

## Listen, The Snow is Falling

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# Listen, The Snow is Falling

by [Sleigh](#)

## Summary

In which Hibiki is willing to follow Atsuki to FORT, to foreign countries, and to his grave.

## Notes

This is an AU where Hibiki joined FORT after the events of the game.

TWs for: references to Hibiki and Atsuki's past trauma w/ silent and their deceased parents, fainting, blood, one tiny mention of needles, and coughing up flowers (specifically written as coughing them up and not vomiting them up bc barf makes me queasy lol, but I used the emetophobia tag regardless just to be safe)

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

“I’m dying,” Hibiki says, and admitting it to Atsuki might be the hardest thing he’s done since he joined FORT.

It’s a dark, icy night in rural Canada. Hibiki, Atsuki, and Liu were sent to search for a specific infectee working for an oil reserve, who’d spread Silent to several of his co-workers living in a small farm town. It was supposed to be an easy, straightforward mission for Hibiki to learn the ropes on, following Atsuki around until he learned enough about the general procedures to face Silent himself. This is an unexpected complication.

Atsuki doesn’t pause, doesn’t hesitate, doesn’t tense his slim shoulders the slightest bit at Hibiki’s words. He’s several paces ahead but doesn’t look back as Hibiki falls behind on the icy sidewalk, his hands still in his pockets. “Are you hungry? Why didn’t you eat more dinner?”

Hibiki entered this conversation with no expectations, yet still finds himself intensely disappointed, like Atsuki has just thrown him off the side of a building. Some part of him, some tiny piece he’s tried so fiercely to deny, desperately wants Atsuki’s concern, his pity, his attention, absolutely any serious emotion he can wring out of him.

“I’m not joking.”

“Sure,” Atsuki replies, in that deadpan tone that Hibiki finds hilarious when used on other people. He keeps walking, snowflakes dusting his shoulders, melting silently in his hair. The night is bitterly cold, and no amount of glittering Christmas lights clipped to gutters or pine wreaths hanging from iron street lights can warm Hibiki’s mood.

“Saijo, please.” Hibiki’s voice cracks and Atsuki stops. He turns, his expression guarded and wary, but a bit nervous. The sharp winds chill his cheeks to a rosy hue, and the golden glow of the street lights catch his face just right. He’s so pretty it makes Hibiki’s heart soar with adoration.

“...What’re you saying?” Atsuki says after an agonizing moment of hesitation. His eye contact doesn’t waver, but his jaw tenses, and Hibiki has learned that it’s one of the few ways Atsuki shows he’s anxious.

“I’m... like I said, I’m going to die, Saijo. It’s not a joke.” He can’t hold Atsuki’s intense stare any longer, so Hibiki’s eyes drift down to the sidewalk, to the decorated birch trees lining the streets, to anywhere else but Atsuki. “I told Nola, but I can’t tell the chief. You can’t tell him. Please.”

Atsuki hesitates again, the uncertainty radiating off him. “What do you mean you’re going to die?” His shoulders tense up.

“It’s...” The words catch in his throat. Even Nola doesn’t know what’s really wrong. Hibiki had to come up with some bullshit excuse, he could never admit the truth. He knew FORT would force the surgery on him, and he’d sooner die than have his brain toyed with one more time. “It’s my heart.”

“Then-- Then go get it taken care of. Do something.” Atsuki doesn’t raise his voice but there’s something different in his tone, something foreign to Hibiki’s ears, like the first time he heard Atsuki speaking another language. When he looks back up at Atsuki there’s something intense about his eyes, and he has an anxious frown. Atsuki opens his mouth then closes it, then runs a hand through his hair, sending snowflakes fluttering around him. “You can’t just...”

Atsuki doesn’t continue, so Hibiki steps closer, some part of him desperate to relieve that anxiety swallowing Atsuki up. “It’s not that simple. But hey, don’t let it get to you, all right?” He reaches out and claps Atsuki on the shoulder. “I’ve accepted it, don’t worry about me. I just thought you should be aware, since we’re partners and all.” Hibiki smiles, hollow and cold like the endless hallways of FORT. To think of all the horrors he’d survived there, in the US, in Kisaragi, only to go out like this. It was some real bullshit.

“How long?” Atsuki murmurs, his eyes downcast and snowflakes collecting on his long eyelashes.

Hibiki would die to kiss him. The irony is almost enough to make him laugh.

“Not long,” Hibiki says.

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There was a clearly defined point where Hibiki had tested the waters, had checked to see where he stood in Atsuki’s eyes.

It was his first time in Kyushu, but more importantly, it was his first mission training under Atsuki. It felt less like training and more like he was a dumb lovesick puppy just following Atsuki around.

They’d dealt with some suspects earlier, a pretty young florist and her doting fiance, who were both wracked with Silent. Neither were their target, but Atsuki said they still got some useful information. Truthfully, Hibiki spent most of the time wondering what Atsuki’s laugh would sound like. He was too confident in his ability to catch up on his training later to dedicate as much time to learning as he did to admiring Atsuki.

“They were a cute couple when they stopped being murderous.” Hibiki murmured, sitting on a bench so close to Atsuki that their shoulders were pressed together. They were going to be sent on a new mission soon, but at the moment had nothing to do but snack on pretzel sticks outside a train station. Once Nola added more funds to their Suica cards and sent them an itinerary, they’d be sent after the next suspect.

“Yeah, I guess,” Atsuki mumbled, loudly crunching on a pretzel. He slouched a bit when he hadn’t slept well, Hibiki noted. He was leaning into Hibiki like he needed the support to stay sitting upright, but Hibiki found it endearing more than anything else.

“I wonder what we’d be like as a couple...” Hibiki leaned in just a bit closer to Atsuki, his stomach fluttering at the warmth of their proximity. “Two handsome young men traveling the world, solving crimes... sounds like a movie, doesn’t it?”

Atsuki made a vague noncommittal noise, his eyes drifting closed.

“Nothing to say, Saijo?” Hibiki smiled his most charming, radiant smile, not that Atsuki was looking back at him. “Or are you still imagining it right now? Should we make it a reality?” The early autumn sunshine was pleasant and warm, and the trees surrounding them were still vibrant and green, but Hibiki couldn’t be bothered to look at anything else.

“I’m imagining taking a nap in peace.”

Hibiki’s smile faltered. He certainly got the feeling that the topic was being avoided. “C’mon, humor me. What do you think?”

Hibiki had never been more frustrated at the limits of his powers. He could pry into any mind, could eavesdrop on the thoughts of any other person in this whimsical little seaside town, but he would never ever be able to hear Atsuki’s thoughts uninvited, and he knew that invitation would never come. Atsuki was entirely closed off to him, through his thoughts and through his words, leaving Hibiki with only little breadcrumbs to gather from Atsuki’s subtle body language.

“I just think you should stop talking and let me sleep,” Atsuki said, light but firm.

Hibiki was terribly embarrassed by how upset he felt, by such a casual dismissal, by the growing ache in his chest. He forced out an airy laugh. “Your loss, Saijo,” he said, as light and hollow as broken bird bones.

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Atsuki is, as always, impossible to keep a secret from. Hibiki trusts that Atsuki isn’t prying into his thoughts, but even without that ability Atsuki is intensely perceptive and good at reading people and uncovering secrets. Hibiki doesn’t know how long he thought he could hide the truth, but he was careless to think he could hide anything at all.

He’s coughing up blood into the sink of their shared apartment at 3 in the morning, and his only hope is that Atsuki won’t wake up. He’s disgusted with himself, blood and wilted camelia petals splattered all over the white enamel, dark splotches dripping from his hands onto the tile floor. Even now, in excruciating pain, coughing so hard he thinks this might be the time his lungs finally give out, all he can think of is that he doesn’t want to inconvenience Atsuki.

“Kiryu.”

The bathroom door opens, and Hibiki wonders if embarrassment and shame might kill him instead. He ducks his face, blood still dripping from the fingers clasped over his mouth, his eyes watery and burning. The buzzing fluorescent light makes him look even worse, all pale skin and dark circles and so much blood.

“What happened?” Atsuki’s fingertips barely brush the fabric of Hibiki’s shirt, and Hibiki knows he’s seen it all. There’s no hiding the reddened petals strewn through the blood pooled in the sink. Hibiki says nothing because he knows there’s nothing to say. Each breath he takes is slow and ragged and he closes his eyes.

Atsuki presses his palm flat against Hibiki’s shoulder, gentle but firm. “You lied to me,” he says, no inflection in his voice. Rather than angry or hurt, he sounds like he’s reading off an encyclopedia entry. “Why?”

“It’s stupid,” Hibiki chokes out, his voice strained and foreign to his own ears. “It’s embarrassing.”

Atsuki says nothing. He starts rubbing a gentle circle against Hibiki’s shoulder blade with his thumb. “I already see you do far more embarrassing things than this on a daily basis.”

Hibiki shakes his head and bites back a laugh before he can fall into another coughing fit. His knuckles are white as he grips the sides of the sink, the sound of the lights buzzing so loud it almost hurts. All at once he feels very cold. “Thanks,” he says dryly, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

Atsuki shifts from one foot to the other, then puts his other hand on Hibiki’s shoulder. There’s an odd vulnerability to him, his warm golden eyes flickering from Hibiki to the sink, his hands repeatedly pausing their soft movements like he’s unsure of what he’s doing. “Are you better? Do you need to lay down?”

‘It’s ‘lie’ Saijo, jeez,’ Hibiki nearly says, but can’t motivate himself to say any more than he absolutely needs to. Instead, he simply nods, and Atsuki escorts him back to his room like he’s frail and fragile enough to shatter if he takes one step on his own. With disgust, Hibiki accepts that it isn’t far from the truth. He hates feeling so weak.

As soon as he is settled in bed, Hibiki is gripped with anxiety. “Stay with me,” he murmurs, sounding more like an order than he intended. He fully expects that incessantly rebellious side of Atsuki to be immediately put off, to push away at the idea of being bossed around. Instead, Atsuki quietly complies, shutting off the lamp and shuffling under the duvet beside Hibiki. Atsuki lays rigidly on his back as if he has no idea how to sleep next to someone else. Hibiki isn’t sure if it’s cute or a bit sad.

Atsuki’s silence is brief. “So who is it?” He asks, his expression a mystery in the dark. Hibiki crawls closer, snuggles right up to Atsuki and lays his head on his chest. Atsuki goes tense, his heartbeat rapid under Hibiki’s ear, but he doesn’t protest. Hibiki decides he will take the smallest crumbs of affection he can get, and will treasure this no matter how awkward it may be. Besides, Atsuki is fully capable of shoving him onto the floor if he gets tired of it.

“I-It’s Liu, isn’t it?” Atsuki asks, his voice suddenly louder than before.

“What? Why would you guess him?” Atsuki is so warm, the quick staccato of his heartbeat and the rapid rise and fall of his chest so intensely comforting. It puts Hibiki at ease.

Atsuki swallows hard. “Nola?” He awkwardly pats Hibiki on the back, more like one would pat a child for doing well in a soccer game. “It’s Nola, right?”

“Two strikes,” Hibiki murmurs, shifting just slightly to rest against the crook of Atsuki’s neck. “Only one guess left, use it wisely.”

There is a long pause where Hibiki is left with nothing but the sound of Atsuki’s breathing and his heart. Finally, Atsuki says, barely a whisper, “...Me?”

A cold panic sweeps through Hibiki’s chest. He nearly stops breathing, wracked with fear. He should admit the truth, but he fears the heartbreak would kill him. Atsuki already rejected him once. Hearing it a second time... he doesn’t think he’s strong enough to take it. “Don’t be ridiculous,” he mumbles dryly. The silence they fall into after that is so uncomfortable it takes Hibiki ages to fall asleep.

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Hibiki works very hard to pretend this is an entirely ordinary breakfast between three friends, none of which are dying. He does not allow himself to be reminded that it’s really just a work meeting with some sad dying guy and two socially icy enigmas who have, when combined, spoken three words in the past half hour.

(for the record, ‘Syrup?’ ‘Yeah, thanks’ did not constitute a conversation in Hibiki’s dictionary)

At this point, Hibiki would generally start a conversation, or at the very least, an argument. Today he says nothing, feeling that he can’t speak without addressing the massive cloud of impending death looming over him, the one that Atsuki now knows way too much about.

“You’re awfully quiet today.”

Liu doesn’t have to look over at him for Hibiki to know he’s being spoken to. He shifts uncomfortably in the sticky vinyl diner seat, almost annoyed that someone else is steering this conversation instead of himself. He glances to Atsuki for some sort of reprieve, but Atsuki is swirling his whipped cream and syrup together into some kind of ungodly sugar soup on top of his pancakes.

“You’re one to talk.” Hibiki avoids eye contact, staring very intently at the untouched cheese omelette on his plate he still hasn’t found the appetite for. “Anyway, don’t you usually say I talk too much? I can’t win with you.”

“You do talk too much,” Liu says, “...Usually. Right now you’re being creepy.”

Hibiki is offended enough to launch into a real argument, but he hesitates for a moment. He's so heavily weighed down by fatigue he knows he won't think fast enough and Liu will take the chance to completely and utterly dunk on him. And yet, he still feels a desperate need to argue. "How can you even call me creepy when you--"

"You're bleeding."

Hibiki glances up from the dejected omelette and Liu looks up from his phone. (Hibiki bets he's reading NPR articles about the Slovak economy or something; something boring old people would read and not like, Twitter) Atsuki gestures vaguely in Hibiki's direction, his eyes wide. "Your nose."

On instinct Hibiki reaches up and touches his nose, as if Atsuki would be lying. His fingers come away bloody, and he mutters 'oh' under his breath. He stands too quickly and bangs his knee on the table, covering his lower face with his hands.

Before he makes it to the bathroom, Liu kicks Atsuki under the table loud enough that Hibiki can hear it and hisses, "Go help him."

Hibiki has a handful of cheap paper towels pressed to his nose by the time Atsuki steps into the bathroom. Atsuki hovers nearby, but this time he doesn't touch Hibiki. Hibiki can feel an emotional wall radiating off of him like the buzz of an electric fence. "Just a normal nosebleed?" Atsuki asks, stuffing his hand in his pockets and looking away at the pea-green tilework as if he's giving Hibiki the space to bleed privately.

"No." Hibiki can feel a wet cough brewing in his chest.

Atsuki shuffles a bit. His shoes squeak on the old, worn flooring. He reaches out for Hibiki, then puts his hands in his pockets and looks down on his feet. "Kiryu." He hesitates again.

"It's cute seeing you worry over me, but you don't need to stress so much." Hibiki stuffs the paper towels into the overflowing trash bin next to the sink, the towels already soaked through with dark blood. In the second it takes him to grab another handful, blood drips down his lips and drops collect on a cracked tile on the floor. "It can't be helped."

Atsuki takes a breath. "Listen. I--"

They fall into an uncomfortable silence where neither wants to speak, nothing but the sound of the air conditioning and papers rustling between them before Atsuki finally continues.

"Stop talking like there's nothing you can do and you don't care what happens to you." Atsuki's voice is strange, carrying threads of frustration tense enough to snap. "Let me help you."

"I do care. And you can't," Hibiki says flatly, smearing blood off his mouth. He feels dizzy.

"You can get it removed. FORT can--"

"No."



“Kiryu--”

“Nobody is going in my head,” Hibiki says. “Nobody is ever doing that to me again. *Nobody*.” Each word Hibiki says drips with anger. He’s not angry at Atsuki, but the way Atsuki flinches, he knows it sounds that way. He takes a deep breath to calm himself before he continues. “I don’t care if I die tomorrow as long as I’m still me. That’s why I’m not getting it removed. And that’s why you’ll never make me change my mind.”

The silence that falls between them is stifling. Atsuki physically backs off, taking a step back and putting his hands back in his pockets. He avoids eye contact, his shoulders tense as he silently stares at the floor. “I’m sorry,” he murmurs. “But...”

Atsuki trails off as Hibiki wipes his nose again, the flow of blood finally subsiding. As long as he keeps his breath even, the heavy feeling in his chest begins to lighten. After a moment, he realizes Atsuki has given up on whatever else he planned to say. “It’s fine.”

“It’s not.”

Hibiki shrugs.

“I--”

“Listen, I don’t want to talk about it anymore.” Hibiki balls up the rest of the paper towels and throws them in the trash. “C’mon, I know you’re still hungry.” He loops his arm with Atsuki’s and leads him back into the restaurant. He knows from Atsuki’s furrowed brow that he has things he wants to say, but Hibiki doesn’t want to hear it. He doesn’t want to be reminded that he’s dying.

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Hibiki had never believed it was possible to dream while in a coma. It just didn’t make sense when it came down to the science, and Hibiki was nothing if not a fan of math and science and all things of that sort.

Then he got knocked into a coma, and for a few days he did nothing but dream.

Much of it was a blur, like splattered watercolor on a canvas: hushed voices he didn’t recognize, distant beeping and rustling and the sound of doors closing. He could hear the shape of Ms. Hino’s voice but not her words, could feel hands on his skin but did not know who they belonged to.

Sometimes he was struck with a startling lucidity. He dreamed that he was seven and it was a week before Christmas. His mother knelt before him in the threshold of their home, her cheeks rosy, snowflakes floating through the open doorway all around her. She tells him she and his father just have to run to the store, she promises to be home soon. When Hibiki complains about not being allowed to come with, she tells him that they’re going to pick up a

Christmas gift, and he's not allowed to see it yet. She kisses him on the forehead. She tells him to be good. She stands up to leave.

'Don't get in that car,' Hibiki wants to say. 'Don't take those back roads. Don't hit that patch of black ice.'

He cannot speak, cannot move. His mother closes the door, and she does not return to his dreams again.

In the cold space that follows, the dreams blur back into nothingness, vague tidbits like the smell of citrus, the taste of salt, the feeling of needles prickling at his skin. But he also dreams of Atsuki; Atsuki walking home from school with him, laughing with him like they're ordinary people. Atsuki bumping into him at Triple Step and asking him if he wants to split fries. Atsuki falling asleep during one of Ryo's rambling monologues at Tohodo and looking so damn angelic Hibiki thinks it's just another fantasy invented by the brain damage.

The dreams spiral into stranger situations. Atsuki becomes his teammate on the World Cup-winning soccer team, Atsuki pilots a mech with him in a fight against monsters from the sea, Atsuki travels with him into dreams within dreams to discover secrets and solve mysteries.

Hibiki doesn't once think about how weird all of it is. He thinks, 'Atsuki has beautiful eyes. Atsuki has a cute smile. Atsuki, Atsuki, Atsuki--'

Despite all of that it's not until months later when Hibiki is in a cold sweat in a facility in god knows where Europe, when he's struggling to catch his breath, when his powers have returned along with a nearly unbearable amount of pain, that he finally accepts it.

He did not put his life on the line to gain power. He did not sacrifice his freedom to a mysterious organization for fame or fortune. He did not put his body through another round of fresh hell for the chance of a hefty paycheck.

Atsuki comes to him first, and brushes his fingers through Hibiki's hair. "Are you okay?" he says, his voice soft and gentle.

Hibiki feels dizzy from pain, from the lingering feeling of fire burning in his veins. He nods, leaning into Atsuki's touch.

Love is a terribly powerful thing.

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Atsuki goes after a target without him. Hibiki spends the whole night alone at their apartment, frantically calling and texting and finally calling Nola in a fit of worry only to hear, "You mean you're not with him?"

From Liu's extremely passive aggressive paperwork, Hibiki learned that this isn't an uncommon thing for Atsuki at all. He closes himself off. He does things alone, regardless of the danger. He ignores Liu and Nola and everyone else no matter how much he gets scolded or outright yelled at. Hibiki thought that maybe things had changed, that maybe those things he heard were in the past now. He felt stupid for thinking himself so special that things were different now.

"You left me behind," Hibiki says when Atsuki steps through the front door, shoving his keys back in his pocket. It's past midnight, their tiny apartment dark and quiet except for the gentle hum of an infomercial on the TV and the rattling of the heater. Hibiki had only left one lamp on in a far corner, too wracked with worry and a feeling of rejection to find it in himself to stand up and turn on more lights.

"It's not like that," Atsuki says flatly, avoiding eye contact. His eyes are dark and there's a tired slump to his posture. "I didn't need you. It's fine, you need the rest." He shrugs off his coat and drops it to the floor. He closes his eyes and rubs his forehead.

"It's--" Hibiki huffs. "I know you don't *need* me," Hibiki says, the words feeling toxic on his tongue. "But you're supposed to take me with you, you're--"

"Liu already lectured me," Atsuki says. He turns his back to Hibiki, stepping into the kitchen and pouring himself a glass of water. Frankly, Hibiki thinks he looks like hell, his skin pallid and his dark circles standing out ghastly. His fingers tremble as he holds the glass. "And Nola. And even Natsuki. I don't need to hear it again. I get it." He takes a sip and his hands shake worse.

"I'm not lecturing," Hibiki says. He follows Atsuki into the kitchen, still dark besides moonlight from the window and a dull night light next to the sink. "You didn't tell me anything, I had no idea what happened to you. Don't you realize that people get upset and 'lecture' you because they're worried and they care about you?"

Atsuki grimaces, not even capable of finding enough energy to hide his disdain. "I'm going to bed." He sets the glass down on the counter too roughly, with a loud clatter that pierces through the silence.

"I still have more to say." Hibiki steps into Atsuki's escape route and blocks him off. "You know I'm not the type to let you off that easily. We need to talk about it."

Atsuki says nothing, gently brushing Hibiki out of his way and making a beeline for the bathroom. Before he can close the door, Hibiki puts his hand in the doorframe and barely avoids getting his fingers smashed. "If that's how you're going to be, you don't have to respond to me but you at least have to listen." Hibiki does a little impatient huff and Atsuki says nothing, but begrudgingly lets Hibiki open the door and step in.

"You're acting like I'm already dead," Hibiki says, his voice still calm and even despite the frustration bubbling in his chest. "If you think you're being subtle about it, you're not. I still have a lot of things I want to do, and I'm not going to let you treat me like I'm so frail that I can't go with you anymore. It's patronizing. It's insulting. I didn't go through all of... all of

*that* at Fort to just sit here while you and Liu do all the real work. You don't genuinely think I can't handle this, do you?"

"You know that's not it," Atsuki mutters. He tries to pry Hibiki's fingers off the doorframe, and his hands are cold. Hibiki doesn't budge.

"I *don't* ." He's a bit surprised by the way the words come out, his voice a little louder and with a little edge to it. "How would I know what you're thinking, Saijo? When do you ever confide in me about how you feel? When have you told me anything more than you absolutely had to? We're partners, we're supposed to trust each other, but you always keep these walls up and I feel like I don't know anything about you, even after all we've been through. I can't tell what you think of me at all. Honestly, sometimes I don't even think you like me."

Atsuki opens his mouth and closes it. "You really think I don't like you? You have such a bad opinion of me that you think I don't care about you at all, even after you joined FORT for me?"

The laugh that escapes Hibiki is haughty, airy and defensive. It's an instinct and there's words pouring out after it before he can stop to process them. "I didn't join FORT for *you* , Saijo," Hibiki lies coldly, feeling fluttery and frightened that Atsuki accurately guessed something so deeply embarrassing.

Atsuki's neutral expression falters, his stoic facade giving way to clear hurt and embarrassment, but Hibiki just keeps going. "If you want me to think better of you, you have to put in the effort. I'm grateful for everything you've done for me, truly." His hands feel shaky and clammy and he just keeps talking and talking like he's going 80mph and can't find the brake pedal. "But I want more from you. You can ghost everyone else before they realize how cold you are, but that was never going to work with me. I need more than that. Being cool and aloof and mysterious isn't enough for me, it's just going to freeze us both to death."

Atsuki pointedly turns away and stares at the wall, frowning. "Then what do you want from me?" he asks, barely a whisper.

"I want all of you," Hibiki says, and when Atsuki turns to look at him again, his gaze is charged with something so heavy, so intense it makes Hibiki falter, makes him pause to take a breath and swallow before he can find any more words to say. "I want the real Atsuki Saijo to trust me enough to let me get to know him. I want to know all his bad habits, his happiest memories, his fears, his favorite songs." There's only inches between them and Hibiki feels dizzy. "I want to matter enough-- I want to be important enough, to be-- to be cared about and trusted enough to have the privilege of knowing the real you. That's all I've ever wanted from you."

Hibiki watches Atsuki's throat as he swallows, watches Atsuki's stare catch on his lips for a moment before he glances away, a shiver running through him as he slowly exhales. He runs both hands through his hair. He takes another slow, deep breath. "You *are* important," Atsuki murmurs. "I do care. Let me prove it to you tomorrow."

It's late. Hibiki is tired. He nods. "All right. I'll look forward to it, then."

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Hibiki wakes up early to find that Atsuki attempted to toast him a bagel, but mostly just burnt it. He opens his mouth to comment on it, but Atsuki speaks first.

“My birthday was yesterday,” Atsuki says, his golden eyes downcast as he picks at his own ruined bagel. “I didn’t mention it because I don’t celebrate it. It wasn’t personal.”

The sunlight streaming through the window casts a golden glow across Atsuki’s face. He looks younger somehow without his contacts in. He still has stressful dark circles under his eyes, and he avoids eye contact as if his life depends on it.

“Happy Birthday, Saijo,” Hibiki says cheerily. “December 30th, then? And you’re my age, so... 19 this year?”

Atsuki’s face flushes as he nods, blushing all the way to his ears. It’s so cute it makes Hibiki’s chest feel tight.

“Drinking age here is 19, right? Should we go find a bar and celebrate?” Hibiki grins. He intends it as a joke, but if Atsuki said yes he wouldn’t complain either.

Atsuki finally looks up at him, and his honey-colored stare makes Hibiki’s breath hitch. “Actually I was going to ask what you wanted to do today.” He looks down at his bagel. “I got us the day off. You said there’s a lot you want to do, so let’s do it.”

“Wait, seriously?” Hibiki absolutely beams at him. “That’s awfully thoughtful of you Saijo. You’re not just doing it because you feel bad for me, are you?”

Atsuki shakes his head. “I want to. Just tell me what you want to do first.”

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There was a certain charm of small towns, but Hibiki was over it by this point in his life. He’d grown up in a small town, and even when he was in the US he was in a fairly small city, nothing like New York or Los Angeles. If he had one day to spend however he wanted, he’d much rather have gone to some ancient historical city, with museums and art and music. He wanted to hold Atsuki’s hand in The Louvre, to kiss him at Meteora at sunrise, to confess his love at the Accademia Gallery... but getting coffee with him at a rundown diner was the best he could do.

They take burnt coffee in paper cups to the park, where Christmas lights still hang from fir trees and light poles. Snow drifts haphazardly cover the ground and a few people take their

dogs for walks through the glittering trees. They sit on an iron bench near the center of the park, so close Hibiki can feel Atsuki's warmth through his coat

"I never untie my shoes before I take them off," Atsuki suddenly says over the rim of his coffee cup, watching a fluffy golden dog roll on its back in the snow. "And I dog ear pages instead of using bookmarks. Those are my bad habits."

Hibiki laughs lightly. "Don't let Ryo hear that, I think he'd die instantly from the horror."

"Borrowing his books was... stressful," Atsuki says, and Hibiki swears he's almost smiling, and he grins back.

"My happiest memory is the last Christmas with my family," Atsuki says, staring straight ahead and gripping his cup with both hands. He still hasn't looked over at Hibiki. "My sister and I got bikes and a cat and we ate too much food. We were really happy. But my mom died a few weeks later."

Hibiki tries to find words to say, but nothing comes to him. "I'm sorry, Saijo," he murmurs, but it feels wrong. Too generic, too impersonal. He'd always hated hearing it directed at himself. He clears his throat. "What did you name the cat?"

"My sister named him Pancake," Atsuki says. "He was a good cat. Brown with stripes. We had to give him away, after..." Atsuki pauses and shifts around nervously. "I still think about him sometimes. If he's still alive. He might be the only one of us left in one piece..." he says as he slowly trails off, staring at nothing in particular.

Hibiki feels like he's tilted off center and he can't quite right himself. He hadn't expected so much from Atsuki and it's flattering but overwhelming at the same time. The amount of trust Atsuki is putting in him is dizzying. Of course it could all be lies, but Hibiki won't let himself go down that line of thinking. "Pancake is a good name," he blurts out, unable to think of anything more intelligent at the moment.

"Anyway, I'm afraid of lots of things. I never told you but I didn't choose to get a Lux-Pain. I was given it without my consent." He flexes his left hand, as if shaking off an unpleasant muscle memory. "I don't regret it. I would've chosen it, given the chance. But I don't like... I'm afraid of waking up and being different. Of not being me. Because maybe the next time I won't be happy with what I've become."

Hibiki nods. The bitter cold feeling in his chest isn't from the weather. "I understand. It's a terrible feeling."

"Also," Atsuki says, his voice a little quieter. "I'm afraid of... when you're..." He hesitates. "When you're gone."

Hibiki's chest squeezes, like thorns pressing against his heart. "Me too."

Atsuki lets out a shaky breath and takes a sip of his coffee. He pulls out his phone and hands Hibiki an earbud. "I made a playlist of favorite songs. It's kind of long. Sorry."

Hibiki takes it gingerly and gives Atsuki a smile as warm as the sun. “Wow Saijo, you really put a lot of thought into this, didn’t you?” he says cheerily, and Atsuki looks away.

They listened to sad, wistful songs and got lunch at another mediocre cafe. They wandered through a bookstore and made jokes at Ryo’s expense. They pet a stray cat outside a barber shop and watched the sunset stain pale pinks and oranges across the cloudy winter sky. They got burgers that put Triple Step to shame. There were papers taped to light poles announcing a small town firework display for new years, and people were already gathering around the park as food trucks and vendor tables began popping up throughout the night. Atsuki and Hibiki spent so long browsing the wares and looking at the lights that midnight approached before either of them really realized it. There were only a few hundred people around, but the energy was electric when the countdown began.

Maybe it was just because of all the energy, all the time he’d spent with Atsuki today, but it made Hibiki feel bold. Hibiki looks over at Atsuki, at the rainbow glow of lights shining on his silvery hair, of his bright warm eyes looking over the crowd. “Have you ever kissed someone at new years, Saijo?”

Hibiki had kissed exactly one person in his life and it wasn’t even in a romantic context. He and Ryo were still kids, and they were big enough nerds to be reenacting Troilus and Cressida at Rainbow Hill, complete with long monologues, goofy accents, and a kiss that wasn’t much more than a clumsy peck. There were plenty of interested girls at Kisaragi, and plenty of interested girls *and* boys at his school in the US. But he hadn’t truly, desperately wanted to kiss anyone until he met Atsuki. Atsuki made him realize what Shakespeare and Sappho and all the other poets were talking about. Atsuki made all the love songs real.

Hibiki could’ve sworn Atsuki was blushing, but it could’ve been a trick of the light. His eyes were wide when he turned back to Hibiki and he hesitated before slowly saying, “No, why?”

Hibiki felt breathless, but tried to feign an effortless smile. “Do you want to?”

People began cheering in the background. The first firework went off and painted Atsuki in a brilliant scarlet red. “Kiryu, I--” He looked around as if he was trying to find an escape, looking from Hibiki to the trees to the crowd and back. “Right now isn’t-- I can’t--”

“No, no, it’s--” All the energy drained from Hibiki and left him wondering why he ever thought this was a good idea, why he’d followed through on such a ridiculous impulse. Now he just felt nauseated, ashamed, like his throat was closing up. “It’s-- I’m just joking, Saijo,” Hibiki chokes out. His breathing feels shallow and his chest feels tight. “I didn’t mean it. I--”

The coughing seems to come on all at once, like an enormous wave suddenly crashing over him. He can’t seem to catch his breath and his eyes burn and all he can think is ‘not here, not now’ but he can’t get himself to stop. It’s painful, and with great alarm he realizes he can’t catch his breath no matter how hard he tries. Atsuki’s hands are on his shoulders and Hibiki knows he’s speaking, but everything fades into a dull buzz, the kaleidoscope of colors around him melting into muddy, ruined watercolors. He just needs to breathe, just get one deep breath, but all he can do is choke and cough until he blacks out completely.

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He dreams that he really kissed Atsuki then, in the cold, under a thousand glittering lights while the sky exploded into brilliant shades of green and gold. He dreams that Atsuki pressed his lips to his ear and whispered over all the noise that he loved him. He dreams that he told Atsuki he loved him too, but Atsuki melts through his arms, like water through a sieve, and he is alone, in an empty park on a dark night with only cold, untouched snow around him.

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Hibiki wakes up curled up in his bed, his throat raw, his ribs tender and aching. For some reason, Liu is there.

“Have a nice nap?” Liu asks without looking up. He’s kicked back on a chair in the corner with a worn out Dostoevsky paperback. Hibiki always forgets he wears reading glasses.

Hibiki reaches for the glass of water already left on his bedside table and takes a long drink, nearly downing it all in one go. “What’s going on? Why’re you here?”

Liu uses an old bodega receipt as a bookmark in his book; it’s better than what Atsuki does at least. “You passed out. You probably should’ve gone to the hospital, but if you don’t want the chief to find out we need to keep this lowkey. So we just brought you back here.” He stands up and stretches, and it’s unfair how tall he is. “Atsuki’s out, but he’s worried you’re going to choke and die in your sleep so I got stuck here making sure that doesn’t happen.”

Hibiki groans and pulls the blankets back up over his head. “Just kill me.”

“No. That’d be too much paperwork,” Liu says. “By the way, you’re not in love with me, are you?”

Hibiki groans louder, shoving the blankets back off his face so he can glare at Liu. “Absolutely not,” he grumbles. “Don’t flatter yourself, old man.”

Liu shrugs. “Good. I’m way out of your league.”

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Nola sends them greasy pizza delivery with a very charming ‘please don’t die’ message attached to it. Liu leaves once Hibiki proves he’s not on the cusp of fainting anymore, and



Hibiki is appreciative of it. He already felt enough shame and embarrassment just for how he looked in front of Atsuki, looking pathetic in front of Liu wasn't going to help things at all.

On one hand, Hibiki wants to see Atsuki more than anything. He wants to apologize profusely, to keep insisting that it was just a bad joke, and beg Atsuki to forget the whole thing ever happened. At the same time, he feels like the easiest route might just be avoiding Atsuki until the end of time. He thinks over a dozen conversations in his head while he idly chews on cheese pizza but he can't find any way to confront Atsuki about yesterday while maintaining his dignity. He finishes his slice of pizza and washes his plate over and over, too lost in his thoughts to pay attention to what he's doing. He doesn't hear the door open, doesn't look up when Atsuki steps into the kitchen.

"How do you feel?"

Hibiki jumps and nearly drops the plate. Atsuki looks weary and nervous. His shoulders are tense and his jaw is clenched. He dodges Hibiki's stare and looks somewhere behind him.

"Oh, I'm-- I'm fine. Honestly Saijo, you worry too much." Hibiki fakes an easygoing smile and turns to lean back against the sink. He wipes his wet hands on his sleeves to avoid awkwardly searching for a dry towel. "Don't make that face, I'm honestly fine."

Atsuki opens his mouth, then closes it. He closes the distance between them and stops so close Hibiki could reach out and touch him if he wanted to. He takes a deep breath and finally makes uncomfortable eye contact. "I should've kissed you. I'm sorry."

Hibiki is silent for a few seconds while his brain catches up. His stomach flutters and his cheeks burn and he feels a wave of embarrassment and indignation and affection smother him as he crosses his arms and frowns. "It was just-- it wasn't that serious, it was just a spur of the moment thought. I don't want some pity kiss Saijo, don't treat me like I'm pathetic."

"No," Atsuki breathes, so close Hibiki can watch him swallow thickly, can watch the way Atsuki's eyes dart nervously between Hibiki's eyes and his lips. In that moment, something in the atmosphere between them shifts. "I should've kissed you. I should've kissed you a long time ago. I should've-- when you first came to Fort, after you got your Lux-Pain, I should've--"

Atsuki's breath hitches, and Hibiki leans closer without realizing. One of his hands is on Atsuki's shoulder and he can't remember when he put it there. He feels like he's been thrown in the deep end of a pool and every time he gets close to climbing out, Atsuki says something else that knocks him back in.

"I know you don't love me. I know there's someone else." Atsuki's barely speaking above a murmur, so close Hibiki can feel his breath and he speaks and it's making him feel dizzy. "But I want to be enough. Even if they don't love you, can't it... can't it matter that I do?"

"What?" Hibiki says without thinking, his mind swimming. His heart is pounding and he's still trying to process the last few minutes of his life. "Saijo, what... what are you saying?"

Atsuki kisses him.

He takes Hibiki's face in his hands and closes the negligible distance between them and kisses him, chaste and awkward and the barest brush of contact at all. Atsuki starts to lean back but Hibiki grabs the collar of his shirt with both hands and pulls him back in, kissing him like his life depends on it. Atsuki is awkward, but he follows Hibiki's lead. His hands are a bit cold but Hibiki melts into the touch. It feels like the same thrill as the power the silent gave him-- the same reckless euphoria, the same buzzing in his veins-- but without any of the horrific side effects. He feels like a roaring fire. He feels like electricity crackling. He feels like poetry.

"I know I'm not as smart as Ryo, or as well-read and my hair isn't as nice but I promise I could make you happy," Atsuki blurts out, before kissing Hibiki again. "I know how you like your coffee and I know what books you like. And we could see the world together." He kisses him again.

"Ryo?" Hibiki asks, brows furrowed. He leans back just slightly to look at Atsuki. "Why are you bringing up Ryo right now?"

"You love him," Atsuki says, solemn and serious and like it's just an obvious fact, like that it's cold outside or like that Nola tried to call a few minutes ago but both of them were too wrapped up in each other to answer.

"I do?" Hibiki swipes Atsuki's bangs back out of his eyes. "Ryo's a good friend, but that's all. I'm not in love with him." Hibiki smiles. "It's *you*, Atsuki. It's always been you." It feels incredible to finally say it. It feels like being set free, like he's finally let out a huge sigh he'd been holding for years.

"What? No it's not," Atsuki says. It's far from the reaction Hibiki wanted or expected. "I asked you that already and you said no. You don't have to lie to me about it."

"No, I'm serious," Hibiki says, and he laughs at the absurdity of it all. His chest feels light, his whole body feels light, like a massive weight has been lifted off his shoulders. "The truth is, I did come to FORT for you. I'm in love with you, Atsuki." Hibiki can't stop himself from beaming. "I got nervous and I lied to you before, and I'm sorry. But I mean it. I love you."

"So that means you're going to be okay?" Atsuki asks slowly, like he's still processing the words.

Hibiki nods.

Atsuki's phone rings again and he glances back at it, where he'd left it on their tiny dining room table. He pauses for a moment, then looks back at Hibiki. "I'm sure it can wait, right?"

Hibiki grins. "I've got all the time in the world now, they can call again later. Whatever they want, it can't possibly be more important than this," he says, and he pulls Atsuki in for another kiss.

## End Notes

If you've read this far... first of all, thank you so sincerely much from the bottom of my heart for reading this fic! I appreciate you very much! I know this fandom is extremely tiny so every single read means a lot to me. Thank you!

Now, onto the notes!

- I started writing this in April of 2018... so it's been about a 3 year process. It took 14 drafts to reach the point where I was ready to send it out into the world! This final draft you're reading took about a year and was probably the biggest overhaul of them all.
- Over the course of writing it I really fell out of love with the concept of Hanahaki and I'm not really a fan of it anymore, but I kept going bc I like applying the concept to Hibiki because of his past trauma with brain stuff... I'm just still not into it much in any other context lol.
- Title is from the Yoko Ono song of the same title!
- Thank you as always to January for reading one of the super early drafts of this and giving me lots of great pointers! And of course for getting me into Lux-Pain like... 12 years ago now??? Dear god lmao
- anyway shockingly I don't have a lot to say about this one besides just the general sentiment that this was a huge labor of love that I had so much fun with and I'm so excited to throw it out into the world!! I have some other LP fics as well if you want to read more but this is my first time posting my ride or die ship and I'm really excited about it lol...

Anyway I love atsuhibi so much and Lux-Pain is my favorite game in the world and has been for over a decade!! Please talk to me about it on twitter at [twitter.com/spudpuppies](https://twitter.com/spudpuppies)! Besides fic I also upload scans, webnovels, soundtracks, etc from Lux-Pain materials on my Tumblr! Find them at [foeyay.tumblr.com/tagged/lpscans](https://foeyay.tumblr.com/tagged/lpscans)! I also have posted some music demos from the soundtrack on my YouTube (which I lost access to years ago oops lol) at [youtube.com/user/venefskujas](https://youtube.com/user/venefskujas). I'm currently working on one complete archive of all the material I've gathered, (including some sick concept art!!!) but it's too big for all the free file uploading sites lol... so stay tuned for updates if I can figure something out!

Thank you again and have a beautiful day!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!