


paper doll

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# PAPER DOLL

NOTE: This is a prequel A/U featuring Katsuya and David, inspired by Tomoko Ikou's SIM on a Halloween two years ago. We are writing this as a break from our regular projects. Sort of do things to these characters that we wouldn't be allowed to do without breaking too much of the canon. We'll update when we can.

Japanese version of this A/U is also being professionally translated and will be distributed chapter by chapter as Free Paper with one new illustration per our visit to Comiket, starting with Comiket Special 6.

A thanks goes out to our intrepid editor - Mycean.

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## Chapter 1

He tried his best not to notice the unsettling sense of anxiety that slowly rose from the pit of his stomach. He didn't like it when he didn't understand what he was suppose to do. He didn't like to deal with someone he didn't know, even if that person was a relative -- a relative of whom he had no memory.

Katsuya Asano glanced over at the passenger seat of his car at the corner of a tan envelope that stuck out from a bundle of manila folders. The certified letter had been delivered to his work five days ago. The sender's name was one that he had only heard his father mention twice in his lifetime -- his grandfather's.

Until he was fifteen and overheard his father say this name, Katsuya had always assumed his grandfather was deceased. The second time he heard the name was when he casually broached the subject of his grandfather the next day. He wanted to know why they'd never met. The grimace that came over his father's face then was troubling.

"You are not to ask about him again," his father said. "And if someday...."

There was a pause -- a reluctance to continue, as if his father knew that if he said more there would only be stirrings of curiosity to follow.

"If someday he tries to contact you, you are not to go to him, understand?"

Katsuya only nodded. It was an easy promise to make about a man he'd never known. That was ten years ago and since then his father had passed. The letter came then and all his questions returned.

His hands tightened on the steering wheel.

*What am I doing...?*

This was a repeated thought, along with flickers of guilt over disobeying his father's wishes, as he drove toward the address posted on the letter. He'd been requested to appear at the address in far upstate New York on a specific date and nothing more. Yet he felt compelled to go, perhaps driven by the hushed mystery of why his grandfather was someone no one spoke about and why he hadn't been in his life and then suddenly asked for him.

*Why would you want to see me? I don't know you....*

He had contemplated showing his uncle the letter at first, but decided against it only because he knew he would be talked out of going. He needed to know. Even if

he would be peering into Pandora's box and would be the worse off for it, he needed to know so he could put this behind him. At least, that was what he reasoned.

An unfamiliar song came over the radio and he stabbed at the buttons and changed the station. He was hungry, thirsty and he missed his bed. He had been on the road for two days.

After a brief stop at a greasy diner half-filled with truck drivers, Katsuya felt a little better. Although he regretted having the burnt coffee, it at least kept him awake. By the time he felt the caffeine wear off, the sun had already set and splashes of blue had replaced the glow on the horizon. He could see the outline of the mansion in the distance -- a lone estate without any neighboring houses for nearly ten miles around.

Katsuya parked his car next to an immense wrought-iron gate. He wasn't certain what to do next. He stood in front of the gate for a while and stared at the expanse of the mansion that was about a quarter mile away. Clusters of pine grew along the cobblestone driveway and not much else -- not much color to frame the house except the gray and the dull green.

He hadn't even noticed the intercom until he heard static as it was switched on and a man's voice asked if he wanted something.

"My name is Katsuya Asano," he began. "I - "

The speaker hung up with a click. A metallic snap followed disengaging the lock on the gates. They slowly opened inward, a low hum of a motor accompanying them.

"Nice to meet you, too," Katsuya said under his breath as he returned to his sedan. For no particular reason he was annoyed with the cold, brisk way he had been greeted, however he quickly dismissed his annoyance as fatigue.

As he coasted along cobblestones that rattled his wheels, the view of the mansion became clearer. Most of the windows were dark, their curtains drawn to the side. The estate felt lifeless and empty -- as cold as he had been greeted. This was a sanitized display of wealth that lacked warmth, he thought. He regretted having given in to the request from this man that he *knew* would be as frigid as his property.

When he reached the end of the driveway, his headlights picked up a man waiting. His face was shrouded by the dark, but Katsuya could tell he was young. His longish hair was a shade of brownish red. The white shirt he wore was neatly tucked into fitted pants, three top buttons undone with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He came over to Katsuya's driver's side window as he parked.

“Just leave the keys in the ignition,” the man said and gave him a smile. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Sure...”

He opened the door for Katsuya.

“Walter will show you to the dining room, Mr. Asano,” he said. “Master has been waiting for you there for two hours now.”

“I didn’t know there was a specific time to meet.”

“Nothing like that,” he said and pointed toward a door. “That’s the main entrance. Walter is waiting for you inside. I’ll take your bags up to your room.”

“Thank you,” Katsuya said, returning the polite smile and extending his hand. “You are --“

The man’s smile grew as he took Katsuya’s hand and shook it. His grip was firm and the warmth in it was genuine.

“No one important around here,” he said. “But I am Kenji. Please go in, I will see you again soon.”

Kenji squeezed Katsuya’s hand again before letting go.

Kenji’s warm handshake lingered in the palm of his hand, even as he stepped through the doors of the mansion. The cold was instant -- a freezing wall of it. As he stood in the doorway, he felt small, staring up at an antique iron balustrade that spiraled up three floors. An immense chandelier made from diamond-shaped crystals dropped from the ceiling and hung down two floors. The gray and white marble tile felt naked without a rug. Sparse furniture made the space feel even emptier and made the height of the room seem even taller. The walls were painted a shade of dark red and were empty -- no pictures, nothing.

“Hello, Master Asano,” a soft and gentle voice said beside him.

Katsuya turned to the speaker and found himself looking at an old man in a butler's uniform.

“My name is Walter,” the man said, bowing from the waist. “I will guide you to the dining room.”

“To see...my grandfather?” Katsuya asked. “Please call me Katsuya...’Master Asano’ makes me feel old.”

Walter smiled. "Not your grandfather," he said, fanning one arm out and gesturing with his gloved hand. "With the master of the house."

"Who is...?"

Walter lead the way and Katsuya followed. While the butler's immaculately shined leather shoes made almost no sound on the polished stone floor, Katsuya's heels echoed.

"He will introduce himself to you," Walter said.

"I see," was all Katsuya could think of to say, as he walked steps behind the old man, surveying his curious surroundings as he did so. When they arrived at the dining room, Walter bowed again and left.

The master of the house wasn't someone he knew, not even in passing. And when he introduced himself as "David Krause", the name meant nothing to him. Krause was handsome. Years older than Katsuya but considerably young for the master of such a vast estate. There was a tint of red in his eyes that made Katsuya stare.

"Oculocutaneous," David Krause simply said. "A form of albinism that affects my eyes."

Katsuya nodded and sat down where David indicated. Along the immense oak dining room table that seated thirty, there was only one plate and one set of silverware on a white silk placemat to the right of David.

"I didn't mean to stare," Katsuya said.

"It's nothing," David said. He sat back down in his seat. He had been there waiting, as Kenji had said. There was a half-glass of white wine beside a near empty crystal decanter.

There was silence. It wasn't until David pulled Katsuya's wine glass to him and emptied the decanter into it that Katsuya finally spoke.

"I am not sure what is going on," he said. His voice was low but it echoed in the large room. "But...am I to meet my grandfather here?"

"What do you know about your grandfather?" David asked, sliding the wine glass to Katsuya.

“Not very much. No one spoke about him in my family.”

“Yet you are here,” David said. He had a small smile on his face.

“He is...still family, I suppose,” Katsuya said. He kept his eyes on the wine glass. “I want to know what I was....”

When Katsuya didn't continue, David said it for him.

“Protected from?”

“Not the words I would use.”

David's smile only grew. He said nothing more as he drained the wine from his glass.

“How are you connected to him?” Katsuya asked, reaching for his glass but stopping and tucking his hand back into his lap when he realized it was shaking.

David noticed. “He was someone I knew,” he said. “A long time ago.”

Before Katsuya could muster enough courage for another question, Walter came back. This time, he pushed a silver service cart with domed plates of food. Two fresh bottles of wine chilled in an ice bucket.

As he served them, no words were exchanged. And although Katsuya had been hungry earlier, he now looked at the food without appetite. Suddenly he didn't want to be there anymore, but he didn't know how to excuse himself. The only thing that made him remain seated was Walter. Although the old man said nothing as he stood to the side, knowing there was someone else there made Katsuya feel better.

The dinner was awkward, silent mostly, with only the slightest clatter of silverware against plates echoing in the dining hall. Katsuya kept his eyes on the pieces of steak on his plate most of the time, raking the tines of his fork over the rareness of the flesh until jewels of fat and blood rose from it. He felt sick looking at it.

“Is there something wrong?” David's voice seemed to thunder, although he spoke in an even tone.

Katsuya looked up to see a disapproving stare. “No, not...really,” he stammered, suddenly feeling like a child. “I wasn't feeling too well most of the day. Long drive. I don't have much of an appetite right now.”

David's brows remained knitted, even though he nodded. “What would you like instead?”

Katsuya shook his head. "I think some sleep will do. I'm sorry for being such a poor dinner companion."

David speared a piece of steak and as it rose from his plate, droplets of red gathered and fell from his fork. Katsuya hoped the grimace he felt inside didn't show.

"Walter will show you to your room," David said, the sliver of bloody steak held inches from his mouth. "I will see you at breakfast tomorrow."

"Thank you," Katsuya said, and pushed himself away from the table. It was with some control that he didn't display his eagerness as he followed Walter from the dining room. He walked slowly, careful not to outpace the old butler who shuffled along unhurriedly.

He let out a long breath when they stepped into the main hall and the heavy doors had shut behind them.

"Are you all right, Master Katsuya?"

Katsuya nodded and managed a small smile.

"I'll be fine. I was just not expecting...all this."

Walter gave him an reassuring nod, genuine concern on his face. "Should I summon the house physician?"

"No, no...I really think I just need some sleep. I was on the road for too long, not enough sleep and too much bad coffee." He made a circle with his index figure. "Everything."

Another nod from Walter and he said nothing else. Katsuya continued to follow him as they walked up a spiral staircase, a different one from the main entrance. They were in another wing of the mansion and these stairs didn't seem as intimidating. The only decoration was the fresco on the ceiling of angels staring down at them, cracked and faded with age,

The carpet that lined the staircase was a deep, bright red, the texture so soft that Katsuya could feel it through his shoes. The banister was carved from a dark wood that might have been cherry. There were four grand chandeliers that hung from the high ceiling, only the one furthest right was lit. It was bright enough to fill the entire first floor and the length of the stairs with light.

They had turned two corners and ascended three flights of stairs to the floor where Katsuya's room was located. The stairs continued upwards.



“Apologies for the lack of an elevator, Master Katsuya,” Walter said, snapping on lights in the dimly lit hall with the press of a button. “Master felt its presence would ruin the aesthetic of the house.”

“Yes,” was all Katsuya said.

His room was the fourth of eight rooms on the third floor. His suitcase had been brought up, the contents carefully sorted and hung up or put away. It annoyed him to have strangers rummaging through his belongings, but he decided he was too tired to care just now. He’d have to have a talk with Kenji later.

“Breakfast is at seven thirty, Master Katsuya,” Walter said, as he pulled the curtains closed. “Shall I wake you?”

“I can set my cell phone to ring me at seven,” Katsuya said.

“If you like, Master Katsuya.”

“Please just call me Katsuya,” he said. “I understand you might have protocols to follow around here, but when we are by ourselves, I’d rather not be called Master...anything.”

A smile creased Walter’s mouth. He nodded once. “If you like,” he said. “Anything else you would like for me to take care of before I leave you? Of course, if you should need anything during the night, you may wake me. My room is on the first floor, to the left of the main entrance. There is another hall located there. All the servants are in that wing. My room is the first one on your right. Our apologies for the lack of a house phone. We rarely have guests and so most rooms on this floor are not wired.”

Katsuya sat down on the Queen Anne armchair next to the bed. “I’d like to know some things, Walter,” Katsuya said in a quiet voice. “What happened to my grandfather? Is he still alive? Is he here?”

“I cannot answer your questions,” Walter said. “Master has asked that no one but himself speak to you about matters concerning this house and himself.”

“I am not asking about his family. I am asking about mine. “

Walter held a gloved finger up to his lips and shook his head. “I believe you will be told everything soon, when you have had ample opportunity to speak to the master. For now, please rest.”

Katsuya let out a deep sigh and rolled his shoulders forward. The day didn’t make sense and the knot in his belly had tightened. He resigned himself to his

fatigue. He was too drained to pursue any more questions. "All right," he said. "I'll ask him tomorrow."

Walter took a few steps forward and bent down slightly to take Katsuya's hand and pressed a key into it. "For the lock in this room," he said, straightening.

Katsuya closed his hand over the key and thanked the butler.

With another bow, Walter told him good night and left.

It took Katsuya a few more minutes to will himself to move. He held up the room key to the light to study it. It was a skeleton key made from pewter. A detailed carving of a snake wrapped itself along the length of it with its mouth open, its fangs forming one end. The grooves at the other end of the key were jagged and looked nothing like any key he'd ever seen.

*It's almost as if I've stepped into a another world....*

He tried to dismiss the thoughts that followed. He gathered what was left of the strength in his legs and stood up, walking to the door. He pushed the key into the lock, turning it until he heard it engage and left it there.

It was a sudden awareness that woke him later. He was shivering long before he registered the cold, shaking hard as he curled his body into a ball. Even with the heavy blanket pulled around him, the chill still crept through.

Then heat gathered at one spot -- on the side of his neck. It was so startling that it hurt. A warm sensation followed that crept along the contours of his body. It was as if someone had slipped into bed with him and cradled him. He was no longer shaking, but the distinct pain in his neck was still there, two hot spokes sank in so deep that he swore he could feel them on his tongue.

"You are safe. Stay still."

The whispered words were said into his ear. They were soothing, they calmed him. Soon, he didn't even feel the pain anymore, just a comfortable numbness that washed over him as the warmth gathered him even tighter into its embrace.

## Chapter 2

He woke before the alarm went off.

He had slept through the night, but it wasn't restful. There was a curious ache at the base of his neck. He lay in bed, staring at the narrow beam of sunlight that came through the seams of the heavy curtains. For a while, he didn't know what to do.

There was a distinctive sensation of being lost in a place where he didn't belong. There was a nagging need for answers, but he didn't know how to ask the questions. He lay there, still contemplating this, until he heard a gentle knock at his door. A glance at his cell phone on the nightstand beside him told him he was late for breakfast.

Katsuya flung the heavy duvet off him and trotted to the door. He turned the key that was in the lock and opened it. He was surprised to see Kenji in the doorway.

"Good morning," Kenji said cheerfully. He wore a dark blue shirt that was tucked into a pair of dark slacks. His hair was a little damp -- almost dark brown with a hint of red. "Walter is overseeing the kitchen. He asked me to make sure you were awake and to bring you to the dining hall."

Katsuya only nodded.

"I hope you slept well," Kenji continued, following Katsuya back into the room. He went to the window immediately and drew open the heavy curtains. The room was suddenly awash in light.

"Could be better," Katsuya said as he made his way toward the closet. He opened it and inspected his clothing that had been hung up the evening before. "Kenji...did you unpack my bags?"

"Yes," Kenji said. "I hope you are not offended..."

"Well," Katsuya said as he pulled a white dress shirt off the hanger and flung it on the bed. "I'm not used to people I don't know handling my personal things."

Before Kenji could blurt out an apology, Katsuya put his hand up.

"It's fine. I'm not upset. But it may be a wasted effort for you. I don't plan on being here long."

"Meaning?"

"Exactly that," Katsuya said. He picked up the slacks and shirt he had taken from the closet. "I really have no business here."

Kenji appeared mystified, but he said nothing. He only nodded when Katsuya excused himself to use the adjacent bathroom to get ready.

“How long have you worked here, Kenji?” Katsuya asked. Those were the first words he'd said since they had left Katsuya's room and they made their way down the stairs.

“A little over a year,” Kenji said. He didn't look back. “Inherited the job from my father who spent a lifetime here. He's too sick to continue to work and I suppose it's only right that I take over.”

“This is all you know? This estate?”

Kenji looked over his shoulder. There was a smile on his face. “Yes and no,” he said. “Master's been generous. I studied in England for eight years before coming back here. Sometimes after leaving home to roam the great earth, you realize you just want to be in a small world.”

Katsuya returned Kenji's smile. He liked him much in the way he liked Walter's apparent candor. There was a warmth in him that was different from the mansion, from its master.

“I do hope you will stay longer,” Kenji continued. They'd reached the ground floor. “Master has been looking forward to your company for quite some time.”

Katsuya wanted to ask Kenji what he meant by this, but he decided it could wait. They were near the dining hall and he was already late. Kenji opened the door for him and left. Walter was there, standing by the service cart. David was already drinking his coffee, his stare fixed straight ahead. Walter acknowledged him with a nod.

“Sorry,” Katsuya began. He took his seat at the table. Walter set a delicate white cup trimmed with gold on a saucer and poured coffee into it from a carafe.

“Did you sleep well?” David asked, putting down his cup and looking at him.

“Yes,” Katsuya said. He looked down at his coffee. The unsettled sensation he had gone to bed with was still there. He was still staring down when Walter set a plate of steak and eggs in front of him. The heavy scent of the food made him queasy.

“I only came because I understood my grandfather had sent for me,” Katsuya finally said as he looked up.

David lay the knife and fork down on his plate and waited.

“Am I to see him soon?”

“Is it important for you to meet someone you don't know?”

Katsuya regarded David for a few moments. Instead of feeling anxious, he felt irritated, annoyed with the lack of answers and feeling stupid for chasing after something for a reason he didn't know. “You're right,” Katsuya said. He shoved back his chair and stood. “There is no point in my meeting a stranger.”

David's eyes narrowed, his eyebrows furrowed. The corners of his mouth tightened. “You are still a guest in my house,” he said.

His voice was low but Katsuya could hear the stifled anger in it.

“Do not disrespect me. Sit down.”

Katsuya stood his ground. The irritation had bloomed into a flare of anger. He nearly pushed Walter away as a reflex, when the old man placed a hand gently on one shoulder.

“Please sit down, Master Asano.”

As quickly as his temper had risen, it dissipated. Katsuya allowed Walter's firm hand to press him back down. David picked up his knife and fork and continued to eat his breakfast.

The rest of the meal went by quietly, without a word. Katsuya watched David eat and drink. Although he was beginning to feel hungry -- his last meal had been hours before he reached the estate and it had been half a greasy burger -- he decided he would touch nothing. He would owe nothing to this stranger.

David wasn't bothered by Katsuya's untouched food. He appeared amused, as he wiped his mouth with the linen napkin. He discarded it on top of his plate. “You are determined to make me appear a bad host,” David said.

“You are a bad host,” Katsuya said. “ You are detaining me here when I have absolutely no reason to stay.”

David laced his fingers together on the table. That was the first time Katsuya noticed a silver band on his left ring finger.

“You are polite, but you do have a temper,” David said. There was almost a smile on his face.

Katsuya grimaced. He refused to be baited.

“Come see me in my study in three hours,” David said as he stood. He brushed the wrinkles from his sleeves absently. “I’ll speak to you then.” He nodded curtly at Katsuya and left.

Katsuya watched him go and then he was alone with Walter. The old man walked over to clear David’s plate and cup, stacking them back onto the service cart.

“Would you like for me to warm your food again, Mas – Katsuya?”

Katsuya shook his head. He reached for the glass of water that was beside the coffee and drank it.

“You must be hungry,” Walter said. “If you intend to have a vigorous debate with Master later, you should eat something.”

Katsuya looked at the food that had long gone cold. For no particular reason except that Walter had asked him to, he ate.

Walter left Katsuya in the grand library and told him to leave it for David’s private wing when the clock chimed. The library was a waiting room for guests. No servants were allowed to go beyond that point unless they had been given specific permission to, Walter explained. He also took Katsuya’s cellphone from him. “There is no reception in this wing anyway,” he said, slipping it into his pocket. “I’ll see that the phone is returned to your room.”

Katsuya only nodded. After telling him to have a good day, Walter left. Katsuya realized he had forgotten to ask Walter if he should wait for David to fetch him or if he should venture into the private wing and look for him. He felt listless and dumb, as he watched the swinging pendulum of the brass clock on the wall. The clock hands turned a quarter way before he convinced himself he would need to seek out the master of the house himself.

He opened the French doors with the frosted glass panels. He was looking down a dimly lit hall. It ran long and ended somewhere in darkness. It was quiet. His heart skipped a beat as he took a step from the rich carpeting of the library onto the stone flooring.

He left the French doors open behind him as he walked forward. He wished he had cookie crumbs to leave on the unknown trail. The light thrown from the open doors cast a shadow that shrouded every step he took as he headed into the dark.

Katsuya stopped after he no longer saw his own shadow. He looked over his shoulder and saw that he had come into the darker end of the hall. He hesitated then, bargaining with himself, trying to decide if anything was worth the uneasiness that

was roiling within him. He had nearly turned on his heel and started back toward the open French doors when a sound caught his attention. He listened. The sound was weak, a cat-like mew. He followed it, trying to understand what it was he heard. It became louder, resolving into a woman's voice. He couldn't distinguish the words, but he continued on. A servant who stayed on this wing, he guessed.

A sudden sharp sound, almost like a scream, pulled Katsuya into action. He sprinted toward the shrill echo as it came again and again -- a woman in distress, unable to form the necessary words. He turned the corner, his eyes slowly adjusting to the dark and felt his way through the hall purely by sound. He came to a door left ajar where the scream came from. He pushed the door farther open and his eyes widened at what he saw.

David's naked frame covered the shape of a delicate body beneath him, even as both moved together. David was driving into his partner hard, the ropes of muscle on his broad back straining with each stroke. The woman's legs were hooked over David's hips and that was all Katsuya could see of her. Another high pitched scream came then, assuring Katsuya that the woman wasn't in trouble. A flare of heat burned Katsuya's face when he realized what he had walked into.

He ran. He turned and ran as fast as he could. He knew his loud footsteps were probably noticed as they echoed in the hallway. He took a couple of wrong turns, but managed to find the correct hall. Seeing the French doors' soft light spilling out pulled him toward them like some heavenly beacon.

He didn't stop running until he was in his room. He was still in an odd frame of mind as he gathered his suitcase from the closet and began to pile his clothing and belongings into it without finesse. He didn't want to be here anymore.

As he was struggling to zip up the overstuffed suitcase, a voice behind him called his name, startling him. He spun around, wide eyed, his breathing still labored. Shinohara was staring at him, mystified.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"I just want to leave," Katsuya blurted out. "My car...where are my keys?"

Shinohara frowned. "You can't just leave without Master's permission," he said. "Perhaps after lunch you can -- "

Katsuya shook his head. "I want to leave NOW," he said, his voice rising. "I don't need anyone's permission! Give me my car keys!"

"I am not sure what happened to upset you," Shinohara said, his voice level, almost cold. "But once you are on this property, you are to abide by the master's rules. He is the only person who can give you permission to leave."

Katsuya cursed. He pulled his suitcase off the bed and walked briskly out of the room. Shinohara only stared after him, saying and doing nothing, as Katsuya went down the stairs.

Katsuya told himself he'd walk out of the damn place. He couldn't remember any houses he had passed that were near the estate, but there should be cars on the road he could flag down. He'd have to come back with the police to fetch his car -- a price to be paid for his rash decision to come here and seek out a man he had been warned not to see.

He didn't know how he managed to find his way to the front entrance, but he did. The familiar vast empty space now felt threatening with two unfamiliar persons standing by the door. They were tall and well built, their thick bodies straining against the dark suits they wore.

"Please return to your room," the one with short cropped hair said.

Katsuya hesitated, but his eyes were still focused on the doors only a few feet away behind the men. He squared his shoulders and decided he would not be intimidated, although he was.

"Get out of my way," he said, stepping forward, intending to try to shove the two men aside.

"We really don't want to hurt you," the other said. He had a square face that was made more squat by an unfixed broken nose.

"Who the hell are you to keep me here?" Katsuya demanded. He dropped his suitcase, letting it fall loudly at his feet.

The men laughed. "It's regrettable that we are not allowed to play with you," the one with the broken nose said. "You would have been an interesting toy."

The words made no sense, but they infuriated Katsuya even more. He was shouting and cursing as the men seized him by the arms, one on each side, and dragged him along easily. Katsuya dug in his heels, refusing to go with them, but it was of little use. He felt like an unruly child being pulled along by his parents.

They didn't take him back to his room. He was taken to a different part of the house, somewhere he had not been. His courage slowly drained from him as they pulled him along. He was becoming afraid. So much so that when they stopped at a plain wooden door, panic consumed him. He writhed in their grip as one reached into his pocket for a key.



“Save your strength,” one said to him. His voice was soft, almost as if he were pitying Katsuya then. The door opened with a whine and an instant cold and heavy metallic scent rushed out.

“Please.... I didn’t do anything.... Just let me go...,” Katsuya pleaded, saying anything that came to mind. “I came here by mistake...please.”

A light clicked on. A bare bulb hung from a single wire in the ceiling. The room was bare except for a metal frame bed without a mattress. There were large eyebolts driven into the walls at eye level and at least two on the floor. One had a length of chain tethered to a lower part of the wall, next to the bed frame. Katsuya’s struggle renewed as he was dragged forward. He could see an open metal collar on the end of the short length of chain.

“Why are you doing this...?”

The collar snapped closed around his neck and the men stepped back. They didn’t answer him and left without so much as another glance back at him. The door shut and Katsuya could hear the key turning in the lock.

Truly alone, he tested the strength of the chain that looped through the eyebolt. There were gouges in the eyelet, signs of struggle from whomever was imprisoned there last. The heavy metallic scent was rust. He could smell it from the chain and the collar. Nothing gave. Not the chain. Not the collar.

He sat, looking around the dimly lit room that reminded him of a very compact dungeon and pulled his knees up to his chest. The cold stone floor and lack of windows chilled the room. He started to shiver.

*Oh God please help me....*

That was his only thought, as he struggled not to let the surmounting terror inside him overtake him.

### Chapter 3

He was gently shaken awake, and the first sensation he felt was immense cold. He had curled into a ball, wedged against the corner of the wall. Warm hands in cotton gloves brushed against his cheek, patting it.

“Master Asano,” a voice in a whisper said, “Let’s get you out of here.”

The collar was slipped from his neck. He could hear the metal clatter on the ground – its tinny echo finally bringing him to full consciousness. He blinked, not understanding for a few moments why he was looking at Walter.

“Can you stand?” Walter asked, his hand extended.

Katsuya only nodded as he struggled to find his footing, Walter helping him up. The side he had lain on, pressed against the icy wall was numb, his right arm slowly gaining back some sensation. When he finally stood, he could only lean against the wall. He couldn't make his right leg work, as he felt a prickling sensation crawling from his toes up to his thighs. It hurt.

“It's past midnight,” Walter said. “We'll go back to your bedroom. I've prepared and left some food and drink for you there. Eat and get some proper sleep. You'll see Master in the morning...”

The mention of David sent an instant burst of anger through him.

“Why am I being kept prisoner here?” Katsuya's voice was loud in the small, empty room.

A slight commotion, reacting to his sudden outburst, made him look up at the previously unnoticed figure standing guard in the doorway. He was one of the men who had brought him here -- the one with the broken nose. The man took a step into the room, but Walter held up a hand to stop him.

“It's all right, Samuel,” Walter said. Samuel stopped in his tracks, crossed his arms and waited.

“You must be calm, Master Asano,” Walter said. “Nothing is under your control now; this is the reality. If you want to find out the truth, then first you have to restrain yourself. You were punished very mildly for your first trespass. The next time....”

Walter paused and decided to say nothing more.

“I understand,” Katsuya finally said, for no reason than his need to leave the dank, cold place.

He stayed silent as he followed Walter out of the room, Samuel following two steps behind. At some point, Samuel left them, and Walter escorted him up to his room.

“I will have someone fetch you in the morning,” Walter said, as he opened the door with the same skeleton key Katsuya had been given the night before. “Eat and sleep. You will have a long day tomorrow.”

With those words, Walter gestured Katsuya into the room, but this time he locked the door from the outside. The simple sound of it -- the lock turning,

imprisoning him for another night in the mansion -- made Katsuya recoil. He remained standing at the door long after he heard Walter's footsteps fade down the stairs.

Although he was hungry, he couldn't eat. He didn't explore the food that had been left under a silver dome on the table. After a hot shower that washed away all the misery and the cold from that small, dungeon-like room, he climbed into bed and slept.

The cold came again. This time, Katsuya had a distinct memory of it. Fingers, like cold tendrils, slipped through his hair, combing through the strands with a curious gentleness. He remembered his father then, how he used to stroke his hair when he was a boy. One of his hands would hold open a book as he read to him, while the other caressed his hair, lulling him to sleep.

He felt a missed, gentle nostalgia, the pain of it resonating deep inside his core; a kind of hurt that was so vivid it was tangible. He woke in tears. Although he felt ridiculous being consumed by an immense sadness that he couldn't remember feeling when he'd looked at his father lying in his casket many years ago, he now allowed himself to be swallowed whole by the darkness that had always been inside him.

Katsuya didn't answer Shinohara's "Good morning", when he came for him the next morning. He didn't even protest when an outfit that wasn't his was laid on the bed.

"His idea?" Katsuya asked, as he unbuttoned his own linen shirt and tossed it onto the bed. "Now I have to conform to his dress code, too?" He slipped on the black shirt – the silk was soft and cool against his skin. His eyes fixed on Shinohara's as he buttoned it.

"I don't know what to tell you," Shinohara said.

"A big damn house of secrets," Katsuya said. He undid his pants, taking them off in quick, angry motions, throwing them to the floor and kicking them to the side as he reached for the pants presented to him. "I'll stay, " he said, pulling them on, "I'll stay here and rip everything apart until I know the truth. Even if it wrecks this place."

Shinohara only gave him a nod and gestured toward the door. Nothing more was said as Katsuya followed him out of the bedroom, down the stairs and finally into the dining room. As expected, David was already there. He was drinking coffee from a cup. Shinohara set a similar cup and saucer down for Katsuya, filled it with coffee and left.

For a while, neither spoke.

“Are you waiting for me to apologize to you for walking into your tryst with your...wife?”

David finally looked over at him and smiled. “I do not have a wife.”

“Then what is that?” Katsuya asked, looking at the silver ring on David's ring finger.

David didn't answer. His smile remained as he finished his coffee and set his cup down. “Your grandfather was a successful businessman,” he said. “The kind of successful that might be described as ‘miraculous’. The kind of success that perhaps only could be gotten through divinity.”

“I suppose,” Katsuya said. He reached for his coffee and drank it. The bitter, hot liquid made a warm path down his throat to his belly. It was good. “Not much of his fortune made it to my father's generation or to myself. My father rejected him and his money completely.”

“Your grandfather bought his success many years ago,” David said. There was a pause. “From me.”

Katsuya hid an urge to laugh, and raised his cup for another sip. He let the absurd words digest for the few seconds.

“So you are some kind of immortal being, to have known my grandfather, two generations back,” Katsuya said, barely restraining a grin.

“I'm not immortal,” David said, and returned Katsuya's amused smile.

Then for a while, there was only silence. David pushed back his chair and rose – the screech of the chair legs against the stone floor a piercing echo. Katsuya watched as David picked up the carafe and came over to refill his cup.

“How did he buy his success?” Katsuya finally asked. “Father said he didn't have any money. In fact, Grandfather inherited debt from his father.”

There was a pause, then the carafe was set down beside Katsuya's cup.

“He promised me a companion,” David said.

Katsuya flinched as if he'd been burnt when the back of David's hand slid along his cheek. The broad hand was warm, familiar, but Katsuya remained frozen in his seat, uncertain how to react.

“He had a son, then,” David continued, turning his hand so he could stroke Katsuya’s face with his palm. “He said he wanted a good life for him and didn't want to saddle him with his debt and his miserable life. Your father was three.”

David cupped Katsuya's face and looked down at him. The malice and arrogance that had been in David’s eyes were gone. In them now was a kind of affection that Katsuya hadn't thought someone like David could possibly be capable of.

“Your grandfather was the kind of man who couldn’t bear to lose what he had. The notion of losing his son was so terrible that he promised your father's first born instead,” David continued. His voice softened and he leaned down so close that Katsuya could only see the blood in his eyes. “If the child were female, she would be my bride. If the child were male....”

There was a break in the sentence and David filled it with a smile. He gave Katsuya a small kiss. A kiss that broke the spell. Katsuya tore himself away and pushed David back. He stood too quickly, knocking over his chair – the clatter loud.

“How dare you....” Katsuya scrubbed at his mouth with the heel of his hand.

“You still believe all of this is an elaborate lie?” David asked. “You’ve never questioned why your father was estranged from your grandfather? Why he fled with you when you were an infant?”

Katsuya's fingers curled into fists. The despair he felt was so tangible, so encompassing, that he knew David was speaking the truth. Embracing it was another matter, however. His immediate decision not to accept it gave him the strength to speak and hold onto his anger.

“It was an arrangement you made with someone else,” Katsuya said, forcing his voice to stay level. “It has nothing to do with me.”

David’s smile grew and he laughed. “So easy, isn’t it? Disregard it with just a few words.” He took a step forward, closing the space between them.

Katsuya had to remind himself to hold his ground and not take a step back.

“It has everything to do with you. If your grandfather hadn’t struck this bargain with me, then you would not have existed. Your life was traded for your father’s.”

Before he could reply, David seized him by the wrist. His grip was iron-like. Strong. Katsuya was dragged along as they left the room. His protests were ignored by the servants in the hallway, ignored, as if he were just a voiceless phantom. As he

was pulled toward the wing of the manor where David resided, he caught a fleeting look from Shinohara. The look held pity and concern, then they rounded the corner and into the emptied side of the house.

“Why am I here?!” Katsuya yelled. “You want a bride! I can’t give you an heir!”

David didn’t answer. They entered a darkened hall that Katsuya recognized -- the hall that led to David’s bedroom.

Katsuya renewed his struggles, panicked. “I can’t give you anything!” Katsuya said, his voice echoing back at him.

David stopped in his tracks, pressing Katsuya against the wall. Although they were still in the dark, Katsuya could almost see the furious expression on his face.

“It’s not for you to decide what you can give me,” David said, his voice lowering to a feral-like growl. He wrapped one hand around Katsuya’s throat, fingers clenching. “It is up to me to decide what I want to take. If I decide I don’t want you, I will discard you. You have no ownership in your life anymore, understand?”

His fingers closed in harder, to emphasize his meaning. “There is absolutely nothing you can offer me that I don’t already own,” he said, leaning in and shoving one knee between Katsuya’s thighs. “You don’t even have the right to die.”

The harsh words revealed the terrible secret that somehow he had always known existed, and the unearthing of it now was suffocating. He was shaking, arms limp at his sides, as David’s knee moved up high enough for him to almost be riding on it as he stood on his tip-toes.

The grip loosened around his neck, a stark contrast to David’s warm breath brushing over his throat – gentle and featherlike. His tongue followed – soft and wet as it made a trail up to Katsuya’s chin, then swept across his lower lip. The kiss that followed was hard, deep. It took his breath away.

He was still pulling in deep breaths after David broke off the kiss. David then began licking along the column of his throat, down to the small junction between his collarbones.

He let out a moan, in spite of himself. For a moment, he had forgotten where he was and why he was there, caught in the pure intoxication of being wanted in a way he had never been before. A want that was pure.

He took in a breath and held it, as a hot pain pierced through the side of his neck – driving through him like a heated shaft. The pain was both terrible and enthralling. He felt his body grow taut at the sensation and as the pain subsided –

pleasure took its place. Katsuya had to brace himself, his arms coming up to cling onto David. His fingers gripped the hard, muscled back – tighter and tighter.

And then his mind went dark as the hallway itself.

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