

Butterscotch

On the day of her twenty-third birthday Asami lost her appetite for butterscotch.

She'd lived for twenty-three years without seeing a single demon. But on that day, while riding the morning ferry to the island of Aogashima, everything changed.

Resting her head against the starboard side window, Asami watched as rain freckled the glass and dimpled the surface of the ocean. She took in the sounds around her to pass the time. The muffled sound of the ship's engine belowdecks. The sound of the hull sluicing through water and the buzz of chatter from the tourists who rode with her.

Across from Asami sat an old woman she recognised from her childhood. Kotomi-san spent her days making *hingya* salt, heating saltwater over the volcanic blowholes which could be found all across the island. She watched as Kotomi pulled a lolly from her purse. Adding the sound of crinkling cellophane to the register of sounds as she unwrapped it.

The sound sent a shiver of cold down Asami's back.

And then he was there.

She never heard him sit beside her, but his breath was hot and stale on her neck. It carried the scent of butterscotch.

When she turned, he smiled at her. A perfect row of white teeth, slightly too large for the mouth they were framed by. They looked like they were carved from wood and painted with white lacquer. His lips were too moist.

Your eyes are different shades of brown, he said. His voice whisper-thin amidst the din of the ferry. *The right eye is darker than the left.*

As soon as he spoke, Asami became conscious of her breathing. She didn't breathe faster or slower, but she immediately became aware of her diaphragm. How it rose and fell and her chest with it. His own eyes were grey. Once blue perhaps, but with the colour now drained from them. Saliva beaded on his lower lip.

Somewhere a child coughed and the spell was broken. She looked away and felt the air loosen in her chest. Blowing out a long, measured breath, she smoothed her dress and stood. She could smell the butterscotch. Carried on the hot wind of his breath but she dared not look at him again.

She moved slowly by necessity, the seas rough and the ferry rolling beneath her feet. Kotomi looked up with a smile and Asami sat beside her. When she finally dared look up from her feet he was gone.

"Is that Asami-chan?"

Asami ducked her head. A slight nod of acknowledgement. She'd hoped nobody would recognise her. After all, it had been eight years. Eight years since she'd been shipped

off to private school in Osaka. Her eyes slipped away from the old woman, not wanting to register the judgement she was sure to find.

And she saw him.

He stood outside. Leaning with his back to the railing as the rough seas collided with the hull, sending a spray of water into the air. His eyes were wide and unblinking as he stared at her. His loose lower lip dragging downwards and showing his oversized teeth. Her breath caught and she felt her nostrils flare. Involuntary. Testing the air of the cabin for butterscotch.

“Just a *funayurei*.”

Asami felt Kotomi’s words as much as she heard them. Like the sound of a fly buzzing close to your ear. She blinked and sucked in a ragged breath, tearing her eyes away from him.

“Excuse me?”

The old woman smiled. Most of her teeth were missing but it was somehow sweet. Coming from her eyes.

“A demon, Asami-chan. The ghost of someone who died at sea and forever shackled to this ferry. Most people can’t see him.”

“But you can.”

She nodded. “All you have to do is ignore him. You look tired.”

“I feel heavy when he looks at me.”

Kotomi smoothed her skirt and patted her lap. “Why don’t you rest? Close your eyes and he’ll be gone.”

It sounded like a very good idea. Asami smiled gratefully and laid out along the bench seat. Resisting the impulse to look outside as she let her eyelids close, she felt her body begin to relax immediately.

Until she drifted off to sleep. In her dreams, her own demons waited.

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The paintbrush left textured strokes behind as Asami swept it over the canvas. She leaned forward to watch as the paint hardened. The soft hairs of her liner brush had made thin scars in the topmost layer. They reminded her of the latticework of scars on her forearm. Self-inflicted, those. Designed to help her feel.

When that had failed, she’d turned to art.

Stepping back, she looked at the piece. Her breath caught and she swallowed. It had started out as a mountain. But now she saw the green slopes of the volcano. Aogashima. Covered in grass and sprouting from the ocean.

The world shifted around her and she was there.

The volcano was the island. Small and reachable only by ferry. Home to a little over 200 residents. And every day, being slowly reclaimed by the sea.

Asami stood again at the top of the retaining wall which swept down the western side of the island and saw him. The toothless grin and the weatherworn face looking up at her. Hoshi. What she wouldn't give to be able to forget that face. To just leave it behind. He hung, suspended from a harness as he worked to shore up the wall. As he had for close to a decade. Every day was a race against the wind and the ocean. A thankless task which was guaranteed to fail one day. Her mother said they should leave the island for the birds. Then again, her mother also refused to leave.

The road was closed but she took it every day on the walk home from school. Just to see his smile. He held the line with one hand and waved with the other. He shouted out to her but his words were snatched away by the wind, which had been stronger than usual that day. She leaned forward, cupping her hands around her mouth as she tried to call down to him.

Her feet slid on the loose shale of the road as the wind betrayed her. In a panic, Asami's arms flailed and she grabbed the railing. Stainless steel pipe cemented into the ground. The crumbling ground, which came apart as she slipped. Her bodyweight dragging along with time and gravity and at just that moment on just that day, the railing came free of the ground and plummeted over the side.

Asami felt her heart pounding as she reached desperately with her other hand. It clung to a fistful of grass and she managed to scramble her knees beneath her. Crawling away from the edge of the fall where she rolled onto her back and tried to remember how to breathe.

A whole, cursed moment passed before she remembered Hoshi. She was nine years old. It was okay for her to forget under the circumstances. So they told her. When she remembered him, she moved carefully to the edge of the retaining wall. Getting ready to see his grin when she waved and told him she was okay.

Instead, she found him hanging limp at the end of his harness. Arms reaching back lifelessly and his face destroyed by the falling railing which had struck him. The wind buffeted him so that he bounced against the criss-crossed rubber matting of the retaining wall. The black latticework reminded her of the scars which would one day decorate her forearm.

She wanted to wake. She knew this dream. The painting which became the island which became the memory. Her paintings were too real. She thought perhaps she should turn to abstract. Colour and shape as emotion. Inspired by memories but not made from them.

The world shifted around her again.

He stood beneath a neon crucifix in the night. A nimbus of pink light washing over him as he lounged against the wall and watched the traffic roll by. He smoked a cigarette as he waited, the filtered end soggy from his too wet mouth and hanging limp in his lips. A dribble of saliva moistened his chin.

I see your pain. I know what it's like for you.

He pushed himself away from the wall and let the cigarette fall to the ground. Grinding it under the toe of his oxford brogue dress shoe. The blushing crucifix hummed on the wall as he looked up. Directly at her.

I ran too.

She said nothing. All she wanted to do was run but his gaze was like an anchor weighing her down. Her diaphragm was heavy, shifting uncomfortably under his scrutiny and the weight of it pulled her forward. Closer.

Run away with me. Let your guilt be a thing of the past.

She heard another sound then, from far away. Like the crinkling of cellophane as a smile spread slowly across his face.

Wake up.

* * *

The smell was there when she woke. Butterscotch. Not entirely there, but lingering. As though she'd woken too late to catch it. She sat up to find Kotomi placing the empty cellophane wrapper in her purse, her cheeks drawn inward as she sucked at her lolly.

Asami's eyes widened.

"You're eating butterscotch."

She nodded.

"You know him."

She nodded again. "He was my father."

Asami slid away from her on the seat and stood.

"Peace," said Kotomi with the smile that began in her eyes. "He was weak, but never cruel. I think this has made something else entirely of him."

"How long has he been here?"

"Many, many years."

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Aogashima loomed. Rising majestically out of the ocean as if it were some bastion of life. Some of the tourists had gathered on deck to admire it. None of them knowing the decay it hid.

Asami stood to one side, watching silently and breathing the fresh, salty air, in the hopes that it would bring her some calm.

She could sense him.

The too-sweet scent of butterscotch and the claustrophobic feeling of gathering shadow.

I'm an artist too.

In spite of herself, Asami turned to look at him.

You can't go home can you.

Asami shook her head as her eyes were drawn towards the bead of moisture gathering on his lower lip...

"I made a mistake. I shouldn't have come."

I know what it's like to run. There's always an alternative.

She felt her brows knit together.

Alternative? She heard the soft whisper of his voice from her dream. *Run away with me. Let your guilt be a thing of the past.* Her chest tightened under his gaze and she could feel the pulse of her blood thrumming in her eardrums.

He turned away from her and she could breathe again. His forearms leaned against the rail and he looked out over the water. In the distance, the green peak of Aogashima beckoned. Asami's family. The small community of locals. And the knowing. Shared by her and all the rest of them. The truth of what she'd done.

I never found the world very suitable for abstract work. We're too familiar with it all. But down there...

Her eyes fell away from the volcanic isle in the distance, sliding instead to the water below their feet. It parted to either side of the rolling deck, shushing against the hull as they glided, as if on an invisible rail. The island coming inexorably closer. A timer, counting down to zero.

He was right.

Light refracted on the uneven surface of the water, disappearing into broad swathes of deep blues and greens. Sometimes highlighting the colours and other times swallowed by them. The rules of geometry were obeyed but they were ever changing and therefore no help in predicting what might be visible below. It was a landscape which was alien. Wholly unfamiliar. It was colour and shape as emotion.

Her eyes were drawn down into the abyss. Reality and guilt falling away.

Down there everything is up for interpretation. Leave the literal world behind and be free to feel what you feel.

She could feel his eyes on her. Her diaphragm was heavy, shifting uncomfortably under his scrutiny and the weight of it pulled her forward. Closer. Closer to freedom and forgetting.

Her hand reached slowly forward until it fell upon the latch. A small gate in the railing where the gangplank would rest against the hull after they docked. She felt the cool metal of the latch beneath her fingertips and before giving it a moment's thought she pushed it gently open.

The gate swung open.

His attention was like an anchor. Pulling her downwards. His words were like a song. A silken invite full of promise and absolution.

She took a step.

Something struck her and she fell.

Asami's arms flailed and she grabbed the railing. Stainless steel pipe bolted into the deck. Expecting to feel the air beneath her as she fell towards the water, she was surprised when her knees struck the fibreglass deck. Movement and shouting came to her attention at the same moment. A rush of colour flying past her and the shouts of panic from the tourists. She turned to follow the movement, her senses finally catching up as she heard the splash.

She looked down to see Kotomi disappearing beneath the water. Her arms wrapped around the demon and the lingering scent of butterscotch in the air.

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Asami couldn't get the smell of the seawater and the sulfur out of her hair. She wasn't sure she wanted to.

It was the unique smell of home that she'd grown up with but never registered until she'd come back to it. The sulfuric smell of the volcano, venting through blowholes, and the fragrance of the ocean, agitated by the local weather and tossed into the air.

Her loose hair whipped around her in the breeze as she stepped across the gangplank and showed her ticket to the captain. He smiled at her and nodded. The warm smile of a local. She'd forgotten those too.

In the end she'd spent three weeks sitting around, drinking tea with her parents and wandering the island every afternoon. But nothing had healed her as well as the conversations she'd had with them both.

As her lips had soaked in the warmth from the rim of her teacup one night, she'd breathed the question softly into existence.

"Why did you send me away?"

She had hoped it would go unnoticed. That her thin and feeble voice would be swallowed by the tension of the years which had passed in silence. It hadn't gone unnoticed. Her father had been waiting for it, perhaps gathering his own courage for just such a moment.

"Because you wanted to be an artist. I only know how to deliver the post."

She believed him as soon as he spoke. Because he was her father and she loved him.

"I thought it was because of Hoshi. I thought nobody wanted me here."

"It wasn't because of Hoshi. Everyone always asks me how you are doing. And why you haven't come home. We never sent you away, Asami. We sent you to school. And it took every piece of love I have for you to do it."

There were 178 residents on the island. 112 of them came to celebrate her birthday. Asami was sad to think that Kotomi couldn't be there. They'd never found her body, even though the fishing boats from the village had helped. But she didn't blame herself. She was thankful that Kotomi-san had been there to save her.

The weeks had passed too quickly. She did her best to be present in every moment. To catalogue the memories. Her favourite was walking along the shore with her father, holding his hand as they watched the ocean.

She turned away from the captain and looked back to see her parents waving and smiling broadly. Her whole life, Asami had always waved meekly. This time she smiled as broadly as they and waved her hand high above her head. She ducked her head beneath the low doorway and stepped inside the ferry.

Her nostrils flared as she caught the scent of butterscotch. Her diaphragm tightened and when she turned, she saw them.

Together.

They sat at the back of the ferry. Side by side. Looking out at the ocean and ignoring the passengers.

Asami wondered if they were holding hands.