

Habit

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Habit

by [holyindolence](#)

Summary

Amnesiac Itou Ryo believes the key to remembering his past life lies in finding the serial killer responsible for the strangulation deaths of young women throughout the city. But his pursuit brings him face to face with his own demons & desires - which all lead back to an enigmatic figure who answers only to "Ran."

Prologue - Habit

Ryo Itou could trace the unraveling of his life to that first slow pour of cigarette smoke from between his lips. He should have listened to Asuka -- and for a long time he had.

"You're not really addicted," his wife had explained over and over. He'd been in the coma too long, the chemicals had long ago left his system and he'd slept through the pains of nicotine withdrawal completely. If he wanted a cigarette it was merely out of habit, the sensation of need was all in his head, and how could that be when his head was all but empty?

"You're not a smoker anymore," Asuka would tell him again and again with her patient smile, the same one he'd woken up to. "Be glad of it Ryo, at least one good thing came of your accident."

Whenever she'd say that he'd used to give her his full watt grin. Because so many good things had come of his "accident" - namely Asuka, herself. Their marriage. Their home. Their happiness.

Ryo would pull her into his arms, kiss the top of her forehead, say, "I'm addicted to *you* Itou Asuka. I need you more than a hundred thousand cigs."

Every time she'd playfully swat him away. "What a charmer you are Ryo," she'd joke in that no-nonsense way he couldn't resist. "Do you use those lines with all the girls?"

And he'd say, "No, love, there's only you."

In the beginning there was only her. On the day the amnesiac in Bed 7 had opened his eyes he'd seen the weave of the standardized bed sheets, the monitor of the machine telling the world he was alive, the clear drip of the IV snaking its way into the back of his calloused hand, and he'd thought--hospital--and it hadn't made him panic at all. It was a safe place, a place he'd maybe woken up before, and hell, at least he knew he wasn't dead.

Seconds later the nurse rushed in. She was petite but fierce, thin but clearly shapely beneath her uniform, and because she was pretty, young, and female, he flashed her a flirtatious grin. It was almost second-nature. It was almost self-defence. His cheerfulness startled her and she stopped dead in the doorway. Apparently it wasn't every day that coma patients sat up and smirked.

"How are you feeling?" She asked. She approached slowly, even cautiously, busied herself with that giant beeping machine but he knew she was looking him over.

He patted the pockets his hospital gown didn't have. "Like I could go for a smoke." He meant it in a sexy, casual way but his throat was dry and the words came out scratchy. She ogled at him openly now. He coughed and tried again.

“Asuka,” he said, reading the name on the ID tag that hung around her neck. It didn’t mean anything to him. He was only trying to be friendly, set her at ease.

“Yes” she said slowly. She ran her finger along the tag like she needed to remind herself it was there. “That’s my name. What’s yours?”

He opened his mouth to answer her and that was when he began to panic.

Asuka had been his Eve, the first woman in all his world. There were other hospital staff of course, neurologists and psychiatrists, poking and prodding more in the name of curiosity than in healing. There was the day nurse, an ancient woman with a gentle maternal touch and coke bottle glasses. She changed the flowers on the window at his bedside, a different bloom everyday, and told him the name of it when she did. roses and fressia and genians and cattleyas.

But for all that, it was Asuka who brightened his world. She came at night and tsked when she found him awake.

“Don’t you sleep, Itou-san?”

“What can I say?” He’d wink. “I guess the night is my time.”

The therapists had suggested a number of coping mechanisms to help with the loss of his memory, with the sudden sinking panic that would swell up in him when he remembered that he was no one -- but none of what they suggested worked. It was Asuka who saved him.

She had found his name, Itou Ryo. It was at the very least the name on the account to which his settlement money was being paid. The settlement from Koua Academy was tied up in so much paperwork it made his head spin. But it at least told him the bare minimum of what he needed to know -- that he, Itou Ryo, had been injured in the school’s collapse, that they were very sorry, so much so that they were footing his medical bills, and that, per a non-disclosure agreement that all the employees of the elite private school had agreed to, he was never ever allowed to ask them for anything more. He’d signed their papers with his new name, a signature that meant as much to him as drawing an X on a dotted line.

But with little more concrete info than that, the world had quickly begun to look bleak. That’s when Asuka had given him the next gift.

“What do you know about yourself?” She asked it every night at the beginning of her shift. There wasn’t much he had proof of but there were things he could feel, things he could observe, things he just knew. And each day he learned more and each night he’d find a new thing about himself to tell Asuka.

His name was Ryo Itou. He was Eurasian, spoke Japanese fluently and could manage passable English when forced to. His hair was blonde, the ends bleached unnaturally pale, but the hair that had grown in while he slept came in a shade of honey brown. He’d been a smoker, Asuka could tell that from one listen at his lungs. He was right-handed and could draw quite well which explained the meagre job title -- temp. art teacher -- that Koua Academy’s legal papers had bestowed upon him.

He flirted mercilessly with all the nurses, from the motherly Momoe-san on the day staff to the precocious Asuka at night. He was good-looking and he found he could use a smile and a wink to get most anything he wanted -- a spare pillow or an extra pudding with his dinner. More than that he enjoyed flirting with the nurses, liked that he could put a smile on their faces or summon a blush to their cheeks. He'd more than once suggested that Asuka should give him a sponge bath.

Ryo had fast reflexes, a sharp mind, observant eyes. In the pages of the glossy magazines Asuka brought him to fill his slower afternoons in the hospital room, he found he had a preference for designer watches and sunglasses and tight fitting clothes that might show off his long, lithe form. His doctors were astounded by his physical fitness, even after his three month long coma, and they all agreed there was little need to keep him in hospital. The best thing he could do, they said, was return to the world and begin to build a life for himself. Make new memories.

"Where will you go?"

"I was thinking for starters, the bar."

Asuka smacked him with one of the pillows she was removing from his hospital bed.

"Don't worry," he told her, "I've got a whole slew of interviews for boring, safe desk jobs all lined up. And I've already set up a nice little bachelor pad, right in the city. I made sure they put in a king sized bed." Ryo winked saucily. "Care to pay me a visit there?"

Asuka surprised him by taking his hand in hers. She rubbed along the strange pattern of calluses there.

"I'd like that," she'd said.

Truth be told, his late night self-discovery conversations with his nurse had been as much a comfort as they had been a lie. There were things Itou Ryo knew about himself that he couldn't tell Asuka. The most obvious one was the tattoo. Surely she'd noticed the cross and wings, tending his wounds, taking his vitals--he hoped, giving him tender sponge baths while he'd slept--but even then she probably couldn't read the English words surrounding it. But he could.

Sin . When you gonna learn? What kind of man had he been that he'd needed that kind of reminder stitched in ink into his skin? Had he been religious? He did not feel overly so. Even in his deepest despair about his lost memory Ryo had never seen much point in raging against God. And the mysterious tattoo with its inverted cross spoke much more of anger, of regret, of shame, than it did of any type of faith.

Ryo's hands were another thing nurse Asuka must have noticed but hadn't commented on. The pattern of criss-crossing lines on his fingers and palms reminded Ryo of a gruesome palmistry -- instead of a life line and a love line he had deep red wounds, remnants of a rough past. They, like the odd collection of bullet holes, cuts and burns across his body suggested

that he had lead a violent life. Whatever the lesson was that the tattoo on his arm was alluding to it was obvious he'd never learned it.

"I love what you haven't done with the place," Asuka joked that first night she came over. She was picking on him of course because he'd done absolutely nothing to make the bachelor pad his own save to drape the promised king sized bed in lush black silk sheets.

"Don't you think it needs a woman's touch?" Ryo asked.

On their first official date they shared take-out--Ryo Itou couldn't cook apparently-- in the midst of that big black bed their legs intertwined like naughty school children giggling at the mess they were making. Ryo took away her paper plate, her chopsticks. He kissed Asuka's ear, the nape of her neck, where the stubble of her boyishly short hair prickled at his lips.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Asuka asked in that husky, teasing voice he liked so well.

Ryo could have hesitated, it was after all, his first time. "Fuck yes," he said and his deft hands moved to pluck her clothes from her body like he was unwrapping a shiny present with his name on it.

Itou Ryo liked women, of that there was no question. He liked to ravish the smooth jutting lines of Asuka. Her hips were delicate, her breasts made small delightful handfuls. He loved most to bury his face in the heat of her collar bone, to rub his thick calloused fingers between her legs and up her neck in twin rhythmic motions that left her mewling, desperate as a kitten pawing to be let in the house. He loved burying himself inside her, thrusting in time to her heartbeat that he kept the pace of with his finger tips at her neck. And gods but he longed to press down, down into her soft sweet pliant body and as he ached and arched he could see on the inside of his eyelids a flash of deep, deep red hair and Ryo imagined that it was instead the smooth hard expanse of a man's chest his hands gripped desperately against. And the sudden white flash of desire for that imagined man shocked Ryo so much that he pulled back his grasping hands even as his climax rocked through his body like a crash of hard thunder.

Ryo rolled off of Asuka, with a satisfied grunt, as the writhing of her own pleasure wave began to settle.

"Wow," Asuka murmured breathless.

"That was incredible," he said.

"Incredible," Asuka echoed. "But -- I'm sorry Ryo-- but who is Aya?"

Ryo blinked. "Aya?"

Asuka blushed. "Aya. That's what you said. When you...you know. You called out her name."

Asuka told him it was okay. It had happened that first time and dozens of times after during their frenzied passionate courtship, particularly in the throes of their more amazing bouts of

love-making, the mind-numbing, earth shattering occasions when Ryo's climaxes made him feel full and senseless.

"She must have been someone I dated," Ryo admitted after one such occasion. He buried his face in Asuka's soft dark hair as they lay side by side, catching their breaths.

"More than someone you dated it seems like," Asuka said, her voice gone soft. "She must have been someone you loved."

Ryo frowned, all the afterglow bliss fading quickly away to be replaced by troubling guilt. "Maybe so. But I don't remember her. I love you, Asuka."

"I love you too," Asuka would promise, every time. "And it's okay, about Aya. If you remember anything about her, anything at all, you can tell me."

Ryo never did remember anything about Aya. And what he did remember about his fantasies, he couldn't say. He could not tell Asuka that the person who he thought of when he was with her in those moments of intimate maddening pleasure was not some old girlfriend or even a wife, but a man. A red headed man with dangerous, cunning eyes and a sharp hard mouth, and a muscular body, a body made for fighting, that yielded under Ryo's familiar touch.

Ryo never told Asuka he was gay or bisexual, or whatever. The thought troubled him, not because he was homophobic, but because that desire, that yearning was so clearly linked to the past that he had been doing his best to forget trying to remember. At the dull job as a salaryman that Asuka had miraculously helped him secure a few weeks after his hospital stint had ended, Ryo met coworkers and clients from all walks of life and he found he had an ease, a charm that made people comfortable with him. Perhaps it was precisely because he didn't judge; how could he really when he couldn't say who he himself was. He was close with his fellow employees, women and men, gay and straight, and though he had a wild penchant for flirting and a healthy appreciation for both genders it all felt harmless, he never felt the urge to stray.

Ryo loved Asuka. How could he not? Yes, she'd been kind to him when he'd woken in the hospital alone and so confused, yes she'd helped him settle into and accept a life without his memories and yes there was certainly a touch of Florence Nightingale-like longing for her, there was no denying it. But it was more than that, Ryo quickly found. He loved Asuka for Asuka, he loved the challenge of her, her sharp feisty personality, her resilience, her savvy, and whenever he was around her he felt elated, struck lucky, like a man given a second chance at something he'd thought he'd lost. Perhaps that was why the problem of Aya and of the redheaded man troubled Ryo so deeply. Every time he said the wrong name in bed it felt unforgivable but Asuka forgave him easily. Selfless and determined as always Asuka had even offered to track down this Aya, following leads and tips for women who had reported missing a husband or boyfriend, even calling up every Itou Aya in the phonebook, just in case. But Asuka's diligent detective work yielded nothing and Ryo eventually had asked her stop.

"But don't you want to know her? I understand if you do."

“I don’t,” Ryo told her and he meant it. It was clear no one from his former life was looking for him and he’d given up wanting them to. “Whoever she is she’s in the past. I love you Asuka. It’s that simple.”

And it was that simple. He loved Asuka. He screamed for Aya. And he dreamed of a male lover he didn’t know the name of.

On the day Ryo bought an engagement ring he also bought a carton of cigarettes and hid both under the big black bed. Asuka was at the hospital, her shift just beginning, she wouldn’t be back for hours yet and Ryo’s hands felt rough and restless.

It was a problem, his restless hands, the way they’d tap out mad tunes and twitch and shake when Ryo was feeling agitated. He’d tap his fingers at dinner, wring his wrists at client meetings, it had gotten so bad that even his boss had noticed and commented that Ryo’s nervous tapping was distracting his colleagues.

“I’m sorry,” Ryo sheepishly explained. “I’ve been trying to quit smoking.”

That was not necessarily true. He didn’t smoke, had no memories of ever smoking, hadn’t so much as touched a cigarette since the day he’d woken at the hospital and turned his crooked grin on Asuka, when the pretty nurse had assured him again and again that the physical cravings were all gone.

“Then why,” Ryo had asked her then, his voice intentionally lascivious, “do I want it so bad?”

Now Ryo lay back in his cool smooth sheets and cracked his knuckles and craved. The carton was an American brand that he’d picked on a whim and stuck in between the usual boring salaryman items on his rote trip to the supermarket. If the grocer that rang him up was surprised at such an exotic purchase he knew better than to say so, the cigarettes rang up at a hefty price tag and he surely wouldn’t cost himself the sale by commenting. Still Ryo had felt his face flush like he was committing a dastardly crime even as the barcode crossed the scanner, as the carton of cigarettes had disappeared into his shopping bag amongst bread and eggs and milk and other mundane necessities of domestic life.

In truth it felt like a betrayal to Asuka. If he gave in to this first inexorable yearning, he’d have to consider all the other mysteries that lingered in the void where his memories ought to be - the name Aya and the identity of the redheaded man, his catlike reflexes and the twin bullet holes that puckered and scarred just under his heart, and the white hot desire he sometimes felt when he was ticking up towards orgasm to squeeze his fingers down around Asuka’s throat and watch her eyes spin in her pretty little head.

Ryo sat bolt upright in the bed, shook himself free of the horror that his mind had been inching towards, the reality that his calloused hands had been playing out unbeknownst to him, strangling at empty air.

Who the fuck had Itou Ryo been with his myriad kinks and scars? Certainly not a salaryman with a dull nine-to-five and a pretty little doting wife named Aya. And even Itou Ryo the

earnest temporary art teacher at Koua Academy with the bleach blonde hair and the smoking habit didn't seem quite right either. There was a darkness there.

"Why don't you draw?" It was something Asuka had lately been suggesting, a solution perhaps to the hands and fingers he couldn't seem to keep still.

Ryo tried it now to calm his jangled nerves. He scooped up the small sketchpad and pencil he'd been keeping by his bed, something to keep him occupied when he'd inevitably wake up in the middle of the night, choking on a scream from a nightmare he couldn't make any sense of. If Asuka was beside him when he woke from these formless dreams she was usually fast asleep, having just gotten to bed, exhausted at the end of her shift. He was always reluctant to wake her or worry her and even more reluctant to return to sleep where it felt like some dark and menacing truth was waiting for him. Instead he'd draw by low lamplight, struggling on a hundred variations of the same face.

Ryo couldn't get it quite right, the face of the man he saw in his dreams. He caressed it now with the point of his pencil trying to get the dip of the cheekbones to mimic the impossibly sharp peaks of the man's lean face. How to get the nose to wrinkle in the small telling way that meant the man was close, so close to the crest of his pleasure?

At first Ryo had thought the red haired asian man could not be real, was instead some heady manifestation of Ryo's own confusion about his sexuality based on some bishonen anime character he'd glimpsed on a billboard. After all, the first hazy sketches had favored Asuka in some ways, her shaggy hair, or the stern no nonsense looks she could sometimes get on her face, her "mission" face Ryo jokingly called it. But Asuka, lean and fierce as she was, was certainly all woman and her short dark hair lacked the long trailing ear tails Ryo had lately been adding to all his sketches, and most contrastingly even Asuka's scolding looks never matched up to the fire and ice warring behind Ryo's dream lover's eyes. That was something, skilled as he was in art, that Ryo could never begin to capture, that singular ferocity behind those imagined eyes.

All of Ryo's anxious renderings of that man's face never felt quite right, never came near enough to the real thing, and whenever he woke Ryo lost the image of the man, the details that felt so real, so crucial were wisped away with awareness. So instead of having the calming effect that Asuka had prescribed them for, his mad little doodles were lately doing anything but relaxing him -- they were making him want and want and need, they were making him hard and hot, his fingers throbbing, wanting, needing to squeeze. To kill.

Ryo threw down the sketchpad. Christ, where had that thought come from? He jumped off the bed, got on hands and knees, pulled the cigarette packet from beneath the mattress. He clawed at the cellophane, desperate, and shook out the first cigarette and just the mere act of gripping the cylinder between his lips began to calm him down. He wanted this. He needed this.

Ryo pulled his newly purchased lighter from his pocket and in the same motion, swung open his bedroom window. He leaned on the sill as far out as he could go. He was only on the the third floor but the height felt dizzying as the lighter clicked and the flame caught in the cup of his hand and the first rush of nicotine entered his lungs like a key sliding into a well worn lock. Home.

Well if home was a tar stained cancer hot bed, he supposed. Ryo laughed letting the smoke puff out from his nose on the sound. Hell but it felt natural, like he'd started a million cold dark Tokyo nights just like this, lightheaded and lungs on fire, ready to spring like a wound coil, not the end of the night but the beginning. Now his violent hard-on eased but his desire for action didn't, it burned hotter every time the tip of the cigarette bloomed red at the edge of his vision..

Ryo turned to people watching. It was an activity he'd discovered he quite liked, guessing at the private lives of others. Perhaps other people fascinated him so because he had no identity himself. Or maybe he was just naturally nosy. Either way from this height he could leisurely watch others without being seen himself and that suited him just fine as he leaned out the window even further and ashed his cigarette and watched the ashes spin down to the sidewalk below, already unrepentant as any seasoned smoker.

The time was ticking close to midnight, but the streets weren't yet still, not in this neighborhood. It was another thing that Asuka had nagged him about, the rough part of town that the apartment he'd picked out was situated in. Asuka was tough and street smart as any nurse who'd seen a thing or two but she still balked at visiting him in that seedy area.

It didn't feel dangerous to Ryo, it felt almost natural, more so than the swank area that Asuka's hospital was located in. Here the empty buildings, the love motel on the corner, the sex workers and drug deals in alleyways, the sirens in the middle of the night, none of it gave Ryo pause. He could more than handle himself and moreover he took a strange hawkish pleasure at looking out at the comings and goings of the people here, like he was a one man nightwatch.

So far his heroics were limited to settling little neighborhood squabbles -- chasing down the delinquent kids who'd been slitting tires with boxcutters or heading off fistfights between belligerent drunks outside the local bar. But these simple acts gave Ryo a sense of purpose as much as a sense of penance for his grimmer thoughts and an escape from his darkest fear -- the fear that one day he might wake from his dreams of the red-haired man to find a living nightmare: that he'd grasped Asuka's windpipe in his ecstasy, squeezed and squeezed and--.

Now a scream cut through the night breaking through Ryo's dark thoughts. It was a bloodcurdling scream that had him tossing down his newly lit cigarette and leaning dangerously far out the window to see if he could determine where the shrill cry had come from. There? Movement in the alley? Ryo pulled himself into his apartment and without a second thought headed out of his bedroom and then out his front door, down the stairs and out into the night.

The alley he'd spied from the height of his window was a few streets over but he crossed the distance in record time. A second scream reached him as he drew closer. Definitely a woman's scream, definitely terrified. He slowed around the corner, reflexes telling him he wanted to see the danger before it saw him. His eyes adjusted easily to the dark and at the end of the alley in a pool of light Ryo made out the struggle, the woman scantily clad and shaking expelled another shriek as two large men strong armed her. Ryo dashed forward, used the thrust of his momentum to tackle the man closest to the woman. The motion sent them both into the hard brick wall of the alley but Ryo recovered his senses first, spinning out in a kick

that caught the jaw of the second man who went down hard. How Ryo had known the second attack was advancing he couldn't say, but he turned back to the first man in the same moment and pinned him against the wall.

"Don't you fucking dare touch her."

The woman was still shrieking and Ryo found that the sound of it made his blood boil hot. He punched the thug once, twice, relishing the feeling of the man's nose flattening, the bones giving way against his fist. Ryo felt the blood slick against his knuckles and between his fingers-- an altogether too familiar sensation-- so much so that Ryo punched him a third time just to feel that spark of familiarity again. It wasn't til the woman's shrieks grew more insistent that Ryo remembered about the second assailant and he managed to whip away just as a knife skimmed past his ear just a hairs breadth away. Ryo reached for his wrist instinctively. Why? There was nothing there but a flimsy wristwatch that he'd bought on a whim from a thrift shop, searching, as he was searching now, and coming up empty.

Stupidly reaching for his watch in the heat of the fight made him falter and Ryo barely managed to scramble away from the second knife swing. His back hit the chain link fence at the end of the alley. Nowhere to go as the attacker advanced towards him with the gleaming knife.

Ryo saw the arc of the pipe's swing long before he could make sense of the flash of silver or the way the thug before him crumpled under the attack, brought to his knees in a way that was almost comical. The thugs collapse revealed the person brandishing the pipe behind him and Ryo weakly brought up an arm to defend himself, fearing he'd be next. But the attack didn't come, only a deep stern voice:

"Take the girl, get her to safety."

Ryo didn't have to be told twice, he leapt to his feet and ran to the woman's side but not before catching sight of his savior. The sight stopped him cold.

The slim redheaded man moved with the killing grace of a ballet dancer, as he wielded the pipe in a smooth kata that levelled his opponent before he could regain his footing. He whirled on the other assailant, a cyclone in a long black coat, the swing of his long red braid following in his wake. When he saw that Ryo had not obeyed his order, his otherworldly eyes narrowed in a deadly impatience, that perfect squint that Ryo had tried to capture in a thousand aborted sketches, that Ryo dreamed of, that Ryo *knew*.

"Go," the man commanded and this time Ryo obeyed, because that obedience, too, was instinct. He helped the shell shocked woman to her feet and tugged her along out of the alley and away from the fight, away from the thuds and groans of the redheaded man handedly taking down the two assailants as though it were a choreographed warm-up.

When they came to a stop, both of them gasping under the relative safety of a street lamp, Ryo got his first good look at the woman he'd helped rescue. A prostitute no doubt, a pretty one, but young enough to make Ryo's heart twist. She was of mixed race like he was and her hair was dyed a similar bleached blonde as the tips of his hair had been when he'd woken from his coma, he noticed wryly.

“You alright?” he asked her.

She didn’t answer, her overpainted face stayed set in a hard grim line. She crossed her arms over her chest, covering up a slash in her crop top that would have fallen open otherwise to reveal her negligible breasts.

“Did they hurt you?” Ryo moved forward and the woman -- girl -- stepped back, her frown deepening. “It’s okay. I just want to help.”

She didn’t look scared though, rather more petulant, and she stuck out her tongue as Ryo advanced again.

“Look,” Ryo hissed, “I’m only trying to--

“Keiko.”

Ryo instantly recognized the voice of the pipe wielding stranger. No, not a stranger. A dream, a memory made flesh. The red-headed man stepped forward and the girl, Keiko, scurried to hug him. He shielded her stiffly in his arms but he kept his eyes squinted at Ryo.

“Thank you for intervening,” the man said, his voice a rumble in his chest that near hypnotized Ryo. “I hope you’re not hurt?”

Belatedly Ryo realized it was a question but he struggled to answer, all the air seemed to have gone out of his lungs.

“Mister?” Keiko leaned out from her saviour’s embrace, batting her contact-lens colored eyes at him.

The adrenaline was seeping out of Ryo, making his head spin, his legs weak. Was this a dream? He raised his hands to his face. They were spasming, ineffectually, and still covered in blood. That seemed right somehow.

Ryo gasped aloud when the man stepped forward and took his hand in his. The contact solidified things suddenly for Ryo. There was no dream as real as the strangers calloused hands on his.

“These cuts might need stitches,” the redhead said curtly.

“What did you do to those men?” Ryo heard himself ask, his tone was harsher, more accusatory than he’d meant it to be. But it seemed important. If he was wrong, about this man, if he was in danger...

“I didn’t kill them, if that’s what you’re worried about,” the man said. The answer sounded almost wry and much too casual. Like he would have killed them if the mood struck him, but it hadn’t been worth his effort.

“You should have gutted them,” Keiko whined from behind them. “Assholes tried to rob me.”

“You shouldn’t be out here,” the redhead bit out, presumably to Keiko, but he did not turn from Ryo. In one sharp motion he tore off the bottom of his black shirt, revealing a swathe of milky white skin that Ryo, his head spinning, found mesmerizing. The strip of torn t-shirt was fashioned deftly into a bandage and wrapped around the worst of the damage to Ryo’s bloodied knuckles.

In the weak alleyway light, dirty and dim, Ryo tried to read the expression on the pale man’s face, but it was blank, inscrutable, no recognition flashed in his saviour’s eyes as he secured the makeshift bandaging, and with the adrenaline seeping from Ryo’s body in waves he began to wonder if he wasn’t mistaken. There were undeniable similarities to his dream lover certainly, but the man before him had a long braid almost to his waist in a red that was more the brown of dried blood than the bright impossible flashes Ryo saw in his mindseye.

It was an amnesiac’s folly and he’d been warned as much by sympathetic doctors, by Asuka herself, that his blank mind might strain to recognize memories where there were none to be had, ravenous to fill itself up. Suffering this false déjà-vu, Ryo’s eyes would stutter along the faces of a group of college age boys crowded around a computer in an internet cafe. Or he’d throw a double-take at guys playing a pick-up game of soccer in the park. Or he’d stop dead in front of a flower shop, peering in through the window, searching for what, he could not say.

After months of sharing a bed with the woman, Ryo had shaken Asuka awake one night, nearly in hysterical tears, to search her cheek for a birthmark he’d never known her to have.

Perhaps now this man in the dark alley hastily tying a bandage around Ryo’s cracked knuckles was a similar mental aberration, the human equivalent of Asuka’s non-existent birthmark.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” The red-head said. The words were kind but his tone was short, gruff. No, no recognition there. Only ice.

“Come on, Ran-kun,” Keiko whined, growing impatient.

“Ran?” Ryo tested the name on his tongue. Nothing, no spark.

Hypnotic violet eyes settled on him. “Please, have a doctor tend to your hands properly.”

“My girlfriend’s a nurse,” Ryo said dumbly. Now why the hell had he gone ahead and offered that information?

The stranger’s lips quirked up in what might have been the ghost of a smirk. “Have her look after you then,” he said and with that he turned and rejoined Keiko, guiding her gently from the alley.

Ryo, still shell-shocked, only watched as they turned down the street, listened to the rumble of Ran’s gentle chastisement and Keiko’s higher-pitched excuses until they faded completely away.

He made the short walk back to his apartment, his thoughts looping in sluggish denials and bitter anguish. The energy of the fight, the panic of the strange meeting poured out of him and he staggered back to his bedroom only to slump leglessly on the floor beside his bed. The sketch of the man he'd left half-finished lay amongst his wrinkled bed sheets and he pulled it towards himself so he could look and look and look and try to remember. Nothing came.

Eventually Ryo pulled the engagement ring out from its hiding place beneath the bed, popped open the lid and the diamond gleamed and winked at him. He'd bought it on a whim, same as the expensive metal lighter, the foreign cigarettes. Itou Ryo didn't want for money, not with the settlement that Koua Academy gave him to keep quiet and ask no questions, and not with the job that Asuka had secured for him even though he hardly needed it. Having a job was the first step towards having a new life.

"Ran," Ryo said aloud to the shadow drawing of his dream-lover. There was nothing there. Ran was just a stranger in the night, a chance meeting of a thug, or a good Samaritan or hell, most likely he was just Keiko's pimp.

There Itou Ryo sat, his sketchy past in one injured hand, his gleaming diamond-clear future in the other. He considered the two for a long, long time.

Then he lit a cigarette. His second of the night. There was no escaping habit.

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