The Heart Knows Beyond Realities

by Yidenia

Summary

Set after TRC. Syaoran dies during his quest to save his parents. Kurogane and Fay return together to Nihon Country, where they try to go on with life in the midst of a land ravaged by war. Ten years later, Kurogane catches a young thief attempting to steal from the Empress' treasury. Old wounds reopen, but this is also the only chance Kurogane and Fay have to heal.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Before dawn, Kurogane was already awake.

Beside him, Fay was still. Sometimes he was actually awake, other times he was not, but it was impossible to tell and useless to try. Fay had a habit of ignoring the day for as long as possible. He liked to sleep a lot, ever since coming to Nihon.

Kurogane was the opposite. He liked to avoid the world of dreams. Perhaps it was because he was the opposite of Fay while awake; Fay indulged in his emotions, while Kurogane ignored them. Dreams have a tendency to expose what was suppressed.

He was not sure which one was better. One could hardly avoid sleeping indefinitely any more than one could avoid waking. Though he supposed, there was one way to avoid ever waking up, but Fay had promised him…the mage had been around for long enough that 'a few decades is nothing'.

For all that, though, Fay seemed to want to skip as much of these nothing decades as possible.

He waited until the sky began to lighten before getting out of bed, tucking Fay in behind him. The mage slept on. He got dressed as the sun continued creeping skyward, and the birds started chirping outside. In the halls, the handmaidens had gotten up, starting their chores. He headed out, ignoring their bows, and strode down the hall to go outside; he liked to do his exercises prior to breakfast, as everything needed to be prepared anyway.

Autumn was coming, and there was a taste of ice in the air, but the sun was warm and the leaves were still green even as many leaves fell with the wind. The clouds loomed high, making the sky seem taller than before. Kurogane flexed his muscles, letting the day soak into his skin. The castle grounds grew more and more lively as time progressed, and soon the sounds carried over the walls, footsteps and murmurs and occasional laughter. Idyllic, were it not for the ever-present tension in the air that Kurogane only sensed because he had been to worlds where that did not exist, where people were truly relaxed and happy because all was well, at least for now. For all that people try to go about their business, war was on everyone's minds.

He went back after he was done. He must have grunted to whoever tried to tell him that the morning meal was ready, but if he did not, they were used to it. Servants were trained to be helpful without being intrusive. Some do better than others, but none of them registered in Kurogane's mind.

Fay was tucked under the blankets, in the same position. Kurogane stood at the door.

"You awake?" he asked, because it was impossible to tell.

Fay did not respond or react. He would do that, sometimes.

"Food is ready," the ninja strode forward. "Come on, we do this every morning. You can't lay about all day."

Fay finally shifted a little, but it was not to sit up. "I'm fine. Go without me."

Kurogane had fallen for that before. "We've been over this. Come on. You need to get dressed and get down before the food gets cold."

Fay sighed. "I'm not hungry."
"Come on. This is getting old. Can't we have one day where we don't have to go through this nonsense?"

The mage finally sat up. His hair was all over the place, but his face was miserable, and it was not because he was sleepy. In fact, Kurogane would wager that he had been awake for quite a while. He rubbed his eyes with one hand, looking as if he were trying to physically apply a strength of will to face the day, before silently flipping the covers out and turning his body to rise from the bed.

"Go," said the mage, heading over to the wardrobe. "I'll join you."

He was already up, so he would do so because he might as well. Kurogane turned and left Fay to finish dressing.

After breakfast were mission reports, which was mostly Kurogane's job. Fay should have contributed, but the mage never showed interest in helping with the war. Kurogane would have withdrawn too, but he cared too much for the princess to abandon her, and chose to use the ongoing conflict as a distraction from his own thoughts. The only times Fay participated would be when Kurogane had to go out into the field; Fay coldly informed Kurogane that he was not going to sit at home and wait for news or a dead body. Princess Tsubasa's expression had been beyond description; it still gave Kurogane chills to recall it, and he never wanted Fay to ever wear it. So it was agreed that if there was any chance Kurogane might fall in service, Fay would be there with him.

It was a bit of a headache, dealing with this, because either Kurogane was going to go out into the field, where he thrived but where he always had to fear for Fay's safety—or he could stay at the castle and train new warriors, stupid, daft youngsters caught in that awkward stage between childhood and adulthood, with their gangly limbs and wide-eyed faces, every one of them reminding him of Syaoran and none of them as good.

Maybe it was because he had gotten older, but they seemed smaller every year. He once had to go through the dojo to speak with one of the senior warriors, and came across a baby-faced novice, a fat face stuck on a lanky body. Kurogane felt a burst of horror at the notion that times had gotten bad enough that they needed to recruit infants now, but the boy had been fourteen. Same age they had always been.

Same age Syaoran had been.

These days, even the twenty-year-olds seemed too young for this.

"Kuroiyama Castle has been demonstrating suspicious activity," said one of the advisors. "They seem to be undergoing some kind of ritual, but none of the mages are familiar with it. I would recommend more scouts to investigate, preferably with mages in company."

"What is the nature of this ritual?"

"Uncertain, but whatever it is, they are sacrificing people to it. Mainly women."

Sacrifices often involved demons.

Kurogane rubbed his face in disgust. Aside from the sordidness of the whole affair, demons were troublesome because it was difficult to know how to approach them. If the summoner knew what he was doing, demons could wreak a good amount of damage, and were very difficult to defeat. It was better, therefore, to try to stop the summoning in the first place. That, however, often required almost as much effort, with the payment of many lives to stop something from happening without gaining an upper hand. There was also the possibility that the demons might turn on their summoner first, which
was actually *good* for Shirasaki Castle, at least for the moment. Demons do not tend to linger indefinitely, and could potentially destroy many of Shirasaki's enemies before they vanish on their own.

"We'll start with the scouts," Kurogane agreed. "Find out who is doing the summoning, what they are trying to summon, and how. Their neighbors should know more, since they would have more at stake. See if we can obtain any information from there."

After the meeting, Kurogane found Fay sitting in the meditation garden. He was not meditating; he was staring into space, which Kurogane knew to be very different from meditating.

"Wallowing, again?"

Fay's eyes flickered to him, and they lost their distant glaze. He smiled humorlessly.

"Always."

"You know of any magical practices that involve sacrificing women?"

"I know of many. Someone is trying to summon some demons?"

"Seems like it, though the court mages aren't familiar with the details. Might be good to check it out."

Fay looked away. "Always the same. Would that they knew the true nature of prices."

"Well, in my experience, demons aren't as picky as that witch."

"Demons aren't the ones that exact the price," the mage replied. "I'll look into it, don't worry." But he still sat there, staring through the garden without looking at it.

Kurogane sat down heavily.

"You have to stop this. We both do. It's been ten years."

Fay said nothing.

"People die," Kurogane went on, keeping his voice tightly controlled so he would not snap at the other man. "Children die too. Innocents. It happens all the damn time. Those eighteen-year-old babies get cut down in the field. When enemy forces pillage a village, they don't care if you're a child or a soldier. That's the story anywhere. I don't see why this has to be any different."

"It's *not* different," Fay spat. "Just because this happens all the time doesn't make it alright."

"Then what else do you want to do?"

Fay looked away. "Nothing."

Kurogane stared at him. "At some point," he stated, "you have to move on. We both do." He paused. "It's been ten years."

Fay did not reply.

"He would have wanted us to move on," Kurogane tried.

"He would," Fay agreed. "He was a good boy."
Towards the end, that had been Fay's mantra of sorts. *He's a good boy. He's a good child.* Fay knew as well as Kurogane that goodness had nothing to do with any of it. It was based on Fate's twisted sense of humor, the irony of life, where the old continue getting older while the young perish, where evil persists like an oncoming tide while good and light wink out by themselves.

"Never," Fay sighed, "thought of himself. Always thinks of others. That's why even half of his soul could impress both of us so much. Half of his soul could inspire a new one to grow, a new, good one. Between the three of us, he should have lived."

It was Kurogane's turn to be silent.

"I used to think it should have started when the cut on his hand wouldn't stop bleeding," Fay shook his head, "but I keep thinking back. I remember even noticing, one morning. I told him he looked tired. He said he did not sleep well, and I *knew* he was lying because I had been awake most of that night and he had slept like a log. In the following weeks I remember thinking that he seemed tired, but we were all tired. I did not think much of it. And then the bleeding. Shouldn't have listened to him. We were the adults, not him. Should have made him."

"It's in the past," Kurogane finally broke in. "What purpose does dwelling on this serve?"

Fay laughed a little, mirthlessly. "I admire you, Kurogane." He looked at the ninja. "I wish I could cope as well as you."

Kurogane was not certain he necessarily coped better. But one had to function, somehow.

"I miss him too," he admitted.

They would have parted ways. If all had gone well, today he and Fay would still have been here, fighting to defend the Empress and the Princess against the barbaric kingdoms in Nihon, training baby-faced fourteen-year-olds to be cut down on the fields while lunatics tried to summon all sorts of demons. Syaoran would have returned to Clow Country and they would have just assumed that he was doing well; there would have been no way for them to know. And he could have died there, just as easily, and neither of them would know. Without Mokona, without Watanuki and the shop, why would they keep track? It made no difference.

But the difference was, Syaoran would have had his parents back. He would not have that one profound regret that had him in tears until his body was too dry to produce any more. Perhaps he might have been treated early, before the illness sank its talons in too deep. Or maybe he would not have fallen ill at all. That one change would be all that was needed to recalibrate his body, so that the sickness never forms. Most of all, they would not have had to watch him helplessly from the sidelines, as the sick consumed him in every way possible. Agony. Misery. Despair. Loss.

It was different, for all that Kurogane reasoned otherwise. A violent death, with the splattering of blood, is quick and finite, and there was nothing to doubt, nothing to deny. With a slow one, like consumption, hope dangled, tantalizing, beckoning to be reached. Until that line is crossed, one never knew how far away it still was. Sometimes the ship had sailed long ago and Fate had already been sealed, but one still never knew, and had no way of finding out until the final day. And there were all these questions of could have's, should have's, all that stretch of time completely wasted. Sometimes wishing for the end to come sooner, just to kill the unbearable suspense. Hating the sufferer for suffering, for not getting on with it. All those days, useless, helpless, except to wait for the end, Fay resorting to praying, Syaoran retching past the point of mere exhaustion, too weak to ask for what he needed. Shriveled to the bone, head bald from the toxic medicine, skin gray and eyes bruised, every joint hurting, every movement painful and dizzying, unrecognizable as the golden-eyed child who defiantly faced off the likes of Fei Wong Reed, slender and lithe but fluid and proud.
"He always seemed young," Fay said absently. "But every year, he feels younger."

"He was," Kurogane agreed.

"He was a good boy. There will be no one like him."

No one. None of the baby-faced fourteen-year-olds in the dojo. Syaoran had that kind of unique spirit that always made him more than he was. Part of the shock was seeing that insuppressible force smear away. He had been the kind of child who would have prevailed from sheer will alone.

There really will be no one else like him.

"He's gone," said Kurogane, "but we carry his memory. Let's not sully it this way, hm?"

Fay looked at him.

"Hm," he agreed.

He received a missive from the front lines, detailing new movements of enemy troops. Needing to sit down and review his maps, he went inside the castle wall to head to his office. Around the corner was where he caught a flicker of shadow, not even human flesh.

It would not have bothered him; there were patrols, and solid objects tend to cast shadows, but something about the winking nature of that flicker gave him pause. Kurogane always trusted his instincts; he had good ones, and they had served him well. One was always vigilant in times of war, and he tucked the missive into his armor before striding down to investigate.

He caught the flicker of shadow again, down the corridor toward the main building. Rather sprightly, for a patrol. Suspicion rising, he went low and quiet, feet making no sound as he approached.

He caught sight of the individual this time. Hooded, clad in dark gray. A ninja, and not one of his. People never learn.

Kurogane first stretched his senses out to detect if this intruder was alone. One must never assume. But the figure moved as if he had no accomplices to support him or cover for him. Kurogane allowed his attention to direct exclusively toward this target. Find out more about him, how he moved and what his weaknesses were. They were far enough away from the Empress and Tsukiyomi that Kurogane could afford a bit of study first.

He was small, Kurogane concluded after a few turns. A little awkward, as if not completely comfortable in his body. Not an experienced ninja, from the looks of it. Something about the set of his shoulders, mostly obscured under the gray cloth, hinted that this one was young, and not a fully-grown man. Rather barbaric, Kurogane thought. Shirasaki always tries to send out ninjas that were more experienced and mature. If they really needed to send a juvenile, they would also send a mentor. Some form of backup.

Ridiculous.

But the figure did not move towards the empress or her sister. He turned to go somewhere else together, and at first Kurogane was confused; where was this person headed?

The answer became clear later when the intruder unerringly found the doorway to the treasury. It was both impressive and disturbing; Shirasaki Castle employed a number of decoy corridors and
doors in order to divert such thieves from the storage chamber. Amaterasu and Tsukiyomi collected many items of great power, locked away to protect them from robbers, and these items were part of what allowed Shirasaki to prevail for so long. Many of them were too dangerous to be used. Others were dangerous if they fell into the wrong hands. Even Kurogane only learned of the room's location after he had saved Tomoyo's life a number of times, and only the general location. He did not know the exact room until after he and Fay returned to Nihon without Syaoran.

He ducked out of sight when the intruder took a brief look around to make sure he was still unnoticed. He heard the sound of lockpicks, and the creaking of the lock. But the room was also magically sealed. Did this person have magic?

It seemed like he did not. After a long time of fiddling with the lock to no avail, he heard a whispered curse. He chanced a look around. The intruder was standing across from the door, hands on his head in dismay.

Bastard has no magic after all.

Seeing no reason to wait, Kurogane lunged forward. He was quiet, but some instinct had the thief turn around. A forearm blocked his first blow, but this one was not trained at all, because Kurogane easily got the second blow in, punching the thief right on the cheek. The impact knocked the boy's head against the door, and his legs folded under him, sending him sprawling on the floor. Kurogane flipped him over and captured both of his wrists, pulling them up the back. The boy cried out.

"What have we here?" Planting his foot firmly on the boy's back to keep him pinned, Kurogane reached up to yank the hood off the boy's head.

A mop of brown hair fluffed from under the cloth. Kurogane dropped the hood and grabbed a firm hold of it, tugging it up. The boy cried out again.

"Inadequate," Kurogane remarked. "Really, I feel quite embarrassed for you. Did you really think it would be this easy?"

The boy gasped, panted, and said nothing.

The hood did not make good rope. Luckily, the boy had a sash. Kurogane shifted so that his foot pinned the arms against the boy's back, a motion that had the boy emit another muffled scream, and yanked at the sash, ignoring the thief's protests, until he had it free. Then he made quick work of tying the wrists together, before grabbing a fistful of that brown hair to pull the boy up. The thief staggered, gasping, and Kurogane spun him around to slam him against the wall.

Out of the shadows emerged a face he had not seen in ten years.

Kurogane froze, which was likely fortunate as the alternative would have been to release his grip. The thief that wore Syaoran's face went on panting, eyes closed. He seemed defeated and resigned.

In fact his build was very much like Syaoran's too, before the boy had taken ill.

Kurogane stared, speechless for a moment.

"What's your name?" he asked.

The boy looked at him, revealing Syaoran's eyes. "As if you care," he growled.

Kurogane tightened his grip on that hair, earning him a wince. "What. Is. Your. Name."
"Syaoran," the boy gasped, totally not understanding. "What's it to you?!"

Syaoran.

**Syaoran is dead.** The same defiance, the same strength, but profound confusion. This Syaoran did not recognize Kurogane at all. He was also the wrong age; he should have been twenty-four by now. And Syaoran had died; Fay and Kurogane had cradled his body after he passed, for hours. The Princess of Clow had wept over his coffin. Where did this one—was it just an enhanced resemblance or… *Is this a clone? Or…*

No. Perhaps Kurogane had gotten smarter over the years without knowing it, but the answer dawned on him surprisingly quickly. Of course. There is a Syaoran in this world. Why should there only be the one? There was more than one Sakura. There was more than one Touya and Yukito. There was more than one Tomoyo. There was probably more than one version of Fay and Kurogane too; they just never met them during their travels.

There was a Syaoran in Nihon.

Ten years and they never thought to look. Though what would they have been looking for? This one would have been four years old when they first returned. And belonged to an enemy faction, apparently.

And now he was trying to steal from Shirasaki Castle.

"What are you doing here?" Kurogane hissed.

For the first time, fear penetrated the boy's countenance. "I can't tell you."

Kurogane pulled, then slammed the boy back into the wall. "Don't make me ask again. I can make your death long and painful."

Syaoran shut his eyes and started trembling. "Do what you need to do."

The same soul. The same *damned* soul. There was that courage, that strength, that determination at the expense of his own self. Kurogane suddenly wanted to yell at him, to scream, *Do you know what it was like, the last ten years, you brat? If you had just listened and thought of your own damn self for once*—but this boy would not understand. This boy did not know Kurogane.

"Where are you from?"

The boy remained stubbornly silent. He was still shaking. He was terrified. From his accent, it sounded like he was from one of the western regions, though Kurogane still could not pinpoint where.

It had been ten years, so Kurogane had to think back to recall what he knew of their own Syaoran, the Syaoran who had perished and left nothing behind but his shriveled corpse. Syaoran was brave, but not without reason. This one might be a bit different, but he doubted the boy's obstinacy was without basis.

"What's going on?" he wagered a guess. "Someone you love is in trouble if you don't do this?"

The boy looked up, eyes wide with amazement. "My mother," he whispered.

His mother.
"What about your mother?" Kurogane pressed, before the surprise could fade enough for the boy to remember to stop answering.

"They have her," Syaoran whispered. "If I don't—" and Kurogane ran out of time. The boy's jaw shut like a trap.

His mother was being used as some kind of leverage. Someone had her. And if Syaoran did not deliver...hm. And his accent was western.

Kuroiyama was out west, sacrificing women to some kind of magical ritual.

"You from Kuroiyama?"

The boy's eyes widened again.

"Goodness," Kurogane exclaimed. "You were never good for any covert operations, I suppose." He yanked the boy off the wall and twisted him to face the front, grabbing a hold of his neck to direct him.

"If you want to see your mother again," he hissed in the boy's ear, "you'll be good now."

Syaoran is a good boy.

"On we go," he stated, shoving at the nape.

Syaoran wanted to see his mother again, for he complied under Kurogane's hand without struggle.
Syaoran of Nihon knew nothing of fighting.

He was apparently just really good at sneaking around. He was not a thief by trade, but he had to sneak around a lot at Kuroiyama Castle. His father had died long ago, and Syaoran never knew him. His mother was a servant at the castle, and was terrified of losing Syaoran, and so she kept him hidden. It was apparently common for people there to do so, for the Emperor there had a predilection for all sorts of dark magic, from eating the flesh of infants to prolong his own life, to sacrificing young maidens to enhance his own powers. Young boys were not spared, for often these children were sent off for hard labor, where they perish from the harsh conditions, or to join the army, where they were cut off from their families and indoctrinated. Those best protected were those hidden from notice, so Syaoran remained hiding in plain sight for years, sneaking outside castle grounds to play and sneaking back in to sleep. He had turned fourteen about a month ago. During this time, his mother sought to find a way to escape. She was not able to do so before her capture.

Kuroiyama was well-equipped to keep captives imprisoned; after all that experience, it would be hard to imagine otherwise. It took a certain kind of talent to get to them, let alone escape with them. Syaoran managed to almost get his mother out, and they had made it to the gates of the castle exterior. Unfortunately, even Syaoran's determination and cleverness was not enough. They were caught. The Prince, impressed with Syaoran's relative abilities, ordered Syaoran to retrieve the Silver Jade Amulet from Shirasaki Castle, figuring if Syaoran did it, all the better, but if the boy failed and was killed in the attempt, no harm done.

Syaoran had apparently been sneaking around Shirasaki Castle for a few days, in order to map out the route to the treasury. The magical seal was the one thing he did not count on.

"He really is the splitting image of him," the princess extended a hand to lift the boy's chin. Syaoran kept his eyes downcast. He was on his knees, his tunic loose, for the sash was still binding his wrists. The side of his face was swelling; he really did not dodge the blow at all.

"He is him, for all intents and purposes," Kurogane folded his arms to physically keep himself contained.

"I'll say," said the princess, and released Syaoran. "Well. What should we do with you?"

Syaoran remained silent. Kurogane could see the tiny tremors at the edges of his shoulders.

"Does Fluorite know?"

"Not yet." Kurogane wanted to prepare Fay first. After they know what the fate of this one would be. Probably a trip to the healing wing, just to be sure…

"I see." Princess Tomoyo frowned. "Well, little one. I can't say I am too pleased with your attempt to take what is rightfully mine. But you are a good son, aren't you? You were forced into this, to protect your mother." She leaned forward and her face softened. "You have suffered. Seems like in any life, you must suffer. I am so sorry, Syaoran. In this case, I think I can afford not to add to it."

It took a moment for the boy to realize what she was saying. He looked up at her as the princess straightened.

"Kurogane, please, undo his bindings."
Kurogane hesitated a split second to debate whether to cut the bindings, as that would ruin the sash permanently, or manually untie them, which would take longer. The boy would need another set of clothes either way, though. He took his sword and sliced through.

"Take him to the healers," the princess went on.

Syaoran brought his arms forward once they were released, but then suddenly pressed his head on the floor.

"Princess...please...you have to let me go. I have to save her—they'll kill her—she's the only person I have in the world. Please. I promise, I won't touch anything here, I won't take anything, but I can't stay here she needs me!"

Syaoran's mother was likely already dead. From the way the Prince of Kuroiyama had simply tossed the boy over to them on this senseless quest, it was likely he had killed Syaoran's mother as soon as Syaoran had left, maybe even before. But if she had been all that this child had, then this hope had been all he had.

Syaoran really was so young. Fourteen years old was...nothing.

"You can't go back," Kurogane inserted before the princess could answer. "But don't worry about your mother. I'll have people look into it."

The boy raised his head in surprise.

The princess gave him a knowing look. "I can't in good conscience let you go," said the princess. "Kurogane tells me you are not trained for combat. You don't know how to defend yourself. Having met you," her eyes became sad, "I don't have the heart to lose you. Kurogane will have professionals look into it. In the meantime, you have struggled hard and suffered much. Go with Kurogane to the healers, and afterwards I'll send you a meal. You must be famished."

At this, Syaoran bowed his head down to the floor again. And again. "Thank you, princess. Thank you, Ninja. Thank you—" and his voice broke as he burst into tears. "Thank you, thank you—"

Hearing the princess mention this, Kurogane realized that the boy must be exhausted. He probably had not eaten in days, likely had not slept either, and was all alone, trying desperately to save his mother, feeling as if there was no one around to help him. The warrior stepped forward and stopped the child before his forehead could start bleeding—he was too late, actually, because a cut had already formed—"Why is that scratch still bleeding?" Fay had asked as Syaoran unwound the bandages. "Must not have applied enough pressure."

"Stop," he snapped, grabbing the disposed sash to dab at the wound. The boy complied, but kept sobbing, breaths shaking and face contorted in a mixture of grief and relief. Kurogane took that small face in his hands. Behind him, the princess withdrew to give them space.

"Thank you," the teen whispered, "thank you, thank you, thank you..." and Kurogane gave in to the impulse and pulled the lad into a hug.

Ten years. There must be a reason for all this.

Ten years.

Kurogane curled over that lithe body and tried very hard not to cry himself.
Fay was writing calligraphy when Kurogane found him to tell him about this new development.

"There's a Syaoran in Nihon Country," Kurogane told him. "One who was born and raised here."

The mage paused for a long time with his pen in the air. He did not look away from the paper. He did not even seem to breathe.

Then he touched his pen back and resumed the strokes as if the previous moment of frozen shock had never happened.

"Is that so?" he inquired levelly.

"Serf of Kuroiyama. Fourteen years old. Mother was a servant there. Currently imprisoned and likely used for what we think might be that ritual I was talking about this morning. Prince forced the boy to try to steal the Silver Jade Amulet from us. I caught him sneaking around the treasury."

"I see."

"He's in the guest quarters." Kurogane frowned. After a moment of silence, he went on, "I thought you might like to see him."

Fay went on writing. "What's the plan for him?"

"What do you mean?"

"He's a serf of Kuroiyama and you caught him trying to steal from us. So what's the plan?"

"I took him to see the Princess," Kurogane admitted. "She doesn't feel the need to punish him. I think we might provide them refuge here."

"I see."

Fay went on writing. Kurogane waited, but when the mage refused to inquire further, he asked, "Aren't you at least curious?"

"No," said Fay, and his tones became ice cold. "How does this matter to me? I do not know this child."

Kurogane frowned. "He is Syaoran."

"No," Fay snapped, and looked at Kurogane for the first time. "Syaoran is dead. Syaoran died a long, agonizing death. You were there. I was there. We were both there. We buried him in Clow Country with Sakura weeping over his grave. I did not imagine this. You really think that some doppelgänger wearing his face will somehow be able to replace him?"

"...they share the same soul, Fay."

"And that makes them the same?" Fay dropped the pen, letting the ink splatter over his words. "All the Tomoyo's were the same? All the Touya's? They all share their souls!"

Kurogane studied the mage, noting the anger in his gaze, the glossy sheen belying the grief his show of temper attempted to mask.

"Our Syaoran is dead," he said softly, "but this one is a Syaoran. One that comes from Nihon, comes from here, belongs here. Belongs to us."
"Belongs to you, you mean," Fay dismissed, picking up his pen again.

Fay was not from Nihon, but Kurogane had hoped that the last ten years would soften him enough to adopt Nihon as his own anyway.

Optimistic. Fay never showed much affection for this world. If he did, he would have worked harder to put wars to rest.

*Fine,* Kurogane thought, turning away. Fay could continue to wallow in the past, but Kurogane saw in this boy a new chance. He was not going continue dwelling on ghosts. Not when there was flesh and blood before him, who needed him.

Syaoran was starving, and by the time Kurogane dropped by, the boy had already finished the entire meal. He had been changed into fresh clothing: a plain, but new tunic and pants. A bruise had darkened on his face; no avoiding that, the healers said. On the whole, though, he looked like all his hurts had been soothed, and the only thing keeping him from falling asleep on his face was—well, based on how he was blinking, there really was not anything keeping him from falling asleep right there.

"My—my lord," the boy managed, and bowed low. Kurogane took the boy by the chin and gently directed him to stand straight. Syaoran's eyelids were starting to stick together so that they did not even blink symmetrically anymore.

The boy was exhausted. He had gone past the limits of his endurance, though he would have pushed on further if he had to. Seemed like all Syaoran's had a habit of never knowing when to quit.

"Guys, guys stop. Guys…I can't see. I can't…"

Syaoran kneeling where he fell, Fay grabbing at his elbow. "Kurorin! He can't walk! We have to carry him—"

Kurogane released that chin. He was not sure what to make of the feeling he got, seeing the boy like this. What was it that made this one appear so young and small? Was it because the boy had suffered from constant malnutrition and did not grow? Or was the other Syaoran the same, and Kurogane just did not know?

When they had met in Tokyo, Kurogane was twenty-five. Syaoran, as the clone, was fourteen. There was a little over ten years between them, and while Kurogane thought of Syaoran as a child, he did not really think of him as a child. Besides, Kurogane himself had been no older than Syaoran when he had lost his own parents, and there was the sense that the boy should be able to handle his own issues…or at least, so he had told himself. One of the ways the clone had impressed Kurogane was the fact that the boy could handle his own issues, because so many other fourteen-year-olds could not. Later, when the seal broke and the original got his soul back, the real Syaoran seemed to be older than fourteen, likely due to having existed for longer than his physical age. He still did not seem like a complete adult, really, given the extra years consisted mainly of him repeating his childhood, but he was not fourteen inside. He had seemed younger, however, when he lost his parents. That desolate sense of being alone in the world. It improved later, when Kurogane and Fay accompanied him on his quest. And then he got sick, and all of that became irrelevant.

Now, Kurogane was in his mid thirties, and there was at least a twenty-year difference between him and this child. Kurogane's peers have children Syaoran's age. And Syaoran appeared so small.

He set a hand on the boy's shoulder and turned him to face away.
"Go to bed," he said. "I'll let you know if I hear any news. You need rest."

He gave the mission to the scouts, using Syaoran's description just in case. Though no one held high hopes, he felt that the boy deserved a genuine effort. Afterwards, he stood upon the high walls, watching the horse gallop away. He thought about that fateful day, when they realized something was seriously wrong.

It probably did not matter when it really started. Likely, the illness manifested long before any symptoms did. The point was they all ignored it, especially Syaoran, who must have realized what this might mean, because he took great pains to hide his growing weakness from his companions. He was good at it too, because Syaoran had that talent, of persevering and enduring past his limits, and if he really set his mind to something, he could pull it off. They had seemed close to fulfilling his wish; puzzle pieces were coming together, and they had landed in a world with enough technology and magic to create bodies. All that was needed was the payment, which should have been easy for the three of them. Fay and Kurogane were already talking about what to do afterwards, with Fay voicing the wish that maybe there might be a way to keep in contact with Syaoran somehow. He was already planning on coming to Nihon with Kurogane. And while Syaoran was eager to return to his princess, there had been something about his statements, his expressions, that suggested he was contemplating helping Kurogane and Shirasaki Castle as well. Kurogane would never have asked that of him, and he probably would not have done it, but the fact that he even was considering was enough.

And then, that day, he tripped and fell. Kurogane had stared, expecting him to get right up, but he watched the boy struggle, his limbs twitch, falter. Syaoran could not get up.

Fay had laughed. "Aw, did that one hurt?"

Princess Tomoyo's ribbon drifted up in the wind, alerting him to her presence.

"You should not be up here," he scolded without looking at her. High the wall might be, it was still exposed.

"Sometimes I need to see the land," the princess replied. "Besides, it's as dangerous for you as it is for me."

Knowing that she had come up for him, Kurogane turned. If he went inside, she would have to as well.

Princess Tomoyo was silent until they got to the courtyard.

"He really is the same," said the princess. "It's mind-blowing."

Kurogane said nothing.

"How did Fay react?"

Kurogane looked up at the palace. "Not well."

"Mm," said the princess. "He was very changed, after."

Fay had never given up hope, even until the end, long when everyone was exhausted and Syaoran was pleading for death. He would have gone on hoping even then, if not for Kurogane.

Fay had never forgiven him for that.

"It's not the same," Kurogane murmured. "He's not the same. He has different memories, different
experiences. All the things we shared, he had no part in."

"He has the same heart," the princess pointed out.

"...He does."

"I am glad," said she. "That our world can be blessed with such a soul...that is a good thing." She looked up at the sky. "He might be the answer to our prayers."

Kurogane looked up as well. "Some of them, anyway."

"Some." Princess Tomoyo laid a hand on Kurogane's arm for a moment, before moving away.

Kuroiyama. What were the odds. There was a Syaoran in Kuroiyama. And then Kuroiyama had sent him right over to them. It could not be clearer if the fates sent the boy over in gift-wrap.

But he did not feel precisely happy. The other Syaoran, whom they had bonded with, invested their hearts in, had died, and his death was painful and heartbreaking and that would never change. The Princess of Clow Country would never marry the love of her life, nor build a family with her soulmate. That can never be fixed.

Yet surely, this was something. Better than that desolate emptiness, of dreams dying, taking hope with them. No shadow or echo of that good, kind boy except in the memories of those doomed to die as well. He was something, this Syaoran of Nihon.

It was something.

Fay was already in bed when Kurogane retired for the night. By all appearances, he was asleep. He curled with his back away from Kurogane's side of the bed. Close, intimate, and yet far away.

Sometimes, Kurogane reflected, he felt more lonely when he was with Fay than he did when he was actually alone. Fay had a way of being present without being approachable, far more thoroughly than Kurogane could enact.

Maybe he should have just brought Syaoran around for Fay to see. The stubborn wizard would have a harder time denying what was right in front of his face.

No. Fay had a talent for denying what was right in front of his face. If nothing else, Syaoran's death had been the most profound example of that.

He dreamed he was standing on the walls of Shirasaki Castle, and Syaoran, in his old traveling garb, cloak over his shoulders and his head exposed, stood next to him as the sky mixed day and night. They were close to fulfilling their errand, and Syaoran was leaning between the gaps of the turrets, kicking one foot against the ground. Mokona was hopping around, but he was present and then he was not, while Syaoran talked about the errand, before switching topics and talking about the wedding. Now they were in Clow Country, and Syaoran's parents were back, and Syaoran was nervous because he was to be styled a prince, in front of all these people who never liked him for his common blood. Though the dream skipped past vital sequences, it still felt so real that when Kurogane woke in the morning, for a moment he was confused, and thought Syaoran had not died, that their quest had been a success. It took a while for the memories to come back, the last ten years, Syaoran's illness, Fay's wild grief.

Syaoran of Nihon was still asleep. He remained asleep even after Kurogane pushed past the handmaidens to check on him personally. Seeing this evidence of the boy's exhaustion made
Kurogane's heart ache.

I'm glad I didn't roughen you up too badly. Glad, too, that he was no longer the Kurogane of more than ten years ago, one who would have killed the child without a second thought.

Syaoran would have been twenty-four. This version was a baby.

Morning consisted, once again, of Kurogane dragging Fay out of bed. Breakfast was the usual modest affair. Later, Kurogane was reading mission reports when the Empress paid him a call.

"Your Majesty," Kurogane instantly knelt.

"At ease," said she. "I heard about our new guest. What a pleasant surprise."

Kurogane rose. "My apologies, Your Majesty. I did not wish to trouble you with such a trivial matter."

"Not at all," she smiled. "The Princess and I went to see him, but he was still sleeping. Poor child."

"Goodness," Kurogane thought. That boy was going to be horrified if he ever knew.

"There's something very interesting about him," the Empress went on.

That could be a good thing or a bad thing.

"Your Majesty?"

"He didn't have magic yesterday," she said. "He does today."

"..." Kurogane would not know, but he supposed Princess Tomoyo had not remarked on his magic the previous day. There were too many other things to worry about.

"What does that mean?"

"Well, it's clear what is happening," said the Empress. "He is dried up. Likely, he had been starving most of the time for most of his life. Yesterday, my sister gave him a good meal, and he also rested for the first time in days. There is the tiniest of sparks, today," she paused, "but he should be much stronger than this. He would be. We just don't know how strong. And given his character, the timing of his arrival, the nature of his person," she turned to him, "I was wondering if you and Fluorite would be willing to train him."

"I was wondering" was really a more polite wording of a command.

But he's a baby. Not just in terms of his age, which Kurogane almost brought up, but then realized it would be futile because they already train fourteen-year-olds, even though he felt increasingly that they should not. There was also the fact that this Syaoran just seemed generally more vulnerable than the other one. The other Syaoran could handle himself, at least until his illness grew so severe that he literally could no longer get up from falling. It was part of what made the other Syaoran seem so mature. This one could not even dodge two punches in a row. Somehow, Kurogane could not imagine sending this one out on any missions, no matter how good he became.

The Empress noticed his silence. "Is something wrong?"

"Not with the idea," Kurogane said hurriedly, because in truth, the suggestion was expected. The boy needed to earn his keep. He would not stay fourteen years old forever, and eventually he needed to contribute to wherever he was staying. "I'll..." but he could not say it. "He's not exactly the
The Empress studied him for a while. "You do not see potential in him?"

"I do." Too much. But all at once, it was important not to have the Empress considering this Syaoran as one of her warriors. "He's..." he was about to say 'young', but that would not work. "Last time, he fell ill. They...they said it was a problem inside him. That it started with him."

_Creeping sickness_, it was called in the world they had been in. Something fundamentally wrong with the body itself, they had said. In the early stages, there was hope, but in the later stages, nothing, no magic, no medicine, could stop its progress. Consumption in the ultimate form, far more so than his mother's affliction, because while tuberculosis shriveled a person away, this one literally consumed, ate at tissues, a horrible invasion of malignant flesh and blood that destroyed everything in its path.

"I don't want to waste efforts training him if he is to meet the same end," Kurogane said quietly.

The Empress turned away. "And yet you devoted scouts to find his mother."

That...did poke a hole in his reasoning.

"I know what it is," said the Empress. "You don't want to watch him die again. More than that, you don't want to have a hand in his death. That makes sense."

Kurogane knelt on one knee. Sometimes, the Empress and the Princess still surprise him with their insightfulness. "Your Majesty. I am unworthy."

"No. You are not at fault. The heart does what it wants. We would hardly be human beings, if we did not wish to protect each other." She turned back to him. "He is young, and new to our kingdom. If and when the time comes, it will be his decision. Not yours, and not even mine. But I think you and Fluorite should train him anyway. In times such as these, having no skill is a gross disadvantage."

Kurogane bowed low. "Yes, Your Majesty."

"At ease," the Empress said again, and Kurogane felt brave enough to rise. She lifted a hand and placed it on his shoulder.

"You are my best man," she said to him. "You always were. You are valuable to me and to Tomoyo. Those who are dear to you are also dear to us."

Kind words. Probably even heartfelt. Kurogane bowed his head.

"My life is yours, Your Majesty. Yours and Her Highness's."

The Empress drew back without another word.

After she left, Kurogane covered his eyes and tried to figure out how to tell this to Fay.
Syaoran of Nihon had a sweetness to him that Syaoran Tsubasa lacked. He had a fawn-like quality to his expressions and his mannerisms, a softness to his eyes now that he no longer felt threatened, and a way of speaking that sounded more like Sakura than the Syaoran Kurogane once knew. He was awed by the princess' beauty, staring in stunned amazement, but was articulate enough when this was pointed out that his answer smoothed it all over with a heartfelt charm that knocked even Kurogane off-guard. He regarded Shirasaki Castle with genuine wonder, and his answers to questions were so entirely innocent, even Princess Tomoyo felt that he would do better to be off the field this time around.

"Perhaps," she said to the Empress, "he does not know combat because he is not meant for the violence of battle. Though they share the same soul, each incarnation is still different in some way, and serves a different purpose." Maybe a healer instead, she suggested, especially given that Tsubasa had perished for want of one.

The only down side is that he could not read.

"I'm sure Fay would be willing to handle that," said the princess with a smile.

Not quite. Fay was not pleased to learn that he had been looped into training the boy in the first place.

"Did you suggest me?" he demanded when Kurogane first informed him.

"Of course not," Kurogane glared. "They associate the two of us with him."

Fay inhaled and exhaled, appearing to suppress a burst of temper.

"You should at least meet him."

"Orders from on high," Fay drawled. "How can I refuse?"

Syaoran, of course, was thankful to even be alive, and greeted Fay with all the respect one delivered to a savior. The boy's mannerisms were a little feminine, probably because he had been raised by his mother, and there was a shyness to him that made him seem very different from the one Fay and Kurogane knew.

Fay regarded him in silence for a long time. The teen grew anxious as the seconds ticked by. He did not understand Fay's blank expression; he did not know that to Fay, and indeed, to everyone he had met so far, he was a living ghost.

Fay did not enlighten him.

"Can you read, boy?"

The child, dismayed, stammered, "N-no, my lord."

"You want to learn?"

The boy looked up timidly. "I—I'd like to."

"You'd like to," Fay enunciated flatly. "Lots of people would. Reading is not just the matter of wanting to. You need to put in the effort." He raised his chin. "I don't know if you're the type,
Discouraged, Syaoran ducked his head. "My one wish is to be of service to Her Majesty and Her Highness."

"Your one wish," Fay narrowed his eyes.

"Fay," Kurogane inserted.

"You're very good at making people like you, aren't you?" the mage ignored him. "You have a sweet tongue. That gets you places, doesn't it?"

"Fay!" Kurogane snapped, wondering when he became the nice one between the two of them.

"What?" Fay looked at him, his voice full of poison. "I'm just getting to know our newest guest."

"If you have a problem," Kurogane snarled, "Come directly to me. Don't take it out on the boy."

"Who says I have a problem?" Fay turned back to Syaoran. "Her Majesty commands me to teach you how to read. I will do so, but that doesn't mean you will learn. That part is up to you. If you fail, that is not my problem, and you don't come crawling back to me, whining about how it's unfair. Understand?"

Syaoran's countenance was distressed and bewildered. The boy bowed, opening his mouth to acquiesce and probably attempt to appease, but Fay whirled around and strode past Kurogane without looking back.

Silence descended in his wake.

The boy bowed his head. "I'm sorry. I...I don't know what I did wrong."

Kurogane reached out. Touched the boy's face. Held that head in his hands. He had not touched their own Syaoran that much, even when he was alive. It was hard to say if this one felt exactly the same. Probably. He looked it.

"You have nothing to do with it," he assured him. "Just...be yourself. All will be well." He paused. "Fay talks a tough talk, but he would never hurt you. He's just been...grieving, for many many years. It's not easy for him to let go of that hurt."

Syaoran looked at him, wide-eyed. Spirits, his eyes were exactly the same.

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

Start with not dying.

"Don't worry about it," Kurogane let him go.

Fay was in bed by the time Kurogane retired. Instead of leaving him be, Kurogane jabbed a hard finger in his ribs.

"We need to talk."

Fay did not react at all, which was a giveaway in itself. Kurogane sat down on his side of the bed.

"He's not trying to replace him."
Fay said nothing.

"He's the closest we will get, though. Do you really want to throw him away?"

Still stubborn silence.

Kurogane longed for the days when Fay was the talkative one. Now he felt the obligation to continue speaking when all he wanted to do was say nothing. But saying nothing was now Fay's ammunition, and Kurogane only had words left to him.

"There is a Syaoran of Nihon." The idea was still amazing. "There are probably many other Syaoran's we haven't met. Kept going to their world at the wrong time, missing him, or going to the wrong part of the world. There are probably other Fay D. Fluorite's, other Kurogane's. In some worlds, Syaoran might have died long ago, for one reason or another. In some worlds, we might have even murdered him, or he could have killed us. What's so bad about this one? Why can't we have this one?"

"Fine," Fay spat. "You can have him."

"Fay." Kurogane sighed.

If only wishing were enough.

"I know you're angry with me," he said quietly. "I know you've been angry. I gave up on him, and you blame me. I didn't tell him to keep going. I didn't tell him to hold on. That's fine. Blame me. But don't take it out on the kid. This Syaoran would have been here no matter what had happened. 'Nothing is a coincidence', and at age fourteen he comes flying into our arms. Ten years, Fay. Isn't that long enough?"

"I don't blame you," Fay said dully. "It was my fault he left."

Kurogane sighed. He had said this before, when Kurogane first questioned why Fay seemed to be punishing him again, but it made no sense. Fay had been by Syaoran's side even more than Kurogane had. Kurogane frequently could not stand to be in the same room as the boy and had to go out, leaving Fay all by himself. Kurogane would have to drag Fay away to feed him. Fay had done everything, from reassurance and comfort, to helping him turn on the bed, to changing and cleaning him, when Syaoran was too weak and stiff to move anymore. Through those horrible weeks, Fay had to stay cheerful and optimistic for the boy, staying with Syaoran through the long nights. When Syaoran, drugged and glassy-eyed with delirium, called for his mother and his father, Fay pretended to be both. He made up stories when Syaoran was too short of breath to speak, applied magic to ease his nausea, rocked him in his arms to soothe the pain. There was not a single additional thing Fay could have done.

"We tried everything," he said to the mage. "You tried everything." Tried donating magic. Tried casting focal stasis spells. Nothing, however, could fix a body that was destroying itself on its own. "You were so exhausted by the end, I was afraid you would leave as well."

Fay said nothing.

"We can't change what happened," Kurogane went on. "And we're not trying to replace him with this one. Helping him won't make what happened to that Syaoran alright. But he is Syaoran where it counts and we have a chance to help him this time. Maybe even catch the illness, if he's destined to get it again, when there's still time, now that we know what to expect."

"You go do that. I'm tired."
Kurogane sighed. Sometimes Fay could be impossible.

News came a couple of days later: Syaoran's mother had long been dead, as expected. Her life was forfeit as soon as the two of them had been caught. The prince simply thought it would be amusing to send the boy on a meaningless errand. Syaoran had that determined look about him, that willingness to do whatever it took, combined with the innocent, helpless gullibility that all truly helpless beings had.

Telling the boy was painful. Syaoran turned very white. He made a choked-off sound, face expressionless, and then swayed dangerously. Kurogane caught him when he swooned. He cradled the boy and touched the young face, shaking him to rouse him. Syaoran blinked, lost, before tears streamed. He did not make a sound.

Kurogane cradled him close.

"It's going to be alright. Your mother would want you to be well. She sent me to you—" which could very well be true, "and showed me how to find you. You're safe now. We'll take care of you. It is what she always hoped for. And you did everything you could to save her. This is not your fault."

Syaoran turned away from him. At first, Kurogane thought he was rejecting him, but the boy heaved. He reached up, but was still too weak from his swoon to rise out of Kurogane's arms. The next heave overtook him and he vomited onto the floor.

The handmaidens cleaned up the mess while Kurogane sat on the floor against the wall, the boy leaning against him, hiccuping. One of the servants handed Syaoran a cup of water, which the teen drank. His skin was covered with a sheen of cold sweat, and he shivered a little from shock. Kurogane ran his fingers through the damp brown locks. He folded the boy's head to his shoulder.

Syaoran began sobbing.

"You're alright," Kurogane told him, though he knew that such words were not really comforting. Syaoran was not really listening anyway.

He stayed with the boy until Syaoran was completely devoid of strength. He deposited the boy on the bed and kept his hand over the teen's forehead until Syaoran fell asleep.

He thought of his own mother, that horrible night when everything went wrong with his life.

The real Syaoran, looking at him in calm acceptance, wearing that shirt with the symbol that had been branded into Kurogane's brain, knowing that Kurogane could execute him without another word for wearing the clothes of a man who had imprisoned him for seven long years.

You're a bit more weepy than the other one, Kurogane thought. Though then again, he probably did all his crying when we couldn't see him.

Men were not very disposed to crying, and one thing Kurogane used to admire about Tsubasa was how he could face hardship without faltering, without losing his composure. Over the years, though, he felt more and more that he had only seen the side Tsubasa wanted him to see, and as his own life progressed forward and he saw the development of children in Syaoran's wake, he wished more and more that he had allowed Syaoran to be weaker, if only a few times, when he truly needed it. Slow deaths were different. It was almost as if Fate were toying with them with what was to come. Taking the choice out of their hands, and yet giving them time to choose. And no matter how much forewarning was given, it still feels like too little time. If only Syaoran had taken years to die instead
of weeks—Kurogane would have been a wiser man, and as time went on there were more and more
things he wished he had said, had done. He never held Syaoran, when he was ill, not until the boy
could not feel him anymore. Fay did all the mothering, because Kurogane was not that kind of man.
It felt awkward, at the time. He wished he did, as the years passed. He had held Fay fine, and Fay
had held him back. He saw others lose their children to brain fever, how they all wished they had not
pushed so hard, that their children could have been less excellent, because death stops everything in
its tracks. Parents prefer mediocre children to dead ones: no matter how prestigious, a dead child was
no accomplishment. He should have told Syaoran that, that his parents would not have wanted him
to die just to bring them back to life. Parents would prefer the other way around, because children
were hope, children were the future—but at the time, Kurogane had a limited understanding of this
concept. He had approved of Syaoran's steadfast determination, his honor and integrity, and could
not see the bigger picture: the child was killing himself. If Tsubasa had accepted his parents' fate, he
could have been with the princess during the last moments of his life. He might not have even gotten
sick in the first place.

He missed Syaoran. More than Fay did, sometimes. Fay had done all he could possibly do.
Kurogane had fled, hidden himself, avoided the situation, argued that he was too manly for such
things. And now there were all these things he wanted to say, but Syaoran had been dead for ten
years.

"Syaoran," he told the sleeping little one, "the best thing you can do for your mother is to stay well."

Slow deaths were different. There was no glory, no fighting chance, no way to really fight. All it
consisted of was endurance, as one's pride is stripped away, and at the end when the battle is lost, it
is not a hero's body that is delivered home, but a husk of a thing, barely recognizable as human. The
bravest person he had ever known, reduced to an incoherent mass of flesh, all achievements in his
life rendered irrelevant. Though Kurogane held on to the visage of Tsubasa when he stood tall and
proud, his memories of that boy would forever be linked with his final days.

"Stay healthy and well," he bade Syaoran of Nihon.

He received news of new movements of Kurenjo Kingdom. It might warrant a personal touch, but
for now he delegated this to one of the other ninjas, because he might have to go personally to tackle
Kuroiyama. Fay submitted a report of three kinds of demons whose rituals fit the descriptions
provided by the scouts. One was a demon of the night, that could bend shadows to do his bidding,
apty named Kurokage. He could cast the entire land in darkness and cover the moon so everyone
was blind. He, of course, could still see in the dark, as could what humans he selects. Torches,
firelight, lightning, none of these could break the blindness. Anywhere his shadow touches opens
into his domain. His only weakness was the sun. It would be truly problematic if he were summoned,
but Kurogane could not see him being a good choice; how would Kuroiyama control him? Then
there was the White-Haired Witch. She was a demoness that thrived in bloodshed. The more blood
spilt, the stronger her power. She could conceivably agree to some kind of arrangement, and use her
own power to feed soldiers, at least for a time. Then there was the Fire Demon King.

That one was very bad, but also difficult to summon.

"How far along is the ritual?"

"Twenty days, my lord."

The different demons had different criteria to their summoning. Kurokage required eighty-one days
of daily sacrifices. The White-Haired Witch required ninety-nine total sacrifices plus a substantial
offering of magic. The Fire Demon King needed a specific type of person to be sacrificed through burning;
someone whose heart is as pure as firelight, and whose flesh burns white smoke.

"What are the neighbors doing?"

"They've fought two campaigns so far. Defeated, with rapid withdrawals. Captives are used as sacrifices."

"Which ones were involved?"

"Jasmine Castle and Rhineheart."

Those two were close. Jasmine was a little kingdom, but Rhineheart was bigger.

The Empress was not keen on making any alliances for this, however she agreed with Kurogane that they needed to monitor the situation.

"I would prefer to know which demon we are dealing with," she told him. "The White-Haired Witch, we can leave alone. The Fire Demon King sounds like a rather far-fetched goal. If it is Kurokage the Black Shadow, we may need to attempt aborting the ritual. Though the sun is within my domain, I cannot keep it in the sky indefinitely."

Would that they could. He hated having to sleep.

"I will speak with the foreign ministers," she went on. "If it comes to it, we will participate in an alliance, but I do not want to launch any campaigns against Kuroiyama on our own."

---

Fay started training Syaoran almost immediately after the boy learned about his mother. Kurogane would have waited, but the boy went along without complaint. He had a lot to catch up on; the old Syaoran had been very well-educated, with a keen knowledge of history, arts, as well as martial warfare. This one was a serf in essentially all aspects. He was ignorant in almost everything, and given his age, it was already difficult for him to learn in the first place, without the addition of losing his mother.

Fay had a lot to say about it over supper.

"He's an idiot."

"He's not an idiot. He never had a chance to learn, hiding and sneaking around that joke of a castle."

"I didn't say it was his fault. An idiot is still an idiot, regardless of the cause. Stupid mother, stupid teachers, a whack to the head. Exalted arcane scholars come begging for me to train them and instead I get this piece of trash. This is stupid; I didn't even have to teach Tsubasa."

"Tsubasa knew even more than you about certain things."

"Tsubasa is far better than this inferior version," Fay spat venomously. "It figures that we're always left with inferior versions. Garbage. Bah."

"Fine, he's garbage," Kurogane threw his mug on the floor. "We'll send him back to Kuroiyama, how's that? He's a piece of garbage, right? Or even better, how about we dispose of him ourselves? You're a fancy mage, you know a lot of spells meant to destroy! Why don't we go over there right now"—he rose and grabbed Fay by the arm—"you can kill him yourself! Will that satisfy you?"

"Let go of me!" Fay threw him off. He then looked away, unable to meet Kurogane's eyes.
Kurogane took a few deep breaths. "We didn't get a perfect replica. He wouldn't understand all your jokes. He can't read, he can't fight, he can't do magic. The only person who gave a damn about him was killed over a week ago. There is no one to care about him, Fay! Do you realize that the only reason he's alive right now is because of us? You really think Amaterasu and Tsukiyomi are so generous that they would just keep him around when he's completely useless to us?"

"Amaterasu and Tsukiyomi are the softest sovereigns I have ever come across."

"Amaterasu and Tsukiyomi would have allowed him to go back to Kuroiyama to try to rescue his doomed mother because there's no reason to devout our own scouts to a dead woman who's not even one of us. He would have begged and they would have respected his courage and integrity and as they sent him off to his death they would have muttered what a pity, if only he had a talent that would be worth keeping him for, and even then they wouldn't have tried all that hard. How many times did you and I allow Syaoran to make the wrong decision because we felt it was his to make? You think the Empress and the Princess would somehow care more than us? The other day the Empress said this to me: 'Those who are dear to you are also dear to us'. What do you think would happen if you and I decided to abandon him?"

Fay was silent.

"He has no one," Kurogane spat, "and it's true, he doesn't have what it takes to take care of himself. He is just like Tsubasa was, except far less lucky. So, go ahead, quit, tell yourself that you are doing Syaoran right by throwing away the only thing we have of him. He had only died thinking he had no one in the world, just like this one. This one can't cross dimensions to find his parents. This one wasn't given a choice."

Fay rose abruptly, leaving the table and then the room.

Kurogane did not follow. He was going to finish the supper; no way was he going to let Fay's stubbornness ruin his meal.

Instead of going to bed, he went to check on Syaoran. The boy was up, already practicing his letters. His face lit up when he saw Kurogane, and he came over to give the ninja a hug—that sort of behavior should probably be curbed at some point, because as much as Kurogane had mellowed since his earlier days, he did have to maintain some appearances. Not to mention, if Syaoran kept this up, people were going to start thinking he was too girlish. He had no idea how to address this though, and hugged the boy back partially because he needed as much comfort as the child did.

"Doing alright?" he inquired as he let go.

"I'm fine," Syaoran smiled in a self-deprecating way, and bowed his head down.

"Fay wasn't too strict with you, I hope?"

Syaoran's smile became uneasy. "I've never been a student before. I know he's had better and is very annoyed...but I'll work hard and do my best." He lowered his eyes.

Shy, like a little maiden. He would not have had a father figure, so he did not know how to behave like a man. This Syaoran really had basically everything going against him.

He needs to be trained. Someone was going to take advantage of him if he continues to be this helpless. Perhaps after he learns a few letters. The boy had, for all intents and purposes, just lost his mother. His intimacy with Kurogane was also reasonable in light of that, considering that Kurogane was the one approachable friend the boy recognized in this new place.
"You're doing just fine," he assured him. "I know it's difficult. We all do. Fay understands as well. He's..." he sighed.

"It's fine, really," Syaoran summoned another smile. "I know I'm not one of the best."

Kurogane reached out to ruffle the boy's head. _No, you don't understand._ Cannot understand. _You're better than you know._

The boy did not believe him, but, there was no helping that for now.

"I'm sorry about your mother."

"You did what you could."

"You're not alone, alright? You can come to me for anything."

Syaoran looked up, eyes growing glossy. "Sometimes...I wonder if—if there's been a mistake..."

"I know."

_"It's his blood," _they had said, clad in their white and blue robes. Syaoran was in a stiff gown, sitting on the bed with his arms around his knees, face pale and eyes bruised, looking twice as sick as he did when he first collapsed. _"The sickness is in his blood...it's consuming the tissues that produce blood...profound anemia...His numbers have dropped slowly over the course of many weeks, but he should have started feeling symptoms a long time ago. People have died from these numbers..." _Then they showed an image of Syaoran's body that showed the illness _everywhere._ Syaoran, listening with calm acceptance while Fay peppered the healers with question after question, unable to believe that Fate could throw such a curve in their path, when they were so close to achieving all their dreams.

Syaoran's face contorted, despite his best efforts. "She didn't deserve this," he whimpered.

"I know."

He wiped at his face as the tears flowed down. "I wish she were here."

The boy then reached over. Kurogane accepted him, enfolding the boy in close hug.

"You'll be just fine," he promised.
Trickling Truths

A few days later, Kurogane had to leave Shirasaki Castle with Princess Tomoyo to go to a wedding along with several of her envoys and other ninjas. The wedding symbolized the alliance of the Red Lotus and Momonoki kingdoms. The Empress, concerned about Kuroiyama, elected to send her sister instead, though either way Kurogane would have had to go. He kept Fay behind, because the two of them had not spoken to each other since the argument, and he did not anticipate any foulplay on this trip. Fay would have been bored out his mind, while Kurogane would have to deal with the awkward cold shoulder.

Honestly, the stuff he put up with from that mage.

"The next few years should be quite interesting," said Princess Tomoyo on the way. "Red Lotus has some fertile soil, while Momonoki manufactures some of the best weapons in all of Nihon. Their warriors know how to use them, and very well. With one supplying, and one defending, it is a very smart match. Princess Chiharu is also a very strong dreamseer. She is a girl of good character and poise. Prince Akira is bit of a dunce, but if he listens to his new bride, she should be able to keep him out of trouble." And us out of trouble, she meant, as Prince Akira was the heir apparent to the throne of Momonoki.

"Would he listen to his bride?"

"Hard to say," Princess Tomoyo admitted. "They're a very militant kingdom, with militant egos. He might turn out to be the proud sort. If he does not, this alliance would falter rather quickly."

"Ah."

It took about three days to get to Momonoki; the trip would have been shorter were it not for the princess' entourage. The wedding was actually far more awkward than Kurogane anticipated, mostly because one of the guests, the Emperor of Ishihebi, used to be Princess Tomoyo's suitor. He happened to be a good friend of Momonoki, and had come to congratulate the new couple. Neither he nor Princess Tomoyo knew that the other was going to be there.

"You are looking beautiful, as always, Princess," the Emperor inclined his head. "How is the Empress?"

"She is well, thank you."

"Still keeping her little sister close, I see."

Princess Tomoyo managed a smile. "I do as my Empress commands."

Actually, Princess Tomoyo was the one who rejected the emperor, on the grounds that he was a suave, talented, accomplished sorcerer who was also totally full of himself. Kurogane had to approve; he would not treat Princess Tomoyo appropriately, and no matter how smart the match was, it would have been a waste to marry her off to someone like him. Amaterasu was not eager to dispose of Tsukiyomi, and was willing to turn him down to keep her close, as the Emperor perceived. Granted, Princess Tomoyo was getting older, far older than most brides. The Empress was also unmarried, and this was generating some concern among her vassals regarding the royal line. If the princess were to wait too long, there would be a succession crisis.

Not Kurogane's problem, thankfully.
Princess Tomoyo remained rather discomfited for most of the stay. They had arrived the evening before the wedding and were shown to guest quarters; the wedding ceremony itself took place an hour before noon, followed by a long reception. Princess Chiharu, decked in rich red with gold embroidery, wore a lotus headdress to represent her kingdom of origin. She looked rather pale, but this was actually not unusual in such occasions. During the reception, Princess Tomoyo went, as one of the honored female guests, to attend to the new bride. Kurogane, as no one of importance in foreign relations, sat with the princess' entourage. He did not eat or drink; he never ate or drank at such occasions. Bad enough that Princess Tomoyo had to drink in toast for ceremony's sake.

Afterwards, Princess Tomoyo paid her respects to their hosts, announced that they had no need for further accommodation, and directed Kurogane and the rest of her assembly to the carriage.

"How is that boy doing?" she suddenly asked.

"That boy?" Kurogane did not follow at first.

"Princess Chiharu told me something. Syaoran's soul is pure. If he is sacrificed properly, he can summon the Fire Demon King."


"But…" he trailed, confused and unprepared for this revelation, "Your Highness, if Kuroiyama is really trying to summon the Fire Demon King… it doesn't make sense. Syaoran has been under their noses for the last fourteen years. Their prince had deliberately let him go."

"Their prince is an idiot, but the main reason is likely because they had no way of knowing. Syaoran's magic did not reveal itself until he came to Shirasaki. How is his training coming along?"

"…I don't know. He's very behind, Fay is starting with teaching him to write—"

"He will need to be protected, then, if he cannot protect himself. Shirasaki Castle is not safe for him."

"…Would they actually—"

"She saw them coming to Shirasaki Castle to find him. I don't know when or how." The princess frowned. "Would that I still have my yumemi, but the Fates show us only what we're meant to know, no more and no less. I don't know when he should leave, but I know he can't stay long."

Dismayed, Kurogane tried to think of a way out of this. "We deal with covert assassins all the time. I'll place him under protection."

"It won't be enough. He cannot be physically within Shirasaki."

*But…* "Where should he go?"

"I have a few ideas, but I need to discuss this with the Empress. He can't stay away indefinitely; he has to come back if he is to fulfill his destiny."

"…What destiny?"

"He's the key to bringing peace to the land." the princess paused, "either through favorable means, or through complete, total destruction. He does this through Shirasaki. Princess Chiharu already promised her father's fields, and will persuade her husband to lend his support to Shirasaki should we need it. If he reaches his full potential, he will bring harmony and prosperity to all, but if he is in Shirasaki while he is this vulnerable, there will be no one to fight a war. Wherever he goes needs to
help him fulfill this potential. Spirits bless the good Princess Chiharu. She has done us a great
service."

Kurogane was still wrapping his mind around this new development; he must be getting old, because
he was having trouble coming to terms with what the princess was telling him.

"Are we sure Princess Chiharu is correct?" Or that she was not lying?

"She is a good girl," said Princess Tomoyo, "and the fear I saw in her eyes is real. We cannot let
Syaoran fall prey to Kuroiyama."

Princess Tomoyo may not be a dreamseer anymore, but she retained enough wisdom that her
confidence eliminated any doubt.

Damn.

"Someone would need to go with him…"

"Of course," the princess looked at Kurogane. "You and Fluorite. I trust this should not be a
problem?"

Oh dear. Fay was going to love this one.

Unfortunately—or fortunately, depending on the perspective, upon their return to Shirasaki, the
Empress had an urgent task for Kurogane.

"Kurenjo has dared to attack the perimeter," she told him. "I want you to handle this."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

His second-in-command, who had gone to Kurenjo to investigate the bizarre activities, had already
sent a report in while Kurogane was protecting Princess Tomoyo at Momonoki. The Emperor of
Kurenjo had been getting ideas for a while, but he was not a new sovereign and Shirasaki had
assumed he would at least follow his usual pattern so long as nothing changed dramatically about
their situation. Lately, though, he had taken a new concubine—he was apparently inspiring him
towards war.

War it is, then.

Princess Tomoyo's party had arrived in the evening, but Kurogane meant to set out that very night,
so as to give Kurenjo as little forewarning as possible. He met with the other senior warriors to notify
them of this and have them rally the troops. After that, he went to his own quarters to pack and also
collect Fay; he was not sure if Fay was angry enough with him to decide to skip this campaign, but
he did not want to throw the gauntlet by not even asking.

The mage was not in the rooms, however. The servants had no idea where he was.

"Perhaps with that new boy?" one of them suggested. "He's usually there, these past few days."

…Fair enough. He headed over to Syaoran's room, where he found the boy hard at work, writing.
Once again, the teen beamed at the sight of him.

"My lord!" he exclaimed, rising instantly from where he had been sitting, and then came to
Kurogane for a hug.
We really need to address this. It was not appropriate, for one: Syaoran was a commoner, while Kurogane was actually a noble. Syaoran should be bowing—but Kurogane did not have time to address this in the gentle manner he preferred.

"Is Fay here?" he asked, hugging the boy quickly and rubbing the back of his head. A thick lock of brown hair came right off with his hand.

"No," Syaoran drew back. "You are looking for him?"

Kurogane was still staring at the chunk of hair in his hand, which Syaoran was not facing to see. He closed his fist to hide it.

"Turn around for me, for a second."

Syaoran gave him a perplexed look, but turned when Kurogane placed his free hand on the boy's shoulder and pushed. On the back of the boy's head was a big white patch of scalp, corresponding to where his hair had just fallen out. Kurogane looked at it, and then ran his hand over the rest of the boy's hair.

A strand came through one runthrough, but nothing like the handful he had in his hand. He ran his fingers through again. This time nothing came out.

He turned the boy back around. "How are you feeling, Syaoran?"

"…Huh?"

"You feeling alright? You look weary." "I'm fine."

"Are you feeling tired?" Kurogane asked. "Dizzy? Any headaches?"

"Guys, guys stop. Guys…I can't see. I can't…"

"Vision blacking out?" Kurogane added for good measure.

Syaoran's eyes were very wide. "No…"

Kurogane turned him around again to look at that bald patch.

"…Wh-what's wrong?"

"Hm," Kurogane kept his voice calm. He was a little impressed by how quiet and steady his voice was, as his heart was starting to race. "Come with me, Syaoran." Fay and packing could wait. Early night departure, middle of the night, same difference.

The healer on duty, an old wizened man with a long fuzzy gray beard, was quick and efficient in his exam. He was one of the silent ones and did not even ask any questions at first. He took a look at that bald patch of scalp, felt the boy's wrists, looked at his tongue and inside his mouth, and felt along his jaw and neck. Afterwards, he stood back and regarded the boy for a moment.

"Getting yelled at a lot lately?"

"Um…" Syaoran's posture hunched over.

"Who's been yelling at you?"

You're kidding, Kurogane thought, as the boy visibly started to sweat.
"Um…no one."

"Hm," the healer looked up at Kurogane, before looking back at the boy. "Well. Either someone is yelling at you or someone is beating you. I don't see any bruises. You try to stay away from this no one and you'll be just fine."

He found Fay in the courtroom with Amaterasu and Tsukiyomi.

"Kurogane," the Empress greeted, "excellent timing. My sister has explained to me the situation. You and Fay may go address Kurenjo. Princess Tomoyo will make arrangements for when you return, after which the two of you will escort our guest to the designated location. We will inform you of where it is upon your return."

Fay turned to him, face impassive. Kurogane looked at him, managed not to blow up at him right there, and instead bowed to his mistresses in salute.

"Your wish is my command, Empress. Fay, we are leaving tonight."

"Very good," said Princess Tomoyo. "May the spirits guide you, Kurogane, Fay."

He packed. He helped Fay pack. By the time they were done, the sun had long set. Kurogane and Fay joined the troops, with Fay casting luminescence to help light the way. They set forth into the dark with the moon shining bright overhead. Neither of them spoke.

They went at a fast pace and reached Kurenjo before sunrise. Fay led the charge, shooting fire up the walls. Under the cover of dark, their attack was a surprise. His own sword hungered for blood, and he knew they had them right from the start.

Fay was always a vision in battle. Slender and graceful, watching him always felt like watching a sophisticated dance, with swirling lights of spells all around him. It was always satisfying to see how enemies underestimate him, how his unassuming appearance fools them into thinking he would be easy prey. Fay was powerful, gloriously powerful, and if nothing else, Kurogane appreciated powerful things.

They carved their way into Kurenjo Castle, past the poor excuse of a moat, through the heavy gates. Within, the buildings were already ablaze.

"Fan out," Kurogane ordered his men. "That Emperor is not likely to sit still for us. Make sure he doesn't escape. And make sure that wench of his doesn't escape either."

Within the castle, it was actually a little less straightforward; some of the figures running about were handmaidens, children, people Kurogane had no interest in slaying. But Kurenjo's morale was low, and many of the cowardly warriors fell back instead of pressing against their enemies. It was not long before the Empress-consort was brought before him; she was still clad in her nightgown, hair falling out of the ties.

She was not the concubine he was interested in.

"Where is that bastard Emperor?" he demanded.

She did not know. Kurogane waved her away; he did not care what happened to her. "Take her somewhere where she won't cause trouble!"

When the sun rose, dawn painted the sky as red as the blood soaking into the ground. Kurenjo was
in flames, and the smoke had Kurogane pulling his men out before they could capture the Emperor. He debated whether he wanted to keep the gates locked so that the Emperor would be trapped inside, but decided that this was probably enough. They were not planning on killing the idiot, just thoroughly scaring him by showing what they could do to him. Best not sully Amaterasu’s name; no one would bat an eyelash to Shirasaki making a statement after an offense, but if the neighboring kingdoms feel that Shirasaki is trying to expand, things could get ugly quickly. For all that Kurenjo was annoying, keeping its Emperor was strategically important.

He had his troops cross the moat. By then, the sun was high enough that the sky was bright blue, save for where the smoke rose. Kurogane turned to face the high walls, bloodied sword raised.

"Hear, hear, Kurenjo!" he shouted, "This is Shirasaki! Know this: strike at us, and we shall strike back a hundred times more! If you ever dare to insult us again, we will wipe you from the map!"

Fay was at his side, robes a little sooty but otherwise clean. Kurenjo continued to burn. The survivors would be able to control the fire eventually, but it was satisfying to watch the fruits of their labor. Kurogane lowered his sword. One of the junior warriors ran up to hand him a clean cloth. He leisurely wiped the blood off the blade, then sheathed it. He turned around.

"Good work, men," he declared. "Let's get out of here."

The way back was slower. It was well after midnight when they arrived back at Shirasaki. Fay wordlessly went to their quarters to bathe and change. Kurogane went first to his office to check for any updates while he was away. By the time he joined Fay, the mage was already in bed.

Kurogane stared at his figure for a while. The thrill of battle had died down, leaving him feeling empty. Fay did not enjoy battle. For all his beauty in combat, the mage had seen and caused too much destruction far too easily to take pride in it. Not for the first time, Kurogane wondered if it had really been a good idea for Fay to come to Nihon. He did not care for the country. He did not care about its people. The only reason he allowed himself to be subject to Amaterasu and Tsukiyomi was because of Kurogane, but the last ten years showed that even Kurogane was not enough to make Fay happy. He had brought a mage who hated war to a land ravaged by it. It seemed cruel. It felt cruel to Kurogane as well. His life had been so full of violence. He had seen worlds where people were truly happy and harmonious, and it made his home a disappointment in every turn. If not for Princess Tomoyo, Kurogane would have been done with all this as well.

He lied down on his side of the bed. He turned his face away from Fay. He closed his eyes. He dreamed.

Syaoran, head bald from hair loss, no eyebrows, no eyelashes. He was wearing a knitted hat because his head was cold. But he was smiling; the treatment was working. He just had to deal with the nausea for a little while, a few more doses of medication, and then the next step would be recovery. Would the princess still like him without hair? Kurogane whacked him on the head. Don’t be an idiot, he said to the boy, and Syaoran laughed. But something is wrong; the cut on Syaoran’s arm was still bleeding. He was not clotting properly. Guys, guys stop. Guys, I can’t see—I can’t…

Birds were chirping. The sun was up. Kurogane stared at the ceiling for a moment, before sitting up. Syaoran had been dead for the last ten years. Kurogane and Fay had just returned from an attack on Kurenjo. He had to give report.

It was rather poor form to launch a campaign and then be the second to deliver news, but the Empress already heard about the attack. Further, she knew more than Kurogane did: the Emperor survived, as did his wench. Kurogane was able to put out the fire, but the statement had been made.
"Well done," she praised. "We have settled that front. Strong work. Take the day off. Tomorrow you will set out. Princess Tomoyo has made arrangements. You will go to Sikayama; there is a temple there that will protect you, and may hopefully help the little one's magical maturity."

He went back to his quarters. He dragged Fay out of bed. He waited for Fay to finish changing so they could get breakfast together. He watched Fay chew listlessly on the morning meal and tried to suppress that cold feeling of not recognizing the person in front of him.

"Do you regret coming here?" he asked.

Fay looked at him. "…What do you mean?"

"You're not happy here." With me.

Fay lowered his eyes.

There was a long moment of silence, where Fay stared at the table and Kurogane stared at Fay.

"Ever since you came here," Kurogane said softly, "you've been hiding, every chance you get. Nothing seems capable of bringing you joy; no gifts, no news."

Fay stabbed into his breakfast. "What are you trying to say?"

"…Am I keeping you here against your will?"

"Don't be daft, Kurogane. You have no power to keep me anywhere against my will."

That was true, but, "Is there somewhere else you would rather be? Some…someone you would rather be with?"

Fay slammed his chopsticks down. "What are you suggesting, Kurogane?"

"You're miserable. And I don't know if it's because of me."

"Don't be stupid. You know me better than that. If there's a problem, you will hear it."

"Do I?" Kurogane reached into his tunic. He pulled out Syaoran's lock of hair—it was a huge lock, so thick that it was hard to believe it had just fallen out; it seemed more appropriate to have been cut deliberately. He set it on the table. "I went looking for you before we left, thought you might be with him. This just came out of his head when I touched him."

Fay stared.

"I took him to the healer. The healer said he was being yelled at. Someone was scaring him." Kurogane frowned, as Fay continued to stare at the thick clump of hair. "The Fay I know…would never be so mean."

It did not make sense to him. Fay had always been the optimistic one. The one to reach out, when the rest of them would be more cautious. And Syaoran was hardly the first person Fay had ever lost.

Something had happened, while Kurogane had not been there. Something happened between Fay and Syaoran.

"It wasn't just that he died, was it?"

Fay did not reply.
Syaoran, Kurogane realized, had made some friends while they were away. He found him outside in the courtyard, instead of in his room. The baby-faced novices from the dojo were helping him with his letters.

"You're a fast learner, Syaoran! Here, let me teach you another one..."

Kurogane stopped and raised his arm to press his forehead against it. He was going to have to remove the boy from all this. The timing could not be worse.

"This is the word for 'castle'. Shirasaki Castle. This is how you write Shirasaki too. Now you know three letters! Shira, saki, and then castle."

"Shira...white."

"Right! And Saki, it's like mountain, it even has the word for mountain as part of the word. Sometimes you can look at the pieces and guess what the word might mean."

"Castle."

"That's right!"

Kurogane listened as the teens murmured encouragement, interspersed with laughter. Syaoran joined in the mirth, sounding happy.

"You're going to be fluent, Syaoran!"

He debated when to break them up. He really did not have the heart to. Of course Syaoran would have the right personality to make friends; he was sweet, gentle, and humble. Kurogane really should have known.

He left the boys as they were. He went up to the front wall. He mused wryly that life had been simpler when Princess Tomoyo was the only good human being in his life. War was matter of fact, death was a normal part of existence, and there was nothing better to expect, nothing better to wish for. He thought of Syaoran sitting by the window, calm and composed in the face of his looming end. Clad in a gown meant for invalids. It showed his bony wrists and ankles. Fay, begging the healers to resuscitate the dead, while Kurogane, who had seen enough, knew Syaoran had endured enough, firmly denied them. No. Coming back to Nihon, to his princess, seeing his wish fulfilled, knowing that Syaoran had died far away from home, torn with regrets, dreams that will never be realized.

Fay, for all his power, thoroughly heartsick afterwards. He had given every essence of his being in the end. Seemed more of a husk than Syaoran's corpse.

"I heard Kurenjo was a success."

Princess Tomoyo. She had a knack for finding him whenever he was lost in thought.

"Hn."

"You are troubled."

"You should not be up here, Your Highness."

"And yet," she laughed, and moved behind a turret in acquiesce. "What is wrong?"
Kurogane inhaled. It is pointless to try to hide from the princess. "It's harder than I expected."

"Old wounds reopened." Princess Tomoyo understood immediately. "He's just different enough that it doesn't really feel like he's back."

"Fay's not taking it well."

"Fay has a shadow in his heart," said the princess. "Our little one has no power to remove it. Only he can."

Kurogane ducked his head. "This one is a bit more of a burden than the other one was." It did not really explain it, but…

"He's different," she agreed. "He needs you two more. But I've been thinking, too. I wonder, about souls, how we can share a soul and yet have all these separate lives, sometimes at the same time, sometimes just off from one another. There is something very delicate about this one. Very frail. He's not as tough as the other one. Perhaps, other than sharing the basic temperaments, what happens in one world affects people sharing the same souls in other worlds."

Kurogane glanced at her.

"Tsubasa passed from illness. Perhaps ours carries vestiges of his last moments. Because if you consider, if he had survived, he would likely never return to his former vitality."

The disease had been severe. Severe enough to kill Syaoran. Princess Tomoyo was likely right.

"Would you consider him a burden then?" the princess raised her eyebrows. "It's just a thought."

"I don't mind as much." Once upon a time, he might have. One of the reasons he wished Syaoran had lived to meet a Kurogane who…at least knew more than his younger self did. "Fay…I don't know."

He was not sure he understood Fay, when it came to this.

"You'll figure it out," the princess smiled.

_I sure hope so._

He had to tell Syaoran eventually.

"Sikayama?" the boy blinked, wide-eyed. "Where…where is that?"

The bald patch of scalp was still there, though partially hidden under the rest of his hair. _Poor kid probably doesn't even know._

"It's named for the deer that roams its forests," he looked over the boy's work. He was actually coming along surprisingly well. The handwriting was in good form. "The deer have pelts with white flowers on them, in the shape of plum blossoms. There is a temple that pays tribute to their patron goddess. We will be spending some time there."

"…Oh."

Poor lad was so confused. Kurogane snorted in amusement.

"Don't look so worried. We'll be back."
"...Alright."

Syaoran did not understand why they were leaving, or what this meant. Kurogane opted not to tell him; he was already under enough stress as it was. All would be made clear in due time, anyhow.

"We're departing in the morning, so you should get plenty of rest tonight. I know you've been working hard, but you should call it in early."

"Yes, my lord."

Kurogane rubbed the back of the boy's head, partially out of affection and partially to make sure that nothing else fell out.

Fay was in their quarters, looking over a tome.

"Are you coming?" Kurogane asked.

Fay looked at him. "Should I?"

"..." Kurogane honestly was not sure.

Fay let out a disbelieving huff and looked away, one arm braced against the table and the other hand on his hip. "This is...all we need is Mokona and this will be a diluted reenactment of what happened last time."

And Sakura. Which Kurogane did not mention, because Sakura did not join them the second time around.

"I don't know how long we'll be gone," Kurogane pointed out. "If you really hate him that much, you don't have to come."

"I don't hate him." Fay bowed his head. "I just—oh spirits." He pressed his hands to his eyes. "Everything he does reminds me of Tsubasa and the fact that he's not him."

Kurogane reached over and pressed his hand over Fay's nape.

"I don't know why you keep blaming yourself," he said quietly. "What is it that haunts you, Fay?"

Fay suddenly knocked his arm away. "You won't understand! You'll never understand. You weren't there half the time. You kept running away like a coward."

"And yet you're the one who's hurting more," Kurogane pointed out. "I have regrets. I regret I wasn't a better man. But we have both done our share of killing. We have killed people who don't deserve it. We have watched people we care about die. Your brother, the King. We've—we've both lost people, Fay. This—this was out of our hands." He paused. "What happened?"

Fay drew away.

"Fay," Kurogane scowled. "Fay, don't do this—" but Fay stepped into the bedroom and slid the door closed.

Concerned and at a loss, Kurogane stood in front of the door.

"Fay, come on. You can't keep..." Every time, Fay would push him away. "You assume I won't understand. Why can't you just tell me?"
Kurogane sighed. "Fay, Syaoran and I are leaving tomorrow. I don't know when we'll come back. Don't let this be the last words we say to each other."

Silence.

_Spirits._ What was wrong with Fay? It had never been so bad.

The door suddenly opened, and Fay's arms were around him.

"I'm coming with," the mage said lowly.

"Well I didn't mean the _very_ last words. I'm not that bad at what I do," Kurogane exclaimed.

"Heh. With someone like Syaoran, who knows what sort of trouble you'd get into."

"That's true," Kurogane admitted, but Fay's moment of levity passed as quickly as he came. The mage stepped back, eyes distant and wounded.

"Are you going to be able to do this without terrifying that kid?" Kurogane demanded. "I prefer him _with_ his hair. Bald was not a good look on him."

Fay sighed.

"Are you going to be able to do this?"

"I can handle it."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes I'm sure."

"Because—"

"I won't yell at the brat. _Spirits._"

"Fay…" Kurogane scowled. Did Fay ever call Syaoran a brat before?

Fay pushed past Kurogane. "I need to grab some supplies from the healers. From the way you two used to ignore common sense, we'll need a lot of them."
Reunited

It was like old times, except not as pleasant; Syaoran was frightened of Fay and profoundly dismayed that he was coming. He also had no clue where they were going and what for, which was a drastic change from the old Syaoran who took initiative on everything. Kurogane became the babysitter and warden, making sure Syaoran did not do something cluelessly stupid, while keeping Fay in line. Their dynamics held none of the casual comfort, with Syaoran going as quiet as a mouse, Fay stone-cold silent, and Kurogane, who had already talked more over the last few weeks than he did the last ten years, also kept his peace. They set forth after breakfast, with the handmaidens packing them some meals for the day. Sikayama was at least two weeks' journey away, and they were going to have to camp towards the end of it.

They went by foot; the trail involved some mountain hiking, which mounts would not be able to handle. Fay was the one who carried the money, while Kurogane carried the rations. They walked until the afternoon, where they stopped off the road for a break. Syaoran, who had surprisingly delicate eating manners, was only able to stomach a portion of his lunch. Fay watched him with a frown on his face while Kurogane tried to remember if the old Syaoran had similar mannerisms. Not that he had noticed, especially with Sakura being the true lady of the group…

Syaoran opened up a bit for the second half of the day, asking Kurogane about Sikayama and what to expect. Though Kurogane had heard of the place, he had never been to it. Little reason someone like him should ever go there; the temples rarely caused trouble, and Sikayama was not affiliated with any particular feudal faction.

"The deer sound beautiful," the boy remarked. "I would like to see one. The fawns are pretty, but when they lose their spots they don't look quite as nice. And plum blossoms…that sounds lovely."

"You'll see many things," Kurogane promised. "Hopefully mostly good."

"I'm sure," Syaoran smiled at him. "Everyone has been so kind. I only wish my mother could be here."

Kurogane rubbed the back of the boy's head. No hair fell out. So far.

"You made some friends back at the castle," he noted. "I'm sorry we have to leave them so soon."

"Me too. They were very nice."

"Did you have friends at Kuroiyama?"

Syaoran was quiet for a time. "Some. They were…taken. They didn't hide as well as I did."

This Emperor of Kuroiyama needed to be disposed of. Somehow.

"Surely your plan wasn't to hide all your life. What were you going to do when you grow up?"

"…I didn't know if I will grow up," Syaoran admitted. "We…don't tend to think that far."

Kurogane winced.

"I always wanted to learn to read and write though," Syaoran admitted. "Mother said it would make me useful. I didn't know where to start, though. I'm so grateful to you, and to Lord Fay. I promise I will work hard."
He was already working hard. "I'm sure you'll be proficient in no time."

There was such a sweetness to him. The way he talked, the way he smiled. It made him look beautiful in a way the old Syaoran did not; Tsubasa had been a handsome youth, but he was tough, and there was a roughness to him, borne out of past betrayal and suffering.

He really should be trained.

Before nightfall, they reached the first town. They stopped by an inn. Syaoran was exhausted and hungry. He started off like any other boy his age, but, once again, did not seem to have much stomach. It was not long before he reached his limit.

The old Syaoran had not been like this. At least not until towards the end. Kurogane tried to determine if this was something he should worry about.

They rented two rooms for the night. This time, Kurogane was the first to go to bed. When Fay joined him, he wrapped his arms around Kurogane from behind.

Kurogane covered his hand with his own.

"Doing alright?" he asked.

"I'll live," Fay said after a pause. "Can't wait for this to be over. Are we really staying at Sikayama with this kid?"

"That is the plan."

"What are we going to do there?"

"Help protect him."

"You think they will find him at Sikayama?"

"I don't know." Kurogane was quiet for a while. "The Princess of Red Lotus seemed convinced, and Princess Tomoyo believes her." Princess Tomoyo likes to give people a benefit of a doubt, but she would not have let Kurogane leave Shirasaki this way if she did not feel this was warranted.

Fay sighed heavily, but said nothing further.

The next morning, they ate breakfast at the inn before heading out. It was chilly, and the leaves showered with every gust of wind. Syaoran was in good spirits, but he was more tired today than yesterday, and had trouble keeping up.

The old Syaoran never slowed them down before. This was new. And the boy was not trying to annoy them; eventually, he had to crouch down to avoid passing out. They went off the road to the side, where Kurogane fed Syaoran some water.

"You ate today." Did he not eat enough?

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," Kurogane frowned. "You don't eat very much for a boy your age."

"…Mother used to say that," Syaoran admitted.

"Why not? Is it the taste?"
"…No. I just…I can't eat a lot. My stomach hurts and I feel sick afterwards."

"…How long has this been going on?"

Syaoran looked at him. "I'm sorry."

"Quit apologizing and answer the question," Fay remarked.

"I—I don't know," Syaoran stammered. Kurogane almost threw Fay a dirty look—when did Fay become so mean? He was always the nicer of their group. "I mean…it's…I don't know."

*This can be a problem.* Kurogane had taken him to the healer that night, but he had gone specifically for the hair loss. What if this Syaoran was sick from the start? If he cannot eat, he will never become strong. If he was physically weak, he cannot learn how to fight. Training takes stamina; Syaoran would need to be able to repeat kicks over and over, shift stances—it all takes practice, and without the proper physique, this would all be pointless.

"I'm sorry," Syaoran said again, pale and distressed.

Kurogane sighed. "Don't be. This is not your fault."

"I'll try harder. This won't happen again."

Kurogane could not see how the boy could try any harder than he already was. "Don't make promises you can't keep." He thought about how the old Syaoran had pushed himself past his limits and died for it. "You don't need to push yourself that hard. We're not in a rush."

"I'm just not used to traveling this much…"

That could be it, though Kurogane's gut felt otherwise.

"Syaoran," he said gently, "it's really fine. We're doing this for you. We'll go at your pace. It's fine."

Syaoran looked at him then. Kurogane recalled that Syaoran actually had no idea why they were going to Sikayama.

"Do you know why we're going to Sikayama?" he asked redundantly.

Syaoran shook his head.

"You have magic."

Syaoran's reaction took a long time to settle. At first he did not seem to understand. Then he visibly struggled with believing it.

"The Princess and the Empress, they sensed it. It's been growing, since you came to us. Magic like that, Syaoran, needs to be trained. That's why we're going to Sikayama."

"…Oh…" Syaoran blinked rapidly. "Wh-what…" he trailed off.

"What is it?"

"Well…does that mean I'll be a court sorcerer?"

"A possibility." Kurogane glanced at Fay.
Syaoran blinked repeatedly. "But…I don't feel any different. And…and I can't do anything."

"That's what training is for. Hence, why we're going to Sikayama."

Syaoran was still blinking. "But…are you sure?"

"I would not know as well." Kurogane frowned. "Fay, were you able to sense it?"

The mage sighed, sounding put upon. "Yes, he does have magic. Yes, it is growing."

Syaoran still looked skeptical.

Kurogane smirked at him. "You'll figure it out when we get there. How are you feeling?"

"Better. Thank you." Syaoran got to his feet. He did not look entirely ready, but there was some color to his cheeks now, and they still had a long way to go.

Syaoran knew fairly little about the land, so the rest of the day was occupied with little factoids Kurogane picked up over the years, different kingdoms and their colorful figureheads, what he learned about magic from Fay. Fay, awkwardly, chose to stay entirely out of the conversation; he had yet to say a word to the boy. On the bright side, it meant he was not yelling at him, or whatever he had done to scare the teen, but it was still somewhat uncomfortable to have this companion that refused to leave the sidelines.

Eventually, though, they entered a region that was more dangerous, and Kurogane had to stop talking.

"Stay close," he told the boy, and even Fay looped around to the other side so they were flanking Syaoran on both sides. "Word is there are bandits in this region. If we're lucky, they wouldn't notice us."

They were not lucky.

"Stop right where you are," a nasal voice called out from the incline on their right. Fay let out a groan while Kurogane moved in front of Syaoran.

"Seriously?" Fay exclaimed.

"Really, boys," Kurogane folded his arms. "What do you want?"

From the bushes stepped at least a dozen men, blades out and arrows notched.

"This is our territory," said gruff man with a deep voice. "You can't pass without paying tribute."

"Really?" Kurogane snarled. "Well, what if I have nothing to offer?"

"Then you pay with your life."

"Sorry, boys. I got nothing." Kurogane summoned his sword to his left hand and allowed them to have a good look at its glistening blade. "Any chance you'll be kind today?"

A third man laughed at this. "What a nutter."

"Could give us that boy. He looks real pretty. Bet he has a fine pair of legs."
"Amongst other things!"

Kurogane's stomach curdled in a sudden rage.

"Oh come on," Fay complained, "that's just tacky."

"I can be persuaded with just having him for tonight," the first one was openly leering at Syaoran, who drew further behind Kurogane and Fay, unsettled.

Kurogane held his sword across Syaoran. "Not a chance."

"Oh," said the nasal-voice, tsking. "That's not smart of you."

"What say we teach these three a lesson?"

The bandits did a lot of talking. Kurogane could have wiped them out while they were all laughing at each other. He allowed them to make the first move, however, just to give them a chance. They did not take it. Three of them came with their swords and axes raised. His sword cut through all three in one smooth swipe. The sight of their blood sailing in the air gave him a thrill of satisfaction. He raised his reddened sword, ready to cut through whoever came next, but the remaining bandits drew back at the sight of how easily he had disposed of their three members.

He pointed his sword at them. "Who's next?"

"Slow down, love," Fay said behind him, and from the corner of his eye, Kurogane caught a flash of light. "I want to have a turn."

"Whoa," said the nasal man, his tone very changed from earlier. "We…we don't want trouble."

"You don't want trouble," Kurogane deadpanned. "Could have fooled me."

"Look, look, you can go, alright? We don't—"

Two of the bandits doubled around and fled right there. Once they went, the others followed. The nasal man also spun around with a yelp of distress and dashed off the road.

Fay let loose a few flashes just for good measure. "Vermin," he hissed.

Kurogane turned around, pulling a rag from his tunic to wipe the sword with. Syaoran was standing very still, face pale and blank. He was staring very openly at Kurogane.

"Show off," Kurogane murmured, keeping his eyes on the boy.

"I do so rarely get to indulge," Fay drawled. "Well, at least that was efficient. The princess would be so pleased. Only three bodies."

"Journey's not over yet," Kurogane pointed out.

Syaoran seemed to be in a daze, looking long and hard at Kurogane before looking long and hard at the bodies while Kurogane polished the blood off his blade to prevent it from crusting. When they made to continue going, his movements were very stilted, and he became very quiet. Something had frightened the boy.

"You alright?" Kurogane asked.

Syaoran swallowed hard, and could not meet his eyes.
"Hey," Kurogane placed a hand over the boy's nape. The muscles were as stiff as iron. "It's alright. We wouldn't have let them take you."

But the terror resonating from the boy did not ease, even when they resumed the trip. Syaoran was silent as a mouse, and when his eyes did happen to rise, the fear was directed at Kurogane himself. His gaze started wandering, like he was a prisoner trying to escape his captors.

Syaoran had not realized Kurogane was a killer. Or maybe he just did not understand what that meant, until now.

This was new. And Kurogane had no idea what to do. He was use to fear and awe from the normal civilians of Shirasaki, and from people who had the misfortune of crossing Shirasaki, but as far as he could remember, Syaoran had never been afraid of him, even when they first met.

Come to think of it, Syaoran had not been intimidated by much. Not even all that surprised by some of the violence they would encounter. This one was much more innocent, and perhaps his lack of strength and vitality also made him feel more vulnerable.

They walked until afternoon. Syaoran did not request a break. He seemed too nervous to feel weary, and Kurogane wanted to reach the nearest town as soon as possible, as long as Syaoran's stamina allowed; he did not want to meet any other dangerous groups on the road. The journey was tense and silent.

Mid-afternoon, they arrived.

Syaoran used the crowd to try to slip away from them. He was very good, because even though Kurogane was watching for him, he almost made it.

"Stop," Kurogane got him around the waist. "Don't be daft. Just because there are people here doesn't make it safe for you to wander around alone."

"Please…" Syaoran whispered.

"You're safe, Syaoran."

"There is no Sikayama, is there?"

Oh spirits. Of course the child would be terrified. Who knew how Kuroiyama got all their sacrifices; Syaoran probably saw warriors like Kurogane cutting down people and then taking prisoners—any kingdom that practiced demon sacrifices had to be run by lunatics, and its people would not view the warriors as protectors, but as predators to be feared and avoided. He probably thought Kurogane and Fay were having him on, luring him into a false sense of security only to initiate some foul practice at a remote location.

"Syaoran, hush. Everything I told you is true."

"Please, I haven't done anything—" the boy was shaking, and Kurogane flashed back to his first meeting with the teen, the look of desolation on his face when he realized he had failed.

"Syaoran," Kurogane said with far more patience than he would have guessed he had, "I promise, I would never hurt you. Now come. You must be exhausted and hungry. We're going to find an inn and we're going to rest for the day."

He looped an arm behind the boy and guided him forward. Syaoran was stiff and resistant, but he did not fight Kurogane all that much. They went to an inn, where, knowing that Syaoran might try to
flee in the night, Kurogane made the point of booking only one room. Fay gave him a look, which Kurogane ignored.

Two rooms was probably an indulgence, anyway.

Anxiety took away the boy's already poor appetite. His eyes were wandering again, and he would look at some of the other patrons as if wishing someone would rescue him.

It all looked suspicious, Kurogane acknowledged. Syaoran knew substantially less than they did. As far as the boy knew, he was a nobody that somehow caught the attention of foreign noblemen. There was, from his point of view, no basis for their kindness. He had nothing to offer and created more trouble than anything else. He could not sense his own magic; he probably had no idea what to sense, so everything Kurogane told him probably sounded like fanciful lies. His entire faith had been based on Kurogane's perceived compassion, until Kurogane revealed a side to himself that he was not aware he should have hidden.

He was not sure how to make this better. Perhaps he should tell Syaoran a little bit about his other self, but he could not predict if that would actually make things worse. And it seemed unfair to force Syaoran to live under the shadow of a self he never knew, had no business knowing.

Fay was no help. He refused to look at the boy, much less speak to him, choosing to focus on his own meal. Kurogane wished he could talk to Fay alone, but if he left the boy by himself, he had no doubt the boy would try to slip away.

Since the boy was not eating, Kurogane decided to bring the boy to their rented quarters. Fay chose to stay downstairs. The boy resisted Kurogane, but was not strong enough to withstand being pushed. They received a few glances on their way; Kurogane's stomach twisted at the thought of how they must look. The words from the bandits echoed the fear he had harbored for Syaoran, and it smarted, getting looped into that foul group. There was no helping, however; this needed to be addressed, or else there was no point to anything they do.

"What are you planning to do?!!" Syaoran demanded as soon as Kurogane slid the door shut.

Kurogane looked at him. "Syaoran, it's still me."

Syaoran's eyes flickered. He could see that the boy wanted to believe him, to trust him, but some basic instinct had him cringing away when Kurogane approached.

"You kill people," the boy remarked. "It's what you do, isn't it. You're just like the soldiers at home. You move like them."

So Syaoran had seen people get killed before. It sounded like his friends had been cut down by those meant to defend them. Kurogane's heart broke a little as he debated what to say.

Sometimes, the blunt truth works better to reassure, in these kinds of situations. "Yes. I am the personal defender of Princess Tomoyo. It involves killing, at times." Many times.

Syaoran blinked, not sure what to make of his honesty. "...H-how can you do that?"

Ten years ago, Kurogane would have been profoundly annoyed at such a question; in truth, he was still a little surprised that there existed people in this world who even ask. Part of him did feel some indignation; he had only killed those men because they wanted to hurt Syaoran, after all; did Syaoran think they could have gotten out of that one by asking 'please'?

But Syaoran was not a pampered little prince, who lived in a world where everyone had the option
of being nice. His sovereign had been a psychopath and he had witnessed his friends slaughtered, had lost his mother. His world had been one of shadow and fear. A question from someone like him meant something else entirely.

"It's not a happy thing to do," he said, lowering himself to sit down on the floor in front of the boy, so that Syaoran had the benefit of height. He made himself comfortable; he could launch from this position very easily if he needed to, but he wanted to make himself appear less dangerous and threatening. "There are bad people, and sometimes you have to choose. But it's never a happy thing to do, nor an easy one."

"You didn't look like you were struggling," Syaoran accused.

"No," Kurogane admitted, and then chose to be slightly manipulative, though his words were still true. "They angered me. They wanted to hurt you. They would have hurt you and then they would have killed you. I couldn't let that happen. These men have hurt and killed a lot of people before. They would hurt and kill a lot more people after. They were trying to kill me. I just happened to be better at this than they were, but they weren't going to stop, so I couldn't either."

The boy looked upset, but at least he seemed to be less afraid of Kurogane. "I wish you didn't do it. It's ugly. You looked like a monster."

Kurogane felt like a monster, at these words. "I'm sorry for scaring you," he said after a moment. "I don't kill anyone unless I have to."

"What does that mean?"

"If they're hurting those I care about, or trying to. I care about you, Syaoran."

"Why?"

A rapid question, with no hesitation—they had reached the very heart of what had frightened him.

Kurogane could tell him. Tell him about the boy that inspired a journey across different worlds. A boy who did so many amazing things, because of the depth of goodness in his heart. But Syaoran would have no feelings toward this boy. Tsubasa had been dead for ten years, and to Syaoran he would just be another name, an expectation of something Syaoran could never imagine reaching.

Kurogane decided to settle with a half truth, once again. "I recognize your soul," he stated. "You are a...good boy. You came to us, like a gift from the spirits. When I saw you...I instantly knew you were mine."

_This one is a Syaoran, _he had said to Fay. _One that comes from Nihon...belongs here. Belongs to us._

Syaoran blinked, thrown by this admission.

"I promise," Kurogane went on, "I won't let anything happen to you. I'll protect you, and I'll take care of you." _Better than last time._ He extended a hand. "Don't be afraid of me. Please."

The boy hesitated for a long time. Kurogane kept his hand extended, understanding how much courage it would take for this one to trust him. This Syaoran was defenseless. He had no other allies, and his mistrust was his only shield. So it both warmed and broke his heart when the boy reached back and took his hand. Allowed Kurogane to pull him down, into a warm hug. Hugged him back.

Kurogane pressed him close. Felt the warmth of his breathing body. He had hugged this one far more than the other one. Had not known, back then, how much he would later wish he did, and now
he was hugging the wrong Syaoran, but one that was growing to be just as dear to him.

He hoped that was alright.

He dreamed about the old Syaoran, clad in the garb from Clow Country, standing tall and straight, face serious. He was trying to negotiate with a group of bandits. Mokona was hidden under the hood of his cloak. Fay and Kurogane waited to see the outcome. He could not hear what the boy was saying, but he sounded confident, unyielding.

One of the bandits attacked. Syaoran blocked, then disarmed him with a few quick moves that even Kurogane had trouble following. Kurogane summoned his sword.

*Syaoran, be careful. If you bleed, you won't stop bleeding.*

He saw Syaoran sitting by the window, dressed in the patient gown that hung loose around him, swallowing him up. Kurogane was leaning against the wall next to the window. Fay sat in a guest chair opposite the boy.

*Syaoran, when did you get so thin, your ribs are showing.*

He woke in the morning with tears in his eyes and a bitter taste in his mouth. Fay was beside him, while Syaoran occupied the other bed. The boy slept deeply; he looked completely drained, and Kurogane mused that maybe they needed to take the day off. He did not even rouse when Kurogane went to check on him and ran his fingers through the brown hair, just to make sure no more fell out.

"You're obsessed," Fay said later, when they went downstairs for breakfast. Syaoran was still asleep, and Kurogane did not have the heart to wake him. "You weren't even this concerned about Tsubasa."

"Should have been," Kurogane said quietly.

Fay did not reply to this. "How are you going to train him if you're this soft on him?"

"..." Honestly, Kurogane was not sure if this Syaoran would even be open to the idea. "I don't know if he would want to learn."

"Well, then, there's no point."

A Syaoran who could not fight seemed fundamentally wrong, somehow. His martial art abilities were as much part of him as Kurogane's own abilities. Yet this one was still Syaoran in that undeniable way.

Maybe if they could make him stronger…

"I was thinking, we can take him to a local healer," Kurogane suggested. "I don't think he can handle another consecutive day of travel. He needs a break."

"Some people just aren't strong. Doesn't mean there's anything to treat. They're just weak."

A weak Syaoran was definitely even more wrong than a Syaoran who could not fight.

"His spirit is stronger than his body. He can withstand a lot if he really needed to. He would just break. Like the last one did."

Fay was silent.
"We're not betraying his memory by helping this one."

"I'm not saying we are."

"Well then why are you so reluctant to help this one?"

Fay leaned back. "Look, I really don't have it in me to care about this one. I'm all dried up. Take it or leave it. But you can go ahead and take him to a healer. I don't know where you're suddenly getting all these parental instincts."

"…Then what will you be doing in the meantime?"

"I'll amuse myself somehow," Fay said humorlessly.

Kurogane glared. "I'm not good at this."

"Right, well, so far he seems to like you fine."

"Are you jealous?"

Fay threw him a dirty look. "What do you take me for?"

Syaoran was happy to hear that they were resting for the day. He was a little less enthused about the healer.

"But didn't I just go to one?"

"He was checking for something specific."

"…then what are we checking for now?"

"Just wanted to make sure nothing is missed." Kurogane was certain he did not sound particularly encouraging, but the boy was too well-behaved to put up much of a rebellion.

Going to the healer on the spot was tricky; clinics had appointments and tended to be booked in advance. They also tended to charge a lot, though Kurogane was less worried about that. They were able to squeeze into a spot, but the wait was long. Syaoran, bored, alternated between napping and plaintively asking if they could explore the town instead. Finally, it was their turn, and the healer did the same thing the imperial healer did at Shirasaki. He eyed the boy critically.

"He's got a weak stomach," he told Kurogane. "Nothing you can do; it's just the way he grew it. Some people end up with weak hearts, others have weak brains; he's got a weak stomach. He could have been born with it, or it could have just stopped developing later. Can't process what he eats, that's why he gets sick if he eats too much at once, and it'll get touchy about the kind of food he eats. I can give him some herbs to help boost him, but he won't have a stomach like yours, or mine. A nice, steady lifestyle for this little one; no swash-buckling, sword-fighting, way-of-the-road living, or else he'll use up all the reserves he does have."

"Does he have any growths?" Kurogane asked.

"Growth?" the healer scoffed. "No, his stomach is just weak. That's not why he's so skinny. Of course, if he keeps going he might get a growth later on; growths happen because of deficiencies, believe it or not. But we can boost him and get him more balanced and then we'll see. Eating more frequently, in small bits, should help as well. He should have a light diet, nothing heavy. Rice, grains, easy on the stomach. Not the coarse kind, the fine kind. Your boy has a dainty build and so
he needs dainty food. He'll be needing a dainty lifestyle as well."

Kurogane frowned. That thwarted…most of their plans, though Syaoran was hardly obligated to live up to any of them. It was a bit frustrating how once again, his physical body was what limited their options…and yet somewhat appropriate, given what happened last time. And maybe this Syaoran needed to be less ambitious anyway. The other one would have chased after the stars.

He ultimately did.

Probably best that Syaoran's body was what held him in check. Before he killed himself again.

"That…alright. But the medicine should help?"

"Help a bit. It won't work miracles," the healer warned. "It will just take the edge off. The lifestyle is still what it is."

Kurogane was thoughtful as he took Syaoran back to the inn with the formula.

"I'm sorry," Syaoran said.

"What for?" He looked at the boy.

"…I know you're disappointed in me."

Disappointed…was not quite the right word, though he did wish things were different. "I'm not disappointed in you. You did well. I was just thinking about our options."

"…Are we still going to Sikayama?"

"Of course we are. That has nothing to do with anything." Kurogane looped an arm around Syaoran. He thought about the old Syaoran, body wrecked as it betrayed him. "I just wish you came to a better world," he murmured, feeling suddenly that he was talking to Tsubasa. "You finally come to us and yet we can't give you what you deserve."

A world where Syaoran could go down a road the way he was and not be threatened by perverted bandits. The memory of those vermin made Kurogane sick to his stomach.

Syaoran looked at him in confusion.

"We're fine," Kurogane assured him. You're not actually dying. No growths. Not that the healer here had any of the resources like the other world did, but they could tell some amazing things, and Syaoran was not pale, his blood was not pink from anemia, and if he was not exactly rosy-cheeked, at least he was standing upright and his eyes were still full of light and curiosity. That is, in itself, great news. They could work with everything else. "You're fine. We have medicines and we will get you whatever you need. I promise."

"You're spending a lot on me," Syaoran said shyly.

"Well, you're a growing boy," Kurogane ruffled his head, pleased that no chunks of hair fell out.

"Nothing strange about that."

"I don't know what I would have done if I had not met you."

There was a quiet horror in that soft voice, and then Kurogane felt it too; his mind flashed to a reality where he and Fay went on with their lives, never knowing there was a Syaoran in Nihon. If the prince of Kuroiyama had decided not to spare the boy after all…
Or worse. He looked at the boy, slender and long-limbed like a fawn. His own fears, and then the bandits. He thought of the two of them being in the same world as the child they had lost long ago and never realizing that he needed help. Failing him, once again.

"Don't think about that," he whispered.

"Sometimes I wonder if this is a dream," Syaoran admitted.

Kurogane pressed his forehead against the boy's. *It's real, don't worry, it's not a dream*, he wanted to say.

Syaoran at a version of his wedding, Syaoran showing them his new son, Sakura beaming at his side.

Syaoran, rotting away underground.

"Me too," he confessed.
Syaoran did not appreciate the bitterness of his medicine, but he did not complain. In this, Kurogane reflected, he was very similar to the old Syaoran. Though tired, he still pushed himself to study, and Kurogane almost wanted to tell him to take it easy for the day. But the boy was afraid of Fay, and also wanted to do well, and Kurogane was afraid he might be getting far too soft with the boy.

It was hard not to be. This Syaoran just seemed so young and small, and his trust was a precious thing, his affection a gift that he could easily retract. He had no one else to care if he pushed himself too hard. Just as the other Syaoran had no one to care, not until it was far too late.

Fay remained resolutely detached, supervising Syaoran only sparsely on his writing, but otherwise avoiding the boy and letting Kurogane do all the work. It was an odd reversal of what had happened last time, and if Kurogane had not heard the rage in the other man's voice when they encountered the bandits, he might have been convinced the mage really did not care at all. He had no idea how Fay was managing to remain so aloof.

He could not talk to Fay in private, because they had only booked one room. The following morning, they left town to continue the journey, and Syaoran occupied most of Kurogane's attention until they stopped for a break about an hour in. They had bought some food for the way, and heeding the healer's advice, Kurogane had Syaoran eat some of his rations during the break. He left the boy to his own devices to seek Fay out.

"I've been neglecting you lately," he noted, touching the mage's shoulder. Fay reached up without looking at him to link their hands.

He would have thought Fay was angry with him, and he would have tolerated it, because he deserved as much, but these little things, signs of affection, went against that vein. It was confusing and reassuring and frightening at the same time.

"I've been making you worry," Fay said softly. "I guess that makes us even. Somewhat."

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine."

"You're angry with me."

Fay tightened his hand around Kurogane. "That what you think?"

"I'm not choosing him over you," Kurogane went on. Just as you had not chosen Tsubasa over me, that time. "He just…he needs attention, at this time."

"Of course," Fay's voice became acidic. "He's a needy little runt in this world."

Kurogane sighed. "Before we left, Princess Tomoyo had pointed out…if Syaoran had survived, he would probably not have recovered fully. Not from something like that. And…this one might be the way he is because ours had been so sick. Had died, from his illness. What happens to someone in one world might affect other worlds."

"It's alright," Fay looked at him, "it's really alright. It—I understand what's going on."
"Fay—"

"It was hard for you to be with him, so you weren't. Thing is, he expected it. Preferred it." Fay looked away. "He didn't want you to see him like that. He always looked up to you, and he didn't want your opinion of him to sink because of something like that. It was degrading. He was ashamed."

The words cut. Kurogane felt a numbness coat over him. *That was how Syaoran had felt. And I had let him think that.*

Their Syaoran had died, ashamed of himself.

Kurogane knew this but... hearing it still hurt.

"Thing is," Fay went on, "I did something even worse."

"No—"

"You weren't there."

"Then *tell* me—"

"You know, he wasn't surprised at all," Fay said instead, "when they told him. He wasn't even upset. Just... disappointed. I keep trying to pinpoint when it all started—"

"Why? What does that matter?"

"I have to know my debts." He paused. "Sometimes I wonder if I'm hurting you all the same, by claiming your heart this way."

Kurogane stared. "Fay..."

Resigned, accepting Fay, subtly rebellious and defiant underneath the outer exterior of complacency. He smiled the most out of all of them and yet he was probably the one who carried the most sadness. A weapon who hated violence. Someone destined to destroy what he loved most.

"But you can go ahead and love this little one," Fay went on. "You are a protector by nature, and there are few I have seen who need as much protection as he does. He even loves you back, the poor wretch."

"What are you saying, Fay?"

"I just can't," Fay talked over him. "I can't say... all the things I've wanted to say, or do anything I've wanted to do, these long years since he left. Not to him. And I don't have it in me to care about him. If I had a choice, I would not love you, just so I can save you from me."

Kurogane frowned. "Now you're talking nonsense, Fay."

"I can't."

"You really think I need saving from anyone, let alone you?"

Fay smiled at this. "That's the reassuring part. But *he* does. He already needs to be saved from me."

"He doesn't need to be saved from you—"
"But I'm not angry at you, really. I know you've been worried about that. I'm really not angry at you, at all. Truly."

Kurogane scoffed. Before he could respond, though, they were interrupted by an unwitting Syaoran, who looked at them with an expression of relief once he spotted them. The boy had obviously been afraid he had been abandoned, so Kurogane did not have the heart to be angry with him.

They ran into bandits again. This time, Fay took the lead. He did not look at Syaoran afterwards. Syaoran huddled close to Kurogane, blinking owlishly at Fay. He was not as frightened as he was when he saw Kurogane dispose of bandits, but he was still nervous.

"It's alright," Kurogane said to him. "Fay would never hurt you."

"He hates me," the boy said quietly.

Kurogane squeezed the thin shoulders. "He does not hate you." He wished he could explain to Syaoran, tell him Fay's story, but that was not his story to tell. "A lot had happened to him in the past. But he would never hurt you. I promise."

Syaoran was dubious on many levels. "I'm supposed to be able to do that?" he asked, referring to how Fay had used magic to deal with the bandits.

"You just need to be trained."

Syaoran ducked his head. "Isn't magic supposed to…why wasn't I able to save my mother?"

He was generally dissatisfied on this front, and Kurogane did not press the matter. The boy would be trained at Sikayama; out here, it drew too much unwanted attention, especially as the boy would not know what he was doing. At least Syaoran was not trying to flee again.

His stamina continued to be an impediment. They entered a large kingdom, one that was strong and very militant. The guards eyed Kurogane with suspicion, but Syaoran's frail appearance did much to assuage their doubts. Shortly after finding an inn, Syaoran started coughing. By morning, Kurogane went to wake Syaoran to find the boy burning with fever.

It was just the flu, though Kurogane could not help the flood of horror that filled him every time he looked at Syaoran the wrong way. The old Syaoran had not been sick during the entire time he and Fay knew him, not until the very end. This time, Syaoran was not shriveled to the bone. He could sit up on his own, and even walk, though he did not like it. But Kurogane could not look at him without seeing the shadow of Tsubasa, gasping for breath, curled in a wretched ball, completely depleted as his body continued to wreck suffering on itself.

"I'm sorry," Syaoran apologized, looking dismayed. "I don't know why…this keeps happening."

How lucky Kurogane had been, he realized, that he had been strong enough to pick up his father's sword. How lucky Fay had been to be healthy enough to endure all the years. This Syaoran would try to reach, summon all his impressive strength and courage, only for his body to fall short. No one would ever look at this one and realize he shared the soul of a warrior and a great sorcerer with a heart of gold. They would just see a sickly boy. A disappointment.

"You're doing fine," he insisted. "Who doesn't get sick now and then?"

With Syaoran sick, they were grounded, during which the shifting movements of Nihon, which Kurogane had not kept track of due to being on their journey, closed in so that by the time Syaoran
began recovering, it was not safe to leave.

Fay related the news of curfew.

"No one but the soldiers after sundown," he told Kurogane. "We are trapped in the inn at nightfall. During the day the guards are dragging random foreigners away to be interrogated. We can fight our way out, but that would not make the rest of the journey any easier."

Kurogane and Fay had brought along a large surplus of money, but it would not last an indefinite stay. They would have to generate some form of income. It was a little odd, having all three of them together without Mokona and without Syaoran contributing to the group. Not that the boy did not try, anyhow, but he was still coughing and his nose was running, and no one wanted to be near that kind of mess.

He missed Mokona, of all things. Mokona would have kept the poor child company.

It started snowing heavily, which made travel rather moot. Kurogane and Fay earned some money helping to shovel snow between storms. It felt a little bit like the old days, when they would have to provide for themselves upon arriving in each new world. In Nihon there were no new rules of physics or magic to learn, but the feel of an alien land with its own laws provoked feelings of nostalgia. If only they had Sakura as well, with her knack for winning at games of chance.

He wondered how she was doing. It had been ten years. He wondered how she would react, if she ever learned that there was a Syaoran in Nihon, ten years younger than the one she loved. She probably would feel some combination of how Fay and Kurogane felt.

He was not her Syaoran, ultimately, even if he was one.

Another snowstorm had everyone locked in; this one was windy, and it was hazardous to go out. Bored, Syaoran became unexpectedly bold and asked Kurogane about how he met Fay.

"How long have you two been together?"

"Ten to eleven years, whereabouts." Hard to keep track of time, when time flowed differently in different dimensions.

"Was it love at first sight?" the imp grinned cheekily.

Kurogane snorted. "Hardly. I thought he was annoying." He almost mentioned how Fay used to call him everything except his actual name, but now that Fay never called him by anything except his actual name, that hurt too much to mention. "He had an irritating sense of humor. He used to be very different."

"He seems very sad," the boy said sympathetically.

"He's lost a lot of people he cared about," Kurogane replied, even though he did not understand Fay's grief very much himself.

"At least he has you."

Kurogane was not certain that was reassuring, but he did not burden the child with this problem. That was between him and Fay, and whatever Fay was dealing with that Kurogane was not allowed to know.

He did not tell Syaoran about the specifics of Fay's past, but he told him about his own. He talked
about his father and mother, how his father was the strongest man Kurogane had ever known, and his mother, beautiful, gentle, and kind, had been a treasure of Nihon. He spoke of the demon that murdered his mother, of seeing his father's arm, still clutching Ginryu. He was surprised by how relatively easy it was to talk about it to the boy; part of him felt like he was talking to Tsubasa instead.

Syaoran listened, his eyes doe-like, and hugged him tightly afterwards.

"They sound like wonderful people," he whispered. "I'm sorry that happened."

Kurogane ruffled the brown locks. "It was a long time ago." The pain of it was not as sharp. Part of it was because he had Fay, and he did not feel so alone.

Sometimes he wondered how he managed, before going to Tokyo.

He did not hold the boy too long; Syaoran was still a sniffling mess, but he tucked the lad in and stayed with him as the teen drifted off.

He went to the main hall for some sake. When he returned, he found Fay leaning against the opposite wall, staring at the boy.

"Has he done anything interesting?" Kurogane asked.

Fay sniffed, but could not seem to bring himself to quip back.

Kurogane leaned against the wall next to him. "What are you thinking about?"

"The only thing I can think about, these days," the mage admitted. "He looks just like him."

"He does." We've been over this.

"He..." Fay trailed off, and for a long time he was silent. Kurogane waited, almost afraid to breathe, hoping, wishing, that Fay would finally tell him...

But Fay closed up again.

Kurogane sighed. "The truth always comes out sooner or later, Fay."

Fay said nothing.

"You can do this. People get sick. It happens."

"People die too," said Syaoran, brave, unflinching, but defeated. Kurogane hated seeing that.

"You're stronger than that."

"It's not a matter of strength."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it's not something you can fight," Syaoran said calmly. "It happens and you endure and you see what happens."

"The mind can be a powerful thing."

"Well, I've been repeating in my head, 'get better', and so far that hasn't worked."
"You can't lose hope, Syaoran," Fay insisted.

Syaoran did not answer.

"We'll get you through this," Fay squeezed the boy's thin shoulder. "Honestly, given all the worlds we've traveled to and all the things we've been exposed to, something like this is bound to happen. And you have the princess to go back to, and your parents."

Syaoran moved away from him. "What choice do I have? It's already been made."

That was an odd statement, but then a little strangeness was expected, in light of the bombshell that had landed on them.

"And it's not like I can refuse treatment," Syaoran went on. "He said we all had to pay for our sins."

"Don't quote him," Kurogane spat. "That's not what this is about. Fei Wong Reed was an evil lunatic. He'd say something like that just to sour your victory."

Fay was pale. He looked away as well, instead of agreeing with Kurogane.

"He would," Syaoran conceded, "but that doesn't mean he's wrong. I just wish...but I shouldn't. Wishes are what ruined everything."

Fay cupped Syaoran's face in his hands. "Syaoran, listen to me. We will get you through this. If anyone can conquer this, you can. Look at me."

But Syaoran would not look at Fay. He kept his eyes downcast, and eventually lifted a hand to Fay's wrist to move it away.

"It's alright, Fay," said the boy. "I know. It's really not necessary." He looked at Kurogane. "You both have already done a lot for me. You have your own princess to go to, and someone to bring besides. There's nothing left here for you, so you don't—"

"If you say one more word," Kurogane growled, "I'm going to break your nose. Which will be bad for you, since you don't seem to stop bleeding very easily these days."

Kurogane woke in the darkness. He sat up and looked at Fay, who was still sleeping.

Syaoran would not look at him.

He had not thought of that incident in this way before.

Later, Syaoran went down to get breakfast while Kurogane was scrutinizing his own hair in the mirror.

"Admiring yourself?" Fay stood behind him to stare as well.

"Getting gray," said Kurogane. "It's already starting."

"Pfft," Fay ran a hand through his black locks. The mage's fingers always felt more soothing than his own, and Kurogane could not suppress the warm feeling that spread from his scalp and down into his belly, like hot soup and a warm blanket. "A couple of strands here and there. Don't be so melodramatic."

"Not all of us can live for hundreds of years."
Fay ducked his head and pressed his forehead into Kurogane's broad shoulder.

"Who's being melodramatic now?" Kurogane turned around. "It's probably just because we have this teenager with us. Teenagers give gray hairs. That's a fact."

"So they say," Fay said wryly. "We can always punt him off to someone so we can mind our own business."

Kurogane glared. "That what you really want to do?"

Fay inhaled. "Let's not get started yet again."

"Face it," Kurogane drawled, as his mind went over the memory, "you wouldn't actually want him to leave."

Fay did not dignify that with a response, which was actually telling in and of itself.

"Fay…what happens if this one dies?"

Fay looked at him. "That what you think will happen?"

"Well he'll die eventually, it's just the matter of when," Kurogane pointed out, "but what I'm asking is…he shares Tsubasa's soul. So what happens to his memories after he dies?"

Fay was very still.

"If there was something you had wanted to say to Tsubasa," Kurogane went on, "maybe he can still hear you. Through this one. Shouldn't that work?"

Fay looked away. "We should go down."

Downstairs was an unwelcome scene.

Men, clad in dark red uniforms, crowded the doorway, blocking anyone from leaving. Fay paused on the stairwell as one soldier dragged a flailing young man from the chair and shoves him to the floor.

"Identification," he demanded, sounding as if it were not the first time.

"It—it's upstairs in my room—"

"That's not him," said a voice from behind the dark red uniforms, and some kind of officer, clad in robes of dark blue, stepped through. "Get rid of that one."

The soldier kicked the young man aside.

Kurogane scanned the scene. Syaoran was not at the table where they usually occupied, but he could not tell where the boy was.

Another man, clad in black, joined the one in blue.

"He's here in this room. I can sense him."

Fay glanced at Kurogane. Kurogane scanned the scene again, but it was harder now that the soldiers
were launching forward. They were peeling people back, getting a good look at their faces before shoving them aside.

"Is this the one?" asked one, hauling another young man with brown hair and brown eyes.

"Too old," said the one in black. "Younger."

Fay grabbed Kurogane's arm just as Kurogane spotted him too. Syaoran was behind a group of men. He was moving with the commotion, but it was artful, how he used the confusion the soldiers caused for themselves to maneuver his way toward the back. Kurogane raised his eyebrows, impressed. But he was not making for the second exit; there were soldiers there. He looked like he was trying to make it toward the larder though. It was on the other end of the room from the stairwell.

Kurogane could see why the boy might choose that spot, as it was immediately out of sight, and going any other way would reveal him more easily, but it was not the wisest move. Now it was harder to get to him, and the larder was a dead end.

He tapped Fay on the shoulder to indicate he should stay, before quietly going back up the stairs. The floorboards creaked slightly, but the sound was hidden by the commotion downstairs. He went quickly down the hall to see if there was a way to reach Syaoran from outside, but the inn was surrounded.

There was no other way down.

He returned to Fay.

"He's gone to the larder," the mage whispered.

He was safe there as long as the soldiers do not think to search there, but larders did not tend to have a second door. He effectively trapped himself.

"We can't have them searching there," Fay looked at him. "Do you think you can get to him?"

Kurogane crouched on the steps. They were out of sight of the soldiers for now, but there was no easy way of going down without revealing himself.

"I need a distraction," he told Fay.

Fay looked thoughtfully at where the boy was hiding. "I have a way," he whispered.

The way he said it made Kurogane pause.

"I'm not going to like this, am I?"

"It's kind of mean," Fay stated.

Kurogane had no idea how to interpret that.

But Fay suddenly fired a small bolt of magic, miniscule and barely a spark, right at the entrance to the larder. With a puff, fire began chewing at the wood.

Kurogane grabbed Fay by the arm. "You better have that under total control."

"I'm keeping track." Fay knocked Kurogane's arm off. "You should get our stuff. We can't stay here after this."
The soldiers caught sight of the fire.

"Put it out!" they yelled at the waiters, standing around uselessly while the patrons panicked.

Kurogane went upstairs. Getting everything was a little tricky; Syaoran did not have a lot of stuff, but the boy was far less compact about his living style than his other counterpart, especially given his recent illness. By the time he joined Fay again, the fire had become rip-roaring, and the patrons had cleared out of the main floor.

"Don't tell me you suffocated the kid," Kurogane exclaimed.

"He's the only one not choking on smoke," Fay coughed.

The smoke was the hard part; it stung the eyes and blocked out all light, on top of clogging up the lungs and making it almost impossible to wade through the room. Fay had to use a bit of magic to clear the air. When they got to the larder, Syaoran was feeling frantically along the sides of the room. Kurogane, blinded by the dark smog, could only reach out and hope he somehow found the boy. He could not see Kurogane and screamed when the man caught him in his arms.

"It's me!" Kurogane yelled at him. "Hold on to me!"

But the roar of the fire and the creaking wood above drowned out his voice. Syaoran struggled, kicked, and Kurogane was compelled to squeeze the boy to him as hard as he could. He knocked into Fay, nearly sending the man crashing into the floor, but somehow Fay understood that Kurogane got what they came for.

The mage parted the flames. Syaoran trembled in Kurogane's arms, body wrenching, gyrating, and Kurogane sensed rather than felt the boy bite down with his teeth. Kurogane's clothes were in the way, and while fear fed strength into Syaoran's limbs, the boy was simply not strong enough. With his arms pinned and head squashed into Kurogane's chest, he had no leverage at all, and he was still weak from being ill. Still, it was difficult to maneuver while keeping Syaoran contained.

If the fire had not belonged to Fay, Kurogane and Syaoran would not have made it out alive.

When they burst out, Fay was instantly met with a shower of magical spells. The mage blocked those with a shockwave that nearly leveled the building while Kurogane and Syaoran were still in it. He then leaped up, his slender body extending into an arc, and spun a spiral of magic from his hands, which he twisted about himself before flicking his arms out. A bright light flashed out with a thunderous clap.

Syaoran had tired at this point, so Kurogane summoned his sword with one arm. He held it in front of him, but it really was not necessary; Fay was holding everyone back. Kurogane slipped to the side while the soldiers dove to the ground to avoid the spells. Syaoran's long legs nearly tangled with his as the boy lost his footing; he was not trying to cooperate right now anyway, and what should have been a sprint turned into a stagger as Kurogane tried to avoid falling on top of the boy. Above, the building groaned, and chips of the rooftop fell; one missed Kurogane's head by a hair, and he bowed over the boy to shield him from any more debris.

The sorcerers that attacked Fay to start with were returning fire. Kurogane could not spare Fay a thought at this time; he needed to get the boy out of the danger zone. The inn's other patrons were scattered to the side, and Kurogane joined them, mingling quickly. Syaoran coughed, body quaking, and once again nearly tripped Kurogane with his feet, but at least he seemed to be cooperating now, and soon Kurogane could let him go.
Syaoran collapsed onto the ground, still coughing. Kurogane began to turn to help Fay, but there was a bright flash of light, one that blinded one of Kurogane's eyes and left the other eye dimmer. He felt Fay grip his elbow and haul him forward. Without thinking, Kurogane followed.

They were already running when he suddenly thought of Syaoran, but the boy was on Fay's other side, also running. They turned around a street corner and ducked into an alley. Fay pulled them against the wall.

"I think we lost them," he said to Kurogane, "but let's lie low for a moment until they truly lose our scent. Stop coughing," he told Syaoran, whose throat rattled, but the boy covered his mouth with both hands. His body convulsed with the spasms, but at least the sound was suppressed.

Kurogane chanced a look around the wall. No one down the street yet. The soldiers had all been too blinded by Fay's spell to know which direction the three of them had gone.

"I need to know how they're sensing the boy," Fay hissed. "How are they sensing you?"

Syaoran's nose and chin were covered with mucus; the smoke had irritated his airway and he had nothing to wipe his face with. Fay glanced at him and ignored his state.

"Can they track him?" Kurogane demanded.

"Probably. We better move." Fay grabbed the boy by the arm and pulled him forward. Kurogane banked behind. They slipped out of the alley and into a main street, where carriages were pulling and pedestrians were minding their own business. Syaoran's face was wet and gross, but none of them stopped to clean him off. Behind them, smoke curled high into the sky.

"We can't keep running forever if they can sense him," Kurogane told Fay. "Is there any way to hide his magic?"

"Not without giving me time," Fay replied.

"You should have thought of this sooner," Kurogane remonstrated.

"I should have done a lot of things."

True.

They cut across a plaza. Syaoran was stumbling and exhausted by the time they ducked behind a latrine. It smelled, and flies buzzed all over the structure, but Fay planted Syaoran on the ground, lying flat on his back, and then placed a hand on his forehead and a hand right below his navel. Syaoran bucked up in surprise.

"What—"

"Don't fight me," Fay warned, "we don't have time for the easier way." His eyes glowed, followed by his hands, then Syaoran's skin lit up in pale green. The boy bucked up again, hissing in pain, but it was over in two seconds.

"That should hold for an hour," Fay said to Kurogane. "We better make sure we're well and truly far from here before it fades."

"What's happening?" Syaoran exclaimed.

Fay seized the boy by the collar and hauled him up. Syaoran staggered like a newborn foal, but
managed to keep his balance.

"They're after you," said the mage, "and what they do to you will be at least as bad as what they did to your mother. No dawdling. Come." He grabbed Syaoran by the arm again and pulled.

"Why are they after me?!" the boy's eyes were wide.

Technically, Kurogane and Fay did not *know* the soldiers and sorcerers were after Syaoran, but considering the circumstances, it was a safe bet. Fay did not answer, and Kurogane did not supply either, keeping an eye behind them for any signs of pursuit. Syaoran ran out of breath and had to focus on keeping up; the boy was not a slow runner, but he could not maintain a good speed for long.

They had to slow. Which was fine, because at the gates, the guards were screening for foreigners, checking everyone's identification.

Fay looked at them. There were about fifteen guards, spread out across the gates. He turned to Kurogane.

"I can't use magic, that will draw their attention," Fay warned.

Kurogane assessed. Fifteen guards. A number of them would have to die.

"You take Syaoran," he told Fay. "I'll clear a path and beat off the rest. Don't stop and don't look back."

Syaoran paled. "What are you planning on doing?"

Fay adjusted his grip on the boy's arm and grabbed their stuff from Kurogane. "They're going to burn you alive, boy. They want your ashes and they'll burn you alive, set you on fire like a human torch, and then when your whole body is combusted dust, they'll use that to summon the most powerful demon to ever walk the mortal realms, and all of us, Kurogane, me, your friends at Kuroiyama, will be set on fire as well. Don't question, don't look back, and keep your feet moving. Kurogane, watch yourself."

"Go with Fay," Kurogane touched the boy's forehead with his free hand. "He'll keep you safe. It's going to be alright."

"Kurogane," Syaoran's eyes widened plaintively.

"It's going to be alright," Kurogane repeated.

Fay pulled. Syaoran turned to go.

Kurogane shifted his sword. It hummed, eager for blood.

*Time to introduce myself,* he thought, looking at the guards.

Kurogane caught up with the other two about an hour later. Syaoran was naked from the waist up, shivering in the snow, while Fay was painstakingly tattooing something on his back. It was a little like the tattoo that the late King Ashura once placed on Fay himself, though the patterns were different.

*Are you sure this is wise?* Syaoran was still sick. Kurogane was too tired, though. He was wet and cold, and he stank.
Syaoran cowered at the sight of him, not recognizing him at first. When he did realize it was Kurogane, he did not seem to think this was much better. Kurogane plopped himself down in the snow across from them, which stained red under him. His face was covered with crimson crusts.

"Did you bathe in their blood before joining us?" Fay paused to remark.

It was a bloody battle. To say the least.

"I need to wash."

Fay pointed to their clothes. "There's a stream about two hundred steps that way. Go bathe and change. You look like a demon come to life."

Syaoran was eyeing him like he really was a demon come to life. Strangely, Kurogane felt a curl of amusement.

This was ridiculous.

He cracked a grin at the boy. "Doing alright?" he teased, and then regretted it, because some of the blood went into his mouth.

Twenty years. One would think that after twenty years of experience, he would know not to open his mouth too much when his face was covered with such stuff.

"I'm trying to work," Fay shooed him away.

The stream was ice cold. There was no helping it though. He got the blood off his skin and hurried back after changing into new clothes, feeling very much less than clean, but it was as far as he could stand at this point. In that time, Fay was done, and had Syaoran wrapped up tight in dry robes and a cloak. Syaoran gave Kurogane a wide-eyed stare as the ninja joined them once more. Kurogane dropped next to him; Fay had cleared out a dry patch of ground, which was nice, because Kurogane did not fancy getting wet again.

"Doing alright?" he asked again, more serious this time. He ruffled the boy's hair, which the boy allowed, but Syaoran was very quiet.

After a long moment of silence, Kurogane took a good look at him, and ducked his head to look into his eyes.

"Hey...it's me."

"What happens when you stop caring about me anymore?" Syaoran asked softly.

Kurogane leaned away, looking into the distance. The woods were sparse, but muted from the crusty snow. Above, the sun was continuing to rise; it had not reached noon yet.

He thought of his father, a brave, strong warrior that he had always aspired to be. His father had died around the age Kurogane was now. When Kurogane had been a child, he had always thought his father was perfect. The idea that his father might hurt him had never crossed his mind, despite seeing all the evidence that the man could. It was just inconceivable that he would ever want to, or be willing to.

But Kurogane was not Syaoran's father. And the question made him think, because his first instinct was to promise Syaoran that he would never stop caring about Syaoran.
But he was not sure that was a promise he could make. Did he have the right to?

"Kurogane," Fay called. "There's another storm coming. We need to find shelter."

Kurogane opened his mouth, then closed it. He blinked. Turned to the boy again.

"Come," he reached for the boy. "We'll talk about this later."
On the Run

That afternoon, the snowstorm hit.

In a stroke of luck that had Kurogane wondering if Syaoran was going to be the Sakura in this world, the boy found an abandoned outpost, used by lumberjacks a long time ago. It was cluttered with dried up growth and there were trees that blocked the door and most of the windows, but the thing was intact and with a little squeezing, all three of them were able to get inside.

Tools like axes and saws cluttered the place, but there was room for the three of them to huddle together. There was no way to make a fire in the shelter, so Kurogane wrapped himself and Syaoran in the same cloak while Fay watched by the spare windows. It was not a very good place to stay; the structure was hard to enter and hard to exit, so it would be very easy for them to get ambushed. For the purposes of the snowstorm, however, it really could not get much better, and small as the place was, the heat from three warm bodies made the place just a touch bearable.

Syaoran burned up within half an hour, coughing more and more violently as time went on. Kurogane held him close and prayed desperately that they were not going to lose the boy to this illness. They had no way of making a fire or brewing medicine, and Syaoran was not the healthiest child to begin with. Holding him this close, he could feel the sharp edges of his bones.

If this Syaoran died, it might just kill him.

At long last, Syaoran, exhausted from coughing, finally fell asleep. Fay came to join Kurogane in their huddle, sandwiching the boy between them.

"It's going to be alright," said the mage. "It's different this time."

"We can't lose him again," Kurogane whispered. "Not this one. We just found him. I'll challenge Shinigami himself."

"We'll take him to a healer as soon as the storm is over," Fay promised. "He's just exhausted," but there was fear in his eyes too.

He left their side to collect snow, which he folded into a sock and pressed over Syaoran's forehead. Syaoran seemed to like that, and so when the snow melted and the sock became warm, Fay did it again. Eventually, Syaoran's whole body seemed to cool down a little. Kurogane closed his eyes, laid his cheek over the brown hair, and let his own weariness take him.

Syaoran was beside him, clad in the clothes his clone wore from Clow Country. He said nothing, and Kurogane said nothing, but there was a sense that they were having a conversation anyway. Syaoran looked out across a golden desert, and he raised his gloved hand to point: up on the dunes was a tower, gleaming bronze and copper, and they had to make their way there, but the trek was long.

*Father used to say...over and over...that he loved me, more than anything in the world. He would say it over and over again, and he would always be so sad. Like he was apologizing for something yet to happen to me. It had happened to him already, but it was coming for me. I had trusted him but I never understood why he was so afraid I would not know, as if I would forget it since the last time he said so.*

*Mother used to say...there are those who love you, who will find you when we are not with you. I used to be so afraid, because she would look different, as if replaced by a ghost that brought*
ominous tidings.

They were afraid, but I was happy, then.

Now I can't remember what that feels like.

He woke when Syaoran fidgeted in his arms. The teen's stomach emphasized the change with a loud, prolonged growl.

"Goodness," said Fay, "that is impressive."

The poor lad blushed beet red. "Sorry…"

"Seriously?" Kurogane grumbled, half-asleep and also a little bit thrown by the sheer volume of that sound, "you're apologizing for that? We need to break you out of this habit."

He felt a flood of amusement then, mixed with tenderness, and then pity. Poor child. They had no food on them.

"When the storm is over," he promised.

Syaoran said nothing; he was probably used to hunger, Kurogane remembered. Fay got some snow in the water skin, which he set aside to melt. When it liquified, he fed some to Syaoran, who drank thirstily. He had to relieve himself afterwards, and Kurogane was nervous because Syaoran looked a little wobbly and had to go out into the storm for this, but the boy's pride and determination prevented him from accepting supervision for this activity, and he was able to make it back intact. His limbs were frozen from this endeavor, though, so Kurogane wrapped him back up and warmed Syaoran's hands with his own.

Fay joined them as well. Syaoran was a little nervous at first, but Fay wrapped an arm around his waist without a word, and after a while Syaoran curled and fell asleep again.

Kurogane fell asleep out of a mix of boredom and comfortable warmth. When he woke, the cabin was dark. The snow had layered up on the windows. Syaoran's body was burning hot, and the boy whimpered when Kurogane moved him. He had been quiet when asleep, but upon waking, he started coughing, the sound wet and rattling.

Fay felt around the darkness, and Kurogane listened to him probe.

"It's night out," he reported, "I can see the sky. But the snow is very high; it's going to be a challenge to walk through."

"We should try to move anyway." Kurogane looked at Syaoran, who was pushing himself up. The boy was actually going to try to do it. "Stop, not so fast." He was fairly certain that if they made the teen travel, Syaoran was going to fall and not get up again.

Fay looked around. "We have tools but no wood."

"There are trees."

"I can walk," Syaoran was turning red.

"You want to chop down some trees then?" Fay gestured to a hatchet.

Kurogane looked outside, but even as he started to affirm, a curl of worry suddenly coiled around his stomach.
It was going to take a while for them to assemble a sled. The storm was already over.

"What is it?" Fay asked.

"I think we should leave now."

Fay was used to Kurogane's sixth sense for danger, so he did not ask questions. Syaoran did not know any better, though he did insist on walking. Kurogane did not see a reason to fight him when he did have enough energy to at least walk on his own for a little bit.

They gathered their things. Syaoran had trouble with the bags, so Kurogane and Fay split the heavier loads, leaving Syaoran to carry some extra clothes. They went out into the snow-covered land, where the snow was thick up to the knees. Kurogane went ahead to clear a path for the other two; Syaoran went in the middle and Fay rounded up behind. The trail would be a clear marker for any pursuers, but for now they had no choice, and perhaps the cover of darkness would protect them. They would have to find a way to break the trail somewhere ahead.

To his credit, Syaoran managed to cover quite a distance, though he did trip a few times and nearly twist his ankle. They managed to break a trail when they reached a mountain pass. By then, the sun was starting to rise. Kurogane opted to climb, and Syaoran made it up, but once they reached the top, the boy could go no further.

They risked a short break, but Kurogane's instincts were still screaming at him to move. The weather was quiet, and it would be easy for men with horses to catch up to them. But Syaoran's fever burned again, and the boy went pale right in front of him when he tried to stand.

"I'm sorry," he sighed miserably, bending his head low to avoid passing out.

The child really could not catch a break.

Fay peered over the side. "We can make a stand here," he pointed out. "We have higher ground."

Kurogane shook his head. "He can't get out of the way like this."

"So then what? We can't move too quick if one of us has to carry all the bags because the other is carrying him."

Kurogane sighed. "Better than nothing. You carry him. I'll take the bags."

"I can carry the bags. You'll break everything."

Kurogane glared. "Seriously, Fay?"

But he ended up carrying Syaoran on his back anyway. Syaoran was light, his body hot as fire, and Kurogane's heart dropped down to his stomach as the boy draped over him, limp and exhausted. He was able to carry some things with Syaoran's weight, but Fay did not allow him, telling him to focus on "not dropping the boy".

They actually made good pace. Eventually, they stopped at a glade to rest. Syaoran looked a little better, and was able to stand on his own two feet without swaying. His stomach had not shut up for the past half an hour, and Kurogane could not tell if he was red because of the fever or because he was embarrassed.

"How are we doing?" Fay asked.
Kurogane raised his head. They had made a good distance, and he was weary and hungry as well. They could go further if they had to, but if they were going to stop, they might as well hunt.

"I think it's time for breakfast."

"...Are you going to hunt with a sword?" Syaoran asked, frowning in bemusement.

Hunting with a sword, Kurogane had found out long ago, was actually a seriously bad idea. The sword was good at what it did, but that was not hunting. He had not brought a bow for this journey; like most warriors, Kurogane had the basics of shooting, but he was far from an expert archer and was never comfortable with such a weapon.

Fay snorted inelegantly. "No, he brought a sling. Though finding game to use that with in this season...you might get lucky."

"We can't hunt big game anyway. Can't afford to stay in one place for that long." Kurogane pointed out. "I'll be back."

He killed a hare. He tracked back to its burrow and found a nest of kits. He killed those. On his way back, he wondered how Syaoran was going to react to this, but then decided that at some point the boy needed to man up. He could understand why Syaoran might be afraid of Kurogane when he killed other men, but at some point Syaoran had to learn that life was harsh and one had to be hard enough to survive.

But he need not have bothered, because Syaoran did not even bat an eyelash at the rabbits.

"Nice job," Fay approved, having assembled a campfire.

As in the past, Fay was responsible for the cooking. Syaoran helped by skinning the kits, and he did so with a kind of practiced ease that reminded Kurogane that he really did not actually know much about this boy. Syaoran had been able to sneak around Shirasaki Castle, he reflected. Had lived under a certain horror in Kuroiyama. For all his apparent naiveté, his past was not an empty one. He was not like the Princess Sakura, who spent much of the early days of their journey without her memories, relying heavily on the Syaoran of that time to preserve her integrity of character. This Syaoran had a completely different life, and if he was somewhat weak and brittle for it, that did not mean he had nothing to contribute, or that he had any lack of understanding of how the universe worked.

They cooked the meat. Syaoran was famished, and he suckled at the marrow, making Kurogane wonder if the boy was anemic like Tsubasa had been. Before his collapse, Tsubasa had also suckled at the marrows. It was a habit he did not have initially, and Kurogane remembered taking note of it, but he had seen no harm in it and never dwelled on the matter...

Syaoran ate a whole kit and part of the hare. Without salt, the meat had no taste and was barely palatable. They were all hungry afterwards; there was not much on the animals, but it was not the gnawing pain of before, and Syaoran looked better.

"Shall we?" Fay asked.

"Let's," Kurogane looked at Syaoran, who got to his feet easily enough.

They put out the fire and hid signs of their camp as best as they could. Syaoran was able to walk. They were able to trek until nightfall, but they were off the paths and there was no shelter this time around. Darkness froze the air, and Syaoran, febrile and exhausted, was especially vulnerable. They
made a fire again, and cleared the snow so that Syaoran could lie down. Fay took the first watch, and Kurogane wrapped himself together with Syaoran to help generate warmth.

He roused in the middle of the night as Fay was adding logs. Syaoran was asleep, head pressed to his chest and legs entwined with his because of the cold. Before this, only Fay had been so intimate. Even Tsubasa kept his distance, for propriety's sake.

He shook the thoughts away. "Fay," he whispered, "you should get some sleep."

"It's fine," Fay whispered back.

"Fay," Kurogane glared, "he's asleep. It's warmer here."

Fay looked down at the boy. "He'll wake up if you leave."

"He's too deep," Kurogane insisted. "He's exhausted."

Fay was weary too. His eyes were swollen. But he hesitated, staring at the boy. He looked heartsick.

"Fay," Kurogane hissed. "Hurry up, you fool. I have to get up anyway." He had to go relieve himself.

Syaoran was loose-limbed, and did not rouse when Kurogane disentangled himself. He started to curl up into a ball when Kurogane left their makeshift bedspread, but Fay soon replaced him, wrapping the cloaks around them, and Kurogane donned Fay's cloak to leave the camp. He did his business quickly and came back to find Fay staring, open-eyed, at the boy in his arms. Syaoran had curled around Fay just as easily as Kurogane, and did not rouse, as promised.

Seeing them reminded Kurogane of the initial days with the clone and the princess—back before they knew he was a clone, or about Fei Wong Reed and his whole rotten plan. Back then, Sakura had been unconscious most of the time, and she had seemed quite helpless. It was not exactly the same; Syaoran loved Sakura far more than Fay would ever love Syaoran, but it was still kind of ironic, how once upon a time Syaoran was the protector and guardian, and now he was the one who needed to be protected.

Well, Kurogane thought unhappily, the truth was he probably had always needed protecting. There was just no one to do it. Those baby-faced apprentices at the dojo, and if the Princess had not sent Kurogane and Fay had not fled Celes, Syaoran would have had to protect her on his own. Tsubasa would have had to face Fei Wong Reed on his own. One lone fourteen-year-old against the man that had stolen his life away.

He was not entirely certain what Fay was thinking, but Fay had his arms around Syaoran in a secure hold, and stared into the fire for a few minutes before closing them to sleep.

Idiot, Kurogane thought fondly. As if Fay could ever be indifferent to Syaoran, any more than Kurogane could. And it was interesting, how Syaoran trusted Fay on this level. Had trusted Kurogane, come to think of it.

Maybe some things the soul knows, even if the body does not? Surely it went both ways.

He listened to the silence of the night, broken only by the crackling flames. When he added wood, he looked over to where the two of them huddled and saw the shifting shadows. Fay was weeping, face ducked into Syaoran's brown hair.

There were those before and those after, Kurogane thought, but none of them had come back to
haunt us like this. In the form of a different version, close and yet not the same. Fay's brother had never shown up anywhere, nor did King Ashura, though now Kurogane wondered if they should look for them; it was possible those two might also be in Nihon. Unless they were in the wrong era to meet them. And Fay had come to terms with their deaths more easily than Syaoran's. *Probably because neither of them had been angry at him?* Or he did not have to watch them die in agony?

*Whatever the reason…*

He pretended not to notice Fay's tears. Fay would just clam up if Kurogane drew attention to it. After a while, the mage's own weariness took him, and he went still. The cold was sharp, and Kurogane felt enervated in the ensuing silence. The fire was hypnotizing, and he stared into the light, reminiscing. He wondered how things would be now.

*This one is ours.* More than the other had been. Part of him felt guilty, and great sorrow, but at the same time Kurogane knew that sometimes that was just the way it was. The whole point of the latter half of their journey had been to restore Syaoran to his former parents. There would not have been any point in forging a deeper bond, just to watch the boy walk away, and so they never did.

Though Kurogane now wondered…if Syaoran father had been his own clone, and this had been a time paradox…did that mean there was a real set of parents, somehow? Who would they have been?

He considered the stroke of fate that brought all three of them together to one place, at the same time. Three completely different reasons, and they each could have been a day off. Or a world off.

*No matter.* Syaoran was dead, and this Syaoran was alive and theirs. Fay was finally forced to confront this; he could try, and he could deny, but ultimately Syaoran was his as much as he was Kurogane's. The mage never had a chance. And they have a new chance.

Kurogane was going to make sure they did not waste it.

They came across a shrine the next day. Syaoran was hungry and still sick, so Fay risked going forward to see if they might find safe harbor. The shrine had a number of armed priestesses, and was to the goddess of the wind. The High Priestess, an elderly woman with snow-white hair who was also the only one without a weapon of some sort, perceived they were with a child, before looking at the two of them.

"You are the Black Steel of Shirasaki?" she asked Kurogane.

"So I am," Kurogane said, doing his utmost to keep the challenge out of his one. He was willing to do a lot at this point to get the boy some food and safe harbor.

"And you are a visitor from afar," she looked at Fay.

Fay smiled, looking a little like the Fay of ten years ago, tired and resigned and trying to hide it all. "One might say."

She looked at Syaoran again. "Come in, then. You are weary, and the little one won't last long like this."

It was a relief, because Kurogane and Fay were tired and hungry too. The shrine was well-kept, though getting on in years. Idols of the goddess and her pages and handmaidens loomed above incense and candles. The priestesses wore gray and black. They carried coal to the main hall where everyone convened for warmth. There were no males here; it seemed like the women did everything. They carried small daggers and slim swords even when they did their usual chores, and eyed
Kurogane's own blade with some curiosity but not a hint of fear.

Kurogane sensed that if he were to challenge any of these priestesses to combat, he might have to struggle a little. Something about the way they moved hinted that they were all more than each appeared.

The travelers were fed boiled turnips and rice—not the most filling, but better than nothing. The High Priestess joined them, and stared at Syaoran for a long time, as did her associate, a younger, middle-aged woman with a severe expression.

"He has a pure heart, your little one," said the High Priestess, when Kurogane was close to finishing. Syaoran had a quick start, but was now eating slowly. Fay was digging in; the mage was ravenous this time as well.

"So he does," Kurogane replied, hoping this would win them some favor.

"He is not your son, though?"

Kurogane honestly did not know how to answer this.

"He might as well be at this point," Fay supplied.

Syaoran's eyes darted around at this.

It was an awkward awakening for the boy that morning; he had actually woken up first, needing to relieve himself, and was stunned to realize Fay was the one holding him. Fay, exhausted, took some time to rouse as well. They parted without saying anything, but Syaoran did not know how to behave around Fay anymore.

"Where are you going?"

"Sikayama."

"The child will need to rest a bit before you set forth again."

Kurogane looked at Syaoran and agreed.

"You may stay here for as long as you need, of course," said the High Priestess, though she looked troubled. Kurogane did not dare ask why.

The priestesses had medicines, which Syaoran dearly needed. They took him to lie down, and Kurogane and Fay chatted with the High Priestess in the meantime. Kurogane informed her of what they knew of Kuroiyama. The High Priestess shook her head; she knew about the dealings there, of course, but had no power to intervene.

"The Emperor is a strong mage," she said grimly. "His practices only make him more powerful. How fortunate that this little one managed to escape, and to find the two of you."

Kurogane had only never stopped thinking about that ever since meeting Syaoran.

Fay's face was blank.

_I saw you last night_, Kurogane thought. Fay could be so annoying stubborn.

Syaoran was asleep when they checked on him, breathing so deeply he was almost snoring. One of the priestesses sat by his side to change the cloth over his forehead; he was still febrile.
"Was he like this in Kuroiyama?" Fay wondered. "How did he even live to be fourteen?"

"Might be why his mother was so protective," said Kurogane.

It was nice to hand the boy off to someone else though. The priestesses, being what they were, made better caretakers than Kurogane and Fay would, try as they might. Fay and Kurogane used the opportunity to explore the grounds together, though it soon became too cold to walk about. The chill was very sharp, and Kurogane wondered why; he never had trouble with winters before, but it seemed the cold was harsher this time.

Maybe the wind goddess had something to do with it.

Syaoran slept until evening; the boy was truly exhausted. Fay and Kurogane sat together near the fire at the main hall, where all the priestesses convened for mutual warmth. The visitors were left alone, as the priestesses were engrossed in their studies. Kurogane tried to find out what it was they were learning, but found it all too dull to keep his interest. The High Priestess eventually joined them, and they ended up talking a little bit about Shirasaki, what had been happening over the last ten years. They could have talked about their adventures from before, but Kurogane did not feel like sharing those stories with such strangers, even if these strangers were being gracious hosts. Fay was similarly quiet on the matter, and so the hours passed until it was time for supper.

The priestesses were very fond of Syaoran. They were less impressed with Kurogane and Fay, but Syaoran, with his soft eyes and sweet smile, had a way of effortlessly charming warrior hearts. They also noted his poor food intake, and asked Fay and Kurogane about it.

"As far as we know, that's how he is," Kurogane told them. "The healer we took him to said that was just how his stomach grew."

"He has a lot of magical potential," said the severe priestess, "but he won't reach it if he doesn't eat."

Kurogane produced the herbs he had bought for the formula, which she scrutinized with a grim expression.

"I suppose these will do." She handed it to one of the other sisters. "We'll brew a dose; he hasn't taken any for a while, has he?"

"No."

The High Priestess and the severe priestess convened when Syaoran drank his brew, and spoke in low whispers after the boy went to bed. A little perturbed by this, Fay stepped over to eavesdrop. They noticed him before he could overhear much, but opened the conversation to both of them.

"Your ward," said the High Priestess, "who were his real parents, if I may ask?"

"His mother was a maid in Kuroiyama Castle," said Kurogane. "He does not know his father and neither do we."

The priestesses glanced at each other as if this response made no sense.

"What is it?" Fay asked.

"What was his mother's name?"

"Li Yelan." Black hair and fair face, Syaoran had described.
The severe priestess looked at Fay, and then looked at Kurogane. "Do you really regard him as your son?"

Kurogane inhaled. His temper was not as quick to rise as it used to be, but he was reaching the end of his patience. "What is it?" he demanded, instead of answering.

The High Priestess regarded him in silence for a long time.

"The story is…" she trailed, and looked at Fay. "If you would be so kind, my lord. This is something we must convey to the Black Steel in private. He may share with you later, if he so chooses, but this is something he has to hear first."

"What relates to me relates to him," Kurogane objected. "He'll know what I know."

"This does not to you," said the severe priestess. "This relates to you and the boy. Please, indulge us. If you wish to inform Lord Fay, you may afterwards, but this first account is for your ears alone, or else you will not hear it at all."

It was on the tip of his tongue to assert that if Fay was not going to be present, then Kurogane did not want to hear this…but that seemed petty. After all, he could always relate to Fay later. He was not sure why the priestesses were pushing the mage away, but perhaps it was because they had no way of understanding the depth of the bond between the two men. It might be safer, in their eyes, and ultimately result in less harm.

He looked at the fair-haired man. "Fay…"

Fay did not look happy. In fact, he seemed scared, of all things, but he drew back without a word.

_I'll tell you everything_, Kurogane tried to convey.

The priestesses bowed to the mage, who did not bow in turn. He merely turned away.

Kurogane faced them when they looked at him.

"Tell me," he exclaimed.

"Long ago," the High Priestess began, "there was a man named Clow Reed."
"Clow Reed's power is enough to rival that of immortal deities," said the severe priestess. "He is not from this world, but he comes from a realm like this one, and is human like you and me. It is said that he can stop Death in its tracks with a mere will."

Kurogane knew this.

"Power like that," said the High Priestess, "causes echoes throughout the realms. Throughout time. The child you have with you carries the blood of Clow. Though his power does not match his ancestor, he bears the same quality of magic. But more than that, he appears to be one of these echoes."

"...What does that mean?"

"Ten years ago, it was said that you went away," the High Priestess intoned. "You came back with the Wizard from Beyond. But you brought back more than him, didn't you?"

Kurogane paused. "No," he said softly. "Just memories."

The two women looked at him.

"Why do you ask? Is it the boy?"

"His ties to this world are weak," said the High Priestess. "Past the threshold, he will fade. Though he carries the blood of Clow Reed, it will not sustain him."

A wash of cold swept through him.

"How do I prevent that?" he asked numbly.

"It is not clear to me," said she. "I've discussed with my sister here, and we cannot make sense of what we see. Perhaps you know more that you do not reveal."

"For the sake of the child," said the severe associate, "we can tell you what we do see."

"...Go on, then. I'm listening."

"We see something very strange about him. His father is a Lord Kurogane of Suwa."

Kurogane blinked.

"Also a man named Li Syaoran," the High Priestess looked at the other, "whose identity is unclear, other than being a descendant of Clow, but he also seemed to be his own son."

"...And then you," the severe priestess paused for a long moment, "as you are."
Kurogane folded his arms. "..." He had no idea how to even start.

"He also seems to have two different mothers three different times," the severe associate continued. "One is a Lady Yelan of Honkon, who was a descendant of Clow Reed. One was a woman named Li Sakura, who was his direct daughter, but...not. And then Yelan again, except she was not a lady but a slave."

**Slave.**

"Then there is his destiny," the High Priestess went on while Kurogane's mind spun around the word, "we see him in a tall crown and golden robes, with far greater power than any Emperor we've ever known. Under his rule, Nihon is united into a great empire, in a reign lasting sixty years and founding a dynasty that would last for a thousand years."

"He dies shortly before turning fifteen, in an illness that turns his very blood into poison. His body is buried in the sands of a distant realm."

"He faces a dark evil in Shirasaki...what happens after is unclear."

Kurogane turned away, feeling strangely dizzy, as if he were spinning, or the world was spinning.

"No." His own voice sounded faint and far away. "That makes no sense." He had never touched a woman this way. Unless there was some...but he was certain. There was no way he could have been bewitched either; Kurogane had been good at what he did.

But then he remembered the clones.

The time loop.

"You see our dilemma," said the severe priestess. "It is almost like we are seeing..."

"Three different timelines," said the High Priestess, "folded over him."

The world seemed to tilt. Kurogane felt himself sway.

"Black Steel," the High Priestess caught him, grip surprisingly hard. "what does all of this mean?"

Like chunks of a puzzle slowly clicking together, Kurogane could feel everything connect. He saw his mother and her kind eyes, his father and his vivacious smile. The horrible ending they faced, except that—that was all Fei Wong Reed's fault. Without Reed, his parents would have still been alive. And Kurogane—Kurogane would have grown up to inherit his father's land.

Become the Lord of Suwa.

Married.

Sired a son.

Tsubasa.

But Fei Wong Reed killed his parents. And Kurogane was adopted by Shirasaki.

He never had a chance to marry, never had a chance to sire a son. And because Reed had intervened with Tsubasa at the center of it all, the boy had gotten new parents.

His own clones, who went back in time to preserve Syaoran's existence.
And then Syaoran died.

His body was buried in Clow Country.

*Syaoran. Tsubasa.* Ten years and the pain never went away, only shifted to the side, left simmering, and now it all rushed to the fore. Syaoran, ashamed of his weakness, his illness—Syaoran, believing that Kurogane was ashamed of him—Kurogane, who had never held the boy, never hugged him, never told him he was proud of him, *his son—Tsubasa was supposed to be my son—*

His stomach cramped. He shuddered. Opened his mouth. Retch. His knees felt weak, and he stumbled—he could not see the furniture in the room, the lights of the candles. The snow splattered outside with the wind. His son. He was supposed to have a son. He was supposed to have grown up in that happy home, his parents alive and proud and safe, and he was supposed to have a *wife,* and a *son,* and that son was supposed to be Tsubasa, Syaoran, that golden-eyed, defiant youngster with a heart as pure as snow, whom he had let *die,* had watched from the sides as the boy pushed himself past the brink, had avoided as the child suffered on that sick bed in the hospital, lonely, humiliated, sick, *dying—*

His knees exploded in pain as they collided with the floor. His stomach heaved. Tears stung at his eyes. *No. No. Please. No.* Syaoran had been right there. They had journeyed together. *he had been with—but that made no sense.* Syaoran was fourteen and Kurogane was twenty-five, there was no way the timing even *worked—*

"No," he heard himself moaning. "No, it can't be—he was too old. I was too young. I—"

"My lord?"

*Like timelines overlapping.* The timelines overlapped. The clones went back in time. Syaoran—Syaoran was displaced too. He did not have to wait for Kurogane to be old enough, because he was no longer his son.

Fei Wong Reed stole him.

Fei Wong Reed killed him.

"No."

"My lord—"

"*No. Please.*" Kurogane covered his eyes as tears poured forth. "No. No no no…no…"

*I had killed him.* Kurogane had killed him. With the flat high-pitched sound from the monitors as the lines went flat, and Syaoran's eyes diverged, his face going slack, Kurogane had said, *No. He has suffered enough.* He had abandoned him to Fay early on so that he could go around the block, away from the stench of urine and feces, away from the pitiful figure the boy had made.

*Tsubasa was supposed to be mine.* And he had been right there, all that time, and Kurogane had not even *known—*

The High Priestess grabbed him. "Black Steel, breathe! Look at me."

He was gasping for air. His vision blurred. Black dots bloomed, like shadowed flowers.

*No,* he thought.
Then all went black.

The wind shifted the sands, and the grains hitting each other built into a roar. He saw Syaoran's cloaked figure in front of him, hood up and hem slapping at his legs. Ahead was their destination, but Syaoran would not make it. With every step, the side of the dunes sank under his boot, drawing him back. Down. He was sinking.

Kurogane called out, but the roar of the desert drowned out his voice. Ahead, the tower loomed. Ever the archaeologist, Syaoran's eyes lit up in sparkling amber at the thought of exploring the interior and finding its secrets, but his place was not the world inside that tower.

_Syaoran, no. That adventure is not for you. Can't you stop for a while. There will always be more wishes. There will always be more losses. There will always be things to fix. Can't you rejoice in a victory for now. Can't you accept a new family. We are right here._

But the boy was afraid. He needed a home, he needed shelter. He was gravely wounded, from the lonely years when he was possessed entirely by Fei Wong Reed, and he had been so young, too young to have known who he was before it was all stripped away. He looked at Kurogane and Fay with an increasingly wretchedness in his eyes even as his lips twisted into a smile. Magic crackled at his fingers, his sword a loyal ally, and the princess beckoned from her fairy-tale kingdom where his journey began, but he trekked stubbornly onwards and he sank and sank and he never turned back to look at those he was leaving behind for his quest. Never called for help.

And the sands covered his body till the cloak weighed flat, and the tower, bronze and copper, crumbled into dust. It was never a real landmark, just the piling of the sand and shadow and sunlight such that it looked like something else, and once it faded there was nothing except the empty sky beyond.

He felt a hand squeeze his.

"Lord Kurogane?" he heard Syaoran call.

Kurogane opened his eyes.

He was lying on a mat, a blanket over him. His outer robes had been shed, and he was only wearing his inner garments.

Syaoran was kneeling next to him, eyes wide and neck craning out, long and slender like a stork. One of his hands held Kurogane's own.

The boy needed a haircut.

"Lord Fay," Syaoran called out, "he's awake."

Fay swept into view, looking murderous, though relieved.

"Kurogane," he pushed Syaoran to the side, "are you alright?"

But Kurogane wanted Syaoran to come back. He sat up, allowing Fay to support him, and reached out to the boy, who had scooted away and was staring at him uncertainly. The ninja reached his left hand out.

"Come here," he beckoned.
He took that small face in his hands. Looked into those eyes. Syaoran had brown hair and golden-brown eyes, which looked like polished amber under certain lighting. His skin was tan, his nose firm and straight, his ears round and tipped against his head. He traced the brows, ran his fingers through the long locks, brushed that gaunt cheek.

People always said that Kurogane was the splitting image of his father. Syaoran was a beautiful child, but there was no resemblance at all. He might as well have dropped from the sky.

*Maybe he did.*

"Kurogane," Fay murmured, "what are you doing?"

Realizing how this must look, Kurogane let go. He managed to restrain himself from taking the boy's hand instead.

"I'm alright." He sat up fully, away from Fay.

"Kurogane."

"I'm fine." Kurogane folded his legs under him.

Fay leaned close. "You *passed out,*" he hissed. "What on earth did they say to you to make you that upset?"

He had promised to tell Fay everything, but Kurogane hesitated.

He had no idea how to even start.

"I need to think," he stated, and moved away.

"Kurogane!"

"Syaoran," Kurogane ignored Fay to address the boy, "did they wake you for this?" It was still dark out. Dawn had to be hours away still.

"I was already awake," the boy admitted. "It—would you like some water, my lord? I can go fetch some—"

*My lord.*

"Fay, can you put him to bed?"

Fay gave him a pointed look, but did not ultimately protest. Syaoran looked at them nervously as Fay gently herded him away.

*"It's fine,"* the mage said. *"I'll take care of him. You are still ill; you shouldn't be up. You need rest."*

Kurogane listened to their retreating footsteps before looking at the window. Through the shutters, the stars glimmered in the sky.

He thought.

Fay watched him think.

Kurogane watched the wall.
He had no idea how to explain any of this to Fay.

He had never even been near a Li Yelan. No one of her description.

He could not have.

The time loop. Syaoran, the offspring of his own clone.

The clone, fathering his own original.

They had gone back in time.

Kurogane wanted to vomit. There had to be another explanation, another way, but he had no idea how to even begin.

"You had asked Watanuki," he finally stated. It was not what he meant to start with, but once the words were out, he did not try to retract them.

Fay turned his head to stare at the same wall. "I did," he said quietly.

"He said there was no way to save him."

Fay was silent for a while. "No," he said lowly.

Kurogane had no idea where to go from there, so he was silent for another ten minutes.

Syaoran, head bowed as Kurogane gave him a cloak to cover the atrocious clothes Fei Wong clad him in, but there was nothing he could do to hide the face that had hurt Fay, nearly killed him.

Fei Wong Reed's last remarks, that they would all have to pay for their sins, and the sudden quiet afterwards.

Fay, considering their next steps, not quite willing to abandon Syaoran even though the journey seemed over. Kurogane, thinking about Princess Tomoyo and war-torn Nihon, for the first time feeling that he had a stronger tie to those besides the sovereigns of Shirasaki.

A son he should have had, coming to his true father for help, though both of them had been oblivious.

No such thing as coincidences, Ichihara Yuko liked to say.

"His mother was a slave, not just a servant," he then said, which was not what he had wanted to say either, but he did not try to take them back.

"…Oh."

"I don't know a kingdom called Honkon. Do you?"

"…If you don't then I wouldn't."

After another long pause, Kurogane tried to say what exactly the priestesses had told him. What this all meant. What this would mean. But he still had no idea how to start.

And Fay.

He had never—and maybe the priestesses were wrong, but even as Kurogane tried to shy away from
the answer, his mind zeroed in on it, like it were a magnet. Timelines overlapping, and future selves going into the past.

Maybe this Syaoran was fathered by someone else, and the priestesses were wrong.

He tried very hard to make himself believe it.

Ten years ago, he might have succeeded, but there was no denying the bond between him and the boy this time.

"I might betray you one day..." he whispered, "I don't know how to avoid it."

*Three timelines overlapping, Clones going back in time.* If Kurogane had not done the deed already, he might have to do it in the future. He honestly saw no other way.

After a moment, Fay rested his chin on Kurogane's shoulder.

"For Syaoran?"

Kurogane swallowed and nodded.

He could not let this one die, much less never exist.

Fay seemed more thoughtful than anything.

"He is Tsubasa, then?"

Kurogane swallowed again. Nodded again. Timelines overlapping. How much clearer could the High Priestess get?

"Then," said the mage, "saving him is saving me." He linked his fingers through Kurogane's and held tight. "Don't worry."

Kurogane woke to the feeling that something was *very* wrong.

Fay also roused. It was still dark, though dawn was much closer.

The ninja went to the window. He saw a flicker behind the shadows. Torchlight.

"Fay," he called out, "we better get dressed."

The priestesses were already up and outside by the time Kurogane and Fay equipped. One of the junior priestesses burst into their quarters just as Kurogane was about to head out.

"Go get the boy," she ordered him, waving her candle so it was out of the way. "You three need to leave. Now."

"What's happening?" Fay asked.

"We're under attack," she said without elaboration. "Get the boy and get out of here. Quickly!"

Syaoran, still sick and exhausted, was sweating and shivering under his blankets. He got dressed with shaking fingers and wobbly knees. Outside, Kurogane heard the High Priestess shout out a challenge, and a man's voice answer her.

"Hurry," Fay urged, wrapping a cloak around the boy.
"What's going on?" the boy exclaimed.

"They found us somehow," Kurogane took him by the arm. "Go with Fay."

"No," the priestess shook her head. "You need to go. There's no escaping if you stay."

"What—"

"It's a whole army out there," said the priestess, drawing her blade. "Take the child to Sikayama, and quickly. He will be well-protected there, but if you stay you will not leave."

"But—" Syaoran protested, but Kurogane understood.

"The sooner we leave the sooner the army might leave the sisters alone," he pushed the boy. "Get moving."

He heard the clash of metal on metal from the window.

"Out the back," said the priestess. "Hurry. Train him, and bring an end to this."

They went out into the cold, where the snow had hardened under their feet, crunching with every step. Syaoran stumbled, shuddering, on the brink of tears. Kurogane rounded the back, ears primed to listen for any sound of pursuit. The priestesses were capable, Kurogane knew, but the problem was sheer numbers.

If this were the old Syaoran, they would have fired off some signal, lured the army away. But the boy was still so sick.

_Tsubasa._

They were in a mountain pass when Kurogane looked back and saw smoke rising. Fay turned and saw the same thing. He moved Syaoran in front of him to block his view in case the boy also looked back. But Syaoran smelled the smoke, and his movements grew stilted, stiff.

"No," he breathed, and tears welled in his eyes. "What—"

Kurogane reached out and grabbed the boy by the head, before squeezing it to his chest.

"Listen to me," he hissed into that ear, "we need to get you to Sikayama. You will learn, you will train, and you can bring an end to this." Somehow. "Until then, none of this is your fault, none of this is your business: your first priority is to stay alive and protect yourself. Do you understand?"

Syaoran whimpered.

Kurogane shoved him forward. "Keep moving."

The boy obeyed, wiping his face and setting his shoulders bravely. Kurogane pushed at his back as Fay cleared the way ahead. They went through the pass and up, where Syaoran began faltering again. He slipped, slid down. Kurogane caught him before he could roll further.

"Up," Kurogane ordered, and the boy scrambled up, but slipped again shortly after. He was tiring.

"Kurogane," said Fay, "you need to carry him. He's done his best."

"I'm sorry," Syaoran managed to stand again, but his legs shook under him.
"I got you." Kurogane handed the bags over to Fay and lifted the child pick a back. Did Syaoran get lighter somehow?

"They're coming," said Fay, looking back, "but they can't move as quickly as we can. They don't know the way." The snow had hardened so that their footprints were not obvious.

"We can't pause for anything now," said Kurogane. "Let's go."

They went until mid-morning, when Kurogane and Fay both had to stop to rest. Kurogane was strong, but his stamina had its limits, and Fay had a delicate build.

"Times like these, I miss Mokona," said Fay. "He could have brought us out of a realm and into a different one."

"Who is Mokona?" Syaoran asked.

Neither of them answered him.

"He needs to eat," said Fay. "We left once again in a hurry and no supplies."

"I'm fine," Syaoran insisted.

Kurogane reached out to him anyway, cupping the skinny face. "Are you alright?"

Syaoran lowered his eyes and nodded.

Kurogane leaned back and suddenly had no idea what to do with this child.

"There's no point in making a fire," said Fay. "And with the day bright as it is, they'd see the smoke from miles away."

"No fire," Kurogane agreed, looking at the boy despairingly. *Spirits, what am I supposed to do now?* "We can't be far from some village, or some town."

"If we go there they'd just follow us."

"But at least we can stock up. And we've been approaching Sikayama. Once we reach the temple… they wouldn't be able to attack us so easily there."

Syaoran covered his face with his hands.

"Don't be afraid," Kurogane said to him.

"Why are they after me?" the boy asked.

*You have great power,* Kurogane wanted to say, but felt this might frighten the teen more. Not that anything about this situation was comforting.

"There was once a sorcerer named Clow Reed," he said instead, "who was the most powerful mage to exist. He was practically god-like, in his time. Your mother was one of his descendants, and so are you."

Kuroiyama must have realized who they slew, when they killed Syaoran's mother. Kurogane just thought of that. They must have realized something was different about her sacrifice, and then
investigated. Realized she had a child. Found out the child had been sent away.

And then Princess Chiharu had the vision. Warned Princess Tomoyo to send Syaoran away from Shirasaki.

Syaoran looked at him. "Mother had no magic."

"She didn't learn any, but that did not mean she had no magic." Kurogane paused. "Syaoran, did your mother ever mention a kingdom called Honkon?"

Syaoran's eyes shone. "That was her home," he said bitterly. "It was destroyed when she was small. They killed all the men and took all the women."

Kurogane heard Fay exhale tightly.

"Was she a noble?"

Syaoran looked away. "I don't know. She never said."

She would not say, Kurogane allowed. Why would she? That life was gone forever. There was no point in mentioning it. She might have even avoided thinking about it.

"She never mentioned any Clow Reed or sorcerer or anything like that," Syaoran went on, tears glistening. Talking about his mother pained him deeply. "We didn't know."

"I know," said Kurogane.

Syaoran wiped his face. "Do I really have magic? Why can't I use it?"

"Right now I've bound it," said Fay, "so others won't sense it. Magic is not a simple weapon, child."

The boy covered his face again, sniffling as more tears spilled. His breathing hitched as sobs welled up.

"Easy," Kurogane reached out. Syaoran moved one fist down and bit hard on a knuckle to try to stifle his weeping. He sounded terrified and exhausted.

Kurogane grabbed the bony wrist and pulled it from the boy's mouth. He did not break skin, though his teeth left deep gouges in its surface.

Emotionally, the boy had reached his limit.

"It's alright," he said gently, but hugged the boy close to him as tightly as he could. "It's alright. You have me, you have Fay, you're going to be alright. Just endure for a little while. We'll get you to Sikayama and...and it will be alright."

The boy was sick, tired, and feeling very helpless and frightened. He was too physically weak to simply do what he felt he had to do, and knew too little to be sure of what that even was.

"It should have been me," Syaoran whispered.

Kurogane's arms seized. "No," he said firmly. "Don't ever say that. Don't ever think that. Your mother—she would never want you to take her place. Do you understand? You were her happiness and hope. She struggled so hard to protect you and ensure your well-being. Don't you dare give up."

If you do I will—
"I don't know what to do—"

"Just stay close and trust us, alright?"

Syaoran's arms wrapped around him. "Alright, alright." He was trying to pull himself back together. Stuck relying on two men whose dependability he had no way to gauge. The truly helpless, Kurogane noted, had to be the most brave.

"We'll take care of you."

"I feel sick." Syaoran did not let go.

There was that too.

"Alright," said Kurogane. "Don't worry. We'll take care of you. Don't be afraid."

He looked up to see Fay staring at Syaoran. The mage looked heartbroken.

He still doesn't know. Kurogane still had no idea how to explain this to Fay.

"You're going to be alright," he hugged Syaoran to him tightly and rocked back and forth while trying to figure out what to do.
Chapter Notes

I love guest appearances. What about you?

The stress of their flight depleted Syaoran's last reserves. By nightfall, the boy sat down at camp and could not get back up again. Kurogane caught fish, which, as they were freshwater, were tasteless and filled with prickly bones, making them impossible to eat adequately, but they boiled the meat in a broth and Syaoran was at least able to hydrate. The boy burned up with fever again and suffered from malaise. Kurogane and Fay bundled together with him to try to get him to sweat.

"He needs a real healer," said Fay. "There has to be a town close by somewhere. We've gone past a shrine; there must be a village, or something. Somewhere he can rest. Maybe even a mage. He can't heal like this; every time he starts recovering a little bit, some insult comes along and knocks him back down again."

Kurogane tried to recall the layout of the land.

"If we keep heading northwest we might hit the road," he said over Syaoran's head. "That would at least tell us where we are."

"We can't make a quick getaway if there's an ambush," said Fay, "and they'd be looking for a trio. I think we should split. I can go ahead tonight, see if I can orient us, and then we can plan."

"If you encounter trouble—"

"I can handle myself," said Fay. "I won't go far, and besides, I might be able to draw their attention away. I'd be faster without the bags." Or Syaoran, he implied, though he did not voice it.

"Don't be daring—"

"I won't." Fay splayed his hand over Syaoran's head. "Don't worry. Just keep the little one hidden. They can't detect his magic but they still found him at the shrine. I'll come back soon."

"You don't have to go right now." Fay was as exhausted as Kurogane. "It's nighttime. They can't travel easily. Rest a bit before you go."

"I'm fine," said Fay, and pulled from their bundle.

He was actually gone for a while. Kurogane worried, but with Syaoran depending on him, he could not afford to go and look. The moon crawled across the sky, and the wind blew, icy and sharp.

Syaoran was sweating, and the boy's clothes were damp under their cloaks. He shifted against Kurogane, all awkward elbows and rapid heartbeat, and seemed unaware of the passage of time.

Fay eventually came back. He did not come alone. Behind him was a figure carrying a torch.

"Kurogane," he announced, his voice filled with relief, "look whom I found."

The torch lifted, and its glow flickered over a familiar face.
"Seishirou," Kurogane exclaimed numbly.

The man had not changed one bit. Even his haircut was the same. It was like he had stepped out of Kurogane's memory in a twist of events that the ninja could never have seen coming.

Fuma stepped out from behind Seishirou.

"Spirits," said the younger treasure hunter, looking as youthful as he had ten years ago, though at least he had the decency to grow his hair out a little.

Seishirou looked similarly stunned. He said nothing, but crouched down, torch in hand, and pointed it over the boy. Kurogane hissed, feeling threatened, and covered the boy's exposed head with his arm.

"Watch it," said Fay.

"Is it really him?" Seishirou asked, withdrawing the torch.

Syaoran started in Kurogane's arms, breath hitching and muscles spasming in alarm.

"Easy," said Kurogane, "it's alright. They're friends."

He allowed the boy to turn his face to the light.

"Spirits," Seishirou echoed Fuma.

"Is he a clone or something?"

"No," said Seishirou, "it's him. He's just very faded." He sounded faintly horrified.

Kurogane sat up, lifting Syaoran so the boy could lean against him. Fueled by adrenaline, Syaoran sat upright instead, blinking at the newcomers. He was scared.

"Do you remember me, little one?" Seishirou asked.

Syaoran stared at him.

"This kid," Fuma exclaimed, "he doesn't catch a break even after that bastard Fei Wong is done away with."

Seishirou straightened from the crouch. "Can he walk?"

"Who are you?" Syaoran demanded, cringing against Kurogane.

"He's an old friend," said Fay.

"It's alright," Kurogane squeezed the boy's shoulders, though his mind was still whirling at this stroke of luck. "What are you two doing in Nihon?"

"Treasure-hunting, of course," said Fuma, "but we'll talk more later. Let's get you indoors. According to Fay you've got lunatics looking to summon demons with this one."

"You are a sight for sore eyes," said Kurogane, as Seishirou reached down to help him up. Syaoran shivered but got to his feet on his own, and then fell over. Kurogane hauled him back up.

"You were not exaggerating," said Seishirou.
"Their camp is not far," said Fay, "and it's well hidden. They're the ones that found me stumbling around. Come, let's get moving."

Syaoran was steadier once he found his balance, and soon they arrived at hunters' camp. It really was well-hidden; Kurogane did not even know it was there until he was in it. Fuma pointed to an unassuming stick poking out of the ground.

"Ward," he explained. "Got it from a world with mostly nomads. Some were stronger than others. This one is plenty strong."

"Get the boy inside," said Seishirou, pointing to the tent.

It was bigger on the inside. Though it looked like it should only fit two people lying down, all five of them were able to get in there and remain standing, though the adults had to duck their heads a little.

"Lie down," he said to Syaoran, who did so after an uncertain look at Kurogane. Seishirou felt the pulse at his wrist and was quiet for a moment.

"He doesn't have a lot of vitality," he concluded.

"He has a poor stomach," said Fay. "Can't eat much, even when he needs it. Not that it matters, because we haven't really been able to feed him."

"We have some food with us," said Fuma, retrieving a bag.

"It hurts when you eat, doesn't it?" Seishirou asked. "And sometimes even when you don't."

Kurogane did not see Syaoran's reaction, but Seishirou seemed affirmed. He leaned back to regard the teen.

"You really don't remember me, do you?"

"He doesn't have much reason to," Fay stated, his voice slightly bitter. "He's never met you before."

"Beggars don't choose," Fuma remarked, holding a large chunk of bread. "Here."

Seishirou and Kurogane stepped out while Syaoran ate. Kurogane was also wolfing down a loaf; Syaoran might be the one that was sick, but Kurogane and Fay were starving too. Fay was inside with Fuma, eating his own share.

"It was difficult to hear," Seishirou stated, "when it happened."

The bread instantly became thick in Kurogane's mouth.

"Never thought I would see this in my lifetime, though," the man went on. "If this isn't a miracle, I don't know what is. That's really him."

Kurogane chewed slowly, unable to swallow and unable to talk with his mouth full. He nodded.

"Does he…does he have the same illness?"

Kurogane went on chewing and did not know how to answer.

"How old is this one?"

Kurogane managed to swallow before replying. "Just turned fourteen not too long ago."
Seishirou looked at him. "That can't be a coincidence."

"I don't know."

"Who are this one's parents?"

"He's mine."

Seishirou stared. "What?"

"He was always supposed to be mine." Kurogane looked back. "And apparently this one is mine. I don't know how."

"You mean—"

"I never," said Kurogane, "so either I go back in time later to...or...I've been trying to figure it out."

"Are you even sure he—"

"He was supposed to be mine."

"What do you mean?"

"Before Fei Wong. The clones weren't his real parents. They were only there because I couldn't be his father."

Seishirou blinked. "...When did you learn about this?"

"Yesterday."

The man was silent for a long time.

"Ichihara Yuko never mentioned."

"She's a wily witch, that one."

"She ought to have mentioned this one though. At least to Watanuki. But he let you three go on that wild goose chase for Syaoran's parents who weren't even real—"

A surge of rage flooded him. "He'll have to answer for that."

"But he didn't know. He cared as much about Syaoran as any of us did. Syaoran was the reason he even exists."

"He ought to have known," Kurogane hissed. "Even I wondered about his true parentage and I am not some fancy arcane scholar."

Seishirou looked at him again, before reaching out to touch his arm.

"He's back," he reminded him.

So he is.

"What is he back for?"

Kurogane stared into the darkness.
What is he back for?

Fuma was much more expressive about his shock than his older brother.

"It does answer the question," said the hunter as they entered the tent, "and there are no coincidences. Though I suppose we still don't know how Fay plays into it."

"Plays into what?" Fay asked, looking up from Syaoran's side.

"Why you got looped into Fei Wong Reed's plans."

Kurogane raised a hand at Fuma to silence him. Fuma frowned at him. Fay frowned at both of them.

"How is he doing?" Kurogane asked Fay.

The mage inhaled. "He's doing better with food in him, and warmth."

"What happened to this person that I look like?" Syaoran demanded. He was bundled up in blankets.

The four adults looked at him.

"You're headed to a place called Sikayama, according to Fay," Seishirou stated after a moment.

"He needs to be trained."

"You're going to train him?" Seishirou looked at Kurogane in disbelief.

"He has magic," said Kurogane. "You probably don't sense it because Fay bound it to keep him from being detected." Though the boy was still being tracked, somehow…"at least it shouldn't be detectable."

"It's not," said Fuma. "I don't sense it at all."

"Magic is a little more reasonable," said Seishirou. "I thought you were going to train him in martial arts. If I had encountered the clone like this, I would have never taught him anything."

"Right," Kurogane sighed.

"How far away is Sikayama?" Fuma asked.

"Don't know," said Fay. "We didn't keep to the main roads, what with soldiers coming behind us."

"This Kuroiyama?"

"Possibly more," said Kurogane. "I don't think the soldiers were from Kuroiyama when we left the last inn."

"No, they were native," said Fay.

"News is spreading," said Seishirou. "Are you sure this Sikayama is safe for him to go?"

"It might be the only safe haven for any length of time," said Kurogane. "Empress Amaterasu and Princess Tomoyo have arranged this on purpose."

"For what purpose?"
Kurogane explained.

"How exactly is this child supposed to resolve all conflict in Nihon?" Seishirou asked, skeptical. "If even Fay D. Fluorite can't stop this war, how is this boy supposed to? Wars are not simple matters."

"Honestly," said Kurogane, "I don't care as much about that. I just don't want him to be used to summon some fire demon."

"Fair enough."

"How far away is Sikayama? Do you think we can escort them all the way there?"

"If it's too far out of the way, we won't be able to. We have some leeway with time but we can't stay in Nihon indefinitely."

"What are you searching for?" Fay asked wryly. "More vampires?"

"As it happens, it is a dead body we are looking for. Bones. Well, crystals from cremation; sariras."

Fay sighed. Kurogane looked down.

"What?" Fuma asked.

"You can probably find them back the way we came," Fay said morbidly.

It was possible that some of the priestesses survived the attack, but Kurogane doubted it.

The brothers noted their expressions and did not ask questions.

"It is late," said Fuma. "We should leave when it's light, to avoid getting lost like Fluorite here—"

"Hey! I wasn't lost—"

"But since we don't know where Sikayama is relative to this place, we might as well get some rest and wait until morning. The boy is sick and you two are tired."

"Very well," Fay agreed.

Kurogane grunted in assent.

With their party almost doubling, Kurogane and Fay both felt safer. It was snowing when they roused, but lightly, and Syaoran seemed to feel safer too, security strengthening his resolve, plus the food helped immensely. The hunters were curious about this new Syaoran, particularly Seishirou, who seemed to have trouble reconciling the fawn-like, wide-eyed teen with the experienced warrior he had trained. Fay had explained to the brothers that this Syaoran could not help his delicate build and they were going to take what they could get, but Kurogane could still see Seishirou searching Syaoran's eyes, seeing that same spirit, and then scanning over the boy's mismatched body with faint distress.

They were not far from the main road, but there were no immediate landmarks to help them orient. Seishirou and Fuma went ahead with Syaoran, which Fay and Kurogane allowed; Kurogane wanted to think, after all, and having Syaoran around was a distraction.

Fay wanted to talk.
"You obviously told them what the priestesses told you. Why can't you tell me?"

Kurogane groaned.

"Is it because they told you that you will betray me?"

"I don't know if I will," because that was true. "I just…I am worried that might happen."

"Well then spit it out. You haven't done anything yet, so you have nothing to apologize for."

That was true.

Maybe sleeping helped, or practicing with Seishirou, because Kurogane went ahead and just said it. "Tsubasa was supposed to be my son."

Fay's face went blank, and he seemed speechless.

"Without Fei Wong Reed and Clow Reed and all that," Kurogane sighed, "my parents wouldn't have died. I'd have grown up in Suwa, instead of what I am now. Would have had a son, and that son was supposed to be Tsubasa. But then all that happened and we got Syaoran, and the clones, the whole wretched mess, but I guess once we fixed the timelines, he's come back. But things are off and he's…I don't know how this works. This doesn't make sense. But he's supposed to be mine again. This one, anyway, even though I've never been with his mother."

Fay's expression remained inscrutable, and he was silent for a long time as they continued to walk.

"They told you Tsubasa was initially your son."

"Yes."

"And then Fei Wong Reed took him from you."

A flare of rage. He almost wished that bastard were alive so Kurogane could kill him again. "Yes."

Fay was quiet again for a while.

"…How…how did the priestesses know this?"

"They saw his past and his future and saw three of each," said Kurogane. "Three sets of lives, 'folded over'. They had no idea what to do with this but they saw I was involved and that was why they wanted to talk to me."

"They told you Tsubasa was your son," Fay looked at him again, and something about how he emphasized the sentence had Kurogane hesitating.

"I've never been with a woman."

Fay went quiet once more. His eyes looked distant.

"I was going to tell you, once I…came to terms with it."

Fay nodded. "I know."

He was silent for another eternity. Kurogane waited, and when it became apparent Fay was not going to say anything further, he asked, "Would you be very angry with me, if I ensured this one…?"
Fay looked at him. "It's…a lot to take in. You—" he hesitated. "I mean, it's a lot to take in. It's…it's a lot."

"I know," he sighed.

"I mean, I guess it makes…" sense, Fay wanted to say, but no, it did not, unless one trusted one's gut. "…With a slave," he went on, his mind leaping before his tongue, so Kurogane could not guess what that referred to.

"Fay," Kurogane pleaded. Li Yelan had died. He thought of the boy's tears and his heart hurt, even though he had never even seen this woman before.

You look like a monster, this Syaoran had accused. He wondered if Fay thought the same.

What in the world am I supposed to do?

Fay squeezed Kurogane's shoulder, sensing his distress. "Don't panic. I'm not…I'm not mad at you. Let me think."

Kurogane watched Fay think.

Fay watched Syaoran with the hunters.

"This is a 'datapad'," Seishirou was showing Syaoran, "it can store a lot of books at once. Some places can store hundreds upon hundreds of books, all on this little device."

"That must be an amazing world," the boy marveled. "Its people must know so much."

Fuma lagged behind his brother and the teen.

"He's like a girl," he said to Fay and Kurogane with a scowl. "What gives?"

"He had no father in this life," said Kurogane.

Fuma gave him a look, and then back at Syaoran.

"It's like some kind of joke," the hunter exclaimed. "What is this, dangling a piece of that child in front of us; a fraction of his strength, a fraction of his smarts, a fraction of everything the old one used to have. Is this some kind of curse from Fei Wong Reed?"

Kurogane shut his eyes in pain.

"He'll learn," said Fay.

"Spirits," Fuma remarked.

Seishirou seemed to have trouble with this as well. They finally reached a sign, outlining that a town was less than a half day's journey away. The hunters were able to accompany them all the way, but Syaoran had reached the limits of his endurance, and they were forced to break. Fay ventured off with Syaoran to find water, while Seishirou came to stand by Kurogane. He covered his mouth and stared at the ground.

"What are you going to do with this one?" he asked without looking up.

"What do you mean?"
"Besides Sikayama and whatever demon issue there is."

Kurogane had not thought about this at all, but the answer burst from his lips. "Raise him. Of course."

Seishirou looked at him then.

Kurogane swore in his head.

_How would I even go about doing that?_

"You're really going to raise him?"

"He's mine," Kurogane exclaimed, even as he panicked quietly in his head. "Am I supposed to just abandon him?"

"No, I suppose not," said Seishirou. He lowered his hands and folded his arms. "That's a lot of work."

"What are you saying?" Kurogane challenged. "Are you saying I should leave him?"

"No, no." Seishirou shook his head. "I'm sorry. I—I guess I'm just upset."

"About what? That he's alive, somehow?"

"No. I just can't believe it's him." Seishirou looked aside. "I was…very sad, when he died. A lot of people were. If I had known that he had been back…I wish I could have helped him, before he got this way. I'm sure you feel the same way."

Kurogane was silent.

"As he is, I'd have taken him from Nihon if you weren't able to keep him."

"I'm keeping him."

"I know. I'm just saying—"

"I'm keeping him."

"Right." Seishirou looked more disturbed than Kurogane had ever seen.

Something about this Syaoran must tug at people's heartstrings. Seishirou did not seem to hold any unusual fondness for Syaoran in the past. He had watched Syaoran battle his clone with a calm apathy, and then fought him for the feather with wry indulgence. Kurogane would honestly never have guessed that Seishirou grieved overly much over the boy's death. Not as much as Kurogane. Not as much as Fay. Not as much as the princess of Clow Country, who had wept over his coffin before it was buried in the grave. But there was no mistaking the dismay in his countenance. Seishirou was not the most expressive man, but he was profoundly affected.

"What about…"

"What?"

"You know. Do you know when he was conceived?"

Kurogane blanched. "No."
"He doesn't know the circumstances of his conception."

"Of course he wouldn't know."

"So what are you going to do about that?"

Kurogane sighed. "Fay's thinking."

"Fay knows?"

"He's thinking. I'm thinking." What a mess.

"He's alright with this?"

"Neither of us are 'alright' with this. We need to think about it."

"You have to do it or this boy wouldn't exist—"

"I know—"

"So it's really a question of how you'll go about it—"

"I know, that's why we're thinking. Sordid rot."

Seishirou looked at him. "Did you contact Watanuki?"

"How is this any of his business?"

"He might offer some options."

Kurogane let out a shaky breath. "Give me a few more days. I just found out he was my son about two days ago, and that I might have to force a woman in order to ensure his survival, so you'll forgive me if I take a moment here."

"That's what I'm saying, there might be a way where you don't have to."

"Right, and that would be great, but I need a moment."

"Alright."

"Alright?"

"Alright."

"Alright." Kurogane blew out a breath, and gave in to his frustration. "This is so unfair." To him, and to Syaoran, who did not deserve to have been born into slavery, not after everything he went through and everything he had done.

Seishirou reached out and squeezed Kurogane's shoulder in sympathy.

They reached a town. Syaoran had wrapped both hunters completely around his finger by then. The brothers argued amongst themselves, unwilling to leave him, while Kurogane and Fay checked the boy over. Syaoran was still marveling over the datapad, though he could read nothing on it, and wanted to hear more stories from Seishirou about the other worlds he had visited. Kurogane noticed that they did not mention the other Syaoran; Fay must have told them, he decided, because this was easily something that could have slipped out.
But the time had come to part ways, and though the brothers seemed reluctant, they had to say goodbye. At least they were able to deliver the boy to a civilized place. For now.

"We can't stay long," said Fuma, "but if you need anything," he held out a loop of string, attached to a tiny seashell. "This is a whistle. It can transmit across realities. If we are able to answer it, we'll come to you."

Seishirou took it from his brother and held it out over Syaoran's head, looping it around his neck.

"Don't give up," he told the boy.

Syaoran smiled and nodded. He liked Seishirou.

The man then turned to Kurogane and pointed up at the sky. "And you should—"

"I know."

"Don't put this—" Off, he meant to say.

"I won't."

Seishirou paused. "You have friends."

Kurogane did not reply, but the sentiment made him feel a little better. These last ten years had been lonely. It felt like just him and Fay. Even Princess Tomoyo was not adequate support. Not really. She had no understanding of everything they had been through, all the worlds they had seen. How much Kurogane wanted to leave Nihon to its fate, sometimes.

Seishirou then pointed at him. "If you—" Mess this up, he was going to say.

Kurogane knocked that hand aside. "Not a chance."

"This isn't something that would happen twice."

"We don't need a second chance."

"This is your second chance."

"We certainly don't need a third."

Seishirou stepped back. "No," he agreed. "You aren't the man you were ten years ago."

"None of us are."

"Hn." Seishirou looked at Syaoran, who was watching the exchange with wide eyes.

"Take care of each other," said the hunter, "and you, little miracle, perhaps I'll see you around."

"I hope so. Good luck finding treasure," Syaoran waved.

Seishirou turned with great reluctance. Fuma gave Syaoran a look of disquiet, before turning with his brother. Fay, Kurogane, and Syaoran watched them as they retreated down the road.

"I hope we see them again," Syaoran declared, thumb polishing the shell pendant.

Kurogane ruffled the brown hair, noting nothing was falling out, before turning to face the town.
They did not stay in town long, but they did take Syaoran to a healer, and stocked up on supplies and carry-out food. The boy improved dramatically with the proper medicine and in the following day, though they kept the pace slow. After this town was a stretch of wilderness, and Sikayama was a mountain at the end of the road, but they were on the last leg of the journey, despite all odds.

Fay was distant. He watched Syaoran. He seemed very lost, dwelling on dark thoughts he would not name. He usually did not go out of his way to reach out to the boy, but Syaoran was not very receptive to the few times he did. They had too much of a rough beginning, and Syaoran was too intimidated by Fay to know what to make of these attempts. He was more comfortable with Kurogane, which was probably just as well, but every time he failed to reciprocate, Fay would fall back to that pensive distance, as if his mind were far away.

Kurogane was afraid to ask what was on his mind.

He regretted telling Fay; he should not have burdened Fay with this. Now and again his mind would skirt to the subject and his stomach would twist into knots. He thought of the clones and how they broke out of their cycle and wondered if there was any way the three of them could repeat that here…but breaking the cycle had cost the clones their lives. Had cost Tsubasa his life. And Kurogane was supposed to marry Li Yelan, which meant he would not be with Fay, but if he stayed with Fay then he would be using Syaoran's mother…and he really did not want to think about that. Fay should not have to think about that. Fay had greater knowledge of magic and dimensions, but this should not have been his problem.

Over the last ten years, Kurogane had taken Fay for granted. They had only grown more comfortable with each other over time, and Fay's problems had been Kurogane's, Kurogane's problems had been Fay's…but nothing like this had ever cropped up before.

There was no good opportunity to talk to the man, though. Syaoran still did not know, of course, and was uncomfortable being left alone. The boy seemed very insecure every time Kurogane showed any hints of affection for Fay, as if being on good terms with Fay would twist him away from caring about Syaoran. The rub was that Kurogane could see why Syaoran would think that; Syaoran was not meant for this way of life, on the road and meeting all these new people, and he was still uncomfortable with the idea that Kurogane and Fay were both killers. He was wary of Kurogane changing his mind and finishing Syaoran once and for all, or Fay dissuading Kurogane from whatever potential Syaoran might have, plus Syaoran still could not sense magic, as he was not trained, and his whole life had become hinged on people, places, and things he did not understand. Kurogane's compassion had become a safety blanket that Syaoran relied on heavily, and stranding him, even for a moment, made the boy fear abandonment. And Kurogane could not very well discuss these matters in front of Syaoran, who still had no idea of what the priestesses had seen.

Syaoran still thought himself an orphan, and to tell him otherwise would require a long conversation Kurogane had no clue how to start.

*If I had the choice, I would have saved your mother.* Had tried, even though at the time Kurogane knew he was too late, but he had still sent scouts, and there was something consoling about having made the earnest attempt anyway. *If I had the choice, I would have raised you with your mother.* Would have honored her as the mother of the dear boy. Anyone who produced someone like Syaoran had to be honored.

Except Syaoran was raised by a slave, sneaking around that nightmare of a kingdom with its insane
Emperor and Prince, and Li Yelan was sacrificed like a piece of meat, so clearly Kurogane never had a hand in Syaoran's upbringing, or bringing his mother any relief.

*I can't explain that to him.* Kurogane wished fervently that he was not Syaoran's father after all. He could be Syaoran's father in all but blood, that way he would never hurt him and his mother this way.

The feeling persisted, though. That inexplicable connection, and he was not sure if it was just the remnant of the old one, carried over because Kurogane was older and this Syaoran seemed so young, or if he really did have a tie of blood to the boy.

Ironic, ultimately, that Syaoran was more afraid of Fay than he was of Kurogane when it really should be the other way around. It had to hurt Fay. Kurogane was sure of it. After all of that, and Fay had been so fond of the other Syaoran, both times. This one was different and yet the same and yet a mere ghost of his old potential, it hurt Seishirou, it hurt Kurogane, and it for sure hurt Fay, especially knowing that the child's state was likely the direct result of his terminal illness last time. And to think, this Syaoran was here because of...that.

*No. Don't think about it right now.*

The universe, Kurogane decided, was playing an epic joke on the three of them. Fuma might have been onto something.

They saw their pursuers, this time long before any risk of capture. Syaoran looked at them and sighed.

"Nice not to be caught scrambling," Fay remarked, seeing the small figures of warriors filing through the ravine.

Kurogane counted the numbers. "If they follow us all the way to Sikayama, we wouldn't get much peace there."

"Sikayama has many protections," said Fay.

"If more than one army comes after us, they won't necessarily hold."

"Having more than one army does not necessarily put us at a disadvantage."

"True." The armies would have to cooperate, or else they would get in each other's way. Nihon was not very good at cooperation.

He looked at Syaoran, who was eyeing the troops with concern.

"Don't be afraid," Kurogane murmured.

The boy looked up at him, and then lowered his eyes. Behind him, Fay turned away.

Kurogane really did not want to think about what might be going through that fair head of his.

Syaoran turned his face to regard the troops again. Something about the boy's posture and expression shifted, and he suddenly looked exactly like the old Syaoran that Kurogane knew ten years ago. It was so familiar that Kurogane abruptly flashed back to that very conversation: it was before Syaoran fell ill, though they had been traveling for a while. They had arrived in a mountainous world, and Fay was preparing camp with Mokona. Syaoran had gone off to survey their surroundings, and Kurogane had looked for him because he had not returned for a while. He found the teen on a tall
ledge overlooking the forest below. Noted that he seemed to be thinking. Asked what was on his mind.

"...I've always been...focused on the princess," Syaoran had replied. "I feel like all my life, my life's purpose had been to save her. And now that she's safe again...I'm doing something else, and I just realized I have no idea where to go from here. Once I bring them back...where my home even is: if it's in Clow Country, where she is, or if it's...back where I was before meeting her."

"Where do you want to go?"

"I don't know," Syaoran admitted. "It's almost like my whole identity had revolved around keeping her safe and well. And now that she is safe and well, I don't know who I am, or what I want to be, let alone where I should go. I was looking through my memories, and I was looking through my father's memories...and I realized that my parents never talked about this with me. They never asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. Never told me I would be a great man, suggested I could be a doctor, or...even an archaeologist. I feel like I spent the last fourteen years living a different life, one which has no bearing on what lies ahead, and I have...built nothing that would help me move forward."

Kurogane had scoffed at this, but he did note that Syaoran had been very disturbed. In hindsight, he was right to be.

This Syaoran then turned, and his face was still set in that familiar look of defiance and determination. Kurogane could not guess what was going through his mind, but Syaoran had seemed more and more familiar as he recovered from his illness. He may be more tearful than Tsubasa was, but that seemed to be the direct result of his physical weakness. That spirit was still there, just as Kurogane had noted when he first found the boy in Shirasaki.

"I remind you of someone," the boy said quietly, resigned.

Despite just reminiscing on that person, Kurogane blinked. "What do you mean?"

"You care about me because I remind you of him," Syaoran looked at him steadily in the eyes. "Same with Lord Fay. Same with Master Seishirou and Master Fuma. Even Her Highness, Princess Tomoyo."

Kurogane was silent. Fay had turned back around to listen to this.

"He must have been a great person," the boy went on, "for all of you to waste your time on me."

A sharp pain tore through Kurogane's heart. Something welled in his throat, and he had to swallow it down. He did not know what to say.

"It wasn't a different person," said Fay, his eyes shadowed. He reached out. "Come. We should get moving or else they might catch up to us."

"Will you tell me about him?" Syaoran asked, not moving.

Fay did not drop his hand. "It was you," he stated, "and yes, I'll tell you about it when we break for camp."

That evening, they sat around the campfire, making points of a triangle. The temple loomed high above; they would have to climb for some time before they would reach it. Syaoran was too tired to eat, and Kurogane had to keep coaxing him before he could stuff down a reasonable ration. They
boiled his medicine afterwards.

Syaoran was a little angry with them, probably feeling like they were keeping secrets from him. Fay did not speak to Kurogane, but he was thinking, all throughout. Probably, Kurogane reflected, trying to pinpoint where the beginning of their convoluted story even was, given the time loops and how everything was out of order, plus all the things neither of them could bear to tell this child.

"I first met you ten years ago," Fay began in quiet, neutral tones, as they waited for the water to bubble. "You were fourteen years old, like you are now. You were from a country called Clow, and you were trying to save…a dear friend. A princess. It was also the first time I met Kurogane. Princess Tomoyo had sent him on a mission…I was trying to run away from a task I didn't want to fulfill. We all convened in a place called Tokyo, where a witch, called the Dimension Witch, had the power to send us between different worlds.

"You had no idea what was going on, just that the princess was in trouble. You had no idea who we were, if you could trust us, depend on us. All you had was your courage, your cleverness, and your determination to protect the princess. Back then, Kurogane was impatient to get home; he didn't want anything to do with you. I couldn't care less about either of you; I just wanted to stay away from home. But somehow, we worked. Even from the start, Kurogane was willing to risk his hide to defend you. I didn't know it at the time, but your success was just as important to me. We went through wondrous worlds together; some had buildings that could touch the clouds, carriages that could fly. Seishirou's datapad came from one of them, and we have seen even more remarkable realms together. But then, halfway through, we learned that you weren't actually there with us. The real you was locked away by an evil man named Fei Wong Reed. He was trying to defy death, but to do so would require…practically destroying the fabric of reality. He had captured you, and created a construct based off of you so that it had your power but none of your heart. You were fourteen years old, as old as you are now.

"I don't know what Fei Wong did to you." Fay's eyes shone. "You once revealed to me that he had hurt you, very badly, in order to create that construct. But you were brave, and you were defiant, and you couldn't let him have the last word. You donated half of your soul to that construct, and that was who we met and befriended that day in Tokyo. Then the real you broke free, and the construct lost your heart. You came to us, knowing us for the familiar allies that we were to you, but we didn't know what to make of you. It took some time before we all found our equilibrium again. But we did and…you were everything to me. You and Kurogane. After we defeated Fei Wong, when the time came for us to part ways, I didn't want to leave you. And at the time you didn't have anyone else. It didn't feel right to just send you off. You were still just fourteen, and would have been all alone."

It had surprised Kurogane too, that only a year had passed. Less. Time traveled differently in different realms, but Syaoran had not grown much taller by the time he died.

"Fei Wong Reed took two people from you when we defeated him," Fay went on. "You wanted to get them back. We came with you, traveling more worlds to find resources and knowledge. I think we learned more about you during that time than we did before, when Fei Wong loomed over our heads. You liked chocolate, and had a fondness for eating flowers. There was one time we came across someone's front yard and they had a scholar tree blooming. You asked the owners if you could eat them. We both thought you had lost your mind. But then you went ahead and ate all the blossoms that you could reach. You even wanted to get a ladder—we had to stop you there. The tree looked significantly less ornamental by the time you were through with it. We were lucky the owners were good-natured folks."

Kurogane remembered that, and started laughing despite himself. It was one of the few times Syaoran had seemed like a little kid. He and Fay had been pleasantly surprised by the idea, and
would have taken their share, but when it became clear that Syaoran really liked them, they even left more of the flowers for their younger companion, out of a fraternal affection.

"But you got sick," Fay's voice grew even quieter, "and you hid it from us until you couldn't anymore. By the time they found out what you had, it was terminal." He paused for a long time.
"You fought, anyway, but eventually it took you. You never found the two people. You died in agony. We took you to Clow where you were buried. I watched them lower you to the ground. Then I came here with Kurogane and…neither of us thought we would ever see you again."

Syaoran blinked. Blinked again. His expression did not change, nor did he speak.

"Then you showed up," Fay went on, "and…you weren't the same as you were. That's certain. You used to be…hardier. You kept up with the two of us, adults, with no trouble at all. You faced demons without flinching, and knew more about some parts of the universe than Kurogane or me. Kurogane thought you had come back. I did not believe you were the same. Loving you felt like betraying him. You…" The firelight glistened off a tear that rolled down one side of Fay's face.
"Letting you go was the hardest thing I had ever done. Still haven't really done it. I didn't think I deserved a second chance. Seemed too good to be true."

There that was again. What was Fay talking about? One day, Kurogane was going to get to the bottom of this.

"I guess it's a reversal of before," Fay said at last. "This time we know you more than you know us. Fitting, I guess."

Syaoran did not say anything for a long time.

"You must have really loved him," he murmured.

"It was you," Kurogane insisted.

He could tell Syaoran did not believe them, though the boy's countenance remained closed.

"Time doesn't travel in order," Fay stated. "When going between worlds, things happen before, happen after, happen before again, between. You came back before we met you. The priestesses confirmed before we left. The way you are now…we think it's because of what had happened to you, before. You had been very sick. Can't exactly expect you to be sprightly as a foal, after an episode like that."

Syaoran hugged his knees, his breath fogging in front of his face in a white mist. Kurogane could tell he was struggling.

"It's a lot to take in, we know. We didn't want to overwhelm you."

Syaoran let out another breath through his nose, but remained silent.

"It's alright," said the mage. "You don't have to worry about living up to old memories, fulfilling old potentials. You d-died." His lip quivered at this, but he pressed on, "that was a loss we thought we would carry for the rest of our lives. That you're even back at all is…a miracle."

*Little miracle*, Seishirou had called him.

"But you want me to be him," Syaoran pointed out. "That's why you're taking me to Sikayama."

"You already are. We're not taking you to Sikayama to mold you into what you were. We're taking
"You there because there are bad people after you and you need to be safe."

"I'm supposed to be trained."

"To keep yourself safe," said Kurogane.

Still disturbed, Syaoran looked away.

He had as much information as he could handle for now. They still had a while before reaching Sikayama.

The medicine was boiling anyway.

"What happened with Fei Wong Reed?" Kurogane asked Fay in the dark. Syaoran was so tired, his breathing was heavy in his slumber. It did not change when he spoke.

Fay was quiet for a while. "He didn't reveal much. Just...he trained himself to wake up before he screamed, usually."

Kurogane stared up at the sky in desolation.

"He tried to get me to leave at nights," Fay said after a moment, "and when I started noticing, he admitted he's had them ever since he broke out from his prison. It's just...we're usually all sleeping. And some nights he doesn't have it so bad."

"He wouldn't tell you what happened."

"He couldn't. He tried."

Kurogane sighed. This must have been while Kurogane was out, hiding.

"Taking away his freedom wasn't enough for that bastard."

"He made a clone," Fay's voice was very low. "He'd need to...and...whatever he did to Syaoran...it wasn't just...it was...he cried inconsolably when he tried to tell me, and wouldn't let me touch him for a long while after that. Threw a fit when the healers had to examine him in the morning. Tried to get it out of Mokona too, but...I don't know why, but Mokona had no idea. Claimed to have no idea, anyway. Possible that Syaoran made Ichihara do something to block. Or made Mokona...that boy..." he sighed.

Kurogane squeezed his eyes shut. Fei Wong would have had to take a piece of Syaoran. And Syaoran would not have given it voluntarily. Someone like him, who had outsmarted Fei Wong Reed at the last moment before his final imprisonment, had to have put up quite a fight before Fei Wong could get what he wanted. And Fei Wong would have responded in kind. *Spirits, Syaoran was only fourteen years old.* Just developing. Those baby-faced novices at the dojo. Tsubasa was just a child.

He raised a hand to wipe away the wet on his face. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"What would that accomplish?"

Kurogane covered his face and rolled away. Fay slid his arms around him from the back.

"Fei Wong's gone," the fair-haired mage murmured. "We did what we could."
"Should have figured," Kurogane muttered. "Should have guessed. Just assumed it was all so simple and...straightforward. He didn't have any of the support he needed."

"We weren't the people he needed it from. He needed his parents."

And it was back to that again.

"You'll be a good father," Fay suddenly said. "Much better than me."

That was preposterous. "Right," Kurogane said sarcastically. "I'll be a great father, abandoning my child when he needs me the most." Potentially abandoning him and his mother too. After...that.

"You didn't abandon him," Fay said, which was nonsense. "You were in pain. But you wouldn't have left if I hadn't been there."

I still shouldn't have left.

"But you didn't leave. You actually took care of him."

"I didn't take care of him."

That made no sense.

"I don't know what taking care of someone entails if you weren't doing it back then."

Fay was silent.

"Fay, you did everything and more."

"I abandoned him more thoroughly than you ever did." Fay's voice was very hollow. "I don't deserve him, or you."

Kurogane rolled around to face him. "Fay. We've been together for a while now. I know you almost better than I know myself. Whatever it is that you hate about yourself...whatever it is you did..."

"I hurt Tsubasa more than Fei Wong Reed ever could," Fay said quietly. "Maybe one day, when I'm finally good enough, I'll confess and accept the consequences...but I want Syaoran to hear it first. He is the one I wronged...and he's not...he's not the right one, to be angry with me as he should."

"Fay..."

Fay rolled away from him, and Kurogane sighed. He had no choice but to drop the topic. Fay would not budge on the issue. Ten years was enough for Kurogane to be able to recognize that.

Besides, compared to whatever Fay did, Syaoran will be much angrier at what Kurogane might have to do.

Syaoran was distant, and seemed confused and nervous and troubled. He said little, tried his best to keep up, and held his face in his hands miserably when they were forced to break. Learning about his past self seemed to make him even more distressed than before. He seemed even more unsure about where he stood with Kurogane and Fay than ever. Kurogane was not sure how to fix this, even though he knew that they had no choice about telling him at least something, and they could not tell him about his true parentage.

Before noon, the boy collapsed on the road. Exhausted, he finally had enough.
"I can't go with you to Sikayama," he exclaimed, eyes bright, angry and afraid. "I won't."

Given how Syaoran had been silently working himself up, Kurogane and Fay were both able to take this in stride.

"Syaoran," Kurogane intoned, "it's going to be alright."

"No it's not. You both think I'm someone I'm not. I'm not brave, I'm not strong—" the child's face contorted with self-loathing. "I don't fight to defend princesses, or overcome evil men—I hide, like a coward. I hid when my friends were cut down—" his voice began rising with distress, "I cried like a baby as I heard them screaming but I never went out to help them! I can't do any of those things!"

"Of course not," Fay exclaimed, echoing Kurogane's thoughts. The thought of this boy, starved and frail as he was, rushing out the way the old Syaoran used to was nothing short of horrifying. "And neither would you before, without any training. Syaoran—"

"No!" Syaoran shouted. "I'm not clever, I'm not brave! I'm not this person you keep saying I am and I can't go to Sikayama! Even if we get there, I can't be what you want me to be! I'm no one—"

"Stop!" Kurogane launched forward and grabbed the boy's face, because the louder he spoke, the more his voice started echoing around them. "Calm down!"

It was a bad time for Syaoran's insecurities to rear its ugly head, though he supposed there was never a good time.

"I'm sorry," the boy's body trembled, "I'm sorry, I'm a disappointment, I don't want you to waste your time—"

Fay joined them, placing a hand at Syaoran's back.

"Syaoran," he stated soothingly, "did your mother ever go through your birthmarks with you?"

The non-sequitur jolted Syaoran from his panic. "What?"

"You had a cherry red one," and then Fay reached around and lightly poked at the outside of Syaoran's left thigh. "On the inside of this one. Remember? A pretty big one."

Syaoran stared up at Fay. Kurogane could feel his anxiety settle, like a cuckoo bird lowering its feathers as its temper cooled. His eyes searched Fay, wondering.

Kurogane had spent more time with this one than Fay did, and he had no idea what Fay was talking about. Fay might have been able to see the birthmarks on Syaoran's torso, back when he had been tattooing the binding spell, but the wizard had not seen anything below the waist. How did he…?

"You also had a dark brown one here," Fay tapped on Syaoran's other knee, "on the inside. This one is probably harder for you to see, but your mother would have seen it when she washed you."

The boy stared at Fay as if entranced.

"We don't want you to be brave," Fay stated, and reached out to wipe at Syaoran's tears. "We don't want you to be clever. We don't even want you to be strong. We just want you to be alive. As far as we're concerned, you've been brave enough for one lifetime, protecting and taking care of others, dying in the process. After Sikayama, I don't even know if we would go back to Shirasaki."

This was news to Kurogane. He would have to talk about this with Fay.
"I'm sorry for doubting you," Fay went on. "I wasn't sure, myself, if you were a ghost meant to punish me, or if you were really back. We had a history of being fooled; the first time I met you, you weren't actually there. It was a clone of you, one that had your face and your mannerisms but only half of your spirit. But we know you more than you know yourself. That," he smiled, an actual, genuine smile, and Kurogane marveled at it, "is just something you'll have to get used to from now on. Here and here," he tapped Syaoran's folded legs, "and here," and he pressed his fingers over Syaoran's heart. "If you choose to leave Nihon to its fate, let others take the sword to defend her, that is honestly fine with us too. We don't want you to be a hero. Being a hero took you away from us. When the time comes, I'd even take you away from here, to one of those worlds where there is no war and you'll never be hungry or scared. It's all fine."

They let Syaoran sit and rest for a while. Syaoran sat, looking more thoughtful. His hand reflexively ran over his inner left thigh; where Fay's reported birthmark was, Kurogane guessed. Fay probably saw it when Syaoran was in the hospital, as they were changing him when he lost the strength to use the toilets properly. The inside of Syaoran's knee, too. The boy stared at the right knee, though he would not be able to see that one without deliberately looking for it, as Fay had said.

Fay, he mused, really forged an intimate bond with Tsubasa when the boy fell ill. No wonder his death hurt Fay so much.

When they set forth again, Syaoran looked at Fay and Kurogane with a mix of fear and hope. He was not going to feel entirely comfortable with them just based on a few birthmarks, but it was a start. He allowed Fay to touch him, though he did not reach out on his own. Though Fay had softened considerably towards Syaoran, the boy still found the mage intimidating.

Which was fine. Sikayama lied ahead, and all of this would take time. It had before, the opposite way, and Kurogane and Fay had only grown more patient over the years.

So long as Syaoran was alive, they would wait for him.
By the time they reached the temple, Syaoran was gasping for breath and his pulse raced under Kurogane's fingers. The boy felt ill and his head hurt.

"Altitude sickness," Fay recognized. "Just a little longer, Syaoran. It'll pass."

The cold was cruel, and even Kurogane could feel some effects of the thin air. Fortunately, the priests from the temple were expecting them. They had come down when Syaoran finally could go no further, and Kurogane could not afford to carry him. The clouds painted the summit in a whirl of fog, though pine trees were dark green against the white snow. They came as if out of the mist, shadowed figures in brown-red robes.

"There he is," they said, pointing, "and the Black Steel of Shirasaki, the Wizard from Beyond."

Sleeping, Kurogane learned, worsened the symptoms of altitude sickness, but Syaoran could do little else. The priests burned incense and gave the boy tea to help with the nausea. Syaoran tried to infuse some energy into his posture in order to be polite to everyone, but ultimately retired to bed, exhausted.

The High Priest was actually a young-looking man who introduced himself simply as Ryou. He was tall, handsome, with a head of curly hair as pale as Fay's, and sporting a pair of vivid green eyes. He had a kind of cheerfulness that reminded Kurogane of Fay in the early days, except Fay's had been a front; this man was genuine.

"Black Steel," he bowed, "never thought I would see you here, of all places. Tied close to Shirasaki, and to the sun and moon."

"Life is full of surprises."

"So it is."

"You knew we were coming?"

"Of course. You'd never arrive here otherwise, with all the ruckus going on hereabouts."

Kurogane had no idea what that was supposed to mean.

"You're a little late though; took your sweet time."

"The little one doesn't travel well, as you can probably tell," said Fay with a note of challenge.

"Indeed," said Ryou, though he did not look troubled. "Beggars can't be choosers, though, We get the body we're given and we work with it. The tea and incense should help. Mages are always more sensitive to such things."
Kurogane looked at Fay. He did not know that.
"Lots of people after him," Ryou noted. "He's pretty popular."

"Of a sort," Kurogane said unhappily. He knew Ryou just had that sense of humor, but he found it a little annoying. "Is it safe for us to stay here?"

"As safe as you'll get," said Ryou. "Can't ask the sun for more sun, can't ask the rain for less rain. There may be safer places in Nihon, but you won't be reaching any of those in one piece. Buckle down and plan on staying for a while. If it's any consolation, the high altitude grows good vegetables, even if the rice never cooks."

The rice was indeed quite awful, hard and rubbery because the water could not get hot enough before it boiled. Fay and Kurogane ate anyway, finally able to relax a little now that they were at their destination.

They retired early. Kurogane was a little curious about the birthmarks; now that they were warm and indoors, he wanted to take a look, but while his intentions were innocent, it went too close to the line for his comfort.

Well. He knew they were there. He did not have to see them. Certainly not in this setting.

"How long are we staying here?" Fay asked.

"I don't know. As quickly as Syaoran is able to learn."

"That sounds like a while," Fay said morosely.

"Hm?"

"He's not dull," said the mage, "but his stamina makes me worry. I hope the priests don't push him too hard. Didn't bring the blasted child all the way here just to get brain fever."

Kurogane sighed.

"Maybe once he's in a safe place, he'll learn quickly. After all," he thought back to the Syaoran of ten years ago, "these are all things he had already learned."

They removed Fay's tattoo, whereupon the boy's magic swelled out so that several temple artifacts instantly reacted with a few pops and sizzles. The boy jumped at this, startled, while Ryou fanned the rest of the tattoo out, dissipating it.

"I have to say," said the High Priest, "I hate those things."

"They were tracking him somehow," said Fay.

"I understand that," said Ryou. "I still hate those things. With that thing on, no wonder your boy was stumbling around, miserable. How do you feel now?"

Syaoran blinked. "Um…"

He did not feel much different; the air was still thin and he still felt unwell. The incense helped, though, as did Ryou's infusion of magic.

"Very raw," he noted, "but a lot of potential. Proper food and water, and this one will grow to be one
of the strongest mages in all of Nihon. Perhaps beyond."

Fay eyed the proceedings grimly. Ryou started off with a simple levitation spell. He demonstrated on a pen, lifting it in front of him, hovering over his hand and turning it in lazy cartwheels. Syaoran eyed it with wide eyes.

"Can you sense what I'm doing?"

"No."

"Hm," said Ryou, letting the pen drop into his hand. "You really can't sense anything?"

Syaoran looked utterly crestfallen. "No…"

"You know, this whole place is filled with magic," said Fay. "Your little trick probably doesn't feel much different compared to the rest of the temple."

"That's true." Ryou rubbed his chin, studying Syaoran for a moment. "Come with me."

Fay and Kurogane trailed behind as the High Priest led the boy out into the courtyard and into another building. Fay was mouthing to Kurogane fragmented words coupled with gestures so the boy would not overhear. He used to be good at this, Kurogane interpreted. Kurogane mouthed back, "read. For some reason Fay mouthed Kuroiyama, lifting his eyebrows in question. Then he made a blocking motion with his hands. Did Kuroiyama do something to make Syaoran unable to detect magic? Kurogane shrugged. Who knew what that kingdom did.

They joined Syaoran and Ryou inside the building. There was a storage room, and from the cabinet, which looked like it would store umbrellas and clothing, Ryou pulled out a sword.

It was small and slender, without much reach. It had a lace at the end and a plain sheath and hilt. He held it out to Syaoran, who stared.

Fay went very still.

"What's wrong?" Ryou asked, when the boy did not take it.

Syaoran did not answer, but his movements were filled with reluctance; he did not like swords. He grasped the weapon by the sheath and froze.

"There we go." Ryou was studying his face. "Feel that?"

"Yes." Syaoran's voice was emotionless.

A little like the clone, before he had a soul.

"Syaoran?" Fay called out, sounding alarmed.

Syaoran turned. His face was expressionless, but his eyes were still bright with spirit. He abruptly thrust the sword back toward Ryou, who took it with a smile.

"Syaoran," Fay went forward, worried despite the High Priest's easy countenance. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine."

"What happened?"
"N-nothing. It's just…" Syaoran looked at Fay and went silent.

"You felt something?"

"I…" Syaoran looked back at the sword. "I don't know if I want to learn magic."

"Hm," said Ryou, sounding pleased. He went to the cabinet. "This one's not as strong, but I think you'll like it better."

He took out a nusa; a wooden wand with streams of paper strips from the tip, used in purification rituals. Syaoran eyed it suspiciously, but was less reluctant about grasping it.

A pulse of something spread across the room as soon as he had a grip. Something about Syaoran's posture then changed; he straightened, shoulders going back, and abruptly looked less exhausted than he had.

"Feeling better?" Ryou asked.

"Un," Syaoran looked at him.

"What is that?" Fay demanded, still sounding on edge.

The High Priest folded his hands over each other and bowed a little to Fay. "His fighting days are over, good wizard. This one is not destined for war. His magic is aligned with protection and purification." He then smirked. "He'd make a good healer."

Fay and Kurogane exchanged a look.

"But he can't use offensive magic at all?" Fay inquired.

"Nothing in life is so absolute, as you may well know. But I wouldn't advise destructive magic. He can know about it, but given his constitution, it would require much more out of him to cast an offensive spell or a defensive one, or even a nurturing one. That is simply how he was built."

Kurogane rubbed his forehead. It was not entirely surprising, but still worrying. One cannot always run and block and deflect.

Fay looked at Kurogane. *We need to talk*, his eyes said.

Syaoran looked at the two of them anxiously.

"That was about what Princess Tomoyo suggested," Kurogane reflected out loud. "Will you teach him some spells, then, High Priest." Fay obviously could not, since the mage had only learned destructive magic.

"That's what he's here for," Ryou held his hand out for the nusa, which Syaoran reluctantly returned.

Fay went past Kurogane, twitching his hand to indicate the ninja should follow. They left the boy with the priest in the room and went into the hall, where they stood across from each other in silence for a moment.

"Well," said Fay, "I suppose it's about as much as one can expect, given what we know."

"It's not that surprising," Kurogane agreed.

"I don't want to take him back to Shirasaki."
Kurogane folded his arms.

Fay lowered his eyes. "I just don't see a way for him to survive what they want him to do."

"What do you mean?"

"Well either he gets sacrificed to summon a demon that will wipe out all of Nihon," Fay's voice was very low, almost inaudible, "or he brings peace through other means, magical. He needs to be trained for the latter to be possible but what is he going to do? Cast a giant shield over fortresses? It took everything he had and more to even get to Sikayama. This is madness."

"...Maybe he'll get stronger."

"Maybe, but the healer said that his stomach is just the way it is. How is he supposed to get stronger if he can't eat well?"

Kurogane was silent.

"I know this world is your home," Fay went on, eyes on the floor, "and I know that...you care a lot about the princess. Your mother is buried here and you have a life here, for whatever it's worth. You're a person with...with an actual purpose here."

"So are you."

"..." Fay then looked up at Kurogane. "I've lived a long time."

Kurogane never knew how old Fay exactly was, mainly because Fay was not certain himself. But Fay was easily hundreds of years old, and had the potential to live for hundreds more. It was not something the mage dwelled on very much. Every now and then, hints of it would slip through, in the things he knew and the ways he reacted, but on the whole, Fay rarely addressed it directly.

"There will always be war," the mage went on. "It's just a matter of when. Even when there's peace for the time being, there is always war looming at some point. Could be a decade. Could be a century. You have a—a person save people from war, end it, and you think you save a ton of lives but when they are destined to die, it's just a matter of how—they can die from illness, they can die from an accident, they can die from an earthquake, or—or—or a personal vendetta, and you think you made a big difference but lives go as they will and how long will it last, a year? Five?"

"What are you saying, Fay?"

"I want to leave Nihon."

Kurogane looked down at the ground.

"I know you're sick of this war. You stay because of Princess Tomoyo but how long are you going to pay her back—"

"She saved my life—"

"So you will pay with your life?" Fay challenged. "Will you also pay with mine? With Syaoran's?"

Kurogane was silent. He was afraid to answer.

"Everyone knows: he's not meant to live like this. He's—he's done. This—this new chance, this miracle—we're not going to get it twice. And—is it really worth it?"
Kurogane was hunching over without realizing when he started. His chest hurt, and for a moment so did his throat, as if it had swelled, tightened, rough and scraping against itself.

"It's not about whether it's worth it, Fay," he said softly. "It's about what's right. But...you're right. This...this war, Nihon's plight, it's not your burden unless you choose to take it. You...don't have—it's not your price to pay. Certainly, no one has the right to expect that of you. And Syaoran—this Syaoran had suffered enough. He—it's his choice. He doesn't owe anyone anything. If you—if you want to go, and if you want to take him with you—he's—he's so young. He can't make that choice, so if you—you can go. If you want."

Fay's face turned stony. "You won't leave no matter what I say," he noted.

Kurogane blinked as his eyes stung. "My place is here. I made my choice long ago, long before I met you. Some promises have to be kept, even when you wouldn't make the same choice later. That's what honor is."

Fay looked away after a moment. "I made a promise too," he said softly. "I did not promise Nihon anything, but I promised you."

"You—" Kurogane swallowed so he would not choke. "I won't hold you to that. I mean—" he blinked and tears fell despite his attempts to hold it back. "I don't know what I'll become, later, to—to do—" he could not say it. "For Syaoran—to be born, I don't know. I wouldn't want you to be near anyone like that, especially if it's me."

"Kuro..."

"You're not happy here," the ninja pressed on. "I've—I've tried, but I know you're not happy here—"

"Kuro, no," Fay sounded firm, this time. "We'll figure something out. It—I just had to say it, in case you—in case you change your mind about the princess. But I'll stay where you stay and I'll go where you go and nothing will change that. As for Syaoran..." he clenched his jaw, "We'll take care of him this time. You and me, we're both wiser, and let's face it, this Syaoran's a lot easier to take care of. He can't lie about his health as well as the other one."

This startled a laugh out of Kurogane, even though it really should not have been funny.

"We can try to contact the shop," said Fay. It would be tricky, without Mokona. Seishirou made it sound like something so simple and easy, but Fay and Kurogane did not have the power to cross dimensions. Or at least, Fay did not have the power to make a round trip. "Whatever happens," said the mage, "I'll be right by your side. And it wasn't so hard to live with you here." Once upon a time, Fay might have followed that up with a joke at Kurogane's expense, and Kurogane abruptly realized that for the first time in ten years, Fay was not calling him by his full name, and he had just done it twice in a row. He almost expected some sort of tease to come along, something like 'though you had your moments' or 'amazing though that is'.

But the mage only blinked wearily, stating instead, "You're the only thing that makes me able to live with myself."

War erupted almost overnight, between multiple different kingdoms all across Nihon. It was as if a switch had been flipped, and all the uneasy truces broke down at once. Kurogane and Fay regarded the news with a slight hint of awe; Kuroiyama had not even summoned their demon yet, and already the world looked ready to implode on itself. One kingdom completely collapsed within a day and
was swallowed up by Masukyo, while Momonoki and Lotus Castle joined forces to attack a kingdom called Kinoheiwa.

"You've arrived just in time," said Ryou, unperturbed by the state of affairs. "If you languished any more on the road, there was no way you would have made it past all of that."

They did not tell Syaoran; the boy did not need to be disturbed with such updates. He was actually a natural, once he familiarized himself through the nusa. Ryou did not give him one again, but even without the wand, he was able to learn levitation, invisibility, and magical detection all in one sitting. Spells, particularly levitation, drained him profoundly, however. He had to space out his magic, and exerting too much at once made him black out.

"Food," said Ryou. "He's going through a growth spurt and he is not getting enough food. Food food food." And Kurogane was sent to collect the herbs for Syaoran's formula; fortunately, the mountain was full of flora, and even with the cold temperatures, there were plenty of roots to dig up.

The other thing that severely limited Syaoran's advancement was his literacy, so Fay was once again in charge. Syaoran worked hard, as he had back in Shirasaki, but he read very slowly and with great effort. It was much easier for him to learn spells, but both reading and magic tired him quickly, so Syaoran enjoyed neither of these things. He preferred going out to watch the sika deer; they were pretty creatures, Kurogane had to say, with their white spots and slender legs, and watching the boy with them made Kurogane feel very peaceful. They reacted well to him, sometimes grazing very close, though Syaoran never reached out to pet them. Sometimes, Kurogane had the odd vision of the boy hopping on one of their backs and riding away from Nihon. Something about how the teen was built made him seem fairy-like that way, like he could sail off on a cloud and never be seen again. Fortunately, Syaoran had a strong work ethic; Kurogane could not imagine where this was from, considering it sounded like the boy never really had to work, staying in hiding as he did in Kuroiyama. Yet, then again, he did skin those rabbits like he did it all the time, and the ninja mused that maybe this version was good at keeping some secrets after all.

Winter prevented much activity. Kurogane was the only one with fairly little to do. He spent his days training or watching Syaoran's sessions with the High Priest. Fay alternated between Syaoran's lessons and trying to find a way to contact Tokyo. The priests tried to help, but they had no artifacts strong enough to power such a transmission.

"I suspect," Fay said one night, as he cuddled against Kurogane for warmth, "Syaoran might have to be the one to contact Watanuki."

That, Kurogane decided, had to be an event he should not miss. He had words for the bespectacled boy. Watanuki Kimihiro would be twenty-four years old; the age Syaoran should have been. Watanuki had not reacted very much when they returned Mokona to the shop. Kurogane did not expect the youth to feel a particular kinship with Syaoran, considering they hardly spent any time together, but he had always been upset about Watanuki apparent indifference. He expected at least Seishirou's level of sadness, even if he did not expect Watanuki to be heartbroken the way Fay was. And the fact that Syaoran was meant to be his son... he was still angry about that.

"Did you ever have visions about what it would be like?" Fay asked.

"Visions?"

"If everything went as it should." He felt Fay turn his head so his hair brushed Kurogane's shoulder. "If you remained Lord of Suwa, and raised a little Syaoran."
"No. Why would I have visions?"

"Hm," Fay sounded thoughtful. "I don't know. Figured the priestesses could have shown you, but maybe they couldn't."

"Hard enough keeping track of this reality," Kurogane pointed out, "let alone realities that aren't... well, real anymore."

"Right. Fortunate, I guess. But...it does bear the question...what do you plan on doing with this Syaoran now?"

Kurogane raised his eyebrows. Seishirou had asked him the same question, but he bit his tongue and considered his response, because he was not sure why Fay was asking.

"What do you mean?" he finally asked.

"I think initially you were planning on trying to prepare him to serve Shirasaki," said Fay. "The Empress and Princess were willing to invest, but that was before we learned that he is your son. Supposed to be your son, anyway."

"He can also be yours," Kurogane pointed out.

Something about Fay's demeanor chilled at this. He stiffened beside Kurogane in the darkness, and a long silence followed. Kurogane was not sure what he said wrong.

"You can reclaim Suwa," Fay stated, ignoring Kurogane's remark. "It's...it's there."

The province was an apocalypse, even after all this time, but technically Fay was correct.

"I'm not bringing that child back there." The thought was preposterous.

"He's a purifier." Fay rolled so he was on his stomach, supported on his forearms to look down at Kurogane. "He's strong. He blacks out a lot but he's strong. He can probably clear the place—"

"Blacking out all the time isn't really something I want to subject him to—"

"And it would keep him away from Shirasaki—"

"What do you have against Shirasaki—"

"And we wouldn't have to worry about being useful, we can just do what we want."

Kurogane was quiet for a moment. He did not understand Fay's thought processes at all. After ten years, he did occasionally find Fay to be mysterious, but for the most part he had a decent understanding of how the mage thought and felt. He was completely lost this time around.

"What is it that you're afraid of?"

Fay inhaled. "You said yourself: their generosity only goes so far."

"So long as I'm here—"

"But you won't always be here," Fay interrupted.

Kurogane blinked.
"He's twenty years younger than you. And you're not always going to be strong and capable; you have a gray hair here and there right now but later on you'll have a black hair here and there. And then what? Once you're no longer useful, do you think Syaoran can continue living in comfort?"

"They'd—" allow Kurogane to retire, he wanted to say, and then Syaoran would just enjoy the retirement benefits with him.

"Spirits willing, Syaoran's going to grow up," Fay pointed out. "He's going to be an adult one day and he's going to make his own decisions and people will start viewing him as his own person, not just an extension of you. And as time goes on they're not going to think of him as the Tsubasa who had just passed by ten years ago. They'll judge him for his current actions and act accordingly. He's also not going to always want to live under your shadow. The old Syaoran never relied on others if he could help it, and neither would this one, weak stomach notwithstanding. You can't anticipate what he'll do. It's not fair for him to be stuck in Shirasaki, behaving himself for your sake, if he can potentially have a home of his own to do what he chooses."

Kurogane felt a little stupid for not thinking of these sooner; he honestly did just imagine that Syaoran would remain fourteen forever. He still did not understand Fay's aversion to returning to Shirasaki though.

"You think Amaterasu and Tsukiyomi won't treat him well?"

"I don't want them to treat him at all," Fay said unhappily. "I don't want him to become another indentured servant to them."

"I'm not an indentured servant—"

"Tsukiyomi saves your life and you trap yourself in a war you are sick of—"

"Fay, people's lives are—"

"People die, anyway, and—"

"She gave me a home when I lost my home—what part of this do you not understand—"

"They won't always be the same, alright?" Fay exclaimed, his voice rising. "People don't stay the same! They're nice and kind when there's something you can offer them back but you can't keep counting on that!" He then lowered his voice. "You probably haven't noticed this, engrossed as you are in your loyalty, but Amaterasu and Tsukiyomi have been getting…strange."

"What?" Kurogane was more confused than ever. "Fay, you're hardly in court with them—"

"Amaterasu is forty years old. Tsukiyomi is in her thirties. Neither of them are married and we have no heir. People don't talk around you because you are the greatest warrior in Shirasaki, and they know your loyalty would make you act if you even catch wind of it, but everyone is getting nervous. They feel that the Empress isn't fulfilling her duties to the kingdom."

Kurogane swallowed.

"When a monarch feels threatened," Fay went on, "they do strange things, because fear makes us irrational. Makes us selfish. And even when a monarch does not feel threatened, you cannot count on compassion forever: Ashura was—" his breath hitched, but he pressed on, "Ashura was my father in all but name and you know what happened to him."

"There's no curse on—"
"There doesn't have to be. My point is that you never know."

Kurogane fell silent.

Fay turned and let himself drop on his back. "I just want Syaoran to be able to determine his own life, without having to answer to another sovereign. As he was supposed to."

That statement sounded a little strange to him. Kurogane's mind turned it in circles to pinpoint why. According to the priestesses, Syaoran was destined to be a powerful Emperor, uniting Nihon and founding a dynasty lasting a thousand years, and of course he would be the sovereign so he would not answer to another one, so Fay was correct in that sense…

But Kurogane never told Fay that. He only told Fay that Kurogane was supposed to remain Lord of Suwa, which implied Tsubasa would be Lord of Suwa, but the Lord of Suwa was still vassal to Shirasaki.

"Did Ryou tell you that he was supposed to become the Emperor of Nihon?"

Fay jerked his head around. "He was supposed to become Emperor of Nihon?" He sounded shocked.

Kurogane stared at his features in the darkness. "Why do you say that Syaoran's not supposed to answer to another sovereign?"

"Well…" Fay sounded confused. "I mean…well, I didn't—I wasn't expecting him to be Emperor. It…really? Emperor of Nihon? It—what?"

"Forget about that. What did you mean, then?"

"Well—I mean, just that he would have more autonomy."

"We have autonomy."

"Yes but he'd have more if he were in Suwa. Wouldn't he?"

Something is not right. Fay's explanation made sense, but Kurogane always trusted his gut. He suddenly rolled over on top of Fay, arms on both sides of the mage to brace himself.

"You know something!"

He could not see Fay's face clearly, but he could almost feel the mage do a double-take.

"Kuro, I had no idea he was supposed to be an Emperor."

He was telling the truth with that one.

"But you know something."

"I know…what?"

He was dodging.

"I…know…something?"

Kurogane hissed. Fay was going to make this difficult. "What is it? Is the Empress going to hurt Syaoran? Is that it? Did you see some kind of vision? Is that why you've been asking me about
visions?"

Fay inhaled, and Kurogane had the distinct feeling that the mage really wanted to lie, but with great reluctance, he replied, "No. I did not see the Empress hurting Syaoran, nor the Princess. I just..." he trailed off for a moment, and then continued in a lower voice, choked with grief and longing, "I did see a vision. Of what might have been...long ago. And...and I want it."

A heavy silence fell.

"What did you see?"

Fay said nothing again for a long time. Under his body, Kurogane can feel Fay's shudder. It took him a moment to realize the mage was repressing sobs.

"S-Syaoran...growing up. Happy. Loved. By his people."

Kurogane felt like a weight slammed into him. He did not move for a full minute. When he did, it was to roll off Fay and onto his back next to the mage, looking up at the ceiling.

"You knew he was my son, all along," he said dully, too stunned to feel betrayed.

"No. I had no idea he was your son."

Fay had been surprised. Kurogane's mind ran over the memories again. Fay's shock. His emphasis on your, when he first learned.

"Whose son did you think he was?"

The ensuing silence felt like an eternity. Towards the end, Kurogane thought Fay might not answer, but then, as if dragged from the deepest parts of his wounded heart, Fay whispered, "Mine."

"I didn't have a twin, you know. I was just Yui. So there wasn't anything about bad luck, or misfortune, at least not associated with me. I was the son of the second prince. My birth was highly anticipated, and I satisfied all expectations. Father still died later on, but Mother never committed suicide because she didn't have that guilt of producing twins. And the King...he liked me. Thought I would be a great addition to his court. Valeria had its share of troubles, but I was allowed to be out and about, to help with...the country, so on the whole, it was a good reign. And the King had...no other heir. He was sad about that, but he was happy to pass the throne to me, lack of options notwithstanding. I was a powerful mage; nowhere as strong as I am now, but strong enough that people had high hopes for me.

"I married a young maiden named Li Yelan, who was a powerful sorceress and a fierce warrioress. She was a descendant of Clow Reed, and the match was deemed...very smart. And she was a good woman. I didn't love her, because...well, it was arranged. But I didn't dislike her. It could have been worse, and I would have been content with her as a wife, because she was wise and good and...she's someone any man would be proud to call a wife. We had a child, whom we named...Tsubasa, because when he was born, he had been swaddled in white blankets in such a way that it looked like he was covering himself with a pair of wings. I remember hearing the news while listening to some lord talk about budget cuts for road construction, and I just ran off in the middle of his sentence to see him. He had a full head of hair, did you know? It was actually a little more blonde when he was born; it went darker as the years went by, but he had a full head of hair. And he was so small. I had never seen anything so beautiful. I was in love instantly. Rotten father though; kept poking him to wake him up so I could feel him move in my arms; Yelan yelled at me, saying that I was hurting the baby, and also hogging him, because she wanted to hold him too. He would cry because he needed
to nurse, and I would shush him and rock him and adamantly refuse to believe that he was actually hungry, because I wanted to keep holding him. All the servants made fun of me, but he was the sweetest baby: everyone agreed. I used to pick him up while he was sleeping and hug him against me, feeling his little heart beating, his tiny lungs expanding with every breath, and he would sleep and sleep and it was so peaceful, this little child, trusting me so much that he'll sleep through anything as long as he was in my arms. When he was old enough to look around and smile, he would smile at everyone—he was such a beautiful baby. My little Tsubasa.

"He was a precocious child. He could read when he was two. He used to do accidental magic whenever he was feeling playful—during his toddler years. But he was the kindest, gentlest prince in the entire household. Servants loved him. He used to visit anyone who was sick and unable to work, even as a child, just to make sure they were alright. He knew everyone by name, their likes and dislikes. He was a good student and good fighter, powerful mage, far more powerful than the one we knew—from what I had seen, he might have been even more powerful than I am now. Cast spells effortlessly, even had trouble containing his magic sometimes. Valeria still had troubles; there was drought, and then flooding, and then outbreaks of illness, this and that. Within the royal households, we were sheltered from the ugliness of the common people, but Tsubasa would go out and see everything and come back more determined than ever to improve and advance so that he can help his people. The King adored him, said he had the makings of a great sovereign, and it was to the point where people almost wanted to skip my reign and jump right to Tsubasa's.

"When he was fourteen, Li Yelan died. Apoplexy. It was sudden, and we were all completely unprepared. Tsubasa was inconsolable for three days. But during Yelan's funeral, he met a miko named Sakura. She was helping with the funeral rites, and Tsubasa was having trouble maintaining his composure. She broke from the ritual to hold his face and blessed him. It was the first time they ever saw each other, and there is something about love at first sight, I think, because he got jolted right out of what would have been a crying fit. Finished the funeral without breaking down after that.

"Afterwards, for a long time he would come seek my company when he was feeling lonely. We would look over Yelan's garden from the balcony window and just stay with each other for hours. But then, after a while he...hurt a little less often. Started visiting the shrine to see Sakura. The King learned about this before I did. Was—well, at this point he was starting to feel a little threatened, because Tsubasa had been such a pure spirit, before, and I think he foresaw that people would like Tsubasa more than him. He seized the opportunity to paint Tsubasa in a bad light. Started giving Tsubasa a hard time and me a hard time. But Tsubasa wasn't doing anything wrong. Turned out Sakura could talk to spirits, and he had just been visiting her to talk to his mother. She was actually quite a powerful mage herself, though her powers were mostly spiritual, and dealt with premonition and fate. There was an interest as well, but it didn't really flare up quite yet; he was still too bereaved to indulge in such things, but Sakura was almost instantly fond of him, so there was that attraction. Her brother, Touya, who was a warrior, was not too impressed. Thought Tsubasa was trying to take advantage of his sister. So all of the sudden, Tsubasa was getting pressure from the King, who had initially spoiled him, and Sakura's brother, who was accusing him of all these things he was not actually doing, all shortly after losing his mother. It was really hard for him to cope, and he...he became even more depressed after that. Studies slipped. His health also declined. Lost weight, lost interest. I got worried and...had a fight with the King. Nothing good came out of that, of course.

"But Valeria had a very bad earthquake. I don't know if they had another motive or if it's truly the case, but the priests told the King that the disaster struck because the gods were angry with how Tsubasa was being treated. Things turned around completely after that. Sakura's brother was still a huge pain in the rear, but he couldn't do much when the King practically ordered Sakura to be with Tsubasa. Tsubasa got better, once the King got off his back, and to an extent he forgave the King for the suffering he inflicted, but he and I both learned...just how complicated people can be. Earnest and genuine one moment, backstabbing and hurtful the next. For this reason, he did not return
Sakura's affections. At least, not for a long time. In the meantime, he picked up on his studies, and started going out on missions on the King's behalf, helping with crops, patrolling the borders, constructing canals. Tsubasa was good at everything, and his magic was like...something divine. And he grew and grew; he was taller than me towards the end. I remember folding him into my arms and he was so big. Seemed like...like yesterday when I could pick him up in one hand. He used to be that little.

"Years later, Tsubasa turned twenty-one. He and Touya sat down at one point and had a long discussion. Tsubasa told me later that Sakura had a big fight with her brother, blaming him for Tsubasa's reservations, and Touya grudgingly decided to scout Tsubasa out. It was absolutely impudent, but Tsubasa was willing to forgive him because...well, you know. She was Sakura, and Touya was her brother. They reached some sort of understanding; I don't think Touya was ever happy with Sakura marrying Tsubasa, but I don't think he would have been happy with his sister marrying anyone. He's just that kind of brother; no one was good enough for his baby sister. Tsubasa did come close, I guess, and in any case, next thing I knew, Touya was appointed as Tsubasa's personal bodyguard. The boy was loyal as a dog, though. Did care about Tsubasa a lot, almost as much as he cared about his partner Yukito. Which was a lot. Still unhappy about Sakura marrying, but humans are complicated, as we well know. And in any case, it became a very important thing, because that time I was in my forties, and the King was also not getting younger, and people were starting to demand that he abdicate in favor of me. He wasn't the sharpest man, the King, and though for the most part he was kind to me and Tsubasa, he wasn't universally kind. He offended a lot of people, and with Tsubasa being so popular, there were murmurs in the dark. His Majesty grew paranoid. One year, two years later, he commissioned an attempt to assassinate my son.

"Touya protected Tsubasa. Nearly died in the process; Tsubasa's magic saved him, but it was a near thing.

"After that, people really turned against the King. He held fast to the throne for another five years, but went mad at the end of the final year. Started raving about everyone trying to kill him, and executing random people if they looked wrong to him. It got unbearable. I was encouraged to stage a coup. Because the King was failing his duties, I agreed to it. The coup was a success, and I imprisoned the King in a tower in a deep valley, where magic is silent and time does not flow. I could not bear to kill the King; doing so felt like treason, but neither could I justify letting him live in a normal tower, given the anger of my people. In any case, I did not have to: at that point he had his final psychotic break and alternated between shouting that the ghosts of his murdered subjects were after him, and catatonia. He was not functional at all.

"I ascended the throne as King. Tsubasa was my Crown Prince, and Sakura the Princess-consort. They had a son, a daughter, a daughter, a son, over the ensuing years. Tsubasa would attend court with me and we used to have long arguments whenever he disagreed with me, but even though we had different approaches, he always argued for helping and protecting the people. It was tough at first because neither of us knew what we were doing, and I had never been King before; it is different when you are actually in the seat. But I learned that people do not respect me less when I give in to challenge, especially not when it is my own son, who loved his kingdom. And Tsubasa... Tsubasa is the best son one can ever have. I loved him so much, I told him all of my insecurities and...he was my best friend, my confidante. We made a great team. And I loved him so much.

"I lived to be eighty. I know Tsubasa's magic allowed him to live for far longer than I did. He was sixty at the time and looked like he was thirty. Sakura was similarly blessed; I don't know what these children drank when they were young, but it was something...I know that after my death, when my soul still lingered over my corpse, and Tsubasa had long retreated to leave me to the priests, Touya remained behind and promised me that Tsubasa will be loved. Tsubasa was the greatest love of my
life. I loved him more than his mother. And I was so so happy that he was going to be alright, that my grandchildren were going to be alright, and I knew, knew that for sure as I was crossing over, that Tsubasa was going to usher in a long era of prosperity unlike any which Valeria had ever known —

"And then Fei Wong Reed…stole him from me. Gave me a twin brother that I should not have had and power that I did not need nor want. We were said to be cursed, and the King, who had loved me dearly, looked upon us as monsters this time around. Locked us in the tower, kept us apart. Murdered everyone in Valeria, and then taunted us. Destroyed Valeria, my home, my kingdom. And Tsubasa…Syaoran…my baby boy…he hurt, he locked up, used…my beautiful boy…my beautiful boy…"

The moon was almost on the other side. Kurogane stared up at the ceiling. Outside, the wind filtered through the trees, haunting, as if an echo of a reality long dead.

After a long, heavy moment, the ninja whispered, "Why did the priestesses say that he was mine if he was actually yours?"

"I've been trying to figure that out too," Fay admitted. His voice was hoarse and quiet in the dark. "I think I know how, now."

"And?"

"I'm a lot older than you."

Kurogane raised his knuckles to his forehead at this.

"Oh."

So simple. Fay was hundreds of years old in this reality. In the old reality, he did not live as long, but he was still born at the around the same time, and Tsubasa had the longevity instead of Fay. All that had happened was that Tsubasa had lived for hundreds of years in Valeria, died, and then was reincarnated as Kurogane's son in Nihon.

"He was both of our sons."

"I think so."

Fay did not just think so, Kurogane understood.

They both knew it.

"When did you learn about this?"

"I received the memories when Tsubasa passed."

"No!" Fay had cried, hands in his hair. "No…no don't do this to me Syaoran, not after everything and not now, not now of all times please, Kuro, please, we have to do something—" and Kurogane had said, "Fay…stop. He's endured enough." And when Fay went on protesting, Kurogane had said, firmly, "No. He has suffered enough." And he wondered, as Fay sobbed over that cold hand, all bruised and purple from the blood draws, the wires and tubes, why the mage was so beside himself when they all knew this day was coming, as if Syaoran's death had been an unexpected tragedy.

He had not realized that Fay had just lost his baby boy.
"...Why didn't you tell me this before?"

Fay raised his hands to his mouth and rolled away from Kurogane. A sob choked out of him and he curled up as more kept squeezing out of him.

Kurogane reached over to hug him, eyes wide. "Fay?"

"No," Fay whimpered, and shook his head. "No. I can't. Please."

Kurogane bent his arm so his hand was at Fay's shoulder. He rubbed it. "Alright. Alright, Fay. It's alright."

Fay gulped, swallowed, and released a shaky breath. He seemed to calm down from sheer force of will.

_There's something he's not saying._ But Kurogane did not want to push right now.

"He's back now," Kurogane reminded him. "He's largely the same, yes? A little beaten up, but not broken."

This provoked a laugh. Fay suddenly sounded tearful and yet happy. "Should have figured. If anyone could demand second chances and then get them, it would be Syaoran. The Reeds had nothing on that child. I'll bet if Syaoran had been the one to wish Ichihara to life, none of this would have happened. He wouldn't even need to mastermind Fei Wong's convoluted plan. It would just be, and everything else would continue on."

A chuckle bubbled out of Kurogane's chest.

"He was the same way in Valeria," Fay murmured. "Didn't expect anything from others, but he expected so much of himself. Hated worrying others, would rather hide any hurt or injury to prevent inconveniencing others. I don't know where his character came from. Sakura put a swift end to it. You know, she could be a terror when she's angry, especially once they got married."

Kurogane started laughing. "I can actually picture her making him sweat. She's normally so sweet-tempered so you'd think it would be hard, but it's really not." Sakura had spark, at times. She could be a downright spitfire if provoked.

"She only got mad at Tsubasa when he neglects himself."

"She wouldn't yell. She's too...Sakura for that."

"No, she didn't yell. Her voice just became hard and sharp, and she would succinctly outline how things will be. And what she said will be, will be. Of course, Tsubasa was always a bit of a pushover when it came to her. Well, she was a bit of a pushover when it came to him, but I think he relented more because her brother was his bodyguard. Touya was actually even worse: Sakura would just declare. Touya reinforced her declarations."

"Spirits, did our son get bullied by those siblings? And you let this happen."

"I absolutely let this happen. It was actually a bit funny to watch: Tsubasa would always be caught completely off-guard, like this were the last thing he was expecting. Even after the fiftieth time, he still could not believe it. And they cared deeply about him. That was all that mattered to me."

Kurogane sighed. If the princess had traveled with them...but he did not want to mention this aloud.
"Your baby son is alive," he said instead, "and this time you get to share him with me."

Though it was dark, he knew Fay was smiling. He wished he could light a candle; it had been so long since he had seen Fay smile a true smile.

"Isn't that something," he murmured as he slid his fingers between Kurogane's own. "A little beaten up but not broken." He was thoughtfully silent for a while. "Little miracle."
Sikayama was protected by winged beasts. Kurogane learned this when a battalion tried to storm the temple and a creature appeared out of a swirl of fire, and then wrecked havoc on the soldiers. Why the battalion attacked the temple, Kurogane had a hard time understanding; they had to have attacked because of Syaoran, but the soldiers were not from Kuroiyama. Nevertheless, the guardian left no survivors to question, much to his consternation.

On the other hand, he supposed part of him did feel reassured that they had such a being to protect them. It looked impressive as well: a great golden feline, like a tiger without stripes, and gleaming metal plates over its head and shoulders. On its forehead was a red jewel.

"Ah, you met Kerberus," said Ryou, after the beast disappeared and Kurogane related the encounter to everyone. "We call him Kero for short. He's a guardian. Don't feed him, especially not sweets; once he encounters those, he completely loses it."

"That thing has a name?" Syaoran exclaimed in amazement.

"Well you have to call him something," said Ryou with a raised eyebrow. "What would you call him? 'Fluffy'?"

"I would," Fay declared. "I like that much better than Kerberus. Fluffy sounds so…fluffed. Gives people a false sense of security. Kind of like Kuropu here." He then fluffed Kurogane's hair.

Since confessing the vision and the memories of that old life, a weight seemed to have lifted from Fay's shoulders. He no longer had that crippling sadness, though there was still an underlying shadow to his countenance. Part of the reason for the change was likely because Syaoran was still intimidated by Fay, and the mage was starting to try to change that impression.

So far, it was not really working, and Fay reminded Kurogane uncomfortably of the time when they first met, when the wizard had been all superficial smiles and airy, breezy front while hiding deep, seeping wounds underneath, but baby steps.

"Really?" he remarked dryly. "That animal reminds you of me."

"You share so many similar traits though," Fay replied without missing a beat. "You are, in many ways, like a big cat, with nasty, sharp teeth. You even share the same expression when you want to bite someone."

Kurogane scowled. "…When have I ever wanted to bite anyone?"

He heard a soft giggle. Syaoran was really confused, but he was also amused. The boy was trying to stifle his mirth, but his lips were split into a helpless grin, and his eyes were wide and sparkling. It warmed Kurogane's heart to see.

He could sense Fay drawing himself up. The mage leaned on Kurogane to look down at the boy.
"Don't you think if Kurotan here wanted to bite someone, he would look like Fluffy?"

"His name is not actually Fluffy," Ryou reminded them, but Fay ignored him.

"I can't imagine Lord Kurogane biting anyone," the boy said shyly.

"It's because I don't bite people. What on earth are you even talking about, Fay?"

Fay made a biting sound, drinking in the sight of Syaoran being happy. Syaoran giggled more, and when Kurogane glared at him, doubled over slightly as more mirth bubbled out of him.

"This is going to be a thing, isn't it?" The High Priest raised his eyebrows at the three. "You're going to try to change Kero's name to Fluffy."

"I like it better than Kero. What does Kerberus even mean?"

"It won't work, you know." Ryou was keeping his expression controlled, but Kurogane could tell the priest was also amused. "You have better luck changing Black Steel's name to Fluffy."

"Oh no.

"Now there's an idea," Fay appeared to consider.

"Or this little one," and Ryou fluffed Syaoran's hair so it was all over the place.

Kurogane looked at Fay. "You're insufferable."

"You wouldn't have me any other way."

That was true, but Kurogane would not grace that with an affirmation. He turned to Ryou. "So that guardian defends the temple?" He wondered why the Wind Goddess temple did not have the same.

"The guardian defends the mountain. Sikayama is a sacred mountain, and there are many guardians here. The mountain came first; the temple after. It's why you three are so safe here."

"Does he come out normally?" Syaoran asked. "When would he eat sweets?"

For some reason, Ryou thought this question was very endearing. "This boy is so smart," he said fondly. "As it happens, he used to come out more often, even when there is no threat, but, as I said, once he encounters sweets, he goes insane. We've since learned to hide the sweets away from him, and these days he only comes when something threatens the mountain."

"That battalion ascended pretty high up the mountain before he materialized," Kurogane frowned.

"The top of the mountain is what matters," said Ryou. "That's why the temple is also so high up. That is where we have the most power and the most protection. I'm serious about the sweets, boy," he pointed at Syaoran, "Do not feed. Understand?"

Syaoran responded with a mischievous grin. It was actually an expression Kurogane had not seen before on this one. Or…possibly any Syaoran, come to think of it. He felt Fay tense a little at this and a surge of sympathy swelled; Syaoran felt more comfortable with Ryou than with Fay. But it really was the mage's own fault, so there was not much to be done about that.

"Can I ride him?"

Ryou let out a disbelieving snort. "Insolent brat." He pointedly did not answer the question, though.
Kerberus showed itself several more times throughout their stay here, along with a guardian that looked like a large black cat. They both disappeared as soon as the threat was disposed of, but Syaoran did not like the dead corpses that littered the mountain afterwards. He was initially intrigued by the guardians, but after the smoke and ash, he grew frightened of them.

"They wouldn't hurt you," said Kurogane, understanding why Ryou once said that the three of them would not have made it to Sikayama's temple if the priests had not expected them.

"Really?"

It was a good point, Kurogane decided.

Syaoran's training progressed. He continued to practice his letters and read. His knowledge of spells continued to grow. Over time, his stamina did improve, though he could not sustain very powerful spells without blacking out later. The stronger the spell, the longer he stayed unconscious. It was to the point where Fay wanted to put an end to it, but Kurogane felt that Syaoran should have everything he could access to defend himself from threats after they leave Sikayama. This became a daily discussion, as Syaoran could not avoid fainting as long as he was doing magic. Fay was convinced this was not good for his health and development, while Kurogane, who worried about the same thing, felt this might be a risk they had to accept.

They also continued arguing about Shirasaki. Fay brought the subject matter up several times. After learning that Fay had once been a King himself, Kurogane was forced to listen to his words with more attention, but it was difficult for him to hear anyone say anything bad about the royal sisters. The only thing keeping his temper in check, Kurogane acknowledged, was the fact that deep down, he agreed with Fay. Over the past ten years, Kurogane had slowly but surely changed how he approached his duties and his superiors with this in mind. Sovereigns use people, and cannot help viewing the people they lead as opponents in a game. Where there were leaders, there were insubordinates.

It just went against all of his instincts.

Syaoran, in contrast to the adults, was oblivious to their concerns. The boy was glad that his travels were over for the time being, and though he had to work hard, overall he seemed less frightened and anxious. Sometimes, in between their intense discussions, and even during their discussions, Fay and Kurogane would watch the boy as he studied in the main hall. Seeing him so at ease was soothing for some reason, as if all was right with the world as long as the boy was feeling well.

It was still surreal, the idea that this boy had been both of theirs across two lifetimes.

Kurogane could not help but marvel at it, occasionally stretching his mind to search for memories that were not there. They could not figure out why Fay had the vision of his original lifetime and Kurogane did not. Fay felt it might be one or both of two reasons: Fay had far outlived his original lifespan, whereas Kurogane was still living through his. The other possibility was that Syaoran was born directly in Nihon, not Valeria. Likely, Fay felt, since the King had murdered all of his subjects in Valeria before Syaoran should have been born, Fay's Li Yelan died before he could sire the boy with her, time travel or not. Since Syaoran did not belong to Fay, Fay was the one with the memories: Kurogane, after all, could make new ones.

Kurogane did not like these ideas very much, but it was all speculation at this point anyway.

_We were both his father once._ And Fei Wong Reed had ripped him away from both of them, simultaneously. The thought still made rage boil in his stomach, but the idea that he actually shared a
child with Fay did a lot to quell it. The notion was confusing, actually. They did not make the child together. Fay possessed a whole series of memories that Kurogane did not have. Yet it still felt like Syaoran was something between them, more than regrets and lost opportunities. A hope, now, a representation of the deep bond he shared with the mage.

He tried to get Fay to tell the boy, at least; after all, Fay had none of the skeletons Kurogane had to hide. The mage refused, however. Said it would be overwhelming for Syaoran, to face a ghost that meant even more to Fay than ever. It would be confusing, the mage pointed out. It was still confusing for Kurogane, who had already reasoned it out in his head, but could not always understand this intense feeling in his chest, that would swell when he saw the boy happy and hurt when the child was in pain or afraid. Sometimes he wondered where it came from—it did not always seem to pass through his brain at all. It was just an instinct, a reflex, as natural as it was for a scratch to smart, for silk to feel cool and soothing. There was no way, Fay explained, Syaoran would understand the depths of their feelings—even children who knew their parents did not. It was transformative and one-sided, and not something they should trouble the boy with. Not all at once. Better to take it slow, allow the child to grow comfortable with them; show before they tell.

Kurogane did not like that plan, but he allowed Fay to take the lead on this one. It was, after all, his relationship with the boy, not Kurogane's.

Winter grew even colder. Syaoran was given a day off to rest, when he then proceeded to fall ill. Kurogane and Fay told the child stories of their previous adventures during the boring hours when Syaoran could not sleep but could not do anything else. Strangely, Syaoran was not curious at all about the princess. Kurogane suspected it was because mentioning her reminded him of how different he was, and provoked feelings of inadequacy.

He figured there was no reason to talk to Syaoran about Sakura and the depths of their love until this boy actually found his Sakura. Which begged the question of if there was one in Nihon, or if the Sakura he was destined for was actually in the one from Clow Country all along. She would be ten years older than him, an adult woman while he was still a child. Potentially, this would not end very well for either of them, so he did not want to give this Syaoran a suggestion that he might find his soulmate.

Any suffering he could spare this boy counted.

Syaoran remained less than comfortable around Fay, but while he was ill, Fay brought his skills to bear. As with the birthmarks, he had a familiarity with the teen that Kurogane had not paid attention to before, and seemed to know what Syaoran needed before the boy even knew himself.

"Did you see the birthmarks with the prince?" Kurogane asked him, "or with our Syaoran?"

"Both," said Fay. "It used to look huge, because his thigh was so tiny. I used to look at it because it was so red."

"You looked at his birthmark?"

"Of course. It looked huge. It looked pretty though. He was a pretty baby."

"That's why you assumed he would have it now too," Kurogane noted.

Fay smiled thinly.

It was through this particular illness that Syaoran finally learned to relax around Fay. Fay told stories about their shared adventures at first, but eventually he also revealed his past, how he had a twin, and
his real name was Yui, but Fei Wong Reed tricked him into thinking he had killed his twin.

"Fay was…my world entire," the mage told him. "It was…us, against the world. Everyone hated us. Thought we were a curse. So all we had were each other. He was the only one who understood me, and I knew him, better than I knew myself. I remember being in the tower, knowing he was above me and swearing to myself that I would reunite with him. We had all the magic we can ever want but none of it worked there, so I had to climb the hard way. I was willing to break my neck to get to him at times, but he would be so scared, and I would give in because I knew…if I died then the King would win and this would all be pointless. He wanted to come down too, but it was far more dangerous; he had no way to climb down without falling and actually breaking his neck, whereas I would fall and at least live. Often wouldn't have injuries, other than a scratch or a bruise. It was wretched. *Wretched.* He squeezed the boy's hands. "It was like walking on daggers, every day. Sleeping on hot coals, every day. Everyone hated us—couldn't we have this one thing, each other, our one source of happiness? And then he died and I couldn't believe I killed him. I couldn't believe I was such a coward."

"But you weren't," Syaoran insisted, eyes glossy. "It was all that man's fault."

"It was," Fay agreed steadily. "He took great liberties with me. In hindsight, I should have known he would have done the same to you, because there was no violation he would abstain from. Took my memories. Took my will. I was a pathetic being then. Didn't have love to spare. My brother was my love. So when King Ashura took me in…he saved me. Just as Princess Tomoyo had saved Kurogane. He was…thoroughly kind. He truly cared about me. So good to me. And I wanted dearly to repay him…wished so hard that I wouldn't have to kill him." He sighed and reached out to touch Syaoran's face.

"I'm sorry," Syaoran whispered, looking heartbroken.

"No," said Fay. "You of all people have no reason to be sorry."

Syaoran was the reason Fay even had a twin. But Fei Wong Reed was the reason Syaoran had to make his wish in the first place.

Fay's vision of that happier lifetime lingered in Kurogane's mind. He knew that the Tsubasa of Valeria had his share of sorrows, as well as Fay, who had been stuck in an arranged marriage with a woman he respected but did not love. But it sounded almost idyllic, compared to their true past. And given the idea that Syaoran's soul had been good enough to bring peace and prosperity to two worlds in succession, it was even more heinous that Fei Wong Reed had done to Tsubasa what he did. Kurogane was certain that had things on Nihon gone the way they should, Kurogane's own memories would have been just as joyous and blissful. He probably would have had to marry Li Yelan out of political and economic need, but he could understand what Fay meant when the mage said she was a good wife. And then Kurogane would have had a little Syaoran of his own. Well, maybe his name would have been Tsubasa too? Kurogane was not sure.

"He must know that you loved him," Syaoran was saying. "We all die at some point, and we can't control our time, and he couldn't control his curse. But as long as he knew you loved him…it doesn't make it alright, but it doesn't make you wrong. We're not gods, right?"

Fay stopped moving at this.

"I mean, we shouldn't expect ourselves to do what only gods are able to do," the boy went on. "I'm sure he doesn't blame you. And he loved you very much, so he'd be happy to know that you have Lord Kurogane, and that you're doing well. In the end, that's what matters. That's all he would want from you."
Fay tilted his head a little, looking a little stunned.

"That's true," he said, his tone a little odd.

"Wherever he is," Syaoran smiled, "I'm sure he's happy."

Fay tilted his head back. "I'm sure," he intoned.

Something the boy said got through the mage's thick skull. Honestly, Fay could be the biggest idiot sometimes. Maybe it was all the magic he knew, cluttering up his brain, but some simple common sense concepts took forever to sink in. Things like not blaming himself for things that were not his fault. Maybe he would also stop blaming himself for being unable to prevent Syaoran's death.

But as Fay seemed to perk up, Syaoran actually began looking more morose.

"What's wrong?" Kurogane asked.

"Nothing," Syaoran managed a very fake smile. Kurogane instantly felt a well of disgust.

"Don't do that," the ninja warned. "Don't ever try to lie to us, boy." He kept his tones gentle, but Syaoran still flinched as if slapped.

"It's nothing," he stated, but at least he was no longer faking cheer.

"What's this nothing?" Fay asked. "Come on. What's on your mind?"

"It—sorry. I was just thinking about my mother." Syaoran's head dipped low. "She…she didn't know if I would be alright. Last thing she knew, I was being sent off to face certain death. She had no way of knowing I would meet the two of you."

Fay leaned forward and hugged him tight, cradling his head. "Not your fault, child."

"I know. I just wish—"

"I know."

Syaoran hugged Fay harder. "Sorry for bringing her up."

"Syaoran," said Fay, "you can always talk about your mother with us."

He roused abruptly that night when Fay called out, "Watch the wine—" and elbowed him hard in the ribs.

The pain bloomed after a moderate delay, and as Kurogane thought ungenerously about Fay's sharp bones, Fay muttered, "That was a very odd dream."

"What were you dreaming about?" he grumbled.

"I dreamed about…my brother."

He sounded more bemused than heartbroken, so Kurogane mumbled, "Was your brother getting drunk?"

"Something like it. I was…showing him Syaoran, since he had never met him before." Fay raised a hand from beneath the covers to rub at his forehead.
It must be the trip down memory lane with Syaoran earlier that day. "You alright?"

"I'm fine."

He seemed lost in thought, so Kurogane poked his ribs with a hard finger. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. It was…it's been some time since I dreamed about him." Fay paused. "It wasn't a bad dream."

"Oh? Want to tell me about it?"

"…Well, he was over for dinner in…Ceres, though it might have been…Tokyo too. I'm not sure. I was telling Syaoran to prepare the sake from Ichihara's shop, so it might have been Tokyo? I told him that his uncle was coming. Syaoran was joking about how he wasn't sure it was appropriate to call him 'Uncle' since Syaoran had created him. For some reason, I told him that he owed me for the clone eating my eye. And then somehow one of Syaoran's eyes was blind, like that clone. Syaoran said that my eye was his as well to begin with, though I could borrow it for as long as I wanted. Fay seemed especially puzzled by this. "I felt very…touched, all of the sudden. I told him he could have both of my eyes if he wanted; I had used them for long enough. He said they looked better on me anyway. We talked about this for a bit, and I said that he could be like those white cats with one blue eye and one brown one; he said he wasn't a cat, he was a wolf, and wolves don't carry that look very well. This went on and on for a while."

Kurogane was not privy to all of Fay's dreams, but he could tell this was strange, even for the mage. His own eyebrows raised up, but he was enjoying the story. This was actually kind of funny; it was rare for their dreams to be so whimsical.

"He then called me 'Papa'," Fay's voice was suddenly filled with longing. "I don't remember what he said other than that. It…the word. It was Valerian." He paused again, immersing in that particular moment, before continuing, "And then…my brother came. He…he was complaining about the weather, how it was raining and he was soaked. He got dry and hugged Syaoran, kissed his face, and told him how glad he was to meet his nephew, but Syaoran really needed to get his eyes checked, because he was too skinny."

Kurogane mentally shrugged. Dream logic. He was familiar with it by now. His own dreams hardly made much more sense, and very often they were dark and restless.

"They talked for a while. I remember sitting there just feeling so happy that they got to meet, and they were the two of the people dearest to me, and if only you were there too, and all three of you would be there and it would have been perfect, but you were away somewhere. You weren't going to be back until morning, by which time…my brother would have left. He was telling Syaoran all these stories…I don't know which ones. Syaoran was being snarky and laughing at me, saying he thought my brother was handsomer than I was, and I was pretending to be annoyed…I don't think they actually said anything coherent, they were just words and impressions, and I wasn't even saying anything that made sense. And then I said it was time to eat, and Syaoran was reaching for the glasses, but he didn't see the wine because of his blind eye. He knocked it over and I woke up."

Kurogane smiled faintly in the darkness. "Figures. Just when we get to the good part."

Fay chuckled at this. "Right." He then fell silent.

"You don't usually dream about him."

"…No."
Ever since the body disintegrated, Fay had reached a closure of sorts. He would always miss his brother, but that overwhelming guilt had gone. His brother did not haunt his dreams these days. Even this one seemed to be of a happier sort, even if much of it was nonsensical.

"I didn't expect to have a happy dream about him tonight," Fay admitted. "I guess I really wished he could have met Syaoran." He looked at Kurogane. "This one never fought. Is one of his eyes blind?"

"Not that I've noticed, but I wasn't paying as much attention this time." There were other things about Syaoran that he did pay attention to, but after this long, surely he would have noticed?

"I'm going to check him in the morning."

Kurogane's own dreams were not as pleasant; he saw the crumpled figure of a woman that his mind identified as Syaoran's mother, and a shadowed figure giving him a choice. Behind him, Syaoran's body floated in a large, glass tank filled with a colorless liquid, clad in Fei Wong Reed's hideous insignia. Syaoran was trapped, but conscious, pressing his hands against the glass. He was running out of air. Precious bubbles spurted from his lips as he cried out, No! No!

He woke peacefully, for all that, though his heart felt empty and numb, as if cut off from the adrenaline in his mind. Fay had gotten up before him, and his side of the bed was empty.

Syaoran's eyes both worked, Kurogane learned when he joined the others for breakfast.

"Why wouldn't his eyes both work?" the High Priest raised his eyebrows. "Why would you worry about that? His eye would turn out or cross if it can't see well. He's never done that."

Actually, Kurogane reflected, the clone's eyes never did that either. Perhaps because Tsubasa had been watching.

"A silly dream, is all," Fay replied without elaborating further.

"A silly dream?" Ryou looked at Fay. "One that has you checking on the boy before breakfast?"

Fay shrugged in a self-deprecating way, but did not offer an explanation. Neither did Kurogane.

"What do you plan on doing after this?" Ryou asked later that day.

"After what?"

"When winter is over. He's progressing in his studies. He's getting stronger, though it's slow. How long do you plan to stay?"

Kurogane hummed. "Are you evicting us?"

"Not at all. You two seem to care about him." Ryou folded his arms. "I don't know if you intend on staying with him. He'd make a good priest, but that's not his destiny. He can use allies for the trials ahead."

Allies.

"Fay and I have no intention of leaving him." He is our child. We had just found him.

Ryou nodded.

"If we do this right," the High Priest went on, "he can have a happy ending. It's possible."
Kurogane looked at him, feeling his throat constrict. His eyes felt misty.

*All we wanted was for him to be happy. Even last time, when we didn't know who he was, all we wanted was for him to be victorious, to be united with his love, to have the kind of life the two of us could only dream of. But it was too much to say.*

"He was supposed to be an Emperor, did you know?" Ryou went on. He seemed oblivious to the fact that Kurogane already knew, or that Kurogane had actually been his father in that lifetime.

"United all of Nihon and brought peace for decades going on centuries. He did so as a great warrior, and was known as the Great Wolf. He was a great intellectual, a master strategist, a powerful mage."

The priest folded his arms. "The boy we know is nowhere near what he should have been."

Kurogane looked away. He did not need Ryou to tell him that.

"Still, his magic is cleansing, and even if he cannot unite Nihon in one fell swoop as he was supposed to, his benevolence is the same. His existence is only good for us." The priest looked at him. "Protect him the best you can."

*You don't need to tell me that.*

"You care about him too," Kurogane noted. His voice scratched at his throat painfully.

"In another life," Ryou replied, "he would save my life. It was the first time we met, and we would never see each other again, but some children don't need a long acquaintance for you to know that they are special. We were only together for a few hours at the most, but his kindness had changed my life. Allowed me to be where I am today, even now, many realities later. That is the true power of Li Syaoran. He has the power to change things for the better, even if it takes several tries, but to me, that is far better than even the greatest sorcerer of all time. Plus," he smiled wistfully, "he's really cute. If I had a son, I'd want him to be just like Syaoran."

Kurogane felt a warm curl of pride coil in his heart. Which was absurd, considering he had not even raised the boy. He deserved absolutely no credit this time. But he could not help but feel happy on the child's behalf.

"He's not meant to be a weapon this time," the priest told Kurogane. "He never was, even though he could be. With his health as poor as it is, most of the way needs to be cleared."

"Fay and I are used to that."

"We'll see," Ryou said cryptically. "In any case, once winter is over, Kuroiyama will be beating at the foot of the mountain. I, for one, would feel more at ease, knowing that he would leave with you."

*When winter is over.*

It would be a while yet, but days have a habit of passing quickly when one did not keep track.

Ryou reached out to grasp Kurogane by the elbow before leaving the ninja to his thoughts.
The next attack on Sikayama required more than the might of the two guardians. Some of the priests headed out, and in the scuffle many of them were injured. Syaoran was recruited to help heal them, which the boy did with great success, but he was severely drained.

"What are they trying to accomplish?" Kurogane exclaimed. "And where are they even coming from? Are they just going to send more men here to be ripped apart by guardians in order to hurt an innocent child?"

"They're from all over," Ryou replied, adjusting the covers for one of the priests. "Some are allied with Kuroiyama, some are against them."

"What?"

"Why are they attacking if they're against Kuroiyama?" Fay asked.

"Because they're trying to kill him before he can be sacrificed." Ryou shook his head. "Kind of amazing if you think about it, how different people react to the same information."

"Yes, that is brilliant," Fay's voice was biting, "send a bunch of warriors after an innocent child. Fantastic."

"Well, it is," said the High Priest. "It's classic stupidity, you have to marvel at it."

"But he's supposed to bring about peace," Kurogane could not understand this.

"You think that would bring about peace?" Ryou pointed at Syaoran's sleeping form. "That?"

A surge of rage coursed through him. "Well if you don't believe in him, why are you training him?"

"I do believe in him," said Ryou, "but I'm saying not everyone would. They take a look at that and think, hmph, might be more likely that he gets sacrificed. Can't afford it. Seers. That's why they're the best of the worst. They only see what they need to see to have the future progress as it should."

"Why would they see that?" Kurogane exclaimed. "Why would they see that he's ill? Why would this be part of anyone's vision?"

"Oh please, you know better than to ask that," Ryou rolled his eyes. "Where do you think visions come from? Who do you think the gods are? You think a god of war would want peace? You think a goddess of peace would want war? Are they your friend or your friend or your friend? Do you think they'll be able to be your friend if they're his friend? Or his friend? You really think every god is on your side? If the Fire Demon gets summoned, guess who would be happy? That's right: the Fire God. Not every god cares about mortals. Not every god cares about every mortal. And not every god cares about the mortals you think they should care about. Gods have jobs, and they do what they need to protect them."

Fay reached out and smoothed over Syaoran's head. "Does he have anyone protecting him?"

"What do you think?"

Fay sighed.

"This will keep happening, won't it?" Kurogane looked at the priest. "They won't stop."
"Such is life," said Ryou. "War is not a pleasant affair, after all. That's why we try our best to end it as early as we can."

The High Priest's solution to Syaoran's bad stomach was to feed him all sorts of eggs. He had two eggs for breakfast along with the rest of his meal (consisting of partially cooked rice porridge and pickled vegetables), two eggs for lunch along with the rest of his meal (consisting of partially cooked rice and some meats or fish), and two eggs for dinner along with the rest of his meal (consisting of partially cooked rice and some vegetables). After a whole winter of this, Syaoran was utterly sick of eggs, which also did not seem to improve his strength, much to everyone's surprise. He did grow; he shot up quite a bit, and earned himself a number of bruises from the sudden decrease in coordination. With his poor weight gain, he ended up looking quite ungainly, with his long lanky limbs that looked like they would tangle with each other (and often did). Kurogane had to wonder at the irony of making one of the most promising young warriors he had ever come across in one lifetime turn into the biggest klutz he had ever seen in another.

This ended up being a real hazard. Syaoran had, as he often did, been mingling among the sika deer during one of his breaks. He was on the last vestiges of his illness, and though still sniffling a little, was feeling much stronger—enough to train again, and continue his writing. Somehow, and Kurogane was not sure how, a few ninjas got past Kerberus and the other guardian.

Kurogane had been close by, but he did not notice until Syaoran threw up a shield; the boy's shields were strong, but Syaoran could not maintain them for long. He beat one warrior off Syaoran with his own sword, and Syaoran released the shield, already tiring. Kurogane held his blade in front of him, eyeing their new foes.

"Black Steel of the White Peninsula," said one of the warriors. "After all these years, imagine finding you here of all places."

Kurogane tensed. The voice was familiar. The ninjas all wore masks, but he recognized their uniforms. Back in the day, all sorts of idiots would try to infiltrate Shirasaki to harm Tsukiyomi and Amaterasu. Among them were ninjas from a kingdom called Jeidoshinrin. They were actually more skilled than most, and utilized some jade weapons that were far more lethal than they had any right to be. Kurogane used to take pleasure in ridding these fools of their troubles. Later, Amaterasu brokered a truce, but as with all such agreements in Nihon, that hinged on the delicate balance of economy and military. Back in Shirasaki, Kurogane had kept special tabs on them. He had since let go of that monitoring as he had no way to do so while accompanying Syaoran to Sikayama, but doubtless Jeidoshinrin had been keeping track of him.

"Jade Warrior," Kurogane replied in a dispassionate tone, "You are also far away from home. This is sacred ground, you realize."

"I can say the same to you," said another ninja—a woman, Kurogane realized. "Your hands are stained with the blood of many, Black Steel. You have no right to intrude on Sikayama."

"As a matter of fact, I was invited," Kurogane held his sword across so that he was partially blocking Syaoran. "I don't think you were, though."

"For the boy," said the first ninja. "Anyone can be his escort. Doesn't have to be you. You will die today."

Without further ado, they attacked.

Kurogane swept his sword forward. He felt Syaoran drop down behind him—and then the boy
disappeared from his senses. Too preoccupied to track him, Kurogane focused on fending the warriors off as quickly as possible. But the jade weapons, though not sharp nor long, were hard and heavy. Kurogane had reach, but they could block and he could not; the jade dulled his weapon, damaging it. Many of them were clubs, though a few were the occasional dagger, and a moderate swing was strong enough to break bone.

He managed to stab through one: the woman, but had to endure a blow to the side of his back that nearly knocked the breath out of his lungs. It must have been what provoked Syaoran into revealing himself, because the next thing he knew, Syaoran was flying over him, one of his arms extended and pushing out with a magical shield.

Then the boy landed.

Then he tripped.

Kurogane fought off the warrior that hit his back, but Syaoran was immediately grabbed by the first warrior—the leader, it seemed. Down came the jade club, right over the boy's kidneys. Syaoran gasped out and scrambled to escape, but the ninja seized him by the throat, tugged him up, and dragged him back. Kurogane had to dodge another blow from one of the others. He managed a strike through the gut; reach counted when it was not parried, and then his sword sliced between a pair of ribs, but when he next looked, the warrior had a knife to the child's throat.

He froze.

Blinding pain rang from his skull. He was on his knees before he even knew what happened. His ears rang.

Another strike. White flashed before his eyes. He abruptly felt sick, and his strength seeped from him.

His vision swam when he next opened his eyes. He felt the ground roll under him. Someone grabbed him by the shoulders, but they were not hurting him. He tried to blink things into focus, and someone touched his head, which spiked agony deep into his skull, before the pain abruptly bled away.

*Good healing,* he had to marvel, before his thoughts snapped into order and he realized it was Syaoran.

The priests were there. Fay was standing over Kurogane, monitoring the situation, while Ryou stood over the woman. She was good, because Kurogane had been aiming for an instant death strike and she was still alive.

"He's alright now," he heard Fay say.

Syaoran's hands were steady, but when he leaned away he started to tremble. His face went from determined to tearful and he took a deep, shaky breath, and let it out slowly. Fay knelt down and grabbed Kurogane by the side of his neck.

"Are you with me?" asked the mage.

"Ugh," Kurogane winced as he raised his opposite arm to his head reflexively and felt blood, still wet. Syaoran's hands were red.

"Hm?"

"Hate those people," Kurogane winced again. "Blasted jade weapons."
"You're lucky there was any brain left to save," said Fay.

Syaoran's face was wet and pale. He blinked, swallowed, and then swooned to the side. They did not catch him before his head hit the ground; luckily, Syaoran was already sitting, and his head did not fall that far.

"Why didn't Kero or Spinel stop them?" one of the priests asked Ryou, who was taking off the woman's mask.

"Slowly," Fay said, as Kurogane bent to check on Syaoran. "You need to take a longer moment."

"You harbor a murderer," the woman was saying.

Ryou released a long-suffering sigh. "Seriously, what is it with you ninjas and the utter lack of self awareness?"

"You would harm an innocent child," said one of the priests. "You are no better than he."

"I am merely what he made me," and she turned to glare menacingly at Kurogane. "Curse upon you, Black Steel of Shirasaki, and your worthless spawn."

Cold washed over him for a moment, before he realized this was just as well: though Sikayama seemed unaware, if the priestesses of the wind goddess could tell, then so could others. Even those who were not on their side.

"Oh," Ryou raised his eyebrows. "Seems like this wasn't about the child after all. This is about Lord Kurogane, the Death Bringer."

"They couldn't wait until after the boy ended the war?" another priest grumbled.

"She's a daughter of someone you killed," Ryou stated loudly when he saw Kurogane's confused expression. "Or sister, or something. Back when your name was synonymous with bloody dismemberment. Looks like our unwanted guests are all of the same ilk. He did not appear capable of being less interested in their motives. "What I want to know is what on earth you did to our guardians. Fan out and get Kerberus and Spinel Sun."

Fay squeezed Kurogane's shoulder as the latter struggled to wrap his head around this development.

"It's alright," he stated, his face stony. "I took care of them. This isn't your fault."

Kurogane looked at Syaoran's slumped form. A bruise was already swelling at his throat.

"Kuroai. It's alright."

…It was not alright. Kurogane had been so focused on how his future actions might make him a poor father, he had not thought about his past. Fay's fingers dug hard into his shoulder, and the pain kept his mind from delving into darker musings.

"And throw her off the mountain," Ryou waved, looking angry. "This isn't some arena to hash out differences."

---

They found the bodies of the guardian beasts on the incline, caught by a wall of dense trees. A dark artifact, made of shadow and death, had looped around them in chains, exuding such a powerful aura that the priests could not go near them. Fay ended up being the one to retrieve the artifact, as he was the only one whose magic could handle something so poisonous. When he untangled the chains,
they withdrew into device that looked like an ornate lock of some kind. Thus deactivated, the aura dissipated, and Fay was able to carry the lock to the temple grounds.

The guardians were dead. Ryou was furious. If Fay had not already killed all the Jade Warriors, Kurogane was certain the priests would.

"There will be retribution on Jeidoshinrin," the High Priest told Kurogane.

"Word can't get out about this," one of the other priests pointed out. "People can't know that the protections around Sikayama can be stripped away."

That was for the temple hands to worry about. Kurogane was more concerned about Fay touching the lock, but the mage seemed unaffected. He tossed the lock into the corner and turned to Kurogane, eyes scanning over his face.

"Knew you'd make it somehow," the blonde murmured. "One…silver lining of knowing what's next, I guess."

Once they were alone though, Fay gave in to his impulses and hugged Kurogane tight.

"What happened?"

"I was distracted."

"That's not like you."

"They had Syaoran."

"Well pay attention next time."

Syaoran had woken by the time they went to check on him. Panicking, the boy had stumbled out, hips slamming into stands and whacking his elbows against door frames. He hugged Kurogane tightly upon seeing him, partially because he was glad and partially because the pain made him cringe.

"Are you alright?" the boy rasped, throat still bruised, and looked at Kurogane's fully healed head. "Spirits! Spirits!"

"You did well." Kurogane ruffled Syaoran's hair, pleased nothing was coming out.

Syaoran blinked several times at him, searching his face, and then the beginnings of a smile appeared. "I didn't know I could do that."

"You did a great job," Fay rested his hand over Syaoran's nape.

Kurogane squeezed the thin shoulder. "You saved my life."

Syaoran stared at him for a moment longer before leaning forward again and folding himself into Kurogane's arms. His sheer relief was touching. Kurogane could not help but let out a laugh.

"I'm alright. Good lad."

Later, Kurogane found Fay staring at Syaoran staring at his hands, alternating between the left and right, flipping them palm up and palm down.
"What are you doing?" Kurogane asked, when it became apparent that Fay was just going to watch this without commentary.

"I can fix things," Syaoran looked at Kurogane in wonder.

Kurogane frowned, puzzled. "What did you think you were learning?"

"Well, I never fixed a person before," Syaoran pointed out after he coughed, "and I've never seen it done. I didn't know what it would look like."

"Hmph," said Fay. "Could've also fixed how pigheaded he is."

Kurogane rolled his eyes, tempted to point out that over the course of the last few months, Fay had been the stubborn one, but he did not want to kill Fay's jesting mood. "When have I been pigheaded recently?"

"That's true," Fay allowed.

Syaoran flashed Fay a big grin. He looked genuinely happy. "I can fix things!"

"This is going to take a while to sink in, isn't it?" Kurogane leaned against the doorframe.

"No but magic always seemed..." Syaoran tilted his head back and forth, "I mean, I thought only special people would have it." He looked at Kurogane apologetically. "Not that you're not special, Lord Kurogane."

"I'm touched," Kurogane said flatly, but allowed himself to smirk.

It was something, to watch confidence bloom in someone who had been unsure of himself. Syaoran would seem to come to terms, only to marvel at everything again.

"Will I be able to do the things you do, Lord Fay?" the boy asked.

"Do you really want to?" Fay replied easily, surprisingly unperturbed by Syaoran bringing up the subject of his destructive powers.

"I don't know," Syaoran said thoughtfully. "It would be nice to have a choice."

Fay bumped his knuckle on Syaoran's forehead, looking fond.

"You're an idiot," Kurogane said to Fay later.

"What?"

"You could have skipped all of the previous awkwardness if you had just accepted Syaoran from the start."

Fay smiled, but said, "He needed to prove himself." He ducked his head close to Kurogane's. "Now if only he has the constitution to withstand his own spells."

"He doesn't seem to have a check," said Kurogane. "He doesn't gauge how much energy he has left and how much a spell would cost."

"You really expect someone like him to?" Fay pointed out. "Syaoran was always the type to overexert. He needs better nutrition, but all those eggs are doing is making him grow taller and stretching him thin."
"I suppose we should be glad he's growing at all."

Fay sighed. "Why can't he eat properly…?"

Kurogane frowned, and sought to distract Fay. "He has us." He'll have you, because Fay might be alive by the time Kurogane dies. And maybe Syaoran would give him a reason to keep living.

"So he does." Fay looked at Kurogane.

"He's going to be alright," Kurogane said when Fay did not relax. "And with the guardians…the priests are going to be preoccupied. We can use the time to try contacting Tokyo once more."

"Yes," Fay nodded, but he did not move from where he sat. He was tired from the ordeal earlier in the day.

They were quiet for a while, before Fay murmured, "Two fathers, from different lifetimes. They say soulmates always find each other. The Clow Prince and his High Priest. Remember them? But I never met anyone like you in the original timeline. You and I…I don't think we've ever crossed paths, until Syaoran brought us together. I wonder if parents and children find each other too, and his soul had called out to us. There were many ways we could have been tied together; Fei Wong Reed didn't hurt just us, and we didn't have to meet, or stay together for as long as we did."

"Or after, Kurogane thought."

"Did you ever remarry?" Kurogane asked.

"No," Fay admitted. "It would have hurt Tsubasa too much. He loved his mother dearly. Much like he did this time. I didn't want to subject him to a stepmother. I was the heir. She would try to secure her own position by producing another child, and then she might hurt him. Or she would be the sore thumb of the family."

"Perhaps we did not meet because there would have been no point." Kurogane looked out the windows. Chances were, if Kurogane had been in Valeria, he would have had been married by the time the two of them could meet.

"It was lonely, though," the mage went on. "Times were when I wanted, just to have some company, especially after he married Sakura and didn't need me anymore. But I was happy overall."

"We can have that, here," Kurogane looked at him. "It's not lost. He's here and he's ours."

"He's yours."

Kurogane glared. "What's mine is yours and you know that. Besides…you're the one with the memories."

"Of another time. One that does not relate to our life anymore."

"It does. You knew the birthmarks."

"Heh. I'm lucky he wasn't creeped out. Strange man knowing what's on his inner thigh." Fay looked up at the ceiling.

"You were his father," Kurogane said warmly, "of course you knew what was on his inner thigh. Did he ever urinate on you?"

"Urinated, vomited, defecated." Fay snorted. "Bit me. With his one tooth. The maids tried to change
him before I could get him but I would always hold him for long enough that he would have to go. He was a little menace when he was teething. Bit me, bit his mom, tried to bite the dog."

"Did he like eating flowers before?"

"He liked all the same things," Fay replied. "Chocolate. We should find him some. I've never come across any in Nihon."

"I don't think we grow the beans here."

"Somehow. Maybe Seishirou and Fuma can part with some."

"They'd be thrilled to learn that we are exploiting their abilities this way."

"I want to see him smile," said the mage, eyes distant. "There's something about being a father… every emotion your child feels is just enhanced ten times in you. Did you see how delighted he was, at healing you? At being able to make a difference? It was something I knew he could do, never had any doubt, hardly a surprise, and yet when I was watching him earlier, I felt like I was experiencing his wonder, at being able to do something so new and amazing. When he's scared, or unhappy, there's such a profound sense of wrongness, like…everything had turned upside down. And your first instinct is to comfort, to take the pain away any way you can. Nothing is worse than when your child is suffering. You'd do anything, no matter how humiliating, no matter how base. And none of your own hurts matter when your child is doing well."

Kurogane smiled wistfully. "We were both destined to be better men, I think, that a soul like Tsubasa's should come to both of us to leave such great legacies."

"I think this time around, I want him to live a more idyllic life," Fay looked up. "Up in the mountains like this one, where he may get involved, or he may not. It's his choice. Not be forced into anything, because of some prior debts, or caged in because of other people's choices and wishes. He doesn't have to be an Emperor; Emperors are the least free, for all that they sit on the top. He can be outside, and wander in when he pleases, and otherwise bask in simply being alive."

"You've thought about this."

"Not for long. Just…" Fay looked at Kurogane. "Since learning he really is Tsubasa after all. I couldn't help but think about where we'd go from here. He doesn't have another pair of parents this time; it's just you. And me. And he deserves…deserves a better life. He's saved all of reality. Surely, one lifetime…he can have a little respite." He paused. "But he can't have that respite as long as you are still tied to Shirasaki."

Kurogane sighed, feeling his patience starting to wear thin. "Shirasaki gave me this life."

"Shirasaki can take it away. People change, and situations change. Before, you were a childless warrior. You brought me to Shirasaki and I cooperated so that you were an asset. But now you have a conflict of interest. Do you understand? I know you don't blindly believe in their goodness because you're the one who said to me that the only reason this Syaoran lives is because of us. The Empress said to you, what is important to you is important to her. They are sovereigns, and sovereigns think in a particular way that no one else does, because they are in a position that no one else but another sovereign shares. They have no friends to depend on who know their situation because other sovereigns are ultimately enemies in the long run. Think carefully about how Syaoran being your son changes your value to Shirasaki, and what Ameraterasu and Tsukiyomi might choose to do in response. Plenty of founding kings have killed their closest allies because if someone was strong enough to put you on the throne, they are also strong enough to remove you. Tsukiyomi chose to
save you because you were a tremendous warrior, almost unstoppable. She sent you to Tokyo because she wanted you to be more controlled on top of being loyal. You might be still loyal to her, but the people close to you are increasingly incapable of maintaining her loyalty to you. I'm not even from Nihon, and my powers are vast. They're only reassured because you are all I have, and your first love is to Princess Tomoyo. No," he raised a finger when Kurogane opened his mouth to protest, "We both know what you'd do if you had to choose. But Syaoran is different. You will not choose Shirasaki over him. This I know."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Retire to Suwa."

"You really think that my resignation and retreat into Suwa would make them feel less threatened?"

"His general poor health gives us a way out," Fay pointed out.

Kurogane sighed.

"We can be Fay-mommy and Kuro-daddy, like Mokona used to say."

Kurogane's heart clenched and he shook his head. His mind flashed to Syaoran's thin, gray face, Sakura's desolation, the sun bright and glaring above them as the wind lifted sands. He had buried his own child and had not even known. How any man can bear to sire bastards and be content to never meet them, he would never understand. He did not even sire that one and the pain made his eyes sting and his mouth sour with acid.

It was Fay's turn to sigh. "Think about it, at least. I'm not saying we should turn against Shirasaki. Just…it's no different than retiring when you're too old to lift the sword, right?"

Kurogane reached out to take Fay's hand and squeezed.

The lock, which Fay had dropped off in a corner, now made the entire room unbearable for all of the priests and especially Syaoran, who grew nauseated and weak just from proximity. Ryou and Fay went to work constructing a container, as the artifact was too dangerous to just throw off the mountain. With that came the lesson in creating such containers, which Syaoran was very intrigued by. Since healing Kurogane, the boy had become much more interested in learning magic, despite the after-effects.

In fact, he became actively interested in learning everything. He tackled his reading and writing with more enthusiasm, and even eyed the bow and arrows in the armory, as well as the swords, with a thoughtful look on his face. While Fay was preoccupied with containing the lock, Kurogane had trained in one of the gardens, and Syaoran caught him as he was going through the basic moves.

"Can you teach me?" the boy asked shyly.

He was going to push the limits once he knew there was something to push; that was the nature of anyone with enough spirit, and Syaoran had never lacked for that. But Kurogane understood what Ryou had said, and he also knew what it took to be a warrior. He really did not want to train Syaoran; there would not be much point, and the boy could get hurt. The bruises were dark around his throat, and it made Kurogane's stomach curdle with acid. Still, he was aware that Syaoran would view a refusal as a rejection.

"Do you really want to learn?" he asked, to stall.
"Well," Syaoran paused, suddenly unsure.

Kurogane flipped his sword and held it out to Syaoran, hilt turned toward the boy. "This is Ginryu. It was my father's. Would you like to hold it?"

Syaoran reached out, took the sword, and froze.

Kurogane mused that this was what happened when the High Priest had given Syaoran that simple sword.

"What is it?" he asked.

Syaoran held the sword out, flipping it so the hilt was toward Kurogane. The ninja approved even as he accepted the weapon. "Syaoran?"

"It's…" the boy trailed off.

"It's alright," Kurogane said, wondering if this was something about the boy's particular magic. "You can tell me."

"It's really bloody," said the teen. "Makes me feel…afraid."

Kurogane flicked his arm and wrist, and the sword went away.

"You were a brilliant warrior," he told him, "had you lived, you probably would have surpassed me with ease. So if you really put your heart into it, I have no doubt you would excel. I don't think your heart would be into it, though. You're a healer and protector. You're not meant for such things."

Syaoran bowed his head, disappointed even despite the gentle way he was turned down. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," said Kurogane. "You were very brave, earlier. They were skilled warriors and you leaped into the fray without hesitation, just like you would in the past. Could have spared me the heart attack, though."

"I'm the reason you got hurt," Syaoran looked up at him in dismay.

"No," Kurogane shook his head. "And even if you were, that doesn't change the fact that you were very brave." He reached out to rub his knuckle on Syaoran's forehead. "In Shirasaki, boys like you would never be expected to go out into the field, precisely because you are all awkward colts. This is the hardest time at your age because you are growing so fast. When I was your age, I mastered many moves when I was twelve, that I had to relearn every time I shot up. The way of the ninja is a very precise, delicate art, and you were up against quite a few masters."

"I didn't make it though. Lord Fay had to rescue us."

"You held out until then. That's what matters. No one can fight without tiring eventually." Kurogane ruffled Syaoran's head. "A good warrior only fights battles he can win. There is no shame in avoiding battle if you are not meant for it. Fay and I are both good at what we do: we are good at battle. I think it's fitting that you're good at something else."

Syaoran still looked a little down, smoothing his hair reflexively when Kurogane withdrew his hand.

He had not meant to discourage the boy, and suddenly wanted to do something to lift his mood.

Kurogane reached out and messed up his hair again.
This earned him a grin, as Syaoran looked up, smoothing his hair again.

Kurogane went after him.

The boy squeaked, laughing, and tried to dodge. Kurogane followed, wrapping an arm around the boy's neck to trap him and burying his other fist into his head.

"Ah! No! Stop!" but Syaoran was still laughing. Keeping the boy confined was no effort at all, but Kurogane allowed him to wiggle from his hold, and then grabbed at his arms in an invitation to wrestle. Syaoran squawked, tripped over his feet, and Kurogane ended up holding him up, but once he recovered his balance it was back to wrestling. He did not keep this up for long, and directed them to a bench, where Syaoran sat, panting and flushed, grinning as he leaned against Kurogane's arm.

"You're really strong," he whined. "Will I ever be strong like you?"

Kurogane was only using a bare fraction of his strength, but there was no reason to discourage the boy now. "We'll see. You're still growing."

Syaoran huffed a breath. "I'm really thirsty now."

"Go get water." Kurogane knuckled his head one last time. Syaoran escaped before they could turn this into another roughhouse. Kurogane watched him leave. His cheeks ached, but he could not stop smiling.

It was a good ache.

They finished the container, which Ryou locked away in the cellar. The bodies of the guardians, Kurogane learned, were also being kept there. Syaoran was a little stunned to realize they were dead; the boy had never seen them up close before. He poked at them as the priests stowed the shadow lock away.

"It is so sad," he looked at them. "They are so still. They seem smaller somehow. Did they shrink?"

He remained rather fascinated by the corpses. Kurogane had to admit he could understand why.

"What are you doing with them?" Fay asked.

"We'll see if we can revive them," said Ryou. "That is not something we are capable of, however."

He looked at Syaoran and did not say anything, but the boy caught the look and appeared visibly intrigued.

"No," Kurogane pointed at him.

"But—"

"No." Ryou's voice became hard. "You need to understand, child, that just because you have the ability does not mean you should use it. This is a dangerous enterprise. Think of how devastated Lord Kurogane and Lord Fay would feel if you were hurt."

Syaoran, being a good child, lowered his head in acquiescence.

"We'll get someone better trained to help with that," the priest went on. "Sabu has already sent the pigeon."

A few days later, it snowed on the mountain, and Fay ended up being the one who got sick. He
adamantly refused to allow Syaoran to heal him.

"It's just a cold," he told the boy. "It'll get better on its own."

"But I can make it better now," Syaoran pointed out.

"Syaoran, if you even try," the mage warned, "there will be hell to pay. Don't even dare."

He had a particular expression Kurogane had called "scary mask" on, ever since this Syaoran came into their lives. He called it that because Syaoran was actually quite terrified of that expression. Fay knew this, but did not always know when he was wearing it. When Syaoran meekly assented, Kurogane gave the mage a little glower.

Fay gave him a cool look. The mage knew what he was doing this time. Kurogane thought about it and decided it was just as well. Now that Syaoran was getting more confident, the boy was more likely to take matters into his own hands. Not something either of them want to risk in this case. Syaoran blacked out enough as it was.

To soften the blow and thaw the frost between them, Fay invited Syaoran to study in their rooms. Kurogane meditated, while the boy bent over his books, and Fay reclined leisurely on their bed. Syaoran had come to their rooms before, but had never stayed this way, in such a relaxed atmosphere.

This is what family feels like. Everyone feeling safe, in one place, while it was snowing outside. He could not quite meditate, and ended up just watching the boy study while Fay napped. Outside, the frost coated the blooming flowers by the window. The coals sizzled from the heating pan, basking the room in its warmth. Kurogane suddenly wished that they could stay here forever, in this moment: Syaoran, alive and well, Fay, relaxed and content, and Kurogane, watching over them, as he should.

After about two hours, Syaoran finally had enough. He set down his pen and rubbed his eyes, mouth widening in an impressive yawn. Fay, without opening his eyes, extended one arm out from under the blankets toward Syaoran.

"Take a nap," said the mage.

Syaoran, being the growing and frail boy that he was, liked napping, but as he stood, he noted Fay's posture and hesitated. It looked like Fay was welcoming Syaoran to their bed, and though both Kurogane and Fay had held Syaoran on the winter nights when they had to camp, this had never happened when they were indoors.

The boy turned to look at Kurogane for reassurance. He had always viewed Kurogane and Fay as a pair that should not be separated, and seemed uneasy about the potential intrusion. It was actually kind of touching.

Kurogane flicked his chin in encouragement and shrugged. Up to Syaoran, but he knew Fay wanted the closeness.

Syaoran is a little old for this. They cuddled him when they camped because it was freezing and they did not have a tent, but indoors…

He did not dwell on the matter though, because Syaoran shed his outer robes in a quick decision and crawled under the covers, where Fay rotated his body to pull the boy close, all without opening his eyes. He turned Syaoran to face away from him so he would not have to breathe in Fay's coughs, before embracing him from behind. They both settled.
Ah. Fay. He should tell Syaoran the truth. He did not have the kind of dark burden Kurogane had. Another life, nothing to do with this Li Yelan; Syaoran could gain emotional security. Syaoran still thought he was an orphan, and no matter how at ease they were with each other, the boy still held back, the way orphans would. If he knew Fay was his father, knew for sure that at least one of them loved him, that would take away some of the sadness that undermined everything the boy did. It would be something.

Still, Kurogane never pretended he was able to get Fay to do anything he did not want to do.

Syaoran fell asleep quickly. Kurogane was not sure about Fay. Watching the two of them made him feel sleepy too, but the bed was not big enough for all three of them. He brought his knees up and hugged them as he continued to watch the two. Fay and Syaoran really looked like they belonged together. Father and son, from across lifetimes.

They had always been better for each other. Even last time, Fay had stayed to take care of Syaoran, while Kurogane had avoided him like a coward.

He went over and tucked them in. Syaoran curled more into his pillow. Kurogane smoothed a hand through the brown locks, and then through Fay's blonde ones. In sleep, his coughs had subsided, though his breathing was still a little congested.

Kurogane smiled down at the two of them before getting up. Since he was not sleeping, he was in the mood for some hot tea.
The Moon Palace and the Sacred Flower

After Fay recovered, Sikayama received two new visitors. They came through, one carrying the other, who was dripping blood in the snow. Without the guardians, there was nothing to stop them, but they were not here for Syaoran or Kurogane.

"Someone help!" One of them called out. "Please, he's badly hurt!"

Syaoran rushed to help with the other priests before Fay or Kurogane could stop him. In the mayhem, at first it was not exactly clear who had arrived and what had happened to them, but as the commotion died down, the story was stuttered out by a tearful Yukito, while Touya bled out over the floor.

"It was a demon," he exclaimed. "It just came out of nowhere—it was tall and gray and its limbs looked like they were made of branches, but it did something to him—at first he had just a small cut but it just kept bleeding more and more—"

"He's cursed," the High Priest murmured as he bent over the young man's pale forehead, "but I can't tell what it is."

'Why is that scratch still bleeding?' 'Must not have applied enough pressure.'

Syaoran reached out.

"No don't—!" Ryou shouted in alarm, but Syaoran was already touching Touya's chest with both hands. Both of them seized, and something shadowed withdrew from Touya's left chest and went into Syaoran's hands, up his arms, and pulsed into his belly. Syaoran turned gray, broke out into cold sweat, and toppled back, before retching violently.

The High Priest swore and grabbed at Syaoran just as a well of black vomit spilled from the boy's blue lips. The sight turned Kurogane's blood cold.

"Syaoran!" Kurogane cried, though Fay was faster and dove to the child's side in an instant. He retched again, and more black vomit came out, shiny and viscous like tar. Ryou tipped Syaoran over and stopped Fay from rubbing his back.

"Again!" he ordered, when Syaoran gasped for breath. "Come on, get it out!"

_He's trying to make him keep vomiting._ Kurogane realized, even as the rest of him screamed for this to stop. He was across the bed as Syaoran hugged a basin, crying with each cramp of his stomach, keening in between because he had no more strength to bring anything up but the reflexes kept firing, forcing him to expel air instead. The nurses, the healers, the sour, acrid smell, and Kurogane had left the room, unable to bear watching, while Fay murmured nonsense in as soothing a voice as he could—

Syaoran seized, screaming as the contents came up, and his face turned purple from the effort. He sobbed for breath again, but Ryou wrapped his arms around his stomach and squeezed in thrusting movements. Syaoran retched again, and then again, tears streaming down his face, and Fay moved his hair out of his eyes and supported his forehead as all of the boy's energy went to making his stomach clench. After what seemed like an eternity, there was a giant puddle of black on the floor, and Syaoran finally ceased, sobbing and exhausted.

"Alright?" Ryou supported the boy he sat back, pulling Syaoran with him so the teen was leaning

Syaoran trembled, utterly depleted.

"What was that?" Kurogane demanded.

"Foolish child," Ryou was too relieved to be angry. "He tried to draw out the poison and it went straight into him. Thank goodness it went into his stomach and not his own heart. My boy, I ought to beat you for that stunt—that could have killed you, you brat!"

One of the priests brought water and fed it to Syaoran, who drank listlessly, too weak to resist.

"Touya," Yukito sobbed, and Kurogane turned to see the young man kneeling by his companion. Touya was sitting up and looking over to them with wide eyes.

Ryou handed Syaoran to Kurogane and hurried over to the two young men. Syaoran was utterly limp, almost a dead weight, and his clothing was soaked with cold sweat, his hair drenched and sticking to his clammy skin. He was still shaking. The priest fed him more water until he closed his mouth stubbornly in silent refusal.

Fay murmured words of comfort, eyes haunted. He had his hands on Syaoran's face. "You're alright," he whispered, "my baby, you're alright."

Kurogane hugged the boy close. They were going to have to change him. As if to affirm, Syaoran whispered, "Cold."

Another priest prepared a bath as a third fetched towels. Kurogane carried the boy to the room with the tub. Syaoran continued to shudder, and did not resist when they took off his shirt. Fay helped to bundle him up. By the time the bath was ready, the boy was strong enough to move on his own. He climbed into the tub with his pants still on, and Fay and Kurogane stayed long enough to make sure he was not going to sink under before giving the child his privacy.

Touya was not as violently ill, though he was weak. They found him and his ever-present companion only a few rooms away from Syaoran's. Touya was in bed, drinking date soup to replenish blood, while Yukito was telling Ryou about what happened.

"It was a day ago," the young man reported, "it looked like a very thin tree, very tall, and its skin looked like bark, but grayed out. It had two legs and multiple arms, no head that I could tell. Touya was ahead of me so it attacked him, but we thought he dodged it except for a tiny cut. I managed to block the other blows and Touya set fire to it, and then it turned to ash."

"A tree demon," said Ryou. "Not surprising that it would have a poison curse. Your friend is lucky to be alive."

Yukito lowered his eyes, looking like he was about to pass out. In contrast, Touya, though pale, was very alert, and he looked at Fay and Kurogane with sharp eyes.

"That boy," he murmured, "how is he?"

"Better," said Kurogane, trying not to feel resentful; it was not Touya's fault Syaoran had done something so apparently dangerous. Not Ryou's fault either—he had done his best to stop the boy. And not Syaoran's fault; the boy did not know better. But his mind echoed with the ghostly sobs of Syaoran ten years ago, and he knew that Fay's mind was the same if not more. The wizard had stayed with the child when Kurogane took the cowardly way out.
"He's very powerful," Touya noted. "I owe him my life, but I wish it hadn't hurt him so much."

"No harm done, ultimately. He'll recover." Ryou said this with more confidence then Kurogane thought he should have, but the priest seemed to know more about what had happened than the rest of them.

Syaoran appeared later; he did not stay in the bath long. At least he was clad in dry clothes, though his hair was damp. His legs wobbled and he needed to support himself against the wall.

"Are you alright?" he asked, worried.

Fay went to Syaoran. "Come here before you fall---"

"I'm fine---" but Fay scooped him up with one arm under his knees. Syaoran was gangly and awkward, sputtering. Touya and Yukito watched wordlessly as the wizard carried him out of the room without another word.

Touya bent his head. "I'm sorry," he said to Ryou.

"Not your fault," said the High Priest. "Drink up and rest. We'll leave the two of you some privacy."

"Thank you," Yukito looked at him, tearful.

Kurogane turned away to join Fay and Syaoran, too shaken to care about those two right now.

Yukito, Kurogane and Fay learned, was some kind of swordsman from the Tsukishiro province, very likely a noble. Yukito claimed he was a scholar who happened to know some bladework, but his mannerisms suggested aristocracy. Touya was a mage and his best friend. They did not say explicitly why they were out in the roads instead of in Tsukishiro, but there was a hint that Yukito's life had been in danger—also why, Kurogane mused, the young man probably chose to keep his true origins secret. They had been passing by Sikayama, but they had not intended to actually come up here. Yukito had carried Touya on his back for the long trek up only when he realized something was wrong and the temple was the closest site he was likely to find aid.

They were not entirely enthusiastic about meeting Kurogane when they learned who he was, though they remained civil, in light of events and in the presence of Ryou.

"What is that boy's name?" Touya asked. "I should like to thank him. He saved my life."

"Syaoran," Fay replied.

He and Kurogane were both uncertain how to react to learning that there was a version of Touya and Yukito here; this implied that there might be a Sakura here, though it was possible that Nihon Sakura would not be related to Nihon Touya at all. As a parent—which was laughable because Kurogane could hardly call himself a father right now, it was still all Fay—he was actually not as inclined to reunite Syaoran with Sakura as he would have ten years ago. There was too much going on, and despite everything, he had strong doubts that this world's Sakura was capable of making Syaoran happy. Not right now, anyway. She might not even understand what made the boy so special.

"That boy is a pure soul," Touya said to Ryou. "He is very powerful, but he's been hurt badly."

"We know," Ryou said dryly.

Syaoran slept. When he woke, it was well into the afternoon. Touya and Yukito visited his quarters
when he was eating, and both knelt before him, pressing their foreheads to the floor in gratitude.

Flustered, Syaoran hurried to get them to rise. He took Touya by the arms and asked how he was feeling. Touya wordlessly shifted, taking Syaoran's hands in his own, and looked at him as if seeing a ghost.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"...F-f-fourteen," Syaoran blinked.

Touya let him go with an inscrutable look. The look he gave Kurogane and Fay was a little more hostile. Kurogane did not choose to react to that, other than to pull Syaoran close when the boy came near.

_They know something._ Kurogane and Fay would have to dig it out of them, though at the moment, with feelings cold and frosty between them, this would have to wait.

"Touya is nice," Syaoran declared that evening as they relaxed in the room the two adults shared; he was still feeble, but in good spirits. "He's good at magic _and_ fighting and he knows so much! And he is so kind. He said one day I should visit his hometown…it's called Tomoeda. Isn't that a nice name? And his mother named him Touya—isn't that a nice name? I'd like to visit Tomoeda; he told me it's beautiful in the spring. Do you think when winter passes that we can go? He says there are these trees there called sakura trees, and they bloom right after winter, and they're the prettiest flowers ever."

_That happened quickly._ Previous versions of Syaoran and Touya were hardly close. This Syaoran had instantly bonded with the young man, who was turning twenty-two soon. His affection was not unreciprocated; this version of Touya was also very tender with the boy. Maybe because for once, Syaoran was not meeting him through Sakura, though it could also be because the Syaoran of Nihon seemed to inspire soft feelings from everyone in general.

He thought of the Touya of Valeria, who had been Tsubasa's personal bodyguard, and then revised his assessment; Touya of Clow Country was likely the anomaly, though even he had looked stricken when Kurogane carried the body to them, uncertain where to bury it.

_We almost didn't bring him back at all._ Clow was not Syaoran's home world, and the royal family was not his true family either. By then, bald, cachectic, and barely recognizable, it almost did not seem right to bring the body back. Sakura's last impression of the boy had been that of a vibrant youth, determined, resolute, and persevering. They considered that it might be a kindness never to give her any hint of just how badly Syaoran fared in his last days. It was Mokona who had argued for it, and the little creature could be very tenacious.

Kurogane still was not sure if he regretted it or not.

"What are you thinking about?" Syaoran asked, cutting into his thoughts.

"What?" Kurogane blinked, startled. "Sorry. Was…" _just thinking_, but Syaoran already knew that.

The boy looked at him with a grave expression. "You two have been acting strange ever since they arrived." In a more cautious voice, "is it the two of them? Have…have you met them before?"

He was sitting on their bedmat next to Fay, who was reclined flat behind him. Kurogane was sitting in front, staring at the window. For a moment, silence descended, and he heard the wind whistle outside through the trees. Just the sound made him feel cold inside, though the room was adequately
warm with three living bodies and a container of hot coals next to the mat.

"It's not that," Kurogane stated. Not entirely. "You...you scared us earlier."

Syaoran ducked his head. "I was scared too. I've...I've never felt anything like that. Even when my stomach hurt, and it's hurt badly before, but...but I thought I was going to die."

Kurogane managed not to flinch. Fay managed not to either. Neither of them were able to speak, though.

"The...the other me...from before," Syaoran said haltingly, "this—this happened to him too, didn't it?"

It was worse. It lasted much longer, over and over again. The healers tried switching the medicine but every one of them caused the same violent sickness. Syaoran cried and Kurogane had wept inside, and in the end it was all for naught.

"It wasn't the same," Fay said quietly, "but you're not the healthiest boy, Syaoran. Please be more careful next time. It..." he sighed and rolled over to hug Syaoran's waist from behind, craning his neck up and forward to press against his side.

"I'm sorry," Syaoran whispered, chagrinned.

Kurogane also leaned forward and touched his forehead against Syaoran's. He meant to say something, but could not think of anything, and after a moment he moved back.

He left Fay and Syaoran to relieve himself, but on the way back, he overheard Yukito and Touya whispering anxiously in their room.

"They probably know," he heard Yukito say. "Why else would someone like Kurogane of Shirasaki hang around a boy like him?"

"All the more reason we can't let them keep him." Touya whispered back.

Kurogane's mood darkened, though he remained silent and still.

"Anyone who has that boy can conquer all of Nihon," Touya said after a moment. "His powers are naturally cleansing. The only trouble is that he doesn't have enough vitality to support it, but people wouldn't care. Once he fulfills his purpose, he can die and it would be less trouble. And if he somehow lands in the wrong hands, or gets sacrificed to the Fire Demon, it would be a disaster. You think someone like Kurogane, who's known to be the coldest killer in all of Nihon, wouldn't exploit him somehow?"

Yukito sighed. "But how are we supposed to take him from them? Plus, Sikayama's priests haven't done anything."

"Sikayama is neutral. They don't take sides, and as long as those two aren't hurting the boy right now, there's no reason for them to act. But that doesn't mean they have his best interests."

Kurogane slid the screen open at this. The two young men instantly stopped whispering, and looked at him in alarm.

"You weren't quiet enough," the ninja said softly.

Touya was still weak, and looked infirmed, blankets covering his legs and propped up on pillows.
Yukito, in contrast, drew his sword instantly, pointing it at the ninja.

"Kurogane of Shirasaki," said the youth, "Do not come any closer."

Kurogane slid the screen closed behind him. "I didn't come here to fight. I just came to clarify some things."

"Oh?"

"You will dismiss any notion of taking Syaoran from us," Kurogane said coldly. "You won't succeed. I am a better warrior, and"—he looked at Touya—"Fay is a better mage. But you needn't be concerned about Syaoran's welfare, during or after Sikayama. He's not a political or military tool, and I promise you, no one cares more about his interests than us. Syaoran has a long history with Fay and me, one you cannot possibly understand. There is no way you can take better care of him than we can."

Yukito glared defiantly at him for a moment, before lowering the sword slightly. "Well, they never accused you of being a liar." He did not elaborate who 'they' were. "However, if you do speak falsely, you'll find that Touya and I are formidable in our own way. Syaoran saved Touya's life, and Touya is dearer to me than my own flesh. We will not allow him to come to harm, especially not from the likes of you."

*Interesting.* Kurogane's earlier anger melted into delight. He did not mind as much that these two did not like *him*, but the fact that they declared their intention to protect Syaoran—that was all he cared about, really. He allowed his amusement to show.

"Fine with me." He then allowed his expression to stiffen as he looked at Touya, and a thought occurred to him. "Tomoeda was your home province?"

"What of it?" Touya asked, face resolute but anxious. Probably wondering if Kurogane meant to launch Shirasaki's forces to attack it.

Kurogane hesitated. "Fay and I have been discussing where to bring Syaoran once we leave Sikayama. Fay doesn't want him to go back to Shirasaki."

Yukito's sword lowered further as both men exchanged a look of confusion.

"You don't want to bring him back to your Empress?" Yukito asked.

"I do," said Kurogane. "Fay does not. He wants Syaoran to have a life away from...all the attention. It's possible we may ask you to grant him refuge."

Yukito and Touya exchanged another look.

"He is my savior," said Touya. "He will always be welcome in my home. But why does your friend not want him in Shirasaki?"

"It's complicated," Kurogane warded away further questions. "Get better soon." He turned away, ending the conversation. He had accomplished what he needed.

That night, Fay kept getting up to check on Syaoran. The incident during the day had terrified the blonde. Kurogane himself slept poorly, dreaming about King Fujitaka. The dream was made up of disconnected images and moments, but in between, whenever Fay left his side, he would look up at the ceiling and remember.
The clone had been Fujitaka's adopted son, and Syaoran himself had been with the royal family for years before Sakura's curse activated. Though Touya had been reluctantly tolerant, Fujitaka had outright loved the boy. He had not said much; none of them had. But when Sakura sobbed, Queen Nadeshiko had been the one to comfort her. Neither Fujitaka nor Touya had been able to react very much. Touya had looked pained, but Fujitaka looked like he had been gutted.

A little like Fay, actually.

After the fifth time Fay came back, Kurogane muttered, "Do you want to just move over there?"

"I can't do that!" Fay climbed under the covers. "They'll think I'm a creepy old man!"

"You're not—" Well, Fay was old, and out of context this was sort of creepy. "He's not going to die overnight."

"I know. I just…if he gets sick again—"

"The curse is gone." That black vomit was some of the stickiest substance Kurogane had ever witnessed. He was a little horrified that it had ever been inside someone, let alone Syaoran. But Ryou had been sure, and Kurogane needed someone to be sure.

Fay wrapped his arms around Kurogane and buried his face in his chest. "I know. I just…" he trailed off.

"You'll know if something bad were to happen," Kurogane promised, trusting in the sixth sense parents seemed to have sometimes. Surely someone like Fay would have it ten-fold.

"He's not actually my flesh and blood." Fay sniffled. "I don't know if I will."

"We'd both know."

They were both very tired in the morning. Syaoran, in contrast, slept well, grimacing unhappily at his two hard-boiled eggs. Touya and Yukito stared curiously as the boy made faces while gulping them down as if they were medicine. The teen seemed to realize Fay and Kurogane were exhausted and kept putting the pickled vegetables into their bowls. Fay, who was more concerned with Syaoran's food intake, eventually kissed him on the temple and assured him that he could take care of himself.

Touya and Yukito watched the interaction with special attention. Kurogane was too sleepy to care. Syaoran patted his head sympathetically. He huffed out a breath at this. It was good to see that Syaoran was getting more comfortable with them.

Well, they were getting more affectionate with Syaoran. At least Fay was. And in the time together…Syaoran would have felt their intentions, even if they never said. Ah, Yelan, Yelan, you should know…your son is loved. That much, Kurogane could give her.

For some reason, he suddenly thought of King Fujitaka, and abruptly wondered if they should let him know that his foster son had returned. It seemed more the thing to do than notifying the princess. Kurogane was not sure if she should know; a parent's love was different on a fundamental level. He could bear it if Fay died, so long as Syaoran lived, but if Syaoran died again, it would destroy him.

He honestly could not imagine how Fay managed for the last ten years. Knowing, and all alone in his knowledge. Did he stay simply to be by Kurogane's side?

_Fay is far stronger than even I gave him credit for._
It occurred to him that the king knew more about Syaoran than Kurogane did. Knew Syaoran's childhood quirks, his likes and dislikes, his habits that might have formed and unformed by the time Kurogane actually met him. Out of all of them, Kurogane actually knew the least about Syaoran, and yet this boy was supposed to share his flesh and blood.

How had that happened?

As ever, Syaoran could not tolerate much of an appetite, and he fussed a little, rubbing his stomach and pinching his face. He was actually a little worse today; yesterday's incident left his stomach feeling raw. Ryou eventually shooed him away, and the boy scampered off, probably to look for the sika deer. It reminded Kurogane of how Tsubasa had spun around the blooming tree, eating all the flowers, and he noted grimly that he could not recall the old Syaoran playing before. Fourteen-year-olds started training in the dojo, but they still played, roughhoused, and generally got up to various mischief. Syaoran had always seemed too sad to play.

Little improvements, he decided. As he said once to Fay, what seemed like a lifetime ago, they could not dwell forever in the past. Syaoran was warm and alive before them. He should not linger on the ghost of his past self. But there were so many things about that time, all the words left unsaid, all the deeds left undone, the promises unkept, hope unfulfilled, and they will probably forever awakened by those frantic moments like yesterday, or the way Syaoran could never stretch to his full potential. That shadow of that terrible disease that had taken the boy in the end. He wished, faintly, that this Syaoran might remember something from that time, and not just bear the physical imprints, so that they could have some absolution from all the things they did wrong.

But that was not fair to Syaoran. Perhaps the old Syaoran would have chosen to forget, and that was why the boy was the way he was. The old Syaoran could never be as happy as this one because of what he had endured. His world was forever marred by his imprisonment by Fei Wong Reed, the long years of loneliness as someone else stole his life. Perhaps the time before, whatever Fei Wong did, too terrible for him to speak of. That was the tragic truth.

He was jolted out of his dark musings when one of the priests came into the hall, speaking in alarmed tones.

"High Priest, there is…I think you should come to the tower, quickly."

"What now?" Ryou muttered, but rose instantly. Fay, who was nodding off over his meal, also stood up, looking troubled. He also heard something in the man's voice.

"What's going on?" Yukito asked.

They went to the tower overlooking the front gates. Ryou took a look and grimaced.

"Now that those guardians aren't keeping these fiends away," he said grimly, and did not finish the thought. Kurogane squinted. Across the wintry woodland, it was hard to make out what it was the priests were worried about.

Fay obviously had similar trouble. "I don't see anything," he stated, shielding his eyes from the sun with one hand.

One of the priests pointed out. "Konton. They're small. Kerberus and Spinel Sun would usually eat them before they get up here because they're hard to get rid of."
"Konton?" Fay blinked.

"Chaos spirits. Minor demons. They're small, but they come in multitudes, like cockroaches."

"They usually precede worse beings," Ryou frowned. "We need to revive those guardians somehow."

"They're staying beyond the border for now…"

"For now. But they haven't come this close before, and they're obviously sniffing for a tasty snack."

Kurogane looked at him. "They eat humans?"

"They don't eat people, exactly," said Ryou. "They drain their essence, particularly their sanity. Hence, chaos. I'm surprised you haven't come across them before."

"I'm not sure I would recognize them if I did." Kurogane still could not see what the priests obviously saw.

"They're not exactly beings you can cut down with a sword," Ryou turned. "We'll have to fortify the temple. And that boy—someone needs to keep a close eye on him. Young minds like his are especially vulnerable to their influence; they're so moldable, and he is at an age when he can actually accomplish some very bad ideas."

"They'd target Syaoran?" Yukito asked, worried. "Why?"

Ryou did not dignify this with an answer. "We sent out the messenger pigeons ages ago, has something happened? Someone needs to investigate this as well. And the guardians…maybe they can operate at partial capacity. It would at least stave off critters like the konton."

"What are these guardians you keep talking about?" Touya asked.

"Partial capacity?" Kurogane blinked. He understood that the guardians were not strictly alive the way humans were, so it may be possible to revive them, but that still did not make sense.

"It's better than nothing," said one of the priests, ignoring Touya and Kurogane.

"Not ideal, but we want to act now and not when they actually come," Ryou turned around to head down.

Touya and Yukito were astonished by the guardians.

"I've seen this one," Touya murmured in his surprise, looking directly at Kerberus. Dead for many days now, the creature's pelt had lost its luster, and it looked almost gray instead of its original fine gold.

"You have?" Ryou looked sharply at him.

Touya flinched at his look. "It—just…probably in some text."

Ryou narrowed his eyes at him and said, bluntly, "You have yumemi."

The young man's expression closed.

"That's fine," said Ryou. "No one here cares."
Some things started to click in Kurogane's mind. Touya had said some things about Syaoran... *I might need to get some answers out of him.*

The yumemi, Kurogane had learned long ago, was tricky because it was heavily influenced by the currents of magic and the spiritual world. Seers tend to only see what is shown to them; they cannot choose what they see and they cannot see more than what would allow them to act in a way that would fulfill a vision's purpose. But different seers actually see different things, because different seers have different alignments. He was concerned about Princess Chiharu's warning to Princess Tomoyo about Syaoran, and wondered if this young man might offer some more insights. Unlike with Princess Chiharu, Kurogane had more confidence that Touya would act in the boy's best interests.

He looked at Fay, but Fay was looking down at the guardian's corpse.

"We'll need to invest a lot of power," said Ryou. "Ideally, Syaoran should be the one donating, but the boy can't afford to. It's a lot of expense for minimal reward, but if the konton are already here, we can't afford to wait much longer. If you are up to it, Master Touya, your help would be greatly appreciated."

"Of course," Touya bowed slightly. "I would not spare any expense to protect the temple that has granted us sanctuary."

"Lord Kurogane," the High Priest turned to him, "Lord Fay, in the meantime, if you can keep an eye on that child. He shouldn't come down here while we work."

Kurogane exchanged a look with Fay. Something told him that there was more to this than what he initially thought, but the feeling was very faint, and he was not sure how to press.

"Master Yukito as well," the High Priest suggested. "It might get intense down here, magic-wise. It would be best if you avoid this place for now."

Yukito exchanged a look with Touya, before bowing. "Of course, High Priest."

He was not happy either, Kurogane could tell. But the temple was the High Priest's domain, and they were all guests. In the end, they had to obey by his rules if they were to stay.

"I would not mind intense magic," said Fay. "I am curious about the process, if that's alright with you."

"I wouldn't stay," said the High Priest. "Your magic might react with the spells."

Fay frowned, but the other priests were already herding them out. "If you please, my lords."

They could cause a scene, but with so many priests in the room, Kurogane did not want to start something he did not want to finish. Not yet, anyway. And with uneasiness coiling in his gut, he did want Syaoran safe with him. After exchanging another glance with Fay, the three of them cooperated, with Yukito looking anxiously back at Touya as they went.
They found Syaoran, predictably, with the deer.

"He's very good with them," Yukito observed, noting how the creatures allowed Syaoran to pet them without even batting their elegant ears.

Syaoran looked up upon hearing his voice. "Is something wrong?" the teen asked.

"Priest stuff," Fay replied.

There must have been something about the way he held his face, but either way Syaoran seemed to think that Fay was unhappy. He left the deer to come to the wizard's side. Fay slowly gathered him close, and then embraced him outright, letting out a shuddering breath. Yukito stared at them openly, while Syaoran folded himself into Fay, sensing his need for comfort.

Kurogane had to wonder at the irony of it; Fay, the more determined of the two of them to keep Syaoran at arm's length when this all started, practically grabbing at the teen to hold onto him. If he were in a better mood, he would have teased the wizard about it.

It was soon too cold to stay out, and they all went inside. Syaoran played with fogging his breath in the air, blowing patterns and seeming endlessly amused by the mists floating upwards. Kurogane was struck again by how something so simple, and yet so fundamental, had been missing from the old Syaoran, and yet they never realized or took notice. He caught Fay watching and knew the wizard was thinking the same thing.

Did he ever have toys? Kurogane felt that old grief well up again. What kind of games did he like to play? Even Kurogane had a childhood, once. He had pretended to be historical heroes, and played in the courtyard of his father's estate. Did Tsubasa have any childhood friends? Did he have any pets? Was he afraid of the dark, or of spiders? Or did he love bugs, and play with ant colonies in the yard? Was there anything he had wanted to be, before Fei Wong threatened the princess and he was sent away to a land he did not know?

Was he frightened, when he first arrived in Clow Country? Was he homesick? Were the King and Queen attentive to him? Did the prince bully him, and did he have anyone to go to when that happened?

Stop it, he scolded himself. Tsubasa is dead.

Those old hurts...the wounds not addressed, the many ways he and Fay had failed to do right by the boy...they were irrelevant. What was relevant was the youngster currently next to them, blowing puffs of fog, scrawny neck stretched taut to create the patterns, before flexing as he laughed at himself. Kurogane tried not to watch too obviously. Creepy old man, he mused. With Yukito watching as well, he had to be a little more subtle than that. But it was so strange to see the boy entertaining himself with such simple things, so easily delighted by something like fog.

And then he tried to get the others to join him.

Kurogane and Fay stayed out of it, but Yukito participated, the two eventually resorting to a game where one would try to create an intact ball and the other would blow to disperse it. This did not work particularly well, but Syaoran enjoyed himself, and Yukito's furrowed brow relaxed as his anxiety was quelled. By the time they did make it into the building, both were grinning; Syaoran had an infectious smile this time around, mainly because he smiled with such unrestrained joy.
Fay and Kurogane allowed the two to wander off to amuse themselves.

"It's strange," Fay said quietly. "I don't sense any magic being employed."

Kurogane frowned. "Should we have stayed?"

"Well there's no magic being employed," Fay repeated, "so I doubt there's any spell to interrupt, but I wonder what they called Touya in for if they weren't casting spells."

"They might be explaining things to him," Kurogane pointed out.

"Perhaps," Fay tilted his head, "but for some reason, I got the feeling that they wanted us out of the room because they didn't want us to see what they're doing."

"Could be a temple secret," but Kurogane was not happy with this either.

"They don't mean Syaoran any harm," Fay sighed, and that was the crux of it all: if the priests showed any designs toward Syaoran, Kurogane and Fay would have taken the boy away in a heartbeat. But whatever was happening still put them on edge. Both Kurogane and Fay did better with more information than less. Whatever this was, there was no direct harm to Syaoran, but it could still affect him somehow.

The expected use of magic came about half an hour after that. As Ryou had warned, it was intense, enough that both Syaoran and Fay started, and even Kurogane felt an unpleasant tingling sensation over his skin. But there was a change in the air even after the tingling faded. Something about the colors of the world seemed to switch, just a little bit.

"What was that?" Syaoran looked up, blinking and very much resembling the deer he so adored.

"A priest ritual," said Fay.

"Oh!" Syaoran craned his neck. "Can I go see?"

"...They specifically asked us to leave, Syaoran," Yukito said gently. "I don't think it's something that we should observe."

"But that felt like Touya's magic," said Syaoran. "How come he can watch and we can't?"

Kurogane did not ask how Syaoran knew that was Touya's magic.

Fay was very stiff beside him.

"Let's not offend our hosts by questioning them too much," he advised, sounding very subdued.

Yukito distracted Syaoran with a board game, which Syaoran had learned the basics of from one of the priests, but was nowhere close to mastering. Yukito was patiently teaching him the tricks he was employing. Kurogane listened to Syaoran giggling and exclaiming in turns and mused that he had never seen the boy so happy. But Fay was still very subdued, and that oddness to the world remained. All the colors were just a bit off.

"What's wrong?" he tried to ask the wizard, but Fay just shook his head. He was disturbed, but he was not sure what was responsible.

Everything seemed to snap back to normal after about two hours with another swell of magic. This time, they were joined moments later by Touya.
He had a companion.

"Kerberus wanted to see Syaoran," the young man announced, as a small creature floated past his shoulder and to Syaoran. It had a yellow-gold pelt and was shaped like something like a cat, except with a much rounder face and ears. On its back were small wings.

"Kero!" Syaoran gasped in delight. "It looks so cute! Awwww! But wait, why does it look like a stuffed animal?"

"That's its 'tiny' form," Touya replied, looking a little bothered, while Syaoran reached out to pull Kero into a hug. "It's supposed to have powers in this form; not as good as its full form, but we don't have enough magic for that, and they really wanted the guardians back."

"Are you alright?" Yukito asked, going to his companion quickly.

Touya looked at him, and suddenly seemed exhausted. "I'm fine. I need to doze for a little bit."

Syaoran was petting Kero's head, looking utterly charmed. The miniature form of the guardian was as silent as a mouse, but it used its tail to tug Syaoran's hand back whenever the boy stopped petting. Syaoran laughed and nuzzled its head with his face. "Its fur is so soft," he said happily.

"...What about the other one?" Kurogane wondered.

He went out to find Ryou, who looked pale and exhausted.

"Spinel got to work," the High Priest snarked, "unlike this useless toy, first thing it thinks is find the boy to get snacks. The little weasel. Well, all the better for it."

Syaoran's giggle echoed down the corridors, and Ryou's expression softened.

"Ugh," he groaned, apparently disgusted with himself. "This is all impossible."

"Something is wrong with Tokyo," Fay said to Kurogane later that day.

"What?"

"I've been trying, this and that. I'm starting to think that I'm not reaching Watanuki because he's not answering." The blonde folded his arms. "It's been ten years. It's possible that...that he left the shop after all."

There was nothing strictly binding the young man to the shop, Kurogane knew. He had stayed for the memory of the dimension witch, and they had all assumed that he would take her place because he seemed like he wanted to. A lot could happen in ten years, though. A lot has happened in just a few months.

He swore. "Well, honestly did not predict that one."

"Me neither." Fay folded his arms. "I can keep trying, but I think we need to think of something else."

Kurogane rubbed his face. "Fine."

"We'll figure this out, Kuro."
"I'm fine."

He was covering his eyes and he did not even know when he started. Fay's arms were suddenly around him. Anyone else, and Kurogane would have thrown them off, but his body knew Fay's as intimately as his own, so all he did was melt into the support.

He inhaled, preparing to extract himself, but sighed out, "I can't bear it."

"Listen to me carefully," Fay whispered to him, "whatever happens won't be your fault."

"Syaoran doesn't deserve a start like that—"

"We'll figure it out. Don't worry. We always figure it out."

The old pain bloomed, and Kurogane whispered back, "We didn't last time."

Fay did not let go, but he sensed the mage freeze, just for a moment.

"Last time is the last time," he said, as if Kurogane's words had not hurt as much as it must have. "This time you and I are both wiser, and Syaoran trusts us more. We can tell him to do things he doesn't want to do and avoid things he otherwise wouldn't avoid, and he wouldn't just shrug us off. And we have all these friends now, and Fei Wong is dead, and Syaoran has that whistle—if anything should happen, he can call for Seishirou and they will take him far, far away. And I don't know if you noticed the looks Touya and Yukito give him; it's like they found a long lost family member they didn't even know they have."

Kurogane huffed, amused despite himself. "I doubt Touya would appreciate just how he is a family member."

"We're still not sure he has a sister," Fay reminded him.

Kurogane huffed again. "This is so...so messed up."

"I'm going to try something else," Fay pulled back.

"What are you going to try?"

"I'm not sure yet. I need to think." Fay turned away. "Syaoran's studying here, but I also need to do some studying."

"Could he have been replaced?"

"I don't know. He could have moved. I've been targeting the Tokyo shop. Maybe he left and is conducting business elsewhere."

"Well how would you find him?" Kurogane blinked. "How did you find Ichihara in the first place?"

"She is known," said Fay. "Many mages knew of her."

"Wouldn't the priests know about Watanuki then?"

"You'd think," Fay nodded, "but Watanuki conducted his business differently. Ichihara Yuuko had a mission. She wanted to reach out to individuals like me, and Syaoran, and Princess Tomoyo. She had been wronged; she was supposed to die, but had not been allowed to, due to Clow Reed's wish. Watanuki was free to write his own destiny."
"He wasn't supposed to be," Kurogane looked away, and then a disturbing thought formed. "Was it between him and Tsubasa? Was that why he died?"

What if Watanuki had no incentive to save Syaoran when they had asked? What if he had an incentive to let Syaoran die? What if they had asked the wrong person all along?

Fay bowed his head. "No. Ichihara had paid for his life. He was kept safe because of her. He wanted to save him. He...he was angry."

He was? Kurogane recalled the cold, apathetic-appearing Watanuki who accepted Mokona back through the shop. It hardly looked like he was grieving; he seemed like his usual self, if a bit distant.

"He didn't seem too angry after the fact."

Fay was silent.

Kurogane had the sense that there was something the mage was not telling him. He thought about the encounter again. Watanuki had been brusque, saying very little. Though Mokona had cried as soon as the creature went back to him, he had not reacted much. It could be that this was simply how Watanuki dealt with his own grief. Kurogane could not pretend to know the boy that well. He remembered challenging the boy directly.

"He's only the reason you exist at all."

Watanuki had looked steadily at Kurogane and said, simply, "I know."

He never looked at Fay. Kurogane had thought that it was because Fay had been the one to plead to Watanuki, and the teen could not bear to look at the wizard...but that was before he remembered that Syaoran refused to look at Fay either.

"He was angry at you," he realized.

Fay wilted a little at these words, though he was still silent.

"Fay," Kurogane's voice was sharper than he intended, but he was so tired of this, of having to face a ten-year-old mystery that should have been dealt with by now. "Why were they both angry at you?"

"It doesn't matter now," Fay said quietly.

"Of course it matters. Is Watanuki ignoring you because he's mad at you?"

"No. That's what I initially thought, but it's not the case. He wouldn't ignore me this long for something like that. He'd turn his eye toward Nihon and he'd see what's happening and he'd have responded by now."

"Well outside of that," Kurogane reached out to the mage to shake some sense into him, "I'm going to find out anyway—I'd rather hear it from your lips than from someone else's. What did you do?"

Fay looked at him, his eyes murky with turmoil, but they were dry, and his face was very composed. There was a set to his jaw that Kurogane recognized as stubborn refusal. Fay was not going to tell him, and he was prepared to face the consequences of that.

Kurogane yanked himself away in disgust. "You stubborn fool!"

Fay looked away.

"You're hurting yourself," Kurogane spat, "and you're hurting me. And you're hurting our son."
Whatever happened last time can happen again—"

"It won't."

"You don't know that! He's—he's sick enough that—" Kurogane choked before the thought could be verbalized. This version of Syaoran was far too underweight, despite all the eggs they had been stuffing in him. His body simply refused to absorb the nutrients it needed. No doubt, if the teen had still been in Kuroiyama, he might have died from starvation.

He sat down heavily, and held his face in his hands.

For a moment, silence descended and hung heavy between them.

"Did you make him sick?" It sounded preposterous, but the whole situation was preposterous.

"No." To his credit, Fay did not sound indignant. "He got sick on his own."

"Did you—did you say something to hurt him before he died?"

"Yes."

Kurogane looked up, surprised by the easy admission. "What on earth did you say?"

Fay's jaw set, and Kurogane felt his temper snap.

"Fay—"

"Kurogane," the wizard said seriously. "What happened was between me and Tsubasa. It will stay between me and Tsubasa, spirits willing. If anyone has the right to know about it, it should be Syaoran. He is the one who can condemn me. Until he learns, I will not reveal this to anyone else."

Kurogane stared.

"He'd forgive you." Was Fay really such a coward? "You know he would."

"He doesn't have the power to," a tear dropped from the wizard's right eye, but besides that, no trace of emotion could be found on his face. "This Syaoran doesn't know what I'm capable of. Did'n't suffer, the way his old self did. This one laughs. Plays. Invents little games in the snow. He had lost much, but he was loved, and did not have to endure those loveless years that Tsubasa did, because we got to him in time. Spirits willing, I will keep this from him till his dying day, so he will never know the loneliness that was the real cause of his death. Tsubasa was a wretched child."

There was a pattering of feet, and Syaoran's voice approached, chattering, "I bet they would love it! Lord Fay! Lord Kurogane!" He slid open the door, panting from exertion; Syaoran tired easily, but that did not prevent him from indulging his impulses, such as running down the hall. "Lord Touya made this top—" he paused suddenly, noting the atmosphere of the room, and instantly sobered.

Fay wiped his face quickly to hide the tear. "Syaoran," he plastered a smile on his face, "what's gotten you so excited?"

Syaoran smiled tentatively. "Lord Touya made this wooden top, it does tricks when it spins! I thought you two might want to check it out." His smile wavered. "Is…is something wrong?"

"Not at all." Fay was probably eager to escape the conversation. "Where's this top you were talking about?"
That night, Kurogane dreamed of Tsubasa again. It was a mix of memory and how Kurogane wished things had proceeded; the boy was practicing his katas, and some part of Kurogane that had been absent from before felt that the teen had gone for too long. He had been going at it for two hours. He should be doing something fun. Tsubasa was always driven, but this was not healthy.

"Stop," he insisted. "You're done. Go play."

"Play?" Syaoran turned to him with a cocked eyebrow. "I'm not four."

"You're not forty either," Kurogane pointed out.

Syaoran turned away and ignored him.

"You're working too hard."

"Really?" Syaoran scoffed while swinging a sword down. "Who are you to talk?"

Kurogane felt irritated. "Look, I'm just trying to look out for you."

"Well stop," said Syaoran. "You're not my father. I'm trying to find my real parents, and I'm not going to play as long as they're still trapped…in me, in the princess. I'm going to make this right. I have to make this right. Besides, when did you start caring?"

That was unfair. Even before, even when they first met, this was unfair, and some part of Kurogane felt that this was very unlike Syaoran to say such a thing, but he was too exasperated to think more on it. "I've always cared. Fay always cared."

"Not where it matters," and Syaoran dropped the sword, looking very much like his current self: vulnerable and sensitive, crushed by the weight of the world around him. "Though I never expected that of you. I'd never ask that of you."

"Of course you should," Kurogane exclaimed, partially horrified, as his memories and his current knowledge blended together, as they often did in dreams. "I'm your father. Of course you should expect that I care about you where it matters."

"You're my father?" Syaoran sneered. "After abandoning me and my mother for fourteen years? After raping her?"

Cold terror nearly choked him. "Syaoran, no—I didn't—"

"You are no father of mine!" The boy cried, before bending over suddenly and retching. Dark green bile mixed with yellow stomach fluids and he sobbed between the spasms pushing everything out. The monitors shrieked above him and the nurses were shouting for the healers and Kurogane was saying, with a defeated voice, "No. He has suffered enough."

Not where it matters.

"Hey."

Fay's fingertips were gentle on his skin, which felt numb. Kurogane blinked in the darkness. His lashes were wet.

"He's safe," the mage said.
Kurogane took his hands and pressed them to his heart, before closing his eyes.

The next day brought a new development that blindsided both Fay and Kurogane. They were sitting at breakfast, and Syaoran was chattering at Touya who was funneling spiced meats into Syaoran's bowl of rice. Kurogane was initially not paying attention to their interaction until he idly wondered why Syaoran looked so red.

"You're not sporting a fever are you?" he wondered aloud, feeling the boy's forehead and cheek. They were warm, but the redness grew more severe under his attention, and the truth hit him like a club.

Fay seemed to realize this the same moment Kurogane did. Kurogane was almost struck dumb, and Syaoran, horribly embarrassed, quickly excused himself from the table without finishing his meager breakfast. Touya stared after him, and from the expression on his face, he seemed to have comprehended just like they did. Only Yukito continued eating, his posture indicating that he actually knew all along.

Fay suddenly laughed. "Well I didn't see that one coming."

Touya groaned. "I didn't…I never meant to—"

"It's fine," said Fay, sounding very relaxed.

"It is?" Kurogane looked at the blonde. Yukito looked up with a mild glare; it was very unnerving to see such a hostile expression on what Kurogane had always thought to be an amiable face.

"Syaoran has a soulmate," said Fay, "just as Touya and Yukito are soulmates." The two young men blinked simultaneously at this. "This isn't anything serious. He's an adolescent boy, who's had a wretched childhood. I wouldn't think too many people were so kind to him, and Touya is an attractive young man."

Touya groaned again, covering his face in his hands. Yukito continued to look annoyed, though he had obviously kept his opinions to himself all this time.

"He also has magic," Fay pointed out, taking a large bite out of a steamed bun. "It's probably more benevolent than most of the magic Syaoran had been around before, other than the priests, and it's similar enough to the magic his soulmate has that Syaoran likely got confused."

"What?" Touya exclaimed in dismay. "That doesn't make this 'fine'!" He looked in the direction the teen had escaped. "And he didn't finish his meal; he can't afford to skip meals like that."

"I'll talk to him," Fay said with more confidence than he ever demonstrated; he actually seemed amused. "Don't worry." He actually laughed again. "Awkward teenage drama. Spirits, I don't think I was able to see this in either lifetime. Neither Tsubasa gave me the chance."

Fay's own son had gone through adolescence around the time his mother passed and the king started mistreating him, Kurogane remembered. And of course, the old Syaoran had other things to worry about. More important things. Suddenly, this development did seem amusing, and he found himself chuckling as well.

"What a gift this is," he said to Fay, who shared a look of amusement with him. "We're getting all these opportunities this time around." How utterly charming, even though the poor lad had to feel so humiliated right now. "If this is the worst thing that happens to him—"
Fay laughed again, and Kurogane was unable to finish. Touya and Yukito looked at them like they had lost their minds.

After everything they went through, Kurogane mused, they probably did. But seeing Syaoran going through something normal for once sent a feeling of tenderness through him. The fact that it was the normally broody Touya, who used to give Syaoran such a hard time in the past, made this all even funnier. What a different dynamic this caused!

"We should have seen this coming," said Fay. "If we were normal parents we would have."

"We're not normal parents."

"Are we sure he's going to be alright?" Touya asked tentatively.

"It's a childish crush," Fay rolled his eyes. "Don't tell me you've never felt that someone else was attractive."

Touya's gaze became guarded. "I have, but…"

It took Kurogane a moment to understand why the young man was so cautious.

"Oh please, Fay just said you two were soulmates. Were you honestly trying to keep that a secret?" Come to think of it, other than when Yukito initially rushed to Touya's side after Syaoran had saved his life, the two young men had been careful to keep a platonic distance. "During our travels, every time we see one of you, the other is not far behind. Usually we see both of you at once."

Yukito's mouth fell open, while Kurogane pressed on, "Though usually Touya was the one that swung a sword, if there was any sword-swinging involved."

"Or a knife," Fay chuckled. "Remember the chef?"

"What?" Touya blinked.

"Never mind," Kurogane waved away the conversation; he did not feel like going into detail. Talking about the past inevitably led to talking about Tsubasa.

"Don't hold it against him," Fay said to Yukito. "He's innocent."

Yukito's irritation smoothed out. "I would never blame him," he said solemnly. He had not been angry at Syaoran; he had been annoyed with Touya.

Touya groaned again.

"I'm going to have a word with him before that boy does something stupid," Fay announced. "And he needs to finish his breakfast."

He left the group just as Ryou joined them. He brought a visitor.

Kurogane shot to his feet. "Kou!"

His second-in-command bowed. "Lord Kurogane."

"What are you doing here?" This was not good. This cannot be good.

"You are needed," said the other man. He was still wearing his cloak. On his face was a scar that had not been there before; it actually still looked quite new. "Her Majesty requests you bring the boy with
The High Priest shook his head. "He's not ready."

Then Kou stated something that chilled Kurogane to the bone. "The Princess knew you would say that, High Priest. Respectfully, we know that by this time, he has learned what he needed to learn to end this war. Anything else will have to be settled during his way back."

"He might know the required spells," Ryou spat, "but he's not physically ready. He's not able to sustain the spells he cast." He looked at Kurogane. "If he goes, he will die. We need more time."

"It's still snowing," Yukito rose. "He's too frail."

"He barely made it here," Ryou exclaimed.

"The way down the mountain should be easier than the way up," Kou pointed out.

"It's still winter though!"

"Enough," Kurogane looked at Kou. "Princess Tomoyo knows that if the boy goes to Shirasaki before he is ready, there can be terrible consequences." He would end the war one way or another, she had told him, and one of the ways was definitely not one that anyone would want. I can come with you, but the boy should stay here."

"Lord Kurogane," Kou said tightly, "Shirasaki is lost. The Empress and the Princess are in hiding." Kurogane's mouth dropped open. "What?"

"Shirasaki was attacked two weeks ago. We tried to hold them off, but they had a whole demon army and we could not fend them off. Amaterasu held them off until the last moment before we were forced to flee. We cannot afford any delays."

"No."

"No. It's too soon."

They had allowed themselves to become complacent. Sikayama had been a haven, a world entirely its own, and within it Kurogane and Fay had lost track of the outside world, forgot that Shirasaki was as vulnerable to the changing tides as any other kingdom.

"I'll bring Fay. Fay has a great deal of power—"

"My lord Kurogane," Kou's voice became sharp, "he is just one boy. Thousands of lives may be lost!"

"Millions more would be if you act too hastily!" Ryou snapped right back.

"Lord Kurogane," Kou glared at his commander, "You don't know what has happened at home. We did our best and it was still a slaughter. We need you, and we need the boy."

His eyes said more than his words. Kurogane had to sit down.

"We can't take that boy to face that!" Yukito exclaimed in horror. "It would be like tying a lamb to a post before starving wolves!"

"Who attacked your castle?" Touya asked. "It could not have been Kuroiyama. It must have been
one of its associates."

"As far as we know, it was not Kuroiyama," Kou replied, "but that is hardly relevant. It was an enemy, one with a significant demon army, and one that forced my Empress and Princess to relocate."

*And abandon Shirasaki.*

"…Let me…" Kurogane managed to rise to his feet. "…Let me find Fay first. Wait here."

He did not give anyone a chance to protest before walking resolutely out of the hall.
"Absolutely not."

"Fay—"

"You know the answer and you know that man will not leave without the boy."

Kurogane sighed. "I don't know what to do."

"You know what you can do."

"What's that?"

"We've only talked about it again and again."

Kurogane scowled. "I'm not abandoning Tsukiyomi. You will not make a coward out of me, Fay."

"That is your choice," Fay spat back, "but you have no right to drag Syaoran into defending your honor."

"They saved his life too. They spared his life."

"Hasn't he paid!?" Fay suddenly exploded. "Hasn't he paid? Or was seven years of his freedom not enough? Was all of his future not enough?"

"Fay—"

"The answer is no, no matter what that man thinks. I don't mind going back to defend Shirasaki. I don't mind if you go back; you swore your allegiance, they're important to you, but I am not taking Syaoran anywhere near that."

Kurogane rubbed his face. "I don't want to take Syaoran back. And I'm not saying I will. I just…"

I don't know what to do.

"You don't choose the princess over your own son," Fay hissed. "You don't owe her that. You don't owe anyone that. And Syaoran doesn't owe you that. Syaoran doesn't owe anyone. That is our final answer. There's no debate, no discussion."

"If Shirasaki is in trouble," Syaoran's voice cut in like a dagger, "I should help."

Kurogane closed his eyes. "We told you this was a private conversation."

"You were shouting," the boy said quietly from the door.

He heard Fay sigh. "Syaoran, this has nothing to do with you. Go…go look after the sika deer."

"I'm not a little kid," the boy stood stubbornly in place. "I can make my own decisions. Princess Tomoyo spared me when I wronged her and the Empress. The least I can do is…is help them against whoever is attacking them."

"Princess Tomoyo spared you because she is repaying a debt she owed you long ago," Fay said through gritted teeth.
"Even if that's true, they need me. That's why that man is here. I can't just…hide here, when they need me."

Kurogane winced. He remembered the easy way Syaoran used to extend his aid to those in need. Through all the worlds they had traveled, Syaoran had always been willing to delay his own mission in order to help others. Fay and Kurogane had always followed his lead, because to them, Syaoran had a moral compass that they trusted; either of them would have succumbed to their jaded instincts and stayed true to their own goals, but Syaoran was good, compassionate, and virtuous. They always believed in his judgment. They never thought there was a way for the boy to exhaust himself to death.

"You'll die," he whispered. There was no way this scrawny wisp of a youth could withstand the throes of war. He was like a fawn that could not run. He still stumbled and fell all over the place. "You have no idea what it was like, the first time."

The terrible truth was, if Kurogane had to choose between his own honor and Syaoran's life…

"Maybe that is my destiny," Syaoran said solemnly.

Kurogane whirled around to face him.

"No," Fay stated, resolute.

"I'm not strong," Syaoran looked sadly at them. "Even back home…I wasn't strong. We were never sure if…if I could make it. And I never…never thought I'd amount to anything. That I could be anything. Just…just taking care of my mother had been all I dared to hope for." Tears beaded along his eyelashes. "Now I have what it takes but it's too late for her. Too late for many others. But there are…there are other mothers there. Other…others like me, who have people that don't want to lose them. My life is not more important than theirs. It's…it's a fair trade, if it comes to that."

Kurogane shook his head, but he was unable to say anything. Fay took a shuddering breath.

Syaoran then bowed, low. "Lord Kurogane, Lord Fay, you have both been…so good to me. I don't know if there is anything I can do to repay you. Please, take me with you."

There was not a trace of fear. He sounded like the Syaoran of old. Kurogane was suddenly struck with the urge to hit the child. How can you do this? After everything…

"Syaoran—" Fay started, but stopped himself. It was his turn to shut his eyes.

The old Syaoran would have gone on his own, even if they refused. This one might do the same, except he would not fare nearly as well.

They both knew there was no other way.

"This day was coming," Ryou said quietly. "As much as we hoped it would be later rather than sooner, we knew this was coming. And at the rate he had been going, he was never going to be 'ready'. That stomach of his…whatever caused him to be this way…nothing we can do has reversed it, and he was never going to be strong enough for his spells. That's just how it is."

"…He's going to die." Kurogane felt like vomiting. The nausea was churning in his stomach. "He's going to die to save Nihon."
"That was always a possibility."

Fay looked out the window in silence, ignoring everyone else. He had retreated inside himself, ever since Syaoran went with one of the priests to collect supplies for the journey.

"But if the war continued," the High Priest went on, "he would die anyway. And he would hurt, knowing that he should have prevented it all."

"Why can't the universe just leave him alone..." Kurogane looked away. "He...he should have been born elsewhere. A world where...things are better."

He would have been willing to give up on the messed up blood bond that they had, if it meant Syaoran could have a happy life for once.

"That is unfortunately not up to us," Ryou reminded him. "And bear in mind that death is not the end of all things. He would have other places to go. Other places to save. And perhaps, once he leaves, he would go to a better world. Good endings. Bad endings. In the end, they are all endings. The journey is what matters."

Kurogane disagreed. The journey...the journey had its wonderful moments, even last time. Last time, Syaoran had laughed, though never in the same carefree manner as he did in Sikayama. Last time, they had eaten meals together, slept in the same room, Mokona hopping between all of them. Fay had teased him, Kurogane had messed up Syaoran's hair...there were good moments. But all of that had been eclipsed by Syaoran's terminal illness. Syaoran's misery in his final days. Kurogane's failure. Fay's despair.

There had to be a better way.

"You knew it would come to this," Kurogane accused. "Did you know that the boy would be sacrificed?"

"No," said Ryou. "I knew he would come to Sikayama, escorted by the Black Steel and the Wizard from Beyond. His destiny beyond that was not clear to me. But there are many things I don't see. I didn't see the love that you two held for this child. I did not know he would come to touch my heart as well. For this reason, I would not lose hope. He has defied worse odds than this before. Perhaps that is luck, but maybe it is also because of what he is."

The words did not comfort him. Kurogane's mind seemed to fixate on Syaoran's body in that coffin. The tomb in Clow Country, dark and locked away. In the last ten years, he and Fay had never visited. To them, Syaoran belonged to another world. Forever lost. To go through all of that again...I can't go through that again. Even if this was different, it felt like sending his child to his death, and something in Kurogane screamed and could not stop screaming. There was no way he would allow himself to watch Syaoran die. One way or another, he would not watch Syaoran die.


"Sorry," he said to Ryou, "I tried to leave him but he kept following me everywhere instead of looking after the kontons."

Ryou looked thoughtfully at him. "Is that so."

"Just what is this thing supposed to be capable of?" Fay asked, looking unimpressed. "Getting rid of
little chaos spirits is well and all, but can it really protect the boy?"

"To some degree," said the High Priest, watching from next to the mage, "but if not in its current form, Syaoran can always transform it."

"You said before that he doesn't have enough power to."

"It would be best not to," said Ryou, "but he can. And it would be a way for him to be aggressive; otherwise Syaoran has no good magic. He has strong defensive spells, but he can't last long with them, and you can't cower under a shield all the time during war anyway."

"Why can't I be the one to power this transformation?"

"Because your magic is impure."

Fay gave Ryou a dirty look.

"I didn't invent the rules."

"I'm sick of whoever did invent the rules," Fay announced. "He's a fourteen-year-old boy. He shouldn't be expected to carry the fate of an entire world. It's something that has happened again and again," his voice rose as he started getting worked up, "every time, every world we went to, it's always Syaoran, Syaoran's the one who has to do this, Syaoran's the one who has to do that! Why can't it be someone else? He needs a break! Can't you see that this killed him the last time!"

Syaoran turned from where Yukito was giving him a hug. The two young men would not be going with them to Shirasaki. Touya had looked like he wanted to, but there was something they had to do; Yukito had been closed-lipped, but it was not like Kurogane and Fay really expected them to come. Even for something that pertained to all of Nihon, it always seemed to be just the three of them in the end: Syaoran, Kurogane, and Fay. And Mokona, who was apparently replaced by this Kero creature, whatever this would do.

At least Kero was not more annoying than Mokona, though Kurogane was not sure he liked the little being's muteness. He had come to enjoy Mokona's antics and commentary, and Kero's silence was a little creepy. It always seemed like the creature should be able to talk, and the fact that it never made a sound and always had that weird smile on its face reminded Kurogane of psychopaths and serial killers. He even had the misfortune of meeting murderers just like that.

If that thing would stop smiling…though that might just be how its face was constructed. Still unnerving.

Ryou reached to touch Fay's arm. "Life is always a struggle, wizard, but one thing remains true. Good persists. What goes around comes around, and good nurtures, protects, heals. That is the boy's entire essence now. White may stain easily, but light banishes shadow. Have faith in the forces you cannot see; for all our vast knowledge, it is still limited compared to the workings of the cosmos, and his existence is a miracle of a greater design. One that, I think, does not have the power to eliminate him."

"If he dies again," Fay said quietly, face set like a mask, "I will take my heart and cast it in stone. My power is impure, you say. Then I will use it for impure purposes."

"Don't say that," said Ryou.

Syaoran left Yukito's side to go to Fay, who hugged him close. Kurogane turned his eyes away. He knew what Fay meant.
Syaoran avoided Touya for the rest of the goodbyes, ducking his head in embarrassment. In the end, Touya, refusing to be rejected this way, had to drag him from Fay’s side.

"You need to do your best to survive," said the young man, holding his face and looking straight into his eyes. The look in the young man’s gaze reminded Kurogane that in this world, Touya was a seer. "Do you hear me? You don’t get to leave just because you think your work is done. There are many forces out there, but the strength of your wish supersedes them all. That is your true power. Remember that."

There was a saying…The world goes mad during war. It was, ultimately, what it felt like.

They came upon a town that was still burning with smoke. There were survivors, but they picked listlessly at the wreckage around them. Bodies lay strewn in the streets, some intact, others dismembered. Many buildings also crumbled, and the gray haze made everything seem like a dream.

Syaoran kept his mount close to Kurogane, pressing from behind as he cringed. Fay was looking at a dead donkey that had been cut down. Someone had set it on fire. By the opposite corner was an upturned wagon that had been loaded with peaches. Most of the fruit had been squashed and mixed with dirt and dust.

"This wasn’t a disciplined attack," Kou noted. "They just went wild."

Some commanders did that, Kurogane knew. Men in armies were a restless bunch, youthful and strong and pumped full of anger and desire for violence. Sometimes they would have men rape and pillage to release some of that pent up frustration. Other times, when morale was low, they would use it as a way to boost enthusiasm. The soldiers would take to it, swept up as if possessed, and just slaughter and rape everything in their path, any object that moved: donkeys, wagons, dogs, birds, and there was nothing to do in the face of that except to run and hide. It was, ultimately, a short-term solution that had dramatic long-term repercussions, but that did not stop some of the military officials from employing it anyway. The results were always horrific, and any survivors take a long time to heal—if they ever do.

"We won't learn much here," Fay went on, referring to how they would not be able to ask anyone for information. "We should leave. This place does not treat kindly to those who linger."

Kurogane looked sideways at Syaoran. "You alright?"

Syaoran said nothing. From his hood, there was a little snore. Kero was napping.

"Let's get out of here," Fay brushed past them.

Syaoran had been quiet on their way here. He actually looked very calm, exactly the way Tsubasa did when he got his heart back from the clone. Kurogane had chills just looking at him. He preferred when the boy was more open about his fear.

"Syaoran."

"I'm alright, Lord Kurogane."

Kou kicked at his mount to urge it forward. They followed

They left the bones of the town behind. Syaoran endured the trip well into the evening, when they finally stopped again. He was not accustomed to riding, and collapsed into the grass like his legs were about to disintegrate.
Fay set the bags he was carrying on the ground. "Here," he said, kneeling down next to the boy, "sit on this. Are you doing alright?"

"You don't have to keep asking me that."

He could not stand up after that, so it was up to the three of them to collect firewood. Kou looked at Syaoran in worry; he had not realized until meeting the boy just whom their savior was supposed to be. Kurogane could tell the man was not encouraged.

"The universe must be playing a joke on us."

Kurogane often felt that way too.

The next morning, Syaoran woke up with a fever, but time was short and they could not afford the comparatively leisurely pace they had gone at when coming to Sikayama. At most, Kurogane convinced Kou to go at a fast walk. Syaoran held onto the horse, but within an hour started slumping. When Fay called for a quick stop, the boy nearly fell off.

"He needs to rest," Fay exclaimed, helping the boy to the side of the road.

"We don't have time—"

"Well we'll have to make time," Fay snapped, "because otherwise he'd be dead before we get to your precious empress and all of this would have been for nothing!"

"I'm sorry," Syaoran whimpered miserably. He keeled over and retched the morning's meal. Kero hovered above his head, tail swishing but otherwise doing nothing helpful.

Kou sighed in distress as Fay bundled Syaoran up and cradled him to himself.

"You need to learn to tough things out," he scolded.

"He can't just tough this out," Fay snapped.

"How is he sick simply from riding a horse?" Kou felt the boy's forehead, and he was so rough that Kurogane had to resist the urge to yank his hand away from Syaoran's face. "He's not making this up, is he?"

"Are you serious?"

"Don't you have magic?" Kou whirled on the mage.

"I don't have healing magic," Fay's embrace tightened, "and he can't heal himself."

"Don't you people meditate or something?"

"You try meditating when you're sick!"

"I'm sorry," Syaoran whispered, "please stop yelling…"

"Right," Fay pressed a kiss to his forehead, and he took a deep breath before expelling it in a puff of steam, while Kurogane finally gave into his impulses and pulled the other ninja back.

Kou turned to Kurogane.

"They have to do their part," said Kurogane. "We are doing ours. We can't push him any harder than
"This. He's no good against any demon army if he can't even sit on a horse."

"Is this some kind of joke?"

Kurogane did not dignify this with a response.

Fay was squeezing Syaoran's body to him. "Just go to sleep. Get some rest. It's alright."

With nothing to do for this, they were forced to abandon travel for a good few hours. Kou went to relieve himself, and then came back, arms folded and face frowning.

"Your mage is very attached to the boy."

Kurogane scowled. "He loves him."

Kou appeared to be baffled by this. "What's so special about this kid?"

That was too much to explain. "Does it matter, other than that he is?"

"Is he going to get in the way?"

"Kou."

"Seriously though," his second-in-command went on, "the boy is ridiculous, and... we're not going to have trouble from the wizard, are we?"

Kou was not the most astute of the ninjas. He was very good at fighting, and as promotion was based on merit, he climbed the ranks to become Kurogane's direct subordinate, but many of the intricacies of human relationships seemed to fly over his head, such as the fact that Kurogane was also very attached to Fay, and that in the last ten years of his tenure in Shirasaki, Kurogane had never treated any child, be they novice ninjas or peasants, as something dispensable for the sake of winning some war. Still, though Kurogane could feel anger boiling in his blood, Kou was not an evil man. He was just annoyingly pragmatic, stuck to his principles—as many ninjas were, to be honest. He could be trouble later, however, and Kurogane toyed with the idea of killing Kou to eliminate the threat—Kurogane never pretended to be a good man, and killing Kou off would be so easy. There were no witnesses; Fay certainly would not tattle, and they could go to Shirasaki and say that Kou had been killed by demons on the road.

He did not act on it, though. Syaoran's doe-like eyes watched him from within his mind. Even deeper, the old, world-weary Tsubasa stared silently from the past. Once, Kurogane might have been the type of man to do it, if for another reason; he cared only about Princess Tomoyo, back then. But he had changed. Tsubasa had changed him. Fay had changed him. Sakura had changed him. It did not feel right to undo it all, not for something like a whisper of a possible threat just based on someone's personality. People were more complicated than that.

"Fay is not the only one who cares deeply about that boy's welfare," he said instead. "His soul is older than he looks, and has gone through much."

"Who else is there?" Kou asked. "I thought he had no family."

Kurogane chose not to reply. Kou was not the most astute of ninjas, and there was no point.

"Tell me what you know of this demon army," Kurogane asked instead.

"They are oni. There were at least twenty thousand of them, and they were very well organized..."
almost like a hive mind. Our warriors stood no chance. Empress Amaterasu and Tsukiyomi used powerful spells to keep them back, but they are relentless. They never tire, and they have a knack for finding the weakest points in our defenses and spreading from there."

"The oni." Seishirou could actually help with this. Doesn't that hunter control the oni?

"Are we sure this is the kid?"

Kurogane sighed. "He's been underestimated before." We've underestimated him too. "Brat has no self-preservation instincts though."

Kou swore. "You know what the prophecy says," he stated grimly. "If he can't end the war one way…he'd end the war the other. If it comes down to it, we might have to kill him ourselves so the enemy doesn't sacrifice him for the ritual instead."

Syaoran roused a couple of hours later, and Fay made him ride double with the mage, leaving Kou to lead the fourth horse. Syaoran leaned heavily against the blonde, looking very uncomfortable and miserable, but otherwise did not complain.

Things grew worse later when, not even an hour later, it started to snow. A few sporadic snowflakes grew more intense, and within ten minutes, they were faced with a full blizzard. Forced to stop, they tried to make camp, but the winds made it impossible to set up a tent, and the roar through the trees sent a few crunching and cracking as the tempest pulled the great trunks up by the roots. Face full of snow, unable to open his eyes because of the piercing cold, hearing muffled by the howls, the world became white and deafening, and within fifteen minutes, Kurogane could not sense his companions at all.

Silence abruptly descended. All around him was pure white; above, in front, the sides, the back, the ground his feet stepped on. The skin on his cheeks were raw, and he could not feel his nose, but there was no more wind. No more sound.

Something is wrong.

"Syaoran? Fay? Kou!"

No one answered.

He stood still for a moment, before raising a foot forward and taking a step. There were no landmarks to suggest he moved forward at all, but nothing seemed to hold him back. He called out again, but only silence answered him.

Did I die? No. The storm. It had been so fast, come on so suddenly…he must be under some kind of spell.

"Whatever you are," he called out, looking above and around while summoning his sword, "you're not going to get away with this. Come out and face me!"

"Kurogane."

He whirled around. Syaoran stood…tall, proud, clad in that brown cloak and travel garb of the olden days. His hair was short, his eyes were sharp, his cheeks were full and glowing with health. The sight pierced through Kurogane's heart, and he took a step back, his sword arm wavering, and suddenly he could not breathe.

It was Syaoran. It was Tsubasa. The old boy from ten years ago. Every bit of him, from the way his
hair fell in front of his eyes, to that steadfast set of his eyebrows, the amber glow of his eyes, was like a direct extraction from the past. The corner of his lips were tilted slightly upward, less a smile and more an indication of his compassionate nature. He was strong, fit, and ready to take on the next adventure.

"It's good to see you again, Kurogane."

Kurogane swallowed, and Syaoran's image blurred. He blinked desperately to prevent the tears from falling. "Syaoran," he whispered.

*You're not real.*

Syaoran smiled again, and his eyes looked softer and warmer, if that was even possible. "Welcome back."

Kurogane blinked, and tears fell down his cheeks. He lowered his sword even more.

"Y-you…wh—" he blinked again, confused. "What are you?"

Some kind of demon?

Syaoran's smile faded slightly. "You're still a little out of it, aren't you?"

"…What?"

He was sitting up on a mat. Blankets were covering him. Syaoran was kneeling next to him. His cloak was gone, but he was still wearing his travel garb. Kurogane looked around. They were in a bedroom. The window shutters were open, revealing a golden morning outside with a vivid blue sky. It was comfortably warm. Clow Country. He could see the dunes rolling towards the horizon.

"You were out of it for a while," Syaoran reached over, and Kurogane saw a bowl of water with a cloth dipped inside it. "Everyone was super worried. The healers kept insisting it was just because you were not use to Clow, which is weird because you've been here before and nothing like this ever happened, but I suppose you never let your guard down quite like this."

"It was a dream," Kurogane blinked.

"Hm?" Syaoran blinked at him. "I guess it was a dream? Anyway, the others are going to want to hear that you're awake." He took the bowl and stood up. "Why don't you lie down for a moment?"

"Wait," Kurogane reached out, and his arm was shaking enough that he must have been sick…how he fell sick, and with what, he could not remember, but it certainly seemed like it. "Please stay."

"Hm?" Syaoran raised his eyebrows, but obliged, sitting back down. "They're going to kick my butt for keeping you all to myself, you know."

"Right, well they can deal with that," Kurogane grabbed Syaoran's hand to anchor himself. That hand was warm, the palms hardened with calluses…so familiar, and yet alien at the same time. Syaoran looked at him uncertainly, and Kurogane knew that he was not behaving like himself, but after that dream, he was never going to take things like this for granted again. "How are you feeling?"

"How am I feeling?" Syaoran raised his eyebrows even more. "You're the one who's sick!"

Kurogane blinked at him. Something did not make sense. His mind felt fuzzy. "I don't remember
getting sick."

Syaoran looked concerned now, reaching forward to feel Kurogane's forehead. "What's the last thing you do remember?"

What was the last thing he remembered?

Syaoran frowned. "You do know who I am, right?"

"Syaoran."

"Right," Syaoran sighed in relief. "Well you did call me that earlier. Sorry."

Kurogane blinked, and then shuddered when he realized what could have been. "You died."

Syaoran looked at him and blinked.

The grief came rushing back, and Kurogane did not even care that he was weeping like a girl. He let the tears fall. "You died and it's...it's the worst thing I've ever had to bear. It was the worst thing Fay had to bear."

"Hey," Syaoran moved forward, and took Kurogane's hands. "I'm fine. See? It was just a nightmare. You were really sick. You're better now. Everything's fine."

Kurogane turned his hands around to capture Syaoran's and squeezed them, tight enough to hurt. To his credit, Syaoran did not protest, nor try to free himself.

"I failed you." The horror of those visions refused to relent. "I watched you die."

"Kurogane—"

"You were sick. We were so close to fulfilling your wish, but you fell ill and I just left you—I couldn't bear to watch, and then you died, and we had to bring you back to Clow to be buried—"

"Kurogane," Syaoran hushed him, "I'm alive, see? We did it. We weren't just close. We did it."

Kurogane took in a shuddering breath.

"That was some nightmare you had," the teen commented.

Kurogane sighed.

Syaoran rubbed his thumbs over the back of Kurogane's hands. "It's alright."

"Right."

Syaoran rubbed his hands some more before saying, "The others will want to see you. Will you be alright while I fetch them?"

"Stay with me."

Syaoran squeezed his hands again, not judging at all. "Alright."

He could not draw this Syaoran into a hug. Could not kiss him on the forehead. Could not bask in the warmth of his healthy body. Syaoran would be creeped out, and Kurogane did not have the right to.
"You found the other," he murmured, still feeling disoriented.

"Both others," Syaoran corrected, smiling. "That was some nightmare you had, Kurogane."

"It was something." Kurogane could not shake it off. It all felt too real. "You were gone for…for years. Fay and I went to Nihon but…we couldn't…it wasn't the same. And we kept thinking about all the things we didn't do right. You—do you like sika deer?"

"…I don't know what that is."

"It's a type of deer."

"…I gathered that."

Kurogane shuddered. He was so confused.

"Look, let me get the others, you'll probably feel better—"

"No!" Kurogane clung on harder. "Please. Just—just give me a minute."

"…Alright." Syaoran was frowning severely now. "Spirits, Kurogane…it was just a dream. I promise."

Kurogane blinked rapidly, though he was no closer to feeling more collected than when he first woke up. "You were supposed to be my son."

"………Really? Mokona's going to have a field day with that one."

Kurogane laughed, but some part of him felt disquieted. He looked up at Syaoran. "Is it true?"

He should not be asking this of a fourteen-year-old, part of him knew. Or was Syaoran fifteen? Either way, he should not burden Syaoran with this, but he felt too rattled, his filters still not in place. He had to know.

"What do you mean?"

"If…if Fei Wong hadn't…would…would you have been my child?"

Syaoran tilted his head and did not answer for a moment.

"I suppose we can ask Priest Yukito," the boy said finally, "but I don't know if it really matters. I think I ended up being yours anyway."

The words brought a rush of warmth through Kurogane's heart. "I suppose." Something in him relaxed.

Syaoran smiled at this. "I'm really glad you're alright."

*I am so glad you are alright.*

"Fay is going to be so mad at you," Syaoran teased. "Be prepared for a lot of jokes at your expense. He's been so worried. You're in for a rough time."

Kurogane looked at him, unable to keep himself from reveling in this precious, precious boy. Those deep wounds could finally heal. He had time to do all the things he had failed to do, say all the things he could not say.
"I love you," he had to tell him, but to avoid making Syaoran feel awkward, he added, "you brat."

Syaoran looked down with a sheepish grin. It was a mannerism that was piercing in how familiar it was.

The door slid open. Kurogane and Syaoran both swiveled their heads to look. From the hall, Kerberus, fully-formed, a giant of a stripeless tiger with massive wings on its back, stalked in. The red jewel on its headplate gleamed.

Syaoran let go of Kurogane and stood up in alarm. Kurogane opened his mouth—he was not even sure what he was going to say, but Kerberus then leaped, powerful muscles bunching up and then springing. It plowed right into Syaoran, knocking him flat to the ground, and sank its teeth into his neck.

Syaoran let out a watery gurgle, whole body twitching.

"No!" Kurogane screamed.

Kerberus shook his prey. Black blood poured from its jaws where it was clamped down into Syaoran's flesh. It stained its nose, its muzzle, its teeth, dripped down its throat and to its chest. It pressed its paws against the boy's chest and pushed as it pulled simultaneously with its head. Then it opened its mouth, clamped down again, and there was a horrible crunch. Syaoran's face turned gray, his hair seemed to melt and become white, his eyes going blank, then gray, then blue.

The world around them was white.

"Lord Kurogane!"

Kurogane was lying in the snow, flat on his back. Syaoran was kneeling over him, one hand on his forehead, the other over his navel. Heat, painful and yet energizing, emanated from both palms. The boy's face was skinny and gaunt, yet flushed with fever. His eyes were glassy, and he blinked deliberately to try to focus his vision.

"Lord Kurogane! Please wake up!"

The wind had died down. To the side, Kerberus, fully formed, was chewing on a demon. Kurogane pushed Syaoran away and sat up. He stared. Kerberus went on chewing, tearing, a black puddle of blood melting the snow. The demon was large and white, and it was hard to make out; the guardian had already done a number on the thing.

I was in a dream. Some kind of vision that the demon made. Syaoran had saved him.

He shot to his feet. Syaoran remained kneeling. Moments later, Kurogane's legs collapsed under him. He fell on all fours. but he caught sight of Kou, crawling and trying to sit upright, while Fay was leaning against an uprooted trunk. His forehead was covered with blood, but when Fay wiped it, the skin underneath was unmarred.

Beside Kurogane, Syaoran toppled over, unconscious.
A Father's Heart

Syaoran lost control of his bladder and bowels, which required an urgent change given the cold. Feeling sick himself, all Kurogane could do was pillow Syaoran's head on his lap while Fay struggled to peel off the boy's pants. Kou gagged at the smell from where he lay curled up; the boy was having active diarrhea, frank brown liquid oozing out. Kurogane was not a healer by any means, but he had seen enough to know that this was not normal. People did not usually lose control when they pass out. Syaoran's skin was bleached white, and he was completely unconscious for a good two minutes.

Unable to do more than clean him up, Fay focused on the task single-mindedly, though he paused to note the red birthmark on the inside of Syaoran's left thigh. Though he had been warned about this, Kurogane was nevertheless dumbstruck by how big and red it was; it looked like a fat drop of blood, quite bright and vivid. When Fay lifted Syaoran's other leg, there was indeed a brown one on inside of the knee, smaller but in a peculiar shape, like an arrowhead, or something similar.

Syaoran opened his eyes and looked up, whimpering. Kurogane cradled the child's head with his arms, feeling like he was about to throw up but was relieved that Syaoran had enough bloodflow to his head to wake up.

"Wh-what…"

"You're alright," he managed to say. He needed to keep Syaoran calm while Fay did what he needed to do. Syaoran looked like he was too depleted to struggle, though, and whimpered again, sounding frightened and sick.

Fay managed to put on a fresh pair of pants before collapsing himself. In the end, Kou was the one that managed to set up the tent. The guardian, now reduced to its toy-sized form, actually proved to be a big help, casually lifting things many times its weight as if this sort of thing made any kind of sense. Syaoran remained curled up in Kurogane's arms, shaking, his skin damp with cold sweat. At length, they moved Syaoran into the tent and bundled him up, where the boy fell into an exhausted sleep.

Fay passed out as well, and Kou went seconds later. Kurogane managed to close the tent to prevent the draft from entering before he also succumbed. He had no dreams.

He woke up when Syaoran started whimpering again. The child was thirsty. The little guardian puffed out a fireball into a bowl of water to heat it, so it would not hurt his sensitive stomach. Syaoran drank desperately, before curling up, sobbing miserably. He was too dry for tears. Fay trembled as he cradled Syaoran close. He tried donating some magic, but all that did was make Syaoran's whimpers more pathetic as his misery grew worse.

Kurogane felt like he was in the midst of some kind of nightmare. It was happening again, all the same things, except they were stuck out in the snow. At length, Syaoran had to have another bowel movement. He was able to hold it until they got him out. Fay carried him back after cleaning him up, reporting gravely that it was watery, again.

Kurogane pulled the seashell out and told Syaoran to blow on it.

Ten minutes later, Fay craned his head up. The tent flap opened, and Fuma bent his head down to peer in.
"Aren't you all cozy in there," the hunter remarked. "I was expecting a bunch of wraiths, or something. Looks like you already took care of the demon. What's up?"

Syaoran's whimper instantly told him the story.

It was tight with five people, even if one of them was a scrawny, underweight teenager. Kou swore as he was squished out of the way. Syaoran could barely make a sound; they were not able to figure out if he was in pain, or if something else was wrong. Fuma moved his hand to the boy's pulse.

"He's still in shock." Fuma's voice took on a forced-calm.

"Can you help him?" Fay asked, eyes wide and desperate. "I can't heal him. Can...can you do something?"

"Syaoran, talk to me," Fuma cupped the lad's face. "Can you talk to me? Are you with me?"

Syaoran was suddenly attacked with a fit of rigors, clenching and flexing in Fay's arms.

"There was some kind of demon," Kurogane told Fuma. "It...I think it attacked all of us." He swallowed, still feeling very sick. "It locked us into some kind of vision...Syaoran got us out and killed the demon."

"He killed a demon?" Fuma blinked in shock.

"Well he powered a guardian to do it," Fay pointed at Kero. The creature was patting Syaoran's temple with its paw.

"He then fainted, and just..." Fay waved at Syaoran's pelvic area.

"What's 'this'?" Fuma repeated the motion.

"He just lost control," Kurogane's lips felt numb. "And...very watery. I mean...I've seen plenty of people pass out before but that's never happened unless..."

"..." Fuma's expression somehow darkened even further. "...Well, thank you for saving this bunch," Fuma said to Kero. The guardian turned its face to him, and he gaped. "Whoa. Could have sworn this thing used to talk. Alright, so—let's—let's start with me grabbing stuff from not-here. I'll be back. It's going to be alright; hang in there." He slipped out of the tent.

"Who on earth was that?" Kou demanded.

"A friend," said Kurogane.

Fuma appeared later, this time with Seishirou.

"Have you even put an IV in before?" Seishirou demanded without acknowledging the group.

"I've watched nurses do it."

"That doesn't mean you can do it."

"How hard can it be?"

Seishirou swore.

As it turned out, whatever he was trying to put in Syaoran could get quite difficult. After about ten
minutes, Syaoran's arm was a bloody mess, and Seishirou had yanked the needle away from his brother to clean it up.

"You're going to give the boy an abscess and then he'd really get sick."

"His vein keeps rolling around!"

"Spirits," Seishirou had to stab a few more times himself, but he seemed to have more of an idea of what he was doing. Fay and Kurogane watched, mainly because they were too exhausted to do anything else, and Syaoran continued to cry helplessly; he was still violently ill and could not respond to any questions.

"He's magically exhausted," said Seishirou, before attaching some kind of tube to Syaoran and lifting a bag of yellow fluid and squeezing it. "It's a bad shock to his system. That was a powerful demon he got rid of."

"How do you know?" Kou asked.

"I recognize the residues. I've never killed one of these myself, but I've had to collect their essences before. They are ice demons, korinakuma. They trap people in visions of better realities based on their memories and desires, and suck their life essence out of them in the real world. The bodies then freeze in the snow. When summer comes this place is going to melt and you'll see all these corpses rotting. Happens in more than one dimension. I don't know how Syaoran managed to escape the mind trap—maybe this guardian—whoa. Could have sworn that thing could talk."

"Why do you keep saying that?" Kurogane asked.

"Because it's true?" Seishirou held the bag higher, squeezing. "Syaoran, are you feeling better?"

Syaoran had stopped writhing, and he also stopped crying. Kurogane touched his face, and the boy's eyes fluttered open. He grunted softly.

He could hug this Syaoran, kiss his forehead. Kurogane went ahead and did both. From the side, Kou watched him, eyes keen and assessing.

"Have to love banana bags," said Fuma.

"If you can put the blasted IV in."

"Look, I never put one in before, alright? And how many tries did it take you?"

Syaoran keened softly, and tried to bend his arm. Fuma's hand shot out to keep it straight.

"Easy, lad," he said. "Don't move this arm for a while. I know it's sore."

Silence descended for a while, and Syaoran quieted. Seishirou felt his pulse while still squeezing with his other hand.

Fay cupped his hand around Syaoran's cheek and looked up at the two brothers. "Thank you."

Seishirou sighed.

"Don't mention it," said Fuma.

"It's been weeks. You still didn't get to Sikayama?"
"We got to Sikayama."

"What on earth are you doing here then? It's still winter and snowing. This place looks like a blizzard went through it."

"A blizzard did go through it."

"What are you two doing with this kid?"

"Shirasaki was attacked," Kurogane looked at Seishirou. "An army of oni. They drove out Amaterasu and Tsukiyomi"—Seishirou closed his eyes at this—"and they're summoning me, and I'm supposed to bring him."

"The way he is now—you really think he can handle an army of oni?" Fuma's voice was high with disbelief.

"It—it's what he's here to do," Kurogane suddenly wanted to sob, and tears welled up in his eyes— he was in that bedroom in Clow Country, and Tsubasa—that beautiful child, so healthy and strong and real—all a lie. The real Tsubasa had died ten years ago and this was all going to happen again. "It—it's the whole purpose of his existence this time around. Everyone—all the priests, the seers, they all saw that he would end the war one way or another. And defying his destiny—if there was a chance, we ruined it because he heard. And you know how this brat is when he hears about people in need."

Fuma looked at Seishirou, who sighed again.

"Typical Syaoran. Typical people. He's always stepping in to solve their problems because they cannot handle it on their own."

"You need to tell these seers and priests to bugger off, as the saying goes."

Kurogane pressed his face down on the boy's ribs. He was so tired. "We're at war," he said miserably.

He felt Fuma smooth a hand over his forehead.

"You've all been messed up by this demon too."

"They're not as bad as Syaoran. They can drink the fluids," Seishirou murmured.

"They need electrolytes."

"Then go get some."

Fuma sighed. "This going back and forth is going to destabilize the integrity of the boundaries, you know."

"Two extra times is not going to make a big difference."

Kurogane slipped into some kind of trance, where he was awake but only partially aware of everything. It was a dangerous state to be, but he was so exhausted, and in any case, Fuma and Seishirou were here. It seemed like not a moment had passed before something was being pressed to his lips. He opened his mouth and drank. Whatever beverage this was, it was the most delicious thing he had ever tasted. He almost inhaled the thing.

After finishing, he felt dramatically better. Syaoran was quiet and still, but breathing deeply, almost
"Child's exhausted," Seishirou noted, still squeezing the bag. "He's out of danger now."

*Syaoran could have died,* Kurogane realized. Seishirou and Fuma just saved his life. He bent over to wrap an arm around the boy's head. *We could have lost you.*

Seishirou and Fuma were still keeping their tones quiet and calm.

"Can't believe he resisted a korinakuma," his brother remarked. "Those things have some of the strongest mind-altering powers. Even mages with the strongest shields get influenced like bees by pheromones."

"Could be that guardian."

"Could be. Where is Kerberus from?"

Fay explained.

"It's a guardian of Sikayama here, huh," Fuma looked at Kero. "Bizarre."

"You can't seriously be taking Syaoran to face that oni army," Seishirou inhaled. "Why didn't you contact Watanuki?"

"We haven't been able to."

"…What?"

"Have you been in touch with him?" Kurogane asked.

Seishirou was thoughtful. "Not anytime recently, come to think of it. And he usually contacts us, not the other way around."

"He doesn't seem to be at the dream shop anymore," Fay murmured.

The brothers turned to look at each other.

"Has he been contacting us from the dream shop?"

"Maybe he moved."

"When did you last hear from him?" Kurogane asked.

"It's been a while. Hard to gauge exactly how long, given the different dimensions, but maybe I should check it out." Fuma looked at Seishirou. "You think you can help them out with the oni situation?"

"The alternative would be to let the boy do it."

"You're a big squishy teddy bear," Fuma slipped out of the tent before Seishirou had a chance to retort.

"Tell him Syaoran needs his help," Fay called out. From outside, they heard Fuma call out an acknowledgment.

After a moment, Seishirou turned around, grumbling, "You're one to talk."
The horses froze to death during the blizzard. Kou kicked at one of them, cursing; it had died standing up, and its limbs were as stiff as stone. Kurogane looked at the poor creatures and mused that beasts of burden were truly unfortunate.

"They had cost a good amount of gold too," his second-in-command complained.

"Be glad you didn't freeze along with them," Seishirou pointed out.

They had to get the boy to a proper shelter, though. A tent was not enough. Syaoran was as weak as a newborn kitten, and anything could come upon them. Another demon. Wolves. A passing army.

"Where is the nearest civilization?" the hunter asked.

"Define 'civilization'," Kou drawled.

Seishirou frowned. "If things are really so bad," his voice lowered, "I can take him."

Kurogane stared.

"Take him where?" Kou demanded.

"If you were wondering how it would go," the hunter pointed, "this is as sure of a warning as I have ever seen. He goes and he saves everyone he needs to save and then he goes to pieces."

Kurogane folded his arms and hunched over. It was tempting. He trusted Seishirou and Fuma to at least keep the boy alive. But he also knew that letting them take Syaoran would mean Nihon would be condemned to a longer period of war. Fay may not hold Valeria in too high esteem, but Nihon was Kurogane's home. There was the princess, her sister, the baby-faced novices at the dojo, the bodies of his parents, buried in the murk of what remained of Suwa.

"If you are really willing to take him..." Fay started, eyes shining. He turned to Kurogane. "Kurokun...we can't make him do this. Surely, you see that."

"Take him where?" Kou demanded again.

Kurogane looked at the man.

"If I'm taking him the best time is now," Seishirou pointed out. "You get him to your empress and princess and he won't be allowed out of anyone's sight."

"Kurokun," Fay grabbed at his arm, "please, this is his chance! Hasn't he gone through enough?"

"What are you all talking about?" Kou's hackles rose as his eyes darted between the three of them. "Lord Kurogane, the orders are from the empress and princess directly. We have to bring the boy to them. You can't let this man take him wherever you're talking about."

Seishirou looked back. "This one's not going to work."

Kou's hand went to the hilt. "You are not taking that child anywhere. My lord! We can't let them leave with the boy! He's the only chance to save our Lady Empress and Princess!!"

Daft, thick-headed Kou. His new stance stirred a kind of fear that Kurogane had never sensed before. It was alien, far out of proportion to anything Kurogane was actually seeing or hearing. A threat that tickled at his gut, that sixth sense that warned him when something was wrong before his other perceptions could identify the threat.
His thoughts felt slow, sluggish. It was hard to think, hard to decide, hard to remember how to choose.

He was seeing his parents, and their teachings on the importance of serving one's people.

Princess Tomoyo, and the way she never asked for anything in return, knowing, perhaps, that Kurogane's loyalty was hers anyway.

Syaoran, always doing his best to avoid inconveniencing Fay and Kurogane. Tenderly laying the princess down, careful not to bump her head. Soft acceptance, determination. That steady gaze, while clad in Fei Wong Reed's clothes, meeting Kurogane's eyes while knowing that he could be cut down without question. Tufts of hair falling out by the handfuls. The vision of the ice demon, where he was alive, healthy, whole, allowing Kurogane to hold his hands. It was not real, but it was something he would have done.

Syaoran now, standing at the door. "...I should help."

Syaoran's body in his arms, warm, heart beating, lungs still moving. Alive.

"...we might have to kill him ourselves..."

Ginryu answered his call almost before he made it. Kou's face shuddered in surprise. He looked down where the blade entered the left side of his chest. The strike had been so quick and precise that no blood stained either end at first. He looked up at his commander.

"You are a loyal son of Shirasaki," Kurogane said quietly, the words coming from somewhere deep within him. A father, who would do anything to protect his offspring, even betray his morals and values to listen to his instincts. "Till now, you have been my trusted ally. But he is my child. I lost him once. I will not make him die again. Not for my own honor."

Kou's heart sprayed out blood as soon as Kurogane withdrew his sword. It spewed, warm and red, over Kurogane's face and torso, some drops splattering onto Fay and Seishirou. Kou sank down into the snow almost immediately, where his body twitched and jerked in small spasms. He made not a sound. Color drained from his face within seconds, and after a few more shudders and shakes, his body stilled.

The impact of what he had done flooded over him, and Kurogane's legs collapsed under him. Seishirou caught him by one arm, while Fay supported him from the back.

"Kurotan, it's alright," Fay eased him to the ground. "You're alright."

Kurogane began to shake. In all his life, this was the first time he defied Shirasaki this way. Defied honor. It felt like he had cut his own heart out.

"He's going into shock," Seishirou observed.

"Help me get him to Syaoran," said Fay.

Syaoran looked so peaceful while he was sleeping.

Kurogane stroked the brown hair, the soft cheek. Moved his thumb over the boy's eyelids, the long eyelashes, the dark eyebrows. He would create this young face, somehow. He was meant to create this face. His flesh and blood and bone.
He bent over the boy and pressed his cheek against the boy's crown. Syaoran had gotten taller, but remained thin and slender. It was too easy to cradle him, with his still-narrow shoulders, arms as thin as a girl's, barely any muscle. But his skin was warm, his blood moving through those vessels, the thud of his heart palpable against Kurogane's chest.

Mine.

He could not stay. Once Seishirou took him away, Kurogane knew Syaoran could not be brought back. Nihon would be his doom. Another place that sought to take from the child. Syaoran was his, but in holding onto him, Kurogane had to give him away.

It was hard to let go, when the time came. If only he could stay here forever, Syaoran in his arms, Fay at his side. Kurogane did not want to give him up. He had just found him. Had fought so hard to keep him. Had given up something in himself he always thought would never be lost. It seemed cruel, to have all of that end with losing Syaoran anyway. Kurogane was not sure he would ever see him again. He was not sure he deserved to.

Seishirou was patient. He did not rush Kurogane. Kurogane knew the hunter would give him all the time in the world. With Kou's body cooling outside, there was no hurry to get to Shirasaki on time, to stop this oni army. He could hug his son for hours, even all night.

But they needed to get Syaoran out of here before the teen woke to form his own ideas, ideas that would jeopardize his welfare. The ninja loosened his hold and shifted his burden into a better position before lifting the teen up. Seishirou accepted the boy solemnly. Behind him, Kero floated, furry face still with that enigmatic smile.

"…Take care of him," Kurogane looked at Seishirou, and his heart clenched as he suddenly wondered, would they care about him as much as I do? Will they treat him right? "…Please."

Fay squeezed his shoulder from behind.

Seishirou looked down at his new charge. "He'll be fine. I'll make sure of it."

Thank you. Kurogane could not say it, though. He could only bow his head.

Seishirou stepped back. The crunch of snow under his boots sounded deafening. Kero floated next to them, tail suspended behind. They retreated a distance away, and there was a flash. They were gone.

Kurogane stared at the space they had been. Fay's arms circled around him and squeezed tight. They stood there in silence for a long, long time.
"The Empress and the Princess will likely know by the time we arrive," Fay warned when they finally pulled themselves together to leave the ice demon's domain. "I can't imagine the yumemi would stay silent on this matter."

"Perhaps." Kurogane replied. "I wonder if they would see this as an act of treason." An act of treason against all of Nihon. In his heart, he was afraid, though he could not regret his decision.

Fay covered his hand with his own. "Syaoran could not stay anyway. There was no way we could have brought him to the Empress and Princess in one piece. Not while it is still winter, the roads are so long, and he so frail."

"I killed a man who trusted me as his commander." I murdered him.

"There was no way we could have let him live."

Perhaps not. One might say Kurogane acted wisely, eliminating a threat before it could reveal itself. Others might say he acted prematurely, never giving Kou a chance. He liked to think he understood Kou enough to be confident that verbal persuasion would not work anyway, but he had fought alongside the man, had trusted him with missions, and there was a bitterness in his throat when he thought of what he had done. Kou had trusted Kurogane, at least, to be a fair leader. Kurogane's betrayal was far worse than any crime he had committed before meeting Fay and Syaoran, for this was done in the child's name, for the child's sake, and it was so ugly and brutal.

Syaoran would have been ashamed of him.

Syaoran would have been afraid of him.

*Perhaps this is where it begins.* He could feel himself turning back into the monster he once was. The kind of man that brought sadness to Princess Tomoyo's eyes. The thing was, even now, Kurogane could not feel remorse for Kou. That man had been so apathetic, so dismissive of the boy's suffering, and when everything in Kurogane screamed at him to eliminate Kou while his guard was down, what could he do but obey? But the consequences were real. Seers would see this and the tale would spread. Kurogane could not predict what would become of him now.

"Are you sure you want to go to them?"

"Nihon is my home." *For better or worse.* "I will fulfill my own duty."

He was aware he might be sentenced to death. It did not seem very likely; with Syaoran completely gone from the realm, Kurogane actually had fewer conflicts of interest. But he did kill a man who had done no wrong. He wondered how Princess Tomoyo would react.

Not well, he would expect.

"You can go to our son," he whispered to Fay. "He is still ill, and whatever I face…it will not be something you can change."

Fay squeezed. "Syaoran is among friends. I am not leaving you alone. Nothing on Nihon has the power to hurt me. I will not abandon you."

Despite himself, Kurogane felt relieved. He did not want Fay to leave him.
Travel was quicker without Syaoran. In the cold of the nights, the stars were solemn and clear. Sometimes the two men kept moving even in the night, anxious to reach safe harbor, but on nights when they had to rest, he would look up and wonder if it was possible to see other worlds through the sky, if Syaoran might be tucked away in one of the sparkling lights high above. War waged on in Nihon, taking life, youth, and joy, but the celestial heavens remained as measured and constant as ever, too beyond the reach of men to be affected by their suffering.

They came upon battlefields were corpses were picked clean by scavengers, and small camps of refugees that escaped invasions only to be trampled by marching troops. In the trees hung bodies, strung up by the necks, their bodies stripped bare and gouged with deep welts. The crows cawed and vultures circled the air.

They almost entered a town in the middle of a raid. The soldiers ransacked everything in sight. It was not even about the thrill of violence; none of the soldiers were enthusiastic or even eager. There were no war cries, no hollers, delighting in the terror they inspired. Instead, it was single-minded focus; no room for doubts, or even anything as basic as anger. They killed because there were people to kill, burned because there were things to burn. Blood splattered the walls and ground, children were crushed under stampeding hooves, and one soldier, a woman, was beating an old man over and over. He had crumbled to the ground and had long since stopped begging or even making a sound, but she went at him as if there was some endpoint he had not reached. Not enough blood.

Fay and Kurogane saw the mayhem and backed away. This was happening everywhere, not just here, and the two of them could not defeat an army. Their involvement would make no difference except cost the two of them their own lives. They left the town behind to its destroyers.

He dreamed of Tsubasa. Of the boy turning towards the dunes. Thin and shivering in his pathetic gown. In the dreams, Kurogane held him close, and the teen clung back, arms around him and face buried in his neck. Blew wisps of fog into the night air above the sands. Played with wooden tops on the smooth floors. The little princess with her vivid green eyes sat on top of a cherry blossom tree, weaving garlands of blossoms and dropping them on Tsubasa's head. Tsubasa, reaching out towards the distant tower of bronze, and Kurogane caught him as he started to go, pulling him close. Don't go. Tsubasa reached up to hug behind him, but still stared longingly at that tower. It's not real, Kurogane told him. Don't go. You'll die trying and never make it. And he would feel Tsubasa settle against him, the way he never would have back then. Tsubasa was not his, the way Syaoran was.

He missed Tsubasa. Deeply. Terribly. He missed that brave lad whom Kurogane had bonded with when he had been a younger man. All the stories, the heartaches, the dreams, the journeys. While Syaoran as he was now did not feel like a new person—he felt like a continuation of Tsubasa's existence; everything, from his physical weakness, to his determination to help even if it meant his own suffering, resonated with the very essence of what Tsubasa had been where he left off, but that story the three of them built could never finish. He was missing the memories; he had a complete lack of understanding when it came to the old camaraderie between the three of them. Without the joy of having the real Syaoran with them, making new memories, Kurogane found himself dwelling more and more on what was ten years dead, the realization that he could never find closure, that he would have that young face haunt him with the false hope, that tantalizing wish.

He wept. Fay held him close. "You did well," said the mage.

Kurogane could believe, at least, that he could do no better.

But the truth of his selfishness was evident all around them. The ghost towns that went silent after raids. The food shortages off the battlefield as all supplies were funneled to the front lines. Tsubasa would never have condoned this.
Finally, the night before they were due to arrive at the rendezvous, Fay held him close inside the tent as the wind howled through the trees. The mage ran his fingers through Kurogane's hair in lazy strokes.

"Don't be afraid, love," Fay whispered. "It's going to be alright."

As Kurogane drowned in dread and despair, Fay seemed to have found an inner peace, somehow. He was content with simply knowing that Syaoran was safe, and would be kept safe, indefinitely. Kurogane doubted Seishirou would bring Syaoran back on his own. But Kurogane was also worried about other things; Syaoran was so delicate this time around, so starved for affection. Would the hunters give him what he needed? What if those around them took advantage of him? And if Syaoran ever exhausted himself again, to the point where he lost all dignity—would Seishirou and Fuma feel resentful?

But he shouldn't have a reason to be in such a state.

He prayed. Please. Syaoran had already gone through so much. He has looked after so many others. Please, if only one of them could look after him...

The Empress and the princess retreated to a small cove that proved very difficult to reach, and impossible to do so without being detected. By the time Kurogane and Fay struggled to the camp, the princess was waiting for him, alongside two ninja guards. She regarded them with an inscrutable expression when both Kurogane and Fay lowered themselves to one knee in greeting.

"Where is the boy?" she asked, sounding very much like she already knew.

Kurogane answered anyway.

"Seishirou took him."

"Seishirou."

"He was ill," Kurogane replied, "and we couldn't expect him to weather the journey."

"And Lord Minamoto Kou?" Princess Tomoyo's voice was cold as ice.

Kurogane looked at her steadily. Once, the princess had the power to make him feel guilty, even if he did not necessarily change his ways. It was strange, how utterly powerless she had suddenly become to him. There was nothing she could say, nothing she could do, that would make Kurogane favor anything over his son.

"He is dead," he stated.

"You did not bring his body."

Kurogane had not even thought to do so. He bowed his head down. "I have failed, Your Highness."

A long silence descended. From the sea, the salted winds blew towards them, scattering sand and bitterness. Kurogane listened to the crash of the waves. Again and again the foam collided with the shores, the sound pervasive and yet so casual, for the oceans of Nihon, as in any world, was far too great a presence to be defined by a simple sound. Such a small thing, for the sea to encroach upon the land and leave devastation in its wake. Far easier than warfare.

"Come," Princess Tomoyo said finally. "The Empress is waiting for you. We have waited long for
The Empress had escaped with half of Shirasaki’s forces and civilians. It was a sizable amount, but they did not have enough numbers to take back Shirasaki. While Kurogane and Fay were away, messengers had already been sent to nearby allies. So far there were no answers, but even if there were, it would be hard to reach them. The roads were very dangerous, and with so many civilians, it would be difficult to defend themselves. Unfortunately, they could not stay at the cove; the winter season kept the fish away from the shores, and on land there was little to eat as it was.

With these matters pressing, the Empress did not bother to chastise Kurogane about not bringing Syaoran with him. She was satisfied with knowing that no one else had taken the boy. Notably, she did not ask about Kou. Kurogane knew this was because they felt they still needed him. As long as he was useful, they would not punish him if they could help it.

He was safe from their wrath, but the situation was dire. What remained of Shirasaki was vulnerable, not only to potential enemy attacks, but also to famine. The court advisors instituted a rationing system; as food was scarce, soldiers were given priority for meals. What was left over could not feed everyone every day, so on certain days only certain individuals were able to be fed. There was not enough for more than a single meal each day. Kurogane noted that many of the elderly were fasting on purpose, so that they could spare rations for the rest of their families. If this continued, soon they would not even be given the option; Shirasaki might have to evict the elderly from the camp in order to save those most likely to survive. The Empress’ advisors whispered in worry. No one wanted to resort to such measures, but hard times meant hard choices, and with their allies out of reach, they would not be able to save everyone.

Word finally came from one of the allies: Ishihebi, which was not ideal, given their history. However, beggars could not be choosers, and they could not afford to be picky. The Empress gave the order to move. The terrain promised to be challenging, and there were those that could not follow. They were abandoned without defenses, for Shirasaki could not spare any soldiers. Some of the able-bodied remained with their families, and a small portion of the kingdom were left behind. Kurogane rode ahead alongside Princess Tomoyo’s carriage. Fay was next to him, and they marched out of the cove in a solemn caravan.

"How exactly is Syaoran supposed to help in this situation?" the blonde demanded.

Considering his crimes, Kurogane did not probe. Fay did not either, so they were left to guess.

"I don't know if they're aware of his limitations," he told Fay. "You didn't know that Syaoran couldn't touch weapons of violence, nor use magic that is offensive in nature, until he had reached Sikayama."

"But he's supposed to help with all of this," Fay grumbled. "It's ridiculous that they expect him to."

"No more so than in the past."

The snow made for difficult travel. The soldiers ahead plowed the way, but it was still slow moving, and the horses fidgeted, unhappy with the migration. They called for a stop shortly after starting because most of the civilians were unable to keep up. Kurogane met with the other ninjas to discuss routes before joining Fay with the horses.

"Are you alright?" Fay asked.

Kurogane was about to answer in the affirmative, but something stopped him. He was not alright.
Once, situations like these would have made him more focused, more driven, but now all he could think about was how tired he was, and how much he did not want to be here. It was a long road to their destination, and all the delays would just make it longer.

Fay reached out to touch the side of his head. "We'll get through this."

"Right…" Kurogane closed his eyes and tried to summon his energy, but he felt empty. There was nothing to gather.

Fay leaned close and touched his forehead to Kurogane's. "See this through—take back Shirasaki. Then come away with me."

Kurogane shook his head miserably. "I can't."

He was not sure how he would endure. Perhaps once Shirasaki was taken, the Empress and princess might choose to punish him then, but Kurogane could not even tell how he could make it to that point. It was alarming, how he was ready to give up. He could sit in the snow and let everyone move on and leave him behind. And yet, he still could not abandon Princess Tomoyo. Taking back Shirasaki would not be enough. Even then, he would not be able to leave.

"We'll find a way to end the war," Fay whispered, "without putting Syaoran in danger. We'll find a way."

He would have to believe that, for now.

The first day continued with considerable progress, all things considered. Kurogane knew that the second day would not be so fortunate. They had about three days' worth of journey, but that was with the pace of trained soldiers. With the civilians, the children, the women, it would take longer, and food was scarce and people were frightened. On the road, it was cold and exposed, and morale was low.

As night fell, Princess Tomoyo went before everyone. Several campfires burned hot and bright, and she stood in a plain garb, devoid of jewelry, wearing her hair tucked in an elegant braid.

"My loyal people," she called to them, "we are on our way to sanctuary. Once there, you will find food and shelter and warmth. All you must do is endure. All of you have suffered much and lost much, but I promise you, on behalf of my Empress: we will regain what is lost. We will persevere. We will emerge victorious!"

But behind the flaps of the tents, the princess was much more reserved in her optimism.

"I will have to marry," she told Kurogane. "Ishihebi will not bother to protect our people otherwise. I will marry into their kingdom, and Amaterasu will be left without Tsukiyomi. Where that will leave all of you…that is hard to say. I can't predict whether I'd have any leverage at all."

"He has waited for you all these years," said Fay, "and time has not cooled his feelings for you."

"He sees me as difficult to obtain," Tomoyo said sadly. "Once he has obtained me, he will tire of me and look to other pursuits, but perhaps that is my lot in life. I have had many happy years, and if this serves my Empress and my people, so be it."

She was too good to blame Kurogane, but that did not stop Kurogane from blaming himself.

The following morning, Kurogane watched a boy, perhaps older than Syaoran, collapse to his knees
on the road. He was gaunt and his eyes were hollow. His father screamed at him to rise. "Get up, you lazy brat! Do you think any of them would wait for you?"

He knew that the older man would have carried the teen if he had the strength to. As it was, the father was exhausted himself, and was powerless to do anything except shout and hope his son might rise to the challenge. As for the child, he was in no shape to continue, and endured the verbal abuse in silence. The father grew increasingly scathing—it was love that powered the words, not misunderstanding; he was in denial, for he knew that his child had finally reached his utmost limit, which meant that he had lost. It was his last desperate attempt to inspire some kind of spark that might get the boy moving for just a little longer, but it was all in vain. The boy could not move, and the party continued on, so at length, the father was forced to abandon him.

Others were more accepting; mothers who went to the side of the road. Some of the children cried, but the women knew they could move no longer and ushered their offspring away. Without food and without shelter, all of these people were sure to die in the night. There was simply no way for any of them to survive.

Even the horses were getting weary. Fay and Kurogane were compelled to walk alongside their mounts as the steeds snorted and hung their heads in fatigue. The beasts were hungry, but there was nothing edible under the snow. Kurogane was hungry too, and he knew that Fay's constitution was more delicate than his. It was a dangerous situation to be in, but there were no other options. Either they give up, or they continue on. There was nowhere to procure more food.

When night fell, it started to rain. Winter was only just starting to fade. Under the downpour, the masses huddled miserably under blankets and cloaks. Fay erected some temporary shelters, but he could do little to ward off the damp chill. He spent much of the evening sitting next to Kurogane, looking over the remnants of Shirasaki. Kurogane's own mind was numb, and he could not guess what the mage was thinking.

The attack seemed to come gradually, or perhaps Kurogane was merely gradually aware of it. He heard the slicing of flesh and cracking of bone, the grunts of warriors that dealt the lethal blows, but at first this did not register, buried under the din of voices as the civilians tried to encourage each other while the soldiers told lewd jokes. He was still among the first to react, however. Fay signaled for the horns to blow, and the soldiers instantly took up arms.

The enemy did a lot of damage by the time Kurogane met them sword to sword, and at first the ninja was not sure whom they were dealing with. The armor was nondescript, and there were no banners to announce their faction.

Fay drew to the Empress and Princess, while Kurogane led the charge. The civilians piled back, with those who were not fast enough trampled under the flow. Ginryu flashed in joy, drinking blood and biting through armor. But he then felt a surge of something, and then the world shifted; all the colors were wrong, the sounds just a pitch too high or too low, and there was an energy above his skin, vibrating.

Out of the darkness of the woods, two eyes opened, and then more, and then more. A great, tall demon, whose face sported dozens of bright yellow eyes, crept from the shadows. Its mouth was made of moving plates, like a praying mantis. It towered almost as high as the trees, and from below something sharp like a sword darted out and pierced through a Shirasaki ninja next to Kurogane.

People started screaming, as the creature emerged into the moonlight and revealed that it had many limbs, each one sharp and jagged with moving parts like hundreds of fingers. It lunged out with multiple at once, slicing through those in their path like a knife through butter. It was so fast, and so efficient, even Kurogane felt a wave of doubt surge through him. This was no ordinary demon.
Fay jumped over Kurogane's shoulder, a blaze of light. Princess Tomoyo and Amaterasu charged forward on foot. Fay had a spell in front of him, pushed by his fingertips. It billowed out, and the royal sisters fed it with their own magic, assembling a great shield that pushed forward, very much like Syaoran's shield at Sikayama. It knocked the demon back so that it staggered, but it recovered too quickly and one sharp limb swiped at Fay. Fortunately, the mage was nimbler than he looked, and the strike missed, but Kurogane's heart stopped for a beat nonetheless.

Princess Tomoyo then uttered some sort of incantation, and a bright light swept up from her body and into the sky. A brilliant beam shot down, colliding with the demon with a resounding boom. It staggered, but then thrashed all of its limbs around. Kurogane stumbled back as one nearly decapitated him. He tried blocking another that came down with his sword, but while Ginryu held, his own boots slid in the wet mud. Stumbling as the limb withdrew, he righted himself as the beam of light dissipated. They could not count on single spells to fell this beast.

The other ninjas realized the same thing, for as Kurogane rushed forward, he saw others do the same. Fay was suddenly beside him, though the mage knew better than to hold him back. He raised his blade as he prepared to leap and felt Fay's magic swirl under his feet, propelling him forward. He lunged and swung. The sword slashed. Black froth spilled from the crack in the creature's hide—it seemed like leather, tough and thick. The demon turned its eyes toward Kurogane and the ninja used this opportunity to stab them, but to his surprise, they were hard as rock, and his blade glanced off.

He fell with gravity. The mouthparts descended after him, but Fay shot some kind of spell right as they opened, and this, more than anything else, forced the demon to pause for a considerable time. Meanwhile, from the sides, other mages were launching their own attacks. From the back, arrows fired. Kurogane landed wrong and slipped in the puddles. He scrambled to his feet and slashed at the legs. Fay followed his blows with spells of his own, and they took out three of the legs before the demon recovered.

A whistle of a sword over his head had Kurogane turning around. Focused as he was on the demon, he was unable to pay attention to the enemy soldiers, who were slicing through the ranks as everyone was forced to contend with the monster. This man, at least, Kurogane was certain Ginryu could take care of, and with a brutal slash, he separated the man's head from his body. Fay's fingers spewed out a spread of fire behind them, and then one of the demon's legs came down, almost right on top of Kurogane. The ninja ducked into a roll, barely managing to avoid getting skewered.

The rain made the demon slip, though it remained upright on its remaining legs. One of the other mages took out another leg, before the demon killed her. Her body lay broken in the sludge.

Kurogane struck again with Ginryu, thrusting above his head right into the demon's body. The sword found the right target, for this time it bit and refused to let go. The demon stumbled back, then appeared to collapse. Its mouthparts moved silently. Fay was over Kurogane's shoulder again, a ball of light in one hand. He threw. Amaterasu and Tsukiyomi followed after, rays of light shooting like a rain of arrows. Then Kurogane saw movement from the corner of his eye, and caught the hand holding a sword, trying to strike him down. He wrestled the blade from the warrior and gutted him easily, before slicing past another enemy. Meanwhile, the mages continued to attack the beast. The human foes, ignoring the demon, went on attacking Shirasaki's forces. Kurogane sliced through faceless men and some women; the sword in his hand did not fit as comfortably as Ginryu, but it was durable, usable, and spilled blood as much as he could want. He tore through the men trying to attack one of the novice ninjas. He sliced open a woman trying to carve up a mage's face.

Battle was a song that flowed through his blood. His heart soared. His mind felt free. He did not feel the cold rain over the rhythm of his heartbeat, pounding like a war drum. His senses were sharp, his body reactive. He could do this all night.
Then the world snapped. Colors and sounds went back the way they were. The demon had died.

The enemy soldiers stumbled. Kurogane did not hesitate. He cut through all of them with renewed rage. He felt Fay beside him, throwing out magic, and each time someone fell from a spell, he felt his spirit pulse.

The rain lessened. Kurogane looked around. The enemy had retreated, and there was no one to kill around him. But there were many bodies already, and the night tasted of ice and blood. He turned to see Amaterasu and Tsukiyomi regarding what remained of Shirasaki.

A silence fell. No one even sobbed.

Fay took his sword hand and pulled the blade from it. Kurogane let it drop.

The mouthparts were made of bone, and the leather was made of tanned human skin.

"Fukuhifu," said Fay. "They wear skin as clothes and bones as armor. Need as much sacrifices as the leather can cover these things."

Kurogane dropped to one knee, pretending that he did so to study it better, but in reality he was too tired to remain upright. It was still raining, though it had lightened up considerably, but he was still drenched.

They had lost a lot of people, and there were many injured. At this rate, they needed support to come to them before they could take another step.

"These soldiers are not affiliated with Kuroiyama," said one of the other ninjas. "They're another faction altogether."

"Which one?" the princess asked.

Kurogane did not hear the answer. He could feel a headache build up behind his eyes at alarming speed. Fay's hand squeezed his nape, a sharp contrast of warmth on his skin.

"Of course Kuroiyama would not be the only ones practicing this," said the blonde.

The princess turned. "We cannot take another hit. Lord Fay, you and the rest of the mages will set up wards. Lord Kurogane, you and the ninjas will watch the perimeter."

Kurogane drew himself together and rose. Of course there was more work to be done. He did not have the strength to salute her the way he should have done.

Fay did so for him. "Yes, Your Highness."

Princess Tomoyo looked at him. She was exhausted too, and for the first time, Kurogane could see fear in those eyes. Even when they reached Ishihebi, her trials would not be over. This was only the start of hardships to come. She was right about Ishihebi using the opportunity to keep Shirasaki under their thumb.

He bowed his head. Such was the burden of sovereigns, he knew. In times of war, rulers never marry for love, nor could they shelter their loved ones, the way Kurogane had.

He looked away and moved from the group to seek out the other ninjas.
They barely made it to Ishihebi.

When they arrived, the Emperor welcomed them with great fanfare. Amaterasu and Tsukiyomi proceeded to the palace. Kurogane and Fay went with them. There was pleasantries before the royal sisters were shown to their guest quarters. Kurogane and Fay were given adjacent rooms. Hot baths were drawn, food prepared, and Princess Tomoyo went through all of these motions despite being ready to collapse. When the end finally came and they were allowed to rest, the sisters retired immediately without even checking on their subjects. No doubt, their welcome was not quite so considerate, but they were safe, and Shirasaki was on its last vestiges.

Kurogane collapsed into bed and was asleep within seconds. He did not dream.

He woke to hear Fay and Tomoyo talking.

"He can't," he heard Fay say. "He's not made of stone."

He got up and threw a robe on. The princess was in the adjacent room. She looked up when Kurogane entered. Her hair and clothes were pinned and perfect. Kurogane knew he looked unkempt, but he had to step in before Fay ruined things.

"Your Highness," he greeted.

"Lord Kurogane," she said back. She still looked tired. Under the makeup, her eyes were faintly swollen. Despite not being subject to the same rationing as the rest of Shirasaki, she had lost a great deal of weight. There was a jittery quality to her movements as well; she was afraid.

She did not feel safe in Ishihebi, despite all the gestures. Though Kurogane did not hear her say so, and she would be too proud to admit it, she had come mainly for reassurance.

Kurogane was tired of it all, but this was why he stayed. At a time when his own life had been unraveling, Princess Tomoyo had been a solid presence at his side. She supported him during his training, made sure to advocate for him when he was trying to fit in, encouraged him when he became homesick and depressed. She was even the reason he had found Fay and Syaoran in the first place; she did not have to put in the effort to make him a better man, to sacrifice time at her side so that he could find his own heart. At this point, it was Princess Tomoyo's life that unraveled; kingdom lost, people in disarray, and she was looking at possibly sacrificing her freedom to buy them some semblance of security. Even Amaterasu would not be able to help her. She was alone. Meanwhile, Kurogane had Fay, and his son was safe, beyond the reaches of Nihon. He could pull himself together for her sake.

"Is the Emperor summoning us?" he asked.

"He is summoning me," the princess replied, looking a little rejected after Fay's remarks. "I had just come to see how you're doing."

"Give me a few minutes and I will be ready," he said, giving Fay a look. The mage meant well, but he should know not to interfere further.

"That's alright," she said. "You don't have to come."

"Give me a few minutes," he insisted.
The Emperor had invited Tomoyo to break their fast with him, without the presence of the Empress. He was unhappy to see Kurogane and Fay with her; the wizard had opted to join them, citing nothing better to do.

"Pardon me," said the princess, playing dumb, "Kurogane was my friend from childhood, and Fay, of course, is always interesting to talk to. I wasn't aware that they weren't welcome."

"Not at all," said the Emperor, though he looked like he ate something sour.

They had a civil enough conversation, though Tomoyo was a little reserved. She made the effort to appear interested, but was too tired to be enthused. The Emperor complimented her on her beauty, which she laughed at. Kurogane agreed she did not look her best, and the Emperor was a bit of a creep.

He mused that his relationship with Fay was nowhere near as complicated.

"Are you kidding?" Fay exclaimed later. "What did Mokona call you? A 'tsundere'. You acted all macho and made fun of me."

"How was I the one who made fun of you?" Kurogane protested. "You were the one who refused to call me by my proper name!"

"It wasn't even your real name. It was already a nickname. Why must I take such care to say it properly when it's not even a proper name?"

"Kurogane' is a proper name. Besides, your name was after a piece of mineral."

"I didn't make you say it all the time. Can you imagine how painful it would be if you guys had to call me 'Fay D. Fluorite' every time? In any case, you refused all of my advances, and I'm still hurt by that, by the way."

He was not; he was just trying to cheer Kurogane up. It was sort of working.

"Well you were just trying to distract me that time. Pretending to be nothing special when you were clocking all that power in your veins. I have a nose for when people hide secrets, you know." "Don't I know it. You can't expect everyone to bare all in the beginning, though." "I never thought you were a creep, though."

"No, you were too preoccupied with pretending to be a ninja."

"Pretending?!"

"It was really cute when you got your first sword after you handed Ginryu away and you tried to cover up how you didn't know what you were talking about by saying 'this sword is not bad. Not the greatest, like that sword you've never seen me use, but still not bad. Usable.'"

"You weasel," Kurogane laughed, conceding defeat; he could go further but it might go places that were not fit for polite company.

But the little meetings between the princess and Emperor did yield two important outcomes. One: Princess Tomoyo became betrothed to the Emperor of Ishihebi; and two: Ishihebi will dispatch forces to help take back Shirasaki.

It was a good match for Ishihebi. Amaterasu was still unmarried, and at this point, she seemed
unlikely to. Shirasaki would be passed down through her sister's heirs, which the Emperor would make sure Princess Tomoyo would produce. Though Ishihebi was not geographically close to Shirasaki, they could easily sandwich the kingdoms in between, provided both sides summon enough forces. It was in the Emperor's best interests to clear Shirasaki for this reason, and he gains a great High Priestess as his consort. The rewards for Shirasaki were a little less impressive, but the alliance was beneficial for them too.

That evening, Amaterasu summoned Kurogane to her chambers. She did not need to keep the meeting secret; part of the point was to make it known to everyone, Shirasaki and Ishihebi alike. But the meeting was casual, with Amaterasu laying out cushions for Kurogane and Fay to sit on.

They talked about the past.

"My sister always had a fondness for you," she stated, "even back when you were Youou. When Suwa was overrun, I was not certain we could save you. She spoke for you, intervened on your behalf. When we took you from Suwa, she took personal charge of your care. I told her, 'the boy is yours. If you save his life, you must be responsible for it'. Of all the people she had met then and ever since, she always took your affairs most to heart. She cared about your well-being, your future. She worried for your happiness, your ability to be an independent man. That was why she elected to send you away for a while, where you could not be fixated on her safety and can find your own person. Granted, even she did not predict that you might bring someone with you," her dark eyes regarded Fay with something Kurogane could not interpret, "nor that this other person would contribute so much to Shirasaki."

Fay bowed his head. "Your Majesty's praise mean a great deal to me."

"They are heartfelt," said the Empress. "Now my sister faces a challenge I cannot protect her from. She will belong to Ishihebi, and move far from home, beyond my reach. It is my wish that the two of you will continue to aid her once she leaves Shirasaki, as you have till now."

"I owe Tsukiyomi my life," said Kurogane. "I will follow her so long as she needs me."

"I will go where this one goes," Fay pointed. "He'd get lost otherwise."

"Tch."

The Empress smiled a little, but her eyes were sad. Kurogane knew that she felt like a failure. It was a severe blow to the pride, to be evicted from one's own home, and be forced to sell her little sister to an individual like Ishihebi's sovereign. Amaterasu was just as scared as her sister, and just like Tomoyo, she was alone in her woes and burdens. She was handing off Kurogane to protect the person dearest to her, but there was no one to support her in turn. All these years, she had her sister as the most dependable ally she could have. Tomoyo was not the only one losing what was important to her.

The sisters spent the night before the wedding together. Kurogane knew Tomoyo cried. Neither he nor Fay felt that the Emperor would stoop to abuse her, necessarily; he did not seem like an outright cruel man. But they understood her vulnerability and the feeling of helplessness. Hopefully, their presence would lend her some leverage in taking control of her life, though for the moment, she had to brave this milestone on her own.

"Were you ever afraid of me?" Fay asked, as they lied side by side in the darkness, the hot coals burning across the room by the window to ward off the chill from outside.
"Afraid?" Kurogane snorted.

Fay snuggled close. "I'm pretty dangerous. I always was. Even with my powers contained, halved… so on and so forth."

"None of us were afraid of you," Kurogane pointed out. "Least of all me. The children were fearless."

Fay considered. "That's true."

Sakura had just gone along with whatever Syaoran did in the beginning, when she was still disoriented, but Syaoran, who had been hypervigilant about her safety, had trusted her care to the two of them many times. Granted, it was his clone, but his actions were still dictated by a piece of Syaoran's soul.

"I think we all saw the real you almost instantly," Kurogane mused. "We didn't know everything that had happened to you, but we recognized who you were all along. I found it annoying that you didn't own up to it."

"You made that abundantly clear," Fay said dryly.

"Well your fake smiles were very unnerving," Kurogane defended. "You were trying to make yourself feel better, but all it did was make you appear disingenuous."

"Honesty wasn't a priority at the time."

"Hn. Good thing we knew the real you. The person you were pretending to be was a freak."

Fay huffed out a laugh at this and chose to say nothing.

"Were you afraid of me?" Kurogane asked.

Fay was quiet for a moment. "A little."

Kurogane raised his eyebrows. It could not have been because he thought Kurogane could beat him in a duel, or something of that nature.

"Everything I touched fell apart," Fay admitted. "You seemed too good to be willing to…deal with that. Too pragmatic. You certainly didn't need me and…I was a mess."

"Syaoran really is your son," he grumbled. "He hides, just like you, and covers it up. He does it better though. It's such a pain in the neck." Seishirou and Fuma were observant enough, he hoped. Otherwise they would miss all the things that Syaoran needed…Kurogane resisted the urge to request Fay contact the brothers. He did not know if Fay could even do it, and he did not want any chance that Syaoran might be brought back to Nihon while it was still too dangerous.
Fay huffed another laugh. "Not like you were too forthcoming either, being all 'tsundere', as Mokona called it."

He entwined his fingers in between Fay's. "I won't leave you, no matter what, if that's what frightens you. We've both seen each other at our worst. And I know what is in your heart. You're far more afraid of yourself than you should be. You give yourself too much credit. You're not so scary."

Fay choked. He punched Kurogane in the arm, before folding himself to the other man.

"You jerk," the mage complained.

The wedding was resplendent. Tomoyo stood in elegant red silk, long hair spilling in luxurious waves down her back. Her skin was fair and her eyes were dark with long velvety lashes. She smiled the same way Fay used to smile, and her movements were just a touch stiff, but it was a handsome ceremony and an auspicious reception. The Emperor appeared pleased, and the Empress of Shirasaki toasted the new couple with inspiring speeches. Ishihebi courted Shirasaki further with demonstrations of great talents; music, dance, song, acrobatics. The food was delicious as well. Fay gave Kurogane a look, which Kurogane did not know how to interpret. Something about how delightful a wedding was? Fay never demonstrated interest in such things before.

The wedding attendees probably enjoyed themselves more than the couple in question. Tomoyo was the epitome of grace and nobility, but Kurogane knew her well enough to know that she was very stressed, and possessed nowhere near the equanimity she displayed. Her new groom, though satisfied, seemed almost bored with the proceedings not too long after the ceremony itself. He was not particularly interested in his new bride either, something Kurogane expected but still found annoying.

There was already talk of heirs, which was also irritating; Tomoyo was frightened enough as it was, and people were already stressing her out even more. This could not be helped though; heirs were the whole reason Ishihebi even bothered with Shirasaki. Kurogane kept his mouth shut, while Fay squeezed his shoulder in support. Maybe the mage was more familiar with this aspect of things, though maybe not, since it was different for men.

"You should have seen the death glares Touya had given everyone during their banquet," Fay whispered, "especially at Syaoran."

Kurogane snorted. "Did he ever give the poor lad a break?"

Fay laughed into his drink. "It wasn't very funny at the time," he insisted, but it was clearly amusing to him now. "Can't imagine what he would think now. Poor child."

About Syaoran's crush on Touya? Poor child indeed.

Kurogane and Fay snickered into their meals, much to the confusion of everyone else.

"I can't believe anyone's face can get that red."

"He was glowing."

"Touya is an attractive young man."

"I can't believe you said that to his face."

"Not like this is news to him. Besides he already found Yukito."
"Still!"

"You were the one that busted him. Nice going; I can tell you're ready for parenthood already. 'You're not burning up again, are you?' or whatever you said—"

"Look, that was a perfectly reasonable starting point…"

They bickered until the guests began to retire. The Emperor and his new consort retreated to their chambers. Since this was a private affair, Fay and Kurogane went to their own quarters.

"I wonder how Syaoran is doing," Fay sighed.

Kurogane said nothing. He missed the boy too.

The next day, the Emperor dispatched troops to escort Shirasaki back to their territory.

Tomoyo would remain in Ishihebi. Kurogane and Fay would also stay.

"Take care of yourself," said Amaterasu to Tsukiyomi, who looked longingly at her sister. "Once we take back Shirasaki, there will be opportunities to visit."

Tomoyo looked like an abandoned child. It was the first time she looked vulnerable on the outside. She really did not want her sister to leave.

The Emperor looked at Kurogane and Fay with displeasure, but said nothing to them and was gracious to his fellow sovereign. Kurogane and Fay also bid their subordinates farewell. From now on, neither Kurogane nor Fay would belong to Shirasaki.

Despite his previous apathy, Kurogane found himself feeling almost as lost and confused as Tomoyo. He had taken for granted that he would always return to Shirasaki, remain in Shirasaki, and that one day Syaoran might be part of Shirasaki too. Now he had a new sovereign, was part of a new society, and he would have to fight to affirm himself and his position here. All the things he had achieved before, the esteem and prestige, were meaningless here. He would have to do it all over again.

Just the thought of it made him feel weary, but he looked at Tomoyo, who was so anxious, doomed to be left behind. He still owed her this.

Shirasaki withdrew with a good portion of Ishihebi's forces. They watched them retreat out of sight.

The Emperor turned. "Well," he said to his new consort, "one hopes for the best." He then left the room without looking at her or making sure she was following.
This was hard to write; let me know what you guys think. Tomoyo's…got stuff going on, and Fay's…a complicated character, probably more so than Kurogane in many ways in my opinion. Please don't get mad at me; note the "incomplete" status!

Spring soothed away the frost of winter, and then the cherry blossoms were in bloom. It was still chilly, but the snow had melted, and Kurogane took to taking walks in the gardens around the palace. The new Empress-consort was easily well-loved by the people, and perhaps was expected, it was her kindness, more than Kurogane or Fay's might, that helped lever her position in the court. The Emperor was not particularly interested in his bride, but she was not particularly interested in him. What mattered was the peace, and Ishihebi was peaceful. Whatever flaws their sovereign had, he was a good ruler, and in this regard, the marriage was a smart match.

He did not like Kurogane and Fay. He even tried to send them away to fight a campaign, which Kurogane and Fay refused; it was a clear ploy to get rid of them, and leave Tomoyo vulnerable. Furious at the insubordination, he then tried to take his displeasure out on Tomoyo, who tried to appease him by offering to fight in the campaign as well. This floored the Emperor, who withdrew afterwards. He never approached Kurogane and Fay again.

Shirasaki was retaken, much to everyone's relief. The oni took out a good number of both sides, but Amaterasu was reinstated, and a solid ally of Ishihebi.

Then Kuroiyama attacked Shirasaki.

News of the siege came from the priests. That afternoon, Tomoyo summoned Kurogane to her quarters. She was very quiet, but she had the maids serve tea and drank her share pensively. Kurogane also sipped, feeling subdued. For whatever it was worth, Shirasaki had been his home for more than two decades. He had fought to preserve it, secure it, defend it. It was all in Tomoyo's name, but he had grown to care, at least a little, about its welfare. The news was a harsh blow to him too.

A heaviness settled over his mind. When will this war stop? He was so tired. Everyone was. Surely, people could stop on their own, without some innocent boy? How come no one else was exhausted from all of this?

He closed his eyes. It felt very difficult to open them. His body slumped.

All went black.

He woke to being jostled. Below him was golden fur.

"Don't you dare—" Fay yelled something unintelligible, and the arms around him squeezed.

Confused, Kurogane blinked and looked around.

They were in the middle of a battle. He could smell blood. Above was a white figure with long white
hair; a woman.

A witch.

It was the White-Haired Witch.

"Fay—" he started, and was surprised by how weak his voice sounded. What had happened? What was happening?

Fay leaned forward, pushing Kurogane down. He was reaching forward to grab onto the plate of armor over Kerberus' shoulders. They were riding on Kerberus. Kurogane grabbed Fay's hand around his chest, but his grip was weak.

Why was he so weak?

"Hold on, Kurochan," Fay secured his hold, "and don't—!"

He looked up just in time to see Syaoran diving toward the witch.

"What—"

Kerberus angled its wings and made a steep turn. There was a loud crack, followed by a shriek. Kurogane tried to look up, but Kerberus was swerving, and black spots bloomed in front of his eyes. He passed out.

When he woke, it was to hear Fay swearing a long stream of expletives. The mage sounded on the verge of tears.

Kurogane was lying on a mat. They were in a tent. At first he wondered if they had reached Ishihebi after all, but then he realized this one was unfamiliar.

"We'll figure something out—" he heard a familiar voice soothe.

"That idiot boy! Of all the daft, stupid things to do! And what on earth were they doing over there?!!"

Touya bent over Kurogane's field of view. "Lord Kurogane."

The ninja blinked up at him. "Lord Touya."

His voice still sounded weak.

I had been drugged. Slowly, realization sank in. He had been unconscious for a while. Things must have happened while he was out.

And…Syaoran.

"What on earth happened?" he demanded.

"The Emperor of Ishihebi learned about Syaoran," Touya explained patiently. "They knew the only way to end the war was through him, but he was in another reality. They didn't know which one, but they figured Lord Fay would be able to reach him. They knew neither of you would be willing to bring him back to all of this. Empress-consort had you drugged and poisoned as ransom and had been trying to persuade Lord Fay to summon him. Lord Fay resisted, but then Kuroiyama attacked, and Syaoran showed up on his own."

Kurogane gaped, then looked over at Fay. The mage looked harrowed, and there were bruises on his
face. Some were older than others, but he could not study them closer before Fay hid his face in his hands in distress. The mage let out a sob.

Kurogane was still having trouble grasping these new developments. "Syaoran—where is he?"

Touya leaned back. "He's alive."

"…" Kurogane glared.

"They took him," said Touya. "The Emperor is bringing him to Shirasaki right now."

A shudder shook Kurogane's heart. "What? Why?"

"For the damned prophecy, that's why!" Fay snapped, practically frothing at the mouth. "That brat! After all that effort, and he goes ahead and ruins everything!"

"How did he even come back?" Kurogane whispered.

"We never had a chance to ask," said Touya. "Suffice to say, he found a way. He was determined to save the two of you; somehow he learned that you two were in trouble and managed to come back on his own."

That brat! "What, and Seishirou and Fuma just let him?"

"We don't know," said Touya.

Yukito moved to Touya's side. "How are you feeling, Lord Kurogane?"

"I'm fine." He still felt weak, but worry for his offspring was fueling him. He managed to stand.

"How long was I out?"

"Two weeks, according to Lord Fay. You were poisoned. Syaoran actually neutralized the poison before everything fell apart."

There was a rumble outside the tent. It took a moment for Kurogane to realize it was thunder.

"It's raining outside," Touya said unnecessarily. "We would have given chase, or at least Lord Fay would have, but it's drenching out there."

Kurogane swore.

More information came in little bits and pieces, not all of which made sense. He was drugged in Tomoyo's chambers. She had apparently done this on purpose. The Emperor tried to use this to force Fay to call for the little one, but Fay did not; first he did not know how—Syaoran had initially reached Seishirou and Fuma through the whistle, which the boy had taken with him. Even if he knew, he had said, he would not resort to putting the child's life in danger over this, but he pretended to try to find a way. Then Kuroiyama showed up at Ishihebi's doorstep, the White-Haired Witch in tow. Fay and Tomoyo managed to get Kurogane out of the immediate danger zone, but with the White-Haired Witch's bloodlust, Ishihebi was faring poorly. They had a brief reprieve when Yukito and Touya showed up with their army, but the real salvation came when Syaoran dove in on Kerberos' back. The boy had Fay and Kurogane mount the beast before facing off the White-Haired Witch. Something about his magic neutralized her, but it took a lot out of him. He fainted, and the Emperor of Ishihebi got hold of him.

Yukito and Touya tried to get him back, but it was Tomoyo who stopped them.
"And then it rained," Touya said flatly.

Yukito was clad in golden armor. It took a moment for Kurogane to fathom why.

"You're a King."

This was ridiculous.

Yukito smiled humorlessly. "I am now."

"What kingdom?"

"Abaron," Yukito turned to Touya. "That, I think, is a story that can wait for another time."

Fay had gone quiet, though he still held his face.

"Don't be angry with him," Touya murmured. "That boy is a good child. He felt he owed you two for saving him. There was no way someone like him would have stood by."

"He's not angry at Syaoran," Kurogane replied, feeling resigned. *We should have figured.* They had taken for granted that once Syaoran left, he would not be able to find his way back, but he could just imagine how things went. Syaoran would have woken up to Seishirou and Fuma. Perhaps they would have taken him to some place of healing. He would have learned that he was sent away, would have found out that Fay and Kurogane had remained behind in Nihon, and taking together all the things that he had seen up till then, would not have been content to stay away. He would have wanted to help them. He would have wanted to pay the 'debt'. It was a stupid oversight on their part.

*We should have gone with him.* Kurogane closed his eyes. Hindsight always bites, but to face the fact that Tomoyo had betrayed them when Kurogane and Fay had sacrificed so much to support her...he almost felt like passing out again.

"The rain would keep them from moving too," Yukito was saying to Touya. "We can start after them when it stops."

"We'd be constantly behind."

"Better than nothing. And they might get caught up. We don't have to reach Shirasaki. We just have to reach *them.*"

"Where is that guardian?" Fay suddenly peered out of the tent. When the flap opened, Kurogane could hear the sound of rain.

There was no giving chase with that.

"The guardian?" Touya joined the mage. Yukito stood back, arms in front.

*A King. Never in a million years...although Kurogane had come across several surprises already.*

"Why are you helping us?" he asked, while the other two were preoccupied.

The King looked calmly at him.

"His well-being matters to Touya," he said calmly, "and as you know, Touya's well-being matters to me."

*Ah.* Kurogane did not trust that Yukito's own fondness for a child would inspire him to move his
own troops. That did not work for Tomoyo. Still, "I'm surprised you're willing to go to Shirasaki for him, though. Syaoran's supposed to be in Shirasaki to...fulfill his destiny." Whatever Tomoyo had done, Kurogane had a hard time imagining that she would allow Ishihebi to sacrifice Syaoran, but he did not trust the Emperor, who might not be swayed by Tomoyo's feelings.

"He can fulfill his destiny a number of ways. Ideally, he should have done so without being in the clutches of Ishihebi, but either way Touya wanted to be there to help."

Kurogane considered.

"Rest while you can," the king turned. "Syaoran needs all of us to be at our best."

The rain dragged on, a heavy downpour that promised numerous floods throughout the area. Much of the army had retreated inside the tents. Kurogane could see them huddled, eating porridge and looking bored.

He was restless too. The languor of the drug and the poison was wearing off, and he was ready to go after that stupid boy, if only the rain would clear. Fay was similarly agitated, sighing and pacing around inside the tent. Touya and Yukito left them to give them some privacy, but that meant they had nothing to distract them from the sheer helplessness of the situation.

Later, the guardian materialized, in its stuffed toy form. It floated around the tent Kurogane shared with Fay. Fay glared at the creature, apparently miffed that it had disappeared in the first place, but soon grew concerned when it began acting odd.

"Is it constipated?" Fay wondered.

"Can it even get constipated?" Kurogane raised an eyebrow.

It shuddered, and then emitted a loud burp. A beam of light shot out of its mouth and plastered against the wall of the tent. Watanuki Kimihiro appeared, as if through a window, and looked directly at them.

"Tell me he's with you," the young man demanded.

Fay and Kurogane were speechless.

Watanuki swore. "What happened?"

Seishirou had, apparently, brought Syaoran to the world best equipped to treat him—which turned out to be the same world Tsubasa had died in. Syaoran spent some time in the hospital, where they ran some diagnostics and found what the Nihon healer had told Kurogane: something was wrong with his stomach. Unlike on Nihon, this world had supplements and infusions that could be directed into the bloodstream. Syaoran recovered quickly, but that was when the trouble started.

He wanted to go back, aware that Fay and Kurogane were still in the midst of a realm at war. Seishirou did not honor this request, which caused a major tiff. Meanwhile, Fuma tracked down Watanuki to Clow Country, which was where Watanuki had contacted them from. Watanuki had no idea Syaoran of Nihon existed. He had immediately left to go see him.

The reunion left a great deal to be desired. Syaoran had no memories of Tsubasa and felt no kinship with Watanuki. When it became apparent that he was not willing to bring the boy back to Nihon, Syaoran was not interested in anything Watanuki had to say. Watanuki initially wanted to bring Syaoran to Clow Country, but the boy refused to go anywhere else with him. Watanuki intended to
bring him back anyway, and left for Clow Country to make preparations. Somehow, Syaoran figured out how to jump dimensions by watching Watanuki.

"So now it's the same old story," Watanuki looked furious. "Nihon becomes yet another realm waiting for Syaoran to solve all its problems."

"Is there anything you can do?" Kurogane asked, heart threatening to beat out of his throat. "Tell us that there is something you can do."

Watanuki looked to the side. "Are you making a wish?"

Kurogane clenched his fists. "Why is everything a transaction with people like you? Why can't you help simply because you care? Or do you not care at all?" The old hurt surged. "You did nothing when Syaoran died last time! Maybe this time is making up for last time! He cared about you, you ungrateful bastard!"

Watanuki snapped his head to glare at Kurogane; it was the most hostile expression he had ever seen on the youth.

"You should ask yourself that," he spat. "How far are you willing to go, for a boy who's not really yours anyway?"

Kurogane felt a surge of triumph. "He is mine, in this life. Which you're going to help me explain, and you will help me conduct in a way that doesn't soil his honor." Or mine. What was left of it, anyway.

Watanuki's eyes flashed in shock, but he frowned, too worked up to be distracted. "Oh. So now that he is yours, you suddenly are willing to save him?"

That comment made no sense. "When was I ever unwilling to save him?"

Watanuki's eyes widened. They flickered to Fay as his mouth fell open. "You…"

Kurogane backed away, his instincts suddenly on high alert.

Fay. Fay had talked to Watanuki. Kurogane had left the room, left the entire building, because he had been too upset, and Fay had talked to Watanuki and then told Kurogane that Watanuki had no way of saving Syaoran—

"So many things make sense now…" Watanuki covered his mouth and started laughing. It was completely devoid of mirth, but he did not seem able to stop. "Gods. It all makes sense."

Kurogane looked at Fay, whose face was like stone.

"Fay—"

"Get yourself together!" the mage snapped. "Syaoran is in danger! We don't have time for you to giggle at yourself! Stop the rain, slow the caravan, do something! Yes! I wish that we can save Syaoran! I wish for him to live! I will pay any price, any price you name—if it means Nihon blows up and the skies are filled with fire, so be it! If it means exchanging his life for another's, that is fine. Are you satisfied?"

Watanuki snapped to, his countenance thunderous. "How moving." His voice was almost dripping with poison. "Ten years and you're finally somewhere close to being as good as Syaoran once was. How fortunate that in this life, Syaoran belongs to Kurogane and not you." He shut his eyes. As he
moved, his cheeks glistened; he had been crying, Kurogane realized. He still was, though his voice would never have belied that fact. "As it stands, the price I must exact is nothing like that. I now have no way to spare Syaoran from what he must do in this life. I can only intervene after."

A long silence fell.

"Ever since he died," Fay whispered, "there never a moment when I didn't regret my choice. I know I don't deserve him and that was why he didn't come to me this time."

Watanuki studied him in silence.

"I can do nothing until the right time," the young man said at last. "He needs to accomplish his tasks first. But you won't have much time once he does. You will need to pause time to talk to me. That has its own price." He looked at Kurogane. "Are you willing to part with Ginryu?"

Kurogane suddenly realized he had sat down at some point. He shook himself, feeling like he was in the middle of a bad dream. Ginryu. His father's sword. It was only after he had proven himself truly worthy...after he had learned that there was compassion in the world, that there were those like Syaoran and Sakura and...only then was he able to wield the true sword. It was not just a piece of metal, not just something that felt like an extension of his own flesh, the way his mechanical arm was. It had history. It had meaning.

But for it to be used to protect his father's grandson...was that so bad? Kurogane was already unworthy of using it. He had murdered his own ally, with Ginryu no less.

"If that is what you need," he said to Watanuki, preparing to summon it, but Watanuki raised a hand.

"I will collect it later. Not all prices must be paid up front. You will likely need that blade in the meantime." He looked at them. "I'm sending an item to you now."

Kero burped. It was kind of obscene. Out of his mouth came an hourglass. It was a considerable size, requiring two hands to carry. the sand had already flowed part-way.

"Tilt it to its side to activate; that stops the flow," said Watanuki. "Ginryu only pays for one activation, so keep it flowing. When the sand runs low, you must tilt it to the other side. Each side takes about a day to fill; it is a twenty-four hour hourglass."

Fay picked it up to study it. "Tilt it to the side to activate," he repeated. "When should we use it?"

"You would know," said Watanuki. "For what it's worth, I'm sending Fuma and Seishirou to help you. They should join you later today."

"Thank you," Fay said softly.

Watanuki ended the spell without another word.

Kurogane grabbed Fay. "You lied to me."

"Kuro—"

"You told me there was no way to save him."

Fay swallowed and could not meet his eyes. Tears spilled, and he cast his eyes on the ground miserably. His face was still bruised. Some were old enough that they had to have occurred before that battle, but Kurogane could not focus on that. "I was a coward."
"You—" Kurogane knew it was more complicated than that, but he could not believe it. "You lied to me. If the price was so high that you couldn't pay—you—why didn't you tell me? I could have paid it instead!"

"I didn't want you to—"

"You didn't even give me a choice!"

Kero sailed overhead and then hovered next to their faces, still with that mystifying smile. Kurogane pushed it away; it was rude, and he would likely have to pay for that one, but he was too overwhelmed to care. "Tell me the truth now, mage! What exactly did Watanuki say to you?"

Fay hiccuped, and appeared to summon a valiant effort into composing himself enough to speak, but he just choked, and then hid his face in his hands.

Kurogane grabbed those wrists and yanked them down. "Alright, if you can't talk, I will. I'm not stupid—Watanuki knew Syaoran was supposed to be your son. He was surprised to learn that this one was mine—he told you, didn't he? Was that how you knew? And for whatever reason, you decided that Syaoran didn't deserve to live—"

"It wasn't like that—"

"Then what in Shinigami's name was it like!?"

Kero came back, and Kurogane swatted the thing away again. He stepped back, because otherwise he was going to punch Fay in the face. He settled for pointing a finger at the blonde.

"You spoke to Watanuki in the beginning, when Syaoran was first diagnosed. He was in that place for weeks—months. All that time, you could have said something—to me, you could have even called Watanuki again because Mokona was still there—he—he watched you watch him suffer, that was why Syaoran was angry with you, that was why Watanuki was angry with you, and then afterwards—" when Fay grieved, ten years and he could not get over it because this time, it was his fault—Kurogane had to bend over as a wave of lightheadedness threatened to make his vision go black.

When Fay spoke, he sounded calm, almost normal. Composed.

"I contacted Watanuki with Syaoran in the room," said the mage. "I told him that Syaoran was sick. Very sick. He said he had been waiting for us to contact him and it was the first time I witnessed him lose his temper like that. He was angry at Syaoran, though. Typical brat that he was, he managed to keep Watanuki from reaching him and never tried to reach Watanuki, all that time. Of course, Watanuki saw it in a vision, and was almost at his wit's end by the time I made Mokona connect with the other one. Watanuki then explained how things were originally supposed to be. He didn't know Syaoran was also yours. We didn't know Syaoran was also yours. So we both learned that...that was how it was supposed to be. But it wasn't. And Syaoran was really uncomfortable. So was I. I had never thought of Syaoran as one of my own. Syaoran never considered himself one of my own. It was...awkward. And then Watanuki said...because of the paradox, because Syaoran was a paradox, left over from a reality that did not exist, and our relationship was also a paradox, left over from a reality that did not exist...I had a choice."

Our relationship. Fay meant Kurogane.

"I've never pretended to be very smart," Fay went on. "I mean, you would know. And I had—I had nothing. Valeria is gone...Ashura is no more...Ceres is gone. I was looking forward to coming with
you to Nihon and…I knew that once Syaoran was well, he would go back to saving his father, and all I could think of was this boy would find his real parents and go back to Sakura and there wouldn't be any room in his life for me, and I wouldn't have you either, and why should I sacrifice…my one remaining happiness, for someone who wasn't even really mine?"

Kurogane pressed his fingers to his mouth. Syaoran would never have abandoned Fay, especially not after something like that. Fay had always been insecure. He covered it up with an airy, light countenance, a facade of someone who was never bothered by anything—but he was always insecure. Syaoran was uncomfortable and this had hurt Fay. He took that personally, because of course he did.

You…idiot…

"I didn't love him then," Fay continued, sounding as if in a trance. "He was just a boy I happened to care about, but I wouldn't say I loved him. I respected his courage, I admired his wisdom beyond his years, I treasured his compassion…but I didn't love him. He didn't feel like my son. His heart belonged to others and I didn't have that room in my heart. But I wavered. I strongly considered it. Because he was there, and I was all he had, and I knew if I didn't do it, there was no one else to vouch for him. But he realized I didn't want to do it. He told Watanuki to go away. I didn't stop him. But the more I thought about it…the less sense it made. Why us? What did our relationship have to do with Syaoran's survival? I was expecting anything from a donation of magic to your artificial arm to…anything. I wasn't expecting that. It made no sense. And…I told Syaoran…it made no sense."

Kurogane raised his head. "Then why didn't you tell me about it?"

"B-because you didn't need me as much as I needed you." Fay's lower lip wobbled and more tears spilled.

Kurogane closed his eyes, feeling like he was gutted. "Why on earth would you think that?"

"I was afraid—I made a mistake, alright? I never pretended I was perfect—"

"You didn't make one mistake," Kurogane shot to his feet, "you made that choice, over and over again, every time Syaoran vomited everything in his stomach and beyond, every time he cried in pain—you made that choice every day while watching him wither and fade. You didn't just make one mistake."

He found himself out in the rain, and was drenched in two seconds flat. It was like taking a cold, miserable shower with his clothes on. The water numbed his skin and seemed to seep into his bones. He allowed it, because somehow it dulled the pain and numbed the mind.

Tsubasa did not have to die. Fay had made the choice. And Kurogane was never around, and Syaoran had to stare into the face of the man who abandoned him, every day, allowing this man to help wash him, turn him, massage his cramping muscles. And Fay had lied to Kurogane's face every time he asked, there was nothing Watanuki could do? No, there was nothing he could do.

He honestly never expected this from Fay. Of all the reasons the wizard might have felt guilty about that time, Kurogane never predicted it would be this. He wanted to scream. He wanted to punch Fay in the face. He could not believe that Fay would deliberately hurt Syaoran like that. This was not a thoughtless word or comment—and this had gone on for months. Every day, Fay had watched Syaoran die and made the decision not to call Watanuki.

It was Fuma who took his arm. "Kurogane," said the hunter, "come. You won't help anyone by catching your death in the cold."
"You don't love someone just because people say you should," said Seishirou. "Just because you know you should either. That's not how the heart works. When there's no bond, there's no bond. And just because you feel sorry for someone, you feel sad about someone dying, doesn't mean you are obligated to take their place."

In the warmth of the tent, Kurogane had started to shiver. Seishirou had wrapped a towel around him. Fuma pressed a mug of hot tea into his hands, but all Kurogane could do was hold onto it, feeling the searing heat push into his palms.

"Kurogane," Seishirou called quietly, "he's punished himself all this time. What happened to Tsubasa…that's not going to change, but Fay's trying and…are you really going to punish him too?"

Kurogane set the mug down. His mind was starting to clear. At his core, he knew, Fay was a vulnerable soul. He had suffered much and barely knew any happiness—every cause, as he said, never failed to transform into tragedy. As outrageous as it was now, back then it would not be unexpected for Fay to believe he could live with this decision; he believed he cared more about Kurogane than Syaoran, and this might even have been true. If it had really come down to that choice: Syaoran or Kurogane; someone like Fay, who only had the vague parental instincts he was born with, would be more selfish, if only for the sake of self-preservation. If he truly lost both Kurogane and Syaoran, Fay would have nothing. And that might have been too much to ask of the mage, after he had lost so much. Part of the choice also probably came down to denial—it did not make sense, Fay kept insisting. He had told Syaoran they would find another way, while Syaoran had been avoiding his gaze. He probably even believed it, at first. And then as time went on, it became harder and harder to retract his decision, but perhaps the turning point really did not sink in until Syaoran's actual expiration, when Fay finally had reason to actually love the boy like he was supposed to.

Fay had the capacity for love…but his own childhood was such a mess, he might not even recognize it in himself. It was actually no wonder that he did not immediately feel a kinship toward Syaoran, even after learning the truth. He had no idea what a father was supposed to feel for a child. His own father had committed suicide after Fay and his twin were born, and despite his long years, Fay had no real children of his own. If Syaoran had felt uncomfortable with the idea—and of course he would, because that would be the natural instinct of any child who had been raised to know otherwise…Fay would have felt rejected. He would not have rationalized that Syaoran was not uncomfortable because it was Fay—he was uncomfortable simply because this was an awkward situation to be in, and that Syaoran, too, could not have assumed that Fay would want him back. Fay was not even bound to Tsubasa by blood. To him, that original timeline was a story, a fantasy, no more real than someone else's dream. Even if he did love Syaoran, if Syaoran reacted badly to the idea, he would have tried hard not to.

Seishirou and Fuma escorted Kurogane back to the first tent, where they found Fay curled up in the corner, keening and sobbing like a child. He was crying like he had already been thrown aside and discarded, and the sounds were pitiful, lost, fearful, and sad. Fay had never thought he deserved to be loved, and Kurogane's reaction only affirmed that notion.

Kurogane felt the rest of his anger dissipate, and he went to the blonde to pull him into a desperate embrace. The mage fumbled at first, breaths hitching, but then clung on when it was clear that Kurogane would not let go. Kurogane's clothes were still wet, but at the rate the other was going, it did not matter.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I didn't mean to scare you. I was upset about the situation, but the past…it's in the past. I still know you, and you are still beautiful to me."
Fay let out a soft wail.

"It's alright," Kurogane ducked his head to cover Fay up tight. "Alright, alright. It's alright."
Race to Shirasaki

When the rain finally stopped, everywhere was flooded. Fay was able to freeze the water so they could walk across, but when they came across a large mudslide, even his considerable powers were unable to create safe passage. Equilibrium fragile as it was, Fay almost lost it. Only Kurogane, holding Fay close, was able to prevent him from throwing a fit.

"Don't panic," Touya urged, "they're all facing the same problem. The storm had been moving in their direction; there are bound to be more mudslides ahead."

"I should—"

"No," Kurogane pinned Fay's arms to the sides with one of his own. "If you blast that thing you're going to bury all of us with a bigger one."

"Then I'll just blast us out of that one!"

Kurogane squeezed the back of his neck. "We will find him. We have the hourglass. If need be, we'll pay something else. My arm, anything, if we had to use it too early. We will get to him."

They had to go around. It was still a treacherous route. The storm did a number on the usual paths; if the trees were not in the way, the road had collapsed, or flooded, or got covered by debris. Kurogane considered getting Kero to carry them—the guardian had been floating insipidly with them the entire time, but they had no idea how to get it to transform. Touya had tried, but the guardian just ate up his magic. It was very frustrating.

They did not sleep; they were behind enough as it was. In the night, the roads were even more dangerous, but they kept going; this group was trained for harsh terrains and enduring long marches. The horses were sturdier and more surefooted, and they actually made good progress, all things considered.

As Touya and Yukito predicted, Ishihebi's forces did not reach Shirasaki before Abaron caught up to them, but it was important not to startle them into dragging Syaoran further away. Seishirou offered to go with Kurogane up ahead to try to determine the layout of the troops. Yukito wanted to send one of his own men as well.

"You're worried we'd take off with him," Kurogane said flatly. He was so sick of everyone's machinations.

"You did before," the king pointed out, completely unapologetic.

Fay looked ready to burst into tears or unleash hellfire on everyone. "What are you planning to do?" he demanded, lunging forward. Touya pushed him back, but Fay yelled over the younger man's shoulder, "He's only fourteen! He looked up to both of you—" he choked on curses as Touya pushed him to Kurogane, who captured him in a firm embrace.

"We're on the same side," Touya said sternly. "You have to believe us on that. We don't intend any harm to the boy."

"Then why can't you let him go?!" Fay shrieked, and magic began gathering in his palms as tears streaked down his face. "You're all bastards—all you do is use people, you use—"

Seishirou helped Kurogane gather him away from Touya. When Kurogane turned, Touya tried to
apologize.

"He's *not* just a tool," the younger man insisted. "He's a sweet child. We're doing our best."

Kurogane did not know what to say. It was not that he had no words—there were too many at once. But he understood that to Touya and Yukito, letting Syaoran leave Nihon was out of the question. In retrospect, it was optimistic of Kurogane and Fay to assume that Syaoran would be able to stay away. Likely, if the boy had not returned on his own volition, something else would have brought him back. If even Watanuki could not spare him from his destiny, none of their plans would.

"What are you hoping to do?" he asked, tired of this nonsense. "Obviously there's something in it for you. You wouldn't have come all this way, risked soldiers and rations just to protect a child."

Touya considered him. It was Yukito who answered.

"Syaoran of Kuroiyama is an ace, so to speak. Whoever has him will conquer Nihon, though he does have to be present in Shirasaki to fulfill the ritual first."

"What ritual?"

"Eliminating war," said Touya. "You know those konton spirits—war is powered through anger, through hate, and this hate is as much due to what stirs in men's hearts as it is through the spiritual realm. Syaoran is a pure soul; his presence can tame any spirit. As a purifier can subdue even the wildest of demons simply through will. Potentially, anyway. But whoever possess him, whichever faction, will be recognized by the gods and deities as the creator of the new era. Those who oppose will fall by the wayside."

Kurogane rubbed his face and turned away. "So Abaron wants to be at the top."

"We all want to be at the top," Yukito pointed out. "Surely you understand this."

"All too well."

Seishirou was murmuring to Fay. "Come on, get a hold of yourself. It's not over yet. There are still things to do. He's out there, waiting for you. You've got help here. What are you freaking out about?"

"I'm *fine,*" Fay stammered, sounding the exact opposite.

"There's no reason to lose it," Seishirou went on. "He's still alive. We're going to get him back."

Fay swore.

"Now that's just rude," Fuma declared.

"Shut up."

Fuma grinned, though his eyes were sharp and deadly. "Look, we'll let His Majesty have his way for now; it suits our purposes too. First we figure out where they're holding the boy, and we go from there."

"Where do we go from 'there'?"

"You let us worry about that," Seishirou turned Fay. "Go calm down. You're a man, not a toddler. You have an actual baby that's going to need you to be collected. Fourteen years old my eye. I swear, they get younger every year."
Kurogane snorted. Nice to know he was not the only one.

"He's a skinnier than he would have been," Fuma reminded him.

"...Still a baby."

"Let's move, we're wasting time," Kurogane snapped his fingers and turned to Yukito. "Who are you sending with us?"

The third member of their party turned out to be a brunette woman who was almost as tall as Yukito himself. She carried a bow and arrow with her; the bow was actually quite heavy, indicating she was stronger than she looked.

"Lord Kurogane," she bowed.

"This is Nakuru," said Yukito. "She's one of our best scouts and the finest archer in Abaron. She has a keen eye, and would be good for long-ranged interventions."

"Hn," said Seishirou, eyeing her up and down. "Ideally, we wouldn't need any interventions on this particular excursion, but a good call, I would say."

Kurogane also studied her. It was always rather odd to see a woman in a martial position; he had seen them before, of course, and Shirasaki had some in their employ, but it always felt a little off, like seeing a man wear makeup. He had no illusions about her abilities; most women were better than man when they put their minds to it, and if Nakuru really was the best in Abaron, she would be impressive indeed. It just required an adjustment on his part, every time he came across a situation like this.

"An archer would be handy," he agreed, and looked at Fay, who was still with Fuma. Fuma looked over Fay's shoulder and nudged his head. He would take care of the mage.

Kurogane sighed. "Let's go."

Unfortunately, Ishihebi was moving, so they had to tail after them with the rest of the troops in tow, making sure to keep a safe distance. Before nightfall, the former finally paused, which allowed Kurogane, Seishirou, and Nakuru an opportunity to take stock. The Emperor had not brought a very considerable force; it was a legion at most. It seemed like their plan was mainly to use Syaoran as their ultimate weapon rather than sacrificing men. But the camp was well-fortified, and they could not get too close. There were patrols, and multiple tents structured so that everything blended into one mass, difficult to penetrate and difficult to escape. They observed for a long time, studying the movements and the uniforms and trying to identify individuals, before they were able to locate anything that could orient them to where Syaoran might be held.

Nakuru was the one who pointed. "That is the Empress-consort."

Sure enough, Tomoyo had appeared outside a tent. She was actually wearing armor, and at her side a handmaiden was bowing. The latter scuttled away before coming back with a bowl of food. Tomoyo nodded, and the handmaiden entered the tent. Tomoyo did not follow.

Clearly someone else was in there, for soon the handmaiden came out and stood next to Tomoyo with her head bowed, waiting for further instructions. Tomoyo seemed content to just stare at the proceedings around her.

Seishirou leaned toward Kurogane from where they hid in the bushes. "He's probably in that tent."
Kurogane frowned. That was a very close eye. Unusual. "Or it could be her husband."

But it was not. The Emperor strode out from the other side of the camp. He went directly to Tomoyo. He said something, and looked very impatient. Tomoyo responded in her normal, poised manner, and after a moment the Emperor huffed and went away, looking miffed.

She stood for a moment, looking thoughtful, before entering the tent. The handmaiden hurried in after her.

"He's definitely in there," Nakuru remarked. "She's protecting him. The Emperor of Ishihebi has a fondness for young boys."

Something in Kurogane shot to his head—blood, maybe. Seishirou instantly grabbed him in a chokehold.

"Why'd you have to tell him that?!" he hissed.

"You didn't know?" Nakuru looked shocked.

Kurogane pressed against Seishirou's hold. "Let go of me or so help me—"

"You can't just charge down there—"

"Just watch me—"

"Stop! You're not thinking straight!"

How could anyone think straight? It was too much. Kurogane's vision blurred as tears blanketed his eyes. He swore. "Son of a—"

"Get a grip! You can't help anyone by crying like an infant!"

"I don't think he got to him yet," Nakuru's eyes were wide with worry. "Look—"

"Why didn't you shoot him in the bloody throat?" Kurogane lunged at her, but Seishirou was still restraining him.

"It's not a good shot. Can't risk revealing ourselves for that. Look, I don't think he got to him."

"You're just saying that," Kurogane wilted. "You have no way of knowing."

"How do you know the Emperor necessarily...?" Seishirou demanded.

Nakuru looked at Kurogane and reluctantly pointed out, "I'm a spy."

"No," Kurogane sobbed, feeling ill. "He can't have." Not to Syaoran.

"Pull yourself together!" Seishirou was craning his neck to look at the other side of the camp. "So what if he did it or not? Are you going to just sit there and feel sorry for yourself and for that child?"

Kurogane took a deep breath. "I need to see him. Come on, I need to see him."

"You know that is a bad idea."

"You can't sneak in right now anyway," Nakuru pointed out. "And what is the Empress-consort going to do, share the same tent? That's alarming itself."
"I need to see him."

"You know, if you can't keep it together, you shouldn't be doing this," Seishirou pointed out. "Syaoran doesn't need his father right now, he needs someone to get him out of there."

"You're his father?!" Nakuru stared at Kurogane.

Seishirou swore. "How did this becoming an information sharing session? Look, get the counts, and we'll work on getting Syaoran out of there when we have more support." He swore another oath.

"Can't you control the oni?"

"You want me to summon the oni," Seishirou deadpanned, "and stampede the whole place, possibly including Syaoran."

Kurogane inhaled.

"Look, he's clearly fine now," Seishirou reminded him. "Whatever the princess—the Empress-consort did, she's obviously protecting him. He's alright. We'll get the counts and we'll go from there. Trust me, if anyone can pull through, it's Syaoran."

The words provoked a deep stab of pain. "He didn't last time."

"Well, he will this time. You know why? Because he still has to finish this spirits-forsaken prophecy of this place." Seishirou squeezed his shoulder. "We'll get him out of there."

Yukito advised a stealth mission.

"We can send the guardian to him," he suggested, indicating Kero, who was floating over Fay's head.

"That's not a bad idea," Fuma remarked, sounding impressed.

Yukito gave him a dry look; this Yukito was a bit different from other Yukito's.

"Does that guardian even understand what's going on?" Touya wondered. "It's just been hovering around. It certainly hasn't gone to the boy. Would it even know to protect him?"

"It did stuff last time," Kurogane remembered how it had ripped into the false Syaoran, who had been the ice demon.

"It 'did stuff'?

"We'll send more scouts with you," Yukito went on, "and try to clear a path. Minimal fuss. The rest of us will flank around to cut them from the front if they try to move; try to drive them toward us, if you can. Lord Fay will come with us—"

"Why am I coming with you?"

"We don't need flashy magic," the king stated, annoyed.

"You just want to make sure we don't take off with Syaoran," Fay accused.

Yukito rubbed his forehead. "Seriously, you have two choices. Either you come with our team or I'm grounding you here so you can't participate at all. I'm not going to keep wasting time trying to
convince you of my motives because you're clearly not willing to listen anyway."

"Your Majesty..." Touya looked at him.

"No," Yukito raised a hand. "I know you're upset. I know you love the boy dearly, but what is at stake is so much bigger than any of us. At this point, I don't really care if you believe the worst in my intentions, so long as we get the boy. So it's up to you: are you going to cooperate, or are you going to make this hard for yourself?"

Fay's countenance blackened. "You have no idea whom you're dealing with—"

"Fay," Fuma warned.

Touya stepped between the two fair-haired men. "Lord Fay," he beseeched, "I owe Syaoran a life-debt. I promise, I will honor it. The King means Syaoran no harm. His assignment was based purely on strategy. You can deal a good amount of destruction. That is something we would need, if Ishihebi were to move toward our ambush. It is better used there, rather than in the initial rescue."

"Fay," Kurogane said reluctantly, "they're right about this. Besides, that hourglass needs to be turned, and if something should happen while we're in the thick of things, it would activate before we're ready."

Fay sighed heavily, looking tearful again; he had been brittle, ever since Watanuki. "Fine. Fine." He waved, looking down. "Fine."
Kero floated into the tent without any attempt at stealth. Kurogane watched with his heart in his throat, certain that someone would see the guardian even in the darkness, but miraculously, no one noticed. He still felt like he was on the verge of dying when it was finally over, and he was not sure what was going on in the tent—if the guardian would just float around uselessly as it had since they joined the Abaron troops, or if it would actually do something to help Syaoran.

Fuma was the one joining him; the brothers correctly assessed that his propensity to crack jokes, particularly when things got tense, would not be good for Fay's already fragile hold on his temper. Granted, Fuma was not in a jesting mood; he actually seemed more ready to go than even Kurogane, who had come to the point where he was very wary of failure. Many things could go wrong. Syaoran might not be in that tent after all. Or, since Kero had gone to the tent which meant he was probably there, he could be gravely hurt. Gravely ill. And a scuffle, if it happened, could hurt Syaoran in the crossfire, or Ishihebi could slip past Yukito, or—

The tent opened. A man pushed the stumbling Syaoran out. The boy's hands and feet were both chained together; his ankles were hobbled so that he could barely walk at all. He tripped and fell on his hands and knees. The man—a soldier, lifted him up by the back of his shirt. Behind him came three other men, trailing behind and then circling around to flank.

Fuma grabbed Kurogane by the upper arm, but Kurogane was still, watching carefully. Syaoran's golden eyes flickered fearfully around him as he was dragged into the open.

There was a long pole, sticking innocuously out of the ground. Kurogane had not even seen it until the men forced Syaoran's arms forward. One removed the chain from one wrist and then looped it around the pole to lock back to the same wrist. The pole was too high for Syaoran to free himself, despite the open end at the top.

The pole glowed. Syaoran glowed with it, a pale green of a new leaf. A pulse of that same aura spread across the camp.

"Bastards," Fuma swore. "They're using him to power a ward."

Kurogane's stomach clenched. He saw the boy collapse before starting to thrash, yanking his chains desperately against the pole. He could hear a soft wail. They were hurting Syaoran.

"How do we get past that ward?"

"He's the one powering the ward," said Fuma. "Those that share his blood should be able to bypass. You can go through, I think, even if we can't." He swore. "You wouldn't be able to remove him from that pole in a hurry, and not by yourself. Where's that stupid guardian?"

"He can't just waltz to the boy," Nakuru pointed out.

"You're a crack shot, aren't you?"

"You mean am I fast?"

Fuma did not wait for an affirmative. "If Kurogane can coat some of the arrows…you can pick them off in his way. Still leaves us the issue of the chain—"

"Ginryu can handle the chain," Kurogane growled.
"Alright, so I guess that doesn't leave us the issue of the chain," Fuma looked at Kurogane dubiously. "Are you sure? Silver dragon or not—"

"I'll throw him over the pole if I have to," Kurogane snapped impatiently, already grabbing the dagger from Nakuru's boot, ignoring her sharp "Hey!" He undid his wristguard to bare more skin, as he did not want to cut his palm; it would not give enough blood unless he went deep enough to affect his ability to hold things. "You got something for me to drop the blood on?"

"Don't go dunking the arrows into the blood, he's not a bag of it," Fuma warned Nakuru.

One of the other ninjas produced a vial; it was initially used to store oil to create flaming arrows. Kurogane tried to squeeze as much blood out as possible, knowing that other archers might find this useful. A few warriors also suggested getting a drop or so on their swords. Kurogane allowed them to decide.

He was going in.

Syaoran had stopped moving by the time they finished preparing.

"Don't rush," Fuma warned, grabbing Kurogane by the elbow. "You're supposed to be a ninja; act like one. Don't waste time comforting him; you can do that when you get him out of there."

"I know," Kurogane threw Fuma off. "I'm not an amateur!"

He was not an amateur, and neither was Nakuru.

They actually worked together very well, and part of Kurogane felt some regret that Nakuru served Abaron and not Shirasaki, before remembering that he did not serve Shirasaki anymore either. Kurogane made some silent kills, but Nakuru's arrows were sharp and true. They went past the wards easily, lodging themselves unerringly to pick off those who might raise an alarm. If she had a few thousand arrows, Kurogane knew, she could easily take down the entire legion. As it was, she only had a quiver, holding at most three dozen, plus Kurogane only afforded so much blood. He knew she had to be judicious, and most of the work still relied on him.

The other ninjas were waiting for him to get to Syaoran and disable the wards. It was a long, winding course to reach the boy; the pole was, naturally, at the center of the camp. Fuma was delusional if he thought Kurogane was capable of comforting the child; he was covered in blood, and bits of flesh were stuck in the seams of his armor. But the boy did not even seem to be awake. His body kept glowing, but he had long since stilled, a small, pathetic huddled figure on the ground. The glow, Kurogane knew, meant the child was still alive, still had magic to draw on, even if it was sapping everything else.

He paused when he was almost there. He looked at his surroundings. Once he freed Syaoran, either by cutting the chains or otherwise disengaging the boy from the pole, the camp might know. He would have to find a good hiding place, so that he could buy the others some time to create confusion before escaping.

He thought he might have picked out a good spot, but then the Emperor of Ishihebi appeared, Tomoyo at his side. The latter saw Syaoran and instantly veered toward him, causing her husband to gnash his teeth.

"Seriously, what use is this child?" he complained, as Tomoyo approached Syaoran's curled form. "He's so delicate. Can't do this, can't do that. This would defile him, that would erase his abilities…"
"We want him to fulfill the prophecy, do we not?" Tomoyo replied easily. "He's no use if we ruin him beforehand."

The Emperor made a noise of disgust.

"I did not make the rules," Tomoyo pointed out. "He is the way he is, and he's all we have. Child, open your eyes."

Syaoran did not appear to obey.

"Your Majesty—"

"No," the Emperor snapped. "We're making him pay his due. He's not going to lie around, being useless. We still have some distance to go before we reach Shirasaki; he can recover then. Tonight, I want him here until morning when we leave. I want to see what this little wretch can do."

"You would jeopardize your own empire for the sake of curiosity?"

"Don't try me, Tomoyo. Now come. I've had enough of him."

Tomoyo rose, clearly reluctant. She left Syaoran where he was and joined the Emperor's side.

"I hate all these delays," the Emperor hissed, and the two moved away.

Kurogane watched Tomoyo retreat. Of course she was as much a victim as any of them, for all appearances to the contrary. Tomoyo was clever and knew how to play the game. He did not want to think about all the choices she must have dismissed. She might have even saved Kurogane's life, even though she was the one who drugged him. Though she might have been protecting Syaoran for political motives, which Kurogane would always find irritating, part of him would always remember that young princess who saved him from the wreckage of Suwa. She had a soft spot for Syaoran. She might be protecting him for that reason too.

In any case, part of him felt relief that someone in the camp was actually doing something to defend the little one, at least until he got here. Now to get Syaoran out…

He had to wait for what felt like an eternity, for then the patrols circled around the grounds and there was no way to get to the boy without being seen. Everyone just walked past him, uncaring. No one even stopped to feed Syaoran some water, or give him a blanket. Why was this pole even outside? They could have easily erected a tent over it. The night was cold, and Syaoran was not wearing much; his arms and feet were bare. Syaoran got sick easily enough as it was. *First thing to do is to get him to a healer…surely Yukito would allow that. They kept insisting they were on the same side. And if not, maybe he could get Fuma and Seishirou to whisk him away again. This time, Kurogane and Fay would go with them."

When the opportunity came, he raced forward and dove for the boy. He summoned Ginryu before he even reached him. The chains were thick, so he pushed Syaoran with his foot to extend them. With all of his strength, he swung Ginryu down.

A huge shockwave sent him flying back. When he recovered his senses, he saw Tomoyo emerging from behind the line of tents. Other soldiers of Ishihebi were heading for him. Syaoran was shivering and trying to get to his knees; the chain was no longer looped around the pole, and his body was no longer glowing, but he was as weak as a newborn kitten.

Kurogane's own body felt detached from his head. Somehow, he managed to get himself upright, and despite feeling like his limbs no longer belonged to him, managed to reach Syaoran through
sheer strength of will. Touching Syaoran's skin somehow brought him back to himself, and he tugged the boy to him, his body rejoicing in the sensation of holding his child again. But the act of gathering the boy took too much time, and he raised his head to see a soldier heaving a sword above his head, ready to strike.

A wet noise froze the soldier—or maybe the man froze because of what caused the wet noise. He collapsed, the sword clattering, and an arrow through his throat.

Nakuru, and perhaps the other archers. Kurogane heaved himself to his feet. Syaoran's long limbs tangled around him, and the chains nearly tripped him, but the boy was light and he was otherwise easy to carry. Kurogane dove for the spot he had picked out earlier as more arrows flew through the ward—no, the ward was down. There were a lot of arrows flying now.

He hunkered down as people shouted alarms, rousing the whole camp. In the darkness, the shadows covered them, and he allowed himself to stay put. One's instinct in these situations is to keep moving, but often that would only draw attention, as everyone expect a target to move. By planting himself in a good spot, he could hide until everyone's guard was down before making his escape.

In the meantime, he could check over Syaoran.

"Lord Kurogane…"

The boy began trembling violently in his arms. Kurogane hushed him, smoothing his hands over the boy's bare arms. They were ice cold.

"Are you alright?" he whispered.

Syaoran nodded, but whimpered, "I'm sorry…"

"Hush, son. You have nothing to be sorry for. I got you."

He reached down to warm the boy's feet. His fingers felt deep welts, and Syaoran hissed and cringed.

From the distance, Kurogane had not seen what happened to his feet. Had not thought much about why they were even bare.

"Sorry, sorry…" he did not have his cloak, as that could get cumbersome on stealth missions. He wished he had it though. "It's alright."

Syaoran tucked his head into Kurogane. The ninja felt the boy's body loosen. He had given in to his exhaustion.

When Kurogane looked up, he noticed he had an opening to move from the spot to a better hideout. Gathering the boy again, he went for it. As he did, he saw Tomoyo's eyes land on him. He crouched down, holding Syaoran tightly, and waited. Whose side was she on?

But a few minutes passed. No other soldiers came for him. She had definitely seen him; there was mistaking it. She was covering for him.

He waited for a moment, before moving again, slowly making his way toward the edge of the camp. Halfway there, Nakuru dropped from above, landing next to him. Kurogane nearly drew his sword on her.

"Come on," she tilted her head. "This way. Hurry."
"They won't cause permanent damage," said the healer, "but they would have been agony to walk on. Or even when he isn't putting weight on them."

Fay was hugging Syaoran and pressing his lips to every inch of the boy's face. If Syaoran felt disturbed by this, he did not show it; in fact, he was clinging to Fay with the same fervor. The healer finished putting the salves on the welts on the boy's soles, and took a bandage to wrap them up so they would not smear everywhere. Yukito and Touya watched, looking solemn.

Seishirou reached down to wrap a hand around the boy's thin ankle. Fuma was undoing the cuff around one of Syaoran's wrists.

"How did they even find cuffs this small?" he complained. "This thing is tiny!"

Kurogane looked at Yukito and Touya. "He can't do this."

The pair did not reply.

Fay bent over Syaoran. "No more," the mage moaned. "No more. It's enough. Enough. No more."

Syaoran's arms tightened around Fay's neck as Fuma finally released one of the cuffs. His other wrist was out of reach.

"We need to give him time," Seishirou said, hand still around the ankle.

"Not, not just time," Kurogane clenched his teeth. "He can't do this."

I can't do this.

Touya and Yukito were silent. Fuma nudged Fay a little. "I need to get to his other cuff."

Fay slowly pulled back a little, so that Syaoran could get the other arm free. The mage rested his chin over the boy's forehead and let out a sigh. Syaoran opened his eyes and watched Fuma worked.

After the cuff clicked free, Fuma leaned forward, rubbing Syaoran's wrist to massage circulation back. He noted Syaoran watching him and smiled.

"Doing alright, little man?"

Syaoran gave him a tentative smile. He then closed his eyes and turned his face into Fay's neck. He was still exhausted.

Seishirou folded his arms. "Let's give them some privacy." When Yukito and Touya looked at him, he added, "They're not going anywhere you can't follow. Not without us."

Syaoran was exhausted, and pressed tightly against Fay, who was almost as drained as his son. Kurogane pulled a mat next to theirs and looped his arm around Syaoran's thin torso. He closed his eyes, intending only to rest them for a few seconds, but when he opened them again, someone had covered them with several blankets. Syaoran was sleeping so deeply he was almost snoring, and he did not rouse even the slightest when Kurogane moved his arm. He pressed his body close to feel the heat of the boy against him, alive and real.

He was safe, for now. Seishirou and Fuma earned them enough respite that he could enjoy it, for the moment. He ran his fingers through the boy's hair and closed his eyes again.
When he woke, it was because Syaoran was starting to thrash a little.

"Easy," Fay was saying, as Syaoran jabbed Kurogane's sternum with his sharp elbows. "You're safe."

Syaoran was silent and still for a few breathless seconds. "Lord Fay."

"Just Fay," said the mage, kissing the boy on the forehead. "We got you out of there."

Syaoran turned his head. "Lord Kurogane?"

"Just Kurogane," Kurogane whispered.

The boy released a sigh of profound relief.

"What did they do to you?" Fay asked quietly.

Syaoran did not reply at first, but Kurogane refused to allow him to withdraw into his thoughts; he used to do that, Tsubasa, and Kurogane could not bear it if something had happened to the child and Syaoran had to bear it alone. After a little prodding, Syaoran revealed that aside from being roughened up a bit, kept hobbled, and otherwise confined, they really had not hurt him very much. He had just been frightened for Kurogane and Fay. Fortunately, Nakuru was right: the Emperor did not touch the boy, though it was not for lack of interest. Syaoran, of course, did not understand what Kurogane was asking, but he managed to reveal the answer: "The Empress told him to leave me alone. She said if he…defiled me, it wouldn't work."

Tomoyo, Syaoran revealed, was also the reason his feet were sliced into ribbons.

"I would have made it out," the boy curled into Fay, "but she was the one who saw me. I didn't think I had to be as careful around her. She told the Emperor and he said they had to hobble me more effectively."

He was more eager to talk about the world Seishirou and Fuma brought him to.

"Their buildings were so tall!" Syaoran gestured, "and they can ride in these cars, they're like carriages, but they can fly! I got better pretty quickly, after they pumped something into my blood, I don't know what it was but it made me feel better than I can ever remember feeling. Fuma took me around; they had these long 'rollercoasters' in an 'amusement park', and this giant menagerie except everyone can visit."

"Would you like to go back?" Fay asked, grinning.

"I don't know," Syaoran said thoughtfully, and then sounded even more uncertain, "it's…different. I don't understand what anyone was saying, and…couldn't read anything either. Fuma and Seishirou had to translate everything for me. They said I could learn but…everyone there is so smart, and I'd be even more behind over there than I am here."

Fay ran his fingers through Syaoran's hair. "I wouldn't let that be the deciding factor. You'd catch up."

"I don't know…" Syaoran worried his lip. "It's not Nihon."

Kurogane resisted the urge to grunt in amusement.

"This man named Watanuki visited us," Syaoran went on. "He said he wanted to take me to this
place called Clow...to live with him and his wife."

"...He has a wife now?" Kurogane raised his eyebrows. Ten years was a long time, but Kurogane honestly never imagined Watanuki would fall for anyone after Ichihara.

"He mentioned having a wife..."

"Who was his wife? Did he mention that?"

"...No. He said he knew me once, though, and knew the two of you. He said...he said we were really close. Is that true?"

Kurogane was not sure he would qualify Syaoran and Watanuki as 'close', though their shared history certainly made them more intimate than mere acquaintances. Back in the day, Syaoran and Watanuki would often have private conversations through the Mokonas. What they talked about, Fay and Kurogane never probed, and now it seemed like only Watanuki would know.

"I think you two certainly understood each other more than anyone else at the time," Fay remarked. "What else did he tell you?"

"Not much," Syaoran admitted. "He seemed really sad when I said I didn't remember him. I told him I didn't remember you two either. Or this Sakura." He folded his arms. "She's still alive, isn't she? Except in another world? That's so strange."

Kurogane mused over how to explain to the boy that he and Watanuki were supposed to be the same person, without actually being the same person. It was confusing, even for him and Fay. Add to the fact that the princess was also ten years older than this fourteen-year-old boy...too convoluted. Fay seemed to have come to the same conclusion, because he did not broach the subject either.

"So you learned how to travel between worlds by watching Watanuki?" Fay asked, and then gave Syaoran a glare. "That is incredibly dangerous and reckless of you, Syaoran."

"It was easy!" Syaoran declared. "I just had to figure out where I was going, but it's so strange that everyone makes a huge deal out of it. I heard Fuma mention that Seishirou had to give up one of his eyes in order to gain the power to walk through worlds. That is so strange! I mean, if I can do it then surely anyone else can? It was even easier than levitating feathers. The hardest part was figuring out which direction to go. I had to open several doorways before I figured out the right one."

Fay and Kurogane were silent for a full ten heartbeats.

"It was easy, hm?" Fay murmured in a deliberately casual tone.

Syaoran nodded. He was getting sleepy. "I can do it right now." He then raised his arms before either of them could stop him—they were not expecting him to be able to perform this while lying flat on his back—and parted them like he was spreading apart a curtain.

Right on top of them, as if a door were lying horizontally, a portal opened like a window. They saw a rainbow against a partly cloudy sky. A light rain sprinkled over Syaoran, who spewed as it got into his nose and mouth. He quickly shut the portal.

"Aw!" he exclaimed, giggling as he wiped at his blankets. "I got us all wet! I guess because I opened one from below. Good thing it didn't open to the bottom of the ocean."
Neither of them reacted for a full minute. Sensing something was wrong, Syaoran's cheer faded. Fay slowly looked at Kurogane, who stared back.

"I'm sorry," Syaoran whispered, sounding scared. "I...I didn't mean to do anything wrong."

Neither man even acknowledged him. They were both thinking the same thing.

"Kurogane..." Fay began.

"You'll have to go with him," Kurogane replied.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"You really expect me to abandon the Prin—the Empress at a time like this?"

"Kurogane," Fay began trembling—nerves, Kurogane knew. He could feel the mage pull his power together. "He needs his fa—he needs you."

"He has one," Kurogane pointed out.

"What—" Syaoran began, but Fay abruptly covered his mouth. The blonde sat up.

"Kurogane, please—"

"Fay, take him and go already—"

"You're making me choose again—"

"I can't, alright?" Kurogane almost shouted. "This is what I am. This is what I have become—I am here today because of her, and I'm not leaving her all alone with that bleeding... predator—"

"Kurogane we don't have much time and I can't do this without you—I can't—I couldn't the first time and I can't bear it the second time—"

The tent flap opened. They had run out of time.

Touya waded in, followed by Nakuru. Fay shot to his feet in a flash. Syaoran tumbled into Kurogane, who gathered him, covering him halfway.

The young brunette paused, taking stock.

"Lord Fay," said Touya, "don't be stupid."

"I should say the same of you," Fay replied, somehow sounding both calm and unhinged. "Do you really believe you can best me?"

"He doesn't belong to you."

"He doesn't belong to you either."

Seishirou slowly entered as Touya and Fay glared at each other.

"Everyone, let's just calm down," he said in a tone that sounded too measured to be truly calm.
"We're all allies here."

"Stay out of it," Fay snapped without looking at him.

"Lord Fay," said Touya again.

"I watched that boy die once," the blonde whispered. "I've lived with his absence for ten years, because once upon a time, no one around him placed him first. Not even me. I won't make that mistake again."

"Fay," Seishirou said softly, "we're not going to let anything happen to Syaoran."

"I certainly won't," Fay retorted.

Nakuru looked at Kurogane, brows furrowed. She had no idea what was going.

Syaoran had no idea either. He turned his head to ask Kurogane, who cradled him close so he could not talk.

"Please," Touya raised his hands placatingly, "let's just...let's just talk. We won't touch the boy right now. Let's just talk."

"There's nothing to say," said Fay.

"He was born for this," Seishirou reminded him. "Even Watanuki could not spare him. What do you think would be the price of keeping him from his destiny? Do you really think it would be good for him?"

"And the price of fulfilling his destiny?" Fay looked at him, eyes hard. "What is that, exactly? He doesn't even have a tenth of the physical stamina the last one had, and the last one died of illness. You expect this child to end a war that millions of full-grown men and women have failed to stop. And you expect me to watch."

"He doesn't have to die. We'll be right behind him."

"Yes, behind him," Fay spat, "like cowards that you are. He's a fourteen year old boy and you will push him ahead to face monsters."

"Do you really think he would be free of that, elsewhere?" Touya pointed out. "Other worlds have their own evils. Some hide it better than others, but you can't protect him from everything."

"I couldn't protect him from anything!" Fay screamed. "Not from his bravery, not from his compassion, not from the scum of the realms that take advantage of the most innocent, the most kind! I watched him suffer in silence and was satisfied with it—so long as he did not weep, we were all absolved of his pain, and then he died and I'll never know all the tears that bled from his heart but were never shed from his eyes. The horrors in his mind that he could never give voice—there was no ear to listen until too late. All the secrets, what little had given him joy. That Syaoran is gone, gone, and never coming back, but in the autumn of last year—a miracle: there he was, a new beginning, but since then, struggle, struggle, and fear, fear, people chasing him, and watching him was like watching a salmon struggle upstream, while predators aim at him from left and right; you people spew garbage about how he's a 'good boy' and they were 'on his side' but none of you know what his absence means! None of you understand how hard it was to have had him in the first place! You ingrates!" Sparks flashed at his fingertips, and a huge wave of magic swelled and collected. "None of you care!"
"Fay!" Kurogane called out, because if the mage unleashed his full power—as he clearly was going
to do, he was going to annihilate the whole area, including himself and Syaoran. Nakuru stepped in
front of Touya, who was summoning a shield—not that his shield would do anything against
whatever Fay threw at them. Seishirou was raising his hand to try to stop Fay as well, face troubled,
but Fay was not even looking at him.

But it was Syaoran who checked the mage. Turning his face into Kurogane's chest, the boy
screamed, a wordless sound emanating from pure terror. Reflexively, Fay whirled around to make
sure Syaoran was unhurt. Seishirou used that moment to strike at the mage's back.

Fay went down on one knee at the blow. It was far from enough to incapacitate him, but when he
reared back to return the favor, Kurogane shouted, "You'll hurt Syaoran!"

Syaoran tried to lunge to his feet, but they were still hurt and he was still weak. Kurogane restrained
him easily.

"Lord Fay!" he cried out.

"Gods, everyone, stop this right now!" Fuma stalked past everyone, heading straight for Kurogane
and Syaoran. Fay growled—Kurogane had never heard such a sound from him before, but Fuma
simply knelt down to check over the boy. Syaoran blinked rapidly as Fuma examined him.

Seishirou had an arm around Fay's neck to subdue him, but he was scolding Touya. "Honestly,
you've seen how he was before. You should have let me come ahead."

"You weren't fast enough."

"He could have annihilated the whole camp. Syaoran can't go anywhere—why do you think he
hadn't escaped before? Ishihebi bound him to Nihon already. He can open doors but he can't use
them."

What? Kurogane looked at Syaoran as Fuma stepped back. Fay let out a guttural cry as he strained
away from Seishirou, magic consolidating at his fingertips.

"Stop!" Seishirou tightened his hold. "No one is hurting your son, but if you lose control, you might.
You know we're on your side! Keep it together!"

"He's been losing it all this time," Fuma warned. "Fay, listen to me, you need to take a deep breath
and calm down—"

Fay suddenly wilted. Seishirou slowly laid him down. Behind them, Touya withdrew his nusa, the
paper strips sticking to strands of Fay's hair.

"He had reached his limit, Your Majesty," he announced.

Kurogane turned and realized that the king had walked in, followed by several others, including foot
soldiers and officials.

Never mind Fay, Kurogane was reaching his limit. Syaoran was stiff against him, thin body
shivering with tremors. Fay was limp, flat on the floor. Touya had knocked him out with some kind
of spell.

He's powerful, Kurogane realized. More so than they had thought. Perhaps the nusa also enhanced
his magic, but Fay would not have gone down with a minor spell.
The king walked over, glancing down at Fay, before looking at Syaoran, Kurogane, and then Touya.

"Are you alright?"

Touya bowed. "I am unhurt, Your Majesty."

King Yukito studied him, as if to confirm, before turning to regard Fay again. Kurogane's fingers itched to summon Ginryu; he did not like the contemplative look on the king's face.

"Y-Yukitoni," Syaoran stuttered, voice small and frightened. No one had told him yet that Yukito had become king.

Yukito glanced up at him while the others around him tensed.

"Separate them," he ordered.

They pulled Kurogane apart from Syaoran. Kurogane struggled, but Nakuru aimed a knife at his throat, and he was no good to the boy if he was dead.

"Easy," said Touya.

Kurogane glared at Seishirou. "We trusted you, you bastard—"

"Watanuki told us more than he managed to convey to you," said Seishirou. "Please, Black Steel. Calm down, and they will let you go. Syaoran is safe for the time being, and we are a long ways away from Shirasaki."

_I've killed him!_ Kurogane thought hysterically, eyes searching for Syaoran, but he could not see him past all the bodies holding him down, even though he had stopped struggling. _I've killed him as Fay had killed him—I chose Tomoyo over him oh gods oh gods—if only he could go back!

Touya leaned past Nakuru and placed a hand on Kurogane's forehead. A wave of calm swam through him, so potent that he went limp. Seishirou took his place as Touya collected Syaoran. Though long-limbed, the teen was light, and the young man carried him easily.

"No," Syaoran protested, "Wait—"

"Hush!"

"Listen," said the hunter, "he needs to stay here. You know that if we can take him away, we'd do so in a heartbeat—we have, but he came back on his own and he did so in a loud way. Do you understand? He's no safer anywhere else."

_No. No no no._ He should have gone with Syaoran, that time in the snow...he should have—

"Kurogane, Ishihebi made sure of it. He had been captured, and the Emperor bound him to this place. You can't force this, Kurogane."

_No. No. No. No._ He should have gone with Syaoran, that time in the snow...he should have—

"This isn't Tsubasa anymore, this is Syaoran of Nihon, and Nihon is where he belongs."

"He's exhausted too," said Fuma. "Let's knock him out."

"No—"
The air was dry and warm. Too warm.

Kurogane opened his eyes.

The ceiling was tall above him, and sunlight. Through the colorful curtains, the sunlight filtered through. There were paintings and mosaics on the walls. The bed was soft under him. Fay was beside him, breathing slowly and body sleep-warm, but too deeply asleep to react to Kurogane's movements.

I'm dreaming. This was Clow. Had they run into another Ice demon? I need to wake up!

He sat up just as the door slid open. He half-expected Syaoran to be poking his head in, muttering some nonsense about how Kurogane had been sick, but it was Fuma.

"Oh go figure," the bounty hunter complained. "I step out for five seconds and you choose that time to wake up."

Abruptly, Kurogane realized that this was not a dream. It was far worse. "You took us away from Nihon."

Fuma sighed, stepping in fully. "You were agitating people that kid's safety depends on. They were worried you two would cause trouble."

"Where is my son?"

"He's safe. They're not doing anything to him."

Kurogane growled, on his feet before he even realized. "If anything happens to him, hunter, you'll plead for death."

"Nothing will happen to him! You think I care about Nihon? Good grief," Fuma grimaced. "My brother is currently staying with him, making sure they all behave themselves. But you two need a time-out. If you can't approach the situation with a rational mind, you'll be useless to Syaoran."

Fay still had not roused, even though neither man bothered to keep the conversation quiet. Kurogane closed his eyes, recalling how they had torn Syaoran away from him. He could still feel the press of Syaoran's shoulder blade against his sternum, the feel of the teen's awkward elbows. It felt like he had just held that boy in his arms for a moment when they were taken apart again.

"What exactly is your plan?" he demanded, wanting again to summon Ginryu. "Keep me and Fay here in Clow until the whole situation blows over?"

"Just until you two can be of actual use to your son," Fuma replied, folding his arms. "Believe it or not, Syaoran is my priority in this situation. I can't care less about the state of Nihon; I've seen plenty of warring states and your world is just one of many. Whether it goes on forever or stops tomorrow makes no difference to me. But you two are lashing out, irritable and paranoid, and all the while you really don't have anything to use to protect him the way your instincts have been screaming at you to do. You've both been winding up. Ideally, we'd give all three of you some time alone, but the king and his priest doesn't want that, for obvious reasons, so this is the next best option."

Kurogane laughed bitterly. I should cut your head off right now. "How exactly is this the next best option? You bring me to the place where Tsubasa was buried. Foreshadowing, perhaps?"

"Her Highness, the Princess," came the announcement from outside.
Kurogane blanched.

Fuma stepped to the side as Sakura entered, a train of handmaidens after her. She had grown taller, and her auburn hair was long, pulled into a bun underneath her headdress. She looked much more mature than Kurogane's memories of her; her facial bones had filled out while much of the childish fat had receded. She wore a gown of deep wine-red, stitched simply and elegantly.

She was beautiful.

"Your Highness," Fuma inclined his head, but Sakura noticed Kurogane and instantly came to him.

The last time he held the princess was after the funeral, when he and Fay departed for Nihon, never to look back. There was more of her to hold now, and hugging her was strange in both how alien and familiar it was. She said nothing and he said nothing. They were just...together, for a good long while. When she pulled back, she looked as if she wanted to speak, but instead she wordlessly caressed Kurogane's cheek, her eyes taking in every feature of his face.

At length, she stepped away. "I had some food brought for us. Fay would likely sleep for a while yet, but we can eat here so that he won't be alone."

Kurogane felt frozen and numb. This was another child he had loved, as much as he was able. Another child he had ultimately abandoned, though it seemed she was doing well. There were blooms of health on her cheeks, and something about the light in her green eyes—not happiness, just...spirit.

"Maini," she said to one of the handmaidens, "lay out the dishes for our guests, please. And do send word to that husband of mine; I expect he would want to join."

_Husband?_

"I hear that you two have had an exhausting few weeks," she said to him. "I hope that your stay here will offer some rest and recuperation."

_Not likely._ Kurogane was not sure how to convey that, though. Did she know that there was another Syaoran? That it was _her_ Syaoran?

_Husband?_

"I'm skipping this one," Fuma announced. "If you're here, I don't need to be here."

"Thank you, Fuma," Sakura smiled graciously. "You are certainly invited to join us, but I understand if you wish to be elsewhere."

He saluted her cheekily, before striding out of the room, relief set in every joint, as if he could not wait to leave. The handmaidens laid out a table, displaying appetizers on small dishes.

"Come," Sakura came and took Kurogane by the elbow. "Sit here. It's going to be alright."

Something about her gestures now reminded Kurogane of his own mother, and he was lulled by the gentleness, still disoriented, he thought, by the sight of her, his new surroundings, this utterly new situation they were in. He found himself seated at the table, and Sakura put some food on his plate for him to try. The taste was sharp, but some part of his brain was still too numb to appreciate it. He chewed automatically without being entirely conscious of doing so.

"His Highness, the Prince of April!"
Prince of April? This must be Sakura's husband—

"There's no need to follow me, you may go," said Watanuki as he stepped through. He turned, adjusting his glasses, and strode over to the table without hesitation.

Kurogane's fingers loosened. He heard a clatter on the plate.

"Kimihiro," said Sakura, rising.

"Sakura," Watanuki gave her a look of tenderness, and then hurried over to Kurogane's side as black spots bloomed in his vision. "Head down. That's right. You're alright."

"We've been married for…two years now," Sakura explained. "He had moved the shop here, which is why Fay had been struggling to reach him. Fay was trying to contact him through the Tokyo base."

Kurogane rubbed the back of his head. It made sense, he decided. Watanuki existed as a replacement for Syaoran, so of course he could also replace Syaoran's eventual destiny. He did not truly expect the princess to mourn the boy indefinitely. Ten years was a long time, and many things could happen. Sakura had the right to move on. Tsubasa would have wished it; he had not saved her life to chain her to him beyond the grave.

It still seemed wrong, though. Watanuki was nothing like Syaoran.

Well.

He was a little like Syaoran.

"It just kind of happened," Sakura went on. "At first, we really only sought each other's company because……but as time went on I came to really enjoy his company, and he would visit too. He didn't need to stay in the shop; he just didn't want to go anywhere, but he started liking Clow. Liking to visit. We spent a lot of time talking. And then he decided to move here permanently. That was about…six years ago? And it just kept going, I guess. My brother finds him very unnerving, which I view as a good thing."

Watanuki huffed.

"We didn't think we would get married though," Sakura admitted. "Just…Father started talking about suitors, and I realized I was expected to marry anyway. And people were talking, saying we were in love, and…I were. Syaoran had been gone for so long. We've both lost people who were dear to us, and I thought, I wasn't dishonoring Syaoran's memory. Kimihiro had been important to him too. He always said he and Kimihiro were the same, and Kimihiro was…something Syaoran had created, in a way."

"You don't have to justify yourselves," Kurogane told her. "It's not my place to judge. I'm happy for you, really. I was…just…"

Kind of humiliating, how he nearly passed out. Only a year ago, Kurogane would never have done that.

"Surprised."

"You were exhausted," said Watanuki. "You and Fay had been on your last vestiges for a while. Looking after Syaoran is never easy, in any lifetime. For what it's worth, I'm glad Fuma brought you
"I am going back though," Kurogane looked at him.

"I can't imagine how I'd try to keep you," Watanuki admitted. "But you might as well use this opportunity to refuel. You had been drugged, comatose, and then on the road in a desperate chase. Neither of you had slept properly for weeks. Fay nearly blew his own son up, from what I heard, and you look like death had run you over. Nihon wouldn't be able to provide you with the nourishment and safety Clow can."

Kurogane blinked desolately. "Nihon wouldn't be able to provide Syaoran either."

"Syaoran is in good hands," Watanuki assured him. "After talking to you, I looked into this version of Syaoran in the original timeline. He was actually always somewhat disappointing on the physical front, mainly because you and your father were so impossibly strong. He was reasonably healthy, but he wasn't the most robust; he had inherited your mother's weak lungs and was prone to respiratory infections. He was highly intelligent and booksmart, and inherited the magic of Clow Reed passed down through his mother. He and Touya of Nihon had the most amiable friendship of any between those two, and the thing is, Touya knows. He has that gift of prophecy. He had actually been the one, originally, to introduce Touya to Yukito. In that timeline, Syaoran became Emperor of Nihon, uniting the warring kingdoms, but before then he was simply your son, and as a noble of Suwa would go gallivanting off to Avalon and Shirasaki, Red Lotus, Chibi, Honkon. Yukito was his constant companion, so Touya actually met Yukito through Syaoran. To some extent, both Touya and Yukito still think of Syaoran as their lord Emperor. It pains them more than you know to see him frightened and sick."

Kurogane could not help but feel a little comforted by this. "So they'll take good care of him."

"They'll take very good care of him," said Watanuki. "Remember, Seishirou is with them too. He is also fond of the boy."


Tsubasa had left many loved ones to care for his reincarnation.

A headache abruptly bloomed behind his eyes. It was as if the stress of the last few weeks had been the only thing keeping it at bay, and now that Kurogane felt some relief, it was roaring to fill the void.

"Actually Yukito had a crush on Syaoran the first time around," Watanuki reflected idly.

Past the dull, throbbing pain, Kurogane almost did not hear this. "…What?"

Sakura grinned. "Apparently he had a crush on the young lord of Suwa, but Syaoran was oblivious, and Yukito, of course, was shy. He actually had an antagonistic relationship with my brother at first because he thought my brother would steal Syaoran away."

"…What?"

"I know, right?" Watanuki chuckled. "How is it that the same people can be so different? Of course, Touya only had eyes for Yukito. He thought Yukito quite charming when he tries to be insulting."

"Mostly because even when he's trying to be insulting, he feels too bad about it and winds up making the other feel better." The princess rolled her eyes. "It's why our Yukito is a priest. More
Yukito and Syoran? "But...Syaoran is seven years younger than Yukito."

"You have an attractive son."

"...What?" This was far stranger than the idea of Watanuki and Sakura together. "But..."

He thought of Syoran's impressive blush, Yukito's annoyed glances at Touya, and all of the sudden that breakfast became far more amusing than it was even then. A chuckle burst out of him, and he ducked his head to contain his mirth. Yukito and Syoran? And then Syoran and Touya? It was so ridiculous that he could not restrain himself. He succumbed to laughter. So Yukito had liked Syoran? And then met Touya? And now Syoran liked Touya, and Touya knows at least some of this, remembers, remembers...he'll treat him well then...

His laughter morphed into sobs as he gasped, and it was as if the faucet suddenly turned on and he was weeping, weeping wretchedly. Sakura pulled him close, and when did she get big enough that her hug felt like that from his mother? Watanuki came forward and took Kurogane's hands. Kurogane bit his lip until it bled.

"I can't," he whispered, shaking his head. "I can't. I can't go through this again. The last ten years...last ten years was a nightmare. Fay...and knowing...we couldn't move past it and now he's here and it's a miracle but everything is taking him away—" and he keened, gasping, "I don't want to lose him again, I can't lose him again, Fay, Fay can't lose him again, we only just got him and we already missed the first fourteen years of his life and now all this! All this!" He took a deep breath and his sobs went away as quickly as they came, though the tears remained. "I just...I just...I don't know what to do...I want to give him the world, but I have nothing, nothing is adequate, nothing...not Ginryu, not Tomoyo..."

"He will have the world," Watanuki said softly, eyes compassionate. "Rest, for now. We will reunite you with your son soon. There will be plenty to do then, so rest, now, while you still can."
Clow

Chapter Notes

It's all done for a reason! I promise!

There were a number of things that Seishirou and Fuma were supposed to tell Kurogane and Fay, but they never got to it at the time.

"Stopping Kuroiyama," Watanuki explained, "is different from stopping the war in Nihon, though you need to accomplish the former to do the latter. There needs to be a clear victor in Nihon, similar to the original timeline when Suwa united all the islands. You can choose to name Syaoran as the new Emperor, as he originally was meant to be, or someone else can be an Emperor, but there has to be an Emperor in place."

"Syaoran needs to name the Emperor," Sakura clarified, "to be responsible for Nihon's reconstruction. It has to be his decision, for he was the true Emperor, and the original position should fall to him."

"There are problems with either choice. If Syaoran names himself the new Emperor, his life is guaranteed in Shirasaki, but afterwards it is not. Between his own strength and the rebellion of everyone on Nihon, he could be Emperor for a day. Maybe a few. If he names someone else as Emperor, it's not certain that he would die, but his life is not guaranteed in Shirasaki. You can't try to achieve both by naming him Emperor and then abdicating the throne; the claim has to be done with a sacred vow, before all of the spirits, including the Fire Demon King. To swear into the throne of the Emperor only to give it up would cause the spirits to revolt and damn him to a fate far worse than mere death. If he commits to being an Emperor, he will only stop on his last breath. Syaoran, as I've seen him, cannot handle the rigors of imperial reign. If I were you, I'd name someone else, someone who would ensure Syaoran's survival and prosperity."

Fay was resting his head on his hands and his elbows on the table. He was very subdued when he woke, and looked a little like he did before Kurogane found Syaoran trying to get into the treasury. He took the news of Watanuki and Sakura's marriage with far more grace than Kurogane did, perhaps because he was not entirely at ease with Watanuki; Watanuki was still frosty with Fay. They spoke civilly, however, and for now that was all Kurogane had patience for.

"The state of Kuroiyama has expanded many-fold since even when Fuma brought you from Nihon. Annihilate the state of Kuroiyama, and you own half of Nihon already. After that, you'll establish peace through conquest; not ideal, but war has seeded deep into the bones of the other sovereigns. Their people are weary but they are still going. You'll need to purge them. After that, rebuild, and that is when you establish the Empire. Unify the writing system, transportation, the economy. But that comes later. The first thing to do is to defeat Kuroiyama, and to do that you need to repel the Fire Demon King."

"The Fire Demon King is one of the five demon kings that rule the spirit world. Summoning him requires the sacrifice of a soul of purity by fire. Syaoran is a candidate, so his burning can summon the Fire Demon. His training in Sikayama should, however, enable him to resist the flames, but it's possible that Kuroiyama might whittle down his strength. The sacrifice doesn't have to be conscious. They can render Syaoran defenseless some other way. Simultaneously, simply preventing the Fire
Demon from being summoned won't defeat Kuroiyama; it would only prolong things. He has a link to Kuroiyama, because of the many people they did sacrifice. This needs to be severed, and for that, he actually needs to appear."

Kurogane glanced at Fay.

"You won't be able to kill him," said Sakura. "Even someone of Fay's great power cannot fell a demon king, particularly not one of the five great demons."

"Then what are we supposed to do?" Kurogane asked.

"Syaoran's ability to traverse worlds may be of considerable help," Watanuki leaned back and clasped his hands together. "The way he does it is interesting. He opens portals. Actually, the more accurate description is: he creates them. The Syaoran of Nihon we have on our hands is a creator and a healer. What's more, the more positive his magic is, the easier it is on his constitution. The most costly spells to him are destructive ones. These are very dangerous for him and can potentially even kill him instantaneously. The next most costly are defensive magic: resisting mind-control, powering shields."

Kurogane shuddered despite himself, recalling how Syaoran had nearly died when facing down the ice demon.

"Healing takes considerable effort, as does anything to do with repair, but creation takes nothing at all. Generally, the opposite tends to be true for sorcerers, which is why traversing worlds is basically impossible except for those of great power. Realms are not built with entrances and exits to other worlds. They allow the passage of spirits to the realms of death, but they shouldn't communicate with each other. Syaoran simply creates a passageway with barely a thought."

Fay leaned forward intently. "Then he can let the Fire Demon in himself, potentially."

"True," Watanuki agreed. "And that is something you should probably do, since a true summoning would require a sacrifice."

"So bring him in, and then what, make a portal and slice him in half?"

"That wouldn't work," Watanuki shook his head, "but the same idea, except around the link, and then shove him out."

"Sounds too easy," Fay muttered.

"It's not that easy."

"Finding the link," Sakura warned, "is going to be very difficult, so as soon as that Fire Demon appears, you need to use the hourglass."

"That gives the wielder an indefinite amount of time to locate the link."

"The wielder?" Fay looked at Kurogane. "I suppose everyone else would be frozen with time, then."

Watanuki nodded. "It will be up to you, since you would be the one to turn the hourglass. You can also shift things around during that time, set things up to your advantage. You can move anything except the Fire Demon."

"You're not ready," Sakura insisted. Though Watanuki was cold, she was genuinely concerned about Fay.

Fay rubbed his face. "I'm fine. Everyone's acting like I'm about to go on a massacre or something. I swear, if one more person insinuates that, I'm going to rip them limb from limb."

"That's not very reassuring," Sakura pointed out. "Look, all you'd accomplish now is you'll join them on the march."

"I'll join Syaoran on the march. He can't walk right now, he can't even get up to use the toilet unless he crawls there on his hands and knees—"

Sakura captured Fay's hands in her own.

"Syaoran will be alright," she said softly. "Fay, he'll be alright."

Fay swallowed, tears still on his eyelashes.

"I know you feel responsible for his death," she went on, and Fay closed his eyes, leaning back with an expression of profound agony. "I know you carry that guilt with you every day. It wasn't your fault. You weren't responsible for him. He wasn't yours to be responsible for. That kind of decision was unfair."

"Princess," Fay drew his hands back without opening his eyes, "you don't get to absolve me of this."

"No, she does not," Watanuki agreed. "Syaoran loved you. He would have given up his relationship with Sakura to ensure your well-being. It's why he didn't go to you this time around. If you don't want to make a mess of this one, you have to be in the best shape possible. Enough that you won't accidentally blow up your own son."

"You just said he didn't go to Fay," Kurogane snapped, sick of Watanuki's attitude; Watanuki was not there to witness the black despair that had consumed Fay for the last ten years.

"Kimihiro," Sakura said in a scolding voice, and Watanuki looked away. Sakura was not done though.

"Syaoran would never want to hurt Fay like this. Do you really think he would have preferred Fay to give up Kurogane just so that he could live? Does that sound even remotely like the Syaoran we knew? Syaoran's death allowed our paths to cross, for us to be together. Syaoran's death is giving Kurogane and Fay a chance to be there for him, together, and build a home, instead of traveling endlessly across the realms. And as we know, Syaoran is here, and he needs his parents. Or do you prefer to hurt them further by dwelling on what is long dead?"

Watanuki glared to the side.

"We've all benefited from his loss," Sakura went on. "I have too. And given how things are now, I wouldn't want it another way—for me to be there for him, and for no one to be there for you. It's been ten years, Kimihiro. They need to move on, just as you and I have." She turned to Fay, and her voice gentled. "Syaoran is back. He doesn't remember anything, but he's back, and he found his way to both of you. Both of you. He didn't have to do that. He never blamed you. Neither do I. If you trust nothing else, know that I understand Syaoran's heart, better than anyone else here. If he were truly angry with you, he wouldn't have come to Kurogane when you were around. Kurogane didn't have any ties with him. He never made any decisions to regret. There was no need for closure on his end, and if he didn't care for you, there was no reason for him to find you. He came to you, because he knew you would care for him."
"Thank you, princess," Fay smiled. Kurogane recognized it for the fake that it was. "I appreciate it."

"You don't believe me," Sakura sighed.

"You aren't a parent," Fay said quietly. "I hope you never know."

Nevertheless, Watanuki refused to bring them back. It was not until Kurogane looked in a mirror that he relented. He had seen Fay, saw how the mage had wilted these last few weeks, but the change had been gradual and it did not really register against the desperation to rescue Syaoran from Ishihebi. He had not looked at himself since the morning when he was summoned to Tomoyo's quarters. It looked like he had aged ten years. He saw numerous gray hairs scattered across his scalp, and his skin had that dull, dark look, all around his face but especially under his eyes. Looking at Fay now, he could tell that the same changes had happened to Fay; his blonde hair was more resistant to graying than Kurogane's, but there was that same aged look, weather-beaten, and the too-bright eyes above the dark circles, almost feverish.

But for all of Watanuki's righteous anger, he did not understand a parent's heart either. Though Clow was sunny and warm and safe, not having Syaoran here felt wrong. He and Fay remained anxious and agitated. They ate. Fay tried to sleep. Kurogane tried to train.

He eventually ran into Prince Touya, who had apparently been away on a mission assigned by the king. Touya was geared up to train as well, and the two men eyed each other warily. Touya had also gotten taller. His jaw had filled out as he entered deeper into manhood, and his shoulders had broadened further. He made Touya of Nihon look child-like by comparison.

They regarded each other for about five minutes in complete, utter silence. Then the prince raised his training blade up in invitation.

Kurogane smiled. True warriors were easy to deal with. Their language could not be simpler.

Prince Touya had been good with the sword before. The last ten years only improved his skills. Kurogane was not at his best; nerves raw and reserves depleted from rough travel and heartache. Without the adrenaline of true stakes, he found himself backing away a lot, simply to get his head in gear. In the past, neither of them would have tolerated this, but they were both ten years older than the last time they had met, and something about Prince Touya seemed more measured, more mature, as if there was more to what made up his person than there was before. He allowed Kurogane to withdraw without pushing, a frown etched in his forehead. After about twenty minutes, Kurogane was done. He and the Prince sat side-by-side on the bench along the side.

It was strange how there seemed to be a completely different dynamic between them even though they never kept in touch over the last ten years; a new level of understanding, what was important, what was less important, what needed to be acknowledged and what could be dismissed. Somehow they were incredibly comfortable with each other, despite the fact that they had yet to say a single word since seeing each other. It was even more dramatic since to Kurogane, Touya had been a twenty-year-old priest, trying to separate him from Syaoran, and now Touya was a thirty-year-old prince and a sympathetic sparring partner.

There was no need for pleasantries.

"My father does not know you're here," the prince remarked at last. "He would have told me so if he did."

That was impudent of Watanuki. "Forgive us," Kurogane started trying to say something that might
spare Watanuki of blame, but then decided that someone like Watanuki probably had nothing to fear. "We didn't know."

"Does my sister know?"

"She knows we're here."

"Hm. Thought the little one needed to stay in Nihon."

"..." Kurogane puzzled over this statement, before realizing that the prince thought Syaoran was with them. "He...he is."

The prince's eyes grew sharper. "You left him there? Who is here besides you, then?"

"Fay. Fuma brought me and Fay away. Left Syaoran...under your care, actually."

The other raised his eyebrows. "My care. You couldn't have chosen this."

"No, we didn't choose this."

"Will you go back?"

Kurogane laughed bitterly. "There's nothing in existence that can keep me or Fay from going back."

"Would you like to bring him something?"

Kurogane looked at the prince.

The younger man slapped him on the shoulder. "Come."

They headed over to the prince's quarters, but encountered the king along the way. The man blanched.

"Is he here?" he demanded.

"No, Father," the prince inclined his head a little as Kurogane bowed fully.

"You're bringing him here," the king looked at Kurogane.

"He's still on Nihon. They're going back."

King Fujitaka looked between them. "I don't understand."

"He can't leave Nihon, Father," said the prince, "or else we would have fetched him ourselves. They were brought here, but they're heading back soon. I was giving them something to bring back to them."

"When are you leaving?"

Prince Touya looked at Kurogane, who replied, "...Not sure, Your Majesty."

"Inform me when you do. There is something I wish to pass to him too."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The king went past without another word.
Kurogane and the prince stared after him.

"He visits his tomb, every so often," the latter said. "He doesn't want my sister to know. My sister and her husband go every year on the first of April, so he goes on the last day of March, shortly before midnight. Besides my sister, I think Father misses him the most."

They were prepared to take care of Syaoran, Kurogane remembered. When Seishirou and Fuma first took Syaoran away from Nihon, Watanuki had planned to bring the boy to live with him and his wife. Syaoran would have come here, to Clow, where Watanuki, Sakura, and Fujitaka would be waiting.

Fujitaka had really loved the boy. He had probably been a better father than Fay and Kurogane ever would.

"Tsubasa always spoke kindly of him."

"Hm."

The prince started walking, so Kurogane followed. They came upon great chambers, where wooden tapestries and thick carpets covered the walls and floors. The prince led Kurogane to a broad, wide cabinet made of rich mahogany wood.

Kurogane was not sure what he was expecting, but it was not the small, child-sized sword that looked barely longer than his forearm. The scabbard was encrusted with the occasional jewel, but the hilt was plane. Prince Touya unsheathed it, revealing a miniature, but completely functional blade. Even just looking at the light glancing off the edges, Kurogane could see that this was a sword of great quality.

"This was my first sword," the prince remarked, and then spun it in his fingers; it was well-balanced, but the size looked odd on a full-grown, tall man. "Nothing special, but I had loved swords, and was always getting up to mischief one way or another, so it was perfect for a little brat like I was then." He pointed it to the side in a proper battle stance. "Can't believe this once felt too heavy. Never had to use it in real combat; outgrew it by the time my skills were really put to the test." He sheathed it, and then handed it to Kurogane in both hands. Kurogane accepted, pulling it back out of the scabbard, mind conjuring up the images of a young prince practicing. His own first sword; his father had given it to him, and Youou vowed to one day become as strong—no, stronger than his father. His father had laughed.

"I never thought of him as a brother," the prince went on, sounding rueful. "I knew my sister liked him, and that one day they'd likely want to be together, but I still never thought of him as a brother. I associated him with bad news. When he first came, I knew there was trouble heading our way. He would come back and forth and each time I was unhappy to see him. Then, when time switched, I still never thought of him as a brother. He was this morose, silent child who needed to learn how to make friends and who had an unknown, mysterious past. Something about him always seemed shadowed, however nice and kind he was. In the end, I think he was the one carrying the Seal of Death all along."

"I don't think he expected you to think of him as a brother."

"Perhaps not." Prince Touya watched as Kurogane tested the sharpness of the blade against his fingernail; it was very sharp. "Still, one's expectations and what should be done are two different things entirely, aren't they?"

Kurogane looked at him, wordlessly sheathing the sword again.
"I'm told he can't wield a sword now. Seems wrong. He was always good with it."

"Those days are over for him."

"Consider this an extension of me, then. Perhaps its presence alone will help to repel what would harm him."

A sword like this would likely only function as a token, anyway, but Kurogane was touched. Syaoran was too tall for the sword, but it could still be useful, and everyone's first sword had a special meaning to it. "He'd be grateful, Your Highness."

"Tell him he has a family here," said the prince.

Kurogane smiled. He felt a little evil for revealing this, but both he and the prince were at the point where they would appreciate the sweetness of the fact. "He has a crush on you. On Nihon."

The prince smiled at this, though his eyebrows furrowed in sympathy. "Really? How does my sister feel about this?"

"We haven't met Sakura," Kurogane admitted. "In fact, I'm not entirely certain she is your sister on Nihon, or that she exists at all."

"And Yukito?"

Watanuki clearly did not give his brother-in-law the update. "He's a king. And rather annoyed with you about all this."

"Figures," said the prince. "Even over there, Yuki thinks everything is my fault. He always did like the brat. So what am I, if Yukito's the king over there?"

"You're the priest." Kurogane could not help but laugh at the prince's expression. "Yukito was the warrior. That was pretty much my reaction."

"What a strange world you live in, Kurogane," the prince smiled fully, shaking his head. His mirth faded as the situation loomed once again before them. "Come to Clow anytime, Kurogane. This goes for the mage too."

"Thank you, Your Highness."

He found Sakura sewing. The princess was in a rocking chair, stitching quietly by the window. She greeted Kurogane with a hug and bade him sit with her. He found himself staring at her figure; there was something about her that compelled him to, though he did not know what it was. Sakura seemed to realize he was not intentionally inappropriate, and smiled quietly, letting his eyes roam over her as if waiting for him to reason it out.

The answer came slowly, but was profoundly affecting. "You're expecting."

Spirits, that was strange. Ten years and he had always thought of the girl as…well, a girl. For her to be a mother now was almost more startling than learning he and Fay had both been Syaoran's father. Was it really so long ago when she was this little waif of a thing, bright green eyes and soft hands, a small vulnerable blossom in the wide expanse of the realms around her?

Sakura rubbed her belly reflexively. "Kimihiro thinks he's a boy."

"He doesn't know?"
"We wanted to be surprised."

This was just one earth-shattering development after another.

"Congratulations," he said, still a little disoriented.

"I should tell Fay that you guessed it on your own," she told him. "He was confident you wouldn't figure it out."

Fay had so little faith in him. "I'll have to get him for that."

Sakura giggled. "I suppose I should also congratulate you, in a way. You've also received a son."

Kurogane turned his head away at that. He needed to ask Watanuki about…how…the mechanics of it…but he could not bring up such a subject in front of the princess.

Sakura proved that the last ten years hardly made her more ignorant of such matters. "You're worried."

Kurogane inhaled and then exhaled. "I was many things when he was conceived, but I never did anything like that. The only explanation is if I do it in the future, somehow. And leave Fay…and leave Syaoran." He looked at her. "Watanuki wouldn't happen to have any insight into this, would he?"

"He didn't say explicitly to me," said Sakura, "but I was afraid to ask."

Kurogane looked away. That was understandable. Kurogane was not a good person when he was first sent to Tokyo, and…the implications were too terrible to contemplate.

"We'll figure something out though," she said without concern. "Watanuki knows how to bend the rules his way. He's only gotten better at it since he took over the shop."

"How did you two start talking?"

"Through dreams," Sakura admitted. "Initially he thought he couldn't leave the shop. He sent Doumeki to do all the errands outside, and sometimes Fuma and Seishirou. Later, he learned that Yuuko had freed him from the shop. That was when he moved here. I like to think he is happy here. Clow suits him better, I think, than Tokyo did; it's quiet here, away from everything, and the magic here is potent."

"He treats you well?"

"Of course," Sakura smiled warmly. "Don't I look well?"

Moving on suited her, Kurogane decided. There was no point in waiting for someone who would never come, and she was not obligated to give up someone who would take good care of her.

Tsubasa would have been glad.

"He's been very adorable lately," Sakura went on. "I've been getting some morning sickness and he keeps looking stuff up with Yukito to help get rid of it, and then second-guessing himself; he gets all flustered. I think he feels even more miserable than I do when it happens, but he's so scared of giving me something that would hurt the baby. He keeps scolding my stomach. It's why he thinks it's a boy; he says boys are troublemakers. Somehow I don't think that's quite it. And you should have seen him when he learned he was going to be a father. I think he was always afraid that our marriage was an
illusion somehow, or that I'll end up leaving him and then he would be all alone...he was all alone, you see, for so, so long. Somehow, the baby is proof to him that this is real, that this is happening. He started talking to it as soon as he stopped screaming like a maniac."

"Huh."

"He talks to it too. All the time. He keeps feeling my belly to see if it would kick. He knows it's far too early for that but he does it anyway. He's so silly."

"I'm happy for you," Kurogane said. He meant it.

Kurogane found Fay that night looking in the direction of Tsubasa's tomb.

He was buried as a hero for saving the princess, and the Clow Kingdom by some extension. It was a modest size, for he was a commoner and otherwise unrelated to the royal family, so it had none of the grandeur of a royal tomb. His funeral had been private, attended only by the royal family, Fay and Kurogane, Yukito, and some palace hands to assist in moving the coffin and sealing the chambers. He had been buried with his few possessions: the clothes on his back, his sword, and Fujitaka's precious book. Queen Nadeshiko had arranged for some flowers, some additional clothing, some statues for protection and blessing, but these were few and fit in the single chamber very easily. Even for a hero, it all seemed generally inadequate; there were no public gestures in his honor, no statues or holidays in his name. What he had done was meaningful and could justify the construction of such a tomb on such short notice, but it was not something the royal family chose to reveal to the public. The rest of the world remained unaware of their loss.

He hugged Fay from behind.

"We shouldn't be here," Fay said quietly.

"Watanuki doesn't seem to be in a rush."

"Watanuki doesn't know what he's going through."

"He does." Kurogane leaned away. "I'm tired, Fay. So are you. We're no use to him the way we are."

"I want to go see Tsubasa."

Somehow, Kurogane knew he was going to say that.

"Let's go, then."

They went. The night was cold, as it usually was in the desert. Above, the skies were clear, and the stars gleamed bright. Syaoran's tomb lay outside town, in the middle of a sandy expanse. They rode on steeds that traversed the landscape far more quickly than humans can.

King Fujitaka ensured the site was well cared for. The limestone was clean and white, swept of dust. The wind blew, humming eerily over the steps. Fay pulled to a stop. Kurogane followed suit. They both looked upon the site for the first time in ten years.

"Afterwards I kept thinking," Fay suddenly said, "I could wish, as he did. He cared enough about the princess to turn back time, give up everyone he had loved for her sake. At any time, I could have gone to Watanuki and wished to turn back time."
Kurogane closed his eyes.

"I kept thinking, maybe, maybe, a life without you, with him in it instead. Maybe I'd come to Clow...maybe...tell him how it was supposed to be. Beg him to take me back. I dreamed, at nights, about how that would be; he'd be with Sakura in this kingdom and I could be...I don't know. The local wise man. Or maybe...I don't know. If I'm truly not needed anymore, then I shouldn't be anywhere at all."

"Fay," Kurogane reached out, but the mage was too far away.

"I'd wake up and see Nihon," the blonde went on, as if Kurogane never spoke. "I'd think, at least you're in it. You're by my side. I'd strongly consider, and then I'd dismiss it. What difference does it make, if I turn back time now or later? Now that the deed is done, I might as well wait. That was how I justified not doing it. I don't know what I was waiting for. I didn't think he would come."

"That choice is not an option now." Kurogane looked at the tomb. "Syaoran is no longer in there. That is just his corpse. We have a real one waiting for us." He reached out again. "Let's go back."

"He doesn't deserve someone like me in his life," Fay looked at Kurogane. "Someone who would do what I did. How can you stand the sight of me?"

Kurogane lowered his arm.

"We were all shadows of who we were meant to be," he pointed out. "You and I were meant to father Emperors. Instead, we are misfits at best, forced to make decisions we cannot possibly make. So you made one that you now regret. He wasn't your son. He wasn't mine. And knowing that he should have been does not mean you should have turned back time. Wishes were what caused all our problems in the first place. Defying death. You could no more have saved Tsubasa than you could have saved Fay. It was an impossibility, even if it felt like it wasn't. I don't blame you for dismissing the impossible choice. Neither would Tsubasa. Neither did he. Syaoran loves you, and anyone who has eyes can see that you love him too. You always have."

Fay looked away and wordlessly kicked his steed to walk.

When they were finally ready to leave, Kurogane did feel a lot stronger. The sun did him good, and the food in Clow was beyond compare. Fuma stood out in the courtyard to wait for them as they in turn waited for the king.

In the meantime, Sakura had packed some things for Syaoran, including chocolate, which she somehow remembered Nihon did not have. There were other things, mostly food, though she also packed a comb, a whistle, and the softest, cuddliest stuffed toy bear.

Fay lifted the bear. "This," he stated, as Kurogane's mind conjured up their little fourteen- (almost fifteen-) year-old Syaoran hugging the thing, "is absolutely going to be his favorite out of all of these."

"He'll definitely like it more than the comb," said Kurogane, thinking of Syaoran's unruly hair. He wondered if Touya and the king bothered to cut it.

King Fujitaka arrived with Queen Nadeshiko, and both bade them a safe journey. The king noted Touya's sword strapped to Kurogane's belt and smiled fondly, clearly recollecting that time.

Priest Yukito presented a turquoise piece to the king, who in turn handed it to Fay. It was a belt accessory in the shape of a bird's wing; Sakura's original name, Kurogane thought at first, but the
"Syaoran was my son," he said to Fay. "I found him huddled on the side of the street. I had seen many such boys; life can be harsh in our world, despite our best efforts, and every so often I would pass by a pathetic figure. I never felt compelled to take one home, however. I was an archaeologist, and though I had a comfortable-enough living, taking in another mouth to feed was no trivial matter. Something about him spoke to me, however, and I instantly knew he was mine. I did all I could to ensure his happiness until I couldn't anymore. During that time he gave me gifts; so many gifts. His smile. His laugh. Hugs and kisses. His love. He struggled with reading and writing at first, but his love of stories helped him prevail. His favorite was a tale of a young orphaned boy who fell in love with a princess, and found a magical lamp that could grant wishes. He was afraid of the dark, of being abandoned. From the very beginning, he cared about all living things. And I was his whole world, for a time. He was also mine. He made me so happy. I knew he was my son, even now, because the only times I had ever been so happy was when Touya and Sakura came to me.

"We never had a chance to talk. Even when everything was fixed, even when he would come back to talk to my daughter, he never came to me. I was busy too. I kept thinking, now I am king again, I should do some of the things I was never able to do as an archaeologist, but I kept missing him, until it was too late to talk or do anything except bury him in a tomb no one knows of. His final resting place. The old should never have to bury the young. It just should not happen. He did so much and our world felt nothing for it. He never had a chance to make any more marks. And as time creeps on he fades away in the minds of everyone else, until I wonder if I had...ever really raised that little boy, held him in my arms, fed him chocolates for the first time, cradled him at night when the dust storms blew sand against the shutters. I was not there when he died. Didn't even know when he left. I was not there when he needed me."

"Your Majesty..." Fay whispered.

"I had this made to feel close to him," the man gazed down upon the turquoise. "His real name was Tsubasa. Everyone thinks this was my daughter, but I don't have need of such a thing when she's right there. He is so far away, though, and I can't go to him too often. Feels like I'm disturbing him," and he laughed a little. "Silly, isn't it?" The king raised his hand, and he wiped an eye quickly. "In any case, I've kept that with me for ten years now. When I heard from Kimihiro that he was back, that he was coming here, I thought, this was my chance—I had Yukito enchant the stone with some healing properties, since the little one was said to be sickly, with a weak stomach and all that. But I guess he's not coming here after all. You better give that to him. It—it might help. Who knows?"

"I'll make sure it gets to him."

King Fujitaka nodded. "Stay safe," he said, and then backed away, looking like he was in a bit of a hurry to do so. Probably for the sake of his composure.

"I hate this place," Fuma declared when the two of them joined him, rubbing his face and sniffing. "Freaking sand keeps blowing in my eyes. Let's get you two going so we can save the brat and move on with our lives."
Nihon Blood

They came upon Avalon under attack.

Fay dove into the fray without question, while Fuma lingered back, swearing and craning his neck to see if he could catch sight of his brother. Kurogane joined Fay a second later, unwilling to be parted from the blonde. In the sudden chaos, he did not even give a thought to where the king was, where Touya might be, if Syaoran was in danger. Time slowed, but so did his mind, only able to process the angle of the blade swinging toward him, the direction of the spell, Fay's sleeve catching on fire, blood on the snow—when had it snowed again? The grass was poking through it, and the white was thin and fine. It parted to reveal the dark soil underneath.

An explosion blasted bits of dirt and rock into the air. A concussive blast knocked soldiers aside. Fay threw up a shield, but some of it filtered through, knocking the mage into him. Kurogane pushed him upright.

There was a loud, thunderous roar. Kurogane turned to behold a great oni demon, with skin that gleamed like oil and clad in shimmering armor. He drew his sword to meet it, but it ran past. Behind it were other oni, whose footsteps shook the ground with each collision. They were five times as tall as any full-grown man, and their faces were completely covered by their helmets.

"Seishirou!" Fay called out, realizing what was happening a breath before Kurogane did. At the same time, they also saw him; he was actually on a horse, which was bucking and panicking. It was thrashing too much for Seishirou to properly dismount. Then an arrow sliced through its neck. It stumbled, and stood still for a moment, as if contemplating its demise. Seishirou used the opportunity to swing off.

Kurogane then had to dodge a spear. Ginryu caught the shaft and cleaved it in half. He stabbed the warrior, then turned as Fay released a volley of spells. He ducked down so Fay could aim. The resulting boom resonated in his skull until his ears rang.

Fire lit up behind them. When the blaze died down, Kerberus gave a great roar, standing proudly with its chest puffed out and wings outstretched.

Fuma swore as it blew another trail of fire from its jaws. Kurogane was forced to turn his head away to shield his eyes from the bright heat. A concussive blast knocked him right only his face, and his thoughts stilled for a moment.

He was in the shop in Tokyo, but instead of Watanuki, Syaoran was there. He was clad in the same robes Watanuki wore, though he also had some form of hat on. He was older, and quite tall, standing pensively at the window. Before Kurogane could take stock, he turned his head and looked right at him with those amber eyes.

There was snow and dirt in his mouth. Kurogane blinked past the roaring pain in his head. He was still face-planted on the ground. Instinct had him rolling to the side, just as a sword slammed down. Ginryu came to him again, and he was on his feet, slicing upwards. The metal slid against the armor, though did not penetrate as the warrior dodged backward. He struck, surprised when he hit his target—everything was spinning, and his limbs felt uncoordinated. His ankle slipped and he fell to his side.

His vision flashed. Syaoran smiled at him over the light of the candle he held before his face. "I inherited that from Clow Reed: the ability to make things."
He roused to Fuma tugging him upright by his arm. "Are you alright?"

He was not alright. He had a concussion. Three oni stampeded past, and their footsteps rocked the earth so much that Kurogane almost lost his balance again.

"Syaoran," he gasped out. In this chaos, what if the boy got hurt?

"That guardian beast!" Fuma pointed. "We have to get to it!"

He did not question this. Fay was rounding up behind. Ahead, Seishirou and Touya were already making their way. Kerberus unleashed another bout of hellfire, stopping everyone's progress, but this also stopped the enemy. When the bright light died down, Kurogane could only see shapeless colors. Fay grasped him tightly, similarly crippled.

When the auras cleared, they saw a wide, gleaming gate. It opened to a wall with photos that looked like family pictures, except there was only one subject: Syaoran.

Syaoran probably meant to escape through the portal he had created, but he was so surprised by this that he hesitated. The gate suddenly shattered as a spell hit it.

Kerberus tucked Syaoran under its wing. Touya and Seishirou flanked the side. Fay charged past Kurogane and Fuma, throwing spells in quick succession. He was singlehandedly demolishing everyone in his way while Kurogane and Fuma blocked shooting arrows by striking them aside with their blades.

A rain of arrows sailed through the air toward all of them, and a thick shield sprang up—Syaoran's.

Somehow, this became the turning point. The tide of battle eased away from Syaoran and to the periphery. Kerberus released a loud bellow, but this was not needed. The enemy was retreating. Avalon's forces cut down those that persisted, and the rest drew back. Kurogane caught up to Kerberus, which lifted its wings to allow Syaoran to stumble to him.

"He's unhurt," he heard Seishirou announce. Syaoran reached for Kurogane's head, and Kurogane realized the boy was trying to heal him. He grabbed Syaoran's wrists, too frazzled at first to check his strength.

"It's fine," he said hoarsely, "I'm fine. Save your strength."

Syaoran's face tightened in pain, prompting him to let go. The boy's eyes were wide as they looked at him.

"They're pulling back," Touya stated. "Your Majesty."

"I don't care if you are king," Syaoran spat as Touya held him back. "I say they're not going anywhere, so they won't go anywhere."

Syaoran, Kurogane realized, could be fearless when his loved ones were in danger. He had a new understanding of what the prince of Kuroiyama likely faced, and what Watanuki and the hunter brothers had to deal with when Syaoran had been taken from Nihon.

"How dare you!" one of the officials exclaimed.

"Quiet," the king waved. "No one is taking your two guardians anywhere, but Lord Kurogane is hurt, and needs a healer."
"I can heal him."

"Syaoran," Touya inserted gently but firmly, "be good. You won't do anyone any favors by hurting yourself."

"I'm not a porcelain doll!" the boy snapped in frustration, though he did not press forward as he had been. "I used a shield, so what? I feel fine."

"Someone bring the healer in already," Yukito sighed impatiently. One of the foot soldiers stepped out of the tent to do just that.

Kurogane's head hurt. Fay was being held in a separate tent, though the mage did not resist. Syaoran was furious, and only Touya was keeping him from using his magic for destructive purposes. The young man was being a little manipulative, exploiting Syaoran's attraction to him to get him to cooperate—the deed felt foul in Kurogane's mind, because everyone except Syaoran understood that Touya's true affections were for the king. For now, though, they needed Syaoran to stay put; if he used such dark magic, it could really kill him.

The healer came quickly; Touya's healing abilities did not take this time, the reason was obscure—one reason Kurogane's interest in magic was limited at best. The healer's work was limited as well, for some reason, and Kurogane still felt off by the time they were done. He was better, though, enough that he was very discontent with their current arrangements.

"Where is Fay?" he demanded.

"Not far," said the king. "You may join him, if you wish."

"Let me go!" Syaoran tried to yank himself from Touya's arms, but the young man held firm. The teen glared, bright eyes smoldering, at the king, who avoided his gaze. "Why are you doing this? They just saved you and your army!"

"So they did. That is why they are still alive."

"Please I'm not going anywhere—"

King Yukito was looking steadily at Kurogane. "You and I understand that, Syaoran, but they need to understand it too."

Kurogane stared back. "If Syaoran dies," he said softly, "I will send you screaming to your early grave, oh King."

"Plenty have tried similar lines with me," said King Yukito. "Fortunately for you, I don't plan on making you own it." He turned. "Let him go, then."

Syaoran was in his arms the next instant, arms squeezing so tightly around his neck, Kurogane was almost choking.

"Hush," Kurogane whispered. "It's alright, lad."

Seishirou and Fuma then entered the tent, followed by Fay.

"Why is he here?" the king demanded, indicating the blonde.

"He just wanted to see Kurogane," said Seishirou. "It would not be remiss to oblige his more reasonable requests. This man is the most powerful man among the realms. He can turn all of Nihon
to dust with a thought."

"So he is a walking weapon of mass destruction," the king regarded Fay coldly. "He thinks he can call the shots now?"

"I'm not so powerful," Fay replied mildly. "I was simply worried about my partner."

"He understands the situation," said Fuma. "He won't be trying to take the boy anywhere."

"I'm not some object to be passed around or locked up," Syaoran drew back from Kurogane. "I want Fay here."

The king scowled at him. "You can't always get what you want."

Syaoran was in front of the king in an instant. "You are throwing me to the wolves! Admit it! You want to rule Nihon, and you are going to kill me to do it. If you are even a halfway decent ruler, you wouldn't need me to do it. You're no better than Kuroiyama! But that's alright, because you are a king, and I know what kings and emperors are made of—I've made my peace with that, but if you want me to end the war for you then you better give me what I want!"

A hush fell. The king was pale. Syaoran turned and went to Fay, who enveloped him in a hug. After a moment, King Yukito also turned and strode out of the tent.

Touya looked at Syaoran for a moment before following his sire out. The remaining officials and soldiers slowly followed suit.

Fay looked over at Kurogane. "You alright?"

"I'm fine."

There was a pause.

"I can't leave," Syaoran said quietly. "I…I have no choice. I have to stay…stay and end the war."

"Syaoran," said Fay, "there's something we need to talk about."

Seishirou had told Syaoran what he had to do.

"I just have to make it to Shirasaki," Syaoran explained. "But there are a lot of people getting in the way."

"We have an hourglass," Fay told him. "It will give us time to find the connection between the Fire Demon and Kuroiyama."

The boy was restless. "I just want to get it over with. Whatever is supposed to happen. Whatever I'm supposed to do."

He looked defiantly in the direction of Shirasaki, and Kurogane remembered the first time he met this boy, in front of that treasury, ready to meet his doom. He had grown since then, and looked more like the Syaoran of old than he ever did. It seemed almost silly to have a tomb on Clow at all. He thought of the silent dignity of that place. For all that it was unknown and unspoken, it had been built in the name of love, and yet all it housed, really, was a husk. The real little spirit was here, bright-eyed and determined, with none of the memories but all of the heart.

"You'll make it," said Fay. "We have a plan. We know what to do now. Kurogane and I will stand
"My sword," Kurogane agreed, "and all of Fay's power. You only need to open the path."

Kero floated over their heads.

"I have Kerberus and Touya too," said Syaoran, looking thoughtful. He did not mention the king.

Kurogane and Fay showed Syaoran the gifts from Clow. Sakura's comb went to use; Syaoran's hair was actually as long as Fay's now. He wore it well, but Kurogane still wanted to cut it. The boy tried the chocolates, and ate three of them before he could summon his self-control. He also loved the bear; he hugged it to himself like it belonged to him instantly, and kept squeezing it with his arms and hands, enjoying the softness.

The one he really took to, though, was Fujitaka's turquoise wing. He stared at it as soon as it was in his hand, and his face went blank, as if in a trance.

"Syaoran?" Fay reached out and touched his shoulder, worried.

Syaoran blinked, coming to, and looked around. "Sorry," he looked at Fay. "I—that was strange."

"What happened?"

"I felt like it was giving me a hug," Syaoran explained, turning a little red. "A man with glasses."

Syaoran could walk now, though his feet were still a bit sensitive. Luckily, they had a horse for him, and they set forth a few hours later. The boy rode alongside the king, and Kurogane sensed this was actually a deliberate move on Syaoran's part; he seemed angry with the king. Yukito, in contrast, bore all of this in solemn calm. Even when Syaoran was rude, which he sometimes was; he never addressed Yukito as king, for one, and never bowed his head to him in deference, but the young sovereign never reproached him, and always hushed the officials when they tried.

Neither Kurogane nor Fay thought that the king still had feelings for their son. For one thing, he met Syaoran after he met Touya, and Syaoran, too, was a mere shadow of what he should have been. But there was, perhaps, some kind of tie, and Syaoran was stronger than they thought. Perhaps while Kurogane and Fay were resting, Syaoran was recovering too. Whatever the case was, it was interesting to see the boy's attitude, and the king's response.

Fay looked at Kurogane, a concerned glint in his eye. The mage was worried that Yukito's patience was only due to the fact that he needed Syaoran. They might have to take steps to protect him. If the situation were different, Kurogane would try to curb Syaoran's insolence...but he was angry too, and it was about time the boy showed his temper. He doubted Yukito could do much, even when the war was over. Still, the young man's tolerance was unnerving. Kurogane would expect this from Priest Yukito, but not King Yukito, who had already demonstrated that he had a temper of his own when the situation called for it, back when he had been annoyed with Touya at Sikayama.

When night fell, they made camp. Syaoran ate some of Sakura's snacks. He fell asleep in Fay's arms and slumbered with a depth that belied his profound exhaustion. He had a long day and had depleted much of his magic. Fay curled around him, eyes moist. Syaoran could sleep without care, but Fay could not.

Kurogane headed out to relieve himself, during which he suddenly had the inclination to snoop on the King and his partner; he wondered what the King was planning, and figured he might learn more about the reason for his leniency with Syaoran's attitude. The two young men were together in the
tent, sharing a meal. Kurogane crept close enough to listen.

"I wish you wouldn't lead him on that way," said the King.

"I'm not leading him on."

"You are. He thinks you might return his feelings."

"It's just a crush, Yuki."

"They're still feelings. You shouldn't dismiss them."

Touya sighed. "You'd rather he not cooperate with any of us, then?"

There was a silence.

"He is far more cooperative than we can ever ask for. You don't have to butter him up with hugs. Eventually he'll realize you're manipulating him."

"I don't hug him just to manipulate him. I do it because he's lonely and scared and I'm being nice. You're overthinking it."

"You're in no position to be nice, just as I am in no position to be nice. Luring a young fawn like him into a false sense of security is cruel, not kind. When the time comes, you'd throw him into the fire just as I would should Nihon depend on it."

"It won't come to that," Touya said flatly. "You think I don't care about him at all? I'm not that kind of person. He's got his own soulmate. I'm just trying to make things bearable for everyone."

"He does not have the emotional maturity to appreciate the nuance, Touya. I'm telling you to stop. That boy had Seishirou, he didn't need you to rely on. Now he has that ninja and the wizard."

"You're not talking sense, Yuki. None of those men have any loyalty to Nihon. That ninja already demonstrated the willingness to sacrifice Nihon in order to keep that child alive. The only reason Syaoran is still here is because Ishihebi did us a favor and bound him to this place. We need him to name you king, as he had promised."

"He'll keep that promise."

"You don't know that."

"He has the soul of the Great Emperor, one who led Nihon to centuries of prosperity. His destiny changed, his body changed, his parentage changed, but his soul remains the same and that soul is noble and brave. He'll keep his promises if nothing else."

Kurogane heard the slam of the bowl on something hard. "You're the one with residual feelings. This was never about me."

"This is about you. Stringing him along."

"You want him to hate me too? Is that what this is about? You're unhappy with him actually liking me when he hates you?"

"I don't care if he likes you as long as it's for the right reasons. I care that he is afraid of me, yet trusts you and believes you will look out for him when you have the same motives I have. If he is aware and forgives you, that is one thing, but he doesn't know."
"This—"

"This whole affair has been a nightmare!" The king’s voice stayed at the same volume, but it lost all semblance of calm as sheer grief and rage radiated out of it. "I don't want the throne—I have neither the desire nor the temperament for it, and yet I am compelled to occupy it in case some other lunatic does! I am compelled to be a monster, to sacrifice innocent children like Syaoran to the likes of Kuroiyama, all in the name of the greater good—I look at him and there is nothing I want to do more than to fall to my knees before the rightful Emperor and beg for his forgiveness, but I can't, because I am tasked with this—wretched—"

He was cut off. There was a silence.

"Syaoran is not stupid. He knows I am yours and you are mine. He tries to be close to me because my magic is soothing. With him so frail, how am I supposed to just ignore that? Perhaps it would be kinder to kill his feelings for me, but we know that will happen in time, and if he finds Nihon a loveless place, how does that do anyone any good, let alone him?"

"You have a hero complex," Yukito accused. "You want to be the one, the champion of the day. You cannot be that champion for Syaoran. His champions are Fuma and Seishirou, Kurogane and Fay. You are his ally only, not his friend, not his protector. If you don’t accept this, you'll only bring about your own downfall."

"You're not his champion either. Do you fancy yourself a guardian of his feelings? He matters a great deal to you, and not just because he promised to name you Emperor before the gods."

"I can give him nothing except the truth. It would be a grave crime for me to lie. I do not wish for you to lie to him."

"You're the one lying, to yourself. He has a soulmate of his own, one he may or may not meet, but he'll never be yours."

"Touya—"

The priest exited the tent, strides quick in his temper. Kurogane drew back into the shadows as his figure traversed the camp to the other side.

So the King knew about crowning the Emperor. No wonder he was on his best behavior and bearing Syaoran's wrath with such calm.

Satisfied with this, he left to rejoin his family.
They arrived at Shirasaki in the early afternoon. Shirasaki greeted them with swords and spears and arrows pointed in their direction. On the front wall, a woman in full armor stood, hair black and tightly curled, standing between banners flying Kuroiyama's insignia.

"Avalon!" she hollered. "Hand over the boy!"

"Straight to the point, this lot," Seishirou muttered to Fuma, while Kurogane looked at the banners.

_The Empress._

But before any of them could remark further, the woman suddenly swung her polearm forward, and _leaped_ off the wall.

She was no ordinary warrior. When she landed, instead of shattering her legs, the ground trembled, so hard that the horses whinnied and stumbled. Syaoran struggled to stay on his mount, and wound up edging close to Fay, nearly bumping into his saddle.

"Syaoran," Fay said solemnly, "whatever you do, stay back."

King Yukito drew his sword. His horse, remarkably, had maintained its calm despite a few correcting steps.

"Cute trick," he said, pointing the sword at her. "We have champions that can do even better. Why don't we teach you a few lessons?"

What happened next was a blur. The warrioress launched herself forward. The King's stallion reared as he bent down. It was Touya's shield, hastily thrown up, that first repelled her attack, but she was up in the air, polearm flashing, and she aimed straight for the king's throat.

The stallion was forced backwards as the king met her blow for blow. He was struggling; though being mounted should give him leverage, the warrioress was almost like a bird, and did not seem to lose any momentum whatsoever despite being airborne for most of the exchange. In the end, she fell back, landing on her feet and bracing with one arm, polearm behind her. She straightened, brought the polearm around, and summoned her army.

They charged.

Avalon held their ground, but Kurogane brought his horse forward and around to shield Syaoran.

"This isn't a viable option!" Fuma shouted. "We're in the line of fire!"

Then, above the front gates of the castle, a rift opened, as if sliced by a blade. It peeled open, and out stepped a dark figure straight from Kurogane's nightmares—the demon he had seen long ago, clutching his father's dismembered arm in its jaws.

It had been some time since the shape of the creature had any hold over him, and Kurogane did not lose his nerve, even then. He did ram his mount into Syaoran's, making it fall back. Better keep his son away from that thing; Kurogane had survived its ilk before, had defeated them soundly, but he had also lost people to them.

"Go!" he yelled, as the soldiers around him swooped forward to meet Kuroiyama. Syaoran did not
have a chance to react, but his horse was all too ready to flee, being a prey animal. Seishirou and Fay flanked the sides while Fuma, who had already turned his horse, led the way.

Then spells rained from the sky, like arrows. One hit Syaoran's horse, which fell to the ground, hard. Syaoran was flung forward as a result, but he was saved from falling by Kero, who transformed to Kerberus and cushioned Syaoran's body. Another grazed Kurogane's false arm.

More spells dove for them. Kerberus spun, flinging Syaoran off and to the ground. The guardian then landed over the boy, wings outspread to create a shelter from above. Fuma was flung from his mount as it was also hit; he landed on the ground with a hard thud. The horse was crippled. Syaoran's was dead.

Kurogane dove off his horse and slid along the ground to join Syaoran under the expanse of the guardian's wings. Spells were still raining from the sky. He looked out to see where Fay was, but could not find the mage.

Fuma crawled up on the other side.

"We have to get into the castle!" he yelled at Kurogane.

Avalon's soldiers were dropping like flies.

"We're not going anywhere like this!" Kurogane yelled back.

"He's guaranteed to make it to Shirasaki!" Fuma shouted. "That's part of the whole requirement! You just have to get into the castle! Or whoever is holding the hourglass!"

"Fay's the one carrying the hourglass!"

"Where's Fay?" Syaoran cried.

Kerberus suddenly moved. Everyone lurched to move with the beast.

Syaoran suddenly moved out. Kurogane grabbed him.

"What are you doing?!

"I'm protected!" Syaoran yelled back. "Stay with Kerberus! I'm going inside!"

"They'll capture you, you stupid child! You're not protected from that!"

A bright beam of light shot into the sky at the head of the troops; Priest Touya, with his divine powers. Kurogane could not tell what exactly that did, but it made the spells raining down of them halt.

Fuma grabbed Syaoran. "Move!" Kerberus was already bunching into a run.

Kurogane spared a quick glance for Fay, but he could not find him. Syaoran was already dashing away. Kurogane had to follow.

The ground shook as magic collided. The demon was joined by another of its kind, which started chomping down on the humans in front of it. Kurogane looked at it, and saw the shadow of his father's dismembered arm hanging from its mouth—

Seishirou pushed with a hand on his back. "Go!"
He went, but up ahead, Syaoran fell hard. It was a bad fall, one that stunned the youngster so he could not move. Kurogane dragged him up, but they were suddenly met with that woman, the warrioress with the curly hair.

She struck at Kurogane. Ginryu swung into his hand as he blocked.

Then Syaoran struck her with a high kick to the face, sending her stumbling backwards.

Kurogane's head reeled—that kick was perfect, from the form to the execution; it was, in every way, the same sort of kick the Syaoran of old had mastered, back when he had that blind eye and had to compensate. But this Syaoran was not trained, nor was he built for battle. He was not able to maintain the good form, and abruptly lost his balance again to another hard fall.

He did not think too hard, instead plowing his own blade forward, straight through the warrioress' ribs. He pulled it out with a spew of blood. She looked at him, and Kurogane had a split second to recognize that her face was familiar for some reason, before she fell and he dismissed her. Whomever she was, she did not deserve his compassion.

Syaoran was still on the ground. He was unable to get up.

"What's with you?" Seishirou demanded impatiently.

But Syaoran was injured. The fall had dislocated his patella. He could not bear weight on his left leg.

"Spirits," Seishirou hissed, "you're just full of problems this time around!" He reached, slid one arm under Syaoran's shoulders and another under his legs and lifted him up like a damsel. Then he handed the boy over to Kurogane.

"He needs to get to the castle!"

Syaoran had gone ashen from the pain. Even his body felt cold when Kurogane accepted him. The ground shook, and Kurogane stumbled, though he kept his hold on the teen. Seishirou then broke away, swinging his sword to block an axe that was trying to imbed into his back.

Kerberus released a loud roar, followed by a fireball that sailed far too close overhead. The golden beast then bunched on its haunches and leaped ahead. Kurogane followed, aware that he could not allow Syaoran to linger too far away from the guardian. But they were headed away from the castle, past the flying bits of flesh and shards of bone. Kurogane looked around once again for the mage. He could not find him.

"Fay!" he shouted, despite knowing this was futile; over the din, there was no way Fay could hear him. But he had no idea where Fay was, and Fay carried the hourglass; how were they supposed to protect Syaoran if Fay was not there with them?

But he need not have worried. From the midst of the chaos, the blonde appeared. His hair was light and his clothes were dark, while about him was a tempest of swirling spells, bright streaks of magic and fire and will. They seared those around him, lighting bodies on fire that glowed bright purple, blue, green. For a moment, Kurogane was in awe. It seemed that Fay alone could take down the might of Kuroiyama and all that troubled Nihon, from the demons scattered in the wilderness to the greedy, power-lusting emperors on their many thrones. Through the sprays of blood and dirt, his eyes glowed pale blue, more vivid and real than anything else around him.

Fay waded through the crowd of soldiers and sorcerers, paving a path of death. At first, he did not see Kurogane and Syaoran. When his eyes landed on them, he broke into a run, and that aura closed into his body until Kurogane could barely detect it at all.
"What happened?" he cried, reaching out to squeeze Syaoran's shoulder.

"His patella is dislocated," Kurogane told him. "Left one." He looked around. "We are going to have to push it back."

Fay reached for it, but Syaoran grabbed him to stop him.

"No! It hurts!"

"Set him down!" Fay ordered. He pointed at Kerberus. "Keep the others away!"

None of them looked to see if the guardian beast followed this order. Kurogane set Syaoran down, not sure what Fay intended to do, but Fay then grabbed a firm hold on Syaoran's left knee.

"No—!!" Syaoran shrieked. There was a sickening pop. The boy sobbed, trembling, and then swooned.

Kurogane cradled his head and looked around. Arrows flew overhead. Kerberus pressed behind, wings outstretched, effectively shielding them.

"It's alright," Fay soothed the teen. "The pain should ease now."

Syaoran's left leg was still going to be shaky, but at least he would have a slim chance. Kurogane still opted to carry him when Kerberus lowered his wings, signaling that the coast was clear for the time being.

"We need to get to that castle," said Fay.

"How are we supposed to get to the castle through all of that?" Kurogane demanded.

In the distance, another portal opened, allowing a demon to step through and wage terror on Avalon's forces.

Syaoran bucked up suddenly. "I can get us in!"

"What?" Fay exclaimed.

Then Syaoran made a parting motion with his hands. Kurogane was just about to warn the boy that he should not leave Nihon, but on the other side of the portal was…the treasury interior.

Fay and Kurogane stared. Kurogane had only seen the interior once before, when he was finally allowed to know the exact room. Fay had never seen the interior.

"Hurry!" Syaoran cried out. "I can't hold it like this without making it permanent!"

That will not do.

Kurogane led the way. Fay and Kerberus followed close at his heels.

Compared to the cacophony outside, the treasury was hushed. Arranged in sorted aisles were the various artifacts Amaterasu and Tsukiyomi had collected to protect Shirasaki. From appearances, at least, everything seemed present and accounted for.

Clearly, they were not enough.
Fay and Syaoran needed a moment to get oriented.

"Brilliant…" Fay breathed. "You can make portals between worlds; why not within one? Brilliant. Clever, clever boy."

"Is this…" the boy inhaled, "where we met?"

Kurogane looked at the door that would lead to the very hall where he found the little thief trying to sneak in. He set Syaoran down on his own two feet, allowing Fay to support him, before veering off to one side to look at the items. The Silver Jade Amulet, somehow poetically, was clearly labeled, stored in an embroidered box.

The prince of Kuroiyama had sent Syaoran on a suicide mission to retrieve this amulet. Kurogane had no idea what it did. It must have been a powerful item, for it to have been kept in this room.

"We're technically in," Fay pointed out, while Kerberus scratched its flank using one of the pillars. "We are in Shirasaki, so we can finish it now. Summon the Fire Demon, stop time, and then cut off the ties."

"We're on our own here," Kurogane reminded him.

"Maybe that's best."

Syaoran leaned against Fay, looking troubled. "I don't like this room," he said in a small voice. He probably would not, Kurogane reflected. Many artifacts had violent purposes. The Silver Jade Amulet might even be one of them.

"We don't know what's out there," Fay went on. "This room is hidden. People don't even know where it is, or how to get in. We might be in the safest place to do this."

"We have to let the demon through. And then, once he's through, we have to shove him out. You really want to do it in this room?"

"You really think any other room is better?" Fay gestured. "Look at all the items in this room. If we go out, we'd have to contend with Kuroiyama as well. We won't get much help, and we might get attacked from multiple sides. Here, we have magical items at our disposal. We can shift things around while time is frozen so that the arena is to our advantage. You are an expert at demon-slaying, and I am no small foe. We also have that guardian."

Kurogane agreed. He reached out to the teen, who reached back; his left leg was still wobbly, but he seemed able to put weight on it now.

"We won't stay here long," he said to Syaoran. I hope we don't stay here long. "Let's take stock of what we have first."

There was something to emerging in this room. In the relative quiet, Kurogane's nerves were also soothed. He knew that silence did not always mean safety, but the room was small and everything was in full view. Fay could sit Syaoran down while the two of them examined everything. The Silver Jade Amulet, Fay warned, was a very powerful item, containing an explosive form of magic that could annihilate everything within a large range. There was a scepter made of wood that was adorned with large pearls; this one, Fay claimed, had a purifying quality.

"Ward off evil," Fay picked it up, "whatever that means."
There were other items meant to strengthen the defenses and properties of those they belonged to. Clearly, that did not stop Kuroiyama, though perhaps they had reached the limits of their power.

There was also a mirror, which had Fay transfixed when he looked at it.

"What is it?" Kurogane demanded.

Fay glanced at him, before stepping aside. "Take a look."

Cautiously, Kurogane did.

At first, he saw his own reflection, as with any mirror. But then, the background in the mirror brightened, and his face was replaced by Syaoran's. He appeared to be the same age, and looked more like the Tsubasa of old, though his skin was fairer. He was wearing an elaborate hat, adorned with pearls and jade.

Syaoran looked like he was examining the mirror from the other side. He said something, but the mirror did not convey sound. Kurogane could read his lips: *What does it do?* Then he tilted the mirror, and his own face left the frame. Behind him, to the side, a familiar figure stood, clad in pink and white. There was a distinctly unimpressed scowl on her face.

"Sakura," Kurogane recognized.

She was fairer than the Sakura of Clow, and her hair was darker, a solid deep brown, but the green eyes were the same. The scowl was not; Kurogane could not ever imagine such an expression being directed at Syaoran, of all people.

Syaoran, on the other hand, seemed unfazed, and when the mirror tilted back toward him, he was clearly laughing. Behind him, Yukito was clad in a similar outfit, though his cap was less ornate. He was looking at Syaoran with clear longing. Someone then snatched the mirror, and Princess Tomoyo's face appeared, face stern but eyes glittering with amusement.

Kurogane stepped away, heart pounding.

"Kurogane?" Syaoran called out, concerned by his expression.

The mirror was reflecting the room again, now that Kurogane had left the frame.

"What was that?" he demanded.

"It stores memories," Fay replied. "I've seen its like, before. These items are said to be particularly robust; no memory-wipe is able to purge them of their records. They were often used for testimonies. Most of the time, I've heard them with sound; this one does not have sound, but it is powerful in its own right, for it plays events that would have happened at this time, were things different."

"What do you mean?"

"No doubt, in the original timeline, today is a day he came to visit Shirasaki. With Yukito. And Sakura. It looks like they were goofing around."

As if a memory reawakened, Kurogane realized what the mirror was conveying, almost like he was remembering. Syaoran, the young lord of Suwa, had sneaked down to the treasury with his best friend Yukito and a very disapproving Sakura. They were probably snooping around out of boredom, and Princess Tomoyo found them.
He looked at the real Syaoran, who was sitting and looking at them, wide-eyed. This was his real future; no pearl hat, no best friend who looked like he could bask in Syaoran's laughter. That, idyllic as it was, had been dead for a long time. But something about what the mirror showed him had Kurogane feeling very unnerved. He was not certain what. It was not just that he had never seen Syaoran like that before, so easy and carefree.

This was not the time to dwell on the matter, though.

Fay handed the pearl scepter to Syaoran. The Silver Jade Amulet, he handed to Kurogane. The mirror, he took and folded it into his clothes.

"What do you intend to do with that?" Kurogane asked.

"It might help," said Fay, "in case I can't find the connection."

They moved some things, and it was time. Syaoran looked at them, clearly nervous. Kerberus lingered in front of him, licking at one massive paw. Out of everyone, the guardian seemed the least concerned about affairs.

"It's going to be alright," Kurogane stated, trying to comfort more than just Syaoran.

The boy nodded. This was what they had come for. Fay produced the hourglass, holding it at the ready.

Syaoran raised his hands.

Reality parted before them, revealing a dark expanse. Black, cold, and empty, it stretched far into the distance. Air sucked into it, like a vacuum, but then a dim light formed.

Kerberus growled, and extended its body across Syaoran, but a blast of bright, hot plasma seared through its protective wings and knocked it clear overhead. By the time it hit the back wall, three quarters of its body was nothing but charred remains.

Frightened, Syaoran yanked the portal closed, but two hooks, lit with flame, trapped the sides of the portal as it tried to seal. It then parted, tugging and bending the world around it. Between, a large yellow light peered through. An eye.

Then the room lit up, so bright that Kurogane's retinas burned from the intensity, and he was completely, utterly blinded. He heard Syaoran scream, felt more than saw something collide with the boy's face, just as Fay tipped the hourglass and the sands stopped flowing.

He was in the shop in Tokyo, and Syaoran was standing at the window, clad in Watanuki's robes, though wearing a hat. He was looking right at Kurogane.

Kurogane looked around, feeling numb and shaken.

"This isn't real," he whispered.

Some foul, demonic magic—

He was back in the treasury, based on the air and the smell and the echoes of the room, but his eyes could only perceive bright swirling colors. He reached out for Syaoran but could not find him.

"Syaoran," he tried calling out, but there was a ringing in his ears too, and he could not even hear the sound of his own voice. He reached out, swept his hands, but he felt nothing. He crouched low on
the floor, but Syaoran was not there.

No. That blast. It had hit Syaoran straight on. Was the boy knocked away somewhere? He called out again, though he still could not hear anything, could not see anything. The bright colors shadowed everything in front of him, and strain as he might, he could not make anything out.

His hand came across a pillar, the edge of a table, but no skin or cloth. He called out again, fear and dread making his heart hammer. He did not care if he sounded desperate. He just wanted to know his son was alright.

Suddenly, hands grabbed at his arms. Four hands. He felt a warm palm rest over his eyes, and a soothing magic penetrated, flowing through his skull and into his brain. It stayed there for a long time, before moving away. When he opened his eyes, he could see.

The treasury was well-lit. In front, Tomoyo, donning her usual princess garb, was peering curiously at him. Next to her, Sakura was frowning.

"Father!" Syaoran exclaimed, adjusting his pearl cap. "What are you doing here?"
Syaoran of Before

From the start, it had been about compassion—even Syaoran's mother had been selected for it. Back then, there were many potential matches for the son of Suwa. The Lady of Suwa was the one who picked out Yelan of Honkon.

"She has a good sort of face," she had mentioned to her husband. "A fair beauty too, but her countenance is good. She'd make a fine bride, and a fine mother."

At the time, Youou was fifteen, somewhat interested in girls because he was curious about them, but he had not been interested in any in particular. He appreciated their beauty, their delicate figures, how their presence elevates the place they were in to a new level of grace, but for one thing: none of them could ever compare to his mother, and for another: none of them inspired that deep feeling inside him. He did not particularly long for their affections either. Maybe he just had not met the right one. In any case, ignoring everything else (since he knew nothing else about this Li Yelan), a beautiful bride sounded more palatable than an ugly one.

He had not realized at the time that this was not what his mother meant.

Li Yelan was a beauty, though Youou had seen better. She looked like she should have been prettier than she really was; at first glance, her face was almost ordinary. It was certainly not unpleasant, and makeup achieved quite a bit to heighten what assets she had. Still, it was only later, when his mother finally passed from consumption, that Youou understood his mother's remarks had been an indirect comment on Yelan's disposition, not her looks.

The wedding took place three months after his mother's funeral; the Lady of Suwa never saw her son married. By that time, Youou was twenty. Li Yelan, in a rather unorthodox turn of events, was actually a year older than him. From the start, she was something of an elder in the relationship; more mature, calm, reserved, and unflappable. While Youou had a little of his father's bumbling mannerisms, Li Yelan was every inch a lady. She still did not inspire that deep desire Youou kept hearing and reading about, but she did complement him well. Theirs was a partnership of mutual understanding and support. He cared about her, respected her, and she was an ever-capable counselor and companion.

About a year later, they had their first child; a son. On the day of his birth, Youou headed out to go hunting—men were not supposed to be present during labor, as that was thought to bring about ill-luck. He caught absolutely no game, though for once his friends graciously avoided teasing him. They were picnicking on a glade when a messenger found him, reporting that he had a new heir.

Syaoran was this tiny little thing, too uncoordinated to even squirm. His father had stolen the infant from Yelan by the time Youou arrived and was playing with the bundle, as giddy as Youou had ever seen him.

"He's got my smile!" the elder man proclaimed.

"What?" Youou had protested. "He's my son! And he's not even smiling!" Which was true, because the newborn could not smile yet.

His father merely grinned at him. "Well I can tell from the shape of his lips!" He jolted the little one, who released an angry wail. "Ohohoho! He's got a temper! Why don't you go along back to your stags; I'm going to play with my grandson for a while!"
"Give him back!" Youou exclaimed.

His father relinquished the child only after a lot of grumbling. Yelan, exhausted, only held the baby for a little while before the midwife took him away.

Youou did not hold his son. He had looked at that little face and thought, *He does not look like me at all.*

He never did end up looking like Youou, but he did not look like Yelan either. It was a bizarre state of affairs that had his closer friends remarking their concern to him when Yelan was not present. But Syaoran had other marks that Youou knew could only have been passed down from him: he had another birthmark under his armpit that was in the exact position as Youou's own. The tip of his pinky fingers pointed slightly in, just like Youou's own. The shape of Syaoran's ears were also a complete copy of Youou's, and on his skull there was an odd indent that was only visible while he had been a baby, before the hair covered it. And, as wonder would have it, Syaoran did share his grandfather's smile, which Youou also had.

Syaoran had a cherry red birthmark on the inside of his thigh, and a brown arrow-shaped mole on the inside of his knee—two things Youou saw when the youngster was two years old and running around naked in the gardens to escape the handmaidens trying to bathe him. Youou had been walking with a priest, who took one look and stated with some awe, *"Those are marks of a strong sorcerer!"*

The magic came from Yelan, as it happened, though there also seemed to be another source. When the child was old enough to use magic, they noted that his amber eyes, a strange color on its own given neither Youou's side of his parentage nor Yelan's carried that hue, would turn a bright, vivid blue. Syaoran could make flowers bloom and trees grow with ease. He healed scratches and bruises and could even mend broken bones by the time he was five. He mastered the difficult spells more quickly than the easy ones, and the easy ones tended to drain him. By the time he was seven, he was as accomplished as any court sorcerer, such that Tsukiyomi of Shirasaki even came to visit on her Empress' behalf, curious about the little darling of Suwa.

"His magic is not of this world," she stated when she met him. "I foresee great things from you. Your soul is so pure. My hope is that it will always be so, despite the murk about us in these times. Such power can be corrupted so easily, but we can choose to ward our minds against evil thoughts, and hearts against evil wants."

It was Yelan's good guidance and sense that steered Syaoran away from the very things Tsukiyomi was afraid of. Syaoran was a soft-spoken, kind, and gentle child. So much so that he was useless with the sword, and hated training for combat. Part of it was his weak lungs; he could not sustain a session for a measurable length of time and required long periods to recuperate, but much of it was also his soft nature. Though he endured his own injuries with brave calm and composure, he hated hurting others. One notable incident was when they had to put down an old horse because it could no longer walk, and Syaoran cried loudly for hours, inconsolable. It was not even his own horse, since Syaoran did not have one. Youou had been furious and embarrassed by all this to-do over something that was very standard, which did not help matters. In the end, it was Yelan who quieted the child, reassuring him that the old horse died painlessly, and would have suffered more if it had to live without the freedom of walking and running. She then scolded Youou for berating the child.

"He has respect for the value of life in living things," she chastened, "for he himself is a delicate living thing. You should be glad that he is so compassionate. With the power he already has, which will only grow as he matures, he can easily be a great peril if he treats other beings the way you treat your game—things that live and die for his amusement. If he does not favor the sword, if he
does not favor bloodshed, then he'll maintain Suwa's glory by earning cooperation through his great
goodness and the dignity in which he treats others, whereas you and your father can only affirm
your authority by acts of cruelty while hoping you remain strong enough to enforce it."

Youou's own father also spoke on Syaoran's behalf.

"He's got a good heart," he said to Youou, more pleased than anything. "The fact that ours are
hardened is no fault of his. If he cares so much for beasts of burden, he'd care a great deal more for
peasants and serfs, and that, my son, is a fine legacy to have."

As a father, Youou was the disciplinarian and lord of the household. Men were to father children, not
raise them. They did not comfort crying babes—that was the mother's job. A father's role was a
punisher so that youngsters know not to step out of line, a protector so others know not to cross him
and his own, a leader so that final decisions are made. For these reasons, a father generally stays
somewhat removed from their offspring, because it would be hard to punish a child who looked to
him for safety and affection, intimidate others when they see his vulnerable side, or make tough
decisions that might make his child unhappy, even if it was for the best. But the next day Syaoran
was still sad, and he was frightened of Youou, and Youou found he could not bear the child
suffering for something that was not his own fault.

He called the boy over, and wondered at the irony that Syaoran could level legions singlehandedly
with the kind of power he had, and yet he still seemed so frail and in need of protection. Syaoran
stood before him, eyes downcast and thin shoulders tense with stress. Youou inadvertently worsened
his anxiety when he took a long time to decide what to say to him.

"Syaoran," he said softly, "I'm not angry at you." That needed to be clarified first. "You are a good
boy with a soft heart. What happened yesterday was not your fault. You are young, and you are
innocent. You don't know better. But the world is not as beautiful as you are, my son. There are
shadows, and evil. There are bad people out there. There are bad spirits. And there are times when
even good people don't have good decisions to choose from. Sometimes, bad things happen.
Sometimes, we have to do things that we don't want to. You are a big boy now. You can't start crying
like a girl every time you're upset, and certainly not in front of company."

Syaoran had nodded, but he could tell the boy only heard a reprimand, an unspoken request that
from now on, he keep his distress to himself. And that was not what Youou intended.

He crouched down and held his arms out to his son. "Come here."

Syaoran, at least, readily went to his father's arms. Youou hugged him close and felt a renewal of that
distant promise to protect this little life he had brought into the world.

"All things die," he told his son. "One day, I will die. One day, you will die. We all die one day. What
matters is how we lived our lives, what we do with our time. How we face what life throws at us,
whether we do what needs to be done, or if we run and hide. Often, life is painful. There is a lot of
suffering. If we don't suffer, we are surrounded by others who do. Courage is when you do what
must be done, regardless of how painful or frightening it is to you. And sometimes that is accepting
unhappy things, when there is no other choice, with dignity. Do you understand?"

"I'm sorry, Father. I'll be braver."

"I know."

He was braver, however, and kept his hurts to himself, at least until he could convene with his
mother, who did a lot to help Syaoran reconcile the world for what it was: a home, but not entirely
safe. There were bandits to the south and warlords to the north, demons hiding in the wilderness, preying on unwary travelers. Syaoran's magic only grew, as his mother predicted, and soon it became apparent that he was meant to change things. He was clever, learned things quickly, and his kindness gave others hope.

When he was ten years old, he met a young prince from Abaron: a fair-haired Yukito, rather far removed from the throne as he was the son of the king's sister, not the king himself. Syaoran had taken a liking to the prince because of his soft manners. Prince Yukito similarly found the boy charming. He was a capable warrior, though his strength was more in the bow than with the sword. While Youou and Yukito's father discussed trade policies, the two youngsters often spent time together. The friendship was fast-forming and deep, for ever since then, Prince Yukito would occasionally visit Suwa and Syaoran would be invited to Abaron. Given his young age, Youou loathed to allow the boy to travel the perilous roads.

At fourteen, however, Syaoran had grown into a slender and tall teen. He was like a willow tree, with gangly limbs that flopped about him, but his face exuded that goodness Youou's mother had commented about Yelan. He was moderately good in combat, though he excelled at magic far more. Prince Yukito had been speaking about Abaron's orchards, the sweetness of the apples, and Syaoran really wanted to try them. They had tried shipping them from Abaron, but the fruit inevitably became bruised during transport. Syaoran could defend himself well enough, so Youou had assigned him a few men and allowed him to go. He was to stop over at Shirasaki, where he would meet the prince, before proceeding on to Abaron.

But shortly after Syaoran left, Yelan fell down the stairs and broke her neck. Shirasaki was close, so Youou let his father manage the proceedings and rode out to fetch his son personally, knowing that Syaoran would struggle with the news. But along the way his party was attacked by bandits. Youou was still nursing a concussion when he arrived at Shirasaki.

"Father! What are you doing here?" Syaoran asked, while the green-eyed girl behind him gasped.

Youou looked at his son, wondering what it was about Suwa's noble house that doomed all its women to early deaths. "Your mother passed," he whispered.

Syaoran did not react at first. His mouth opened, closed, opened again, and he then looked around, as if searching for help, or some sign that this was a joke.

"What happened?" Prince Yukito asked.

"She fell," said the girl, just as Youou replied, "She had an accident. Fell down the stairs. It—she was dead when we found her."

Syaoran turned ashen, and he made like he was about to swoon—Prince Yukito steadied him with a hand at the back of his shoulder. In the back, Princess Tomoyo looked on with a troubled frown. Youou wanted to gather his son into his arms and let the little one cry it out, but with all these people around, his first instinct was to take Syaoran away.

"I'm here to take my son back to Suwa," he explained to the others. "We have preparations. I'm afraid we can't afford to let him visit Abaron at this time."

"Of course," said the prince. "Please accept my condolences. Syaoran! Breathe!" He reached out to support the boy, and Youou was flooded with the bizarre urge to fling the young man off; he needed to get Syaoran home. Now.

"This—this isn't real," Syaoran shuddered, and his eyes became glassy. "This isn't—"
He was in Tokyo, in the dream shop. Li Tsubasa was pouring tea, acting the part of a good host. He was a solemn creature, with brown hair and amber-brown eyes. He was young, only fourteen, and seemed too small for the role he played.

"You wish to have a son," he remarked, sounding mystified, "and the princess sent you here." He looked to the side, where the blonde, blue-eyed king sat, calm and serene. He was clad in a robe embroidered with gold and silver thread, and wore a crown on his head. "And you were told to come here too."

As the budding lord of Suwa, Youou had been an eligible bachelor, but his mother had not been impressed with any of the young ladies that would have been potential matches. She kept lamenting about Honkon after it had been demolished by rival faction Hatsubi. Honkon’s noble house was purged, and amongst them, his mother told him, had been a girl she especially liked. Such stories were common in Nihon, however, so the house of Suwa moved on. Youou took on a different wife, shortly after his mother died of consumption, but they had no living children; their first son was a stillborn, the next three were miscarriages, and the fourth lived until two months before expiring. After that, two more miscarriages, another stillborn, and one child that lived until nine months before dying of pox fever.

Nihon only grew more chaotic with time, and though Suwa remained prosperous, a lack of heir would only escalate violence and discord. Princess Tomoyo of Shirasaki was the one who told him about a new Dimension Mage, a youth named Li Tsubasa, who seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. The Dimension Witch, Ichihara Yuuko, had passed and left him in her stead. Supposedly, Tsukiyomi informed him, this boy could give him a son who would "bring peace to Nihon".

Such transactions required hefty fees, however. First getting to Tokyo required a great deal of power. The Princess of Shirasaki warned that the price may not be something Youou could afford.

"Well, you are said to be the heir of the dimension witch." The King of Valeria looked at Youou with an airy smile that looked entirely fake and superficial. "If anyone can grant sons, it should be you, no?"

Li Tsubasa set the teapot down.

"I don't know if I can help you," he stated, folding his arms to himself. He looked composed, but had that transparency youngsters had, or perhaps Youou was just good at reading under the skin. He realized that the boy was feeling insecure and upset. "The price is very high. You'll lose much of what you have now. We all will."

"Why?" the King demanded, eyes flashing blue, bright and angry. "I was told I was supposed to have a son. I was promised a son. Why must I pay a high price for someone who was supposed to be mine in the first place?"

"It's easy to break things," Li said sadly. "And when things break, you can put it together again but…it never becomes entirely what it was."

He turned away, looking disturbed, before either Youou or the King could ask him what he meant.

"Why now?" he asked while facing away, holding his arms as if cold.

"Does it matter?" Youou asked.

"I suppose not," Li admitted. "They won't likely know how things must be, to bring a new life into someone's home." He looked to the side. "Valeria, at least, is alive. Suwa, at least, persists. If either
"What would change, exactly?" Youou demanded.

Li shook his head. "I can't say for sure. But why rock the boat? Perhaps it's better, the way things are."

"Valeria has no future," said the blue-eyed King. "For all my powers, I cannot purge the curse cast upon it."

"Nihon stands on the brink of annihilation," Youou added. "Suwa was to produce a savior that would unite the continent, but that was stolen away."

"So you see," said the king, "neither of us have much to lose."

Li was shaking his head. "Think carefully. This is no small matter."

"Why don't you just tell them that you were the son they're supposed to have?"

The statement, uttered in a bored, dry tone, came from a tall young man with short dark hair and eyes that changed from green to gold depending on the light. He had been the one to greet both the King of Valeria and Youou when they each arrived, before bringing them to Li Tsubasa for his audience. He had been mostly silent and stoic, seeming uninterested in the passage of events, but he was clearly still observing everything.

"Hey!" Li whirled at him. "That was not your business to make public!" But it was too late.

"What is he talking about?" the King leaned forward.

Li's shoulders were shaking minutely; only Youou's habit of keen observation allowed him to notice this. "Nothing important. You should go. Your wishes are not in my power to fulfill."

"No," Youou said softly, "I think you can fulfill them. Something else is holding you back. And what did your friend mean, you were the son we're supposed to have?"

Li turned and glared, mostly, Youou saw, to hide the tears gathering in his eyes. "It's noth—" he tried, but then seemed to realize that denial would not stop their questions, so he switched tactics. "Well, he meant what he said. I don't know how to make it clearer. I was supposed to be…you were supposed to have…but none of that matters."

"You were supposed to be both of ours?" the King exclaimed, blue eyes wide and disbelieving. "At once?"

"Not at once," the tall man drawled. "For your information, Your Majesty, you weren't supposed to live for three hundred years. That was supposed to be—"

"Shut up Doumeki!"

Doumeki ignored Li. "—his little gift, and then he was supposed to take off, be reincarnated as Suwa's golden child, but a sorcerer more powerful than all of us decided to go back in time and kidnap his soul."

"When did you start getting all talkative all of the sudden?" Li hissed, eyes flashing in anger.

"This isn't real," Syaoran looked like he was about to swoon again. His lips were blue. Youou
stepped forward to hold the boy up.

"We need to leave," he told the others.

"He's in shock," said the green-eyed girl; she might be a handmaiden here, or whatever her role was, but Youou had never seen her before. She seemed to take far more than a servant should. "We should lie him down."

"We don't have time—"

"The dead have time, Lord Youou," the princess pointed out. "Your son is ill."

"I'm fine." Syaoran managed to right himself, even though he sounded far from fine. "I…I need to see my mother—"

"When did you start getting all talkative all of the sudden?"

"When you started being a coward," Doumeki looked at Li pitilessly. "If you keep cheating yourself out of your own salvation, you'll never find what you've yearned for all your life."

"What do you know of what I yearn for?"

Doumeki merely folded his arms and looked away, bored. Li glared at him, avoiding looking at his guests.

The King of Valeria and Youou exchanged an uncertain look. Both of them were unsure what to make of the news. For a long moment, silence reigned.

"If you're hoping to save your worlds," Li said in a low, soft voice, "that won't happen by gaining a son. You were both supposed to be fathers of a unifying king, emperor. That cannot happen, even with my powers. I no longer have the ability to save realms, not after everything that has happened. I can try and give you someone else, but that would mean stealing another soul from their destiny, and it would be an endless chain of wrongs that cannot be righted. Better to leave it here, as it is, and deal with whatever comes as best we can."

It was a refusal, and normally both men might have accepted that for what it was. But this child exuded such pain, there was clearly more to all of this. Youou instantly suspected that the reason Li did not think he could help was because he had been hurt.

"Who are your parents now?" Youou asked gently, needing to start somewhere, needing to understand.

"That's none of your business." Li Tsubasa turned around, eyes hard and sharp. "Go. I cannot help you. Doumeki, please show them out."

Doumeki did not react except to move forward toward the exit. After a moment, the two men followed him. They stepped out to the bright cityscape of Tokyo, with the glittering skyscrapers and neon signs flashing.

The King of Valeria grabbed Doumeki by the elbow. "What happened to him?" he demanded in hushed tones.

"He was kidnapped by a psychopath," the young man replied dispassionately. "He was tortured for years until he had a psychotic break and killed his captor. Apparently it was a bloody scene." A
smile then ghosted the man's lips, and his tone carried a touch of satisfaction. "Truly gruesome, worthy of the goriest horror novels ever to be written. The old shopowner collected his catatonic butt and took him here before she passed all this on to him."

The King blinked. "He's just a child."

"Since when did that matter when it came to such things?" Doumeki closed the door.

"I need…" Syaoran's breath hitched, fingers squeezing a handful of Youou's robes.

"Syaoran, have some water first—"

"No." His voice was stronger. "I need to go home with my father. Maybe…maybe I can do something." His eyes began to glow. "I'm supposed to have—"

"You can't resurrect the dead, child," Princess Tomoyo sighed.

Syaoran shook his head. "She's not dead."

"I'm not leaving," said the King. "Are you?"

"No," said Youou.

"I need to leave."

"Syaoran—"

"I need to—"

"We're not leaving."

Li glared, yanking at his wrist. Youou held on firmly.

"You're not staying," the boy hissed.

"Then make us leave," the King challenged.

Li blinked. "Why are you tormenting me this way? You don't even know me! Let me go!"

"You can make me let you go," Youou whispered. "You're holding back, just like you're holding back on fulfilling our wish—it's your wish too, isn't it? But for some reason, you don't think you're good enough."

Li's frame quaked under him. "Don't test me, Youou of Nihon. You don't know what I'm capable of."

"I'm aware," said Youou. "So is King Yuui. We know you've survived worse than being the savior of realms."

"You don't understand," Li was starting to beg. "I'm not what you need me to be. You're both here to save your worlds and I can't do that anymore. The whole reason I was assigned to be your offspring was because I was pure and I'm not anymore—you don't know what he's done to me—he's
poisoned me, stripped me bare, and even now just a shadow of his memory fills me with so much hate it's like he is still alive inside me!" His voice raised as he grew hysterical. "I laughed when he died! I ripped at his flesh and kept tearing until he no longer bled! Even now I see it over and over again," his voice tapered off to a whisper as tears overflowed from his eyes. "I wish I can do it all over again—it filled me with such joy. If it could last ten times as long it would never be enough. I'll rip off those fingers and cut them to pieces from the tip back—one for each time he touched me, and that foul heart, I'll shred it with my own nails as he watches…” The boy was now shaking with rage. "This is the monster you're asking for—"

Youou yanked the boy to him and engulfed him in the tightest embrace he could manage. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you—"

"You're not listening, you're not listening to me, listen to me—"

"Father! What are you doing here?" Syaoran asked, while the green-eyed girl behind him gasped.

Youou looked at his son, far too young to have lost his mother. "Your mother passed," he whispered.

Syaoran did not react at first. His mouth opened, closed, opened again, and he then looked around, as if searching for help, or some sign that this was a joke, because looking at his father was unbearable.

"What happened?" Prince Yukito asked, sounding aghast.

"She fell," said the girl; she was not someone Youou had seen before. Perhaps a new friend Syaoran had made; his son was good at making friends.

"She had an accident. Fell down the stairs. It—

The hourglass exploded into shards of glass and puffs of sand.

Kurogane stared, forgetting for a moment whom and where he was. There was a deafening roar all around him, and the room smelled of smoke. In his vision were blooms of color, receding to allow him to see only to grow and spread and cover his vision once more. It was hard to look through and the sting of smoke on his eyes did not help matters.

The amulet glowed on his belt. Kurogane looked down.

What was happening?


The Fire Demon spilled through the portal, shapeless, formless, but a thick, dark murk that chilled the heart even as the room heated up, suffocating. Where the portal was, wooden artifacts spontaneously burst into flame. Its voice vibrated deep into the marrow, deafening in its power.

Spirits will always triumph over mortal flesh and mind.

Kerberus roared, golden wings sweeping, spells sparking in front of its maw, but the Fire Demon continued to spill through. It summoned a shield to block the worst of the heat, but it was a much smaller spirit than the great Fire Demon, and its shield could only do so much.
All things die. In death, glory fades. Even the exalted Unifier, the Peace-bringer, the Wings of Mankind, cannot defy his ultimate doom.

"Syaoran!" Fay shrieked, and his body dove towards a huddled form on the floor. Ice froze in Kurogane's veins and despite the heat, he felt cold.

Time. They were stopping time after opening the portal and—did Fay do it? Did he sever the link? Was the Fire Demon still there?

"No!" he heard Fay scream. "No! No!"

He blinked rapidly, willing his vision to clear so he could see what was wrong, so he could help Fay, who did not stop screaming. The mage's voice was filled with horror and pain.

There was only one thing that could make Fay sound that way.

Kurogane reached out, still blind, but his hand found Syaoran's easily. They were clenched and cold.

Syaoran. Syaoran had been hit. He had heard his son's death cry. Though the smoke made it too dark to see, he could tell that the boy was still. Too still.

Last time he died, Fay remembered how things were supposed to be. Now Kurogane was starting to remember...that meant—

Syaoran was dying.

Another wave of fire washed over Kerberus' shield. Fay looked up at the murk about him, eyes blue and shining with tears. His magic was wild, filled with rage. His fingers moved fast as he wove a spell, which seemed to gather the wisps around them and push the Fire Demon toward the portal, but even as the mage pushed the demon back, more of it spilled through. There was no hook to keep it from closing; it was staying open on its own. This portal had become permanent. Fay could drive it back, but he could not shut him out.

Kurogane felt Syaoran's arm. The smoke was getting thicker, and he could see absolutely nothing, but he could tell, by the tense muscles under his fingers, that Syaoran was in some sort of spasm. He seemed to be in a tense paralysis, for the hands did not react to Kurogane's, and the boy did not react to Fay's screams.

Recalling the vague direction of the blast, Kurogane reached to feel the boy's face. Skin. Skin.

Ash.

He nearly doubled over. No. He reached up, felt intact hair, albeit covered with dust. He cupped the child's face. It was intact. But there was a part that did not feel right. Like a burn, mixed with sticky wetness.

"Syaoran," he choked, coughed, and then begged, pleading with everything he had—

"K-K-Kuro..." he heard a faint whisper, and the body under him started to shake.

"I will tear you apart!" Fay shrieked, and water swirled in heavy mist all around.

"Syaoran!" Kurogane cried, then buckled down as pain seared through his clothes at his hip. The Silver Jade Amulet was burning.
It was blazing bright. Kurogane looked at it, took it in his hand, and then looked at the portal where the Fire Demon was seeping through. Kerberus was roaring at it, but the guardian was also fire-based, and at most it could summon shields, not harm the spirit. The room was starting to crumble from the damage, and Fay fell to his knees to bend over Syaoran, crying, as chunks of debris began to fall from the ceiling.

Ominous laughter echoed.

"No…" Fay wailed.

He felt Fay twist his body, and that pulse of incredible magic, followed by a deafening boom.

"Leave us alone!" Fay's voice did not even sound like him anymore. If Kurogane had not been so in tune with the other's presence and very being, he would have thought the voice belonged to a demon as well. The room shook, and Kurogane felt dust fall from above. He curled over Syaoran's body as well to shield him from any debris.

"Please!" Fay screamed, cradling Syaoran's head as the ceiling continued to fall apart.

Kurogane looked at the portal. The Fire Demon was coming back. In his hand, the amulet was almost burning. He looked for the hourglass and found it shattered, the sand in it spilled onto the floor.

Fay had resumed time. That meant the Fire Demon's mystical ties should have been cut. They just needed to push him out, but despite all the magic being flung around, the demon remained unscathed, and just kept streaming back, more and more and more.

He looked at the amulet again.

The Silver Jade Amulet was supposed to destroy things. Could it destroy the portal?

Only one way to find out.

As that flaming eye appeared again, Kurogane took aim, and threw.
Almost to the end! Just bear with me here ;D

Who will lead Nihon to glory?

Y-Y-Yukito of Ab…

Are you certain, young one? The throne might save your life.

I made…a promise…

"Kuro!" Fay screamed, his voice faint and far away. "Help me! He's dying! I can't save him!" He sobbed. "I can't save him! Syaoran, no, Syaoran, child, hold on. Hold on, sweetheart. I'm right here. Papa is here." Fay's voice was choked with tears and terror. "Son, don't do this to me. Not again. No. No no no no no."

Kurogane blinked to gray dust and smoke. There was a loud ringing in his ears, and his whole body felt like it had been bashed into the wall repeatedly and then dropped onto the floor.

"Kuro!" the mage coughed, choked, and sobbed. "Kuro, do something!"

His face loomed over him even though his voice was still soft and distant. His cheeks were covered with blood.

Kurogane stared dumbly at first, and then rose—when had he fallen?

"The demon!" he gasped out, but the portal was gone, and the Fire Demon was no longer oozing into the room; its foul magic, heavy and clogging, was absent, as if it had never been. The fires were also out, leaving behind a thick stench of smoke and had Kurogane coughing as hard as Fay.

But the room was still crumbling, and a thick chunk collapsed from above, shattering into pieces on the floor. To the side, Kerberus coiled, wings bunched up and tail swaying. With a single bound, the guardian joined the group of humans, but even with its wings outstretched, it could only do so much to protect them from the impending cave-in.

Syaoran's body was crumpled on the floor. The boy was alive and still breathing, emitting choked gasps as he fought for his life. The right side of his face was covered with blood; the same blood that was staining Fay's. Black goo oozed from his swollen right eyelids. His body trembled in spasms.

"Kuro," Fay whimpered. He was in an absolute panic. "Do something, please, do something, something—I can't use the hourglass again—he can't—I can't do this again please please please—"

They had to get out of this room. With the ceiling still crumbling, it was a death trap in here. Kurogane gathered the boy into his arms. Syaoran continued to choke and spasm from shock.

Out in the halls, Kuroiyama's forces charged, but Fay lashed out with magic wipes and sent blood
and flesh splattering against the walls and ceiling. When desperate, he was a creature of catastrophic destruction, and there was nothing Fay could do now except destroy. Kerberus blew balls of fire, each one like cannonballs. Kurogane stumbled after, dizzy—

Syaoran rode like demons were after him.

"Slow down!" Yukito was calling to him. "You'll wear out your mount!"

Syaoran did pull his horse, but was soon urging it faster again. The beast, sensing its rider's distress, responded with an erratic pace.

Youou caught up, tugging the reins. "Syaoran! Stop. You need to stop."

"What—"

"Get off the horse. Now."

Syaoran dismounted. His eyes were wet. Youou also swung himself off, and herded the teen to the side of the road.

"You can't hurry ahead of the party," he scolded. "What if you were attacked? Have you lost your mind?"

Then the boy burst into tears.

All of the sudden, he looked like that seven-year-old, sad and frightened after the horse was put down. He valiantly tried to restrain his sobs to no avail. Seeing his child in pain hurt Youou too, and while he might have snapped at anyone else who lost their composure in the middle of the road, he could not bear to hurt his son any further.

"Son," he sighed, and grabbed the boy to pull him close. He engulfed that head, pressing it against his shoulder. "It's going to be alright. Father is here. Father is still here. Come."

Syaoran nodded, shaking. "I'm sorry."

"What are you sorry for?"

"I just—I can't—stop—"

Crying.

Youou bent his forehead down and cupped his son's face.

"It's going to be alright," he said softly, staring into those amber eyes. Eyes that seemed to have come out of nowhere; they were not like his own and not like Yelan's. "Father is still here. You're not alone."

There's nothing I won't do for you. No line he would not cross for his son's sake.

Nihon will bow at your feet.

Syaoran stared back and, drawing strength from his father's promise, slowly calmed down. After a moment, Youou released him. Syaoran inhaled.

"I'm ready, Father."
There was a sound of bowstring vibrating, and a whoosh of an arrow. Syaoran's eyes flashed bright blue, and sparks of magic, iridescent, glowing, flashed about them. An arrow incinerated into flame, easily as thought.

"Lord Syaoran!" one of the men yelled.

Youou bumped into Syaoran, drawing his sword. "Get on the horse!"

"Father!" Syaoran cried in horror, grabbing him by the sleeve, "what are you doing?"

"I'm right behind you!" Youou swore, and shoved his child toward the—

Fay bumped hard into him, nearly making him drop the boy. Kerberus' head bumped into the back of Kurogane's legs.

"Do something do something do something—" Fay trembled so badly that even his speech sounded almost incoherent. The blood on his face was washing away because of his tears. "This can't be how it ends—"

Kurogane then did drop Syaoran. He was so dizzy.

"Kuro!" Fay supported him as he tilted to the side, nearly banging into the wall of the corridor. "No, no no, this can't be happening—"

Kurogane blinked. Syaoran was on the floor. He was no longer trembling now. Around them were Kuroiyama's soldiers, some fried to a crisp, others slowly oozing blood and entrails. The floors were painted red and black. Ahead, they could hear the war cries and flying spells and metal.

Kerberus bent over the boy's face and sniffed.

The four of them were the only living beings in the corridor, and one of them was nearly gone.

"Kuro!" Fay shook him, blue eyes shining. "What are you seeing? Are you seeing a way to help him? Please tell me you're seeing a way to help him!"

Kurogane blinked, seeing Syaoran lying face up, his countenance now calm as he gave in to the injury. The blood oozed slowly from his right eye with every breath.

"It wasn't just Fei Wong," Li snarled, thin face pale with anger. "Kyle Rondart...I dismembered him the way he always threatened to dismember me and I stuffed it all in his ugly mouth—he was still alive when she found me, you know, because I kept him alive—"

"Hush." The King was weeping silently, pressing his forehead to the boy's temple. "That was not your fault."

"I knew what I was doing." Li shrugged away. "They called it a breakdown but I. Knew. Exactly. What. I. Was. Doing—and Xing Huo, I stabbed through the stomach even though she was the only one who had ever been kind and pinned her to the wall—"

"It's over," Youou whispered, cradling that young face, wet with tears of pain and rage. "You did what you had to, in order to survive—"

"No, I didn't have to do all that," Li glared up, eyes flashing gold as his own voice softened. "I wanted to. All his whispers, poison, for seven years, until I forgot who my own parents even
were. He tried to make me think he was my father, and now that is the only truth I know: that he wasn't. When Yuuko took me here, she worried that I would have to be put down like a rabid dog, because she wasn't sure I had any humanity left.

"Clearly you do," the king pointed out. "She wouldn't have left the shop to you."

"She didn't have a choice. There was no one else to take the shop when that Clow princess undid Reed's wish—"

"She wouldn't have left the shop to you," Doumeki interrupted, eyes narrow. "You seriously think someone like Ichihara Yuuko couldn't have figured out a way?"

"She couldn't kill Fei Wong Reed." Li turned away from Youou and the King, but the King kept a hold on his wrist, just as Youou had done before.

"If you come to us instead," the King said earnestly, "everything you went through would never have happened. All the things you suffered."

"It's not that simple," Li looked at him. "He's imprinted himself in me. That won't go away, just because I rewind time. I can't be what you want me to be, or need me to be."

"I don't need you to be anything except my son," said the King, "and neither does Youou. What you are is more than just a savior of worlds. Your destiny extends beyond any single realm, and you are meant for more than just manning this shop, fulfilling everyone's wishes except your own. You are my child—that does not change just because of the crazed actions of one hateful man, and I can no more leave without you now than if I had raised you for the last fourteen years."

Li stared at him, eyes wide and wounded, his heart were covered with bruises.

"I—I don't know. I don't know. You don't know what you're saying—"

"That's arrogant of you," Doumeki drawled. "They are older than you. By a lot. Considering the last seven years don't really count, since you were too busy being raped and tortured to have much mental development—"

"Shut up Doumeki!" Li shouted, and made to lunge at the man. Youou restrained him, glancing over at Doumeki. He seemed particularly unkind, but at the same time he seemed to be helping the youngster, in his antagonizing, provocative way.

"What?" the man exclaimed. "You seem keen on telling them every ugly truth about you so they'd know what a horrible ruin of a human being you are. Aren't I helping?"

Li folded inwards, sobs squeaking from his throat, and his body went limp as he surrendered. Youou supported him and embraced him close, letting the little one cry it out. He knew just one episode would not be enough. Li Tsubasa might never truly heal from what had been done to him.

But if he and the King of Valeria get their way, Li would not need to. He squeezed his eyes shut, vowing that they were going to fix all this. They were going to—

Kurogane squeezed his eyes shut and then opened, trying to focus. Syaoran was very still, his chest barely rising as his one eye stared upwards, blank.

A strong sense of familiarity overcame him. The boy looked just like Fay had, when the clone had eaten his right eye. In fact, it was the same eye. Like father, like son.
Kurogane blinked. He looked at Fay, then at Syaoran.

Syaoran's eyes glowed blue when he cast magic.

Fay never said what Tsubasa's eyes did on Valeria.

"Your eye," he remembered. "Didn't Syaoran say that it was his to begin with?"

Or was it Fay's brother?

He could not remember.

Fay drew back, his countenance morphing into something Kurogane could not describe.

"An eye for an eye," the mage whispered. He looked at the boy, and suddenly pressed his right hand over Syaoran's face.

"Wait—" Kurogane stuttered. He had not known what he was trying to say, the implications of what he just said, until Fay acted. "Fay—"

"I've used this eye for hundreds of years," Fay looked at him. "Syaoran has more use of it."

"Are you—"

Fay's hand glowed, an iridescent shimmer of white, gold, and blue.

"—sure…" Kurogane trailed off. An eye to save someone's life was hardly a trade. Would hardly be a trade to Fay, after all that had happened.

Syaoran's head also glowed, bathed in Fay's magic. The mage bent his forehead down to touch Syaoran's, and reached for the pearl scepter.

White light glowed, washing out the world—

"Taking her hand will create an intermediate timeline," Li looked at them nervously. He still had trouble believing that Yuui and Youou still wanted him. "It will create a paradox, which would make me obsolete. I will die shortly afterwards and be…reincarnated, and then we can start over, with whatever's left. And I don't know what will be left. You might end up with siblings you never had, your parents might die, people might show up in your life or disappear from your life. I don't know."

"But you'll be ours?" Yuui asked.

"Whatever that's worth," Li shrugged, avoiding their gaze. "And for all I know, this might destroy Suwa and Valeria immediately, because all I'm able to account for is that Reed dies, Sakura lives, and I end up coming back to you. Those are the only certainties; everything else…it can go any which way. So it's—it's not much of a—"

"What do you need to do this?" Youou interrupted.

"Do you understand what this will do?" Li finally looked at him, his amber eyes full of fear beneath a scowling mask. "Are you listening?"

"I think you're the one who's not listening," Doumeki drawled.

"Shut up," Li snarled. "I get that you don't like me, but this isn't the way to get rid of me, you
"I'm not trying to get rid of you, you self-absorbed little brat. If I were, I'd just send you to the pound. I wouldn't bother with the whole time-rewind." Doumeki rolled his eyes.

Youou took that chin and turned it so the amber eyes focused on his own.

"We'll be waiting for you, son," he murmured.

Hope warred with fear. Li searched his face, perhaps to look for any hint of deception, of hesitation.

"I'll be good," he whispered, hope winning, and tears overflowed again. "I'll be good—"

"I wish," the King of Valeria began.

"I wish," Youou echoed.

---

I wish…

Wish…

......

......
Happy New Year, friends!

Ishihebi was hollering at the front gates.

Kurogane could hear them through the window from where he was sitting, as the rain pattered from the gray sky. Syaoran was on the mat, sleeping; he had been wrestling with a low-grade fever ever since Fay transplanted his right eye. The boy had yet to waken since the initial injury, though Touya assured Kurogane it will happen. Not that Kurogane needed the confirmation; the memories had stopped, the remainder of Syaoran's journey back to Suwa, as well as how Li Tsubasa rewound time, remained beyond the reach of his mind and perception.

Which was fine, because he already knew what he needed to know.

The mage was also recuperating; the transfer was not as traumatic as when the clone had stolen it by force, but the sudden reduction of his powers required some adjustment, and Fay had taken to napping alongside the youngster. He did not move even as the argument got heated outside; Ishihebi was not happy with the state of affairs.

Well, few really were. With the Fire Demon banished, King Yukito was supposedly accepted by the spirits as the upcoming Emperor of Nihon. Kuroiyama was defeated soundly, and they found Amaterasu in one of the cells, held captive by the invaders. Her powers had been bound; they had intended to sacrifice her. After freeing her, they let her manage what remained of Shirasaki, but Abaron continued to occupy the castle; Abaron's own forces had sustained considerable losses during the battle, and adding the journey beforehand, needed to recuperate. King Yukito did not give Shirasaki a choice about provisions; Abaron simply took, and stayed. If they had plans to leave in the short-term future, Kurogane was not privy to them; he and Fay stayed out of negotiations for the most part. Fay needed to heal, and Kurogane was not leaving his side. He knew that Nihon was far from the promised peace that Syaoran was destined to bring, but none of that mattered without his family. He did not answer summons to defend the castle against Ishihebi, just as he did not attend meetings between the king and his advisors.

Overall, at least in the immediate aftermath, it did not seem like the state of Nihon was any better than before Syaoran was brought to Shirasaki, before they opened the portal to shove the Fire Demon away, before Syaoran, apparently, named Yukito as the great unifier despite the fact that naming himself would have ensured his survival in that treasury.

Which was all the better, really, because Syaoran was alive regardless, Fay was alive (minus his right eye, so now he was wearing bandages over the socket), and because Syaoran did not name himself the unifier, this meant Kurogane could ignore all the drama outside.

It was just shy of noon when Syaoran did wake, his eyes opening to reveal one amber and one blue orb. The blue eye turned out briefly before Syaoran managed to bring it in so both could fixate on Kurogane's face.

"Kuro," the boy whispered, voice hoarse.
Fay roused instantly, sitting up. "Are you thirsty, son?"

Syaoran nodded, closing his eyes and gulping a little.

Kurogane had received some hot tea before all the yelling, so he poured some and helped Syaoran sip. By now, the tea was hot but not burning. Syaoran drank the whole thing and then looked in the direction of the chamber pot.

*Good to know his kidneys are working.*

"Did we do it?" the boy asked afterwards, wobbling a little on his two feet as Kurogane guided him back to bed.

"What do you think?" Kurogane pushed him gently to lie down.

"I don't remember much," Syaoran knelt, then stared at Fay. "What…what happened to your eye?"

Fay reached out to help the boy sit properly. "I'm fine, Syaoran, don't worry about me—"

"No, wait," Syaoran grabbed his arms. "I—I was the one that Fire Demon hit—I—"

"Syaoran—"

The boy grabbed at his right eye, and Fay quickly tugged his wrist down before he could accidentally scratch it. "Careful! You'll poke it out—"

"Wait—" Syaoran staggered to his feet. Fay let him go. He was going to have to know.

Syaoran stared, mesmerized, at the sight of himself in the mirror. Kurogane circled around to Fay, and the two of them watched as the boy came to terms.

"I know it doesn't look quite like your original eye," Fay said softly when the boy stayed silent and frozen for too long, "but it was the best I could do."

Syaoran turned around, eyes wide with horror.

"Why did you do that?" he whispered. "Why *would* you do that?"

Fay looked steadily at him. "Because," he said calmly, "you are my son, and I love you."

Syaoran froze in shock.

"Come here, child," Fay reached out to him. "It's alright."

Syaoran moved forward hesitantly, allowing himself to be gathered into his father's hold.

"We have fought long and hard to get you back," Fay told him, and started from the beginning.

After the transfer was completed, Fay had slumped, and that was where Abaron's soldiers found them, with Kurogane still cradling Syaoran, trying to figure out what was wrong and why the boy had not woken, and Fay leaning against the wall, legs sprawled on the floor. King Yukito took the boy from Kurogane after a bit of wrestling ("he needs a healer and so do you, now let go") and they were all gathered in the healing camp afterwards, Fay eating to replenish some of his reserves, while Syaoran slept, bundled up in blankets within the canopy of their makeshift shelter. King Yukito had sent scouts to search the castle for any loitering remnants of Kuroiyama's forces, though in general
they were pretty certain everyone had been weeded out. Kerberus went with the scouts, flashing its fangs and flexing its muscles.

While they were waiting for the go-ahead to settle in Shirasaki for real, Fay shuddered, cradling Syaoran in his arms. Kurogane sat on the other side, somehow the only one of the three that still had the energy to sit up. His mind felt like it was finally thawing from the shock of everything that had happened. In the aftermath, it was hard to believe any of that had happened.

"He was dying," Fay whispered, squeezing Syaoran's hand, still shaken from the near-loss. "The death blow hit right as I turned the hourglass. Even Kerberus' shield came up too late, it was so fast…I don't even know how he lasted as long as he did."

The answer to that became evident when Fay adjusted Syaoran's blankets and felt something—Fujitaka's turquoise, unnaturally hot. It was not a particularly powerful healing item on its own, but it must have been actively working, keeping Syaoran just on this side long enough for the two of them to figure out what to do and save him for real.

"They were slow," Kurogane told Fay. "The memories didn't come all at once. The first part was suddenly just there, but then when I got to the part where he was fourteen…it came slowly, rough, like it was catching on something that needed oiling. It kept getting interrupted, and I would break back into the present, perhaps when the turquoise stabilized him for a moment. But then he would start dying again and the memories would start but they would only make it a little bit down the way before catching again. I didn't make it all the way. We had saved him by then."

They both looked down on Syaoran's peaceful face. With his eyes closed, they could not even tell that one eye had been switched, though the lids there were still slightly swollen.

"I had two memories," Kurogane went on. "One was the original, the way things were supposed to be. One, I think, is when the timeline first changed. When Fei Wong Reed first took our son from us, but before the old Syaoran wished to save the princess from the mark. There was a timeline in-between."

Fay frowned. "I suppose that makes sense. There must have been a timeline without the clones, that got lost. He couldn't have started out as the son of his own clone. How did you know what you saw was that one?"

"Just the things that happened in that one. Suwa was…still around. You were the King of Valeria. You had Tsubasa's magic already, since he was stolen from you. Both of us had trouble siring progeny, and both of our countries couldn't last long, so…someone told us about the dream shop, or sent me to the dream shop. I think Tomoyo was the one. But instead of Ichihara Yuuko, we found…Tsubasa. He had taken over the shop, after Ichihara died. I think he knew who we were and what we were supposed to be to him, but he was this sad, frightened, hurting thing. Didn't remember who his parents were in that timeline, so I don't know who they were. Fei Wong Reed had taken him, I think when he was seven years old, and just…tortured him, for seven long years, perhaps to try to break him into becoming his minion. Towards the end, Tsubasa killed Fei Wong as well as his lackeys, in a horrific way, to the point where Ichihara thought he might be beyond saving. She fortunately took him in anyway, probably rehabilitated him until…somehow death came to claim her. That part I don't know. Either way, he took over the shop, and was doing what she did: granting wishes."

"So…Li Tsubasa was Watanuki," Fay said slowly. "Watanuki replaced him in the paradox."

"It makes sense."

After absorbing this for a moment, Kurogane went on, "We learned that we were supposed to sire an
heir that would be the salvation of our respective realms, so we both went to Tokyo to wish for a son. That was the first time we met; I don't think I met you in the original timeline either, though I didn't see the whole thing. I think when you healed Syaoran, the memories stopped. They certainly shouldn't have ended when it did."

Attacked by bandits. Syaoran would not have been Emperor of Nihon if he had perished during that encounter.

"We met Tsubasa for the first time at the shop, then," Fay guessed as he stroked Syaoran's hair out of his face. Syaoran turned his face in toward the mage, but slept on.

"He was…very different from the other Syaoran's. This one was tortured, brutally. Not just by Fei Wong Reed, but also Kyle Rondart, someone named Xing Huo. He was solemn…defeated…afraid of himself. He initially tried to push us away, told us he couldn't give us what we wanted. It was Doumeki who told us that he was originally supposed to be ours. But Tsubasa didn't think we'd want him. Fei Wong Reed had already changed things that could not be fixed. Tsubasa did not have the ability to reverse the fates of Valeria or Suwa. Valeria was under some kind of curse…Suwa might have been the same, I'm not sure. Even if he reversed time, he couldn't change these things."

Fay was silent, perhaps thinking of his brother, of Valeria, of Ceres.

"As soon as we realized who he was though…once we learned what he had gone through, I think both of us came to the decision that we were going to get him back, one way or another. He kept pushing us away, tried to explain why he was horrible…but all I saw was my child, frightened and in pain. It didn't matter that he didn't share my flesh and blood that time; I could read him as easily as if I had known him all his life. You also…didn't even acknowledge anything he said. You just confirmed, 'you'll be ours?' and you didn't care about anything else."

"Why was he pushing us away?"

"He didn't think we'd want him, because he thought Fei Wong Reed had corrupted him. He took joy in killing the bastard and his minions. Wanted to do it all over again. He said that the reason he came to us was because his soul was pure, and after everything that had happened to him, he wouldn't be able to save either of our countries the way he originally was supposed to. At some point we convinced him to explain what it was he could do, and I guess it was creating the alternate timeline, where he grabs Sakura's hand to save her from the Seal of Death. He said this would ensure he comes back to us, that Fei Wong Reed dies and that Sakura lives, but everything else is beyond his calculations. He even warned us that we might end up with…siblings we didn't initially have, or we might lose people we loved a lot sooner."

Fay inhaled, then exhaled.

"We wanted him anyway. It felt like he was ours even then," Kurogane went on. "If he really continued to resist, we'd have dragged him from the shop, but we wanted to change things so that he would never have to suffer through all of that. So that he would belong to us from the beginning. I guess that didn't really happen…but we both wished, anyway, and he was able to create a timeline where he could save Sakura when they were seven, causing Fei Wong Reed to create the clone, leading to that time paradox, and Watanuki ultimately taking Tsubasa's place in the dream shop. But this was an intermediate incarnation, meant to bridge to the real outcome: where Syaoran actually comes to us, as he is now. Tsubasa wasn't able to return things exactly as they were. He couldn't bring himself to you in Valeria or to me in Suwa the normal way. So he did the best he could. I suspect he was the reason the two of us are together, the way we are now."

Fay contemplated this for a while.
"So Li Tsubasa was always an intermediary," he murmured. "Even from the beginning, he was just a bridge. He was never meant to last."

"He was supposed to ease the timelines," Kurogane agreed, "smooth out all the kinks, and then he was supposed to fold over and live through the polished timeline as our Syaoran, right now. Tsubasa was always supposed to die, so that he can come back to us."

Fay looked at the wall. "When I chose not to save him..." he looked at Kurogane with hope, "It...it was because I had already chosen to save him."

Kurogane squeezed his hand. "It all happened because we both wanted him back. We both wished for him, and the past few centuries...your brother, the clones, when you rejected sacrificing our love to save Tsubasa from fading...that was all part of the process, the aftermath of that wish. You were working to get your son back for real, all this time."

Fay was still and silent for a long time, long enough for Kurogane to be worried. When he moved, he cupped his face in his hands and sobbed.

"Fay?" Kurogane reached for him, concerned.

Fay laced his fingers through Kurogane's, tears still streaming. "I'm alright." He laughed. "I'm...I'm so happy. Oh Kuro, I'm...I'm so happy." He laughed and sobbed at the same time, before flinging himself into Kurogane's arms and keening.

Amaterasu found them hours later. Syaoran was slumped in Fay's arms, eyes puffy and nose red. He looked a little like one of those cats with one blue eye and one amber one. It was still a little disconcerting to see him that way.

"Ishihebi has withdrawn," she told them.

They knew this already. Ishihebi had hollered insults, and then launched an assault, which Abaron beat back. Now, all was quiet again.

Amaterasu looked at Syaoran. "How are you doing, little one?"

He managed a small smile. "I'm alright."

"Are you?" Amaterasu was disbelieving.

His smile widened. "I have a Papa. And a Dad!"

Fay, who had been dozing despite the arrival of the castle's sovereign, opened his eyes to exchange a look with Kurogane. Amaterasu also looked at Kurogane for some context.

Kurogane said nothing. He no longer felt like he owed her anything, much less explanations. As long as Syaoran was alright with things—and he had taken in the information far more easily than either of them could have hoped for, once his initial hesitation had passed—Amaterasu hardly needed more elaboration.

The Empress looked at Kurogane. "What are your plans?" she asked.

Plans? Kurogane had no plans. Beyond keeping Syaoran alive past this, he had not dared to hope that there would be any plans.

"We're leaving Nihon," Fay said, patting Syaoran's hair. "We're going to go on a long, long
vacation."

Kurogane opened his mouth to protest that they could not just leave Nihon, before realizing that... after this, they really could.

"We can go to the island with the bunnies?" Syaoran looked up at Fay. "There's this island with thousands of bunnies that come up to you and you can pet and feed them!"

"Where did you hear about that?"

"Fuma told me!"

Fay chuckled and kissed Syaoran on the temple.


Kurogane stilled at this, his heart doing a double-take at the prospect of yet another task before they could really own their future, but Fay seemed to have thought of this already.

"We'll get Ishihebi to undo it," he said simply. "Shouldn't be hard to convince."

"You think so?" the Empress raised her eyebrows.

"It's no cost to him," Fay replied. "And if common sense doesn't appeal to him, ambition will."

"He's like an odd-eyed cat," Fuma squinted one eye. "I think it's quite fetching. Would be a hit with the girls."

"Don't corrupt him!" Seishirou scolded.

"What? He's fourteen, not four! Good grief! Does it feel different from your other eye?"

Syaoran squinted. "Not really, but I don't know...maybe. Probably because I know it's...well."

Seishirou turned to regard Fay while Fuma continued to engage Syaoran.

"You alright?"

Fay smiled. "Never better."

"Well, would you really say that?"

"Yes," said Fay, without hesitation.

Seishirou studied Fay for a moment.

"Hm," he grunted.

Fay reached out to clasp his arm. "Thank you, for everything."

"Well, we're not out of the woods yet. I'm told you're going to try to get Ishihebi to undo Syaoran's binding."

"Well, Syaoran wants to go to Rabbit Island, so we'll have to undo the binding."

"...And if the Emperor doesn't agree?"
"Meh. Worst case scenario, we can have Syaoran open a portal and send Kuropi through to catch a few."

"Why me?" Kurogane scowled.

"Because I no longer have depth perception."

"...Careful," Seishirou chuckled. "Next thing you know, he's going to make you do all the chores because he's short one eye."

"I can help do the chores!" Syaoran piped in, clearly missing most of the conversation.

"I'm sure your fathers will appreciate that," Fuma smirked.

Syaoran beamed, looking so happy, and Kurogane remembered Syaoran's distraught sobs when he learned his mother died, Li Tsubasa's tears and self-hatred, and wanted to remember this moment forever. Fay, happy for the first time in his life; Syaoran, looking so content, certain of his safety and acceptance. He had not thought twice about how having two fathers at once should not have worked; the kid probably just thought "magic" and figured that explained everything.

Kurogane still had no idea how he was supposed to have sired this child in the first place, but... having seen what he had seen, he figured...it will work out. Somehow.

Maybe he will find the answer in one of the worlds, once they get to traveling.

"Where's the King?" Kurogane asked.

"Still in audience with his advisors," said Fuma. "They talk a lot."

"Happens," said Seishirou. "You want to talk to him?"

Kurogane looked at Syaoran, who had gone to Fay again, seeking another hug; the boy was still adjusting to the notion of having a real family, and needed a lot of reassurance. Fay was only too happy to provide.

The teen was a little too old for all this but...who was Kurogane kidding? He could grow up later.

"You really think the king will cooperate with your plan?" Seishirou looked worried. It seemed the bounty hunters both had trouble reconciling with this new, hopeful future as well.

"I think," Kurogane replied quietly, "some things transcend lifetimes or timelines. Love between soulmates. Love between parents and children. Maybe even love between good friends."

Whatever the King was now, once upon a time he had been Syaoran's good friend. Kurogane will never forget that Yukito of Abaron was willing to kill Syaoran to preserve his own kingdom, his own dynasty. But he did believe that Yukito cared about Syaoran, in his own way. Now, Syaoran would never be at Yukito's mercy, and all turned out well...so...they could afford to be kind, now. Not to mention, Syaoran did hand him his own crown.

"We'll find some way," said Kurogane. "If not now, then later. If not today, then tomorrow. After what we have survived...this isn't a grave matter, by any means."

They can do anything.

"But you want to leave Nihon," Fuma murmured.
"I want to take Syaoran on vacation."

"I want to see the rabbits," Syaoran grinned. "Do you suppose we can take one with us? I'll feed it carrots!"

The next couple of weeks were oddly domestic.

Spring bloomed, full and sunny, and the days were warm and bright. While Abaron and Shirasaki continued to grapple with the war, Syaoran, Kurogane, and Fay lived in a sort of bubble that no one else tried to burst. Word of Nihon's many cities diffused to Kurogane's ears. Once upon a time, he would have listened attentively, but now he only paid attention to what was somewhat intriguing, like the death of a king from appendicitis, or the conquest of a kingdom, the expansion of countries that he would not have predicted, just a year ago.

Fay was still weak, but he was recovering, and Syaoran, happily, was soon up and running about. He took to the pearl scepter and kept hold of it all the time. Kurogane had yet to see him cast spells with it, but Fay assured him that the teen could. It was just a matter of not choosing to.

Which was fine. Choice was always a great commodity, Kurogane knew.

The teen reunited with the three ninja apprentices who had helped him initially with his writing, and the four of them went exploring in between meals during the day, though Syaoran's strength and endurance were still limited due to his frailty. Fay used that time to nap; he slept often, these days. Kurogane went to train; he no longer felt the urge or the intensity, like before, but Nihon was still dangerous, and other worlds were still dangerous, and Syaoran could not learn to fight anymore. Mostly, though, he used it to meditate, his mind sifting through memories of the past, when the old Syaoran had led their band of misfits from one realm to another, Mokona chirping, Sakura with her trusting gaze, Fay with his airy smile, carefree mask.

For some reason, despite knowing that it all came to this, this moment with Syaoran with his odd-eyed look and Fay finally absolved of his decade-long guilt, the pain did not lessen very much. He had expected it to be erased, but for some reason, it all still hurt, far more than he would have anticipated. He still missed the other Tsubasa, the one that had bravely committed to an endless journey for the sake of his most important person. He thought of Syaoran of Suwa, that bright vibrant child even in his sorrow; ten times more beautiful than this Syaoran purely because of his health and confidence, and he mourned that stolen life, the chance to have made his current child just as wondrous and magnificent. And he recalled that wretched waif in the shop, well-dressed but rotting on the inside from his suffering, all the tears he could not shed because a single lifetime was not enough to let them all out. In a way, it felt like all of them had died; Syaoran of Suwa, the original Li Tsubasa and the one after, all children he had lost, and he could not quite achieve complete closure for any of them, because the Syaoran he had now was different from the ones before.

Though Syaoran did not really feel like a different person, he had a different story—one that his past selves had clearly impacted, but he would never truly understand how.

When he could not quite reconcile with the past, he tried thinking of the future, but he was almost terrified to; the future was so intimidating. Fay had already decided on leaving Nihon and doing what it took to achieve that. The mage had requested the Crowned Emperor to track down Ishihebi so they could reverse the binding. If this was accomplished, Syaoran was free, and the three of them could go anywhere, to any realm. It seemed too good to be true, and in Kurogane's experience, when something seemed too good to be true, it often was.

Tsubasa's journey had been coming to an end. Kurogane had thought freely, naively, of the future then. And then the boy fell ill, and nothing about the next ten years was what Kurogane had planned.
The boy, fortunately, was happy; he was occasionally shy, and he would seek reassurance, mostly from Fay but also from Kurogane—Fay was the more motherly of the two, and these days, after giving his eye to Syaoran, the mage had been weak and tired, so the boy was more attentive to him. Syaoran was not quite sure what to do with the fact that he had parents again, and sometimes Kurogane caught him looking at the two like he was afraid they would disappear. He did not like going to sleep, because he was afraid that he would "wake up". Fay stayed with him for the first few nights, but pushed him to be more independent. Syaoran was an obedient child, but there were nights when Kurogane heard him snooping about, perhaps startled out of a nightmare. He was always back in bed by the time Kurogane got up to check on him though. The youngster was, after all, good at sneaking around.

After a while, though Fay began to get restless.

"We shouldn't stay in Shirasaki for too long," he said to Kurogane.

"You think they have designs?"

"This was never a place I'd want to stay for long. Not with Syaoran around. They wanted to use him from the start, even before all this, and I'm sure they'll find a use for him again."

"It's not so bad being useful," but Kurogane's heart was not in it.

"If Yukito can't find Ishihebi, we need to," Fay said grimly. He looked at Kurogane. "The sooner we leave Nihon, the better."

"Why are you in such a rush?"

"It's all too quiet," Fay whispered, proving that he was wrestling with the same doubts Kurogane had. "I want Syaoran far away from this place. Somewhere where we'd be left alone. You and I both know better than to let our guard down when everything seems alright. We'll give Abaron another three days; by then I should have recovered enough. Then we'll move whether or not we hear back from them."

Fair enough. Kurogane knew Syaoran would be sad to leave his friends again, but he wanted to leave too.

There was still work to be done. And after…

They can think about after, when they get there.
Two days later, reports came that Ishihebi's forces had been defeated. Yukito and Touya themselves had left Shirasaki by then, leaving the Empress to man the castle. Kurogane did not ask questions because he did not truly care about the answers, but he did gather that Amaterasu and Yukito had reached an agreement. After all, Emperors needed vassals, and Nihon was a big territory.

By then, Fay had recovered reasonably. He seemed to have lost a little of his vitality, but he made up for it with the quiet hope he resonated almost constantly now. It almost made him unrecognizable.

"They have Ishihebi somewhere in Tomoeda, love," Fay informed Kurogane when the warrior joined him on the balcony. "I'm told Priest Touya expects us to join them there. Didn't Syaoran want to see cherry blossoms there? It would be a fine trip this time of the year. We can stop by Sikayama and drop off Kerberus on the way."

"We can, hm?" Kurogane considered. "High Priest Ryou would like that."

Syaoran was not enthused about seeing the Emperor of Ishihebi, but he was excited to go to Tomoeda, and he had liked his time in Sikayama far more than in Shirasaki. The youngster wanted to open a portal, which made sense, given everything, but Fay and Kurogane hushed him before anyone else could hear; though Amaterasu likely knew of Syaoran's ability to cross dimensions, they doubted she was aware of this particular nuance. Even though all seemed settled on the matter of Nihon's sovereignty, Watanuki once warned that the throne needed to be enforced; that was the entire reason he recommended against Syaoran taking it for himself. Kurogane understood Amaterasu enough to know that while she might be cooperating now, it would not be in her nature to surrender to someone else's authority so easily. Later, perhaps months or even years, she would plot. And she would be as eager to use Syaoran and his powers as anyone else. Syaoran was, despite their insistence, far from useless to the war effort, even if his main role had been accomplished.

The prospect of riding all the way there did intimidate the youngster somewhat. Kurogane allowed the boy to believe they would travel the entire length, just because he did not want Amaterasu to sniff out otherwise. Syaoran was a bit heartened to realize that Seishirou and Fuma would be coming along; the bounty hunters had came and went a couple of times to report to Watanuki, but did not seem to have any other agendas to see to. For all the reassurance, though, what they actually did was ride out from Shirasaki until they were out of sight of the towers, and Fay told Syaoran to open a portal to Sikayama.

Syaoran did so, happy to bypass the dangers of the road. Sikayama seemed like a different mountain without all the snow. Kurogane and Fay looked about in front of the temple. He remembered the cold, miserable experience only a few months ago, with Syaoran falling ill and then them being pursued, huddling in the lumber house, fearful of what the future held.

Strange, to think they were here now. He almost had a hard time believing they made it. His heart would start a little at the prospect of approaching the Emperor of Ishihebi, or seeing Tomoyo, and all this almost seemed too good to be true. What if this was all a dream, and he was trapped in a delusion within his mind? What if Syaoran had died and Fay had followed him, and everything had erupted into fire and brimstone?

Fuma reached out and touched his arm. "You alright there?" the bounty hunter asked. "Ready to see some monks?"

"Priests."
Kero, in its false form, headbutted Syaoran for a final pat on the head before it sailed off into the temple grounds and disappeared. Ryô met them at the gates, wrapping Syaoran in a hug, and welcoming the company to sit down for a meal.

"You're going to undo the binding?" he guessed, as Fay and Kurogane sat down while Syaoran dragged the brothers off to see the sika deer.

"Will we have trouble?" Kurogane asked.

Ryô shrugged. "Compared to what you've already done? Don't think the Emperor of Ishihebi would put up much of a fight. He already lost. He only has to gain through cooperation."

Kurogane was not sure how to articulate how difficult it was for him to have so much confidence that things will work out. Things had never worked out before. His parents were killed, his province ransacked. He had gone on to befriend a wonderful boy, only to lose him to something Kurogane could not defend him against. Over the last ten years he had watched as Fay lived like a ghost, as Nihon was plagued by war, and when Syaoran came back to their lives it was ordeal after ordeal, between Syaoran's own frail health, the cruelty of others, the apathy of spirits. He had fought tooth and nail for a new beginning, but so many things kept going wrong, old allies he had trusted turned out to be people he had to guard against...it did not seem possible that anything would be this easy. Surely, this would be a struggle too.

"They won't try to ground him here out of spite?" Fay asked.

"He might, but I can't imagine that's worth what Abaron is willing to offer him."

Kurogane looked away. He hoped Yukito fulfilled his end of the bargain.

"Doesn't feel quite real, does it?" Ryô noted, seeing his expression. "Doesn't feel quite...safe."

"All this time," Fay murmured, "workings behind the scenes that we only find out years after the fact. The only consolation is the worst that can happen is...we stay with Syaoran here. That's all."

There was no reason for anyone to chase after Syaoran, or hunt him down, kill him before anyone else can capture him, demand more sacrifices, more suffering. Even if they were stuck on Nihon, they would be free, of sorts. The worst possible scenario was not so bad.

"I just worry that he'll fall ill again," Fay went on. "He fell ill so suddenly, last time. For all the warning signs beforehand, we really had no idea. Never would have imagined. He was always larger than life. And now...he's a delicate thing."

"No guarantees on that front," Ryô replied with some mild cheer. "Congratulations. You are now dealing with what any other parent is dealing with. Do you really think you'd get more than anyone else?"

Fay managed a smile. "No, I suppose not."

"You can die tomorrow too," said the High Priest. "So can Black Steel. Freak accidents, within the body or without. Plenty of ways. No spirit swore to you that you would live past today. But life wouldn't be all that meaningful, if there were such promises. Would it really be better, knowing for certain that he would live for now to fulfill yet another purpose? The price of freedom is knowledge. There's no telling what will happen. But he looks lively enough to me. Until you have reason, there's no need to be apprehensive. Plenty of people have muddled their way through life just like so: never
knowing where the next step will lead, but having hope for the best and having faith that they can manage the worst."

"I suppose we are just like everyone else, for once," Fay glanced at Kurogane.

_We can work with that_, Kurogane thought.

"Papa!" Syaoran cried out from outside, "Dad! One of the does is giving birth! Dad! Papa! Come out! Hurry!"

For a moment the two of them sat there, not reacting. It was still so heartwarming to hear Syaoran refer to them this way.

"Oh my," said Ryou, rising himself. "Better check on the doe as well."

---

He dreamed that Syaoran had died from his wounds, that the Fire Demon burned everything down with its flame. Fay, devoid of hope and all feeling, with no fight left and no will to go on, bent over the young face, bloodied with the swollen right eyelids, the other eye dull and blank, as the tongues from the fire licked at their flesh and consumed them in its hot embrace. When he woke, it was still dark. Fay was not at his side.

He sat up, feeling lost and alone, but very quickly the door slid open, and Syaoran was leading Fay in.

"You should go back to bed," Fay was saying. "You don't need to put me to bed—"

"You're having trouble sleeping," Syaoran whispered back, "and so is Dad." He bent down to a candle and blew at it.

"Syao—" Fay started, but the little flame flickered on.

Syaoran seemed no worse for wear.

"How'd you learn to do that?" Fay asked, letting Syaoran push him to bed.

"I don't know," said Syaoran, shrugging. "I was just trying stuff. I imagine what I want to do and they just happen. Why?"

"How are you feeling?" Kurogane asked, and then scolded, "you need to be careful, Syaoran. Remember how these kinds of spells make you sick?"

"They don't make me that sick anymore," Syaoran tucked Fay in and knelt next to them. "I don't know. Ever since Papa gave me this eye, it's like everything became a hundred times easier."

"Of course it did," Fay reflected. "It was yours to begin with. You were missing it the entire time. It would have been like missing a vital organ."

"You should go back to bed," Kurogane glared. "It's still chilly at night, especially up on the mountain."

"I'm fine," Syaoran reached out. "Let me just help Papa sleep."

"I don't need…" Fay fell silent when Syaoran touched his head. Kurogane saw Syaoran's eyes glow; one glowed blue while the other glowed amber.
It was so strange to see, and yet seemed very right, for some reason.

When the light died, Kurogane whispered, "Go to bed, or get in here. You're not wearing enough."

"I'm fine, Dad. I can help you sleep too."

"I don't need it—" Kurogane caught the boy's hand. "Syaoran, be good now and go to bed. Or get under the covers, for crying out loud."

The bed was not big enough for the three of them, so Syaoran withdrew.

Fay's body was soft and supple against his. Kurogane inhaled, then exhaled. Fay was here. Syaoran was here.

*It's going to be alright.*

They stayed in Sikayama for a few days, as Tomoeda would not be expecting them for a while. Syaoran played with the deer, particularly the new fawn, which followed Syaoran everywhere. Seishirou and Fuma treated the whole affair like a vacation, eating, drinking, napping, and telling Syaoran stories, some of which were real and others, questionable. On occasion, they would hear the roars of the guardian beasts somewhere down the mountain, but the temple grounds was undisturbed, and all was peaceful.

Kurogane and Fay mostly watched Syaoran, or sat in silence, content in each other's companionship. Sometimes Fay would talk about the future, about what they should do in case the Emperor of Ishihebi refused to remove the binding. They could build a lodge, he suggested, up in a mountain, and he and Syaoran can create some guardians to defend their home, and they would live a quiet life; Fay would be responsible for tutoring Syaoran in writing, and Kurogane could tutor Syaoran in history, and as Nihon settled into this promised peace and unity they can slowly extend Syaoran back into the world. "We can get whatever we need through the portals," he pointed out to Kurogane. "If he wants to eat flowers, we can open a portal to those trees."

What an odd lifestyle that would be.

But they both hoped the Emperor of Ishihebi would undo the binding, because there was so much outside of Nihon, and both Kurogane and Fay were sick of it.

"I keep thinking about the old Syaoran," Fay whispered one afternoon. "It's so strange. I know he's here, with us, but…still feels like I still have to repay him, even though I don't know how."

"It's over," Kurogane stated, "it's been washed away. Syaoran doesn't have any of those memories. Does it really matter?"

"I don't think so," Fay relented, "but…it still hurts. I still remember him…crying those nights. I didn't say what I needed to say, and now it's too late."

"You probably didn't need to say them. Not if he was going to forget it all anyway."

"Would have been nice, nonetheless." Fay looked aside. "It's frightening that he had been with us all that time and…we still don't know."

"Our Syaoran doesn't seem worse for wear. He's lived under Kuroiyama's thumb for fourteen years."

"It's his birthday soon."
"Not necessarily his. Tsubasa actually had a different birthday. He was born in a completely different year."

"That's true. But we don't know his exact birthday."

"Well, when was Tsubasa's birthday in Valeria?"

"April, actually. When was Syaoran's in Suwa?"

Kurogane paused. "Mid-July."

"Do you think this one's also in mid-July?"

"It kind of fits. He had just turned fourteen when we met him, remember?"

True.

"Well, I suppose we can ask one of the seers, or Watanuki, if it comes to that." Fay reached and squeezed his hand. "Tell me that I wanted him back as much as you did."

He wanted to hear that he was a good person. Kurogane thought this was cute, in a sad way. He was only too happy to oblige.

"Of course you did. We decided at the same time. As soon as Doumeki exposed the truth. The only reason we hesitated was because we wanted to figure out what the other intended to do."

"Did we decide to raise him together?" Fay asked. "I don't recall any of this, so you'll have to tell me."

"We didn't make the decision to raise him together. I think it just happened. Fei Wong did irreparable damage to both our worlds. Valeria was doomed, and Suwa was also on the verge of annihilation. There was nothing Tsubasa could do to change either of these things. All he could account for was that he comes back to us, somehow, through the intermediary. He said everything else was going to shift and rearrange as they would and he had no control over that."

"Hm. So you and I were an accident."

"It works out."

Fay smiled wistfully. "He seriously brought us together to raise him. Fate can be clever."

"Indeed."

Their plans to leave were delayed when Syaoran came down with the flu. The poor child was miserable, burning with fever and face swollen from congestion. He curled around Sakura's stuffed bear and slept as much as he could with his nose stuffed and his throat sore and raw. Fay stayed with him, while Kurogane was responsible for the legwork.

"You're living like a King," Fuma joked. "Meals in bed and everything. What luxury!"

"Stop teasing him," Seishirou scolded. "It's no fun when you're actually sick."

"Nah, but he'll be alright," Fuma ruffled Syaoran's head. "He's growing, which is a good sign."

Syaoran did shoot up quite a bit in just a few short weeks since getting Fay's eye, though that did mean that he was bumping into everything again and his coltish limbs were covered with
bruises. Kurogane was glad he was growing, though; Syaoran of Suwa had been taller.

"He's just not getting in as much trouble," Fuma went on. "He's still going to pull in all the ladies."

"You have a one-track mind," Seishirou cocked an eyebrow.

"I just want Syaoran to experience what it is like to be a real boy. Real boys flirt with girls."

"Explains why you have yet to snag a girl."

"Well if I had Syaoran's odd-eyed cat look maybe I will. Hm, one of the worlds have these implants you can use to change your eye color—"

"You are not putting in a contact lens just to look like—"

Fay and Kurogane exchanged a look.

"You really think girls will like me?" Syaoran asked, proving that even when his nose was redder than a rose and his sinuses were clogged with snot, this was a matter of concern. "I look so weird!"

"That's fine. Girls are weird," Fuma assured him.
When Syaoran recovered, Ryou gave him a long hug; in the past, Kurogane knew, Ryou did not feature much in Syaoran's life, but training his magic in Sikayama was likely what enabled Syaoran to pick up on how to create portals so quickly and easily, so at least in this lifetime, he was a beloved friend. The High Priest seemed to believe that they would not meet again, for he held on to Syaoran for a long time before letting go. Syaoran was confused, but rolled with it. Fay and Kurogane tried not to worry about what this could mean.

Syaoran opened a gate to the highway some twenty miles away from Tomoeda. Even through the portal, they could see the cherry blossoms. Syaoran stared at them, entranced.

"There are so many," he breathed. "This whole forest is blooming."

"It's something, isn't it?" Fuma grinned.

"It's beautiful," Syaoran looked around. "If they don't undo the binding, I'd be happy to be here."

"They don't stay for too long," Seishirou warned. "Pretty soon all of these would just be...regular trees."

The wind sent petals flying through the air. Syaoran raised his hands to catch them. The sight caused a hush to fall over Kurogane's mind. His son was so beautiful, in his own way, and the flowers showering over him made him look like something ethereal.

He wished there were a way to paint a portrait, or capture this image somehow.

Then Syaoran looked at him, sensing his regard. "Dad?"

Kurogane smiled. "Let's go."

Syaoran sighed, "I wish I knew how to do this before, it would have been so much easier!"

"Do what?"

"Open portals. It was so bad. Dad and Papa were fighting so hard, and I was so useless."

"You weren't useless," Fay protested. "You didn't know how to use portals until Watanuki showed you."

"I don't understand why I couldn't have learned them when I was at the temple."

"Ryou didn't know how to open portals," Seishirou pointed out. "Most people can't hop dimensions, Syaoran. Watanuki is one of few people who can, and who can give that ability, besides. Even Fay can't go between dimensions whenever he wants to."

"But you can," Syaoran noted astutely.

"Watanuki's predecessor gave that power to us," said Fuma, "in exchange for making us run errands for him."
"Ichihara?"
"Yes."

"What does she make you do? Like what sort of errands?"

"Bounty-hunting."

"Now Watanuki's the one that makes us run errands because he's too busy spending time with S—uh, his wife."

Kurogane glared at the brothers. "Did you two know that they married?"

"It was a while ago," Fuma protested, "and there was a lot going on. Who cares about them when we were busy trying to help Syaoran?"

"Did you know they're going to be parents?" Fay glanced sideways at them.

"I actually did not know until the last time we went to Clow," Fuma glanced at Seishirou. "She didn't show and we never stayed long enough to really talk small. Smalltalk. However you call it. But it kind of smarts—those kids are already going to have a kid of their own! My brother and I haven't even settled down yet—maybe we should tell Watanuki to stop giving us so much work so we can find girls."

"Or boys!" Syaoran piped innocently. "Like Papa and Dad!"

The bounty hunters looked genuinely taken-aback at this.

"Spirits, you're young," Seishirou remarked with a hint of awe. He glanced at Kurogane. "Was he really that young before? Or am I just old?"

"Were we ever that young?" Fuma wondered.

"What?" Syaoran scowled. "Did I say something stupid?"

"Not at all," Seishirou laughed. "The world is stupid, and my brother and I are two cynical old men who can't see what's right in front of our faces."

"I think you would look quite fetching with a handsome stud on your arm," Fuma grinned.

"My heart is dead and dry, like leather."

"I don't know. I think you still have squishy feelings for a certain someone, and as our wise young friend pointed out—"

"Don't you dare—"

"I mean it's a perfect scenario, and if you're into those kinks it can get really wild in the—"

"Hey!" Kurogane interrupted, aware that the brothers were venturing into pretty dangerous territory for young, innocent ears. "That sort of thing is not appropriate for children!"

"Or, like, anyone," Fay amended.

"What are you all talking about?" Syaoran was still scowling, and Kurogane realized he quite liked that expression on the child's face; it was absolutely adorable. "And Seishirou, why is your face so
Fuma nearly fell off his horse. "Right, Big Brother, why is your face so red?"

Seishirou swung a fist at his brother, who dodged it and swung back. They exchanged a few throws before Seishirou ended the spat by kicking Fuma's horse and sending it galloping down the road.

They were halfway to the city when they encountered the Prince of Kuroiyama.

Fuma was playing with Syaoran's sword—the little weapon looked even smaller on him than it did on Syaoran.

"Can you imagine a little Touya wielding this thing?" Fuma was laughing with his brother. "Say, Syaoran, does touching this thing feel bad, like your dad's sword?"

"No," Syaoran accepted it back and held it up. "It doesn't really feel like anything. Ginryu feels like an angry tiger, and it feels slimey."

"Slimey?" Kurogane raised his eyebrows.

"And sticky," Syaoran flexed his fingers, "like the hilt is all icky, and my bones feel like their vibrating, and it's very uncomfortable."

"That's probably because Ginryu actually killed people, while the squirt probably couldn't even hack a straw dummy at this age."

"That thing's actually pretty sharp," Seishirou remarked. "You want to be careful with that."

"He's not much of a squirt," Kurogane muttered, but he was still feeling a little annoyed at Syaoran's description of Ginryu. It belonged to the brat's grandfather, who had used it to defend Suwa in multiple timelines, and Kurogane had—

What am I thinking? He had a similar reaction when Syaoran had been so distraught about putting down the old horse. He recalled the boy's terror when Kurogane had killed the bandits, how the child had tried to run away. This was simply what Syaoran was.

No wonder the original Li Tsubasa had been so sad and frightened. He had been reduced to doing something that went against everything in his nature.

"I don't get it," Syaoran was saying, "Ginryu's supposed to be Grandpa's, and Dad's been using it, but I can't seem to touch Ginryu even though I can touch Dad, and it's not like the sword can do anything without someone using it."

"Eh. It wouldn't surprise me if the sword's developed a mind of its own at this point. Certainly freed enough souls to get a little semblance of one itself. And if you can't touch your own father, something's really wrong with you."

"I'm curious, Syaoran," Seishirou broke in, "What do you feel with Kurogane and Fay?"

"I don't know," Syaoran shrugged. "Same thing I feel when Mama hugs me."

"When they hug you?" Fuma turned and winked at Kurogane, who resisted the urge to kick his horse, because the animal might not tolerate it as well this time. Seishirou bent over to watch the two of them make faces at each other.
Then Syaoran suddenly waved his sword—some buried spiritual instinct must have launched his reflex, because he deflected a spell perfectly with Prince Touya's scabbard before any of them could react.

Kurogane urged his mount forward while Fay pushed Syaoran's to the side. Up ahead, however, there was already a battle going on. Kurogane caught sight of green eyes and brown hair before a flash of metal blade.

*Oh, he somehow had time to realize,* _Sakura is a warrioress here_*—

It was the girl against a bunch of soldiers, plus one tall armored man that they later learned was the Prince of Kuroiyama. They were all on horseback, and she was actually wielding a polearm, clad in priestess robes. It was incredibly odd to see her execute maneuvers that full-grown warriors had trouble with, but she was a nimble thing, flexible on the saddle, and though her clothes were soaked with blood, none of it seemed to be her own.

"What on earth?" Fuma yelled, as his brother kicked his horse into a gallop. "Is that—"

"Right, she looks different here," Kurogane saw Fay still pinning Syaoran's horse to the side of the road, and wordlessly kicked his own horse forward; she might be a capable warrior here, but math was still math and there were at least twelve men to one girl—not great odds, no matter how skilled.

Sakura released some kind of spell that showered pink sparks and white bolts of light everywhere. One of them hit Kurogane's horse, which collapsed under him so suddenly that Kurogane was thrown. He spun and rolled on the ground and managed to end up on two feet, Ginryu already in hand, but Fuma was not so lucky, tumbling into a tree. Thankfully, the actual targets—Kuroiyama's men, were also down. Sakura made her horse rear and try to stomp on the men, but the beast was a little too slow to accomplish that well.

Ginryu made quick work of two men, the sight of blood on the metal making Kurogane's own sing. There was a certain thrill to battle, to killing, and in the heat of it, he reveled in the power of the rush. Killing was what he was good at—in the moment, no questions, no doubts, just pure movement and purpose.

With Seishirou, Fuma, and Kurogane, it was four against twelve or more, and they had the advantage of surprise. Sakura had the prince at spearpoint as the bounty hunters disposed of the rest. Kurogane sliced one wretch down and happened to turn around—to see Fay dragging Syaoran halfway off his horse. What was going on over there?

"*Let me go!*" Syaoran cried out, and Fay suddenly covered his eyes. Beside Kurogane, the prince knocked Sakura's blade aside and kicked. She stumbled back, and the prince made to strike a death-blow—

Seishirou decapitated him with one swing.

A hush fell over them, as they all looked at the dead bodies on the road, the prince's head still rolling while the neck stump on the body spewed blood into the dirt in pulses.

Two things then happened at once: Syaoran started sobbing, and Sakura started yelling.

"I had that one!" she snapped. "What did you do that for?!"

*What?*

"Uh," Fuma blinked. "You're welcome?"
"Do you have any idea who that man is? You just killed him in one blow!" Sakura wiped off her pole on the grass, and then her face with her sleeve. "You let him get away easy!"

Kurogane was trying to figure out why his son was crying. Sakura whirled around to the boy before he could parse what was happening.

"And what are you wailing for, huh?" she shouted. "You were just standing there like an idiot while the rest of us did all the work!"

"Hey!" Fay snapped back, a mother bear rearing up to defend the cub. "He already saved Nihon and by extension you, so shut your trap!"

"What is going on?!" Fuma shouted over everyone. "I am so confused!"

Why is my son crying? Kurogane hurried over to Fay and Syaoran. Was the boy hurt? But a quick glance-over revealed no injuries except to Prince Touya's sword, which actually cracked down the middle, through the scabbard and into the blade.

It turned out, Syaoran was angry too. "Why did you stop me?" he shoved Fay off him. "He killed my mother!"

"You can't use offensive magic, child, are you daft?"

"Everyone shut up!" Seishirou roared, so unlike the normally composed man that even Kurogane did a double-take. When silence fell, the bounty hunter muttered, "I like the other Sakura better."

Chapter End Notes

Hohohohoho…………enter Sakura of Nihon! She's not quite what anyone expected, is she? *Hides*
Sakura of Nihon was a warrior priestess, recruited at the tender age of twelve. She was a warrior, a moderately good spellcaster, and a little bit of a brat. She was angry at Seishirou for giving the Prince of Kuroiyama a quick death, because she, like Syaoran, had a score to settle; the Prince was apparently responsible for her mother's death as well, and Sakura wanted the sweetness of revenge. Once the initial tensions simmered down, she no longer spat fire, but she was all harsh and sharp-tongued and hard edges and kind of mean to Syaoran.

"What is he crying like a girl for?" she demanded, ironically puzzled by the state of things. Fay had been cradling him too closely for her to get a proper look. "And what are you all doing here?"

"Meeting up with your brother," Kurogane replied, unimpressed.

Sakura looked at him sharply. "Who, now?"

"Your brother," the ninja drawled loudly. "Brown hair, best friends of the new Emperor of Nihon, self-serving manipulative bastard, named after a flower. Remember him?"

Her green eyes narrowed. "How did—you're Black Steel." She whipped her head around. "You're the Wizard from Beyond. That means…"

Fuma and Seishirou were looting the bodies and totally ignoring everyone else.

"Kuroiyama's loaded," Fuma was saying. "Why are evil homocidal societies so rich?"

"Their enforcers are rich," said Seishirou. "Their people are like Syaoran, sickly and tired and dirt-poor."

"He touched her," Syaoran whispered, trembling, and his voice echoed the hatred Kurogane remembered of the original Li Tsubasa, "he grabbed her and touched her like she was a thing, a toy, made her scream and cry while sneering about how disgusting and old she was. Get going, boy. Go on to Shirasaki. I'll just play with your old ma here—the longer you take, the longer I play. Maybe I'll get bored before you come back with what I want—"

"Shhh, Syaoran," Fay soothed.

"And I just stood there—"

"Hush. It's not your fault—"

"I wasn't fast enough, or smart enough—"

"He's dead, and you live," the mage whispered. "You're alive. That's your greatest victory. His kingdom is in ruins. The empire he intended to build. You, my child, are here in the daylight at the end of it all. He doesn't even have anyone to mourn him."

"I wanted to kill him—"

"No, no," Fay hushed him. "I know you, my son. Over many lifetimes: you do not want to deal the killing blow. And it's over, now. Papa is here. Dad is here. We're all here. Let him rot without a
proper burial."

"Mama was all alone—"

"So is he, Syaoran."

Syaoran trembled, but fell silent.

Sakura clearly did not understand what was happening, but she was genuinely concerned. "Is he alright?"

"He will be," Fay said in the same calm tone. "What about you, Sakura? Are you injured?" She was still covered in blood, though nothing about her posture or movements indicated any wounds.

"I'm fine," Sakura dismissed. She then pouted a little. "I'm sorry for sounding ungrateful. I had just wanted to off that bastard myself."

She was not just *sounding* ungrateful, Kurogane thought, but he could understand the frustration.

"My brother didn't think I could do it," Sakura went on. "If you know him then you know what a giant thorn in the side he can be."

Kurogane snorted.

"I think I like this one," Fuma declared. "She's far more entertaining. And has a much more realistic relationship with her sibling."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Seishirou demanded.

Syaoran finally withdrew from Fay to reveal his tear-streaked face and still-watering eyes. He looked up, saw Sakura staring, and then glared; the expression had a very odd overall look due to his two eye colors, one a burning amber, the other an icy blue.

"What are you looking at?" he snapped at her, clearly feeling vulnerable and defensive.

Unfortunately, the Sakura of Nihon was both gutsy and temperamental, without being particularly sensitive.

"Well if you're going to cry like a baby," she snapped back, "what do you expect?"

"Yes, we get it," Fuma interrupted before the two teens could come to blows, "you're a strong, fighter woman, the Heroine of Nihon. We're all properly impressed. You don't need to flex your biceps, lady. Syaoran's actually had to serve that maniac for the last all-of-his-life. Lay off and give it a rest."

"She's not a heroine," Syaoran refuted. "Heroes don't make fun of others for being sad."

Sakura started at this and even looked guilty. "I wasn't making fun of you," she protested. "That's what people always say to *me* and it's always made *me* stop crying."

"Well it's a lousy way," Syaoran opined as Fay let him go, even though he was, in fact, no longer crying.

"Well it works," Sakura had picked up on it. "You're not sad anymore."

"Right. I'm mad at you."
"That makes you not-sad, stupid!"

"You can be sad and mad at the same time, genius!"

The frankly asinine exchange continued while everyone got to their horses, with the bounty hunters throwing bewildered glances at Kurogane, and Fay looking like he did not know whether to laugh or cry.

"I wish Mokona were here," he said to Kurogane.

*Spirits!* That little pork bun would have enjoyed this way too much.

"Like father like son, huh?" Fuma observed while the children were still going at each other. "You two weren't too amicable either when you first met."

"That's because Fay was an immature brat," Kurogane said instantly.

"Because Kuropi thought way too highly of himself," Fay replied smoothly.

"It wasn't thinking too highly; your nicknames were just stupid."

"My nicknames were fine. You just needed a stick removed from a certain unmentionable place."

"Why did you do that?" Seishirou asked Fuma.

"I couldn't resist," his younger brother smirked.

Syaoran and Sakura continued to jab at each other's sore spots for the final leg of the journey until they reached Tomoeda. Sakura, Kurogane overheard, was something of a rebel; she did not want to be the demure and delicate little ladyflower, good at sewing and embroidery and holding her tongue. She liked to speak her mind and be tough, and got herself into martial arts at a young age. She joined the priestesses because she did not want to marry, and nothing made her temper snap faster than the implication that she could not do something well just because she was a girl. Princess Sakura of Clow was sweet, gentle, and now extra motherly because she was actually becoming a mother. She was always easily as strong as her male companions, but she was always a girl first. This Sakura was spirited, cutting, uncompromising, and tomboyish. She was very confused by Syaoran's soft mannerisms and delicate constitution, and could not seem to wrap her mind around the fact that the boy really could not do "boy stuff", whatever that was supposed to mean. Her method of investigation was provocation, and she poked and prodded at Syaoran until Kurogane was genuinely worried she might make the boy cry again.

Syaoran, in his turn, was rather put off by Sakura's own harsh demeanor; he did not have a lot of self-esteem to begin with, and did not enjoy having it challenged. Considering that even the men in his life sheltered him like a precious infant, he was not used to Sakura's manner of acquaintance, but Kurogane was a little amazed to discover that the boy, in fact, had quite a tongue of his own when it came down to it.

He had to remind himself that this Syaoran was not so different from the older ones—when he first found him down at Shirasaki's treasury, Syaoran had been every bit as brave and defiant as his past incarnation.

The boy was very distraught about the sword. Fay and Kurogane tried to assure him that Prince Touya would not have been angry about it, but the boy was still upset. This earned him some baffled
looks from Sakura, who did not understand why he was so distressed about another person's training sword, which did not help Syaoran's mood.

In the end, when they arrived at Tomoeda, with Priest Touya riding ahead of an entourage to receive them, Syaoran did not cry again, and the two teens parted from each other with a strong sense of mutual distaste.

"Oh spirits," said the priest, when he saw his sister. "What are you doing here?"

"What are you doing here?" Sakura exclaimed. "I thought you were with Yukito!"

"That's His Majesty, to you," said Touya, noting Syaoran's sour expression. "You've grown."

Syaoran flashed a smile. "You can tell?"

"Of course! Come," Touya gestured to the group, "Welcome to Tomoeda—this is where my sister and I grew up. My father is currently away, or else he would have received you."

"She's your sister?" Syaoran exclaimed.

Things only got more awkward when Sakura noticed Syaoran's extra fumbling while around her brother.

"You have a crush on my brother!" she exclaimed, much to Syaoran's mortification. "How is it that you have a crush on him?"

Touya winced. "Some things never change, do they? When are you going to grow up?"

Sakura was gaping. "Why does everyone have a crush on my brother? It's absurd!"

King Yukito arrived just in time to break it up before Syaoran actually started crying again.

"It's always like this between you two," the young man exclaimed, and directed one of his advisors to lead Sakura and Touya away from the rest.

"The Emperor and his Empress-consort are confined in the tower," He informed Kurogane and Fay. "I haven't offered them the deal yet. Thought I should wait. Are you alright, little one?"

"I'm fine!" Syaoran said angrily. "I don't even know why everyone's making such a fuss." He would have been more convincing if he did not have tears already clinging to his eyelashes.

"Tempers are running high today," Fay said in a calm tone. "Young Sakura was battling the Prince of Kuroiyama and his entourage. It all ended on a sour note, so our meeting began on a sour note."

"Sakura is a remarkable young lady," the king replied. "She grew up without a mother, as her mother was assassinated by the Prince of Kuroiyama—she rejected his suit, and he was obsessively insulted. Sakura grew up...quite lost, I feel. She was old enough to be severely affected, but too young to quite understand what happened. Unfortunately, people were always comparing her to her mother—negatively. Nadeshiko was a renowned beauty in our region, and Sakura, though pretty, was not so well-regarded. It's all very unfair, I think, because one thing people use to remonstrate her for was her clumsiness. Nadeshiko was the most uncoordinated human being in Nihon, but for some reason everyone forgot that. They kept pressuring Sakura to be more graceful and ladylike, and as we all know with sharp-minded youngsters, they sometimes take off with their own ideas. She seemed to have made it her mission to be the most ungenteel, least feminine young woman in existence, and has a cantankerous relationship with To-ya. She's a good child though, just...not the most mature." He
looked at Syaoran again. "I'm sorry if she upset you. You're not the first and you won't be the last."

"It's not your fault," Syaoran mumbled.

Kurogane noted the king's look of concern. He wondered if Yukito knew the previous relationship with Syaoran of Suwa, or if this was a spontaneous affection on its own, despite everything that had happened.

"She doesn't have a lot of finesse," Fay said quietly, "but her methods are sound. They're just not appropriate coming from a fourteen-year-old girl, and rather misdirected."

"You've summed her up rather well with just that."

"I am familiar with such individuals. I've been around for a long time." Fay stroked Syaoran's head at this. "I worry that her temper will lead her into situations she can't get out of. Nihon is not quiet yet, and there are many dangers on the road. Even earlier, if we had not come along, she might not have escaped unscathed."

"You have no idea how often we've tried to persuade her," the king drawled. "The girl has a mind of her own. In any case, enough about her. I know you must be anxious to get down to business."

Syaoran was not that eager to see the Emperor of Ishihebi when all was said and done. His hand sought Kurogane's and clenched it in a tight grip. King Yukito led the trio to the building where the sovereigns of Ishihebi were kept.

In the tower, they came across the Empress-consort first. Nakuru was guarding her, and the redhead gave Kurogane a slight nod in acknowledgment.

Tomoyo was clad in the soft undergarments for her armor. Her hair was braided but coming loose. She was not given any handmaidens and had only a single room for herself. There was a single window, narrow and framed with stone. She had gotten thinner, pale from confinement, though her posture retained its regal bearing as she rose to greet her visitors.

It hurt to see her like this. Kurogane looked at the king. "Was this truly necessary? She is only the consort."

"You and I know she's far more than that," said the young man. "Though we'll see if she remains the consort of anyone."

Tomoyo's eyelashes fluttered at this, but she did not otherwise react. She was looking at Kurogane and Syaoran.

"Kurogane," she murmured, "Syaoran. You are looking well. Fay."

She seemed so small. Decades of loyalty warred with his desire to be free. He had served this woman for years. At one point, she had been the one good thing in his whole world. In her own way, she had cared deeply for Kurogane, as much as a lord could care for a vassal. To see her so defeated, brought so low, when it was mainly due to circumstances beyond her control, made his initial convictions to leave Nihon pale. Tomoyo was the reason Kurogane had been able to rescue Syaoran from Ishihebi. She was the first reason Kurogane found Fay, might even have deserved him. She was the reason Kurogane did not kill Syaoran when he found the youngster lurking around the treasury months ago.

Now, Kurogane had a family, had a wide open future where he could choose to remain by Tomoyo's side, by Yukito's side, in Nihon—he could go, somewhere, anywhere, wherever Fay might want to
go, wherever Syaoran, wherever he might decide. Tomoyo's fate was not so clear.

But Tomoyo's destiny had never been Kurogane's to influence. She was always high above him, beyond his reach, whether Princess of Shirasaki or Empress-consort of Ishihebi or prisoner of war. Once, Kurogane was the father of the Emperor of Nihon. Now, he was Kurogane of...

Nowhere.

"She's not able to undo her husband's binding," said the king. "Would be easier if she could. She's more reasonable than him."

"We should get her back to Shirasaki," Syaoran murmured. "Amaterasu would appreciate that."

The king tilted his head at this. "Is that what you want?" he asked.

Was he really going to consider Syaoran's wishes? Kurogane looked at Yukito in surprise.

"She doesn't belong here," the boy replied. "She was a better person in Shirasaki."

Tomoyo stared at Syaoran. She looked like she wanted to speak, but ultimately stayed silent.

Fay led the way forward. "I want to see Ishihebi. We can come back to his wife later."

Syaoran was still holding Kurogane's hand. The boy's head was bowed; he was upset.

Once they were out of earshot, Fuma asked the king, "What do you plan to do with her?"

"I don't know," Yukito replied. "It all depends, really. I prefer Ishihebi's cooperation. If he refuses, we're in a bit of a pickle."

"You can return her to Shirasaki as Syaoran suggested."

"I could." Yukito did not sound like he wanted to, however. Kurogane could guess why. Amaterasu and Tsukiyomi, together, had always been formidable: two mortal goddesses on Nihon.

"We'll see what ultimately happens."

The Emperor was locked in a room even smaller than Tomoyo's, also clad in the undergarments beneath his armor. He sneered when he saw them, eyes defiant. There were chains around his wrists and ankles, and in the air there was the sour smell of urine.

"Come here to gloat, have you?" He bit. "Named yourself another Emperor, and now you are here to mock me."

Yukito stepped into the room casually. Syaoran let go of Kurogane while Fay followed the king. Kurogane remained outside.

"I have a proposal for you," said the king.

"Oh? What could the King of Abaron want from little old me?"

The king smirked. "Believe it or not, I don't enjoy degrading my colleagues. Seems rather obtuse. And you, Jyou, have managed Ishihebi well, until you made your losing bid in the war. As it happens, when I unite my empire, I'll need capable leaders to preside over precincts. It would be a waste of resources to dispose of talent, and I don't waste resources. The question is, are you smart enough to do this? As much as I would hate investing time and effort appointing another Lord of
"Ishihebi, well," he smiled humorlessly again, "Nihon is a big, big country."

"You have a lot of confidence, Yukito of Abaron. You really think a young brat like you can hold
the wolf that is Nihon? You hold it only by the ears, boy. You weren't even sovereign material—
stumbled upon it by accident. Your confidence is soaring from one or two good battles, but ruling
isn't just quick fight, and this war is not over yet."

"I chose Yukito," Syaoran said quietly, and both men fell silent. The Emperor of Ishihebi stared at
the boy, and seemed to try to scowl at him, but he could not quite get his countenance to do it.

"The spirits waited for me in that time between times," the boy went on, "when we removed the Fire
Demon's claim on this world. They asked, who will lead Nihon to glory? And I saw every one of
The wardens and guardians of Nihon gathered to wait for me to name one of us. I chose Yukito, and
they said, 'so it will be'. For all your hopes and dreams, Emperor Jyou, you have no ally amongst the
divine, for they follow my word, and the name I called out during the tempest. I have crowned the
Emperor of Nihon, and your choice now is only whether you serve him or die. What you choose
does not matter to us: the sun will continue to rise from this land, the stars continue to spin, and
Nihon will march toward peace, with or without you."

"I can assure you," said the King, "if you do choose death, from some misplaced sense of honor, you
will die in this room, without ceremony, and your name will fade away with the names of your
troops into times lost, just one anonymous individual out of many that existed during our time of
disunity." He turned. "Why don't we let you think about this."

"You alright?" Kurogane asked, after they descended the tower.

"I'm fine," said the boy. "He wasn't as scary as I thought he would be."

"You did well," said Fay.

Sakura was waiting with Touya in the courtyard, and almost immediately the two teens started
clashing again.

"Are you going to eat?" Sakura asked, a perfectly innocuous question, really.

"I'm not really hungry," said Syaoran, a perfectly innocuous answer.

"You look like you ought to eat anyway," said Sakura. "You need to eat like four dozen eggs a day
or something."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"What do you think it means?!"

Fuma leaned over to Fay as this turned into the most pointless squabble Kurogane had ever
witnessed. "Are you sure you want to take the kid away from all this?"

"You're enjoying this far too much," said his older brother.

"I can so eat four dozen eggs!" Syaoran snapped, while Sakura rolled her eyes in disbelief.

"Are you kidding?" Fuma's eyebrows were so high, they were almost to his hairline. "Those two got
along so well and they both had such easy-going personalities. This is surreal and amazing. I mean
seriously, do you remember those two ever arguing before?"

"Certainly not over something this insipid," Seishirou grunted.

Touya was trying to rein in his sister, but Fay laid a hand on his shoulder. "Let them work it out. It's fine."

"I think they should get married," Fuma declared.

"They're fourteen years old, brother mine."

"They're doing everything backwards anyway," Fuma pointed, "arguing like an old married couple before they're old or married, so I say they should just get it over with."

"How exactly does this," Touya gestured, "translate into 'marriage' to you?"

"Eh," said Fuma, "there are worse beginnings. Couples that started off actually trying to kill each other, predator versus prey," he glanced sideways at Seishirou.

"Don't you dare," his brother growled.

The children were stomping away.

"I can make an omelet!" Sakura was huffing, "and it's a good one too!"

"It's probably as good as your manners!"

"Well it's way better than yours, just you wait!"

Fay glanced at Touya. "She's not going to poison him, is she?"

"If she doesn't burn the place down," The young man crept from Yukito's side. "I need to get to the kitchens."

Sakura's perpetual scowl as she and Syaoran continued to clash reminded Kurogane of the vision in the mirror, and he realized that even in the original timeline, these two butted heads. With her particular brand of brash provocation, she managed to compel Syaoran to finish two whole omelets (that she did not set on fire), about a quarter of a sizeable seafood pancake, and a bowl of goat's milk.

"If you throw up you're the lamest loser in existence," she warned, when Syaoran started squirming in discomfort.

"I'm not going to throw up!" he fired back.

"Why can't you be polite for once?" Touya lamented, at a loss.

"I'm only polite to people I like!" Sakura glared, because clearly in Tomoeda, people cooked for those they did not like.

Unfortunately, Syaoran's temper was not quite enough to kick his poor digestive system into gear. It was not long before he turned green and his stomach started hurting.

"Oh come on," the girl complained, and pressed healing magic into his arms, "after all the work I put in, I don't want it to go to waste. Keep it down, keep it down,"
And Syaoran was able to keep it down.

Fay and Kurogane were willing to let the teenagers figure it out, provided neither of them started crying, which came to be a near thing after one particular bout, when Sakura got really confused about Syaoran's remark regarding having two fathers. Between calling him stupid for believing such a thing was biologically possible, getting offended that he thought she was that gullible, and asking him for proof, the two did nearly come to blows. Kurogane could not even bring himself to be angry with her, because the poor girl was clearly out of her depth and having a difficult time reconciling her new company. She could not make sense of how Syaoran was, and everything about her reactions stemmed from confusion rather than malice. Syaoran was just as confused about Sakura, unused to someone like her being so insensitive. It was interesting that he was not meek, or polite either; maybe it was because she was clearly the same age, and he did not accept her authority, the way he would have with Tomoyo or Amaterasu.

Though come to think of it, he was rather rude to Yukito too. Maybe this was all a natural extension of that.

Touya was apologetic.

"I don't know what's gotten into her."

"I wouldn't worry too much about it," Fay assured him. "Children find their own way."

Kurogane knew Fay was not particularly interested in the process. The mage had his sights set elsewhere. For the immediate future, Kurogane was willing to entertain the same, provided Jyou did what they wanted. And he likely will, because the man was nothing if not ambitious, and ambitions were rather useless if one was dead.

They were interrupted when one of the guards entered the room, dropping to one knee in salute.

"Sires," said the man, "the prisoner agrees to the terms."

There was a brief silence.

"Excellent," said Fay. He extended a hand to the King of Abaron. "Let's finalize all this. Syaoran, come here."

Syaoran perked up, curious, and came over to Fay like an imprinted duckling.

"What's going on?" Sakura blinked, walking over as well.

"Sakura," Touya warned, "this isn't your business."

"Why?" Sakura demanded. "Is it because I'm a girl?"

"It's because it's not your place," her brother said flatly.

"Then why are you going?"

"Because I'm more important than you."

Sakura sneered. "Oh really?"

Seishirou and Fuma glanced at Fay.

"She should know what I'm capable of," said the mage, "and despite the name…she's not a delicate
Sakura turned her nose up at her brother, who looked more worried than annoyed.

Syaoran sensed the dark undercurrents. "Dad?" he asked Kurogane.

"It's alright," Kurogane assured the child.

"Let's go," Yukito led the way.

They crowded in the room. Touya was the one who approached the man.

"I agree to your terms—"

"You will swear an oath," Touya declared, "to be witnessed by the sun and moon and sky, all the spirits of the spirit realm that reside and guide the path of Nihon."

The prisoner's face twisted in disgust. "Fine."

Touya looked at Yukito, who nodded.

A sudden magic hushed the room, and everything seemed darker somehow, save the former Emperor of Ishihebi and the priest. Touya raised a nusa up, strips of paper drifting in a slow current of air that seemed to come from nowhere. Syaoran cringed a little against Kurogane. Though Touya was a priest, and his magic normally felt comforting for the young one, it seemed this particular spell was not to the boy's liking.

"Do you swear, Jyou of Ishihebi, unqualified allegiance to His Majesty, Emperor Yukito, to faithfully defend him from attack by any who would seek to harm him, and forswear loyalties to any false pretenders that may seek the throne for their own or do harm to he who is sparing you?"

"Yes!" Jyou of Ishihebi hissed, eyes flashing murderously. It was clear his heart was not in it, but the words were enough.

There was not something as dramatic as a flash, but there was something different about the room after that. If nothing else, Syaoran pressed against Kurogane for reassurance, clearly sensing something the warrior did not. Even Sakura was frowning, though she seemed more use to the proceedings. She might have even conducted them herself, being a priestess, though she was likely too young to have done so.

King Yukito strode forward.

"The spirits witness," said the man, "but their loyalties are wide. Wizard of Beyond, if you can do the honors."

Jyou frowned. "What?"

Kurogane also frowned. Did Fay and Yukito reach another arrangement? He remembered Fay had been very resolute, but the mage had not mentioned the details of the agreement to Kurogane, perhaps because he did not want to jinx it. Kurogane had not thought to ask.

The warrior watched, curious.

Fay stepped forward, and, like entering battle, his figure became bright, magic lighting up his body as he approached Yukito's new vassal. He held a hand out and grabbed Jyou by the face.
"I bind you," he said serenely, "to your new master."

This time, bright light did flash. Kurogane's arms came over Syaoran instinctively to shield him. A dark swirl twisted out of the light and curled into a pattern: ouroboros, drawn in interlocking strokes of shadow. It shimmered, and there was another bright flash, before Kurogane felt it slam into Jyou's body.

As the afterimages slowly cleared, Kurogane heard the former Emperor shrieking, "What did you do to me?!!"

"I placed a curse," Fay said simply. His single left eye glowed bright blue. "The tattoo will continue eating itself, gradually, and as it does it will disintegrate your magic, and your memory. Once the snake eats itself completely, you will be reduced to a drooling husk, covered in your own feces and urine, the mockingstock of all of Nihon. It can only be removed by me or the Emperor of Nihon, and will only…reverse, itself, at our command. To ensure your continued cooperation with Emperor Yukito on his mission, you see. Precautions. People like you, who torment children, lack a certain…integrity."

"I never tortured your precious brat!"

"I never said which child," Fay said coldly.

Syaoran was pressed closely to Kurogane, alarmed. Kurogane rubbed the boy's shoulders in reassurance. *It's alright...he's still your Papa, don't worry...*

"In any case, you can't remove it; you are not as strong as me. Now, as it happens, the Emperor and I can also speed the curse up. Consider this your first display of loyalty to your new lord. You will remove the binding from Syaoran."

"In your dream—!" The former emperor gasped, and sparks flickered over his body.

"That was a demonstration," said Fay. "Remove. The. Binding."

All was silent. Syaoran was very still. Beside them, Seishirou and Fuma watched, expressions grim but patient. King Yukito had yet to say anything. Touya, too, looked unsurprised by the proceedings. Only Sakura was trembling a little.

After a while, Yukito murmured, "I will create you, Lord of Ishihebi. So long as you serve my people well, and you serve me well, you have nothing to fear from me."

"He's not a bad man," Syaoran said, even though he was still pressed into Kurogane. "That's why I chose him."

The former emperor looked at the boy. "There are no good men among kings, boy."

"I didn't say he was good," Syaoran replied.

"I should have killed you," the man spat, voice full of hate. "I should have broken your scrawny little neck when I had you. I should have had you screaming under me, purity or not—"

"Then you wouldn't be here today," said Touya, while Kurogane's arms tightened in a hug around Syaoran as that old fear rushed through his blood. At the dream shop in that other lifetime, the tearful waif revealing, *The whole reason I was assigned to be your offspring was because I was pure and I'm not anymore...* Tsubasa had lived that, probably twice, and Syaoran almost did too, *oh gods.*
"Life or death, Jyou of Ishihebi. Those are your choices. My lord Yukito will lead Nihon to glory. You can partake in it, or die in the shadows."

Jyou was ultimately too cowardly to die in defiance. "Fine!" he raised his hands out impatiently. "Well come along then!"

Chapter End Notes

I don't know, it just seemed appropriate that they'd get on each other's nerves this time around. Certainly makes it entertaining for the rest of us, teehee!
Beginnings often had ceremony. Shouts, cheers, laughter, cooing over the new baby. Song and music and gongs at weddings. Chants of vows for a new Emperor.

Syaoran's freedom, however, had nothing, except Fay's wide smile, happier than Kurogane had ever seen in his life, and his own odd sensation of floating. Of soaring. The world looked different, somehow—this place he had been born to, had grown up in and spent the last ten years of his life fighting for, suddenly seemed...small. A stop, amongst many. There were so many places to go.

And the future seemed...limitless. A realization of a dream he never dared to hope for. A simple truth: that he can be happy, can find all the happiness he can ever take, and that those he loved can find this same happiness.

Happiness. Not just victory.

Almost twenty years ago, his life fell apart. He lost his family, lost his home, and in many ways, he lost himself. His goal since then was to preserve the one thing worth preserving: Princess Tomoyo, mortal and doomed to die, growing and destined to change, to belong to those other than herself. Nihon, in its state of endless war, seemed fated to remain a country in turmoil, and his future was that of bloodshed and violence and competition of strength and wit, skill and agility, all of which he could only excel for a little while. He was filled with rage, and underneath, fear: once upon a time he was happy and optimistic, certain that despite the ugly shadows, the world was still filled with more good than evil. In his years in Shirasaki, he trained his heart to believe the opposite was true—that behind every good introduction was a sinister intrigue. He was a monster and he was fine with it, for he was surrounded by monsters. Happiness existed to be shredded to pieces. Hope was for the ignorant, and peace was a lie. He lived every day by the day in a battle for survival; life was to be endured, and every minute was to exist, not to thrive.

Then he met Syaoran and Fay—from Syaoran he learned how to create a dream and pursue it with honor, how to chase one's goals and find fulfillment along the way. From Fay he found love, found safety, found resilience, the ability to remain kind even in the face of terrible odds. He looked deep inside himself, in that year when they traveled together, and learned that he did not want to be what he trained himself to be: a warrior, a man of violence, someone who lived through endless struggles to kill others so he would not be killed. He had even seen the silhouette of the future he wanted: one that would fill him with contentment and pride.

But Syaoran fell ill, and when he died, Kurogane learned that he was a coward, capable of hurting others far more than any blade can. Syaoran's death was the death of a dream, far more completely than any mad hallucination of Fei Wong Reed's. He learned that failure was worse than an end of things; it was moving on, a shadow of before, and living, always, with the knowledge of what might have been and what should have been, while all around him, everything was not. Fay drifted in his sorrow, unable to find joy, and once again Kurogane lived day to day, fighting against sleep. They both existed with the knowledge that no matter how many conquests and how much success they gathered in their name, nothing made them happy and nothing ever will, and each day will be the
same as the last: struggling not for more but merely not to lose as much. Empty. Meaningless.

Yet now Syaoran was here. Came running to them. And after a frightening struggle to keep him, he was theirs. He was completely, utterly theirs. Not Shirasaki's. Not Abaron's. Not Nihon's. Theirs. And in him was their future, for though they missed the first fourteen years of Syaoran's young life, he was still growing, his future still climbing, and he will grow taller and stronger and brighter and more beautiful. Every day was a triumph, every tomorrow the hope for the better. Syaoran now had a greater destiny than just Nihon, and so their futures also extend past this wretched country, with its cruel emperors and machinating queens. As Syaoran rises in glory, they will rise with him.

Happiness.

Kurogane and Fay stood for a long time, coming to terms with their new destiny. They could hardly believe they were here. It felt as if they had lived in a world of gray, and only just now experienced color. They had lived in a world of silence, and just now heard music, the sounds of the ocean, the birds in the sky. And the transition, though positive, was overwhelming—Kurogane hardly knew what to do or say now, and Fay looked similarly stunned, as if afraid to move or speak for fear of breaking this precious new part of their lives.

Syaoran, on the other hand, felt nothing; the little rascal probably always figured that his future was with his fathers, and this hardly changed after Jyou of Ishihebi freed him from the binding. Instead, he was much more interested in arguing with Sakura again, and this led to another nonsensical quarrel about whether or not rabbits liked sweets. Fortunately, neither teen was emotionally invested in the argument. They even seemed to be enjoying themselves amidst their annoyance. Arguing for the sake of arguing…

Actually he and Fay used to do that.

"Well," Seishirou clapped Kurogane on the shoulder, "I'm sure you three can handle yourselves from here."

"You should go to Clow," Fuma added. "Watanuki would be furious if you don't. And his wife can be just as scary as this spitfire here. It'll only get worse while she's pregnant."

"We...we'll go," Fay said, still sounding a bit taken-aback. "There's the King too, and the prince. Lots of people he ought to see."

"We might see you there too," Seishirou informed them. "Watanuki still has errands, so if you decide to stay long enough we might cross paths again."

"Syaoran would appreciate that."

"You think you might stay in Clow?"

"I don't know," said Kurogane looked at Fay. "Maybe. We wouldn't want to intrude on their hospitality, so it depends on if we can make a living there."

"I don't think the King would mind," Seishirou pointed out.

The brothers departed, having stayed for longer than they probably had planned, though neither would admit to it. Kurogane appreciated it. It was good of them to see this to the end.

The end. It was really over. They were free. He and Fay had to come to terms with this all over again.
He would have allowed the boy to enjoy himself a little more, but Fay was eager to leave. The mage did not want to stay in Nihon; he never thought of Nihon as his home, not that Fay ever considered any place his home. But he might have felt safer in some places rather than others—somewhere that did not hurt Syaoran in the past, perhaps, like the island of rabbits, or where they had allies that had enough power to enforce their protection of their guests. He did not say where, specifically, he wanted them to go, but Kurogane could feel him itching to take off.

Perhaps someday Syaoran will return. He was, of course, born of Nihon, grew up here, lost here, found here, and in one moment of decision, steered Nihon toward its fate. Perhaps he and Sakura might even find each other, as they seem to in each lifetime, in each timeline, no matter what was done by others and where they themselves came from. But fourteen years old was so young, younger every year, and with his whole life ahead of him, Kurogane did not feel the need to impress upon him the importance of his dearest person, to open his heart to someone else so thoroughly that for her sake he would volunteer to be imprisoned for years, stripped of his freedom and dignity and identity. Not when Fay and Kurogane had fought so hard for him to control his own life at last. There were many years yet for Syaoran to live with his soulmate. He did not need to start when he was fourteen going on fifteen, when his limbs were still growing in spurts, his voice cracking, his magic coalescing in him.

They had time.

So he gathered Syaoran away from this Sakura who struggled to understand him, from Touya who sought to exploit him, from Yukito who wished to connect with him. Perhaps someday, they might form deeper friendships. Someday in one of the tomorrows. There was nothing keeping Syaoran away. But they were not enough for him to stay. Not yet. Maybe not ever, and that would be just as well, too. Freedom was about choice, and just as Fay and Kurogane found each other when they never had before, perhaps Syaoran would find someone else, someone suited for this new self. Or perhaps Sakura really was the best for him, and that would be fine as well. It did not matter, so long as Syaoran was happy. Everything else can change to adapt.

"Where will we go?" Syaoran asked, oblivious to the look of regret Yukito cast their way, Touya's assessing scrutiny, Sakura's wide-eyed glare. "Can we go to the island of bunnies?"

"We can go there," Fay laughed.

"I need to stop somewhere first," Kurogane interrupted.

Fay's brow pinched. "Kuro—"

"I have to say goodbye," the warrior told Fay. "It won't take long."

Fay frowned, but nodded after a moment. He looked like he wished Kurogane could just drop everything here so they could fly, but he knew better than that.

Nihon might not be Fay's home, but it was Kurogane's, and there are certain gestures that needed doing before he leaves.

Tomoyo was freed from confinement and given fresh clothes. She had relocated to guest quarters at the castle proper, and had bathed and washed. There were shadows under her eyes, and she still looked very pale, but she was no longer the defeated creature of the tower.

She stood when he entered, as one did for an honored guest, and Kurogane wondered, not for the first time, what he was to her. He always felt he owed her, and expected she felt the same; she was a
princess, and Kurogane was an orphan, without home and without family despite his noble origins. Their relationship had always been that of master and servant, despite Tomoyo's incredible generosity. There were barriers neither crossed, and both observed the rules of propriety as such. It was fine on his end; he had viewed Tomoyo as his savior, at one point the one good thing in the world, which must be protected at all costs. He once laid waste to entire armies for her sake, and slew men, women, even children barely older than Syaoran in the name of defending her. He never imagined that one day he would choose to walk away. He never imagined that one day he would find better people to fight for.

And now, and actually for the first time, Kurogane wondered what she was to him. Because it was actually not so clear. She was never someone he ever had romantic feelings for. She was never a role model; she was too different from him to ever aspire to emulate. Was she an elder? Not quite. Was she a superior? Not that either. She was not a sister, or even really a friend. Tomoyo was something else altogether, and over the last ten years, serving her had felt less like a privilege and more like a burden, like a chain. Tomoyo never did anything to disillusion him of his perception of her; he still thought Tomoyo was a greater and better human being than almost any other. But she was not his, and he was not hers, and now that he found his destiny, he saw her, standing in her borrowed robes and the faded light in her eyes, as someone he can no longer walk beside. Her road was not his to follow, and he was turning away not because he did not like her or did not care about her, but simply because it was time to part ways. She was no longer the princess who had saved him from the wreckage of Suwa; she was both more and less, one with duties to her own dreams and her own priorities that did not involve Kurogane. And Kurogane was no longer the ninja warrior sworn to protect his lady; he was a father and companion, obliged to usher his own loved ones into realizing what was in their hearts.

Perhaps part of him was disillusioned after all. Ten years ago, he would have believed Princess Tomoyo would be overjoyed at the prospect of Kurogane finding his own way. Looking at her now, Kurogane knew this was not true. Tomoyo was frightened and sad. She wanted Kurogane to stay. To give up his happiness so that she would not be alone. And while he would never blame her for the sentiment; he would always love her for saving him, for doing what she could to protect his son, for simply being so good and so pure; he knew that he could never honor it either. He had changed enough to be able to recognize this side of her, and he had also changed enough to be able to accept that her happiness was not his responsibility; that her well-being was not his priority.

That was not what she was to him.

And that was not what he was to her.

"Will you be staying with Ishihebi?" he asked.

She lowered her eyes. "I swore a vow."

"So did I. He once swore to serve her. Though he never said it, in his mind he had been committed to serving her forever. He was not sure when that changed, and when it felt alright to leave her. He wondered if he was actually a dishonorable man.

Tomoyo suddenly laughed, her voice incredibly sad. "It's funny," she remarked. "All I wanted was for you to find yourself. I didn't think your doing so would take you away from me. Now that you have…" she trailed off, unable to say it. "I want you to know," she stated instead, "I was going to do everything in my power to keep Syaoran from harm. All I wanted was for him to save Nihon. I didn't want him to die doing so. I would have…" she bit her lip as tears pooled in her eyes.

She thought Kurogane still blamed her. The sight of his princess, once so stately and self-assured, now so frightened, self-deprecating, and regretful about something that was not her fault, prompted
Kurogane to approach her. She had turned away to hide her face behind her sleeve. He knelt on one knee and waited for her to compose herself. As much as he was used to comforting Fay or Syaoran by embracing them, he could not do that with Tomoyo.

It was not his place.

"You have always been a good person," he said, when she managed to collect herself, though she did not raise her face. "You are brave and wise and noble. I never believed otherwise. Knowing you were there fueled my hope that no matter what happened, my son will stay intact. And you did not let me down. You've never let me down."

She finally looked at him, managed a watery smile, and nodded, looking down again. All at once, she seemed childlike.

They had been little more than children when they first met. When she saved him.

"I am not angry with you, Princess," he murmured, even though that title was not technically correct anymore. "I never was. I have always thought fondly of you and I always will. But I cannot stay with you. I've done what I can. You do not need me anymore."

"No," said Tomoyo, "but you do not need me."

"Nihon will find its way to peace," said Kurogane, "and you will see a peaceful Nihon one day. That, I have no doubt. My role is finished. I have defended you so that you might see that world."

"No." Her eyes were watering again, and this time she did not hide her face. "Your role was far more than that."

"That is true," he relented, because he realized Tomoyo needed confirmation; he never imagined she would actually need to know that he cared about her—he assumed it was obvious, but some things needed to be said. "That has not changed, Princess. You will always have a friend in me, and if you ever need me in the future, I'm sure our paths will cross again. But I must go, because...there are others who need me too, and you will be alright."

"I don't know," she whispered in a small voice. "You must know now, what kind of man I married."

A pedophile. A coward. A man unworthy of one such as Tomoyo. But Kurogane remembered what Syaoran said, and the look King Yukito gave him. Tomoyo had the means to free herself, should she choose.

"You will be alright," Kurogane promised, "because my allies are your allies, and I leave them behind to stand beside you, and shelter you in times of need."

Tomoyo looked at him, more puzzled than comforted. Kurogane rose; it was not a remark that bore repeating. She would need a demonstration, at a later time. For now, he had said all he needed to say.

He never imagined that would be all. It seemed wrong, to have so few words for a woman who had done so much for him. But perhaps less was more. And all goodbyes led to the same thing.

"Farewell, Tomoyo," he bid. "Perhaps we shall meet again."

"I wish you and yours well," said Tomoyo, dignified and composed once more. Kurogane looked at her, imprinting, for a moment, this image of her in his mind, before turning. He walked out without another word.
Fay and Syaoran had been talking while Kurogane was away. As he approached, the youngster was exclaiming, "and Watanuki said he had a cool shop!"

Fay turned to Kurogane as he joined them. "I was just telling him, I think our first stop should be Clow. He should see the others—they'd want to see him, at any rate, and…it would be good for him to be somewhere safe."

Safe. Clow was safe.

"I mean..." Fay went on, sounding like he was still getting used to the idea, "we can go anywhere we want. He can go anywhere and bring us along. We'll stop there, and then go to rabbit island, and...if there's a unicorn island or a mammoth island or something, we can go there too. And if we don't like it, if it ends up being dangerous, we can just leave." He wore a stunned look by the end of it. "It's even better than Mokona. And...if we wanted to go back because we left something behind, we can just go back." He stared at Kurogane in astonishment.

Kurogane stared back.

Maybe there was a ceremony to Syaoran's new beginning: endless rounds of elation.

He could work with that.

"Well make sure you remember to feed yourself," Sakura drawled. "Otherwise you'll stay short."

"I'm not short."

"Yes you are."

"No I'm not! And I'm going to keep growing and I'm going to come back and tower over you."

"Ha, as if!"

The two teens paused.

"Will you come back?" Sakura asked, sounding oddly plaintive.

"Of course," Syaoran replied easily. "Nihon is my home! And I love the cherry blossoms."

"Oh. Alright."

"Alright."

Well! Kurogane thought, amused. Looks like these two really are perfect for each other, even in their current forms. He exchanged a look with Fay, who also looked tickled by the scene.

"I'll bring something back," Syaoran promised.

"Don't you dare get me something girly!"

"I'll get you a big sword! You can use it on bad people!"

"Promise?"

Syaoran grinned widely. Sakura, in contrast, scowled.

"Do you even know how to look at swords?"
"I don't need to know how to use one to tell which ones are good!"

"You're going to find me a 'pretty' sword that can't function and is only good to look at, I know it!"

"No I won't!"

Fay looked like he was about to die. "Alright, Syaoran, time to say goodbye."

Syaoran did not say goodbye to Sakura. He did say it to Touya, even giving him a hug, much to Sakura's disgust. To Yukito he was a little more reserved, but Yukito pulled the youngster into a hug as well.

"Stay safe," he bid the teen.

"I will," Syaoran promised. "You'll be great."

Yukito squeezed, looking like he really did not want to let Syaoran go, but eventually he released him, and the boy stepped to Kurogane and Fay, grinning with excitement.

Kurogane realized that Syaoran was the only one who did not think he would be leaving Nihon for long. Perhaps he was right; after all, he was the one creating the portals. It certainly made the parting much easier for him.

And why not? Syaoran's world may be getting bigger, but he can go anywhere he pleased at anytime. Wherever his heart led, and if he missed Nihon, there was no reason he could not come back right away.

With a flex of his arms, a portal opened before the three of them. Syaoran grabbed Fay and Kurogane by the hand and pulled them through before either adult could quite react.

Then the portal dissipated behind them, and they were standing in a new world.
Their arrival generated a lot of hubbub, because Syaoran had opened up a portal smack in the middle of the marketplace. Upon reflection, Kurogane realized they were lucky to have landed in the correct world on the first try, because while Syaoran could open and close portals at will, he did not know where every world was in relation to each other. It would not have been the worst thing in the world if they did wind up somewhere else; without being bound to any specific place, Syaoran could just leave if the situation called for it, but they could have perused through many worlds for a while before finally arriving where they wanted.

As it was, Syaoran was as awestruck by his surroundings as everyone else was by him. The clothes were different, the smells, the atmosphere, with the bright sun shining far more intensely than it ever did on Nihon. The air was warm and very dry, lacking the cool moisture of spring in Tomoeda. The people, too, were more tan. Kurogane looked at Syaoran, pale from ill health and being in a different realm for so long, and realized he really did not fit here. Not as he was.

The boy was a little overwhelmed by everything, and stuck close to Fay and Kurogane as they tried to orient themselves. The gathering crowd did not help; people were coming up to look at them once it became apparent they were not immediately dangerous.

It took a while to extract themselves from the commotion. In the end, they needed help from the royal guard, who recognized Kurogane and Fay and escorted the trio to the palace grounds, where there continued to be a low-grade chaos involving a lot of emotion. By then, the royal family had been alerted. Prince Touya and Watanuki met them at the gates.

Watanuki engulfed Syaoran in a hug and seemed like he never wanted to let go.

"He's so tiny!" Prince Touya exclaimed in shock, staring from next to them. "Was that always like this or or is it just this time?"

"Who cares?" Watanuki snapped, still clinging to the boy. "We'll fatten him up."

"He didn't seem so little last time," the older prince murmured, disturbed.

Syaoran looked like he wanted to protest, but Watanuki was holding him too tightly for him to speak. Princess Sakura joined them a few minutes later; she walked up, though she might have wanted to run. Her handmaidens held her by the elbows; she must have been afraid of falling.

"Fay, Kurogane," she reached out, since Watanuki was still holding Syaoran.

Fay went first, embracing the princess warmly.

"I'm so glad you're here," she remarked. There were tears in her eyes. "You better not leave for a while. I don't think I can stand it if you do. And your eye—does it hurt?"

"Not at all." Fay smiled, his face brighter than the sun itself. "You should hear how jealous Fuma was—kept lamenting how Syaoran is going to steal all the girls."

Sakura turned her head to look, but Watanuki was still holding Syaoran, so she went and gave Kurogane a hug first.

She was bigger around the middle.
"Are you sure you don't want to do this inside?" Prince Touya poked Watanuki on the shoulder. "It's getting hot."

Watanuki finally let Syaoran go. There were tears in his eyes too.

"Let's go inside," he whispered, but cupped Syaoran's face to look at his eyes. He suddenly laughed. "It's not a bad look." He looked at Fay. "Are you alright?"

"He's my son," Fay said quietly. "How can I not be alright?"

Syaoran was actually not comfortable with Prince Touya or Princess Sakura; he clearly recognized them, but they were a good ten years older than their counterparts on Nihon, and the boy did not know how to approach them. He was also uncertain about their positions: being unfamiliar with the fashion and royal regalia on Clow, the boy had the sense that Touya and Sakura were important people, but was not sure how to address them or otherwise behave. Prince Touya, of course, was taller than the priest, and Sakura was actually as tall as Syaoran, which seemed to baffle the boy. He ended up retreating close to Watanuki, while Fay and Kurogane buffered the half-introduction, half-reunion.

Sakura was also not sure what to do with this new Syaoran, who seemed to have frozen in time since the last time she saw him, if not regressed somewhat due to years of poor nutrition and stunted development. It was difficult for her, Kurogane could tell, because despite knowing better in her head in her heart she was eager to reunite with the old Syaoran, Li Tsubasa, with whom she had shared adventures and trials. This Syaoran had his own sorrows and memories that had nothing to do with her, and had no emotional tie to any of the old experiences. He blushed when talking to Touya and was generally careful around Sakura, which was the opposite of how the old Syaoran used to behave. In an ironic twist, Syaoran was the one who had moved on more thoroughly than anyone else.

"I saw the whole thing," Watanuki told them in a hushed voice, as Syaoran did his best to avoid Sakura's gaze. "I thought he was—it was too close. I don't know how you figured out how to save him—I never would have guessed."

He had been badly frightened, which explained his display of emotion; he was still holding Syaoran's hand, tangling his arm with the teen's. Syaoran allowed him, sensing his distress.

"Turned out, there was more to the story," Kurogane replied softly.

"I know," Watanuki shook his head. "I should have realized, but transplanting eyeballs wasn't exactly an intuitive solution for me. Even if the clone did hint at it before."

"The only reason I thought of it was because Fay had a dream that his twin was visiting. The dream mentioned that Fay's magic belonged to Syaoran."

Watanuki gripped the boy tightly. He looked at Syaoran. "It's not a bad look."

"Everyone keeps saying that," Syaoran smiled, and then hugged Watanuki again. "I'm sorry for scaring you."

"You shouldn't apologize for something like this. You survived, didn't you?" Watanuki cradled the boy's head again. "But enough heroics for now, hm? You'll find Clow Kingdom to be far quieter on that front."

"When did you last eat?" Prince Touya asked. "We called down to the kitchens to have something
"Your counterparts fed us," Fay admitted. "But perhaps some tea."

"Tea it is then," Sakura looked at Syaoran, who met her gaze. His face was very open in its curiosity, but there was no more to his regard, unlike Sakura, who searched his countenance for any hint of recognition. She broke eye contact and led the way, letting her husband pull Syaoran along.

"He's a skinny little thing," Prince Touya pinched Syaoran's other arm. "No wonder he can't swing a sword."

"I did swing a sword!" Syaoran protested, scowling furiously (and adorably, in Kurogane's opinion). Then his face fell. "But I broke it."

"You broke a sword?" the prince raised his eyebrows.

He was, as Kurogane predicted, pleased when they revealed the remains of the training weapon that had probably saved Syaoran's life on the road to Tomoeda. "What do you know?" he exclaimed. "It worked! I thought for sure this was only good for symbolism and nostalgia once I outgrew it. Not bad for a lump of steel."

"You're not mad?" Syaoran asked shyly.

"Weapons are to be used," the prince pointed out, ruffling Syaoran's hair. "Rather pointless if the owner were harmed while the sword's not. The whole reason I gave it to you was to protect you. If it broke while doing it, so be it; it's fulfilled its purpose. If you want, I'll fashion you another."

"You're really not mad?"

"Come on," the prince took Syaoran by the shoulders. "Come with me. We'll pick one out for you from my collection, right now."

*Right now?* Kurogane raised his eyebrows.

"You really don't have to," Fay interjected.

Prince Touya ruffled Syaoran's head again and ignored Fay. "Come along."

"You don't have to—" Syaoran echoed Fay as he blushed a deep red, taking his cue from the adults that casually accepting such a gift was not appropriate.

"Stop listening to Fay," Prince Touya pushed the teen. "Shh. Don't listen to your fathers. I have quite a few, and you just pick out the one you like..." the two separated from the group and disappeared down the corridor.

Sakura stared after them. She must be hurt, Kurogane thought. She had been the old Syaoran's most important person. Now she was little more than a stranger. The contrast could not be easy to take.

"He's so young," she murmured. "He's nothing but a child. He didn't seem so young then. I hadn't felt so young. He was so small to have already gone through so much, and for my sake. I suppose it is just as well that he has forgotten about me."

"I don't think that's quite it," said Fay. "You were never to blame for what the two of you went through. He simply has his own Sakura on Nihon."

"Does he?" Sakura looked at him, green eyes dark. "What is this one like?"
"Kind of immature, actually."

By the time Kurogane and Fay finished telling him about his sister's counterpart, Sakura's eyebrows nearly disappeared into her hairline.

"I can't imagine saying such things to him," she exclaimed.

"He's a very delicate child this time around," said her husband. "It makes sense that his soulmate would be tougher, and a touch more brash, to make up for him being more sensitive."

"She sounds so mean to him though!" Sakura exclaimed, dismayed.

"She learns by provoking others," Fay explained gently, "because otherwise no one tells her anything. She really wasn't so bad. And despite how we made her sound, I don't think Syaoran minds her methods as much as we'd assume. Out of everyone he has come across, she was the only one who did not treat him like glass. I think he came to find that rather refreshing. And he could handle her, blunt as she was. The more I think about it, the more I think she really was a good fit for him."

That was an interesting point.

"Fourteen years old is young, though," Watanuki went on. "She may change. I know I did."

"He's so young," Sakura lamented again. Beside her, Watanuki was silent.

"You really are surprised?" Fay asked.

"It's just..." Sakura reached over and took Watanuki's hand. Watanuki looked at her. "I think I never realized how vulnerable he was. I know this one had a different life, but I'm thinking back and he wasn't much bigger then. He wasn't that much stronger either. He had been this lanky, awkward... child. Before, I always thought his death seemed so out of place; sometimes I feel as if it was some kind of ruse, because he was someone I had depended on, sheltered me, took blows for me. I never thought of him as a boy. But looking at him now, it makes sense that he would die after everything he went through. Such things would have felled an older man, and there he was...facing them...no parents, and I wasn't with him. I always thought of him as...as my hero. He still is. But I never understood, until seeing him today, that he had been so...small."

Prince Touya and Syaoran ended up being gone for a long time. Kurogane eventually grew uneasy and went to look for them. He found the two of them in Prince Touya's armory. Syaoran's eyes were streaming with tears, while the prince was speaking in low tones and cradling the boy's head with both hands.

Kurogane wanted to demand answers, but instinct made him wait in silence instead, to see what he could glean without revealing himself.

"I'm just...I'm so scared..." Syaoran was sobbing softly. "I don't know what anyone's talking about, and this person seemed so much better, and what if one day people realize I'm not him after all? Will they leave me?"

"But you are. You got rid of the Fire Demon."

"I know..."

The prince pulled the boy into a hug. "It doesn't make you feel better, does it? Everyone says all
these things about you, things you have done, and you can't remember any of it. You end up having to trust others and take them for their word."

"I just…on the one hand, I feel like…one moment I'm sure and the next—"

"I know."

"Or—or if I don't end up being as good as him anyway, even if I really am him, then everyone would be so disappointed—Papa gave up his eye, and Dad gave up his home, and—"

"Listen to me," Prince Touya drew back to look at Syaoran right in the eyes. "Tell me, what do you want to be when you grow up?"

Syaoran blinked. "What…what I want to be?"

"What do you want to be?"

"I…I don't know—"

"You don't know?"

Syaoran stammered, frightened. "I never thought about it. I never knew if I would leave tomorrow—and—I just never—"

"Well now is your chance. What do you want to be?"

"I-I-I don't know"

"I want you to repeat something after me. Are you ready? 'I can be anything I want.' Say that."

"......I…can be anything I want?"

"Say it again."

"...I…can be anything…I…want?"

"Again."

Kurogane's eyes stung as he listened.

"I can be anything I want."

"Again."

"...I can be anything I want." This time, Syaoran said it with more confidence.

"I want you to remember this," said the prince. "The main difference between you now and you back then? You couldn't be anything you wanted. Did you really think you were good at fighting because you liked it? It hurt you every bit as much as it hurts you now. You just pushed it aside, because we wouldn't let you back away, because we needed you to be something you're not. Well now you can. You don't have to like the sword. You certainly must not enjoy the sword just because you think you should, or because everyone around you does. You can be anything you want, and if you want to be someone who never has to touch a blood-soaked sword again, and you become that someone who never uses a blade, never takes another life, never sheds another's blood, my dear little brother, you are more triumphant in how you live your life than you ever were. Because you didn't used to have a choice. You weren't your true self. You were what other people needed, what other people wanted.
So be yourself, who you are, and as long as you stay true to that, you've gone further than you had last time around. No disappointment, Syaoran."

Syaoran could not touch Touya's swords, Kurogane realized. Particularly not the blades that the prince had used in real battle. It was not just Ginryu that made Syaoran uncomfortable. Even the weapon in Sikayama Temple had been repulsive to the youngster. The only reason he had not been repelled by the training sword was because Touya had never used it to kill anyone.

"Now," the prince drew back, "Big Brother will give you another gift instead. I think you'll like this one far better."

"You're not mad?"

"Pfft. Be mad that you're such a good child? You tell me who dares to be angry with you and I'll give them a whopping."

Syaoran giggled, and turned as the prince guided him around. They both saw Kurogane then. The prince pushed the teen, but for the first time in months, Syaoran hesitated.

Kurogane reached an arm out in silent summons. The boy went to him then. Kurogane tucked Syaoran to him.

"I'll always be proud of you," he promised the child.

Against him, Syaoran nodded.

Prince Touya's alternative gift was a horse; a yearling, and quite a beauty. Large, doe-like eyes, a wide forehead and a gracefully tapered muzzle.

"Spirits!" Kurogane exclaimed, because a colt like this was sure to be a prize anywhere.

"What's his name?" Syaoran asked, holding his hand out to the creature to let it sniff.

"We call him Kane," said the prince, "but you can change it, if you want."

"I wouldn't change his name!" Syaoran sounded mortified.

Prince Touya laughed. "Not like this one would care," he muttered sideways to Kurogane, but did not mention so to the boy.

"Is he backing?" Kurogane asked, as the boy held out an apple.

"About to start," said Prince Touya. "He's going to sire some fine breeds for sure. Look at those legs. Nice thing is, he's actually rather docile for a stallion. Occasionally given to a bit of spirit, but nowhere as much as others. And he is a beauty."

"He is. Are you sure about this, Your Highness? He's certainly a good fit among your own collection."

"I can only ride one horse at a time," said the prince, "and I have others. This one is young. Like him."

Kurogane hesitated. He had not been certain about staying in Clow for the long-term. They had come because to do otherwise would be rude, but to be given a horse—
"You worry too much," the younger man chuckled. "Really now. Can't one give a little brother a present?"

"He has no idea how to take care of a horse."

"Few owners do," the prince slapped Kurogane on the arm.

"This is true," Kurogane conceded.

"And look how happy he is," Prince Touya went on. "I have never seen that boy so happy."

Syaoran was connecting to the young animal the same way he had connected to the fawn in Sikayama. The colt was licking the apple juices off his fingers. He could not refuse the gift, and it was clear his son did not want to either.

Well, Clow was never going to be just a single visit. No one said they had to pick only one home.

When they returned from the stables, the King's court had adjourned. The man was speaking rapidly to his son-in-law, with Priest Yukito at his side. They looked up when Kurogane, Prince Touya, and Syaoran entered.

King Fujitaka's eyes became very bright, his face tightening as he fought for control.

"Father," Prince Touya stepped forward at first, but then moved to the side when the man did not even acknowledge him.

For a long time, a silence fell. After a while, Syaoran's body began tilting toward Kurogane for reassurance, which made Kurogane realize that he needed to greet the King and provide the introductions.

"Your Majesty," he bowed. Syaoran bowed as well. "This is—"

"Come here," said the king, extending a hand out.

Syaoran shuffled forward cautiously, pausing about arm's length away. King Fujitaka's eyes moved up and down. His brows were pinched now, and he almost looked like he was scowling.

"Child," he murmured. "Do you remember me?"

"...You're the man in the amulet."

The King hesitated to process that, and then asked, "do you remember anything else?"

Syaoran shook his head. "No, Your Majesty."

Kurogane looked away, knowing that Syaoran's answer had to hurt the man at least as much as it had hurt Watanuki and Sakura.

After an agonizing silence, he heard the king choke out an attempt at a laugh. "Ah. No matter. It was a long time ago. Come closer. Let me look at you."

Syaoran went, and allowed the man to cup his face. When the King spoke again, he sounded like he might burst into tears any minute, and was trying with all his power not to. "I've been…hoping to meet you. Syaoran."
Syaoran did not reply. The poor child would have nothing to say to this man, this stranger who was only familiar because of the impression he had left on the amulet.

Kurogane felt a wave of pity for the poor king. Unlike Kurogane and Fay, King Fujitaka had truly lost his son forever. This Syaoran was not his. Will never be his.

Next to them, Prince Touya stood with his eyes downcast. He likely understood the same thing.

"You are staying, this time?" the King asked Kurogane, still holding the boy by the shoulders.

"We have not made definite plans," Kurogane replied, because to say that they had not intended to stay would be uncouth after the horse, and now this.

"You must stay," said the King, and looked a little more collected as he managed a genuine smile while invoking a little enthusiasm in his tone. "You have never been to Clow before. There is so much to see."

"I know!" Syaoran brightened, eager to follow the King's lead toward happier topics. "When we first arrived at the marketplace, everything was so different! All the clothes! And it's so sunny here! I've never seen anything like it on Nihon, though I still haven't been everywhere on Nihon."

"Well, there's more to show, little one," the King wrapped an arm around the boy's shoulders as he turned him. "Have you been on tour of the palace yet?"

"No."

"Well that must be corrected," said the king.

Priest Yukito and Prince Touya led the way, and soon Syaoran forgot about the awkwardness of meeting so many familiar strangers. Soon, his caution gave way to natural curiosity, coupled with a sweetness that seemed unique to this incarnation. King Fujitaka followed behind, and after a while Syaoran lost his reservations and would bounce back and forth between the prince and his father, pointing at things that he found particularly odd, comparing them to Nihon, and generally having a good time.

Kurogane and Fay followed in silence, watching. From accounts, Tsubasa had been a quiet, reserved boy when he first came to Clow. He had also been seven years old at the time, and leaving his parents for the first time. Syaoran, in contrast, was full of enthusiasm. He took in everything with wide eyes; everything was so different from Nihon that it really was no wonder. Kurogane knew that this was likely how he looked when Seishirou and Fuma first took him away, and felt a surge of fondness for the boy. Free from the stress of evil targeting him and those he loved, he could be himself, and this was the radiant being that had been sequestered all along.

But it was a little striking, how Syaoran had absolutely no recollection of this place. King Fujitaka would point out certain things, and they sounded like the usual trivia that came with living in a palace that housed the monarchs for generations. There would be an expression on his face, though, that suggested he recalled something directly to do with Syaoran. In the corners and by the curtains were shadows of the old Tsubasa, the little things he enjoyed or disliked, where he preferred to sit or stand, and he could see them playing in the King's head, all of them still gone forever.

When Watanuki led Syaoran ahead, Kurogane fell back to be in line with the King.

"He does remember," he told the man, thinking of how Syaoran had blocked a spell with Prince Touya's training sword. "It's just not very clear. The more he tries to remember, the less he can recall."
"He is the same," said the King. "See how he holds his chin when he's delighted? He used to do that, when he was very little. Well, I suppose the clone did." He paused. "He really has no reason to remember me. I knew this. I knew. I'm fine." He summoned a smile. "He's happier this way, too. Perhaps it is better that he forgot."

Fay was looking over with his left eye. "Your amulet saved him," said the mage. "He was bleeding out, and...we needed more time. The turquoise kept him alive until we could save him. He's here today because of you."

This time the King could not maintain his composure. He hid his face behind his sleeve when the tears escaped. It was, Kurogane thought, perhaps less of a consolation than it should have been. He and Fay turned away so the King could retain his dignity.

They had dinner that evening, which consisted of Queen Nadeshiko making plans for an adventure the following day; out of everyone, she seemed to be the only one who took the new Syaoran in stride. It was not so much that she did not care, Kurogane thought. She just came to grips with it more than the others.

Sakura and Watanuki were quiet for the entire meal; indeed, they said little for most of the day. Syaoran sometimes spoke to Watanuki, but mostly ignored Sakura. Some of it might have been because of her counterpart's influence on him, but Kurogane did not think so. This Sakura even looked different. Older, actually, once Kurogane was able to compare her to her fourteen-year-old self, even if that self was a little more toned and had darker hair and fiercer features. This one was softer for many reasons, one of which was the new life she carried, and that, more than anything, was probably the root of Syaoran's disinterest; she really had nothing to do with this one anymore. He had his own.

Despite his initial reticence, Syaoran became quite the talker with the king, chatting about Sikayama and the priests, how the fawns were born (he described this in more detail than was perhaps appropriate for a meal, but the king listened with great interest nonetheless, and no one else stopped him). That old stomach issue reared its head again, though, prompting the king to ask Yukito to talk to the palace healers. Exhausted from all the new experiences, Syaoran began yawning soon after the meal, and so they called it a day. Fay and Kurogane were given quarters right next to Syaoran's, and they all retired for the night with plans to go riding tomorrow.

This all got scrapped, however, when Kurogane woke to find Fay gone from his side, and found Fay in Syaoran's room. The child had come down with fever and diarrhea.

"Food poisoning?" Kurogane wondered. He could not have been poisoned deliberately; there was no way Clow's royal family would ever do that to the youngster. But Kurogane and Fay had eaten the same thing, so why were they not affected?

"No," Fay instantly refuted as he tucked Syaoran in. "He's just not accustomed to this place. Clow has a different climate altogether. His body is stressed."

"I'm sorry," Syaoran mumbled.

"It's not your fault." Fay kissed his forehead. "We'll get the healers to look at you, make sure."

The healer confirmed what Fay suspected, and gave Syaoran a tonic to soothe his fever and stomach-ache. Fay retreated with Kurogane to their own room, though neither of them slept well.

By morning, Syaoran looked worn, though better. He was in no shape to go riding, however.
"It's fine," said the King. "This kind of thing happens, and you've had an arduous run before coming here."

"Why is this child so frail?" his wife lamented.

"He's better than he was," said Watanuki. "Nothing a little rest wouldn't fix."

Indeed, Syaoran napped for most of the day. Kurogane and Fay slept also, feeling more relaxed than they had in years. They woke up feeling more tired than before they slept, but there was no real war here, no castle to defend, and for once, they could...laze about.

The "jetlag", as Watanuki called it, was brief; by evening, Syaoran was his cheerful self. The king read with Syaoran from a heavy-set book; Kurogane thought he overheard mentions of a lamp and a spirit. Syaoran actually knew a lot of words, and it took a moment for Kurogane to recall that Clow Kingdom had a different language than Nihon, so this did not make sense. In fact, that Syaoran could communicate at all to anyone in Clow should have been unexpected.

They thought that it was because Tsubasa had traveled to so many worlds, but the queen revealed that it was actually Syaoran himself.

"The first time he came," she revealed, "he was a quiet little thing. Cautious. He had never been away from his parents before. He was in a new land, with new people. But he understood, even then. There was no Mokona."

"But his clone couldn't understand either of us without Mokona," Fay remembered.

"I don't know about the clone, but Syaoran himself did not need Mokona. As for this one, I don't expect language to be one of his impediments. Even literacy should not evade him for long."

"Well, even if it does," Priest Yukito pointed out, "I doubt it would get in his way. Not even death can hold him back."

He said it so flippantly, Kurogane felt a surge of annoyance, but he let it slide. Ten years ago, he would have taken issue with the priest being so dismissive of just how hard Syaoran had to struggle to prevail. Just because he succeeded did not mean the trial had not cost him. Here he was, without his old memories, without his old vitality. Every battle stripped at him; his death most of all.

But he did come back. And the priest was right. After that, reading was nothing.

Two days later, Syaoran was about as energetic as he could be, and the King had taken him out riding in the royal oasis. From accounts, it was quite large and actually open to the public, but the king had priority, and having scheduled ahead, cleared visitors away so that he and Syaoran might have the place to themselves.

Kurogane and Fay chose not to go with them; Syaoran was fond of the king, but did not quite view him as a father-figure the way the clone had. King Fujitaka wished to build a relationship, and the two trusted him enough to let them have some time alone. After all, Fujitaka had demonstrated better parenting instincts than either Fay or Kurogane in the past.

Watanuki used the opportunity to talk to Kurogane about a subject they had all been avoiding.

"I've figured out what you're supposed to do."

His expression was placid, as it usually was these days. Fay looked at him, a little startled, while
Sakura, who was nearby embroidering, continued to sew from her rocking chair.

Whatever it was, it seemed the prince and princess were not very concerned, but Kurogane still felt a lump form in his throat.

"I'm going to send you," said the young man, "to someone you've heard of but have never met. He is waiting in a place between times. The price has already been paid in full. All that's left is for you to go, whenever you're ready."

"He?" Kurogane blinked.

"It's best if you see for yourself."

Kurogane exchanged a look with Fay, and suddenly felt very, very afraid.

Watanuki suddenly laid a hand on his shoulder. "It's going to be alright," he said.

It was unusual for the sorcerer to say something like that. Perhaps because so much of what Kurogane, Fay, and Syaoran went through had been uncertain.

"The hard part is over," Watanuki reminded him.

That was true, but…

Fay stepped to him and pressed his forehead against Kurogane's. "It's probably just really complicated," he whispered.

Kurogane swallowed and ended up gulping audibly. His palms were sweaty.

"It's not complicated," Sakura said, pausing in her sewing, "but it's hard to say and easier to show."

Kurogane looked at her, searching her face for any hints of what he might encounter, what he might have to do.

_Please please please please please…_

"Can…can Fay come with?"

"…For a price. His journey wasn't paid for. Unless you want to bring Syaoran along, but he wouldn't know where to go."

No. Syaoran should not be part of this.

Watanuki gripped his shoulder again. "You're not going to rape anyone. I promise. You'll understand when you get there. But he has a lot to say to you, that's why I'm not starting. You can wait if you're really not sure about this, but it's…probably better to just get it over with."

That was a little better but…

Kurogane exchanged a look at Fay again. Fay's one eye was compassionate. Whatever Kurogane would have to do, the mage will be there for him.

The ninja released a breath. "Alright."

_I can do this._
For Syaoran.

He closed his eyes as Watanuki's magic washed over him.
Clearing all Debts

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your awesome reviews! I can't tell you how happy they've made me feel. I really appreciate all of you coming on this journey with me, and I almost can't believe we're nearly at the end! You guys are wonderful and your support meant so much. <3 <3 <3 to you all!

There was a sunshower in Hong Kong.

"Would you look at that," Clow Reed murmured, tilting his head to look up at the sky, fascinated. "Not a single cloud in the sky. Where does the rain come from?"

Kurogane looked around. On the walls were framed photos, Some were completely empty except for some furniture. Others featured Syaoran, perched or posed in a way that suggested he was accommodating others in the picture.

The sitting room was covered in a layer of dust, and there was a mild musty smell to the air, something like mold but not quite. The place was otherwise neat and tidy, all the cups and dishes put away, clothes in the hangers and the shoes lined up by the door. The lights were off; they likely had not been turned on for a decade, judging by everything else. Even the windows were a little fogged over, in a way they would never be if living, breathing occupants still inhabited the home.

Clow Reed himself clearly interacted little with his surroundings. There were no footprints in the dust on the floor. He looked rather out of place here too, with his robes, and he kept on a ridiculous hat, wide-brimmed with a long ostrich feather arching over and down.

Kurogane took a cautious step forward, noting the very real print he made on the floor, and stopped, considering the situation and feeling somewhat at a loss.

"Sometimes," Reed murmured, "towards the end of the day, or the beginning, depending, you see rainbows with these things. Quite amazing. Mother Nature is truly amazing, all on her own."

He had yet to turn around. Kurogane looked at him, and then decided to stop being confused or let this man, whose whims had controlled so much of everyone's lives, intimidate him in any way. He could demand how the man was even here when he should have been dead long ago, but with someone like Clow Reed, what would be the point? The sorcerer clearly did whatever he wanted.

"You sound earnest," he murmured, "but given the context, I find it hard to believe you mean it."

"Oh?" Reed tilted his head, indicating his attention was entirely focused on the company, but still did not choose to face Kurogane.

"Wizards," Kurogane moved forward, continuing to take in Tsubasa's old home, "generally don't seem all that inclined to allow for the natural progression of things. In fact, the stronger they are, the more they seem to think they know best."

"That is true," Reed allowed. "Would that I had your wise counsel much sooner, Lord Youou; the many realms would look very different today."
Kurogane drew to a stop. Ten years ago, he would have called Reed out for mocking him. Now, he was perceptive enough to hear the genuine contrition.

"Seems you're not done playing god," he pointed out.

"'Playing god'. What a phrase. Once, I think I dared to. No, I've learned better. But I am here through unnatural means, yes. Or perhaps it is natural. Who knows."

At last, he turned. He was not as tall as Kurogane might have assumed. Someone like Clow Reed, the greatest sorcerer of all time, ought to be larger than life, but in fact, he had a narrow figure, almost unassuming. He did have a well-structured face, slight hints of Anglo-Saxon, with a well-developed jaw and nose. He bore some resemblance to Watanuki, though in this form, he was a little older; he looked to be about his forties, with the occasional streaks of white hair through the black.

"The people here don't like homes where murders have taken place. They believe the ghosts of the victims remain to haunt whomever comes to occupy the house. That is how this place has remained undisturbed for so long, though I expect the government will remedy that soon, superstition or not."

"That's fine," Kurogane narrowed his eyes, wondering why Reed was trying so hard to procrastinate the conversation they must have. He was not particularly eager to have it himself, but it almost seemed like the sorcerer did not know how to start. "We're not planning on living here anyway, or having anything to do with his place. Syaoran's moved on."

"I see. That's good."

"He's doing well. Do you actually care?"

Reed's eyes darkened.

The rain pattered against the window, the only sound in the silence that fell. After a while, Reed turned away to regard the window again, this time bereft of the wonder that emanated from him moments before.

"It wasn't a split-second decision," he said quietly. "It had been, at first, but a wish like that would have kept her amongst the living for a second, maybe a minute. An hour, perhaps. Not as long as she stayed. Sometimes decisions aren't only made once. They're made over and over again, despite challenges, despite new information, despite feelings to the contrary. In the moment, I wanted her to live, but I chose to keep her long after that feeling passed. Worked for it, wove the forces to my bidding, because without her, I had nothing. Everyone knew me. I was named for my powers before I could even speak. Everyone knew I would do great things, bring about great changes, and everyone had a different opinion on just what that should be. By the time I met Yuuko, I was tired. All my powers never seemed to be enough to fix the evils of the universe, to do what others expect. I thought, something for myself. Just this once. Why give Man desire, if he can never indulge in it? I honestly never figured it would cause any harm. We're born with the instinct to avoid death, after all. I certainly had lived far longer than I had any right to, and the skies have yet to fall. Someone like Yuuko could easily live twice as long."

Kurogane thought of Fay, another mage with so much power that he did not know what to do with himself. Another mage who had made the same decision, over and over again, despite challenges, despite perhaps feeling otherwise. In the end, Fay got what he wanted. Reed never would; Yuuko was gone for good.

"…She started having nightmares. Vivid ones of monsters, coming for her. At first they occurred every so often; it wasn't every night, but she would have them more than perhaps I knew
of. Then it was every night, and they crossed over to the day, haunting her waking hours. She started drinking, because that would keep the visions away. She didn't tell me; didn't want me to feel guilty, but I saw that she was developing a drinking problem and didn't know what to make of it.

"One day I came home and found her trying to set herself on fire. At some point, she had begun hallucinating. Strange things. Terrifying things. She was so certain that she was covered with something she had to burn off. She had these compulsions; she wanted to dive off buildings, run into the streets in front of passing cars, and the only thing that helped at all was sake. But the sake was costing her liver too. She would get such terrible hangovers. She lost weight because she wasn't eating. At length, I had to take her to the healers, and while she lying there on the cot, I looked at her wasted temples and her yellowed skin and thought…'she looks like a living corpse'. That was when I realized…life and living were two different things.

"We had a discussion, when she came to. By then, our passions have cooled; she because of malaise, and I because I was weary of watching her suffer. Her time was long past. She understood, and was ready to meet her maker. I was ready to let her. I took her home. She washed, bathed, combed her hair. We spent one final night together. At midnight, I undid the spells. All of them that tied her to this plane. But she didn't go."

"Worlds travel differently through time, as you might know," Reed went on. "Families tend to stay together. Soulmates find each other. They do so in different times. Yesterday for me is your tomorrow, and your other self's present, and your third self's history lesson a hundred years later. In some worlds my father wasn't born yet. In others, my bones had long since crumbled to dust. So in some worlds, I already have hundreds of descendants. Fei Wong was one of those. In his memory, I had already failed, and Yuuko was long gone. Whatever the reason, he worked to keep her alive, bring her back to life, in his case. From our perspective, she never left. But this time, I wasn't the one keeping her here.

"We searched. That took a long time. It wasn't until the High Priestess Nadeshiko gave us the tip that we had any idea where to even look. Fei Wong Reed meant to use her daughter, you see, but a boy had saved her. In this timeline, he had no relation to me. Was born to a different set of parents altogether. But his soul was the same and he was the same and Fei Wong realized he potentially had exactly what he needed. Tormented that child for an eternity. Boy went mad, slew his captors, and was found by the King and Queen. Princess Sakura recognized him as the child who had saved her, so the royal family felt compelled to try to help him, but he was a tearful, frightened, feral mess. They wanted the help of the Dream Witch. Brought him to Tokyo. Yuuko actually recognized him before I did; asked them to leave him here. He wept, nonstop, for three days and two nights. He was deathly afraid of me and would only allow Yuuko anywhere near him."

Kurogane's eyes stung and burned. He closed his eyes.

"Did you know he was your descendant?" he asked softly.

"Not at first," Reed admitted. "Neither did Yuuko, for that matter. She just sensed he was important. Perhaps he provoked some remote memory from her earlier years, when she first managed the shop. We enlisted Queen Nadeshiko's help. Together, we found out about Valeria, where this all seemed to have started. It still wasn't obvious, though. Worlds die, just as people do. That itself wasn't unusual. But the biggest clue was the child's parents. The first version of him I found was in Tomoea. His mother died when he was fourteen. Cancer, as it happened. In another world, he was in Hong Kong all his life. Met Sakura when he was a little older. Mother dead at fourteen, also Li Yelan, though different father. Families do tend to stay together, so it was unusual that he should have different fathers, though that is not unheard of. But his mother was always constant. She always died when he was fourteen, as well, in a variety of ways. Accidents. Murder. War crime. Illness. The key, we
discovered, was actually with Li Yelan.

"She wasn't my descendant, technically. She was a descendant of my mother's family. That is why her name was always Li, and never Reed. In some realms, she acknowledges the connection anyway. Often, however, this isn't addressed. Women aren't as valued as men, and lineage is traced through the paternal line, not the maternal. Her mark in history is rather subtle, if it could be felt at all. She seemed to exist purely to have this son. Sometimes she has other daughters. Never other sons. And when we investigated further, she never failed to have him as a son, except for two instances."

"When she was killed," Kurogane realized. What a fate.

"Fei Wong was using her as an experiment," Reed explained, "because she was the perfect model; a woman doomed to die before her son turns fifteen. If he could bring her back to life, then he could apply the same methods to Yuuko. So he kidnapped her, and conducted trials. He kidnapped her throughout several dimensions, not just Valeria and Nihon. He's tried some bizarre things, including cloning her; he might have created his first clone from her. Not a complete copy, but one based on her. Xing Huo, her name was. But clones aren't the original, no matter how similar. What he was trying to accomplish with those… I can't imagine. Perhaps it has to do with creating destinies for beings that weren't supposed to exist. Couldn't quite manage it, fortunately, and Yuuko learned it was because he didn't have the right type of magic. But Sakura and Tsubasa did; the eventual King of Valeria, Emperor of Nihon, and the Princess of Clow had just the right creationist magic for Fei Wong's purposes. The King of Valeria and Emperor of Nihon were never born, so he attempted to kidnap Princess Sakura. At seven years old, her magic was due to mature, and that was when he struck. But to his surprise, there was someone unaccounted for: a Tsubasa of Clow, who was not there before. The boy came out of nowhere. Even I don't know how he came to be, but it was definitely because of how Fei Wong meddled with Valeria and Nihon. Boy wove a working that protected the princess, but left himself open. Truly an amazing child, worthy of being the founder of dynasties. But this one was a commoner. He didn't have the right magical capacity. Fei Wong was convinced he should, since the boy was able to thwart him, and the others… some had a little magic, others had none. There was no better alternative. So he tormented this one for seven long years and in the end… Tsubasa of Clow did eventually realize his potential. Child of my mother's house, wept for three days and two nights without stop, because of seven years of horror at the hands of a child of my house. Do you have any idea how that feels, Lord Youou?"

Kurogane did not dignify this with an answer. He was not going to show pity for a man who deserved to feel regret.

"I reminded him of Fei Wong, for obvious reasons. I had such power that others shudder to behold, but I was helpless to comfort him in any way. Yuuko bore through the visions and hallucinations to rehabilitate him; she could not do much, but between her receptiveness and his own will to prevail, Tsubasa approached something like a normal human being far sooner than we could ever have hoped for. He was, above all, a compassionate soul. Tried very hard to forgive me. Couldn't quite do it, though. I had hurt him too much. Hurt his parents, whom he could not remember, anymore."

"Do you know them?" Kurogane whispered.

"An archaeologist named Eriol Hiiragizawa," Reed replied, "and his wife, Kaho Mizuki, a mathematician. It was the one and only time his mother was not Li Yelan. They weren't even supposed to exist in that kingdom; this time around, they don't."

Because in this timeline, Tsubasa's parents had been the clones.

"By this time, Fei Wong had already died. Yuuko, however, still lived; something continued to hold her here. Eventually, the madness took full hold. She attacked Tsubasa, who killed her. In the end,
he was the one that freed her."

Kurogane squeezed his eyes shut. That poor boy, so full of self-loathing. Even if no one else blamed him, he would have blamed himself. He yearned to hold that child again, to hold his child and never let him go.

"He would have been well looked-after," Reed told him. "Doumeki loved that boy. The shop would have provided all his needs. But a wish is a wish, and that life is past. This one still needs a mother, but Li Yelan is gone for good. Fei Wong had destroyed her, just as he destroyed her in Valeria."

Kurogane swallowed. "So now what?"

Reed turned away. "Tsubasa's wish was the result of mine," he stated as he strode away from Kurogane, "so I am here to pay the price for his."

He left no footprints in the dust. Kurogane realized with a rush that though the sorcerer looked solid enough, he was actually a spirit. He guided Kurogane into the dining room, just as dusted and old as everywhere else, but on the table was a woman's body, looking freshly dead, like it had just been placed there. She had black curly hair and broad, high cheekbones. Her eyebrows were arched with disdain, even in death; she had no breath in her, and her skin was cold and bloodless. On her belly was a large incision, as if someone drove a blade through her. Her dark dress made the bloodstain hard to discern, though it was very much there.

"Meet Xing Huo," Reed introduced. "She was the clone of Li Yelan, Syaoran's true mother. In the first timeline, she partook in his torture, though some part of her remembered the bond with him enough that she comforted him and shielded him the best she could. In this lifetime, she was the reason Li Tsubasa was able to join you in Tokyo when he broke through his seal, and the clone lost his soul. Fei Wong did not think much of it when her body did not dissipate like other clones when he killed her. He did often miss critical details like that."

"Why didn't she dissipate?" Kurogane asked.

"Because I kept her," Reed replied.

Kurogane looked at her face and imagined that fawn-like creature of a son being under her care. Li Tsubasa of Tokyo, eyes bright with rage he could not vent, spitting her name, "—Xing Huo, I stabbed through the stomach even though she was the only one who had ever been kind—"

"She loved Syaoran," Reed murmured, interrupting Kurogane's thoughts, "as much as it was possible for her to love anyone, soulless as she was. Perhaps it was not enough, but that was no fault of hers. She is not a real living being, and has no destiny. Besides, she is already dead. But she will care for Syaoran, as much as he needs her; will fight to the ends of the earth to preserve him. After all, she had betrayed her very master for his sake. Her body is as much his mother's as Li Yelan's, even if her heart isn't. Given all the damage that Fei Wong caused, this is the only viable option."

"Wouldn't bringing her to life cause problems just like last time?"

"Living and existing are two different things," Reed replied. "As it stands, I would not wish a daughter of my mother's house to go through what Syaoran's mother must go through in Nihon. Xing Huo is tough and hard to break. She will nurture and protect Syaoran without feeling the pain others might believe she ought to feel."

"So she would be akin to an animated machine," Kurogane realized, "just a bundle of flesh, dressed up like a mother, for the first fourteen years of his life."
How would Syaoran react to learning that his mother was not real?

Was it right, to bring this wretched clone to life just to kill her fourteen years later?

"She will have fourteen years of life, free from slavery," Reed corrected, "during which she will learn to love a child the way she was meant to. Perhaps she might acquire a soul of her own. Your son seems to have a knack for creating souls where none exist. Afterwards, she may die to be reincarnated into a body of her own, and able to craft her own destiny, her own fate. It is, perhaps, an unorthodox approach, but it suits our purposes and it will suit hers, in the end. All she needs is your essence."

"I prefer my bedmates living and breathing," Kurogane glared, disgusted and not a little bit frightened.

Reed smiled humorlessly. "She just needs your essence. How she gets it is of no importance. In any case, you've already made your choice, fourteen years ago."

Kurogane looked at the corpse, feeling conflicted and horrified and saddened and angry all at once. To use someone this way, even if they were a clone—clones were people too, as Sakura and Syaoran had proven—and to just utilize their bodies, without consent, without consideration—it was such sordid, filthy business, and what was worse was he might have already decided, and he felt horrible. He wished the good things in his life did not have to cost so much. His honor, his dignity, his integrity…why must all this be demanded of him?

But then he thought of something.

"Sakura and Watanuki's child," he looked at Reed. "Is it…?"

Clow Reed did not reply, but he smiled, genuinely this time.

"Oh, I wouldn't know," he stated, sounding very much like he did.

"We will not meet again," Clow Reed had said in his farewell before sending Kurogane home.

The significance of meeting with the greatest sorcerer of all time, of talking to him and hearing his own grief, did not really hit Kurogane until he was surrounded by Watanuki and Fay and Yukito and Sakura, all of them talking over each other and asking him if he was alright. He was guided to a seat, where he sat, staring at Sakura's bulging belly.

"Kuro," Fay grabbed his face. "Talk to me, love."

"I'm alright," Kurogane reached up to hold Fay's hand. He looked at Watanuki, a soul that Tsubasa had created, and then back at Sakura's belly again.

"What is it?" the princess asked, noting the trajectory.

Kurogane leaned away from Fay. "It's fine. I just…it's complicated. I need time to process everything, but it's fine."

"Process what?" Fay stared at him, apprehensive.

Kurogane looked at Fay for a moment. "It's over," he said quietly. "Our son is alive. And Sakura is having a daughter."

"No," Priest Yukito's eyes went wide. "You're sure?"
Kurogane looked out the window and realized that he had been gone for a long time.

"Is the King returning soon?"

"...Perhaps?" Watanuki blinked. "Is there something you wish to discuss with him?"

"No, just wanted to see my son," Kurogane rose, feeling a little better.

"Kuro!" Fay exclaimed. "Stop tormenting us and tell us what happened already!"

"I'll tell you later," Kurogane moved past him. Served Fay right for keeping his own secrets from Kurogane for ten years. Fay can live with the suspense for a little while longer.

Syaoran and the King had just returned when Kurogane met them in the main hall.

"Dad!" Syaoran called in delight. Clad in the garb of Clow Kingdom, he looked like a little prince, lithe and light on his feet with that airy grace unique to this version—all belied, though by the very red, burnt-looking skin on his face, which would definitely start to hurt within the hour. "Next time you and Papa need to come with! They—" he got cut off when Kurogane swept him in a hug.

King Fujitaka's eyes were warm when Kurogane raised his head.

Syaoran was too giddy to feel awkward about being hugged mid-sentence. He giggled in Kurogane's arms and allowed the ninja to rock him back and forth.

"There were rabbits here too, with huge ears and big long feet, and they were so fast, the horses couldn't catch up with them, you should come out and see them next time, they're so quick!"

Kurogane squeezed him harder, and Syaoran broke off into another set of giggles, a light, happy sound that made Kurogane's own heart soar.

And then the boy's stomach growled.

"That is a good sound," said the King, sweeping past. "I concur. Notify the kitchens, and I think some chocolate cake is in order—extra cocoa and cream. We have a hungry hungry youngster to feed."

"Chocolate cake!" Syaoran twisted in Kurogane's embrace. The man was compelled to let him go. "What is that?"

"Oh spirits," Prince Touya exclaimed from behind Kurogane. "We have a lot of work ahead of us!"

Syaoran retired early due to the strenuous day, with a mask of burn cream. Fay and Kurogane stayed up with the other adults, drinking (with Sakura only drinking some plum juice) and chatting about this and that. Kurogane had yet to tell Fay about Clow Reed, though the mage did try to pry it out of him. Kurogane was not ready yet. Maybe in the morning, he would tell Fay everything the sorcerer had told him, but for now he just wanted to relax and bask in the feeling of not having any more loose ends.

Well, except one.

"I don't think you have much use for Ginryu anymore," Watanuki said apologetically, "and I do need it for the hourglass. Especially since you broke it."

Kurogane hesitated only because he remembered the very first time he had to hand Ginryu away—or at least, what he thought was Ginryu. This time, it was the real thing. He thought idly that it would
never find its way to his mother, but his mother would never have a use for it. In any case, it was a small price to pay for something that saved his son's life.

"Where is Doumeki?" Kurogane asked, "and his wife?"

Watanuki looked at him in surprise. "They are well," said the young man. "They have two children now."

Fay then asked the question that perhaps Watanuki had been expecting since they arrived. "What about the Mokonas?"

"Those two adore their children. They preferred to stay in Tokyo to play with them." Watanuki tilted his head. "Do you…want to say hi to them?"

Fay glanced at Kurogane, who found himself unable to answer.

"Not right now, hm?" Prince Touya observed.

Kurogane was not sure why both he and Fay were hesitant about meeting Mokona again. The little ball of fluff was actually quite sensitive and understanding, even if sometimes Mokona gave the impression of being immune to everything. Maybe it was because he was not sure what to say to the creature that had been part of so much tragedy in his past, even if the little one meant well. Certainly, Syaoran would not appreciate the magnitude of the reunion, and perhaps Kurogane and Fay were both just too overwhelmed right now.

"When Syaoran is more acclimated," Fay replied, "perhaps we'll pay a call to the Doumekis in Tokyo. I know Syaoran would want to explore there."

The princess smiled, rubbing her belly idly. "I'm sure he would. It would be nice to see Tokyo, without everything…else. Tokyo was always a place where we had to be briefed and debriefed about what to do next; never a place where we could just see the sights."

"Is the baby kicking you?" Watanuki suddenly asked her.

"I wouldn't say 'kicking', exactly," Sakura reached for her husband's hand and placed it on her belly. "Just a little excited, is all."

*Little Xing Huo, Kurogane thought, living up to her name.*

He kind of wanted to meet her now. No doubt, she would be very different from the empty shell he had seen in Tsubasa's abandoned home in Hong Kong.

They looked out toward the horizon, where the sun was floating down, the rays bending to paint the sky in rainbow hues. In the distance, over the golden sands, Tsubasa's tomb remained, white limestone and old grief, a monument to a child that had been loved and lost, the clones that he was never able to bring back, a dream he was never able to realize.

*But Tsubasa, you were and still are loved. We never said…but you must have known, some part of you, even when you were so lonely, even when you were afraid, because...sometimes the soul remembers, even when the body doesn't. You must have known that you were here because we loved you, because the King and Queen couldn't bear to see you in so much pain, because your fathers couldn't bear to leave you weeping in that shop, because we all wanted you and we all wished for you, damn the consequences. You are here because your mother's love was so great, the foulest magic couldn't stop her from saving you when it mattered most. And now you are here, free to just be a boy.*
"The tomb," Prince Touya whispered, cautious in the weight of the solemn silence that fell over them, "Syaoran is alive now."

"It once symbolized loss," said his father, echoing the sentiments Kurogane and Fay shared, "and regret, neglect, despair. Let it instead symbolize triumph, good over evil, rebirth, joy, and most of all, hope. Syaoran's new life does not make Tsubasa's any less real. He is here because of his old incarnation's conquests and victories. If ever Syaoran should need comfort, he may look to this monument of his own strength and courage. Let it stand until the end of time."

The Queen suddenly raised her glass. "To our little Syaoran, may his courage always prevail."

Sakura raised hers as well. "To Tsubasa."

Fay and Kurogane hesitated, before raising their glasses with the rest. "To Syaoran."

"To new beginnings," said Watanuki.

"Ow," Sakura interrupted. "Ow. Ow! Alright, you can toast too. Oh!"

Fay laughed, doubling over, and with that, the solemn atmosphere broke. Kurogane also grinned.

"Are you alright?" Watanuki asked, concerned.

"I'm fine," Sakura looked at her husband. "You were a naughty one, weren't you?"

"No, that would be you," said her brother.

"No I wasn't!"

"Yes you were. Right, Mother?"

The Queen only smiled.

"You are horrible, Big Brother," Sakura scowled at Prince Touya. "I'm sure no matter how bad I was, you were much worse."

"No, I was always the better of us two."

Fay slid against Kurogane, leaning his head on the dark-haired man's shoulder.

"Let's stay here for a while," he whispered, voice full of contentment.

Kurogane had no problem with that.

"Yes," he agreed. "Let's."
Chapter Notes

And we are at the finish line! Oh man, this has been a long journey! There will be more adventures for our gang, but what those are will be up to you guys. My story ends here. Thank you all so much for your comments! I can't express enough how wonderful you folks have all been. Hopefully this ending lives up to expectations. In any case, I won't bore you with more remarks. Please let me know what you think at the end!

The buzzer sounded, signaling the game's start.

"Alright," Syaoran said while adjusting the cannisters strapped to his waist, "we want to take out Jou and Kou first."

"No duh! I swear those two have like twelve senses between them or something."

"It's the twin phenomenon."

"Stay focused!" Syaoran admonished into the microphone arching from his headset. "We're going to fan out, Miki and Misaki, you guys head toward that red bell, Jun and I will go toward the fire hydrant, and Rei and Aya can go toward the emergency exit."

"You're sending the girls on their own?"

"...What is that supposed to mean??"

"Don't you remember how we totally nailed you in the face last time?"

There was a round of chuckles.

"You're such a jackass, Misaki."

"Guys, come on," Jun exclaimed next to Syaoran, "Let's get going before the other team makes it too far."

They went in their respective directions through the battlefield, but not thirty seconds in, Syaoran heard the sound of shots.

\textit{Splat. Splat.}

"Oh!" Miki exclaimed. "That was close! They're over by the pyramid!"

"I got them," Rei announced.

Syaoran could not hear her gunm but Misaki whistled low. "Right in the heart! Girl, you show no mercy at all!"

"...You're such an idiot, Misaki!"

Syaoran and Jun, on the other hand, were not having much luck finding any targets. Syaoran kept
glancing behind him and trying very hard not to use his other senses to detect when someone might be aiming for them, while Jun was moving so quickly that Syaoran was struggling to keep up while monitoring his six.

"Dude, where is everyone?" Jun whispered to Syaoran.

Syaoran aimed his gun up, wondering if anyone chose to climb up on one of the walls to aim down, though that was technically not allowed.

"Arrrghhhhh!" Miki suddenly exclaimed. "Kou and Jou! Those two suck!"

"You're hit?" Aya asked.

"Right in the face," Misaki was laughing. "Bright pink too. Those twins are awesome. Oh snap!" There was another sound of something splattering, but Misaki was already breathing out, "Whew! That was close!"

Jun managed to off one of the other team, but it was about another ten minutes before the two of them were able to get anyone else. In the meantime, Rei got knocked out after valiantly taking down two from the other team, including Kou (she was then offed by Jou). The target Syaoran and Jun were pursuing ultimately escaped them, so the two of them finally rounded back toward their base.

Someone from the opposite team (as could be told by the color of the helmet) was trying to sneak around the base too. Syaoran instantly knew it was Sakura. She could dress as anything and he would know it was her, even without the magic, because she had a particular way of moving that none of the other girls (or boys) shared. Her back was facing him, and he started to aim for her helmet, but then had a very wicked idea and aimed his gun lower.

Splat!

Sakura whirled around just as Syaoran felt a blob of paint smack right into his spine. He still crowed in victory.

"You jerk!" Sakura screamed. "You complete and total jerk!"

"Heeheeheeheehee!!" Syaoran hopped up and down, practically wanting to dance. "I finally got you on one of these things! Jun! Record the date and time!"

"I'm going to murder you!" Sakura exclaimed as she twisted around to look back at the splatter of green paint on her buttocks.


Jun was rubbing his helmet in exasperation. "Dude. You're dead."

"I don't care. Do you know how often she actually kicks my butt? This is the one time I get to hit her butt."

"Dude!" Jun groaned. "How can anyone be so clueless?"

"He's a moron!" Sakura was wiping fruitlessly at her pants. "I swear Syaoran's the dumbest person in all the realms put together."

" Doesn't matter. I still hit your butt. Finally!"

"Dude stop saying that!" Jun exclaimed.
"What?" Syaoran blinked, suddenly realizing that he might have been saying something wrong.

"Don't worry about it, it's part of his small amount of charm," Sakura grabbed Syaoran by the elbow to steer them to the stands where all the losers were convened. She kicked his butt with her boot for good measure, but that was fine because she did that all the time and Syaoran finally beat her at paintball.

"We're sorry about this," Papa said to Lord Fujitaka. "He didn't mean any ill by it."

"It's her fault as much as his," Fujitaka pointed out. "Why would Syaoran think anything of it if she kicks him there all the time? See what I meant, Sakura? You really need to stop it with your antics; you're getting too old for this."

Syaoran's earlier glee had dissipated in the wake of everyone's discomfort. "We were just playing paintball," he looked down. He had not meant to do anything wrong.

"This isn't your fault," Papa said. "These are things parents are supposed to teach you. Everyone knows you didn't mean anything by it. But it's not something you can get away with later on. Right now you're still a child. This isn't acceptable when you're older, and you need to know this now, before it becomes a habit."

Ironically, Fujitaka ended up lecturing Sakura far longer than Papa and Dad lectured Syaoran. The lord was not even particularly concerned about Syaoran, giving his hair a ruffle when the boy tried to apologize. Sakura walked out to the gardens later and sat down next to Syaoran with a groan of exasperation.

"I didn't mean to disrespect you," Syaoran lowered his head.

"You better not. I'd kick your butt so hard you can't walk." She took his hand though, and laced their fingers together. They looked out at the pond and the bridge across from them. The cherry blossoms were just starting to bloom, but one had to squint to see them.

"When do you want to go to the rabbit island?" Sakura asked.

Syaoran was honestly a rather tired. They had wanted to go that evening, but Syaoran kept underestimating how exhausting paintball could be. "Maybe tomorrow?"

"Alright."

Sakura squeezed his hand, and Syaoran wondered for a moment when the handholding started. It just seemed so right and natural, neither he nor Sakura thought anything of it until one of the handmaidens gave them a disapproving look. Something about how girls and boys were not supposed to be too close, but it was just holding hands; Syaoran had seen much more intimate gestures in public, depending on the world in question. Besides, it was not like he went around holding every girl's hand, or Sakura sought every boy's. Ever the rebel, Sakura scoffed and declared that she intended to do what she liked, no matter anyone else's opinion. Syaoran decided to do the same, because really, it was not like their relationship was anyone else's business.

He had to wonder, though, if Sakura was sometimes holding his hand because she wanted to yank him along. She was like a whirlwind, wild and free and full of her own ideas. She was strong, fast, and not a little bit scary. Meanwhile, Syaoran certainly wanted to be more adventurous and explore, but his stamina was ever the limiting factor in any activity. Paintball, riding, even browsing museums or walking through botanical gardens where there were plenty of benches to rest on, generally took a lot out of him. Sakura had an annoying sixth sense for his fatigue, too, and used to complain a lot,
although she had not done that ever since they grew closer.

Closer?

He felt like they were always close, actually, other than the first day when he found her to be the most annoying person on earth.

"I wish I were stronger," he sighed.

He wished he were a number of things. Taller, smarter, handsomer. Ever since Sakura started joining him on his adventures, they had been running into these really charming young men, who never hesitated to flirt with Sakura as if Syaoran were chopped liver. Of course, Sakura never hesitated to turn them off with her nasty personality. Syaoran always did say that Sakura was like a wolf dressed up like a cherry blossom. Sakura once said Syaoran was like a cherry blossom dressed up as a wolf. And he was an idiot, because everyone knew wolves dressed up as sheep.

Which reminded him; he needed to take her to that world just to prove her wrong…

"I wish you were stronger too," Sakura said with brutal honesty, because nice manners were never something she bothered with even with people she needed to impress, let alone someone like Syaoran. "You're so frustrating. Aren't you getting those whatever it was, infusions, or vitamins, or something?"

"They only help to a point," Syaoran pointed out. "Can't imagine what I'd be like without them. I remember always being tired when I was young." And scared. And hungry.

"Well, whatever," Sakura shrugged. "It just means I'll have to be stronger to make up for how lame you are. What's wrong with that?"

"Pfft. Who are you calling lame?"

"The lamest," Sakura insisted.

"Who beat you at paintball."

"And then got shot at himself."

"You still died first."

"A butt-shot isn't a kill-shot."

"You were out fair and square!"

The ribbing went on for a little bit before it started raining suddenly. They continued to jab at each other on their way indoors. Lord Touya trailed them through the corridors for a little bit before they realized they were being followed.

"What do you want?" Sakura exclaimed.

"Weren't you two going to rabbit island?" her brother ignored her question.

"We're allowed to change our plans, you know. Anyway, what were you stalking us for?"

Lord Touya cocked an eyebrow. "Can't a brother look out for his sister? Anyway, you two were making such a ruckus, as you always do. I wanted to see how long it would take for you to notice me."
"Not long enough," Sakura groaned.

Her brother looked at Syaoran. "I haven't seen you lately. You look well."

Syaoran said nothing.

"Don't you have work to do?" Sakura broke in.

She kept at him until Lord Touya left.

"Ever since he became the King's advisor, he's only gotten more insufferable," she remarked as they continued down the corridor to the main hall, "but I get the feeling you're avoiding him for something else entirely."

"It's complicated."

"I'm sure it is," Sakura sounded unimpressed, "but he is my brother and eventually you will have to talk to him, if only for my sanity."

"I will. Don't worry."

"Alright. What's he done?" Sakura drew to a stop. Syaoran sighed. Sometimes he wished Sakura did not have such a strong personality, but he supposed this was what drew him to her in the first place.

"It's stupid, really."


"Well…"

She already knew, really, so it should be alright for him to say it.

"I had a crush on him once."  

"I know. So annoying."

Syaoran could not help it; he chuckled. This was such a Sakura response; mercilessly sharp in both mind and tongue. Sakura glared, perhaps thinking he was stalling, so he went on, "I…I think lately…looking back…he knew too, and…took advantage of that. I'm…not sure how to feel about that."

It had hurt, in a surprising way. For a while, Syaoran was not even sure how to interact with Prince Touya of Clow, who had been nothing but kind to him and had nothing to do with any of his counterpart's transgressions. All was well that ended well, supposedly, but knowing that element of his past, realizing just what Lord Touya had been willing to do, the lengths he was able to go…it made Syaoran uncertain about how to proceed from here. He was no longer a naïve child.

Well, not as naïve, anyway. Dad and Papa would argue that Syaoran was still a child. They seemed to think the only way Syaoran would qualify as an adult was if he were constantly ten years older than he already was. There was just no winning that argument with those two.

"My brother is an idiot," Sakura said after a moment of silence. "No one knows this better than I do, trust me. He's really not fit for half the stuff the King lets him do; he relies mainly on luck, and that gives the illusion that he's somehow marginally capable. But he's not a bad man; he's not smart enough for it, and mistakes are as much a part of his role as the power he wields. I think there's a direct correlation between errors in judgment and influence in any position. There's no helping it.
Even the wisest of us will make the wrong choices somewhere down the line. But just because you decide to give something up, doesn't mean it wasn't still important to you. I can promise you that he's very glad you're still here, and he never wished otherwise."

Syaoran blinked. Sometimes Sakura's insight was astounding. He was not even sure how she was able to understand him so thoroughly. Or her brother, considering most of the time Sakura seemed more interested in verbally abusing the two of them rather than understanding their feelings and thoughts.

"For some reason," Sakura added, because it just would not be her if she did not sprinkle some salt into the honey. "I can't imagine why. Though if you want, you should definitely take advantage of this. If you make both of them feel guilty enough, they might hand over all of Nihon to you in contrition."

"I don't want Nihon," Syaoran exclaimed.

"I know. Why would you want Nihon when you have Hanshin, Lecourt, Koryo, Rabbit island, which you're too lame to go to—"

"Ugh," the youth groaned. "I don't understand how you aren't too tired to go to rabbit island."

"I'm not a wilting flower."

"I'm not either!"

"Could have fooled me. You're sagging."

"Oi! I beat you at paintball!"

"Right. Next time I'll take you out first so you get to sit in the stands and save all your precious energy—"

"In your dreams. I beat you once, I'll beat you again!"

"Not if you're too weak to even pet rabbits..."

His eye socket hurt, and the tattoos were tight against his skin. He could not even move a finger, though his limbs floated helplessly in the water. Past the glass, he felt the heavy gaze of the man who kept him captive, tall and broad-shouldered and big, ruthless in his apathy.

He strained despite knowing better, willing the blonde mage and the black-haired ninja (Papa, Dad, supplied his mind from somewhere underneath the numb terror) to see past the construct, for the construct to gain a soul, his own feelings, something, anything that might deviate from his captor's machinations. (Somewhere underneath, he begged for them to come and save him, though he knew they never would; they did not even know he existed—)

"Syaoran?"

Syaoran came to so suddenly that his body did not sync with his mind yet. Paralyzed, he could only lie there with his eyes still closed as someone pressed at the comforter and sat down beside the curve of his hip. A warm hand settled on his shoulder.

"Son?"

His body was numb, but Syaoran managed to blink his eyes open. It was dark and quiet; dawn was
still far away. The moonlight illuminated his Papa, who was holding him.

The realization seemed to wake the rest of Syaoran's body, and they unlocked, finally responding to his mental will.

"Papa," he called.

"Son," Papa's hand reached up to cup the back of his neck. "Were you having a nightmare?"

Was he? Now that Syaoran was awake, it seemed like his dream vanished entirely from his memory. He strained to grasp at it; surely he should be able to remember some parts of it, given how suddenly he had roused. But the last thing he could recall was curling up in bed.

"I don't remember," he murmured. "Did I wake you?"

Sometimes he would tug at his Papa while dreaming. In the beginning, it was because of nightmares Syaoran could actually remember; he would dream of being back in Kuroiyama, of watching his mother burn to death, of never meeting his fathers after all and being executed by Shirasaki for attempted theft. Particularly in the peaceful days right after they arrived in Clow, Syaoran had such violent nightmares sometimes that his magic would go haywire. Princess Sakura would soothe him with her own magic; Syaoran felt bad because she was getting very pregnant and the baby's kicks kept her from sleeping as it was. They would sit and talked for hours, and he would confess to wondering at times if all of this was just some kind of hallucination, that none of this was real. Sometimes it really seemed too good to be true.

He still had such dreams on occasion. Prince Kimihiro had wryly remarked that this would probably stay with him for the rest of his life, a little twinge of a scar on his soul that would spasm every now and then, never leaving him completely. He knew that his fathers shared the same problem; Papa would have this look on his face as if he needed to be sure Syaoran was not a ghost, and Dad would be in the dojo in the middle of the night, almost like he was trying to sweat it all out.

But nowadays he would occasionally tug at his Papa and not remember why.

"Mm," said Papa. "You're alright?"

Syaoran nodded. "Sorry."

"Don't be. All is well." Papa smoothed his hair, paused for a moment, before rising to leave.

The next morning, Sakura and Syaoran went to Rabbit Island with Jun and his girlfriend, Minako.

They were buried in bunnies and soon all of them were out of anything to feed the creatures with. Sakura continued patting them and generally having the time of her life. Syaoran, unfortunately, was summoned by Seishirou to play at being the delivery boy (again; Seishirou and Fuma both take advantage of Syaoran's portals on a weekly basis).

"Doumeki wants Watanuki to have this old watch," said the bounty hunter from what looked like some kind of mob scene in one of Tokyo's malls. "I need to hold my place in line for this release, and my useless brother isn't answering my calls. Just drop it off and go back to whatever you were doing. Thanks a lot! You're the best."

The first person to greet Syaoran in Clow was actually Sutafaya. The toddler released a loud squeal and then walked really fast (she still could not run yet) over to the youth with her little arms outstretched. Syaoran picked her up. She released another squeal as he settled her securely on his
It figured that Sakura would produce such a daughter, even if it was a different Sakura.

"Where's your father, hm?" Syaoran bumped his nose into the little one's.

"Yaoyan!" Sutafaya babbled. "Yaoyan! Yaoyan!" She could not say 'Syaoran' properly no matter how her parents tried to teach her.

She farted again when Syaoran found Prince Kimihiro.

"What was Sakura feeding her?" her father exclaimed. "She's been so gassy all day."

Sutafaya was chewing on Syaoran's collar; she was teething.

"At least her pipes are working," said Syaoran, and made to hand the toddler over to her father, but Sutafaya did not want to let go, and started crying when Syaoran tried to press the issue.

"I need to get back to Rabbit Island," Syaoran said apologetically. "It's alright! It's alright! I'll be back soon." Sutafaya always fussed when Syaoran left her.

"She's worse with you than with her mother," Kimihiro muttered, mostly to himself, and picked up a pen with some flashing lights to distract the little one.

Syaoran used this opportunity to sneak back to Rabbit Island. Sakura looked like she hardly even noticed he was gone. She looked very content, surrounded by rabbits and with two little ones on her lap. Jun had apparently procured more feed for everyone, and the ones on her lap were nibbling from her hand.

They stayed for about another hour before everyone got bored. After transporting Jun and Minako back home, they returned to Nihon. At the palace in Tomoeda, Dad and Papa were eating lunch with Lord Fujitaka and Lord Touya.

"You've only been back for a couple of weeks," Lord Touya was protesting, "and the King's birthday is coming up."

"We can come back for that," Dad pointed out. "It's just to explore. That's the whole point of all this."

"Are we going somewhere?" Syaoran asked.

"Has Watanuki ever mentioned a place called Nirai Kanai?"

"…No?"

"Your fathers are hogging you again," Sakura exclaimed, as tactful as ever.

"As is our right, young lady," Fay lifted his glass of water in her direction.

"Whatever," said Sakura, sitting down. "I'm famished."

"When are you not?" her brother ribbed.

"Oh please, as if you didn't pig out twice as much when you were my age."

"I actually grew taller for it. You're only going to get wider."
"Touya," Lord Fujitaka remonstrated, "be nice to your sister."

"Why would I want to be nice to her? Have you met her?"

Syaoran chuckled, thinking about Princess Sakura's little daughter and her recent antics. The siblings ignored him and continued to banter over the table. Dad pulled a seat out for Syaoran to sit.

"What's in Nirai Kanai?" he asked his father.

"Lots and lots of cherry blossoms."

"Hm," Syaoran glanced at Sakura. "I don't know if I want too much of that in my life."

"I heard that!" Sakura poked him with the back of her chopsticks.

"See what I mean?"

"I need to test out my camera," said Papa, and Syaoran realized that he had actually been hiding said contraption on his lap under the table. He brought it out and snapped a photo of Dad's scowl just as the latter turned around to look at it. "I want a picture of Kuropi wearing a wreath on his head."

"In your dreams," Dad growled.

"That I will make into a reality."

"I'm second-guessing our decision to go to Nirai Kanai."

"I'll wear one with you!"

"I'm not wearing flowers in my hair, you nutter! And quit taking pictures of me!"

"But you're so cute!"

"Argh! Fay!"

Sakura and her brother had, in the meantime, argued past the subject of body weight and onto something else entirely.

"But Tsukiyomi always makes me wear these ridiculous outfits!" Sakura was exclaiming. "Doesn't she have anything better to do than designing clothes for me? I'm not some kind of doll!"

"You're definitely not any kind of doll," her brother snorted.

"She should dress you up instead!"

Syaoran watched Papa take another photo while Dad tried to grab at the camera, and then looked at Lord Fujitaka watching his two children argue. He looked down at his bowl of rice, the chopsticks to the side, and picked both up.

This had to be real life, he decided as he picked some vegetables for his first mouthful. No way could any vision, dream, or hallucination be as ludicrous as all this.
End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!