

tatsu

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Don knew the first time he saw Tsukoi, that he'd met the man who would fulfil his desires.

He'd heard of the party through other people, deciding to crash it before he went home. It was in an area used to being cool; sprawling urban lofts filled with expensive liquor and women and the streets bristled with flashy imports, their paint jobs gleaming under the street lamps.

The guys standing outside nonchalantly gestured with burning cigarettes, saying hello to one another with silent upward jerks of their heads. A trail of women eyed the men up as they chattered past, their eyes meeting to pick off favourites like selecting a choice fruit at the market.

Don wondered what it was like to be one of those guys; mulling over which ripe, succulent peach to bite into before the night was over.

Wandering through the labyrinth of rooms, he stumbled from dancing to games of quarters, rounding a pool table where a group of solemn faced Japanese watched him back out slowly from the door. If he had to swear to it, Don would have said he'd spotted the dull gleam of a gun on the table's polished wood rim.

He looked for someplace to be. Any place would be preferable to a room filled with flat-eyed stares. What he found down the hall made him swallow his soul.

An almost nude woman lay on a flat chaise, her face hidden from Don's view. Her legs were endless and a towel draped over her hips, providing the barest hint of modesty. The white fabric tucked up against her mons, a darkened sliver hinted at her sex, a shadowed promise behind the cloth.

She'd be a bitch, he thought. She had that air about her, like the women coming through his work place. The skank would look right through him, passing by as if he weren't in front of her. He knew her kind all too well.

Don couldn't hear her speaking above the noise of the machine and the music pounding through the house but he imagined her husky whispers tickling the ear of the Asian man leaning over her. One bare hand rested intimately on her hip, the other working the rattling machine back and forth, filling in fractures, scales of an uncompleted dragon.

As the man moved back, the twisting shape revealed itself, powerful and fierce in its stark state. A Japanese dragon reached over her back - its front claw piercing one plum-tipped breast - and moved down her length, wrapping its frilled tail around her upper thigh. She seemed uninvolved in the inking, even as blood ran down her hip, pooling between the man's fingers as he stretched the skin to work. Stopping briefly to tap the needle head into a well of blue ink, he continued to shade in the lines of the dragon, going over a scale with skilled precision.

It was not what Don expected to find in the back room of a house party but sometimes destiny had a strange way about it.

“What’s up?” Don choked briefly over his own tongue. It dried against the roof of his mouth, clutching to his palate when the artist stopped and looked up at him. Don skittered, took another look, a harder look at the slender man balanced on the edge of his stool. The red vinyl creaked and the machine stuttered to a stop as the artist’s foot eased off of the pedal.

He could have been the woman’s twin, barely masculine and too beautiful. Don could break this man in two if he wanted. He immediately stopped that thought, seeing the strength in the other’s hands, the stains of ink under his fingernails. Here was someone who ground out the weakness in those who lay under him, turning the cast off grit of a man’s skin into stained glass. Here was someone Don needed.

“What do you want, *howaido*?” The artist dipped the tip of his finger into the murky tea of blood and ink pooling on the woman’s thigh. Sucking the liquid from his finger, he lapped at the granules clinging to his upper lip.

“He’s turning green, Tsukoi,” The name had an intimate sound to it and she yawned as she stretched back. “*Fugainai*.”

“Did Heng tell you to come back here?” Tsukoi looked up, the dimness of the room masking his face. “What do you want?”

“That.” Don jerked a thumb at the tattoo, keeping his eyes on the man’s face. “I want what you’re doing to her...on me.”

“Why?” The artist moved and his eyes flared amber from the light bounced into the tiny room from the open door. “What do you think it will give you?”

Don’s answer came easily, rising off of his tongue. “Power,” He said with a long smile. “And respect.”

§

Banks of rolling fog caught on the bay’s orange lace bridge, pouring around its slender metal threading and stretching over the shore line. The low keel of a ferry echoed around the scattered islands dotting San Francisco’s cold waters, the chilly bay now a stark black ooze pushing up against the bleached sky.

The City by the Bay took advantage of its coy veil, hiding behind thick white mists. Long trails of BART line wound through tangled streets, their cars bloated with warm, drunken human bodies. The trains smelled of puke, sweat and beer, the evening’s riders adding to the pungent aroma with various degrees of dedication.

Grumbling under his breath, Don bumped shoulders with the tall blonde woman he’d been eyeing for the last few miles. When the train hissed to a stop, he jerked against her body, nearly knocking her to her knees. She slanted him a hard look and teetered off the car on unsteady feet, grabbing at the door as she stepped off. Don watched the plump flesh of her ass jiggle just above the hemline of her short nylon dress, its horizontal stripes widening over her curves.

“No time to chase some tail,” He mumbled and stepped off onto the curb. The foreignness of it caught at him, a cling of earthy spice tickling his nose as he walked through the streets. He hated the oppressive feeling of secrets lying beneath the surface of San Francisco’s winding roads. The signs offended him

sometimes, a straggle of lines and dips he couldn't make out. There weren't enough real words on them for his liking.

A florescent walled dim sum restaurant nearly hid the place's entrance. Don spotted a small white sign over a slender doorway, its English added in a handwritten scrawl beneath bold black kanji. The addresses seemed to be a jumble of numbers, like the puzzles Don's mother did in the middle of the night. The foreign lettering looked the same to his eyes, aggressive black slashes against crackled white paint.

He knocked at the red door and it opened while he stood uneasily as people passed by, their dark eyes slanting curious looks at him. Tsukoi was as he remembered him, pretty faced and slender, someone Don normally would have pushed down. The man's black hair fell forward as he bowed his head and Don stepped in, unsure as to whether the nod was mocking or welcoming.

The door opened to a long hallway, squares of light from high set windows barely denting the shadows. Tsukoi stepped in front of Don after closing the door, taking the lead. His shirt rode up, exposing his back and colour glittered on his pale skin, rising from the waistband of his jeans to curve towards his spine.

The tattoo was of hues found between slices of a rainbow and parts nearly shimmered as the man walked. A pair of koi danced through stylized waves, bubbles and cherry blossoms floating on the sheer surface of painted skin. The tattoo... moved, breathing as if it had a life of its own and the Asian only served to carry it. Each scale of the fish fanned out, darker lines of colour scalloping every edge. Dappled with white and orange gold, the koi swam amid wrinkled folds of water, curls of fins splashing up to nudge away pink petals fallen down from an unseen tree above.

Don wanted to touch it...very badly.

This was what he ached for; wearing something that exquisite on his skin would make him *someone*...someone to be reckoned with.

"That's nice." His voice came out breathy, like a girl's and Don cleared his throat, hearing himself echoing in his ears. "Who did it?"

"My father." He left it at that, no other mention of the art or his family. Disappointed, Don followed Tsukoi closely, nearly slamming into him when the artist stopped abruptly at an open door. "In here. We can figure out what you want."

"I need something large. On my back and over my arms and legs." Don's eyes adjusted to the brighter light in the small room. Its walls were devoid of any decoration, a plain vanilla cream colour and the wooden floor was dull, dark wood run rough in spots from furniture legs. A long massage table lay in the centre, its folding sides flat and at the ready. Nearby, a stool on casters abutted a low table, an electrical cord from the tattoo machine under it stretching over to the outlet in a sinuous black trail. "I want it to be memorable. I want it to look like... important."

"Something like that is expensive. A life of work." Tsukoi played with a bottle of unopened red, swirling the ink around the plastic container. "Do you think you can pay that price?"

“I’ll pay.” Don thought of how much spare money he had at the end of each pay check. He’d have to play fast and loose with a few things while he had the word done but it was something he was willing to sacrifice for. “I want this. I don’t care what it costs. Do you want money up front?”

“You don’t pay me until we’re finished. It will take a long time,” The Asian nodded thoughtfully then his eyes flicked up, catching Don in their amber. “And it will have to be something that tells a story. Something that goes on a man’s entire body should be complete. It should be a legend.”

“Good,” Don replied. “Because I want to be one.”

§

It hurt.

There was no other word for the pain other than...hurt.

The thin black lines Tsukoi sketched over his right arm would take an eternity to fill in, Don knew that in his bones. He hissed and spat when the needle touched him for the first time and then wept when the buzzing grew to a climatic sting on the bone of his shoulder. More than once, he wanted to beg the man to stop but the steady grind of Tsukoi’s concentration didn’t seem like something he would dare to interrupt. Especially as the Asian swept back to refill his needle tips and turned back to daub away the blood pouring from Don’s flesh.

His bare fingers stretched and played with his living canvas, seemingly immune to the sounds of displeasure pouring from Don’s throat. Another burning touch came and then Don’s nerves jumped, arcing towards the digging steel. The pain worked down from his skin and into his marrow until he felt sure it would crack apart and spill into his blood.

“Shouldn’t you...be wearing gloves?” He remembered asking at one point, needing to talk to ease the silky, thick saliva in his mouth.

“I need to feel you under me. If I wear gloves, I can’t feel you enough.” Tsukoi stopped and angled his stare through the jet black hair fringe covering his eyes. “Do you want me to stop? You can get someone else to do this for you.”

“No,” Don said, shaking his head. “I want you to do this.” Tsukoi didn’t look convinced, giving Don a cocked eyebrow and a beestung pout that wouldn’t look out of place on one of the Japanese school girls Don lusted after. “Please.”

That one word was enough to bring the needles back down and Don bit the inside of his cheek to keep his screams in.

§

The tattoo itched and burned. Don rubbed at the scratchy fabric of his work shirt, hoping to ease the discomfort. The lotion Tsukoi gave him made the ache of his nerves subside for a few hours but then the crawling sensation was back in full force. He didn’t put it on while at work because the green slime

clung to everything but the stunning hues beneath the foamy gel were breathtaking. He could only dream of when the ink spread over his whole body.

Climbing the stairs to the apartment he shared with his mother, Don stopped at the third floor landing, irritated at the clutter blocking his path. Old Virgil sat on a metal chair amid the mess, his fingers marbled from cigarette smoke. The bent man once terrified Don, his shape menacing when he walked by and the hall shook with his footsteps. Ten years and a cancer later, the monster now huddled in his own doorway, spitting out chew or dropping almost empty cans of protein drinks that leaked onto the hall's industrial linoleum.

“Went down to get yourself some poon?” Virgil burred, spit flecking his mouth. “You sure spending a lot of time with those gooks, boy. Bringing your mama home some of your banana babies to raise?”

The words didn't get to him, not like he'd thought they would. Hell, he'd said the same thing to a friend of his once when the guy sniffed around one of the FOB girls in their high school but Virgil's words...cheapened him, made what he was doing for himself...less.

Don wasn't certain what drove him on but one thing was for certain, bathing in Virgil's hot blood soothed his inked skin a lot more than Tsukoi's salve.

§

His back was on fire. If not for the constant buzz and whine of the machine working over his body, he could swear Tsukoi instead dripped acid on him from the head of a pin. The singing needles sang bass when the other man worked in a length of black in, going over the same spot until he was satisfied with its saturation.

Reaching up, Don grabbed what he could to steady himself, letting his fingers dig down deep into Tsukoi's calf. Panting, he fought the waves of sick coming over him and inhaled sharply when the needles stopped their descent down his spine.

“Let go of my leg,” Tsukoi said, his voice a dark purr.

“You're hurting me.” The solidness of the other man's leg felt good under his hand and Don was reluctant to withdraw. With Tsukoi under his hand, the pain lessened and he was anchored to something other than himself.

“You asked me to hurt you,” He said softly, still under the throb of Don's palm. “Remember you asked for this. You're the one in control. I am only giving it to you because you asked for it.”

Don let go and the needles began again, fiercer and deeper. His skin wept blood but his eyes were dry. He'd take what Tsukoi gave him without complaint. He would bleed out before he fed the pain any more of his whimpers.

§

She walked by him. Every night the blond woman he saw on the BART looked through him and stepped away as if Don were nothing. After a few weeks, he'd taken to wearing a tank top, showing off the exquisite ink he'd bled for but she continued to pass through his life as if he were nothing.

One day she brushed up against his shoulder and flicked a glance at his face before turning away, not before he spotted the sourness in her mouth and eyes.

No matter, Don thought as he worked a knife through the tendons of her shoulders, popping the joints as her screams bounced against the underpass, unheard over the Bay traffic. He'd make certain that she saw him. He would be the last person her cold blue eyes would ever see.

Catching her limp body up, he held her as the life gushed out of her chest, heart pumping to a furious beat as it tried to resuscitate its dying host. An upturned hubcap from an old Pontiac gave him the receptacle he needed to catch her fluids. His back hurt too much and reaching around to smooth ointment only crinkled the skin, rumpling the healing ink.

He'd found creased skin on newly inked tattoos made for unsightly lines that had to be filled in and Tsukoi had already hissed at a line in the dragon claw reaching over his ribs. That was not an experience he wanted again.

Don's fingers shook as he held them up to the gibbous moon. Her life dripped from his hand, inky red and lush. Her mouth held nothing for him now. It lay open and slack, her prettiness faded under his knife. Bringing his fingers to his lips, he sucked at them, pulling her into his body.

He spent himself washing with her blood, watching her limbs sink down into the cold blackness of the Bay.

§

Tsukoi was waiting for him outside the next time he came. Smoke wafted around the man's face, an ethereal fog that reminded Don of the mists on Alcatraz. Exhaling out, the Asian released a clove-scented ring, following it up with his eyes until it was lost in the pearled dimness of a lit San Francisco night.

"You're here too soon," He said, snubbing the butt out against the wall before flicking it into a street grate. "You should take more time. This kind of thing should take years to finish and you're rushing your life."

"I feel like I'm not...complete," Don leaned against the wall besides Tsukoi, catching a whiff of the man's spiced breath. "I want to feel it on me. It's like I can't do anything but think about how it is going to be when I'm done...when you're done."

"Come on then," Tsukoi replied softly, opening the door to let Don in. "Let's get to work."

§

He screamed this time. Don was ashamed to hear his own shrieks echo against the wall but when Tsukoi stretched his hand over the inside of his thigh and began to work close the fold of his leg, he nearly blacked out with the agony crawling with hooked talons into his tender nerves.

The story was told in inches, a brutal tale of a dragon and a man fighting over a treasure they'd die before having. Tsukoi murmured as he worked, soft rolling streams of Japanese that caught on Don's imagination until he dreamed in a language he didn't understand. Now came a battle of demons and a woman turned *oni*, the *hannya* Tsukoi told him. The long-nosed mask stretched on his thigh, turning it blue before it ran crimson as he bled out profusely, the thin skin giving in to the rapidly moving steel tips.

Don struggled for something to distract himself from fierce visage forming on his thigh. Gasping when the machine's clicking arm caught on a leg hair and yanked it free from its roots, Don's eyes grew blurry and he leaned forward, placing his hand on Tsukoi's shoulder.

"God, just talk or something." Don leaned back, letting his fingers trail off of the man's arm and flopping onto the padded table. "Get my mind off of this shit. Talk about anything. Chicks. Your dad. Anything."

The needles stopped singing, a blurring lull in the room but the pain increased as if the skin had memory of the tips moving in and out, leaving behind minute drops of ink and punctured welts. Canting his head, Tsukoi brushed his bloodied fingers through his hair, moving it off of his face.

Slowly, the Asian eased his lean body moving along Don's length until their faces were nearly touching and he shuddered at the coldness of Tsukoi's full mouth. The man's whisper tickled his cheek, hot and rolling like the pin tips he wielded.

"I am nothing to you but ink and pain, remember?" Tsukoi's lips hovered at the plump of Don's ear. He filled Don's world, until nothing existed but the ache along his thighs and the ivory and black blend of Tsukoi's features. "You are nothing to me but skin, something to work on. You come here because I can give this to you and I do this because you come for it. There is nothing else between us."

He lay there, mute as Tsukoi began again, steadily hooking ink under Don's pale, stretched skin. The pain rushed him anew, thickening in his mouth until all Don could taste was the sickly sweetness of his fear and the gurgle of bile rising from his throat.

When he's done, Don thought, I'm going to have him on me. Just like the others.

§

Nothing worked like it was supposed to. No matter how much he smeared blood over the length of his thigh, the ink burned before the liquid dried. Things were *moving* under his skin, Don was sure of it. Tsukoi had placed something inside of him that was hungry, ravenously evil and thirsty. It left trails of ache as it swam through his body, bringing pinpricks of agony along its wake.

His lashes were smarting and the back of his eyeballs were bleeding out. Don could feel the drip-drip-drip of his fluids leaking into the bowl of his skull.

There was a sea of blood washing over the kitchen floor, a cloud of flies swarming in its rich metallic scent. He stared down at his mother's broken form, her fingers crooked and twisted around a pencil. She'd fallen where he flung her, lifeless when her strings were cut from her.

It had been so easy to reach into her and yank her life out of her chest, digging in with a long kitchen knife she'd purchased from a shopping network she watched. Red splatters filled in the circles of her number puzzles, drops from the slice on her arm providing answers that she never seemed able to figure out. Some of the pages were rubbed through from her eraser, little holes of her stupidity.

Much like the ones dimpling her torso and arms.

Maybe, he needed the place he'd come from, Don reasoned, moving to her cooling flesh. It would stiffen then soften again, her body's spoils flushing from the relaxed orifices once it realised its death. Amid the gush, he excavated the worn floppy organ lying under her belly. Its intense redness was a surprise then the oddness of its shape struck him.

"Will it taste like bunny too, Ma?" He nudged her leg, avoiding the sharp nails on her stubby toes. Turning on the burner, Don placed it into the cast iron skillet they left on the stove and waited for his dinner to sizzle.

§

"I want it finished," Don said to Tsukoi when he opened the door.

Sheets of rain covered the city, obscuring buildings that were mere feet away. Don's jeans were soaked to the knee, the denim dripping water as he walked in. The squelch of his sneakers echoed in the hallway, its length now a dank grey from the watery light of its windows.

The room was as they'd left it, the machine lying inert and rows of ink bottles lining the cabriolet. Tsukoi waited for him, barefoot and lithe, his face an unreadable mask as Don stripped off his shirt, preparing himself for the final stretch of blank skin to be filled in, the curve of the dragon across his shoulder blades.

He knew the story by now, etched into his body and under his skin. He carried the legend of a warrior and the *tatsu* discovering a phoenix's treasure, battling one another over the smallest golden coin bearing the likeness of a beautiful woman. Armies of demons warred down his belly and across his thighs, roused from the hells by a scorned princess, the warrior's former beloved. The roll of Tsukoi's voice accompanied each prick and dot of ink and Don flexed his broad shoulders, rippling the creatures fleeing the epic battle as the dragon descended from the heavens.

"You don't have to do this now," Tsukoi said, quietly. "You should have more time. At least to...be who you need to be before it is completed."

"No," Don hooked his leg up over the edge of the table and slid onto his belly, tucking his arms under his chin. "I won't be complete until it is."

"No," He whispered as he took up the machine, setting the safety off. "You won't be."

§

Don woke to find himself on his back, a pressing weight pushing down on his throat. Shining lights seared his eyes and he blinked, trying to find himself surcease from their burning glare. Grunting, he lifted his head and gasped helplessly when all he did was flop his head to the side. His limbs were unresponsive and the crawl of his tattoo burned distantly in the back of his brain.

Something was wrong. Something was horribly wrong.

“Good, you’re awake,” Tsukoi stepped out of the light, his pretty face swimming into view. The Asian brushed at Don’s forehead then down over his face, resting his hand on the other man’s shoulder. “It’s better when you’re awake.”

“Whhaaa?” His tongue didn’t move and Don choked as the fleshy tube slithered back down his throat. Alarmed, he fought to regain control of the limp muscle but it merely folded back over and closed off the airway tighter. Tsukoi nodded, calm and knowing, before sliding his fingers into Don’s mouth, pulling out his tongue before he lost consciousness.

“Don’t worry. I’ve seen that happen before. I won’t let you go like that,” He said, fitting a small white waffle ball into Don’s mouth, closing his jaw over its spongy form. It trapped his tongue against his teeth, cutting down into the muscle.

Frantic, Don looked around him, hoping to see someone, anyone, who could help him. His eyes strained with the effort, the muscles slowly fading under the press of whatever Tsukoi had injected into him. Struggling did him little good, his body refused to move and he could hear the Asian move about, connecting something and sliding items around.

“I know you’re scared,” Tsukoi came back into eyesight and Don was relieved, despite his fear. This was the man who spent a year carving out a story onto his skin. There had to be a reason for this, Don thought. Something happened and Tsukoi would soon sort it out.

Or so he thought until he spotted the fleshy scrolls hanging around them, the stiff husks of people’s hides hanging from wooden Ts set behind glass.

There seemed to be...at least a hundred of them, each as brilliant as his own tattoos. Those closest were vivid, the skins’ limbs sporting creatures and people, the wide swath of chests or backs ripened with court scenes or even mountains bristling with pines and layered with the soft white of snow.

“I know. You see them,” Tsukoi glanced back behind him, a smile curling his full mouth. “Those are the others, the stories that have come before you. We keep them so we don’t tell the same one again. The dragon beneath us is fickle. It’s not right for him to hear something twice.”

“This is hard for me, you know. You’ve rushed things forward. You’ve not had much time,” He continued, unrolling a length of plastic tube. Its end dully gleamed with a spigot tip that reminded Don of an oil punch. “But you’re the only one who could make that decision.”

“The *tatsu* hears the legends every time we let the blood drain into the grate. My father says he suckles at the walls, looking for each word that is whispered over the tattoo,” Tsukoi prattled on, above the pain

covering Don's body. An acrid smell rose from under him and then a gush of fluids poured from his body. Tsukoi stepped back, keeping his bare feet out of the stream. "Don't worry about that. Everyone pisses themselves. He doesn't mind."

"He'll eat your blood and meat...I'll cut out small pieces as I go. They have to fit down the grate but I'll keep your story safe with the others. That's why I'm lifting up your skin." Tsukoi worked the metal end under Don's skin, lifting up the flesh on the inside of his elbow. Despite the numbness of his limbs, Don winced at the thick sharp bulb sliding into him. He choked again, trying to pull more air in with hisses through the plastic ball. "I'm sorry but it's better if the blood is spiced with pain. We know what the *tatsu* likes. We've been feeding him for years."

Another tube then another slid under his skin, tunnelling under the inked story until Don's body sprouted clear tentacles, each leading to the pump. With a delicate ease, Tsukoi took a scalpel and sliced vents into Don's back and thighs. He stepped out of Don's eyesight and then the chitter of a pump began, churning out long streams of something richly plum scented into Don's raised skin.

"Thank you for paying me so soon. I appreciate your dedication to my duty," Tsukoi rested his chin on his fists, his mouth brushing on Don's cheek with a gentle kiss as the *umeshu* surged into Don's body, lifting the skin up in long patches and draining wine-soaked blood through the slivered cuts along his torso. "I shall keep you here with the others...and remember you always. You have my word. I promise."