted, grinning, grinning, “and what are these things that men don’t understand?” Slipping around him, pacing around him like a puppy interested in a muzzled wolf, fingertips just-there-but-not at his cheek his neck his shoulder always close enough to send shudders of light through him.

“The secrets of the universe,” said Saguru, “how nature makes itself---” Kaito’s fingers brushing across his cheek, then his chest, coming out with his pocket watch and tugging it loose, “---anything beautiful, and wild, and supernova-bright. And thieves, Mr. Lupin.”

Kaito laughing, tilting his head to one side, dangling his watch, “am I not beautiful, wild, and supernova-bright?” A flick of his wrist and his watch vanished, became a bird that slipped out of Kaito’s grasp and darted out over the crowd, a sunbeam in the dark.

“You are something that language has not made words to describe yet,” said Saguru, Sherlock overlaid with himself.

“I hope when it does, they’ll be good,” sing-songed Kaito, dancing away from him, leaping up to a small wall, walking over to him, leaning closer, closer, closer---

And it didn’t matter that there was a crowd of people watching, Saguru wanted to kiss him, right there on the stage, smiling at him and laughing and happy, happy, happy, in his bright clothes and with his devil smile stretching from ear to ear.

Ryuichi to the side of the stage, looking perplexed, furiously shush-shushing through the script and
looking for this scene, this improvisation, flushed pink underneath the hot lights, and Saguru wanted to throw the script to the wind, to hell with it and everything written; didn’t they do this dance every time there was a heist? He was used to the steps by now, used to being teased, always a half-second too slow to catch KID - but for once he could enjoy it, enjoy the chase instead of worrying that someone would slip in out of the corner of his eye and grab KID, take him somewhere where he couldn’t protect him, couldn’t stop them (and what were the chances of KID getting a light sentence in the eyes of the press even with everything he said to journalists to police members who were sympathetic to Yukito to himself, KID was still a criminal and even if he was absolved, it would follow him everywhere here, a shadow trailing in his wake) and make him an example: this is what happens to criminals who break the law, this is what becomes of their lives.

Saguru shuddered, looked away from Ryuichi to watch the spiral of Kaito’s cape, spark-red against the midnight black of fake Paris, and slipped back into Sherlock, pushed KID and Kaito from his mind; focused only on the lines.

But even focusing on the lines, it was hard not to---indulge. Brushing his hand over Kaito’s back when he strayed too close, stepping a few inches nearer so that their chests brushed, he could see Kaito’s hat wobble underneath his breath; softening his lines, speaking them with a gentler blur. Watching him, always watching him, on-stage and off, trailing his eyes up to the balcony to see him slipping on his wires, waiting for him to swoop back down.

And Kaito, too, Kaito made it difficult, impossible, to focus; too much of him shone through Lupin: his smile, the way he moved, the bright glint of mischief in his eyes, his scent - hot paper hot lights sweating through his suit, and Kaito’s scent cut through it like a blade, clean and neat, chased him like a dream all through the scenes in his Paris bedroom, deducing the previous tenant’s habits through a miniscule examination of storage-room furniture and backstage props. Kaito, again, in the wings, watching him; Ryuichi with a look on his face that told him another step out of line would be his end.

How could he not, though? When they were in scenes together, and he could reach out and touch Kaito’s cheek, almost; could swat at his hat, lose himself in the sound of his laugh, how could he not? Kaito was Kaito was Kaito, everything about him familiar, and even as Lupin - even as Lupin - he was irresistible.

Through the chase scene, down in the auditorium, a little past the back room; up the stairs, full-pelt down the second floor hallway and another flight of stairs, Kaito’s cape whipping past him, and nobody chasing them because the plan was for them to come out in the balcony anyway and for Kaito to go over, use his skills in the gymnastics club and the wires underneath his clothing to suspend himself above the audience for a second hit the mats roll free and make his way back to Paris while Saguru huffed his way down the stairs and chased him; the windows like diamonds, yellow sunlight glinting in the corners of his eyes as Kaito veered a hard right, past the library, past the door to the Student Council room, and then--

--Stumbled, stopped dead, turned to grin at him a full few feet away from the door where he was supposed to be, and he had to skid to a stop to avoid crashing into him; flushed hot, panting and too bright too bright the inside of him taken over by brightness.

“Is this where we’re supposed to--” begun, and then Kaito leapt.

Muscle memory to catch him, hook one arm underneath his hips and haul him up against him, against the wall closest to them, bare except for the pinboard with adverts of half-price school supplies and special offers at the drink stand in Shibuya; muscle memory to push him up against the wall and tilt his head so that their mouths fit together better, and he could nip his lower lip,
could arch into the kiss, could run his gloved hand through Kaito’s hair and enjoy the ghost of it against his fingertips and muscle memory to draw back take a ragged aching breath look up at him with starry eyes, and wonder, “what’s--”

“You and your stupid improvisations,” huffed at him, and then Kaito leaned down and kissed him again, hard, harder, drawing a tiny drop of blood when he bit too hard into Saguru’s lip, and the pain was welcome, the pain was good, even with the heat haze going through his body, the aching awareness that they only had so many minutes before Ryuichi came looking for them and it was so dangerous to be out here when someone could walk in and he wanted to keep this a secret and theirs for just a little while longer---

“Sherlock is a strong character,” gasped in between hot panting breaths, Kaito’s teeth against his ear, his voice purring---

“You’re so embarrassing,” almost laughed, “none of that was Sherlock, was it?”

His turn, then, to growl at him, to arch his back and press against him, his turn to kiss him too hard, kiss him sharply, “No.”

Another laugh, another rippling belly-deep-bright laugh and tumbling closer left him shuddering underneath the weight of his thoughts and the warmth of Kaito’s presence and he wanted to wrap his arms around him and draw him down kiss him deeply deeply deeply and forget about the rest of the play forget about everything they were doing and just---

Crack of a door opening somewhere, and Saguru drew back shuddering, saw himself reflected in those eyes, the curve of his smile, “we should---”

“Yeah,” quick-paced and heavy, hoarse; Kaito’s hand reached out to touch his jaw, and Saguru learned into it, tilted his cheek against his palm like it was all that was holding him anchored to the world. “Yeah.” Softer still, and Saguru needed----something, he wasn’t sure, needed something to tide him over the other part of Arsene. Shuddered, again, took a step back to break that focus, and then turn: sharp, to the right, look down the hallway at the door that led up to the upstairs balcony (for esteemed parents and guests only) and---

“See you back on the stage,” said Kaito, quick-fire grin and a blown kiss that he could almost feel and Kaito disappeared, the semi-imprint of his cape leaving blocky colour in his eyes; the door opening, Kaito disappearing, the hallway stretching out on both sides.

A clearing of someone’s throat, and he turned, didn’t expect to see his mother in her business suit arms folded her eyes narrowed and all at once his stomach dropped into his shoes and he didn’t really want to----admit to her what had just happened how much had she seen did she know what Kaito was to him, and---

“What was that?” every word a smooth little cut, lacerating, pin-prick sharp, like he was still a child who caused trouble at school because everything was too much too much too much---

Draw back draw in brace himself against the wall the smooth plaster summer-warm underneath his fingertips and breathe breathe take it in slowly, let it out even slower, watch the way that she shifted on the balls of her feet like a fist was about to fly at his face (stance all wrong and even his mother wouldn’t be tempermental enough to lash out at him when there were people; besides her weapon of choice was words and she wielded them better than---)

“You were bound to find out soon,” even as he said it the words echoed hollow; had he ever
intended to tell her while she was in the country?

A cock of her head and her teeth on show, consonants like stones, “Was I? In this manner, as well?”

“No.” Rapid-fire-rabbit-beating heart and the edges of his brain were fuzzy with overstimulation dimmed voice noises in the distance (Ryuichi’s footsteps on the stairs someone coughing down below the chaos of the Culture festival and what he’d told Shinichi when all he’d asked was a simple question the door creaking behind him the wind outside), “no, this wasn’t how I imagined telling you. I thought -- perhaps a sit down dinner, maybe in a formal situation--”

“It’s the Kuroba boy, isn’t it?“ snip-sharp. “Toichi’s son?”

And the name landed like a rock between them, left him reeling, remembering Yukito saying, ‘oh she never liked him’ but had he ever really considered that she hated Toichi Kuroba enough to make his name sound like spitting like a curse like something to be crushed underfoot never even thought that there would be enough rage in his mother to make her sound that way and---

“I need to---” half-turned to the door, kept his eyes on her because he knew what she’d do if his back was turned, how her little digs would form like splinters, slip in underneath his flesh, “I’m---”

His mother straightening, her back broadening as her shoulders stiffened, the coif of her hair falling over one brow, pushed back by a hand gleaming fingertips dyed midnight black.

“Go play your silly games,” like a slap in the face, but he’d weathered worse, “but we’re not done talking about this. I sincerely encourage you to come home as soon as this---ridiculous business is finished. We have a lot to discuss.” Cocked her head again and he had to resist the urge to flinch underneath the way she looked at him (if she hated Toichi then what did she think of him stop don’t think like that you’re spiralling) didn’t stop didn’t breathe just turned around gave her his back and strode away.
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his eyes tight and focused on breathing what were the three signs of a panic attack irregular pulse
difficulty taking breath and shaking at least the three signs for him were those and he could feel his
lungs closing closing could feel his hands starting to tremble but---

“Saguru--” louder, louder, through the din in his head, the reverb of the applause from earlier,
“Saguru, shhh, Saguru--” Arms around his waist, and Kaito’s hand on his back, guiding him
closer, pushing his face against his shoulder his sweet-smelling-smoke-sin cologne; Kaito
whispering into his ear that, “I’m here, I have you, I’m here, you’re okay--” the sharper sharper
sharper pains of his heart cracking against his ribs getting fewer and fewer in between.

Sink to the ground in a puddle, clutch tight to the warmth Kaito offered, and try to breathe, block
out the image of his mother slipping into his thoughts, poised and perfect, holding herself distant
waiting until he’d turned his back before she told Kaito something along the lines of get out you’re
not good enough I don’t want to see you around here and who could argue with a Hakuba, an
heiress with a name double-bolded by being rich and marrying richer? Maybe she’d pay him off
and he’d have the house emptied out again and---

Tears, nervous-shaking tears, soaking into the shoulder of Kaito’s shirt.

A surprised little noise, and Kaito’s cooing increasing, the sound of his voice deepening, his hands
on his back rubbing harder, pressing harder, like every fingertip was a message, I’m here I’m here
stay calm I have you.

An age before he came into himself, and the shaking stopped, and he could breathe. No more
crying, no more panic, just ice-numbness inside and out, barely able to feel the wind on his face,
and shirt-cloth against his cheek. All at once, remembered: they were on the rooftop, in their
Arsene and Sherlock clothing; they’d slipped out after the play, and his mother was waiting for
him to go home (three hard beats of his heart against his chest) and Saguru exhaled slowly, drew it
in again, exhaled slowly.

“Are you feeling better?” Kaito, in his Lupin’s makeup, smeared somehow across his face - from
the lights the movements on the hot stage from him?

Nodding. His tongue too heavy too form words, too heavy to say anything too heavy to even move.
Maybe he could live the rest of his life like this, not speaking, except Saguru thought his skull
would explode with his thoughts and he’d go mad drowned in the remnant-tissue of his brain, to
float in between the worlds as something potentially other. The world wobbled as Kaito pulled
away, and Saguru dragged in air through his teeth, let it out so slowly he felt it singe his chest, and
he had to say something, he had to explain, he had to tell Kaito that this wasn’t normally something
that happened, but his brain circled around the right words, underlined and danced around them,
and they wouldn’t form.

“Was it your mother?” Cut to the quick, to the marrow, and Saguru closed his eyes again because
the world felt sickeningly simple; boiled down to just this, his mother’s visiting, the chill of her
gaze, the way she looked at him like he was nothing but dust on her shoe, and her face when she’d
seen him mid-kiss. “Did she say something?”

Never that simple, his mother wouldn’t have spoken in front of witnesses, didn’t have the temper to
speak in front of witnesses; it was always private, always just them, where he couldn’t pinpoint
what was wrong with her language but that it was wrong, that it hurt, that it made him shudder and
shake and want to be elsewhere, that it broke underneath his skin like a piece of glass, digging
deeper and deeper until he had to have it out by any means necessary, and it still left a mark, an
imprint in his flesh like a scar.
Shook his head, still, buried his face in his throat, breathed him in in gulps of air until the world steadied again, and he felt a little calmer, a little less like he was floating.

Drew away, and saw Kaito’s face, and underneath that smeared makeup, he looked ghost-pale, wary-eyed, worried? Over him, like anyone should worry over him, like he wasn’t a workhouse who could take a bullet to the side and keep going until everyone was clean and safe (if you ever do that again I’m going to eviscerate you your parents be damned) and, “I’m okay,” and that was good, a first sentence, an understanding, words that meant something, “I’m just—it’s a shock, seeing her here.”

Kaito nodding like it made sense to him too, wasn’t just something that popped into his mind and out of his mouth without forethought. “She looks intimidating.”

And he could kiss him for that alone because she was, she was, but nobody ever saw that, nobody every really looked at Mother and saw someone to be frightened of unless she turned her head at the right angle or the light shifted and suddenly her shadow seemed doubled in size, and her mouth full of teeth, and it was all too easy to forget that this was a woman who’d carved out her life in England with the same efficiency as butchers filleting a cow and never let him forget it; all she’d suffered, all she’d done, for him, and his benefit, only for him to run off and--

“We don’t get on very well,” halting and slow, and he hated that the very air was making it difficult to think, hated that he couldn’t really wrap his head around what was going on because he kept thinking of her staring at him from the door, kept thinking of what she must have seen, “ah, my mother wasn’t very pleased that I had come to Japan to begin with--” though he’d never really understood why she’d disliked it and now he thought maybe it had something to do with Yukito and how she knew he’d meet him eventually, and was she worried that he’d set her against him? (Hadn’t he, though, with the way he talked about her, with the recollections of her as a child that translated too well to the adult and no, no, stop, he couldn’t go in there with those thoughts in his head or she’d sense them and he’d never really be able to get them out and he couldn’t let her have a weapon over him, he couldn’t let her see that he was influential to kind words from a sad old man--- that isn’t what I taught you be stronger make your heart into stone you’re no use to me or your father if you’re wounded by every sad story).

Kaito’s hands on his face, cupping his jaw, tilting his head up to the sun, and it blinded, he blinded, so Saguru closed his eyes again, trembled there, and then wrapped his arms around him and buried himself deep into the feeling of him, of his heart beating against his chest, of how warm he was when he held him. “I’m sorry,” again, “it’s just a—it’s just a shock, I didn’t---”

“Plan on telling her yet?”

“I wanted to do it properly,” hesitant, quicker, “where I could --- where I could really talk to her, alone. Tell her and my father and give them time to come to terms with it.” A pause, and then, “I suppose they’ve always imagined that I wasn’t---”

Except his mother had known about Rhys had known what he’d done had sent him running out of the house so that couldn’t be it and it wasn’t like she didn’t have experiences of it with Yukito and Toichi and a slow ache was starting to throb in the centre of his forehead like his brain had come unhinged and was banging, banging, banging up against bone like a door in a storm and he couldn’t decide what would be best what would be better should he tell his mother now or should he leave it and pretend like he’d never had the intentions that he had, like he had never considered dating Kaito Kuroba (but that wouldn’t make him happy either and wouldn’t make Kaito happy and how could he--)}
“If you need me to pretend to --- just be friends---” Kaito, quieter, gentler, “----I get it. It’s hard, telling people.” Looking down, and it occurred to Saguru that they’d never talked about themselves with other people and maybe he was presuming too much about their entire relationship but then Kaito looked at him with his head tilted and those eyes, and he fell, every time he looked at him, he hit a new level of wanting to be with him.

“No,” said Saguru, shook his head, “I’ll --- I’ll tell her. Tonight. We’re having a---” grimaced; knew, now, why she’d shown up in Tokyo without his father in tow, “---we’re having a family dinner. Just --- me and her.”

There isn’t other family to invite except his grandfather but he knew how that would go down; his mother, narrowed eyes, her teeth glinting oversharpen in her mouth and a pause between her words where they honed their edges like blades, and he didn’t want to think of that, didn’t want to have that image in his head and so paused, looked away, stood up, “---we should---” Go somewhere else, go somewhere private, go on a holiday, and none of those things would happen in the next half-hour-hour time span, “---can I walk you home? When you’re ready to go?”

A quick flush, dipped head, and Kaito nodded, and then said, “you’ve never been to a culture festival, right?” Standing up, rocking on his heels, back and forth and back and forth. “They don’t have them in England?”

“I --- not that I’m aware of - I would imagine open day is the closest equivalent, but---we don’t really do the things that Culture Festival has. No food stalls, no, ah --- plays, or anything like that.”

Thought, in England he’d never been talked into playing Sherlock for a school production (in England nobody’d really spoken to him (had he tried to be friends with anyone there?) much less go around in his costume and pretend to analyse people just for fun just because people wanted it, but he didn’t want to tell Kaito that, didn't want to show him, underneath the glamour and the paint, there was nothing to Saguru Hakuba worth advertising or speaking to.

“Good,” said Kaito, nodded his head, “that means this can be your first time -- come on! I want to go to the Cookery Club’s stand first.” Took hold of his hand, and didn’t move, exploded out of sight, dragging him with him like it was a guarantee he wanted to go (he did but that was beside the point), down the stairs, down another set of stairs until they reached the first floor classrooms and a smell of dubiously charred food.

The rest of the afternoon, snapshot memory, too full for him to remember everything in detail, but it was an agony of selection; to keep Kaito with his hands cradling red takoyaki in a grease-stained wrapper, Aoko with flower streaked through her hair, Kaito again, in his Arsene costume, flirting and bowing and kissing hands, and always brushing close enough that the air around him was saturated with whatever cologne he wore, whatever he’d tapped behind his ears to give him a feeling of Old French old lawlessness original sin. Food, so much food, glossy okonomiyaki with singed edges, matcha cupcakes and gelatinous glossy puddings, waterdrop cakes (which Kaito drizzled in chocolate sauce, left a shine against the corner of his mouth that he wanted to kiss off); Ran Mouri, muscles rippling in her legs, slapping him so hard on the back he choked on his food (got to see Shinichi huffing, and going scarlet when he caught his eye, raised a brow, caught him looking at the stretch of her legs, Heiji amused to his right and a small woman catching his arm dragging him to one side for a selfie, talking in English and Kaito again, shrugging his shoulders, grinning, talking, disappearing to come back with more food that he pushed into his hands and---)

Outside, finally, in the quiet, drizzling wind through trees, and time hadn’t seemed to move, the light hadn’t seemed to move, and maybe if he closed his eyes and leaned against the wall it wouldn’t.
“Oof,” Kaito, head against the wall, looking up at early twilight, “I’m stuffed. It’s a good thing Culture Festival is annual.”

“You’ll burn it off,” said Saguru, mindful that he’d eaten too much, too, could feel the strain of his trousers, his stomach aching with fullness, and still he had dinner with his mother to go to, “probably doing something that’ll turn my hair white.”

Kaito in front of him suddenly, his hands cupping his face, yanking his head down, and scrutinizing, scrutinizing, with Saguru’s face pressed to his neck and breathing in the scent of chocolate and Old cologne, the tang of sweat, and snaking through that, his own soap, his own shampoo, the faint little ties of home.

Time slowed, and Saguru felt every heart-beat like it was his last, and then Kaito drew his head up so he could look at him, and Saguru crooked a smile, and Kaito smiled back, and maybe it would be fine if he stayed here - his mother wouldn’t be too angry, would she (she would)?

“If I turn your hair white,” said Kaito, thoughtfully, “would anyone even notice? You’re almost white now.”

“Due to stress,” said laughing, pushing Kaito with his shoulder, but gently, not even making him so much as stumble; when he wanted to be, Kaito was like a rock, all of the muscles in him borne of gymnastics and jumping off of rooftops rappelling down the sides of buildings taking hold of helicopters training to be a thief---

“Not white enough,” said Kaito, pushed him away, and said, “maybe I should take more risks.”

“Maybe you can sod off with that line of thought.”

A laugh, high, infectious, bright. “Isn’t Sherlock supposed to be polite?”

“You’ve never watched any of the shows, have you?”

“Ah, you watch them enough for me.”

Behind them, the school, gates open, taking in a steady stream of people even though culture festival would probably end soon, stalls getting shut down, food getting shepherded out to the staff rooms and to whoever hadn’t had a chance to eat. A light breeze singing through the trees and through the buildings, people ferrying their way home, and the two of them standing there, so still, anyone passing by wouldn’t notice them against the wall, wouldn’t look twice at them, and he wanted to---

---keep this moment like this, untouched, to have it last longer and longer before he had to go home and face his mother who’d want to know who and what and how this came to be, and she didn’t know Kaito was living with him and he could only hope Baaya hadn’t mentioned it but maybe she had and---

Mood dipping, and to stop it, leaned down, and found Kaito’s mouth, warm and soft, still tasting of chocolate from his messy cake, still ready and waiting for him; and it deepened, at a touch, a sweet sweep of warmth through him that had him trembling, leaning in closer, fingers knotting in Kaito’s hair, and holding onto him, and keeping a hold of him; Kaito’s arms around his waist, his body straining up, and when Saguru blinked out of the kiss, drew back for a second to grab more air, and glanced down between them, he saw Kaito on the tips of his toes.

Didn’t have the breath in him to laugh, just to kiss him again, again, over and over and over, until he couldn’t taste the chocolate anymore, but he could taste Kaito undiluted, and all the sweetness
Drew away, again, rested his forehead against his, and said, “I wish you could come with me.”

“I will,” said Kaito, “if you want me to.” His voice so quiet, close to his heart, and hot like it was dripping through his skin, warming everywhere that had lain cold for so long, “I will. But don’t you think you should talk to your mother first? On your terms?”

“She won’t understand,” not even the gay part, she’d get that part - she’d never minded that part, or had she? - but she wouldn’t understand the ‘poor’ part, the part that would look at Kaito and see a reflection of everything that Yukito had given up to chase, wouldn’t understand (if she knew, recognized Kaito) that there was more to life than money and riches and polite fucking society. “I’ll try to convince her, though.”

And maybe he was giving her too little credit, and she’d been right all along, his grandfather had poisoned him against her, but---

Kaito leaned up, kissed him again, and this time, it ended after seconds, too brief. “I’ll be home later,” he promised, “I’ll sneak in through the window, so she doesn’t know I’m living there. Keep your bedroom window open for me?”

“I will,” took hold of both of his hands, squeezed them tightly, “I promise.”

“Take care of the rabbits and the birds,” said Kaito, “feed them for me. I’ll see you tonight, okay? I’ll just hang around in Tokyo until your mother’s gone to bed.”

“She might sleep at a hotel room,” said Saguru, though he doubted it, “which would mean she would leave early.”

“Keep me updated,” said Kaito, and took a step away from him that felt as if Saguru was coming unglued, falling into disparate pieces. “It’s only one night -- not even one night. It’s some hours. I’ll come when you call me--we’ll be fine.”

“One more kiss?” bartered Saguru, and leaned down, took the chaste kiss to his lips, a squeeze to his hands, a promise that he’d come home as soon as Saguru texted that he could, and then Kaito was pulling away, and slipping through the crowd again, and in a matter of seconds, he was gone, like he’d never even really been there at all.

On his way home alone in the dark and the phone ringing inside his pocket with Baaya (young master let me come and pick you up) and Jack (hey pick up if you get this Hei wants to organize a little get together) and his father (what the devil have you done to your mother?) but his mother remained silent and distant and not calling him not bothering to did she even care if he was struck down in the street of course not of course yes because then his father would have to rely on someone else’s brain to do his work, and he was so---

Stopped by a flower-shop in the Shibuya walkway, considered it; roses, too gauche, chrysanthemums not her favourite; she liked lilies and irises, but they were out of season, and maybe pansies? But then he imagined opening the door, his arms filled with flowers, his mother waiting there, asking him, what was your intention, what did you think I would do when I found out? And he didn’t know he didn’t know, none of this made any more sense to him than it did to her and he wanted to breathe maybe and take it all in and sit down and explain it to her slowly, talk
to her as though in some universe they weren’t at loggerheads all the time.

*I’m in love with a boy, mother.*

And she’d say, maybe, *well if you’re sure* --

Except it wouldn’t go like that in real life, it would go, *I’m in love with a boy, mother,* and her response would be, *nevermind that, what are you doing messing around with a working class layabout like Kaito Kuroba?* And he’d argue back, tell her there was more to life than money and status and power but it would all----

Tannoy train announcer voice the hiss-shhh of the train pulling into the station, and he hadn’t ridden public transport in so long; fumbled on the entrance, wound up pressed up against the doors, between two men and a woman intent on their newspapers, stared out of the window at the Tokyo underground going past, the burst of colour from billboards, calling him all the way to Denenchofu, and the house his grandfather had forgotten, and maybe he could text him and let him know?

Fumbled for his phone, saw a message from Kaito instead: *got a lift to my house! Take care of yourself, detective - don’t want to come home and see you in pieces.*

Burning warmth, deep, low, heavy, in his belly. Shuddered, and read it twice over (forget the eidetic memory, he wanted it engraved into his brain) and then tapped out a quick response: *I’ll be good. Tell me when you’re coming home.*

Immediately, before he’d even exed out of the message and found his grandfather’s ancient contact number: **xx**.

Which was strange, but not unwelcome, and he ducked his head and hid it and pictured for a minute or two Kaito sidling up to him and kissing his cheek and the flush of warmth that followed the trace of his mouth. Cleared his throat so no-one saw him flushing, found his grandfather’s contact number, typed out, *mother’s in the country.*

Grandfather Yukito would know what to do, would know what to say to her, would know what how she would react a pause and a pause and a pause and the train pulled into the Denenchofu station and Saguru pushed himself out carried on the wave of exiting commuters and nobody had responded to him yet and the house loomed over him like a shadow. Loitered outside, away from the doors so he didn’t block them, considering what to open with, regretting he hadn’t bought the flowers but it had seemed like it would be admitting he was guilty or something and he didn’t want to do that, he didn’t want to give his mother another weapon to fight him with.

Moved slowly, step by step, echoing numbers in his head. One, two, three, and he was near the fancy bakery that sold French pastries every morning, four five six, moving past the bakery and over to a clothes shop, and the residential area was ten more steps away, but he lived even deeper into it than the politicians and the idols, and it took him twenty more steps before he reached his house (that with stopping to buy a bottle of water from a shop, to look over a selection of chocolates, decide that he wouldn’t take anything, to sit on a park bench and breathe until his trembling was under control) and then outside his house the gates arched and pointed and dark and he’d never seen it look quite as threatening as it did now not even when he’d stumbled to the country in the middle of the night with his head about to split open and nothing to his name but his name and some money and no friends, and no knowledge that he even had family here until he was watching the television one morning and he saw his grandfather interviewed outside of the
Ministry of Justice, and even then it took too many phonecalls for just a simple ‘hello, I’m your nephew’ and---

Breathed in. Keyed in the code, let the gates whisper shut and then closed, made his way up the path not slowly, not briskly, trying to pace himself, take in the garden and the bubbling koi, take in everything that was bright and beautiful and had good memories (over there where he’d kissed Kaito first in the rain and there where they lay Sunday afternoon, dozing, dreaming, taking Watson around the grounds and watching her mark every tree with a scrape of her beak Kaito’s hand slipping slowly into his and fingers looping).

Inside, Baaya blank-eyed, waiting to greet him with a snifter of something powerful and slim.

“Young master,” inclined her silvery head; watched him toe off his shoes, and he wondered how much of her appearance had to do with his mother slipping into their lives like a shark in shallow water. Eyed the spot behind him, like she was waiting for Kaito (a hard sharp pang to the chest that left him breathless) and then a single minute moment second where Baaya looked like she was going to ask about the other young master and then thought better of it (which could only be good; he didn’t know how much of the staff was on his mother’s payroll over his).

But that moment between him and Baaya, strangers in a strange land, felt the closest thing to good that he’d felt today and breathed out let it out slowly slowly and then, in slippers, took the first step in. Baaya pressed the glass into his hands, and he knocked it back, set it on a sideboard.

“Your mother is in the library, young master,” called Baaya, “she’s waiting for you. Dinner will be served promptly—” a lapse into a sneer at the corner of her mouth, “---at seven.”

His stomach full of food from the Culture Festival but if he didn’t eat (if he ate too much) his mother would say something to so he’d find some way to push his food around on his plate and the hallway seemed too short and the door appeared too fast and he wanted to turn around and slip down to the basement where nothing lived but darkness and where his grandfather had once sworn he’d seen a ghost and just stay there until she was gone.

Slid the screen door open, stepped inside, smell of soft tatami, heavy old wood, brewed tea, feathers. His mother sitting on one of the uncomfortably stiff couches, a wine glass in her hand, eyeing up something on her tablet, tapping with one red-tipped nail.

Silence, and then, “you’re late.”

“I’m sorry,” words tumbling out of him, “I---the line was busy, and I---”

Snap of her head upright, and, “we have a driver, and you took the train?” Tap tap tap of nails on high-polish LCD screen and, “have you forgotten who you are? Hakubas do not use public commute. You never took the train in London, I expect you to remember what we’ve spoken about--”

London, London, grey and dreary and too many people crowded into a train station that still wasn’t as big enough as Shibuya wasn’t as crowded wasn’t as noisy but if he told her that he liked the noise and the crowd and the press she’d tell him that that would lead too quickly to a knife to the spine and did he want to trouble bringing her over here because he’d gotten himself stabbed or shot or taken hostage or something equally stupid and he could tell her that the crime rates in Japan were low even with the high rate of police corruption but he told her nothing, firmed his mouth shut stared at the floor like a chastised little boy, waited for her to take her eyes off of him, breathe out through her nose, take another sip of her wine.
“Stop taking the train. It’s impractical to take the car, but safer.”

“I’ll be late to work,” quiet, quiet. “And to school.”

A shrug of her shoulders. “You’ve been accepted to Oxford since you were a small child, anyway. And work doesn’t really matter, does it? You’re only here because you wanted to play at being your father. And because it’s good on paper - helping the common man, etcetera.” A flick of her hand, nails winking like eyes. “When you’re married, you’ll stop that, of course.”

Of course.

Took a seat farther away from her, tried to still his trembling breath, he couldn’t break down he couldn’t he couldn’t. “I’m too young to be married, anyway.”

“About to be eighteen,” bored. Drawled. “You’re legal enough.”

Closed his eyes, a fraction too slow, shifting weight on the creaking couch, the clink of glass on glass and he would not panic he would not panic he would not---

“What are you doing with your life?” Less combative. Less sharp. Soft, and almost gentle. “I sent you here because you insisted it would do you good to live like a normal boy for a change - because you wanted to work in a place where your father’s name didn’t have any meaning---”

But it had still skipped him all the way up to the rank of right hand in a police station (unofficially) even if that might end if Nakamori said his say.

“---And you’ve gained weight which doesn’t appear to be muscle, you have bruising underneath your eyes, and to make matters even worse, you’re colluding with unsavoury characters.” His mother’s Japanese clipped and pointed, and she never spoke it at home, and somehow it hurt even more to hear it here---

(remembered her, when he was young, young, maybe a false memory, singing songs to herself, to him, in Japanese in the midst of the Mayfair house her voice as soft as distance traffic a finger in his hair which made him squirm because he didn’t like the tap tap scrape of her nail--)

“I sent you here to improve your name, and for your father’s benefit,” every word curving, sharp-toothed, “and instead you’ve completely given up on solving the Kaitou KID case---”

Flinched, wondered if she’d seen it but her head was bent low and her eyes were on her hands and he couldn’t breathe and he wanted to be outside where the rain was a sweep of cold air across his face tugged at his collar undid the first button and then redid it before she could see and then choked down a mouthful of air and heat before she could---

---wondered if it was true had he really broken up so easily so quickly had he forgotten everything about being a detective all for a smile from Kaito---

“And no doubt that boy is making you do something stupid, like reinvestigate his father’s demise.” Lightning-bolt clarity through her words, and he knew without looking that her eyes were on him, watchful, just as he knew he couldn’t really hide it from her that they were closer than two boys should be and Saguru swallowed his protests, swallowed his words tried to calm his breathing this was the trick to dealing with his mother in all capacities she attacked like a woodpecker and in doing so gave him no time to respond and so he needed to be calm and to be rational and not to---

Breathe out, seven seconds.
“I am still working on the Kaitou Kid case,” quieter than normal, but his voice didn’t stutter or tremble, “mother, an entire police force couldn’t solve the KID case---”

“None of those police have the tendencies you do,” dismissed, and he wondered if the first word to her mind had been ‘freak’ (shouted at him on a wine high in the middle of the room in Mayfair when the party outside was too loud and he’d snuck away and tried not to play with the other children because they were interminably boring and he didn’t want to go back outside to play his father’s gruesome party games with trickshot blood spattered all over a coffee table so he could analyze analyze in front of a crowd of police how smart precious clever he was when none of them really cared wanted nothing more than to schmooze to his father and to get funding for better things and if it meant temporarily voiding his existence then---

“But they’re clever men,” Saguru cleared his throat, wedged his hands behind him so she couldn’t see his fingers trembling refused refused to show her, “and KID is an unparalleled thief, and I’m working on it, but it takes time - there’s not a single trace of evidence left behind to---”

“Are you useless unless there’s evidence?”

Flinched and this time she saw and he could see the gleam in her eyes when she did, the half-second lapse of lupine sharpness instead of motherly concern, and he ducked his head and didn’t say no didn’t say yes didn’t say anything, wanted badly a drink but there wasn’t---anything in his hands to busy his brain and so he stared down at the floor and counted patterns in the carpet and tried to settle his breathing and---

“Look at me,” momentary softness, metal in velvet.

Looked up saw his features reflected one across the other and it would have been so easy to just just just admit that he didn’t know couldn’t know that he could only really work within the realm of viable results and the team hadn’t gotten any evidence (that he knew of because he’d spirited snuck away the bloody suit and other tiny flecks of Kaito that had gotten caught in the middle of that mess).

“Are you useless?”

“N---” yes, yes, yes, he was useless, he didn’t know who the thief was, yes, he was useless he didn’t know how else to keep going but if she knew then she’d somehow take this away from him and he couldn’t leave Kaito to face the men in black who followed him all alone but if he didn’t say anything to the effect then she’d tell him to---

“Then catch the thief.” The sound of her tablet shutting off, a death-still silence in the absence of her tapping. “Prove your worth. I’ve been following up on your habits with Nakamori, and it’s deplorable, how you’re behaving.” A quick little dig of pain - what had Nakamori told her Nakamori didn’t want him on the case to begin with - before she brushed off her skirt, stood up, faced him, so much smaller than he was, her face nearly unlined, stern, steady, solid as a warship. “I’m disappointed, Saguru. I expected you to be so much more than you are.”

“I’m sorry.” Ducked his head, kept it low, just breathe just breathe it’ll all be over soon just breathe. “I know.”

His mother passing him by, a cloud of her perfume chasing out the last resistant fragments of thought. “Come to dinner. I expect you’re hungry. I’ll tell Baaya to prepare a light plate for you.”

Dinner (fifteen minutes in the bathroom with his head on the cold tiles, vomiting bile bile nothing but bile wondered if his mother would go back to the morning weigh-ins now that they were in the
same country and immediately tried to put it out of his mind; wanted Kaito to appear out of nowhere, lean in from the window the garden tell him come away and he’d follow him and go somewhere else where his mother wasn’t and ten minutes counting down five minutes counting down two minutes counting down until there was nothing, nothing, left and his mother’s knuckles at the door her voice come to dinner) quiet and distant, sound of chopsticks rattling against fine porcelain, his mind glazed over with wondering how early he could slip out and go somewhere else (wondering how early he could go back to Kaito).

“You haven’t asked me anything about my work yet,” smoothly from the other end of the long, low table; his mother with her hair out of her face, chopsticks holding a sliver of ghostly sashimi, “your manners are even worse than I thought.”

“I’m sorry,” mumbled into his miso, “I’m---”

“Work is well,” continued as if he hadn’t spoken and why had he bothered even to begin with? “The level of peoples’ gullibility will never cease to amaze me, though. Spin a few pretty words and there’s nothing more to do; they’ll do anything to get their hands on what you’ve promised them.” A laugh like a knife-glide over porcelain, and he didn’t want to listen to any of this, “though I suppose it all does depend on who you’re speaking to - an accurate judge of character is key to determining what people value.”

Her words drifting through his head while he tried to count out the calories of everything he’d eaten during the Culture Festival.

“---that is perhaps the one area that Nakamori praised you in - your judgement of people. He did say you had a tendency to see the best in every one.” A smear of red lipstick on the right end of one of the chop-sticks, but not smudged outside the precise line of her lips, “I suppose that has it’s own uses - but it would be beneficial for your duties as a police officer to remember that not everyone is as decent as your childish mind would believe.”

“I apologise,” as he reached for his glass of water, to swallow down the lump of food in his throat (what lump formed from miso soup?), “I do look at the best in people, that is true. I will do better next time, mother.”

“Do.”

To change the conversation, “have you sold anything interesting recently?”

A cock of her head, would it work? Sometimes it did - his mother valued her business buying and selling antiques and curios more than she valued (you her husband her career in London). She liked to say the only decent thing that London offered was a vast array of history; enough to appease buyers all over the globe. Chinese porcelain, Japanese swords, English furniture, French jewels; her clients were innumerable (ferried into the Mayfair house forced to wait in the living room, don’t mind my son he’s a little bit special please don’t talk to him or acknowledge his presence while he sat on the floor with a child’s colouring book in one hand a volume of Sherlock in the other the tips of his ears scalding red until he had to get up and go outside in the boxy jungle-wild back garden where the neighbour’s cats snuck in to mate underneath the wild rosebushes until his mother put standing water bottles in the earth to dissuade them).

“A Dutch prize binding belonging to a student of Latin,” said with a tip of her head away. “Some odd pieces of furniture - Dali torcheres, an original 19th century Steinway piano; a diamond necklace.”

It would be the necklace that was illegal, sourced through blank-faced buyers, probably from a
warzone. Did she care that he’d noticed? Should he point it out, show her that he knew her tricks?

What did it matter?

Didn’t say anything in the end, ate his soup slowly, until it was cold, couldn’t answer the buzzing phone against his thigh, listened to the description of the objects. Made small noises - agreeable, gentle noises, noises to show that he was listening he did know what she was talking about he hadn’t drifted off to thinking about Kaito and what he was doing and whether he was alone in the house with his father’s portrait and his dead eyes staring down at him and if he was sitting in the underground room with the ghost of Toichi Kuroba---

A sharper buzzing against his thigh, his police beeper. Reached down, caught his mother’s eye, thought about not answering it---

“It’s, um---” his voice stuttering, and he hated it; crowds of people, crowds of adults, not a problem, but his mother’s single raised brow made him a child, “---it’s work.”

Snapped her chopsticks together, and said nothing.

Saguru slipped it from his belt, squinted down to read - Shinichi’s number, followed by: Kaito home? (how did he know had he told him he couldn’t remember over the other side of his thoughts screaming about food his mother his appearance Nakamori his mother his mother his mother---)  

“I should---” scraping himself back away from the table nearly catching his knee on the low top and his mother’s eyes following him out of the room and she didn’t have to say that she was disappointed because he could taste it he could feel it underneath his skin how much she---

Slid the door shut behind him with a snap and sagged against the wall and tried to take in small breaths to stave off the flutter-bird panic in his chest. Fished his phone out of a pocket and put it to his ear, listened to the clickclickclick of buttons inadvertently pressed by his cheek and then pulled it away, programmed Shinichi’s number, listened again to the dial tone.

Why would he ask if Kaito was home?

“Is Kaito home?” Without a greeting, strange rush to his letters, in the background the whirr of the aged VCR set in the interview room (booked out for the day only and for special request by the detectives, ridiculous because it had the only--)

“No,” didn’t even stop to point out that using words like ‘home’ for this was dangerous, jinxing, because Shinichi sounded - strange, distant, and he didn’t know how much of it was down to electronic interference, how much of it was just Shinichi, and, “why do you ask?”

“Where did he go?” before he’d almost finished answering, immediately, “did he get into contact with anyone from the department?”

“I don’t----”

“Get down here,” like glass, jagged edges and sharpness, “get down here immediately.”

His chest fluttering fluttering and he heard the door to the dining room catch on its hinges, his mother’s click click click of heels; why what’s going on where’s kaito what do you---

“Shinichi, what’s----”

Click of the phone, and Saguru pulled it away from his ear, stared at it, snarled underneath his
breath like a dog with a pricked foot, shoved it back into his pocket, of course it was just like Shinichi to give him half a conversation and hang up without explaining himself but then again it wasn’t like Shinichi to run through and ask vague questions, and order him around and---

Is Kaito home?

Get down here immediately, when he’d told him not.

The world spun hot-white-blinding, and Saguru turned his head to the sound of those clicking heels, had a dim thought to pull up the face he’d worn for countless parties bored but interested, proper and not looking directly at his mother, just, “I need to go to work for a little while,” staring into the space where her face was and not seeing anything but a blur of colour her glasses her hair her bright red lipstick, “please do not wait up - it is a case I am consulting on with Kudou Shinichi.”

The red blur moved, her mouth, her voice said, “---if you must but it’s rude to step out on your guests---” and receded into the distance as he moved by instinct towards the door forgot his jacket or to change out of his inside slippers, padded out over the grass and the tall pathway and was halfway there before he realized. Stopped, then, went back, changed his shoes, checked his phone.

Two hours ago, a single message, got a lift to my house nothing after that so he should be at home should he not?

Walked out again, strains of music blurred after him - light bright Beethoven filtering in through the jumble-sale mess of his head. Halfway down the garden, the air luminescent with hidden lights set into the pathway and the grass; down to the wrought-iron gates and the parking area just near it, where the Aston sat next to a sleek black Hyundai.

His driver, head lowered, staring at something in his palm, snapping upright - Hanamura Kohaku, 40, sun-wrinkles fanning out from his mouth and his eyes, the skin on his arms papery thin and crisped by too much light, “sir?”

“To the Kuroba house,” said Saguru, and the words floated out of him, didn’t seem to come from him. “As quickly as you can get there without breaking any laws.”

“Sir,” a nod, and then the door opened for him, the seat already waiting, squeaking as he slipped along it like it too was a testament to how much food he’d eaten at the culture festival, which now roiled, boiled, squirmed in his stomach like it was still alive. The door slamming shut, Kohaku slipping into the driver’s seat, the purr of the engine coming on, gleaming blue lights in the electronic dash board. In the back of his head, wondering how much the car had cost his mother and why couldn’t he just take the train and this was one occasion where the car came in handy but--

A bump as Kohaku reversed, caught onto one of the lumps of grass that the gardener liked to leave overgrown with wildflowers; he’d be crushed to see them broken, and Saguru shook his head to get that thought out of there (what did he care is kaito home get down here immediately but he cared he’d buy him something nice to make up for---)

The gate opening, responding to the car, the car shooting out into the road, and Saguru turned his head to see his house disappearing behind him like a fog, and thought he saw a stain of black hair and red lipstick standing in the doorway, watching him leave, but then they were around the corner, and it slipped from view like water.
Chapter 23

In traffic, the phone buzzing with messages from his mother (tea with the CEO of some company he’d never heard of; a date with Hifumi Togo, a Shogi superstar, who he had heard of; visits to the cemetery where the rest of his family was interred; some television programme early in the morning) until he reached for it and switched it off, resisted the urge to throw it out the window into traffic, lowered his head between his knees and sucked in a hollow rattling breath in out in out until his heartbeat stopped pounding pounding like it would crack in two just by being.

Shinichi kept popping into his head, the way he’d asked him with so much urgency, is kaito home, how he’d told him---

Get over here, get over here immediately.

---and he should have listened but he hadn’t was hurtling instead through Tokyo dark to find the Kuroba house find Kaito realize that this was all nothing and he was jumping to conclusions his broken brain spinning in circles trying to see a gun when there was no gun, and the car hitching over a speedbump, the scenery blurring past, his thoughts still spin spin spinning around Shinichi’s voice when he’d said get over here get over here now.

“Young master?” the driver, and he didn’t answer, turned his head like an heir half his age, spoiled by money, stared out until the headlights of other cars burned into his eyes and he saw spots of starry brightness when he blinked.

Car hitching to a halt, and he pushed the door open before the engine was off, crossed out onto the sidewalk didn’t expect the lash of wind to hit him right at the collarbone, and hesitated on the threshold on the pathway staring up at black windows and a wide door and curtains drawn tight, an abandoned rusting rabbit hutch in the back garden just visible around the corner of the house and feathers strewn around the yard and he hadn’t really realized before now how much this house seemed out of the way forgotten lonely never really lived in.

Thought again of the painting underneath the darkness spilling from around the corners, thought of how long Kaito had lived in it before he’d been shot and he’d come to him and it had only been for a few days supposedly but he’d never---

Breathe in, take a step over, open the gate, feel it cracking and juddering against his fingers, the ironwork papery with rust. Pushed it open until it protested, stepped over into shin-height grass, moved mechanically to the bright red triangle of the door, paused to look into the mailbox, stuffed full. They hadn’t been back here since that day underneath the house; how quickly this place grew forgotten, how easily a house went to dust when it wasn’t being used loved taken care of stop thinking.

“I won’t be long,” called over his shoulder, and he reached out and knocked on the door.

( a few days ago, Kaito coming up to him, slipping a key onto his desk and leaving it there, sending off a ray of golden light where the lamp hit it brightness skidding across the surface of his desk and it’d been so hard to concentrate until he’d picked it up, turned it over to see the neat tag written and tied to the metal loop ‘kuroba’ but Kaito was home and he wouldn’t need it, Kaito was home and he wouldn’t---)
Rang again, harder this time, denting his finger on the button. To the side, a window opening, an old woman looking out, was Aoko watching him too? He couldn’t use the key now, not in front of the old lady, but the other half of his brain tailspinning into panic not thinking not thinking where was Kaito if he wasn’t home?

Logic said: at the shops at an onsen in Akihabara a bookshop a planetarium anywhere anywhere underneath the house where he couldn’t hear but he was---

Took out the key, felt it warm in his hand. His driver polite behind him, not mentioning anything even though he must have looked so strange standing there, trying to see through the door like it was possible trying to think of something anything that he could try before he opened the door himself and walked in, coming up blank every, every, every time until he gave up, slipped the key into the lock, his heart tripping over itself when it clicked.

His stomach twisting as he twisted the door knob, and he nudged it open, watched it swing on its hinges, gape back to show a square of darkness, the fuzzy shape of furniture in pitch black. Held his breath, stepped inside, and (he’d trip over his body in the dark he’d find him flayed alive in the living room every Junji Ito horror story he’d read or glimpsed or had sent to him came to life and lived in the darkened corners of the house and none of it mattered because it was---)

It was Kaito and he’d follow him anywhere, into any corner, into every bad idea, until he found him.

“Kaito?” his voice wavering, and it wasn’t him but the echoes that did it, the words bouncing oddly off of the angles of the house until it sounded like it came from everywhere and nowhere at all, “Kaito, are you here?” Taking a step further inside and the carper crushing underfoot with a sound like beetle carapace giving way, and he cocked his head, looked around, tried to squint through the shadows to see if he could see something more substantial than waiting dark, but there was nothing, nothing. Felt along the wall and found a switch, flicked it, and light guttered like a bleeding wound, splashed on all the walls, showed nothing but beige carpet and white walls and quietly colourful furniture accented with throw pillows and---

And nothing more nothing more nothing more but the shadows. Stepped inside anyway, his heart in his throat, his hand to his hip, to where the phantom of his baton hung, and he forced himself to breathe as he checked the hallway, the kitchen, the living room, never turning his back to a room he hadn’t checked. Strained his ears to hear something, anything but the pounding of his own blood, the tread of his own footsteps. The portrait of Toichi Kuroba following him wherever he want, life-sized, glass-eyed, focused.

A thick layer of dust on the glass coffee table, the wooden commode, the back of the television set; nobody had come here for a while, nobody had tended to the house.

So where was Kaito? He was here, wasn’t he?

Upstairs, rifling through bedrooms with two-second glances: Chikage’s, unmade bed like she’d just rolled out of it, but dust on all of her things from the mirror to the vanity to the boxes of classy-looking lipstick, one side of the bed unmade and smooth as glass. Jii’s room next, sparse as a prison cell, a deck of cards on a tiny bedside table pressed up tight to one side of the bed, a pocket window overlooking the back-garden; no dust but the door was closed (all the others half open did that mean anything had someone come here looking for something or was it just the way that families lived when they were fractured---)

Kaito’s room next and he had to brace himself on the wall, steel himself, try to pull the detective down over the rest of him: this was nothing more than a routine investigation, clearing all spaces,
making sure that foul play could be ruled out or not dependent on what he found between all the other closed doors and a pause a single pause a single second where he hovered between should I and shouldn’t I, his hand hovering on the door-knob, thinking about turning back, <i>I don’t want to see what’s behind this door I don’t want to see you like this---</i>

You don’t know anything is wrong yet. <i/></i>

But he did, could feel it on his skin like soap: Kaito hadn’t answered his text messages, Kaito hadn’t even read them, Kaito had spoken to him once but never again, and Shinichi had called him, asked about him, told him to get to the station and this was stupid and he should be there instead of investigating a potentially active crime scene on his own (but what if he wasn’t hurt or gone what if he was just tired and Saguru went there stirred up a panic had to make an excuse for why he believed he was in danger) his brain hammering him with thoughts over and over and over and ov--

The door’s sound, the creak of hinges, how it opened with a little push from his shoulder because it felt stuck where it was; a pause, and then he stepped inside, pulling-off-a-bandage quick, braced himself for the smell of blood and shit and crime-scene.

And there was nothing.

No body no blood spatter no foul play no indication that anyone had ever lived here for more than a couple of hours. Books stacked up neat in the shelves, three deep in some places, one in others, flat; the bed made, corners smoothed, a book about the history of magic open on the bedside table, posters for bands and singers he didn’t know on the walls, a two-year-old laptop model charging on the desk, blinking green to show it was full. Absentmindedly reached to unplug it; stopped himself, and made himself step back, think logically: if Kaito wasn’t here, then where was he? (at the shops, but he couldn’t think of any places nearby still open at this hour; in Tokyo Central, but he didn’t know what he’d be doing there; had he caught a train to somewhere else, gone for a heist alone, visited a shrine? Too many variables thoughts moments to keep track of.)

Fisted his hands, pressed them to his eyes until colours kaleidescoped on his eyelids, breathed in shallow bursts. Kaito was somewhere, Kaito was somewhere. This didn’t mean anything, this room half-lived in, half his existence, the rest of it tucked away behind the portrait on the wall, and when he looked at it - the same grin same dark eyes the same way of cocking their heads the same way of shimmering with light, and day in, day out, Kaito had to live with that knowledge; that he looked just like the man who’d never told the truth, and it had---pushed him to do this and now he was somewhere where Saguru couldn’t reach and---

Took a step two three to the poster, and placed his hand on the surface of Toichi Kuroba’s face his thumb following the curve of his smile like it was meant to (like it had on Kaito’s face) until he was desperately desperately sure that down to the millimeter it would be the same on Kaito’s face and an itching need to check started up in him like poison where was he where was he (at the shops, but he couldn’t think of any places nearby still open at this hour; in Tokyo Central, but he didn’t know what he’d be doing there; had he caught a train to somewhere else, gone for a heist alone, visited a shrine? Too many variables thoughts moments to keep track of.)

Footsteps on the landing, too heavy to be Kaito’s, and on muscle memory, reaching down to his hip grabbing hold of his thigh where his baton should be finding nothing instead and a glance around the room around all the magician paraphenelia showed him a cheap lamp that he plucked from the base, held it in one hand, balancing the weight of it in the centre of his palm thumb far from tucked in between his fingers just like Jack had thought him (keep the weapon centered in your grip know where you are in relation to how much room you have to avoid keep in mind that running is always an option even if you’re cornered). The door creaking, every nerve in him tensing, half-scared, half-annoyed, something else lurking in the recesses of where his emotions live, in the shadows of
their being, and he wanted to shake himself senseless (prayed that it’d be Kaito and he’d laugh at him being prepared to clonk him over the head with a cheap lamp like a husband in a bad horror movie and he could laugh at him all he wanted so long as he did it here here here—)

“Is that how police behave in the UK?” A woman thin and ghostly glasses over her eyes dyed light brown hair with dark roots starting to peek through expertly hidden but not enough cheekbones jutting out like wings in her face a well-wrinkled suit. Took him a minute to place the voice, because it wasn’t hazed over with static from two-year-old laptop speakers; to place her face because it wasn’t ten different shades of oil-slick colours from a webcam so old it registered blue as green as yellow as red, and he’d never seen her face to face but there was something about the way she moved that looked Kuroba to him, economical and pretty, her eyes taking in everything but not moving off of his.

“Kuroba-san,” drooping his arm but not enough; his nerves were screaming screaming screaming that something wasn’t right why was she here when Kaito hadn’t mentioned that she was visiting (when before if she did he’d disappear for a few days come back smiling and wistful and talking about it Kaasan took me to this new cafe Kaasan and I went to an art-show is the gallery really owned by someone you know / you’ve met my grandfather Kaito / but he doesn’t seem like the type to own art galleries) and, “I’m sorry, I was looking for Kaito.” Not lowering his gaze, not; it was rude, but she’d deal with his rudeness, with his barging into her house, with his staring her down like she was on enemy ground.

The laptop screen hid how thing she was, how sharp the outline of her looked; if he ventured close enough, Saguru felt he could cut himself to pieces on her.

“You don’t know where he is either?” A flicker in her eyes, a flame coming alight and reflecting outwards; corner of her mouth twitching, her fingers dipping into her pockets, and he imagined for a half-second she’d come out with a pack of cards to play with just like Kaito but she brought out a packet of cigarettes, a cigarette lighter in the shape of a magician’s wand crudely blackened metal and a shining silver tip, flicked one into her mouth and lit it. The air perfumed with clove smoke and mint, and the ripe, wet scent of wrongness, wrongness.

Dropping the lamp finally onto the bed, and sagging onto it, too, “no,” he said. “I don’t know where he is. He was supposed to be home.”

Two puffs on a cigarette, an exhale out like all of her worries were smoke, “he must be at the shop,” she said, finally, as if she could make herself believe it if she thought more about it.

Took out his phone, didn’t glance up when she came to sit with him, but he flinched away from the brush of their shoulders; found Kaito’s number, sent him a message.

Undelivered.

“His phone must be off,” tried to keep his voice level nice even nothing was wrong yet nothing was wrong yet but in his head his mind spiralled going off of Shinichi’s terror Chikage being here Kaito not being here, and the rates of kidnapping in Japan, he couldn’t remember the figures off the top of his head because it was full of fuzzed-up white noise repeating shitty television procedural facts, facts, the first twenty four hours are crucial in any kidnapping stop it stop it stop it---

“She was here,” firm, and her hand burned when it took hold of his, and he came out of the thought-loop to see blood on his fingernails, puncture wounds in his palm.

Pulled his hand away, stood up quickly enough to make the bed shake, and strode towards the
door, “I apologise for being in your home, Kuroba-san,” over his shoulder, the clunking of his shoes on the stairs deafening. “goodbye.”

Behind him behind him Chikage Kuroba and her shadow stretching over the walls in front of him and if he had the time he could turn around and ask her why it was that Kaito was always alone was he not worth the time to stay here live her life here raise her son why was he not worth keeping together a splintered family <i>does it have anything and everything to do with the way he looks almost exactly like his father</i> but he knew Chikage wouldn’t answer that Chikage wouldn’t answer anything and the more he thought about it the more he was sure that that was what it was and he had no time to spend on people who couldn’t see Kaito for the shadow his father cast.

Downstairs, two quick strides towards the door, and he was about to leave when he heard her calling his name, softer than his mother ever used, somehow corded through with steel even though she didn’t raise her voice above a bare minimum, “Saguru?”

And he turned, anyway, turned; it wasn’t in his nature to ignore anyone calling to him, and definitely not a mother definitely not someone who was in pain (she had to be in pain she had to know the facts just as he knew the facts she had to know how easy it was for a missing person case to get swept underneath the carpet fewer and fewer police left on it until it became a check-mark that the press liaison mentioned once every quarter and then forgot about eventually).

Darkness creeping behind her, and when she stood just askance of the light, he could see silvery traces of old wounds on her face on her hands when she raised it to gesture with her cigarette, trailing smoke like ghost breath, “if you find him,” said Chikage, “could you send him home?”

“And where would that be?” before he could stop himself before he could keep himself in check, it spilled out of him like wine, and he wanted to take it back, but something in him - small base fly-wing-tearing cruel - egged him on and in that moment it was the strongest impulse in him.

Chikage saying nothing, and he turned to leave, then turned back to face her, “I’ll tell him you’re here.”

“That’s all that I ask,” like she hadn’t spent however many months away and left him to deal with the trauma of everything alone. “I want to see him.”

“Be around more often,” said Saguru, and stepped outside the door, “you’ll find that works wonders for seeing people.” Slap of the door behind him, and in his head, his mother’s voice soft and murmur-gentle, that’s how you should treat the weak. Marched down the path hemmed in by gravel and weeds, crushing grass underfoot with a sound like glass, slipping back into the car, and to his driver, “to the station.”

And he didn’t look back at the house, didn’t want to see Chikage Kuroba standing in the doorway and watching him, ashes drifting from her fingertips, just sat in the back, nursed a bottle of water like a bottle of whiskey, didn’t dwell on how he was his mother’s son.

The police station quiet and dark from the outside, and his skin prickling because it felt like he shouldn’t be here felt like he shouldn’t really be viewing this place where he spent the minutes of his life reading and re-reading the same case files, stalling for time, thinking of a hundred different ways not to catch Kaito Kuroba when it wasn’t prepared; like he’d wandered into an airport on lock down, broken into a school over the top of the gates. Hesitated outside (his phone buzzing and
he checked and it wasn’t Kaito but some advertisement agency that he’d never heard of) stepped inside and there was a hush all along the floor and he could only brace himself could only step forward find the lift step inside punch in the button for the floor everything so routine so obvious but it felt like he’d uncovered another way of living. Outside onto the third floor where Division One was, a dim light in Kogoro’s office, but he bypassed it, nipped down the hallway to the right, nearly ran right into Shinichi standing outside the door of one of the interview rooms, fiddling with a packet of cigarettes like he was considering breaking them open, and when he saw him dropped them into his pocket, said, “what took you so long?” in the same breath as he grabbed him by the wrist and pulled him into the interview room.

Grey walls grey floor grey table two chairs on one side with a seat on the other a handcuff chain dangling uselessly from the edge of the table and Saguru sank down into a seat, felt the radiating ache of too much movement in a short amount of time, “I got here as quickly as I could.”

Shinichi scrolling through something on his computer and grabbing hold of the screen, twisting it around, “I had to show you something.”

“But, Kaito---”

“In a minute, I want to show you something;” and the screen went black, then grey, then grainy with colour, time-stamp at the bottom an indistinct blur but he could make out a two or a three, a number that could have been a month or six hours ago; leaned in, focused, “that’s---”

Watanabe in a holding cell, arms folded behind his head, staring straight up, bobbing one leg, and it was so long ago that he’d seen him not bleeding not unconscious not delirious with pain and he hadn’t kept up with his case or the sporadic updates from the hospital (the last time he’d been had been so long ago and he should go back and see him but--) humming something underneath his breath, turned his head to the side to look close at the cell door no not quite something beyond the cell door? Watanabe moving up shifting so that he could stare down the screen at something.

Watanabe’s mouth moving, but there was no sound nothing to put words to him and Saguru wanted to ask him if it was possible to hear him even though he knew the cameras in the holding cells didn’t record audio just visual but it would have been the last time he’d ever spoken and he wanted to remember him the way he hadn’t remembered him now (as soon as this was over he’d go and visit him and tell him that he was sorry and give him what he’d promised and Watanabe had refused) but there was a shape in the cell and somehow he recognized it wasn’t sure from where but he recognized the build of the shoulders long legs narrow waist.

Blur of movement, Watanabe getting up, the chair in his cell sent skittering across the floor (imagined that it would sound loud in the holding cells underneath Division One where there were so few there to contend with that month and dread building up in the pit of his stomach achingly empty until he held his breath and counted down the seconds to--) and his arm raised and the glint turned to a gleam and there was a knife in his hand with an edge like a sword,
gleamgleamgleamgleaming blinding him off the glare in the camera.

Watanabe opening his mouth, a step across; the gush-splash of blood so visceral he flinched away from the screen could almost feel it on his face; next to him Kudo watching without blinking a cup of coffee gone icy in his hands, watching watching watching the way his father always wished he would but there was so much blood (how was there so much blood in a person a single person and he knew the figures and it still didn’t make sense that one person could bleed so much) and--

The raw slimy pink thing of his tongue in the assailant’s hand, Watanabe curled up, mouth open, and---

Crouched down, wrenched his jaw open, stuffed something into his mouth his tongue his tongue fed him his own tongue pushed his mouth shut and gripped it like a cat about to spit out pills and Saguru squeezed his eyes shut rode out the wave of nausea stupid boy stupid stupid stupid boy not good for anything not good at your job and then, “Again.”

Watched it again, again, Kudo manning the laptop, repeating it twice three times four times until he had it stamped on his brain like a childhood memory, and then took the laptop from him, cycled through to the end, and--

Paused just two seconds before the end, where the man turned to leave, and the cowl on his face slipped down and he’d een him somewhere knew him from somewhere but his brain wasn’t working was spiralling in mad loops the blood the blood Watanabe with his mouth wide open and the hand around his jaw clenching it shut the bob of his throat and unbidden Nakamori saying vomit all along the floor in his cell “who was on monitor duty that night?”

Kudo lifting his coffee cold, taking a sip of it, setting it aside, “Keiichi Ito.”

“So he would have seen this,” said Saguru, “he would’ve known, wouldn’t he? Where did you find this?”

“Deleted files,” said Kudo, “that’s the gist of it, anyway.” Launched into an explanation about looking for feed for something else an error the tech couldn’t solve calling some professor friend of his and his voice in the background as Saguru tried to think around the gaps in his knowledge, what he knew blinking out at him first: Watanabe with his tongue cut out, Watanabe in his cell, the assailant, Keiichi Ito on monitor duty but he hadn’t reported it (and he knew how criminals were treated in the department how police saw yakuza but to watch a man hacked to death and tortured and not say anything was that the sign of police or---).

Stood up, scraping the chair away from him (the chair skidding across the floor in the cell, Watanabe trying to get away in a room like a shoebox, the knife the knife the knife) and said, “I want to watch the feed again. Could you queue it up?”

“So you think we can get a face from it?”

“I know a guy,” moved away from the desk, his fingers itching, his back sparking, and he thought of Kaito, big brother Keiichi Ito, a friend of mine, a friend of mine, I’m getting a lift home but it was putting the horse before the cart and when had he gotten so paranoid that everything in his life had barbs and pitfalls and when all other avenues have been exhausted but that was the trick wasn’t it he hadn’t exhausted any other avenues hadn’t even started looking.

So, other avenues, potentials, “could you get the feed from the entrance? I want to know who was in and out of the building. He can’t have phased out of the fucking floor.” English in the middle of his Japanese, and he couldn’t --- think his head was too full, “get that, and then we’ll go over it and
try to narrow down a time-frame; we should also start looking at whose keys were last signed out -
you need special ones to open up the holding cells, don’t you?”

Shinichi’s brows lifting, “I checked that,” he said. “No keys were signed out, but a pair was
reported missing a few days ago.”

“Stolen or misplaced,” turning away from Shinichi and pulling his phone out of his pocket; the
international charges would have been a concern if he wasn’t who he was if Kaito hadn’t just gone,
“stolen’s more likely; Nakamori’s rigorous about those keys, so the likelihood of them getting
misplaced are---”

“---Higher than you think; don’t forget to factor in human error into all of this; this could just be a
misunderstand, it could just---”

“---a misunderstanding, a series of coincidences? Does that seem likely to you?” Turning on his
heel to look at Shinichi, calmer now that he was here, calmer now that he wasn’t on the phone and
telling him cryptic things, and, “---or do you have some information that I don’t?”

Shinichi pausing, and then, “is that what you think I’d do? Bring you here, give you half a
mystery, and let you tie yourself into knots trying to solve it? I don’t know anything else.”

“I know,” had to admit that, breathe breathe breathe out, had to know that that wasn’t really what
Shinichi did in any case. “I---I know, it’s just---you called out of nowhere, brought me down here,
Kaito isn’t answering my phone, and---and now this.”

“Do you think---”

A hum from his phone, and Saguru juggled it, caught hold of it, brought it up to his face to see---

Keiichi Ito Div2: Sorry!!! it's kaito phone did

Keiichi Ito Div2: *died listen Im on borrowed phone talk to you later

Knee-weakening relief sagging against the wall, resting his forehead against the cold cold plaster
the edge of someone’s photograph frame biting into his skull and, “thank you thank you thank
you,” underneath his breath (hadn’t he said he was going home?)

“He’s safe,” said to Shinichi; Shinichi’s shoulders weakening a little, slumping, but he coughed,
pretended that they didn’t. “He’s -- borrowed someone’s phone, his phone died - he’s terrible at
remembering to charge it, and he won’t let me buy him a new one--” spilling from him like grain
while he responded ‘ok text me when you’re home’ and felt stupid, stupid, for leaping to murder
before he’d thought of the rational.

“Hm,” said Shinichi, turned his head, and stared at the computer, Watanabe’s face a blurry grey-
black-red mess.

Fuck, right. Right, right, right, here for a reason, here because Shinichi called him (is Kaito home,
why did that stand out to him more and more and more and more and more the more he thought about it why
would he care if Kaito was home how would he know---), sent the message he was typing,
accessed the keypad, tapped in a number and hoped it was still valid.
Dialing dialing, Shinichi in the background doing something on the laptop (calling up the front door footage?) bouncing his knee against the top of the desk taptaptaptap like a rabbit’s foot a piece of music a hush everywhere else in the department not even backshift around to take a look at the pair of them jumping at shadows jumping to conclusions why wasn’t he answering the number had connected but---

“Sodding----” porridge-thick brogue and suddenly he was ten again and hanging off of Jack’s arm on his first visit home from the army, peeking up at the stranger he’d dragged home with him like a rain-damp sheep; tall fair freckles along his cheekbones crouching down and taking a look at him (shying away because his mother told him people could see he wasn’t like them and it was why he had no friends), “---what’s wrong? Are you okay? Is it Jack?”

“Mattie,” breathed out (‘hi there I’m Mattie Jack has told me all about you’ / ‘I told him what a giant brat you are’ Jack grinning both arms clasped at the back of his neck and he pretended like he didn’t move with a limp now and there wasn’t a bandage peeking out of his sleeve / Mattie slinging back, ‘it takes a brat to know a brat, now sod off and take my bag into the house and let me talk to the lad, will you?’), “I---I’m sorry, no, I’m --- I’m fine, Jack’s fine, it’s a work call.”

“Work call---?” shuffling of things on the other end of the line and he could see Dublin through the window old buildings and older spirit and the hungering windows catching the last of the gunshot-spatter rainfall halfway and sunlight starting to peer right through the clouds and into Mattie’s apartment, heavy with furniture half-drowned under paperwork but there was a room for him with floral wallpaper and a perch for Watson, and he was ten, and his life was better than he’d ever dreamed it; Mattie’s voice sharpening like a whet-stone, and, “what kind of work?”

“Police work, I need you to look into enhancing something for me.”

Mattie pausing on the other end, then gently, “isn’t that something you should deal with in-house, dove?”

Swallowed the hysterical little note that crept into his voice, tried to keep it level, “there’s no-one on duty in cybercrime, and it’s a matter of some urgency; could you just---” but his voice faltered as he was saying it because he’d reached his limit for smoothness and it cracked down the middle on ‘you’, left his letters gasp-obvious.

Mattie saying, hesitantly, reluctantly, “---how badly do you need it done?”

“As urgently as possible,” whisper-soft, “please, Mattie. Please. I won’t---I won’t ask you for anything else---”

“You know that’s not what I mean,” quick clatter of keys, and a burst of Clair de Lune, a hum of shoes on carpet, “let me just get my work laptop out, the security is better on that one.”

Long minutes filled with nothing but silence, and there was a time when it would’ve been calm for him and for Mattie to just sit there and do their work and not have to talk and just wait for cousin Jack to come home but then---

“How’s Jack?” said Mattie, and he was clever, better at him at hiding his emotions, but the way he said Jack - like a prayer like a song like ‘sunlight’ and ‘halcyon’ and ‘precious’ - gave him away would give him away would show his heart on his sleeve every time. “He mentioned he was coming to Japan to see you. Has he arrived?”

“He’s been here for a while, tormenting me and my friends,” said Saguru, and leaned back in his chair, watching Shinichi but not seeing what he was doing, seeing only the indistinct, hazy outlines
of his body, the way he hunched over as he typed, the comma-curve of his back and the rigid line of his spine flaring down to the bottom of his seat and then expanding outwards, the chair making him look like he had a growth, same colour as his shirt, “---he misses you, you know.”

On the other end, a cracked-open laugh, and a sigh like a breaking cup. “I miss him too, but you know I---” Stopping, starting again, “---we both decided it would be best if we didn’t see each other anymore. I can’t say I feel too badly about it.”

Except how he sounded, how he said it, but Saguru didn’t press, didn’t say anything.

“What about you? Have you met anyone? Jack said you had a bit of a thing for one of your mates.” Clickclickclick the keys.

Saguru smiled a little, crooked his hand underneath his jaw, rested his chin there, closed his eyes; Kaito’s face coming to mind without even thinking of him, but as soon as someone said something along those lines, Kaito came into his mind; he was every romantic line in every song, every good thing glimpsed, every softness in his life, and even if his mother didn’t accept or want to understand his presence, then that was---that was fine, because he’d have him anyway. “I did,” twisting a pen from the desk and in his hands, catching it on his knuckles, letting the plastic ripple over his fingers, “his name is---”

Shinichi glancing up, motioning to his phone with one hand, exaggerated frowning, and mouthing ‘who are you talking to?’

Saguru waving him off, but remembering: nobody else knew, and Japan wasn’t as laissez-faire as (London? Hate crimes against the queer community still happened in London they were just kept quiet) wasn’t something they’d ever discussed going public with, and so he made a quiet noise, and Mattie said, “we’ll talk about this later -- now, what about that work you wanted me to do?”

“Image recognition,” said Saguru, “could you enhance security camera footage and try to get us an I.D.?”

“It might take me a couple of hours, but I can do my best - send it to my Dropbox, and we’ll see what I can do.”

Setting his phone down, to Shinichi, “ a friend of mine can probably enhance the footage and try and give us a likely match. Shall I send it along to him?”

“How legal is this friend of yours?” Brows raising to his hairline, the edge of his mouth slanted down like he was going to say ‘no’.

“He works for MI5,” which he wasn’t strictly supposed to say but in this case it could be chalked up to confidentiality, “and he’s trustworthy. Besides, we need to know who attacked Watanabe, and if we’re considering police, then---”

“Are we?” Shinichi cocking his head to the side, fingers laced together one foot bopping at the floor onetwothreefourfive and Saguru snapped his mouth shut and didn’t know what to tell him what to think (wasn’t this where it was going?).

“Who else would have access to the department?” slower softer quieter. Shinichi considering him and in the meantime, Saguru slipping himself into the chair at his desk (which used to belong to another detective now retired and Nakamori had never actually said he needed a desk but he used this one when he was in the department) to reach for his mouse flip on the ancient computer wait for it to whirr whirr whirr to life, “the way I look at it, there’s one of two things that could have
“Talk me through them,” like this was a game, and Shinichi moved and dropped his hands between his legs and looked at him, all hunched shoulders and focus, “what are the options here?”

“A police officer,” said Saguru, and the word spat out like poison.

Yes, he knew most departments had their flecks of corruption, had people who wouldn’t think twice about taking that little bit extra and looking the other way; yes, he knew what people said about the broken places that corrupt police officers went to and what they did and how if he made this accusation to Nakamori he’d need to back it up with proof that wasn’t easy to fake and that he was sure of because he could ruin someone’s life without trying without hoping without even fucking--

“Right,” said Shuichi, looking at him.

“A police officer, or a criminal who’s so adept at sneaking past that he made it into a department under cover, he made it into the monitoring room - somehow managed to hack or otherwise disable the camera or bury the footage deeply enough that nobody found it until just now---”

How often did the footage get viewed recycled deleted? On the other end, Mattie quietly typing (already patching into the mainframe here probably, or just writing an email to Olivia, which was more likely, both were more likely) while he talked and conjectured and Shinichi looked at him like he’d never seen him clearly before in his life and there’d always been foggy glass between them.

“---managed to get down to the holding cells, again without any of the cameras picking him up, managed to get the keys off of---” faltered, because he couldn’t remember where the keys were (had he ever known?)

“The keys went missing, remember?” said Shinichi, and his eyes were blue blue blue and focused focused focused and he didn’t know which one stung more. “Nakamori threw a massive fit over it. They found them eventually, but---” handwaved it away like it wasn’t convenient. “It must have been on one of your days off.”

Barked a laugh that hurt his throat. Days off? Spent hiding in his room, combing over the Toichi Kuroba murder over and over and over again until he had blood-spray patterns on the inside of his eyelids and when he wasn’t it was trying to outthink KID before he got himself killed and when he wasn’t it was getting shot at getting driven around by Jack getting to help with heists and not any closer to solving the mystery of who what why where.

But he let it go, smiled brittle-bright at Shinichi, and amended to, “---right, so somehow managed to get the keys, opened the cell, and cut a man’s tongue out without so much as getting a single speck of blood on him or with ample clothing that he could just shed the upper layer and leave them---” where? There was nowhere to dump clothing in the department without alerting at least three officers or one of the canine units, so unless he’d had a friend on the inside, and unless that friend on the inside had a face well-known to the officers here---

“I don’t see anything implausible in that scenario,” said Shinichi, and gave him a smile, too bright too bright. “We both know a criminal who’s very good at dressing up.”

A split second of thinking and then, “… you mean KID.”

“World’s greatest detective,” dry as dust, and he could-- he could-- he could smack the smile off
his face but he didn’t have to. “KID could have gotten in and out of here without anyone being the wiser. We’ve established how it could have been done, and what other criminal in Japan has such a capacity for dress up and parlour tricks?”

In his head, Kaito sneaking into the department, Keiichi Ito with his arm around his shoulder; Kaito and his first-name basis with half of the KID group; Kaito and knowing him, knowing him, he’d been around the department enough that nobody would so much as blink twice if they saw him again, and maybe he could say he was bringing around food to Nakamori or---

*Except it was Kaito,* and Kaito didn’t waltz into police departments to silence witnesses who wouldn’t have seen his face to begin with, “KID isn’t violent,” quiet like a mantra, “KID has never lashed out or attacked anyone.”

“If he was desperate enough, wouldn’t he have done so?” said Shinichi, “say -- if someone saw his face, and he had a lot of things to lose?”

“Like what?”

Shinichi smiled, smiled, smiled. Dashed his gaze to the side and contemplated something beyond Saguru’s care and he didn’t want to look didn’t want to take his eyes off him like Shinichi could shimmer out of sight and go find Kaito and take him apart clap him in handcuffs and arrest him for something he hadn’t (probably) done (potentially).

“What?” slide-slow, his words a tangled too-soft too-much mess, “what do you think would make KID desperate enough to---”

“KID has a mole in the police department,” said Shinichi, and time clicked stopped making sense minutes skidding all together in his head. “You know that’s the only logical reasoning. Someone is feeding him information about which policemen are on duty the days of his heists - pinpointing our weaknesses, and letting him find a way to wiggle out of trouble. I’m surprised you didn’t come to the conclusion yourself.”

Silky-tongued pause and Saguru opened his mouth to deny it, froze because the way Shinichi was looking at him, askance, cock-browed, the way he was waiting too sharply for an answer that wouldn’t come wouldn’t come wouldn’t---

He knew, he knew, or suspected, he knew or suspected and Saguru didn’t know what to tell him how to tell him that Shinichi didn’t have the whole picture, didn’t know the whole truth; he knew parts of it, shuddery little after-images of it, superimposed on the truth, and the more Saguru wanted to explain it, the less the words would come until Shinichi cleared his throat, and said, “Saguru?”

“A mole?” operating on the fly, which emotion would settle best on his face? Surprise, maybe a little bit of outrage; put some of the old blue-blood pride on display. “In the KID team?”

Shinichi raising his brows a tiny tiny tiny amount, not enough to be surprised, something more than interested. “It’s obvious,” like it was, folding his arms across his chest, waiting a second or two, and then, “how else do you explain KID getting away on heists? Even when we’re both on duty? Someone’s helping him.”

His imagination, but Shinichi’s voice lingered too much on ‘helping him’, his eyes watching too closely.

Knew it was a risk, but he ducked his head, chanced a look at the screen, “what makes you so sure
that the person who did--” gestured to the computer screen, the flash-frozen image of the assailant with his hand on his jaw (height all wrong for Kaito, weight distribution all wrong for Kaito; Kaito had smaller legs, a leaner torso, moved with a grace like a dancer, not choppy, not military, not sharp), “--who did that is Kaito KID? It could be whoever is helping him, if there’s a mole in the police department.”

“There is,” and he sounded so certain, so certain, “it’s just determining who it is that’s the problem. I don’t know enough about the people who work in other departments -- about the people who work in your team, for example.” Leaned back, folded the ankle of one leg over the knee of the other, said, “I’ll give you that, though - it could be KID’s companion. The heights look wrong, anyway.”

Tapping fingers on his desk one ankle bouncing against the floor and he could hear the tap tap tap tap of his shoes and the sound it made like a beating heart a beating heart a beating heart a beating heart beat quicker when it lied, “right,” said Saguru, “then I suppose there’s no harm in contacting an outside agency to scan the footage and see if they can discern more information from it?”

Shinichi pausing, half-second surprise, and then, “I suppose not, no,” admitting it seemed to cost him something, made his fingers pinch together for a second two three and then release. “Tell your friend, then. No need to go rushing to Nakamori with no evidence and half a story.”

To Nakamori who knew Kaito and if it was him on the video (it wasn’t him on the video couldn’t be but if it was if it was if it was then he had bigger things to worry about than just Kaito) then Nakamori would know and how could Saguru fix that (get him fired get him reassigned send him to Saitama to work in the provincial police stations make him take over another task force bury bury bury), “Mattie?” his voice shaking but not enough to be noticeable to Shinichi who swivelled in his chair and went back to his screen and typed something on his laptop that sounded like a handful of teeth click click clicking, “Mattie, could you scan and search the footage, please? See if you can identify a face, or---”

“My pleasure,” said Mattie, pleasant layered over pleasant, type type typing away and he’d be halfway done by now, halfway through whatever database he was using in its billions to narrow it down to a few sharp points on a blurry scale and if it was Kaito (it wasn’t) what would he do what would he do? Took out his phone, scrolled to his contact, thought about sending him a message, and then remembered that his phone was dying and he had Keiichi Ito’s number only, but what could he send him, and how would he make it seem casual, friends looking after friends?

His head throbbing and none of his thoughts were in line. Focus, focus, breathe in and narrow it down to the phone, the phone; lifted his own cellphone from his pocket and fiddled with it, switched on, went to reread the messages from Kaito, half-second little blips of communication in between heists and late-night cases, are you coming home today? With check out what the doves did and look Watson has a new hat, pictures of Kaito with Watson on the too-big glove on his arm, Watson wings wide beak open a shrill-sharp caw and nothing but gold-gleam joy in his face and how could he---

How could he, how could he, how could he for a second believe that Kaito could have done that could have hurt anyone done that to an innocent person (and wouldn’t Watanabe have recognized him if he was the same person he’d come to kill wouldn’t he have said something shouted overpowered him done something---)
Or was he there and had he hidden it? Scrape of the chair as he pushed it away, leaving his phone on the table, Mattie’s dim-dusk brogue in the background of his typing. Shinichi glancing up at him as he passed and saying nothing when he made a beeline for the coffee-pot in the little kitchenette to one side of Nakamori’s office, banged the door open, watched it rebound. Humming silence of the mini-fridge in the corner the glug of water as he filled up the coffee pot set it back flicked it on and heard it bubble in the dark in the dark in the dark, bubble bubble bubble while the taste of bitter blood sat back on his teeth.

Facts, then: someone had cut out Watanabe’s tongue. That someone had access to the police station or was on well-enough terms with police officers that he wouldn’t be blinked at twice while he was wandering around areas that were supposed to be off-limits to civilians; then, a distraction or a feedback loop of footage from the holding cells, subtle simple easy enough that Keiichi Ito on the screens wouldn’t have noticed the discrepancy between what was going on and what was really happening in the holding cells.

Only one criminal in holding at the time. Had that been planned as well?

No, no, that was insane, that made this a conspiracy, a high-ranking nightmare, and he wasn’t playing the plot of the beleaguered detective working outside the confines of the law and yes he knew about the corruption in the higher ranks of the TMPD but this wasn’t the same thing. Bubbling coffee done, and he moved on automatic, took a mug from the cupboard, poured coffee until the midway mark, a dash of milk, two sugars, took it back to his desk.

The back of Shinichi’s neck red from a sunburn, a scarring, a mark, and Mattie was humming something soft and Irish, and he couldn’t get out of his own mind.

Bit his lower lip, put his mug aside, called up the camera footage. Keiichi Ito sitting in the room at precisely 14:48:20 when the man who was cutting out Watanabe’s knife was--

Pulled up the other footage, and started them together.

14:48:03, man walking down the hallway.
14:48:03 Keiichi Ito shifting in his chair.
14:48:12, man opening the door.
14:48:12, Keiichi Ito squinting at the screens and moving closer, moving away, getting up, stretching.
14:48:16, Watanabe getting up, intercepted, pushed back; gleaming knife.
14:48:16, Keiichi Ito sitting.
14:48:20, Watanabe overpowered held down, the knife plunging in his mouth a spatter of blackened blood.
14:48:20, Keiichi Ito standing up, moving to the copier, printing something.
14:48:25, Watanabe kicked away; man rising, wiping his hands on a rag he pulled out of his back-pocket.
14:48:25, Keiichi Ito back sitting, looking at the screens.
14:48:35, Watanabe kicked to the side, left to struggle on his own.
14:48:35, Keiichi Ito with his hands underneath his jaw, looking up at the holding cell cameras. Nothing on screen.

Sitting back, sitting back, creaking chair behind him; rewatched the footage twice, playing it on mute so he didn’t have to hear the sticky-wet-slick squelch of the knife in a mouth of footsteps of Watanabe’s agonised guttural scream. Played it again, noting down the times next to him on a scrap piece of paper, rewinding, rewatching, trying to see the moment where the two stories converged.

But there wasn’t, there wasn’t, there wasn’t. The screens with Ito stayed blank at the same time, the same date. Whatever had been done to the cameras - probably a pre-recording, edited time-stamps - hadn’t been caught - someone familiar with tech? Or someone with access to someone familiar with tech.

Pinched the bridge of his nose and leaned back, missing Kaito so badly he could feel the raw, raw, raw echo of his heartbeat, wanted him, wanted him, wanted him. He wanted him to come back here, wanted him to tell him something, wanted him to make him laugh. Reached for his phone again, opened up the messages, the last one sent from Keiichi Ito’s phone number; by now, where would he be? At home, talking to Chikage? Please be at home, numb-voiced, please be at home I want so badly to see you--

“Finished,” said Mattie, on the other end, whip-crack voice right in the middle of his focus and he flinched and pulled his scattering thoughts together, stared at the phone in his hand and Mattie’s crackling voice, and, “sending it to you now; it’ll take a few.”

“Sending it now,” the after-effect-echo of his voice hollow and dim to his own ears like a recording played backwards and harmonized all wrong, “it’ll take a few.”

The back of Shinichi’s head implacably still, focused on whatever he was doing typing scrolling reading; downstairs the door going and somebody punching numbers into a keypad and he wondered if it was Heiji come to take advantage of the late hours and Shinichi working the night shift or if it was Kaito somehow he’d figured out the code to the locker room and the showers or the makeshift gym in the basement where cops who wanted to train themselves went when they had the time. Pushed his chair away from his desk, watching the email pop up; clicked it, ran a cursory scan on the ancient systems, and then clicked to download.

To the windows where Tokyo was a mist, foggy-bright and dazed beyond the glass, and he could see the stilted rooftops of the city gleam gleam gleaming on the underside of clouds a whispery wind kicking leaves down the street; Shinichi’s chair creaking as he moved wobbled away from his desk to go to his and look at the download one percent two percent three percent took out his phone and scanned the numbers again looked at Keiichi Ito’s last message from Kaito put it away.

By this time, Tokyo winding down, the after-hours day blending into longer night, studded with lights that winked out around 2AM if they were in Shibuya never going dead remembered being a beat cop patrolling at night with an older partner but that was in Scotland in the Highlands where the dark was darker and the night was longer and then in Mayfair his patrols had been on the fringe edges of his other work with his father who never really spoke to him but wanted him to know all the on-foot secrets of London so that when it came down to catching a thief or getting lost he would---

Twenty thirty forty percent done.

“How do you know this Mattie, anyway?” Shinichi speaking out of nowhere, making him start, his voice like a blade-tip cold down his spine, “is he a friend of yours?”
“In a manner of speaking; he dated my cousin Jack, and stabbed him once, and we’ve remained friends since.”

Mattie laughing on the other end, “in my defence, I didn’t know it was a real knife, and your cousin’s a bloody idiot.”

“Oh, I think stabbing made him an infinitely better person,” and his voice sounded again like it was coming from someone somewhere somehow else, stretched out and too thin, and when he dipped his hands into his pocket again it was to take out his phone and open it, look at the messages blank and quiet the last one from Kaito clocking in at two three hours before closed the phone put it aside checked the download rate sixty seventy eighty percent. “You’ve never met Jack, have you?”

“I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure,” said Shinichi, didn’t say how before know he hadn’t known Saguru had family; didn’t say how this was the longest they’d spoken on anything that wasn’t work anything that didn’t come blood-drenched and aching, “you should introduce me at some point -- when this is over.”

When this is over, when this is over, and it made him crook a smile because he knew, Shinichi knew, as well as every other cop in the system that there was no sort of ‘when this is over’, there was never an over, there was always another case to solve another crime to untangle another report to write and he couldn’t understand how Shinichi did all that and kept up with after-school club activities when all Saguru could manage was school, go home, eat, go to work, sleep, wake up, school, repeat, repeat, repeat, working at the office from around three in the afternoon to midnight and sometimes later depending on if he could get the security guard to trust him with the key and go home and---

Ninety percent, and Saguru couldn’t stare out the window any longer, pulled away, and stared at his laptop instead, the embossed insignia on the top scratched off label the years of years of years of coffee stains and God knew what grimed underneath the keyboard like brown spots underneath fingernails; sat down, rocked back on his seat, felt it squeak and the cushion give, and pulled out his phone again to check for Kaito but there were no messages and it was ninety-one, ninety-two,ninety-three, ninety-four why was it taking so long when he needed to know who had enough access to the department to walk in and cut a man’s tongue right out of his mouth without even waiting for a second without anyone noticing?

“Mattie, while this is downloading, can you run a scan for any signs of---” hesitated because what he said next would take this from a hunch into a suspicion and he didn’t know where Shinichi stood on the side of police corruption, “---tampering with the cameras?”

Saw his brows raise but Shinichi said nothing and thank God, thank God; he didn’t want to get into that argument now when there were more important pressing things to look at.

“Already doing it, love,” said Mattie, and the type-type-type of his fingers punctuated the last trickling percentage of the downloadable file that Mattie had sent, named like a virus, designed to delete itself off the system unless he decided no, no he wanted to keep it and see it and burn it into his memory.

Suspended time, his hand hovering over the mouse button a breath away from clicking it. Shinichi moving to stand behind him, and he could smell him on the recycled air: coffee shower gel clean clothes the after-school smell of paper and fresh ink.

Clicked the link, waited while the ancient laptop wheezed; bit back the scream of faster faster faster spun the wheel in the middle of the mouse aimlessly clickclickclick while Mattie typed and
Shinichi’s heartbeat echoed in his ear like a drum and he could taste the old coffee in the air and the file still hadn’t opened but he could hear the laptop whirring working whirring and where was Kaito now?

A jump, an electronic twitch. The screen went black, then white, the video replaying, scrambled features smoother; there was the man’s shoulder, there was his back, there was he striding further into the room catching hold of Watanabe’s jaw the chair scraping back the knife plunging down and across and then a flick up of his face at the camera and---

“Shit,” Shinichi swearing slow and lethal at his ear, “shit, shit, shit.”

Keiichi Ito flicked his head back down, looked at Watanabe, nudged him with his foot. Knife slipped away and then he was gone, melting out of sight.
Buzzing.

His head buzzing buzzing too much static in between his ears where his thoughts roved. Onscreen, Keiichi with the knife in his hand, too big too slick too bright catching the glare from the overheads and burning into his eyes onscreen Keiichi Ito nudging Watanabe with his foot like he hadn’t just like he hadn’t just like he hadn’t---

Scraped the chair back, rolled over Shinichi’s foot but Shinichi didn’t notice, was too busy reaching for his phone, dialling a number, moving back and his head was air air air.

Phone died Im on borrowed---

“No,” whispered first, “no, no, no---”

He’d hallucinated it, he’d hallucinated it, or Mattie was wrong (Mattie’s never wrong, Mattie doesn’t have it in him to be wrong, Cousin Jack laughing as he swung his arm around Mattie’s shoulder and even after they’d broken up he said the same thing) or maybe it was just the angle, just some trick of the light that made men look alike there had to be a reasonable explanation that didn’t involve Keiichi Ito a cop with Kaito with Kaito with Kaito somewhere after killing a man.

Jerked himself out of the seat the air mountain-top thin, the lights like exploding stars in front of his eyes and he reached for his wallet without really thinking about it, for the card that he kept with Jack’s number on it, stopped himself, made himself breathe, breathe, through a throat gone swollen and heady with panic. What was he going to tell Jack?

Kaito went out a while ago and hasn’t come back and the man he’s with cut out the tongue of and tried to kill someone who was sent to kill us and I don’t know what to do help me help me help me.

Except then Jack would call his uncle and would call his grandfather and they’d handle it slowly responsibly while Kaito was somewhere unsafe unsafe (no, he had to be safe there had to be a connection was Keiichi one of the men in black?) and waiting and wondering why he hadn’t figured it out yet why hadn’t realized until now that there had to be someone in the department to keep an eye on him of course it made perfect perfect sense why hadn’t he seen it before? Stupid boy even the thing you’re good at you’re not really good at, focus focus focus focus.

Focus, the facts, okay: Kaito had Keiichi Ito’s phone which meant that he was with him. Keiichi Ito had attacked Watanabe which meant that he knew a little bit about Watanabe’s past (let it be something else, prayed in the back of his head, let it be something else let it be something else) which meant that maybe he’d known that Watanabe would take a plea deal had seen him talking to him and maybe decided to remove his ability to speak at all?

Would Watanabe know about this, know any of this? Snapped his head around to Shinichi, pacing and talking on his phone, gesturing with his hands, and his head, his head, it hurt with the thoughts pinballing around, the screaming background din of Kaito’s in danger Kaito’s in danger Kaito’s in danger drowning out everything else until his breath shook and his head ached and Mattie's voice was clicks and beeps and keyboard snaps.

“Mattie?” Couldn’t hear himself over the sound of his own heartbeat. “Was the footage doctored in any way? Was there tampering with the cameras?”

Silence, tapping, silence, tapping, and then, “hm,” soft and quiet, and then, “there was a piece of
footage superimposed over the recording - it’d play on a loop so that it looked like your bloke was in the camera room while that lot was going down.” A pause, and then quieter, quieter, “lad, what have you gotten yourself into?”

Forced his voice steady tried not to let the panic peek through, “nothing, really, just your standard, ah---murder.”

“You’re in white collar crimes,” said Mattie, only mildly alarmed, tapping away still, crush-crunch of the keys underneath his fingertips, “you’ll need a better lie than that, I’m afraid, my boy.”

Tell him just tell him just tell him whispering in his head; pour out the whole story like a drink, and for a second two three it was on the tip of his tongue to do that anyway, pull up his desk chair and spill out the truth for him, tell him about Kaito and his father and the ghosts that chased the both of them, about Watanabe and Keiichi Ito and how he thought his boyfriend was trapped somewhere with him, but then Mattie would tell Jack who’d tell Hei who’d tell his uncle who’d all try and deal with it responsibly and the ticking clock in his head screamed out the minutes and told him he was wasting time looking askance at the story that he needed to go away and find Kaito and then he could solve the whole mystery.

“I can’t tell you more than that,” said Saguru, and his voice sounded like it was coming from the far end of an upside-down phone, “I’m looking for that thief, and he’s led me down a rabbit hole.”

Shinichi’s fox-terrier look, his hunting eyes, looking at him like he knew the whole truth of what he spoke and could he have possibly been more obvious?

A pause on the other end and then Mattie saying, “and Jack doesn’t know any of this?”

“Jack knows enough,” crossing his fingers underneath the desk a childhood superstition but if it saved him precious seconds to find Kaito then he would have, “Jack understands I can’t really talk about this anyway - it’s police work, the same as it was in London.”

“London nearly killed you.” Tap tap tap and he wasn’t going to understand to think about how Mattie was right because it didn’t matter right now, it wasn’t important. He had to hang up, go to the hospital, run Keiichi Ito’s face by Watanabe, glean from him every last scrap of information that he could, scrape him dry for what he knew.

Stood up, chair kicked backwards, skittering into the half-empty bullpen. The empty desks yawning with paperwork, heavy files lopsided on Nakamori’s side, Shinichi’s clear but for a picture of him and Heiji Hattori and Ran Mouri and someone else that he didn’t know; his own barren, bare like a fire-scorched field, no scraps of anything to remind him of home and hearth.

“Thank you for all your help, Mattie,” as he shrugged into his jacket, switching the phone from one side of his face to the other, “I really appreciate it, you’ve given us a little bit more to go on.”

Shinichi standing up watching him like he didn’t know him and he wanted to bare his teeth snap at him ask him what he was looking at but patience patience patience---

“Lad,” gentle careful soft, “lad, if you’re getting yourself into some kind of trouble---”

I don’t have time for this I can’t talk to you I have to go over and over and over in his head and somewhere Kaito was probably curled up in the dark gagged (bound?) still alive but struggling and he couldn’t stay here and talk Mattie through everything, “I’m not. I promise. Just doing my job, Mattie. I’ll call you in the morning.”

A pause on the other end and he switched out of the call and grabbed his phone to text his driver,
outside still probably, freezing in the recesses of the Aston Martin, hadn’t given him a thought, a single thought, I’ll make it up to him when this is over, and then had to bite back the laugh; like Shinichi, he assumed too much that this would end when it wouldn’t really, not the way he thought it would. There was always something overlooked, some fragment of the puzzle that didn’t slot in; that was what crimes were that was how crimes worked that was what his life was.

Mattie on the other end, “do so, lad. If you forget, I’ll bloody well come and find you.”

Crossed fingers, hope against hope, “of course.”

And then the connection frizzled, and he tossed his phone down onto the desk, drew in a shaking breath, let it out, only partially aware that Shinichi was watching him like he wasn’t really sure what to do next, but the steps were so clear in his mind.

“We need a witness ID,” said Saguru, picked up his phone again and slotted it into his pocket don’t think about Kaito’s last message, “we need to talk to Watanabe.”

“At this hour of the night? He’ll be asleep and the hospital will be shut---”

“I’ll get us in,” already picking up his phone, running through his contact lists of people that he knew people with enough connections to get them through, “you just, ah ---”

“What is it about this case?” said Shinichi, and his eyes too cunning too sharp too blue too much like Kaito’s, “you’re behaving differently. Why?”

“We’ve just uncovered police corruption within the department,” said Saguru and his fingers too big for the buttons slipping sliding over the place, “and you’re asking me why care?”

Could almost see Shinichi’s mind work twist around what he’d said looking for the gaps in the truth, “not exactly,” smoothly, “that’s not what I asked, and you’re deflecting. All evening, you’ve been jittery; you’ve broken the law twice already, supplying a contractor with sensitive information - it’s like you have information on what we’re looking for before you’d even come here. Do you know more than you let on?”

And Saguru sucked in air, sucked in air, so he didn’t laugh at his face, his earnest, stupid, bloody do-good face, and scrolled back up to the top of his contact list, taking the names one by one by one, “no,” he said, “I’m a good police officer. If you must know my mother is visiting, and we’re not on the best of terms at any occasion. I’m preoccupied with wondering what she must be thinking.”

In the silence that followed, chancing a glance up to look at Shinichi looking at him watching him considering him, and Saguru wanted to do something childish, to start a fight, bruise his knuckles on Shinichi’s page-edge face, come up with a reason to leave this department and leave Shinichi behind and find his way back to wherever Kaito was, wherever he’d been taken to.

But he couldn’t, had to reign it in, swallow down frothing rage and think of Kaito, in the dark somewhere, waiting for him, Watanabe resting in his bed at the hospital. He found the number he was looking for, tilted the phone to his ear, listened to the mechanical beep beep beep of start-up-linking connections, ignored Shinichi’s eyes on his back like a brand burning through him down to his spine looking where the hollow negative-space of his heart was, seeing in him what his mother saw him: spinelessness, cowardice, a street-dog malice.

Fumbling awake, the director of the hospital, Kobayashi Sae, answering in bite-mark words, “what?”
“I need access to one of your patients,” and before she could do more than stutter, “he’s perfectly stable, and it’s an urgent matter. I wouldn’t call otherwise.”

“I---do you know what time it is?”

“Late enough that I know I’d be refused if I don’t have your go-ahead, Ms. Kobayashi. I thought it would be best if I phoned you instead of my mother,” drip-drop name, and he considered slipping in the familial ‘Hakuba’, reminding her what family she stood to annoy (in the back of his head Kaito looking over his shoulder disapproving watching him I never told you I wasn’t my mother’s son--)

“This is highly irregular,” grumbling on the other end, and he could hear shuffling of clothing.

“So is your acquaintance with my grandfather,” smooth smooth smooth, “among others.”

A pause, and then, deliberately, “how official is this visit to the hospital?”

“As official as a few of your sins, Ms. Kobayashi,” said like silk, out of Shinichi’s hearing, because what he knew would definitely hurt Kaito hurt him hurt, “but I promise I won’t be more than a ghost in your hospital. In, a few words, out. No need to start a fuss.”

“Young man---”

“I won’t ask nicely a second time around,” said Saguru, “and would you really want two detectives showing up at your house in a police vehicle? Think of the neighbours. Think of the investigations the journalists would open up. Ah---and if they have a way of looking---”

Sharp short intake of breath, a curt, “one moment.”

“You know Kobayashi Sae?” said Shinichi, when he tucked the phone between his ear and his shoulder.

Saguru shrugged; turned himself three-quarters to Shinichi, and how much of the story to tell him? There were acquaintances his mother name-dropped in his presence that he took the time to look into; a few had sins bigger than what he could slide, but the rest didn’t hurt anyone, didn’t do anything to anyone, would be useful in a pinch. He wouldn’t be able to pull this trick twice, but if it got him to Watanabe before the end of the night, before the end of the hour, it would be worth it.

But Shinichi wouldn’t approve, would want to investigate Kobayashi Sae (>that’s what proper police do or have you forgotten?) tick tick tick of his nails against the back of his phone-case, and then on the other end, a beep, and, “you’re expected. Do not ever call my house again, Master Hakuba.”

“Thank you, Ms. Kobayashi,” said gentle, courteous, old-man sweet. “I won’t forget your kindness.”

Click of the phone, and Saguru scrolled up to his messages, spun on his heel and made for the door, “are you accompanying me?”

“To the hospital? Of course.” Before he’d gotten to the door, Shinichi right beside him, buzzing with questions that he wouldn’t ask, wouldn’t get answers to if he did.

Saguru pushed the door open, took the stairs three at a time; just this once, promised to himself, to Kaito, just this once he’d use what his mother told him, he’d turn a blind eye for the wrong reasons, he’d be his mother’s son.
Just this once, and then when Kaito was safe, never again.

The hospital, pitch-black, a security guard idling with a magazine in his hands, jumpy from three cups too many of the tar-black brew in the foyer a night duty nurse looking them over with her brows knotted together until Saguru reached into his pocket and pulled out the student ID (formal, glossy, bent at the corner where he forced it into his wallet too quickly after every time he took it out) to show her; watched her eyes take in the first character of his name, the second, the third, linger on the ‘Hakuba’ that no other family wrote the same way.

Watched her eyes widen, and in the back of his head, straightened his shoulders, made himself taller, gave his voice a deeper resonance, like his mother had taught him when he’d been little and London too big and too wild, and she’d told him to walk straight and keep his chin up, and to hit twice as hard as anyone else.

“We’re expected,” he said, before Shinichi could get his own ID out, “it’s a police investigation.”

“Yes, of course,” crow’s-feet-framed eyes blinking too quickly, scratching over his face like she wanted to take a piece of him for memory alone, to talk it over with in the staff break room, *I met the youngest Hakuba and do you know he’s just like his pictures*--- “Follow me, please.”

Shinichi snorting a little to his side, tucking his wallet into his back pocket where he’d almost had it out, and then, “is it like that everywhere you go?”

“Money talks, and names talk louder,” said Saguru, counted the doors they fanned past in his head: one two three most of them open a crack enough to see the darkness inside lit up by machine-gun beeping and wires and tubes spilling out of light-starved skin, “I’m sure you have pretty much the same reaction when you go to places, do you not?”

“Not the same way,” said Shinichi, cracked a smile so big it looked like he’d hurt himself doing it, “I think it would drive me a little crazy if I had to be perfect every waking second of the day.”

Was there a dig there? The nurse’s footsteps getting louder as they bottled around a corner, took the elevator down to the third floor, her nervous twitching making Saguru’s shoulders want to hunch inwards, the spot between his shoulder blades itch itch itch.

“Um,” said the nurse, “can I ask what you want with Mr. Watanabe? He’s not well, you see, and--”

“He’s helping us in an investigation,” said Saguru, and his voice felt razored, and his throat ached, and *I’m so sorry I wish I could let you rest*, but if he didn’t talk to Watanabe now, to find out where what how Keiichi Ito might have taken him---

The hallway ahead intermittent blinking lights a door open and was---

Shinichi taking hold of his arm and keeping him steady before he lunged towards the pair of outstretched legs in the hallway. The nurse paling out of the corner of his eye, her mouth opening wide wide wide and before he could think about what he was doing Saguru reached out cupped his hand over her mouth dragged her in and squeezed until her teeth scraped against his palm and he could feel her rabbit pulse against his chest wondered if she could feel his where her head rested against the hollow of his throat.
“That is highly unusual,” Shinichi in a whisper, reaching down into his pockets and pulling out a thin collapsible baton, eyeing the outstretched legs half-exposed by an open door, Watanabe’s room, Watanabe’s room. Blue scrubs, no signs of blood, maybe a nurse taking a nap? During a shift, don’t be stupid---

“It would be kind,” whispered into her ear, and he could smell the strains of her perfume, two-day-old unwashed hair, the heat of her skin radiating that smell of humanity on hot days, ripe and heavy, “if you didn’t make a single noise. Go back upstairs. Call the police.”

A whimper and a dribble of drool against his palm as she nodded. Saguru let her go, touched his finger to his lips, watched her scuttle away, trying not to break into a run, almost succeeding before she reached the elevator.

And then he turned, strode towards the door, Shinichi hissing behind him, “what are you doing, you aren’t armed---”

To the door, back against the wall, and the hospital wall seemed to hum beat like a heart and when he pressed his shoulderblades flat against the wall he could feel the tiles, the corner of a painting digging sharp into the middle of his shoulder-blade, and he reached back to see if he could peel it off the wall, lifted it careful. Cocked it at Shinichi, who scowled, took up the other side of the doorway, his baton loose in his hand and pointed down.

On three, mouthed at him, carefully twisting his head around to press his cheek against the wall. His heartbeat rattling in his chest like loose teeth, one two three four, every pulse agony on his ribs.

This was nothing, this was what he was trained for, and one day Saguru hoped it would stop feeling like this, like jumping, like falling, like death. Pressed his free palm flat to the doorway, the framed picture in his hand heavy like sin, slid his cheek forward and around.

Hunched over shoulders, a figure in almost-close blue scrubs, but too wrinkled and drab and slightly two shades too dark in the moonlight bladed across the floor to the other side of the doorway Shinichi sliding in baton first guttering noises in the air like what was that what was that? Sounded like---

In bed, Watanabe flailing, his arms pinwheeling at his side and he’s killing him there’s too much force moving into the room with the picture frame above his head, his hands sliding to hold it one at either end strike down hard smack right into the back of the doctor’s bent-over back. Glass shattering, then falling like tiny splinters, hitting the ground with rain-drop notes, and the doctor half-turning, wild-eyed, leading with a fist that Saguru took to the shoulder; strike-point pain radiating down his arm, nerves tingling like they’d fallen asleep.

Keiichi Ito grinning at him, cocking his head to one side, “figured it out, huh?”

Keep calm stay calm put the picture frame aside and reach down like he had a baton or a gun pray that Shinichi would stay out of the way and to the side where he wasn’t--- “You missed a trick with the footage,” watching his shark-flat eyes glide from his face to the doorway judging the distance and if he could take one teenage boy in bed Watanabe breathing so hard that it sounded like he’d flatline, “and I have some enterprising civilian friends who were all the more excited to flex their crime-solving skills.”

“Must pay to have money,” cocked a fist back and (within five feet a knife’s going to have the
advantage but if you corner someone unarmed they’ll go for your face and the eyes first so you’re going to want to--) dancing back, hitting his hip on the corner of the table at the end of Watanabe’s bed and sending reference sheets a glass a pen tumbling to the ground Shinichi advancing from the doorway with his baton in his hand going “police, police--”

“I’ve never had complaints,” breathlessly dancing out of his reach, leading Ito away Watanabe, away from Shinichi, had to get him talking, “and an above average intelligence helps, as well, not that you’d know anything about what that’s like--most men with grades worth talking about don’t enter the police force, do they? Go on to become doctors, somewhere they can really make money--” Tactic one, keep him angry, keep him focused, give Shinichi time to get behind him and--

Ito whirling around, catching Shinichi’s baton on his forearm, crack of synthetic on bone and skin; Ito’s eyes narrowing, and--

“Oi!” said Saguru, “pay attention to your betters!” Get him away from Shinichi, give Shinichi time to dart out call for back up had the nurse gone for anyone? But even if she had the night shift at the TMPD operated on a skeleton crew and before Nakamori---

---moonlight-thin gleaming light following Keiichi Ito’s right fist and---

“Knife!” as Ito lunged, Shinich ducked, cracked his baton hard into his shin and collapsed him onto one knee.

“I see that!” Shinichi snarled, “I told you to wait for backup, but you never---”

Ito turning his attention back to him, looking at him and Saguru remembered (the day they’d first met Kaito’s arm around his shoulders big brother how Keiichi smiled at him when he’d dropped him off at work and) no not looking at him not---

Feint to the right, to the bed, and Saguru threw himself at Keiichi’s back, dragged hard and desperate at his forearm trying to get it to get it to get it his fingers clawing into his skin Watanabe’s eyes gleaming in the midnight dark of the room and in the light of all the machines and monitors and he never saw the knife plunge into one side of his neck and out the other, raking a smile across his throat.

Hot spit-spatter of blood across his face, and then Keiichi moved, slammed back against the wall; his head cracked back, dented plaster; he could taste blood in his mouth on his face in his eyes, stinging and sticky, the warmth of it nauseating Shinichi shouting in the background and whirl-whirr-whirr of cars beyond the window a gleam of red and black-blue light. His grip tightened on Keiichi’s shoulders, refused to let go, had to find out where Kaito was had to had to had to, digging his fingers tight into Keiichi’s arms when he tried to shake him off and---

Slampain radiating from the back of his skull making the black light on the inside of his eyelids throb and bounce and club-beat wave his grip faltering failing the plaster sticking to him as he felt Keiichi shrug him off, sounds of smackthumpsmack and Shinichi swearing coughing, footsteps, footsteps.

Forced his eyes open, even in that twinkling brightness, and there was so much blood in his eyes he could barely see, Watanabe Watanabe machine-beep-scream of the monitors as the wires tried to find a pulse and fail, and Keiichi right now would be covered in blood so he’d be easy to tail but Watanabe---Shinichi---Watanabe---

Shinichi curled up pretzel-tight on the floor, and his nose by the looks of it needed setting, but he crouched down, shook him, got a swear in response and dragged him to his feet. Watanabe’s
machines were haywire, beeping, there had to still be a pulse, and without thinking, without thinking, dragged Shinichi over and pressed his hand down on the ruined wreck of his neck, pressed hard.

“Keep pressure on it,” babbling the words like syrup in his head, “I have to go after him, we can’t lose him, he has Kaito--”

“Saguru--”

Room blurring as he spun on his heel darted for the door Shinichi behind him shouting incoherent words and on a split-second thought grabbed the discarded baton from the floor where it had rolled away and hit the hallway running; glance down to the lift, not there, he wouldn’t risk going towards the exit, but the fire exits were fair game; spotted blood on the grouted tiles, grimed with footsteps. Calculate: how much of a head start had Keiichi Ito had, where would he go from here that was convenient, had he shown up with a car?

Shouldered open the first fire escape door, took the stairs three at a time, following goldfish-flecks of blood on the staircase, smeared along the walls. Shinichi’d smashed in one of his knees, which meant he’d run slower, couldn’t have left the hospital yet because he’d have to think of a way to hide the blood he was covered in if he thought he’d lose himself in the crowd (second door, three floors down) the hallway beyond the fire-escape filled with the rattle-roar echo of waves of detectives amassing on the room where Watanabe and---

A flash of disappearing fabric around a corner the doors ahead creaking; his lungs aching as he kicked up the speed, nearly fell down the stairs, slammed the door open and caught sight of Keiichi Ito up ahead, limp-running down the stairs.

“Police!” and his voice echoed hollow and from everywhere around him, “police, stop!” the baton in his hand clacking against walls railings his hand his hip banging and leaving bruises; down another staircase, through another door, Keiichi less ahead of him now, flagging.

Outside, through the cool air, startling a receptionist out for a surreptitious smoke. No car that he could see, but Ito made for the road, blackened by a lack of street lamps (burning in his lungs a stitch in his side but he couldn’t wouldn’t stop needed to catch him to know what---)

Ito slanting him a look back, stumbling, hitting the ground hard with his palms on the tarmac, and this was the moment where he could speed up and catch him; baton in hand, grass crushing underneath his footsteps the receptionist shouting something indistinct, a blare of lights and noise and---

“Stop!” a hand catching hold of his shoulder, and Saguru swung wild with his fist, cracked it off a jaw just as a car hurtled down the road and crackthump a scream high-pitched and narrow the rise and fall of a body a shape a shape up into the black air and down ten feet away and in the back of his head (couldn’t have survived that nobody could survive that and he had to be going over the speed limit) broke the law the car coming to a skidding stop right by the man in the road the shape of bones splintering through flesh no possible way when a car hit a prone body head on there was no chance for survival. Shrugged off the restraining arm aware he was covered in blood looked wild, stepped over past the car in a daze. Inside, driver of about forty-fifty years old glazed eyes salaryman suit staring in incomprehensible bug-brain shock headlights falling on:

Keiichi Ito, unrecognizable pulped face blood seeping around his head into the tarmac into his clothes fractured skull almost certain instantaneous death reached down for his throat pressed hard for a pulse any pulse a flicker of a pulse. Tried not to look at the raw-meat mince of his face loose teeth around---
“--chased him into the road--”

Footsteps behind him.

“--I tried to stop him but the--the boy, he chased him out into the road, and then that car--”

Could he have evidence on him, a phone he could give to Mattie to trace if Ito didn’t survive what makes you think he did but his hands slipped down his throat through his jacket pockets pulled out a clamshell cracked-front phone that he slipped into his own pocket bloodyed and pricked his hands on a fragment of glass embedded into his fingertips from the screen starburst into sections, anything else look for a wallet any notes his hands pulling open his shirt oh God oh God his chest was barren and broken in battered ribs moving underneath his hands as he looked for hidden pockets on the inside of his jacket anything anything anything to figure out where Kaito had gone.

“Boy,” Nakamori’s voice, just over his shoulder; the weight of his hand like a rock against his back.

“My name is Saguru Hakuba,” the words slipping out before he could stop them, “and you’ll address me as Mr. Hakuba. Have you arrested the driver for vehicular manslaughter and DUI?”

A pause, and then the hand on his shoulder tightened pulled up, and he went.

Nakamori’s face bagged and strained with tiredness, striated veins fanning out around his eyes the grit-tooth smile that meant he was trying not to snarl curse closed-fist hands at his sides once he’d taken them off his shoulder. “Boy,” said again dangerous and slow, “I don’t believe I gave you permission to investigate Watanabe’s case at this hour of the night. In fact, I am very sure I ordered you off that case.”

“And you think that’s enough to----”

“Saguru!” Shinichi Kudo from the doorway by the traumatised receptionist, “there you are.”

Nakamori turning around slowly, and he could see the tic pulsing in his cheek, in his head. Could see how he clenched his hands again, unclenched them, looked around so slowly he could see every muscle twitching in his neck as he took Shinichi in considered the two of them opened his mouth to say something and then thought the better of it.

Brushed past Nakamori stiff-boned statue-solid to go to Shinichi, glance at him up and down, ask, “Watanabe?”

Shinichi shook his head, and in his pocket the phone felt like a drop-stone pulling him down to the bottom of the ocean. “Dead. Dead before I even touched him; you knew that, of course, so making me try and ‘put pressure on it’ was--” Shinichi’s eyes wandering up and over his shoulder focused for a moment to take in the berry-stain asphalt, “--what happened?”

“I didn’t reach him in time,” short to the point no room to confuse himself. “I was in pursuit, but he ran out into the road.”

“You were in pursuit?” Nakamori from behind him the silence of his voice ringing in his ear, “you didn’t tell me that.”

“Of course I was in pursuit,” without turning, “what makes you think I wasn’t? We caught him trying to smother Watanabe with a blanket, then he slit his throat and ran. I was doing my duty.”

“Your duty?” snow-soft, “your duty?” Louder and a hand on his shoulder pulling him around to
stare into Nakamori’s face, “your duty is to solve the Kaitou Kid case and go to school, not to chase after suspected mutilators—”

“---I think I very much know what my duty is better than a detective who---”

“Shut up,” snapped like teeth every letter spiky, “shut up, for once, and listen to me you brat.”

Nearly five inches of height on him about fifteen pounds of muscle and the Hakuba name if he formed a fist and punched Nakamori would anyone investigate it of course not of course not he was the golden Hakuba and he could ruin his career wreck his life like Nakamori didn’t expect and his mother would support him would help him. Cocked his head back shoved his chin forward like he was waiting for a punch stared down his nose at Nakamori blistering with the urge to get away get back to Mattie look at the phone and access whatever data it had contained like too much time wasted would gutter out binary into the atmosphere leave him chasing after loose ends to try and tie down Kaito Kuroba.

Breathed in, swallowed his anger, stepped carefully back from Nakamori, from Shinichi, couldn’t get fired or displaced now. “I understand,” words raspy-rough, “but I was in pursuit because I didn’t want him to get away. Do you think we would have caught him if he’d managed to get to wherever he was going? The man who has spent months in the police department, access to every file in the database, without any one of us realising?”

Out of the corner of his eye Shinichi flinching like he’d been slapped, Nakamori not blinking an eye.

“He’s clever,” said Saguru, “he’s clever, and he has backup plans on backup---”

“Was,” said Nakamori, ground out pebble-dust words.

His fingers shook shook shook stuffed them into his pockets to stop them from shaking tried not to lift his head to see the chaff of what remained of Keiichi Ito didn’t want to remember him in that moment where the car lit up his face hollowed out his cheekbones made his eyes huge and hollow in the headlight-gleam of the car rushing towards him and hitting him head on the snapcrack of bone snapcrack of bone snapcrack of bone and how he rose in the air like he was suspended on strings hovered up there before crashing ten point five feet away dragging along the asphalt and on impact his organs would’ve liquified ruptured he’d have died instantaneously of the fissure-crack in the back of his skull and---

“Saguru?”

---maybe lived for a second or two long enough to see that car hurtling down his way to him and had a second or two to regret to fear to know that it would hurt and it would hurt and it would hurt and maybe if he’d survive it he wouldn’t ever walk again but he didn’t he didn’t a second’s difference between making it and not and winding up smeared all along the ground because he was chased and Saguru hadn’t---

“I didn’t think he’d run out into the road,” didn’t realise it was him who’d spoken at first his voice distant and cloudy-heavy-hollow, “I thought there was a car stashed here, there should have been a car stashed here, what sort of idiot drives to murder someone without a car? He ran out ahead of me I couldn’t stop him---”

And it took ten seconds maybe fifteen at the most maybe less than that but when his mind replayed it drew out the seconds like they were minutes until the image repeated itself with Saguru mired in quicksand watching a man bug-eyed staring at the car until it rammed into him sent him scattering
sliding grinding across the asphalt leaving skin and blood behind him.

“I didn’t think---” and his hands were bloody when he looked at them, dark in the moonlight, black-blue in the moonlight, and his pockets were full of sloppy-red stains his jacket his face everything covered in sticky sticky blood two deaths tonight and he hadn’t been smart enough fast enough sharp enough to stop either one of them his heartbeat stutter-stopping on Keiichi Ito’s face and how it looked blinded-frozen-stuck and then smeared across the ground. “I tried---I didn’t think---”

“What you did or didn’t think,” Nakamori didn’t sound tired anymore, sounded halved instead like the two parts of him were at war and he was powerless to stop them and he didn’t know anymore what to do about it, “is irrelevant. There’ll be an inquest. If it turns out that you chased a man into oncoming traffic--”

Nothing would be done because he was Hakuba and Nakamori knew it, he knew it, Shinichi and his watchful eyes knew it, and it hit him then that that was what it looked like to Nakamori, like he’d fled after Keiichi egged him into traffic willfully took a life in the pursuit of trying to find Kaito Kuroba. His stomach ached hollow and rocked and he stared down into Nakamori’s eyes and tried to see some -- something, some scrap of kindness, anything that wasn’t guarded and hollow and watchful and aware that whatever inquest was going to be performed was rudimentary, he wouldn’t even be slapped on the wrist.

“I didn’t know that was what he was going to do,” said softly, and it sunk into him all at once, leaving him shivering: Keiichi’s footsteps on the stairs and the crack-thump of the door opening and how it felt to see him skidding out into the road nothing to occupy his mind except catch question find out where Kaito was. Underneath that, worm-subtle, a sliver of guilt that left his teeth aching but not because Keiichi had become so much meat on so much road.

“Go home, kid,” said Nakamori, no more fight left to him, nothing left to him, “go home and keep yourself available.”

“Aren’t you going to take my statement?”

“Underaged,” said Nakamori, “can’t, without an attendant adult.”

Right. Right. Which meant he had to go home and face his mother, fly-sticky with blood and it all itched on his face all itched on his skin his jacket practically crawling on him and as he cut across to the night-lit doors he dropped his hands into his pockets and closed it around the clamshell phone, tried to think if there was any possible way of him ditching Shinichi and heading back to the department finding Mattie waking him up and asking him for his help again one more time.

But Shinichi fell into step beside him and said, “I’ll catch a ride with you. You dropped me off here, so---”

“I want to see Watanabe before we go,” before he could stop the words from leaving him and out of the corner of his eye Shinichi blinked two three four times in shock and then shrugged and said, “okay,” and tagged along with him up the click-clack stairs to the floor where the hallway looked like a bad movie and the bloodstains were still greasy and bright and there was yellow tape and police investigators crawling over the room. Nobody looked at him knew him by now and he stepped inside and looked at the shell of Watanabe in the bed where he’d spent the last - how many months? How many months? Not sure, couldn’t bring it up then, but he looked pitiful, drop-weight narrow, a flap of skin hanging loose from his throat like a tongue exposed bone broken-in muscle, one eye broken and blood-red and he couldn’t remember if he was there when that had happened.
“I promised him he’d be safe, you know,” said Saguru, to Shinichi, to no-one, to no-one. Crime scene techs milling around vulturesque on the body and nobody answered and nobody needed to. “I promised him he’d be safe in here if he gave me information.”

“A guard wouldn’t have stopped a crooked cop for long;” went unspoken that Watanabe hadn’t even had that much budget cuts budget cuts and there was only so much his influence could get him. Shinichi awkward, tucking his hands into his pockets, shifting next to him like a track runner waiting for the starting pistol, saying, “there’s always so much more than we can do and never manage.”

“I promised, though,” and he’d promised Kaito he’d help him and Kaito was a wraith and Watanabe was dead and the man that linked them together was mush on the road, and it was all somehow his fault, hadn’t been strong enough, hadn’t seen the links until now a better detective would have looked at those tapes sooner not let his happiness blind him and hope that it would all go away quietly without death as a cop he should have known that this wouldn’t leave without bloodshed but he hadn’t thought it would be this way when he was in pursuit when he should have been looking with both eyes forward.

Dropped his shoulders, slunk out of the room over the body bag waiting on the floor, to the elevator, rode up in silence with Shinichi; avoided the glances of the nurses and kept his fist around the clamshell phone silent and still in his pocket and narrowed out his focus to ahead of him one step at a time to the car and his driver, still in the moonlight and his eyes glowing in the reflection light gleam glaze from phone.

“Saguru?” said Shinichi inside the car after the driver put blankets down to protect the upholstery.

“Yes?” tired-sounding flustered drained down to the marrow; his driver looking at him in the rearview mirror arching his brows up to his hairline and for a moment Saguru considered asking him what he was looking at and if he’d never seen young master so distraught and then bit his tongue and swallowed it back and didn’t say a word of what he was thinking. “Sorry, I---yes?”

“In the hotel room, with Watanabe, you said that you needed to catch Keiichi Ito,” said Shinichi. Forced his eyes to snap open stay open look at Shinichi; it wasn’t like him to lead with questions that had simple answers. “Yes?” Curt-sharp-jagged so that if he was looking drained it wouldn’t give Shinichi second thoughts wouldn’t lead him to attack when Saguru couldn’t defend. “We’d just seen him try to smother a man, and before that we’d watched him mutilate a witness in a holding cell. If he wasn’t extremely dangerous before he knew we knew, he would be once we did.”

Shinichi quiet, and Tokyo a dreamscape beyond the window, distorted neon shadows in mouth-yawn black, eye-bleam windows in fifty-storey scrapers winking and catching headlights and spinning back a firefly glow; his driver found a jazz station, filled the car with tubas and soft drumbeats, and---

“You said you needed to catch him,” said Shinichi, “because ‘he has Kaito’.” Cocked his head to the side, narrowed gaze again, and Saguru didn’t look saw him shift in his seat like a bloodhound on corpse-scent, “how did you know Kuroba-san was missing?”

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